



THE SHADOW REALM

THE FIRESTAFF CHRONICLES 4

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Prologue

"Come back here, boy!"

The shout rumbled across the small meadow deep in a forest so pristine, so dense, so remote that it had not known the footsteps of mankind in a thousand years. The clearing stood at the end of a shallow valley nestled at the top of a rather large hill, a cleft at its top that concealed the clearing from any who did not already know of its existence. It held a small log cabin, little more than two rooms and a loft, with a small vegetable patch tended at its back and a well several paces to the right of the small cabin's raised front porch. The porch held a pair of rocking chairs, a small table, and hanging from the side of it was a rack of drying meat. It was a small home, a cozy home, and most important of all, it was an isolated home.

Very few knew of the valley's existence. The few that did were either the friends of the occupant, or they were dead. The owner of that small cabin in the forest was a small yet powerfully built female, short and lithe, yet her every muscle rippled with her movements as she jogged off the porch to chase down a toddler. This female was not human, though she appeared very close to a human. She had human features and a human build, tall for a woman but short for her age and her species. That was the extent of the resemblance, however, for the female had a long furred tail sprouting from the back of her untanned, rather ragged breeches. Her arms and legs were covered with short, thick black fur to just above the elbows and knees, and instead of human ears, a pair of triangular cat's ears poked out of an unruly mane of short, curly black hair. Her hands and feet were not hands and feet at all, they were curious crosses between human appendages and animal paws, oversized for her frame and hiding very long, very sharp, very deadly claws. Despite these obvious indications that she was not human, a human would have considered to be rather handsome. She had sharp, drawn features, with pronounced cheekbones and a sharp chin, giving her face a fox-like quality. Bright green eyes, with pupils vertically slitted like a cat's eyes, stared out under a bouncing array of bangs

and slender eyebrows, eyes that would chill most people who looked into them. There was an ominous quality about those eyes, as if the woman looked at others as enemies, or as prey, a predatory gaze that even put members of her own race on edge and uncomfortable. There was more hiding within those eyes, an old, haunted pain that had only recently begun to heal, an old wound that had only recently been repaired.

Her name was Mist, and she was a Were-cat, one of a magical race of beings blessed with the ability to transform into the shape of a common housecat. She had come to that small shallow valley on the top of the hill to raise her son, to provide him with shelter and protection from the dangers of what the humans called the Frontier, though there was no danger any longer. Mist defended her territory with a ferocity and savagery that gave the Were-cats a very bad reputation among *Fae-da'Nar*, the loose association of wood-dwelling beings, often killing invaders without any warning or any quarter. Mist did not mark the edges of her territory, fearing that it would attract Were-wolves or migrating Centaurs looking to harass her, so many of the Woodkin who wandered into her territory did so with no idea that they had just meandered into a very deadly place. It got so bad that the closest Druid to the valley, an elderly human woman named Ne'Vanne, marked Mist's boundaries clearly and made it clear that any who entered did so at their own peril, and did so without her approval. The Druids of the Heartwood held great power over the Woodkin, and a statement like that would be enough to dissuade even the most hateful Were-wolf or Centaur to leave the Were-cat alone.

Then again, once the boundaries had been marked, they left her alone anyway. They all knew Mist, and they all knew her reputation. If Were-cats had a very bad reputation among *Fae-da'Nar*, Mist had a very bad reputation even among the Were-cats. She was *feral*, a term for a Were-kin whose animal instincts had come to dominate their thinking, Were-kin who no longer trusted strangers. They were like rabid wild animals, vicious, unpredictable, and very violent. Mist had been one of the most feral Were-kin ever known, so feral that she did not even trust her own kind, so feral that there were only a very, very few who could even get close enough to speak to her. When the boundaries were marked with Mist's name, every Woodkin within fifty longspans moved even further away.

But few knew that she had managed to conquer some portions of her feral nature. Much of the reason she had been feral was tied up with her history, a history when a Were-kin hunter wounded her with silver and left her barren. Still carrying the powerful instincts to reproduce and care for children, yet left incapable of doing so, it sent Mist spiralling down into a black void of hatred and frustration, which inevitably caused her to turn feral. Mist blamed the humans for her condition, and for nearly three hundred years she remained thus, scarred both physically and mentally, unable to forgive, unable to forget, and unable to trust.

But that all changed when she met Tarrin. He had been much like her, a feral Were-cat who had been scarred by the actions of the humans, betrayed by the very ones who had promised to care for him, who had been turned Were by the orders of the very Sorcerers who had promised to take care of him. He too was a Sorcerer, and he had magical powers of healing. He had used those powers on Mist, healing what the Druids could not heal, restoring her body to its rightful condition. The restoration of her body had done much to restore her mind, because it finally allowed her to put her wounding behind her, and it restored her ability to bear young.

That was why it happened. Tarrin had restored Mist's body, but he was the only male around. Mist desperately wanted a child of her own, and that meant that she had to trust him, trust him in a way she never thought she'd ever trust another again, to mate with him and leave herself exposed to attack. She found herself at war within, as her feral fear warred against her powerful urge to follow her instincts, but in the end, it was Tarrin himself that allowed her to face herself. He had been wounded at the time, and what at first started as a thought that she could control a wounded mate became the realization that he would not hurt her, because he wasn't like that.

When she realized that he wasn't going to hurt her, that he had healed her because he *cared* about her, and that he was willing to mate with her--something that he would not have done because of the lingering traces of human morality within him--because it was what she needed instead of what he wanted, it broke the wall she had built around herself. She opened up to him, put her complete trust in him, and for the first time in centuries, she found peace within herself. She took him for mate, something she could not have done with any other male, even to this day. She had found a friend that day, had finally found someone she could trust.

He had changed her life so much. His gentle words had caused her to reconcile with her bond-daughter, Kimmie, whom she had found half-crazy and nearly dead after being bitten by a Were-cat and changed from human to Were. Mist was just as feral then, but the instincts to nurture and raise young had briefly overwhelmed her fear, and she had taken the turned human as a child. It had been a very nervous time for both of them, for Mist feared the very child she had taken, and would have killed her the instant that she felt that Kimmie was a threat. Somehow, the turned Were-cat had sensed this, and had exhibited almost supernatural self-control and the ability to read Mist's moods, and that kept her alive. Kimmie had stayed with her bond-mother, even after she released Kimmie to the world, staying with her and giving her the only companionship she had had during the entire time she had been feral. But after he mated with her, Tarrin showed her that Kimmie had stayed with her because she loved her and cared about her, and that had been a revelation to the feral female. She had had a long talk with her daughter after she left Tarrin, after she knew she was pregnant, and had come to accept her daughter completely.

It was a happy time for Mist now. She still did not trust any strangers, but she had come to accept four Were-cats who had been there for her when she was feral, or had been there for her since. Tarrin and Kimmie, of course, and also Triana, the eldest of the Were-cats and the undisputed ruler of their kind. The last was Jesmind, another of Tarrin's acquaintances who had started visiting not long ago. She didn't completely trust Ne'Vanne, but the human was a Druid, so that status allowed Mist to treat her amiably and respectfully when she came to visit. She had even reached a point where she would allow other Were-cats to visit her cabin, but the visits were usually very brief and somewhat strained. Most of the Were-cats either still feared Mist or didn't like her, and most of the visits were simple requests for a night's sleeping and a meal. The only other Were-cat that visited with any regularity was Shayle, one of Triana's daughters, and Mist had started developing a genuine fondness for her. She was still feral, and that ferality made her fear Shayle, but with a little work and some understanding from Shayle, Mist felt she may even be able to accept her as a friend.

The only one who had never seen Mist's nasty side was Eron, her son. She caught up to him and grabbed him and picked him up, then momentarily forgot that she was angry with him for knocking over the

dishrack. Mist's entire life revolved around her son, her precious son, the most valuable gift she had ever received. She had named her son after Tarrin's father to honor him, just another way to honor him, and she could never touch his son, or hold him or scold him or think about him, without having warm thoughts about his father and the joy she had brought into her life. She turned him around and stared into his green eyes, which were a little fearful, but then he giggled and threw his paws around her neck and hugged her.

He was about eight months old now, but was the same comparable age as a three year old human, and he was the same size as a three year old human. That was normal for Were-cat cubs, growing to adulthood in about ten years. Such a short time to have with her son, but she would cherish every moment of it. He looked like a miniature version of his father, with the same cheekbones and strong jaw and expressive eyes. He had his father's hair as well, blond as corn silk and thick enough to be unmanagable, and it was almost inevitable that he would end up with black fur. Both his parents had black fur, and a child's fur almost always took after one of the parents. He was a little Tarrin, healthy and happy and growing stronger every day. He was an energetic, precocious child, always getting into trouble and trying to give his mother gray hair.

She gazed at him lovingly, then put on her scowl. "I told you *not* to climb on the counter, cub!" she said sharply. "Now go back in there and pick up every single piece of the plate you just broke!"

"Yes, Mama," he said, his pronunciation a bit skewed. He had started talking about three months ago, and was learning at what a human would consider to be an inhuman rate. But that was normal for Were-cats, whose minds matured as rapidly as their bodies. He could speak in complete sentences now, building quite a vocabulary which included some of the more colorful words that no human would teach her cubs, but were perfectly acceptable for a Were-cat to teach a Were-cat cub. There were many things Were-cats taught their children that would have mortified a human female.

"Now scoot!" she barked, setting him on the ground and swatting him on the backside with the side of her foot. She was about to follow him in, but the wind changed, and it carried to her a scent that she had not scented

in quite a while, a scent that made her ears pick up. Were-cats had incredible senses, sharp eyesight, acute hearing, sensitive touch and taste, and a sense of smell so delicate that they could track by scent and detect the approach of others from longspans away, if the wind blew the right way. The scent was Triana's, and she was close by. She was also alone.

Mist felt a bit elated about that. It had been almost two months since she'd seen Triana, who stopped in regularly to check up on Eron. Mist had been a bit lonely since Kimmie had left last month, left to answer the call of *Fae-da'Nar* to help the humans fight the Goblinoids that had invaded Sulasia. They had been called at Tarrin's behest, and that had been enough for Kimmie.

It was quite a situation. Mist adored Tarrin utterly, for he had been the one who had made her life so wonderful. She would do absolutely anything for him, would always be there for him--at least after she released Eron as an adult, her duty to their cub came first--and would always love him in a powerful way. Tarrin had been her mate once, and she fully intended to chase him down and take him for mate again. Then Jesmind arrived with her daughter, Tarrin's daughter, which was quite a surprise to Mist and Kimmie. They talked, got to know each other, and Mist had found that she liked Triana's hot-tempered eldest child. Their talks eventually came around to Tarrin, and Mist found out that Jesmind was in love with him. Not the distracted love Were-cats exhibited, but the powerful, binding love that was common in humans. That caused not a little bit of animosity to rise up, but then they realized that neither could ever claim him forever, and neither was about to back down, either. Were-cat behavior and instincts would permit an extended mating, but over time the mates got to wearing on each other, and they had to part before they killed each other. Jesmind wanted Tarrin, but so did Mist. And then she realized that Kimmie did too. Mist's quiet, clever daughter harbored an almost childish crush on the enigmatic male, a male who had been turned just like her, a male, she admitted to them, with whom she felt more comfortable than with any other male. Kimmie's infatuation with Tarrin was partly her identifying with him, and partly because of what she had done for Mist. She could see that, and could understand it.

And so, a deal was struck. All three of them wanted Tarrin for mate, but there was only one of him. So they decided to let Tarrin decide for himself. Tarrin would choose his first mate, and when time forced them apart, one of

the others would be allowed the chance to take him for mate, until they grew weary of one another and parted, and so on and so on. They would share him by turns, not interfering with one another, but defending their rights to him from the other females. Peculiarities of the race caused there to be seven females for every male, so the competition for males was fierce among the females. Their little circle of three was not the first time a group of females had laid a collective claim over a male. Some females had even taken a male for mate simultaneously, sharing him between them.

Mist couldn't think of Tarrin without thinking of Triana. She appeared at the edge of the clearing and paced towards the smaller female with that resolute gait of hers, like she owned every grain of soil beneath her feet. Triana was the tallest, oldest, and most powerful of the Were-cats, a thousand years old and possessing Druidic powers that rivalled the most powerful of the Druids. She was an intimidating, imposing figure, whose beauty was overlooked because of the stony, emotionless expression that was usually on her handsome face. Her tawny hair matched the color of her fur, a rarity among Were-cats, blowing in the wind as she approached the smaller female. Triana looked grim and serious, but Mist knew that it was a front to intimidate others. Triana spoke her mind, was brutally honest, and absolutely expected everyone around her to obey her. And they did. Even complete strangers could feel the aura of absolute power that enshrouded the Were-cat matron, a sense of invincibility that thoroughly intimidated everyone around her into doing her bidding. Triana spoke, and kings and queens jumped at her command. Literally.

"Triana," Mist said, taking the much taller female's paw warmly when she reached her. "It's been a while. Where have you been?"

"Suld," she replied in her customary brusque voice, not bothering to go through frilly greetings. She was like that. "Where's Eron?"

"Being punished," she replied. "How did the fighting go? Is Kimmie alright?"

"We won the fight," she replied evenly. "Kimmie's fine, but she's not going to be coming back for a while."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you inside," she said. "I'm tired, and I'd like to sit down."

"I have some venison drying, if you're hungry," Mist offered as they started for the cabin. "I'm afraid I don't have much else to offer right now."

"I'll Conjure us something suitable, Mist," she stated.

They entered Mist's small cabin, which consisted of a small common room and two bedrooms in the back. One had been Mist's with room for Eron's cradle, and the other was Kimmie's. Kimmie's room was empty now, but Mist had been thinking of letting Eron sleep in her room by himself. Mist's room was small and her bed was smaller, and Eron was getting a little big to share it with her. Eron was dutifully picking up the small shards of one of Mist's plates, almost finished, and he knew better than to stop even to greet Triana before he was done. Triana sat down at the small, ramshackle table and immediately Conjured up a large meal of roasted pork, boiled potatoes, a large loaf of warm, dark bread, and bowls of a thick vegetable stew.

Eron finished, throwing the last bits of crockery into a wastebin Mist kept beside the door, and then ambled over to the table and held his arms out to Triana. She reached down and picked him up, holding him out so she could look at him. "He's getting bigger every day," she said. "How are you, Eron?"

"Tee-wana," he bubbled. Eron had always had trouble pronouncing her name, and that was customarily the closest he got. "Did you bring me a present?"

"Not this time, cub," she told him. "Maybe next time. Now sit yourself down and eat." She hoisted him over to the empty chair beside her, and then stared at him until he picked up a spoon and started feeding himself. He wasn't very graceful, but his Were nature gave him more dexterity than a human as old as he appeared, so he didn't make too much of a mess.

"What happened in Suld, Triana?" Mist pressed. "Why isn't Kimmie coming home?"

"She's on a journey with Tarrin," she replied, then she very thoroughly went over everything that happened at Suld. "They had to leave almost as soon as the smoke cleared," she sighed. "They don't have much time, and they're going to run into enough trouble on the seas as it is."

"I can understand why they left, but why did Kimmie go?"

"I wanted another Were-cat with Tarrin," Triana told her. "Jesmind couldn't go because of Jasana, and Kimmie had already arranged to take lessons in magic from a human Wizard that travels with Tarrin, so I picked her."

Mist looked at her, then laughed. "Clever girl!" she said. "Is Tarrin that attached to Jesmind, Triana?"

"I've not seen two Were-cats closer than those two," she replied. "They're almost as sappy as humans." She snorted. "It can't be good for them. I also picked Kimmie because she has it for Tarrin. I can smell it all over her. I'm hoping that she educates him about the more necessary aspects of our kind."

"What a thing to say," Mist murmured, though she was happy to hear it.

"Jesmind can't be hogging Tarrin to herself," Triana grunted. "When she starts getting tired of him, she'll spoil him for all the other females. She keeps forgetting that he was born human, and he still thinks like they do. If he ups and decides to think of Jesmind as a *wife*, he won't touch another female. And Jesmind would be the sort to lead him on, just so he wouldn't be mated to another female when she decides she wants him again." She blew out her breath. "She's always been a little selfish."

"Well, Triana, we talked about him, when she was here," she disclosed. "She agreed not to interfere if me or Kimmie went after him."

"She meant it at the time, Mist," Triana sighed. "But after getting him for mate, she's been acting like they'll never get tired of each other. I think this time apart will be good for her, show her that she *will* push him away eventually. I just want Tarrin to be ready for when that happens. If I'm lucky, Kimmie will seduce him and show him that there is life after Jesmind." She snorted, then chuckled. "She won't be able to resist. Jesmind will be too far away to do anything about it, and Jesmind knows it's going to happen."

"I think Tarrin is stronger than you think, Triana," Mist said defensively. "He may have been born human, but he understands his instincts. Better than many Were-cats."

"I know how strong he is, but you know how humans get when it comes to love. I know my son better than anyone else, but even I'm not sure how

he's going to handle it the first time he and Jesmind have a fight, and he tries to kill her. That's about the time any other Were-cat pair would know it's time to separate, but with him, I'm not sure. The way they look at each other, I'm afraid they may try to stay together, and one of them *will* end up hurting the other."

Mist hesitated. She remembered the story she'd heard of him from when he was at the Tower, about when he nearly killed his birth mother. That had almost driven him mad. But he'd come so far since then! She had seen it in him during the single night they had been mates, a strength that could rise up and conquer any obstacle. "I think he'll be alright."

"I think so too," Triana grunted. "I don't want to interfere with this. I want Tarrin to get seduced, I want him to realize that it's alright. It'll help him understand the nature of mates. I know Jesmind didn't tell him that when she let him leave, she gave him up. He thinks he's still mates with her, but he's not. He's a free male, fair game, and I'm confident that Kimmie's going to teach him that." She looked at Mist. "I want him to learn about being mates from someone *other* than my very selfishly motivated daughter. I want him to learn that it's alright to love Jesmind, so long as it doesn't interfere with his ability to take other mates. Love may be love, but instincts are stronger, and there aren't enough males around for him to only be willing to be mates with one female. Kimmie will show him that it's alright to love Jesmind, yet still be able to mate with other females."

"He took me for mate."

"You didn't give him much choice," she said with a very slight smile. "But he did, and that's a good sign. He needs to learn the difference between love and mates. He can love Jesmind and be mates with Kimmie at the same time. He'll have to learn it eventually, so better now than later." She looked at the table absently. "And if he knows he can be mates with a female after he leaves Jesmind, it'll make things easier for him. He does love my daughter, Mist. It'll hurt him when they split up, so it'll be good for him to see that there are other females out there, and it'll be good for him to know that the hurt doesn't last long. He can love her and still be a devoted mate to another female, and when he splits up with that female, he can go back to Jesmind."

"True," Mist agreed. "If one of us doesn't steal him away from her."

Triana glanced at her. "I rather doubt that, but don't worry, Mist. He cares for you. If you took him for mate, he'd be a devoted mate to you. Once he realizes how Kimmie feels about him, he'll be a good mate for her as well."

"That's fine with us. Me and Jesmind and Kimmie, we kind of agreed to share him. As long as we keep him away from the other females, it's alright."

Triana looked at her, then laughed. "That explains a great deal right there," she said. "I was wondering why Jesmind wasn't so against Kimmie going."

"She will be in a while."

"I think her magnanimous mood left her as soon as the ship pulled out and she realized that Tarrin was going to be alone on that ship with Kimmie," Triana agreed.

"Excuse me if I sound even more biased than you, but I hope Kimmie gets him."

"She will. A male trapped on a ship with a willing female? Come on, Mist! What do you think is going to happen?"

Mist laughed. "Kimmie has her prey cornered."

"That she does. The sooner Tarrin bows to the inevitable, the better it will be for everyone."

There was a sound at the door, and then to both of their surprise, someone knocked upon it. Mist stood up immediately and moved to grab Eron, but Triana calmed her with a paw and moved to answer the door. She opened it, and Mist saw beyond her a human female, a little tall for a human, lithe and voluptuous. She was a very pretty woman, with a lovely face, a pretty body garbed in a strange garment that looked all shimmery...like stars spun into silk. Her scent was a human one, but there was something strange about it, something unusual that Mist had never scented before...almost like stone. But it was her hair and eyes that got Mist's attention. Her hair was *striped*, and the colors were absolutely bizarre. Colors like *green*, and *blue*, and even purple. And her eyes! She must have been victim to some kind of strange magical accident, for she

had no white or pupils, only a strange glowing amber radiance that emanated from her eye sockets. But she seemed perfectly able to see, for she smiled when she looked up at Triana. The Were-cat matron seemed taken aback by this strange visitor, stepping back in surprise and giving the woman enough room to simply invite herself into Mist's house.

Mist saw that she was barefoot. But it was only one more oddity about this strange woman.

"Triana," the woman nodded with a rich, strong contralto voice. "You're looking well."

"What are *you* doing here?" the matron gasped, staring at the woman in shock.

"I can go anywhere I want now, Triana," she smiled. "And I wanted to come and see Tarrin's son. Is that so wrong?"

Mist's son had climbed down from his chair and ran past Mist, towards the woman. Mist had to strangle the impulse to snatch her son away from the strange stripe-haired woman, but something deep inside her told her that this woman was not an enemy. There was just something about her that calmed Mist, and allowed her to kneel down and embrace the child lovingly. "Eron," she said with a radiant smile. "You're getting so big!"

"Shining lady," he bubbled, looking up at her adoringly. "You came!"

"Of course I came," she said with a chiding smile. "Did you think I'd forget about you?"

"How do you know my son?" Mist demanded, the sense of peace she was feeling dissolving away in a wave of fear and anger. How did this woman know her son?

"Eron and I are very good friends, aren't we, Eron?" she asked him.

"Yah, Mama. She visits my dreams, and we play games and she tells me stories! And you came!"

"I promised you I'd come, little one," she reminded him. "I always keep my promises."

"Who are you?" Mist demanded, suddenly confused.

"Who I am doesn't matter, Mist," she said seriously, standing up. "I am a friend of Tarrin's. That is all you need know. While he's gone, I decided to watch over his family for him, and I take my job seriously. You and Eron are part of his family, so I have come to meet you." She looked at Triana, who paused and then nodded imperceptibly. "I came here to give you a gift, Mist," she announced, reaching into the bodice of her dress, and then withdrawing two strange necklaces. The amulet at the end of the black steel chain was also black, and she recognized it as the symbol that Tarrin wore around his neck. "These are for you. You and Eron."

"Why should I take them?" she demanded hotly.

"Because I *say* you'll take them," Triana ordered flatly. "Trust me, Mist. You won't be disappointed."

"What are they?"

"Insurance," the woman with the strange eyes and hair replied cryptically. "These are special necklaces, Mist. They are magical, and Tarrin would want you to have them."

"Magical?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes," she replied. "As long as you wear them, nobody can track you down using magic. And they'll allow you to shapeshift without losing your clothes, just like the way Tarrin's amulet does for him."

That piqued her curiosity. The annoying part about shapeshifting was that the clothes didn't change with you, and you had to leave them behind. Nudity didn't bother Were-cats, for they were part animal and had little concept of human modesty, but a naked Were-cat walking down the street of a human city did attract attention.

"These are safe?" Mist asked Triana.

"Safe enough," she replied with a nod.

"Just to warn you, Mist. Once you put it on, it won't come off. It won't allow itself to get lost, and it won't allow itself to be stolen. If you want to take it off, you'll need Tarrin to do it for you. Does that bother you?"

Mist considered it, but she had made care to mention that Tarrin could remove the amulet. She looked at the woman suspiciously. She was a

stranger, and Mist feared her if only because of that...but Triana seemed to know her and trust her. And she was a close friend of Tarrin's, from the way she talked. Mist trusted Tarrin, and she found that if she was sure she was close to him, she would trust her if only because she trusted him. "How do I know you're not lying?" she asked.

"Look into my eyes, Mist, and then ask that question again."

Mist did indeed look into those strange eyes. She looked deeper, and deeper, and then she saw something. Something...strange. The sense of peace she'd felt when the woman entered her house intensified, and she realized that it came from the woman's love for Tarrin, and her love for his family. Mist simply *knew* right then and there that this woman was not an enemy, that she had genuine care for and interest in Mist and her son. That she was there as a friend.

Mist's hostile posture melted away, and she actually blushed slightly. "I, I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'll accept your gift, lady."

"That will never do," the woman said. "Call me Mother, child. All my closest friends do."

"Mother," she corrected herself immediately, feeling a strange compulsion to please this strange woman.

She took the amulets, and felt how warm they were. One of them had a short chain, obviously meant for Eron, and she looked at them. They looked just like Tarrin's amulet.

"Put it on, Mist," she prompted. "I won't feel safe about leaving until you do."

Obeying out of impulse, she took the amulet meant for her and put the chain around her neck, then settled it on her chest. It seemed suddenly hot, then cold, and then it got heavy for a split second...and then it simply felt like it belonged there. She wrapped her paw around it for a moment, surprised at what she felt, then she bent down and helped Eron put on his.

"Aww, you're leaving, shining lady?" Eron pouted.

"I'll always visit your dreams, little cubling," she smiled sweetly. "But it costs me much to come and visit this way. It's much easier to do it the other way."

"Who *are* you?" Mist asked, almost plaintively.

"You already know that answer, Mist," she replied cryptically, looking at Triana. "How long are you staying?"

"A few hours," she replied. "I need to get back to Suld. Jesmind needs constant defusing."

"I've noticed," the woman laughed.

"How is Tarrin doing?"

"He's doing fine."

"Has Kimmie seduced him yet?"

The woman looked at her, and then laughed. "No, but Tarrin is fully aware that she's interested," she replied. "He's resisting her out of respect for Jesmind, but I doubt it will last long. Tarrin understands his instincts, Triana. He knows when it's not healthy to deny them."

"Good," she snorted.

"Well, I hate to come and go, but it's time for me to go back," she sighed. "We'll talk later, Triana?"

"If you wish," she replied respectfully.

"I do wish it," she assured with a nod. "Goodbye, Mist. It was nice to meet you."

And with that, she knelt and gave Eron another hug, kissed him on the cheek, then stood and walked towards the open door.

"But who *are* you?" Mist asked a final time, but got no answer. The woman stepped out the door and closed it behind her. "Triana, who is that woman?" she demanded.

"Mist, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," the matron said seriously. "She's a friend. A very unusual friend. Let's just leave it at that."

"She's the shining lady, Mama," Eron told her, as if that explained everything.

The shining lady. Mist looked at the closed door, thoroughly convinced that something very weird, very unique, had just happened. But she had no

idea what it was. She just had a *feeling*.

She reached up and put her paw around the amulet, felt the strange energy that emanated from it, and then it just *hit* her. She gasped, her eyes widening in shock, and she turned to Triana with pleading eyes. "It *wasn't*--"

"It was," she said with a simple nod. "Feel very lucky, Mist. You were just visited by a Goddess."

Mist gaped at her.

Triana laughed. "I *told* you that you wouldn't believe it if I told you," she chided her. "Now let's eat. I have to get back to Suld by nightfall, or Jesmind may get pecky and kill somebody."

Chapter 1

It was a fine day to be out.

The day was sunny, cloudless, and delightfully warm. The winds blew stiffly over the expanse of open ocean, which was rolling with small waves that barely rocked the ship as its bow cut through them on a westward course. The sails were full of wind, pushing the ship along at a pace that few ships on the seas could match, the speed and grace of the technologically superior Wikuni clippers. Everyone on board the rather large, elaborately painted and decorated clipper ship was busy with work, as sailors minded the sails and rigging to keep them adjusted for maximum speed, and officers stood on the deck studying the sails with hawkish eyes, issuing commands to the sailors above every time the wind so much as fluttered. The Queen had demanded full sail and best speed to Wikuna, and the proud crew of the Royal ship, a ship that did nothing but carry the monarch, would prove to their queen that they were the best sailors on the twenty seas.

Tarrin looked down at them from the crow's nest, a tiny barrel nailed to the top of the center mast, the highest point on the ship, and marvelled at the skill of the Wikuni sailors to handle a ship with so much rigging. The ship constantly had to slow down to prevent from breaking its formation with the squadron of fully armed military vessels that escorted the Royal clipper, ships that formed a very tight, overlapping defensive ring that kept the Queen's vessel firmly within its center. They had no need for a lookout when they were surrounded by friendly ships, so the crow's nest had been empty and available, and Tarrin couldn't resist climbing up and getting a good look around. He raised his face to the sky, staring up at the cloudless, blue expanse, which was broken in half by the ghostly band of white that ran from the eastern horizon to the western horizon. Those were the Skybands, wearing their ghostly veil during the day, only to cast it away and shine down on the land with its brilliant bands of color during the night, colored light that, when combined with the light of any of the four moons,

was enough even for humans to see well enough to move around. It never truly got dark on Sennadar unless the night sky was covered with thick clouds. They looked just as far away as ever, but they were narrower than what he was used to seeing. The Skybands appeared narrower and narrower as one moved towards the equator. He'd never been on the equator before, but Keritanima said that they looked like a knife's edge in the sky. Where his mother was from, the great northern kingdom of Ungardt, the Skybands took up almost half the sky. Then again, that was so far north that the sun sometimes didn't rise during the winter and didn't set during the summer.

It was a beautiful day. He looked down at the the deck, absently scratching at the fur on his arm. Tarrin was not human, though he had been born so. He was a Were-cat now, a magically imbued being with the power to shapechange into the form of a common housecat. The circumstances that caused him to be turned were very complicated, and things seemed even more complicated now. The Were-cat who had bitten him, the fiery female Jesmind, was now the mother of his child, and the people who had sent her after him, the *katzh-dashi*, were now his allies again. He never dreamed he'd go back to the Tower after what they did to him, but he had. Time had mellowed him, had given him a chance to heal those wounds, though not completely. Tarrin had been Were for nearly two years now, and had come to accept it, even desire it. Where most Were-kin were not so obvious, the Were-cats were. Unable to take the full human form without pain, Were-cats took a natural form that was almost human, but not quite. He still looked human, but he had very inhuman features, such as his tail, or his cat ears, or the fur that covered his arms to just above the elbows and his legs to just above the knees, and the fact that he stood head and shoulders over most humans and Wikuni. His hands weren't quite hands, they were hybrids between human hands and cat's paws, and his feet were elongated and thicker than a human foot, forcing him to stand on his toes, with the balls of his feet rather wide. His feet were much more unusual looking than his paws--or his hands, as a human would think of them--but they gave him great balance and stability. Each paw and foot also held very long, very sharp, and extremely wicked claws, the natural weapons of a Were-cat. Tufts of fur grew on the outsides of his wrists and forearms and around his ankles, what were called fetlocks, a visible sign of an age that had been forced upon him.

They were all a little afraid of him, the Wikuni sailors. He could smell it on them. Tarrin's senses were exceptional, and he could smell fear, track people by scent, and could often smell it when people were lying to him. His sense of smell was the most acute sense he possessed, and like all Were-cats, he depended on it, was guided by it, and it formed the foundation of his perception of the world. Where humans would identify things by their names, or how they looked, Tarrin did so by their scent. He couldn't blame them for being afraid of him, after what had happened lately.

Tarrin had been feeling...annoyed. That was a good word for it. It had started out as depression, as he had just been forced to leave his mate and daughters behind in Suld, but that had eased over the journey. He knew it would, because he talked to them every day using magic. Talking to them every day made them seem not so far away, and had eased his sense of loneliness. He also had his blood sisters, Keritanima and Allia, to provide him with the companionship he needed to take his mind off Jesmind, and his friends Azakar, Dar, Miranda, Camara Tal, and Phandebrass were there to talk to him when he felt unsettled. Whenever he felt troubled, however, he immediately sought out Dolanna. The petite, sober, wise Sorceress had never failed to calm him, and her gentle wisdom comforted him many times in the past, as it would do so many times in the future. Tarrin held Dolanna in the highest respect, so much so that he deferred to her authority, something he did not do for anyone else on the ship, not even Keritanima. In his mind, Dolanna was the dominant, was the stronger of them. It wasn't true in a physical sense, nor was it true in a magical sense. Tarrin could break Dolanna over his knee. But she had been the one to help guide him through the traumatizing time after he'd been bitten and turned, and that caused him to see her as a mother figure, a person whose interaction with him caused him to perceive her as dominant over him.

Tarrin's very simple outlook on life boiled down to that one concept...dominance. In his mind, he was the dominant, for he was larger, stronger, and faster than almost everyone else. In his mind, that was all that was necessary for others to obey him. And when they didn't, he perceived it as a direct challenge, one that could not go unanswered. The only being on the ship that Tarrin even came close to viewing as a respectable rival was Szath, Keritanima's massive Vendari bodyguard, but Tarrin didn't bother fighting him to establish the pecking order between them. Szath was

Keritanima's servant, and deferred to her in all things. Since Szath submitted to someone who was submissive to him, Tarrin saw himself as dominant over the Vendari. He was glad he wouldn't have to fight him over that, though. Tarrin didn't back down from any challenge, but Szath was *big...big*, and fast. A fight between them would be evenly matched, with the outcome uncertain.

The only real hole in his ordered little concept of the ship was Kimmie. The female Were-cat, who had come along to tutor under Phandebrass, was causing Tarrin certain discomfort. It wasn't her fault, that was true enough, but it was getting to be very inconvenient. Kimmie was a female, and she also rather liked him. That much was a given, for she'd said as much. She'd also admitted that she'd like to take him for mate, but wouldn't do so as long as he was mates with Jesmind. She had even promised Jesmind that she wouldn't touch him during the journey. If she made it so clear, why was she-

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He snorted. Females. Kimmie must have forgotten her promise, because she had it all over her scent. She was bandy. Tarrin was part cat, and that gave him the instincts of his animal brother as well as the senses. When cats were interested in each other, it showed up in their scents. Kimmie's scent was absolutely radiating her availability. That wasn't unusual in Were-cat females, and Kimmie had no control over it. She couldn't smell it on herself, so she may not even be aware that she was doing it. But she was, and it was getting to him. Tarrin loved Jesmind, she was his mate, and the idea of dallying with Kimmie seemed...wrong. Oh, there was interest there--*real* interest--and that made it worse. Tarrin did find Kimmie to be attractive, and she knew it. Tarrin may love Jesmind, but he had the instincts of an animal within him, and no healthy male animal was going to ignore a willing female.

That formed a fundamental aspect of Were-cat society. There were seven females for every male, and the Were-cat nature, being so powerfully grounded in the instincts of the cat, made it impossible for mates to form lasting bonds. Females took males for mate for a while, until their need to be alone overwhelmed their desire for companionship, and the mates parted. It always happened, and Tarrin knew that it would happen to him and Jesmind despite how much they loved each other. Not even love could overwhelm the instincts, and cats were independent creatures. Females had

to share the few males around, and competition for males was fierce, even for males who were already mates with a female. Mate stealing was an honorable and practiced custom, a custom of attempting to seduce a male away from another female. It created a lot of friction in Were-cat society, but Were-cats thrived in the competitive atmosphere, ensuring that the crafty female, or the strong one, would hold onto her mate and succeed in reproducing. A female worked to find a male, then catch him, then she worked hard to keep the other females away from him. Males were rather appreciative of the custom, for males rarely went without companionship for very long. They were careful to show interest in all females and not show favoritism; even if a female hated a male, she may take him for mate if she was desperate, and that would make the mating a very nervous one. A few males did have favorites, however. All females knew that Thean was owned by Triana, and that Thean adored her. He would be mates with other females, but if Triana showed up to claim him, he would leave them.

He had come up into the crow's nest to avoid Kimmie for a while, to clear his head and think. It wasn't Kimmie's fault, but she wouldn't leave him alone. She would almost seem to go out of her way to track him down and talk to him, or ask him about things, and that closeness made him more than aware that her scent was trying to bait him into making advances. Female Were-cats were usually very direct about getting mates, but Kimmie wasn't being direct like she should be. Was she trying to suppress her interest, or simply trying to get Tarrin to touch *her*, thereby keeping the promise she made to Jesmind? He wished he knew. If Kimmie came flat out and asked, he'd know...and he didn't know how he'd answer.

It was the combination of Kimmie's distracting him and his separation from his family that had been making him short tempered. Tarrin was feral, meaning that he had an automatic suspicion of and distrust for people he didn't know. That had softened greatly when he was with his mate and daughter, but now that he was away from them, outside of the comfortable confines of the Tower and back out in the cold, harsh world, it had begun to creep back into his personality. Wikuni sailors that had seemed friendly on the first couple of days began to look more and more threatening, as the old feral sense of paranoia had begun to reestablish itself in his mind. There had been a time when Tarrin couldn't control that fear, control that sense of danger from anyone he didn't know, and it caused him to shut himself away

from strangers. Now, however, he understood his feral nature, and had learned to overcome the fear to the point to where he could tolerate the presence of strangers around him. He wouldn't turn his back on them, and he wasn't very cordial or friendly when he talked to them, but he refused to allow their presence to interfere with his daily life the way it used to. With him being lonely for his family, annoyed over Kimmie, and wary around strangers, it created a situation nearly as explosive as gunpowder. On two separate occasions so far, Tarrin had struck at unknown sailors that had gotten too close to him. The blows hadn't been to kill--Tarrin could kill with a single swipe of his paw if he so wished it--more like warnings to stay away from him. Keritania and Dolanna had to go around to all the sailors and explain that this Were-cat was *not* was friendly and personable as the female, and to stay out of his way, and also to automatically obey any command he gave them, no matter what it was or how crazy it seemed. They made it clear to the sailors that their lives depended on that obedience.

Tarrin's behavior had been very disappointing for his sisters. They had seen him be so calm in the Tower, so mellow, almost like the way he'd been before they fled from it the first time, but they simply did not understand. Once a Were-cat was feral, they would never be anything other than feral. The degree of the feral nature could change, as could its symptoms depending on the surroundings, but it never went away. Tarrin knew he would live the rest of his life in fear of strangers, unable to trust anyone he did not know, not in the slightest manner. Now that he was out of the comforting surroundings of the Tower, away from the calming influence of his mate and daughters, the old mannerisms were returning, and returning quickly.

He looked down to the deck and saw Phandebrass and Kimmie near the bow. Phandebrass was a human Wizard, thin, tall, and his age was somewhat indeterminate. He had hair that was partially white and partially dark, which had to be the result of some kind of magical spell, for it had been white before that, with a narrow face that seemed young but held eyes that looked ancient. He wore a simple gray robe with mystical symbols embroidered into it and a ridiculous conical hat. He was an addled man, given to rambling on when he talked and speaking of things that nobody else could understand, but Tarrin respected him. He was flaky and erratic, a bit annoying at times, but he was a very good Wizard, and he was

exceptionally intelligent despite his rather befuddled demeanor. Tarrin would trust his life in Phandebrass if it came down to it. Phandebrass' little pets, two red-scaled drakes, sat on a rope coil beside their master, watching him. Chopstick and Turnkey had become the ship's mascots. They were curious little creatures, fearless and bold, and were rather friendly and affectionate. Tarrin had not liked them when he first met them, but he had grown quite fond of them, to the point where they commonly slept with him at night, all curled up in a bundle of scales and fur on a bed that was so small he was forced to sleep upon it in his cat form. Phandebrass was explaining something to Kimmie, waving his arms in an animated fashion as the female Were-cat nodded with an intent look on her face. Kimmie had come to learn magic from Phandebrass, and he had begun her education.

He shifted his gaze, to where Keritanima, Miranda, and Szath were near the sterncastle. Keritanima was a Wikuni, the queen of Wikuna, a bipedal being that resembled a mixture between a human and a fox. She had a human body, but had a fox-like head, complete with a muzzle. She had reddish fur with white on her front, black tufts of fur on her ears and the tip of her tail, and amber eyes that gave people the creeps when she stared at them. Tarrin thought that she was rather cute, for her fox features were flavored with human appearance, making her look more like a human woman with fox features rather than a fox walking on two legs. All Wikuni were like that, resembling animals, but not all of them were foxes. Most of the sailors on the ship were varieties of cats, dogs, and other carnivorous mammals, like badgers or wolves. There were some bird Wikuni and some reptilian Wikuni as well, but they weren't as common as the mammal Wikuni. Keritanima was sitting on a cushioned chair, reading from a book in her lap, as Miranda sat beside her in a similar chair and kept her eyes on her knitting as she conversed with her employer and friend. Keritanima was very smart, easily the smartest of them all, but she didn't advertise that. Keritanima--or Kerri, as he called her--was a woman of deep mysteries, a result of a lifetime of hiding her true self from those around her. She was born a princess, but had no desire to take the throne, given the rather bloody and deadly environment of Wikuni politics. She had thrown all her energies into escaping from her gilded prison and running away, and that caused her to submerge herself in other personalities. Keritanima was the best actress he'd ever seen, able to fool anyone and everyone into believing that she *was* the person she pretended to be. She had used her vast knowledge of

political chicanery to succeed in escaping from her father, only to have him capture her and drag her back to Wikuna. Tarrin still wasn't sure what happened there, but he did know that Keritanima had somehow managed to get her father abdicated from the throne and take it herself. She didn't want it, but she had done it anyway, probably for no reason other than to get rid of her father. Her Royal Majesty's resources had been incredibly useful during the battle for Suld. Since she commanded the armies of one of the prominent nations on Sennadar, she was able to supply troops, materials, and even the deadly muskets and cannons that only the Wikuni knew how to make, to the defense of Suld. When she wasn't acting like a queen, Keritanima was an engaging young woman, funny and endearing, with a good sense of humor and a vibrant nature that made people like her.

Miranda was a mink Wikuni, almost criminally cute and innocent looking, yet Tarrin knew that the Miranda hiding under that deceptive facade was as worldly and seedy as a veteran sailor. Everything about Miranda was feminine, from her voluptuous frame to her long blond hair and silky white fur, to her wide, cheeky face with a cute little button nose on the end of a short muzzle and round ears poking out of her blond hair. Miranda was Keritana's maid, a member of her council of advisors, and also was the head of her intelligence service. Miranda had served Keritanima faithfully and well for a very long time, since the time when she was a princess trying to stay alive long enough to run away so she wouldn't have to take the throne, and they were very close. Tarrin liked Miranda very much, for she was smart, quiet, observant, and often saw to the core of the matter. She had been trained by Keritanima, so she had some of Kerri's quirks, but she was much bawdier than her more uptight employer. Miranda was attractive, sexy, and desirable, and she knew it. She used them as weapons to get what she wanted from men, and that made her an incredibly effective spy. Few men could think rationally when Miranda gave them her cheeky grin and fluttered her eyelashes at them, even human men. Miranda's beauty and desirability crossed racial lines. Tarrin knew alot more about Miranda than she did herself, like the fact that she was an Avatar, a mortal who had within her the power of the god who had touched her. Tarrin had discovered that Miranda had literally been created to be Keritanima's companion, a woman with a mind to keep up with the vastly intelligent Wikuni princess, and a stalwart companion to be with her through all the hard times. One of the Wikuni gods had put her hand on

Miranda before she was born, made her what she was, even though Miranda herself had no idea that she was blessed in that manner. Miranda supernatural nature had been what had attracted him to her at first, for the god who had touched her was a god of the sky and the moons, and Tarrin, like all Were-kin, had an unusual affinity for the moons that probably explained all the wild stories about how Were-kin always changed into monsters when the largest moon, Domammon, was full. Miranda sang to him the same way that the moons sang to him, and it had a very calming effect on him and caused him to be very attracted to her.

They were good friends, but they all knew that they took a second seat to Allia. She was sitting with Dolanna and Dar near the bow, not far from Phandebrass and Kimmie, the petite *katzh-dashi* instructing them in some magic. Allia was Selani, a race of warriors that lived in the eastern desert, and she was, simply put, the most breathtakingly beautiful woman alive. No one could look at Allia and not be moved by her appearance. She had creamy brown skin and ethereal features, sharp and alluring, with large eyes that were the color of the sea. Her hair was a silver-white color, caused by the bleaching of the sun over generations, which often covered up the tips of her pointed ears. Allia looked human from a distance, but when one got close to her, they saw that she obviously was not. She was unnaturally tall for a woman--at least to a human--as tall as a human man, and had much sharper and more defined features than a human. That sharpness of appearance was that made her so lovely, a bone structure that no human woman could possess that accented everything about her that was pleasing to the eye and made her so attractive. The pointed ears were one of the big giveaways that she wasn't just a thin Mahuut, a race of brown-skinned humans, as did the fact that she only had four fingers on her hands instead of five. This day she was wearing a loose, baggy shirt that concealed her very tight, busty torso, silky skin wrapping steel-toned muscle, yet possessed of enough bosom to make most women envious of her. She wore a pair of tight leather breeches that accented her long, shapely legs and alluring hips, pants that made every male eye move with her as she passed. She was beautiful, but Allia was a warrior, a proud warrior from a race of warriors, her entire life bound up in her honor. Few outside the Selani understood the Selani, so they all did not understand Allia. Most found her cold and arrogant, maybe even a little conceited, but they didn't understand Selani ways. Allia was a warrior, and a good one, and she was also a

woman who held tremendous honor among her people. Allia was actually a very modest and self-effacing woman, but she was proud of who she was and what she had attained, and it showed in her manner and her speech. Allia didn't talk very much, but when she did, everyone around her listened to her. Allia was a wise woman, kind and loving, and she was Tarrin's best friend. The love he held for Allia was so intense that it defied rational explanations, but it was a platonic love. She would always be his closest, most intimate friend, willing to tell her things he wouldn't tell another living soul, not even his mate, Jesmind, because he knew they would go no further. Allia's love for him was just as strong, and it formed the basis of a bond of friendship that could never be broken. No matter what either of them did, or how far they fell from grace, they would always love one another and respect one another.

He wondered what Dolanna was teaching them. Dolanna was a human woman, very short and petite, yet with a figure proportionate with her size that made her attractive. She was a handsome woman, not beautiful or cute like Allia or Miranda, with pleasing features and dark, expressive eyes and a thick mane of long, dark hair. Dolanna was the undisputed leader of their group, the one all of them respected and trusted, for she was very wise, very learned, and had travelled for so long that she knew someone almost everywhere and was never caught off guard by the dangers of the road. Dolanna was a calm woman, able to take what was thrown at her without getting too ruffled, and always with an idea for how to get out of a bad situation. Tarrin adored Dolanna, respected her as much as his parents or bond-mother, and looked up to her. She was the only one on the ship outside of Keritania or Allia who could berate him or chide him for doing wrong and expect to live through it. There was an air of calm that always surrounded the woman, who was from the southern kingdom of Sharadar on the distant continent of Arathorn, a sense of assuredness that calmed everyone around her. She was a careful, thorough woman with an eye for detail and an answer for every question. He enjoyed her company, for she never failed to make him feel safe.

He smiled as Dar touched the Weave, and wove an Illusion of a Troll for some reason. Dar was a very young man, an Arkisian, with swarthy, dark skin and features that promised that he would be a handsome man when he was fully grown. He wore this day a simple white linen shirt, his brown

doublet laying on the deck before him, and a pair of black trousers, with leather shoes. He was about sixteen now, just starting to shave, but despite his young years he was a very accomplished Sorcerer. He had been Tarrin's roommate when he was at the Tower to learn, and had become a good friend. Dar was a dreamer and an artist, with an almost amazing affinity for weaving Illusions. But he was also a smart, worldly young man who was the son of very successful merchants, and because of that, had a very broad education that dipped into many different aspects of history, society, culture, and politics. He was intimidated by the august personas around him, and rarely spoke, but when he was alone with Tarrin or Kerri or Allia, he was much more open and affable. Tarrin liked Dar very much, for he was an honest young man with a very mellow nature.

There was a sudden shout, and Tarrin looked almost straight down, to where Azakar and Camara Tal were sparring. The Amazon had returned to wearing her halter and *tripa* skirt, and the ensemble showed much more skin than they concealed. Camara Tal was a very tall woman, with copper-colored skin and hair as black as pitch, tall and buxom and sleekly muscular. She was a very handsome woman, with a sharp-cheeked face, large, dark eyes under elegantly sloped eyebrows, and a sharp chin and narrow nose and a pair of pouting lips that drove men crazy. She also had a scar on her cheek, the only mar on her coppery skin, a scar that she had told him once was something that her goddess wouldn't allow her to remove. A reminder of some past event or transgression, though Camara Tal had never told him the specifics. She was a Priestess of the goddess of the Amazons, but had been a warrior before the calling of the religious order. She prided herself on her ability to fight, and was checking to see how improved Azakar had become under his tutelage with the Vendari. Camara Tal reminded him a lot of his own mother, Elke, a gruff, direct, no-nonsense kind of woman who didn't play around, yet held great capacity for love and friendship within her. Once one got past her rather unfriendly front, they found a warm, caring woman beneath, and a stalwart friend. Tarrin had been learning the spells of the Priests from her during the mornings, chants in some arcane language that nobody spoke anymore, a language that was used universally among all Priests, no matter what god they served. They used the same spells as well, the Goddess had told him, part of a rule that the Elder Gods had made concerning the gods granting their power to mortals. Tarrin found them difficult to learn, for the language they used

made very little sense to him. It was more a memorization of obscure words and sounds than any kind of language he had heard. Tarrin had a strong affinity for languages, being able to speak six languages fluently, so it bothered him a great deal that he couldn't decipher this odd languages that all Priests used to chant their spells, yet none of them seemed able to speak outside of spellcasting.

She was really pressing Azakar. Azakar was an oddity, a human that was so unbelievably tall that he was even taller than Tarrin. He had to be ten spans tall--a Wikuni would call him eight *feet* tall...strange term, that--an absolute monster of a human that was as strong as three men yet moved with the speed and agility of a panther. Even decked out in his plate armor, so heavy that an average man couldn't even lift it, let alone wear it, he still moved with speed and precision, though there was a great deal of clanking and squeaking involved when he did move. Azakar had been caught up with Keritanima when she had been separated from the others, and had taken lessons in fighting from the Vendari bodyguards that usually protected the queen, but could not come to Suld with her this time. Tarrin had seen him fight during the short war in Suld, and he had to admit that he had come a very long way. Binter and Sisska had taught him new techniques, but they had also taught him what was most important for a warrior, patience. Azakar, or Zak to his friends, had learned how to not lose his head in a fight, to be controlled and calm and force the opponent to make mistakes that would allow him to defeat him. He watched as Camara Tal and Azakar danced around each other for long moments, then the Amazon lowered her sword meaningfully, a signal to stop. The human sheathed his weapon and took off his large visored helmet, baring a rather handsome face with a strong jaw and a slightly wide nose and full lips. Azakar was a Mahuut, a race of humans from the southern continent of Valkar, with dark brown skin and coal black hair that had curly waves in it, and slightly smallish dark eyes, eyes that seemed hooded and defensive most of the time. Azakar kept his hair very short on top and on the sides, but had rolling black waves of hair cascading down onto his shoulders in the back. Azakar had been a slave at one time, and though he couldn't see them, Tarrin knew that his back and the backs of his arms were covered in a multitude of criss-crossing scars, scars gained at the business end of a whip. Those scars defined much of Azakar's personality, for he was a haunted, defensive man, nervous around strangers and very quiet. He never tried to bring attention to himself,

which was very hard considering his great size. But he opened up when around friends, showing that he was a considerate, friendly man who had come through his slavery surprisingly well, not allowing it to change him too much on the inside, though it had hardened him on the outside. If he'd been a Were-cat, Tarrin would have considered him to be feral. He certainly had the traits.

A strange group, very diverse, but that diversity had proved to be an advantage so far. What one could not do, another could. They had Dolanna and Phandebrass' education, Keritania and Miranda's intelligence and cunning, Camara Tal's, Allia's, and Azakar's martial skill and bravery, Keritania's resources and contacts, and Tarrin had many unique attributes that made him useful. Firstly, he was a Were-cat, and his nature granted him several magical and quasi-magical abilities that made him exceptionally hard to kill. Were-kin could only be truly harmed by silver, magic, and weapons of nature, such as fire or acid or being struck by unworked, natural objects, or falling from a height. Wounds inflicted by a non-magical sword healed over as soon as the weapon was withdrawn, which only managed to anger the Were-cat struck by it. His Were nature gave him inhuman strength, a strength proportionate to a cat of the same size. Cats were deceptively powerful creatures, and it gave him the strength of six men, a raw power few humans could challenge. He also had the senses of a cat, and had the power to shapeshift into cat form. The gifts of his Were nature were primarily defensive, keeping him alive and allowing him to detect foes, but his magical powers were most definitely an offensive weapon. Tarrin was a Sorcerer, a very rare kind of Sorcerer called a *sui'kun*. He was a Weavespinner, a Sorcerer that could weave spells that normal Sorcerers could not even dream to be able to do alone. Tarrin's power was staggering, eclipsing every magician of any order around him, a huge power that few could withstand when he used it in anger. If that weren't bad enough, his Were nature had stopped his aging, rendering him all but immortal. That distinction was important, because it allowed him to transcend a law set forth by the Elder Gods that no mortal would be able to use more than one form of magic. Tarrin was a Sorcerer, but he was also a Druid, a being with mystical ties to the energy generated by living things, an energy called the All. He could use that energy to create Druidic magic, which was very versatile and clever, capable of some things Sorcery either could not accomplish, or he had yet to figure out a spell to accomplish it. He had

learned very recently that he could also use Priest magic, which was the reason he'd been taking lessons in Priest spells from Camara Tal, but it was still new and rather uncomfortable. The Goddess had already told him that she would grant no Priest spell to him that had a corresponding spell in Sorcery. Since Sorcery was very versatile in its own right, that covered virtually all Priest spells he had learned so far.

Tarrin was an almost undefeatable, unkillable opponent, and that was the only reason he was still alive. He and his friends were on a very important mission, a quest to find an ancient artifact that was called the Firestaff. It was an object that could turn a mortal into a god, if he held it on a certain day and at a certain time, the brief time in which it activated every five thousand years. Half the world knew of the Firestaff, and almost all of them were either searching for it or had sent agents to retrieve it for them, so Tarrin and his friends had encountered stiff competition, competition that had often turned violent. From the very beginning, one group in particular, called the *ki'zadun*, had known of Tarrin, and had continually tried to kill him almost from the very day he left his home village of Aldreth, before he knew anything about the Firestaff. They knew he was the destined *Mi'Shara*, a term for the one who had the best chance of finding and winning the Firestaff, and they knew he was in the hands of their enemies, the *katzh-dashi*. So they tried to kill him to deprive the order of Sorcerers from gaining his aid in the search. It did not in any way mean that he was the *only* one who could get it, but the ancient books that spoke of it said that of all beings, he had the best chance of succeeding. Even he could fail, and if he did, it would fall to some other who had a lesser chance than him, but may have better luck.

It was why they were on the sea. The Firestaff had revealed itself to the world during the battle at Suld, a battle between the *ki'zadun* and half of the kingdoms and races in the West, a battle to prevent the *ki'zadun* from finding and destroying the icon of the Goddess of magic, the Goddess who maintained the Weave. It was an attack aimed at destroying Sorcery and killing almost all Sorcerers in one fell swoop by destroying the physical manifestation of the Goddess, which was also her link to the physical world. Without the icon, the Goddess could not give magic to the world, and it would cause the Weave to tear. That would kill any Sorcerer with even a modicum of ability, and would conveniently destroy the one order of

magic that posed the greatest threat to their own bid to find the Firestaff. It had been a very involved plan, a very clever plan, and a very thorough plan. And it had come so close to succeeding that it still made the fur on Tarrin's tail ruffle with goosebumps. Had it not been for the warning he had received from Jegojah, once a Doomwalker under the control of the *ki'zadun*, they would not have known about it, and they would have won at Suld.

The Firestaff had revealed itself, and now virtually any Wizard, Priest, Sorcerer, and Druid knew in a general sense what direction in which the Firestaff lay in relation to where they had been standing that instant that the Firestaff had activated. Tarrin had no doubt that many of them were now on ships, sailing towards the direction of the Firestaff, hoping to get lucky and find it before anyone else. It was a race on the open sea, but Tarrin and his friends had a fundamental advantage in this race, for they had discovered very specific directions to follow that would take them to where it was hidden. The directions also held warnings, warnings that no ship with sails could reach the Firestaff, so they were sailing to Wikuna to take a very experimental ship that was propelled by a paddlewheel that was turned by a contraption called a steam engine. It could move over the ocean without sails, and would suit their needs.

That advantage made him optimistic about all this. They may find where the Firestaff is, but they wouldn't be able to physically reach it. But Tarrin's group could, meaning that the only hairy part would be getting the Firestaff back out. They'd have to run a gauntlet of enemies to get away with the prize.

He was hungry. Kimmie looked intent on her magical lessons, and it was about time for Keritanima's lessons as well. Kerri had crossed over during the battle at Suld, had become a Weavespinner herself, and that meant that there had been some pretty significant changes in her magic. Sorcery was much a function of the body as it was a magical power, and the crossing over changed the body. It rendered the Sorcerer invulnerable to any kind of heat or fire. Keritanima could stroll through a volcano and swim in the lava now, and the worst it would do is burn the dress off her body. But that physical change affected her magical powers, and she had temporarily lost them until she adjusted to the changes her body had undergone. Despite not being able to use magic, Tarrin had begun teaching her the basics of

Weavespinner magic, fully confident that she'd be able to use it when she did regain her powers.

In return for the lessons in magic, Keritanima had been teaching him the Wikuni language. Tarrin had used that as an excuse to experiment a bit with Priest magic, using a spell that caused him to remember with perfect clarity everything that was said during the spell's duration. It was how Dolanna learned Sha'Kar in a matter of a couple of rides. Now Tarrin was using it to learn Wikuni at an accelerated rate, and so far, it had been working. In six short days, he had gone from totally ignorant to being able to form sentences in Wikuni and understanding some of the more obscure grammar rules. He'd been working on his vocabulary the last few days, doubling or tripling the number of words he knew every day. At the rate he was going while using the magic to assist him, he'd be competent enough to understand almost everything everyone said when they got to Wikuna. The Priest spell augmented natural ability, and Tarrin's natural affinity for language made the spell that much more effective when he used it.

It seemed like cheating, though. He had learned Sulasian and Ungardt as a baby, from his parents. One was Sulasian, the other Ungardt. He learned Arakite from Karn Rocksplitter, the village smith in Aldreth, who taught it to him during long hours over the forge when Tarrin had briefly worked there to help Karn after his apprentice broke both his arms in a very bad accident. He learned Selani from Allia while they were at the Tower together, the Selani woman wanting to be able to speak to him in her native tongue, a language in which she could express herself more easily. He learned the dead language of Sha'Kar from scrolls that he, Keritanima, and Allia had stolen from forgotten vaults in the Cathedral of Karas in Suld. And he'd learned Sharadi from a Selani named Denai while crossing the Desert of Swirling Sands. Now he was learning Wikuni, but he was doing it in a matter of days, and that seemed...cheap. Things gained easily weren't valued as much, his mother would say. He was learning Wikuni with almost no effort, and he wondered if the language would hold in his mind long after the magic that helped place it there faded away. Cheating or not, he enjoyed it. Tarrin loved languages, loved to learn them, loved to speak them. It was a special gift, something that had nothing to do with Sorcery or being a Were-cat or anything, something he enjoyed. Where some knitted or collected ancient coins or carved or painted, Tarrin learned languages.

He felt better. Kimmie's scent had been flushed out of his nose, including the inviting smell of her availability, replaced by the clean smell of the salty ocean and the smell of the wood and rope and paint that surrounded him, as well as a few lingering scents of some those who had recently occupied the crow's nest before him. He felt ready to go back down there and endure it for a while, while he taught Keritanima about Weavespinner ways and she taught him the Wikuni language. He enjoyed the lessons, both teaching and learning, just enjoyed spending time with Keritanima. She had been separated from him when they had left Suld to seek out the Book of Ages, an ancient tome of knowledge that held information vital to their mission, had been taken back to Wikuna to face her father for running away. Tarrin had missed her desperately during the time she was gone, and it got worse when he himself had been separated from the others after getting the Book of Ages, forced to get back to Suld on foot while the rest of them went back by ship. That had been a journey of nearly two thousand leagues, and it had taken him nearly a year. A year with no one but Sarraya for company at first, and then later the companionship of Var and Denai, two Selani he'd met while crossing the Desert of Swirling Sands.

Var and Denai. He had to chuckle at the thought of them. They'd been coming to Suld with the other Selani to help, but he hadn't seen them there. He'd honestly forgotten about them in all the chaos, but when he did realize that he hadn't seen them, he asked his bond-mother Triana to find out what happened to them. Triana had circulated the word through the Druids, and one of them had finally responded two days ago. She had contacted him the day after and told him that his suspicions were correct. Denai was pregnant, and according to Selani custom, the expecting mother and the father of the child could not fight, to protect the interests of the child. They had gotten but two days from Suld when they were forced by their clan chief to leave the West, to return to the desert before Denai got too big to travel. They had been forced to turn around almost within sight of their destination.

Fate was sometimes cruel that way.

But he was happy to hear it. Var and Denai were young, and very much in love. The child would be loved, nurtured, and would grow up happy. That was the best thing that could happen for a child.

Climbing up onto the edge of the crow's nest, Tarrin vaulted out into open air and snagged a rope. He dropped down onto a mast spar, startling the two Wikuni who were trying to secure it with ropes, then almost immediately stepped off of it and dropped twenty spans to another rope, using it to break his fall. Tarrin had the agility and dexterity of a cat, and had an absolute fearlessness concerning heights. He used the rigging and the masts and spars and jibs to execute a controlled descent to the deck, moving with a speed and grace that made all the sailors stop what they were doing and watch the Were-cat seemingly fall through the rigging and land easily on the deck so far below. He landed right beside the mizzenmast, not far from the sterncastle, and within spans of Keritanima's chair.

"It's about time," Keritanima said without looking up from her book. Szath turned to stare at him, with his boxy, scaly green snout and black, soulless eyes, and shifted to get out of Tarrin's way as he approached. Tarrin didn't really like Szath, for he was a bit stiff and not too smart. He hoped that Binter and Sisska would rejoin them when they got to Wikuna. He liked those two. "I thought you were going to forget about me."

"How could I do something like that?" he asked simply, looking around. He spotted a barrel tied against the sterncastle, an empty one that had once held water. He untied it and dragged it over to face the two Wikuni females, then seated himself atop it easily. "Where did you want to start, Kerri? My lessons, or yours?"

"I'll go first today," she said with a toothy grin, showing off that muzzle full of sharp teeth, closing her book and setting it on the deck beside her. "I've come to discover that the person going last gives a longer lesson. I'd rather spend more time learning than teaching." Kerri didn't actually give that lesson by herself. Miranda helped out quite a bit, since she spoke Wikuni as well. She didn't look up from her knitting, pausing to brush her thick blond hair from her face, pushing it back up into the little poof that hung over her face, yet didn't droop down to touch it. She parted her hair to the side, tucking the long bangs up over the round, furry ear that poked up through her hair, giving her that poof of hair in front.

Tarrin cast the Priest spell that enhanced his ability to learn, and then they began. Keritanima concentrated on vocabulary, expanding the number of words that Tarrin understood. Tarrin could speak Wikuni as it was, albeit

slowly and not without a little prior preparation, so she was working on the more uncommon words that still managed to find their way into everyday speech. The way things were going, Tarrin was going to be fluent by the time they reached Wikuna, which would be in about twelve days, by Keritanima's estimation.

After his lesson was over, he became the teacher. This day, he concentrated on the Weavespinner's ability to join his consciousness with the Weave and leave his mortal body. It was something that all Weavespinners could do, and it allowed one to perform some pretty clever tricks, such as weaving spells from great distances, or looking out into the physical world from the strands of the Weave. Tarrin took great pains to explain the metamagical geography and the rules of the Weave, for they were completely unlike anything Keritanima had ever experienced before. The Weave was its own world, its own domain, and it had its own set of laws. The most obvious one, and the one that caused Tarrin so much trouble, was that the geography of the Weave did not correspond to the geography of the real world. A Sorcerer may have to travel vast distances through the Weave to look on the other side of a door, for instance, and that was why using the Weave in that manner was better used for looking across a continent rather than across a city. Joining the Weave took energy, and a Sorcerer could tire himself out much more by spying through the Weave than he would by simply going and looking for himself.

"You haven't taught me how to do this yet," Keritanima complained. "You keep talking about what I can and can't do when I do it, but when are you going to teach me how to *do* it?"

"You already know how to do it," he replied calmly. "You've done it once before, when you crossed over. When you regain your powers, you'll find yourself joining the Weave even when you don't mean to, and the Weave will respond to you even when you don't think it can."

"What do you mean?"

"When you crossed over, you became bound to the Weave," he explained. "It's much closer to you now. It's why Weavespinner magic doesn't require drawing power. The Weave responds to your *desire*, not the force you exert against it. The Weave will react to you whenever you're highly emotional, because it senses your feelings. Sometimes it doesn't do

anything you notice, but sometimes it does. When I get like that, sometimes I hear echoes in the Weave, memories of past events still reverberating along the strands. More than once, the knowledge of what I need, what got me so worked up in the first place, came to me through echoes when I needed it. But don't think that's going to happen all the time," he cautioned immediately.

"Can I find these echoes?"

"You can look for them, but more often than not, they find you," he replied. "And when you do find them, what you get is broken and incomplete. The Weave has all the knowledge any of us ever knew trapped in it, but it's not coherent. More often than not, what you hear leaves behind more questions than answers."

"You just had to go and ruin a good idea," she muttered with a snort.

"That's just one of the things you can find when you're inside the Weave," he told her. "There are also currents of magical power that flow through the strands. Some of them are strong, and a few times I almost got pulled away by them. Every once in a while, you'll find yourself in a nexus, a point where some magical device draws energy from the Weave to power itself. Those try to drag you into them, so avoid them."

"What would happen if you did get pulled in?"

"I have no idea. Odds are, your consciousness would become part of the magical item you'd just been pulled into. You'd be a living magic item."

Keritanima shuddered. "I think I'd like to keep the body I have right now, thank you," she said.

"That's about it as far as danger is concerned. The Weave is actually a pretty safe place. It's easy to get lost, but you can always return to your body any time you want just by willing it. It's also easy to find the Heart. All you do is sense which way the magic flows, and follow it. All magic flows back to the Heart."

"I, I remember that place," the Wikuni said with reverence. "I could feel the Goddess there, like *really* there. And there were glowing threads in the blackness, as well as thousands of glittering stars. Those stars seemed so close I could touch them."

"You could," he replied. "The stars represent every Sorcerer alive, and each of us has one there. When you see a star go out, that means the Sorcerer it represented died. When one appears, a new Sorcerer has been born. You can use a Sorcerer's star to find the Sorcerer in the real world. Remember the first time I used a projection to talk to you?" he asked, and she nodded in reply. "Well, I couldn't find you physically through the Weave, so I used your star to locate you. It guided me to you."

"Then why did you tell me to touch the Weave?"

"So I could find you more easily," he replied. "It was the second time I'd ever done it, if you recall."

"Oh yeah," she mused. "I tell you, brother, I just can't wait until I get my powers back and I can practice all this. It sounds so much more exciting than boring old Sorcery."

"It's just an aspect of Sorcery, Kerri," he replied. "And don't worry, it's been a while since you lost your powers. You should be getting them back any time now. You been practicing?"

"Every night," she assured him. "I can feel the Weave now, but I still can't weave spells."

"Then you're close," he told her. "Just remember that the Weave is going to seem slippery at first. The flows will resist you until you get the hang of it. When you have that down, I'll show you how to weave spells without that resistance."

"Why not show me how first?"

"Because you have to know the basics before I can teach you the advanced concepts, Kerri," he chided her.

"I hate it when you get smug," she snorted.

"I could say the same thing about you," he teased. Chopstick, one of Phandebrass' pet drakes, flapped over and dropped itself in Tarrin's lap. He stroked the creature's iridescent reddish scales gently, and it nuzzled its scaly head against his stomach in contentment. It was a very clever little animal, and looked just like the pictures of dragons he'd seen in so many books. Only it was the size of a small dog, when a dragon was supposed to be the size of a large house. It even had small black horns that swept back

over its head, jutting out over each little yellow, reptilian eye. Its muzzle was narrow, and filled with a mouthful of needle-like teeth. Tarrin rather liked the two drakes, because they were affectionate and didn't make too much of a nuisance of themselves. Turnkey was more mischievous than Chopstick, given to playing games of hide and seek with Phandebrass at the most inopportune times. Chopstick was a spoiled little drake, always wanting someone to pay attention to it. Usually it bothered Allia for attention, for both drakes seemed to really like his Selani sister, but when she or Phandebrass were too busy for it, it came to Tarrin. Tarrin didn't mind at all. The little drakes were companions for Phandebrass, and now for the entire group, but they had proven that they could be very useful in fights. Both of them were very small, but they were utterly fearless, and they were fast and agile enough to distract enemies and give their human and non-human friends an easy shot against the distracted foe.

A bell rang on the sterncastle, signifying that dinner would be ready within the hour, and Keritanima clapped her hands. "It's about time!" she announced. "I wonder what they're cooking tonight."

"I hope it's not fish," Miranda said, making a face. "I'm getting tired of fish."

"I thought all Wikuni loved fish," Tarrin mused.

"There is such a thing as too much of a good thing, Tarrin," she told him with a wink. "I saw them bring some sides of beef on board when we laid over at the Stormhavens. I hope we're having that tonight. They'll have to cook it soon, or it'll go bad."

"They already did, Miranda," Keritanima told her. "It's been gone for a week now."

"You had to go and ruin a good idea, didn't you?" she accused. Then she batted her eyelashes at Tarrin and gave him that quirky grin that warned him she was about to try to sweet-talk something out of him. "You love me, don't you, Tarrin?" she asked in a little-girl voice. "Do you love me enough to make me some steak?"

Tarrin looked at her, watched her wink one more time, then he chuckled ruefully. "You could *ask*, Miranda. If you keep flirting with me, I may take you up on it. Then you'd be in real trouble."

"Bah. A girl shouldn't flirt if she wasn't ready for the consequences," she said dismissively. Tarrin often forgot that Miranda was actually a very bad girl, nothing like the rather straight-laced Keritanima. She had often had to seduce information out of targets, and it was something she did not entirely object to doing. She had even confided that she enjoyed it, given that her mark was handsome. "It's an empty threat, anyway. I know you wouldn't be serious about me," she grinned.

"Well, you never know, Miranda. You *are* cute, even to a Were-cat."

"And you'd break me in half if we tried," she teased. "Entirely accidental, of course, but you know how wild things can get when--"

"I think we get the idea," Keritanima cut her off, the fur on her cheeks ruffling slightly, her form of a blush. Keritanima was bold, but Miranda often seemed to get the best of her friend and employer. Talking about such things wouldn't bother Keritanima if they were talking about strangers. To Keritanima, it would be the same as her brother sleeping with her best friend, something not entirely pleasant to think about.

"Well, will you, Tarrin? I've been dying for steak all week."

Tarin had to think about that a minute. The Wikuni used some different standards for measuring things, like distances, or time. A Wikuni *week* was a period of seven days, when the West used the terms *ride* or *tenday* to describe a period of ten days. They also used weird terms called *feet* and *miles* for expressing distances, where the West used *span* and *longspan*. The length of a foot was different than the length of a span; a foot was longer than a span by a small amount, but those small amounts added up when talking of large lengths. Tarrin was nine and a quarter spans tall, but Keritanima had told him that in her measurements, he was seven and three-quarters feet in height. Azakar was ten spans tall, but Keritanima said in her measurements, he was just a shade over eight feet in height. The monstrous Szath was well over twelve spans tall, nearly thirteen, but Keritanima told him that he was ten feet in height.

Tarrin wondered how those terms came to be used, and how their distances were set. It was something he'd have to study one of these days.

"Well, I guess so, but let's not make it common knowledge," he told her. One of Tarrin's abilities was called *Conjuring*, and it was an aspect of his

Druidic magic. It was what Miranda was asking of him. It was a catch-all term for three forms of conjuration magic, Conjuring, Creating, and Summoning. They were simple tricks, something any Druid could do. Conjuring was bringing to a place an object that existed elsewhere, but not a specific one. The magic tended to grab the closest object that fit the Druid's parameters when the spell was used, regardless of who owned it beforehand. Creating was just that, creating something from nothingness, often used when Conjuring an item would deprive someone of something valuable or when something with specific dimensions or qualities was desired, and Summoning was causing a *specific* object to appear. Druids used the tricks to conjure food and drink, conjure gold and other valuable items, and generally to conjure anything they needed. Druids never went hungry and were rarely left without something they needed. Tarrin preferred Creating rather than Conjuring, for he never was very comfortable with the idea that the food he was Conjuring was being stolen off the plates of innocent people. It required more energy than Conjuring, but he was willing to make that sacrifice knowing he didn't just steal the food out of a child's mouth. "I'll have people asking me for menus."

Keritanima chuckled, and Miranda grinned at him. "You're such a good friend," she told him. "What did we do without him, Kerri?"

"Oh, just deposed my father and took the throne of Wikuna," she teased, winking at him.

"And you didn't want the throne," Tarrin chided.

"I still don't, but I'm safer on it than off it," she replied honestly.

"How is the new system working?"

"I'm not entirely sure yet," she answered. "The nobles seem to be accepting it, but on the other hand, Jervis told me that they've been real secretive lately. I have the feeling that they're up to something, so I had Jervis find out what it is."

Keritanima was the queen of Wikuna, having taken the throne from her father, Damon Eram, with deceit, chicanery, and political cunning. In other words, like any Wikuni monarch would gain the throne. But since Keritanima didn't really want the throne, she had changed the system of government into something she called a *republic*, where the people

generally governed themselves. Keritanima was still the head of the government and had tremendous power, but not the absolute power she had had as the sole ruler. The nobles, secure in their dominion over the commoners, had had a fit when Keritanima had effectively stripped them of all their power and made them little more than rich commoners. But when Keritanima threatened to turn them into *poor* commoners, they all bit their tongues and decided to cooperate. But Keritanima had said that the Wikuni nobles were hard to repress for very long, and this secrecy probably collaberated her worries. No doubt they were up to something, taking advantage of Keritanima's absence to deal with the crisis at Suld. She had left the subject king of the Vendari that lived in Wikuna in charge in her place, and it struck Tarrin as odd that the nobles would be insane enough to try anything against him. *Sashka* was a Vendari, and they had very, very strict and regimented laws and customs, and though he was governing the Wikuni in Keritanima's stead, he would still act with the same severity of action. If the Wikuni nobles tried anything, it was entirely possible the *Sashka* would summon the Vendari army and crush the nobles in a massive war of absolute destruction. That was the Vendari way. And it was not something that any Wikuni--human, Aeradalla, *Fae-da'Nar* or just about anything with intelligence--would want to have happen to them. The Vendari were the most feared and respected race on Sennadar, because their size and power made them almost invincible warriors.

Chopstick gave a little growling hiss, demanding more attention, and Tarrin dutifully began to pet the little drake again. "You are getting *so* spoiled, Chopstick," Tarrin chuckled, using a claw to scratch delicately under his little horns, something he really liked.

"You should get your own drake, Tarrin," Keritanima told him. "You have a way with them."

"I don't need my own drake when I have Chopstick and Turnkey," he replied easily. "Besides, they'd get jealous."

Chopstick chirped in agreement. The drakes were very smart, and understood quite a bit of Sulasian. They were much more intelligent than a common housepet.

"Well, Phandebrass has been trying to breed drakes," Miranda said.

"Both of them are males," Tarrin said in confusion.

"I know, but we have drakes in Wikuna," she told him. "They're unbelievably expensive, but you can buy one in Wikuna. I think Phandebrass is thinking of buying a female."

"He'd better be careful," Keritanima snorted. "Drakes have very aggressive mating habits. Chopstick and Turnkey would fight one another for the rights to her, and the fact that they're brothers wouldn't matter. Drakes sometimes get killed in duels over females."

"Then he should get two," Miranda said calmly, biting apart the yarn and then holding up what she'd been knitting. It was a tasselled shawl, and it looked to be finished. "Ah, there we are," she said with a smile. "That looks nice."

"Who's that for?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"Oh, nobody," she replied. Miranda knitted just for the sake of knitting. "I'm sure somebody will want it."

"It'll go nice with my new party gown, as soon as I change the color," she hinted.

"You'd change the color of your gown for my shawl?" Miranda asked with a slightly mischevious smile.

"You," Keritanima laughed. "The shawl!"

Miranda handed it to her friend without a word, then dropped her knitting gear into the leather satchel she carried with her everywhere she went. "I've had about enough of knitting for a while," she announced. "I think I'll start doing needlepoint again. Or maybe crochet."

Keritanima threw the shawl over her shoulders, and Tarrin saw that Miranda had knitted it to fit her perfectly. Obviously, Miranda had an owner in mind for it since she started it. "I'll get an ivory hoop for the ends, and it'll sit perfectly," Keritanima mused. "Just over my neckline."

"She's fishing," Miranda whispered to Tarrin.

"I am not! Well, not really," she amended.

"Oh? And just who is she fishing for?" Tarrin asked.

"Rallix," Miranda replied with a cheeky grin. "The badger that runs the trading company she owns under one of her other identities."

"Kerri told me about that," he told her. "Just be careful, Kerri. Workers get nervous when the boss starts flirting with them."

"He knows who I am, Tarrin," Keritanima said with a face. "It turns out that he knew the whole time," she said in a voice that made it clear that the idea of that still mystified her. "I'm not out to get him, Tarrin. Not yet, anyway. I'm just testing the waters, that's all."

"She's already picked out the rings," Miranda laughed.

Keritanima's face fur ruffled so badly it looked like she'd been attacked by a pack of licking puppies. "Well, a girl should be ready for any eventuality, shouldn't she?" she said defensively.

Tarrin smiled. It was a very good thing that Keritanima had started noticing a man. He'd been worried about her that way, worried that her bad childhood had hardened her to any kind of intimate contact with others. It was a very healthy thing if she'd started noticing a man.

"Want me to kidnap him, Miranda?" he offered. "We can persuade him that marrying our friend here is the only way he'll live to see tomorrow."

"Tarrin!" Keritanima gasped in shock. "You leave him alone! I'll get him in my own way, in my own time!"

"You can't rush these things, Tarrin," Miranda chided him.

"I'm not too familiar with Wikuni mating habits."

"It's not a *mating habit*," Keritanima said sharply.

"Do you want to marry him?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

"Well...maybe."

"And that means that you want to mate with him?"

Her fur ruffled furiously.

"Then it's a mating habit," he said in a calm, logical manner. "Some animals are just more complicated than others."

"Not like those Were-cat females," Keritanima sniped in reply. "Always ready to rip off their clothes!"

"They're a bit more honest about what they want than other races," Tarrin replied calmly, taking no offense. "At least with a Were-cat female, you know exactly where you stand with her, and exactly what she wants. There's none of this flirting and deceit and silly games that seems to go on with humans and Wikuni."

"Were-cats have no romance in them!" Keritanima accused. "None at all!"

"We're part animal, Kerri. Romance is an alien concept to us," he agreed without batting an eye.

Keritanima snarled slightly. She wasn't used to losing arguments, especially when the points she was making helped the other side. "Well, it's not right," she growled.

"For you. It works for us, though. And that's all that really matters."

"Well, our way works for us," she declared.

"And that's all that matters for you. Don't compare your culture with mine. They're apples and pears." He turned to Miranda. "Explain this to me, Miranda."

"Well, Kerri has to attract Rallix's attention first," she began. "She'll do that with low-cut dresses and little hints in her conversation. When she has his interest, she has to show him that she's the only woman for him, and that all other women are worthless. That won't be too hard for Kerri, she's good at making people think the way she wants them to. Then she cleverly guides him into believing that he chased her the entire time, and then dupes him into asking her to marry him, while he thinks he started it the whole time. So he won't think she's too forward, you understand. At least not until *after* they're married, and he can't do anything about it," Miranda added with a wink.

"You make it sound so *deceitful*," Keritanima snapped at her friend.

"Deception seems to be a Wikuni requirement," Tarrin said dryly. "Where some races find size or attractiveness or ability desirable, I guess Wikuni see deception and glibness as good traits in a mate."

Miranda laughed. "I think you're right, Tarrin," she agreed.

It all seemed a bit silly to Tarrin, but to each race its own customs and culture. He wasn't one to pass judgement on them because their ways weren't as simple and uncomplicated as his kind's were.

"When does the quest for the prize begin?" he asked.

Probably the minute the gangplank hits the wharf in Wikuna," Miranda laughed. "Kerri wants his ring on her finger before we leave for Vendaka. That gives her about two weeks."

"You can force a man to marry you in two weeks?" Tarrin asked her in surprise.

"I'm not going to *force* him," she said challengingly.

"You call that testing the waters?" Tarrin asked with a laugh.

"She just didn't want you to think that she was a hussy, Tarrin. It's not becoming for a Wikuni lady to seem too aggressive."

"But she's a queen. She's *supposed* to be aggressive," Tarrin scoffed.

"Then people would think that she's a titled hussy," Miranda told him. "Women aren't supposed to seem too willing, Tarrin. Not in Wikuni society. They have to play hard to get, even when they're playing it against a man they want to get them."

"What a waste of time," Tarrin grunted.

"It makes the victory that much sweeter," Keritanima grinned at him.

"I doubt it'll take that long," Miranda said with a smile. "Rallix is smitten with our cunning little queen here. I'll bet fifty gold marks that he'll fall all over her as soon as he sees her flirting with him."

"I'll take you up on that, Miranda," Keritanima said confidently. "I'm a good judge of people, and I haven't seen that in him. Not that I don't *want* him to do it, but I'm not going to be that optimistic."

"It's your money," Miranda shrugged. "Or mine now, as it were."

"Don't count your gold yet, Miranda," Keritanima said smugly.

The bell rang again, and then Keritanima stood up. "I'm going to go wash up for dinner. See you there," she said, then she sauntered away, her fox tail swaying back and forth behind her with her stride.

"That's the easiest fifty marks I've ever made," Miranda laughed after Keritanima went below decks.

"What is this Rallix like?" Tarrin asked.

"A good man," she said sincerely. "Smart, well educated, and very loyal and dependable. He's known about Kerri for a long time, but kept her secret and kept working for her. Kerri doesn't understand why, not really. She thinks he did it because he was making a fortune at her trading company. But I've looked into his eyes when he's looking at her, so I know that that's not the reason at all."

"He loves her," Tarrin surmised.

"You bet," she said with that cheeky grin. "He's devoted to her, and he's absolutely loyal to her. He doesn't even skim off the top. Rallix wouldn't have given away Kerri, not even after a week on the rack. He'll be a good husband for her, because he won't be quite so pliable once they're on even ground."

Tarrin chuckled. "He's that strong?"

"He's like steel, Tarrin," she winked. "Kerri's going to have quite a shock waiting for her when she does marry him. She'll be up against someone just as strong as she is."

"That's good. If Kerri could knuckle under her mate, she wouldn't respect him."

"I know. Now then, let's get moving before they ring the bell a third time," she announced. Tarrin stood up with her, putting Chopstick up on his shoulder, and they walked towards the stairs. "I think I'd like a nice porterhouse, tender, well aged, and cooked to where it's still pink in the middle," she told him. "Do you do baked potatoes?"

"For you, Miranda, I'll do a banquet."

"You're such a good friend," she gushed, leaning on his arm girlishly.

"Flirt."

"I have to stay in practice, you know," she said with a teasing giggle.

Chapter 2

Life aboard a sailing vessel was one of routine.

Even for the passengers, the days turned into a procession of regular events that made the days blur together, which both made Tarrin feel like time was flying by, even as each individual day seemed to drag out endlessly. Breakfast some hour past sunrise, then for Tarrin, it was long, involved discussion and debate with Camara Tal. The Amazon had decided that simply teaching him the spells of Priest magic wasn't enough. She grilled him on his knowledge of theology, philosophy, and history, and she surprised him with the depth and breadth of her knowledge. Tarrin had never pegged the fiery Amazon as a scholar, but she proved to him that she was easily as well educated as Phandebrass, especially in the realm of multipantheonic theology. Camara Tal knew the name of every god, Elder, Younger, and those not accepted by the organized pantheon, which were called cult gods. She knew most of the beliefs and goals of the religious orders of all those gods, even things Tarrin was surprised an outsider would know, like certain ceremonies they performed. She grilled him about his beliefs in his goddess, even going so far as to ask questions about what she expected of him as a Priest, something even he didn't know.

While Camara Tal and Tarrin argued over finer points of philosophy, the others had their routines as well. Azakar would sit with Dar and play stones or chess. Dolanna would learn the finer arts of needlework or knitting from Miranda, and Allia would usually spend that time in the company of Keritanima, who had gone back to reading books, or going over reports brought in to her by the priest on board the ship, who received them via magic from Jervis or the *sashka*. Phandebrass and Kimmie would be off by themselves, and they appeared in the most unusual places. One rainy morning, the entire ship was rocked by an explosion in the bilges, and when sailors went to investigate, they found the pair of them in there setting fire to water. That little stunt caused the entire fleet of ships to come to a halt, but then again, it probably was for the best, for the rain intensified into a rather

nasty storm. The ships all dropped their sea anchors and rode it out, then continued on that afternoon.

At noon precisely, they had lunch, and then they all changed their activities. Tarrin sat down to teach Keritanima Sorcery and be taught Wikuni by her and Miranda in return, as Allia, Camara Tal and Azakar sparred on the widest part of the deck. Camara Tal had first done it to see if Azakar had improved, but now she was the student as Azakar taught her some of the forms and techniques the Vendari had taught to him. Allia had watched at first, but she realized that sparring with the likes of the Amazon and the Mahuut would improve her own forms. Basicly, that meant that the two of them suffered as Allia's target dummies as the Selani gave herself a workout. The two of them were good, but they just couldn't match the Selani's blazing, inhuman speed. Kimmie and Phandebrass continued their morning session into the afternoon, often changing locations.

At an hour before sunset, dinner was placed, and they took the evening meal with the ship's captain, a leopard Wikuni with a chunk missing from his right ear who called himself Karlin, Admiral Torm, and the Wikuni priest aboard, a willowy mammallian Wikuni that looked something like a cross between a squirrel and a chipmunk, with golden fur. Keritanima told him that he was called a *prairie dog*, whatever that was. It was some kind of animal indiginous to Wikuna. Whatever he was, he was a quiet, observant fellow named Velton, modest and discreet, and someone with whom Tarrin didn't mind sharing company. Given his more aggressive behavior since taking ship, that was saying that the Wikuni priest was almost a friend.

After dinner, they all generally wound down, drinking whatever was available and sitting up on deck to watch the sunset, sharing company. It was important for them to do so, since they had been separated in one way or another for a very long time. Tarrin needed to reacclimate himself to the others, and those who had been separated from him for so long needed time to readjust to him. Especially Azakar. The Mahuut didn't quite know what to make of Tarrin now, or what to do about him or how to act around him. Tarrin was many things, even to those with him, but Azakar seemed to have the most trouble understanding what had happened and how Tarrin had changed. When Tarrin had been separated from Azakar, Miranda, and Keritanima, he had been a much different person. Young, afraid, and on the edge. His behavior was erratic then, but only to an untrained observer. Now

he was gruff, quiet, brooding, given to not speaking unless he had a reason to do so, and more than a little mean. That probably set Azakar off the most, for despite his huge size and impressive fighting ability, Azakar was actually a very gentle and caring person. Tarrin's vicious nature seemed to disturb Azakar, where the others had had time to get used to it.

Just after sunset, every evening, Tarrin found someplace quiet and talked to Jesmind and Jasana. They talked of very unimportant things, more like listening to Jesmind fume and rant and rail about this or that, venting her frustration. There was little for him to say to them after the fifth day, after he'd described the ship and the sea and the things he saw for the tenth time. Speaking to Jesmind made him a little less lonely, but he had yet to mention the fact that he was having trouble with Kimmie. He was very evasive about it, because Jesmind asked after her almost every night. He wouldn't lie to her, but he'd learned many ways to misdirect the truth when necessary, and he knew his mate. He knew how to deflect her, distract her, make her forget what she was asking.

Little had changed in Suld since they'd left, nearly twenty days before. Jesmind and Jasana stayed on the Tower grounds with Jenna most of the time, as his sister continued to write her book and teach Jula about Sorcery. Jula had regained her powers already, and had just begun the practical exercises to learn Weavespinner magic. Since the ship was moving, and Tarrin couldn't enter the Weave unless he was stationary, he was missing out on quite a bit of what Jenna was teaching his bond-daughter. He would have liked to have been there for that. Triana too remained in the Tower, to watch over Jesmind and Jasana and, to his surprise, to get to know his parents and Jenna intimately. Triana had adopted Tarrin, and now she was coming to know the other side of his family. His mother and father were planning to return to Aldreth, but had delayed that at Triana's request, so they could get to know each other. Tarrin imagined that Triana was very impressed with his parents. They were very strong, very admirable people.

After his nightly talk with Jesmind, Tarrin spent special time with Allia, usually in his cabin but sometimes walking around on deck, to reinforce the powerful bond they shared. They didn't have to speak or do anything, or even interact with one another. They only had to be in the same room together, and be alone. That was all either of them needed. It was their time to speak to each other of things they didn't tell any of the others, not even

Keritanima, where Tarrin told his sister the whole truth about anything she wanted to know. Tarrin held no secrets from Allia, just as she held no secrets from him. After Tarrin finished telling her about what happened to him, Allia told him about what happened to her after they parted, things even of the most intimate nature, personal observations and such that would offend all the others, even Keritanima. Allia was like that sometimes.

Everything else may change, but the powerful bond between Tarrin and Allia would always remain.

After spending time with Allia, Tarrin went to bed. It was a bed he now shared with the two drakes, curled up with them on top of the covers in his cat form, because the bed was too small for his tall body. Tarrin liked sleeping with the drakes, because they were cozily warm all the time, and Tarrin liked heat. They would sleep through the night, and then when the sun came up, the cycle would repeat itself again.

It was a day, much like any other. Tarrin had just finished teaching Keritanima about the intricacies of Weavespinner magic, teaching her techniques for controlling the magic, trying to jar her powers back. She'd yet to regain her powers, though he could sense in her that she was very close to them. Any day now--any time now, for that matter--she was going to realign herself and find her magic again, and it was what Tarrin was waiting to happen. He couldn't really teach her anything else until she regained her powers, so his tutoring lately had only been various exercises and observations, trying to help her regain her powers more quickly. But he couldn't go too far, because Sorcery was still a very private affair, even Weavespinner magic. Keritanima's method of using her magic was her own, and trying to teach her his own methods would interfere with her ability. He could only tell her what to do; the method of going about doing it would be uniquely her own. The only thing that they would share would be generalalities defined by the laws of Sorcery, laws by which they had to operate.

He heard her growl as she closed her eyes and raised her muzzle. "I can *feel* it right there," she growled in a low tone. "I can sense it. Why can't I use it, dammit! It's getting frustrating!"

"Relax," he told her. "You can't do it if you're agitated."

"Then that's the problem," Miranda winked at him. "She's been agitated ever since you started teaching her. She's too impatient, she wants it all right now. If you'd just relax and let things happen yourself, Kerri, you'd have been using magic again days ago."

"Like you know anything," Keritanima huffed at her in irritation.

"Kerri," Tarrin chided. "Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

"Someday you'll learn not to order me around, Kerri. You know I'm not going to obey you," he said evenly, adjusting himself on the stool that a sailor had brought for him. Since many Wikuni had tails, much of their furniture either didn't have backs or had split backs, making it easy on the tail to use the seat. "Remember the exercises in mental discipline that Allia taught us?"

"Of course I do," she replied. "I--oh, I see," she said with a sudden toothy grin. "That might work. If I can use the meditation trick to focus myself, I might be able to regain my magic." She glanced at him. "That's a clever idea, brother. I'm surprised you thought of it."

"You do so much for my self-esteem, Kerri," he said in a dry drawl. "Try that tonight. Meditation will do more than focus yourself, it will calm you down. Miranda may be right, sister. I tried to push it when it happened to me, and I got so wrapped up in trying to use my magic again that I didn't sense that I could do it all along. I think you're falling into the same trap I did."

"Maybe," she acceded after a moment.

"I say, hello there, Tarrin," Phandebrass greeted as he led Kimmie towards the stairway below decks. "How go the lessons?"

"Fairly well," he replied. "Though we're more or less circling until Kerri regains her powers."

"Well, well, good luck, your Majesty," he said with a smile. "How are the language lessons going?" he asked her.

"It's scary," she told him. "That spell he uses lets him memorize everything. He's fluent already, all he needs is to expand his vocabulary. It's

Dolanna all over again."

"Well, my dear, Dolanna is a very clever woman, she is. I think I might try to develop a spell to duplicate that effect," he mused to himself, looking up. "To think that I could go into a library and remember everything I read! I say, what a wonderful thing that would be, it would!" He looked at them. "I say, how are the lessons going?"

Tarrin suppressed a chuckle. Whenever Phandebrass was heavy into his magic, he tended to get extremely absent-minded, even forgetting things he'd just said. It looked like he was in one of those states at the moment. "Kimmie, you'd better take him down below before he forgets we're on a ship," Tarrin told the female.

"We're already on the way," she said with a light smile.

"Now I see why he irritates Camara Tal so much," Keritanima said with a giggle as Kimmie led him below decks.

"That's not what irritates Camara," Tarrin replied. "What irritates Camara is how his studies overwhelm reality. Did I tell you that he tried to stop a Demon and ask it questions during the battle in Suld?"

"He didn't!" Keritanima gasped with a laugh.

"Oh yes he did. Camara told me about it. Tried to stop it in its tracks and ask it all sorts of questions. Camara said that if she'd been beside him, she would have brained him herself."

"Phandebrass puts learning above almost everything. Even his own safety," Miranda surmised in a calm voice. "He must be either terribly brave or completely crazy."

"I think he's a little bit of both," Tarrin said, glancing back to the stairs below. The wind had shifted, and Kimmie's scent, left on the deck, was touching his nose, tickling at him. Her scent caused all sorts of impulses to rise up in him any time he scented it now, impulses he both wanted to satisfy and actively tried to ignore. He put his paw over his nose in irritation, letting his own scent and the scents left behind on his paw drown out that smell.

"You know, I think Kimmie's the most unusual Were-cat I've ever met," Keritanima said. "She seems almost *human*."

"She was turned, like me. But the turning didn't seem to change her all that much," Tarrin told her. "But don't let her personality fool you, Kerri. She's just as much a Were-cat as me."

"I've noticed. I've also noticed that you've been avoiding her lately," she said slyly.

Tarrin growled lightly in his throat, glaring at his sister. He had a feeling where this was going to go. "I think you should mind your own business," he warned.

"You are my business, brother," she said mildly. "And I have a nose too, if you recall. I've been noticing a change in Kimmie's scent lately, and now that I've seen how you react to it, I know what it is."

"Well, what is it?" Miranda asked.

"She's either in heat or she's playing for him," she replied with a glance to where the female had gone below decks. "You'd better not let Jesmind find out. She'll kill both of you."

Tarrin snorted, putting his chin in his paw. "I think she doesn't realize she's doing it," he replied. "She doesn't act like she's after me, so I think it's unconscious."

"And that means you're not going to do anything about it."

"I don't plan to," he replied.

"You should. Every time Kimmie goes by, you suddenly get very short-tempered."

"I can't argue about that," he admitted. "But it would be cheating on Jesmind."

"Cheating or not, if you kill one of my sailors in a tiff, we're going to have a very nasty fight, brother," she warned.

"I can keep a handle on things. I've gone through this before."

"I know, Allia told me about it," she said. "With Jula."

He nodded. "I didn't have much trouble with her. I shouldn't have much trouble with Kimmie."

"There's a difference here, brother," Keritanima said mildly. "You didn't like Lula at the time. You *do* like Kimmie."

"True, but it doesn't matter."

"We'll see," Keritanima said absently.

The rest of the day went on more or less as usual, except whenever Kimmie was close to him. Telling Keritanima about it seemed to make it stay at the forefront of his mind, and he found himself thinking about Kimmie whenever his mind wasn't actively engaged with something else. More than once, he caught himself thinking of some way to get her alone, and he had to crush all those impulses and keep himself occupied to stop it. But those thoughts rekindled any time he came across Kimmie's scent.

That was the problem. They'd been on the ship for twenty days, so Kimmie's scent was *everywhere*. The rain washed her scent out of the exposed deck, but Phandebrass' habit of moving around meant that she put her scent back down all over everything very quickly afterwards. Below decks, her scent was mingled with all the other scents layered on the floor and walls and furniture, but Kimmie's scent was the first one he noticed, and he realized that he was actively looking for it. There were few places on the ship he could go to get away from her scent. The crow's nest, his room, and Allia's room. That was it. Kimmie had been in everyone else's rooms, even Keritanima's.

Keritanima had been right. He *had* been getting short-tempered whenever Kimmie passed. It was a combination of her and the resurgence of the feral aspects of his personality. Surrounded by strangers and trapped on a ship with an available female, he wasn't surprised he'd been so contrary lately. It got worse when she was close, when he started resisting the call of his instincts. That was a very fast way for a Were-cat way to get unpredictable, as the instincts warred with the human will. So far, Tarrin's will had won out, but the instincts only had to win once. And he knew that.

He pondered the problem through dinner, as Kimmie's proximity and her alluring scent dominated his mind, picking at his food without much enthusiasm. He listened as Phandebrass prattled on about some kind of magical spell that he and Kimmie had been developing as part of her training, a spell that supposedly would cause any book that contained

magical Wizard spells to glow when they came within the spell's area of effect.

"So, how is the training going, Kimmie?" Dar asked.

"Pretty well," she replied with a cute little smile. "I've already tripled the size of my spellbook, and Master Phandebrass taught me some things that allowed me to understand some of the spells I already had, but couldn't cast."

"I say, for a self-taught dabbler, she has considerable potential," Phandebrass praised. "I think she could learn some of the greatest secrets of the art if she applies herself."

"It'll be a ways before I get there," she chuckled wryly. "I looked through Master Phandebrass' spellbook. I think I could only understand about ten of them."

"You were looking through one of my advanced books, my dear," he chided her. "If you did understand ten of them, then you *do* have potential, you do. I say, I couldn't possibly keep all my spells in one book, I couldn't. Why, it would be so big that I wouldn't be able to carry it!"

"No need to brag, Master Phandebrass," Kimmie teased. "You're offending my one little spellbook, you know."

"Give yourself time, my dear," he assured her. "I say, you'll have a spellbook collection just as large as mine, you will."

Tarrin excused himself after that, and went up on deck. After leaving the dining room, his appetite returned, and he Conjured the meal he'd left sitting on the table and finished it sitting at the bow, looking out over the sea. It was a bit before sunset, and the ships were still plying their way westward before a strong tailwind. The wind was very warm and muggy, and some threatening clouds were gathering ahead of them, threatening to swallow up the sun before it reached the horizon. There was a small island just to the right, some distance away, but it was large enough to support a colony of seagulls. Some of them were circling over the ship, cawing and crying, looking for a meal. Birds followed ships to partake of the scraps that were thrown overboard from time to time. Tarrin looked at the island, just being eclipsed by a clipper sailing alongside, and saw that it was carpeted

with green. It was too far away to see much else, though. He'd never heard of an island out here, so odds were it was uninhabited.

Admiral Torm wandered over and looked off the rail just beside him. Tarrin wasn't sure about Admiral Torm. He was a sober fellow, not much of a sense of humor, all business and all leader. He was respected by his men, and from what Tarrin had heard, the man had a very, very impressive reputation.

"Ah, Twinfluke," he mused aloud. "We'll be in Wikuna in six days, with Kikalli's favor."

"That's the name of that island?" Tarrin asked, standing up.

"Aye," he replied. "So named because of the whales that tend to gather around it."

"That would be a nice place to live if you didn't want to be disturbed."

"You wouldn't live there long," Torm told him. "It's populated by some pretty unfriendly animals, and some of them are rather rare."

"Like what?"

"Like a bird-like animal that can turn a man to stone if you touch its tailfeathers," he answered. "I think they're called Cockatrices. There are also a fair number of wild drakes, and it's also the island where the last of the Minotaurs were exiled some five hundred years ago. From what I've heard, there are some of them still living on the island."

"Minotaur? I've never heard of that."

"It's a creature with a man's body but the head of a bull," he replied. "They're not very smart, they're pretty rough customers, and they're very unfriendly. They were rounded up and exiled off Wikuna when we tried to bring them into the kingdom, but they just couldn't obey the law. It was decided it was more humane to move them than to kill them all off."

"And they still live there on that island?"

Torm nodded. "We don't know how many there are, because we won't land there. But some sailors see them on the shores as they pass, often enough to know they're still alive. I'm glad of that."

"Why?"

"It's a crime to kill off an entire species just because you don't get along with them," he replied. "They may have lost their home range, but killing them all would have been wrong. Wikuna has made some bad decisions in its time, but at least in that respect, it made a good one. They seem to be doing well on the island, so maybe it all turned out for the best. If they're happy there, then it turned out even better."

"I guess," Tarrin said in agreement.

The crying of the birds began to intensify, and Tarrin looked up at them. They seemed to be getting very agitated. Tarrin lifted his nose and tested the air, but found no scent that would seem threatening to him. Birds had good vision, so it had to be something they could see that was making them upset, or perhaps a change in the wind or the air.

"That's odd," Torm noted, looking up. "Seagulls don't act like that unless there's a predator about."

Tarrin saw it coming over the ship that now blocked the view of the island. A little cloud of smaller blue birds, all swarming around something in its center. From the looks of it, they were attacking whatever they kept surrounded, pecking at it and scratching at it with their claws.

Those weren't birds! They were *drakes*!

Tarrin watched in surprise as a large pack of blue-scaled drakes attacked whatever was in the middle of their group, flying closer and closer to the ship as the seagulls overhead scattered. They weren't pecking at it, as he first thought, they were biting it, and there were weird little flashes of bluish light now and again. They came closer and closer to their ship, until he could make out what they were attacking.

It was another drake!

Tarrin and Torm watched as the victim of the assault, a blue-scaled drake just like all the others, tried to stay aloft, but was being bitten on the wings and having the membranes torn by the claws of its attackers. It was smaller than the other drakes, and it was being pretty well thoroughly thrashed by them. It managed to stay aloft until one of the largest drakes managed to bite it on the wingjoint, and he distinctly heard it squeal in pain.

and suddenly spin down on the same side that the drake had bitten it. The attackers gave chase, coming shockingly close to the ship, only spans away, and continued to pursue the victim until it fell into the water. They circled over it for a moment as it weakly tried to swim, keep its head above water as the water around became stained pink with its blood, then they all banked and flew back towards the island.

"I've never seen that before," Torm said. "I wonder what made them attack that other one like that."

Tarrin was leaning over the rail, looking at the drake as the ship passed it by. It was obviously going to drown, and its body sank deeper and deeper into the water as its attempts to stay afloat became weaker. On an impulse, Tarrin wove together a short weave of Water and caused the water surrounding the drake to become solid, to give it something against which to push. Then he brought his water cage up to the side of the ship and then, after making sure the other drakes were gone and wouldn't see what was happening, raised it up on a column of water to where he could reach it. The drake looked terrified by whatever was happening to it, but it was too weak and tired to struggle. Its terror didn't improve when a creature with a predatory scent reached down into the water with wickedly clawed paws and grabbed it, then pulled it free of the watery prison.

Tarrin was rather partial to drakes. Chopstick and Turnkey were very beloved companions for him, and he couldn't stand to see another drake die. Even if it was a wild one.

He gathered the drake up in his paws, knelt, and set it on the deck, as it hissed threatening at him and tried to bite him. The other drakes had torn it up pretty effectively, and he could see countless tears in its beautiful, blue scaled hide. They were so blue that they almost shined. It did bite him when he put a pair of fingers on the base of its long neck, turning its head to take a bite out the paw holding it down, but its small jaws had trouble getting much of a grip on his thick paw, and the lower teeth couldn't even penetrate the pad on his palm. The pain it caused was barely even an annoyance, but the pressure he exerted against it did cause it to stop thrashing, beating its shredded wings against the deck.

"Calm down," he chided the drake in a gentle voice. He thought about using Sorcerer's healing, but the discomfort it caused would make the drake

think he was attacking it somehow. It wasn't something to use on a wild animal. So he instead reached within, through the Cat, and touched the vast, endless energy of the All. His intent was to heal, and the image was that of the little drake in perfect health. The All responded to him, sending its energy through him and into the drake through his fingers. The warm, gentle energy suffused the little animal, causing its natural healing processes to accelerate dramatically. Torm watched with wide eyes as the many tears and bite wounds on the drake smoothed over, as the holes in the membranes of its wings mended before his eyes, and the animal suddenly stopped struggling and yielded to the Were-cat.

When he was done, he pulled his fingers away, resting his arm on his knee, and looked down at the drake. It was about the same size as Chopstick and Turnkey, maybe just a shade smaller than them, with the same appearance. It had the ridges on its back, and the little backswept horns on its head, but its muzzle was a bit more boxed and a little shorter, and it was a little leaner than the two red-scaled drakes. Its scent was a little different than the red-scaled drakes, probably a result of a different environment. It seemed to lay there for a moment, then got up to its feet hesitantly, shaking its head and shivering its wings. "There now," Tarrin cooed to it in a gentle voice. "All better. You can go ahead and fly home now."

"I've never seen a drake so close before," Torm said, looking at it. "Not even the two that Wizard owns gets this close to me. It's very pretty, isn't it?" he asked, leaning down to get a better look.

And then the blue flashes he saw became very clear to Tarrin. The little drake hissed, then Tarrin sensed a sudden release of magical energy. A small arc of electricity, like a miniature bolt of lightning, emanated from the little blue drake's body and struck Torm in the chest as he leaned down. Torm was knocked backwards and crashed to the deck, his swearing telling Tarrin that he was alright. A little singed, but alright.

"Wow," Tarrin said in appreciation. Now *that* was a defense mechanism! "Calmly, little one," he said in a soothing voice, not moving. "We're not going to hurt you."

The little drake looked up at him, blinking, its front paws fidgeting and its claws scrabbling on the deck. Then, to Tarrin's surprise, the little drake

ambled forward and rubbed the side of its head against his ankle, chirping pleasantly. Just like Chopstick and Turnkey did when they were in an affectionate mood.

It *liked* him! The drake either liked him because he'd healed it, or it could tell that he was a Druid. Most wild animals wouldn't bother Druids, because the sense of the All that surrounded them put the animal at ease. No wild animal saw a Druid as an enemy. Tarrin reached down and rubbed the scales on its back, mindful of the little ridges and spines, then patted it on the head.

"Ouch," Torm grunted from the deck.

Tarrin looked back and saw that the Wikuni was sitting up, with a little scorch mark on the chest of his resplendent red uniform coat. "That was interesting," Tarrin told him. "I've never seen a drake do that before."

"Me either," Torm agreed.

"You alright?"

"I will be in a minute. All my fur is standing on end."

"It must have thought you were going to attack it when you leaned down. I wouldn't do that again if I were you."

"I'm not planning on it, no," Torm agreed mildly. "That's quite a trick, though. I'll bet that's how it hunts. It shocks birds out of the sky and lets the fall kill them."

"That would be an effective tactic," Tarrin agreed, looking down at the drake. "Alright now, little one," he told it. "You're better now. You should be going home now." The drake made no move to turn and fly away. Instead, it reared up on its hind legs and put its front paws on his knee, begging for attention. "You're welcome," he chuckled to it, petting it on the head gently. When he stood up, the drake did turn around and jump into the air, flapping its wings, but it did little more than gain altitude, turn around, and land on his shoulder.

Tarrin was a bit surprised. It seemed to be in no hurry to go home, but it had to leave soon, or the island would be too far away for it to get back. He reached up and took hold of the drake, holding it gently, then set it on the

rail. "You need to start back, little one, or you'll be too far away to reach the island," he warned it. "Now go on. Before we get too far away."

It looked at him quizzically.

"Go on now," he ordered. "Back home. Go home!" He made a shooping motion with his paws, and the drake reacted to that, vaulting up into the air and flapping its leathery wings, back towards the island. Tarrin watched it go with a slight smile, happy that he'd had a chance to help someone for a change. "Phandebrass is going to kill me," he chuckled.

"Why?"

"A drake that can shoot lightning? He would have loved to have studied it. If he would have survived," he added with a laugh. "Did it burn you?"

"Not really," he replied, getting up and putting a furry hand to his chest. "It would have if it would have hit my fur. The coat took the burn for me. I've never been shocked like that before. It didn't burn, but it certainly wasn't pleasant."

"I can imagine it wasn't," Tarrin agreed mildly. "I'd better be going, Torm. I have an appointment to keep."

"I need to change coats," the admiral noted, looking down.

The rest of the day went by as all the days did, but the next morning was anything if not ordinary. Tarrin had woken up to some shouting bleeding down from the deck above, but hadn't paid much attention to it. He dressed and went out on deck to find Camara Tal, but found all the sailors on the deck, looking up into the rigging. Some of them were rubbing arms or shoulders, and there were little burn marks on a few of them. Keritania was standing by the foremast with Miranda, watching Phandebrass crawling through the rigging as Chopstick and Turnkey fluttered about the mainmast, circling the crow's nest.

"What's going on?" he asked Dar, who was standing not far from the sterncastle.

"There's a little animal up there in the rigging," Dar replied. "It attacked a few of the sailors, and now Phandebrass is trying to catch it."

Tarrin looked up, seeing that the thin Wizard was on the rope ladder leading to the crow's nest, a rope in his teeth and his ridiculous conical hat gripped in one hand. His hair had gone all white again, Tarrin noticed, and the Wizard had trouble with getting his feet tangled in his robes as he tried to climb up the rigging.

He stopped as a little streak suddenly shot out of the crow's nest, towards the bow, then dove down through the rigging with Chopstick and Turnkey in hot pursuit. Tarrin didn't get a good look at it, since it was behind the sails on the foremast, but when it dropped under the lowest sail and pulled out of its dive, he realized that the flying thing was a little blue blur.

It was the drake!

It flew right at him then pulled up and landed on his shoulder, its claws tearing his shirt and drawing blood from the speed of the landing. It chirped in his ear and licked him on the side of the face with that reptilian tongue, then suddenly hissed threateningly as Chopstick and Turnkey flew towards him.

"Land!" Tarrin called, holding his paws out. That was a command that both the drakes knew, and they obediently flapped down to the deck and stayed where they were. He reached up and took hold of the blue drake, bringing it down to his chest and looked down at it. It looked up at him with eyes as blue as its scales, vertically slitted, reminding him irrationally of Kimmie's eyes. "I told you to go home, little one," he chided the drake in a stern voice.

It looked up at him unashamedly, then it gave that chirping sound and rubbed the side of its head against his chest.

Tarrin blew out his breath in a snort as Dar looked at the drake in surprise. "How does it know you, Tarrin?" he asked.

"I met it last night, when we passed by that island. I guess it decided to follow the ship," he replied.

"I say, you got it!" Phandebrass' voice called from overhead. The thin Wizard shimmied down a rope and got back on the deck, putting his hat back on as he ambled over quickly. "I say, it's a rare blue!" he gasped. "A Blue!"

"Rare?" Tarrin asked. "There was a whole pack of them flying around out here last night."

"I missed it?" he asked in a crestfallen voice. "I say, we need to turn the ship around, we do! I really must see this!"

"Dream on, Wizard," Camara Tal scoffed as she approached, with all his other friends converging on him. "It certainly seems to like you, Tarrin," she noted.

Tarrin told them what happened the night before, about the attack and his saving it. "I let it go, but I guess it just flew far enough away to convince me it left, then turned around."

"Drakes are like that, lad," Phandebrass said. "When they find someone they like, they stay with them. This drake is attached to you, and there's nothing you can do short of attacking it to make it leave, there isn't. You're stuck with it."

"I wouldn't attack it!" Tarrin said in a sudden voice.

"Then you should give her a name," Phandebrass grinned. "I say, what luck! I can study a blue!"

"Her?" Dar asked.

"I say, certainly!" Phandebrass said confidently. "See the smaller horns, and the different proportions of the ridge-spine pattern? Those are the markings of a female."

"Why would the other drakes attack this one?" Allia asked Phandebrass curiously.

"Any number of reasons, my dear," he replied. "I say, she may have been an intruder in the territory of another pack, she might. Drakes are social animals, they are, and live in packs in the wild. Or she may have tried to win leadership of her pack, and lost. Losers are chased out of the territory. Sometimes they're killed."

"They certainly tried to kill her," Tarrin mused. "Even chased her halfway out to sea."

"Then she must have nearly won," Phandebrass said. "The pack leader certainly didn't want her coming back to challenge again, so he was making

sure of her, he was."

"Well, brother, it looks like you have a new pet," Keritanima grinned at him. "Care to introduce us?"

"I say, that's a bad idea," Phandebrass warned. "She's a *wild* drake, Tarrin. You'll need to domesticate her and train her. She may like you, but she'll be aggressive towards everyone else, she will."

"We noticed," Camara Tal said.

"I say, take her below decks, to your cabin, and I'll come by in a few minutes and tell you what to do," Phandebrass said. "Raising a drake isn't easy, my boy. You'll need some help, you will."

Tarrin wasn't entirely sure about this. He'd never had a pet before, not even a dog, because his father was allergic to dogs. The Kael farm was one of the rare few that didn't have dogs on the farm, and the few cats there were were restricted to the barn to control the rodents, because the small flock of sheep they'd kept on the farm didn't like them. He took the little blue drake down to his cabin and sat down on the bed, stroking it absently, considering the situation. If it was true, and he couldn't make the drake go away, he was more or less stuck with her. He did like drakes, though, and if he was going to have a pet, then a drake seemed a sensible choice. He wasn't sure how much the drake was going to affect his life, because Chopstick and Turnkey seemed to more or less take care of themselves. So long as they were fed regularly and someone paid attention to them every so often, they didn't seem to need anything special. On those terms, Tarrin wouldn't mind at all to take care of the drake.

Phandebrass knocked on the door, then entered immediately afterward. To his surprise, Kimmie filed in behind him. That made him inwardly groan; now he'd have to scour her scent out of his room or he'd get no peace at night. But he put on a brave face and greeted her as amicably as he could. She smiled at him and sat down on the stool in front of the desk, and the Wizard stood before him. "I say, very good. The first thing you need to do is domesticate her, you do. She's a wild drake, and she'll need to learn that everyone isn't going to attack her."

"How do we do that?"

"Carefully," Phandebrass grinned. "She's a blue, and they have magical powers, so we have to be cautious. I trained my drakes to behave by slowly introducing them to people, being nice to the people and such to show that the person was my friend. Drakes are clever creatures, my boy, she'll understand that your friends are her friends. Once you have her acclimated, she'll start relaxing around strangers. While you're taming her, you'll have to teach her what you want her to know, you will."

"Like what?"

"Like housebreaking her, but that will actually be an easy task, it will," he replied. "Drakes prefer to bury their waste, or expel it while flying, but they'll never soil what they consider their den. You have to convince her that this is her den, then leave the window open for her so she can leave to relieve herself. I say, you'll also have to teach her not to chew," he continued. "Drakes chew on things to keep their teeth sharp. I have chew toys for my drakes in my cabin. Leather works best, it does. Get yourself a piece of ragged leather and reprimand her whenever she chews on anything other than that chew toy."

"How do you reprimand a drake?"

"An angry tone," he replied. "Drakes are smart, my boy. She'll learn what your voice sounds like when you're in certain moods, and she'll respond to it. But don't *ever* hit a drake as punishment. She'll think you're attacking her, she will, and she'll either run away or attack in kind, or both."

"Alright. What else should I know?"

"That's basically it, my boy," he replied. "As far as basics go. But drakes are smart little devils, and they're easy to train. Training her in certain things and to do some tasks would be a very good idea, it would. As you've seen, Chopstick and Turnkey have been trained how to attack enemies. I've also trained them to fetch certain things, and they also know how to find certain things that I need. They also know a good variety of commands for their own good, to keep them out of trouble and out of harm's way. Such as the land command I saw you use. It's a good idea to have a well trained drake if she's going to go out in public with you, it is." He looked at the drake longingly. "I can't wait until she's tame," he said in an excited tone. "I'll teach you how to teach her commands, and I can study her abilities."

"One thing at a time, Phandebrass," Tarrin said, scratching the drake between the horns, right where Turnkey and Chopstick liked to be scratched. She too seemed to like being scratched there, leaning into his claw.

"I say, you need to give her a name," the Wizard told him. "You should always call her by her name."

"I think Sapphire would be a good name," Kimmie offered. "She has the same color as a sapphire."

"It's as good a name as any," Tarrin shrugged. "So her name is Sapphire."

"Very good then. Stay with her in the cabin for the rest of the day, and make sure to open the window. She'll learn that this is her den, and she'll also get used to you. Just keep visitors on this side of the room until tomorrow."

"What should I feed her?"

"Drakes eat anything, but they can be finicky, they can," he replied. "Table scraps work best. She'll tell you what she does and doesn't like. Oh, and make sure she always has fresh water in a bowl somewhere. Drakes drink alot of water, they do."

"Alright," he nodded. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of at the moment, no," he replied. "As soon as I remember something else, I'll run down here and tell you, I will."

"So, just sit in here with her all day?"

"Just so," Phandebrass nodded. "I say, you may want to get a book or something."

"I can have visitors, so could you go find Camara Tal and ask her to come to my room?" he asked.

"I say, I'd be happy to, my boy," he replied with a smile.

Phandebrass turned around and took off his cap, then replaced it on his head for some strange reason. "I'll send Camara down here for you, my boy," he promised. "I say, coming, Kimmie?"

"In a bit," she replied.

"See you in a bit, then," he replied, nodding to her. Then he let himself out.

"What do you want, Kimmie?" he asked her.

"To know why you've been avoiding me," she replied bluntly, putting her elbows on her knees and leaning towards him.

"I didn't realize I was avoiding you on purpose, Kimmie," he said blandly. "You've been busy, and I've been busy. That's all."

"That's not all, and don't deny it," she countered. "Am I upsetting you, Tarrin? If so, tell me so, and I'll fix whatever it is I'm doing that annoys you."

He snorted. "There's nothing you *can* do, Kimmie," he told her directly.

She looked at him, then she blinked. Then she laughed. "Is that all that's bothering you?" she asked with a sudden grin. "Why didn't you say so!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you really think Jesmind is going to care if we go to bed together?" she asked easily. "I thought you knew females better than that!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Tarrin," she chided. "Love is love, but sex is just that. Sex. Jesmind isn't going to give a flip of her hair if we go to bed, so long as your love for her doesn't change."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't feel right if I did," he told her. "It would be like cheating on her."

"If I'm bothering you this much after only a couple of rides, what do you think it's going to be like in a month, Tarrin?" she asked bluntly. "And I wasn't even *trying* for you. But now that you've made your interest clear, I *will* be trying for you. It'll only get worse."

"That's a cheap shot, Kimmie!"

"That's one way of putting it," she teased with a wink. "I told you a long time ago that I'm interested in you, Tarrin. Now that I have you all to myself

and I know that you're interested in me too, do you really think I'm going to pass up the chance?"

"But what about Jesmind?"

"What about her?" Kimmie mirrored. "I don't really care what your feelings are for Jesmind, Tarrin. What matters is *now*. And right now, you're a male, I'm a female, and we're attracted to one another. Just let instinct run its course."

"You're an evil woman, Kimmie," he accused.

"I know," she replied with a wicked little smile. "If you feel all that worried about what Jesmind thinks, tell her," she offered. "Tell her everything. Even tell her that I'm going to try to lure you now, I don't mind. Because she knows that you can't ignore instinct. She knows it's in my instincts to lure a male I find attractive, especially when I know he's interested. Tell her anything you want to tell her. I think you'll be surprised what she tells you."

"What do you mean?"

"Odds are, after shouting at you a while to make herself feel better, she'll tell you to take me for mate," she said calmly, leaning against the desk. "Just make sure that you stress how it would feel like cheating if you did," she added with a chuckle. "That'll remind her that you're still in her thoughts."

"So, you're telling me to ask my mate if I can dump her and take another," he said in a dangerous tone.

"Not at all. There's no rule that says you can only have one mate at a time, Tarrin," she replied calmly. "I don't want you to give up Jesmind. I'm just asking to take up with you, and I'll gladly step aside when we get back to Suld. Jesmind can't be here to attend to your physical needs," she said with a surprising leer. Tarrin never expected that kind of behavior out of Kimmie. "I'll be happy to take care of it for you," she finished with a wink.

Tarrin was taken aback. In just a short moment, Kimmie had gone from her usual demure, conservative self to the epitome of a hot and bothered Were-cat female. Kimmie really was just like all the other females, just as she had told him a while ago. Tarrin had never seen this side of Kimmie

before, and he was startled by it. But in reality, he shouldn't have been too surprised. Despite being turned, her instincts and her blood were just as hot as any other female's.

"I, I don't know, Kimmie," he told her.

"Just talk to Jesmind, Tarrin," she told him. "Because if you don't, I'm going to make your life a living hell," she finished with a seductive smile.

"You are a witch," he said, but in a teasing tone.

"No, I just have you where I want you," she replied. "It's a buyer's market, Tarrin. And you're the merchandise."

"I really hate females sometimes," he grunted, patting Sapphire on the head gently.

"Then we're doing things right," Kimmie retorted with a grin. "Oh, Tarrin, by the way."

"What?"

"I can smell it all over you," she said bluntly.

To Tarrin's intense pique, he blushed.

"Talk to Jesmind. I'm sure Triana told you that it's highly offensive to a female when she can smell a male's interest, but the male won't have anything to do with her. You don't want to insult me, do you?"

"Do you know that you are a witch?"

"I think you just said that," she said with a teasing grin. "I'll see you later."

She sauntered out of the room, her gait and stance proclaiming her victory, and Tarrin had to suppress the urge to throw something at the door behind her. Tarrin felt a little foolish and not a little uncomfortable with the situation now, since Kimmie knew he was interested in her. What made it worse was that she was right on most counts. He was interested, she was interested, and they both knew it. The instincts were going to drive him to mate with her. And since she knew, she would come after him shamelessly. The only surprising part of it was Kimmie's change in personality, becoming bold and forward. That was pattern female behavior concerning

males, but it was unusual when it came from Kimmie, because of her mild disposition and her human-like outward personality. He realized that he'd been judging her by past conversations, when she carefully chose her words to foster his interest in her without being obvious about it. It just showed that Kimmie knew when to be discreet, and she knew when to be direct. That was unusual in a female. Most wouldn't be able to be discreet if their lives depended on it.

He would have to talk to Jesmind, and soon. He wouldn't touch Kimmie without at least letting her know, and he had the feeling that he'd better do it before Kimmie started getting to him. More than she already had gotten to him, actually.

Tarrin brooded about Kimmie for the rest of that day and most of the next, taking turns between lessons and the drake, but his mind wasn't really on either. Or at least part of his lessons. Sapphire seemed perfectly at ease when Camara Tal came into the room and sat down with him to continue teaching him about Priest magic, but when Keritania and Miranda came to visit him after lunch, the blue drake almost immediately attacked them. Tarrin had to use Sorcery to restrain the animal as she launched up off the bed with lightning crackling around her body. Tarrin realized quickly after that that it was because of Torm. The drake had thought Torm was attacking her, and now she associated Wikuni scents with enemies. Camara Tal was human, so her scent was completely different. When Camara Tal came in and showed she wasn't an enemy, the drake accepted her easily.

Tarrin saw that it would take a long time to break Sapphire of that, unless he cheated. The easiest way to do that would be to talk to Triana. He knew the Druidic spells for talking to animals, but they were for talking to normal animals. Drakes weren't what many would call normal animals, so he wasn't sure if the spells would work on her. And if they did, he wasn't sure if they'd hurt her, or him, or both of them because they weren't entirely compatible with her. All he had to do was talk to Sapphire and assure her that Wikuni weren't enemies, that it was just a misunderstanding, but before he tried, he wanted to make sure it would be alright.

All in all, however, given that he'd only had the drake for two days, he was rather pleased with her. She was a constant companion, she didn't really cause too much trouble, and she was very affectionate. Sapphire's presence

had been enough to keep him from talking to Jesmind about Kimmie the night before, since he was content to let her distract him. He'd already found out from Phandebrass what drakes would eat, and it only took a while and a little Conjuring to determine Sapphire's likes and dislikes. The only thing so far he had had to say about her was that she was a little bit too energetic sometimes. She knocked over the washstand and almost broke a wing chasing a small flying insect through the cabin, intent on catching and eating it. Drakes were social animals and hunted in packs, hunting animals their size or larger, but an individual drake would hunt anything smaller than itself, even insects. At least she didn't use her electrical ability to try to catch the insect, she could have set fire to the cabin.

Tarrin stayed in the cabin the first day out of necessity, but stayed another day both to keep Sapphire separated from the Wikuni and avoid Kimmie. Just thinking about her raised all sorts of instinctual urges in him, the kinds of urges that were extremely hard to suppress. He still had his lesson with Camara Tal, but since Keritanima couldn't come into his room, he instead spent the free time between lunch and dinner reading from a book Camara Tal had lent him, a book on multipantheonic history and philosophy. It described all ten Elder Gods and all forty-five Younger Gods, as well as the six established deities that were defined as Cult Gods. There were quite a few of them, and Tarrin saw the general lines in which they operated. The Elder Gods were gods of natural forces. There were a few Younger Gods that also represented natural forces, but the book said that they were subject to the Elder God whose sphere of influence overlapped their own. Those Younger Gods tended to represent an aspect of a sphere of influence, like Chulali, a Mahuut goddess of the jungle, and Talon, an Arathorn god of the forest and birds. Both were subject to Leia, the Elder goddess of nature. Vykar the Ravager, god of storms, was subject to T'Kya, Elder Goddess of weather. Those Younger Gods that didn't represent a natural force instead represented a human condition, pursuit, or position. Ragya was the god of disease. Endar and K'tar were gods of war, Endar representing the dark aspects of war such as bloodlust and killing, while K'Tar represented the purity of the concept, the testing of man against man in honorable combat. Denthar was the god of knowledge, and Sheniiia was the goddess of peace, mercy, and healing. A Younger God represented an aspect of human culture, but they could also be a patron god to a kingdom or nation. The Sulasian patron god, Karas, was the god of law and justice.

The Ungardt patron god, Dalstaad, was the god of strength and power, and to a minor degree, another god of war. The Younger Gods that weren't gods of nature didn't answer to any specific Elder God, but instead attended to their own devices. They still had to obey the Elder Gods, but didn't have a specific one looking over their shoulder.

Tarrin had almost immediately looked up Val. It turned out that he was considered a Younger God. He was the god of darkness, but was also called the god of evil, and was also considered a god of discord, feeding off conflict. The book said that he was known as the Forgotten God, whose imprisonment by Spyder some five thousand years ago had caused him to be forgotten by all but the sages and historians.

Were they wrong. The worship of Val was alive and well among the *ki'zadun*, the very organization that Val created to further his own ends.

Tarrin had never really thought much about the hierarchy of the gods. After all, he had his goddess, and the rest of them just didn't seem to be very important. But Camara Tal did think it to be important that he understand how the gods functioned in the world, and to understand their orders in order to better get along with them.

So many gods. Sixty of them, and those were only the *human* gods. The Wikuni had gods of their own, ten of them, and the Vendari had three gods they revered. The Aeradalla had a god of their own, as did the Selani. And he was pretty sure that the various races of the Goblinoids, *Fae-da'Nar*, and other sentient beings he'd never heard of before also had their own gods. Quite a few gods, all trying to work together in what they'd probably consider to be a confined space. Contending with one another, competing for worshippers and territory, all jockeying for power through their orders, which constantly strove to convert others to their god's worship.

Tarrin got so involved in the book that he almost forgot about dinner, but Sapphire wasn't about to let herself go without something to eat. She bit at the ends of his fingers in agitation as the sunlight began to creep across the cabin, as the sun lowered towards the western horizon. He looked up and realized he'd been reading from the book since just after noon. He wasn't quite ready to take the drake outside just yet, so he Conjured a meal for both of them, wolfed it down, and then decided it would be a good time to see if Triana was with Jesmind.

As Sapphire gnawed on a chunk of roasted beef, complete with bone, Tarrin put his paw around his amulet and called out to Jesmind. She answered almost immediately, her voice tart. *"You call later and later, and now you call before sunset,"* she accused. *"Make up your mind!"*

"You're testy today," he told her by way of greeting. "What's the matter?"

"Your daughter has been changing the color of the walls!" she shot at him. Whenever Jasana did something magical and it was something naughty, she became *his* daughter. When she was behaving, she was *their* daughter. *"Then she changed that cat you gave her into a goldfish! And we won't even discuss what she did this morning!"*

Tarrin almost laughed, but knew it would only set Jesmind off. "She's your daughter too, Jesmind. Punish her."

"I already did, but you know how much good punishing her does."

"Almost none," he admitted.

"Damn right. She got both our stubbornness."

"Is everything back to normal?"

"Somewhat. The cat won't come anywhere near anything more than a saucer of water, but Triana said it'll calm down after a while."

Tarrin chuckled. "I need to talk to Triana, Jesmind. Is she around?"

"She's in Jasana's room," she replied. *"Why, what's the matter?"*

"Nothing serious. I sorta ended up getting stuck with a pet of my own, and I need Triana's help learning a spell to talk to it. It's kind of unusual."

"What is it?"

"A drake."

There was a pause. *"Like those two little flying lizards the Wizard has?"*

"Just like them, except this one is a different color."

"Oh. I kind of liked them. Is it cute?"

"I think she is," he replied.

"Why do you need to talk to Triana? Doesn't that Wizard know how to take care of drakes?"

"He already told me what I need to do, but the drake thinks Wikuni are enemies, and keeps attacking them. I need to be able to talk to her, so I can convince her that Wikuni aren't enemies."

"That could be a problem, given you're on a Wikuni ship and you're going to the Wikuni homeland," she agreed with a slight chuckle. "Mother, Tarrin needs to talk to you for a bit. Tarrin, how are we going to do this? Do I have to tell you what she says in reply?"

"Don't you know your own mother, Jesmind?" Tarrin chided. "She's got her own ways to talk to me."

Almost on cue, a swirling bluish circle of energy spun out of nothingness before the bed, in the direction he was facing. Tarrin had seen something like it before, and knew that an image of Triana would appear in its center when it was fully formed. Sapphire, on the other hand, didn't quite know what to make of it. At first she hissed at it, then sniffed at the air, flicking out that forked tongue. When she found no scent to go along with the strange light, she flitted from the desk, where her water bowl was, to the bed and settled down on Tarrin's lap. Obviously, she accepted it as some kind of natural phenomenon. The blue circle of glowing, swirling energy grew to the size of a large mirror, then colors formed in its center and expanded. They changed size and shape and contracted, slowly forming a clear image of Jasana's bedroom. Jasana was sitting on the bed in her nightshirt, pulling a tangle out of the tip of her tail. Triana sat sedately on the edge of the bed, looking at him with that stony expression.

"Cub," she said with a nod of her head.

"Papa!" Jasana said happily, bouncing up and looking at him. Tarrin's mood improved vastly when he looked at his cub, looking just as happy and energetic as ever. Her strawberry blond hair had been tied back behind her head, and the white furred cat ears that poked up from the tied hair looked a bit larger than usual, since the hair that surrounded them was pulled down. Jasana's hair was as thick and springy as her parents'. "Is that really you, Papa?"

"Of course it's me, cub," he replied with a bright smile. "Your grandmother is using a spell that lets us see each other."

"You're looking a bit drawn, cub," Triana noted sharply as Jesmind sat down on the other side of Jasana and looked at him. Jesmind looked as lovely as ever, but she had an unfriendly expression on her face. That softened considerably when she looked at him, replaced by a loving smile.

"I'm doing well enough, mother," he replied absently. "I need a bit of help."

"What with?"

"Well, as you can see, I have this new little friend," he said, pointing at the drake. "I need to talk to her to break her of a fairly bad habit. Do you know a spell you could teach me to let me talk to her?"

"What is that, Papa?" Jasana asked, leaning over her grandmother's leg and peering close to the viewing spell. "It looks like a big lizard someone painted."

"It's a drake, cub," he told her. "A blue drake. Remember the drakes that Phandebrass has?"

"I never got to pet them," she pouted in reply.

"They don't really like strangers, cub," he told her.

"Sathon didn't teach you the spell to talk to animals?" Triana asked in surprise. "It's a basic Druid spell."

"He did, but this is a rather special animal, mother," he replied. "She's not what you'd consider a *natural* animal. I wasn't sure if the spell would work, or if it would cause her harm, so I wanted to make sure of things with you before I tried."

"You can use the spell on a drake, Tarrin," she assured him. "At least you were wise enough to check with me before trying."

"I don't want to hurt her, mother."

She nodded, then seemed to study him carefully. "You do look a little stressed, cub. What's wrong?"

"Just the situation, mother," he replied carefully, glancing at Jesmind. "I'll be happy when we're back on dry land."

Triana was quiet a moment. "Just bed her, cub," she announced bluntly, taking Tarrin aback.

"What?" Jesmind demanded. "Tarrin, is Kimmie causing you trouble?"

"Well, not *trouble*," he said quickly. "We're just starting to--"

"Drop it, cub," Triana said flatly. "You can't lie to me, and I'm not blind. If Kimmie's interested, bed her."

"*Mother!*" he gasped.

"Stop thinking like a human, Tarrin," she ordered. "You're not Jesmind's exclusive property, no matter what you may think." Jesmind glared at Triana, but said nothing. "After all, cub, it's *just* sex."

That seemed to strike at the core of his dilemma, caught between the Were-cat's casual attitude towards that kind of thing, and his human association with fidelity as part of a relationship. He blew out his breath and gave Triana a helpless look, then avoided Jesmind's eyes. "It feels like cheating," he admitted.

"There's no such thing among Were-cats, cub," she chided him. "A female gets exclusive rights to a male only as long as she can keep him. When Jesmind let you leave, she let you go, and when she did that, she gave up her claim on you. Kimmie knows that, and that means that if she knows you're interested, she'll come after you with everything she's got. If she does that, you'll bed her whether you want to or not. It's best to do it willingly, so you don't have any guilt over it afterward."

"Jesmind may have had to let me leave, but I never said I was leaving her," he explained to his bond-mother. "It just doesn't seem right to me, mother. It just doesn't."

Triana looked at Jesmind expectantly. Jesmind seemed to be ready to challenge her mother's will, but that defiance died as soon as Triana's expression turned ominous.

"Alright!" Jesmind snapped at her mother. "Tarrin, I--damnit, I don't want to do this!"

"You'd rather leave Tarrin in pain?" Triana asked archly. "I knew you were selfish, cub, but this even surprises me!"

"Gramma, what's wrong?" Jasana asked in a small voice.

"You're learning how *not* to treat a mate, little cub," Traina told her firmly. "Your mother is putting her desires over your father's needs. She's being very selfish and stubborn, and her selfishness is going to make your father sick, because he won't do what he needs to do unless your mother tells him it's alright."

Jesmind averted her gaze from her mother. "If I let him go, he may not come back," she protested weakly.

"Are you sure you know him at all, you foolish cub?" Triana bored into her. "Don't you trust him, or do you just think you're not woman enough to keep him?"

That hit a nerve. Jesmind raised her gaze and looked at her mother challengingly.

"Papa won't leave us, Mama," Jasana said assuringly. "He promised to come back."

"Alright," Jesmind growled. "Tarrin--I can't believe I'm saying this! Tarrin, if Kimmie's after you, go ahead. But don't get too friendly with her!" she warned in an ugly tone. "And tell her that me and her are going to talk about this when you get back!"

"It's not her fault, Jesmind," Tarrin said defensively. "It's my fault. I made it worse when she cornered me about why I've been avoiding her and dragged the truth out of me. She said she'd be after me. She even told me to tell you that, and that she'd be happy to step aside when we got back to Suld."

"Oh, sure she says that *now*," Jesmind snapped. "Just like she said she wouldn't touch you!"

"She never did," he told her. "I told you, it's my fault."

"You're a male, cub," Triana told her mildly. "A male trapped on a ship with a female that has interest in you. There's nothing either of you could do about it."

"You did this on purpose, didn't you!" Jesmind suddenly accused. "You *knew* Kimmie had it for him, didn't you! That's why you sent her!"

"That's why," Triana admitted shamelessly. "Tarrin needs to learn what it's like to be with another female. It'll make things easier for both of you when you do finally part ways."

"I can't believe it! My own *mother* engineers a plan to steal my mate!" she shouted, standing up.

"I didn't allow anyone to steal anything," Triana said calmly. "Gods, woman! If you don't trust Tarrin enough to be a Were-cat male, then you should go find a human!"

"What does that mean?" Jesmind snapped.

"It means that of all people, I thought *you*, an elder female, would understand the nature of our kind," she replied bluntly. "Isn't it you that taught Tarrin the difference between emotion and sex? Weren't you secretly seducing him even when you were supposed to be killing him?"

That made Jesmind blush furiously, sitting back down and assuming a meek posture.

"Didn't think I knew about that, did you?" Triana challenged mockingly. "The point is, daughter, don't give yourself rights and then deny them to Tarrin. If it were another male in the Tower that had your eye, you wouldn't think twice about bedding him. And don't deny it."

Jesmind blew out her breath, then nodded silently. That stung Tarrin a little bit, but in that moment he began to understand what Triana was trying to get across to him. To both of them, for that matter. "If I got this jealous every time Thean took another female for mate, all my hair would be white and my fur would fall out," she said in an accusing tone. "Both of you had better learn how to deal with knowing the other is with someone else. Part of this is to teach both of you that there *is* life after you break up."

Both Tarrin and Jesmind were uncomfortably silent, and Tarrin just looked at Jasana. His daughter was listening attentively, and didn't seem to understand the emotion involved in Triana's words.

"So, Tarrin," Triana said. "If Kimmie interests you, take her. She won't say no. I guarantee it. And Jesmind," she said sharply. "Learn to trust

Tarrin. He loves you, and when he comes back, he'll be yours again. Until then, let him learn what it's like to be mates with some female *other* than you. Let him learn the same thing you learned when you were his age."

"I don't like it," Jesmind growled.

"I don't like it either," Tarrin agreed. "It still feels like cheating."

"There is no such thing, cub, and if you say that one more time, I'm going to come over there and educate you personally," she warned.

"Yes, mother," Tarrin said meekly.

"Good," she said with a snort. "Now then, this spell is starting to get a bit heavy, so I'm going to end it. I'll talk to you later, cub," she told him, looking at him. "And don't get the idea that I'm not going to check up on you. If I find out you're resisting your instincts out of some kind of loyalty to Jesmind, I'll be cross with you. Loyalty to a mate is in your head and heart, not between your legs."

Tarrin sighed. "Yes, mother," he said.

"Alright then. I'll talk to you in a few days."

And then she ended the spell without another word from anyone.

Tarrin sat there a long moment, stroking Sapphire's scales, considering the spoken and unspoken lessons Triana had given him. That it was alright to have interest in other females, that it was natural for a Were-cat. And that he could love Jesmind and be mates with Kimmie. Kimmie had said it, but he hadn't really thought it possible until Triana said it and he saw Jesmind admit that if she found a male she found interesting, she would take him for mate in his absence. Were-cat culture didn't associate sex with fidelity to a mate as human culture did, and that was probably his hardest problem to overcome. It would be virutally impossible, given the number of females to males and the power of the instincts. Cats were not pair-bonding creatures, and that heavily affected the human flavor of their makeup.

It wouldn't be the same. Then again, it wasn't supposed to. Kimmie was not Jesmind. Kimmie was her own female, unique and different, as all Were-cats were. But perhaps, that was the lesson Triana wanted him to learn.

Either way, he'd have to get it overwith. He wasn't ready for a relationship with Kimmie, but he doubted if she would object if he proposed a single night's encounter. If Kimmie started coming after him, wagging her tail in his face and putting even more into her scent than she had been already, he'd not be a pleasant person to know if he resisted her.

If it had been anyone but Kimmie, he wouldn't have been surprised. But even the blue-eyed, very unusual Were-cat proved that, as she had told him a while ago, she was just as hot-blooded as any other female.

But that could wait until tomorrow. As long as he stayed away from Kimmie, he'd be just fine. Looking down on the little ridges and spines on Sapphire's back, he dredged up the spell that Sathon had taught him, the spell for communicating with animals. It was a spell of intent more than image, for it was hard to form the spell's effect in a visual manner. When he had the series of cascading meanings and intents arranged in his mind--it was a surprisingly complicated spell--he reached within, through the Cat, and came into contact with the endless energy of the All. It saw into his mind, read his intent and looked at his image, and then responded to what it found there. It came as a sudden expansion of self, surprisingly enough to him, and his awareness of the little drake in his lap increased dramatically.

He realized why immediately. Drakes were animals, with no concept of language that he would understand. So the entirety of their communication, with each other and themselves, came in the forms of images, emotions, memories of scents and sounds, and impulses. The spell literally opened a window into the drake's mind and allowed him to read into that multitude of various concepts that formed the core of the animal's thought, read into it and translate it into words he understood. The spell would also take his words and transform them in the drake's mind into the form that she would understand. Thus allowing them to talk with one another.

Another surprise was the complexity of the mind that could see now. Phandebrass was so correct when he said that drakes were very smart. Sapphire was a very intelligent little animal, capable of emotions and comprehension that went beyond what most animals could understand. But despite that intelligence, she was still an animal, still governed by instinct and impulse.

"I know you can understand this," he said aloud. That caused the drake to crane her neck, to look up at him with clear surprise showing in her eyes. "I think you know what I am, so it shouldn't be too much of a shock."

You are an Earthbrother, came the reply. I could sense it in you.

"That's right," he agreed. "I'm using Earth magic so we can talk, so we can come to some understandings."

What is there to understand? You please me, and you care for me. I will stay with you.

"I'm glad to have you, but there are some things you have to learn if you want to stay with me and not cause trouble for yourself and those around you, Sapphire."

What does that word mean?

"It has no true meaning, but it's a word that people will associate with you. It's called a *name*. When someone thinks of you, they will think of that word."

A name. What a strange concept. My scent is who I am.

"Yes, but few of those around me can smell that, Sapphire. They're much different from you."

Truly, it seems. How alien.

"You should get used to it. When you hear that word, people are either trying to communicate to you, or they're speaking about you to another."

Strange, but understandable.

"I'm glad you agree. Now, the first thing. The furred ones, like the one you shocked the night we met. They're not enemies."

It attacked me.

"No, it wanted to look at you. It had no meaning to hurt you. It was a mistake. The furry ones that all smell the same, they're not all your enemies, Sapphire, but I won't tell you that all of them are friends. You should approach each one separately. Don't think all of that species are enemies, but don't assume that all of them are friends either."

I understand. It is so among my kind as well. Some are friendly, some are not. The learning takes time.

"Good. That goes for the hairless ones, like the dark female that's spent the last couple of mornings with me. Approach each one as neither friend or enemy, until it proves itself one way or the other."

Her scent pleases me. She smells of spices. She is of the same kind as the dark tall one and the dark short one and the short pale one?

"The species is very diverse," he replied. "There are many kinds within the kind. Just as you are blue, but the other two of your kind that live with us are red."

Ah. They are cousins to one another.

"Something like that." He stroked her side gently. "There are some things you'll need to learn, Sapphire, actions that you'll need to perform when I say certain words. They're not meant to degrade you, but you do need to know them for when I understand something you may not, things that deal with the beings around you."

You are pack-leader. I will obey, in all things.

"I'm glad you feel that way. If I may ask, why were the others attacking you?"

My pack was killed by the stone-makers. I survived. The pack attacking me was claiming the territory of my former pack.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I am alive, I am here, and I am content. That is all that matters.

Tarrin understood that mentality. It came from her instincts. "I can't speak to you like this all the time," he told her. "Most of the time, I'll be trying to speak to you with the words that ones like me use."

The funny sounds?

"Those," he affirmed. "In time, you'll come to understand that they are different, and they have certain meaning. Like the sound *Sapphire* meaning you."

A strange way to communicate. Where are the scent-marks, the language of stance and set?

"We don't use those forms," he told her. "There is some information that passes along in the language of the bodies of our kinds, but mostly we communicate using the sounds."

If that is how it must be, then that is how it will be, she said diffidently. *I will learn.*

"Good. I hope you'll be happy here."

You are kind to me. You feed me, and you share your territory with me. Why would I not be content?

"Why indeed?" Tarrin chuckled in reply.

After the conversation, Tarrin felt comfortable with leaving the room with Sapphire. For as long as he could maintain the spell, he taught her the names and appearances of his sisters and his close friends, those she should not fear, explained some of the intrinsic dangers the ship may pose, things her animal mind wouldn't understand any other way, and taught her nearly as many commands as Phandebrass had taught Chopstick and Turnkey. She was very intelligent and she learned quickly, and it didn't take long to teach her everything she'd need to know to keep her safe up on deck. By the next morning, Sapphire knew where it was safe to perch and where it wasn't safe, not to get around the cannons, to avoid the Wikuni sailors and not interfere with their tasks, and who among the people on the ship she could approach without fear. If course, it had taken some convincing to prove to her that Keritanima and Miranda weren't enemies, but in the end she accepted the fact for what it was.

Tarrin learned that she may be obedient, seeing him as the dominant, but she certainly had a stubborn mind. She was very headstrong.

When he came up on deck with Sapphire the next morning, he could tell immediately that the sailors were nervous about her, and wouldn't take their eyes off of her. She had zapped quite a few of them the morning he had accepted her, and they weren't exactly going to be very forgiving about it. Sapphire could sense their hostility, and was hostile to them in kind. She

didn't attack them, but she made sure to hiss at any Wikuni that got close to her. That made them afraid, and that seemed to satisfy the drake in a most effective manner. She was almost smug by the time he found a nice stool and sat down near the bow, waiting for Camara Tal.

What he got instead was Kimmie. He scented her long before he saw her, and her scent was almost intoxicating in its allure. Kimmie had been true to word, somehow being able to put her attraction for him into her scent, then broadcasting it to him in a way that almost no male could resist. She plopped down on a rope coil against the bulwark, wearing one of her usual peasant dresses, a dress that wasn't laced up quite as tightly in front as usual. The result was that quite a bit of Kimmie's rather impressive cleavage was peeking out from that neckline, a calculated effort to remind him that Kimmie was very much a woman.

"Well, I'm glad to see you come out of hiding," she said with a smile. "Did you talk to Jesmind?"

"I did," he replied evenly, looking down at her.

"And what did she say?"

"What could she say?" he challenged.

"Knowing Jesmind, she probably had quite a bit to say," she said mildly, but her eyes were dancing with mirth. "But let's skip over all the cursing and the ranting and the raging and get down to the part of her tirade that matters. Did she tell you yes or no?"

"It was something like a yes under protest," he replied blankly. "Triana was there, so she couldn't say as much as she wanted."

"Triana? Why was she there?"

"Following up on what she started," he replied, giving her a slightly accusing look. "Triana sent you with me specifically hoping we'd get together."

"She did? That's surprising, considering you're her daughter's mate."

"I think Triana wants me to learn some things I can't learn with Jesmind," he told her. "I think I've already learned some of them."

"Like what?"

"Like not confusing love for attraction, I think," he replied.

"I went through the same thing. I was all but ready to marry the first mate I had after turning Were. I was devastated when he rejected me," she said with a little sigh. "Maybe Triana doesn't want to see you go through the same thing."

"Maybe. I can't say I feel very comfortable with it, Kimmie," he admitted. "I mean, yes, I find you attractive, but I can't help feeling like I'm betraying Jesmind."

"Tarrin," she sighed in exasperation. "I'm not asking you to turn your back on Jesmind. I told you that! I don't want anything from you other than a good time and a little fun. You and I are friends, Tarrin. Good friends. I told you a while ago that we could be good friends and mates at the same time. The mating won't interfere with our friendship unless you *let* it." She reached up and put her paw on his knee. "What you have with Jesmind, I respect that, Tarrin. I'm not asking for that. I just want your attention and your companionship. That's why Were-cats usually mate. For attention and companionship. Not for love."

Tarrin was silent a moment, then looked down at her. She smiled. "Now, can you give me attention?"

"I'd be hard pressed not to right now."

She grinned. "Can you give me companionship?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Can you be my *friend*, Tarrin?"

"I'm already your friend."

"Then we'll be a good match," she assured him. "You can go right on loving Jesmind, so long as you don't let her interfere with what we'll have."

"I'll try."

"And I'd appreciate it if you didn't shout out her name while we're making love," she told him boldly. "That really annoys a girl, you know."

Tarrin looked at her, then laughed helplessly. He'd always thought he understood what it meant to be mates with a female. At that moment, he

realized how wrong he'd been.

Chapter 3

Tarrin had two new females in his life, and both changed his daily routines dramatically.

That wasn't to say that it was a bad thing. After abandoning certain misgivings and surrendering to the instincts of it, Tarrin found that he could enjoy time together with Kimmie. She was actually quite an affectionate female, comfortable with him in ways he didn't think a female would be comfortable with a male after such a short time. There was no love there, not like with Jesmind, but Kimmie had been so right when she explained things to him. That they could be good friends and mates at the same time. Tarrin liked Kimmie, and Kimmie liked Tarrin. He was attracted to her, she was attracted to him. It allowed them to share a physical relationship, and to his surprise, it really didn't interfere with their friendship, nor did it change how he felt about Jesmind. He had been born human, and had been a very naive and young boy when he was turned, long before he could gain any kind of carnal experience. That sheltered background and its teachings were scrambled by the instincts, warping many of his concepts by jumbling human-taught morality with the pragmatic, nonchalant approach of the Cat. Jesmind had done absolutely nothing to untangle his conceptions, since it suited her designs to keep him as he was. Triana had done much to try to show him, but really hadn't broken through to him. Tarrin knew that to a Were-cat, sex was a casual affair, but he had never really managed to drive that point home in his own mind. The one woman outside of Jesmind at that time had been Mist, and he'd been very uncomfortable with the idea of a casual mating even then. He'd only done it for her, not for himself. In a single day, Kimmie had completely rewritten the book of the complicated levels of relationships between Were-cats. Kimmie was his friend, first and foremost, just as clever and funny and wickedly smart as ever, and she acted in no way different towards him. At least in public. When she got him alone and she was in the mood, however, it was like she transformed into a completely different woman. But even during those times, she was still Kimmie, just a Kimmie showing a side of herself to him he had not

experienced before. And after their ardor was satisfied, she went right back to being Kimmie again.

It was most definitely the strangest relationship in which Tarrin had ever found himself, and he found himself completely mystified by Kimmie after they agreed to become mates and she led him back down to his cabin. Even though both of them were turned, Kimmie showed that she had adjusted to the peculiarities of Were-cat culture much more easily than he had. Or, more to the point, she had been taught better than him. He was shocked that Kimmie could literally see him as two different people; as Tarrin, her friend, and as Tarrin, her lover. She seemed perfectly capable of separating the two sides of their relationship in her mind, something that Tarrin found a little more difficult.

Sapphire certainly didn't help. The little drake had completely taken over his life, it seemed, and her promise to be obedient went only as far as when he was watching her. It was almost like she was testing him, seeing how far she could push his authority, seeing how much power she held in their relationship. She wasn't vicious or destructive, just stubborn, often resisting his commands or intentionally pestering him when he was busy with something else. But despite the trouble she caused him at first, he found her presence to be very comforting, and was more than happy they'd found each other.

Tarrin settled into his two new relationships over the days as they got closer and closer to the mysterious continent of Wikuna, a continent that his sister Keritanima ruled. That idea still hadn't quite sunk in, even after all that time. To think that his sister Kerri actually ruled an entire continent! He couldn't even imagine having that much power. Even if he could imagine it, he was absolutely positive that he didn't want it. He saw the long hours that Keritanima worked, even out in the middle of the ocean, constantly going over reports or making decisions, decisions that affected the lives of everyone under her rule. That was a dreadful responsibility, and it was not something that Tarrin wanted. It reminded him of the vision he'd had of her, standing on a mound of skulls, crying. Maybe that was what the vision meant. That the duties of her station had changed her, saddened her somehow. They had certainly taken over her life. She was just as talkative and irreverent as ever, but he could sense the change in her. She wasn't the

carefree, spontaneous girl he'd known in the Tower. She was different now, more methodical, maybe a little more ruthless. She was more *mature*.

In the five days since consenting to take Kimmie for mate, his routine had changed. Kimmie slept in his cabin now, but hadn't officially moved in. She came to him after he finished his time with Allia, then left before breakfast. She didn't hide the fact that they were lovers, but it was almost as if she wouldn't allow herself to take up residence with him, like it was some kind of violation of the strange rules females had concerning males and other females. After breakfast, he spent his time with Camara Tal, then with Keritania and Miranda after lunch, but this was where Sapphire had usurped his schedule. She interrupted them constantly with demands for attention, demands for food, torturing the Wikuni sailors by chasing them around the deck, and being a general nuisance to the ship. She had integrated herself with Chopstick and Turnkey, taking over the social hierarchy by winning a pretty nasty little fight with Chopstick, who was the dominate between the two males. This didn't surprise Tarrin, because Sapphire had been a wild drake, where the males had not. She was smaller than them--if not by more than a shade--but she was faster, stronger, and more experienced in fighting other drakes than they were. She ruled the other drakes, and she and the two males would often tear around the ship in endless games of chase, or harass the sailors whenever Sapphire felt bored. The rest of Tarrin's schedule was generally unchanged, though he did spend slightly less time with Allia at night. He found it hard to concentrate on Allia when he knew that Kimmie was waiting for her to leave. Allia, the blessedly understanding woman she was, took it all in stride. Allia was his most intimate friend, and she better than anyone understood the power the instincts had over a Were-cat.

The morning was shaping up to be just like any other morning. Kimmie was sitting on the bed trying to sort out her dress--a bed that now fit him, after he used a combination of Sorcery and Druidic magic to alter its dimensions to fit his frame, as Chopstick, Turnkey, and Sapphire growled and snapped at each other as they fought over a piece of long rawhide leather Tarrin kept in the cabin to serve as a chew toy. Kimmie had had issues with the drakes at first, finding their presence disturbing, but had gotten used to them. They didn't sleep in his bed now, sleeping in a

cushioned basket Tarrin had placed on the desk, but they did still sleep in the room at night. Now they curled up with Sapphire instead of him.

Or, more to the point, they didn't *start* in the bed. But they usually ended up there, nestled in the folds of the blankets between or on top of the two Were-cats. Tarrin thought that that was what irritated Kimmie more than anything else, rolling over and getting jabbed by the small, sharp little ridges and spines that grew from the backbones of the drakes.

"I know there's an arm in here somewhere," Kimmie growled to herself, holding up the crumpled mass of cloth. "The trick is going to be finding it."

"You should be more careful when you take it off," Tarrin suggested. "I'm getting tired of stepping on buttons."

"Maybe I should take it off in my cabin and come over here in a robe," she countered.

"That would work," he agreed. "Or just bring some clothes in here."

"No, I won't do that," she said. "I'm not *mates* with you, Tarrin. We're just mates."

"Someday I may actually understand the difference."

"You already do. Hey!" Kimmie snapped irritably when Chopstick bit the end of her tail. Kimmie snapped it around her body quickly and forcefully enough to drag the drake along with it, pulling it out of bed. It dropped to the floor and spat out a mouthful of orange-brown tabby fur, then chirped a couple of times and jumped back up onto the bed. "You bite my tail again, and I'll start biting you, you little creep!" Kimmie threatened the drake.

"He likes you, Kimmie," Tarrin said soothingly.

"That's the problem," she growled. "They'd be a lot less annoying if they didn't like me." She stood up as she solved the mystery knot into which her dress had become tied, then pulled the garment over her head. It was missing a few buttons on the front, thanks to Kimmie's impatience to undo them. She settled the brown wool dress into place, at least mostly, not bothering to thread her tail through the hole cut into the back of the dress for it. She would only wear it back to her own cabin, where she would wash up and change into something new. "I heard from one of the sailors last

night that we should see the coastline of Wikuna today," she told him. "And then we'll travel north for a couple of days."

"We turned northwest not long after passing Twinfluke Island," Tarrin recalled. "We can't be too far from the city."

"I'll be glad to get off this ship," Kimmie complained. "I've never liked them. Something inside me objects to putting myself at the mercy of someone else, where I can't control my fate. But at least this one is spacious, compared to other ships. Once I was on a ship from Tor to Arkis, and the cabin I had was so cramped that I couldn't even lay down on the floor without my ears hitting one wall and my toes hitting the other. I gave up the cabin and slept up on deck with the sailors. At least there, I could stretch out." She chuckled. "And I'm not even *tall* for our kind. I'd have loved to have seen someone like you or Triana in that cabin."

"I doubt I'd have been able to get in through the door," Tarrin said mildly.

"Probably," she smiled in agreement. "What do you think Wikuna is going to be like?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do you know that only a handful of outsiders have ever been there? At least recorded visitors, anyway," she amended. "From what I've read, Wikuna's cities are cleaner, better organized, and more advanced than cities in the West. They've even built large, extensive sewer systems, and even have running water in some parts of their larger cities."

"You know something, Kimmie?"

"What?"

"You talk too much," he said bluntly, handing her a glass of water.

"Call it a personality flaw," she teased, then drained the glass. "You don't have to answer me, you know. Just let me prattle on."

"You're getting to be as bad as Phandebrass."

"I could never be *that* bad," Kimmie laughed. "I'm really fond of him, but he just talks and talks and talks. Sometimes he talks so much he forgets what he was talking about."

"That sounds like Phandebrass, all right," Tarrin agreed.

"But you know something? If you *listen* to him, you'd be surprised what you can learn. I think that man has forgotten more than you or I have ever learned. I learn more about a lot of things by listening to him ramble than I do when he's trying to teach me."

"I think that's the problem. He's learned so much, maybe his brain can't hold it all. It all just leaks out his mouth."

Kimmie gave him a look, then she laughed delightedly. "It's a pretty bizarre image, but it does make sense. In a twisted sort of way, that is."

"Phandebrass is a twisted sort of person."

"No argument there." She tied her hair behind her neck with a bit of leather thong. "I'll see you at lunch?"

"If you remember to show up," he chided.

"Blame Phandebrass for that. He gets so wrapped up in teaching me, and I get so wrapped up in his lessons, I forget what time it is. And he certainly won't remember."

"Try."

"I will, I promise." She rose up on her toes, but still had to pull his head down. Kimmie was much shorter than him. She gave him a quick, intimate kiss, then adjusted the bosom of her dress. "Alright, see you later," she said in farewell, then opened the door to his cabin and filed out.

Tarrin watched her leave, and couldn't help but be surprised how different she had made his life, and also how much it hadn't changed. He had no idea why he'd stressed so much over her.

Just as he was reaching for the door to close it, he felt a shift in the Weave. That made him smile; Keritania had finally figured it out. That information was proceeded almost immediately by a scream from Keritania's cabin, a squeal of delight. Her cabin door was at the end of the companionway, about twenty spans from his door, and the large, surprisingly ornate door opened almost immediately. Keritania ran out of her cabin, and her eyes locked on him as soon as she looked up from the floor. "I did it!" she cried out happily as he stepped into the companionway.

"Tarrin, I got my powers back!" She jumped up into his arms and hugged him tightly. "I did, didn't I?"

"It's just like before, Kerri," he assured her. "Once you do it once, you can do it again."

She glanced over her own shoulder, back to her cabin door, and he felt her will push against the Weave. It responded to her, although it was very resistant, and it finally gave up a flow of Air that she wove into a simple spell to close the door. "I can do it!" she said with a laugh, but then she blew out her breath. "But why is the Weave fighting with me?"

"I told you that it would happen," he reminded her. "I'll teach you a way to get around that later, but for now, I want you to go up on deck and practice, practice, practice. As soon as you're used to the new way to use Sorcery, I'll teach you how to weave without that resistance."

"As you command, Master," she teased as he let her back down onto the deck.

"Go," he ordered, pointing towards the stairs imperiously.

"I want to eat first."

"Have them bring you food. Go."

"Alright," she acceded.

Tarrin took up a place near the mainmast as he watched Keritanima sitting by the bow, weaving spells continuously, weaving many of the spells she knew to see how different it was to weave them without drawing in the power first. He watched her without much interest, just keeping an eye on her mainly, as he recited spell prayers back to Camara Tal. "Pay attention," she ordered. "You just mispronounced *thalimasticia*. You almost ended up setting your hair on fire."

"Sorry," he apologized. "It still annoys me that I can't figure out this language," he fretted. "It doesn't seem to have any kind of pattern at all."

"Sages and Priests have been trying since there were sages or Priests," Camara Tal told him calmly. "It works. That's all I know, and that's really all I care about. Now, recite the spell that changes stone into mud."

"I'll never use it."

"I didn't ask if you were ever going to use it. I told you to recite it."

"Alright," Tarrin growled softly, recalling the words of the spell, then repeating them back to her.

"Good. Now, recite the spell that neutralizes active poison." Tarrin recited that one absently, watching as Keritanima Transmuted a coil of rope into stone. "Alright, recite the spell that causes someone to see you as a friend." Tarrin repeated it mechanically, watching as Keritanima Transmuted the petrified rope coil into water, then scurried out of the way as it splashed to the deck. "Good. Now cut off your hair and sing the drunken sailor song."

Tarrin stared at her flatly. "Why don't you try to cut off my hair, Camara?" he challenged.

"Just making sure you were still paying attention," she said with a wolfish grin. "I don't like it when my students are looking somewhere else."

"I'm trying to keep an eye on *my* student, Camara," he explained. "I'm sure she'll be alright, but I can't help making sure."

"This is *my* time, Tarrin," she asserted. "You're mine until lunch. Now forget Keritanima and recite the spell that lets you use a pool of water to view a distant area."

Camara Tal ensured that his attention didn't wander for the rest of her lesson, using barbs, harsh tones, and even poking him whenever his attention wandered to Keritanima. The bell rang announcing lunch, and to his surprise, Kimmie and Phandebrass actually managed to show up. They all sat in the dining room and ate together. The dining room was actually a pretty interesting room. It was above Keritanima's cabin, and had the same large windows across the back wall, showing the sea and the ships trailing the Queen's vessel. It also showed a darkening sky, as it looked that the ship was about to sail into some bad weather. The chefs had prepared a main dish with something called rice, some kind of boiled grain, upon which was smothered a rich tangy sauce with meat and various vegetables. They also had the usual soup, bread, fresh fruit (where they got it was something Tarrin had yet to figure out) and a desert called bread pudding.

"You're still alive," Camara Tal noted as Kimmie led Phandebrass into the dining room.

"Not for lack of trying," Kimmie grinned as she sat down beside Tarrin. "I saw the Queen using magic. Did you get your powers back, your Majesty?"

"How many times have I told you not to call me that in private?" Keritanima demanded. "My name is Keritanima, but you can call me Kerri."

"Sorry. Old habit," she said mildly.

"Say it," Keritanima prompted between spoonfuls of the rice dish.

"Kerri," Kimmie obliged with a light smile.

"If I hear you call me your Majesty when we're not in public one more time, I'm going to turn your fur green."

"Temper, temper," Kimmie teased.

"Were-cats don't have the right to tease other people about their tempers," Keritanima pointed out.

"Maybe not. But who's going to gainsay me?" Kimmie asked with an innocent look.

Keritanima looked at her, then laughed. "You're probably the most interesting Were-cat I've ever met, Kimmie. I don't think any of them have a sense of humor."

"Were-cats have a sense of humor, Kerri. It's just not the same as most other people's," Kimmie said calmly, picking up a spoon with an oversized handle. "I was turned, so I have a better understanding of the nuances of human personality. Wikuni may not be human, but they're similar enough," she added.

"That's almost an insult," Keritanima grinned.

"Centuries of contact between two peoples can cause them to act similarly," Dolanna observed. "Besides, Keritanima, the Wikuni truly are *not* that much different from the human race. Your society and culture is indeed similar to some human cultures, especially in the West."

"I say, that's an interesting observation," Phandebrass said. "I should study it, I should."

"How would we be similar?" Keritanima asked, a bit tartly.

"Your culture is very similar to the kingdoms of the West," Dolanna told her. "The Wikuni personality is dominated by greed, which is a common human trait. And you wear clothes," she added with a smile.

"Wear clothes? How is that a commonality?"

"Think about it, Kerri," Dar told her. "All Wikuni are covered in fur, or feathers. Why do you *need* to wear clothes?"

"Because we'd be naked if we didn't," Keritanima said.

"Yes, but since you have fur, who's going to see it?" Camara Tal pressed. "I'd just see some fur-covered curves. Not anything that would matter."

"We're not *that* covered, Camara Tal," Keritanima said.

"Yes, you can see the important parts," Miranda said with a grin at Keritanima. "A woman's nipples aren't covered in fur, or else she couldn't nurse. And neither is--"

"That's about far enough. Tarrin wears clothes," Keritanima interrupted.

"That's a practice mainly for your benefit, Kerri," Kimmie smiled. "When we're alone, it doesn't matter if we wear clothes or not."

"Of course it's not for you two. I've seen you sneaking into Tarrin's cabin lately," Keritanima winked.

"I'm talking about all Were-cats, Kerri," Kimmie said, unperturbed. "Were-cats have learned to wear clothes as a nod towards strange human customs, and it's a practice that's more or less caught on. But some Were-cats won't wear clothes when they're not in human lands."

"Which ones?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Shirazi is one you'd know," she replied. "She says it doesn't feel right to hunt wearing clothes."

"We're drifting off the point here," Camara Tal said. "What it comes down to, Kerri, is that the Wikuni don't need to wear clothes, but they do. That shows a similarity between humans and Wikuni."

"Well, alright, I'll give you that," Kerri admitted. "Maybe there are some similarities between us and the humans."

"Maybe we should give up clothes," Miranda chuckled. "It would save me a fortune on my wardrobe."

"You're welcome to give them up any time you feel like it, Miranda," Keritanima told her acidly.

"It would be a liberating experience, I think," Miranda mused.

"I wouldn't want to be jiggling in the wind, that's for sure," Keritanima grunted.

The tone of her comment caused everyone at the table to laugh.

"Jiggling isn't for the weak," Kimmie said with a grin. "It took me a long time to get used to that part of Were-cat culture."

"Jiggling?"

"Nudity," she replied.

"I keep forgetting you're like Tarrin," Keritanima admitted. "You're alot different from the other Were-cats I've met."

"I'm more or less unique," she replied. "I managed to keep most of my human mannerisms after I was turned. It drives the others crazy," she laughed.

"I saw how they acted towards you," Allia said, finally speaking. "It was almost dishonorable."

"I'm used to it. I'm the black sheep among the Were-cats. Triana respects me, Jesmind likes me, and Mist loves me. That's all I really care about."

There was a rumble of thunder. "Well, looks like we'll be staying below decks the rest of the day," Keritanima said, looking out the large windows.

They finished up lunch, and then Tarrin went with Keritanima when she went back to her cabins. To his surprise, Dolanna, Allia, and Dar also came along. "We need to learn about your powers, so we can better understand them," Dolanna had told him by way of explanation as she seated herself on the bed with Allia, and Dar sat on the cushioned chair in front of the desk.

"Well, I guess it won't matter much," he said. "Kerri's not the kind to get distracted. I think she actually does better when people watch."

"Our sister likes the attention," Allia pointed out with a slight smile.

"You mean she's a ham," Dar laughed.

"I'm a Queen. I'm supposed to thrive under pressure," Keritanima said tartly.

"You should have been born a performer, Keritanima," Dolanna told her.

"And miss out on all this luxury? No thank you," Keritanima replied.

Tarrin was confident that Keritanima was fully used to Weavespinner ways, so he sat her down and explained, in fine detail, the give and take nature of true Weavespinner magic, that in order to have the magic obey her, she had to give back to the Weave. "You make it sound like a religious experience," Keritanima accused.

"It *is* a religious experience, Kerri," he said firmly. "Using Sorcery is a way we worship the Goddess. You have to show her your love when you use her power. When you do that, the power will obey you completely. If you don't, it fights you and makes Sorcery much more demanding."

"I've never been all that religious."

"Do you love the Goddess?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

"Well, yes, of course," she replied after a moment. "She's proved she'll be there for me."

"Then that's all it takes. Will it kill you to *show* it, Kerri? That's all it takes."

"It seems so alien."

"No, it's you not wanting to show any weakness, not even to the Goddess," Tarrin said flatly. "Love is *not* a weakness, Kerri. It's probably the greatest strength you could ever possess."

"Where I come from, Tarrin, love is a liability," she said sharply. "Excuse me if I don't go all gushy on command."

Tarrin put his paws on her shoulders. "I've told you what to do, sister," he said in a reasonable tone. "Actually, I can't teach you any more about

this. It's something you have to do for yourself. It's up to you to find your own harmony. And until you learn how to weave without resistance, I won't teach you anything else."

"That sounds like a threat," Keritanima said dangerously.

"It's reality. I won't teach you anything else until you learn how to use Weavespinner magic the right way, because the spells Weavespinners use that regular Sorcerers don't are too demanding. You won't *be able* to use them unless you can weave without resistance. And I can't train you in joining the Weave because we have to stop before we can do that. So I hate to tell you this, sister, but you've only got one option in front of you."

"I hate it when you're right," Keritanima growled at him, her eyes flashing. "Alright, I'll humiliate myself for the Goddess' benefit. What choice do I have?"

"Love is not humiliation, Keritanima," Dolanna said gently. "To think it so dishonors the love you have for your brother and sister."

"That's different," Keritanima said quickly. "They're my friends. They're here."

"Is not the Goddess always with you?" Allia asked. "Does she not comfort you? Did she not bring you peace of mind when you were taken from us? It is dishonorable to the Goddess to think she would see your love as you humiliating yourself. She is not like that, and you know it. You are just too arrogant to allow yourself to place yourself below another."

"That's cruel, sister," Keritanima said in a quavering tone.

"You get nothing but the truth from me, sister," Allia said calmly. "I still love you despite the fact that you are arrogant. Just as I love Tarrin despite the fact that he is not the same man I knew when I branded him."

Tarrin forgot sometimes just how observant and wise his sister was. She had seen right to the core of the matter. Allia knew Tarrin and Keritanima probably even better than they knew themselves. She was quiet and inobtrusive, but she proved again and again how she always knew exactly what to say when it mattered.

"Well, now that I've been dressed down by my own sister in front of Dolanna and Dar, I guess I can get started," Keritanima said in a hurt tone.

"Arrogance is not a bad trait in a monarch, Keritanima," Dolanna said calmly. "Actually, it is a job requirement. We do not think less of you for it."

"I don't think you're arrogant, Kerri. I always thought of it as confidence," Dar assured her. "I've wished sometimes I could be more like you."

"Well, someone appreciates me," Keritanima said with a toothy grin, though her eyes were still a little injured. "Alright, brother, exactly how do I do this?"

Tarrin instructed Keritanima in how she would have to use the power, just as Spyder had instructed him. "Sorcery isn't magic, Kerri. It's art. You have to breathe life into your spells the same way an artist breathes life into a sculpture, or a painting. You have to devote yourself to it like an artist would, and that passion, that love, is what makes the Weave respond. Artists love their work. You have to love to use Sorcery, and love the Goddess that gives you that honor. When you learn to do it, it will be just like anything else in Sorcery. You do it once, and then you can do it again. But it's also like other parts of Sorcery. You may be able to do it again, but it takes practice to master it."

"I, I think I'm starting to understand," Keritanima said. "I've always had a passion for Sorcery. All I have to do is show it. Sort of."

"Partially. Remember, the love you have for the Goddess has to be there. Give that love to the Goddess, and the Weave will respond to it. The passion and love you have for Sorcery makes the Weave yours to command."

"Now that makes more sense," Keritanima said confidently, closing her eyes.

It took her a surprisingly short amount of time. She failed several times at first, and then the Weave suddenly opened up to her favorably, and flows pulled from the stands quickly and easily. She opened her eyes and gave him a startled look.

"Was that so hard?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"It was, was *beautiful!*" she said in wonder.

"It is, isn't it?" he agreed. "Every time you use your power, you tell the Goddess how much you love her. And she replies by showing the love she has for you. You can't ignore that, no matter what you're doing. It never stops feeling good."

"I never thought it would feel like that," she said, a tear forming in her eye. "I loved the Goddess, but it never felt so, *intimate* as it just did."

"I know," he told her. "Now, do it again. And again, and again, and again. It takes practice to master, and I'll have to show you some techniques to make you weave spells faster and more efficiently. Your speed is abysmal, and you have about as much control as a newborn kitten."

"Well excuse me," she said, then she laughed.

Tarrin watched over her as she practiced, as rain started pattering against her windows and the ship began to rock in the storm. She managed to get a firm grip on the concept of give and take, removing the resistance the Weave had to her. She listened intently as Tarrin taught her the things Spyder taught him, about how to weave spells with blinding speed, about how to maximize control and efficiency for the best results. "My big problem was always pulling out too much power," he admitted. "I still do it sometimes when I'm excited, but when you overcharge a weave, it can make it less effective. No more, no less. That's how I was taught, and that's what you have to learn."

"Taught? Taught by *who*?" Keritanima demanded.

Tarrin blinked. He didn't realize he'd said that. "Well, I guess there'd be no harm in telling you now," he said to himself. "She only said not to tell you while we were learning, and to protect you. You've crossed over, so it can't hurt."

"Who, Tarrin? Who would *know* how to teach you anything?"

Dolanna suddenly went pale. "Spyder!" she gasped. "She still lives?"

"She's still around, Dolanna," Tarrin nodded. "She came to me and Jenna when we were at the Tower and trained us, or at least partially. She gave us some instruction, said she'd be back, and never did come back. I still wonder what happened to her."

"Who is this Spyder?" Keritanima asked.

"She's the Guardian," Dolanna replied. "She defends the last open gateway between our world and the other dimensions. That gateway is across the great bay on Sharadar's southern side, in an inaccessible place between two impassible mountain ranges and defended on the sea by an impassible reef. A place we have always called Haven."

"Sounds like a serious duty," Keritanima said.

"It is. She is the oldest of the *katzh-dashi*, but she has not been seen in five thousand years."

"They wouldn't miss her, that's for sure," Tarrin chuckled. "She's Urzani, the ancestors of the Sha'Kar. She actually looks alot like Allia," Tarrin remembered. "She could be your great-great-great-great aunt, sister."

"I would not find being related to someone like that a bad thing, brother," Allia said mildly.

"She made me swear not to tell anyone what she was doing, because she was afraid Kerri may try to do some of it and get herself killed," Tarrin told them. "Now that Kerri's not in any danger anymore, I guess it's alright."

"You were trained by an Ancient," Dolanna said reverently, in Sharadi. "The old ways aren't dead after all!"

"They're not dead," he assured her in Sulasian. "Spyder taught Jenna alot of history, and Jenna's been writing it down. Jenna's going to teach the *katzh-dashi* what they've forgotten. That's why she's still in Suld. It's what the Goddess wants of her."

"She is blessed."

"I know," Tarrin agreed.

There was a strange scratching at the door. Dar got up and went over and opened it, and Sapphire ambled into the room. She flapped her wings and got into the air, then flew up and landed on Tarrin's shoulder. "I wondered where you got off to," Tarrin told her, reaching up and petting her on the head. "You're dry, so you found some place to hide from the rain," he noted.

"She's probably hiding from Phandebrass," Camara Tal grunted. "I've noticed him trying to sneak up on her on deck while you've been with Kerri."

She doesn't seem to like him. I guess that means she's smarter than she looks."

"He can try. He won't like what happens to him, but he can try," Tarrin shrugged. "He should ask Torm how it feels to end up on Sapphire's bad side."

"I've never seen an animal with magical powers before," Dar noted. "Only sentient beings."

"Is it magical?" Camara Tal asked. "There are some fish in the waters off our islands that can shock you. I'm sure they're not magical, because they're stupid as stumps."

"It's magical. I can sense it," Tarrin replied. "This kind of drake has some kind of innate magical ability, something so much a part of them that their instincts have adapted to using the magic. I can feel it when the power builds up in her. When she shocks someone, she has to recharge that power."

"I didn't know that. So, you can drain her?" Keritanima asked.

"She recharges very fast if she completely drains herself," he told her. "She can shock again in a matter of minutes, but it's not very strong. When she's fully charged, she can shock someone with some pretty impressive power, enough to paralyze them for a few minutes at the very least. Maybe even kill, if she hits someone in the right place."

"How do you know that?" Dar asked.

"Experimentation," he said with a short smile. "I had her shock me when she was fully charged. It was a pretty unpleasant experience."

"Why in the twenty seas did you do that?" Keritanima demanded.

"To see what she could do," he replied. "She can't really hurt me, sister. My body resisted most of the magic, but it was still enough to make my fur all stand on end."

"Is she charged now?" Keritanima asked.

"You should know that, Kerri," he chided. "Can't you feel it?"

"Uh, no."

"Then you're not paying attention," he told her. "Close your eyes and just *feel*. You should be able to sense it, even from over there. Her power is magical, so you should be able to feel it, the same as you can sense the Weave."

Keritanima was quiet a long moment, then she opened her eyes. "I think I can feel it, but you're interfering," she told him. "All I can really sense is *you*."

"You do interfere with the Weave, Tarrin," Dolanna agreed. "You are probably throwing off Keritanima's attempts."

"Fine then," he said, picking Sapphire up from his shoulder and setting her on the desk. "Stay right there, Sapphire," he told her, holding his paw out palm up towards her. She understood both the spoken and the gestured command--he'd taught her commands by paw gesture, in case he wanted her to obey him quietly--and sat down sedately on the desk and waited. Keritanima closed her eyes again, and smiled. "I can feel her now," she announced. "I don't know what her limits are, but she's *really* charged. That's a *lot* of magic, brother."

"She's fully charged," he nodded in agreement. "Surprising that something without any kind of training can have so much magical potential." He waved to the drake, and she jumped into the air and landed in his paws. He cradled her to his stomach, scratching her between the horns delicately with a claw.

"Tarrin, I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"Has the Weave been getting...well, *thinner*?" she asked. "I can see the strands all the time now, just like you said I would, and there seem to be fewer and fewer of them. Like the Weave is thinning out."

Tarrin glanced at her, then nodded. "As we move away from Suld, it becomes thinner," he confirmed. "That means it takes longer for us to use magic. Didn't you notice that when you were at home?"

"Of course I did, but I guess I never thought about the reason for it," she replied. "I had alot on my mind, you know."

"I've noticed that," Dar said. "That it takes longer to weave spells. It's like the magic's sluggish."

"It is the fact that it takes longer for you to draw the same amount of power," Dolanna told him. "These thin areas in the Weave are not uncommon. They exist in the areas far removed from large Conduits. That is why the *katzh-dashi* built the Towers in Suld and Abrodar, young one. To be in the area where our powers are at their strongest."

"Are there any holes in the Weave?" Dar asked. "Places where you can't use Sorcery at all?"

"I have never found one, but some of the Lorefinders speculate that such a place may exist," she replied. "If there are any, however, they would be very, very small areas. Even halfway across the world from the Heart, there are strands. Very few of them, but they do exist."

There was a brightness at the windows. Tarrin looked, and saw shafts of sunlight penetrating the breaking storm. He noticed that the ship wasn't rocking as severely as before, either. "Looks like the storm is over," Tarrin noticed.

The ship then seemed to list to the side, and the view from the window began to change. The five ships behind theirs were sliding off to the left. "We're turning," Keritanima said, which explained to Tarrin what that meant. "We must be within--"

"Land ho!" a thin voice managed to reach them in the cabin, shouted from the decks above. "Thalin's Point off the port bow!"

Keritanima's eyes brightened, and she stood up quickly. "Well, everyone, why don't we go up on deck and let you get your first look at my homeland?" she offered.

"We'll be in Wikuna in three days, if the wind holds," Miranda realized. "I didn't realize we were so far north."

They all left Keritanima's cabin and went up on deck. The deck was still wet, and the water was cold on Tarrin's pads as he stepped into it. Tarrin wasn't the only one to take special precautions because of the rain; Miranda's tail was so long and bushy that the end of it occasionally hit the ground when she walked, so she made a special point of keeping it up high

enough to keep it dry. They moved to the port rail, not far from the sterncastle, and Tarrin looked to the west, to Wikuna. He couldn't see much, just a strip of green past the four ships protecting their port flank, but the importance of it wasn't lost to him. There it was, a new continent. The land of Wikuna. He'd heard Keritanima describe it many times, but he found himself actually looking forward to seeing their cities and finding out what it was like there. Few outlanders had ever seen Wikuna, because the Wikuni were usually very careful about keeping others out of their ports. It was a well known policy of the Wikuni that they would attack any ship that approached their coastline, because of their very long war with the Zakkites. Zakkites would sometimes capture non-Zakkite ships and try to sail them to Wikuna, so the Wikuni solved the problem by simply attacking anything that wasn't a clipper or raker. Tarrin had heard much about life on Wikuna, and now he was curious to see how much of it was Keritanima's boasting.

"That's Thalín's Point," Keritanima announced. "It's a hook of land that extends out from the coast. The land on the other side of it is used mainly for farming."

"Wikuni *farm*?" Dar chuckled. "I thought that doing anything on land was too tedious for your people."

Keritanima ignored that. "We're about three days from Wikuna," she told them, "if the wind holds. I need to talk to Jervis. They're supposed to have that prototype in the harbor and ready for us to go as soon as we get there."

"We're not staying long?" Dar asked.

"We don't have much time," Keritanima replied. "We have to be off Vendaka at the summer solstice. I'm not sure how fast that new ship is going to go, so I want as much time as possible."

"How long would it take a clipper to sail from Wikuna to Vendaka?" Dolanna asked.

"About seven or eight days," she replied. "I'm guessing that this new ship will take twice as long, probably two weeks. The solstice is three weeks away, so we should be in position when we need to be there, as long as we don't dilly-dally around."

"I was hoping to look around for a day or two," Dar sighed.

"We'll be in port for at least a day, Dar," Keritanima told him. "I'll have to go over some things with *sashka* and talk to Jervis about some things in person, and I would like to sleep at least one night in a bed that doesn't sway."

"Too bad. I guess you'll have to go after Rallix when you come home," Miranda teased.

Keritanima shot a nasty look at her friend, then cleared her throat. "I think I'd like to go back to my lessons now," she said primly. "Since you're not a Sorcerer, why don't you go somewhere else?"

"Well, tou-chy," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "Tarrin, could I bother you for a little magicking?"

"What do you need, Miranda?" Tarrin asked.

"Yarn. A new knitting needle too, I broke one of my good ones."

"I thought you were moving on to crochet."

"I need the yard for crochet, but I broke my knitting needle and I'd like a new one, just in case I have a relapse," she said.

Without much effort or thought, Tarrin Conjured a very large ball of yarn and a new knitting needle, exactly like the ones he'd seen her use, and then handed them to her. "Why thank you," she said. "I'll see all of you later," she said, then sauntered off.

"I think I will go to the galley," Allia said. "I find myself hungry."

"You just had to mention food, didn't you?" Dar complained. "I'll go with you. Don't you two do anything major until we get back," he told Tarrin, then the pair of dark-skinned beings hurried towards the stairwell below decks.

"May as well stay up here," Keritanima told Tarrin. "I'll dry us off a place."

Tarrin worked with Keritanima over the rest of the day as Dolanna, Dar, and Allia observed, refining her technique and giving her plenty of time to practice. She proved to be a very quick student, and her speed and

efficiency increased almost every time she wove a spell. What was probably more important, with her experience came the ability to see what Tarrin was doing when he wove spells, something that she had not been able to do very effectively beforehand. She got used to the speed at which Tarrin wove spells after she started working at the same speed, and that allowed her to begin to see what he was doing. That meant that he could start teaching her some of the weaves that only Weavespinners could use, spells that required more power than most Sorcerers could safely manipulate.

The very first thing he taught her was how to summon Elementals. But before teaching her the spells, he trained her in Elemental etiquette, reinforcing to her the fact that the same Elemental spirit was going to answer her call again and again and again, so it was imperative that she treat her Elemental with respect. If she angered her Elemental, it may disobey her, or even attack her out of irritation. Fortunately, however, it was very hard to anger an Elemental that much. They gained power by being summoned, and were willing to endure the period of servitude necessary to gain that power in exchange. Elementals could not be harmed in any way, even if their forms were destroyed, since their animating force was an energy not of their world, and therefore could not be harmed while it was on their world. That was why Elementals were so willing to fight on a Sorcerer's behalf, because it knew that even if its material form were destroyed, it would suffer no real injury.

"Alright, I understand," Keritanima pressed. "Show me the spell."

"The spell is woven the exact same way for all four Elemental types," he told her. "The only difference is the Sphere you use. It's a two flow spell, but it's fairly complicated, and its patterns change depending on how much energy you want to grant the Elemental when you make its material form. So pay attention." Tarrin had never summoned a Water Elemental before, so he decided to use that as his example, and also to find himself a Water spirit. "I've never summoned a Water Elemental before, so I'll do that. It will let you see how to introduce yourself to the Elemental."

Tarrin turned and looked over the rail, then began. He wove the spell slowly to his seeming, but at a speed that would let Keritanima see what he was doing. He wove the spell very loosely, making it very spacious, and

held it in that state for a long moment to let Keritanima look over the spell's design. "See it?"

"I see it," she affirmed. "It *is* complicated."

He nodded, snapping it down and then releasing it into the ocean. He felt the spell take form, and felt the link between the spell and that other place where the spirits of the Elementals lived open. He felt something come through, and then felt the weave fully activate.

An amorphous mass of water suddenly rose up from the relatively choppy surface of the sea, a column of water that came up over the level of the rail. It expanded and widened a little, but was still a pillar of rotating water, but two reddish spots appeared near its top. Eyes. Tarrin felt the Elemental connect with him, and then looked at it calmly as the others stared at the creature in fascination. "I'm Tarrin," he said aloud. "I thank you for answering my call. I didn't summon you for any specific task, though. I needed to show my student the right way to weave the spell, and how to treat her Elementals with honor and respect."

That made the Elemental warm to him very quickly. It communicated its understanding, was a little pleased that it would have to perform no tasks. It then asked a most curious question. Why after so long were the Elementals being invited back to this world?

"Because the magic that summoned you has only just been rediscovered," he answered it aloud.

It understood that, and then asked if it should do anything.

"No, you've already done what I needed you to do. Thank you for your service. You can go back home now."

He released his side of the spell, and felt the Elemental's spirit return to where it came from. The pillar of water shuddered, the two glowing spots vanished, and then the pillar of water simply fell back into the sea.

"That was amazing!" Keritanima said. "I could almost feel something passing between you and it!"

"There was. The Elemental will be linked to you by your thoughts," he told her. "It can communicate with you like that, from any distance. It's almost like the telepathy that Shiika has. Alright, your turn. Let's start with

an Air Elemental. I want you to make it just like I did, but replace the Water flow with Air."

"Alright." Keritanima's brow furrowed as she began repeating the spell. Tarrin knew Keritanima's amazing ability to remember things she saw almost perfectly would mean that she would be able to duplicate the spell, and after a little practice, she would have it completely memorized. She wove the spell very loosely, moving much slower than she was capable of weaving to make sure she was doing it right. He didn't blame her; it was a very, very complicated spell, but the fact that it was only a two-flow spell made the risk of a Wildstrike more remote. Spells with one or two flows fizzled almost all the time if they failed. Only complicated spells with three or more flows tended to explode in a Wildstrike. The more flows used, the more the chance increased, Dolanna had taught him so long ago. Keritanima finished, and held it in its loose state easily as Tarrin studied the weaving she had done. He found it an almost perfect copy of his own spell. He did point out the few mistakes she'd made, and she corrected them quickly.

"Alright, it's ready," Tarrin announced. "Go ahead."

Keritanima snapped it down, then relased it. It was a little different sensation because he didn't do it himself, but he could feel the spell activate, feel it breach into that other dimension where the Elementals lived. The air over them suddenly gusted and swirled, and two glowing reddish spots appeared over them, looking down. Keritanima wilted slightly after the spell took form, but that wasn't something to be surprised about. Summoning an Elemental was hard work, and she'd been using her magic steadily all day. Summoning the Elemental had taken the remainder of her strength.

"It worked!" Keritanima squealed in happiness, then she composed herself. "I'm Keritanima," she introduced. "Thank you for answering me." Tarrin could sense the communication going on between them. "No, I don't have any service for you to do. I'm sorry. I summoned you because I just learned the spell, and had to practice it. I know it seems like a silly reason, but it's better to know I can do the spell now, when it's not vital, than when my tail depends on it working." She paused, seeming to listen. "No, I'll be alright, I'm just a litle tired. Thank you for asking. It seems that the spell

was a complete success, so you can go back home now. Sorry to drag you away for no reason."

"You didn't drag it away, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "It responded willingly. It wouldn't mind if you summoned it over and over and over, most likely as long as you warned it you were going to do so."

She looked at the Elemental, and then she nodded. "Oh, I understand. Well, I don't think I need to practice to the point of summoning you again. Thank you for coming. You can go home now."

With a sudden gust of wind, the glowing eyes disappeared, and then the wind returned to normal. "How was that?" Keritanima asked him with bright eyes.

"Not bad," he complemented. "You were polite, you answered its questions, and you showed some consideration for its feelings. It probably went home not regretting answering you, and that's what you were aiming for."

"Good. I'm suddenly tired," she complained, leaning against the mizzenmast.

"It's a demanding spell, Kerri, and you've been using magic all day. I figured that it would wear you out. That's why we did this last."

"Smart thinking. Let's go below, so I can sit down for a while. And could someone tell someone to bring me some warm bread and a glass of wine?"

Tarrin spent the rest of the day more or less by himself, staring out over towards the drifting coastline of Wikuna, as it appeared over the horizon then retreated back out of sight. They passed a surprising number of smaller vessels, rakers and even some barges and fishing boats, the Wikuni plying trade with themselves or fishing up the evening meal. All the other ships stayed well out of the way of the squadron of clippers, often dropping anchor and raising sails to remain stationary as the formation sailed by, either out of respect or because of some kind of rule of seafaring which Tarrin didn't know. The lessons had gone well, but Tarrin was a little unsettled by Dolanna. She had watched it all, and had a very, very intent look on her face. She was learning about magic that she couldn't use, and he was worried that she was going to try to use it. If that happened, she was

going to cross over the line, and either end up being *da'shar* herself or getting Consumed. Summoning an Elemental took a tremendous amount of energy, even though it wasn't a spell of High Sorcery, and it also required a command over the Weave and a control of the flows that only someone with a great deal of experience could manage. Only Weavespinners could use the spell, it was one of the many spells reserved for the upper tier of the magical order.

He thought about that a moment. Dolanna certainly *could* managed to ascend to *da'shar*. She was a very, very experienced Sorceress, and was capable of many things that most other *katzh-dashi* would consider impossible. Dolanna's ability to weave blindly had awed him for quite some time, because it was something that everyone else said was impossible. She had tremendous skill, and she also happened to be a very strong Sorceress as well. Dolanna was small, but her magical powers were formidable, comparable to the powers of those present on the Council. Dolanna could *be* on the Council. If there ever was a candidate for *da'shar*, he could think of nobody better qualified than Dolanna.

But Dolanna had been a skilled and strong Sorceress for a long time. So had many on the Council. It made him wonder why nobody had ever become *da'shar* before, why every single person who had faced the test since the Breaking had been Consumed. What made things different now? Why the change?

You are the reason for that, kitten, the Goddess told him. Remember when Spyder and Jenna told you about the sui'kun? About how the realms of magical ability increase with each new birth of a sui'kun?

"Yes, I remember that."

Well, kitten, you represent the resurgence of the high orders of magic, she told him. When you were born, the realms of the Weavespinners were reopened, among other things. Before you were born, no Sorcerer could face the test and become a Weavespinner, because the entrance into the Weave was blocked. If they can't reach the Heart before the moment of destruction, they fail. So they would fail, despite instinctively understanding what must be done to save themselves. They would seek me out, but the door to reach me was closed. When you were born, that door was reopened.

"That must have been hard for you," he realized soberly.

It was, kitten, harder than you will ever know, she told him sadly. But thankfully, I won't lose any more. You were the first new Weavespinner in a thousand years, but in just two short years since your powers were awakened, there are now four of you. And there are many who are primed and ready to face the test, like Dolanna, she affirmed. A great many, because they had so much time to train and practice and grow, and they have always been exceedingly careful to never allow themselves in a position where they may lose control. In time, I will goad them into the test.

"Should I do anything with Dolanna?" he asked. "I think she's going to try something foolish."

Leave her alone, kitten. She must make her own choices.

"That sounds ominous."

That depends on how you see the situation, she replied. Don't you think Dolanna is ready to face the test?

"If anyone is, she is," he said after a moment. "I don't know of any Sorcerer more skilled than Dolanna. Others may have more raw power than her, but she's so experienced, it's almost scary."

That's because when others were sitting in the Towers reading books and playing politics, Dolanna was out in the world, the Goddess told him. You always learn fastest by doing, and Dolanna has been out there doing since before you were born. Any time I needed a skilled, intelligent, courageous Sorcerer to perform a task, Dolanna was always on my short list of candidates. But don't you dare tell her that, she warned. She doesn't know how many times she's been acting directly on my orders, even when she didn't realize it.

"I won't," he said. "She's going to do it, isn't she? Try to use the magic I taught Kerri."

I won't tell you that, kitten, but I would suggest that you don't sleep too soundly tonight, she said plainly.

"I understand. I'll be there for her in case anything happens."

I appreciate that. I have to go now, kitten. Be well. I love you.

"I love you too, Mother," he nodded, and then he felt her retreat from him. He sighed and looked over the rail, out to sea, not reacting when Sapphire landed lightly on his shoulder from behind. "Well, little girl, it looks like I may have a problem tonight," he told her in a low tone as she rubbed her head against his neck.

She chirped in reply, then clambored down his arm and goaded him into holding her to his chest. He scratched her between the horns delicately with the tip of his claw and stared out towards the coastline of Wikuna. He was more than a little worried now.

It happened around midnight, as the ship stood motionless in a period of dead calm. Tarrin had been standing on the deck, staring up at the moon, with Sapphire on his shoulder and Kimmie standing quietly beside him. He hadn't told her what was going on, why he was so nervous, so she simply accepted things as they were and kept him company. He'd been admiring the moon when he felt that now familiar surge in the Weave, the surge of it finding a portal into the real world that presented no resistance to it.

Just as he had feared, Dolanna had tried to use Weavespinner magic, and now faced being Consumed as a result.

"Stay here," Tarrin told Kimmie, reaching up and taking hold of Sapphire and then quite deliberately placing her in Kimmie's paws. "Stay with Kimmie," he ordered her in a tone that would brook no disobedience, and then he hurried towards the stairs below decks. He literally jumped down the very steep flight of stairs, rushing towards Dolanna's cabin door as Keritanima opened her door at the end of the companionway, her face unsettled. Tarrin grabbed the latch of Dolanna's door, but found it locked. Not put off by that, he sank his claws into the wood frame of the door and ripped it off its hinges, getting it jammed in the doorframe, so he simply put a fist against it and shattered it like a china plate. He could sense the power reaching a crescendo in Dolanna--she was right on the verge of it, he had to get to her quickly and explain what to do! The shattering of the door released blazing light into the companionway, light emanating from Dolanna's body as Magelight writhed and swirled around her form. She had her eyes closed, and instead of screaming in pain or convulsing, she had her arms crossed her chest and had the most incredible look of absolute

concentration on her face. Goddess, what a woman! She was actually not panicking! Tarrin was taken aback by that, more than he would have been surprised to see her in pain or in terror, as he himself had been, and then he realized that she was already forming the bridge into the Weave.

Dolanna *knew what to do!*

For the first time, he had a chance to see the actual process of crossing over, of ascendance into a new realm of power, up close and rationally enough to understand what was happening. He felt Dolanna's power form the bridge into the Weave, and then felt her consciousness retreat from her mortal form. That left her body behind, a body immobilized without its consciousness to guide it, then felt her escape into the Weave, drawn to the Heart like a tossed stone falling to the bottom of the pond. She left his range of senses, but it was but a heartbeat before the Magelight surrounding her suddenly shivered, then absolutely froze, as the power within her reached its maximum potential...and then simply *stopped*. It then seemed to quiver, and then blazed forth ten times brighter, casting blinding light into the companionway, a light of searing heat that didn't burn the deck, yet burned away Dolanna's clothes, leaving nothing behind but the amulet around her neck. Tarrin realized that she had found the Heart, and now the communion with the Goddess had shown her what to do, as she reached back to her mortal form and used the power built up inside her. The Magelight coalesced quickly, forming the concave star around her small body as he felt the power within suddenly begin to take shape, to form, to be woven. He read the flows of the weave, realized that it was the spell of Transmutation that would render Dolanna invulnerable to the heat that the power within her was generating. He sensed her weave it, a spell of such stunning complexity that not even Keritanima could have woven it with that one look at it, and then it was released. Tarrin sensed it sweep through Dolanna's small, slim body, altering the very nature of her, transforming her, though showing no outward sign of doing so.

As Tarrin watched, the amulet around Dolanna's neck changed, growing the leg-like extensions from the center star that made the center of the amulet resemble a spider, flowing outward and connecting to the triangles that surrounded it.

And then it was over. The bright light that enveloped Dolanna simply disappeared as Dolanna's consciousness was flung back into her body. Dolanna gave only a slight sigh, and then crumpled bonelessly to the deck.

She had done it, and done it without any assistance!

Tarrin stared at her in awe for a moment, then came to his senses and rushed into the cabin. He scooped up her small body carefully, gently, then set her on the bed as Allia, then Dar, and then Keritanima rushed into the room, stepping carefully over what was left of the door with their bare feet. All of them had obviously been in bed, for Keritanima was wearing a silk nightgown, Dar a pair of hastily pulled-on trousers not buttoned up in the front, and Allia nothing but a cloak thrown over her shoulders, a cloak she didn't exactly bother to pull around her. That made Dar militant about keeping his eyes away from that side of the room. "Tarrin, what happened?" Allia asked first, since she was the first to arrive.

"Dolanna tried to use the Weavespinner magic I taught Kerri," he answered. "She overstepped her abilities, and ended up crossing over."

"You mean she's like you now?" Dar asked.

Tarrin nodded. "I swear, I think she *planned* it," he growled, absently weaving a spell that reassembled the door, and then set it back in a repaired doorframe. "You should have seen the look on her face. I think she did it on purpose."

"She tried to cross over by herself?" Keritanima said in shock.

"Well, she did do it, so maybe she knew what she was doing after all," Dar noted.

Keritanima swore. "She asked me all sorts of questions about when it happened to me," she said in a tone that made it clear she realized the ulterior motive behind them. "How it felt, what I saw, what I did to save myself. I never *dreamed* she'd use what I told her to try it herself!"

"Don't be too mad at her, Kerri," Tarrin said, looking down at her. "I think she was ready. And after all, it was her choice."

Keritanima blinked, then chuckled ruefully. "I guess so. But then again, if anyone could have done it, it's Dolanna. She's about five times better than almost every Sorcerer I've ever met."

"It was foolish," Allia said, "but her courage shows her honor."

"Sometimes courage and foolishness are the same thing," Keritanima mused.

"And she didn't tell you because she thought you may tell her no," Dar reasoned. "She was determined to try, and as my mother always says, it's always easier to ask for forgiveness than permission."

"You have a very wise mother, Dar," Keritanima told him.

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled to know that the Queen of Wikuna thinks she's wise," Dar answered dryly.

"Was that an insult or a compliment?"

"You figure it out," he teased.

"Children, if you're going to fight, do it outside," Tarrin ordered, pointing to the door. "Right now, Dolanna needs rest. So stop disturbing her."

"Will she be alright, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

"She'll be fine, Dar, but she does need to rest," he answered. "She'll sleep like a log for quite a while, but when she wakes up, she'll be just fine."

"Looks like you picked up a new student, Tarrin," Keritanima chuckled.

"I think we should all go back to bed," Allia said. "It looks like Tarrin will stay with Dolanna for now."

"I was planning on it," he agreed.

"Wake me when you tire, brother. I will sit with her next," Allia told him.

Tarrin was about to say something, but he sensed a *presence* seem to enter the room. His ears picked up and and he looked around, but saw nothing, smelled nothing, heard nothing. But he could feel that presence clearly. It was *there*, but it was like it was just outside the boundaries of his senses. He was about to say something, but felt another *presence* join the first. Both were close, very close, and both of them seemed strangely familiar to him. Like he knew who they were.

Tarrin realigned his thinking, shaking off the Cat-induced need to see or hear or smell, and expanded his senses into the Weave. When he did that, when the strand that crossed through the cabin came into the forefront of his vision rather than being a faint ghostly mirage dominated by the solidity of the real world, he sensed clearly that the presences he felt were within the strands. And they were very familiar to him for he got a clear assessment of them. It was Jenna and Julia.

Tarrin smiled slightly. "You can stop hiding, Jenna," he called towards the strand. "I can feel you in there. Come out."

Dar looked a bit startled when flows pulled from the strand, coming from the *inside*, and then they wove together into a very detailed Illusion. The Illusion blurred slightly as it came into focus, then it stabilized to show the image of Julia, wearing a frilly blue nightshirt with lace around the collar. She looked rather sleepy, and her dark hair was unkempt and standing up at the top of her head. "Tarrin," she said woodenly, rubbing her eyes. "I didn't think you'd ferret me out that fast."

"You too, Julia," Tarrin ordered.

Another Illusion wove itself out of the strand, and then solidified into the image of Julia. She wasn't wearing anything at all; obviously, both of them had come right from bed. "Father," she smiled. "We tried whispering, but it seems that it won't reach this far. Now I understand why the Ancients used the amulets."

"I take it you felt it, all the way over there?" he asked.

"We were in the Heart," Jenna told him. "We saw it all from that side, and decided to track Dolanna back using her star."

"Dolanna just appeared in the center of the Heart, and the eyes of the Goddesses seemed to wake up," Julia told him. "They seemed to commune for a moment, then Dolanna vanished. We realized what happened pretty quickly."

"You were in the Heart, but you're both obviously in bed?" he asked curiously.

"Well," Jenna said with a blush, "we were talking about something."

"What?"

"Girl things," Jenna told him with sudden heat and a furious blush.
"Butt out of it, Tarrin!"

"Alright, alright," Tarrin said in a mollifying tone.

"Is she going to be alright?" Julia asked.

"She'll be fine," Tarrin told her.

"Why did you have her cross over?" Jenna asked.

"I didn't. Dolanna did this on her own."

"We certainly didn't know she had this on her mind," Keritania grunted. "If I did, I would have stopped her. If she would have failed, she would have blown this ship out of the water!"

"That's right, always assume the worst, Kerri," Jenna teased.

"You don't have to pay for this ship!" Keritania snapped at her. "And let's not even talk about the sailors I may have lost! I can buy another ship, but I can't replace their lives!"

"Calm down, Kerri, you're going to disturb Dolanna," Tarrin told her.

"I think we all should go back to bed," Allia announced. "What has happened has happened. It is wasteful to stand around talking about it now."

"Yah, and this is *not* easy," Julia grunted, putting an illusory paw to her illusory head. "I never realized this could tire you out so fast."

"Weaving through the Weave itself isn't easy, Julia," Tarrin told her.

"It makes me wonder why you just didn't do that at Suld," Dar noted. "When you had that Circle going. To get the men out of range, I mean."

"I couldn't, Dar," Jenna told him evenly. "Weaving through the Weave itself is a Weavespinner trick. I can't use it in a Circle, because I can only use Sorcery and High Sorcery in a Circle. That's why the Ancients didn't simply abandon Sorcery after they crossed over. They had to keep their skills up, in case they ever had to Circle."

"I didn't know that," Dar admitted.

"Well, now you do," she said with a grin and a wink. "And I need to go. This really is tiring, and I had a long day already." She looked at Tarrin.

"You need to come to the Heart occasionally," she accused.

"We're still moving, Jenna," he replied. "You know I can't do that unless we're stationary."

"You are now."

"And at any time, the wind could pick up and move us," he said. "You think I'm going to risk getting my body pulled out of the strand while I'm in the Weave? I don't know what would happen, but I'm sure it wouldn't be good."

"Alright, I'll accept that excuse," she teased. "But please, do come visit as soon as you stop, alright?"

"I will," he promised. "And I'll bring along Kerri."

"The more the merrier," Jenna smiled. "See ya." And then her Illusion dissipated like smoke.

"Be careful, father," Jula told him seriously. "And please, talk to Jesmind. She's going nuts because you forgot to talk to her today. She thinks you've forgotten all about her. I've never seen her this loopy before." She grimaced. "I can still hear her in the other room. She ran out of things to throw about an hour ago, so now she's clawing up the walls."

"I'll calm her down," he assured her with a nod. "How are you two getting along?"

"Well enough," she replied. "She's not my best friend, but I think she's starting to get used to me. I better go, before I get too tired to find my way back. Talk to you later, father."

And then her Illusion too dissipated.

Tarrin chuckled in spite of himself. He'd been so worried about Dolanna that he completely forgot to talk to Jesmind that night. She went that crazy because of one missed appointment? He'd hate to see what happened if he missed two in a row.

"What's your problem, Dar?" Keritanima asked.

"I never realized Jula was--" he said, then he blushed. "She didn't have any clothes on."

"You've seen naked girls in the baths all the time!" Keritanima almost shouted at him.

"Those were girls," Dar said. "That was a *woman*. And she looked a little like Tiella does when she's nude," he added with a little squirm.

"Oh, so that's how it is?" Keritanima suddenly grinned. "I knew you and Tiella were friends, but I didn't realize you were staring at her that hard in the baths," she teased.

"Yeah, and you don't get all fuzzy in the face when someone mentions Rallix, do you?" Dar countered.

The fur on Keritanima's face did start to ruffle slightly, then she glared at the young Arkisian. "How would you like to spend the rest of the trip in the brig?" Keritanima threatened in an ugly tone.

"How would you like it if I told Rallix all about how you feel when we get to Wikuna?" Dar retorted.

That was the wrong thing to say. Keritanima balled up her fist and socked Dar in the shoulder. Keritanima was slender, but she was rather tall compared to a human female, and her lithe body harbored surprisingly toned muscle. Keritanima exercised every day and kept herself in very good shape, so her punch was more than enough to stagger Dar back, wincing and holding his arm. "How would you like a bloody nose?" Keritanima snapped, holding up her fist.

"Children!" Tarrin barked. "Take it outside!"

Keritanima and Dar glared at each other, but they obeyed Tarrin and filed out of the room. Tarrin looked at Allia, who had a slightly disappointed look on her face, shaking her head, making her silvery hair sway. "Some day, those two will show the dignity of age," she told him in Selani.

"Not any time soon," Tarrin chuckled. "Actually, I rather like them like that. Them and Phandebrass make me feel young."

She gave him a mysterious smile, then pulled the cloak back onto one of her shoulders absently. "I'll see you in the morning, *deshida*. Remember, if you get tired, come wake me, and I'll sit with Dolanna. She's my friend too."

"I will," he promised. "Do me a favor before you go back to bed?"

"Certainly."

"Go up on deck and tell Kimmie I'll be busy here tonight. And tell Sapphire to come find me. She'll understand it."

"I will," she promised, opening the door. Keritania and Dar were still arguing out in the companionway, but doing it in hushed tones. "See you in the morning."

Tarrin settled Dolanna into the bed, pulling the covers over her and putting a pillow under her head. About the time he was done, there was a scratching on the door. Tarrin opened it and let in Sapphire, then remembered to open the porthole of the cabin so Sapphire could get out. He Conjured a bowl of water and a little food for her, then shifted into cat form and jumped up onto Dolanna's bed. He settled himself down at the foot of it, tucking his paws under himself and closing his eyes. There was little to do now but wait, and that was time best spent resting. Dolanna really didn't need anyone to sit with her, but as many times as she'd sat with him when he was wounded or sick, he felt it was only right to be with her now, when she was the one incapacitated.

Sapphire vaulted up onto the bed and settled in beside him. She knew he was a shapeshifter, knew he was Were, actually without him having to tell her. She was an animal, and therefore could sense Tarrin's magical nature. She knew that the black cat was Tarrin, and cuddled up beside him and wrapped her long, whiplike tail around both of them. Tarrin accepted her presence, felt the strange heat that always seemed to radiate from her body, and found it pleasing. He drifted off to sleep, knowing he'd have plenty to think about and consider in the morning.

Chapter 4

The first thing Tarrin did when he woke up in the morning was talk to Jesmind. He didn't do it the night before because Jula said she was in a tiff, and he didn't want to talk to her when she was so angry. Waiting until morning had proven to be a bad choice. Her anger had only festered over the night, and when he did contact her in the morning, she absolutely let him have it. She raged at him for nearly half an hour, accusing him of everything from betraying her trust to throwing her away in favor of Kimmie, and doing so in a very derogatory manner. Calling him a "tail-chaser," a term for a male only interested in the female in front of him, was the least of the things she hurled at him over that period. Tarrin endured the tirade stoically, knowing that it was the fear talking in her, the fear that maybe he did favor Kimmie over her. Yelling at him was a way to see if he still wanted her, if he was willing to put up with all that and still want to be with her. In the end, after she yelled herself out, he calmly explained the emergency that kept him from contacting her, gave her a few moments to feel utterly foolish and embarrassed, then accepted the rather chagrined apology with a certain amount of dignity. He tried very hard not to laugh, and managed to hold out until after he broke contact with her.

All in all, it went rather well, he thought. It was a bit long, but the result was worth the wait. Jesmind felt a little foolish for going off the handle as she did, peace was restored to the family left behind in Suld, and what was more important, Tarrin established the fact that there may be days when he couldn't talk to her, because of fast-moving events or other problems that may arise. And if that did happen, he would contact her as soon as he could and explain what had caused him to miss the appointment. He decided to go around the table after that, as it were, talking to Jasana, Jula, Jenna, and Triana in turn, catching up on the little things that had little importance to anyone but him, matters of family. Jasana in particular had quite a lot to say, but most of it was about the Tower, about how the Keeper kept trying to be her friend, about this thing or that, this new doll or what happened the day before when she and Jula went down to get something to eat from the

kitchens. Jula told him all about her lessons, how she was learning the spells of Weavespinner magic, and how she was learning more and more about joining the Weave. Jenna told him about the lessons from the other side, telling him that Jula was an excellent student, and seemed to have a particular knack for joining the Weave. Jula had a much more refined and dependable sense of the Weave in relation to the real world, able to find her way to physical locations through the Weave much better than Jenna could. Tarrin wasn't sure why, but then again, some Sorcerers had knacks for certain things. Like Tarrin's sensitivity to the whispers and echos of the Weave, and Dolanna's trick of being able to weave blindly, and Dar's uncanny aptitude for Illusions. Jula had found her niche, her area of natural aptitude, and Tarrin was glad that she was developing it to the best of her ability.

Once that was out of the way, Tarrin and Allia sat together in Dolanna's cabin and waited for her to wake up. They passed the time playing stones as he told her more detailed stories of Var and Denai, eating the lunch that Keritanima's cooks brought to them, and waving off the day's lesson with Keritanima in favor of staying with Dolanna. After they got tired of stones, Tarrin brought in Sapphire and allowed the drake to get acquainted with Allia. Just like the males, Sapphire seemed to take an immediately liking to the Selani, and became nearly as sappy and adoring over her as Chopstick and Turnkey were.

Tarrin pondered again over Dolanna as Allia played with the drake, watching his friend sleep. Had the Goddess done this? She'd seemed so certain about things, about Dolanna trying Weavespinner magic, and what was more important, her crossing over with almost no difficulty. Tarrin had never seen such a look of concentration on Dolanna's face as he had last night. It was as if Dolanna knew exactly what to do, like she had studied and trained for the event all her life. And it had gone so smoothly for her. Tarrin knew that it had to be excruciatingly painful, but that didn't seem to bother Dolanna at all. That look of concentration had never wavered, not in the slightest. Spyder had said that the Goddess goaded any Sorcerer she felt was ready to try to cross over, forced the test upon them. Had the Goddess goaded Dolanna?

Spyder. Where was she? She had said she'd be back for another lesson, but then simply vanished. He hadn't seen her, and Jenna hadn't seen her.

What happened to her? What had been so important that she abandoned Suld, abandoned protecting the Goddess herself, in their hour of greatest need? Whatever it was, it had to be something huge, something absolutely cataclysmic. That was what it would take to keep Tarrin from defending the Goddess. But Spyder was so old, so strange, so different. Maybe she didn't come because she didn't want to come, didn't help because she felt that they didn't need her help.

Then again, he remembered some of the things that he'd heard about Spyder. That she was the Guardian, the being responsible for defending the last gate into Sennadar. But they also called her the Aleax, a term that meant that she was some kind of direct mortal agent at the service of the Elder Gods. *All* the Elder Gods. Did one of the other Elder Gods usurp Spyder and send her on a mission? That was possible. She was also supposedly the assassin of the gods, a mortal sent to kill other mortals that committed some kind of hideous transgression against the gods. Or something like that. He'd only heard that story once, and it had been a very long time ago. Tarrin's memory wasn't the best in the world about things when he heard them when he was in a bad mood. Any one of those things could be the reason Spyder hadn't returned, hadn't continued the lessons or helped defend Suld or the Goddess. He figured he could ask the Goddess, but he had the feeling that any answer he did get wouldn't give him satisfaction.

"You're quiet, brother," Allia noted in Selani, getting distracted from the game of "flick Sapphire on the snout with a finger before getting bitten," and getting bitten as a reward for her inattention. She hissed and chided the drake in Selani, batting her on the side of the snout, but the drake looked entirely unashamed of her sneak attack.

"Just thinking about a few things," he replied. "That's all. You're bleeding."

"Your pet plays rough," she noted. "The price of looking away, I guess."

"She has a mouthful of very sharp little teeth, sister. You have to pay attention."

"I noticed."

The door opened, and Dar and Azakar looked in from the companionway. "Is Dolanna awake yet?" Azakar asked in his deep bass voice.

"Not yet, but she's stirred a couple of times," Tarrin replied. "She should be waking up soon."

Azakar nodded. "Do you want something from the galley? I'm on my way down there."

"Whatever they have laying around would be alright with me," Tarrin told him. "I missed lunch."

"I noticed," the Mahuut said. "Anything for you, Allia?"

"No thank you, Zak," she replied with a grateful nod. "I ate before coming to sit with Dolanna."

The pattern of Dolanna's breathing changed, a sure sign that she was either waking up or coming out of her deep, almost coma-like slumber. Tarrin's ears picked up and turned towards the bed behind him, and he turned and looked just in time to hear her sigh and see her open her dark, expressive eyes. "Well," she said in a weak voice, in Sharadi. "I should have expected to see you when I woke up."

"That's right," Tarrin told her. "What in the world made you decide to go and do that, Dolanna? You had to know what was going to happen!"

"That was why I did it," she replied unblinkingly. "I felt that if Keritanima could achieve a new level of power, when she doesn't have even a fraction of the training I do, I could do it as well. And I was right," she added with a tad bit of uncharacteristic smugness in her tone.

"Could you speak in some language I understand, Dolanna?" Dar asked.

"I am sorry, Dar," she called to him. "I only just awoke, and I tend to speak in my native language when not fully awake. As we all do."

"That's the truth. How do you feel?"

"Weak, tired, hungry, and very sleepy," she replied. "Could I trouble someone for a bite to eat and a glass of water?" she asked, moving to sit up.

"I wouldn't do that unless you're ready to compromise your modesty, Dolanna," Tarrin warned. "I put you in the bed, but I didn't dress you."

"So I feel," she said with a weary smile.

"I'll bring something for you, Dolanna," Azakar offered. "Would you like some hot spiced wine?"

"Please," she answered. "And a nightshirt, at the least."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, Dolanna," Azakar said with a slight smile, then he left for the galley.

Dar glanced towards the Mahuut. "Uh, I'll go help him, so you have a chance to get dressed, Dolanna," Dar said.

"Thank you, Dar," she nodded, and he scurried after the huge dark-skinned Knight. Allia dug a nightgown out of Dolanna's chest, and the petite Sorceress pulled down her covers and sat up to allow Allia to help her into it fearlessly. Tarrin and Dolanna were too close, too strongly befriended for him to think of her as a human, and as such didn't even think of averting his eyes. Dolanna, who understood Tarrin better than anyone but probably Allia and Keritanima, showed no aversion to exposing herself to the Were-cat. Allia helped her into her nightgown as Tarrin propped up some pillows on the bed so she could sit up to eat, then they put her back into the bed and drew up her covers for her. "Such attention," she smiled. "I should play sick more often."

"You would have more if Keritanima was not using that magic mirror of hers to talk to that rabbit, Jervis," Allia said. "She has been speaking to him since before lunch, and I think she is still doing so."

Jervis was Keritanima's head of intelligence, and she talked to him quite often, either directly using that magic mirror or through reports. The Wikuni nobles had been up to something, and Keritanima had told Jervis to find out what it was. If she was still talking to him, he must have found out, and they were planning the counterstroke to deal with it.

"She has a large kingdom to manage, Allia," Dolanna said dismissively. "I am not disappointed that she is not here. I know she would be if she had the time."

"Probably," Tarrin agreed. "Alright, now tell me. How did you know what to do?"

"I did not," she admitted. "But I listened to Keritanima describe it, explain how it felt and seemed to her. I knew what to expect, and when it did begin, I realized what it was I had to do. It seemed as if I had done something I had known how to do since I was born, but had forgotten until that moment." Her eyes became distant a moment as she tapped her finger on her cheek in thought. "Perhaps Sorcerers have instincts concerning the magic, just as humans and Were-cats have instincts concerning the species," she proposed. "It is, after all, an innate ability. Something we possess from birth. Maybe a set of instincts concerning the magic comes with the power."

"Maybe," Tarrin agreed.

"It was, indescribable," she said in wonder. "That other place, we can return there again and again, can we not?"

"It's called the Heart," he told her. "And it's part of what I'll teach you about the change in your powers."

"I am starting to feel very left out," Allia said with a half-smile. "First my brother, then my sister, and now my mentor. You have done something I feel I will not do for many years."

"If you practiced more often, you would not be so far behind," Dolanna said accusingly.

"I can use my power, but I often do not see the need for it," she said dismissively. "Selani do not do what is not needful. When I need to use my power, I will use it. When I do not need to use my power, I will not."

"Practicing is a needful thing," Dolanna told her firmly. "With practice and study, Allia, you could become a very strong Sorceress. It is a crime to ignore your talent."

"I will not become dependent on my magic," Allia asserted.

"I am not asking you to do so. I am only asking that you live up to your full potential," Dolanna countered. "You have much potential, Allia. You are easily as strong as most *katzh-dashi* in the Tower."

"Let's save the arguing for another time," Tarrin interrupted.

"We are not arguing," Dolanna and Allia said in unison.

"Yes you are," he said bluntly. "It's the same argument you had with me, Dolanna, and it's the same argument you two have been having for the last two years. The only reason you're arguing out loud with Allia now is because you can't use it on me anymore. I think you two can go at least the rest of the day without fighting about it, can't you?"

"I will try, though seeing a great talent wasted burns at me," Dolanna said.

"I will not speak of the matter again today," Allia assured him.

"Good. Where is that food at?" he asked irritably.

After making sure that Dolanna ate a good hearty meal and he put her back to bed, Tarrin left her to sleep comfortably on her own and wandered back up on deck with Allia and Dar. Azakar still seemed uncomfortable around Tarrin, and he was starting to get a little annoyed at that. He needed to take Azakar aside and explain some things to him...this silly habit of trying to avoid him was getting old. It seemed worse that the Knight seemed capable of treating him courteously when necessary, but he wouldn't willingly spend time around the Were-cat. They waited a considerable amount of time for Keritanima to come out from her cabin, and when she finally did near sunset, she looked livid. Miranda and Szath trailed behind her a a modest distance, a clear sign that Keritanima was furious. If even Miranda didn't want to get close to Keritanima, it had to be bad.

"What troubles you, sister?" Allia asked.

"I--You--They--*Oooohhhhhhhh!!!*" she growled in Selani, stamping a foot on the ground. "I'm going to kill all of them! I mean it this time!!!"

"What's wrong?" Tarrin asked.

"My father escaped from his insane asylum two weeks ago, and Jervis found out someone from one of the noble houses helped him!" she snapped hotly. "Now they're going to try to return him to the throne!"

"You should have killed him," Allia said in a calm tone.

"I wanted him to suffer for everything he did to me and our homeland," she growled in reply. "I can't believe that they did that! I made it a crime punishable by death with *no trial* if anyone aided my father!"

"Then punishing them will be a simple affair," Allia reasoned.

"I don't know *which house did it!*" she raged. "I know at least one house was involved, but even Jervis can't find out which one! And they can't find my father!"

"Someone has to have seen him," Tarrin said.

"Not yet," Keritanima grunted. "But the worse news is that I just can't leave Wikuna until I get this under control. If my father regains the throne while we're away, the ships that may be escorting us in the steamship may turn around and fire on us! It just won't be safe to do anything until I find my father and put him back in his cell."

"Kerri, we have a schedule," Tarrin reminded her.

"*I know that!*" she snapped at him in a very nasty tone.

"How can your father get back the throne if the Vendari support you?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"By force," she replied. "But the navy will be split over it, Tarrin, and we may end up with escorting ships loyal to my father. The last thing we need right now is a civil war in Wikuna."

"What are you going to do?"

"The simplest thing possible," she replied. "It starts and ends with my father. If I can get him, I can stop anything from happening before it goes too far. That's what it's going to take. I already have Jervis and his men taking the city apart looking for him, and they have orders to bring him in dead or alive."

"Dead would be the wiser choice," Tarrin told her.

"Oh, he's going to die now," she hissed. "Whether it's at the end of a musket or the end of a rope is the question. I spared his life once. I won't do it again." Keritanima was almost shivering with fury. "Excuse me, I think I'll go back to my cabin and throw things for a while," she said in a tightly controlled voice.

"Have fun," Tarrin told her, and the fox Wikuni stalked off in a tizzy.

They watched her leave. "Are you worried?" Allia asked curiously.

"Not really," Tarrin replied absently. "I have confidence in Kerri. She'll fix everything."

"Truly."

Dolanna was well enough to move by that evening, but she didn't reappear on deck until the next day. She looked as weak as he knew she felt. She sat down in a chair that Keritanima had brought up for her, and spent most of the day in it, watching the coastline of Wikuna drift in and out of sight on a cloudless, glorious summer day, or reading a book, or listening carefully and intently as Tarrin taught Keritanima more of the spells he'd learned from Spyder. Camara Tal drifted by occasionally to check on the Sorceress, and there was a stretch where the small Sorceress played hostess to all three drakes.

That day was full of mystery. Keritanima had some kind of plan, he realized when he looked her in the eyes, but she hadn't told him what it was yet. Phandebrass and Kimmie had disappeared again, and nobody on the ship could find them. Admiral Torm had even had the ship searched from crow's nest to the bilges, for his memory of what happened the last time those two had vanished for a long period of time was fresh in his mind. The last thing he wanted was for the white-haired Wizard to wander into the powder magazine and accidentally blow the ship sky high. But there was no sign of them. It created quite a stir on board, among the sailors as well as the passengers, and Tarrin pondered for quite a while about what happened to them, long enough to get curious about it himself. So around sunset, as the others went to dinner, Tarrin decided to track them down, or at least find where they had been last. He started at Phandebrass' cabin and then tracked the man's scent, which wasn't easy given its age and the number of scents both under and over it. But there was enough there to follow, even if he had to move very slowly to make sure he wasn't following an old trail, or lose the scent completely. Step by careful step, Tarrin crept along the companionway, up the stairs, out onto the deck, down the other set of stairs leading to the sailor's portion of the below deck area, and into the galley.

Tarrin had to work around the cooks, who stared at him like he had lost his mind as he literally crawled along on all fours on the deck, following the scent trail carefully as it meandered around the galley. Kimmie's scent joined his at that point, and he gave up following Phandebrass' scent for following Kimmie's, for hers was a much different scent, and was much easier to follow. He followed the trail of both of them along a passageway and into one of the small holds near the bow of the ship, not far from the door marked with the large red letters that he knew was the powder magazine. Just knowing that Phandebrass was that close to the magazine made Tarrin's fur stand on end. The hold was one of the cargo holds, with four rows of stacked crates lashed to pinions nailed into the deck at regular intervals. There was no light in the hold, but the light coming in from the companionway was more than enough for Tarrin's light-sensitive eyes as he entered the hold in pursuit of Phandebrass and Kimmie.

This was where the mystery deepened. Their scents entered the hold, but they did not leave. Tarrin triple checked this fact, thinking that they may have tracked directly back over their own scents, but they had not. Tarrin followed their scents between two stacks of boxes, and then it simply stopped. He checked the boxes for their scent, then the walls, and even the low-beamed ceiling, thinking that maybe Phandebrass taught Kimmie some kind of spell that caused them to defy gravity. But there was no trace of their scents anywhere.

Tarrin realized that he'd done all that creeping about for nothing. Standing erect and muttering to himself, he wove together the Mind weave that would sweep out and locate any mind similar to his own, responding to the spell and revealing its location to him. Kimmie was a Were-cat, just like him, and he would get a response from her mind. And then the mystery deepened even more.

According to the spell, Kimmie could not be more than six or seven spans from where he stood. She was literally right on top of him, so close he should have heard her heart beating. How could this be? She was in the room, but she was nowhere to be found! There was no scent, no sight of her, but the spell wasn't woven wrong, and it couldn't lie. Kimmie *was* in the room. Somewhere.

Tarrin kept the spell going, moving towards it slowly, cautiously now as his suspicious mind began to consider the possibility of foul play. But he smelled no blood, and no Wikuni on the ship could hurt Kimmie. He stepped in the direction of the spell, having to climb over a stack of boxes and into another small pathway between where they were lashed to the deck, sensing the spell's information. According to the spell, he should be able to reach out and touch Kimmie. She was that close to him. But still, there was no sign of her.

Wait...not quite. He wasn't reading the spell correctly. Figuratively speaking, he was within reach of her, but his confusion over what he was sensing was keeping him from reading its outcome properly. In a figurative sense, he was within reach of Kimmie, but the spell said that she was *below* him. She wasn't right on top of him, he was on top of her!

He looked down at the deck. It was a standard stretch of deck, wooden boards, and he tried to remember if there was another deck below that one, or if it was the bilges.

That was when he saw it. It was a tiny speck of motion against the deck, up against one of the wooden crates lashed to the deck in the hold. It was a slight motion, like the movement of a small insect, but Tarrin's very sensitive eyes, which were extremely keyed to detecting motion, picked it up in the gloom. It was a strange motion, a rhythmic kind of swaying, and it was not a way that your standard insect moved. Tarrin split his attention to weave together a spell to create a small, softly glowing ball of light over this paw, and then he knelt and lowered it towards the motion.

He was almost bowled over. That tiny motion was *Phandebrass*!

He had shrunk himself! He was the size of a large bug, not even two fingers tall! And as soon as he lowered the light down, the indescribably minute form of Kimmie darted out from between two crates on the other side, jumping up and down and waving her arms frantically. She too was exceptionally tiny, so small that he couldn't even hear the sounds coming out of her mouth. Given that her lungs and her vocal chords were just as tiny as she was, it was no surprise he couldn't hear any sounds she made.

"What in the nine hells happened to you two?" he asked in a quiet tone, unsure whether a loud voice would hurt them.

Tarrin couldn't understand the response, but the sudden ugly look that Kimmie shot in Phandebrass' direction explained everything. He suppressed the urge to chuckle. "I take it you can't get back to normal?" he asked. Kimmie shook her head vigorously, pointing at Phandebrass with the claws on her paws out. That was not a good sign. Kimmie was livid, and he realized that he'd better do something to fix this before Kimmie lost her composure and decided to take her frustration out on her mentor. "Calm down," he told her, looking at her as he raised his awareness into the Weave, then stared down at her with eyes more attuned to magic than to light. He could see the spell, a Wizard spell, infusing the both of them, causing them to be the size they were. He could tell that, like most Wizard spells, it was operational only as long as it was intact. If he broke the spell, the magic that changed their sizes would be disrupted, and they would return to normal. Wizard magic was like that; where Transmutation was permanent--one of the very few forms of permanent magic a Sorcerer could employ--some transformation spells that were used in Wizardry were permanent only so long as the magic that fueled them was uninterrupted. This was probably one of them.

"I can break the spell," he told them. "Both of you, move out into the middle of the aisle." It took them a few moments to trek out into the center of the aisle, quite a walk for the two of them, and then Tarrin stood up and backed up step. He looked down at them, not looking at them, but at the magical spell that was causing them to be that size. He couldn't attack the spell directly--it was a different form of magic, after all--but he *could* attack the link that connected the spell to the source of its power, that other place from which Wizard magic flowed. Spyder had specifically taught him how to do it, how to defeat Wizard spells already cast as well as how to prevent them from casting any spells in the first place. He rose a little higher into the Weave, and once he felt comfortable, he exerted his will against it, causing the Weave itself to pull away from the Wizard spell causing the two of them to be so small. The spell seemed to shudder, resisting the removal of its power, and it actively tried to seek to reestablish that contact. But when the Weave was pulled away from it, the spell could not reach far enough to regain its power. It shuddered as the link it had with that other place was broken, and then the spell dissolved.

In a sudden shimmer, the two exceedingly tiny forms blurred, and then were replaced by two normal-sized figures. Tarrin returned his consciousness to the real world and stood up as Kimmie shook herself, almost as if she were shaking off water, and then glared at Phandebrass. "Don't ever do that to me again!" she shouted at him.

"I say, I have no idea what went wrong," Phandebrass said absently. "That's never happened before, it hasn't. The spell should have ended hours ago. I say, I've never seen a spell manage to hang on beyond its duration like that, I haven't. How odd. I really must study this!"

"Graaoooh!" Kimmie shouted, sounding like either an attempt to say something that ended in a growl, or a growl that tried to end in some kind of word. Whatever it was, it was certainly an unusual sound. Phandebrass ambled away, not even paying attention to either of them. "If I could duplicate the effect, I could make any spell permanent, I could! What a discovery! I say, I really must study this." He then pattered out of the hold, turning in the wrong direction and walking into a wall with an audible thud, before reappearing in the doorway going in the other direction.

"I'm going to kill him!" Kimmie raged, holding her paws out with claws extended. "I'll skin him and use his hide to upholster my chair!"

"Calm down, Kimmie," Tarrin said, then the situation got the best of him. Kimmie glared death at him as he began to laugh helplessly, so hard he actually got tears in his eyes. "How long were you stuck like that?" he managed to ask.

"All day!" Kimmie replied in a furious tone. "We thought about trying to get up on deck, but then I realized that someone would come looking for us, and our scent trails ended in here. You almost stepped on me, Tarrin!" she accused.

"I couldn't see you," he told her.

"How did you find us?" she asked. "Once you got in here, that is."

"I used a spell to locate you. It took me a while to make sense of what it was telling me, though. I couldn't see what it was saying, because I didn't think it was possible." He suppressed the urge to laugh again. "While I was trying to make sense of it, I saw Phandebrass moving."

"At least he was good for something!" Kimmie hissed.

"You looked cute like that, Kimmie. Almost like a little doll," he teased.

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped at him, then stalked out of the room with his laughter chasing her.

Kimmie didn't speak to Phandebrass until they reached Wikuna, but the mage probably never noticed. He spent the next two days with his nose buried in this book or that, trying to discover the reason why the spell didn't expire when it was supposed to do so. The two days that they travelled went by quickly for Tarrin, as he continued his lessons with Camara Tal and also trained Keritanima in Weavespinner magic. He had a new pupil now, and Dolanna watched on, even taking notes in a blank book she had gotten from somewhere as he showed Keritanima new spells, and taught her more and more about joining the Weave and using it for various tasks.

It started getting apparent that they were close to their destination early in the morning on the third day, as Tarrin got up before dawn and decided to walk around to watch the sunrise. The sailors were all on deck, tacking to the wind and executing a turn that would bring them on a heading for the mainland. All the sailors seemed a little anxious but excited, probably happy that another voyage was about to come to a peaceful and unexciting end. The only time a true sailor was happier than when he put out to sea was when he was about to come into port. The drinking and the carousing and the ladies were all waiting for them at port, and that was almost as exciting as the open sea for a sailor. Tarrin moved towards the bow as the sun came up behind them, illuminating a coastline that was getting closer and closer, and the first signs that they were approaching a city were becoming apparent. He could see towers and a large coastal fortress.

And he saw smoke.

Tarrin peered into the gloom, unsure of what he was seeing. He waited long moments as the light became brighter and brighter, and then, when the edge of the sun began coming over the horizon, illuminating the sky above the land before travelling down to touch the land itself, he was sure of it. There were three distinct columns of thick smoke rising up from a very large city. One was coming from deep in the city, one was coming from the docks, and the third was coming from just behind one of the coastal

fortresses that stood on a rise just before the shallow, bay-like harbor of the city, on the south side. There were three of those fortresses, one on each side of the island that split the entrance of the harbor, and the third that stood on the island itself. They'd built walls out from the island and sides facing it to narrow those entrances even more, making getting into the harbor while being attacked by the cannons in those fortresses a very risky proposition.

This was serious. One column of smoke, Tarrin would explain away as a fire. But three? That was no coincidence. Keritanima said that the noble houses were up to something...this could quite possibly be it. Tarrin wasn't the only one to notice the smoke, as the sailors stopped chattering animatedly and became more sober, more grim. They all stopped what they were doing and paused to stare at the smoke, and they were probably thinking the same thing that Tarrin was thinking. What was going on?

Torm began shouting orders at the men in Wikuni, and Tarrin, who was now completely fluent in Wikuni, could understand them. He rode them about having a voyage to complete, and they'd find out what was going on when they got there, and to get back to work. They did so, but now there was a jerkiness to their usually smooth actions, as they tried to watch the smoke and do their jobs at the same time. One Wikuni, a dog-like Wikuni, nearly fell out of the rigging in his inattention to his duties.

They sailed closer and closer, and the ships surrounding the Queen's ship tightened their formation, moving into a much more defensive posture. The sun rose from the eastern horizon and cast the morning light on the city before them, which seemed almost ominous now. Tarrin's suspicious nature automatically assumed the worst, that this was indeed some kind of attempt by the nobility to dethrone Keritanima. It didn't seem to make much sense to him, though. The Vendari supported Keritanima, and that literally meant that there was no way they were going to take the throne from her. They couldn't defeat the Vendari, not even if they had all the Wikuni on their side. So why cause trouble? They must realize that the Vendari were just going to march out and crush them!

Tarrin blinked, shifting his thinking from the big picture to the core of the matter. He remembered what Keritanima said about her father and the danger he posed, that it started and ended with him. Well, the same could be

said of Keritanima. If the nobility could kill her, they wouldn't *have* to fight the Vendari for the throne. If they already had Damon Eram, Keritanima's father, and they killed Keritanima, they could just trot him out and let him reclaim his throne. Then things could go back to the way they wanted them.

Tarrin held out an arm, stopping a sailor in his tracks as he rushed towards the lines running from the bowsprit. "I think you should go wake up her Majesty," Tarrin told the Wikuni seriously, a short ferret-like Wikuni with a long, narrow snout and a pink button-nose on the end. "Tell her to come see me, and don't take no for an answer."

"Me, wake up her Majesty?" the man said in a nervous, high-pitched, nasal tone. "I don't have a deathwish!"

"You can get killed by her for waking her up, or you can be killed by me for not obeying me," Tarrin said in an ominous tone, showing the Wikuni his claws in a very direct manner. "Make your choice."

The man blanched at the sight of those claws, which were nearly as long as the Wikuni's fingers, then nodded emphatically. "Go wake up her Majesty, yes sir! I'll go right now!"

"Do that," Tarrin growled, feeling his feral instincts rise up even at the same time that his need to assert his dominance strengthened. The little rodent rushed away, literally running for the stairs below decks, and Tarrin gave him no more mind as he turned back towards the coast, watching the smoke carefully.

Keritanima, Miranda, and Szath joined him several moments later, and Tarrin didn't really have to say anything to her. Keritanima took one look at the smoke, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "I'll have someone's head for this," she growled in a deadly tone.

"I'm sure they want yours too," Tarrin told her. "Did Jervis say anything about this?"

"No, he didn't," she replied. "But I'll go find out what's going on from him right now," she announced. "Stay here, Miranda. If you see anything happening, come tell me."

"Alright," Miranda acknowledged as Keritanima and Szath hurried back to her cabin.

Tarrin and Miranda watched the smoke as they approached, getting closer and closer to the city. They watched in relative silence, only answering questions as the others came up on deck after realizing that something was going on. Camara Tal, who had a background in military matters, seemed to understand the danger immediately. "If they took that fortress, they're going to fire on us as we pass it," she told them, pointing to the approaching fort standing on the rise over the inlet to the harbor.

That made things more nervous, and they waited in almost grim anticipation as they got within what he thought was the range of the fortress. And there was no firing. They got closer and closer, then passed by it as they entered the harbor, and still no firing. They were close enough to see that the smoke was coming from the back of the fortress, but on the outside. Someone had indeed assaulted the fortress during the night, but they had been repelled. That made Tarrin breathe a sigh of relief.

They pulled in to the quay with no difficulty, a quay where a very large complement of Vendari warriors and three carriages were waiting for them. As soon as the hawsers were tied down, the Vendari warriors marched out and flanked where the gangplank would be lowered.

Tarrin, still standing at the bow, stopped worrying about the situation long enough to look at the capital city of Wikuna. It was indeed a very large city, bigger than Suld, and its buildings were made of wattle-and daub or red brick. Occasionally, there was a building made of wood, and the larger buildings were made of a strange stone that looked like whitewash. Those were the new buildings, the old ones were obviously made with defense in mind, large, ominous constructions of gray stone interspersed with the newer, less war-minded buildings. There were more old buildings than new, but the old buildings seemed to blur together with one another and making the new buildings stand out. In the center of the city was a hint of gold, and when he looked closely he saw that it was some kind of building that stood higher than the others, with some sort of gold-painted face that made it stand out. They drifted into the harbor, forced to enter the harbor single-file with half of the escorting ships ahead and half behind, which was jam packed with ships and wharves extending out into the dark water. Some of those crane-like constructions he remembered from Den Gauche were also here, loading and unloading huge amounts of cargo from ships with their ropes and their nets. The formation around them opened to

let the Royal ship out, dropping anchors and letting Keritanima's ship pass. They then turned towards the far side of the harbor, moving towards an empty wharf at the extreme southern side of the harbor, the wharf closest to the coastal fortress they had passed. The ship drifted in, threw out its lines, and men on the dock tied them to huge hawsers on the dock. The quay to which they had tied themselves was made of stone also, but it was the strangest stone he had ever seen. They were made of long, long blocks of it, cut thin, and it didn't look like any stone he had ever seen. He didn't see any Wikuni close by, but then again, they had landed at what had to be a private wharf, with no buildings standing at the end of it as they did for the wharves he could see further down the line. There were Wikuni on those other wharves, dock workers loading or unloading ships, sailors on the ships themselves or moving to or from them, and well-dressed men and women standing at the feet of the docks or among the workers, either supervising or observing them. This was the strength of the Wikuni, the trade and commerce that financed their massive fleets, and Tarrin paused to watch it in action. Sapphire flapped up from the side of the ship and landed on his shoulder, and he petted her absently as he watched the mighty Wikuni economy in operation, going on despite the smoke rising from the north side of the harbor, just behind the buildings facing the water, and the smoke rising from the coastal fortress and the area deep inside the city's heart.

Keritanima gathered them all together, and then they left the ship quickly and without ceremony. She didn't explain what was going on, and Tarrin couldn't tell if she was happy or angry as she got in the first carriage with Miranda. Tarrin squeezed into the second carriage with Allia, Kimmie, and Camara Tal, and Dar, Dolanna, Phandebrass, and Azakar packed into the last one. The carriage had lavish cushions, covered with red velvet, but the roof was way too close to his head. He banged his head into that roof more than once as he tried to scrunch his legs so Camara Tal, who sat opposite him, would have enough room for her own. The carriage was never designed for such a large person. Tarrin only wondered how much fun Azakar was having in the other carriage.

"I wonder what's going on," Camara Tal speculated. "Kerri looked mad enough to bite the hooves off a horse."

"I think something happened last night concerning her father," Tarrin replied. "Something certainly happened, that's for sure."

"Since that fortress didn't open up on us, I guess Kerri's forces won that fight," Camara Tal reasoned.

"I hate Wikuni politics," Kimmie grunted. "They're so murky."

"As clear as pitch," Tarrin agreed.

"The core of the matter is Keritanima," Allia said. "We need that ship she can give us, and we cannot use it if she does not have the throne."

"That's the short of it there," Camara Tal agreed, patting Sapphire on the flank when the little drake jumped onto her lap.

Tarrin had to duck down to look out the window, as they travelled up streets made of either cobblestone, brick, or that same strange white stone that he'd seen on the docks, stone laid down in such large blocks that it must have taken ten horses to pull the wagon carrying it. Some of them were as wide as the street itself! The streets paved with that white stone were perfectly flat and smooth, very easy to disseminate from the rough cobblestone or brick streets they travelled. How did they get such huge blocks of stone to the street and make it so flat? There were many Wikuni on the street, going about their daily business, pausing to watch the procession pass by as small children chased after the carriages and the Vendari escorting it. They were dressed very much like they dressed in the West, dresses, doublets, tunics, and breeches. The architecture was also similar to Sulasian or Shacèan architecture, so much so that if they'd put humans on the streets instead of Wikuni, he would have thought he was still on Sennadar. The city smelled alot better than any city he'd ever been in; the putrid miasma of garbage, waste, and decay that permeated the cities he'd visited was very much reduced here. There was still hints of it, but all in all, it had to be the cleanest city he'd ever visited. There weren't piles of trash lining the streets as there were in other cities. The streets were clean and neat, and people filed to and fro in an orderly fashion. Wikuni wearing blue uniforms of some sort stood on a raised podium in the center of the busiest intersections, blowing a whistle and directing the many wagons that passed him by on the two crossing streets with hand gestures.

As cities went, Wikuna was impressive. Not for its size or its wealth, but for its orderly appearance. Everything was clean, efficient, and well maintained. People didn't stagger down the streets drunk--at least not where they were now--and everything seemed to be organized. Sulasia could take some serious lessons from the Wikuni about how to run a city.

They turned a corner, and after banging his head against the ceiling for the fifth time, Tarrin irritably leaned down as far as he could and put his head out the window to gaze up at the Royal Palace. It stood within a large ornate fence, where Wikuni wearing the red uniforms of the military stood with muskets to their shoulders in defense of the main gate. The Wikuni crest was on the gate, seemed to have been inlaid directly into the gate to become a part of it, a lion and a dragon done in etched silver facing one another across a brass chevron. Tarrin looked at the dragon on the crest and then looked at Sapphire on Camara Tal's lap, and he saw the similarities immediately. Sapphire was a perfect replica of a dragon, though she was much, much smaller. Tarrin looked past the fence and to the palace itself. It was absolutely massive, but it was not a castle-like building, as he always imagined it would appear. It looked more like some kind of immense mansion, obviously hundreds and hundreds of years old, with a massive dome made of what looked like gold rising up from its center. Tarrin realized that it was the same gold building he'd seen while approaching on the ship, since it stood on a hill in the center of the city, stood at the highest point in the city. It was a truly immense building, much larger than any one family would ever need, but Tarrin knew that it was much more than that. It also served as a central hub of the Wikuni government, populated by servants, courtiers, messengers, politicians, and the men and women that made the Wikuni system work. It was a testament to the position of monarch, not the monarch him or herself, the home of this or that noble family that happened to hold the throne at any one time for over a thousand years.

The carriages went around the building, to a side entrance, and then they stopped. The Vendari marched off towards the back of the huge building as an absolute horde of servants rushed out of a pair of elaborately decorated double doors, two of them unrolling a red carpet out to Keritanima's carriage, which had stopped directly in front of the doors. Tarrin recognized Jervis as one of the Wikuni at the front of that procession,

in his dumpy waistcoat that had the gold chain hanging from the pocket of the vest he wore beneath it, looking as frumpy and innocently harmless as ever. Tarrin opened the door of his carriage as Keritanima was helped out of her own, ignoring the hot looks from the Wikuni coachmen, one of which was trying to tell him in broken Sulasian to wait in the coach until the Queen was inside. Tarrin snorted and waved a paw negligibly at the Wikuni, then stepped down onto Wikuni soil and padded towards Keritanima as all the servants bowed or curtsied to her. All the servants and courtiers looked at Tarrin with looks of shock on their faces, either at his appearance or the fact that he wasn't obeying the commonly understood protocols and customs that surrounded dealing with the Wikuni monarch.

"Tarrin, you're supposed to wait in your carriage!" Keritanima admonished him.

"Make me," he replied bluntly.

"Don't embarrass me here!" she hissed at him in Selani. "I am a *Queen*, if you don't recall!"

"Then you should have gotten me a carriage large enough to keep me from banging my head on the ceiling," he replied. "If I banged my head one more time, I was going to break a hole in the ceiling."

Keritanima looked at him, then chuckled. "Alright, I think we can fling in the face of tradition this one time," she conceded. "Jervis, I'm sure you remember Tarrin."

"Of course," he replied in his nasal voice. "You weren't quite so tall the last time we met, Tarrin."

"Just wait another two years, Jervis. You'll be surprised."

The rabbit Wikuni looked at him, then grinned in a mischievous manner. "I have little doubt," he agreed. "I really must complain to you about how you changed our little princess here. When she came back home, she was completely different. She caused no end of trouble for us."

"That's my sister," Tarrin said without blinking. "If she wasn't causing trouble, I'd think she was sick or something."

"Tarrin!" Keritanima protested in a petulant tone. "Do you have anything to report, Jervis?"

"Quite a bit, actually, but it's best left for the council chamber, your Majesty," he said with a slightly smug smile.

"Is it good news?"

"It is excellent news, your Majesty."

"Then let's get to it as soon as we see to the comfort of my guests," she said. "Bring them in and give them the best rooms you can find," she told the chamberlain.

"Of course, your Majesty. Only the best," he said with a deep bow.

"Alright then. Let's stop standing around out here," she called.

Tarrin was led into the cavernous building after the chamberlain gave sharp commands to the servants as to where the guests would be staying. Sapphire fluttered up and landed on his shoulder to the surprise of the small bear Wikuni, a rotund female, that was leading him. She wore the livery of the Palace servants, with the lion and dragon crest emblazoned on the front of her black maid's dress. She led him along hallway after hallway, all of them carpeted and with painting and tapestries and stands and tables holding sculptures or suits of armor or racks with ceremonial weapons hanging from them. The lavishness of the interior was as obvious as the exterior, everything about the place trying to overwhelm the visitor with the wealth and power of the Wikuni empire. Tarrin wasn't very impressed by things and objects--except works of beautiful art--mainly because he could make anything he wanted. It was strength and personal power and ability that Tarrin respected, not titles or wealth or ancestry. The Palace, to him, was a gaudily overdecorated waste of space that was mildly interesting to look at, but was ultimately a hollow thing trying to intimidate rather than impress or please. The whole place had a coldness about it, a sense that those objects displayed were a collection of booty rather than an attempt to please the eye, and the sense of the place was one of ruthlessness, mirroring those who had lived, worked, and plotted within the confines of the building.

There was no soul in the place. That was what it was. It lacked that sense of soul that many old buildings possessed, a warmth of welcome. In fact, the place seemed hostile, somehow, as if the souls of all those who had met their end in this place, or whose ends were manufactured by the

scheming that was rampant here, were trapped inside the building, screaming out their fury and despair for any who would take the time to listen to them. It did not feel like a home; it felt more like some kind of military fortress, grim and foreboding, or maybe even a mausoleum. Tarrin did not like this Palace, not a bit, and it was all he could do not to tell Keritanima that he was going to stay out in the city until it was time to leave.

The room to which Tarrin was shown was suitably stupendous. It obviously was a very special kind of room reserved for the most distinguished guests, and he felt lost within it inside two seconds. It was just as over-decorated as the passageways, every finger of wall covered by paintings, tapestries, or shields displaying crests or coat-of-arms, and there were many dainty stands and tables holding strange abstract sculptures that consisted of strange asymmetrical or geometric shapes, bizarre art that teased at the back of his mind. The floor was covered by a massive blue rug that took up the entirety of the floor, thick and shaggy, and Tarrin's claws caught on it no less than three times as he moved through that first room. It was an apartment, a cluster of five rooms with entry only through that first room, furnished with chairs and couches and resembling a parlor. Beyond it was another sitting room, obviously meant for the private use of the occupant, with only a single couch and a pair of cushioned chairs surrounding a low table set before a large fireplace. There were three doors leading from that room. One went to a large bathroom with a tub made of stone set on a pedestal of sorts, and some strange stone-like objects for which Tarrin had no description. One resembled a washstand on a narrow pedestal, with strange knobs flanking an obvious spigot, all done in brass polished to a brilliant shine. One vaguely resembled a seat, but it was actually a bowl filled with water, with a small lever set against the side. Tarrin looked at it in curiosity, then recalled the descriptions that Keritanima had given him of the Palace, and the technological advances of her people. The basin-like thing was a sink, and the small knobs would allow running water to flow from the spigot, a place to wash his face or paws. The bowl was a toilet, something like a privy that stood alone, and it too had running water. If he flipped the handle, water would flow into the bowl and carry away the waste down a drain. The tub too had handles and a spigot looming over one end, so that the bathtub could be filled. He looked down into it, and saw a hole in the bottom where the water drained out, as

well as a small piece of cork that was meant to be placed into the hole to stop it up and allow the tub to fill up.

The second door, the one directly across from the door leading into the outer parlor, opened into a grand bedroom, filled with all sorts of furniture. The bed itself was absolutely monstrous, more than large enough to fit his tall frame, a full four-poster bed with curtains drawn around it. There were dresser chests and armoires and footchests and chairs scattered throughout the room, more than enough to hold enough clothes for ten people and seat five, and there was a large oval mirror that had to be nine spans high and five spans across at its widest point. It was set directly into the wall. The room had a large window filled with many panes of very clear, well-made glass, and the morning sun was streaming into it, casting sunbeams down onto another thick, shaggy, softly cushioning blue carpet. That room had two smaller rooms leading off each side of it, and he realized that they were closets, places to store even more clothing, or gear.

The third door from the inner parlor led into what had to be some kind of working room. It had a large desk squarely in the center of it, and there were strange rectangular pieces of furniture behind it that had many drawers. He opened them, and found them to be too small for clothing. He opened them randomly until he found one that was stocked with many neat pieces of paper. The desk also had drawers on one side, and one of them held an inkpot and writing quills. The desk had an oil lamp atop it, for the room had no windows. At least that room had no carpet, only a wooden floor that was polished until it nearly shined.

Tarrin wandered back into the outer parlor, feeling a little lost. It was way too much space. He would really only use one room, and occasionally use the room with the bathtub in it. What was he supposed to do with the others? He'd have to go through two rooms just to get to the two he intended to use.

Sapphire flew around the apartment a little while, then landed on his shoulder and barked her displeasure with the arrangements. "I completely agree," he told her absently. "I'm not even sure if I can open that window for you."

She chirped a few times, a sound that he had learned meant that she was hungry or thirsty. He Conjured a bowl, then went into the bathing room and

held it under the spigot in the sink. He turned one of the knobs gently, and he was surprised and a little impressed when clean, clear water poured forth from it. Running water! How did they make it pour out of the pipes like that? They had to have something pushing the water, but what? He'd have to ask Keritanima. He set the bowl on the table in the inner parlor, then Conjured Sapphire a few large chunks of raw mutton on a large platter. Sapphire seemed to really like mutton. She landed on the table, her claws scratching up the highly polished finish of the top of the table, and started eating.

Tarrin watched her eat for a few moments, then wandered back into the bedroom and looked out the window. They were on the fourth floor, overlooking the east side of the city, towards the harbor. He could see the harbor clearly, since nothing impeded the view from the Palace, see the many Wikuni clippers and rakers, the smaller, shallow-draft ships they used for short-distance trade or defense. Keritanima had talked about the rakers, just as she had described the clippers, fast, maneuverable ships that could engage ships much larger than itself because it was very hard to hit. They also had one of their massive battleships in the harbor, a ship that looked vaguely like a galleon, but was nearly three times larger. They were largest ships afloat, three hundred spans long and a hundred spans wide at amidships, with five masts. Its side had three rows of gunport after gunport, making coming to broadside against a ship like that absolute suicide. The battleships were slow, but that much concentrated firepower in one place made its speed a moot point.

He glanced into the inner parlor, seeing that Sapphire was still eating. So many advancements. Gunpowder, running water, cast iron, steam engines, pens that carried their own ink, those strange huge stones that were set into the quay and the road. The Wikuni were indeed far ahead of the West, even further ahead of kingdoms like Yar Arak. He realized that if the Wikuni ever went to war with the rest of the world, they would actually stand a good chance of winning. They ruled the oceans, and could land whenever and wherever they pleased. Their homeland was untouchable, allowing them to strike at any place and at any time of their choosing. It would not be a war in the traditional sense, he knew. The Wikuni weren't really interested in anything but trade, but if there was a war, they would strangle seaborne trade, sink anything not Wikuni afloat, and slowly choke

off the trade that enriched all nations. But it wouldn't come to a war, because the Wikuni were traders, and war was bad for business. No nation on Sennadar with the exception of Zakkar had any issues with the Wikuni, and the Zakkites had shown over the hundred years that they had been skirmishing with the Wikuni at sea that they couldn't defeat the mighty Wikuna Navy.

They were much different from the humans, and yet they were not. The Wikuni weren't human, but they had based their society around things that humans would easily understand. It was almost as if they had copied the humans somehow, and then realized that they could do it better. Maybe because where the many types of humans fought with one another, the Wikuni were united, working towards a common purpose. If the humans weren't so busy tearing down one another's cities, if they would actually work together, maybe they too could prosper as much as the Wikuni had.

Sapphire flapped over and landed on his shoulder, and she looked out the window as well. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now. Were they going to come for him when Keritanima was ready? She was the queen here, and that meant that she couldn't act the same way she did when they were more or less alone. She had her image to protect. He'd already seen that it was going to make her act differently. The rooms were nice, but they were...uncomfortable. Too grand, too large, and too sterile. They didn't tell him that he couldn't leave the rooms, and he realized that he really didn't want to wait in them.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked Sapphire. She chirped emphatically, agreeing with him, and then he nodded and turned around. "Alright then, let's go look around."

He left the apartment, and started to wander aimlessly through the halls of the Wikuni Palace. It was as grand everywhere as it had been in the parts he had seen, almost garishly and lavishly decorated with art or displays from all over the world. They even had a strange suit of armor that looked to be made of *wicker*, of all things. He'd never seen anything like it before, but the sword at the belt of that display told him that it was armor from the Far East, since it looked much like his own sword. The same gentle curve, and after drawing it, he saw that it had the same chisel tip and elegantly constructed blade. It was much smaller than his sword, meant for a human

to wield it in either one or two hands, where his own was obviously meant to be a two-handed weapon for a human. He replaced the sword carefully and continued on, wandering up and down staircases, passing many Wikuni in the hallways, and looking into any open doors that he encountered, but never leaving the passageways. The Wikuni he passed were from everything between the two opposites of Wikuni society. He passed servants in their livery, and also occasionally passed a rough-dressed Wikuni that had to be a common worker or peasant, in the Palace for some unknown reason. To a man, every Wikuni that looked as if he didn't belong in the Palace was awestruck at it, and also looked terrified to be there. He also passed any number of haughty, richly dressed Wikuni men and woman in their outrageously expensive clothes, jewels dripping from them like water, and haughty, almost sneering expressions that said that they believed that they were about ten rungs up the ladder over everyone else. Tarrin didn't like nobles, because his concept of respect and power were diametrically opposed to what they thought respect and power were supposed to be. He found the lot of them to be arrogant and weak, and those two traits were very dangerous ones when combined in the face of a Were-cat. Were-cats respected strength and wisdom, and those were traits that few nobles had in any abundance.

But the nobles he passed in the halls didn't bother him overmuch. They stared up at him in curiosity, as he could tell that they were trying to decide if he was some strange kind of Wikuni or not. They also stared at the drake on his shoulder with open greed, obviously considering his companion to be some kind of exotic pet. One Wikuni lady, a wolf Wikuni wearing a gown with a neckline low enough to leave little to the imagination, even went so far as to try to buy Sapphire from him, using badly mangled, broken Sulasian to do so. They didn't think he knew Wikuni, and in a moment of cunning, he realized that that could be an advantage, so he played along with her. He declined her offer, and then managed to meander around until he found a door that led outside.

The door opened into a garden of sorts, not as large or grand as the one in the Tower, but still rather nice. It had gravel paths around clusters of small trees or carefully laid out patterns of different colored flowers, and there was a strange place in the middle that had no flowers at all, but rather six very large stones seemingly randomly dropped in an area of sand that

was carefully combed so that the lines made by the rake swirled around the stones and filled the voids between them. The designs in the sand were abstract, but he could tell that they had some kind of meaning. Tarrin squatted down at the edge of the sand, surrounded by strange bricks that were molded into semicircles that formed a border with the sand, finger tapping on his chin as he studied the designs in the sand and tried to puzzle out the hidden meaning concealed there.

"I never realized you had the soul of an artist, Tarrin," Miranda's voice reached him. He looked up and saw her walking towards him, and to his surprise, she had an old friend marching behind her. Sisska looked just as he remembered, with her boxy snout and her black eyes, wearing the kilt and the leather bandolier over her torso. She carried her axe negligently in one hand, a large weapon against which few could stand. Tarrin stood up and took Sisska's scaled, clawed hand when she reached him, genuinely happy to see her.

"Her Majesty said you had grown. She did not exaggerate," Sisska said by way of greeting.

"You're looking well, Sisska," he told her. "How are your eggs?"

"They are in the keeping of the clan, as is proper," she replied. "Raising the hatchlings is a task of the clan, not of the parents. They will be raised in the Vendari tradition."

"Well, it's good to have you back. I didn't like Szath very much."

"He is a fine warrior, with much honor."

"He's also as smart as a box of rocks," Tarrin grunted. "I think the only reason he's still alive is because he is so big and powerful."

"Such things do not matter as much to us as they do to you," she told him with a level gaze.

"I guess not. Is Binter here too?"

"He defends the Queen."

"I take it you came out here for a reason?" he asked Miranda.

"Do I need a reason to come out into the garden?"

"When I'm here, I'd say yes," he replied.

She gave him her cheeky grin. "Actually, Kerri's looking for you. I figured you'd find your way out here, so I decided to save the messenger that would come find you from a very bad experience."

"You're so considerate," he said dryly.

"When did the dragon-kin come to be with you, Tarrin?" Sisska asked.

"On the journey from Suld," he replied. "I'll tell you about it while we're walking."

Tarrin told Sisska about what happened with the drake as Miranda led them along the halls of the Palace. Sisska seemed impressed by that, and he just had to ask why. "There are drakes in Vendaka," she replied. "They are colored gold, however. It is a very high honor if a drake befriends you, Tarrin. Drakes are creatures of honor and dignity, and they do not choose their companions lightly."

"Then how do you explain Chopstick and Turnkey?"

"They chose wisely," Sisska said adamantly. "I did not have much time to come to know the mage Phandebrass, but from what I have heard, he has a good heart and a kind soul. Do not let what you see on the outside cloud the truth within, Tarrin. It is a bad practice."

Tarrin nodded in agreement. He happened to agree with her. Phandebrass may seem a little odd, but he was actually a good friend and a good person. "Maybe they saw what was there when nobody else did," he offered.

"Drakes know," she said simply.

Miranda led him to a huge hall deep in the bowels of the Palace, a huge place with buntings hanging from vaulted walls, a domed ceiling from which hung several chandeliers, and at the far end was a raised platform about two spans high. It had a huge throne on it, and a banner with the crest of Wikuna hung from the wall behind it. Keritanima sat on that throne, wearing her royal robes, and the large numbers of Wikuni nobles gathered in the hall told him that this was a formal audience. Tarrin looked around, and saw the Vendari lining the walls, as well as a complement of armed Wikuni that surrounded the dais; those had to be the Royal Guard he'd

heard about. Binter and Azakar stood at either side and slightly behind the throne, ready to defend the Royal Person from any attack. Binter had that massive, ugly war hammer with him, the head of it on the floor between his feet and the handle propped lightly with one hand. Keritanima looked almost smug on that throne, and as Miranda led him closer, through the crowd of nobles, to the front, he saw why.

There was a Wikuni chained by the wrists kneeling at the front of the crowd, that was a respectable distance from the prisoner, flanked by two Royal Guardsmen who both had swords drawn. He was a tall Wikuni, a lion, but his fur was scraggly and dirty and there was some dried blood in his mane. He wore a red waistcoat and black trousers, and they were dirty, bloody, and rather the worse for wear. Tarrin looked at him and realized that this was Damon Eram, Keritanima's father, and the cause of a lot of irritation she'd felt as they came into the city. Keritanima had been talking when they came in, asking Damon Eram who had helped him escape.

"I had no help, traitor," he spat. "A crazy man couldn't escape from there, but a *sane* man could easily."

"Your mental condition went out the window the minute you tried to lead an armed party into the south fort and take it over, father," she said coldly. "You could be as sane as a cold stone right now, and it wouldn't help you. The punishment for treason doesn't make any allowances."

"Treason? Me?" he screamed. "You were the one that used your foul magic to make everything think I was crazy! You're the one that bull-rushed the noble houses into dethroning me! But I know that they're not very happy with that decision now, witch!" he laughed. "If I would have taken over that fort and sunk your ship, they wouldn't have executed me for assassination, they would have put the *rightful king* back on the throne!"

"You engineered your own destruction, father, not me," Keritanima said with flashing eyes. "Your need to punish me unhinged you. I can see now that it was a *temporary* insanity. Fortunately for me, your act of treason has made any kind of contest for the throne a moot point. You have committed high treason against the crown, father," she said in a nasty voice. "If you would have made a *legal* challenge, I'm sure you would have had a decent chance of abdicating me and regaining the throne, and I would have honored a legal decision without a fight. Doesn't it eat at you, father?" she

said in a teasing tone. "To know that if you'd not bowed to your anger, *again*, you would have probably regained the crown? That temper of yours cost you the throne, and now it's going to cost you a whole lot more."

"Don't play with me, witch. Just be done with it," he hissed.

"Before I do that, I think you deserve to know who it was that turned on you, father," she said with a bright grin. "I don't want you to go on to your final reward without knowing the truth. Shan," she called.

Tarrin looked as a door opened on the side, and a Royal Guardsman escorted a young female Wikuni into the hall. She was a mink Wikuni, like Miranda, but her features were much sharper, and her eyes looked haunted. Tarrin remembered the description of this woman; this was Jenawalani, one of Keritania's sisters.

"Jenawalani!" Damon Eram shouted angrily. "*You* did this? Two of my daughters betraying me?"

"I'm not a traitor," Jenawalani said in a haughty tone. "I'm the Baroness of Wildwater. I'm not an Eram anymore, and I'm not your daughter anymore. I am loyal to my Queen."

"Of anyone on this earth, I'd have thought you would be the last to side with Keritania!"

"Things change, Damon," Jenawalani said calmly, crossing her arms between her breasts. "I'll never be Queen. I made a vow. And I knew that if you got back the throne, the first thing you'd do is have me killed to keep your plot a secret, or to keep me from trying to do to you what you did to Sabakimara. I'm doing nothing more than what you were going to do to me. I just did it first."

"You witch!" Damon Eram raged at her. "I'll make sure you don't survive to enjoy your victory, Jenawalani!"

"You can't touch me, *father*," Jenawalani hissed at him. "I knew everything, and I told Keritania everything. I told her that House Bell was the one that freed you, and them and House Koramon were the ones behind the attacks. After all, I was right there in your planning sessions, wasn't I?" she added with a little smirk.

Damon Eram glared viciously at the mink.

"So you see, Damon, you are of absolutely no more use to me," Keritanima told him coldly. "House Bell and Koramon have both already been punished for what they did. I hear that there's nobody left." That explained to Tarrin why there were *three* plumes of smoke. While Damon Eram, House Bell, and House Koramon were attacking the south fort, Keritanima's forces were attacking their home bases. "In gratitude for Jenawalani's faithful service, I'm giving her all the assets of House Bell and House Koramon and granting her a noble charter. She's the matron of a new noble house, father, the house Chan, which, I'll admit, probably has more material worth than house Eram now. So in the end, you get nothing, and the children of the house of Eram prosper. I'm the queen, Veranika will be the matron of House Eram as soon as she finishes school, and Jenawalani will be the new matron of House Chan. And you get an unmarked grave."

Damon Eram gave out an indecipherable shout, and then struggled against his chains.

"You're the one who taught us the value of betrayal, father," Jenawalani said viciously. "You taught us well, didn't you?"

Damon Eram spat in Jenawalani's direction.

"Temper, temper," Keritanima teased. "I hereby decree that since you were caught in the act of high treason, that there is no need for trial. Do the noble houses assembled acclimate this fact?" There was a rumble of agreement. "Good. So, as being found guilty of high treason by acclimation of the noble houses and decree of the crown, I hereby sentence you to death by hanging, to be carried out immediately. Furthermore, your body will be buried in an unmarked grave, so that not even your body can be found to serve as a reminder of what you once were. It's a criminal's fate, father. Perfect for you, given what you did to our kingdom while you occupied the throne. Take him away," she commanded.

Screaming and kicking, Damon Eram was dragged from the audience hall, and there was silence as his screams died away. "Well then, now that that's settled, I'd like all of you to greet Jenawalani Chan, the new matron of the new noble house of Chan. Welcome back, sister," Keritanima said with a mysterious smile.

"It's good to be home, your Majesty, though I'll miss Wildwater," she replied with a nod.

"What just happened, Miranda?" Tarrin asked quietly.

"Well, I'll just elaborate on what you just saw," she replied as Keritanima read something a servant handed to her, and the nobles swarmed around Jenawalani. "When Keritanima took the throne, she forced her sisters to vow to abdicate their titles and never be queen. Instead of turning them out, Kerri gave Jenawalani a small barony in a remote part of our kingdom and sent Veranika to a merchant's school so she could be the matron of House Eram. Well, from what I've heard so far, Mardal Koramon and Pleris Bell concocted a scheme to free Damon Eram and overthrow Kerri, and they enlisted the aid of Jenawalani, because she was a princess. She knows a lot of things that many nobles don't, about the Palace and the way things work where the nobles can't see them. Instead of siding with them, however, she accepted their offer and then immediately contacted Jervis. Jervis didn't tell Kerri what he was doing, because he wanted her reactions to be genuine, and that was important to keep house Bell and house Koramon believing that Kerri didn't know what they were up to. Jenawalani told Jervis everything, and Jervis arranged the little trap that caught Kerri's father earlier today."

"I thought Jenawalani hated Kerri," Tarrin said.

"She did, but I think she realized that she was safer with Kerri on the throne than her father. You heard what she said, and she was right. Damon wouldn't have blinked when he would have ordered his daughter killed. He assassinated Sabakimara, his eldest daughter, though everyone believed that Jenawalani did it."

"He killed his own daughter?" Tarrin gasped.

"Without shedding a tear," Miranda said bluntly. "Because she was getting to be too dangerous. Damon Eram took the throne by killing his own father. He didn't want history to repeat itself."

Tarrin was shocked. Damon Eram was absolutely *heartless*! If there was ever a man that deserved to die, it was Damon Eram. "And people call me a monster," Tarrin declared.

"There are monsters, and then there are *monsters*, Tarrin. Now I'm sure you understand completely why Kerri ran away."

He did. "Completely," he agreed. "Hanging isn't good enough for him. I wonder if Kerri would let me do it."

"No, in our society, being hanged is a criminal's death," she told him. "When Kerri ordered him hanged, she was taking away any shred of what little honor Damon Eram had or may have had with the nobles. He's going to die a criminal, not a king."

"That's suitable," Tarrin said with a nod. "The man deserves far worse, though."

"Pain wouldn't have mattered to him," she said. "This is the best way. Trust me."

"It matters to me."

"You're a savage," she teased.

"Then I'm a savage."

"Well, that about settles that," Miranda said with a smile. "Now that Keritanima's destroyed two noble houses for treason, both of them very rich and powerful, the rest won't even think of trying. In just a little bit, the only man in Wikuna that could challenge her throne will be buried in an unmarked grave. Kerri has the Vendari as allies, and Jenawalani's house, which is probably fourth or fifth in the new line of influence, will be just one of the top four or five houses that are Keritanima's allies. I'd say that Kerri's position is now totally secure."

"Good. Then nothing's standing in our way now."

"Not a thing," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "At least from this side. Out there on the ocean, though, who's to say what's going to get in our way?"

Chapter 5

The demise of Damon Eram--or just Damon, since Keritanima had stripped him of his noble name--was carried out in complete anonymity. Tarrin was one of the people Keritanima had asked to witness the execution, as well as the heads of the twenty-eight remaining noble houses. Damon, to his credit, didn't blubber or beg or snivel. He accepted his fate with a quiet dignity that seemed strange after Tarrin had seen the infuriated, angry Wikuni in the throne room. After the sentence was carried out, the body was carted off and buried in an unmarked grave. That was the end of Damon, and nobody outside the thirty witnesses, eight guards, and four executioners knew that the former king of Wikuna was dead.

Tarrin's humanity thought it a bit ruthless that Keritanima would order her own father put to death, but the human in him couldn't argue with the very long list of crimes that Damon Eram had committed on the throne. The simple fact that he had killed one of his daughters, and attempted to kill Keritanima, was all even the human in him needed to justify the act. Damon Eram was an evil, ruthless man, and it was a service to the entire world that he be removed from it. Keritanima obviously had no love for her father, and Tarrin couldn't blame her. If his parents never showed him any love, never supported him, and then tried to kill him, he'd probably hate them too.

The execution of her father didn't show at all on Keritanima's face. She returned to the throne room with the witnesses, ordered that a feast and ball be held that night to celebrate her return, and then she ended the audience. Tarrin walked back in the general direction of his room with a servant guiding him, lost in thought about what he'd seen. He'd witnessed the worst of the Wikuni society in action, the infamous political chicanery that was famous throughout the civilized world. It really was as bad as people believed, but Tarrin could see an end to it in Keritanima. She was slowly but inexorably taking hold of things, either eliminating or wooing the opposition. She was using the same general tactics she had learned from her father and trying to use them to institute an alternative form of government,

and he saw the paradox there. She had to have a lighter hand if she wanted people to embrace her new system, but she couldn't use a lighter hand against those who were using heavy hands against her. Keritanima was caught in a nasty little trap, being forced to ram a system that promoted peace and cooperation down the throats of the very people who were eventually going to be responsible for its maintenance.

The key here, he saw, were the commoners. If Keritanima wanted her new form of government to succeed, she had to bring the common man to her side. He was pretty sure that she probably had their support--the commoners were wildly loyal to Keritanima--but she had to get out there and tell them that she needed their help. The nobles would resist Keritanima, but if the commoners that worked for them stopped buying their goods, or stopped working for them, the nobles would buckle in short order. The way to get at the rich was to take away the luxuries and comforts that they had grown to depend upon. A rich man was a formidable opponent, but make him dress himself, cook for himself, and clean his palatial estate by himself, and he was a rich man on his knees.

Tarrin himself didn't entirely understand Keritanima's new system, and, like the Vendari, it would not suit him if he were inside it. Tarrin's instincts would make trying to operate in this *Republic* almost impossible for him. Then again, Tarrin knew he wouldn't operate well in any system where he had to bow to the authority of someone he didn't respect. Were-cats were never meant for organized society.

After returning to his room, he set Sapphire down by her water bowl, then sat down and decided that a surprise talk with Jesmind would be a good idea. She'd told him to tell her when he reached Wikuna, and besides, she was still a little peeved over his missed appointment. She'd appreciate him contacting her. He took hold of his amulet and called her name, and then waited. And waited, and waited a little longer. He called her name again, a little louder this time, and then got a rather muffled reply through the amulet.

"What's the matter with you?" Tarrin asked.

"*I was asleep,*" she said, a little blearily. There was a pause, and she spoke more clearly. "*Is there something wrong?*"

"No, not at all. You wanted me to let you know as soon as I got to Wikuna. Well, we're here."

"That's good. Did you have any trouble?"

"Not since the last time I talked to you," he chuckled. "Kerri stuck me in these apartments that makes the one you have there look like a broom closet. I'm almost lost in here, love. It's too much space for one person."

"What about Kimmie?"

"What about her?" he asked. "She's not living with me, Jesmind. She just comes around whenever she wants attention, that's all."

"Oh. Ohhhh, alright," she said in a much happier tone. *"You didn't tell me that."*

"You kept getting bitchy every time I tried to bring it up," he countered.

"Well excuse me," she chuckled. *"She was always in the room when you were about to stop talking to me. I thought she moved in."*

"That's because she was *coming into* the room, Jesmind," he said patiently.

"Alright, I understand now. So how have you been?"

"Same as always, Jesmind," he told her. "I'm not sure how long we're going to be here in Wikuna. We have to be somewhere else very soon, so I doubt we'll be here longer than a couple of days. What's been happening over there?"

"Not much more than usual," she replied. *"Jenna and Julia still spend almost all day together, and I'm trying to keep your daughter out of trouble. That's starting to get harder and harder, because she's started using her magic whenever the mood hits her."*

"You need to stop her from doing that, love," he said seriously.

"I know, but your sister isn't helping," she grunted. *"She's teaching Jasana magic, then sending her home and telling her not to do magic unless she's there with her. That's like telling the sun not to shine. Jasana tries to use magic any time she doesn't think I'm paying attention. It's good that it*

always makes that light, because she hasn't learned how to hide it the way you and Jenna and Julia do. I see that light, and I know what's going on."

"I'll have a talk with Jenna. She should know better than that," he said.

"I'd appreciate it." There was a sigh. "I miss you, beloved. When will you be coming back?"

"I have no idea yet, Jesmind," he replied. "I miss you too."

"You have Kimmie," she said dangerously.

"Kimmie and me are mates, Jesmind. You're my love. I enjoy the time with Kimmie, I won't deny it, but I still miss you."

"Well, it's good to know where a girl stands," Jesmind said with an almost kittenish quality to her voice. "Uh oh, mother's calling me. I'd better go see what she wants. I'll talk to you later, alright, Tarrin?"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight is fine with me. Just do me a favor and talk to Jenna for me, alright?"

"I will," he promised. He felt her break the contact from her side, probably by taking her paw off the amulet. He did need to talk to Jenna, but he felt that the best way to do that would be through the Weave. It would also be a good chance to teach Keritanima about joining the Weave, since he wasn't sure how long they were going to be stationary.

Then again, he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to drag Keritanima away from her queenly duties to give her a lesson. She'd all but vanished again, whisked away to some other place doing whatever it was that queens did. He couldn't blame her for doing what she needed to do for the country she ruled, but in a way, it made him feel just a little different towards her. The fact that she was a queen had never really impacted him until right then, when he wanted to see Keritanima, but realized that it wasn't as easy as walking into her bedroom anymore. He'd have to wait for her schedule to clear, whenever that would be. He wasn't even sure how to get in touch with her through the normal, proper means.

But Tarrin never really did things the normal way. Putting a paw to his amulet, he called her name, and then waited patiently. He figured she'd have

to chase people away to reply to him. His patience was justified a few minutes later. *"What is it, Tarrin? Are you alright?"*

"I'm fine. I need to go talk to Jenna, and I figured we could use it as a lesson, if you have the time. Are you available?"

There was a rueful laugh from the other side. *"Brother dear, I'm not going to be available until sometime next year,"* she told him. *"Of course, I don't have that much time, so in reality, I'm not going to be available until tomorrow morning. I'll make it a point to put some time aside for us tomorrow morning, alright?"*

"That's fine with me, sister."

"I'm glad you're going to give me some sail here, Tarrin. I know my studies are important, but this is too."

"I know that, Kerri. You have alot of work to catch up on."

"You have no idea," she drawled. *"Tomorrow after breakfast. Deal?"*

"Deal."

"See you then. And don't forget Dolanna."

"I won't," he said, then let go of the amulet. That was easy enough. He still had to go see Jenna, but at least now he could do it quickly.

There wasn't a strand that ran though his room, so Tarrin had to pause long enough to make one, joining it to two very distant strands and threading it right across his bed. He sat down atop the bed, so the strand passed directly through his chest, and then closed his eyes and started the process to separate his consciousness from his body and send it into the Weave. It only took him a moment, for it was something at which he was experienced, and in a short time he was free of himself and hurtling through the black background and dazzling light that made up the Weave as seen from within.

As always, he ended up in the Heart. A Weavespinner didn't have to go right to the Heart when they joined the Weave, but Tarrin always felt drawn there, like water flowing downhill. It had to be because of the presence of the Goddess. He looked up into those eyes that loomed over the Heart, the eyes of the Goddess staring down into her domain unblinkingly, and felt a

surge of love and faith flow through him at the sight of them. They seemed to shift, to move, and then they smiled down on him in a loving benediction that made him tingle. He basked in that gaze for longer than was entirely necessary, then bent to the task at hand.

Finding Jenna was a very simple affair. Her star blazed in the Heart, easy to pick out among the others. He used it to track her physical body back to its location relative to the Weave--it was very close to the Heart--and prepared to journey to her.

There is an easier way, my kitten, the Goddess intoned, showing him an exceptionally complicated spell by placing the images of the flows directly in his mind. *Simply touch her star and weave that spell, then speak to her. She will hear it.*

Tarrin didn't answer, for he realized that the Goddess had told him that from afar, and didn't intend to reply. He reached out and put a single finger to Jenna's star, and felt its vitality and warmth. The star was a reflection of the soul it represented, and touching Jenna's star told him much about the inner strength of his sister. He could sense the resolute nature of the star, the stalwart adamance about it that was slightly surprising. Jenna was a Kael, and that meant that she was stubborn and mule-headed, but her star showed that she was dogged and determined, clamping onto a goal and not letting go until she achieved it. It showed her warmth and compassion, traits that Tarrin often lacked, and it showed her gentle nature. Jenna was a nurturer in spirit, giving to those around her and making them better than before she came to know them. That quality would make her an outstanding teacher.

"Jenna," he called, his voice resonating through the Heart, to race out into the infinite blackness where the strands crossed the black sky.

There was a shiver through the star, and Tarrin could hear her reply clearly as Jenna bridged into the Weave. "Tarrin?" her voice called from her star, obviously shocked. "Where in the blazes are you? I can hear you inside my head!"

"I'm using your star to talk to you," he told her. "I'm in the Heart."

"You have *got* to show me that trick," she said immediately. "Wait there a minute, I'm coming."

Tarrin drifted back into the empty area at the center of the Heart, directly beneath the eyes of the Goddess, and he waited. He only had to wait a scant moment, as Jenna's mind-conjured form simply appeared not far from him. The image of self projected in the Heart was not how the body appeared, but how the Sorcerer conceived of his or herself. The image of Jenna he faced was not his sister as he knew her, it was his sister as an adult, with long, dark hair and generous curves garbed in a gown that looked made of spider silk. Jenna was still a young lady, barely more than a girl, but she obviously thought of herself as an adult. Then again, with Jenna, that was probably not far off the mark. The knowledge that Spyder had imparted to her had matured her beyond her years, so it was probably appropriate that her self-image was that of a full adult rather than a child.

Jenna looked at him, then smiled. "You're consistent, I'll give you that," she told him. "Jula appears in her human form when she projects. You're the shorter you, but it's still you."

"I've been here a lot longer than she has," he told her.

"That may be why," she agreed. "Alright, show me how you did it."

He did so, showing her the spell that the Goddess had taught to him not moments before. "Anything you have to teach me?" he asked curiously.

"Not yet," she replied. "I'll be done with the book in about another month or so. I'll let you Summon a copy when I'm finished, so you can read it. Have you seen Spyder?"

"No, have you?"

"Not since the last time she taught us," Jenna fretted.

"How is Jula doing?"

"She's learning fast," she replied. "I'm starting to really reach to teach her new spells. I was kind of hoping you'd have learned more through the echoes in the Weave."

"Not lately. They usually don't come to me until I need them, and there's not been anything going on that really needs me to use magic."

"Then go put yourself in danger," she winked. "I need to learn new spells!"

"Experiment," he told her. "It's not like you can Consume yourself or anything."

"I could still generate a Wildstrike," she objected.

"True, but it'll only hurt for a few moments. Sometimes you have to suffer to advance."

"I'd rather let you do the suffering and me doing the advancing," she laughed.

"I love you too," he said dryly.

Jenna was about to say something, but she suddenly whirled around and looked behind her. At about the same time, Tarrin sensed...*something*. He wasn't sure what it was, where it was, where it came from, or where it went. All he did know was that *something* had been there just a split-second before.

"What was that?" they asked one another in unison. Jenna laughed and Tarrin gave a slight face of irritation. "Have you ever sensed anything like that before, Jenna?" he asked.

"A couple of times," she replied. "I was hoping you could tell me about it."

"I've never felt it before," he answered her. "Maybe we should ask the Goddess."

"I did. She won't answer me," she replied. "This is either something she won't tell us about, or something we're supposed to find out on our own."

"Any idea what it is?"

"No idea at all," she grunted. "That was only the third time, and it's never here long enough for me to get any kind of a sense of it at all. Well, if you're here, then you're not moving. Are you there yet?"

"We're there," he told her.

"What's it like? Wikuna, I mean."

Tarrin described what he remembered of the city, then told her about the Palace and some of its technological luxuries. "I don't like this place, Jenna," he said. "The place is cold. Almost as if all the evil that's been done in here

has seeped into the walls. If it were haunted by a thousand ghosts, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Ghosts aren't evil, Tarrin, they're just confused," Jenna corrected him absently. "I wonder how they make the water flow through the pipes. They have to have some kind of massive wellpump."

"When did you learn about ghosts?" he asked.

"It was part of what Spyder taught me," she replied. "There are such things as ghosts, but most of them aren't evil like the stories say. Most of them don't even realize they're dead."

"You really need to sit down with me and tell me about it all," he told her.

"You'll be able to read it all when I finish the book," she assured him. "Oh, I should tell you now."

"What?"

"The Keeper is ill," she said. "I don't know what it is, but whatever it is, Sorcery can't heal it."

"Sorcery can't cure disease, Jenna."

"I know, but it came on too quickly for it to be natural," she said.

"Get a Priest. They can cure diseases."

"We've already tried that."

"Then get a stronger Priest," he amended. "A High Priest can bring someone back from the deathbed."

"And where do we find one?" Jenna asked, a bit tartly. "Just about all the high-ranking Priests that were in Suld were part of the conspiracy in the Cathedral, so we can't use them. Most of them are dead, and the rest were stripped of their magic by Karas. The ones that still have magic are getting it from another god."

"Val," Tarrin realized. The Goddess and Spyder said that magic grew stronger with each new Weavespinner. Before, Val couldn't grant magic spells to his Priests, they had to serve another deity while surreptitiously serving Val. If the resurgence of lost magical powers and the strengthening

of magic as a whole applied to Val as well, despite the fact that he was a god, then maybe now he could grant magical spells to his followers.

Tarrin hedged. "I, I think I might be able to do it," he said finally. There was no love lost between him and the Council, and the very memory of the Keeper was still enough to make him snarl in hatred. But the Keeper was the Keeper, and the Tower needed stability at the moment. If that meant swallowing his almost overpowering urge to ram the Keeper's teeth down her throat, then he'd do it to protect his family. "I'm no High Priest, but I may be able to fast-talk the Goddess into granting the spell for me, if there's nobody else available."

I hope you realize that I can hear every word you say, the Goddess said whimsically. Tarrin flushed slightly. In fact, he had forgotten about that. It was easy to forget about that. *It's a good idea, kitten but Priest magic is not Sorcery. You have to be there and make physical contact for the spell to work properly. You're in Wikuna, and the Keeper is in Suld.*

"Then Jenna can do it," he said impulsively. "She's just as strong as I am."

She's also human, the Goddess answered simply. *Where you can bend the rules because of what you are, it would break them if I granted high-order Priest magic to Jenna.*

"Then Lula," he reasoned. "Since it's a one-time deal, I'm sure you can bend the rules for her the way you do for me."

Lula doesn't have the magical training necessary to cast the spell, kitten. It's a good idea, though, she assured him. *If Lula trained with some Priests, she may be able to do it. But it would take too long.*

"Then what should we do?" Jenna asked.

Nothing. In this, I want the two of you to do nothing. Do you understand me?

"Yes, Mother," they said in unison.

"Mother, what was that presence we sensed a few minutes ago?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

Something you'll have to discover for yourself, my kitten, she answered, and then her sense of nearness retreated away from them.

"Well, you were right about that," Tarrin grunted to Jenna.

Jenna looked over her shoulder. "Um, Tarrin, I think Jasana is tugging my hair," she said uncertainly. "She's doing something that's getting my attention, that's for sure."

"It scares her when we join the Weave," he told her. "I wouldn't do it around her. It upsets her."

"I'll--ow!--remember that," she said, wincing. "She *is* pulling my hair!"

"Then you'd better go back," he said. "I wanted to tell you to stop training Jasana and then just sending her home," he told her. "She keeps trying to use magic at home when she knows she's not supposed to do magic without one of us there. You have to teach her, but start being heavy-handed. If Jesmind tells you she used magic the night before, deny her her lesson for that day. That'll make her get back in line *very* fast. Jasana's fascinated with magic, and when she finds out that the price of disobedience is losing the chance to learn magic, she should behave."

"That's pretty underhanded, Tarrin," Jenna chuckled.

"When you're dealing with Jasana, you have to be as conniving as she is," he told her plainly.

"No lie there," Jenna laughed, then she winced again. "Is that all you needed to say? If not, then give me the rest before your daughter rips all the hair out of my head."

"No, that's it," he said. "I'm bringing Kerri to the Heart tomorrow morning. Want to make it a double lesson?"

"Sure," she replied. "Me and Julia will be here. I'd better go, I think I just lost my bangs," she growled.

"Remember, be tough," he told her.

"Tough. Got it," she nodded. "See you tomorrow." Then her image dissolved.

Tarrin returned to his own body as well, having accomplished Jesmind's request in a timely fashion. And found himself almost immediately bored. He had nothing to do. Yawning, he shifted into his cat form and curled up on the bed. Whenever a cat had nothing else to do, it slept.

"Absolutely *not*!" Tarrin roared, throwing the ridiculously gaudy costume aside.

Keritanima stared at him evenly. She had come to his room not long before sunset, and it was the first time he'd seen her since the throne room. He'd eaten lunch with the others, but Keritanima had not been there, as she did whatever it was that she had to do with her government. But she had found the time to drop by his room before the grand feast and party she'd ordered and give him the most frilly-looking blue doublet and hose--*hose*, of all things!-- for him to wear. Tarrin did *not* like such ridiculous looking clothing, and there was no way he was going to wear it. "You are not going to come to the ball and feast wearing that, brother," she warned in a dangerous tone. "You look like a peasant."

"I *am* a peasant!" he told her flatly. "Don't forget that, Kerri! I'm a simple village farmboy, no matter what I look like right now. I'm not going to wear that stupid doublet and hose. And that's final."

"Yes you are," she said in a deadly tone, reaching down and picking up the doublet. "You aren't about to go in there in front of all the noble houses looking like a clodhopper, Tarrin. I know you don't care what people think about you, but your appearance is going to reflect on *me*." She thrust the doublet back at him imperiously.

Without blinking, staring right into her eyes, Tarrin sank his claws into the doublet and ripped it in half. He tossed the two remnants of the doublet to each side and glared at the smaller Wikuni, daring her to say a word.

Just as coolly, Keritanima wove a weave of Air and picked up the pieces, then used the weave of mending that Tarrin had taught her to repair the garment.

"Don't make me burn it out of your hands, Kerri," Tarrin warned. "I'm not going to wear it, and you should know better than to push me."

"I don't care what you think, Tarrin," she warned. "If you don't wear something nice, you're not going to attend. That's final!"

"Then so be it," he said bluntly, turning his back on her and shifting into his cat form. He heard Keritanima growl furiously as he jumped up onto the bed and curled up atop it. He closed his eyes and ignored Keritanima as she shouted at him, but was honestly surprised when the Wikuni grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him off the bed. Tarrin wasn't a kitten, so her grip on him was decidedly painful as his skin stretched and the Wikuni's short, sharp little claws dug into him. He opened his eyes and glared at her, but her amber eyes didn't waver as she glared right back at him. He couldn't shapeshift while she had hold of a good part of the back of his neck, but he could make his displeasure known with magic. "Why do you always have to be so childish!" she shouted at him as he deepened his connection to the Weave, preparing to weave a pretty unpleasant spell to make her let him go. "I swear, brother, I want to wring your neck!"

Keritanima's voice got too hostile, and her hold on him was a bit too aggressive. Keritanima yelped in considerable pain as a bright blue flash illuminated the room, and she dropped him from a nerveless hand as Sapphire's magical lightning scoured motor control out of her body. Keritanima flopped over backwards as Tarrin shapeshifted back to his natural form, then let Sapphire land on his shoulder. She chirped softly at him and rubbed her head against his neck, making sure he wasn't hurt. Almost mothering him. Tarrin hadn't seen such a display of protectiveness out of the drake before, at least not on his behalf.

"I...hate...that...drake," Keritanima slurred, trying without much success to move. She did move, but she had very little control over her actions, moving in erratic, jerky movements. Sapphire had been carrying a full charge, and she had let Keritanima have it with all of it.

"Be lucky it was her. I would have done something much worse," Tarrin said flatly. "I don't care if you're my sister or not, Kerri. That hurt, and I'm sure you know how I react when people hurt me. Don't *ever* grab me like that again."

"I, I didn't know it hurt you," she slurred, getting a little more control back. "I'm sorry."

"I accept the apology, but don't come in here and boss me around, sister. I'm not one of your servants, and I'm not one of your subjects."

"I'm used to bossing people around," she said in a clearer voice, managing to sit up.

"Get over it," Tarrin said flatly. "You may be a queen, but that doesn't put you over me. If you want to order me around, then roll up your sleeves and *make* me obey you. It's the only way it's going to happen."

Keritanima looked at him, then laughed. "Dolanna warned me, but I didn't want to listen," she admitted. "I was so used to bossing you around back in the Tower, I guess it became second nature."

"It was only practical to do what you wanted then, since I knew you understood what was going on alot better than I did, and you were better suited for dealing with it. Things aren't like that anymore, *deshaida*."

"So I see. Well, I won't force you to wear the doublet, but you absolutely *will not* come to the ball wearing those rags. You look like a homeless vagabond!"

"Would a new linen shirt and a pair of new leather trousers offend your sense of style?"

"Yes, but I think it's as far as I'm going to move you, so I'll live with it."

"You're right."

"And you need to take a bath!" she ordered. "You still smell like a ship!"

"The salt smell permeated the clothes," he realized, sniffing at his shirt. "I'd gotten used to it. Actually, I kinda like it."

"So do I, but you need to smell as neatly as you appear. So, take a bath, wash your hair, get some new clothes, and I'll have a servant come get you in about an hour. Alright?"

"That's fine with me," he agreed.

"Alright then. Imagine, Keritanima-Chan Eram, Queen of Wikuna, having to fight with someone in her own Palace!" she sighed. "If the nobles found out, I'd never live it down!"

"If they tease you over it, just point them out to me, and I'll kill them," he offered.

Keritanima laughed. "Sometimes I wish it was that easy," she told him, heading towards the inner parlor. She'd left her Royal Guard outside the entrance to the apartments. "I'll see you in a while. I have to get ready myself."

Tarrin let her go, still a little annoyed with her, then chided Sapphire softly as she hissed towards the open doorway. He set her down and Conjured new, clean, undamaged clothing, trousers that weren't shredded around the ankles from the claws on his feet, a shirt that didn't have holes in it from the claws on his paws, and then joined the adventure of figuring out how the bathtub worked. It still mystified him that they had managed to put running water in an upper-floor room of a large building situated on a hill. How did they keep the water pressure going to make the water flow out of the spigot? There had to be *something* pushing the water, but how could they do it without using horses, or men, or a water wheel of gigantic proportions? He took off his clothes and put a paw in the flow of the water, still amazed that there was hot water flowing out of it. How did they heat the water without magic? Or *did* they use magic? There were a few Priest spells that would cause a heating effect, one in particular jumped to mind, a spell that heated metal. There was another spell, much more advanced, that caused a lesser spell's effect to be rendered permanent. Was that how they did it? Did they use magic that heated the water, then make it permanent? If so, they must be able to control the temperature. The water flowing over his paw was hot, but it wasn't boiling. Not that it would have bothered him if it was boiling. He just couldn't imagine how they were doing it. But then again, Tarrin had never learned much about mechanics and physics and science. Most of his learning had been warfare and hunting and swordplay.

He watched the tub fill up with water, then he stopped the water's flow. Then he let some of it out for good measure, recalling that his body would displace the water and raise the water level. He didn't want to have to clean up a small pool of water off the bathroom floor. It steamed lazily in the contained air of the bathroom, raising the temperature of the room, and Tarrin found it to his liking. He tentatively put a foot in the bath, feeling the strange sensation of hot water soaking into the fur on his toes. Tarrin didn't like getting his fur wet, but this was a special occasion. He did need a bath.

He stepped into it then slowly sank down into the water, watching the fetlocks on his ankles floating and drifting in the comfortably hot water, feeling its heat work into him and relax muscles that he didn't realize were tensed. The bathtub was monstrously oversized, almost large enough for a small human to swim in it, but for Tarrin it was almost perfect. They'd probably made it so large to amaze the royal guest housed in the room, to overwhelm him with the grandeur of the place.

Tarrin blinked. Maybe the bathtub *wasn't* oversized. He took the fact that everything was usually too small for him for granted, but he realized right then that the furniture was a little larger than normal, the chairs were a little sturdier than normal, despite being garishly over-decorated, the bed was absolutely huge, even the pedestal upon which the sink rested was very high for a Wikuni-sized person. The Wikuni were allied to the Vendari that lived on the continent...did they furnish these rooms with an eye on making an oversized Vendari feel comfortable? If they did that, they would have made all the furniture much larger. Or maybe they'd reinforced things for a Vendari but still made it usable by smaller beings. That was a possibility. After all, they'd only have to make the bed and the bathtub truly large to accommodate a Vendari, since they, like him, were probably used to the undersized furniture they encountered when dealing with the smaller folk.

Either way, the bathtub was large enough for him, and that was all that mattered. He laid all the way back until only his head and neck were out of the water, enjoying the sensation of being surrounded by hot water. Sapphire flapped over and landed on the lip of the tub, sniffing at the water curiously. She looked at him with those blue-blue eyes, and the question was obvious within them. What was he doing? "It's a bath, Sapphire," he told her. "I'm cleaning up."

She tilted her head quizzically at him.

"Nevermind," he said absently, reaching behind him and unbinding his braid. He combed it out and then washed his hair, rinsing out quite a bit of sea salt and travel dust. He felt the heavy weight of it, all that hair soaking up the water and tugging at his head, and he paused to remember how Mist looked with short hair. Then he remembered what Triana said, as well as Kimmie, that a Were-cat could actively control how long they wanted their hair to be. He'd never really given it much thought up until that point, when

he felt the great weight of his hair and he wondered how it would feel to not have it pulling the back of his head down all the time.

What would it hurt? If he failed, it would just grow back. Tarrin rose up and sat on the lip of the tub, then twisted his hair together to gather it up and squeeze the majority of the water out of it. Then he Conjured two mirrors and hung them in midair with Sorcery so he could see what he was doing. Once he had the mirrors set where he could see clearly, he used a slight weave of cutting Air to slice the gathered hair in twain, just below the base of the hairline on the back of his head. He could feel his scalp immediately start to itch, the signal that the hair was about to begin to grow at that astronomical rate that would return it to its former length within moments. He closed his eyes and willed his hair *not* to grow, forming an image of himself with a hairstyle something like his father's, with just the small tail of hair at the back of the head, just reaching the shoulders, and the short hair on the sides and in front. He felt his scalp continue to itch, but he felt no hair growing yet. He realized that it was still itching because his self-image had always been with the long hair, with the braid, and seeing himself with short hair seemed almost unnatural. It wasn't how he currently appeared or how he wanted to appear, the Were-flavored body wanted to mold itself into the self-image maintained by the mind. As a shapeshifter, that self-image was critical for returning to the natural form, so it was branded into his deep subconscious.

Tarrin opened his eyes, and was surprised to see his hair short. It had grown just a little, to match the image of self he had pictured in his mind, and in that moment he could see his father in him. His hair looked like his father's hair, almost perfectly, right down to the shaggy, uneven bangs and the shoulder-length tail of hair on the back of his head. Father kept it because his neck easily sunburned. His head felt weird, too light, and he looked very funny. Father's hairstyle didn't suit him. He willed his hair to grow out just a little more, to where the bangs were even and just over his eyes, and longer on the sides to conceal the smooth skin where human ears would have been. Those patches of bare skin upset some humans, for some reason, so he was in a habit of keeping them hidden. It felt quite right to have the bangs there, since he kept short bangs, but it still felt funny in the back. He looked at himself in the mirrors, and wasn't entirely displeased with the slightly longer hair. His black-furred ears looked a little strange

popping up over the freed hair, since the braid kept his hair more or less flat, and his hair began to try to poof up as it began to dry out. Like all Were-cats, Tarrin's hair was incredibly thick, so thick that it had a tendency to stand up on the top of his head.

"What do you think, Sapphire?" he asked absently, turning his head this way and that to look at his hair. "Is it me?"

The drake looked at him and gave a noncommittal chirp.

It was certainly less of a burden like that. Lighter, and it would be easier to wash. And, if he didn't like it, he could just make it grow back out any time he wanted. He did make it grow out a little more, not liking how it felt when it moved around free with every turn of his head. He gathered it up at the back of his head and Conjured a thong to tie it. It wasn't a braid, it was a tail, and it made him go right back to looking much as he did before he cut off the braid. He looked at it in the mirror and decided he liked it. Maybe not as much as having the braid, but he'd try it and see.

That left a five-span long mass of hair left over. Tarrin picked it up where he tied it to cut it off, looking at it. All that hair had been connected to the back of his head not a few moments ago. He remembered Phandebrass' warning for him not to leave such things laying around, that they could be used against him in magical spells, so he incinerated the mass of hair with a quick weave, reducing it to fine, powdery ash. He picked up the ash with a weave of Air and deposited it in the sink, then washed it down the drain.

Feeling clean and relaxed, Tarrin climbed out of the tub and dried off, then dressed in the new clothing he would wear to the feast. They felt very nice against his skin and fur, and they smelled much better than the old clothes, though they lacked that sea smell that Tarrin did rather like. Sapphire jumped up onto his shoulder and flipped the new tail of hair with her snout a couple of times as he was lacing the front of the new shirt. Then she bit it.

"Sapphire!" Tarrin chided as she clamped onto the tail of hair and pulled at it. "Do you mind?"

Obviously, she didn't mind at all. She kept biting at it, sawing her teeth back and forth, and then he felt his hair come free of its bindings. Sapphire

pulled away, and he looked down and saw that she had the leather thong he'd used between a single clawed forepaw and her maw, pulling at it with a clawed finger as her teeth tried to sever it again. He forgot that he gave Sapphire leather rawhide to chew on, and she had smelled the leather thong and thought it to be a new chew toy.

Grumbling, Tarrin Conjured a silk cord and used that to tie his hair. Sapphire sniffed at it curiously, but this one, she decided, wasn't worth biting. "If you chew up my new pants, we're going to fight, little girl," he warned as he left the bathroom.

Tarrin passed the time between getting ready and the knock on the door in tedium. When it finally did come, Tarrin was both relieved and a little anxious. Tarrin didn't like strangers, and he was about to go into a huge crowd of them. Some of them weren't going to be friendly, either. He decided the best thing to do would be go to the ball, eat, hang around long enough to satisfy Kerri, then quietly leave.

The servant sent to fetch him was a wolf Wikuni female that looked surprisingly like Audrey, the Were-wolf female that he'd come to meet on the march to Suld. Almost exactly the same. She had the same narrow snout and gray-white coloring, wearing a white gown with the Royal Crest emblazoned on the front in red, and her black hair done in a multitude of little curls than hung over her amber eyes. Audrey was a little taller than this female, which made this female taller than the average Wikuni female, and Audrey was a Were-wolf, who were a very sleek and powerful breed. This female was slender, but she had the same softness that human females exhibited. This one probably did not do any real work. "Um, Master Tarrin?" she asked hesitantly. He could smell her fear, and that caused his predatory nature to rise up, staring down at the smaller female.

"Let's go," he said bluntly, stepping out into the hallway and forcing her to back up, eyes widening.

"Um, are you bringing the drake?"

"Is it here? Am I carrying it out into the hall?" he asked.

"Um, yes, but, um, you may want to leave it in your rooms, sir," she said meekly.

"If she bites anyone, they obviously deserved it," Tarrin told the little servant with a stare that made her flinch away from him.

"I, um, yes, Master Tarrin," she acquiesced, then started down the hallway.

Tarrin fell into step behind her, having to go slow. "What's got you so nervous?" he asked her directly.

"Um, well, um, we were warned to be polite to you, that you were, um, well, sort of not very nice," she answered honestly. Tarrin admired that honesty, even if her words did seem rather cowardly. "They said to always tell you the truth," she added quickly, obviously fearing that she insulted him. She was visibly trembling, and the fear-smell emanated from her as if she'd doused a bucket of it over herself. She was terrified of him! Tarrin wondered why they would send *her*, when Kerri knew that if the servant she sent showed fear, it would irritate him?

"Kerri knows me too well," Tarrin chuckled to himself. "What's your name?"

"Amber, my Lord," she replied.

Fitting name, he reasoned, given her eyes. "Calm down, girl. I won't hurt you unless I have a reason to. Do you plan to give me a reason?"

"No!" she squeaked.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," he told her calmly. "Why did Kerri send you?"

"Her Majesty didn't, Master Tarrin. I was sent by the Master of Servants."

In other words, the servant that was supposed to come and get him was too afraid after Kerri warned him about Tarrin's peculiarities, so he sent her, someone he could bully into doing it for him. At least she had the courage to do her duty, even if she was afraid of him. Tarrin could respect that. "From now on, if anyone ever has to come and get me or bring anything to me, you're going to do it, Amber," he told her. "At least *you* have the courage to face me. That's more than can be said for some of the spineless cowards Kerri has working for her."

"Um, yes, Master Tarrin," she said in a slightly quavering voice. Amber, it seemed, wasn't quite so enthusiastic about her new appointment.

Amber led him down hallways, up and down stairs, and down more hallways, each more gaudily decorated than the last, until he again stood in the throne room. It had festive buntings hanging on the walls between the numerous decorations designed to impress the onlooker with the splendor of the Wikuni kingdom, and the grand open space was filled with so many Wikuni that the floor was very crowded. Almost all of them were very richly dressed in expensive gowns or extravagant doublets, and jewels dripped from them all like water. Each of them did his or her very best to impress everyone else, and exhibit his grandeur, wealth, and importance. They talked in groups, large and small, and a veritable army of servants scurried between them holding trays carrying food or drink. The dais on the far end of the throne room was empty at the moment, and since there were no tables within the hall, the meal would be taken in another chamber. It had to be a pretty huge one, to hold tables for what looked to be nearly three hundred guests.

Amber led him through the throng, and each group stopped talking when Tarrin passed them, only to fire up into heated whispers after he went by. His ears could pick up some of the whispering, which was all wild rumor. Some said he was Keritanima's lover, some said he was a wild monster from the West she had tamed as another formidable bodyguard, some even said he was some kind of missing link between Wikuni and other races, since he was half animal. The most annoying rumor, however, was the scornful tone used when they called him a Sorcerer. Tarrin often forgot that Sorcery was not a very welcome profession outside of Sulasia. Most other kingdoms feared or hated Sorcerers, blaming them for the Breaking and just about any other misfortune they may have befallen in the thousand years since then.

It wasn't hard to make out Keritanima's group. Three Vendari and Azakar made them stand out on the floor, near the dais. Keritanima was there, wearing her Royal robes and crown in a formal sense, and Binter and Sisska stood at each side of her, as they always did. Azakar stood by Binter, wearing his armor. Miranda stood beside Sisska, wearing an off-white, nearly cream colored gown that cleverly matched the color of her fur and made it hard to tell where neckline ended and fur-clad cleavage began. All

the others were there, and they were all wearing finery. Allia wore a white robe, of all things, that did make her look good, since it was belted around her very sleek waist. Dolanna wore her best gown, a deep blue gown that accented her dark hair, and Phandebrass was wearing a silk robe that didn't have any burn marks or stains on it, as well as that same ridiculous pointed hat of which he was so fond. For Phandebrass, that was pretty remarkable. Camara Tal still wore a *tripa* skirt, but it was new and black, a new color for her, and she wore a breastplate with an eagle etched into its front and a new swordbelt with the magical sword that she had inherited from Faalken on it. Dar wore a new silk robe that was dark brown, and he looked very comfortable in the social situation. Dar was from a wealthy family in Arkis, so he was probably used to things like this. Kimmie was also wearing a gown, altered for her tail, and Tarrin was quite taken by how pretty she looked in it. It was lavender, a strange color that did go well with her hair but also made her striped orange tabby fur stand out on her paws. It wasn't quite clashing, but it was close. Then again, few colors were going to go well with orange and yellow, so Kimmie had chosen a color that went with her hair and put long sleeves on to hide as much of her fur as she could.

"Um, your Majesty, Master Tarrin," Amber said with a deep curtsy.

Keritanima looked at Tarrin expectantly, but he just stood there until Dar elbowed him in the side. "You're supposed to bow!" he whispered to the Were-cat under his breath.

He forgot about that part. He gave Keritanima a bow, a slight one but still graceful, and she nodded her head in acknowledgement, relief evident on her face. "Whatever did you do to your hair?" Keritanima asked him curiously.

"I decided to try it without all the weight," he answered.

"Well, what do you think so far?" Keritanima asked with a sudden grin.

"It's weird," he replied, putting a paw to the back of his head.

"I imagine it would feel that way," Keritanima agreed. "Did you have to bring that little monster with you?"

"She protects me from you, Kerri," Tarrin said bluntly.

Dar had to stifle a laugh, and even Dolanna looked about ready to smile.

Tarrin glanced at Amber, who was nervously waiting to be dismissed. "I want you to send this one any time you send for me," Tarrin said, pointing at the servant.

"You like her, eh?" Keritanima asked.

"She has more guts than the one you originally sent," he replied.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Keritanima asked in concern, a question that made Amber flinch.

"He never showed up. He must have pawned it off on her. She *did* show up, and she was even honest with me."

"What's your name, girl?" Keritanima asked her.

"Amber, your Majesty," she replied with a curtsy so deep she almost fell over.

"I like servants with courage, and you're obviously loyal, if you were willing to face *him* on my orders," she said, grinning at Tarrin. "Don't let him scare you, girl. He's all bluster and fanfare, but deep inside he's just a big pussycat."

Amber's muzzle fur ruffled slightly, and she glanced at Tarrin.

"If Tarrin wants you, then he's got you," she said grandly. "You'll serve Tarrin as a page until we leave, and then you'll take up a place on my personal staff. I think that's suitable reward for standing up to the big bully."

"Th-Thank you, your Majesty," Amber said, curtsying again.

"Now go take the rest of the day off," Keritanima ordered. "You deserve it."

Amber curtsied about ten times as she backed away from their group, stammering and stuttering, until she was swallowed up by the crowd.

"She was honest with you how?" Dar asked curiously.

"She said I wasn't very nice," he replied.

"That's honest," Dar laughed.

"I don't understand why she's so nervous. She's a lot braver than most of these sheep."

"Those sheep have others to stand between themselves and danger," Dolanna said sagely. "Ones like Amber have nothing but themselves."

"Well, do you like your rooms, Tarrin?" Keritanima asked.

"It's too big," he answered.

"So are mine," Allia agreed. "I do not know what to do with all that space."

"Why did you put us in there?" Tarrin asked her.

"Well, I like my rooms," Dar said defensively. "I've never had so much space to myself before."

"I could grow very attached to the baths," Dolanna agreed.

"I say, you really must send me to your civil engineers," Phandebrass said brightly. "I am completely amazed by how advanced your water system is. Well, running water, hot and cold, and even a sewer system! I've never seen the like!"

"And what are those stones that I've seen out there?" Dar asked. "Those huge ones that they've been putting down on the streets? How do they move them without breaking everything?"

"Those aren't stones when they start out, Dar," Keritanima grinned. "It's the newest invention from the Ministry of Science. It's a mixture of crushed limestone, sand, gravel, and some other ingredients I'm not quite sure about. They call it concrete."

"How do they move it?"

"It starts out as a liquid," she explained patiently. "They mix all the ingredients together with water, pour it into a mold, then simply wait for it to dry. When it does, it's as strong as just about any kind of stone."

"That's almost unbelievable," Camara Tal said calmly. "Liquid stone?"

"I've seen them do it," Keritanima told her. "It looks like gray mud when they start out. They pour it out onto the street in a mold, smooth it out with flat boards, then just rope off the area and let it dry. They've been tearing up the streets here in the city, installing a better sewer system underneath them while they've got them ripped up, then covering it with

new concrete streets. It's been going fairly well," she said with a toothy grin. "They started on the largest and most travelled streets and then they're working their way down. The city's master engineer wrote me a report saying they'd be done in about four years."

"Liquid stone," Tarrin mused. "That's almost better than magic."

"How do they think these things up?" Dar asked curiously.

"I have an entire university full of people who do nothing but think things up," Keritanima told him seriously. "Wikuna's edge has always been the fact that we're one step ahead of the rest of the world. We have faster ships, better weapons, and a stronger economy. Well, the rest of the world is going to catch up to us, so we spend a *lot* of money researching new ideas. The steam engine, concrete, cast iron, and something that's caught on over in Sennadar, printing presses and cooking stoves, they're all products of Wikuna's state-funded science department."

"You told me the Tellurians invented the stoves," Dar accused.

"They developed the idea, but it was our cast-iron technology that made them cheap to produce," Keritanima replied calmly. "They were riveting together hand-worked iron plates to make the stoves before we bought the idea from them. Now we just cast the pieces, assemble them, then sell them. If there's anyone in the world that gives us a run for our money in technology, it's the Tellurians. If they were a larger, better funded kingdom, they could probably pass us by. Tellurians are probably the most creative people I've ever seen. That's why over half of my Science Department are Tellurians," she admitted with a grin.

Tarrin recalled that clever little writing pen that had all the ink inside it, the one Miranda was so fond of using. She had said that it was a Tellurian design.

"I say, my countrymen are rather bright," Phandebrass said with a mild smile.

"*You're* Tellurian?" Camara Tal asked with a scoff.

"I say, isn't it obvious?" he asked, slightly offended.

"I certainly hope he's not an example of the race," the Amazon said to Keritanima, jerking her thumb at the mage.

"Master Phandebrass certainly displays the intelligence of the Tellurian people," Keritanima said with diplomatic aplomb.

"Too bad it's so warped," Camara Tal grunted, crossing her arms across her ceremonial breastplate.

A Wikuni stepped into the grand main entrance to the hall and rang a large brass bell. "Ah, there's dinner," Keritanima said brightly, obviously heading off another argument between Phandebrass and Camara Tal. "Shall we eat?"

"Capital idea," Phandebrass said, adjusting the ridiculous pointed hat he wore.

They were led to an immense chamber not far from the throne hall, nearly twice as large, and filled with table after table. There had to be a hundred of them in the hall, all of them circular with six chairs placed under them and the silk-covered tables set with the finest gold-chased china from the Far East. Even the cutlery was made of gold, Tarrin could smell as he and his friends were led to the head table, on a small raised dais at the far end of the room. They all waited as the Queen was seated, then were allowed to take their own seats. Keritanima's table was twice the size of all the others, but only had nine places, giving the three extra diners at the Queen's table much more space. They were all seated except Binter and Sisska, who stood to each side of the Queen's chair defensively. Tarrin sat at Keritanima's left, and Allia to her right, as Miranda, Phandebrass, Dar, Camara Tal, Dolanna, and Azakar took the remaining seats. Both Tarrin and Azakar gave the chairs a nervous look, for they didn't look all that sturdy. They were heavily padded, made of cherrywood, and had designs embroidered on the cushions tacked to the backs. Tarrin gave Azakar a slightly amused look, as they both hovered there and waited for the other to sit down, to see if the chair broke. Tarrin weighed less than Azakar, so he decided to try it first, carefully lowering himself down until his full weight was placed on the chair. It did seem to squeak a bit, but remained whole.

"You're not that fat, Tarrin," Keritanima chided him.

"I don't trust furniture made for little people," Tarrin told her absently as Azakar gingerly seated himself in the chair. It squealed a bit in protest, but accepted his full weight without breaking.

Dinner was served immediately after the Queen was comfortable, and it was a very large, very long meal. They served it in courses, one dish at a time, and some of the foods were things that Tarrin had never seen before. The first course was a thick soup made of small sea creatures that Keritanima called shrimp, with cream and small bits of some kind of fish. Tarrin didn't like it very well, it was too heavily spiced, but Sapphire seemed to be very partial to it, so he gave the rest to her. The second course was a weird creature that looked like some kind of mutated scorpion, cherry-red and angry looking. Keritanima called it a lobster, a sea animal that was abundant in Wikuna's chilly coastal waters, and she showed them how to extract the white meat from the hard shell with small, delicate forks and a tool that looked like a steel version of the pincer that was on the lobster's body. Tarrin dispensed with the shell-cracker and simply split the thing open with his claws, using the tips like an awl to puncture the shell and cause it to split. Then it was just a simple matter of digging out the good parts. The third dish they served was grilled fish steaks, some kind of reddish-meat fish that was actually quite savory.

Tarrin looked around briefly, and saw that most of the nobles were watching him, their expressions slightly unpleasant. He glanced at them only briefly before going back to his fish steak, feeding a part of it to Sapphire, who seemed to like it as much as he did.

By then, Allia was looking a little displeased. "What's wrong?" Tarrin asked.

"These things, they're all from the sea," she said in Selani. "They all taste funny, metallic in a way. I don't like them."

"Don't worry, sister," Keritanima assured her. "It won't all be seafood."

"I hope not."

The fourth dish made Allia much happier. It was a vegetable dish, bean chutes, mushrooms, large brown things, and strips of some kind of fleshy plant cooked in a rich, tangy sauce and served over a strange grain-like food that Keritanima called rice. Tarrin had never seen any of the vegetables except the beans and mushrooms before, but he had to admit that they were quite good. The rice itself was tasteless, but he found that when it was mixed with the sauce, it was very good. The fifth dish was obviously

prepared with Tarrin in mind, for it was beef steaks, not roasted, but grilled over an open flame. The difference wasn't a very big one, but it made a world of difference in the way that it tasted. The steaks were served with a potato, something with which Tarrin was more than familiar, one baked instead of boiled. Tarrin had always found potatoes to be bland, but if one heaped enough butter on them, they became almost edible. Even with his heightened sense of taste, he still found potatoes to be rather bland. But it didn't take as much butter as it did when he was human to make it tolerable. Tarrin set the bone of his steak, with plenty of meat still on it, on the table in front of Sapphire, setting it on a small saucer that had been part of the set table. The drake sank her teeth into it happily, and to his surprise, her small, sharp little teeth seemed to have no trouble grinding down the bone as well as the meat. Just like a raccoon, she used her forepaws to hold the bone down and even used them to hold the bone off the plate as she ate. He saw that her forepaws had remarkable dexterity, and since her duke claw could serve as an opposable thumb, it gave her a lot of gripping power. Sapphire used her forepaws like hands, and she seemed to be quite adept at it. That was unusual, since he'd never seen Chopstick or Turnkey do what Sapphire was doing now. Their forepaws had the same shape, but they'd either never bothered or had never learned how to grip things as she had.

The last dish was dessert, and it was, quite simply, the most delicious kind of sweet he had ever tasted. It was some kind of sweetbread or cake served with a hot sweet liquid poured over it, a liquid that was thick, sticky, and tasted both sweet and buttery at the same time. The sweetbread was good enough by itself, but the topping made it absolutely marvelous.

"What is this, Kerri?" Dar asked, shoveling a spoonful so large that it almost didn't fit into his mouth.

"It's called bread pudding," she replied. "The other nobles think it's scandalous that I like it," she added with a coy smile. "It's not something nobles eat."

"Why not?"

"Because it used to be made of stale bread," she replied. "It was an old commoner's dessert, thought up so the bread wouldn't go to waste. My cooks redid the recipe a bit, though. I have to admit, I think they did a good job."

"Jesmind would absolutely die over this," Tarrin mused. "She loves sweets."

"You'll have to make her some," Keritanima told him.

"What is this honey-like stuff they pour on top?" Dar asked.

"Caramel," she replied. "It's a confection from Sharadar."

Dolanna nodded. "It is actually not that hard to make," she added. "It is just a matter of the right amounts of butter, honey, salt, and spice."

"Sounds like alot of what the Wikuni use didn't come from Wikuna," Tarrin noted.

"If we find something good, we borrow it," Keritanima shrugged.

"I say, an advantage when you're a society of global traders. There isn't much your people haven't seen," Phandebrass said.

"Good point there," Miranda agreed.

Sapphire snapped the last of the bone into a managable mouthful, then crunched it into her mouth and swallowed it. She eyed Tarrin's dessert hungrily, but he put a paw between her and the plate. "Don't even think about it," he warned her.

"At least she has table manners," Keritanima said, looking at the drake, who hissed slightly and glared back in return.

"Be nice," Tarrin chided the drake. Sapphire did nothing but snort and look longingly at the dessert sitting on Miranda's plate.

"You want this?" Miranda asked her, pointing at the bread pudding.

"Don't give her that," Tarrin warned. "If she eats that, she's going to be flying around the room all night. Drakes and sweets are not a good combination."

"What's the harm in giving her a little bit?"

"Tell you what, Miranda. If you want to feed it to her, fine. But you have to take her home with you tonight and try to get her to go to sleep."

"Ah, well, when you put it like that, I guess I can see your point," she grinned. "At least now I know how to get back at you if you annoy me," she

added with a wink.

"And I'll just send her to your room and let you deal with her," he warned. "Just ask Kerri how much of a handful she can be."

"Don't remind me," Keritanima growled.

"What did she do?" Dar asked.

Miranda giggled. "She shocked Kerri," the mink replied. "Never argue with Tarrin when she's with him. She tends to zap anyone that raises her voice to him."

Dar gave Keritanima a broad smile. "I guess we should thank Kerri for showing us that."

"Like you'd ever argue with Tarrin," Keritanima shot back.

A Wikuni servant scurried up to the table and whispered in Keritanima's ear. It was very soft, very quick, but Tarrin had very sharp hearing. The servant told Keritanima that Rallix had only just arrived, and that he sent his apologies for being so late. He saw her eyes light up, then her fur on her face ruffle, and then she nodded exuberantly. "Thank you very much. We're almost done here, so ask him to join us in the ballroom," she commanded.

"At once, your Majesty," the servant said with a bow, then hurried away.

"Well, I'm about finished here," Keritanima said firmly. "Shall we go to the ballroom? I have my best musicians here tonight, and we're sure to have a good time."

The ballroom was just as large as the dining room had been, decorated with ten massive chandeliers that hung from thick chains from the ceiling. Small crystal teardrops were suspended from the candleholders, and they caught and refracted the light into rainbow cascades that made each look like glittering stars were hanging in the air. This was a chamber near the outside, since it had a line of huge windows lining the far side, which offered a spectacular view of the harbor from a balcony that ran the length of the ballroom along the outside of those windows. Huge works of art and tapestries hung from the other walls, depicting scenes of dancing and lone figures, and the far corner held a dais upon which sat ten Wikuni holding various musical instruments. The floor was made of a reddish wood cut into large squares, the grains opposing one another to give the place a

lanceboard appearance, but the wood was so deeply polished that it literally glowed in the light of the candles above it. The room was large, brightly lit, warmly decorated, and seemed a very nice place. It was the first room he'd visited in the Palace that had any sense of warmth, of soul within it. It was one of the few places in the Palace where Wikuni had a good time.

There were already about twenty Wikuni in the ballroom outside the musicians, and it took him all of a heartbeat to figure out which one was Rallix. Miranda had described him to Tarrin very precisely, and he saw that Miranda hadn't missed a thing. Rallix was a tall, rather thin Wikuni, a badger Wikuni, with brownish fur with dark stripes, and a black stripe over his eyes that looked like a mask. He had a narrow muzzle and a badger nose at the end of it, but his expression was one of cool control. He wore a black waistcoat with tails over a white linen shirt, his bushy badger tail splitting the tails, and a pair of black trousers with a red sash or some kind of adornment around his waist. The red stood out against the black and white, but it was more of a fashion statement than any kind of glaring fashion mistake. Tarrin saw that Rallix wore shoes--not all Wikuni did--black leather shoes polished to a shine. He was handsome, in the Wikuni fashion, but it was the intelligence in his dark eyes that caught Tarrin's attention.

More than that. Tarrin looked at Rallix, and looked at him harder. There was something about him, something unusual. Something that made Tarrin look right at him as soon as he came into the room, something that made him stand out to such a degree that it was blatant. It didn't seem to be something that anyone else noticed, because the others didn't seem to be taking notice of Rallix, although Dolanna's gaze did linger on him for a moment before moving on. Tarrin puzzled over it, for it wasn't a bad sense, it wasn't a feeling of danger, and he hadn't even caught the man's scent yet. There was just something about him that seemed....different. Tarrin glanced away from him as he considered it, and his eyes locked on Miranda's luxuriantly furred tail as she walked in front of him. Then he glanced at Kimmie--

Kimmie. Of course! Kimmie and Phandebrass both had that same sense of presence about them that Rallix did!

Rallix was a Wizard!

Did Keritanima know? Was Rallix a serious student, or was he simply a dabbler, as Kimmie had been before tutoring with Phandebrass? If he was as smart as Keritanima boasted, he certainly could be a good Wizard. When did he find time to study, since he was so busy running that trading company that Keritanima had told him about?

Tarrin put his thoughts aside as Keritanima stopped in front of him. Rallix bowed gracefully to her, sweeping an arm before him, then rose up and kissed her hand. "I was quite flattered to receive your invitation, your Majesty," he said in a soft voice, but Tarrin could sense the power within it. "It took me completely by surprise, I must admit. I also must apologize for being so late, but there was a very big emergency at the trading company I run."

"Oh? What happened?" Keritanima asked, the fur on her cheeks trying to rise up as Rallix's hand remained on hers. Tarrin could see that Keritanima was smitten. He decided that that was a good thing, and he'd see to it that Rallix was equally smitten with her. Even if he had to smite Rallix himself.

"We had a ship fire, your Majesty," he answered. "There was very little damage, but you know the kind of chaos such a thing can cause. I simply could not leave until things were settled down. I do hope you'll forgive me."

"Oh, that's alright, Master Rallix," she said demurely. "I know all about that kind of thing. You're here now, and that's all that matters, isn't it?"

That seemed to take Rallix by surprise. He gave Keritanima a very speculative, searching look, then seemed to realize that he was still holding onto her hand. He let go of her with a surprising amount of grace about the whole thing. "Yes, well, I'm happy to be here, your Majesty," he said quickly. "My duties don't give me much time for dancing."

"I'll have to have a long talk with your employer about that," Keritanima said with a very faint grin. "Where is she now?"

"Still at her country estate, I'm afraid," he said carefully, in a very low voice. Tarrin realized that Keritanima was asking about something more than what her words said. Keritanima was actually Rallix's boss, so it had to be about someone else. "From what I hear, she's been very quiet and reserved lately."

"I'm glad to hear that. I heard that she'd sailed to Sennadar, though."

"Something she decided it would be best people believed, your Majesty. She did intend to take the journey, but didn't feel well enough to undertake it not long after setting sail, so she was returned home. Her sabbatical to her country estate has done wonders for her health. She sends her best regards to you." He leaned in close. "Why *did* you send me that invitation, your Majesty?" he asked.

"Do I need a reason to send you an invitation, Rallix?" she asked with a surprisingly disarming smile.

"Given that we don't know one another, I'd say yes," he answered truthfully. "I had no idea your Majesty even knew I existed."

Keritanima seemed to ignore that. "It's common custom for the sitting monarch to begin the first dance. I needed a good dance partner, so of course I thought of you right away. So," she said, holding out her arm expectantly.

"Of course, your Majesty," he said after a brief delay.

Tarrin watched as Keritanima and Rallix stepped out onto the empty floor, even as some of the guests filed into the ballroom. That seemed to be a cue for the musicians, who took up their instruments and began a lively song. He watched Keritanima and Rallix dance, a stately dance despite the energy of the song, one that involved a great deal of spinning about. Rallix, Tarrin saw, was an excellent dancer, leading Keritanima in graceful spin after spin as they stepped across the floor. He also saw that they weren't talking. If Keritanima called up Rallix to both fish for him and catch up on her trading company, talking while dancing would be a good way to do it, but not with every eye fixed on them. They'd wait until the others joined them.

After the song ended, couples stepped out onto the floor and joined the Queen and her partner as another began. Kimmie elbowed him in the ribs and offered her paw to him, and seeing no reason not to do it, he took it and led her out onto the floor as Sapphire left his shoulder to fly around near the ceiling to explore the vast room. Both of them had only seen Keritanima and Rallix perform that particular dance, which was being danced again, but

their Were-cat grace and agility allowed them to copy it with perfection, and shame everyone on the floor with their grace and poise.

"That has to be Rallix," Kimmie noted, looking over at them. "I didn't understand a word they were saying but I do think I heard her use that name. She didn't even introduce us."

"She's a little distracted," Tarrin replied, glancing around and speaking in low tones. "Rallix is her business partner, but--"

"The scent she's laying down right says he's alot more than that," Kimmie finished.

"About that. Just don't repeat that."

"You just said it out loud."

"On a crowded dance floor among people who speak Sulasian as a second language, if they speak it at all," he told her.

"You need to teach me Wikuni," Kimmie chuckled.

"I need to teach you Sha'Kar," he told her.

"Phandebrass is working on that," she replied. "He's trying to adapt that spell you used to learn Wikuni and make a Wizard spell that does the same thing. If he succeeds, I can learn it in a matter of days."

"Is he making any progress?"

"Some," she sighed. "He accidentally scrambled his memory a few times. He taught me a counterspell specifically to restore lost memory, and I've had to use it on him a few times."

"He didn't hurt himself, did he?"

"Not permanently," she chuckled. "There was a period there for a few days when he couldn't remember his own name, but he's recovered."

"I think I remember that," Tarrin said. "That was right after he shrunk you two."

"Don't bring that up," she said in a pained voice.

"It could be worse. He could be experimenting on you."

"After the shrinking incident, he knows better than to experiment on me," Kimmie grunted. "I may seem like a sweet little girl, but I can just as nasty as Jesmind when I'm annoyed."

"I doubt anyone could be as nasty as Jesmind when she's annoyed," Tarrin chuckled. "Except maybe her mother."

"Well, maybe not *that* bad," Kimmie agreed with a laugh.

The song completed, Tarrin escorted Kimmie off the floor just as a slower song began, one that was almost stately. It was a different kind of dance they were doing now, some kind of group-oriented dance where a long line of males faced a long line of females. They bowed or curtsied, and as one, the lines moved forward. Grasping hands, each pair made slow, cautious steps, turning a circle in one direction, and then the other way.

"I just noticed something," Kimmie said.

"What?"

"Not all Wikuni have tails," she observed. "Look at that cat Wikuni over there. She has a tail. But that one over there doesn't," she finished, pointing to another Wikuni, a male.

Tarrin looked closely at the Wikuni female, wearing a black dress that matched her black fur, and he realized that he knew that Wikuni. It was that female pirate, the one whose ship they had destroyed. Sheba. Keritanima had mentioned in passing that Sheba wasn't a pirate anymore, that she was back in her noble house. Tarrin didn't really care about Sheba one way or the other, but his human morals were a little outraged that Sheba had never been punished for all the damage she had done to the kingdoms of the West. she had terrorized the shipping lanes in the Sea of Storms for six years, sinking several dozen ships and killing a great many people. And yet there she stood, smiling and dancing in the court of the Queen of Wikuna.

Dar was right. The Wikuni were completely hypocritical. Decrying piracy, but doing nothing about it as long as it didn't affect them. If a human raider had ever attacked a Wikuni tradesman, he had no doubt that the Wikuni fleet would hunt down and destroy the interloper without mercy. And yet they had allowed Sheba to run wild over the Sea of Storms for six years, because she didn't attack Wikuni ships, and her father happened to be a noble.

Tarrin looked away from her. He was getting a little worked up, and he didn't want to embarrass Keritanima.

"What's got your hackles up, Tarrin?" Kimmie asked.

"An old score," Tarrin told her shortly. "I'm going to go step outside a moment. I need some fresh air."

"Alright. I'll take Sapphire over to the punch bowl and see how many Wikuni we can mortify," she grinned, reaching up and taking Sapphire off his shoulder. "Come on, let's go get something to drink," she told the drake. Sapphire liked Kimmie, so she didn't object in the slightest to being picked up and carried away.

Stepping through one of the open windows as he had seen several Wikuni do, Tarrin stepped out onto the balcony outside the ballroom. It was a very wide balcony with slate squares making up its floor, and an elegant carved marble handrail protecting people from falling over the edge. He put his paws on that rail and looked down on the city of Wikuna, at the many lights winking from below, then looked up at the sky. It was a brilliant, cloudless night, with only one of the four moons out, the Red Moon Vala. The White Moon was new, and the Twin Moons had yet to rise. The Skybands in Wikuna were very wide, much wider than he was used to seeing, taking up about a third of the sky. Wikuna was pretty far north, Keritanima had told him, and was subject to some pretty fierce winters.

Something on the ground below caught his eye. Tarrin leaned over the rail, looking down to see two uniformed Wikuni guards marching on patrol along the outside edge of the building. They wore those red-coated uniforms with the gold buttons and the white bandoliers that held their gunpowder and musket balls, their white trousers, and they carried their muskets, with long knife-like attachments at the ends of the barrels that turned the weapons into pretty formidable hand-held weapons. They marched along smartly, but they weren't stiff or uncaring about their duty, looking this way and that and keeping an eye on things. Keritanima had good guards. Tarrin leaned over a little more, sending his tail out behind him to counter-balance himself as he watched the two Wikuni, both canines of some sort, march under where Tarrin was and then continue on.

Something struck his tail on its top and then slammed it into the ground. Tarrin felt the pain, but it wasn't enough to make him yelp or jump, even when whatever had struck it down landed on top of it. It was a boot, and the boot ground into his tail as it tried to apply full pressure, tried to break bone. Tarrin turned his head to look, and saw a rather tall, portly rodent-like Wikuni, looking vaguely like a badger but much heavier in build, with solid brown fur. He was decked out in tremendous splendor, a brocade doublet of a midnight blue color and hose that looked like they were made of silk, with gold and jewels hanging from any available area. He had a Wikuni female on each arm, a canine Wikuni on his left and a strange honey-furred mammalian Wikuni whose type was unknown to him on his right. She had a boxed snout with a black dog-like nose, small round ears, and large brown eyes. He looked right at Tarrin as he removed his boot from Tarrin's tail, his expression amused. "Excuse, please," he said in broken Sulasian. "Saw did not."

He flowed past Tarrin grandly. "I don't see what her Majesty sees in that creature," he said to his lady-friends in Wikuni. "If it had proper fur, it wouldn't be quite so repulsive as those bald humans she's surrounded herself with. And that one with white hair! She may be pretty, but she looks like a wild animal! Did you see the way she stared at me?"

Tarrin chanted inwardly that he did not want to embarrass Keritanima. He did not want to embarrass Keritanima.

"It's probably as stupid as it is ugly," the male added to the other lady.

That did it. The badger-like Wikuni squealed in shock when Tarrin's claws hooked into his finery from behind, getting a paw full of doublet and gold chains, then hauled him off his feet literally by the scruff of his neck. Tarrin turned as the two Wikuni females screamed in fear, whipping the male over the rail so fast he swayed in Tarrin's grip and letting his feet dangle over the fifteen or so span gulf between the balcony and the grass-covered lawn with its slate walkway running along the wall of the Palace.

"The next time you insult someone," Tarrin hissed at the male, in perfect Wikuni, "make sure *it* doesn't speak the language."

Then Tarrin let the Wikuni go. He screamed delightfully as he dropped to the ground, a cry that was cut short when he hit the walkway below.

Tarrin brushed his paws together as if cleaning dirt off of them as he looked down at the male, who lay on the walkway with one leg sticking out at an unnatural angle. The two females ran to the rail and peered over it, beginning to cry and make hysterical sounds.

"Do either of you want to step on my tail?" Tarrin challenged, bringing his tail around and presenting it to them garishly.

The females gaped at him in terror, then turned and fled back into the ballroom.

Snorting, Tarrin turned back around and looked down, watching the male try to get to a sitting position. The two guards that had passed by a moment before trotted back over and saw the man laying there, then set their muskets down and helped him sit up. The male blubbered something and pointed up at the balcony, and his eyes went wide when he saw Tarrin standing there looking down at them, his expression very ominous.

Then he realized it was pointless to stand there. He'd already educated the Wikuni, and they wouldn't get the male to where they could set his leg so long as he stood there watching them. He turned, then paused when he saw quite a few Wikuni lining the windows, staring out at him.

It happened almost at the same time. Tarrin felt something hot go under his chin at an angle, up through the side of his mouth and out his cheek, so fast he didn't even have time to register the pain, even as a loud thunderclap cracked across the balcony. Tarrin staggered slightly as his tongue registered the fact that there was a hole in his cheek, and several of his teeth were missing. The flash of pain struck him just a moment later, but it was not a pain that would incapacitate him. He had felt much worse. The pain dulled almost as fast as it struck him, as his body repaired the damage done to his face and mouth with efficient speed. Whatever had wounded him was neither magical nor silver, so it did not do him a true injury. Tarrin's mouth itched as new teeth replaced the ones lost, and he spent that time turning back around and looking from where the thunderclap had come.

It was down on the walkway. The badger-like Wikuni he'd tossed was still sitting on the path, but he had a smoking musket in his hands. The two guards looked shocked and amazed that the Wikuni would dare to shoot at someone right where everyone could see him do it, and were so stunned

that they didn't stop the Wikuni as he tossed the musket aside with burning eyes and reached for the other one.

That was going too far. The man had *shot* him. There were no rules now. Feeling a fury rise up in him, a fury he hadn't felt in months, he grabbed the marble rail with both paws. Tarrin's muscles flexed, and the sound of tearing stone heralded the sight of the Were-cat breaking away a sizable chunk of the masonry, a good two spans of polished rail and two support columns still attached to it. The badger-like Wikuni raised the musket from his seated position and took aim at Tarrin, who raised the heavy stone over his head and prepared to hurl it down at the Wikuni. The two guards gave out cries of alarm and dove aside wisely as Tarrin flung the rail at the Wikuni, even as the Wikuni fired the second musket.

The musket ball struck Tarrin in the lower abdomen, on the far right, penetrating flesh and flying upward. It passed between his lowest ribs and exited his back. It was a glancing blow, something even a human could have survived. The piece of stone was much better aimed, hitting the Wikuni squarely in the chest, crushing the musket and his upraised arms in the process. A fountain of blood exploded from his mouth as he was smashed to the walkway by a quarter ton of heavy marble, and when the marble settled on top of him, he didn't move.

He was very dead.

Tarrin had to actively resist the urge to go down there and take the Wikuni's head off to make sure of him. He hadn't felt an explosion of rage like that in a very long time, and it was almost frightening. He clenched his paws into fists, fists that shook with a need to dish out more punishment, and Tarrin had to forcibly take hold of himself and try to relax. The man was dead, the reason for getting angry was gone. He'd started it by insulting him and stomping on his tail, and he sealed his own fate when he took the musket from the guard and shot him. Closing his eyes, he centered himself, thinking about the people he loved. Jesmind, Jasana, his sisters, Janette, his parents, his friends. He recalled peaceful times, happy times, and that helped calm him down quickly.

When he opened his eyes, Keritanima was hurrying out onto the balcony with Binter and Sisska attending her. "Can't you keep out of trouble

for one night?" she demanded hotly. "What did you do?" She looked over the rail, then growled loudly. "Tarrin! What did you do that for?"

"He shot me," Tarrin said in a hiss.

"And what reason did you give him to shoot you?" she shouted.

"I threw him over the rail."

"Why did you do *that*?" she snapped.

"He tried to break my tail, and insulted me."

"You killed a man over an *insult*?" she said in fury.

"I killed him because he shot me. Twice," Tarrin said in a dangerously low tone. "He brought it on himself. He intentionally stomped on my tail and tried to break it. I paid him back in kind for it. He shot me with a musket, so I paid him back in kind for it."

"You there, what happened?" Keritanima shouted at the guards below in Wikuni.

"We didn't see it all, my Lady," the guard replied, not recognizing Keritanima as the Queen. "We saw this one laying on the ground, and that one up there watching. We tried to help the man, but he grabbed my musket and shot at that one up there. Then that one up there tore out the rail and threw it down on this one while this one down here got the other musket and took another shot at that one up there."

Keritanima growled in her throat. "Tarrin, what am I going to do with you?" she asked in frustration. "I asked you to behave! This is how you honor that request?"

"He started it!" Tarrin shot back.

"It doesn't *matter* who started it!" she shouted at him with sudden heat. "Could you, for once in your life, have the wisdom to simply let an insult pass? Did what that man think of you mean so much that you had to kill him over it?"

"If someone had put a boot on your tail and ground it down into the floor, trying to break it, would you be so forgiving?" he countered.

"How do you know he did that?" she accused.

"I'm not stupid, Kerri," he snorted. "When someone raises a foot to step on a tail that's in the air over his knees, he's going out of his way."

Keritanima glared at him a minute, then sighed. "Go back to your room, Tarrin," she ordered. "I'll straighten this out, somehow."

"Kerri--"

"Just go," she ordered, pointing towards one of the open windows.

Snorting, Tarrin went past her and into the ballroom. Every eye was on him, and they parted before him as he marched deliberately through their ranks, eyes speculative or fearful. Sapphire landed on his shoulder as he passed through the assembled Wikuni, then made his way to the door. He was a little regretful he'd caused Keritanima trouble, but he didn't feel a thing for the man who tried to kill him. He got what he deserved.

Chapter 6

Tarrin paced back and forth in his apartments, replaying the events over and over in his mind. Every time he did so, however, it only made him angry. Why did people have to be that way? Why did they have to be so *cruel*? Tarrin wasn't like that. Surely, he had a mean streak in him, and he was a bit vicious, but he didn't go out of his way to hurt other people like that Wikuni had done. Nobody ever got hurt at the end of Tarrin's claws unless there was a reason for it. The other man was to blame, and yet Tarrin seemed to be the one getting into the trouble.

Didn't Keritanima warn all of them not to do such things around him? Didn't Keritanima know by now that Tarrin did not tolerate it when people behaved towards him like that? Whatever Keritanima thought, he saw no blame in it on himself. The other man started it, Tarrin responded in kind. The man tried to kill him, so Tarrin simply responded in kind. It was that simple. He hadn't gone looking for a fight, and by all rights the other man should have left well enough alone when he got his leg broken. His pride had caused him to try to kill Tarrin, and it cost him his life.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why did people have to be so stupid! Was he not large enough and mean-looking enough to prevent people from doing exactly what the man did? What kind of insanity possessed people like that?

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. So angry, in fact, that Sapphire seemed to sense his hostility and decided to spend a little time in the bathing room, away from him. He paced back and forth and back and forth, and kept getting just a little more angry with each step.

So much for looking forward to his visit to Wikuna. He was ready to leave, and he was sure that Keritanima was busily stepping up her schedule to get him out of her Palace as quickly as possible. He had little doubt that his action was going to cause Keritanima problems. He'd heard all about how cunning and devious the Wikuni nobles were. One of them would figure out some way to turn it to their advantage.

How did he keep getting into these things? It was frustrating! Tarrin turned just as his anger got the best of him in the outer parlor, bringing his fist down on the back of one of the deep chairs sitting on the carpet, shattering the wood in its back and sending down and bits of fluff flying as the cushioned back was torn open.

"I'm sure that was an expensive chair," Kimmie's voice called from the outer door. Tarrin whirled around to see her standing there, half in half out, her paw on the door handle. "Should I come back later?"

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Do I need a reason to come to your room now?" she asked pointedly. "Actually, since Kerri sent you to your room, I figured you may want to talk to someone, or at the very least, have someone to yell at. I can do either, you know."

Tarrin snorted, crossing his arms and turning his back to her. "I wouldn't be good company at the moment."

"That's a matter of opinion," Kimmie said lightly, stepping inside and closing the door. "I've dealt with Mist in her less than friendly moments. I think I can deal with yours."

Tarrin glanced at her, but her expression and her scent both were mysterious. He had no idea what she was thinking, what she was feeling. Usually, the scent gave one or both away. "Now then, should we stand here in silence, or would you rather go into the other room and sit down in silence? Shoot, we could even go into your room and lay down on the bed in silence, or hang from the ceiling in silence, or climb the walls in silence, or hover in mid-air in silence, or--"

"I get the point," Tarrin snapped, interrupting her.

"There, see, you just spoke. That wasn't hard at all, was it?" she asked with a disarmingly warm smile. "You think you can do it again, or do I need to go fetch some treats from the kitchen and entice you?" She waved a paw. "I've gotten speak. I just need sit up, lay down, fetch, play dead, and heel, and I'll have you completely trained."

Tarrin glared at her, but she seemed to be oblivious to it. Then again, after so long with Mist, Tarrin realized that he wasn't going to ruffle

Kimmie. It would take something pretty spectacular to ruffle Kimmie.

"You take alot of chances, Kimmie," Tarrin warned.

"Of course I do," she smiled in reply. "Now, since we've gotten you past the 'I'm not talking' phase, we can talk about it." She looked him up and down. "There's blood on your shirt, you know," she told him.

"I can smell it," he said shortly.

"Well, there's half the problem," she snorted. "Let's get that shirt off of you. The blood smell probably isn't doing your temper much good."

He did try to resist when Kimmie grabbed his paw and started dragging him towards the next room, but her grip was surprisingly strong, and she totally ignored his attempt to pull away. "Why do you always have to be so contrary?" she complained. "I swear, Tarrin, you're as bad as Mist! Do you take the other side just to give yourself an excuse to argue with people or what?"

"You could leave me alone and save yourself the aggravation," he said.

"Right, and deal with you stalking around in a tiff for the next three days. Spare me," she said with a drawl. She dragged him through the inner parlor and into the bedroom, then let go of his paw and grabbed the tail of his shirt with both paws. He tried to push his shirt down, so Kimmie decided to opt for the convenience of simply ripping it off him. "You're a complete baby sometimes!" Kimmie accused. "So wrapped up in your temper tantrum that you even refuse help!"

"I didn't ask for you to come in here, you know!" Tarrin shouted in reply.

"As a matter of fact, you did," she said with a grin. "You could throw me out if you *really* wanted to. I know it, you know it. You're just putting up a fight because you're not sure if I'll really sit here and talk with you. You're thinking that if I stay no matter how much you fight about it, I'm not joking or playing with you. It's a test of trust."

Tarrin blinked in surprise.

"You're feral, Tarrin," she chided him. "You and Mist are alot alike. All the things I've seen in her, I see in you. I understand every aspect of it, and I

can read you like a book. Right now, you're feeling a bit sheepish because I can read right through you, and not a little nervous about it, thinking that there are things about you too dark for me to see. Well, think about it, Tarrin. Mist is my bond-mother. Do you really think I haven't already seen it all?"

Tarrin was quite honestly taken aback, because Kimmie had yet to be wrong.

"Now then, we can stop being silly, sit down, and you can talk about it," she said in a mild voice. "I guarantee you, Tarrin, you'll feel better after you talk it through."

Tarrin was impressed. It was easy to forget how smart Kimmie was, when comparing her to minds like Keritanima or Phandebrass. She was inobtrusive, quiet, and modest, alot like Allia, now that he thought about it. Rarely if ever bringing attention to herself. Considering the life she must have had with Mist, he completely understood her behaving that way. He knuckled under to her demands, sat down with her on the bed and did just as she asked. He talked. He voiced his frustration and irritation over the whole situation, about how he just didn't understand why some people had to be such jerks, and admitting that he was a little irritated with himself that he had embarassed and disappointed Keritanima. Kimmie simply sat there and listened attentively, letting him talk out the whole problem until he began to repeat himself.

"Well, the first thing you have to do is not blame yourself," she told him. "Keritanima understands you, no matter what you may think. If you killed the man, you certainly had a good reason for doing it. You don't just go around and kill people for no reason."

"I know, but I let her down, Kimmie," Tarrin sighed. "She asked me to her big party, introduced us to Rallix, or she would have if I haven't have messed things up, showed us to her friends and court, and I ruined it for her. I really tried to control myself, Kimmie. After he tried to break my tail, I let him go on without doing anything about it, but when that Wikuni insulted Keritanima, insulted Allia, then called me stupid, he just took it too far."

"As far as I'm concerned, Tarrin, you didn't do anything wrong," Kimmie told him calmly. "Then again, I'm a Were-cat. I'd have probably

thrown him over the rail myself if he'd tried to break my tail. You lasted alot longer than I would have."

"I can't see you throwing anyone over a rail, Kimmie," Tarrin chuckled. "You're too good-natured."

"You've never seen me angry," she smiled. "I assure you, Tarrin, I have just as vile a temper as any other Were-cat. It just takes a little more to set me off, that's all."

"I can't imagine you being angry. It's just not you."

"Well, I'll take that as a compliment," she said with bright eyes. "And I don't think you should worry too much about Keritanima. She knows you pretty well, and she'll get over it. Who knows, maybe it was actually a blessing in disguise."

"How so?" Tarrin asked.

"Well, now if any of the nobles annoy her, she can just insinuate you into the conversation. Oh, say, how she may invite you and them to a special private party, in a nice empty room with a stout door."

Tarrin chuckled. "She'd probably do something like that," he agreed.

Kimmie leaned back on her paws on the bed, looking up at him. "Feel better now?"

"I hate to admit it, but yes," he told her.

"Good." The texture of her scent changed in a most appealing manner. "Well, now that you're not going to stalk around in a tiff for the next three days, I think we could find something else to do for the rest of the night," she said in a purring tone.

"So, the true motive is revealed," Tarrin said with a laugh.

"It's just a fringe benefit, since I'm still trying to help you forget about what happened tonight," she said with a teasing smile, but her eyes were hungry. "Now shut up and kiss me."

Kimmie had done much to improve his mood before, but now she strove to make sure he forgot all about it. And she did a good job. The altercation during the party was the last thing on his mind after just a few moments.

After a very busy night, the two of them napped until sunrise, when Kimmie's stirring woke him up. Kimmie yawned and sat up, forcing him to roll free of her, and he kept his head on the pillow and looked up at her contentedly. "Morning," she greeted with a smile. "I'm going to have to talk to Kerri about these rooms. I definitely got cheated in the bed department. The bed I have is too soft."

"This one isn't exactly firm, Kimmie."

"If you don't tie a board across your back, you sink into my bed and threaten to get suffocated," she complained. "I have to sleep on it in cat form. It's like sleeping on a blanket thrown over quicksand."

Tarrin chuckled. "You know, this is the first time you've spent the whole night?"

"I've stayed with you til dawn before," she protested.

"Only after coming in after midnight," he pointed out. "I forgot how nice it is to sleep a full night with a female."

"Well, I'll just have to spend nights with you from now on," she offered. "And not just when we're feeling frisky."

"I don't mind," he assured her. "But Jesmind probably won't like it too much."

"So, you want me to move in?" she asked pointedly.

"You may as well," he shrugged. "I didn't understand why you didn't move in at first."

"You didn't *ask*," she said bluntly. "I know you love Jesmind, so I wasn't going to impose myself on you any more than necessary. But if you want me to move in, I'll be more than happy to do it."

"That may be a moot point here," Tarrin said. "I doubt we'll be here in two days."

"Me too," she said. "The solstice is only twelve days away. And I heard that it'll take us ten to get to Vendaka. We absolutely have to leave by tomorrow, or we'll miss our chance." She looked behind his head. "I don't like your hair like that," she told him. "You looked better with the braid."

"I was just trying it out," he said defensively. "If it bothers you, I'll grow it back."

"I don't know why, but it does," she said. "It's almost as if a part of you that's supposed to be there is missing."

"That's how it felt at first," Tarrin agreed.

Kimmie yawned, then stretched languidly. Tarrin paused to admire her form, her mixture of sleek Were tautness combined with a curious she-softness common among the humans. Kimmie was a lot different from Jesmind, who was definitely muscular, or Mist, who was a powerfully built little Were-cat, but she was still a very beautiful, very desirable Were-cat female. At least to him, anyway, since some males may not appreciate her more human-like body when they were used to seeing muscular definition and washboard stomachs on females. "Enjoying the show?" she asked shamelessly, looking down at him.

"I'd enjoy it more if you'd turn a little this way," he told her with a leer. "I want to get the full view."

Kimmie laughed, then turned and shook her chest in a manner that waggled the objects of his attention in his face. "There, are you happy now?" she asked.

"I will be in a little while," he said in a husky voice, pulling her down into an embrace.

"Ah, there's nothing better than smelling desire in a male," Kimmie sighed as Tarrin kissed and nibbled lightly at her neck.

It was well past dawn when Tarrin and Kimmie finally got out of bed, washed up, and dressed. The first thing he did, at Kimmie's behest, was cause his hair to regrow, and Kimmie indulged both of them by taking on her human hands and braiding his hair for him. Afterward, he Conjured a new shirt to wear, someone knocked on the outer door. Tarrin moved into the outer parlor as Kimmie opened it, and he saw the wolf Wikuni Amber standing there, looking a trifle nervous. She now wore a white silk dress, very fancy, very expensive, with the Royal Crest embroidered in a much smaller design than the torso-covering one on her last dress, the crest resting right over her heart. This had to be the dress of a Royal Servant, the

maids, pages, butlers, and attendants that directly served the Queen herself. Keritanima said she was taking the girl onto her personal staff.

"What is it?" Kimmie asked her.

"Is Lord Tarrin here, Mistress?" she asked in broken Sulasian.

Kimmie moved aside and pointed in his general direction. "Lord Tarrin," she said with a curtsy in Wikuni. "Her Majesty asks that you join her for breakfast."

"Just me, or is it a general invitation?" he asked.

"I know that the others that arrived with her Majesty were also invited, so it must be a general invitation, Lord Tarrin," she answered.

"Don't call me that," he said sharply. "I'm no Lord."

"Begging your pardon, Lord Tarrin, you're wrong. I personally witnessed her Majesty bestowing the title of Margrave to you earlier today."

"What's a Margrave?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"It's something of a honorary title, my Lord," she replied. "It grants the recipient with the title and privileges of the nobility, but without granting lands. You're a landless noble of sorts, but it's a somewhat high rank. Only her Majesty, a Duke, and an Earl outrank you."

Tarrin snorted. "Alright. Give me a few minutes to finish dressing, and you can take us there."

"Of course, my Lord," she said with another curtsy, stepping just inside the door and waiting with her hands crossed over her lower stomach.

"What's going on?" Kimmie asked.

"She's taking us to a breakfast with Kerri," he replied.

"I hope it's formal dress," Kimmie said, grabbing the skirts of the dress she had on, the same one from last night.

"It's your fault for not bringing your clothes."

"You wouldn't let me out of bed," Kimmie challenged. "It's your fault."

Without blinking, Tarrin Summoned every single stitch of clothing that Kimmie owned, making them appear in neatly folded piles around

Kimmie's feet. "You'll have to get the other things, but I'm sure you can find whatever you want to wear in there somewhere."

"These are mine," Kimmie said in surprise, holding up one of her plain peasant dresses. "How did you do that?"

"I'm a Druid, Kimmie," he told her absently. "And I've touched just about every piece of clothing you have with you."

"Ah, yes, you can only summon what you've touched," she chuckled, recalling that rule. "I'll have to let you put your paws on my spellbooks. That way I can never lose them." She held up the dress. "Think this is too rustic?"

"I don't think you have to worry about impressing Kerri," he told her. "Amber said that all of us were invited to this breakfast, so it must be a family affair."

"Family affair," Kimmie chuckled, reaching behind her and starting to undo buttons.

Seeing a woman in need, Amber stepped up and helped Kimmie unbutton her dress. "Would you like to retire to the bedchamber, mistress?" Amber asked her in Wikuni.

"She doesn't speak the language, Amber," Tarrin warned her. "She wants to know if you want to undress in the bedroom, Kimmie," he told her.

"Whyever for? The clothes are right here," she objected.

"The lady prefers to change here, Amber," Tarrin relayed. "I assure you, you're not going to be uncovering anything I haven't already seen. The lady doesn't consider me a compromise of her modesty."

Amber's face fur ruffled slightly as she nodded. The wolf Wikuni proved to be an efficient maid, helping Kimmie out of the fancy dress quickly and not having much to do other than carefully hang up her fancy dress as the Were-cat female dressed in something much less expensive and much less remarkable. Kimmie smoothed the wool skirts of her simple peasant dress with her paws as her tail slashed back and forth several times in rapid succession, a trick every Were-cat used to flatten the clothes down to the base of the tail.

"There, that's better," she said. "I felt like I was about to fall out of that dress."

"It had a good view, at least," Tarrin told her.

"Maybe I should lower the neckline of my other dresses," she mused with a sly look and a wink in his direction.

"If you take it off, I'll see much more."

"But then everyone else will see too."

"So?"

"It doesn't bother me, but you know how it tends to stop traffic," she said with a teasing smile. "As much as I like parading around naked for you, Tarrin, we have to keep the local customs in mind, you know. As soon as we visit a place where everyone goes naked, I'll be happy to do it for you."

Tarrin chuckled. "Are we ready to go now?"

"I think so, unless I've got something hanging out," she said, turning unnaturally far, twisting her back like a pretzel, and looking down at her lower back and bottom. Amber gave a rather wild look at Kimmie as she turned on herself to inspect the back of her skirts. Tarrin sometimes forgot that Were-cats had a much wider range of motion than other races.

"We're ready to go, Amber," Tarrin told the maid as Kimmie untwisted herself.

The wolf Wikuni led them to a small, cozy little dining room on the fifth floor, that had a huge window overlooking the harbor. It lacked the overwhelming decorations of most of the other rooms, with rich wood panelling covering the walls that happened to have nothing covering it up. Keritanima sat facing the window at a large circular table, with Binter and Sisska standing at either side of her chair. All the others were there, but to Tarrin's surprise, Rallix was also present, seated at the Queen's right. Tarrin took one look at the badger and saw his discomfort.

"It's about time," Keritanima said, looking at them. "This explains why my page couldn't find you, Kimmie," she added.

"You should have known where to look for me, your Majesty," the Were-cat female said patiently.

"I should have at that," she chuckled. "Sit down, please. Now that you're here, we can eat." She glanced at Rallix. "Oh, Tarrin, Kimmie, may I present Rallix. Rallix, this is Tarrin Kael and Kimmie, Phandebrass' student."

The badger stood and bowed to them as Tarrin and Kimmie approached, then held out his hand and shook Tarrin's paw. That close to him, Tarrin could smell Keritanima all over him, and it wasn't just his clothes. Her scent was plastered all over him. Tarrin leaned in a little closer and analyzed that latent scent, making Rallix distinctly uncomfortable when he realized that the large, imposing Were-cat male was actually *smelling* him. "Uh, a pleasure," Rallix said nervously.

"What are you doing, Tarrin?" Keritanima demanded.

"You should have cleaned him up a little better, Kerri," Tarrin said pointedly.

Kimmie glanced at him, then she too leaned in and took a whiff of Rallix's fur. Then she laughed. "Soap gets that out every time," she told the Queen with a sly smile.

The fur on Keritanima's face literally stood on end. She glared at the two Were-cats viciously, then laughed in spite of herself. "Alright, you caught me. I've been a naughty little queen. Now sit down so we can eat." Tarrin and Kimmie sat down between Allia and Dolanna as Keritanima regained her composure. "Soap, you say?" she asked Kimmie conversationally. "We don't use soap often. It makes the fur dry and flaky and hard to manage."

"Soap washes out almost any smell," Kimmie told her confidently.

"I never smelled anything."

"The hardest scent to make out is your own," Tarrin told her calmly. "Since it's always in your nose, it's almost impossible to make it out on something else."

"What are you talking about?" Dar asked.

"If you have to ask, then you're too young," Camara Tal said bluntly.

Dar looked at the fox Wikuni. "Kerri!" he suddenly gasped.

Keritanima laughed. "Shut up, Dar," she called at him. "Now, first things first. Rallix here has graciously accepted my offer of marriage."

"She didn't waste any time," Tarrin told Allia.

"Not a moment," Allia agreed.

"Seeing as how I threatened to throw him in the dungeon if he refused, I think he made the right choice, don't you?"

"Her Majesty is quite an effective bully," Rallix said mildly, still looking a little wild-eyed.

"What happened to all that talk of courtship and stuff?" Dar asked.

"That was when I thought we had all sorts of time," Keritanima grunted. "Truth is, we're going to be very busy for a long time, so I decided to take what I can get right now and worry about what I'm missing when I have the time to reflect on it. Besides, marrying Rallix is going to put him in the Palace and under the protection of the Royal Guard. When I invited him to the ball last night, I all but put a big target on his back. This way I can protect him."

"You're going to cause a row," Tarrin warned.

"I caused that last night," she shrugged. "I revealed the fact that I'm actually Lizelle Sailmender, and I incorporated her assets into my own. Since Rallix and Lizelle have had a working relationship for such a long time, it probably won't shock anyone when they receive the invitations to my reception tonight. They'll all think that Rallix wooed the young and impressionable daughter of the King without knowing who she was."

Rallix visibly winced.

"Tonight?" Tarrin asked. "You really aren't wasting any time, are you?"

"It's not going to be a state function," she said quickly. "At least not the first time. We'll have a big state wedding, but that will come later. Tonight will be a simple ceremony with a priest of Kikalli, just to make it legal under the law. Oh, yes. Binter, would you ask *sashka* to come see me? I want to arrange a Vendari bodyguard for Rallix."

"Immediately, your Majesty," Binter said in his bass voice, then he turned and marched out of the room, being careful not to slam the door behind him.

"I say, you don't have to sit there in silence, my boy," Phandebrass told Rallix with a grin. "We're all family here. A somewhat strange family, to be sure, but we're a family, we are."

"You're getting out easy, Rallix," Dar grinned. "Kerri had all sorts of nasty plans for you."

"Her Majesty laid out my options rather clearly, Lord Dar," Rallix said in that same mild tone. "Or lack of them," he added with a slight smile. "She made it all sound like a business arrangement. At least that was beforehand."

"Yes, well," Keritanima said with a smug little smile. "I can now say happily that I completely understand what I've been missing, Tarrin. I should have married Rallix years ago."

"Who says you have to marry?" Tarrin asked her.

"Well, things work a little different around here," she told him. "Rallix won't think he's getting a spoiled bride, since he's the one who spoiled me."

Rallix stared directly at his plate.

"Since no one else has said it, allow me to congratulate you, Kerri," Dolanna said with a warm smile.

"Yes, hear hear, congratulations," Phandebrass agreed.

Tarrin glanced at Miranda, who had a mysterious smile on her face. She looked at him, then gave him a sly wink. "The first rule around here is speak your mind, Rallix," Tarrin told him. "That being said, just what did Kerri do?"

"Well, as I said, she made it sound like a business arrangement," he answered. "She called me into her study after the ball and explained that she needed to marry me to secure her position, protect me, and protect our merchant company. She made it sound as if it would be a marriage on paper, and promised that she could have it annulled at any time. Under those conditions, I agreed. That's when she made it clear that she did *not*

think of it as a business arrangement," he said with his face fur ruffling. "I admit, I do have rather fond feelings for her Majesty, but I had no idea she felt that way."

Dar laughed. "You got his name on the contract without revealing the whole deal!" he proclaimed. "Kerri, that's *awful*!"

"I *am* a Wikuni," she said smugly. "I out-bargained him, plain and simple. To put it bluntly, I swindled him out of his socks." She put a hand on his arm fondly. "I think he'll get over it. He's already found out how affectionate I can be, and I know he likes me. He'll get used to it. He'd better, because he's *mine* now," she added with a victorious look.

"Her Majesty is an effective bully," Rallix repeated.

"You already said that, and I'd appreciate it if you called me by my name," Keritanima told him. "I'll go crazy if I hear nothing but 'your Majesty' for the next fifty years."

"Yes, Keritanima," he said with a slight smile.

"Kerri!" she shouted at him.

"That seems a bit too personal, Keritanima."

She glared at him. "I'd think that'd be a moot point by now, Rallix!"

Tarrin looked at Rallix, and realized that he was playing with her. He wasn't as stuffy as he seemed, he noted. Keritanima had got the better of him, and now he was making her pay for it. Tarrin screened out all the other scents in the room and concentrated on his, and found that his scent became quite agreeable whenever he looked at Keritanima. The amount of information that could be passed along by a scent was considerable, and it was enough for Tarrin to understand that Rallix felt more than fondness for Keritanima. Keritanima had told him all about Rallix, and how he had kept working for her even after he'd learned who she was. Rallix could have made alot of money by turning her in, or by taking over the business after Keritanima ran away from her father, when Lizelle wouldn't be around anymore to see to the business. Rallix had had any number of opportunities to turn her in or sabotage her or take over what was hers, but he did not. He had been loyal to Keritanima through it all, and that loyalty was based on more than a simple ethical position. Rallix himself may not know it, but he

loved Keritanima, very much so, and it was that love that had kept him so faithful to Keritanima's interests.

Tarrin looked at Rallix, then looked at Keritanima. They were both intelligent, headstrong, and stubborn. Once he got used to the idea of being married to her, Rallix wouldn't be intimidated by her position or her crown. That was going to be a very lively relationship.

Dar laughed again. "It's a good thing you got it on paper. He may have ran away."

"You're just jealous because I got mine," Keritanima said with a nasty smile. "What did Tiella say when you asked her out?"

Dar glared at Keritanima.

"That is enough, both of you," Dolanna said mildly. "If this is the main part of the business you needed to tend here, may I ask when we are leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning," she replied. "I've cleared my desk of all the important things, and *sashka* can handle the rest, with Rallix's help."

"Me?" he said in surprise.

"Of course you, silly," she told him. "You're a fantastic businessman, Rallix, and running the government is alot like running a business. After *sashka* gives you some background information, I'm sure that you'll do just fine in your new position as Minister of State."

"You never mentioned this, your Majesty," he said in a business-like tone. "Who is going to look after our business interests?"

"Didn't you hire Veldo last year? Veldo is an excellent administrator, Rallix. He'll do just fine running Twenty Seas as long as you go over there from time to time and help him with the important issues, the same way I used to come over and clear the in-box of all the important things."

"That was different, your Majesty--"

"Kerri!" she snapped at him.

"Kerri," he corrected calmly. "You own the company. You had to sign off on those decisions."

"And now *you* own the company with me," she reminded him. "You have the authority to sign off on anything you want, Rallix. It's not like I never trusted you to make important decisions, you know."

"Oh. I didn't consider that." He paused. "Since you've absorbed the Twenty Seas under your true name, have you considered something?"

"What?"

"Well, before you changed the law, the nobility didn't have to pay taxes. Since you can prove that you were the true owner of the Twenty Seas operating under an assumed name, you should be able to recover all the taxes you paid retroactively, since past law is still binding on legal issues dealing with that time frame. It would be an impressive amount, your--ah, Kerri. Five years, given the profits we made? I doubt the Royal Treasury could cover the refund."

Keritanima laughed. "Are you trying to get me to break the Royal Bank, Rallix?"

"It's more of the state paying back what it legally owes to you, Kerri. Besides, with that much operating capital, I could put some of the noble merchant companies out of business," he said, his ears seeming to twitch slightly.

"I see you're still out to put everyone else under," Keritanima laughed. "Alright, I'll have a barrister look into it. You realize that I'll be paying myself, don't you?"

"At least it will be money going from government control to personal control," he said. "You won't have to account for it under the new legal system."

"I don't account for it now," she chided. "The Royal Treasury won't go under Parliament control until *after* both houses are seated. Legally, every copper bit in the treasury still belongs to me. Since the nobles keep dragging their feet, they're forcing me to handle the kingdom's economics."

"You should not have given that power to this new Parliament, Kerri," Rallix told her.

"Four hundred minds are better than one, Rallix," she told him. "It may look a little chancy now, but trust me. In fifty years, we'll be better off for it."

In fifty years, our economy is going to be so large and complicated that we'll *need* a group of educated Wikuni watching over it."

"I hope so."

"Is it alot of money?" Dar asked.

"The treasury?" Keritanima asked. "The last time it was audited, I think there was about eighty million nobles available."

"Woah," Dar said. "And that's all yours?"

"Master Dar, you're looking at the richest woman in the world," Rallix told him mildly. "Now that she's absorbed all her assets listed under her assumed name, her combined worth is greater than many kingdoms, and that's before taking the money in the treasury into account."

"The money in the treasury is actually Wikuna's money, Dar," Keritanima told him. "You saw all those street projects out there when we rode in from the docks? I pay for all that out of the treasury. I also maintain a very large, very expensive navy and fund alot of additional projects, like the Ministry of Science and the Intelligence Service."

"I knew that, but in Arkis, the Emperor doesn't actually *own* the treasury. If he tried to take all the money, the *kaisra* would revolt."

Tarrin knew that term. *Kaisra* was an Arakite term meaning *nobility*, but in Arkis it referred to the assorted noble houses.

"I'm sure that if I emptied out the treasury, the noble houses here would revolt too," Keritanima chuckled. "Paying for the kingdom is the monarch's responsibility."

"So your system is alot like ours."

"For now. When I finally manage to get the new system working, the treasury will be controlled by Parliament. It will be their job to pay for everything."

"You're giving the money to this Parliament?"

"No, I'm giving them the ability to propose spending ideas," she explained. "Actually, the final authority when it comes to making spending decisions will be mine, but they'll have to approve those ideas."

"But you just said that Parliament is going to control the treasury," Dar said in confusion.

"It works like this, Dar. Either I or an agent I authorize will prepare an operating budget for the kingdom for the year. The Parliament will look at it and either approve it or disapprove it, and they can also change certain things, remove some things, or add some things. If they change things, I have to approve the changes. So in reality, it will take both them and me to pass a budget. This way, I get valuable input from Parliament about some things, but they can't slip anything by me, since I have to sign off on the budget as well."

"Strange system," Dar grunted.

"Wikuna is getting too large for the monarch to make all the decisions," Keritanima said. "Yar Arak and Nyr have beauracracies to help the Emperors, and the other kingdoms are too small to be that burdened by their sizes. This system is going to work very well as we grow, because it involves everyone in the decision making process, not just a king or queen, and it delegates authority in a way that allows small sections of the kingdom to run themselves without too much supervision."

"Wise, Kerri," Dolanna said. "You made a system that allows you to listen to many different viewpoints."

"Exactly," Keritanima nodded. "I'll have no end of suggestions about things. Some will be good, some bad. It'll be up to me to weed out the bad from the good. It also delegates alot of my authority without me actually having to give up that power, so I can control alot of what goes on without having to do things personally."

"A job is only as good as the man you place to perform it," Rallix said sagely.

"So I'll just have to find good people. Like you," Keritanima said with a smile, touching him on the forearm. "Where is that food?" she complained.

The food did arrive a few moments later, and they enjoyed a good breakfast together. They mainly spent it listening to Phandebrass talk, which wasn't unusual, as he filled in the others on his progress for converting the Priest spell of learning into a Wizard spell. It came down to a half hour dissertation on the forces of Wizard magic when a simple yes or

no would have answered the question. Tarrin watched Keritanima and Rallix as he ate, saw how they were acting towards one another. Keritanima was perfectly comfortable, but Rallix was still a bit scattered, and wasn't quite sure how to act or what to do. Keritanima had twisted him around her little finger. For a moment, Tarrin felt a little sorry for him. The meal was interrupted about halfway through by Binter's return, leading a huge Vendari with a notch taken out of his crest, who came in and said something to Keritanima, having to bend far over to reach that far down. Keritanima nodded and said something to him in a quiet tone, and he left.

After the meal, Keritanima beckoned Tarrin and Allia to walk with her and Rallix, as four Royal Guardsmen moved ahead, four lurked behind, and Binter and Sisska moving along with them. "I'm sure you're waiting for me to yell at you over what happened last night, Tarrin," Keritanima told him. "Well, after getting to the bottom of things, I realized that you didn't do anything that wasn't given to you first, so I'm not that angry. At least not anymore."

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of your subjects, Kerri," he apologized.

"Eh, it's no big deal," she said with a wave of a paw. "I care more about our friendship than I do about their respect. They'd all like to stick a dagger in my back anyway, so let's forget about them."

"Well, it was certainly, unexpected, to hear that you and Rallix have become betrothed," Allia broke the subject. "Why did you not tell me about this, *deshaida*? I am a little upset about it."

"I'm sorry, but it wasn't sure it was going to work, so I didn't want to say anything until I knew or not," she said with a toothy grin. "Knowing you, if I told you I wanted to ask Rallix for marriage, you would have put a dagger to his throat and forced a promise out of him."

"Probably," Allia admitted.

"I asked you two out here so you could inspect him to your heart's content."

"Inspect me?" Rallix asked in a little concern.

"Of course. Tarrin and Allia are my brother and sister, Rallix, you know that," she told him. "They have a say in my life. They'll look you over, and if they like you, they'll let you live to see the wedding."

Rallix shuddered visibly. "Let me live?" he asked in a nervous voice.

"She is teasing you, Rallix," Allia told him calmly. "I would not kill you. I would mark you and drive you away from her, but I would not kill you."

"I would," Tarrin snorted.

"We know you would," Keritanima grinned.

"I have heard all I need to hear from Kerri," Allia said diffidently. "There is no need for inspection. I trust the judgement of a sister."

"Tarrin's already looked you over," Keritanima told Rallix with a grin. "He may look big and mean, but he's got quite a nose and quite a mind. I could see him figuring you out while we were eating, and it's pretty apparent he's already made his decisions about you. Haven't you, Tarrin?" she asked.

Tarrin nodded.

"Well?"

"He loves you," Tarrin said bluntly, glancing down at her. "He doesn't quite understand that yet, but it will come to him in time. He'll be a good mate."

"Just couldn't say it diplomatically, could you?" Keritanima said archly as Rallix almost missed a step.

"If you don't understand your feelings, there's nothing wrong with someone else pointing them out to you."

"You don't have a romantic bone in your body," Keritanima fussed.

"You should know by now that if you ask me a question, you're going to get an answer. If you're not ready for the answer, don't ask the question."

"I figured that out," Keritanima chuckled.

"You do not have to go through with it, Rallix," Allia told him. "Keritanima would not force you to marry her."

"Yes she would," Tarrin disagreed.

"Tarrin!" Keritanima snapped. "Don't listen to him, Rallix," she said quickly. "Tarrin loves to dwell on my faults."

"Actually, Lady Allia, I have to admit that I'm not entirely against the idea," he said quietly. "I am rather fond of her Majesty, and I can't argue the merits of the arguments she made to go through with the marriage. I must admit, I'm rather surprised that she seems to like me so much. And, well, this may seem a bit offensive to you, my Lady--"

"You can't offend Allia, Rallix," Keritanima chuckled. "She's a Selani. They're alot more worldly than we are."

"Yes, well," he said, clearing his throat. "Actually, her Majesty's biggest club is an obscure law dealing with Royal chastity," he said, looking very uncomfortable. "Since we--ah, since we slept together, I'm now technically guilty of high treason. She didn't reveal that until after we--ah, after it was over."

"You mean that when she seduced you, she put a legal noose around your neck?" Tarrin asked.

Rallix nodded, his facial fur standing on end to have to talk about such things. "Her Majesty threatened to invoke that law, should I refuse her. The penalty for deflowering a Royal Lady is quite severe," he said, clearing his throat again.

"Kerri, you *blackmailed* him into marrying you?" Allia asked in surprise.

"Well, you're the one who always talks about equal measures of sugar and the strap. I laid out the sugar before I showed him the strap," she said sheepishly.

Tarrin stared at Keritanima, then he laughed loudly. Even Allia laughed, displaying the fact that she did indeed have a sense of humor. A Selani would find that situation to be very funny. "Sister, I knew you were cunning, but that is almost deplorable!" Allia told her, then she laughed again. "But it was an honorable trap, since you would not be forcing Rallix to do anything he is not already inclined to do."

"Excuse me?" Rallix asked in confusion.

"Selani adore romantic games," Tarrin told him absently. "Prospective mates will challenge each other the silliest things to demonstrate their strength or their intelligence or their courage. Keritanima played a game with you, a game of deception, a game you lost. Since she was baiting her trap with something you wanted, it means that a Selani wouldn't consider what Kerri did to be dishonorable. She's not forcing you to do anything you really don't want to do. It would be the same as a Selani male kidnapping his love interest. The female is given an opportunity to escape, though it may not seem apparent to her. If she doesn't escape, then she obviously wanted to go in the first place."

"Just so," Allia agreed. "You were inclined to marry her, or you would never have slept with her. As I understand Wikuni, anyway. Why is that humans and Wikuni put so much on the taking of a lover?"

"They're just backwards, sister," Tarrin replied. "At least the Arkisians and Arakites are more progressive."

"In other words, when I allowed her Majesty to seduce me, I sealed my own fate," Rallix mused.

"The bait she used was herself," Tarrin chuckled. "The one thing you couldn't resist. A clever trap."

"Thank you," Keritanima said shamelessly. "I worked quite a while to make it. Are you proud of me?"

"Quite," Allia agreed with a smile. "If you are half of what Kerri says you are, you will be a fine husband," she told Rallix. "The husband of a sister is my brother. It would honor me to speak of you thusly."

"The honor is mine, Lady Allia," Rallix said with a light smile. "Acceptance by a Selani is the highest honor one like myself could hope to achieve."

"At least he can sweet-talk," Tarrin chuckled.

"Hush," both Allia and Keritanima told him.

Tarrin, Allia, Keritanima, and Rallix spent the rest of the morning together in Keritanima's new apartments as Binter and Sisska stood quiet, vigilant guard over the room. They were huge, grand, and decorated in Keritanima's own style, a style of simplistic taste. There were only a few

works of art, two tapestries, and three sculptures, but all of them were beautiful and powerful pieces, invoking great emotion. Keritanima did appreciate finery, so her furniture was all obvious antique, made of a dark wood that was highly polished, and was graceful and elegant in design. The motif of her outer parlor was blue, with the upholstery of the chairs and couch a deep yet soft-seeming blue, with a tapestry depicting the night sky over Wikuna hanging from the wall. They sat in that parlor on those comfortable chairs and did nothing but talk, giving Tarrin and Allia a chance to come to know Rallix's mind. They talked of their journey and their mission, of what had happened in Suld, and even listened as Rallix voiced his reservations and opinions about the new governmental system that Keritanima was trying to institute. Then Keritanima took her turn defending her system, explaining to Rallix how it was supposed to work in detail.

"There, that is the problem," Rallix said as he listened to her explain the concept of Parliament as a governing body. "This is why the common man hasn't become so supportive, your Majesty."

"We're in private, Rallix," she chided. "You can call me by my name here."

"I'm sorry, Kerita--uh, Kerri," he said. "The system as *you* describe it does make sense, and I can see the potential of it. But the common man, someone without my education, he's not going to understand the system by the documents you've distributed to the Mayor and the papers. You need to explain things, not send out a sheaf of papers with new rules. If you explain things in simple terms, as you did for me, you'll gain a great deal more support from the common man."

"Kerri sometimes believes that all can understand what she understands," Allia said mildly. "She cannot conceive of someone not being able to understand what is very simple to her."

"I've noticed that about her," Rallix agreed, looking at her calmly. "Usually, she doesn't bother to explain. It's not going to work in this instance, Kerri. You're trying to change a fundamental cornerstone of our society, so if you want people to embrace it, you need to *explain* it."

"I guess I should have at that," she admitted, tapping on her muzzle with a finger. "I did try to explain how it would improve the lot of the common man."

"Your statement and speech wasn't very clear on that, Kerri," he told her. "I read it from the *Examiner*."

"What is this examiner?" Allia asked.

"A newspaper," Rallix told her. "A printed journal of events," he explained when he saw Allia's blank look. "They pay people to go out and find information that people would find interesting, and then they print it on paper and sell it."

"It's a new idea that's just catching on," Keritanima told them. "Someone invented a machine that makes it very fast and easy to mass produce printed pages, and change those printed pages quickly. The *Examiner* was the first of these 'news-papers' to appear, about a year ago. I have to admit, they're making a killing. People actually pay to read the news."

"What you should do is print a detailed explanation of your system and distribute it the same way they do with newspapers," Rallix told her. "The nobility is already starting to realize that if they attack you and your ideas in the press, they can lie through their teeth and have people believe them as long as they do it first. People are starting to take what they read in the newspapers as inviolate truth. It won't be long before one of the nobles gets the idea of printing a pamphlet decrying the system and handing it out all over the kingdom."

"That's a good point. If I write this thing, how long would it take to get it printed?" she asked.

"I know the owner of the *Wikuna Herald*, a new newspaper. If I bring him the article you write and the gold to cover his expenses, he'll print it and hand it out. I could have it on the streets the day after you hand me what you want printed."

"Don't you love modern technology?" Keritanima laughed, looking at Tarrin and Allia. "I'm going to resort to using propaganda against myself. Ironic, isn't it?"

"You just lost me, Kerri," Tarrin said.

"I told you a while ago, what I'm doing is akin to overthrowing myself, Tarrin. Now I'm going to convince people that me overthrowing myself is actually a good idea. Using selective information to present a single view in favor of any other is called propaganda."

"I just do not understand Wikuni politics," Allia said with a shake of her head.

"That's a good thing," Keritanima grinned. "If you did, it would stain your honor." She clapped her hands together and rubbed them. "Well, if I'm going to do this before I leave, I'd better get started."

"That would be a good idea," Tarrin agreed.

"Seeing as how we're getting married later tonight, I'd like to get this out of the way," she added as she stood up. "Now, if the Ministry of Science could invent something that makes writing faster and easier," she grunted. "Binter, could you go find Miranda for me?"

"At once, your Majesty," Binter said with a bow, marching from the room.

"Well, you're going to be busy, so we'll leave you to it," Tarrin told her.

"What are you going to be doing for the rest of the day?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied.

"I wanted to go down into the city and see their wonders," Allia told him. "Would you go with me, brother?"

"That's a good idea," Tarrin agreed. "I'd like to go see Wikuna for myself."

"I'll send a guide--"

"No guides," Allia said. "No guards, no fanfare. I wish to walk the streets as any other."

"You're a Selani, sister. You're not going to just walk around unnoticed," Keritanima chuckled.

"Perhaps, but I would prefer to go on our own rather than be escorted."

"Well, I seriously doubt that there's a single living thing in Wikuna that could threaten either of you, so you have my blessing," she grinned. "Just be back before sunset, alright? You don't want to miss our wedding, do you?"

Rallix fidgeted a bit. Sleeping with Keritanima was one thing, but now he had to pay for it, and the cost still hadn't settled with him quite yet.

"Just call to us when you want us to return," Allia said, touching her amulet meaningfully.

The mention of Sorcery reminded him that he was going to take Keritanima into the Weave. He sat back down, and Keritanima looked at him strangely as he used Sorcery to spin out two new strands, anchoring them to the same strand he'd used to anchor the new strand in his room. "I forgot," he grunted. "This is going to be our one and only chance to do this, Kerri. We'll be on the move again tomorrow."

"Oh, right!" she said brightly. "Writing that article can wait!" She rushed over to where he had put the strands, on the floor between her chair and his, grabbing a pillow off the nearby couch, dropping it on the floor, then sitting on it.

"What are you doing, Kerri?" Rallix asked.

"Kerri is Tarrin's student in magic," Allia answered for her. "He is going to train her in an aspect of Sorcery that can only be done when they are stationary. While we are waiting, would you like to play a game of stones?" Allia offered.

"What kind of Sorcery?" he asked curiously.

"A very old kind," Tarrin said. "And no, you can't do it."

"I'm rather sure I couldn't," he said mildly.

"I know your type, Rallix. Trust me, you can't do it, and you can't make a spell that copies it either."

"*Make* a spell?" Keritanima asked quickly.

"How did you know that I once dabbled in Wizardry?" Rallix asked in surprise.

"It leaves a mark on you," Tarrin told him. "I sensed it in you the moment I met you."

"You learned Wizardry?" Keritanima asked in surprise. "Rallix, that's forbidden by law!"

"I was in Sennadar at the time, your Majesty," Rallix said with a smile. "The law doesn't apply there. So long as I don't actively practice magic on Wikuni soil, it's perfectly legal."

"When were you in Sennadar long enough to learn magic?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"When I got out of primary school, I signed on with House Plantan as a sailor," he told her. "They saw I wasn't much of a sailor, but I had a nose for business, so when we reached our destination, Dala Zah in Yar Arak, they put me on at their trade consulate so I could learn about the merchant business. I learned magic from one of the local Wizards. He thought it a grandly funny thing that a Wikuni was willing to learn magic, but back then, I often didn't consider the consequences before jumping head first into things."

"That sounds alot like someone we know," Tarrin told Allia with a smile.

"Yes, it does, does it not?" she agreed.

"I spent two years there. Long enough to learn some very simple spells, little more than cantrips, but it was enough to satisfy my curiosity. I reached the end of my contract with Plantan and didn't extend, so I was returned to Wikuna. I still have my spellbook," he said with a distant smile.

"Sometimes, when I feel nostalgic, I take it out and read it."

"You were born on the wrong continent, Rallix," Tarrin said.

"Sometimes I have to agree with you," Rallix sighed. "I was always fascinated by magic. It's a pity the priesthoods of Wikuna managed to get the laws against other forms of magic passed."

"I've already started undoing those laws, Rallix," Keritanima said, patting the floor beside her impatiently. "Hurry up, Tarrin! I already have a long day ahead of me, and my night will probably be even longer," she said

with a look at Rallix. The badger cleared his throat and pulled at the neck of his tunic.

"Alright," Tarrin said, sitting down beside her. "This isn't that hard. All you have to do is relax and do what you did the first time, Kerri."

"I don't remember much about that," she warned him.

"You do, you just don't realize it," he added. "First you do what you always do when working with Sorcery. Calm down, clear your mind, and concentrate on what you're doing. When you do that, you'll feel the Weave above you. You just rise up into it, that's all. That's how I imagine it, myself."

"That's it?"

"More or less. The currents of the Weave will pick you up as soon as you join with it, and carry you to the Heart. So don't get panicky when you feel yourself being carried away."

"Do you always start there?"

"At first, yes," he answered. "When you have more experience, you can hold your position and go wherever you want. But I haven't done very much of that."

"Why not?"

"Well, mainly because you have to be stationary when you do this," he told her. "We've been on a ship the last month, and there was too much going on at the Tower for me to explore the Weave very much."

"Those are good reasons," Keritanima chuckled.

"Pardon my curiosity, but exactly what are you going to do?" Rallix asked.

"They are going to join with the Weave," Allia answered him. "Certain Sorcerers have the ability to join their minds to it, and it gives them a period of expanded consciousness."

"Ah. Interesting," Rallix hummed.

"It's more like an alternate consciousness," Tarrin clarified. "While we're joined, we'll be completely unresponsive. We won't hear or see or

smell, but we can feel. If there's an emergency and you need us to return, just pull our hair. We'll feel the pain and return."

Tarrin waited for Keritanima in the Heart, and it only took her about ten minutes to arrive. He allowed her a little time to marvel over the place, then he began her education. He explained things as best he could, given his limited knowledge, then taught her the same spell he'd taught Jenna, using a Sorcerer's star to speak directly to his or her mind. Tarrin used that spell to talk to Dolanna, to tell her to find a strand and attempt to join the Weave. She arrived not long after that, and then Tarrin repeated his lesson for Dolanna, who already seemed to have a much firmer grip on the information that Keritanima did. Tarrin described the Heart and the Goddess, then explained how the strands worked when travelling through them from the inside. He stressed that Weave geography didn't correspond to the geography of the real world, and it usually required help from another Sorcerer or some kind of landmark or beacon to allow a Sorcerer to find something in the real world through the Weave. He taught them spells for looking into the real world from the Weave, a form of completely undetectable spying, and taught them how he projected into the real world through the Weave, using an Illusion and then pushing his consciousness into the matrix of the weave to allow him to use it like a borrowed body.

"It's not a real body, though," he warned them. "When you move your arm, you're not *really* moving your arm, you're changing the weave to alter the image. It takes a little practice, but once you get the hang of it, it does feel like you're moving your arm."

"Understandable," Dolanna agreed. "I remember when I saw you doing it that you did not walk. The projection simply changed positions, sliding along the floor."

"I remember that," Keritanima agreed.

"You can weave spells through a projection, but it's *very* hard," he told them. "You're literally weaving over a distance between your physical body and the projection. The further it is, the harder it is."

"You explained that already," Keritanima said. "I want to try this."

"So do I," Dolanna agreed. Then she looked at him. "Tarrin, are you shorter?"

"The image here is an image of self generated by my subconscious," he explained. "In the Heart, I don't appear as I really am, I appear the way my mind perceives me to be. I guess my mind hasn't reconciled the fact that I'm so tall yet. I'm not the only one that appears differently. Jenna appears as an adult, and Jula appears as she looked when she was human."

"Ah. Interesting," Dolanna mused. "Do I look the same?"

"Both of you look exactly as you do in reality," he told them.

"Then I guess we don't have any identity issues," Keritanima laughed.

"Alright then, let's go visit Jasana," he said, giving Keritanima a rather cool look. "I want to see my daughter." He turned and looked at all the many stars, and it only took him a moment to find Jasana's star. It was one of the brightest ones, a visible marker of her tremendous power. He wove the spell to talk to her and reached out and put his paw on her star, feeling its power and vibrance pulsing into his paw. "Jasana," he called.

There was a pause. "Papa?" her voice came through the star. "I can hear you talking inside my head!"

"I'm using a spell to talk to you, cub," he said gently. "Are you alone?"

"No, papa," she replied. "Mama and gramma are here, and so is Aunt Jenna and Jula."

"That's fine. Where are you?"

"We're in our rooms," she answered.

"Tell them we're coming to see them," he told her. "We'll be there in just a minute, alright?"

"Alright, papa," she answered excitedly.

Tarrin felt back between her star and her physical body, until he knew which way to go to reach them through the Weave. He paused and then explained what he did to Keritanima and Dolanna, teaching them how to use the star of a Sorcerer to find his or her physical body, then he taught them the specifics of weaving the projection they would occupy, and exactly how to go about animating it. Then he led them away from the Heart, rising up and entering a Conduit, following that into a smaller strand, then another, then yet another, hurtling through the Weave against the flow

of the magical currents. He entered a small feeder strand and moved along it slowly until the sense of Jasana was right before him. He paused and waited for the other two to join him, and when they did so, they were both looking rather amazed. "It's incredible!" she said, looking around. "We're *inside* the strand. In the magic!"

"Can't you feel it flowing around you?" Tarrin asked, motioning with a paw at the river of soft radiance in which they were submerged, which did reduce visibility, making anything more than twenty spans away hazy and indistinct, like looking into a fog. The boundary of the strand was clearly distinguishable as a black wall at the edge of the radiance, a physical boundary that would hinder any travel through it. Tarrin had never really paused to look around at the interior of a strand before, understanding its nature without having to look at it with his spectral eyes. He could sense much more than he could see anyway, feeling the flow of the power, the gentle eddies and currents even within the flow, and the occasional pulses and flickers of alien magic that travelled through the Weave.

"It's beautiful," Dolanna said in Sharadi, looking around. "We went so fast, I didn't get the chance to appreciate it before."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Tarrin agreed. "Alright, first you look out and get an idea of where you're going, then you weave the Illusion and then enter its weaving just like a strand. That will allow you to join with the spell. Ready?"

"Ready," they both said.

Tarrin wove the Illusion of himself as he truly appeared, and then pushed himself into the Illusion. He opened his spectral eyes to see that they were all in the apartments he had in the Tower, sitting or standing in the parlor with its three couches surrounding the tea table, all set before the fireplace. Jesmind and Jasana were sitting on one couch, Triana standing behind it, and Jenna and Jula sitting on one of the others. He focused on his mate and daughter and smiled. Jasana squealed in delight and tried to jump up to hug him, but Jesmind put her paws around her daughter quickly. "It's not *really* your father, cub," she warned. "If you try to hug him, you'll pass right through. It's just an Illusion."

"Aww," Jasana said with a pout.

"I'm sorry, cub, but this is the best I can do," he smiled at her, feeling his powerful love for the little girl flow through him at the sight of her. Seeing Jesmind had as strong an effect, reminding him again how much he loved his fiery, tempermental mate. "Believe me, I'd give a great deal to be able to touch you right now," he said longingly, looking into her eyes.

"I feel the same way," she answered from her heart, gazing into his eyes.

Tarrin sensed the building of other spells, and then images of Dolanna and Keritanima appeared on either side of him. They were motionless, still, until he felt their minds join to the weaves, and then the Illusions became animate. Their eyes opened, and they looked around the room in wonder.

"Amazing!" Dolanna breathed, turning to look around. They both, it seemed, caught onto the trick of simulating motion immediately. In reality, it was very much like moving a physical body.

"You're about six hours late," Jenna said critically. "It's midafternoon here."

"It's still morning here," he told her. "I forgot about the time difference. We should have made it clear whose morning we'd use to meet," he told her.

Jenna chuckled. "I guess so," she agreed.

"You're looking well, father," Jula said with a gentle smile. "How are things going there?"

"Rather well," he replied. "We'll be leaving for Vendaka tomorrow, so this will be the only chance I have to do this. I can't project like this when the ship is moving."

"Why not?" Jesmind asked.

"Because we have to be in physical contact with a strand," Jenna answered her. "If we're moving, then we'll move out of contact with the strand, and I don't know what would happen to us if that happened."

"Exactly," Tarrin agreed. "Mother," he greeted Triana. "You're looking well."

"Not for Jesmind's trying to make me go bald," she said sourly. "Sometimes I think I should have killed her when she was younger. I'd have saved myself alot of headache."

Tarrin chuckled. "I'm rather glad you didn't, mother," he told her. "She may be a handful, but she's *my* handful."

"Then you come deal with her," Triana said as Jesmind gave him a glorious smile.

"I'd love to, but as you know, things can't be that way at the moment," he sighed.

"How are the lessons going?" Jenna asked Dolanna.

"I was there to observe as Tarrin trained Keritanima, so there is little he has had to repeat for me," she answered. "This is our first excursion into the Weave, and it will be our last for some time."

"Travelling doesn't make for good teaching," Julia said sagely.

"Actually, since we are on a ship, we have plenty of time for teaching," Dolanna told her. "But since the ship moves, it restricts what we can learn." Dolanna wiped her brow. "Tarrin, you were right. This *is* demanding."

"I'm starting to feel it myself," Keritanima agreed.

"It takes practice," he told them. "Why don't the two of you go on back? You need to rest. Trust me, as soon as you go back to your bodies, you'll feel twice as tired as you do now."

"What motivation," Keritanima grunted.

"He's right, Kerri," Julia said, then seemed to blush when she realized she'd used the contraction that only Keritanima's friends used. "I almost collapsed when you saw me do it back when Dolanna crossed over. It's a good thing I was already in bed."

"Uh, Tarrin, you didn't teach us how to stop this."

"Just pull out of the Illusion and go back into the Weave," Jenna told them. "It's as simple as that. Rejoin the Weave, and when you're there, just will to return to your body. And you'll go back, almost immediately."

"Oh. I think I can do that," Keritanima grinned. "See you all later." And then her Illusion dissipated. Tarrin felt her consciousness hurtle back into the distance, as she returned to her body.

"It was good to see you again," Dolanna said with a smile, then her Illusion too wavered and vanished, and her mind rejoined her body in Wikuna.

Tarrin remained behind, however. He caused his projection to kneel before his mate and daughter, looking at them with yearning eyes. If only he could touch them! But as he was, they were insubstantial to him as he was to them. Jasana put her paw out as if to touch him, then she flinched when her paw passed through his head, disappearing into the Illusion. "That's scary, papa," she complained.

"I warned you, cub," Jesmind said softly, gazing into his eyes. "When are you coming home to me, beloved?" she asked.

"I don't know yet, my mate," he answered, resisting the urge to reach a paw out to her. "Is Jasana behaving herself now?" Tarrin talked to both Jesmind and Jasana every night, but he was leery to bring up such things when both of them could hear, so he hadn't had a chance to ask about that quite yet.

"Jenna's cracked down on her," Jesmind said with a wan smile. "If she misbehaves, she gets no lessons."

"It's not fair," Jasana complained. "I'm supposed to practice, aren't I?"

"Not without supervision, cub," Jenna told her sharply.

"How is it with you and Kimmie?" Triana asked directly.

Was she *trying* to start a fight? Tarrin gave her a sharp look, then blew out his breath and answered. "Well enough," he answered.

"Well, if you had to be with another female, I'm just glad it was Kimmie," Jesmind said, and that surprised Tarrin. He looked at her, and saw that she was being sincere. "At least she understands you."

"Jesmind's stopped looking at the situation with her hormones and saw it with her eyes," Triana told Tarrin calmly.

"Well, then I guess I can tell you that I told her she can move in with me," he said cautiously.

"That's the way it should be, Tarrin," Jesmind said calmly.

"You're awfully calm about it now, my mate," he said.

"I saw your eyes, Tarrin," she told him simply, but with powerful emotion. "When you looked at me, I saw that when you come back, you'll come back to *me*. I don't have any cause to be jealous of Kimmie anymore, beloved. Because I know that given the choice between her and me, you'll choose me."

"You knew that all along."

"Knowing with the mind isn't the same as knowing with the heart, cub," Triana said sagely. "Even I get a bit irrational right after Thean leaves me, but I get over it."

"Is he still here?" he asked.

Triana nodded. "We'll be together for at least a year," she answered. "It's been a few years since the last time, so we'll be able to stay together for quite a while."

"That's good to hear, mother," Tarrin told her, then he felt a twinge. "I'd better get back. I promised Allia I'd go with her today, and I don't want to wear myself out and back out of a promise."

"Then you'd better go. But please, talk to me a little earlier than usual, alright?" Jesmind asked. "I'm getting tired of staying up into the middle of the night to talk to you, and Jasana gets surly in the morning because she's staying up so late."

"It's the time difference," he chuckled. "I'll try to talk to you a little earlier, alright?"

"Thank you," she said with a grateful smile.

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because you try not to mess with a good thing, beloved," Jesmind answered.

"You're going, papa?" Jasana asked.

"Afraid so, cub," he told her with a solemn nod. "I'll talk to you tonight, though, alright?"

"It's not the same."

"I know, but we have to take what we can get. You be good, and we'll talk tonight, alright?"

"Alright, papa."

He stood and looked to Jenna and Jula. "You two keep it up. You know where to find me if you want to talk."

"Can I talk to you later tonight, father?" Jula asked.

"You can talk to me now."

"I'd, uh, I'd rather speak to you alone, if that's alright with you," she said hedgingly, glancing at the others.

"That's fine with me, Jula," he replied.

"Can I use the Weave?"

"You can talk to me any way you want," he assured her. "I'm sure Jenna's taught you everything you need to know to join the Weave without her there to hold your paw."

"That's right," Jenna assured him.

"Then you come and talk to me in a few hours, alright?" he told her. "I should be back from my trip with Allia by then."

"Alright, father," Jula said with a nod and a relieved look.

"I'll see all of you later," Tarrin said, looking at Triana. "Can I talk to you privately later tonight, mother?" he asked.

"Any time, cub," she nodded. "I'll look in on you until you're not busy."

"Fair enough," he replied. He wasn't sure how she was going to do that, but then again, Triana knew so much Druidic magic she surely had some kind of way to do it.

"All this secrecy," Jenna laughed. "I'm tempted to ask if I can talk to you privately, Tarrin."

"I have my reasons, Jenna," he said calmly. "I'll talk to all of you later."

With that and one last look at his daughter and mate, Tarrin withdrew from the Illusion and returned to his own body. He opened his eyes to see Keritanima pacing back and forth, a hand on her stomach, a little out of

breath. Sisska mirrored her movements, ready to catch her if needs be, but she looked like she was going to be alright. Tarrin regained his feet gracefully, pondering what Jula might want to need to talk to him alone, and his own impending conversation with Triana. Tarrin's motivation to talk to her alone was important, because he wanted to hear from her how his mate and daughter were *really* doing. Triana would give it to him straight. He also wanted to catch up on how Jula's education in the things she needed to know to pass the test of *Fae-da'Nar* was going. Triana was continuing her education, and he knew that Jula hadn't yet been tested for acceptance. It was starting to run into some time, so he was worried about how things were going in that department. That was something he didn't want to discuss in front of Jula, or even Jesmind. It wasn't any of Jesmind's business, and it may upset or rattle Jula to hear the truth of her progress from Triana, in case Triana had something bad to say. Tarrin had come to learn that Jula was a very anxious woman, nervous, a little high-strung, and not a little neurotic. If she heard something bad from Triana, she would obsess over it, the way she'd obsessed over her fear that the Goddess had rejected her. Given everything that she had to learn from Triana and Jenna, it was best that she be kept as calm as possible.

"I never dreamed that could be so exhausting!" Keritanima told him breathlessly, leaning against the back of a chair. "My respect for your power just went up several notches, *deshida*."

"You just wove and maintained a spell over a thousand leagues, sister," Tarrin told her mildly. "Did you think it was going to be easy?"

She looked at him, then laughed. "I guess not," she admitted. "Will it always be that tiring?"

"It doesn't get easy, but it will get less difficult," he answered. "You're still maturing into your full power as a Weavespinner. When you top out, it should be a little easier. But will always be tiring, even for me and Jenna. We can just do it a little longer than you."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," she grinned.

"We'll see," Tarrin said mildly, turning to look at Allia. "Are you ready to go?"

"I am ready," she said with a smile.

Refusing offers of guides, guards, even servants to discreetly follow behind them, Tarrin and Allia left the Royal Palace and wandered the streets of Wikuna. To say that they stood out was an understatement, for there were only a scant handful of non-Wikuni on the entire continent. A being like a Selani attracted a great deal of attention as she wandered aimlessly with Tarrin, who looked more like a deformed Wikuni to them than anything else, wandered streets and talked about absolutely nothing of importance. They rekindled the powerful bonds that held them together, a selfless, giving love that they shared, a loving friendship so deep that it defied rational explanation. Every once in a while, they just needed time to themselves, to renew those ties, and the walking of the streets of Wikuna was a perfect opportunity.

Of course, there was much to do. They visited the docks and watched the cranes loading and unloading ships, then they walked up a grand avenue that had a strip of green grass and planted trees splitting it in half. They found workers paving the road with that liquid stone that Keritanima described, and paused to watch them pour it out of wheelbarrels caked with the stuff, pouring it into molds bounded by wooden boards, then smooth it flat with long-handled tools. Tarrin managed to get close enough to put his finger into the residue in the wheelbarrel, and he used that little sample to use Sorcery on it to discern its ingredients. Powdered limestone, water, sand, fine gravel, a little lye, and some chalk. That was it. Strange to believe that this goopy liquid would dry out and harden into stone, and from the looks of some of the other paved areas, with the heavy wagons crossing them, a very hard stone.

After that, they sat at a sidewalk cafe and ate things that neither of them could identify, for Tarrin could read the menu, but the food listed were things he'd never heard of before. Then they walked along the central part of the city, and found a small Wikuni boy hawking some of those "news-papers" of which Keritanima and Rallix had spoken. On an impulse, Tarrin bought one, and then he and Allia sat on a bench in front of a large fountain that sprayed water from eight different spouts up at one another, where they collided in the air and cascaded back down into the center. Tarrin thought that it would be interesting to see what the Wikuni felt was important, and that would be as easy as reading the information in the newspaper. They had to sell the papers, and that meant that there had to be something on it

interesting enough to a Wikuni for them to pay for them. Allia looked at the blocky script printed on the page, strange printing that looked very sterile. Tarrin still had a little trouble reading Wikuni, because the written language had a great many sharp letters that all looked the same, where only an apostrophe, dot, or a very slight difference in the shape of the letter distinguished from all the others that had the same shape.

"What does it say?" Allia asked in Selani. Whenever they were alone or wanted to speak privately, they spoke in Selani.

"Give me a minute, I'm trying to translate a language I'm not good at reading through three languages here," he answered shortly.

"Three? Why three?"

"How would you translate something you read in Sha'Kar into Sulasian?" he asked.

"I'd--oh," she said, her brows furrowing slightly. "I see. You translate it into your native tongue first, then translate again."

"I'll make a linguist of you yet," he told her with a smile, perusing the paper. "A lot of it deals with trading," he told her. "How much something costs for the day. Gold, silver, copper, and things like honey, tea, sugar--whatever sugar is--livestock, wool, cotton, and a bunch of others. Half of this thing is some kind of trader's guide."

"What about the other half?"

"I'm getting there. Alright, this part here is all gossip," he said, pointing at a column. "About the nobles. This part here talks about some duchess getting drunk at a party and saying very nasty things about some countess. It's a bunch of drivel." He turned the paper over. "Ah, well, there's my mistake," he chuckled.

"What?"

"I was reading the second page first," he admitted. "This is the front page."

"What does it say?"

"Give me a minute," he said, scanning the page. "Now this is more like news. The story at the top, with the big headline, is about how the city

watch found three bodies in an alley yesterday morning. The headline reads 'Boscany Strangler Strikes Again.' I guess this is a recurring problem," he mused. "Over here is a story about the war in Suld," he said. "It's--wait, it's not very nice. It's ripping up Keritanima for sending over Wikuni troops. But then again, the article is complaining about the cost more than the lives that were lost. That's compassionate," he snorted. "The person who wrote it calls it, let's see, 'a foolish little war in a foolish little kingdom beneath our notice. That Queen Keritanima-Chan Eram would dedicate resources and manpower to fight for such colloquial bumpkins degrades the honor of the kingdom and the reserves of our own treasury.'" He frowned. "Colloquial. It seems that all Wikuni are as arrogant as Kerri is."

"Given the wonders we've seen here, they do have some small reason to feel that way, brother," Allia said sagely. "They have advanced beyond your people, so they naturally feel themselves superior."

"Every musket in Wikuna would be useless against a single Sorcerer that knows how to weave a Ward that would stop their musket balls," he scoffed. "They advanced with technology, we advanced with magic. I'd say that that evens us out." He read the bottom of the page. "Here's something about the new system. It says that construction on the building that's going to house that Parliament thing was delayed again because of sabotage. Do you really understand Kerri's system, Allia?" he asked honestly.

"I can comprehend it, but I feel it to be silly and redundant," she answered.

"I just don't understand it. I guess it's the Cat in me. I can't fathom any kind of system that seems so restrictive."

"It's her kingdom. If she wants to run it into the ground, that's her decision. It's not our place to interfere."

"Eh, who knows, maybe it will actually work for them," Tarrin shrugged. "Wikuni are weird to begin with. A weird system may be just what they need."

"An interesting viewpoint," Allia said with a laugh.

After finishing with the printed newspaper, they set out again. They walked along both cobblestone and new concrete streets, looking at the mixture of old and new architectures that gave the city its unique

appearance. From old, fortress-looking buildings with fences, arrow slits instead of windows, and battlements to the newer plaster-faced buildings, with their slate roofs and their dark wooden beams interrupting the continuity of white on their outside. All Wikuni seemed to like fences or walls, fencing in a little extra land with their homes to serve as gardens or lawns. Those areas seemed to be generally in the back of the houses, with the front of the house facing the street and the back, with the fence or wall, facing the street on the other side. Some wider blocks had houses facing the streets on both sides, with the lawn or garden sandwiched between them. Space seemed to be at a priority in Wikuna, with the smaller houses having very little, and in some cases absolutely none, of the fenced in area with the house.

They wandered into one of the poorer sections of the city, and it was here where the differences between rich and poor in Wikuni society were so prevalent. The buildings were all run down and in poor repair, and the people who lived in them were all very thin, wearing dirty, torn clothes, and looked very tired and despondent. The worst were the children, unnaturally thin children wearing clothes that usually didn't fit them, playing with whatever was available, able even in their misery to find some escape from the harshness of their existence with a child's game or a wandering imagination. Tarrin had never heard of poverty in Wikuna, had never heard anyone talk about it. Yet here it was, glaring at them with dull eyes, the dark underside of the shining veneer that the Wikuni wanted everyone to believe was their greatness.

"So now we know that the Wikuni aren't any better than anyone else," Tarrin growled as they moved out of the poor neighborhood and into an area with slightly better buildings. "It reminds me of what we saw in Dala Yar Arak. It was so infuriating to see the humans so poor, so hungry. I couldn't believe that the other humans would just leave them like that, that they didn't care. Now we see that the Wikuni are the same way. They're much more human than your people, sister."

"My people shun contact with the humans," she told him. "I see now that that's a good policy to keep. It seems that contact with other races has affected my distant cousins."

They walked on until midafternoon, and then they both decided to return to the Palace. Tarrin returned to his apartments to find that Kimmie had taken over the study room, her spellbooks sitting on the desk and any number of strange vials, bottles, beakers, and vials holding all sorts of weird things standing on the cabinet and on a shelf that she had brought in. Kimmie knew they were leaving in the morning...why bring everything out like that? Kimmie and Sapphire were nowhere to be found; odds were, Sapphire was with Kimmie, and Kimmie was probably with Phandebrass.

As he returned to the inner parlor, there was a strange twinge in the air. Tarrin sensed it and realized that it was Druidic magic, the beginnings of a spell. It was Triana. He sat down on the couch and waited for her spell to find him, and when it did, that familiar swirling circle of energy appeared before him, then sharpened into a visible image of her. She was standing in Jesmind's parlor.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked curiously.

She gave him a slight smile, which for her was a very big display of emotion. "I once held your bond, cub," she told him. "Since I'm a Druid, that means that I can still access it without actively holding it. I keep track of all my children that way."

Tarrin looked at her, then laughed. "You don't cut any of us off your apron strings, do you?"

"The kind of children I have?" she scoffed. "I have to watch them every minute, or they get themselves in trouble. Jesmind is bad enough, but you don't know Nikki or Shayle or Laren. They're all just as bad."

"And now you have me. It must be enough to give you gray hair."

Triana looked at him, then laughed. "Some things are worth the trouble, cub," she said with a wolfish smile. "What did you want to talk about?"

Tarrin and Triana talked for quite a while about Julia. Where she was, what she needed, and when she'd be ready. Tarrin was pleased to learn that Julia was coming along very well, that Triana was beginning to teach her the laws and customs necessary for acceptance. She'd put it off because of Julia's instability, working to solidify her sanity before working with her on fitting in in Woodkin society. Triana said in no uncertain terms that Julia was completely stable now, that she had found her balance and was no longer in

any danger of going mad. That pleased Tarrin, though he had already suspected it given his interaction with her when he was in Suld. He could tell that she had achieved some stability in her struggle against her instincts.

After that, they shifted to his family. Tarrin heard all about what Jesmind was up to through her mother's eyes, about how she was dealing with him being gone and granting his attentions to Kimmie. That was important to Tarrin, because he wanted to make sure that her brave talk in front of him wasn't just a front. But Triana assured him that Jesmind really had come to accept the situation--"coming back to her proper Were senses," Triana had called it--and was alright with what was going on. Jesmind's love for him was very strong, and Triana told him that such powerful emotion clouded the Were-cat outlook about such things. "I go through the same thing every time Thean leaves," she admitted. "I go through a period of intense jealousy and anger, but it fades as I come back to my senses. Thean relates it to the human female's period of irrationality when she's in heat. He calls it my period." She smirked slightly. "Then again, he's not around to experience it, so he can make fun of it all he wants. I usually retreat from everyone for a while after we split up, so I don't kill someone I'd regret killing later."

It was very strange to hear Triana admit to weakness. She was the oldest of them, and she was almost mythical in his mind as the pinnacle of Were, a solid foundation to which he attached his life. But in its own way, it was more than understandable that she would admit to weakness. She was the one that had told him time and again that certain aspects of Were mentality affected them all, from the very youngest to the very oldest. That Triana herself suffered some of those same things made her feel much more mortal, and allowed him to relate to her as a true kindred spirit.

"Does Thean feel the same way?" Tarrin asked.

She shook her head. "Males and females have different instincts, cub," she reminded him. "He doesn't like splitting with me, but he doesn't suffer irrational episodes. Males have it easy," she complained. "Males don't have an instinctual impulse to hold onto a mate. Females do. My episodes and Jesmind's, they're instinctual, not emotional."

"I didn't know that."

"Emotion does make them worse," she told him. "But that's the base of them. It has to do with the hybrid instincts of human and cat. Both human and cat females strive to find a mate. The human female tries to hold onto him, where the cat loses interest in him after he impregnates her. In that situation, we're governed much more by our human instincts than our cat ones. Remember, in a given situation, if one set of instincts reacts but one does not, we'll still be affected by the instincts that react. It's only when the instincts directly oppose one another that they cancel out."

"I figured you'd have an answer," he chuckled. "How is Jasana handling things? She's always herself when I talk to her, but you never know with her."

"She's doing fine," she replied. "She's clinging to the promise you made to come back, so as far as she's concerned, you'll be back any day now. She asks if you've come back every morning when she wakes up. It's really starting to irritate Jesmind." She glanced to her right. "How is Kimmie?"

"She's alright. Busy learning about magic from Phandebrass."

"That's not what I mean," she said sharply.

"What do you mean then?"

"Is she feeling alright? Has she been exhausting herself with her magical training? That can't be good for her right now."

"That's a strange question, mother," he said calmly.

She glanced at him. "You don't know, do you?" she asked. "Then again, she probably doesn't know either."

"Know what?"

She looked right at him. "Tarrin, Kimmie is pregnant."

She couldn't have produced a more profound reaction if she'd hit him in the back of the head with a sledgehammer. He gaped at Triana for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "Preg--how did you--there's--I don't--mother!" he finally said indignantly.

She laughed. "You can't hide anything from me, cub," she told him with amused eyes. "She's been pregant for a few days now."

"How do you *know* these things?" he demanded.

"I took Kimmie's bond just before she left, then released it and took Jula's bond from her again," she said simply. "I don't let anyone close to my family go around where I can't keep an eye on them."

He was stunned, completely flabbergasted. "Why shouldn't she exhaust herself?" he asked. "She's a Were-cat, mother! She won't even start slowing down until she's ready to deliver!"

"She's a Were-cat," she affirmed. "She's also a *turned* Were-cat, and a turned Were-cat has never carried a child before. The sire of the cub is a *turned* male, and though your other two cubs came out alright, I have no idea how it's going to work with a turned female. She's also a magician, and since we're magical beings, there's no telling how her magical training is going to affect the child. That baby won't have any kind of resistance to the magical forces that infuse Kimmie when she's working her magic. I honestly have no idea how it's going to affect her, or the baby, and since this is uncharted territory, I have no idea if her status as a turned Were-cat is going to cause any unforeseen complications. So I want you to tell her to go easier for a while, cub. She can still learn magic, but she can't exhaust herself, and she can't let anyone use magical spells on her unless *you* do it, because Sorcery won't affect the baby. Let's not take any chances."

"Why won't Sorcery affect the baby?" he asked curiously.

"Because Sorcery affects what the Sorcerer wants it to affect," she told him. "You *know* she's pregnant. Any spell you use on her, you'll tailor to work around that little complication. Do you understand me?"

He mulled it over, then nodded. "I understand, mother. I can do that."

"Good. Congratulations, cub. You gave Jesmind a cub, Mist a cub, and now Kimmie a cub. Since they're your three chosen females, it's only fitting that they all share a bond with you through the children you gave them."

Tarrin stared at his paws, not sure what he should feel. Another child! Three children! Three! First Jasana, then Eron, and now Kimmie was going to give him another cub. He felt blessed, embarrassed--that coming from his human side--and strangely proud all at the same time. A sudden wave of intense protectiveness rose up in him as well, the need to defend mate and child from harm establishing itself in his mind. He was ecstatic that Kimmie

was pregnant, but the enormity of what they were doing hit him. They were sailing off into the unknown, into danger, and Kimmie had to go with him! Not really, but Kimmie would refuse to be left behind--he knew her too well--and Tarrin really didn't want to let her out of his sight.

Tarrin looked up at his bond-mother and blew out his breath. "This is going to cause some problems, but all in all, it's good news, mother," he told her.

"A new life is always good news," Triana said calmly. "I'm glad you asked to talk to me, because I was going to contact you anyway."

"I guess so," he chuckled humorlessly, absorbing it all. Kimmie, pregnant! "Does Jesmind know?"

"Not yet," she answered. "I'll tell her, if you want me to."

"I--it's only fair," he said. "Go ahead."

"I'd better get going, cub," she told him. "There are things I need to do, and this spell is starting to weigh on me."

"Alright," he said. "Thanks, mother."

"Any time, cub. I love you."

"I love you too."

And then the image of her vanished as the spell was cancelled. Tarrin leaned back on the couch and mulled it over. Kimmie was pregnant. She was a Were-cat, meaning that it wouldn't even slow her down until the cub was almost ready to be delivered. Were-cat females only carried for six months, not the nine normal for human females, and they were born with much more strength and mobility than a human infant. A Were-cat infant could crawl within days of being born. Another sign of the accelerated beginning a Were-cat cub received over its human counterpart. She wouldn't start showing it for about two months, and then her waist would slowly begin to expand. But they were heading off into danger, and Tarrin was very wary of bringing Kimmie with him. Then again, he was wary of leaving her behind. He'd not been there for the births of his other two cubs, and a part of him wanted to be a part of this child's life from its birth. Kimmie was a turned female, and that meant that she'd probably be much

more amenable to the idea of allowing him to remain with her until she gave birth to the cub.

Triana's warning did worry him a little. Kimmie *was* a turned female, and that was uncharted territory. Tarrin was a turned male, and his two cubs had turned out alright. He could only hope that a turned female would produce a healthy cub. But this was a turned female giving birth to a cub sired by a turned male. It was double jeopardy.

Kimmie seemed to know when to make an entrance. She came into the apartments and called out his name as Sapphire flew into the room and landed on his lap, rubbing her head against his paw fondly. Tarrin looked at her as she came into the parlor and she stopped dead at the strange look he gave her. "What?" she asked curiously.

Tarrin stood up so quickly that he displaced Sapphire and approached her. He didn't say a word. She was wearing a dress, meaning that he couldn't put his paw on her bare belly from the top, so he expedited the matter by grabbing her skirts and lifting them as he bent down. "Tarrin!" Kimmie squealed with a giggle, but she made no attempt to stop him as he put his paw under her skirt. She seemed a bit disappointed when he placed his palm on her belly instead of somewhere else, her expression turning curious as Tarrin wove a spell of Mind and sent it inside of her, seeking.

It was there. It was a completely unformed entity, little more than biological processes, but it was separate and unique, differing from the signature of its host.

Kimmie was definitely, certainly, and thoroughly pregnant.

He leaned in and tested her scent. It wasn't there, at least not yet. The signs would become apparent after the baby grew a little, began making changes to Kimmie's body chemistry to suit its needs.

"Tarrin, if you're going to play games, at least explain the rules to me," Kimmie protested. "What are you doing?"

Tarrin looked down at her, then leaned in and gave her a very delicate, very gentle, very intimate kiss. She seemed a little breathless for a second, putting a paw on his shoulder and looking up into his eyes in confusion.

"I have news for you, Kimmie," he told her gently. "I think you may like it."

"News? What news? Is this why you stuck your paw up my--" Her eyes widened visibly, and she put a paw on her belly, over his own, with the dress' material separating them. "You mean--"

"Yes," he told her with a smile. "Kimmie, you're pregnant."

She gave a squeal and actually jumped up and down, forcing him to remove his paw before it tore her dress. She jumped into his arms and kissed him exuberantly, all over his face, digging her claws into his back to the point where she drew blood. "I'm so happy!" she said excitedly as she kissed him. "I can't believe it! Are you serious? How did you know? How long have I been pregnant?"

"Triana told me," he told her. "She said you've been pregnant a few days."

"So we conceived on the ship coming here," she laughed. "Probably that last night. That *was* a wild night," she said with a bright, naughty smile.

"Triana told me to tell you that she wants you to take it easy with the magic," he told her. "She said that since we're both turned, she's not sure about how the pregnancy is going to go. And since you work with magic, she doesn't want anyone casting any spells on you except for me, or you exhausting yourself with magical study while you're pregnant. She said it may affect the baby."

"I can still study?" she asked quickly.

"She said you can still study, but don't overdo it. No exhausting yourself or exposing yourself to strong concentrations of magic. And don't you *dare* let Phandebrass cast any more magical spells on you!" he said adamantly.

"He won't, I guarantee you of that," she laughed, kissing him again. "We're going to have a baby, Tarrin," she said gently, touching his face with a paw. "You couldn't have given me anything in the whole world to make me happier than I am right now."

Tarrin held her for long moments, letting her continue to celebrate by kissing him. Everything else was forgotten, everything else didn't matter.

For that long, sweet moment, there was nothing but the joy of knowing that Kimmie was pregnant. That they were going to have a baby.

Chapter 7

It was a very calm, quiet, happy night.

The sun would be coming up soon. Tarrin lay on the huge, oversized bed he shared with Kimmie, arm draped protectively over her as he watched her sleep. He couldn't help but stare at her in wonder. She was pregnant. She was going to have a baby, their baby. Although he had two other children by two other females, this was his first opportunity to be there with the female during her pregnancy. He hadn't even known about Jesmind being pregnant, and when he made Mist pregnant, he knew that the circumstances of their meeting and his mission wouldn't permit him to be there with her. If she allowed him to remain at all. Females usually forced a male away after they became pregnant, part of the cat instincts working within them, and Mist was very much dominated by her cat instincts.

He already felt more intimate with Kimmie, closer. If anything, then because of the child they were bringing into the world. He liked her, she liked him. They were both turned, so he was sure she would be able to tolerate his more human-grounded concepts, just as he expected her to be more human in her approach to dealing with him, but he was pretty sure that she knew that he wouldn't be like human males. He wouldn't see her as an invalid or delicate, because she was a Were-cat female. Her pregnancy would have no effect on her until days before she was ready to deliver, when her body began preparing for the event. She'd be as mobile and capable as ever until then. Of course, there would be some changes in his behavior, he knew that. He felt wildly protective over Kimmie already, and her pregnancy wouldn't even show for two or three months. She was more than capable, but that didn't mean that he'd like it if she intentionally went into a dangerous situation. He'd allow her her studies and let her travel with him, but he wouldn't let her fight. And deep down, he had the feeling that Kimmie would be just as reluctant to fight as he would be to allow her to do so. Were-cats didn't get pregnant very often, and when they did, the instincts of protecting the unborn cub were exceptionally powerful within

them. It was why Jesmind left him, it was why Mist returned to the Frontier. They were doing everything they could to put themselves out of potential harm. Kimmie wouldn't have that same opportunity, but Tarrin would make sure that she was the safest being on the face of the planet.

They hadn't told the others yet, but they knew something was going on. They'd attended Keritanima's rather unorthodox wedding the night before, which had been little more than a priest, Keritanima, Rallix, and all Keritanima's friends and siblings gathering in her apartment for a ceremony that lasted about five minutes. It was quick, clean, and easy, a simple exchanging of vows and rings that made their marriage legal under the law. Tarrin felt that it was almost too sterile, too unemotional, but he realized that this was a wedding of convenience, a marriage of necessity, not a marriage of love. That marriage, the official state wedding, would take place after Keritanima returned. It would be Kerri's chance to shine, her chance to have the kind of wedding any girl from her social background wanted, with all the emotional trimmings to make it a day she would never forget. Until then, though, she seemed content with her unofficial ownership of Rallix. They'd seen how wildly happy Kimmie was after the ceremony was over, saw that even Tarrin was happy, almost talkative and outgoing. For the grim, brooding Were-cat, that was almost unheard of. Five separate times, Allia asked him if he was feeling well. But Tarrin couldn't help it. He just couldn't stop smiling, just couldn't stop being happy over it. It was all both of them could manage not to tell all of them, but both of them wanted to do it after the wedding, so as not to take anything away from the already skeletal feeling of Keritanima's wedding ceremony. For all it was worth, that night belonged to Keritanima, and neither Tarrin nor Kimmie would steal her thunder.

But there were receptions, and there were receptions. Keritanima's inner circle had their own reception of congratulations and a strange fizzy wine called champagne, then Keritanima and Rallix attended the other reception, the one for which the invitations had been sent out. That one was attended by a group of confused and mystified nobles, who were invited to a party when they had no idea what the occasion was. Tarrin thought it odd for Keritanima to wed in secret then have a public reception, then Dolanna explained to him that in order for people to leave Rallix alone, they had to *know* that he was Keritanima's husband. So Keritanima was broadcasting

that fact, using the reception as a perfect vehicle for spreading the news. Rallix had become a target as soon as the Queen took interest in him, inviting him to her ball, and that target grew larger when Keritanima revealed her alternate identity and absorbed all her assets under her true name. They would know that a wise, shrewd, observant man like Rallix would know the truth, and he'd become an inviting target for others to use against Keritanima. So Keritanima simply put him completely out of reach. Rallix had a Vendari bodyguard now, which happened to be Szath, and Dolanna explained that now Rallix had all the protections and distinctions allowed him under the laws that governed and protected the royal family. Rallix was now unassailable, or at least so out of reach that any attempts to abduct or kill him would be months in the planning, for the penalty if the perpetrator failed would be the most severe possible.

It had to be a culture shock for the quiet, efficient man. He'd gone from running a lucrative business in relative anonymity to being in the highest levels of the Wikuni government and society. He was given the official title of Duke of Wikuna, but wouldn't ever be called king. If Keritanima died, he wouldn't be in line for the throne.

After the reception--they didn't attend the stuffy noble one--they had a very long, very honest talk. Tarrin and Kimmie said what was in their hearts, brought everything out into the open so they could know one another's mind, done in preparation for the baby. Kimmie wasn't shocked to know that Tarrin didn't love her romantically, but he was a little shocked to hear that Kimmie *did*. Kimmie admitted that she had had a crush on him that started after he healed Mist, a crush that had bloomed into something more, but she was quick to tell him that she didn't expect him to feel for her the same way she felt for him. Unlike many females, Kimmie's crush was realized when she persuaded Triana to let her come with him, and she managed to catch her male. Kimmie explained that she was quite content with his attentions and his friendship, and that not only did she know where his heart lay, she was quite willing to take what he would give to her and be happy with it. She knew that he belonged to Jesmind, but, as she said, "I'm happy to borrow you from her for a while." That they were going to have a baby together made her even more ecstatic about the whole thing.

That took Tarrin a little mulling to rationalize. It felt, *wrong*, that Kimmie loved him, but he didn't love her in return. It was like violating her

trust, or hurting someone he did like a great deal, and did love in a platonic manner. But she was patient and tender in explaining how she felt to him, that it was alright for him to love Jesmind and be with her, that she understood, that she was happy being his friend. Unlike many relationships, since Kimmie *could* consummate her feelings with him, it seemed to be all she wanted or needed. She had him for now, and though she knew he didn't love her the same way she loved him, it still seemed to be enough for her.

She had to talk for quite a while to ease Tarrin's concerns about that. It did change the way he looked at her a little, but he couldn't forget who she was. She was one of his best friends, someone that knew him better than he knew himself, someone who could read him like a book, someone he could entrust with his deepest secrets and be sure they would go no further. He could tell that she wasn't talking just to calm him, she was speaking sincerely from her heart, so when she said she was more than happy with the relationship they had, he believed her. He still felt a little guilty over it, but if it made her happy, he'd go right on going the way they were going.

After he swallowed that and understood it, he realized that it really wouldn't change their relationship a great deal. They'd still be tender lovers, they'd still have their talks, and they'd still be best friends. It did change how he saw her a little bit, it made him understand some of the things she did a little better, but he knew it wouldn't change them where it mattered. He would be a little more attentive to her, more sensitive to her needs, but the core of their relationship wouldn't change.

Kimmie sighed in her sleep, rolling over on her back. Tarrin put his paw under his head to prop it up and looked down at her, smiling gently. He reached down with his other paw and brushed her dark hair from her face, which made one of her reddish-furred ears to twitch reflexively. He admired her for a long moment, reminding himself yet again how pretty Kimmie was, and he felt at that moment to be a very lucky Were-cat. He had Jesmind's love, and he had beautiful, engaging, interesting females like Kimmie and Mist seeking him out as well. It felt strange to him to have multiple females interested in him, and for the first time ever, he accepted that fact gladly, even revelled in it a little bit, letting the dirty-minded rascal in him shine through for the first time. Even human males enjoyed attention from more than one female.

He just couldn't resist. He slipped his paw under the blanket and put his palm against Kimmie's flat, surprisingly soft belly. He knew he wasn't going to feel anything, he wouldn't for months, but just knowing that the baby was in there was enough to make him try anyway. He wondered what it would look like. Would it be a boy, or a girl? Would it be tall, short, thin, stocky? Would it have Kimmie's fur or his? Her hair, or his? Would the baby have blue eyes, or green? Usually that would be a given, but Kimmie was a unique female, and that put many of the things that were generally taken for granted in Were-cat infants in question when it would be Kimmie's baby. Triana seemed worried that the baby may have unforeseen problems, but Tarrin was pretty sure that Triana was just being over-anxious. The Were-cat traits had bred true for Tarrin, and he had little doubt that they would breed true for Kimmie, even if Tarrin was the father.

He wasn't sure what the baby would look like, but that didn't matter. He'd love it, the same as he loved Jasana, and would love Eron when he met him. Tarrin's children were everything to him, and this new child would never want for attention from its father. As soon as all this unpleasant business with the Firestaff was finished, he'd return to Aldreth, go home, and would always be there for his children. He'd never have to leave them again, never have to abandon a mate and child in service to another again. He'd be free, free to live his life, free to raise his children in peace.

And for the mothers...well, there were three of them, but his heart was large enough for them all. He loved Jesmind, loved her desperately. His compassion for Mist was still strong, and if they were together again, he felt that it too could be something more. And Kimmie...well, that was a delicate situation. He really liked her, she was one of his best friends, and that seemed to be enough for both of them.

Kimmie stirred as Tarrin caressed her belly, her tail wrapping around one of his shins, and she opened his eyes. She looked over at him and smiled gloriously, putting her paw over his. "Morning," she said. "Can't sleep?"

"I slept some," he replied. "I'm just, you know."

"I can see that," she said with that same smile. "And you have no idea how wonderful it feels."

"Kimmie, about last night--"

"Don't start that again, Tarrin," she told him seriously, gripping his paw. "You know how I feel now. Does it have to change things? You understood things last night, so *please* don't dwell on it anymore." She sat up and took his paw between hers, holding it to her breast. "I love you, but I know your heart belongs to Jesmind. I don't mind that, Tarrin. In a way, it makes me very happy, because *you're* happy. Can you understand that?"

"I, I guess so," he admitted.

"This may sound a little corny, but I don't mind being the mistress. Honestly."

Tarrin looked at her, and couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"I know it sounds funny," she said with a crooked grin, "but it's the truth. You and me, we're friends. Good friends."

"Best friends," he told her honestly.

"Best friends," she smiled. "But look at this as a Were-cat, Tarrin. Don't you think I can be happy being your mate? When you're with me, I know your attention is on *me*. I don't need you to love me to be happy with that. I have you, and I know you like me. I don't need you to love me back to be happy with what I have now. Please understand that."

"I just don't want to hurt you, Kimmie."

"There's no way you could hurt me, Tarrin," she smiled. "I know that may sound hard to believe, but it's true. When you go back to Jesmind, I'll be just fine. I know I can't keep you, the same way Jesmind can't keep you. I'm not jealous. Well, not *too* jealous," she admitted. "But it's no different than how she feels. And besides, you'd better get used to it."

"Why?"

"Mist, silly," she smiled. "Mist loves you too. You're going to be passed around between the three of us, Tarrin. You'll always have a mate that *loves* you. Won't that make the mating that much sweeter?"

He was silent, mulling over that concept.

"And the three of us will probably be a little happier knowing that you're going to be with females who care about you. We know you're not like most males, that you have special needs. We'll make sure you're always happy." She kissed his paw intimately. "And that's why I'm more than happy, Tarrin. I know you'll always honor my love for you, even if you don't feel the same way, because that's the kind of male you are. You won't use me and then throw me away, and you'll always care about me, even if you don't feel the same way I do. My time with you will always be about *me*, not about any baggage you bring to the relationship. I'll be sure you're always with a good female who loves you, and that you'll be happy when I'm not the lucky girl being your mate at the moment. That's all that matters to me."

At that moment, he felt incredibly blessed to have Kimmie with him. He knew she was speaking the truth, and it made him very happy she was there. He put his other paw on her cheek, and she leaned against it with closed eyes.

"I'll do my best to honor those feelings, Kimmie," he promised. "You'll never get a cold shoulder from me. You'll always feel wanted when I'm with you."

"Then what more does a girl need?" she asked with a winsome smile, pulling him into a deep, intimate kiss.

Kimmie's kiss effectively scattered his attention, to the point where he didn't sense the shifting of the magical forces within the room. So it was with a bit of surprise that he opened his eyes and saw a projected image of Julia standing at the foot of the bed. Julia was blushing furiously, though she wasn't looking away.

"Oh, Goddess, I'm *so* sorry," she said quickly, hastily. "I'll go back and leave you two alone."

Tarrin looked at her steadily, but Kimmie was laughing. "At least you got here before we went any further," Kimmie told her. "Ten minutes later, and you'd really have cause to be embarrassed."

Julia turned almost purple. "I'm sorry. I should have called ahead before just showing up."

"Well, you're here now, so you may as well stay," Tarrin told her. "What did you want to talk about?"

Jula looked at Kimmie, then sighed. "Well, this concerns Kimmie too, so I should just tell you both."

"What is it?" Kimmie asked.

"I heard something from Triana yesterday morning," she said, hedging a bit. "Uh, well, there's no easy way to say it. Kimmie, you're pregnant."

"I know that, Jula," she said with a glorious smile. "I found out last night."

"That's a relief," Jula said sincerely. "I wasn't sure if mother was going to tell you, but I thought you should know."

"She told us yesterday," Tarrin told her.

"Good, so I'm not really betraying her trust," Jula said with an explosive sigh or relief. "She said it in passing, and I don't think she realized I heard her, but I just couldn't sit on that kind of information. I just had to tell you two."

"It's nice that you care that much, Jula," Kimmie told her honestly.

"Tarrin's been good to me, better than he ever had to be, so I want to be good to him," she answered truthfully.

"I appreciate you looking out for us," Tarrin said. "Does Jesmind know?"

"Not yet, at least as far as I know. Triana hasn't been here since this morning, and I haven't told her, so there's nobody there to tell her yet."

"I'm not sure how she's going to react to that news," Tarrin grunted. "She'll either be happy or furious."

"I don't think she's that mean, Tarrin," Jula said. "Jesmind may talk rough and act rough, but she's a sweetheart once you get past her bark. I think she'll be happy about it, at least after she gets over a bout of intense jealousy."

"You may be right," Tarrin chuckled. "At least I hope so."

"If anything, it just gives Jasana and Eron another playmate," Kimmie smiled.

Sapphire flapped into the room through the open door and landed on the bed, sitting on Tarrin's lap and looking up at him expectantly. It was breakfast time for her, and she wanted food. "Well, another demanding little female is making her presence felt, so I'd better go, Jula," Tarrin told his bond-daughter, scratching the drake between the horns. "Sapphire has her 'I'm hungry' look."

"Alright. This spell is starting to wear on me, anyway. I'll talk to you later, father. Be well."

"You too," he nodded, and then her Illusion dissipated.

"Well, what do you want, Sapphire?" Kimmie asked the drake, picking her up and holding her over her head. "I'm in a good mood, so I'll make Tarrin conjure you a feast that will stuff you so full you won't even be able to fly."

"Talk about ulterior motives," Tarrin chuckled as he slipped out of bed. He fed Sapphire and refilled her water bowl, then returned to the bed and cuddled up to his mate. "You know, they'll be knocking on the door and telling us we have to get ready to go any minute now," he told her as the sun just began to stain the eastern horizon, visible out the window that faced the bed.

"Well, that gives us a few minutes then, doesn't it?" Kimmie asked with a hungry smile, dragging him down with her.

"Pregnancy hasn't done anything to curb your sex drive," Tarrin teased.

"Some things you do just for fun," she said with a wicked little laugh, then silenced him with a passionate kiss.

Fortunately, nobody knocked on their door until they were both up, dressed, and Kimmie was nearly finished packing away her magical equipment. But then again, Tarrin realized that Keritanima was a married woman now, and she'd probably used this one and only night with Rallix to have as much intimate fun as she possibly could. That meant that if she had gotten any sleep at all over the night, it was only a few minute's worth. That wouldn't make her too motivated to get out of bed this morning. And that

meant that the official order to leave was going to be late. When that knock finally did come, it was Amber who delivered it, stepping just inside the door after Tarrin opened it to see who it was. She curtsied to him deeply. "Lord Tarrin, her Majesty requests that you and your Lady pack your belongings. She's running late, and you don't have much time to reach the ship before it has to sail on the morning tides."

"We're one step ahead of you, Amber," he told her with a calm look. "We'll be done in a few minutes."

"Very good, Lord Tarrin. I'll send porters for your things."

"Are we eating here or on the ship?"

"I think you'll be taking your breakfast on board, Lord Tarrin," she answered. "Her Majesty ordered her travelling gear packed and sent to the ship immediately, and I didn't see any preparations for breakfast in the kitchen earlier."

"I figured as much," he grunted. "Kimmie, are you ready yet?" he shouted into the inner parlor.

"Almost!" she shouted back. "Give me a few more minutes!"

"Do you know where Queen Keritanima is right now?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"When I left her, she was in her private rooms," Amber answered. "She was conferring with the king of the Vendari."

Preparing him for her leaving, Tarrin realized. "Alright, send your porters. We'll be ready by the time they get here."

"As you wish, my Lord," she said with a curtsy, then she scurried out.

Tarrin went into the study and helped Kimmie pack away her vials and bottles, seeing that she used a special leather satchel for them that had loops in it to keep them from banging around inside. Kimmie really didn't have very much, only her spellbooks, two satchels and a small box filled her magical equipment, and a pack for her clothes. Tarrin himself only had a small pack for clothes and small personal effects, since he simply Conjured anything he needed and kept his weapons in the *elsewhere*.

"What do you do with all this stuff?" he asked curiously, holding up a small vial of strange green liquid.

"We use them as spell components for the more complicated spells," she answered. "These things have to be there when you cast the spell, or it won't work right."

"Strange."

"Be lucky you're a Sorcerer and a Druid, Tarrin. They don't require material components, or chanting, or somatics."

"What are somatics?"

"Precise gestures," she replied. "Some spells require you to stand a certain way, or even move your feet in a particular manner. If you don't do it right, the spell either fizzles or goes wild."

"That sounds like an awful lot to remember."

"Now you understand why it takes so long to study Wizard magic," she said with a teasing smile. "It's certainly not for the easily confused, that's for sure."

"I've never seen Phandebrass do any of those things," he noted.

"You've only seen Phandebrass use battle magic," she told him. "Combat spells are specifically designed to be fast and easy to cast. Most other spells aren't quite that easy."

"You're probably right," he agreed, closing the satchel. "Is this it?"

"Yes, that's it," she answered, picking up the small box. "Help me carry it into the receiving room?"

"Which room is that?"

"The first one you step in when you get into the apartment, silly," she laughed, wagging her tail at him as she walked away.

"Well excuse me," he drawled. "I didn't realize it had a fancy name. I've been calling it a parlor."

By the time they had all their things in the outer parlor--or receiving room, as Kimmie called it--five burly Wikuni arrived with Amber. They looked a little relieved when they saw only two packs, two satchels, and a

small box to carry away, and did so with quick, quiet efficiency. "If you'll follow me please," Amber said with a curtsy. "Her Majesty is waiting for us."

"We can't keep Kerri waiting," Tarrin said absently.

"You know, I'm going to miss that bathroom," Kimmie sighed as they followed Amber out of the room, Sapphire riding on Tarrin's shoulder. "The first thing I'm going to do when we get back to the West is figure out how to put running water in my house."

"You're never in it," Tarrin reminded her.

"True, but it would be there on those rare occasions that I am," she chuckled.

"Where is your den, anyway?" he asked.

"Actually, right now, I don't really have one," she said. "I did have a place not far from Mist's territory, but she moved, and I just let my den go back to the forest. Ever since then, I've either stayed with her or been on the move."

"There's lots of empty territory around Aldreth," he told her.

"Yes, there is," she smiled. "Quite a bit."

Amber led them to a large antechamber on the ground floor, where everyone else except Miranda and Phandebrass had arrived. Keritanima and Rallix stood hand in hand with Binter, Sisska, and Szath standing behind them protectively, and Dolanna and Camara Tal were talking about something on the far side of the room. Allia and Dar were talking with Azakar, who for once wasn't wearing his armor, dressed instead in a blue tunic and black trousers, with new half-boots on his large feet.

"Where is Phandebrass?" Tarrin asked as he reached Keritanima.

"Fussing with the porters over his stuff," Keritanima growled. "He's being a bit ridiculous about it, telling them not to drop anything and having a hissy fit every time one of his boxes dips even an inch low."

"Phandebrass isn't playing, your Majesty," Kimmie told her seriously. "If those porters drop the wrong box, what's inside could very well explode. Some of the compounds we work with are very unstable."

"Well, I need to remodel anyway," Keritanima said absently, glancing towards one of the doorways leading out of the chamber.

"You look tired, Rallix," Tarrin said to the badger Wikuni.

Rallix chuckled humorlessly. "Her Majesty kept us up all night," he answered.

"You knew it was coming," she said to him archly.

"Yes, but the morning after always makes one wonder if the night was worth it."

"Excuse me?" Keritanima said in a *very* dangerous tone.

"I feel like I have a hangover, your Majesty," Rallix said quickly. "I'm just comparing how I feel now to that, that's all."

"Oh. Well, if you say it like that, then it's alright," she said to him calmly.

"You probably do have a hangover," Tarrin told him. "You two drank alot of wine. Where is Miranda?"

"She went back to the apartment for something. She'll be right back." Keritanima fidgeted a bit with the ring that was now on her finger. It was a surprisingly plain ring, a simple gold band with no stones or adornment. Keritanima was a queen and was used to finery, but deep down inside she was actually someone who very much loved simple things. She could have had any ring she wanted, as expensive as she could make it, but she had chosen something that made a statement for what it represented to her instead of how many diamonds it had on it. The ring was a symbol of her union with Rallix, and it mirrored the simplicity of that state. Keritanima could be very artistic sometimes. "It's going to take me a while to get used to this," she admitted. "After it rubs the fur off my finger, it probably won't itch as much."

"Is that how you wore your jewelry before you came to Suld?" Tarrin asked.

"I didn't keep it on long enough for it to rub off the fur," she answered. "I wore alot of jewelry, or the Brat did, but it changed so often that it didn't have a chance for me to get used to it."

"Married life seems to suit you, sister," Tarrin told her.

"It'll suit me a bloody lot better when I get back home," she growled. "One night with Rallix seemed like enough when it was ahead of me. Now that it's behind me, I want to postpone the journey another day."

"We can't do that," Tarrin told her.

"I know, she groaned.

"Then take him with you," Kimmie said sagely. "We have to stop in Vendaka anyway. We'll drop him off there, and he can catch another ship back to Wikuna."

"I'd love to, but Rallix has a lot of work to do here," Keritanima sighed. "He's now in charge of my efforts to educate the commoners about the benefits of the new system. Given his talents, they'll be ready for it by the time I come back."

"Her Majesty is a bit optimistic," Rallix said in a mild tone.

"We'll see."

Miranda returned with her shoulder back slung over one shoulder, and Chopstick riding on the other. Turnkey flapped into the room and immediately sought out Allia, and Phandebrass ambled in, his expression rather unfriendly. "I say, your Majesty, those clouts you sent to move my things are about as graceful as a stone golem!" he complained. "They nearly dropped my case of nitrates!"

"Is that bad?" Keritanima asked Kimmie.

"That's *very* bad," Kimmie answered honestly.

"I say, they should be more careful, if they want to live to get my things to the ship, they do!" he added. "Are we ready to leave?"

"I think we are," Keritanima said. "We'll be taking my personal ship to Vendaka. The steamship was moved there last month, where they finished getting it ready for us. As far as the reports I'm getting go, it'll be ready to sail when we arrive. I was told that the compartments on the steamship are very cramped, so we may have to double up," she warned. "So enjoy those big cabins on my ship as long as you can."

"I'm staying with Tarrin now," Kimmie told her calmly. "So if someone wants my cabin, they can have it. Mine had a pretty big window."

"Ah, so that's why you two have been almost sickeningly happy," Keritanima said with a grin.

"No, there's another reason for that," Kimmie winked. "We'll tell you about it when we set sail."

"Ah, a mystery. I adore mysteries," Keritanima said brightly, rubbing her hands together. "Don't tell me now. Let me figure it out on my own."

"If you want," Kimmie told her with a shrug.

Since everyone was ready to go, they wasted no time. They filed out onto the grounds, and then were driven down to the docks in large, comfortable carriages. After they arrived, the ship in which they'd travelled to Wikuna suddenly bustled with activity, as sailors and workers rushed to prepare the ship to sail as soon as the Queen gave the order. Keritanima led them along the dock, then up the gangplank and onto the ship. All of their gear was sitting in neatly stacked piles on the deck, the morning sun shining down on them, with about twenty uniformed servants standing around it. Tarrin recognized a couple of them; they were the same porters who had collected their belongings.

With sharp commands, Keritanima ordered the porters to deliver the luggage to specific rooms, telling the porters who was going to stay where. Keritanima gave Tarrin the same cabin he'd used on the journey over, and he found that to be more than satisfactory. It was large enough for both Tarrin and Kimmie. Keritanima kept them on deck until all the porters were done, and then she dismissed them with a kind word for the excellent service. They filed off the ship quickly, and then she ordered the captain to prepare to set sail for Vendaka, that they'd be weighing anchor as soon as Rallix and Szath disembarked. After she said that, she told all of them to go to their cabins and wait, for cooks would deliver a large breakfast to them, since none of them had yet had a chance to eat. "By the time you finish unpacking, breakfast should be waiting for you," Keritanima told them with a smile, albeit a strained one. It was strained because she then turned to Rallix, took his hand, and led him some distance away. Tarrin, and all of

them, for that matter, intentionally didn't look in that direction. They gave Keritanima a little privacy to say goodbye to her new husband.

It was an understandably long time before Keritanima padded over to them, where they were all literally standing with their backs to where she and Rallix had been standing. She sniffled a bit, looked rather sad, but also looked a little annoyed. That was Keritanima, alright. Tarrin turned to look, and saw that Rallix and Szath were already down the gangplank, standing on the dock with the porters and the Royal Guard that had escorted them down from the Palace. Rallix didn't look very pleased that he and Keritanima were being separated either. That said something for how Rallix felt.

The gangplank was raised, and Tarrin felt the ship begin to move as he and Kimmie went to their cabin. The cabin had been cleaned scrupulously while the ship had been docked, with new linens on the bed and a fresh coat of paint on the walls. After Sapphire landed on the bed and curled up contentedly, familiar with the room and comfortable in it, they unpacked what few clothes Tarrin had, and then he helped Kimmie unpack her many dresses and the few pairs of trousers she kept, just in case. Kimmie's moving in felt more to Tarrin like she was taking over his living space, and for a moment he had the irrational sense that she was some kind of invader. But that passed when he realized that she was just using the space that he wasn't using at all, and hadn't used in the first place. Kimmie only unpacked her clothes, and one of her two satchels and box were stowed in the tiny closet by the bed. The other satchel, the one that held her three spellbooks, was set by the bed carefully. She sat down on the bed and bounced on it a few times, then flopped down on her back, startling Sapphire. "Travelling with you feels almost the same as when I did alone, except you have nicer, richer friends," she chuckled. "I could get used to all this pampering." She looked up at him. "There's something strange I noticed."

"What?"

"Keritanima doesn't really have many servants, and that's very odd given her station," she replied. "Unless she keeps them hidden. Every time I've seen her, the only servant around her is Miranda. Most monarchs are attended by a small army of maids, butlers, valets, pages, and generic lackeys."

"Miranda is Kerri's maid, and she's also the only one that she'll allow close to her," he answered. "Kerri is a very nervous person, Kimmie. She was comfortable here because this ship is an enclosed area. I could smell it all over her when she was in the Palace. She was expecting an attack to come at any moment."

"She did smell a little uptight," Kimmie agreed, then she snorted in the peculiar way that all Were-cats seemed to do. "Miranda's alot more than a maid," she announced. "I can feel something strange when I'm around her. It's almost like her very presence is, well, *disarming*. I feel strangely comfortable when I'm around her. It's...it's like she *sings* to me."

Tarrin had forgotten about that, mainly because he was around Miranda so much that he'd gotten used to the sense of her. Kimmie couldn't help but notice it, because she was a Were-cat too. She'd probably noticed it months ago, but hadn't said anything to him for some reason. "She has that effect on people," Tarrin said carefully. He knew why she radiated that sense, but he didn't want Kimmie to know. That was a private matter, so private that even Miranda didn't know. "I've never met a single person that didn't immediately like Miranda."

"I noticed that too," Kimmie nodded.

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened. Azakar and Dar were outside, holding large trays in their hands, and two of the Wikuni cooks were standing behind them in the narrow companionway. "Can we come in and eat with you, Tarrin?" Dar asked politely.

"Sure," he answered, waving them in. They put their trays down on the table in Tarrin's room, and then the two cooks did the same. They bowed gracefully and then left without saying a word. The trays were filled with scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, a bowl of porridge, and a small loaf of dark bread with a small pot of butter for it. Tarrin's mouth watered at the smell of it, and he had to shoo Sapphire away from the table before she decided to try to steal something for herself.

"Why aren't you eating in your rooms?" Kimmie asked them curiously as she broke her loaf of bread in half.

"Well, it's been a while since we've talked with you two," Dar said. "We're just being sociable, that's all."

Tarrin looked at them, then analyzed their scents. Dar was being sociable, but Azakar's reluctance at being there was obvious in his scent. Azakar hadn't really felt comfortable around Tarrin since they're been reunited. Tarrin understood the reasoning behind it, and really couldn't blame the big Mahuut. He'd come around once he realized that though Tarrin may seem much crueler and more mean-spirited than he was when Azakar had been kidnapped with Keritanima, he was still the same Were-cat Azakar had once known. In a way, Tarrin was glad Azakar felt that way. It told him that Wikuna hadn't changed his big friend, that he was still gentle, kind, and compassionate. That Azakar had lived as a slave and a gladiator for so long and had never lost those qualities said volumes about Azakar's moral fiber and the strength of his will.

"And, to be honest, I just had to ask what's going on," Dar added. "At the reception, I almost thought you were drunk, Tarrin. And Kimmie was being just as giddy. What, did the two of you find some catnip in the garden?"

Kimmie laughed, putting a paw over her mouth so as not to lose her mouthful of bread. "You could say that," she said after she swallowed. "Should we tell them, Tarrin?"

"May as well," he shrugged. "They'll find out sooner or later. In a couple of months, you wouldn't be able to hide it anyway."

"True enough," she said with a smile at him. "I'm pregnant, Dar," Kimmie said calmly.

"Really?" Dar said, as Azakar finally broke his silence, saying "that's wonderful!" The Mahuut looked at Tarrin, then averted his eyes and reached for his fork again.

"We just found out yesterday," Tarrin said. "We didn't want to reveal it at Keritanima's wedding. We didn't want to take anything away from her."

"That was kind of you," Azakar said to him in a hesitant voice. "Congratulations."

"Yes, congratulations," Dar smiled. "How far along are you, Kimmie?"

"Days," she replied. "Triana's the one that told us I'm pregnant, but Tarrin confirmed it with a spell."

"Triana? How on earth did she know when she's in Suld--or was--and we're here?"

"Triana has a *very* long arm, Dar," Tarrin chuckled.

"I would say so!" Dar exclaimed in agreement. "It must feel like she's always looking over your shoulder."

"Actually, I feel rather safe knowing that Triana is always watching me," he replied honestly. "If I ever get into serious trouble, she's always there for me." He chuckled. "I really need to learn how she can travel halfway across the world in a few hours."

"It must be handy," Dar agreed. "So, did Triana tell you if it's a boy or girl?"

"No, she didn't," Kimmie said, "and I don't want her to. I want it to be a surprise."

"I guess that means that you don't want me to peek," Tarrin noted.

"Absolutely not!" she said adamantly, staring right at him. "If you know, you'll find some way to blab, so you keep your spying spells out of my belly!"

"Yes, Kimmie," Tarrin said mildly, going back to his eggs.

The ship slid out of the harbor on the receding tide, a rather strong one, since it was the tide governed by the Twin Moons, and the ship raised all its sails and turned south. The wind blew from the west, out from the land, forcing the ship to quarter the wind as the crew crowded every finger of sail they could manage on its five masts. The air was warm and muggy, and there was a dark bank of clouds creeping in from the west, the wind obviously a forerunner of a storm system preparing to move in from the interior of the Wikuni homeland. Tarrin gave Kimmie a kiss after breakfast and let her go to her studies with Phandebrass, warning her not to overexert herself. Sapphire resumed her rulership of Chopstick and Turnkey as the three drakes flew up into the rigging, and Tarrin decided to spend the day at the rail watching the land go by, and keeping an eye on that weather system.

Dar and Azakar spread the word, so he had a procession of friends come up to him and congratulate him over the day. Allia was a bit put out with him that she didn't tell her immediately, but when he explained that he

didn't want to take anything away from Keritanima's day, she understood his reasoning. He was rather happy that they didn't dwell on it, they simply congratulated him, interrupted Kimmie's lessons when she and Phandebrass came up on deck and concentrated more on her. He watched as she laughed and bantered with the others, patting her belly and making some comment that Tarrin didn't hear. He was glad that it was Kimmie that was getting the attention. She deserved it. After all, *she* was the one who was pregnant, after all.

Miranda took Kimmie aside after lunch, and the two of them disappeared for a while. He hadn't really talked to Miranda much since they'd been reunited, since his attention had always been taken up by other things, other people. He did know that Miranda was rather fond of Kimmie, and that the two of them did talk quite a bit. He knew that because Kimmie told him all about all the talks she had with Miranda. Kimmie and Miranda seemed to be fast friends, the same way Kimmie and Jula had been in the Tower. Kimmie had once been a human female, so she had a need about her to be around other women. She lacked that isolationist attitude prevalent in most other Were-cat females. In many ways, Kimmie was most certainly not a normal Were-cat.

Azakar came up on deck about midafternoon, as Tarrin finished another of his lessons with Camara Tal over Priest magic. Azakar looked a little uncomfortable for some reason, and that became more apparent when he came over to the rail where Tarrin was standing and looked over the sea, towards the land still visible to the west. The cloudbank was now almost directly overhead, and Tarrin could see that it was raining at the coastline. They'd get wet in about half an hour. Azakar's scent was hard to make out since the wind was so brisk, but it was obvious that he looked a little worried over something.

"Tarrin," he finally said. "I wanted to apologize."

"For what?" he asked calmly.

"I've been avoiding you," he said. "I'm sure you know that."

"I know. And I know why."

Azakar bowed his head. "I was wrong about that," he admitted. "I thought you'd become completely--you know. Keritanima explained all that

to me, and when I saw how you were back in Suld, I thought you'd gone completely feral. I was actually afraid of you."

"It's an understandable reaction, Zak," he said gently. "I know how you are, and I don't blame you for acting the way you did. I'm actually rather glad you did, because it told me that though I've changed, *you* didn't. Wikuna is a hard place, and you managed to stay just the way you are despite everything they could throw at you. I'm very proud of you for that."

Azakar flushed, looking at the rail. "It wasn't really that hard," he admitted. "Kerri more or less protected me from most of that kind of thing."

"Well, either way, I think now you see that I may be hard and unforgiving, but not when it concerns friends. Go talk to Dolanna. She can explain it all alot better than I can."

"I'll do that," he promised.

"And I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"As you know, Kimmie is pregnant," he began. "She's a Were-cat female, Zak, so she doesn't need to be coddled or waited on. But she's devoted to her magic, and that may make her extend herself in ways that she doesn't need to be extending herself."

"What do you mean?"

Tarrin explained Triana's rather vague warnings about Kimmie being exposed to too much magic. "Triana's not entirely sure how this pregnancy is going to go, because Kimmie is turned, and I'm turned, and we're both magicians. Were-cats are very magical creatures, and she's afraid that exposing a baby with such an unknown factor in its parents to so much magical energy may be harmful."

"That's not an unreasonable fear," Azakar said after a moment.

"I know, that's why I agree with Triana," he affirmed. "So I want you to keep an eye on Kimmie. Don't follow her around or coddle her or wait on her, but do make sure that Phandebrass doesn't push her into things she shouldn't be doing, and make sure she doesn't push herself too hard. If you

think she's overexerting herself, don't try to stop her, just let me know. I'd really appreciate it."

"I can do that, Tarrin," he said with a nod and a smile. "Actually, I'm rather glad I have something to do. With Binter and Sisska back, Kerri doesn't really need me to be her bodyguard like she did when she only had Szath. Outside of training with them and Camara Tal, I really don't have much to do."

"Well, watching Kimmie won't consume all your spare time," Tarrin chuckled. "She's got a level head on her shoulders, and I really don't think she's going to push herself too hard. Were-cat females are extremely protective over their babies, and that includes when they're pregnant. Her instincts are going to keep her from going too far, but sometimes instincts can't stop us when we're really focused on something."

"The way Kimmie focuses on her studies."

"Exactly," Tarrin nodded. "So just do me a favor and keep an eye on her."

"I'll do that. And if it looks like we may run into some danger, I'll make sure I'm always somewhere close to her. She may be a Were-cat female, but I think you won't mind if I make sure nothing gets close enough to her to do her any harm."

"Zak, you just read my mind," Tarrin chuckled. "And I would very much appreciate that. Thank you for offering."

"I'm a Knight, Tarrin. I'm not happy unless I have someone to protect," he smiled.

"Then feel free to protect away. But don't step on Kimmie's toes."

"I can protect Kimmie without having to follow her around like a puppy," Azakar told him confidently. "She'll never know I'm there unless something endangers her. Then it won't get a finger closer."

"Zak, you're a good man," Tarrin said, patting him gently on the shoulder. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm just doing what I can, Tarrin," he said modestly. "With the likes of you and Kerri and Phandebrass around, we unmagical people have to fit in

where we can."

"You're just as important as any of us, Zak. Even me," Tarrin told him seriously. "Don't forget that."

"I'll try not to," he smiled as the first sprinkles of rain began to fall.

The weather remained rainy for several days as the ship trekked southward, the sailors working through the rain to keep the wet sails catching the wind. Their diligence paid off as the ship sped towards its destination, and Keritanima was happy to estimate that they were going to arrive in Vendaka a full day early. Tarrin spent those rainy days in quiet rest and relaxation, feeling a calmness that he hadn't felt since before he'd been turned. They were completely safe skirting the coast of Wikuna, with only two military clippers and a vessel called a schooner escorting them, and his days weren't filled with learning or exercises or stress. It was almost like a holiday, and he took full advantage of it by lounging around and doing nothing of any importance whatsoever. He almost got bored after a few days, but every time he started feeling unsettled, he reminded himself that everything would be an unknown once they got on the new ship, and he may not have time to just lay around and do nothing. So he took complete advantage of the lull to rest up and enjoy his free time.

He had plenty of company during those days. He rekindled his friendship with Miranda by having breakfast with her every morning, and he caught up on all the things that went on in Wikuna and the Tower before he arrived, getting the whole picture from the mink. She didn't leave anything out, especially those part too embarrassing for Keritanima to repeat. He played stones with Azakar a few times a day, as well as playing chess with Sisska or Binter, and there was always his time with Allia. Tarrin talked to Jesmind and Jenna and Jula and Jasana right after lunch, a lunch usually shared with Azakar and Camara Tal, who were just finishing their sparring about that time, and then he went on to give Dolanna and Keritanima their lessons in Sorcery. Dar sat in when Tarrin taught Dolanna and Keritanima about Weavespinner magic, as he taught his former teacher the spells to summon Elementals, and guided her as she did in fact summon her first Elemental, a Water Elemental. His teaching of his sister and mentor didn't really seem like work, because they were both so dedicated to the

craft and easy to teach. It felt more like an informal gathering of friends, when they just happened to talk about Sorcery. The time after those lessons belonged to Allia, as they spent their time together, and the

The nights belonged exclusively to Kimmie. Now that he knew how she felt about him, he did his best to honor those feelings by paying her a great deal of attention and being very responsive to her needs. They started off as great friends, but Kimmie's trust in him and devotion to him only increased day after day, as she saw how he had responded to her admission, and saw that he was being everything that she imagined he would be. Though he didn't love her the way he loved Jesmind, he did care for her a great deal, and he'd do what was needed to make her happy. And besides, it wasn't like it was a serious chore. Kimmie was easy to please, and he liked pleasing her. She wasn't as demanding as Jesmind, and certainly wasn't nearly as tempermental. Kimmie was a very mellow, laid-back Were-cat, and that attitude made her easy to please. All she really wanted from him was his attention, and he gave it all to her. Tarrin couldn't help but feel closer and closer to Kimmie as the days passed, and though his love for Jesmind didn't waver in the slightest, he found himself starting to think of Kimmie in many of the same ways he thought of Jesmind. Kimmie was a good mate, and he enjoyed his time with her. Living with her was just as easy as he thought it would be, requiring very little adjustment for either of them, and he found the time with her to be both enjoyable and rewarding.

Of course, he simply couldn't forget about the baby. Every time he looked at her, it was always on the forefront of his mind. Kimmie was carrying his child, and he couldn't suppress the wave of pride and joy that brought to him. Tarrin wasn't sure how Jesmind was going to take it, but he didn't intend to let Kimmie get very far away once they returned. He would return to Jesmind and be her mate, as he promised, but he didn't want Kimmie going very far. He wanted to be there for the baby, wanted to be involved in its life, he wanted the chance with this new cub that he didn't get with Eron or Jasana.

The time just flew by, so it seemed like it was only a couple of days when the ship turned southwest, following the coastline, and the rains only got harder. Keritanima explained that it was the monsoon season in the southern marches of Wikuna, when it would rain for months at a time, but it also happened to be the end of the season, so the rain was expected to break

before long. It didn't break when the forests and grasslands visible off the ship's rail became dense jungle, and the temperature of the air got higher and higher as they neared the equator. The interior of the ship became very hot and very stuffy, so much so that even the heat-dwelling among them like Camara Tal and Dar began to complain. Miranda, who was both from a cold climate and had a full coat of fur, suffered the most, resorting to having Keritanima use Sorcery to keep their cabin cool and the air dry. Kimmie was a Were-cat, and cats liked heat, so the heat didn't really bother her. Tarrin was immune to heat, so it didn't bother him at all, but everyone else did seem to be quite uncomfortable.

The rain was as heavy as ever when they reached their destination on a very unpleasant late afternoon nine days after leaving Wikuna. Vendaka was the seat of the Vendari political power base, a large town made of very large, strange dome-like buildings that were covered with what looked to be moss. Tarrin understood the value of the dome buildings immediately, for the water simply cascaded off of them. The Royal ship passed through a very large concentration of other military vessels, defending the harbor town, it seemed, and then dropped anchor in a shallow bay that formed the harbor of the city, though it wasn't much of a harbor. The water was so shallow that Keritanima's ship had to drop anchor almost a longspan from the shore.

It dropped anchor beside the strangest ship Tarrin had ever seen. It was a very large ship, the size of a clipper, but it was much wider across the beam than a clipper. It had two large metal pipes protruding from either side of the sterncastle, both of which had smoke wafting from them. It had masts and sails, two masts to be exact, but the dominating feature was the huge circular construction that jutted out from the ship's port side. It was covered with metal halfway down, and within that cover the paddlewheel of the prototype ship was visible descending into the water. The ship was painted in a dark blue, with black trim, and it didn't look to have any gunports, or any cannons at all. The thing didn't look very sleek or fast, but then again, they weren't using it because of its speed or grace. They were using it because it could move against the wind.

Tarrin looked over the ship, absently moving the shield of Air he was using to protect himself from the rain with him as he moved down the ship's rail, studying the vessel. Its decks were filled with Wikuni, and to his

surprise, a swarthy-skinned man with white hair, a human, was standing on the deck with a cloak thrown over his shoulders despite the heat, shouting in Wikuni and pointing with his hand at something. He shouted even louder, and Tarrin could make out his words. "No, no, no, you slack-jawed fluffbrain!" he bellowed at a rodent Wikuni of some sort. "Put that over there, and for the gods' sake, get that gunpowder off this ship! Which of you mental giants had the brainstorm to think this ship was armed? Do you want to blow us sky high?"

A human? What was a human doing in Wikuna? And what was he doing giving orders to the Wikuni? Tarrin puzzled over that for a moment, then he remembered that Keritanima said that she had Tellurians working for her in the Ministry of Science. This had to be one of those Tellurians. If Phandebrass was Tellurian and he had white hair, then maybe white hair wasn't uncommon there. But Phandebrass was rather pale, where this fellow was dark, almost as dark as Azakar. He looked Arakite, except for the hair, at least from that distance. So. Phandebrass' unusual appearance suddenly didn't seem quite that unusual, and it must not have had anything to do with magic.

Tarrin crossed his arms and watched the human bully the Wikuni for a few moments longer, then Keritanima joined him at the rail. She too was protecting herself from the rain with Sorcery, and their two shields of Air touched and almost disrupted one another. Both of them quickly and effortlessly adjusted the spells so they wouldn't interact. "It looks bigger than the plans said," Keritanima said without greeting or fanfare. "I see Donovan is already at it."

"Who?"

"Donovan Thale," she said, pointing. "The Tellurian. He's a Priest of Dragor, you know."

Dragor was the Younger God of creativity and innovation. If this Donovan was an inventor, it only made sense. "Worshipping Dragor is the state religion in Telluria," she told him. "Either Dragor makes them so creative, or they're so creative that no other god would do."

"I see he has white hair," Tarrin noted. "But he's dark, where Phandebrass is lighter."

"They come in all shades in Telluria. It's a melting pot of sorts, because it's on the southern edge of the Nyrian landmass, right where Nyr and Arathorn meet, and right across a channel sits the northernmost tip of Valkar. So they have all kinds there. But the white hair, that's something of a status symbol among them. Tellurians say if you're born with white hair, you're favored in the eyes of Dragor, because Dragor had white hair when he was mortal. It's so important that people not born with white hair bleach it. So in a way, it's a custom. You can always tell a visitor in Telluria because he doesn't have white hair."

"Phandebrass must be favored then. His hair is natural."

"He better be, as much trouble as he gets himself into," Keritanima snorted. "If he wasn't, he'd be dead fifty times over." She sighed. "Well, we'd better get ready to move over there."

"We're not going to the city?"

"That's *Vendaka*, Tarrin," she said bluntly. "Only a fool sets foot there if he doesn't know the customs. That's one place where the smallest misstep or misspoken word can kill you. I'd rather not lose anyone, so we're not going to land."

"That's hard to believe."

"Believe it," she told him. "Binter and Sisska only *seem* cultured because they operate under certain very strict rules I set down. An average Vendari would kill someone not Vendari over the slightest insult, whether real or imagined. Just imagine an entire city full of people like *you*," she said, slapping him lightly on the chest with the back of her paw. "The Wikuni have the sense not to go there unless absolutely necessary. We don't even have any trade enclaves. If we need something from the Vendari, they bring it to the dock there, and sailors load it after the Vendari leave."

"They're part of your kingdom, yet you don't interact with them?"

"They interact with us," she told him. "And part of the agreements between the crown and Vendaka is that we honor their borders. The only thing we really ask of them is that they help us in battle from time to time, and for the Vendari, that's all the compensation they need. Vendari love to fight."

"That's a strange situation. One-sided, and all the benefits fall on your side."

"Not really. The Vendari are protected by our navy, and believe me, the Zakkites would be all over this place if it weren't for us. The Zakkites have been trying to wipe out the Vendari for centuries. It's almost like a holy war for them." Tarrin didn't think that odd, considering that he knew the origins of the Vendari. The Zakkites created the Vendari to be warriors, and they had done too good a job. Tarrin guessed that ever since the Vendari turned on their former creators, the Zakkites had been trying to eradicate their past mistakes, and avenge the damage the Vendari caused after they rebelled. "It just burns them up that the Vendari thrive here, and they can't get at them. Why did you think all these ships are here, Tarrin?" she asked.

"I thought you ordered them down here."

"These are the ships that are *always* here," she explained. "The Zakkites do try to slip in from time to time, so we keep a pretty formidable fleet down here to run them off."

"Ah, now I understand," Tarrin nodded. "That ship isn't armed, is it?"

"Not with cannons," she grinned. "But I think you and me and Dolanna and Camara Tal could be considered weapons, don't you?"

Tarrin gave her a stern look. "Are we going to be escorted? You know we're going to run into trouble."

"I'm not that dumb, my brother," she grinned. "We'll have four clippers with us, for as long as they can sail. But when we get to where the wind is against us, we'll be on our own."

"By that time, it's not going to matter," Tarrin shrugged. "Nobody will be able to follow us."

"Exactly."

"I think four ships is pretty intimidating," Tarrin said in contentment.

"Quite," Keritanima agreed. "Well, it's time to spread the word. Go pack, brother. We'll be transferring to the other ship as soon as I get word to Donovan."

Tarrin didn't leave with Keritanima, looking over the ship some more. That was the ship that would carry them for forty days, then be the one that would allow them to sail behind the wind. The thought of that still excited him a little bit, but also made him a little nervous. That poem had said that it would take all three of them to pull this off. They needed Keritanima to get there, Allia to find it, and they needed Tarrin to get them there once Allia did. He wasn't sure exactly what it meant, but that was the closest explanations any of them had managed to comprehend. The poem had been quite vague, and there were lines of it that nobody understood even now. But the Goddess had confirmed what they'd managed to decipher, and quite honestly, that was enough. They were now where they were supposed to be to start, and they knew which direction to go and for how long. Forty days on a southwest heading, which would slowly shift as they followed the constellation, as it turned on the heavenly wheel. It would cause them to go more and more south as the days passed, keeping the constellation firmly in front of the bow. That was why they didn't just sail as soon as they got onto the ship, because of that alteration of course. Tarrin knew that a good astronomer with complete charts could probably navigate the course without having to leave at the summer solstice, but there would be a good margin of error there, and this was no time for error. From the way it sounded to him from the poem, what they were looking for would be *very* hard to find, so they had to be exactly right the first time. With all that competition out there, sailing around in circles would be a very bad idea. Besides, there was another time constraint hanging over their heads, that being the day that the Firestaff would be activated. Tarrin didn't know what day that was, but it had to be soon. The Firestaff had awakened and revealed itself to the world, and to Tarrin, that meant that the day of its complete activation had to be very close.

Actually, Tarrin would be overjoyed if that day came and went while they were still out to sea, still trying to get it. It meant that the day passed without anyone finding it, and then they could all just go home and not worry about it anymore. But that was a pipe dream, and he knew it. The Goddess wouldn't have sent him if things were going to be that easy. No, there had to be enough time for someone to have a reasonable chance to figure out where it was and how to get to it, even without the advantages that Tarrin had. If only Tarrin and his friends could get to it, then there was no real need to go after it in the first place.

But they were that much closer. The ship represented that, another major landmark on the long, twisting, crooked road down which the Goddess had sent him. There had been quite a few twists and turns on that road, and more than a fair share of shocks and surprises. But all in all, looking back on it, given the bad and the good, he was glad he did it. He'd seen so much, learned so much, and had had the chance to make such great and lasting friends. He'd stood at the top of the world and flown with the angels, he'd moved the world with his footsteps, he'd faced the spawns of the Abyss and seen that miracles did in fact happen. It had only been some couple of months over two years since the fateful day that Dolanna and Faalken had led him out of Aldreth, but it seemed a lifetime. A lot of it was spent in fear or pain or misery, but now things looked much better than they did then. All in all, he was content with the way things had turned out so far.

If anything, he'd have some wild tales to tell his children and grandchildren.

More smoke began issuing up from the twin metal pipes on the ship, like the chimney of a fireplace, and there was a strange rhythmic metalling banging coming from it. The ship shuddered visibly, and then there was a loud *pop*, which even vibrated the water lapping at the steamship's hull. And then the smoke began to thin and the metallic sounds ceased. The human, Donovan Thane, swore sulfurously and rushed out of sight, probably going down to see what had just happened.

Whatever it was, Tarrin hoped it was a *good* thing. That contraption suddenly looked quite ominous to him, an unknown thing with dangers he couldn't imagine. Keritanima said that the steam engines had a bad habit of *exploding*. Tarrin certainly didn't want that to happen while they were on the ship in which the steam engine was contained. That would not be a very pleasant experience, to say the least.

It didn't take Tarrin and Kimmie long to pack their things, since they'd only really unpacked the clothes. Keritanima sent a sailor to tell them to be ready to transfer over to the steamship at the top of the hour, so they spent the time waiting up on deck, Tarrin shielding them both from the rain, as he and Kimmie looked at the ship and Tarrin listened politely as Kimmie described the progress Phandebrass had been making on his memory spell,

stroking Sapphire's scales as she was held in the female Were-cat's arms. "I think he's almost got it," Kimmie announced after telling him about the session they'd had the day before. "He cast it on himself and read a Wikuni book until the spell expired. Though he doesn't speak the language, he was able to perfectly copy the writing on the first ten pages, what he was able to read before the spell ended, and he retained the memory of it. He says he can't get it out of his head, since he doesn't understand what the words mean. He said it's like a piece of art that's so engaging that it haunts you for days," she chuckled.

"It does sound like he did it. Too bad he can't use it on you."

"Why not?" she protested. "The spell is safe now!"

"Triana said no spells cast on you unless I cast them. As soon as Phandebrass teaches me how to use Wizard magic and then teaches me the spell, I'll be happy to do it for you."

Kimmie glared at him. "Then how am I going to learn Sha'Kar?" she demanded.

"Hold on." He raised his head. "Mother, can I cast the memory spell on someone else?"

Yes, you can, came her mental response. *A Sorcerer can only cast it on himself, but a Priest can cast it on another.*

"There, that settles that," he told her. "I can cast the same spell I used to learn Wikuni on you, so you can learn Sha'Kar."

"Who were you asking? Triana?"

"The Goddess," he replied calmly.

"You have her at your beck and call now?" Kimmie asked.

"No, it's more like she seems to know when I'm about to ask her a question, so she comes to me and answers it. Sometimes I wonder how she knows," he mused to himself.

"She *is* a god, Tarrin," Kimmie chuckled. "If she didn't know, she wouldn't be a very good god, would she?"

"You have a point," he acceded.

Not long after that, sailors packed their belongings in a longboat and ferried it over to the steamship, and then longboats were brought up for the passengers. Keritanima and Miranda were the first ones to board the longboats, with Binter and Sisska attending them. Tarrin, Kimmie, Azakar, and Allia boarded the next one, and Camara Tal, Dar, Phandebrass, and Azakar boarded the last. Boarding the longboats was almost fun for Tarrin and Kimmie, since they had to climb down a ladder to the boat. The boat rocked alarmingly as Tarrin put a foot down in it, but in a few moments it became almost enjoyable to feel the boat sway as Kimmie, Dolanna, and Allia joined them. Four burly Wikuni manned the ship's oars, and then they pushed off from the Royal vessel and rowed for the steamship anchored not far away. Sapphire flew over them, turning circles in the air so as not to get too far ahead, but then Chopstick and Turnkey interrupted her waiting circle and distracted the blue drake into a game of airborne chase. The three drakes zipped off into the rain happily, quickly travelling out of sight. Tarrin wasn't worried, however. Sapphire could find her way back once she caught the two red drakes.

As Tarrin climbed up onto the deck of the steamship, he saw Keritanima was standing on the deck with Miranda beside her, talking to the Tellurian, Donovan Thale. That close to him, Tarrin saw that he was a world different from Phandebrass. For one, he filled out his cloak. Donovan Thale was a burly, muscular man with a barrel chest and remarkably thick legs, not very tall, built like a treestump. He looked a little older than Phandebrass but still had a youthful way about him. He had swarthy brown skin and white hair, looking a little like Allia in that regard, but now that he was closer he could see that Donovan Thale dyed his hair white. It wasn't natural. The roots of his shortly cropped hair were black, and that made him look more like an Arakite. His features had the same sharp quality about them that Arakites did; Tarrin felt that this man had an Arakite for a parent, or at the very least a grandparent. Around his neck, under his cloak, he saw that the man wore a steel amulet. The amulet was under his shirt, so he couldn't see the design on it, but it reminded him of the amulet that Camara Tal wore. All Priests wore such amulets, which had the holy symbol of their gods upon them; in fact, the vast majority of their Priest magic wouldn't function unless they were wearing the amulet. Tarrin's amulet was radically different from theirs, but the premise was exactly the same. Without his amulet, he wouldn't be able to use any Priest magic except for a few of the simplest spells.

Tarrin bent down and helped Kimmie the rest of the way up, who smiled at him in thanks. He patted her fondly on the bottom as she passed, and she responded by slithering her tail across his torso in a sensual manner. He reached down and helped Dolanna up the ladder, but his small friend only gave him a smile and warned him not to be quite so friendly with her posterior. That made Tarrin laugh, and he moved as if to do the same to her as she went by, which made her hurry up a few steps to get out of range. He helped Allia up, not that she needed any help, and then rejoined his mate as she walked around the deck of the ship.

It looked alot different from a regular ship. There were only two masts and much less rigging, so the air above them looked strangely empty. The thing smelled of smoke and wood and coal, which was understandable, but the simple fact that he *could* smell it with all the decks being saturated with water and rain still falling heavily told him how pervasive the smell was. When they got out of the rain, it would be an overwhelming scent, drowning out everything else. The deck space wasn't empty, it was filled with rows of barrels and boxes, many of them with waterproof canvas tarps thrown over them and tied down. Keritanima said that there wasn't much free space on the ship, and she was obviously right if they had to store equipment and supplies up on the deck. Another thing he noticed was how few Wikuni sailors there were. On the Royal ship, there had to be fifty of them. But over here, he only saw nine Wikuni on the deck. But that really didn't mean anything, since the whole crew may not be on board, and that didn't count the Wikuni below decks working on that mechanical contraption that was supposed to propel the ship. He looked up between the two pipes and saw that the top of the sterncastle was covered over, with many windows along its walls, and that the wheelhouse was inside it. That, he saw, was a good idea. The steersman wouldn't have to stand out in the pouring rain, which often made the job a miserable one when the weather was bad.

"Ah, here you are," Keritanima said as Tarrin and Kimmie wandered over in their general direction as they looked at the ship. "Donovan, this is Tarrin and Kimmie. Tarrin, Kimmie, may I present Donovan Thale, the man who designed this ship."

"Not really the ship, just the engine," he said modestly, nodding to them.

"Don't be modest, Donovan," Keritanima smiled. "Who else is with you?"

"My whole team," he replied. "We're not letting her go out without us here to see how she performs."

"I thought you said you tested it," Keritanima said flintily.

"We did, your Majesty, but not under operating conditions," he replied. "We ran the engine for twelve straight hours, and she did fine. But you'll be running it for days, non-stop. She'll hold up, though," he said quickly, "but since we didn't do that, we want to be here to see if we can't improve her design with the next ship we build."

"And since they'll be right here, if it breaks down, we have the people we need available to fix it," Miranda added.

"True," Keritanima agreed with a nod. "When will we be ready to leave?"

"We're still loading the supplies, so it won't be until tomorrow morning at the very earliest, your Majesty," Donovan replied. "But since this is a first for all of us, I'd like to doublecheck everything one more time, so I'd like to leave no sooner than tomorrow afternoon."

"We'll be leaving tomorrow night, after sunset," she told him. "That gives you a full day and some spare hours to make sure everything's ready before hand."

"Yes, your Majesty," he replied calmly. "Everything will be ready. You have my guarantee of that, even if I have to step on a few necks to do it."

"Step away, Donovan. This journey has the highest priority. Until we leave, you'll be speaking with my voice."

"Thank you, your Majesty. I've been having trouble getting supplies from the other ships and the Vendari. They keep sending the wrong things. One fool loaded four barrels of gunpowder in the hold!"

"Don't all Wikuni ships carry cannons?" Kimmie asked curiously.

"This ship can't use gunpowder, my Lady," Donovan answered her. "The steam engine uses a fire to make the steam, and there's always a chance that the fire may get out of control and set off the gunpowder. I'll be

able to design some ships that can carry gunpowder later, but since this is the very first ship of its kind, we don't want to take any chances."

"A wise precaution," Keritanima assured him. "The other ships will do the fighting for us if it comes down to it."

"We thought that too, your Majesty," Donovan nodded.

A rare reptillian Wikuni, tall and scaly, with a thick, meaty tail, was the one that showed Tarrin and Kimmie to their cabin. Keritanima's warnings had been correct, for the cabin was very small and very cramped. It had only a single bed, but at least Keritanima had thought ahead to have a bed installed large enough for him. It had a large chest at the foot of the bed, which was almost against the opposite wall, and only about seven spans of floor between the bed and the door. The cabin was not designed for extended stays, that much was for sure. The place was clean and sterile, but at least the ceiling was high enough to keep Tarrin's head from hitting the low beams that served as the deck of the level above. It had a window, a small round porthole, over the bed, that had a view of the coastline. Kimmie opened the chest and looked inside, then chuckled. "Enough room for our clothes, but not much else," she said. "I'll have to leave my equipment with Phandebrass."

"I'd hate to see how much room he'll have when he gets all his things in his cabin," Tarrin noted as he sat down on the bed. "He may end up sleeping up on deck."

"As long as he can get from the bed to the door, I think he'll be alright," Kimmie chuckled, reaching down and grabbing his paw. "Let's go look around. I want to see this steam engine thing."

Tarrin and Kimmie joined their other friends in an informal tour of the ship by the man Donovan. He showed them the steering deck and some of the mechanical gadgets that would tell the men in the engine room how fast they wanted the ship to go, and then he showed them the engine room. It took up the entire back half of the ship, forcing everything into the bow. It was comprised of a huge metal tank of some sort that had a multitude of pipes and metal things running all over it. Tarrin could see what looked like huge gears that ran from the massive contraption to a heavy shaft that extended out of the wall. That had to go to the paddlewheel, he realized. He

couldn't make sense of much of anything he saw, but the ten Wikuni and four humans that were in the engine room did seem to know what was going on. There were levers and dials and wheels and handles scattered along the pipes, set into the equipment, jutting out of walls and the floor, attached to the many pipes that crawled all over the gigantic chamber. There was a huge door on the far side that led into the other hold that was in the bow, and Tarrin could see that it was filled almost to overflowing with a strange black rock. Coal. The smell of the place was certainly unusual, with the wood and tar mixing with the multitudes of copper pipes all over everywhere, and the sweat and fur of the Wikuni and the humans mixing with a riot of other smells he just couldn't identify, because he'd never scented them before.

"It looks like a convulsing spider," Dar said honestly, which made everyone laugh.

"I guess it does at that," Donovan chuckled. "Alright, here's how it works. We burn coal in that boiler right there, and it boils the water in that big tank right there," he explained, pointing to the indicated components. "The steam collects in the boiler until it builds up a lot of pressure. Once it does, we open a valve that lets some of the steam escape. The steam goes through these pipes to the engine itself, where its pressure causes those gears to turn." He pointed to the gears. "That area over there allows us to engage different gears to make the paddlewheel outside turn slower or faster, no matter how fast the gears coming out of the steam drive turn. Leonin calls it a 'gear-force transmission junction,' but that's too long, so we call it the transmission area. The steam drives the gears and enters these pipes over here, then it collects in that tank over there, what we call a condenser, where seawater flows through pipes inside it to cool the steam back into water. Once the water collects in the bottom, gravity causes it to drain back into the boiler through those pipes over there. Some of the steam is bled off to run water pumps that keeps the seawater in the condenser cool."

"It's all self-contained?" Keritanima asked.

Donovan nodded. "We can't use seawater in the boiler because of the salt, and the fact that the water has to be very clean. So we boiled water and collected the steam back into pure water and injected it into the system. The

same water gets boiled and recondensed back into water over and over again. It's the most efficient way to go about it, seeing as how fresh water isn't easy to find on the open sea."

"What happens if you spring a leak?"

"We'll lose some water no matter what, your Majesty, because some of the steam drives the water pumps and the whistle," he told her. "We have some barrels of spare water in case of an emergency, and if all else fails, we installed a smaller boiler over there where we can boil the salt out of seawater and use it. It also doubles as a fresh-water maker, since the water it makes is drinkable. But we're not going to rely on it quite yet."

"It all sounds pretty complicated," Dar said.

"It is until you've been down here a while," Donovan told the youthful Arkisian.

"I say, you really have to show me the step-by-step procedure," Phandebrass told his countrymen with bright eyes.

"You'll have to get her Majesty's approval," Donovan told him seriously. "She funded this project, so she owns the rights to it."

"You can look, but you *will not touch anything*," Keritanima told him hotly. "Do you understand me? Touch just one control, and I'll have you thrown overboard!"

"I say, your Majesty, I understand that this is a delicate device, I do," Phandebrass assured her. "Why, they're working with steam under pressure. One wrong move, and the whole thing will blow itself up!"

"You should know about blowing yourself up," Camara Tal grunted.

Phandebrass ignored that. "I say, I must get myself a new book. I'll have to write all this down," he mused to himself. "I wonder if magic could improve the operation of it."

"Not unless you know a way to set a fire in the boiler we don't have to feed," Donovan grunted. "Half the ship is taken up by the engine, and the other half with the coal. It doesn't leave much room for anything else."

"It is most impressive," Dolanna said. " More impressive because it does not use magic anywhere in its design."

"Magic is a strong and respectable force, ma'am, but you'd be surprised what you can do with a little steel, a little creativity, and a lot of sweat."

"Indeed," Dolanna agreed with a nod.

"Well, that about finishes the tour, your Majesty. The rest of the ship is like any other."

"Why do you have sails when you have this thing?" Dar asked curiously.

"This engine is still experimental," Donovan told him. "In case it breaks down, the sails make sure the ship isn't dead in the water."

"A smart precaution," Miranda mused.

"When you're dealing with a prototype, you have to plan for breakdowns," Donovan told her with a nod. "It's the nature of the beast, as they say."

"I hope there won't be too many, Donovan. We're depending on your ship like we've never depended on anything else."

"We'll get you to your destination, your Majesty, even if I have to get the whole crew down here and turn the gears by hand."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Keritanima said with a smile.

"Let's hope, your Majesty."

The next day, the day they were to depart, was filled with bustling activity, at least for everyone else. The activity was taken on with a furious pace, for there had been a break in the rain, a rare break, and the skies remained cloudy and threatening to rain again at any moment. That gave the workers a certain amount of motivation to get as much done as they could before they started getting wet.

Tarrin and Kimmie rose with the sun, though Tarrin's back was a little cramped. The bed was long enough, but it wasn't very wide, and that made him sleep pushed up against the outer wall. Tarrin dealt with that by expanding the bed a good two spans with magic, until it took up over half of the small cabin. He also made a small, narrow stand for Sapphire's little

bed, which Phandebrass had given to him, since the drake didn't like the idea of sleeping on the floor, since she ended up in bed with them. Drakes liked to sleep high up, where their ability to fly would allow them to simply escape a predator by jumping out of the nest and catching themselves before they hit the ground. They were sacrificing some open space, but as long as they had enough room to open the door, it didn't really concern him. The only things they'd really be doing in the cabin were dressing and sleeping anyway, it was too small for anything else. Kimmie certainly seemed to prefer losing some space to having to worry about rolling out of the bed as it had been.

Tarrin and Kimmie let everyone else go about their bustling, as Phandebrass, Dolanna, and Dar attached themselves to the scientists that had made the engine so they could learn about it, as Camara Tal, Azakar, Binter, and Sisska helped out the crew by stowing things and doing the heavy labor sometimes necessary on a ship, where their combined strength could accomplish things that took ten to twelve Wikuni to accomplish, and as Keritanima and Miranda talked with held long council sessions with some Wikuni and Vendari brought from other ships and the shore, organizing what would go on after she left, and organizing the roles of the four ships that would accompany them. They watched it all go by as Tarrin used the memory spell on Kimmie and used the entire day to do nothing but teach her Sha'Kar, both spoken and written. Every time he taught her a word, he showed her its written form. In that one day, Kimmie absorbed a staggering amount of the language, because they devoted an entire sunlight day to the task. Nearly fifteen hours, breaking only to eat or to stretch and relieve themselves. Since it was the day of the summer solstice and they were literally right on the equator, it made it the longest day of the year, and they used every minute of it to get Kimmie up with the others.

The skies remained heavy and ominous most of the day, but to everyone's surprise, they began to clear out about an hour before sunset. The clouds disappeared with a nearly frightening speed, almost racing out of the sky and disappearing over the eastern horizon. They cleared out in time for the sun to shine down on the ship not long before it set, casting hot light that almost immediately began to evaporate the water pooled on the deck and clinging to the masts and rigging. The hot air became almost unbearably muggy as the sun dried out the ship, for the air was strangely

still. There was no wind to pick up the humidity and blow it away. Sailors began stripping off their clothes as the sunlit minutes passed, until nearly everyone on the ship was wearing as little as they could possibly get away with wearing. It was worst for the Wikuni, whose pelts trapped the heat and made them all look absolutely miserable. Except for Keritanima and Miranda, of course, with Keritanima using Sorcery to keep the air around her cool and comfortable. Keritanima was immune to the heat, but Miranda was not, so she was doing it strictly for Miranda's comfort. That said a great deal about how Keritanima felt about her maid.

The heat did cause a slight row, and that came from Camara Tal. Deciding that her leather haltar, as skimpy as it was, was simply too hot, she simply took it off. That didn't bother Tarrin or any of the people who knew Camara Tal, since exposing her breasts was not considered a violation of modesty in Amazon society. For that matter, complete nudity wasn't really a violation of modesty in Amazon society, given that Amazons didn't wear anything under their *tripas*, and the kilt-like skirts were so short that a stiff breeze exposed everything that most human women fought so hard to conceal. The only violation of modesty in Amazon society was *touching*. Looking was just fine, but one did not touch an Amazon in any sensitive area unless it was explicitly allowed. It didn't bother any of Camara Tal's friends, nor did it really bother the Wikuni, but it *did* upset the Tellurians quite a bit, who gawked at her and tried their best to ignore the fact that there was a half-naked woman parading around on the deck. The fact that she was such a stunningly attractive woman, with appealingly large but not oversized breasts that had not sagged a finger during her life, made ignoring her a very difficult thing to do.

Kimmie found the entire thing to be quite amusing. They would pause in their involved teaching session to watch Camara Tal pace up and down the deck with a grim expression, anxiously waiting for them to set sail, and watch the eleven Tellurians on the ship scatter before her like mice before a cat, averting their eyes as she passed but stealing glances at her whenever they could, when they didn't think she was paying attention. They wanted to look, but they didn't want her to know that they were looking. That was what amused Kimmie so much.

As much fun as the uptightness of the humans was, it bowed to their lessons. By the time sunset came, as the wind suddenly picked up and the

sailors hurriedly made the ship ready to leave, Kimmie had managed to grasp the fundamental structure of the language, the basic rules of grammar, and had learned all of the most commonly used words and the most common verbs, and had begun to learn the conjugation of verbs for dealing with various locative and temporal states. Tarrin figured that in five days, if he taught her from sunrise to sunset, Kimmie would be fluent in both spoken and written Sha'Kar.

"I've never seen a language where every sentence ends in the verb," Kimmie told him. "Torian and Sulasian are nothing like this."

"When did you learn Torian?" he asked.

"Tarrin, I *am* Torian," she grinned. "Remember?"

"Oh, I forgot," he admitted. "Sha'Kar is a pretty complicated language, Kimmie."

"I noticed. But it's very musical."

"I know."

They kept going right until sunset, when the smell of burning coal began to permeate everything, and the two chimney pipes--Donovan called them smokestacks--began to belch forth boiling clouds of black smoke. They were heating up the boiler, getting the ship ready to start moving. Keritania came up on deck with Miranda, and they talked to Donovan for a long moment. Donovan was the ship's captain as well as the head scientist, so Keritania was probably telling him when they were going to leave.

Sapphire landed on his shoulder with a chirp and a little nuzzle, breathing hard. She and Chopstick and Turnkey had been flying around almost all day, even flew out to the coast of Vendaka for a short time to investigate the thick jungle, and she looked a little tired. She hadn't done that much heavy flying for a long time. He chided her softly about wearing herself out and put her in his lap, massaging her back just between her wings, something she very much loved for him to do after she'd been flying a while. She laid down limply in his lap and allowed him to do whatever he wanted, enjoying the attention immensely.

Keritanima and Miranda came over to them, the Queen of Wikuna sitting on a rope bale with a flop, not looking very queenly. She looked a little tense, and he realized that their impending departure was wearing on her. It didn't take him long to figure out why. "The sooner we leave, the sooner we get back, Kerri," he told her. "Rallix is going to be there waiting for you when you get back, you know that."

"I didn't think I'd miss him this much," she admitted. "And I'm worried about him. Is he doing alright? Are they causing him any problems? Is he getting the hang of the job I asked him to do? It's frustrating not being able to be there to help him."

"Then talk to him. That always helps me when I miss Jesmind."

"How? He's not a Sorcerer, Tarrin."

"Talk to the priest on the ship and have him contact the Palace. Have Jervis give Rallix an amulet," he said, holding up his own. "I know Jervis must have a couple of them laying around somewhere. As long as he has the amulet, you can talk to him. The magic of the spell comes from *your* amulet, not from *his*. You can use your amulet to talk to anyone with his own amulet. I've used it to talk to Ariana and Shiika, and they're not Sorcerers either."

"I didn't know they could do that!" she gasped. "What a great idea! I'll go send the message immediately!" She jumped up, collected her skirts, then literally ran across the deck, seeking out the bear Wikuni that served as the ship's Priest. No Wikuni ship, not even a prototype like the steamship, sailed without a priest of Kikalli aboard.

Miranda gave Tarrin a very grateful look. "Thank you for that," she said. "Kerri's been getting snappy lately."

"I should have realized she was missing Rallix. She's a good actress to hide it for so long."

"She's one of the best actresses in the world," Miranda winked. "I have to say, you two look very happy. What have you been up to over here all day?"

"Teaching me Sha'Kar," Kimmie told her.

"That's it? I thought you were whispering secrets or something," she winked. "I did see you two watching Camara Tal."

"We were watching the Tellurians run away from her," Tarrin chuckled. "I didn't realize Tellurians were so priggish."

"If I were a human man, I'd be intimidated no matter what race I was if I saw *those* heading in my direction," she said with a naughty little smile. "Didn't you notice that every man that talks to Camara for the first time talks to her chest?"

Kimmie laughed delightedly, and Tarrin had to smile. Miranda was right. Camara Tal was certainly well endowed in that department, and even Tarrin had to admire her chest from time to time, just for its perfection. "She'd better keep them in the haltar, or they'll be hanging down to her navel by the time she's sixty," Kimmie said with a sly grin.

"She's a Priestess, Kimmie," Tarrin said mildly. "I'm sure she knows some kind of spell for, well, bounciness."

"You mean firmness," Miranda grinned. "Well, as much fun as it is to stand here and gossip about Camara Tal's breasts, I'm getting hot again. I'm going to go back to Kerri and stay in her cooling spell. I'll see you later," she said with a wave.

"I really like her," Kimmie told him as they watched her leave. "She's very funny."

"Alot more than that," Tarrin agreed.

"You're right there. Alright, explain to me why there are four separate forms of the same verb again. I don't understand that."

The sun set and the stars came out as Tarrin and Kimmie continued their lesson. The ship began to throb and rumble under them as he continued teaching her Sha'Kar, as they tried to ignore what was going on to finish the lesson, reach a good place to stop. All his friends came up on deck, gathering around Keritanima near the bow, and Tarrin and Kimmie stopped their lesson and joined them. They looked up where Keritanima pointed towards the southwest horizon. "There it is. The Diamond Crown," she announced. "And it's fully above the horizon. We made it."

"Thank the Goddess," Dolanna sighed in relief.

Tarrin didn't see the constellation, but he was confident that Keritanima did. "And now we sail southwest," Tarrin mused.

"Forty days," Camara Tal added, putting a hand on his forearm. That told him how much she liked him, for Amazons didn't often touch others. "Let's all pray it's an uneventful trip."

"Amen," Tarrin agreed, patting her hand.

They all stood there for a long moment in silence, pondering the events that had brought them to Vendaka. They were on the ship, and the Diamond Crown was now visible. They were ready to go, ready to sail to where the Firestaff was located, ready to embark on the last leg of their long journey. Not all of them were there to give thanks for that moment, and those absences pained Tarrin greatly. Faalken, solid, dependable, funny Faalken, such a good friend, gone. Never to stand by Dolanna's side again. Sarraya, returned to her colony so she could rest and recover her strength. They'd see her again, but it would be after it was all over. She'd miss the most exciting part of the journey, when they faced this guardian and claimed the Firestaff.

Either way, it would be good to see her again, because to Tarrin, seeing her again meant that it would all be over. The next time he saw Sarraya, the Firestaff would be safely hidden away and wouldn't pose a danger to anyone. He'd be free to return to Jesmind and Jasana, keep Kimmie close to him so he could be there for the birth of their child, and start a new life for himself far away from the craziness that had so altered his life. Soon, it would all be over, and he would have his life back.

The ship's anchor raised, and then there was a strange rushing sound. Tarrin realized that it was the paddlewheel attached to the side of the ship, beginning to turn. The sound of the water beaten by the wheel was audible to them, and then the ship began to slowly move forward. They were under way, under way for the hiding place of the Firestaff, under way on the last leg of their long, arduous journey. Soon, now, very soon, they'd have the Firestaff, and his life would be his own again.

Soon.

Chapter 8

It took Tarrin a while to get used to the novelty and difference of the mechanical ship. There were many things different about it, only a few of which the others could appreciate. Those problems were really annoying at first, but time and a little ingenuity solved them and made them either no problem at all or nothing to really worry about.

The first was the smell. The smell of the coal and the smoke was always in his nose, causing him and Kimmie and Keritanima as well to sneeze quite a bit and have trouble with breathing. The smell was pervasive and insidious, and it irritated his nose quite a bit. The wind sometimes blew down and from astern, blowing the smoke across the deck and giving everyone the same problems they had. Tarrin's answer to that some days after they began to was erect a Ward over the deck the penetrated down as far as his cabin within the ship, that kept out the smoke and blocked the smell from entering. Kimmie and Keritanima both kissed him liberally for that, but nobody was as relieved about the clear air and the ability to breathe without sneezing or choking as Tarrin was.

The second problem had been the sound. The steam engine wasn't quiet, and its rhythmic thrumming went on and on and on. It was audible everywhere on the ship, to a faint thrumming on deck to a deafening cacophony when one was inside the engine room. It was so loud down there that the Tellurians and their Wikuni companions had to put cotton in their ears to avoid being deafened by the sound after prolonged exposure. It really bothered Tarrin at first, making it hard for him to sleep for the first few nights, but then he began to grow accustomed to its sound. Tarrin learned to stay out of the bowels of the ship, where his exceptional hearing made the sound painful to him, staying on the deck and the one level below it where the galley and his cabin were located. He wouldn't go any deeper into the ship than that, and everyone learned not to ask him to do so. It became less and less of a problem as the ship travelled southwest over the days, until it became a part of the background noise that Tarrin learned to

ignore. The only time he took notice of it was when it changed or when it stopped, as they shut down the steam engine occasionally to grease gears or check something, or to inspect the pipes, which were too hot to inspect while the steam was going through them. The stoppages when the steam engine was shut down usually only lasted a few hours, and then they were on their way again.

The third problem was the rolling of the ship. Despite its great weight, the ship wasn't balanced in the water very well, for a great deal of its weight was in the bow, in the form of the huge quantities of coal that had been loaded for the journey. That made the ship unstable in the water, and it had a tendency to rock excessively back and forth in the wind or the waves. That caused seasickness, even among the Wikuni, until hard decisions were made. Some of the coal was jettisoned into the water, for they'd packed the hold to the rafters to make absolutely sure they had enough for the trip. They didn't do this until after Donovan went over the amount of coal the engine had been using for the first six days of the journey and deemed it safe to drop some of their weight. The rest of the coal was smoothed out and distributed equally through the hold, and that helped balance the ship and make it much more stable. The ship did still tend to wallow a bit, but that was because it was a little shallower in the keel than a clipper, and shallow-drafted ships were more prone to the rocking action of the waves and wind.

The fourth problem was the cramped conditions. Nobody could really do anything about that, but Tarrin didn't think that anyone realized how crowded the ship was until about the fifth day. The ship had twenty engineers on board to deal with the steam engine, and also had twenty-three sailors on board to help with the rigging and to maintain the ship as needed. Add to that the twelve of them who were strictly passengers, and that was quite a few people. The ship was big, but so much of it was taken up by the steam engine and the supplies that it left very little space left over for the people. There were always at least twenty people on deck, some of them working in the rigging or on the deck, but there were always people around. It was hard to find privacy on the ship, because the cabins were so small that one got claustrophobic after only a few hours in one. The air was hot, the climate was hot, and the boiler under the ship radiated its heat all through the insides of the ship and even made the darkest, coolest hole hot.

And since it was so hot, the cabins below were almost unbearably stuffy. Even in the pounding, pouring rain, there were people on deck, just sitting in the rain because it was better than sweating to death below decks.

The ship had its share of problems, but Tarrin had to admit one thing. It was *fast*. The paddlewheel didn't stop turning, and it pushed the ship steadily on their course, sometimes having to slow down for their escorting ships when the wind slacked and robbed them of propulsion. The steamship more than easily kept up with the clippers, sometimes outrunning them and having to slow down so they could catch up, and that seemed to irk the men on those clippers to no end. Tarrin could see it in their faces when they tied up with the steamship when it made one of its brief stops for inspection or repair. They had expected the outlandish contraption to fail, and now that it was outperforming their precious clippers, they were getting resentful.

Sometimes Tarrin would stand at the rail and just watch the paddlewheel turn, amazed that such a strange looking amalgamation of iron tanks, pipes, gears, and rods, maintained with liberally applied grease and a whole lot of careful attention, made the wheel turn, and turn so steadily. It just whooshed right along, merrily churning the water and pushing the ship forward. It was almost as amazing as magic, that a group of men and Wikuni had come together and designed something that could move such a large ship using nothing more than boiling water. It was pretty remarkable, and they'd done it without magic. It just went to show that there were no limits to the breadth of their ingenuity and inspired creativity.

One could stand and watch what looked like a waterwheel for only so long, but fortunately, Tarrin had other things to do. He kept working with Kimmie, teaching her Sha'kar for half a day, and in twelve short days she had achieved a level of fluency that satisfied him. Which meant that she was as fluent as he was, both in written and spoken Sha'Kar. She even had his accent, though that was perfectly understandable, given he was her instructor.

Very little happened during that time, as they all got used to the crowded ship and its unusual noises and smells, as it steamed steadily southwest, turning gradually more and more southward as the constellation above them shifted by the slightest of degrees each night. Keritanima had them going towards the brightest star in the constellation, which served as

the tip of the crown's formation, the middle of it. Keritanima figured that they couldn't go wrong if they steered by the constellation's center. More than that, they saw no other ships for those twelve days, having the very empty ocean on the southwest of Wikuna all to themselves.

That changed on the thirteenth day, when the formation of five ships came across a blasted hulk of another vessel. It had been attacked and partially burned, the rains putting the fire out before the fire sank the ship, a western galleon. It was a wreck, with two of its three masts fallen and charred wood decks buckled and torn. There were bodies on the ship, Allia told them as she looked at the ship with her superior vision, and that was reason enough for the ships to stop and send a search party over to the ship to inspect it.

Tarrin, who felt remarkably bored that morning, decided that he was going to go to the ship himself, regardless of what anyone else thought. So he used Sorcery to pick himself up off the deck on a platform of Air and float over to the ship. He probably startled half the Wikuni on the escorting clippers with his magical display, but he really didn't care. He set his feet down on the blasted ruin, and felt immediately that it had been caused by magic. The residue of the spells was still within the wood, and they were strong. The ship was attacked by magic, and the scattered bodies, many of them burned beyond recognition, told him that the attack came from above. Magical attack from above, that was classic Zakkite tactics. He knelt and put his fingers to the deck, relying on good old fashioned woodlore taught to him by his father to detect that the fires had burned about two days ago.

The first of the Wikuni arrived, climbing up onto the deck using grappling hooks and ropes, and he told the officer in charge of his findings. The officer, a tiger Wikuni, nodded and pointed to one of the bodies. "That's the uniform of a Shacèan naval officer," he said. "But what a Shacèan galleon is doing all the way out here is beyond me."

Tarrin knew why, but he figured there was no reason to tell him.

"I doubt there's anyone alive. Zakkites take survivors for slaves," the officer told him. "But let's look around anyway. Sometimes someone does manage to hide."

Tarrin helped the squad of six Wikuni search the ship. It was carrying no cargo, another oddity to the Wikuni, but they did find the captain's log in his cabin, and there was also a small chest with an impressive amount of gold. In another cabin, they found what Tarrin recognized immediately as spellbooks hidden under a pile of old clothes under a cot, which wouldn't have been found if Tarrin hadn't felt the presence of a magical spell that had been cast to hide the books from magical detection. There were five of them, and as he looked through them, he saw that they were quite full. Tarrin claimed the spellbooks as his own, putting them in an empty chest and telling the Wikuni that it would be dangerous for them to even touch the magical objects. They gave him a wary look and nodded in agreement, not willing to fight the intimidating Were-cat over something he obviously intended to keep.

They completed their search, even searching the bilges, then they collected up everything that the Wikuni intended to salvage from the vessel and began loading it into the longboat they'd used to ferry over. Tarrin took the chest back to the steamship himself, and found himself facing five angry female faces. Keritanima, Allia, Kimmie, Dolanna, and Camara Tal all glared at him when his spell deposited him softly on the deck with the chest by his feet, and he stared at them all calmly. "What?"

"How *dare* you go off on your own unescorted!" Camara Tal managed to say first, cutting the others off. "How am I supposed to keep you alive if you run off whenever the mood hits you?"

"I wasn't in any danger," he told her calmly.

"That's not the point!" Camara Tal shouted at him, then started swearing sulfurously in her native tongue.

"The point, dear one, is that we need you," Dolanna told him flintily as Camara Tal continued to swear. "You are too important to just wander off, as Camara Tal put it. We are not saying you cannot go, but we *would* appreciate it if you would let us know first. It will save us a great deal of gray hair."

"I don't see why you're so angry," he told them.

"You explain it to him!" Camara Tal told Keritanima, then she stalked off.

"She's touchy," Tarrin grunted as he watched her walk away.

"You forget, she is here to protect you, Tarrin," Dolanna told him. "It is her duty to keep you alive. Just because you have been apart from her from a long time does not change that."

"She didn't act this way at Suld," he said challengingly. "She didn't have anything to say when I joined the battle."

"That was a different situation," Keritanima growled at him. "Don't you dare try to compare them."

"You were wrong, my brother," Allia told her. "The next time you wish to go off alone, *ask*."

"Alright, alright," he sighed, though he still didn't see what the problem was. "I'll ask from now on."

"Good."

Though he got off relatively easy with his sisters and friends, he didn't get away quite as easily with Kimmie. She gave him the cold shoulder for the rest of the day, and even refused to talk to him that night as they got ready to go to bed. That frustrated Tarrin to no end, frustrated and aggravated him, and he found it to be a very brutal and effective means of punishing him. She had shut him out, turned him away, and all he could feel when he looked at her was guilt over something he did that she didn't like, and frustration that she wouldn't talk to him. He wanted to talk about it, work it out, but she wouldn't even acknowledge him! Kimmie knew him better than he knew himself, and he had to admit, she'd found the one and only way to get under his skin, something that even he was surprised was so effective. It got so bad that he finally grabbed her by the arms and made her look at him. "I said I was sorry!" he told her adamantly.

"You didn't *mean* it," she hissed at him. "What if there would have been something very dangerous on that ship? What if it had been burned by survivors of a plague, and there you go flitting over there to catch that disease? Don't you realize that you're *too important* to go racing off like that? Did you see Keritanima in that longboat that went over to investigate the ship? Allia? Dolanna? Phandebrass? If you'd gotten yourself killed, what would we have done without you? Would you have deprived your cub to be of knowing its father?"

If anything, that got him. He dropped his eyes and blew out his breath, finally understanding why they were all so upset. He guessed that maybe it was a little rash. He was bored, and he didn't think things all the way through. "Alright, I'm sorry," he said contritely. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You're right. You shouldn't have," she said calmly, staring into his eyes. She pushed his paws off of her arms and rubbed her arm gingerly. "Now you have to make it up to me."

"I think I can do some of that right now," he said, turning and picking up the chest he'd taken from the ship, which had been sitting on the other chest at the foot of their bed. "I found these over on the ship. When I saw them, I figured you may be able to use them."

Kimmie gave him a suspicious look as she took the chest, then set it down on the deck and knelt in front of it. She opened it, and her eyes widened when she saw the leather-bound tomes within. She picked one up and opened it, and saw that it was written in a strange, glyphic language that Wizards seemed able to read. "This is a spellbook!" she gasped, looking at it. "I, I don't know this spell!"

"They're all spellbooks," he told her. "I thought you might want them."

"Might want--Tarrin, you've given me a treasure!" she told him happily, gazing up into his eyes. "These look like the spellbooks of an accomplished Wizard!"

She put the book down reverently and carefully, then vaulted up into his arms and kissed him exuberantly on the lips. "Well, you're doing a good job of making up," she grinned as she pulled away enough to look at him. "But I'm not ready to forgive you quite yet."

Tarrin ran a paw down her back meaningfully. "Maybe I can find some other way to make it up to you," he purred.

"Now you're getting the idea," she giggled breathlessly, then kissed him again, this time quite seriously.

Kimmie was absolutely overjoyed that he brought her the spellbooks. Even Phandebrass was impressed by them, as she showed them to her mentor, for the books contained several spells that even he didn't have. And Phandebrass collected magical spells the way a forest floor collected dead

leaves in the autumn. She spent the next three days with Phandebrass as they deciphered the spells and learned how they worked, and she allowed her mentor to copy the spells into his own books. But she kept the spellbooks, copying some of the spells she knew into those books and using them as her primary spellbooks instead of her old ones. Tarrin asked after that one night as he watched her carefully writing in one of the new books, doing so on a very small table and chair Tarrin conjured for her, that took up almost the entirety of the available space in the cabin.

"It's easier to copy a few spells in here than it would be to copy a few dozen into my old books," she told him patiently. "I will copy the spells so I'll have more than one set of spellbooks, but for now, this will do."

"Why keep more than one set?"

"These books represent everything I know as a Wizard, Tarrin," she said patiently. "If they get lost or stolen, I'll lose everything. Any mage with even half a clue keeps a copy of his spellbooks in a safe place. Just in case the unthinkable happens."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"I'm so glad you agree," she drawled, then returned to her careful work.

They saw no other ships over those three days, but the formation was closer and the lookouts were being very alert. It was well known now on all five ships that Zakkites had attacked the ship they'd paused to inspect, and they weren't going to let their ancient rivals on the sea get the drop on them. On the fourth day, they did see a plume of smoke appear on the eastern horizon, but no one on any of the ships thought even for a second about changing course to investigate. That far out to sea, the smoke could only be coming from a ship.

The day after that, they encountered their first live ship. It was an old, battered caravel, with a few patches in its sails, merrily making its way due west, and was looking to come close to crossing their path as it approached them. Keritanima went up to the steering deck as the formation around the steamship tightened noticeably, as the four clippers moved into a very defensive posture around the unarmed ship that was carrying their queen. Tarrin and Dar happened to be on deck playing stones when the call of the sighting came out, and the clippers tightened up around the steamship. They

put the game on hold and went to the rail to get a look for themselves, and saw the old ship with its patched sails and a few patches in its hull. The old ship had seen some action recently.

Tarrin and Dar watched as the ship slowed as it threatened to cross the path of the clippers, then ran up a white flag. That meant that they were either surrendering or they were attempting a parlay. Tarrin looked up at the steering deck, curious about this turn of events. What would Keritanima do? Would she attack the ship, which was probably a rival seeking the Firestaff? Would she stop to talk to them? Or would she simply pass them by?

It didn't take him long to find out. He wasn't quite sure how they knew the order, but the four ships surrounding them opened their formation a little, enough for the steamship to put on a little more speed, and they sailed right by the halted vessel, the sailors upon it gawking at the steamship in shock and awe. They'd never seen such a thing before. Keritanima had obviously decided to pass the other ship by without talking to them. All things being as they were, Tarrin felt that Keritanima made the wise choice. That fellow was sailing west, not southwest. He was going in the wrong direction.

Later that day, it suddenly seemed like it wasn't a very good idea. Allia came to Tarrin right before dinner and told him that the ship they'd passed earlier in the day was following them. Tarrin knew about Allia's incredible eyesight, so he didn't doubt her in the slightest, but that seemed a bit odd. With all that firepower, what in the blazes could that caravel's captain be thinking? Didn't he realize that if he irritated Keritanima, she'd send one of her clippers to sink him? But how could he know that? As far as the captain of that ship was concerned, he saw a quartet of Wikuni military vessels escorting some kind of bizarre new ship. Maybe he was curious, and was following along a while to see where they were going, or get a better look at the steamship. Or maybe he was taking orders from a mage, who thought that the Wikuni knew where they were going. If that was the case, then Tarrin would be the first to sink them. He didn't want any company tagging along when they reached their destination.

All his speculation turned out to be moot, however. By morning, the caravel was so far behind that it didn't matter anymore. The steamship hadn't stopped during the night, continuing its steady course just south of

southwest, and in the darkness the caravel wouldn't even be able to see the smoke plumes from the smokestacks to guide it as it tried to follow the faster vessels. Keritanima's boasting about the speed of the steamship turned out to be a critical asset to them now, since they could easily outrun any ship that tried to follow them.

The sighting of the attacked galleon and the encounter with the caravel galvanized the Wikuni and the Tellurians even more. They realized now that they were sailing on a crowded ocean, and they had to be ready for anything. The lookouts were doubled, and they scanned the seas and the skies both at all times during day and night. The ship no longer stopped for periodic inspections of the steam engine, running at all times to keep the ship moving, keep the ship from becoming a target. Tarrin saw that the cannons on the accompanying ships were being cleaned and inspected and the materials they used to fire were brought up from below decks, ready to be loaded and fired at a moment's notice. At night, the gunpowder was taken back below decks, why Tarrin wasn't sure, but he was sure it hadn't been taken very far.

Things got a little quiet and a bit tense on the ship after the two encounters. The sailors weren't quite as talkative as they were before, and the engineers working on the steam engine were all business, spending almost all their waking hours tending the invention carefully, even as it operated. The tension, added to the heat and the intermittent rain, made many of the sailors short-tempered, and there were a few fights on board the ship that caused a momentary distraction for everyone else. They kept it running continuously for two days, and the five ships hurried towards the southwest, towards their ultimate goal. At sunset on the second day, however, everyone knew that something was wrong when a sudden grinding sound rattled the ship, so loud and strong that the deck beneath their feet vibrated with the sound. The ship began to slow very quickly, so quickly that the ship trailing behind had to execute a sharp turn and drop its sea anchor to avoid ramming the stern of the steamship as it drifted to a relative halt on the choppy seas. As if the halt wasn't bad enough, the cloudy skies opened up on the ship almost as soon as it drifted to a halt, sending pounding rain down onto the deck and irritating people who were already nervous and flustered.

Tarrin decided that the best thing to do in a situation like that was sleep it away. He and Kimmie retired to their cabin and went to bed early.

It was approaching morning, a few hours before sunrise. Tarrin had awakened to relieve himself, and didn't feel like going back to sleep quite yet. He instead laid in bed beside Kimmie and watched her sleep, pondering doing something he promised her he wouldn't do. Though she wanted to keep the sex of the child a secret, that missing information had been eating at Tarrin over the last few days, up to where the need to know was reaching a fever pitch. Just like any cat, or Were-cat, once Tarrin's curiosity was piqued, it was almost impossible to deny satisfying it. He would have done it days ago if not for the promise he made to Kimmie not to do exactly what he was considering doing. Promises were not things taken lightly among Were-cats. To break a promise was to lie, and lying to another Were-cat was a cardinal sin. It was so much of a transgression that him lying to Jesmind was what put her on him and made her try to kill him. Oh, there were little white lies, the kinds of lies that a Were-cat wouldn't find offensive, for they were spoken when the speaker honestly believed he was doing the right thing. But this was much different than saying something not quite the truth to avoid a fight, or trying to hedge in a vain attempt to hide information from Triana. This was a *promise*.

Sort of. He hadn't explicitly told Kimmie he wouldn't do it. She had simply told him not to do it, and he had agreed with her. If he did do it, he could raise that as a valid argument against Kimmie, but there would be consequences. Kimmie had proved that she could get to him, get to him in ways that Jesmind could not. That silent treatment was a torture, worse than anything Jesmind had ever done to him, and he didn't want to face the next few rides with nothing but Kimmie's back for company.

That was the punishment he would face if he did it. He'd satisfy his curiosity, but he'd infuriate his mate in the process. But his curiosity was so strong that he seriously weighed those two things against one another, trying to decide which one was the lesser of the two evils. To leave his curiosity unsatisfied or get the silent treatment from Kimmie. He was going to have to suffer through one of them.

The Cat finally barged into his debate, quite effectively settling the argument. It saw a good thing here, a receptive female that kept it quite happy. It saw no reason to jeopardize a good mating, so it buried his curiosity beneath an instinctual impulse to protect his unborn child. He shouldn't do anything to upset or aggravate Kimmie until after she gave birth to the cub.

And that ended that. Blowing out his breath, he put his paw on Kimmie's bare belly, wondering at what was going on in there. He was sure that Triana could give him a day by day accounting of what went on inside a female after she conceived, but she wasn't there, and he wasn't going to peek. It was well within his power to find out, but the consequences for doing so were a bit more than he was willing to endure, for those consequences also affected their baby.

His paw made Kimmie stir, mumbling something in her sleep, rolling over on her side. Tarrin admired her silhouette, her feminine curves, and marvelled at how different she was from Jesmind. Jesmind had all those same curves, but everything in between them was hard, chiselled muscle. Kimmie was a female with softness in her, a deceptive softness given that she was a Were-cat and was stronger than three human men, but it was the same she-softness of the human women, something that Tarrin, having been turned, found quite appealing. Her differences from Jesmind were more than physical, though. Jesmind was fiery, tempermental, bullish, stubborn, and overbearing, where Kimmie was much more mellow, wiling to give and take with Tarrin without fighting with him over the smallest detail, as Jesmind did. Jesmind made him fight for absolutely everything, always testing the boundaries of their relationship, always pushing him. Kimmie just let things be and found happiness in whatever happened to be in front of her at the moment, but Tarrin had already discovered that when he riled Kimmie, she could be a steel-willed, as adamant as Jesmind was. The difference was that Jesmind was like that all the time, where Kimmie only did it when she found reason to oppose Tarrin's decisions, which she only did when she thought he was wrong. Jesmind would challenge him, even when she knew he was *right*. Two very different females with almost diametrically opposed personalities, and he had feelings for them both.

It was more than just friendship now. Tarrin could admit that. Tarrin still loved Jesmind, loved her with all his heart, but he'd begun to feel the

stirrings of something maybe a little bit more than friendship for Kimmie. He loved her as friend, and she was a very good friend, but knowing that she loved him was starting to affect how he thought of her. He honored her feelings by trying to be what she wanted him to be, and it made her deliriously happy. And he was happy to make her happy. He was starting to go out of his way to please her, was starting to think of her in many of the ways that he thought about Jesmind. He knew that the baby had a lot to do with that, that he was beginning to lavish attention on her to keep her from leaving him when they got back. And he knew deep in his heart that if he had to choose between Kimmie and Jesmind, he would choose Jesmind. That made him feel a little guilty, because Kimmie would be getting the short end of the deal. But on the other hand, she herself had told him that she entered the relationship fully understanding where his loyalties lay. She had been willing to give him up when they returned, and that made him realize how strong she was. Jesmind wouldn't step aside, not for anyone. Jesmind would probably come after Kimmie if she thought that Tarrin's loyalties were changing, getting Tarrin back by simply killing off the competition. Kimmie showed tremendous strength by admitting her love for him, then turning around and telling him that she was willing to let him go. He found a powerful new respect for his new mate after understanding that.

If anything, Tarrin decided, reaching down and sliding his paw along her bare hip and admiring her, he was glad Triana sent her with him. That wise old Were-cat matron, it bothered him how she was always right. Once, just once, he wanted Triana to be wrong about something, and he wanted to be there to see it. For as long as he'd known her, he had never known her to be wrong about anything yet. Maybe living for a thousand years made her a lot wiser and more observant than most other people, but she couldn't possibly be right all the time, no matter how well she thought she knew him. Tarrin made that promise to himself as he slid his paw along Kimmie's waist and along her ribs, feeling her smooth, silky skin. He was going to see Triana wrong about something, even if he had to lie about it. He just wanted to see the look on her face. He'd have hell to pay for it, but that was a consequence he was willing to endure.

"Tarrin," Kimmie said sleepily, pausing to yawn, "either let me go back to sleep or put your paw back on my butt and give me a reason to wake up."

"Sorry. I was just admiring how beautiful you are, Kimmie," he told her, setting his paw firmly on her waist and laying back down.

"It's not that I don't like hearing you say I'm beautiful, but you can admire me in the morning," she said with another yawn. "Unless, of course, you had something else on your mind?"

"Not really," he answered truthfully.

"Alright then. We can do that in the morning too. Good night," she said firmly, then she scooted her back up against him and put her head back down on the pillow, pausing to grab his paw and pull on it, making him drape his arm protectively over her before sighing and immediately returning to sleep. Were-cats could do that, just go right to sleep so long as their minds weren't occupied with something. Tarrin put his nose in Kimmie's hair and let her scent wash over him, then closed his eyes.

Then opened them again. He rose up over Kimmie as he felt something....*tug* at him. There wasn't a good explanation for what he was feeling. It was coming from the Weave. He closed his eyes and concentrated on that sensation, trying to understand what it was. It was a tugging, alright, but it wasn't tugging at him, it was tugging at the strands. It was faint, but it was definitely moving in his direction, whatever it was that was causing the tugging. He was sure that there was something causing it, because he knew of no natural force within the Weave that would cause a sensation like that. Or at least nothing he had ever experienced. Besides, this didn't feel natural, didn't feel like it was a natural phenomenon. No, this was something external exerting force against the Weave...and it felt oddly familiar.

For long moments, Tarrin kept his eyes closed and kept his attention focused on the Weave, as the sensation moved closer and closer. As it approached, he got a clearer sense of it, and managed to discern that it was indeed an outside force exerting itself against the Weave. The tugging sensation was being caused by a strong outflow of magical energy, strong enough to cause an eddy current in the Weave itself that interfered with the magical flow through the strands. That was where the tugging feeling was coming from, from the magical current. Whatever it was, it was *strong*, and it was moving towards him steadily.

He waited a while longer, keeping his attention on the sensation. He was so focused on it that he didn't feel Kimmie roll over on her back and look up at him in irritation, reaching up and shaking his shoulder to get his attention. It was getting closer and closer, and as it approached, the sense of it seemed to divide. There wasn't one of those things, there were several of them. As they got nearer, he managed to separate them enough to count them, and realized that there were nine. Nine, but they were so close to one another that they'd felt like a single magical force from a distance. They were close enough now to make out the kind of magic it was, too.

It was Wizard magic. Powerful Wizard magic. Nine separate Wizard spells, moving towards him, spells so strong that they had had an affect on the magical currents in the strands. What kind of spells were they? As strong as they were, they had to be really big ones, high-order magic, the kind of magic a Wizard would cast to move a mountain.

Or move a *ship*!

Gasping, his eyes snapping open so fast it made Kimmie flinch, Tarrin realized what he was feeling. There was only one explanation for what he was feeling. Nine powerful spells moving towards him on the open ocean? Those were the magical spells that powered *Zakkite Skyships*! That was why they felt familiar, because he'd seen them and felt them before!

Tarrin swore sulfurously as he literally jumped over Kimmie and out of bed. "Tarrin, what's wrong?" she asked in concern, sitting up.

"Kimmie, stay here!" he said as he moved towards the door. "There are Zakkites Skyships moving towards us!"

"Like bloody hell I'm going to stay here!" she snapped, quickly rolling out of bed and rushing after him as he opened the door. She paused just long enough to snatch up the belt she wore with her dresses, that had small pouches holding the material components for her Wizard spells. She whipped it around her waist, and Tarrin paused to think that she looked a bit silly wearing nothing but a leather belt. Then again, Tarrin wasn't wearing anything at all, and neither of them really felt like they had the time to get dressed.

Tarrin ran to the end of the companionway and banged loudly on Keritania's door. "Get up!" he shouted through the door. "Get up right

now!"

"Tarrin, I'm going to kill you!" Keritanima's voice blasted through the door.

"Get up!" he shouted. "There are Zakkites moving this way!"

That made every door in the companionway open, almost all at once. All his friends were in various states of undress, from Camara Tal standing in her doorway completely nude to Dolanna's frilly nightdress, but none of them looked very sleepy. Keritanima flung her door open, wearing a silk robe, and her expression was one of grim sobriety. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"I haven't *seen* them, but I can feel them coming. Can't you feel the pull in the Weave?"

"I can," Dolanna said after a moment. "It is very strong. Given we are on the open sea, it is only logical to assume that that could only be Zakkites."

"You're, you're right," Keritanima agreed, her eyes going distant for a moment. "That *has* to be a trio of Zakkite Triads. I count nine. Am I right?"

"Nine," Dolanna agreed.

"Nine," Tarrin nodded.

"Bloody hells," Camara Tal growled. "Let me get my sword."

"Quickly, all of you," Dolanna ordered down the companionway in a strong voice. "We do not have much time. Come above with whatever you can find, quickly!"

"A pitched battle with Zakkites. Not my idea of a good way to start the day," Dar grumbled as he hurried back into his room.

"If we do this right, it won't be as much a fight as the Zakkites think it will," Tarrin said, getting an idea. "How high up do Zakkites usually fly their ships, Kerri?"

"About a hundred feet--er, about a hundred and thirty spans or so," she replied.

"What would happen to one of those ships if it fell back to the ocean from that height?"

"It would crack like an egg," she told him immediately. She looked at him, then laughed. "Tarrin, can we do that?"

"It won't be easy, and it's going to take all three of us," he replied, "but we can."

"Do what?" Kimmie asked.

"Disrupt magic," Dolanna told her with a nod. "Yes, we could do that, but you are talking about disrupting an area of nearly a square *span*, dear one, and maintaining it for quite some time."

"Like I said, it won't be easy," he grunted. "I couldn't do it by myself, but we'll save ourselves a whole lot of headaches and save quite a few of Kerri's sailors if we do."

"Explain this to me, Tarrin," Kimmie commanded as Tarrin rushed away from Keritanima's door with Keritanima following behind, rushing towards the stairs that led to the deck above.

"Sorcerers can disrupt Wizard magic," he told her. "You know that."

"You're going to try to disrupt the magic that makes the skyships fly?" Kimmie asked, seeing the point of the matter.

"Not just that magic, but *all* Wizard magic," Keritanima told her. "The Zakkite Wizards won't be able to throw spells at my ships as long as we block them."

"With luck, the drop is going to do all the damage for us," Dolanna added. "So it is important that we ensure that their ships are airborne when we do this."

They burst out on deck, which was sheeted with water, and rain fell heavily from the sky driven by a rather stiff wind. The thick clouds concealed the moons and the Skybands, and made the night black as pitch. The rain reduced that already poor visibility even more. Tarrin could barely make out the lanterns on the clippers that were tied up with the steamship, ropes holding them together to ensure the ships didn't drift apart during the night. They would need light, and a lot of it, if they were going to make sure

that the Zakkite ships were indeed damaged or destroyed by the fall. "Kerri, go tell your men to signal the other ships to ready their cannons, but do it quietly," Dolanna told the Wikuni queen quickly. "We must be ready for them, but we do not want to know we are ready."

"We'll make it a big surprise," Keritanima grinned, and then she ran through the rain to the steep staircase that led up to the steering deck, and climbed up as the officer in charge of the dog watch saluted her sharply before she even got up to the deck. The others reached the deck looking as unprepared as Tarrin was. Dar wore nothing but smallclothes, doing his best not to look at Kimmie, Allia, or Camara Tal too much. Allia had grabbed her shirt and her short swords, the linen shirt she wore under her very long desert top not quite long enough to conceal the fact that she hadn't managed to put on anything else. Camara Tal had grabbed her swordbelt, and that meant that she also had her *tripa*, for the garment was actually attached to the swordbelt. So Allia had nothing on from the waist down, and Camara Tal had nothing on from the waist up. They were both armed, however, as Allia and Dar moved towards Dolanna, who was wearing her sheer silk nightgown and a frown, moving towards her so they could Circle with her if she needed them. Phandebrass was wearing a long nightshirt that left his skinny, knobby knees bare, but had managed to find the time to put on that ridiculous conical hat. He also had his belt around his waist, for like Kimmie, Phandebrass kept his spell components in the many small pouches tied to his leather belt. Binter and Sisska stood near Miranda, the two Vendari wearing nothing at all-though it didn't matter all that much, given that the reptillian nature of Vendari physiology made them both appear genderless, protecting the little mink Wikuni, wearing a robe that was tied so loosely that it threatened to compromise her modesty at any moment. She had a dagger in her hand, just as Binter had his hammer and Sisska had her axe, knowing that she could do little to help but ready to do whatever was needed of her. Azakar was by far the most prepared-looking of them all, for he had managed to get on his breeches and his breastplate both, but his feet were bare as he moved up behind Kimmie and took a defensive position nearby, sword in hand and eyes scanning the black, rainy skies.

"How far are they away?" Kimmie asked Tarrin seriously.

Tarrin closed his eyes and bridged into the Weave, so the energy of their magic would be more clear to him. He could sense their coming clearly, so

clearly that he could discern both a direction and a distance. "They're about two longspans away, moving towards us from over here," he said, pointing off the port side of the ship. "They're all gathered together, but their ships are starting to spread out."

"They are preparing to surround us," Dolanna realized. "How do they know we are here?"

"Magic, since they're Zakkites," Camara Tal grunted. "They don't do anything without using a damned spell." She spat. "That's why they can't beat us. Can't do for themselves, and it shows. As soon as they lose their magic, they're helpless weaklings."

"Let us hope that remains true," Dolanna told her. "How fast are they moving, Tarrin?"

Tarrin was silent a moment as he gauged the nearing of the sensation. "They'll be here in a few minutes."

"Long enough for us to put on some clothes?" Dar asked.

"Dar, you were never this shy in the baths," Allia told him with a slight smile.

"That was the baths," he said with a slight blush.

"Put your moral outrage back in its box until this is over, boy," Camara Tal ordered him bluntly, raising her sword. "I seriously doubt the Zakkites are going to be kind enough to stop and give us a chance to get dressed so we can meet them."

Tarrin tuned them out, gauging their distance more and more accurately. It was important for him to do so, for what he was about to do was going to be very exhausting, and that meant that it was going to have a limited range. What was most important was that they had to let the Zakkites get as close as possible, let them begin fanning out to silently encircle the Wikuni ships and let them think that they had the element of surprise. If they thought they'd been detected, they would attack with their magical spells, and that may start before all their ships were close enough for Tarrin to affect them. So they had to be close, very close, just one step away from initiating their attack.

Tarrin explained that to the others as he monitored the approach of the Zakkites, and Dolanna nodded. "Then let us move off the open deck," she said. "Move among the lashed crates, so we are not so obvious. If they see us dressed as we are now, they will be certain they have been detected," she said with a slight smile.

Tarrin felt that a wise move, so they all scattered among the crates and barrels that were lashed into groups on the top of the deck supplies they needed but had no room to store anywhere else. Tarrin knelt between a line of barrels and a line of stacked wooden crates. Kimmie was just behind him and Azakar just behind her, looming over her bare back with his imposing size.

"Tarrin, the other ships are getting ready," Keritanima's voice came over his amulet. *"What do you want us to do now?"*

"Wait," he said, putting a paw to his amulet. "Let them come in, let them think they have surprise on their side. I need them to be close enough so only one of us can disable them all in one blow, and since I'm the strongest, I'll take care of that. So let me strike first. What I want you and Dolanna to do is light up the sea, bright enough for us to see several longspans in any direction, so your ships can see what they're shooting at. It's going to take both of you to make that much light, so get down here and Circle with Dolanna, Allia, and Dar."

"I need to be up here so I can relay orders."

"Tell Donovan to tell the others ships to hold their fire until you light up the sky, then fire at anything that looks like it's still a threat."

"I'll tell the other ships. Give me a minute, and I'll be ready. When do you want us to light up the sky?"

"After I disrupt their magic."

"I thought that would be the best time," she said with a chuckle. *"So, we're going to pull their pants down, then yell and get everyone around to stare at their bare butts."*

"Something like that," he agreed, unable to suppress a slight smile at the image that conjured in his mind.

They waited in tense silence for long moments, hearing the feverish preparations taking place on the other ships, even as they tried to keep things quiet. The other clippers put out most of their lanterns, making it look like they were sleeping the rainy night away. Tarrin's attention was focused on the Zakkite ships, however, sensing them as they approached, and sensing also that they were both spreading out and slowing down. They were moving to surround the Wikuni ships, and they were aware that even in the pounding rain and the blinding darkness, the movements of their ships may give them away before they were ready to strike. Motion was much easier to see than shapes, and though their ships were painted black, there would still be some visible shifting in the background as they moved that a sharp-eyed lookout would be able to detect. All in all, Tarrin had to respect their tactics. They had obviously done this before, and they knew what they were doing. As long as they caught their prey off guard, victory for them was all but assured.

But this time they were not dealing with the average ship's crew. They were dealing with magic-users just as experienced and capable as they were. The Zakkites were going to be in for a very, very nasty shock.

They waited quietly for another couple of minutes, as the Zakkite ships moved closer and closer. He could sense their magic distinctly now, could feel the flow of magic from that other place from where Wizard magic came, through the Weave, and into each of the ships. He could even sense a precise location, and realized that what he was feeling wasn't a magical spell, it was a magical device. The devices that powered the ships' magical flight. Closer and closer they came, the furthest away only about half a longspan out, but that was still too far. He wanted them all within three hundred spans; that would be just outside the extreme range of their attack spells, but close enough for him to do something about them. He had the feeling that they wouldn't begin their assault until all their ships were within striking distance, to attempt to cripple and eliminate the four very formidable Wikuni clippers as quickly as possible. Even Zakkites tread *very* lightly around the Wikuni, as five hundred years of consistent losses on the sea against the seafaring empire had proved. They would treat the Wikuni with very high respect, respect for their very real chance of turning the tables on their attackers if they could get their cannons firing against the Zakkites, and that respect would demand that their ambush be as damaging

as possible when they made the initial assault. Tarrin intended to use that against them, let them set up, which also put them right where Tarrin could get at them.

"Tarrin, I think I can see them," Kimmie whispered in his ear as she looked over the water barrels. "I see something moving out there, something in the air, and it's big."

"Just another couple of moments," he said to her. "The lead ship is only a few hundred spans away from us."

"*Tarrin, Allia can see them,*" Dolanna told him through the amulet. "*Are you ready?*"

"Just another moment," he replied, putting his paw on his amulet. He ignored the leading ships, concentrating instead on the last three. They were about five hundred spans out, and that was too far. Tarrin waited in tense silence as his heartbeat ticked away the time, as the three ships he was watching crept closer and closer, seeming to take forever. He cast his senses about and realized that the other six ships had turned, were moving to surround the cluster of five stationary targets, leaving the three at the end to fill the hole they vacated and complete the trap.

That was when he would strike, just as they were *about* to enter the ring. The others wouldn't attack until they were in position, so he had to strike *before* they got into position and attacked. He started tamping his feet on the deck, an instinctual signal to Kimmie that the hunter was about to pounce, and she raised her paw over the crates and hissed audibly for everyone to get ready. Azakar thumped the hilt of his sword on the deck quickly, and that seemed to have the effect that Kimmie's barely audible and undecipherable voice did not. Everyone got very quiet, and Tarrin felt Keritanima, Dar, Allia, and Dolanna join in a Circle several rows of crates behind them.

Tarrin reached out and made a deeper connection to the Weave, beginning to get it ready. He would have to use High Sorcery to affect such a large area, and the glow would give him away. So he primed the Weave by saturating the two strands close enough for him to use, pooling up the power and making sure that it would only be a split second between him touching High Sorcery and being able to immediately draw in that prepared

energy and use it. He already had the weave he was going to use in his mind, going over the weaving of it again and again until he was sure he could get it woven and released before the Zakkites could react to his magical light, which would give away the fact that the Zakkites were the ones that had fallen into the trap.

The three ships began to separate from one another, moving to fill in the empty side of the ring. Almost. Almost....

Now!

Tarrin stood up and opened himself to the power of the Weave, drew in the power of High Sorcery, and the Weave responded to him. His paws exploded in Magelight, a light that seemed brilliant in the murky, rainy darkness, a light that immediately drew every eye to his position. Tarrin sucked up that energy he had prepared like water pouring into a glass, and he began using it even before it was finished flowing into him. The weave necessary to disrupt Wizard magic swept out of him in a blisteringly fast wave, the flows wrapping and weaving and twisting into the proper spell so quickly that any who could perceive them would have trouble keeping up with what he was doing. He did his teacher proud by weaving a spell designed to affect a massive area in a shockingly short amount of time, so attuned and in touch with the power of the Weave was he, so attuned to his Goddess. Her power flowed through him effortlessly, and it obeyed his every command as the six flows of the power of Interdiction, the power to disrupt Wizard magic, formed in a huge globe nearly a thousand spans across with the steamship forming its center. Tarrin didn't have the time to look over the huge spell before releasing it, for every second counted. He could only release it and hope that he had woven it right. If he did not, it would either fizzle or explode in a Wildstrike, which itself would be just as dangerous to the steamship as the Zakkites were. The bigger the spell, the more unpredictable and potentially destructive a Wildstrike it could create would be.

The spell was true, however, because Tarrin felt it take hold around them. He felt the Weave react to that spell, as the strands within its area of effect suddenly stopped conducting the energy that fueled Wizard magic, swallowing it up and denying its release into the physical world. Almost at the same time, the Circle that Keritanima was leading did its part, creating a

globe of blazing light directly over the steamship, so brilliant, so bright, that it illuminated the sea for almost a longspan in every direction, an incandescent beacon that blinded almost everyone with its brightness, blinded eyes that had become accustomed to the dark gloom.

Tarrin winced from the light, but his Were-cat eyes quickly adjusted to the change in brightness, allowing him to see what happened next. The nine black ships, floating in the air, suddenly all shuddered, then as one, they literally dropped out of the sky like massive stones. They had been about a hundred and fifty spans above the sea, high enough to clear the masts and rigging of the ships below them, but all of them were about fifty to a hundred spans away from the ships. They all plummeted towards the choppy sea, and Tarrin, as well as many on the silent Wikuni ships, could hear the collective shrieking of the men on board those vessels as they fell out of the sky.

Those screams were cut brutally short as the Zakkite skyships hit the water. They didn't all hit at once, they struck one after another as the ones closer to the sea hit first, sending huge blasts of water away from them and into the sky, blasts of water that sprayed over the four Wikuni clippers that encircled the unarmed steamship at the center of their formation. The cries of the men were replaced by the deafening roar of those splashes, and the sound of snapping and tearing wood as the nine ships were slammed into the water, were exposed to stresses that their wooden constructions had never been designed to withstand. Masts tore from decks, hulls split, keels snapped like twigs as the nine ships impacted the water. Tarrin had been looking to the port, looking towards the three ships that had filled the gap, and his eyes focused on only one of them in the chaos of flying water and shuddering vessels. That vessel struck the water almost perfectly flat on its keel, and it after the geyser of water cleared out of the way, he saw that the ship had broken in half almost perfectly amidships. The two halves tore away from one another in a squeal of grinding and tearing wood and snapping ropes, and both halves began to sink almost immediately.

"Merciful Sheniiia," Kimmie whispered as she watched the ship Tarrin was watching, watched as stunned men jumped from its two halves, as men floundered in the water, seeking out floating debris. There was a sudden loud boom, the report of a cannon, and then another, and then they came quickly as the Wikuni cannons opened up on the ships, blowing massive holes in

the ones that hadn't been shattered by the fall, making sure they would soon be joining the broken ones on the bottom of the sea. The firing only lasted a few moments, as it became clear that the few ships that had survived the fall intact had been burst open at the seams by the impact, and they were quickly beginning to sink. The Wikuni gunners ceased fire without orders, because quite literally, they were firing on doomed ships. They all stopped and watched as ship after ship slipped under the waves.

In a matter of ten minutes, it was over. The last of the Zakkite skyships slipped beneath the waves, leaving the seas surrounding the five Wikuni vessels littered with debris, bodies, and the men who had survived the fall, who were clinging nervelessly to whatever they could find. They were all stunned, absolutely senseless after the harrowing fall and impact with the water, or they were struck dumb with disbelief that their trap had been turned back on them with such a devastating effect. Keritanima ended the spell of light and broke the Circle, sending Dar and Allia back below so they could either return to bed or get dressed. Camara Tal, seeing that neither her sword nor her healing spells would be needed, also went back below decks, muttering in displeasure, but the relief of not having a battle showed on her face. Any warrior was pleased when it turned out that they didn't have to fight, even seasoned veterans like Camara Tal. Tarrin's father had always told him that the favorite saying of the men in the army, even the Rangers, was that the best kind of battle was the one that was avoided.

"I'd say your plan worked, Tarrin," Azakar said calmly, laying the flat of his sword on his shoulder. "Are the Wizards still being blocked?" he asked, sheathing his weapon. It was apparent that it wasn't going to be needed.

Tarrin nodded.

"Then if Camara Tal is right, they're helpless," he surmised. "It'll just be a matter of picking them up."

"No, it won't," Kimmie said with a sigh. "As soon as Tarrin drops the spell, they'll get their magic back. We can't afford that. We can't take prisoners, Zak. Not now. And especially not Zakkites."

Azakar looked at Kimmie with surprise, stunned that the gentle Were-cat who was so amiable would say something so ruthless. "But they'll die if we leave them out there!" he protested.

"They won't be helpless, Zak," Kimmie told him. "Some of those men swimming around out there are Wizards. They'll have magic that will help them save themselves."

"But what about the slaves?" Azakar said loudly. "They didn't ask to be here, and the Wizards aren't going to save *them*! Are we going to leave innocent men out there to die? Are we?" he demanded with a shout.

"We are," Tarrin said in a low voice, his tail slashing behind him as he looked over his shoulder at the Mahuut.

"That's cruel!" Azakar said accusingly.

"I'm not known for my sentimentality, Zak," he replied in a cool tone, narrowing his eyes at his fellow Knight.

"We can't just leave innocent men out there to die!" Azakar shouted.

"I'll give you a choice, Zak," Tarrin told him, turning around halfway. "We either leave them behind, or I'll kill them all right now."

Azakar gaped at him in horror.

"This is not a game, Zak, and we don't have time to be chivilrous, or even nice. Those men will threaten us reaching our goal, and I won't let *anything* stand in our way."

"But leaving them out there, that's cruel! That's *evil*!"

Tarrin raised a glowing paw, lightning crackling around his fingers. "Then I'll make sure they don't suffer very long," he said in a deadly serious voice.

"No!" Azakar said, reaching for Tarrin's paw, but the Were-cat pulled back out of his reach too quickly for him. "Tarrin, we can't do this! Kimmie, tell him we can't leave those men to die!"

"Zak, sometimes you're too much a dreamer," Kimmie sighed, looking up at him with compassionate eyes. "Tarrin is right, Zak. This is a war, my big friend, and sometimes in a war we have to do things we don't like."

"Well, I'm not going to be a party to murder!" Azakar shouted.

"Then choose, Azakar. It's up to you, because to be completely honest, I don't care either way."

Azakar looked at him with disbelieving eyes, shock apparent on his face. "I, I won't let you kill them," Azakar stated defiantly.

"Then we leave them behind," Tarrin said, turning his back on the Mahuut.

"I said I *won't let you kill them*," Azakar said hotly, drawing his sword.

Tarrin stopped dead. "Don't go any further, Zak," he warned in a deceptively soft voice, not looking at the Knight. "If you use that sword against me, you won't live to resheathe it."

Before things could deteriorate any further, Kimmie put herself between the two towering males, putting a paw on Azakar's chest and pushing him away. "Zak, are you insane?" Kimmie demanded in a surprised voice.

"I'm not going to let him kill them," Azakar said with a snarl.

"He's not. I am," Keritanima said in a strong voice from behind the Mahuut. Azakar turned and looked at the Wikuni Queen, whose eyes were hard and her posture stiff. The bearing of a monarch, not the young woman they all knew. "We take no prisoners, Zak. None. We can't afford the risk."

"I can't believe any of you!" Azakar hissed at her. "You're going to condemn innocent men to death because it's not *convenient* for you?"

"You have a choice, Zak," Keritanima told him in a level voice. "You can see the little picture, or you can see the big picture. We can pick up the survivors and save a few dozen lives. And if we do, we put at risk the lives of every single person on these ships, and even more than that, every single person you know and love. We put the lives of everyone in my kingdom at risk, in Suld at risk, bloody hells, we put everyone in the *world* at risk. You forget what we're doing out here. We run the risk of letting someone else beat us to the Firestaff, and having them use it. You know what's going to happen if that happens. Are you willing to risk that, Zak? Are you ready to put *my* life on the line? Miranda's? Dolanna's? Everyone you know and love? Are those few dozen lives worth risking the safety of the entire world?"

Azakar lowered his sword and his head, his eyes haunted.

"That's right. It's not an easy thing to face, is it?" Keritanima asked with a quavering voice. "Do you think I enjoy abandoning men to the sea? I

don't, I assure you. If anyone understands, if anyone wouldn't want to see it happen, it's a Wikuni. But I'm going to do it because the risk I'd take if I saved them is just too terrible to contemplate. Those men are going to die. That's a fact that you can't change. They can die here and now, or they can die when we fail and unleash ultimate horror on the world. The only question is how many other innocent people are going to die with them."

Keritanima looked stern, but Tarrin could see the tears forming in her eyes. "So make your choice, Zak. Because I simply can't stand here and talk about this anymore."

With a hanging head, Azakar dropped his sword to the deck.

"Donovan, pass this order," Keritanima told the Tellurian as he approached her, speaking in a voice almost trembling as she tried to control it. "Pick up no survivors, and discourage them from approaching the ships. We'll weigh anchor and go under sail until the steam engine is fixed. We are leaving this place. We have to get away from those Zakkites before Tarrin can lower his spell of disruption, and I won't have him kill himself maintaining the spell while we lounge around here." She sniffled. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'd really like to be alone right now," Keritanima said with teary eyes, turning and running towards the stairs leading below decks.

Tarrin sighed. That couldn't have been easy for her. The memory of the dream came back to him, of Keritanima standing on a mound of skulls, weeping. Now he understood the meaning of it. Keritanima had no qualms about destroying the guilty, but when it came to sacrificing the innocent, it was a different story. It was something that, as a queen, she occasionally was forced to do, but it was never easy for her. And if it did become easy, then she would be no better than her father was. Tarrin looked towards Miranda, and they shared a knowing look, then the mink ran after her friend and employer. Miranda understood. The dream had been a warning, he felt, a warning to not allow Keritanima to dwell on what had happened. Miranda would know what to do.

Tarrin felt the weight of the spell begin to take its toll on him. It had taken High Sorcery to create, and he couldn't let go of High Sorcery until he ended it. His paws still glowed with Magelight, and they would remain so until he could safely end the spell. But as Keritanima pointed out to Azakar, he couldn't do that so long as they were close to the surviving Zakkites.

"I hate this," Azakar finally said, his head still hung low.

Tarrin reached down and picked up his sword, then wiped the water off of it and resheathed it for him. "So do I, Zak," he said honestly. "I know you think I'm a monster, but maybe now you understand me a little better. I don't do what I do because I like it. I do what I do because I know what will happen if we fail. In this case, my gentle friend, the ends justify the means. We *must* succeed, no matter what."

"No matter the cost?" he said in a quiet, plaintive voice.

Tarrin bowed his head himself, a wave of emptiness flowing through him, and there was no sound but the sound of the rain on the deck. "Some of us have already paid that price," he told the Mahuut. "Thank your gods you weren't one of them." Then he padded slowly, statefully, towards the stairs to return to the cabin, to get out of the pounding rain.

Chapter 9

As always, whenever someone confronted Tarrin about what he had become, it caused him to undergo a period of depression afterwards. Tarrin knew what he was, but he didn't revel in it the way some people thought he did. He had been like Azakar once, gentle and caring, but the Cat, time, betrayal, and the danger of his mission had changed him. He knew that it changed him, he knew that if the Tarrin that had been could see himself now, he would be horrified. But in the end, there was nothing he could do about it. And since it was a situation he couldn't change, he didn't dwell on it. That was forced upon him by the Cat, but in a way, he was glad of it.

He wouldn't have been able to be very depressed even if he tried, because of Kimmie. She stayed with him the entire day, using careful, gentle words and sincere affection, humor and compassion, to prevent him from falling back in that black pit of nearly psychotic self-torture. She lavished the same kind of attention on him that he had been lavishing on her, making him feel like the most important person in the world. Kimmie did indeed know him better than he knew himself, and her previous experience dealing with Mist had made her almost invincible in her battle to keep him from brooding.

Things were rather tense on the vessel after the surprisingly swift victory over the Zakkites, and Tarrin was only a part of it. Phandebrass and four of the Tellurian engineers had somehow--nobody knew how--managed to salvage some of the magical equipment from the lone Zakkite ship that had not sunk as the five Wikuni vessels prepared to get under way. It took so long because the steamship's sails hadn't been unfurled since they started out, and the sailors needed a little extra time to set the rigging to support the sails. Phandebrass and his fellow Tellurians had left in a longboat--Keritanima was furious that the sailors had helped the mage lower it--and had somehow managed to get over to the ship without any of the Zakkites in the sea challenging him or trying to climb into his boat. They then boarded the badly listing ship, which would sink at any moment,

and had managed to get out just as it did sink with several enemy spellbooks and other strange things thrown into a sack. What was most surprising of all was that the mage had somehow pulled up the magical device that allowed the skyships to fly, pulled it off the deck, tied a rope to it, tied the rope to the longboat, and then let the ship sink with the device still aboard. The longboat very nearly sank when the rope kept it from falling into the deep, and Phandebrass and two of the Tellurians that were helping him had to bail frantically as the other two rowed desperately to get the longboat back to where they could tie it to a Wikuni vessel and keep it from going under.

After he got back, Keritanima let him have it. But it was just the kind of thing that Phandebrass would do, and they all knew it. Whenever Phandebrass found something that intrigued him, he would go to almost any lengths to study it or research it, even at tremendous personal risk. He was almost crazy that way. He had been curious about how the Zakkites made their ships fly, for no mage outside Zakkar had ever been aboard one of their legendary skyships. Tarrin had seen their flying device before, and had described it to the Wizard long ago, during one of their many talks. Phandebrass knew exactly what to look for, so when they boarded the sinking ship, he knew exactly what to do. He had had the Tellurians go about tearing the device out of the deck as he recovered any magical equipment he thought may be useful or interesting to study.

And so, those were the circumstances that caused a flying device from a Zakkite skyship to be lashed down onto the spare deck space on the steamship.

Phandebrass was deliriously happy about it, so happy in fact that he handed over all the spellbooks and magical knickknacks to Kimmie for her to study as he worked on the flying device. It was a large metal contraption that had a floor and two pillars, and from the pillars there were chains with manacles on the ends. Tarrin had seen that device before, when he had destroyed the Zakkites long ago when they were on the *Star of Jerod*, seen a Wyvern locked into those manacles just before destroying the ship with Sorcery. It was very large, so large in fact that it should have sunk the longboat like a stone as soon as the rope that tied the two together had snapped taut. How the longboat managed to stay afloat was an absolute mystery, and only enhanced Phandebrass unusual reputation among his

friends. The Wizard was wild and scattered, but he seemed to have this absolutely amazing luck that allowed him to slither through any situation unscathed. That mystical luck had saved the Wizard once again.

The steam engine was repaired at about noontime the next day, as Keritanima took Tarrin down into the engine room so Donovan could show him the part that had broken. Tarrin used Druidic magic to Conjure a replacement, and once it was installed, they were under steam once again and moving at good speed towards their destination.

Those days were filled with magical uncertainty. It turned out that it wasn't the spells of the Zakkites that made them so devastating in an attack on other ships, it was their magical objects. Phandebrass had recovered nine separate little wooden sticks that Kimmie called *wands*, sticks that had been magically imbued with the power to invoke a magical spell upon command. It was the same spell over and over again, and each of the little wand devices could only invoke the spell so many times before its magical supply was exhausted. Tarrin could feel that magical power stored inside the little sticks. What made everyone so nervous was when Kimmie worked on unlocking the means of activating each wand. Magical balls of fire or raking blasts of lightning or pale beams of magical energy would fly across the deck at random intervals as Kimmie succeeded in discovering the method of activating each wand, then began studying them to determine their function. While she was doing that, Phandebrass was absolutely attached to his flying machine, never moving more than twenty spans from it as he measured it, studied it, experimented on it, even tried to cut the tip off one of the tapered pillars to learn what the device had been made from. His experimentations had noticeable effects on the device, and on the ship to which it had been attached. On one occasion, the entire ship suddenly lifted about two spans off the surface of the water for about three heartbeats, then dropped back down, shaking up the entire ship and everything in it. An infuriated Donovan ran out from the engine room and actually slapped Phandebrass across the face because his little stunt had broken a part in the steam engine. Tarrin was summoned to Conjure a replacement part, and after about three hours, the ship was again under way.

That had been the last straw. Keritanima threatened to throw the device over the side if Phandebrass did any more experimenting. She told him he could study it, but no more magic. Phandebrass looked indignant and

terrified that his precious captured device would be thrown overboard, so he promised to behave.

The destruction of nine Zakkite ships had done much to thin out the crowds on the sea. Or more to the point, the nine Zakkite ships had done the thinning, and the Wikuni formation was reaping the rewards of that sweep. They encountered no vessels for a long ten day stretch, but on that tenth day, Allia's eagle eyes had spotted exactly what none of them wanted to see. Another Zakkite Triad had appeared on the northwestern horizon, and they were moving southwest, towards them. But Keritanima seemed unconcerned. Zakkite ships were fearsome in battle, but they didn't fly everywhere they went. And when they were on the sea, they were slower than Wikuni vessels. The common Wikuni tactic for dealing with Zakkites was to flee from them if outnumbered and send out the call, and every Wikuni ship in the vicinity would converge in a central location then turn around and attempt to chase down the Zakkites with superior numbers. The Zakkites were familiar with this tactic, so it turned into a game of cat and mouse on the high seas, as the Zakkites tried to sink lone Wikuni vessels before reinforcements could arrive.

Though Keritanima said that the Wikuni were faster, those three Zakkite ships did not disappear from the horizon for long. They would reappear at irregular intervals, looking as if they had put on every square finger of sail in an attempt to keep up with their quarry. The Zakkites' ability to keep up unnerved the Wikuni sailors on the steamship, and the lack of space and brutal heat only made them even more short-tempered. The occasional fights that been going on before became more common, and had even spread to the clippers. The famous discipline of the Wikuni Navy was starting to break down.

The morale of the men got worse and worse as each day passed. Tarrin heard them muttering constantly under their breaths about the insane mission the Queen had pushed on them, mutter about other sailors they didn't like, complain about the steamship's bad conditions, and voice their discontent. The mood got darker and darker as they moved ever southwestward, slowly turning more and more south as they kept the Diamond Crown firmly at the bow.

The insidious nature of it hadn't been apparent to Tarrin until he began seeing discord among his friends. The sniping between Camara Tal and Phandebrass began to get ugly, and Azakar glared at Tarrin every opportunity he got. Tarrin and the Mahuut hadn't really talked or reconciled since the fight over the Zakkite survivors, and Tarrin's behavior had seemed to rankle the Knight as time went by, festering like an infection. Dar and Keritanima started fighting like siblings, arguing over the least little thing, and their arguments got longer and more vicious every time. Keritanima seemed consumed by her need to wrangle with Dar, but one fact kept Keritanima focused, kept them all focused. They had left Vendaka a month before, and the instructions said that they were supposed to travel for only forty. They were getting very close to their destination, and that knowledge kept all of them rational. They only had about ten days to go, and then they were going to be there. That helped alleviate some of the stress, and the air had even begun to cool as they moved deeper into the southern hemisphere, away from the tropical heat of the equator. It was still hot, but it wasn't as brutally hot as it had been, going from unbearable to merely uncomfortable.

So it was understandable that there was a tremendous amount of tension on the ship when they sighted their first land in more than thirty days. It was a small island, little more than a volcanic peak jutting out of the water, with smoke issuing forth lazily from the volcanic cone. The whole thing was a mass of black stone, coastlines that rose out of the sea as steeply as the side of a mountain, as waves pounded frothily against the steep black rocks. The disappointment that it wasn't an inhabitable island, that there would be no respite from the diet of hard tack and salted meat that was the staple of a sailor, made the Wikuni even more irritable.

The night after the island passed by was quite momentous. Tarrin was awakened by Sapphire biting at his ear, but there was also a scraping at the door, very faint, very muffled. Had Tarrin not had his nose buried in Kimmie's hair, he would have smelled the Wikuni outside the door. His keen eyes made out that they had stuck something very thin, like a knifeblade, through the doorframe to try to throw the latch. They were trying to get in. But why? Tarrin crept over Kimmie and slinked up to the door silently, pausing to listen. The similarity of the situation struck him, as he recalled creeping up to a door in the Tower to listen to men that tried to

break into his room. Those men had been trying to kill him. What did these men want?

"Careful, ya clumsy oaf!" one of them hissed. "That beast has ears, ya know!"

"Why're we doin' this, Clem?" another asked. "Ye've seen that monster, and ye heard the stories!"

"We can't convince her Majesty to turn us around and take us home unless we got collateral, Vin," a third voice said. "I like her Majesty, but this insanity has gone on long enough. We just had the bad luck to draw these two. You got that silver knife handy?"

"Aye, but I hope we don't have to use it. Goin' home is good and all, but that big furry one saved us from the Zakkites. It ain't right to pay him back by killin' 'im."

"Ain't nobody here wants bloodshed, Vin," the one called Clem assured him. "We just want her Majesty to turn us around."

"We'll be hanged fer sure."

"Better to hang at home than die out here," the third one whose name was unknown said immediately.

Tarrin was stunned. They were going to mutiny! He knew that they were unhappy, but to mutiny, it was unbelievable! That one was right, they would be hanged. But they sounded like they'd rather hang than keep going!

It was irrational! Why would they want to go home, when certain death was waiting for them? Not only were they going to mutiny, they were going to mutiny on the ship that carried their queen. That would be as good as high treason against the Crown! And there were more than these three. they said that they got the bad luck of drawing Tarrin. That meant that other mutineers were going to try to take some of the others hostage, the ones closest to Keritanima. They'd never get anywhere near Miranda, so that left Dar, Allia, Dolanna, and Camara Tal. They'd die quickly trying to take Allia or Camara Tal, and though Dolanna wouldn't kill them, they'd fare just as badly against her. Dar was the only one they'd have a chance of taking, but the young Arkisian's Sorcery was much stronger now. He would be no easy mark either.

Weaving blindly, Tarrin sent a weave of Air across the door and released it. He felt it collapse around the three mutineers, enfold them in itself, and quite effectively paralyze them by encasing them in sheaths of solid Air that only gave enough for them to breathe. "Kimmie," Tarrin called quickly, then put his paw on his amulet. "Kerri."

"You woke me up!" came a bleary response.

"You'd better get up. Three of your men just tried to take me hostage. And from the sound of it, there are more."

"What?"

"Just get up and get Binter and Sisska out into the companionway. Allia will kill whoever comes after her, you know that, and we need these men alive to find out what's going on."

Tarrin ignored any reply, shifting his attention. "Dar."

"I'm up, Tarrin. I was about to come get you. Do you know that two of Kerri's sailors just broke into my room? They tried to tie me up!"

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. All those nights sleeping in the same room with you has turned me into a light sleeper," he chuckled.

"Did you kill them?"

"No, I just tied them up with Sorcery. We need to tell Kerri about this."

"Three of them just tried to do the same to me," he informed his young friend. "I think we all need to get out there and break up this little rebellion."

Tarrin tried raising Allia, but he got no reply. The sudden sound of combat that roared up the companionway explained why. There were shouts of fury, then sudden groans of consternation, then shrieks of agony. Tarrin opened the door to hear sudden confused shouting, and when he looked out, he saw about fifteen of the Wikuni sailors in the companionway, all holding knives or cutlasses or starwheel pistols. They looked shocked and frightened, and Tarrin saw why. Allia was standing in her doorway with her two shortwords in her hands. She was nude, and there was blood spattered all over her. She looked furious. And in all the world, there was nothing

worse than an infuriated Selani. The sailors in the companionway saw her, saw that she had caught the men trying to sneak into her cabin, and dealt with them in a manner that was quite final.

One fellow had enough of a mind to level his pistol at Tarrin's sister. Tarrin's protective instincts roared to the forefront, but the man fired before he could stop him. Allia seemed unphased by that act, and Tarrin saw why when the small lead ball struck something in front of Allia, ricocheted into the wall beside her. Allia has woven a shield of Air to protect her against the pistol. Wise Allia, even prepared in a moment of fury!

The man may have had the time to fire the pistol, but he didn't have time for anything else. Tarrin was on him a mere heartbeat later, his wicked claws ripping the life out of the dog Wikuni before the loud bang of the pistol had a chance to fade from the cramped passage. The attack on Allia had sent Tarrin right into a blind rage, and his rage caused him to savage his unfortunate victim in exclusion of turning on the others. That moment of fury gave the Wikuni sailors a chance to flee from the Were-cat, whose attention was focused on shredding the body of the one who had fired on his sisters into pieces as small as he could possibly make them.

It was about to turn into a very ugly slaughter, as Camara Tal came out of her room, this time in a breastplate as well as her *tripa*, sword drawn and ready. Binter and Sisska stepped out into the passage with Keritanima just behind, and Phandebrass and Azakar too had come out of their rooms ready to do battle. Tarrin roared in fury as he reduced the Wikuni who had attacked Allia to a mangled pile of quivering gore, then turned and moved to attack the fleeing Wikuni, who were running up the passageway towards Keritanima, Binter, and Sisska. Tarrin's room was the first one passed after coming down the stairs, and Allia's was the second. That put Tarrin between the Wikuni sailors and the only way out of the companionway. Only the three Wikuni sailors that Tarrin immobilized with his magic were on the other side of him, the only ones with a chance to survive the Were-cat's fury.

Then Kimmie was there. She rushed in front of him and put her arms out wide, looking squarely into his eyes. "He's dead, Tarrin," she said softly. "The one that tried to hurt Allia is dead. Let it go. Let it go."

The Cat looked at her, recognized her as mate and friend, and saw that she was moving to defend the enemies behind. The Cat paused to consider this. The Cat knew that mate was wise and knowing about things that the Cat did not understand, and the Cat deferred to her wisdom. So if mate protected the enemies, perhaps they were not enemies. She had her back to them, and they were not attacking her. That helped the Cat make that decision, and gain more respect for mate. Mate was strong of heart to challenge the Cat when it was angry, when mate knew fully well that she was the weaker of them and could not stop it if it decided not to listen to her. Mate was a good female, and the cub she would bear him would have her strength of heart as well as his physical power. A fine cub.

Easily and gently, the Cat receded back into Tarrin's mind, allowing his conscious to regain control over himself.

Tarrin put a paw to his forehead, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. As always, he was a little disoriented and unsure what had happened, but he did know that he'd been in a rage, and that he'd only been like that a few quick moments. He looked and saw Kimmie standing between him and the dozen or so terrified Wikuni sailors behind her, arms out and her expression resolute. She was protecting them from him! She didn't protect all of them, for he could smell the blood and flesh of a Wikuni all over him. He'd killed at least one of them.

It came back to him quickly, because he'd only been in his rage a moment. One had shot at Allia with a pistol, so he had dealt with the man in a suitable manner. He looked at the others, saw them all standing woodenly, turning around to face Keritanima. They turned and just stood there.

Tarrin sensed it after clearing his head. Keritanima was using Sorcery, a Mind weave, on them. Because Keritanima was Wikuni, she could affect other Wikuni with Mind weaves. She was using one now to control all of them, to keep them from panicking.

"Just what in the bloody blazes is going on around here!" Camara Tal snapped, brandishing her sword.

"A mutiny, it seems," Phandebrass answered her.

"I didn't ask you, you clod!" Camara Tal shouted at him, raising her sword in Phandebrass' direction.

"Now see here, I've been very nice to you up until now, but I've grown tired of your incessant picking," the mage said grimly, pulling one of the captured wands out of the belt over his nightshirt. "If you don't like me this much, I think we should do something about it, we should."

"Cease, both of you!" Dolanna said, but it fell on deaf ears. Camara Tal stalked up towards Phandebrass with her sword levelled at him, and Phandebrass pointed his captured wand at her threateningly.

Then they both simply stopped. Their eyes glazed over as Tarrin felt Dolanna do the same thing to them that Keritanima did to the Wikuni.

"What is going on around here?" Dar asked, looking at Tarrin fearfully. "Camara and Phandebrass *like* each other! They just argue because they enjoy it!"

Tarrin looked at Camara Tal and Phandebrass in surprise, but Dolanna closed her eyes and bade at them. They stiffly obeyed her, coming up to her and kneeling before her, so Dolanna could put her hands on each of their heads without having to strain herself to reach up so far. Dolanna's expression became searching for a long moment, then her eyes snapped open in surprise. "Goddess!" she gasped. "It is *magic* doing this!"

"What?" Kimmie asked, turning to face the diminutive Sorceress.

"It is very faint, very subtle," she said. "But there is a magical influence provoking this animosity."

Keritanima beckoned to one of the sailors, and he marched up to her and stood stock still. Keritanima put her hands on either side of the ram Wikuni's face, under his horns, her expression one of concentration. Then she opened her eyes. "There is something there," she agreed. "It's affecting his mind, irritating his anger and influencing him."

"We are close to our goal. Perhaps this is but the first of its defenses," Allia said sagely. "A magic that causes discord in whoever attempts to reach it, so that they turn on one another."

"I never felt a thing," Tarrin said.

"Me either," Kimmie agreed.

"Neither did I, but it must be so," Allia added. "For a while now, I have felt that the tension on the ship was uncharacteristic for the Wikuni. They are just not like this. Not normally."

"So we have magic that affects humans and Wikuni, but not Were-cats and Selani," Dolanna mused. "There must be something about your races that renders you immune."

"You haven't shown any changes, Dolanna," Tarrin told her. "Neither have Binter or Sisska."

"I have felt certain, stirrings," she admitted. "But it was nothing that I could not control."

"I guess our training makes us resistant," Keritanima said.

"It didn't make *you* resistant," Tarrin told her bluntly. "You and Dar have been fighting like two angry hornets for days now."

"The question is, what are we going to do about it?" Kimmie asked pointedly.

That made them all silent for a moment. "There's nothing I can do," Tarrin said simply. "If I can't even sense it or see it, then there's not much I can do to stop it."

"We'll need to discover what this magic is and exactly how it affects us," Dolanna offered to Keritanima.

"I think we could design a counterspell, but we need to do it quickly, before the sailors on the clippers start firing on one another," Keritanima agreed.

"Binter, Sisska, have you felt anything unusual lately?" Tarrin asked the Vendari.

"No," he answered. "Only an increased awareness of the hostility around us."

"What have you been feeling, Dar?" Dolanna asked.

"Homesick," he replied after a moment. "So strong that all I wanted to do was go home. I thought Tarrin and Kerri were the one keeping us from

going home. I know better than to be nasty to Tarrin, so I guess I was taking it out on Kerri."

"Dar's training as a Sorcerer made him more resistant to the effects of the magic," Dolanna surmised. "Kerri?"

"Homesick," she agreed. "But I thought it was because I wanted to get home to Rallix."

"The sailors mutinied because they wanted to go home," Tarrin said. "I heard them talk. They were willing to get hanged, so long as it was done back at Wikuna."

"I think that is how the magic affects the mind," Dolanna said. "It provokes a sense of homesickness. Actually, that is quite clever. If it was a magic that made one not want to continue forward, that would be much more noticable than a feeling of homesickness."

"What about you, Miranda?" Dolanna asked. "Have you felt anything unusual?"

"No, not really," Miranda said. "I guess I feel home is wherever Kerri is," she said with a charming grin.

Tarrin looked at her, not sure about that. Miranda wasn't entirely a Wikuni, she was an Avatar, and that extra granted to her by her gods was probably insulating her from the magic's effect. Of course, nobody knew that but Tarrin, and he wasn't about to say anything. As long as Miranda had a rational explanation for not being affected by the magic, there was no reason for him to say anything.

Dolanna and Keritanima seemed to accept that explanation. Sapphire flapped out of the room and landed on Tarrin's shoulder, rubbing her head against the side of his neck affectionately. "Well, the magic hasn't affected the drakes either," Kimmie chuckled. "Maybe it's targeted at humans and Wikuni. After all, who else would have the ships or nautical expertise to get this far? Selani and Vendari don't sail, and the Were-kin wouldn't care to do what we're doing. I don't know of any other races intelligent enough to sail ships."

"The Aeradalla, but they wouldn't bother building a ship," Tarrin said. "If they can't fly there, they don't go there."

"Well, I think we know how the magic is affecting us," Dolanna said. "Now we try to counter it."

They did that for the rest of the day. Keritanima didn't punish anyone for the mutiny attempt, but she did order *everyone*, even the Wikuni on the other ships, to go to their quarters and rest. She explained that there was a magical force affecting them all, and that it was imperative for everyone to rest and remain calm until the magicians among them could come up with a way to counter the magic. Keritanima and Dolanna didn't restrict their efforts to themselves, they summoned the Priests of the other four ships and the Priest on the steamship, they released Camara Tal and Phandebrass and had them join them, they even brought in Dar, Allia, Kimmie, and Tarrin, and then they all put their heads together and discussed the matter, and tried to find a way for those among them to find a way to counter the magical influence.

By nightfall, they had a solution, but they also had a serious problem. Keritanima had engineered a Mind weave to protect from the magic, but it was not something that a Priest could duplicate. Any Sorcerer could cast the spell, but the fact that it was a Mind weave meant that only Dolanna and Keritanima could use it on the humans and Wikuni on the ship. For Dolanna, this wasn't a daunting proposition, for there were only fifteen humans for her to protect. But Keritanima would be responsible for protecting over two hundred Wikuni, and she would have to cast the spell at least three times a day. Mind weaves weren't permanent, but their effects did linger beyond the expiration of the spell, how long they lasted depending entirely on the mental toughness and willpower of the mind being affected. Keritanima wouldn't be able to protect every Wikuni on all five ships, and Dolanna and Keritanima both reasoned that the closer they came to the source of that magic, the stronger its effects would become. The better conditions and higher level of discipline on the military clippers hadn't caused any dangerous problems on the clippers, but as they got closer to the source of the magic, they too would be affected. And the other four ships were carrying cannons. If the crews on board those ships began to get affected by the magic, they could start firing on one another, or even the steamship.

Keritanima and Dolanna cast the counterspell on the men on the steamship, one after another, as the men waited in line to receive their

magical protection from the ship's magicians. The Wikuni sailors looked very sheepish and quite nervous that the Queen herself would be personally using magic on them, an act that made them very proud and very ashamed. Proud that the Queen would do such a thing for them, and ashamed that they had not resisted the magic better and had actually attempted to mutiny against her.

The captains of the four clippers were outraged by Keritania's solution. "Absolutely not!" Captain Jalis shouted, a burly bobcat Wikuni with a scar marring the fur on the right side of his face. "Your Majesty, your ship is *unarmed*! If you send us back, you'll have no protection!"

"Captain, you fail to see the point," Keritania said coolly. "This magic affects Wikuni *and* humans. If we continue on alone, I seriously doubt that we're going to run into any opposition. We got in this far because of the discipline of our navy. Do you think these rag-tag vessels carrying these mages will have the same discipline to breach this magic this far? Their crews would have turned on one another long before now. Think about it. Why haven't we seen any more ships since the Zakkites? It's because this magical effect is making them avoid this area."

"I will not gamble her Majesty's life on maybes!" he said adamantly.

"Are you a loyal servant of the Crown?" Keritania asked calmly.

"Of course!" he said proudly.

"Then accept my orders," she told him. "I want your ships to turn around and see if you can't sink those Zakkites tailing us. Once you do, anchor somewhere outside the magical effect and wait for us. I'll have our Priest contact yours at regular intervals, so you'll be constantly appraised of our progress and situation. If you feel that we're getting in over our head, then you can come in after us. But only *one* ship, and manned by only your most disciplined veteran sailors. A strong will resists the effect of the magic."

"I will obey her Majesty, but I refuse to allow you to go in there without some kind of protection. You must at least take on a few cannon, so your ship can fight if needs be."

"I'll talk to Donovan," she promised him. "If he says it's safe to carry the gunpowder, then I'll agree to that."

"You also need a capable ship captain, not that human engineer," he said doggedly. "So, I request transfer to your ship, so a *real* Wikuni captain can establish some better discipline and leadership to the crew."

Keritanima blinked, then smiled. "I don't think that's an unreasonable request," she agreed. "Very well, permission granted. Welcome aboard, Captain."

Jalis nodded with a satisfied look, then sat back down.

The other ship captains looked more than pleased by Jalis' requests and Keritanima's assent, and were much less resistant to Keritanima's orders thereafter. They still grumbled and protested, but Keritanima was the queen, and they had to obey her. They felt much better that a very capable captain like Jalis, one of the fleet's best, would be taking command of the queen's ship, and were willing to agree to Keritanima's commands.

The next morning, things were readied. Donovan did agree to taking on some gunpowder, so five cannons were brought over and set on the deck, and enough powder and shot to use them were also brought on. Jalis transferred to the steamship with his personal effects, and immediately took control of the vessel. Wisely, the first thing he did was talk to the Tellurian engineers and come to an understanding about the revolutionary new steam engine, learning about its limits and its abilities, learning as much about his ship as he could. That was a smart thing for a captain to do. The next thing he did was transfer out almost the entirety of the Wikuni crew, breaking them up and sending them to other ships. Jalis didn't want a group that had mutinied once to stay on the vessel, so he asked the other ships to send their very best sailors to man the ship that would be carrying the queen alone into untold dangers. The other four ships responded in tremendous fashion, sending Jalis a group of very experienced-looking Wikuni to man the ship and operate the cannons. The men that replaced the old crew looked confident and very professional, and even Donovan looked relieved to see them aboard. Jalis didn't waste any time taking full control of the vessel, but he didn't alienate the engineers in the process, showing that he had good leadership qualities. Donovan took the new crew with Jalis that morning and explained the differences of the steamship over a clipper, and trained them in the unique duties they would be expected to perform. The men learned quickly and devoted themselves to their tasks, and that was why

both Jalis and Donovan announced to the queen that the ship would be ready to steam ahead the next morning.

The next morning, they left their four escorts behind and steamed south-southwest alone, sailing into a bank of dark clouds that threatened rain. The ship's attitude problems were gone, as the new sailors went about their duties with quiet efficiency. They didn't grumble and complain as the last crew had. They did their jobs and did them well, doing their duty for Queen and country, with the Queen herself watching on in approval. This crew was probably the best of the best on those four clippers, and they showed it as they kept the steamship running in proper order as they moved towards their ultimate destination.

There was a little excessive quiet. Now that the business of finding a solution was done, both Camara Tal and Phandebrass looked a little embarrassed that they had been affected by the magic. Camara Tal especially looked rather contrite, for her warrior's pride was stung that she had been so easily influenced. They both avoided talking to everyone for most of the day, until Camara Tal and Phandebrass met at the starbord rail and had a long, quiet talk. Camara Tal wasn't the only one that was apologetic. Azakar approached Tarrin as he and Allia were playing chess, and took Tarrin aside and quietly and earnestly apologized to him for his behavior. Tarrin understood that it was the magic that had caused it, so he made sure to tell Azakar that he had nothing to apologize for, that Tarrin understood that it wasn't Azakar doing it.

Keritanima seemed to have been right about one thing, and that was how alone they were. The four clippers keeping the Zakkites off their stern had left them virtually alone on the ocean. They saw nothing the first day nor the second, but there was little time to look for anything on that second day.

The bank of clouds was a storm, and a very violent one. The rain was very heavy and driving, blowing straight from the bow and slashing into everyone, propelled by the powerful wind. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, the lightning raking the two masts of the steamship with multiple hits, even striking the two smokestacks several times. It was more than the average sea squall, it was an impressive storm that made the seas high, forced the steamship to baton down its hatches and wallow in the high,

strong waves for nearly a full day. Everyone inside was thrown about like rag dolls for most of the day, Tarrin thanking the Goddess that the Wikuni had experience enough to nail all the furniture to the decks. The thrashing of the ship on the waves would have sent the furniture flying in every direction. The ship managed to breach the far side of the storm at nearly sunset that day, and everyone came out of their hiding places to discover that almost everything that had been lashed onto the deck was gone, washed overboard, and the foremast had been split by the power of the wind. The only thing left was Phandebrass' flying device, a fact that made the Wizard almost religiously thankful, and the heavy cannons that had literally been bolted down to the deck. The supplies they'd lost on deck had mainly been parts and supplies for the steam engine, but Tarrin promised to Conjure whatever Donovan needed to keep the engine going. So the supplies had not been a critical loss. If anything, they gave everyone a lot more room, and the sailors, engineers, and passengers actually seemed happier with the increased amount of living space afterward. In more than one way, it was more of a blessing than a curse.

The morning of the third day the ship found itself steaming into clear sailing, the skies ahead clear and a brilliant blue, except for the narrow white line that was the Skybands that was almost directly overhead, pointing out east and west to the men and women on the ship below. The rain was over, but the wind was still quite brisk, a constant strong gust that blew from the bow, making the Wikuni flag on the mast snap and stand almost straight out in the breeze. What got Tarrin's attention was that the air was dry and much, much cooler than the air they'd passed through just a few days before. This air was pleasant during the day, and would probably be pleasantly cool at night, since there was no humidity in it to trap the day's heating. Tarrin was standing on the deck with Allia and Dar after breakfast, as Tarrin had let Kimmie go on to her studies as she continued to study the spellbooks Phandebrass had recovered from the Zakkites, and Phandebrass continued to study the flying device. He had his drakes with him, happily studying every square finger of the device with a piece of glass that magnified what one saw when looking through it.

"Strong wind," Dar said, pulling his robe a little. He, Tarrin, and Allia were standing at the bow, staring straight ahead as the steamship made good time even against the wind.

"I think this is the wind the poem spoke of," Allia said calmly, her white hair whipping in the wind. "It said that the Firestaff is behind the wind. The wind has been blowing in from ahead for two straight days now. I would say that we are getting very close."

"Well, if we're going to go on what that poem says, it's almost your turn, Allia," Tarrin told her. "Kerri got us here, now you have to find behind the wind. Whatever that means."

"If you need my eyes, they should be where I can see the most," she said, pointing to the crow's nest above and behind them.

"I guess," Dar said. "Just make sure you tell Captain Jalis."

"Who better to serve as lookout than a Selani?" Allia asked with calm assurance, then she patted them both on the shoulder in farewell and walked towards the sterncastle.

"You think this really is the wind the poem talked about, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

"I think it's a good bet," Tarrin said in agreement with Allia. "The wind has been blowing from the same direction for two days now, like she said. And since it's been coming from straight ahead, no ship moving with sails could keep moving forward in it."

Tarrin put his paws on the rail and looked over the bow, considering. And feeling just a little anxious. If this was the wind that the poem spoke about, then that meant that they were very close to their destination now. If they had indeed reached the wind, as soon as they got behind it, they would be there. It felt strange to think that, for things to be so close to being *over*. He'd been at it for so long, the very thought that it may soon be ending seemed very strange to him. It was almost as if he'd been doing it his entire life, and now that part of his life was about to come to an end. There was a poignant sadness to it in a way, but that didn't last long when he considered the idea that he'd soon have his life to himself. No more running around and doing the bidding of the Goddess. He'd still obey her, but she'd promised him that there would be no more after this. All they had to do was find the Firestaff and wrest it away from this fabled guardian, then hide the damned thing until after that special day came and went.

The only part of it he'd regret would be the breakup that was sure to come. They were a very diverse group, and they lived in places scattered all over the world. Tarrin would return to Aldreth, and Allia would return to the desert. Keritanima, Miranda, Binter, and Sisska would return to Wikuna. Dar would probably go back to the Tower with Dolanna, and Azakar would return to the Knights. Phandebrass would go who knew where, and Camara Tal would return to the Isles of Amazar, her home. Whether or not she went back with Koran Dar was the hot question among them at the moment. Kimmie would come back with him to Aldreth, whether she wanted to or not, and he'd make sure that she set up her new territory within easy walking distance of the secluded meadow in which he intended to build his homestead. They were all his friends, his dear friends, and he didn't want them to leave, to break up. But that was going to happen sooner or later. Tarrin would be happy to take control of his own life, but he'd regret leaving all of his friends behind to do so.

"The poem said twenty stone of coal and wood would get us behind the wind," Dar mused, breaking him out of his reverie. "If this is the wind, then it certainly seems to fit."

"It also makes it sound like the wind won't last forever," Tarrin added. "Then again, as strong as it is, it wouldn't have to last very long to push almost any sailing ship away."

"Does it feel like magic to you, Tarrin?" Dar asked curiously.

Tarrin paused to assense the area around him. "No, not at all," he replied in a curious tone. "That means it's either natural, or it's another kind of magic that I can't sense, like the magic that affected everyone."

Sapphire landed on his shoulder suddenly. Had Tarrin not gotten used to her surprise landings, he would have been startled by it. He reached up and scratched between her horns affectionately, and she replied by rubbing her head against the side of his neck.

"It's kind of hard to imagine Sorcerers making a spell that can do something like this," Dar said, shielding his eyes from the wind.

"Jenna would know," Tarrin said. "Since Spyder gave her all that knowledge, she should know if the Sorcerers ever made something like this."

"I wonder what it would be like to know all that," Dar sighed.

"Jenna's writing it all down. When she's done, we'll be able to read it."

"That's good. Sometimes I think--"

Dar cut himself short as Tarrin felt a sudden *violent* realignment of the Weave. It was a Weavequake, and a powerful one. The magic of the Weave was disrupted by the shift, the strands trembling and quivering as the flow of magic within them began to stop flowing, to cease and stand absolutely still. Then the magic flared, roared from the Heart like a dam, flooding into the strands and expanding them all, making every strand in the Weave just a little stronger, just a little richer. Tarrin's sense of the Weave expanded and contracted with the Weave, and its tremors flowed through him, causing him not a little discomfort. Even Dar, who was not a Weavespinner, felt it, gasped and winced as the Weave's strands shifted and reset themselves.

The wind, which had been blowing strongly from the bow, just *stopped*. Then it picked back up as strongly as it did before.

Tarrin and Dar weren't the only ones affected by the Weavequake. Sapphire squealed in pain, her claws sinking into Tarrin's shoulder as she endured the pain of it. Sapphire was a magical creature, and she too was subject to the effects of a Weavequake.

Then it was over. Tarrin took Sapphire off his shoulder and held her closely, tightly, stroking her scales and calming her as she trembled in his grasp. "Tarrin, what was that!" Dar asked breathlessly, rubbing his temples.

Tarrin knew exactly what it was. "That, Dar, was the next *sui'kun*," he said quietly. "The sixth Weavespinner was just born. What you felt was the Weave reorganizing itself to take that into account."

"Really?" Dar asked with wide eyes. "That's incredible! But why did we feel it when we didn't feel it when Jasana was born?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's because the Weave is a lot stronger now than it was when Jasana's birth affected it," he answered. "When the seventh is born, it should cause another Weavequake, and it will be even stronger."

"What happens when all seven are born?" Dar asked.

"The Weave will be restored," Tarrin told him. "Completely. We'll have the same magical power in the Weave that the Ancients did back in the Age of Power."

"Wow," Dar said breathlessly.

"Are you alright, Sapphire?" Tarrin asked her gently, stroking her scales.

The drake looked up at him and chirped, then laid her head against his chest.

"My poor little baby," he said compassionately, putting his huge paw over her protectively. "Let's get you back in the cabin and in your bed, alright? You need to rest."

Tarrin Conjured his drake a large meal, then put Sapphire in her bed and let her rest after she ate. He found out after coming back up that Chopstick and Turnkey were also affected, and Phandebrass had to pause in his research on the flying device to tend to his two drakes, making sure they were alright, comforting them through their period of fear, then giving them a good meal and setting them down to rest and recover from their ordeal. After that, Tarrin gathered with Allia, Dolanna, Dar, and Keritanima and explained what had happened, and they were visited by Jenna and Jula in their projected Illusions while he was explaining what happened to them. "Tarrin, Tarrin, did you feel that!" Jenna said in excitement even as her Illusion solidified.

"Of course we did," Tarrin told her. "Did the Goddess tell you where the baby is?"

"No, should we ask?" she replied.

"You'd better," Tarrin told her. "If someone kills that baby, its effect on the Weave will be removed. Protecting the new *sui'kun* is the most important thing you can do right now."

"Good point," Jula agreed. "Maybe you should ask, father. The Goddess always seems to talk to you."

"This is important, Jula. Right now, she'd probably tell any Sorcerer who asked where the baby is."

There is no need for worry, my children, the voice of the Goddess touched Tarrin. From the sudden surprised expressions on the faces of Dar, Dolanna, Allia, and Keritanima, it was not a personal contact. The Goddess was speaking to all of them. *The baby was born to a Sorceress at the Tower in Sharadar. They understand what the baby is, and they will protect him very carefully. The baby is quite safe.*

"That's a relief," Jenna sighed as the sense of the Goddess retreated from them.

"What changes can we expect from this?" Dolanna asked.

"Every time another *sui'kun* is born, it increases our power a little," Jenna answered her. "What it does for the other orders is returns an aspect of their magic that they lost after the Breaking. You'll have to have Master Phandebrass and Mistress Camara Tal to research it and find out what they regained. But as for us, you'll all find that your powers are stronger than they were before."

"Our limits cannot change," Allia said uncertainly. "That was taught to us in the Initiate."

"In this respect, they can," Jenna told her. "I'm not telling you to go out and try to move mountains, but you should see an increase in the amount of magic you can handle. That means you can work with some stronger spells than you could before."

"We will explore your new limits," Dolanna told Allia and Dar. "As Tarrin will help Keritanima and myself explore ours."

"You mean Tarrin's even stronger now too?" Dar asked.

"No," Jenna told him. "*Sui'kun* are a little different. The reason Tarrin could do things none of you thought was possible two years ago is because he exists outside of those restrictions, just like I do. We're not affected as much by the change in the magic as you will be. We will have a little bit more strength, but it won't really be enough to make it matter."

Jula looked at Tarrin. "Where are you now, father?"

"Allia thinks we've reached the edge of the wind," Tarrin answered her. "For two days now we've had a strong headwind, and yesterday we came through a pretty strong storm."

"Well, be careful, father," Julia said. "Jesmind is just starting to calm down now. I don't want her getting all worked up again."

"How has she been?" he asked. "She always tries to put on a good face when we talk."

"She's actually been in a pretty good mood," she answered. "Triana told her about Kimmie, and surprisingly enough, she was happy about it. Strange, seeing as how Jesmind has been planning how to kill her when you two come back," she chuckled.

"Even Jesmind has to feel happy about a baby," Tarrin chuckled, a little surprised. Tarrin hadn't told Jesmind about Kimmie being pregnant yet. If Jesmind already knew, why didn't she say anything? He had to ask her about that.

"Jasana?"

"Fine," she smiled. "She's looking forward to seeing this new baby. She seems to think that Kimmie already had it."

"You'd better break her of that notion."

"I'll try, but Jasana can be very stubborn about things," Julia said with a slashing gesture of her paw. "When she makes up her mind about something, she's decided that she's right, and everyone else has to be wrong. Even if you tell her straight that she's wrong, she won't believe it unless you can *prove* it to her."

"That sounds about like her," Tarrin chuckled.

"Is it a boy or a girl? Jesmind wants to know."

"I don't know, and Kimmie won't let me find out," Tarrin told her. "She wants it to be a surprise."

"She's a strange woman," Julia mused.

"Well, we'd better get back," Jenna said. "Me and Julia are sitting at a dinner table with your parents, Triana, Jesmind, Jasana, Thean, and Sevren. Odds are, they're looking at us funny right about now."

"Be careful, you two," Tarrin said.

"And please do not tell people where we are," Dolanna warned them. "The *ki'zadun* may still have eyes and ears in the Tower. Do not make it easy for them to discover where we are."

"We'll be discreet, Dolanna," Jenna nodded. "See you later, brother, everyone."

"Good luck, father, and be careful," Jula added, and then their Illusions wavered and vanished.

"Well, that's good news," Dar said. "At least the new *sui'kun* is safe."

"Sharadar is the one place where the baby would be completely safe," Dolanna nodded in agreement. "The *katzh-dashi* have run the nation for thousands of years."

"I have always meant to ask how that works," Allia said to her. "Do they help the king?"

"The Keeper of the Tower in Abrodar *is* the king," Dolanna told her calmly. "Or queen, in this case. The current Keeper and queen of Sharadar is Alexis Firehair, a very powerful Sorceress. She is an example of how hard work and devotion can raise one from the lowest gutter to the highest pinnacle of the mountain."

"Why is that?" Dar asked curiously.

"Alexis Firehair was once a street urchin in Darrigon," she answered. "A kingdom south of Sharadar. She was a beggar and a thief before the Tower found her and discovered that she was a potentially powerful Sorcerer. She rose through the ranks at the Tower in Abrodar more quickly than anyone has ever done so before. She went from a mischevious Initiate that got in trouble about three times a day to the Queen of Sharadar in fifty-three years. That is positively meteoric in the way that *katzh-dashi* reckon time."

"A living rags to riches story," Dar said with a grin. "I thought those were just bedtime tales."

"Alexis is not one you would want to tell stories about to your children," Dolanna smiled. "She never lost her rough edges. She is a very beautiful woman with a tongue sharper than a razor, and a vocabulary that would make a sailor blush. She is quite a unique person."

"You know her personally?" Allia asked.

Dolanna nodded. "We went through the Initiate together. Alexis got me in trouble almost every day," she said with a wistful, distant smile.

"Dolanna? You got in *trouble* when you were younger?" Dar said in shock, then he laughed.

"I was once as precocious as any youth, Dar," she said mildly. "Alexis always managed to provoke me. She and I were the scourge of the Tower of Abrodar," she said with twinkling eyes. "Of course, that was seventy years ago. I have mellowed much since then."

"It is hard to imagine you as a troublemaker, Dolanna," Allia said with a smile.

"We all change, dear one," Dolanna said with a mysterious smile. "Time cannot help but change us."

The new *sui'kun* had changed the Weave, had restored magic to the Priests and Wizards, had increased the power of the *katzh-dashi*, and Tarrin discovered to his surprise that it had much greater far-reaching effects. And those effects were personified in Sapphire.

The change in the Weave, Tarrin realized after noticing Sapphire, affected almost any creature with magical abilities. Sapphire's electrical powers almost tripled in power, so much so that the little drake had a hard time controlling her magical powers. Lightning would crackle and dance around her whenever she built up too great of a charge, and Tarrin could tell that the little drake was trying her hardest to keep her magic under control. Not only did Sapphire's magical abilities increase, Tarrin could tell that something fundamental had changed inside of her. Her eyes seemed much more lucid, almost sentient, and she seemed to pay a great deal more attention to him and Kimmie when they talked at night, or whenever she was with him. It was almost like she could understand them, or was trying to do so.

Sapphire's alteration kept Tarrin's attention the rest of that day and all the next, as the ship continued to sail directly into the headwind, a wind that got stronger and stronger as the ship moved ever closer to its goal. He

tended his little drake carefully as she recovered her strength, then tried to figure out how to help her get her powers back under control when it became apparent to him that her magical abilities had grown tremendously as a result of the birth of the new *sui'kun*. Her magical abilities were worrisome, but it was her change in personality that worried Tarrin more than anything else. Whatever had happened to Sapphire had had a distinct effect on her mind, almost as if the increase in magical power had expanded her consciousness. Tarrin considered using the Druidic spell to speak to her directly, but that didn't seem to be necessary, or needed quite yet. Though she was acting different, she was still Sapphire, and she still seemed more than content to be near him. She just seemed more attentive to what was going on around her, much less like an animal and much more like a sentient being.

The dawn of the third day convinced Tarrin beyond any doubt that they had been penetrating the wind of the poem, for the ship moved into an area with a vastly, radically depoluated concentration of strands. The number of strands dropped as if they had crossed a line, as if they had walked out of a forest and onto a grassy plain with only a few trees breaking up the landscape. The effect on Tarrin was quite noticable, as the power that surrounded him dropped dramatically, and that actually made him feel listless and tired. The few strands that penetrated into the empty area dropped more and more as the ship moved during the morning, until Tarrin, standing at the bow, looked ahead of them and saw *nothing*. It was a massive region with absolutely no strands at all, a *void* of sorts, a place that Dolanna had speculated may exist but had never seen. Within that void, as soon as they got some distance from the last of the strands, no Sorcery and no Wizard or Priest magic would function. Only Druidic magic would function within the area, because it did not depend on the Weave.

The magic influencing the minds of the humans and Wikuni had been the first defense. The wind was the second defense, a defense still actively pushing against the bow, and this, this magical void, it had to be the third line of defense. It had to be here to prevent any ship that used magic to get this far against the wind would have to continue without that help. And go a very long way, for Tarrin could see nothing ahead of them, nothing but empty sea all the way to the horizon. It told Tarrin that if the wind was indeed not natural, the magic that had created it had to be on the *other* side

of the void. Weather magic was as temporary as any other Sorcery, but its *effects* were not so temporary. Wind created by Sorcery would continue to move after the spell was ended, for magic could not completely overwhelm or nullify basic natural laws. One of those laws was that when you moved something, if it was large enough, its momentum would make it continue to move. The spell that could create such a powerful wind may not be permanent, but the air it was moving got everything it needed from the spell when the spell pushed it. The wind continued of its own volition, being helped along by the air pushing at it from behind, until the resistance of the air around it that was not moving finally broke the wind up and nullified it. That storm they'd encountered a few days ago had to be the boundary where the cooler, drier wind finally died out and impacted the hot, muggy air blocking its progress, and those two colliding airmasses were generating storms. That storm they'd passed through was probably stationary, and had probably been in that same spot, raining away, as long as the wind had been blowing. A stationary, perpetual thunderstorm, and a pretty rough one at that. That may not have been one of the designed obstacles to cross, but it surely served as a damn effective one. More than once, Tarrin thought that the steamship was going to founder.

Tarrin was standing on the deck, feeling tired, as the ship moved into that magical void, an emptiness that only Tarrin, Keritanima, and Dolanna could see, an emptiness that unnerved the Were-cat. He had never felt anything like it, and the emptiness around him felt like an emptiness within him as well. He was *sui'kun*, he was attached to the Weave in a myriad of ways, only some of them he understood or was even aware existed. Now he was moving into an area where his connection to the Weave would be stretched, maybe even severed temporarily, and that made him feel both curiously defenseless and almost yearning. He was being pulled away from the gentle presence of the Goddess, and that scared him more than the thought of not being able to use Sorcery until they got to the other side. The Goddess' presence in his soul had been a constant thing since he'd accepted her, and now he felt that connection to her fading as the steamship moved deeper and deeper into the void.

Tarrin got more and more unsettled as the ship moved deeper into the void, and he realized that he was getting short-tempered and a little paranoid as well. The loss of his magic was nothing compared to the loss of

the sense of the Goddess, and without that he felt alone and vulnerable. Alone was something that the Cat could handle, but vulnerability was not a healthy emotion in one such as he. Everyone around him suddenly began to seem much more threatening, more dangerous, and his feral fears began to rise up in him with each ominous human or Wikuni face he viewed. His feral nature hadn't been any kind of problem for a long time because Keritanima had carefully told her crew and the engineers about Tarrin, and exactly how to act around him to keep him calm. They all obeyed Keritanima's rules, even the new crew, never talking to him unless he spoke to them first, never being impolite or untruthful in response if he did speak to them, never approaching him, giving him a cushion of personal space that they could not enter, and if they had to pass him on deck or enter his personal space because of the confines of the surrounding environment, to make very sure that Tarrin knew that they were there, by clearing their throats or whistling or speaking as if talking to themselves or another. They did a good job of keeping out of Tarrin's hair and preventing his feral distrust of strangers to become an issue that put their lives at risk. But with the change in the Weave before and the entering of the void now, Tarrin felt his ferality begin to claw its way into the forefront of his mind, and he realized that the best thing, the safest thing, for him to do right then was go to his cabin and wait things out.

He did just that, joining Sapphire in the small, cramped cabin to try to regain his composure. He ended up taking a nap with her in cat form, curling up with her in the bed as the drake continued to rest comfortably after her ordeal. The time had done well for her so far, as she had managed to regain control of her power any time except when she was almost at a full magical charge. Sapphire alleviated the problem by burning off the excess charge when it got too much for her to control, which was happening about once every two hours or so. But every time she did so, she went longer and longer every time as the charge rebuilt in her. She would have full control of her magical powers very soon.

That was why the sailors had been periodically seeing a bolt of lightning flash out from the port side.

It took them nearly a full day to breach the void. Tarrin had spent the entire time in his cabin, sleeping, but he felt it as the sense of the Goddess began to get stronger, and that awakened him. He opened his eyes and

jumped off the bed, shifting back to his natural form, and feeling the proximity of a few strands. They were pretty far away, but they were ahead of them. That meant that they were coming out of the void.

The return of that feeling reduced his anxiety by a great amount, and he felt composed enough to go back up on deck and look around. He was greeted by a brilliant sunset to the west, painting the sky red as the sun began to sink below the horizon, and looked ahead though the stiff wind, a wind that was even stronger now, whistling through the ropes in the rigging and threatening to tear the flag off the mast. His eyes watered from the strong wind, but his layered vision could make out several strands, and he had a sense that there were many more behind them, beyond his perception.

They had crossed the void. That was one more barrier successfully breached, and one step closer to their ultimate goal. They hadn't quite got there yet, because the wind was still pushing at them. They had not passed behind that wind yet, and he wouldn't feel that they were very close until they did. The poem said that they had to get behind the wind before the next thing happened, the thing that Allia needed to do. Whatever that was. The poem said that Allia would *find* behind the wind. That seemed a little odd, but they were all convinced that it was a metaphor, or a generalization. Now that they had experienced some of the defenses set in their path to protect the Firestaff, Tarrin felt that the passage meant just what it said. After they got past whatever was causing the wind, Allia would be able to see their destination. Then it would be up to Tarrin to get them there, according to the poem.

Tarrin was joined at the bow by Allia and Dolanna, as they shielded their eyes and looked ahead. "Do you see something, dear one?" Dolanna asked.

"I see a few strands ahead," Tarrin replied. "We're coming out of this magical void."

"Good. I have felt decidedly uncomfortable since entering it."

I never realized how much the magic is a part of me until it was taken away," Allia said quietly. "I should pay more attention to my studies."

"You should," Dolanna agreed emphatically.

"Phandebrass has been trying to study the void, but since his magical spells will not function, he is not having much luck," Allia told Tarrin with a smile. "How is Sapphire?"

"She's doing alright," Tarrin replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Chopstick and Turnkey have been very listless since we entered the void. I think it affected them."

That seemed strange. The birth of the new *sui'kun* had had very little effect on the two red drakes. They didn't seem to have any magical abilities either. So why would entering a magical void cause them distress? It didn't seem to affect Sapphire very much...but then again, she'd slept almost through the entire thing. Tarrin wasn't even sure if the void affected her lightning magic, since he'd slept through it right along with her. "Strange," he gave voice to his musings. "I wouldn't think that it would affect them."

"All drakes are magical creatures, dear one," Dolanna told him. "Even though Chopstick and Turnkey do not exhibit their magical natures as dramatically as Sapphire does, magic is still in their blood. The void could not help but affect them in the same manner it affected us."

"True, but like you said, it's hard to imagine those two as being magical beings," Tarrin said. "Sapphire's personality changed with the new *sui'kun's* birth, where Chopstick and Turnkey are still Chopstick and Turnkey."

"Sapphire's magic is stronger than theirs, so it is not a stretch of logic to assume that such a thing would have a stronger effect on her than it did on them," Dolanna told him.

"Good point. I wonder if--"

Tarrin stopped dead and flinched as the wind suddenly seemed to double in power, howling over the ship and threatening to drag Dolanna's robe right off of her. Tarrin put a paw around his mentor's wrist to keep her from blowing away, then turned his back on the wind and sheltered the diminutive Sorceress from it as Allia huddled beside her. The steamship seemed to struggle to continue forward for a long moment, as the sound of the engine screaming became audible over the wind, as the engine battled the wind for mastery of the ship's direction of movement. The engine raced, pushing the ship inexorably forward finger by finger, span by span, as Tarrin, Allia, and Dolanna staggered carefully to the closest shelter,

huddling behind the foremast as the patched mast creaked and groaned very loudly and very alarmingly as the wind assaulted it.

"I think we have just discovered the wind in the poem!" Dolanna shouted over the howling gale.

"If the wind is blowing so hard, why are there not large waves to go with it?" Allia asked keenly, looking over the rail. "The sea is still as choppy as it was before we entered this!"

"It may not be very wide," Tarrin shouted in reply. "There has to be a lot of wind to create high seas!"

"No, Tarrin, Allia, the wind is blowing *down*!" Dolanna shouted, pointing. "Look at the water!"

Tarrin looked, and saw immediately what she meant. The water around them was flat, more than that, it was *depressed*, at a lower level than the water around it. The steamship had slipped down into the bottom of that very shallow, very wide depression, and had just started trying to climb up the other side. The wind changed direction, from blowing in their faces to blowing over the bow at an angle, and then it was blowing from directly above, threatening to push the ship under the waves. The ship slid down alarmingly as the wind drove it downward, but the powerful steam engine was keeping the ship moving, climbing it up the shallow embankment of pure water on the far side of the strange phenomenon. Tarrin put his claws into the mast and his two friends hung onto him as the wind suddenly lost its direction, seeming to swirl wildly and randomly around them, trying to pick them up or slide them laterally or push them down, often all at the same time.

The steamship, her engine driving as hard as it could, finally pulled the ship up out of the depression on the far side. And as soon as the keel tilted level with the water at the top, the wind simply *stopped*. Not stopped, Tarrin realized, looking behind them, over the sterncastle. The wind was stationary, what had happened was the ship passed through it!

They had done it! The steamship had managed to penetrate the wind! The air was breezy, but it wasn't the powerful wind they'd faced the last few days, and what was most important, it was blowing gently from the *stern*.

The focus of that weather phenomenon made the wind blow outwards, leaving the air inside it relatively calm by comparison.

"All stop! All stop, before the boiler explodes!" Donovan screamed as he came from the bridge, rushing towards the stairs leading to the engine room. The Tellurian disappeared below decks, and scant seconds later, they all heard the whining, overworked engine begin to quiet down quickly but not explosively, as the engineers below did whatever it was that they did to bring the engine to a halt. After that kind of a stress, Tarrin thought it only smart that they shut the engine down and check it out before running it any more.

"Crew on deck!" Captain Jalis shouted from the bridge. "Prepare to drop sea anchor and secure for inspection!"

"I think we have just passed the first test," Dolanna said quietly, looking towards the bow. "We have passed behind the wind, just as the poem required. Now we must find behind the wind," she said, looking at Allia. "The poem says that it is your task, dear one."

"Maybe not," Tarrin said, frowning. "Something doesn't fit here."

"What?"

"The poem said that the steamship would let us *reach* behind the wind. Well, not only did we reach it, we just passed through it. It said that it would take the champion to *pass* behind the wind. Did I miss something here?"

"Maybe, but maybe not," Dolanna said. "The poem references behind the wind with every line. I think it is a unifying phrase, like the use of twenty, a means to keep the poem sounding like a poem. And I get the feeling that this is a large area, Tarrin. We are behind the wind, but we still have a great deal of sea in front of us," she said sagely. "I think that the poem stated that the steamship would let us reach behind the wind. If you think about it, dear one, we *have* reached behind the wind. There the wind is, and we have reached the sea behind it. So, we have fulfilled the first part of the poem's instructions."

"So, you think the place where the Firestaff is is out there somewhere, and we'll have to look for it," Tarrin reasoned, looking out over the bow.

"But the poem calls everything on this side of the wind *behind the wind*, so we still have to find our goal and get there."

"Precisely," she nodded.

"That still doesn't explain why we need to pass behind the wind when we're already here."

"I think the part about the champion means that we will need you to overcome some obstacle that will stand between us and our destination," she told him. "Often, when one speaks of overcoming a challenge, they are said to pass the test. Perhaps that is the context the poem uses."

"That does make sense, *deshida*," Allia agreed.

"Either way, whether we misread the poem or it is right or wrong, it does not change the fact that now we must find our destination," she told them. "We have reached an important landmark, my dear ones. But we still have far to go."

"Very far," Tarrin said quietly, looking out over the ocean. "Very far indeed."

Chapter 10

The hope that they were coming out of the void faded quickly after the ship started moving under the power of its sails early the next morning, as they got closer to the strands that Tarrin had sensed. The fact was, they were strands, but they were not strands. They were the strangest strands Tarrin had ever assensed, because they were *closed*. They were strands, and they did have magical power flowing through them, but the strands seemed to be sealed off somehow, resisting Tarrin's every attempt to look into them or draw their power out of them. He couldn't even sense how strong the magic that flowed within them was, he could only go by the metaphysical dimensions of the strands to get a rough estimate of them. They were fairly large strands, and that meant that they probably could move a good deal of magical energy. He could see them, but he could do nothing else with them or to them. It was almost like they didn't exist as anything but an Illusion.

Quite clearly, they had encountered something that none of them had ever seen before, magic on a level not seen in the world since the Breaking. Tarrin was still separated from the Goddess, so he didn't think she could explain the strands to him. They rose up out of the sea and stretched into the sky, beyond his ability to see the Weave, for that aspect of his augmented vision had a range more limited than his normal sight. Since the strands were closed off in that unusual way, and they were in the general vicinity of the wind, Tarrin reasoned that those closed strands were somehow feeding the magical effect that created the wind, granting them the magic to operate even within this area of magical emptiness.

Beyond the strands was more magical emptiness. But now Tarrin did not hide in his cabin, for the realization that they had passed the first of the poem's listed obstacles made all of them edgy and anxious. All twelve of them were up on deck, Azakar wearing his armor and Camara Tal her breastplate, ready for any possible surprises. Dar and Dolanna and Allia dispensed with their lessons that day, Allia up in the crow's nest so her eagle eyes could spy things on the horizon that nobody else would be capable of

seeing. Miranda helped with a spyglass borrowed from Captain Jalis, standing on the roof of the sterncastle that covered the ship's wheel and scanning the seas with the spyglass. Tarrin and Keritanima stood in the bow with Binter and Sisska in quiet, vigilant attendance, standing there as if waiting for something to appear on the horizon any minute now, but not quite sure what it was. Phandebrass and Kimmie were the only ones that seemed relatively unphased by their situation, as Kimmie sat on a chair Tarrin conjured for her, just beside him, with one of the captured spellbooks in her lap, as Phandebrass continued his research on the Zakkite flying device. Sapphire felt well enough to come out of the cabin, sitting on a jib low in the rigging with Chopstick and Turnkey perched up there with her. The sailors working in the rigging worked around the three little drakes, though they didn't really have to go far out of their way, since the three drakes weren't perched in a place that had much traffic.

It was quite a change from what they had endured before. The wind blowing from behind was cool and dry, and it was just strong enough to push the ship at a fair pace without being so strong that it threatened to break the already damaged foremast. It was a big change from the stifling heat on the other side of the storm, almost as if they had somehow sailed directly from the tropics to the northern marches. But the Skybands above told them that they were still relatively close to the equator, for they were still a knife-edge across the sky. Only now they leaned into the northern sky, when Tarrin was so used to seeing them hovering just inside the southern section of the sky. Keritanima explained that long ago by telling him that the Skybands were a heavenly body, like the moons, and they seemed to sit right on the equator. When one was in the northern hemisphere, they looked to be in the southern sky. When one was in the southern hemisphere, they appeared to rest in the northern sky. As they continued to move south, further and further away from the equator, the Skybands would expand in size, creeping ever deeper into the northern sky as their inside edge remained somewhat stationary.

The constant wind blowing into their faces before made it hard to enjoy the change in temperature, but now it was quite pleasant. The sailors and engineers especially seemed to enjoy the cooler air, the engineers sneaking out of the engine room to get a breath of fresh cool air before returning to the hot confines of the hold. The steam engine had ruptured a few pipes in

the attempt to breach the wind barrier, but Donovan had told Keritanima that morning that they had plenty of spare pipe stored in a corner of the engine room, and they'd be back under steam by suppertime. Until then, the ship would continue on under sail, and also enjoy much calmer seas than they had endured while sailing up into the wind.

They were all wary and observant that day, but they stood guard against empty sea. None of them felt foolish in the slightest, for they were in uncharted territory, and they'd already managed to get past several insidious magical obstacles. Anything could happen when one was dealing with ancient magic, still functioning after thousands of years, and so delicate and subtle that not even Tarrin could sense it. The Ancients had hidden the Firestaff for a reason, and they'd done a very good job protecting it thus far. The protections were so effective, in fact, that Tarrin didn't quite understand why the Goddess wasn't willing to leave the artifact where it was. Only a steamship could have breached that wind, and only the Wikuni and the Tellurians had the technology to do it.

But maybe that was the point. The Wikuni and the Tellurians *did* have the capability to breach the first of the known barriers. If a king like Damon Eram was still on the throne in Wikuna, who was to say how close he would come to getting his hands on the Firestaff? The Wikuni's gunpowder was very fearsome, and if they could bring it to bear against the mythical guardian of the Firestaff, they could very well kill it and walk away with the Firestaff with only minimal losses. Keritanima's steamship proved that if someone was clever enough and resourceful enough, they could very well penetrate the carefully designed obstacles the Ancients created and retrieve what was never meant to be retrieved. The Ancients relied on magic, but in this modern age, what was circumventing their magical defenses was *technology*. Something the Ancients could not have taken into account when they hid the Firestaff those thousands of years ago and designed the magical defenses to protect it from being reclaimed. Without the technology of the steam engine, the Firestaff may very well be unreachable. But they did have it, and they had used it to get where they were now. If they did it, then anyone with the knowledge they possessed would be able to do it as well.

Times had changed. Perhaps that was why the gods were so worried now, worried that the advancement of the peoples of the world made the

forbidden object not quite so forbidden anymore.

They stood there for almost the entire day, waiting for Allia to call out at any minute that she had seen something, but it never came. The magical void kept Tarrin from talking to Jesmind or Jasana, which made him a little more edgy, since Jesmind always went nuts when Tarrin didn't talk to her when he said he would. Nobody really got anything done that day except for Kimmie.

The ship dropped anchor and raised its sails at sunset, not wanting to continue moving in dangerous, unknown waters in the dark, and they all shared a rather quiet, anxious meal. Nobody really felt like talking, mainly because they all shared the same feeling of expectant nervousness. None of them knew what was going to happen next, and that made them not quite as talkative as usual.

Almost. Kimmie had remained quiet during dinner, but she became quite animated when they got back to the cabin. She talked away as Tarrin put Sapphire down in her bed and made sure she had enough food and water for the night, then continued to talk away as they undressed for bed. She talked about the spellbooks she'd been studying, telling him all about the many spells in them, spells that she and Phandebrass both had never seen before. The Zakkites were a kingdom of magicians, and their spellbooks reflected their very heavy use of magic in their daily lives. They had spells for almost everything, from dusting the furniture to cleaning the dishes, spells for battle and spells for daily life. They even had a spell for the physical gratification of a lonely wife, though Kimmie used terms much less delicate or modest than that.

"I wonder who would waste time making a spell like that," Tarrin snorted as he shrugged out of his shirt.

"Well, I guess the men are always sailing around on ships looking for boats to sink. That must make their wives rather lonely," Kimmie said with a mischievous grin. "That, or a woman designed it who couldn't find, you know, a good man."

"Magical debauchery. Now I've seen everything."

Kimmie giggled as she pulled her dress over her head, slashing her tail a few times to settle the fur disturbed when the tail was pulled through the

hole cut in the back of the dress to accomodate it. She turned sideways to hang her dress up, and Tarrin saw that her belly was just as flat and sleek as it had always been. It had nearly been two months now since she conceived, but there had been no physical signs of it quite yet. She did eat much more than normal now, and did start to have cravings for certain foods, but since Tarrin was a Druid, he could Conjure anything she wanted at any time. "It just goes to show, Tarrin. Humans are funny creatures."

"I know," he agreed, laying on his side on the bed, watching her. "It's even stranger to think that we used to be human."

"Seems like it isn't possible, doesn't it?" she agreed with a smile and a nod, putting a paw on her belly. "I wish this cub would start getting fat. I'm starting to worry that something's wrong."

"Should you be showing yet? I'm not that familiar with Were-cat pregnancy."

"I should just start to get thick around the middle about now," she told him. "But since Triana's worried about it, I guess it makes me nervous too. The cub's in there, I can feel it more now than ever. It just isn't growing fast yet."

"Is it moving yet?"

"I think it is, but the feelings are so slight that sometimes I'm not sure if it's that or just gas," she said with a laugh. She came over and sat down on the bed and started brushing her hair, one of her nightly rituals. Tarrin reached around her and put a paw on her belly, trying to see if he could feel anything moving around in there. When he put a paw on her, he felt that she was starting to develop a little expansion in her belly. It was hard to see because her sides had expanded a proportional amount, hiding it from his eyes. "You *are* a little thicker, Kimmie," he told her.

"I know, but I'm not sure if it's as much as I'm supposed to be. That's what worries me," she fretted, putting the brush through her hair again. "I hope you'll still like me when I get fat and ugly," she told him.

"You're not going to be fat, Kimmie," he said sternly. "You'll be *pregnant*. There's a difference."

"I'm going to feel fat, and that will make me feel ugly," she complained. "What would you want with a fat mate?"

"Do I have much of a selection right now?" he asked with a slight smile. Kimmie whipped her head around to glare at him, but when she saw his smile, she laughed ruefully. "I thought you were a sexy Were-cat before, and I still think you're a sexy Were-cat now. Even when you start getting round, I'll still think you're sexy."

"What a sweet thing to say," she purred, leaning down to kiss him before returning to brushing her hair. "Even if I don't believe you."

"Why say that?"

"You say it now, but I'm not fat yet," she told him. "When I'm fat, we'll see how sexy you think I am."

"You're such an optimist, Kimmie," Tarrin chuckled, caressing her belly. "Besides, you're fun to have around, even if we're not making love. I'll keep you just for your wonderfully bright outlook on life," he drawled.

Kimmie looked at him, then laughed delightedly. "I never realized we graduated out of a purely physical relationship."

"Who's lying now?" he told her with a pat on her belly. "You know that's not true."

"Well, maybe," she hedged with a charming smile. "I guess I'm just a girl trying to keep her man interested in her."

Her proximity was starting to get to him, and leaning back the way he was, staring at her bare hip and the peek of her bare round bottom, the sleekness of her back, the glance of the swell of her breast when she moved the right way, smelling her closeness, made him want her. "I'd say you're doing a very good job," he told her, leaning forward enough to kiss her on her hip, grabbing her tail and giving it a slight tug, squeezing it gently.

She shivered at that, and Tarrin scented the change in the texture of her scent that never failed to entice him. She sniffed at the air audibly, then turned and looked down at him with hungry eyes. "Why brush my hair when I'm just going to muss it up?" she asked breathlessly, tossing the brush to the floor and climbing into bed with him with a great deal of kissing and giggling.

Kimmie proved to be a delightful distraction to a serious, mentally draining day, and her ardor hadn't diminished when they woke up the next morning. Tarrin felt a little more relaxed and ready to deal with another day of nervous anticipation after Kimmie effectively burned up all his nervous energy. Allia had once said in a naughty tone that a little rolling in the sheets did much for one's temper, and Tarrin had to admit that she was right. He seemed much less high-strung than his friends, joining them on the deck for a breakfast of a bowl of ham stew passed out to them by the ship's cooks. The dining room had been taken over temporarily as a safe place to store the gunpowder, so everyone, even the Captain, was either eating in their cabins or on deck.

"You're in a good mood," Keritanima noted as he took a bowl from Binter with a nod of thanks.

"Kimmie was feeling frisky this morning," Tarrin replied with a slight smile.

"If only I had Rallix here to be similarly entertained," Keritanima grunted in a sour tone.

"You could have brought him along," Tarrin told her.

"Yes, but I didn't want to put him at risk. This *is* dangerous, brother."

"True," Tarrin agreed.

"I wish we'd get out of this void," Keritanima growled. "I can't even talk to him right now."

"You had him get an amulet?" Tarrin asked.

"Yah, it was a good idea. I'm glad you mentioned it," she answered. "It's alot easier being apart when we can talk to each other."

"Maybe I should look into those spells your Priests use," Camara Tal said. "It would be nice to be able to talk to my husbands right now."

"Which one?" Dar asked.

"Are you asking me which is my favorite, Dar?" the Amazon asked.

"I think I already know which one that is," the young Arkisian said with a smile.

"Oh? And which would that be?" Camara Tal asked archly.

"Koran Dar," he answered.

"Koran *Tal*!" she corrected him hotly.

"That's all the proof I need right there," Dar grinned.

"You just like him because his former house name happens to be the same as yours," the Amazon told him.

"No, I like him because I've seen you pawing him when you didn't think anyone was looking," Dar told her with a mischievous grin.

"It's a woman's right to paw her husband," Camara Tal said bluntly. "I paw all my husbands."

"But you certainly seemed to be enjoying it with him," the Arkisian pressed.

"I've made no secret of that fact that I do fancy him, Dar," she admitted. "He is certainly the most handsome of my husbands. But he's the one I want to father my children. Our children would be strong and good additions to our house."

"You choose which husband fathers your children?" Allia asked curiously.

"Of course," she replied. "We are a small nation with few people, so we're very careful to breed only with the best men to maintain the strengths of our bloodline. Koran Tal is the prime man in my harem, so he is the one I've chosen to father my children."

"No wonder you're so hot on him coming home with you," Miranda noted in a serious tone. "If you can't have any children except with him, it makes it hard to produce heirs if he's not there."

"Not can't, exactly," Camara Tal elaborated. "More like won't. Koran is a special man, and the children he will give me will be special. I won't settle for anything less than him. And I'm not getting any younger," she growled. "Women my age back home have four children by now, and here I am, still childless."

"He certainly seems stubborn about going back," Keritanima said. "I've talked with him a few times. He likes you, Camara, he really does, but he just can't see himself going back to Amazar."

"I'm going to change that," she promised with a grim look.

After the meal, Allia returned to the crow's nest as the ship started moving again under the power of the steam engine. She didn't stay up there long, however, as the wind blew the smoke back into the rigging, causing her to drop out of the rigging as quickly as she could, choking and coughing once the smokestacks started belching forth copious amounts of the black smoke. She had to settle for standing on the top of the sterncastle with Miranda, sharing the spyglass with her as she sought to find their destination, as the poem hinted she had to do. On the deck below, all Allia's friends except for Tarrin, Binter, and Sisska paced nervously back and forth or stared worryingly out to sea, as Tarrin and Binter locked horns once again over the chessboard. Tarrin had yet to defeat either of the Vendari in chess, and he was bound and determined to do just that before they got where they were going. Sisska was much better at chess than Binter, but Binter was no slouch. Binter had been trained by his mate, and much of the genius Tarrin faced in Sisska was beginning to blossom in Binter's game play. Tarrin figured to defeat Sisska's apprentice, and then go after the mistress of the chessboard herself.

Unfortunately, reality did not live up to Tarrin's ambitions that day. Binter defeated him convincingly three times, then he was crushed by Sisska later that afternoon. He sought solace with Kimmie and Sapphire that night, setting a chessboard on the bed and studying it as Kimmie read from one of the capture spellbooks. She finally looked up as Tarrin recreated the board as he remembered it and tried to figure out where he went wrong, how Binter had beaten him in the last game they played. "Tarrin, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Trying to figure out how Binter beat me," he replied, rubbing a finger along his chin as he studied the pieces. "I don't see where I'm messing it up."

"If you could, you wouldn't be losing," she said impishly.

Tarrin snorted at her, flicking his ears in mild irritation as he looked at the chess board.

"You know what? I think you're getting into this to keep yourself from thinking about the serious things," she told him with a smile.

"Probably," he agreed. "It's alot easier to think about this than worry about things we don't know about. All we can do is wait and see. Until then, I guess this is good enough," he said, motioning at the chessboard with a paw.

Sapphire hopped over to the bed and sniffed at the ivory chess pieces on her side of the board. Tarrin smiled down at her, scratching her between the horns. "I should teach you to play, little one," he told her.

"I don't think she'd be a good partner. But you could teach me," Kimmie offered, setting the spellbook in the chair behind her as she stood up. "I need a break from this for a while."

Sapphire watched in strange fascination as Tarrin explained the rules of the game to his mate, showing her how each piece moved, and the rules that governed its movement. "Alright, so this one can only take another piece diagonally, but it can't move in any direction but forward unless it's taking another piece," she reasoned, holding up a pawn. "What happens if you move it all the way to the other side of the board?"

"It becomes a queen," he explained with a raised eyebrow. "That's a pretty strange question."

"I couldn't figure out what would happen if it couldn't move anywhere," she replied. "I guess that's a pretty suitable reward, if you can get a pawn all the way over without losing it."

"That's the general idea," Tarrin told her.

The ship stopped again that night, Jalis unwilling to move in uncharted waters in the dark, but Tarrin and Kimmie hardly noticed. Kimmie proved to be a fast learner, and her education and training as a Wizard gave her a very logical mind. That logical reasoning made her a dangerously talented chess player, and she very nearly beat him after their fifth game. Tarrin admitted that he wasn't paying much attention to the game, his attention diverted by Sapphire and her strange intent expression as she looked at the

pieces. She even jumped up onto Tarrin's shoulder so she could get a better look at the board.

Tarrin had lost track of the game at that point, as he studied his pet more carefully. Did she understand what was going on? Had the birth of the new *sui'kun* affected more than her lightning magic? Had it made her *smarter*?

After recovering himself and defeating Kimmie for the fifth time, she begged off the rematch to go to the galley and get them all something to drink. Tarrin reset the board and then quite deliberately put Sapphire in front of it. She looked up at him curiously, her forked tongue flicking out to test the air between them. Her reptilian eyes were locked on his cat's eyes, as he tried to fathom the mind of the animal.

"Alright, Sapphire," he said in a low tone, feeling his suspicions rise even higher. "I get a very strange feeling that you know exactly what I'm saying. Don't you?"

She didn't react, but she did blink, her attention remaining eerily fixed on his eyes.

"Maybe not exactly what I'm saying," he amended to himself. "But I do think you're aware of what's going on. More than even I realized."

Her gaze didn't waver. Tarrin suspected that he could prove it, and he went about it by reaching down and moving one of the pawns on the board. It was a poor starting move, something he would not have done against a learned player, but he wasn't intending on playing a game. At least not in seriousness. He motioned over the board with his paw, looking at Sapphire. "I think you know what to do, little one," he urged.

Sapphire stood up, walked to the edge of the board, and then grabbed the king's knight in her teeth. She pulled it over the pawns, then set it down where it would be allowed to move.

Sapphire had known how the knight moves, and knew it could jump over other pieces.

Tarrin moved out his own knight to defend the pawn he had moved earlier, and Sapphire knocked over the king, queen, and both of her biships to grab the queen's pawn in her teeth and push it out two squares. Again, a legal move. He set the pieces back up and responded by moving his king's

pawn, and then she picked up the queen's bishop and knocked over the queen and the pawns in the middle of the board to put the bishop in a position where it was defended by the knight she'd placed earlier. Again, a legal move, and this time she had set the piece in a position that made one sacrifice to take the piece. Her moves didn't have any kind of unifying theme behind them, Tarrin realized, but two things were clear. Sapphire had learned the rules governing the movement of the pieces by watching Tarrin and Kimmie, and she had remembered them well enough to apply them in this little test. He didn't think she had a grasp of the underlying strategy of the game, but it was clear to him that Sapphire had learned something that an animal should not be capable of understanding.

Amazing. Sapphire *was* smarter!

"Sapphire!" Tarrin said in wonder, reaching over and stroking her head gently. "I'm impressed, little one!" He laughed and reached over the board, picking her up and then holding her at arm's length over his head. "I'm going to see if I can't teach you the Sulasian tongue, by beautiful little drake," he cooed to her. "You may not be able to speak it, but it would be incredible if you could understand it."

She chirped fondly to him as he cuddled her to his chest, stroking her smooth scales gently.

Kimmie returned with a bottle of wine and a pair of glasses. She looked at him cuddling the drake, then raised an eyebrow and gave him a quirky smile. "Should I leave you two alone?" she asked.

"I have to show you this, Kimmie," he said immediately, putting Sapphire back down on her side of the chessboard. "Alright now, Sapphire, try not to knock everything over this time." He reached over and moved his pawn up another square, then motioned to the drake.

Sapphire padded back and forth as she looked at the board, then moved her queen's knight out of the back row in her jaws, setting it delicately down on the board without knocking over the pieces.

"She must have seen me do that," Kimmie said, setting the wine and glasses down on the tiny table that held Sapphire's bed.

"Kimmie, she's made all the moves on her side of the board," Tarrin told his mate immediately, moving out his queen to threaten her queen's knight.

Sapphire looked at the board, and then she grabbed the king in her teeth and moved it beside the rook, then moved the rook to the opposite side of the king.

Sapphire had *castled*!

"She moved two at once," Kimmie said curiously. "Isn't that that that fortress move?"

"Castle," he said, staring intently at his drake. Tarrin moved his queen out and took the queen's knight, and Sapphire, being careful not to knock over the pieces by craning her neck over the board, grabbed his queen and pulled it off the board, then moved one of her pawns into the square it occupied. She understood that well enough!

"Did she just take your queen?" Kimmie asked in wonder.

"She did, and it was a *legal move*," Tarrin told her with a broad smile. "Kimmie, Sapphire was affected by the birth of the sixth *sui'kun* alot more than we thought. She's *smarter* now. Just look at what she's learned, just by watching us! Can you imagine what else she's learned while she's watched us, or watched the crew or our friends? She sits up in the rigging and does nothing but watch us, ever since the birth."

"I'll be dipped in hogfat," Kimmie said in wonder, then she laughed. "Sapphire, you little sneak!"

The drake actually looked a little contrite. But she seemed calm, as if it had been her intention to show them that she was smarter than they thought.

"I'm going to teach her Sulasian," Tarrin told her. "Want to help?"

"Why not?" Kimmie laughed. "But we really should teach her a much more elegant language, like Torian."

"You're biased."

"So are you," she grinned. "Want to compromise and teach her something else?"

"No, let's stick with what everyone around here commonly speaks."

"Then we should teach her Wikuni."

"Ah, no. Right now, I think Sulasian will be enough for her to handle. Besides, it'll be good practice for us. Teaching her will be like teaching an infant. We need to learn that, for when your baby comes."

"Well, when you say it that way, it sounds like a good idea," she said with a gentle smile. "But you know it's going to take a while, and we'll be very busy soon enough."

"I forgot about that," he said with a brooding frown. "Well, we could cheat, I suppose."

"Use magic on her? Well, that may work, but she's an animal, Tarrin. It may not be healthy. Besides, you'll have to wait until we get out of this magical void."

Tarrin reached over the board and picked up his drake, scratching her between her horns in the way that she so loved, which made her chirp contentedly and lean her head against his chest. "My little Sapphire is a smart little drake," he cooed to her. "Then again, maybe I should talk to her a little more maturely," he chuckled.

"She may be smarter, but it's unformed intelligence," Kimmie reminded him. "You teach an infant with baby talk, and besides, she likes it when you pay attention to her that way."

"She does at that," Tarrin agreed, cuddling the drake to his chest.

"You know, I suddenly feel a bit embarrassed," Kimmie laughed. "She's been in this cabin with us since we left Wikuna. She's overheard all our secrets, and she's probably been watching us when we make love. I feel violated," she winked.

"Like a Were-cat female could ever feel violated," Tarrin scoffed. "As to the secrets, well, I don't think she remembers things she overheard before the birth quite the same way she does now, and even if she does remember, I doubt she'd go off and blab them to the ship. Even if we teach her Sulasian, the shape of her mouth won't let her speak it very well. She'd be very hard to understand."

"Maybe. We'll see," she said, picking up the chessboard and setting it on the floor after putting the pieces in a small canvas pouch. "But if Wikuni sailors start coming up and pulling on my tail, I'll know who to blame."

Kimmie found it very pleasurable when Tarrin pulled gently on her tail. He wasn't quite sure why she did, but then again, Jesmind liked it when he bit her neck. He guessed that every Were-cat was different in their own ways, and that included what they found pleasurable and what they didn't.

"You never know, Kimmie," Tarrin said with a sly smile. "Maybe I did it."

"You'd better not!" Kimmie shouted playfully, jumping into the bed and pinning him down beneath her, forcing Sapphire to scramble out of Tarrin's lap to avoid getting crushed. "I'd have to punish you," she told him with a grin. "And it wouldn't be the good kind of punishment, either."

"I can live with that, as long as I get the good punishment afterwards."

"Flirt," she teased, leaning down and kissing him on the tip of his nose. "Now behave yourself, and we'll drink this bottle of wine, have a nice long chat about all the things we love to talk about, and then get some sleep."

"Hmm....behave, or misbehave. Behave, or misbehave," he said with mock seriousness, rolling his eyes from side to side as if choosing between two things he could see. "Can't I do both?"

"No!" she laughed, slapping him playfully on the shoulder before letting him up.

Tarrin did behave, and they drank the bottle of wine, talked about Sapphire, as well as how anxious everyone was and how tense things seemed with them being so close to their destination, and then about anything else that came to mind, like chess or what was happening in Suld or how Mist and Eron were doing, anything at all. Tarrin enjoyed the talks he had with Kimmie, because she was an engaging, intelligent woman who was patient enough to be able to do it and smart enough to always challenge his mind. They talked well into the night, as Sapphire laid in her bed with her eyes open, watching the two of them attentively, and then they went to bed. But the conversation didn't stop with that, as they continued to talk as Kimmie let Tarrin brush her hair, then brush her fur, and they continued to talk as Kimmie undid Tarrin's braid, brushed out the dust, and then rebraided it for him, and even continued on as they blew out the lantern and settled in for the night. They talked until the warm, inviting bed overwhelmed their desire to talk, causing both of them to drift off in the

middle of a discussion about how strange Wikuni society had seemed to them for the short time they'd been there.

The next morning, Tarrin was not quite as occupied as everyone else, because he had something to distract him from the seriousness of their position. He came up on deck with Sapphire and started teaching her Sulasian, showing her objects and telling her the words they represented. She paid careful attention to him throughout the morning, as Allia and Miranda stood on the roof of the sterncastle and continued to search for their unknown destination, seeming to absorb what he was trying to teach. He would teach her the words for various small objects, then test her by laying the objects out on the deck and speaking one of the words and having her identify the object. She began to get the hang of the instruction quickly, and by lunchtime, she had learned about two hundred words. She was learning at a very high rate of speed, so quickly that Tarrin was a little intimidated.

What he was doing invariably attracted a crowd of his friends, and they were amazed that the drake was as smart as she was. Phandebrass especially seemed astounded by it, and he nearly got himself thrown overboard when he asked Tarrin if he could dissect Sapphire's brain to find out how it had changed. Tarrin treated his drake to a very sumptuous lunch for her hard work, and continued with her in the afternoon, this time with help. Azakar and Camara Tal, still dressed in their armor and breastplate, came over after lunch and helped out, actually getting in the way at first as they just threw words at the drake, but after Tarrin calmed them down and organized things, they did help out quite a bit. He did start riding them when Azakar started teaching Sapphire words in Arakite, and Camara Tal started teaching her Amazon. He didn't want to confuse the drake overly at first, and trying to teach her three languages at once would confuse her.

By sunset, Sapphire had quite a vocabulary. She knew the words for almost everything one could see on the deck, and everything one could carry on his person. She had learned the names of all his friends, and had even come to understand the concept of racial groups. She could tell the difference between a Wikuni and a human, an Amazon and an Arakite, a Selani and a Were-cat. He knew that because he would tell her the word for a race, and the drake would fly over and land on the shoulder of a member of that race briefly, then fly back to him. Tarrin was very happy with the

progress the drake had made that day, and as the sun set over the western horizon, he treated her again to a large plate of veal, one of her favorite meats.

But all thoughts of the drake vanished when Allia's voice called out over the deck. "I see something!" she cried quickly, patting Miranda's shoulder and pointing her in the direction she was looking. Tarrin looked up at the pair quickly, then looked in the direction that Allia was pointing, almost directly off the starboard side, just a little angled towards the bow. All he could see was empty ocean, even after he rushed up to the rail and put his paws over his eyes to try to screen out the light of the setting sun. Tarrin wondered how she could see looking into the sunlight. He looked up at her again, and saw that she was wearing one of the Selani visors. Where did she get it? She said she'd broken hers! He saw that she had to hold it over her face to keep it from slipping off her nose, and when he took a better look at it, he realized that it was the one *he* used in the desert. She had taken his visor! No wonder he couldn't find it anywhere!

In five steps and one bounding leap, Tarrin was on the roof of the sterncastle as an excited Allia pointed to what she saw. "Right there, Tarrin!" she said in Selani. "It's right there, but I have no idea what it is!"

"What do you see, sister?"

"Here, you look," she said, taking off the visor and handing it to him. "Miranda, give Tarrin the spyglass," she ordered the mink in Sulasian.

Tarrin donned the visor and held the spyglass up to his eyes. At first he saw nothing but a blur, but Miranda showed him how to focus the image. He scanned the glass back and forth slowly, until he finally saw what Allia had seen. And it made little sense.

It was a tiny spot of blackness on the horizon. There was no form or shape to the darkness, but it was very discernable with the red of the sky backlighting it. It was a tiny spot of black sandwiched between the red sky and the dark blue sea.

And it was tiny looking through the spyglass! Tarrin felt very awed and impressed at his sister's vision, to see something so tiny at such a distance, with the sun in her face! No wonder the poem said they'd need Allia to find

what they were looking for...only a Selani, or perhaps an Aeradalla, would ever have spotted that!

"It's not much, sister, but it's definitely something," he told her in Selani. "I can't make anything out. Can you?"

"No, just the darkness," Allia replied. "Almost as if night had taken over that one little patch of sea. If it wasn't sunset, I would never have seen it," she admitted. "The sky is highlighting the darkness."

"It is at that, or I wouldn't have seen it either," he agreed. "Even with this thing," he added, handing the spyglass back to Miranda.

"What did you see, Tarrin? I can't find it," Miranda asked.

"It's a patch of black," he told her. "I can't make anything out, and neither can Allia. Maybe it's a mountain of black stone, like that volcano island that we passed a while ago." He handed Miranda the spyglass and the visor, then carefully pointed her in the direction she needed to look. "Move slowly, now," he told her. "It's very small."

"I think--I see it!" she said happily. "You're right, it's like a black spot on the horizon."

"What do you see?" Keritanima called from the deck.

"It's not much, sister, but there's definitely something out there," Tarrin called down to her. "Just a speck on the horizon."

"More like a smudge than a speck," Miranda agreed. "But even I can see it. Kikalli's winds, Allia, you have some eyes," Miranda told her with a smile. "I would never have seen that if it hadn't been pointed out to me. It's just too small."

"Well then, that settles that," Keritanima said bluntly. "Jalis! We need to turn starbord! Allia, call out when the bow is pointing at what you see!"

"Aye, your Majesty!" Jalis shouted from the steering deck. "Helm, come to starbord, but do it gently," Tarrin heard the bobcat order his steersman from under his feet. "Listen for the Selani's call, and when you hear it, call out the compass reading and set that course."

"Aye, cap'n," the pilot acknowledged.

The entire ship waited silently as the steamship slowly began to turn starboard. They all watched Allia as she slowly turned her body to keep herself facing what she saw on the horizon, and Keritania began to pace nervously. Tarrin looked towards the horizon, but the sun was blinding him and he wouldn't have been able to see anything anyway, for Miranda had the spyglass and Allia had the visor. Tarrin did get a general sense of how close they were by watching Allia's body. He figured that when Allia's shoulders were set squarely with the bow, they were more or less there.

She shuffled more and more towards the bow of the ship, until her shoulders finally squared up. A moment later, she called out, a sound everyone on the ship, even the Tellurian engineers that had come up from the bowels of the engine room when word was passed down to them, heard. "Now!" she shouted.

"Bearing two-five-three! Setting course, two hundred fifty three degrees, cap'n!" the Wikuni pilot reported.

"Very good, son," the captain said in a calm voice. "Let's steam for as long as we can, then set the sea anchor and wait out the night."

"Aye, Cap'n," the junior officer with him on the steering deck acknowledged.

"Well, brother, we're almost there," Allia told him as she took off the visor. "Now we know where we're going. We just have to reach it."

"I know," he said soberly. "We're another step closer. The only question is how big the hole is going to be we'll have to step over to get there. Remember, the poem said we still have one more step to go."

"Then we'll conquer that obstacle when we reach it," she said simply. "I've come to find out that when we are together, there is almost nothing we can't do."

"I hope you're right, Allia," he said fervently. "Goddess, I hope you're right."

Nobody slept well that night. Now that their destination was no longer an unknown, everyone was antsy and restless, Tarrin the worst of them. They were almost there. Almost there! Tarrin paced back and forth on the

deck, constantly looking over the bow, unable to sleep, unable to even sit still for more than a few moments. The night was crisp, cool, and clear, but Tarrin hardly noticed it. Everything they had been working towards for two years had almost reached its conclusion. Everything Tarrin had done, everything he had gained, everything he had sacrificed, it was all leading up to this.

Nobody knew what to expect. They had all sat down and had a long talk after dinner, discussing what the next day may bring. The only absolutes they had were that there was one more obstacle to overcome, and there was a guardian that would be defending the Firestaff once they reached where they were going. Outside of that, nobody could offer much more than imagined problems. The problem was, though they knew where they were going, they had no idea what they would find once they got there. They didn't know if it was a small speck of an island, or a huge semi-continent. They didn't know if they would immediately find the Firestaff, or if they would have to spend days, rides, maybe even months searching the land for it. If the Firestaff was even on land. Miranda brought up that rather chilling scenario, that the Firestaff was indeed hidden under the ocean, and it would force them to find some way to counter the killing water to get it. They didn't know if the Firestaff rested within the void, or if the void would end before they got there. That was the one thing they all fervently hoped would come to pass. None of them wanted to have to face down the guardian without the power of magic to aid them. As it was, Tarrin was the only member of the group with access to magic, and it was his Druidic magic, the weaker of his two magical abilities.

The night passed for Tarrin in an almost feverish whirlwind of mental supposition, as he tried to imagine every possible thing that may stand in their way, imagine every kind of guardian he could think up, and think of ways to defeat them both with and without his Sorcery. The not knowing was what aggravated him the most, he realized after half a night of thinking about what may be. If he only knew what to expect! But that was the one thing that he didn't have, the one thing the poem didn't reveal.

But it could have been worse. They could have not found the poem, and if that were the case, there was no telling where they'd be. They may be searching old ruins in Sharadar, or scouring the inner regions of Wikuna. They may be invading Zakkar, or attempting to find the stronghold of the

ki'zadun to take the information they had amassed about the Firestaff by force. They didn't know what was coming, but he could only thank the Goddess that they had gotten the information that they did have. Without that poem, the Zakkites may very well be in the lead in this most important of all races. They may have been able to figure out a way to get around the obstacles the Ancients had set down to deter people from doing exactly what they were doing, and with a little luck, they very well may have gotten to the Firestaff first.

That would have been a disaster of monumental proportions. Tarrin didn't know when it would activate, but he wasn't going to take any chances. It could be tomorrow, it could be next ride, it could be next month, it could be next year. Whenever it was, he was going to make sure nobody else had it when that day came.

Tarrin was joined on deck by the others, one by one, well before dawn. Keritanima was the first to abandon the attempt to sleep, about two hours before dawn, coming up with a blanket wrapped around her, but she was wearing the same dress she'd had on the night before. Keritanima changed her dress every day, so it was clear to him she hadn't even tried to go to sleep. But instead of pacing on the open deck, she'd been pacing in the privacy of her cabin. Dolanna came up almost immediately after Keritanima, looking a little tired and drawn. Not a few minutes later, Allia came up with Miranda, Binter and Sisska, and Camara Tal. Dar came up with Azakar and Phandebrass about a half hour later, the three of them carrying large trays with hot pastries just out of the oven in the galley, and Kimmie joined them with Sapphire riding on her shoulder not long after that. They shared the slight meal, for nobody felt like eating much, and then waited in anxious, almost tense silence for the sun to rise and Jalis to give the command to get under way.

It was the longest sunrise in Tarrin's life. They watched the false dawn come and go, then watched as the sky began to transition from the darkness to the pink hues of sunrise, until the very tip of the sun appeared on the eastern horizon. Tarrin wasn't the only one trying to will the sun to come up, but the resistant heavenly body almost seemed to be moving backwards to the Were-cat as he got more and more impatient.

"Why isn't Jalis giving the order yet?" Dar demanded in irritation. "It's light!"

"They have to wait until the sun comes all the way up, Dar," Keritanima told him. "There may be reefs around, so the lookouts need enough light to see into the water."

"What is a reef?" Allia asked.

"A shoal of rock just under the surface," Dolanna answered for the Wikuni. "Since these are uncharted waters, the captain is going to be careful. We do not want to hit a reef and founder this close to our destination. It would make the Goddess fairly angry with us."

"Slightly," Keritanima agreed. "Just keep your pants on, Dar. We'll be moving in a little bit."

After about a half an hour, they did get under way. Jalis intended to go at half speed at first, but Keritanima personally told him that he could put them under full steam or he could get out and swim. After a short and heated argument, where the captain actually backtalked his queen, Jalis knuckled under when Keritanima threatened to execute him on the spot if he didn't obey her commands immediately. Jalis reluctantly ordered full speed, and the smokestacks billowed smoke as the ship surged forward with two men looking out on the bow and three from the foremast, low enough to where the smoke of the engine didn't choke them to death.

Though he'd stayed up all night, Tarrin didn't feel in the least bit tired or sleepy. He stood watch along with the others, with Allia standing on the sterncastle with the spyglass, watching. She wasn't the only one who could see, however. Tarrin stood at the bow and watched as the tiny black dot they'd seen last night grew larger and larger, becoming visible to Camara Tal not long after sunrise, and visible to the others as they moved towards it. It was still an utter black against the horizon, without feature or form or texture, a darkness that loomed ahead of them and grew inexorably larger as time flowed by.

"I don't get it," Keritanima growled about an hour before noon. The blackness was visible to everyone now, a dark half-circle just inside the horizon, getting larger by the moment as they approached it, and it made all the sailors nervous. The most obvious thing about it was that it didn't look

like land or any sort of natural feature. It looked ominously *magical*, and that was enough to unnerve the average superstitious sailor. "We're closer now. Why can't Allia make anything out yet?"

"I'm not sure, Kerri," Tarrin replied, looking at the blackness before them. "Maybe it is magic, like some of the sailors have been whispering. I wouldn't discount anything at this point."

The darkness got larger and larger, and as they approached it, it made the sailors more and more edgy. Tarrin was getting very anxious himself, but not because of the strangeness of what they were seeing. He was certain now that the blackness *was* magical, because it couldn't be very much further, and by now Allia should have been close enough to make out features. But she still saw nothing but featureless, empty black, and its lack of dimension made it hard to determine just how large it was or how far away they were. It was like a shadow looming before them, a shadow of inky black, the object casting it hidden from them.

It grew and grew and grew as they steamed towards it. By lunch, it consumed a good portion of the sky before them, and it became apparent as they neared it that it had a definite shape. It was semi-circular, with defined edges, but nothing within that border was discernable through the inky blackness.

"That just *has* to be magical," Tarrin growled to Camara Tal as they stood at the bow and stared at the blackness, which now extended out to the sides far enough to make Tarrin have to move his eyes to look from one edge to the other.

"I'm more worried about how far away it is," Camara Tal answered, gripping the hilt of her scabbarded sword. "It's like a big piece of darkness torn away from the night, and it has no depth. It could be a few leagues ahead, or a few hundred. There's no way to tell until we get to it."

"That's a scary thought," Tarrin grunted. "It may be a thousand longspans across. We may be hundreds of leagues away, but we're seeing it now because it's so big."

"Possible, but if that were so, I think it would have to be made by a god," Camara Tal told him. "That much magical power? No mortal could do it."

"We may be dealing with something the gods left behind to protect the Firestaff, Camara."

"I know, but that seems a little--"

"Ahoy!" one of the lookouts in the rigging screamed. "Rocks ahead, Cap'n! It looks like a reef!"

"Aye," Jalis shouted from the window of the steering deck. "Should we reduce speed?"

"Aye, sir! They're about a mile ahead!"

"Aye," he acknowledged. Tarrin didn't hear him give the order to slow, but he felt the ship start to decelerate. Tarrin moved up to the rail and peered ahead, and he saw the rocks. They just barely made it over the surface of the relatively calm water, a slight disturbance in the small, gentle waves in the very clear water. Tarrin looked more and more closely, and then he scanned his eyes to one side, realizing something rather significant.

The reef extended as far as he could see to the north.

He looked south, and again, the reef extended as far as he could see to the south.

"It's continuous," Camara Tal said sourly, scanning the reef with her eyes. "I don't see a break in it anywhere."

"Allia!" Tarrin shouted. "Can you see a hole in it?"

"No, brother!" she shouted back to him. "It goes as far as I can see in both directions!"

The ship came to a gentle stop just in front of the reef. It sat just under the water, a strange corrugated jumble of stones that looked covered with sea creatures. The top of the reef wasn't level, and knobs and protrusions rose out of the water, lapped by the gentle action of the waves. Tarrin saw a strange star-shaped creature that was almost five spans across creeping over the surface of one of those jutting rocks, the water lapping against it gently as it slithered over the wet surface of the dark grayish stone. All of them gathered at the bow and took turns looking over the rail, down at the reef. It rose out of the water about fifty spans in front of them, but it rose up from the ocean bottom in a gentle incline, which put part of the reef beneath the

ship. The water was very clear, and it let them look down into the water at an angle to see the part of the reef the sunlight could touch.

Keritanima came up to the bow rail and leaned over it, looking at the rocks about fifty spans ahead. "Damn," she muttered. "I knew this was going too easy."

"We need to find a passage through it," Tarrin said.

"Maybe we could have Sapphire fly out and see if she can see a break in the reef," Kimmie offered. "You said you could use Druidic magic to talk to her."

"I could, but I don't want her going too far," Tarrin said. "Since we don't know what's out here, I don't want some creature to swoop down on her when she's busy looking at the reef and eat her."

"I know one thing," Keritanima said grimly. "We're close to land."

"How do you know that?" Dar asked.

"That's how," she said, pointing towards the blackness ahead. Tarrin squinted as he peered ahead, for at first he didn't see anything. But then he saw white flecks in the blackness, and once his eyes focused on them, he saw that they were birds. Seagulls. "Birds. Those are seagulls, Dar, and they're too close to the water's surface to be migrating. They're feeding, and that means there has to be land nearby where they can land and rest."

"I didn't see those," Dar grunted, looking at the darkness.

"Do you think we're close?" Camara Tal asked.

"I have no idea, but I do know that we can't be too far away for those birds to die of exhaustion before they fly back," she answered. "With this tailwind pushing them back towards the darkness, they could come out a long way." She snorted. "But let's worry about one thing at a time. We have to get past this reef."

"Anyone have any bright ideas?" Tarrin asked.

"What else can we do, brother?" Allia asked. "We must find an opening."

"I say, that's rather narrow thinking," Phandebrass said. "We have three options, we do. We can find a way around it, we can try to go over it, or try to go through it, we can."

"And just how would we go over it?" Keritanima asked. "Or through it?"

"Over it would be easy, it would," he said. "We just make a wave that carries the ship over the top."

"And what happens if the ship bottoms out on the reef in the process?" the Wikuni asked sharply.

"Well, we just don't do that," Phandebrass replied.

Keritanima growled audibly and glared at him. "We should rephrase. Anyone have any ideas that *work*?"

"Without magic, our options are rather limited," Dolanna said, leaning over the rail and looking down.

Jalis came over to them and saluted the queen sharply. "The lookouts can't find a break in it, your Majesty. Before I just pick a direction and start moving, I thought you may want to decide which direction we go in."

"How far does this reef go?" Dar asked. "No, I mean how far do they usually go?"

"There's a reef in Valkar that extends for over a thousand miles," Jalis told him. "It makes the northern marches of the west coast of the continent unreachable. I've seen reefs as short as a few feet, and as long as a thousand miles, lad. There's just no telling until we find its edge, or find a hole in it."

"How long is a mile again, Kerri?" Dar asked.

"He means about three hundred leagues or so," Keritanima answered.

Dar whistled. "That'll take us days to cross, if it's really that long."

Tarrin looked down at the reef, considering. It looked natural, and it probably was, but he had the sneaking suspicion that this was another obstacle deliberately set down to hinder anyone from reaching the Firestaff. If Jalis was right and there was no way to tell how long it would take them to go around it, it would mean that they would lose precious time. Days,

maybe even rides of time lost as they searched for a channel through the reef, or its end.

Tarrin looked at the reef, tuning out his friends as they debated what to do. Could this be the test the poem talked about? Where twenty may try, but only one would succeed? Of course, that reference of twenty was probably a metaphor, or just thrown in there to keep the structure of the poem consistent. If there was a one to reference, now was a good time. Of the eight magic-users in their group, only Tarrin had access to any form of magic at all. He was the only one left that could do anything about this challenge from a magical standpoint.

But what could he do? Triana and Sathon had never taught him spells to pick up ships and carry them over a reef. Even if he tried, he seriously doubted he'd live long enough to get the spell going. Doing something like that would take an incredibly powerful Druid to accomplish, someone like Triana. Tarrin knew already that he just didn't have the power to use Druidic magic to move the ship over the reef.

But as Phandebrass said, he was thinking narrow. The problem presented was an obstacle preventing the ship from moving forward. The two most common means of dealing with an obstacle that hindered progress were to either avoid the obstacle, or remove the obstacle. Tarrin couldn't avoid the obstacle, meaning he couldn't pick up the ship and get it over the reef, but he might be able to *remove* the obstacle. that would mean moving the reef, or at the very least, opening a hole in it wide and deep enough for the ship to pass through safely.

That may be possible. Tarrin mulled over how he may go about that using Druidic magic. He could part the stone using Druidic magic, that was an option. Part it like opening drapes. He could cut the stone, or he could use Druidic magic to pulverize it, change it into sand and let the ocean carry the sand away. He could try to use the ocean itself to ram the reef and break a hole in it as well, but that would take a whole lot of power, and he doubted he'd have the ability to use a spell like that.

Other than that, he couldn't really think of other ways to open the reef, at least not things that he would be able to do. There were any number of easy ways to open the reef that would get him killed in the process. He needed a way to affect a large amount of stone, yet do it in such a way that

it made it a very easy spell to cast. Tarrin crossed his arms and glanced at a bit of motion, seeing a lynx Wikuni sitting on the barrel of one of the cannons lashed to the deck, staring at the reef--

--cannons. *Cannons!*

"Kerri," he said quickly, "how much gunpowder do we have on board?"

"About--that won't work, brother," she warned. "That's the first thing I thought of."

"What won't work?" Dar asked.

"Using the gunpowder to blow a hole in the reef," she answered. "The problem is that the reef is under water, and we don't have any way to ignite the kegs if they're under water. Just putting the kegs on top of the reef won't be enough, because they won't blow out a deep enough hole for the keel to get through." She grunted. "Besides, I don't think we have enough gunpowder in the first place. Donovan only let them bring on four kegs. That's enough to fire these cannons about five times each."

"Can you conjure gunpowder, Tarrin?" Kimmie asked.

"Easily," he answered.

"Tarrin, we're in a void," Keritanima told him. "We can't use magic, remember?"

"We can't use *Sorcery*," he said sharply. "Or Priest or Wizard magic. You forget, sister dear, I also happen to be a *Druid*."

Keritanima looked at him, then she laughed brightly. "I completely forgot! You can use Druidic magic in this void?"

"Yes," he assured her. "The All is everywhere. Nothing can block Druidic magic. The only thing I need to know if the kegs will explode. Will they explode if they're under water, Kerri?"

"I really don't know," she said with a sudden laugh. "But we'll find out, won't we?"

Tarrin thought it would be as easy as wedging the kegs into the reef, but Keritanima disabused him of that notion quickly. The first thing she did was send two sailors over to the reef in a longboat to see how thick the reef was

on its far side. Then she had them take careful measurements of the reef's thickness at various depths, a task that required them to dive into the water with long poles that stuck up out of the water, as men on the ship gauged the distance between the poles visually. After she had the thickness of the reef, she sat down with a piece of paper and did some mathematical calculations. Tarrin didn't understand what she was doing, and she wouldn't answer him while she was doing it.

After about an hour, she finally finished what she was doing and pulled Tarrin aside. "We don't have enough gunpowder," she announced. "We'll need at least three more kegs."

"It took you three hours to figure that out?" Tarrin asked, a bit impudently.

"Would you rather have just stuck the kegs in the rocks and blown them up, then merrily rip the bottom out of my ship as we tried to squeeze through a hole that wasn't big enough?" she countered sharply.

"It would have worked," he protested. "We just have to keep doing it until we have a big enough hole."

"And it would take three times as long as my way," she snapped. "My way, we spend a little time now to avoid wasting a lot of time later. I know how much gunpowder we need and where to put it. We can blow a hole big enough for the ship in about two hours, where you'd have us out here tossing kegs of gunpowder over the rail for days!"

"Two hours?" Tarrin asked.

"Two hours," she said. "We should have a hole open by sunset. We can slip through it and anchor to the reef overnight, and set out in the morning."

"Well, if you say two hours, then I guess we'll trust you, Kerri," he acceded.

"Thank you," she said with an edge in her voice, stalking away.

Keritanima issued her orders, and her sailors carried them out quickly. The steamship backed up until it was about a quarter of a longspan off from the reef, then dropped its anchor. After that, a longboat set out with a single keg of gunpowder aboard, and two of her best swimmers, the same two that did the measuring of the reef with the poles, pulled the keg overboard. They

tied lead weights to it, then slipped beneath the waves to place it where Keritanima had told them to place it. They were down for a very long time, and for a moment Tarrin thought they drowned, but then both of them surfaced, and then were pulled back aboard the longboat. As the four sailors that had ferried them over rowed back towards the steamship, Keritanima pulled Tarrin to the bow and told him what to do.

"They put the keg about twenty spans down," she told him. "They were supposed to wedge it in a crevice in the side of the reef. Can you find it and blow it up from here, or do you need to get closer?"

"I can do it from here," he said, peering into the water. He really didn't need to see it, for the All would do his aiming for him. But a good look at the keg would help him immensely. Druidic magic was heavily keyed to images, and the sharper and more detailed--and more accurate--his image, the better chance the spell would work as he desired. He already knew exactly how to use the magic to blow up the keg. Gunpowder exploded when exposed to fire, so all he had to do was create a lick of flame inside the kegs. The kegs were waterproof, which would keep the water from dousing the flame, but that was a moot point. Tarrin had seen gunpowder explode before, when Keritanima had hit the powder magazine of Sheba's pirate ship with her magic. That created an explosion that blew the pirate ship into a thousand little pieces. The instant the fire touched the gunpowder, it would cause the whole keg to explode. The water wouldn't really do anything except muffle the sound of the explosion.

"Not yet!" Keritanima said quickly. "Let my men get the longboat back over here and tie it to the steamship. That's a pretty big keg, and it should make quite a shockwave. I don't want them getting hurt."

Tarrin nodded, and as he waited for the longboat to row back over. After about five minutes, the longboat was beside the steamship, tying a rope to the anchor chain and waving up to the sailors above that they were ready.

Tarrin stood by the bow, closed his eyes, and began. He reached within, through the Cat, and made a connection to the endless power of the All. It felt warm and comforting to him, welcoming him and offering to him its power. Tarrin had already worked out how he was going to perform this task, and so his image and his intent were already prominent in his mind. He would do it in two stages. The first was a spell not of image but of

intent, and that intent was to be able to see in his mind's eye an image of where the gunpowder keg was. The All responded to his request, showing him an image of the keg, with its lead weights tied around its girth, stuck in a wide crevice in the reef about twenty or so spans deep, with the sunlight shining on it in scillinting waves as the surface of the water refracted the sunlight penetrating it. Once he had that image, he distanced himself from the All and then touched it again; a Druid couldn't cast successive spells on one touch of the All, for the All would contaminate the spell cast beforehand with the new image and intent the Druid used. The new spell would conflict with the image and intent which had created the first one, causing unpredictable and often deadly results. It was the Druidic version of a Wildstrike. Sarraya had been very careful to drill that into him. To keep the mind clear of everything but the image and the intent while actively touching the All. Stray thoughts introduced variables into the formula, and the All was notorious about interpreting those unwanted thoughts or images in ways that were often quite deadly for the Druid and everyone around him. Once he felt the All touch him through the Cat, he pushed the image of the keg into the forefront of his mind, and then formed the intent that a small flame come to life within the interior of the keg. The All responded to him, seeing his image and reading his intent, then carrying out his desire.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. A white geyser of water erupted from the surface of the water, hurling bits of rock out the column of water, and a dull *boom* rocked the ship. Spraying seawater, like rain, and small bits of the reef stone pattered onto the deck of the steamship, as well as a few fish and sea animals that looked like aquatic scorpions.

"Nice," Kimmie mused, wiping the water off her face.

"I say, that was interesting," Phandebrass said in agreement. "I wonder if I could design a spell that would duplicate the effect. I could call it Phandebrass' Amazing Detonation, I could."

"Is that it?" Tarrin asked.

Keritanima shook her head. "Now my divers go see how much damage it did, and when they're done, they'll set another keg. It's going to take us a while to blow a hole through that, brother. It may look narrow at the surface, but it's actually pretty thick thirty spans down."

They waited as the longboat rowed back over to the reef, rowing out into water that had become cloudy with the explosion stirring up the sand and sediment in the reef, and then the two divers slipped over the side of the boat and disappeared into the water. They were down only a moment before they breached the surface of the water and scrambled back into the boat quickly, one of them screaming loud enough for them to hear him all the way over at the steamship.

"What's the matter?" Tarrin asked. They all looked to Allia, who went over to the rail and looked at the longboat.

"The screaming one had something take a bite out of his leg," she reported. "I see dark shapes circling the longboat in the water. There, one of them just broke the surface," she said, pointing.

Tarrin looked, and picked out a dark fish fin sliding back under the waves. "Shark," Keritanima said in concern. "They better get him over here quickly, so we can bandage his leg."

"The explosion must have riled them," Azakar noted, then he flushed slightly and closed his mouth.

"And attracted them to us," Camara Tal added, pointing. "Is it just me, or are there several dozen over there?"

Tarrin looked, and he had to agree. There was an absolute swarm of the dangerous fish circling the longboat as the sailors frantically rowed for the steamship, and there were many more gathering in the murky water near where the keg was detonated.

"Alright, Kerri, what do we do now?" Tarrin asked, a little acidly.

"Give me a minute," she said, her brows furrowing as she thought.

The sharks complicated things. Without being able to send divers down to assess their progress, and also to place the kegs so they did the most damage, Tarrin figured that they would have to do things the way he first thought they would, simply try to blow a big enough hole in the reef by piling the kegs on the top. Tarrin wasn't sure that was going to work now, mainly because Keritanima didn't think it would. He had learned to trust Keritanima's judgement in these kinds of things, for she was rarely wrong. Keritanima's moment turned into an extended silence, broken only when the

injured sailor was brought back aboard and tended, his leg showing a rather nasty bite made by something with very wide jaws. Keritanima herself bandaged the wound, apologizing to the sailor for sending him out there to nearly get his leg ripped off. The sailor seemed flabbergasted that the queen of Wikuna would bother to take the time to even check on his condition, let alone be the one to bandage his wound. And even *apologize* to him!

"Alright, I'm stumped," Keritanima admitted after she finished with the sailor. "I'm not sending another man down there, not now that we know this area is infested with sharks. Anyone have any ideas?"

"How about if we fill a longboat with gunpowder, take it over there, and then sink it?" Dar proposed. "Tarrin can blow it up, and we can hope there's enough powder in the kegs to break a hole in the reef."

"Would that work?" Camara Tal asked. "You're the expert on gunpowder, Kerri."

Keritanima drummed her fingers against her muzzle. "I think it would, but it would have to be one *big* keg," she said. "If Tarrin only blows up one, the others may not explode underwater. I've never seen or heard of anyone trying to do this underwater before, so I just can't say for certain."

"I can Conjure as big a keg as you need, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "I can make a barrel bigger than a longboat."

"Alright, then, conjure us an iron barrel the same size as that, and then fill it with gunpowder," she prompted, pointing at one of the large water barrels that had been lashed to the deck to free space below. "That should be a good start."

Tarrin did so, and then they lowered the barrel into the longboat. It was too heavy for the boat to carry the standard complement of six, so only three sailors ferried the keg over. Keritanima shouted at them from the bow so they positioned themselves in the general vicinity of where the first barrel was set and detonated, and then they struggled considerably in their task as they heaved it over the side, very nearly capsizing the longboat in the process. The iron barrel sank like a stone, and the longboat rowed back to the steamship. Keritanima ordered them to go behind the steamship, for this explosion would be much larger than the last, and the steamship would protect the boat from the wave the detonation would create.

Once a sailor at the stern shouted that the longboat was tied up and secure, Keritanima looked to Tarrin. "Alright, brother, it's your turn," she told him.

Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, and came into contact with the All. He did the same thing he did the first time, first getting an image of the barrel, then turn around and using that image as an aiming aid to set fire to the gunpowder inside the barrel.

The water did *nothing* to muffle the sound of the detonation. An earsplitting *BOOM* shuddered the ship, the shockwave of it actually pushing the ship back as a column of water rocketed into the air, sending huge boulders of reef stone flying in every direction. The ship pulled its anchor chain taut as a huge wave generated by the explosion slammed into the ship, making it rock dangerously and throwing almost everyone down to the deck as the ship bucked like a wild horse.

They all stayed down on the deck as the last of the water and bits of reef stone rained down on them, and then there was a strange silence, the only sound being the water lapping against the ship. Then Keritanima laughed. "My, that was a big one!" she said cheerfully. "Can we do it again?"

Tarrin looked at her, then chuckled ruefully. "Children and their toys," he told her as they all picked themselves up from the deck.

"Alright, crewman, tell the longboat to row over there and see if that blew a hole in the reef!" Keritanima shouted at the crewman that had been at the stern.

"Aye, your Majesty!" he replied with a salute, then leaned over the rail and relayed the queen's instructions to the longboat.

They waited as the longboat rowed over, and the three men inside probed the churned, murky water with long poles. Encasing the gunpowder in an iron barrel seemed to have made the explosion much more powerful than using wood, despite the barrel they used being larger, and as they watched they realized that the iron-encased gunpowder had done massive damage to the reef. A huge hole had been blown out of it, nearly twenty spans wide, and it looked to pierce the reef's wall all the way to the other side.

"It's jagged, your Majesty!" one of the sailors shouted up after they rowed back to the ship. "It's roughly twenty feet wide and thirty feet deep, but it does go all the way through the reef. The problem is that it's narrow on the far side and wide on the near side!"

"Very good, crewman!" Keritanima said with a smug, victorious smile at Tarrin. "Prepare to load another barrel!"

"That's not big enough?" Tarrin asked.

"Tarrin, we need about *fifty* feet of width to clear it safely, and the ship draws about twenty-five feet at the keel," she answered. "We need to widen the hole. I figure we'll have it blown out wide enough with three or four more barrels."

"You're the boss," he said absently.

"That's right, and don't forget it," she winked at him.

Keritanima's solution did work. The crewman loaded another powder-filled iron barrel Tarrin Conjured, and then she had them drop it on the far side, where the opening was at its narrowest. The explosion of the barrel was no less spectacular than the first, and after the men probed the murky water with their poles, they announced that the hole was more or less evenly wide on both sides. Keritanima had Tarrin Conjure three more barrels, and they were successively dropped into the hole at the near side, the middle, and the far side successively, which systematically widened the breach even more and dug out its bottom. The five barrel bombs blew a huge, gaping hole in the reef, more than large enough for the ship to traverse safely.

"Alright, Mr. Donovan, give me your slowest speed," Jalis ordered the engineer from his sterncastle window at the Tellurian, who had come up on deck to check on the progress. "And keep your men right where they can stop the engine at a moment's notice. This is going to be a tricky piece of navigation."

"Aye, Cap'n Jalis," Donovan replied. "We'll creep through as slow as you please."

Sailors lined the rails with long poles as the steamship very carefully, very slowly set its bow into the hole the explosions created, ready to push

the ship away from the jagged rocks should it drift too closely to them. The destruction of a portion of the reef created a backcurrent in the water, as water flowed from far side of the reef to the near side, forcing Jalis to have the engineers increase the ship's speed. The ship nosed into the opening, then the new current pushed the ship back out. They tried again, this time gradually increasing speed once the steersman had the ship solidly in the center of the narrow channel to overcome the resistance of the pushing current. Tarrin watched with Dar and Camara Tal as the ship slowly traversed the dangerous opening, Jalis taking no chances with the ship as the men lining the rails kept their poles ready to push off the reef should the current draw the ship towards it. A man at the bow threw a weighted line into the water and called out the depth every few seconds, quickly reeling the line back in then tossing it out again as soon as he had the lead weight in his hand.

Jalis' patience paid off, as the stern of the ship cleared the reef, and the ship once again was surrounded by nothing but water. All the sailors gave out a cheer when the captain announced they were clear, clapping each other on the back and putting their long poles away. Tarrin looked back to the reef, seeing the surface of the water eddy as the currents beneath flowed through the new opening. The sun would be setting very soon, so the captain ordered the anchor dropped, preparing to wait out the night and set out again in the morning.

"Well, that's that," Camara Tal noted, looking back with Tarrin. "The question is, what next?"

"That's a good question. I wish I knew the answer," Tarrin grunted.

It was another night of anxiousness, but it wasn't quite as bad as it had been the night before. The restless night caught up with almost everyone, and everyone, even Tarrin, had very little trouble sleeping that night. Getting past the reef relaxed everyone, for Tarrin was sure that the reef was the last obstacle the poem mentioned. They had cleared all the challenges, and now there was nothing between them and that strange blackness ahead, the place that all of them were absolutely convinced held the Firestaff, nothing but seemingly empty ocean. Tarrin felt that the hardest parts had

been put behind them, and now it would be a simple matter of sailing up to the darkness and passing through it to see what was on the other side.

The morning's mood was quite a change from the morning before. Everyone had been quiet and sober and serious the day before, but the mood among Tarrin's friends now was one of exuberance and enthusiasm. Tarrin wasn't the only one that felt that they'd cleared the majority of the obstacles, and though all of them knew that there could be more challenges ahead--the poem mentioned nothing about the mind-affecting magic, or the storm--they felt that they could overcome them. They all knew they weren't there yet, but for the moment, at least, all of them were celebrating penetrating the reef.

The reef had quite a surprise for them the next morning. Tarrin heard the sailors whispering about it when he went up on deck and got something to eat, so he went to look. Needless to say, he was quite surprised when he looked back.

The hole in the reef was gone.

It was like someone had come along behind them and put all the rock back into the reef wall, leaving it intact and again representing a barrier to anyone that wished to cross it. Tarrin was a bit shocked to see that, for it had to have been a magical effect, but he felt nothing. He wasn't sure how it could be done, since only Druidic magic worked in the void. Was there a Druid nearby that was so powerful that they could do something like that?

Though it was a strange and obviously magical phenomenon, none of the sailors seemed all that worried about it. After all, their queen had gotten them through it once before, so they could simply do the same thing again when they left and get through it again. What worked once would easily work again.

The happy mood evaporated after the ship got moving, and the blackness before them began to loom. It loomed more, and more, and more, the darkness expanding to take up more and more of the sky before them, growing larger and larger. By midmorning, the darkness swallowed up almost the entirety of the horizon before them, a daunting sight to say the least. They still had no idea how far away it was, what it was, or what would happen when they reached it. The sailors got more and more worried

as the darkness seemed to tower over them, rising high into the sky and consuming the entire view ahead. It was like sailing into oblivion.

Just before lunch, Allia gave the call that they all had been waiting for. "I can see its border now!" she announced loudly from the roof of the sterncastle. "I can see where the darkness touches the water!"

"How far away is it?" Keritanima asked loudly.

"It is a good way inside the horizon," she called back. "It took me a while to understand what I was seeing. If we keep at this speed, we will reach it in about three hours."

"Jalis, are we moving at full speed?" Keritanima shouted.

"No, your Majesty, we're moving at three-quarters right now," Jalis called back. "Donovan wanted us to slow a little so he could do something."

"Well, tell him it's over," she ordered. "I want full speed!"

"Yes, your Majesty, full speed," Jalis acknowledged.

The ship sped up a little after the order was given, and they all watched and waited.

The darkness expanded even more as they approached it, as sailors moved jerkily and had trouble keeping their attention on what they were doing, as Camara Tal sharpened her dagger in preparation, the Amazon going down to change out of her leather haltar and coming back up with her breastplate on. Azakar did the same, going down and changing into his armor. Kimmie and Phandebrass went down and studied their spells, even though they couldn't cast them, and Dolanna, Allia, Dar, and Keritanima grouped together unconsciously, should they suddenly find themselves in a need to Circle. Miranda, Binter, and Sisska seemed the only ones unmoved by the situation, the mink Wikuni sitting sedately on a folding canvas chair near the bow, knitting away as Binter and Sisska stood silent vigil over the queen and her maid.

After two hours, the darkness was a tangible, discernable wall. It rose up to dominate the sky before them, and Tarrin could see its edge where it bordered the sea. It was a wall of massive proportions, and as they neared it, he could sense its power. It was a tangible thing, he could feel, but what surprised him most was that it was Sorcery.

It was a Ward!

As they got closer and closer, he could make out its construction. It was definitely a Ward, the weaving of a Ward was unique, one of unfathomably complicated weaving. Tarrin couldn't make out a tenth of it, and the tenth he could make out he couldn't understand. Its construction was so vast, so complicated, so intricately detailed that he didn't think any mortal mind could have managed to weave a spell so unbelievably complex. Was this another spell of the Goddess? He didn't sense her unique signature in the weaving. There was a precise exactness in the weaves the Goddess wove herself that seemed to be missing from this one, but he couldn't imagine anyone other than the Goddess doing something like *that*. It was so big, so complicated, Tarrin couldn't even pick its weaving apart enough to understand just what the Ward was designed to defend against. It had to have a purpose, a thing it was designed to prevent from passing through it. It was the fundamental operation of a Ward.

Keritanima and Dolanna began to get a sense of it as they got closer and closer, Keritanima's eyes widening and Dolanna putting her hand over her mouth. "Tarrin, is that *Sorcery*?" Dolanna asked in wonder. "I can--it is unbelievable!"

"It's a Ward," he said with a nod.

"Well, one thing's for sure, it looks like the void's going to end right at that wall of darkness," Keritanima said.

Tarrin nodded. It was hard to sense through the Ward, because of its magic, but he could indeed sense strands on its far side. The Ward marked the border of the void.

"How did they make it black?" Dar asked. "Wards are supposed to be invisible to the eye."

"I have no idea," Tarrin said. "I can't understand a fraction of what I'm seeing. It's just too complicated."

About a half an hour later, they reached the edge of the darkness. It was indeed a titanic wall of utter darkness rising up out of the sea. It loomed over the steamship like a Giant looming over a mouse, the sun preparing to pass behind it and leave the steamship in shadow. Jalis ordered the ship to stop about half a longspan from the edge of it, and all the sailors stared at it

with wild eyes, many of them with shaking hands. Tarrin had to admit, it did look quite intimidating and frightening. They couldn't see through it, so they had no idea what was on the other side. It could be empty ocean, or a coastline could be lurking mere longspans on the other side of that wall of darkness.

"Amazing," Dolanna said. "We know it is shaped like a dome because we could see it as we approached. But this close, it looks like a flat wall."

"Well, the water is passing through it," Keritanima said, pointing to where the waves disappeared into the darkness. "That's a start."

"What are we going to do now?" Dar asked.

"We can't try to go through it until we know what the Ward was designed to stop, and what steps it takes," Dolanna said. "If that is a killing Ward, the last thing we want to do is sail through it."

"Good point," Dar said, paling slightly.

"Well, Tarrin, feel like a little ride?" Keritanima asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You, me, and Dolanna are going over there in a longboat," she told him. "I think between the three of us, we can figure out what the Ward does."

"It's a start," he mirrored her former words.

The longboat was lowered, but not after a heated fight between Jalis and Keritanima. Jalis wasn't about to let the queen run off into an unknown, dangerous situation, but Keritanima wasn't about to stay behind. Jalis was almost treasonous, threatening to put Keritanima in irons for her own good, then Keritanima countered by telling him that if he tried that, he'd be swimming home. Jalis lost in the end, simply because Keritanima pulled rank on him, but he did manage to get her to agree to take a full crew armed with muskets as a precaution. Binter also accompanied them, his huge hammer in his hands and ready to defend the queen from whatever may jump out of the darkness to attack them.

The longboat rowed up to the wall of darkness carefully, slowly, and then the sailors pulled in the oars and dropped a sea anchor to try to keep

the ship stationary. All three of the Weavespinners leaned towards the Ward, an inky wall of ultimate blackness, and they tried to understand what it was and what it did. That much closer to it, Tarrin could make out its weaving much better, but it was still an unbelievably complicated, multi-layered weave of stunning proportions, and its function was hidden within its mind-boggling complexity. After nearly a half an hour of quiet, intense study, Tarrin blew out his breath and leaned back. "It's just too big," he sighed. "I can see its weaving, but I can't make out what it's supposed to do."

"Me either," Keritanima growled.

"Nor can I, so I guess now it comes time for experimentation." Dolanna picked up an oar and pushed it towards the Ward, but it passed through. "So, it does not stop objects," she noted, setting the oar down and reaching out with her bare hand.

Before Tarrin could react, Dolanna reached out and tried to touch the Ward.

His heart about leaped out of his chest when he saw that, but to his ultimate relief, her hand touched the Ward as if it were a solid object. She laid the palm of her hand against it and pushed, which only made the longboat drift backwards.

"It looks like it's designed to act as a physical barrier to living things," Dolanna said. "Or perhaps certain living things. The birds we saw earlier may be able to pierce the Ward, but it obviously will repel a human."

"Let's see," Keritanima said, reaching out with her hand. It too struck the Ward as if it were a solid object. "It's amazing," she whispered. "I can feel the power of it under my hand! It's incredible!"

Tarrin reached out as well, his paw reaching out and making contact--

--then it passed through! White light erupted from the blackness around Tarrin's wrist as his paw passed through the Ward, and he felt an blasting surge of magical power assault him, like white-hot steel placed into his paw. The power of the Weave conducted through the Ward, entering him, filling him to his capacity in the blink of an eye. Magelight exploded around his body in a blinding flash, startling two of the sailors so badly that they fell overboard. Tarrin felt paralyzed by the contact, unable to move, unable to do anything but try to fight back against the onslaught of magical energy

that sought to fill him. At that moment, he realized that even a *sui'kun* could be destroyed by the power of the Weave, as its power sought to fill him to such a capacity that the energy reacted with itself and destroyed him.

Clamping his jaws, biting off the tip of his tongue, Tarrin set a foot against the side of the lonboat and tried to pull away, but the Ward had his paw in a vice-like grip, like the hand of a Giant holding onto him, and he couldn't move it.

The power became pain, a pain he had not felt since that day in the desert when Spyder had provoked him into crossing over. He could feel the power, feel its heat, and though the heat did him no harm, the power itself was starting to infuse his every cell, his every tiniest part. Tarrin's flesh and skin and fur began to glow with the same light as the aura that surrounded him as the power flowed into him like water, and he the vessel.

Fight back! the voice of the Goddess reached him, though it was distant, fuzzy in his struggles. *Fight back, kitten! If you don't master it, it will destroy you!*

Tarrin clenched his eyes shut and tried to center himself. Fight back. He had to resist the power, or take control of what was trying to send it into him. It was like a fight between Sorcerers, as one tried to overcharge the other and force him to let go of the Weave or be Consumed. His adversary was the stronger opponent, and that made Tarrin go on the defensive. He used every trick he'd learned from Spyder and through trial and error, channeling the flow of the power into a weave, a weave of pure, unmitigated power, and then he focused it in his free paw and drove it into the Ward, even as his free paw drove into the blackness. Tarrin used the power against itself, channeling what was flowing into him into an eruption of all seven flows, flows that radiated out from his paw. They flailed into the matrix of flows that made up the Ward, and whenever a flow made contact with a flow from the same Sphere, the two flows cancelled one another out. The Ward was attacking the integrity of Tarrin's body, so Tarrin retaliated by using the power of the Ward to fuel a spell that would attack the integrity of the Ward. Tarrin's spell slashed through the weave that made up the Ward as the flows Tarrin fed back into the Ward caused the weaving of it to unravel, as Tarrin's spell actively attacked it. It happened quickly, too quickly to follow, but Tarrin realized that he'd done serious damage to the integrity of the Ward around his paws, enough that he felt the vice-like

grip on his paw loosen. Tarrin was about to jerk both his paws out of the Ward, but he felt the power roaring into him suddenly ease, becoming a trickle that he could easily control.

The weave of the Ward actively altered, right around his paws. The black surface of the Ward shimmered like ripples on the surface of a pond, radiating outward. The ripples intensified, and then the Ward's blackness broke up, going from a featureless, intimidating wall to a barrier of black mist, its edge defined but its appearance looking intangible. The size of the disturbance was rather impressive, nearly a hundred spans high and a hundred spans wide, and Tarrin could sense that the dimensions of the disturbance were similar under the water. It was a circular area of change.

"Tarrin, what just happened?" Dolanna asked fearfully, reaching out as if to touch him, but not sure if she should.

Tarrin was panting to recover his breath. Goddess, that was *close*! He'd never been...manhandled like that before! Spyder's attacks seemed gentle compared to what he'd just experienced! Tarrin's attention was taken up by the Ward, and he ignored Dolanna as he tried to understand what had just happened. The Ward's weaving had changed, its fundamental nature altered, but he didn't do it. The Ward had changed itself after Tarrin nearly disrupted that parts of it he was touching, and changed itself over a wide area. Tarrin had done something to trigger this, a programmed response of some sort.

But what did he do?

Keritanima reached towards the misty barrier, but this time her hand penetrated into it. Her eyes widened and she jerked her hand out. "It felt like ants crawling all over me!" she said.

"Tarrin, whatever you did, it has altered the Ward so we can pass through it," Dolanna said in surprise, putting her own hand in.

Pass through it. *Pass*. Tarrin looked at her, sweat forming on his brow as he maintained control over the Ward as it still tried to fill him with power, the urgency of the flow becoming stronger and stronger every moment. The poem said only one in twenty could allow them to *pass* beyond the Weave. The reef wasn't the last challenge. This was!

"It's starting to fight back again, Dolanna," he said in sudden concern. "I think this is what the poem was talking about. The Ward reacted to me

when I touched it, and I had to fight it for control. I think I accidentally opened a hole in it when I managed to overcome its attack, but I don't know how long it's going to last."

Though his train of thought was scattered, and it showed in how his words bounced around from subject to subject, Dolanna seemed to follow him. "This is why we needed you," she realized. "Only you could conquer the Ward and grant us entry."

"Speaking of entry, we'd better do some entering quickly," Keritanima said urgently. "If it's starting to resist Tarrin, we can't waste any time."

"That is dangerous, Kerri," Dolanna said. "We do not know what is on the other side."

"We just have to show a little faith that the Goddess isn't leading us astray," she said with an impish smile, standing up in the boat and looking back to the steamship. "Tarrin opened the Ward!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Get the steamship through, and do it *now*! He can't hold it open for very long!"

Tarrin heard no reply, as he devoted more and more attention to the Ward, and how it was trying to overcome whatever it had done to itself. Tarrin could feel the weave try to realign itself the way it had been before, and he realized he had to actively put his paw in to stop that. He didn't know what he was doing, but he drew from the Weave through the Ward, using it to make indirect contact to the strands beyond the Ward, and quickly wove together a monstrous weave of pure Divine. He wedged that into the matrix of the Ward, locking the flows in place like nailing a wedge under a door to keep it open. The flows of the Ward resisted Tarrin's attempt to stop them, but the flows did indeed stop trying to rearrange themselves back into their prior organization, which would cause the Ward to attack him again.

"Tell them to hurry," Tarrin said through gritted teeth. "I can't hold it open much longer!"

Tarrin struggled to hold the Ward in its current state as the steamship's engine roared to life, audible to them, and it started surging forwards. Tarrin didn't look, didn't think of anything but maintaining his spell, struggling to hold the Ward open as the resistance it posed grew stronger and stronger

with each passing moment. Tarrin's paws began to itch and got progressively colder as he kept the wedge in the Ward, prevented it from closing on itself and rearrange back to its former state. "Where are they?" Tarrin hissed, his tail sticking straight out as his body strained, almost as if he were trying to hold the breach open with his bare paws.

"They're passing us right now, Tarrin," Keritanima told him. "Throw down a rope and pull us through behind you!" Keritanima shouted.

Tarrin was losing. The edges of the altered Ward were beginning to collapse as the force exerted against him became stronger than what he could resist. Tarrin retracted his holding weave of Divine, pulled it down to make it more concentrated, and though he couldn't see it, the men on the ship did. They saw the misty hole suddenly shrink visibly, the top of it just over the top of the mast as the bow and amidships passed into the black swirling mist. Tarrin was forced to give more and more ground to the inexorable pressure being exerted against his weaving, being exerted against him, and sweat rolled profusely from his brow as he struggled to retreat to a position where his Divine weave could set itself and hold its position against the closing hole. Tarrin felt the longboat suddenly yank forwards, and the cold sensation passed through his body as the longboat was pulled through the breach. It lasted a long moment, and then he felt warmth on his paws, spreading up his arms, and then across his body. Tarrin felt the tip of his tail come free of the Ward, and when he lost contact with it, his Divine weave was crushed by the pressure of the Ward. From the outside, the effect was startlingly abrupt. With a sudden *snap*, the misty black of the Ward shuddered back into featureless black, and the hole Tarrin opened closed.

Tarrin opened his eyes, letting go of the Weave and feeling his body throb a bit from the effort. From the inside, the blackness wasn't there, and he looked up into a clear, beautiful sky. He realized that the blackness was an Illusion, an Illusion that was only visible from the outside. The area inside the Ward was not a void; in fact, there was such a concentration of strands that it made his ears buzz slightly. The place had the same feel as the Tower of Six Spires, that same sense of magic charging the very air itself, but here it was even stronger. The power of the Weave literally saturated the air, and there were so many strands that the ghostly sight of them almost threatened to overwhelm his vision, hide the physical objects

that were behind them. It took him a moment to adjust himself to it, to remind himself to ignore the ghostly images of the strands and concentrate on the solid things behind them, things that became more easy to see and sharper as he tuned the strands out of his vision. There were birds soaring on the gentle wind before them, he could see, soaring over something that made his heart leap to see.

It was an island. A very large island, with the towering cone of a volcano raising up from its north side. They were very far away from it, but even from that distance, he could see the green of the grass and the trees, could see that it was a lush, beautiful place. It looked to be about thirty longspans across or so, and its distance put it a few hours' travel away by steamship.

"We, we made it," Tarrin said in relief, looking at Keritanima. But instead of seeing joy or relief on her face, she looked frightened. "Kerri, what's wrong?"

"Tarrin? Hold on," she said, raising a hand. She caused a ball of light to appear over her hand, and she held it up to him. "We made it, didn't we?"

"If course we did!" he told her. "We're inside the Ward, Kerri, and there's an island in front of us!"

"How can you see it?" she asked, peering in that direction. "Tarrin, it's as black as pitch in here!"

"No it's not," he protested. He looked to the steamship, seeing that they were lighting lanterns, and he heard them calling out to the longboat fearfully. What was wrong with them? It was broad daylight, why on earth did they need to light lanterns? "It's the middle of the day!"

"Alright, one of us lying," Keritanima said sharply. "I can't see my hand in front of my face!"

"Well, everything's as clear as day to me," he told her.

"Amazing," Dolanna said. "Tarrin, you can see?"

"It's broad daylight, Dolanna," he told her.

"I can barely see you with Kerri's light," Dolanna told him, squinting in his direction. "It is like the air itself is swallowing up the light. I cannot see

the steamship at all, but I can hear them talking."

"It has to be some kind of magical spell put on us by the Ward when we passed through it," Keritanima said. "Let's get back the ship and see who's been affected, and try to come up with a way to counter it." She looked around. "Tarrin, I can't see the steamship. Could you guide us back to it?"

"Alright," he said, shifting to Wikuni to address the four rather nervous sailors in the ship. "Alright men, set your oars. The steamship is just a little starboard of us, about three hundred spans away."

"A little more than hundred fifty feet," Keritanima translated for the Wikuni.

"Let's go nice and slow," Tarrin told them. "Just keep calm and row steady, and we'll be there in just a few minutes."

"Aye, sir," one of them said in a shaky voice. "You heard the man, set oars," he ordered his fellow sailors.

The sailors rowed carefully, and Tarrin looked around. The island looked inviting, but this magical effect on the others was a bit disconcerting. Why hadn't he been affected? Had anyone else managed to avoid the spell's effect? Tarrin was a little surprised that it had done that, that it could affect everyone who passed through it, but there was no magical spell or effect that could not be countered or removed. They would just have to figure out what caused it and engineer a remedy. And now that they were out of the void, that meant that all of them, even Kimmie, Phandebrass, and Camara Tal, could bend their magic to the task. He was confident that this problem was an easy one to overcome.

Tarrin guided them to the ship, looking at the island. He didn't feel anxious or worried anymore, at least not yet. For a long moment, he simply revelled in the fact that they'd made it. He was sure of it. Somewhere on that island, the Firestaff was laying, waiting for them to come and claim it.

All they had to do now was find it.

"Well, my friends, I think we are here," Dolanna chuckled. "You said there was an island, Tarrin?"

"Yes, a couple of hours ahead."

"Then that is probably our destination," she nodded.

"Well, my friends, let me be the first to welcome us to the end of our journey," Keritanima said with a slight smile. "It won't be long now."

"Indeed," Dolanna agreed.

"Since I can't see my hand in front of my face, I think we could give this place a fitting name. Let's call it the Shadow Realm."

Tarrin stood up and grabbed a dangling rope from the winch that had lowered the longboat, looking at Keritanima. If anything, he realized, it was a fitting name. An island protected by a dome of darkness, that cast shadow over the eyes of those who managed to pass through, making day seem like night to them. "It fits," Tarrin agreed.

Soon, their journey would be over, Tarrin realized with a sigh. Somewhere in here the Firestaff was hidden, and all they had to do was find it.

Somewhere in the Shadow Realm.

Chapter 11

The magic affecting the people on the ship did more to unnerve the Wikuni sailors than anything that had happened thus far. Tarrin had never seen a group of men more frightened and nervous than he saw that day, after they had brought up the longboat holding the queen. They stumbled around blindly, banging into things, and every time someone did it made everyone else even more anxious. He understood that their inability to see was the cause, that beings like Wikuni were so dependent on their sight that when it was taken away from them, it caused them to nearly panic. They couldn't see their own muzzles unless they had a lantern, and Keritanima and Dolanna told him that the light was swallowed up by the air, barely lighting anything outside of arm's reach.

Tarrin thought it slightly odd that they would be carrying around lanterns, candles, and torches in the middle of the day, but to them, it wasn't day, it was night.

Unlike the mind-affecting magic that caused the attempted mutiny, this particular magical effect got everyone but Kimmie, Binter, and Sisska. Allia was similarly affected by the magic-induced darkness, as were all the humans and Wikuni. All of them had little doubt it that Tarrin and Kimmie were immune because they were Were, but nobody seemed to understand why the Vendari were also immune to the magical effect. The drakes weren't affected by it either, but then again, they were animals, even if Sapphire had exhibited more than animal intelligence lately. It fell to the Were-cats and the Vendari to clear the deck of most of the loose objects, clearing paths for the terrified Wikuni sailors and Tellurian engineers, who had been forced out of the engine room by the total darkness below.

Then again, they weren't going to be needed. Jalis dropped the anchor, and Keritanima didn't argue with him when he told her adamantly that he wasn't going to move the ship until they figured out what was going on, and if they could find a way to fix it. Even if four people on board could see,

nobody else could, and the two Were-cats and two Vendari couldn't run the ship by themselves.

After Keritanima and Jalis made rounds to try to calm everyone down, giving the men double rations for dinner and sending them below to rest and stay out from underfoot, Keritanima gathered all of them together, even the bear Wikuni that served as the ship's Priest and Jalis, and they tried to figure out what was causing the darkness. The Wikuni Priest, Orlen, and Phandebrass cast a series of magical spells to try to discern the source of the magic, but their attempts failed. Dolanna and Keritanima couldn't sense the magic, which made it on par with the magic that had caused the mutiny. Tarrin couldn't sense much of anything with the powerful background magic that permeated the entire region within the magical Ward, a background noise that drowned out anything that wasn't stronger than the background itself. That meant to him that the magic had to be very subtle, very delicate, the same way that the mind-affecting magic that had caused the mutiny had been. Tarrin suspected that that was why Dolanna and Keritanima couldn't sense it either, but since they didn't have as much experience in using the senses to probe the Weave as he did, they discounted their own abilities and felt that they failed to sense anything.

"I say, if we can't detect its source, we need to figure out how it's affecting us," Phandebrass said clinically, scratching the beginnings of a white beard. "If we can't block it from affecting us, we need to counter what it's doing, we do."

"It must be a mental effect," the Wikuni Priest, Orlen, reasoned in a deep bass voice. "If the Vendari and Master Tarrin and Mistress Kimmie can see, then it can't be a physical spell."

"Agreed," Dolanna added, "but what kind of mental effect? There are a variety of possible approaches to create this. Illusion, Phantasm, Enchantment, or even Necromancy."

"What are those last two?" Dar asked.

"Enchantment is something Sorcerers cannot easily do," Dolanna explained to him. "It is a mental magic that affects mood or personality, but in strong cases, it can affect thoughts. It is the Wizard's form of Mind

weaves. If an Enchantment is making us *think* that it is this dark, then our minds will not believe what our eyes tell us."

"Necromancy is a forbidden form of Wizard magic, dealing with negative energy," Camara Tal explained. "It's been forbidden for centuries. Necromancy can do anything Wizardry can do, and a whole lot more."

"Then why is it forbidden?"

"Because it delves into the realms of the dead," Phandebrass answered the Arkisian. "Necromancy was the magic that raised all the dead in Suld and caused them to fight against us, it was. I say, most people don't like the idea of someone coming along and stealing the bodies of their departed loved ones to use as servants, they don't, so Necromancy is hated by almost everyone. In some kingdoms, it is death to practice it, it is."

"I don't see how it's different from Wizardry."

"Wizardry draws *positive* energy," Kimmie said simply. "Necromancy draws *negative* energy. There is no spell in Necromancy that is directly helpful or beneficial. All Necromantic spells are destructive, because negative energy can't be used for beneficial ends."

"I say, good explanation, Kimmie."

"Thank you," she said to her teacher with a smile.

"I think I understand," Dar said. "Necromancy sounds creepy."

"It's not for the faint of heart," Phandebrass told him. "I've studied Necromancy. I can even cast a few of its spells, but I won't go too far. Necromancy subverts the soul and turns the casters evil. I've gone as far as I could go without suffering those effects."

"Why in the blazes did you do something so foolish!" Camara Tal snapped at him.

"I wanted to learn about Necromancy, I did," he told her. "So I tracked down a Necromancer and apprenticed to him. He was a sinister fellow, he was, totally enslaved by his power. But he was a good teacher."

"You *are* crazy," Camara Tal told him bluntly.

"We digress," Dolanna reminded them. "We may be able to discern the type of magic it is if we can discover why the Were-cats and the Vendari are immune. There has to be a reason for it."

"Well then, we must ask what makes them different from us, we do," Phandebrass said.

"Well, they're both part animal," Dar said.

"So are the Wikuni," Keritanima told him immediately. "That's not the reason, or the Wikuni would be immune too."

"Were-cats are magical beings," Phandebrass reasoned aloud.

"But the Vendari are not," Orlen countered him.

"I remember something that Tarrin told me long ago," Allia injected. "That the Were-cats and the Vendari originated from *magical* beginnings."

Tarrin remembered telling her that, and nodded. "The Were-cats were magically evolved from common cats," he affirmed. "The Vendari are a race that was created by the Wizards of Zakkar."

"Well, that is a common denominator," Phandebrass mused. "But the magic of that creation is ancient. It couldn't be strong enough to counter this magic, it couldn't."

"You miss the point," Dolanna said. "The Vendari and Were-cats are not completely *natural*."

"Neither are the Wikuni," Keritanima countered. "If we really are descended from the Sha'Kar, then we should look like Allia," she said, pointing at the Selani." Then Keritanima's eyes brightened. "But we did *originate* from the Sha'Kar," she said quickly. "I think that's the commonality here."

"What?" several asked at once.

"The Vendari and the Were-cats aren't descended from the four original races," she explained. "They were created later. If this magic really was set down by the Ancients that hid the Firestaff some five thousand years ago, maybe it's only attacking the people it was designed to attack. Think about it, when the Ancients hid the Firestaff, the Vendari didn't exist, and if the Were-cats did, they probably would never have considered them a threat."

Were-cats aren't the kinds to seek the Firestaff, because they'd have no interest in it." She winked at Tarrin. "The humans are one of the first four races. They existed back then. So did the Sha'Kar. And the Selani and the Wikuni are descended from the Sha'Kar."

"Excellent. You just explained us right back to where we began, Kerri," Dolanna smiled. "We need to determine how the magic is affecting us to counter it. I do not doubt that you are right, but it does not help us figure out how the magic works."

"Actually, it does," Keritanima said smugly. "If the Ancients laid this down, then it's Sorcery. And Sorcerers can't affect others with Mind weaves outside their own race." She looked at Tarrin. "And if it's Sorcery, then it can be *blocked*, by a Ward. Think you're up to challenging the Ancients, brother?"

"You assume that the magic is active, Kerri," Dolanna chided her. "The effect could have been placed on us already, and now we only suffer the weave's lingering effects. If that is so, no Ward can block what has already been laid down."

"Not a Ward to stop Sorcery, Dolanna, a Ward that totally *nullifies* all magic," Keritanima corrected. "I think it *is* an after-effect, or we'd sense the active magic. If we can eliminate the effect once, then we can see if it re-establishes itself or it just goes away."

Tarrin considered that, and he saw where she was going. The Ward they'd penetrated had been unbelievably complicated, and there was quite a good chance that crossing through it had been what had caused this magical influence. It may have had safeguards within safeguards within safeguards. The Ancients had went to all the trouble to hide the Firestaff all the way out here, it wasn't a stretch to think that they had taken exorbitant precautions to safeguard the island upon which it had been placed. Striking blind anyone who did penetrate the Ward in some way was a good tactic.

"We can try it. There would be very little chance of anything bad coming of it," Dolanna nodded. "Tarrin, do you think you can do as we ask?"

"Dolanna, *you* could do that," he told her.

"Yes, but I would like you to place the Ward over me, and I cannot create it from the *inside*," she told him. "It would block my power as soon as I wove it, and I would not have time to set it before it disrupted itself."

"Good point," he said, stepping back. "Alright, everyone get clear of Dolanna," Tarrin ordered.

They cleared away from the small Sharadite Sorceress, and Tarrin made contact with the Weave. He was astounded at how rich it was, how easily the power came to him, almost as if it were eager to please him. He had no trouble at all weaving a Ward that absolutely defeated all magic that either tried to cross it or existed within it. Such Wards were very hard to make, for instead of it affecting on things on a border, they affected everything within them as well. Such Wards could only be made with High Sorcery if they were much larger than a broom closet in volume. Tarrin didn't have to resort to High Sorcery for this task, building the Ward just large enough to affect his small mentor, and then setting it so it would only last a moment.

Dolanna gave out a slight gasp and blinked, then shielded her eyes. "It worked," she announced. "It is daylight again. Now then," she said, stepping forward, removing herself from the effect of the Ward. She looked around, and nodded. "I can still see," she announced. "The Ward removed the effect. You were right, Kerri, it was a lingering effect, not an active spell."

Tarrin took hold of the Weave again and recharged the Ward so it would last longer. "Alright, Kerri, you try," Tarrin told her.

Keritanima stepped into the Ward's boundary, then she too blinked and squinted. "It works alright," she chuckled, stepping out.

"Well, let us line up and step through," Dolanna told them.

One by one, the magicians crossed through the Ward, and regained their ability to see. They all blinked and tried to adjust their eyes to the light, standing in a group to give themselves that moment. Tarrin called over Miranda from where she, Binter, and Sisska were nearby, and she passed through the Ward and regained her ability to see as well.

"Alright, we found the answer," Keritanima said. "Let's clear everyone up and get moving."

Keritanima was both right and wrong. The Ward cleared the vision of the magicians. It also cleared the vision of Miranda and Azakar. But it did *not* clear the vision of the Wikuni sailors after they left the Ward. It let them see while they were within it, but as soon as they stepped out, they were again affected. Only the Wikuni Priest, Orlen, had regained his vision. Jalis, his crew, and the Tellurian engineers all were unaffected by Keritanima's solution, and that baffled the Wikuni queen to no end. She grumbled and began to pace, muttering to herself as she tried to come up with a way to solve the problem.

"I don't get it," Dar said. "Why would the Ward restore our sight, but not anyone else's?"

"The question you should ask is what makes us different from everyone else," Camara Tal told him.

"I say, I do see one common denominator, if we exclude a couple of stray elements," Phandebrass said. "It restored our sight, and we're all magicians in one way or another. It didn't work on the sailors or the engineers, because they're not magicians. But it *did* work on Azakar and Miranda, and that is where my theory goes astray, it does."

"Azakar is a Knight," Camara Tal grunted. "That means he has Karas' favor. In a way, he *is* a magician, mage," she explained. "Knights can't cast spells, but they do have the favor of their god, and that gives them certain magical advantages."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, because I've never seen them," Camara Tal said. "I just know that they do. Back before the Breaking, Knights *could* cast spells. They can't do it now, but I guess that ability gives them just enough magical ability to make the spell Tarrin used work on them."

Tarrin glanced at Camara Tal. He didn't know that, and he'd never heard anything about it from Darvon or Faalken. Maybe they didn't talk about it because they were lost abilities. Maybe they didn't know themselves. Camara Tal was a student of military history, and Amazar was very close to the land of Sharadar, the one place where the lore of the ancient world hadn't been lost in the Breaking. She'd probably read more in the Cathedral

of Knowledge, the legendary library in Abrodar, than Tarrin had ever known in his life. She probably read about that in Abrodar.

"But that doesn't explain Miranda, it doesn't," Phandebrass said, looking at the mink.

"I guess I'm just lucky, Phandebrass," she said with a cheeky grin. "That, or maybe Kerri's rubbed off on me a little."

Tarrin knew why it affected her, and it wasn't something he wanted the others to find out. Miranda was an Avatar, and that link to the goddess that had made her gave her whatever it was that let the Ward affect her.

"Maybe Miranda has some magical potential we didn't know about," Tarrin said carefully. "That could be it. Want to study Wizardry with Phandebrass and Kimmie, Miranda?"

She smiled at him. "I'm busy enough as it is, Tarrin," she declined with a chuckle.

"I say, I didn't consider that," Phandebrass said. "You sure you wouldn't like to try, my dear? It wouldn't be hard to test you."

Tarrin almost sighed in relief. Phandebrass' attention had been deflected. If the doddering Wizard had really gotten a stick up his craw about finding out, he *would* find out. He was relentless that way. Tarrin's quick thinking and focused that dangerous obsessive curiosity on another tack, and Miranda's secret was relatively safe.

"Maybe later, Phandebrass," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "For now, let's worry about the important things."

And there were important things. Jalis and Keritanima could be heard screaming at each other a few moments later, as Keritanima tried to get the captain to move the ship forward, but the captain absolutely refused to weigh anchor, screaming that the engineers couldn't see to run the engine, and it was too dangerous for his sailors to try to use the sails. There was no easy solution, because Tarrin couldn't make a Ward to cover the entire ship. It was just too large to try a Ward like that, since it was such a demanding spell in the first place. But Phandebrass came up with a solution that pleased both sides in the altercation. Tarrin couldn't create a Ward to cover the entire ship, but he could make a Ward to cover a large area. So

Phandebrass dragged him down to the engine room and had him set the Ward there. It took alot out of Tarrin to do that, but when he was finished, he had set a Ward that made the entire engine room a place where they could see, and had set it so that it would last nearly a whole day. That would be more than enough time for the ship to reach the island.

The ship weighed anchor under steam and started towards the island, with Allia and Miranda on the lookout for any hidden dangers in the water. Keritanima, Tarrin, Dolanna, and Camara Tal grouped together at the bow and decided that they would land at the extreme southern tip of the island and sweep methodically from south to north. It was a huge island, heavily vegetated with what looked like thick forest, so it was going to take them a very long time to check the island thoroughly. Tarrin seriously doubted that he'd be able to sense the Firestaff's location until they were rather close to it, because of the powerful background magic that clouded his ability to sense magical energy. That too almost seemed designed, as if it had been set that way to prevent someone from landing on the island and quickly determining the Firestaff's location. If that were the case, then Tarrin realized that there were going to be more adversaries than the mythical guardian. The entire island may be populated with creatures placed there to make getting the Firestaff as difficult as possible.

That was not a very pleasant thought. They'd come a long way, and the last thing Tarrin wanted to endure was putting his friends in danger. But then again, they all knew, even expected, to literally have to fight their way to the Firestaff. It wasn't going to be a surprise for anyone if their initial landing on the island wasn't immediately challenged by some fell beast or monster. The Ancients had gone to some extreme measures to protect that ancient artifact, at least what they'd seen so far, so it was no stretch to assume that they had left behind something other than magical defenses. If Tarrin were hiding it and had unlimited resources, he'd seed the island with all sorts of nasty creatures, making sure to put enough there to where they could breed and keep up their numbers. If he could think of it, he was absolutely positive that the Ancients thought of it first.

It took them about four hours to reach the southern tip of the island. It was carpeted with forest, a deciduous forest that reminded him of home, trees standing almost right up the waterline, where a very narrow sand beach separated sea from tree. Tarrin was surprised that the seeping of the

saltwater into the ground hadn't killed the trees so close to the shore, but they seemed quite healthy. Allia and Miranda guided them into a small, shallow cove, and the ship dropped anchor and killed the fire in the boiler to stop the smoke. They may be in hostile territory, so they had to keep a low profile. Tarrin, Allia, and Miranda scanned all the visible shoreline for denizens, creatures, monsters, enemies, or even animals, and outside of some birds and various rodents, a few wild cat-like animals about the size of a housecat, and one small deer-like mammal, they saw nothing. Certainly nothing that looked dangerous. That bolstered Tarrin just a bit; if such small animals could live and thrive on the island, then there couldn't be an overpopulation of large, highly aggressive animals or monsters preying on them. That certainly didn't mean that they weren't there, but it did mean that there wouldn't be one hiding behind every tree. Unless it was a herbivore, of course. He'd seen a herbivorous creature on the plains of Saranam that looked like a sloth, but was almost the size of a small cottage, and had claws on its paws that had to be as long as broadswords. Tarrin certainly wouldn't want to have to fight something like *that*.

At this point, Jalis and Keritanima had another fight. Jalis was a loyal subject, but when he heard Keritanima ordering longboats for her and her companions, Jalis exploded. He threatened to lock Keritanima in a closet, because he absolutely *was not* going to let his Queen wander around on hostile, alien soil without every sailor on the ship escorting her for her own safety. Keritanima countered that they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces, so they wouldn't be much more than a hindrance to her party anyway. Jalis wasn't quite so ready to admit defeat, and while the longboats were lowered and prepared, the two of them fought like children. Tarrin was of a mind that this wasn't a good time to go. It was nearly dark, and though he and Kimmie would be comfortable in the night, some of the others wouldn't. They were there, and Tarrin found that he could wait one more night before starting out. It was the safest course of action. But he decided not to tell Keritanima that until she finished her fight. Kerri got cranky when people interrupted her fun.

"It's nearly sunset, your Majesty!" Jalis bellowed at her. "Or at least I think it is! Very soon now, it's going to be dark even for *you*! I'm not going to let you blunder around out there in the dark!"

"So, you're conceding that I don't need an army," she said with a sudden toothy grin.

Jalis' expression grew dark and grimly contrite at his verbal blunder, then he regathered himself. "You do need an army! There's no telling what kind of monsters are roaming around out there!"

"Binter and Sisska can protect me," she said confidently. "But maybe you are right about this not being a good time to leave. We should wait until morning, so we'll have a full day to explore the possible dangers before having to worry about another night."

"Well, there went telling her," Camara Tal chuckled.

"I'm glad she realized it for herself," Tarrin told her. "Sometimes she's as bad as Phandebrass."

"Nobody can be that bad," the Amazon grunted.

The easy mood Tarrin had been in once they arrived soured over the night, as the gravity of the situation began to get to him again, and the fact that they were there but they had to wait until morning made it hard for Tarrin to sit still or think about anything other than get going. He tried to imagine what they would find on that island other than the Firestaff; if the Ancients had left things behind, his wildest imagination couldn't fathom what those things might be. There may be old relics of the past, surviving five thousand years on the island. There may be ancient ruins to explore and strange wonders to behold. There was absolutely no doubt there would be danger, and Tarrin tossed and turned as he tried to prepare himself for anything from rampaging beasts to sinister magical traps. Kimmie got aggravated with him because he didn't want to get out of bed, but he couldn't get to sleep. He tried to settle down, but it was almost impossible for him to relax. Kimmie solved the problem by putting her claws in him, putting him on his back, then wrapping him up and promptly falling asleep with her head on his shoulder. Tarrin almost instinctively stayed still once Kimmie put her comfort at risk of his fidgeting, since he wouldn't do anything willingly to disturb his pregnant mate. After Kimmie got him stationary, Tarrin did manage to calm down after that, and part of him understood that he needed to be alert for tomorrow, and he'd be much better prepared if he got some sleep.

The next morning, Kimmie woke him up before sunrise, and they quietly began to get dressed. Tarrin decided to give over on the shirt and wore his breeches and a simple leather vest that left his chest and midriff bare. Kimmie put aside her dress and wore a pair of stout undyed leather breeches and a similar vest, although hers buttoned up the front. She put her belt on over her breeches, with its several small pouches and little satchels that had her spell components within it. Without the dress on, Kimmie looked alot leaner, alot more dangerous, for it showed off her sleek form. Even with her pregnancy, she was still slim and supple. They both knew that she wouldn't engage an opponent hand to paw unless she had no choice, but those oversized paws with their long claws would make any opponent very wary to try to do so. One simply did *not* fight Were-cats at close quarters. Their speed and inhuman strength made it suicide for anyone not similarly blessed.

Sapphire watched the two of them from her bed, not seeming to be very interested, and then put her head down and went back to sleep.

Tarrin wrapped a paw around his much smaller mate from behind and put the flat of the pad on his palm squarely on her belly. "I want you to be careful," he told her gently, yet sternly. "If I see you get within paw's reach of anything, I'll kill it, then I'll kill you."

"I appreciate the concern, but I'll be just fine, Tarrin," she said with a chuckle, turning and looking up at him and patting his paw fondly. "Trust me, my instincts to protect the cub are alot stronger than yours. Besides, I know there's a big, strong, handsome Were-cat male nearby to protect me if something endangers me," she said with a winsome smile.

"Right," he drawled. "You'd scream like a human girl, then turn around and shred it like paper."

"Probably, but you know I wouldn't choose to get that close to something."

That made clear, the two Were-cats went up on deck, only to find that they were the last ones to come up. The sailors had set up a table on the deck, and Keritanima, Miranda, Dar, Phandebrass, Allia, and Dolanna were seated at it as the others stood near to it; the table could only seat six, and some, like Binter, Sisska, and Azakar, were too large. All of them were

dressed for the situation. Keritanima was wearing a utilitarian dress, one of the ones Miranda made for her, one of simple brown with long sleeves. Miranda too was in a dress, one made very much like her queen's, but hers was a dark blue, nearly black. Dar wasn't wearing his robe, for the first time since Tarrin had seen him, opting instead for a pair of black leather trousers and a dark linen shirt. With his brown skin, it would allow him to hide in the dark better. Dolanna wore her favorite blue dress, but then again, she wouldn't look like Dolanna if she wore any other kind of clothing. Phandebrass had on his oldest gray robe, a very plain unadorned one with a frayed hem, but still insisted on wearing that ridiculous conical hat. Allia had cast aside the western tunic and trousers she'd been wearing and was again in her sand-colored, loose-fitting desert garb, even going so far as to put her hair up under her loose-fitting turban-like head covering, with her veil hanging from the side of her head. Tarrin hadn't seen her wear that head covering since he met her in the Tower years ago. Camara Tal was seated on a small barrel near the table, a plate on her lap and wearing her *tripa* skirt and her breastplate, as Binter, and Sisska sat on the deck close to the table and ate from their own plates. They wore their kilts and leather bandoliers, their massive weapons laying beside them. Azakar, decked out in his full plate armor, stood by the table with his plate in one hand as he ate with the other. Armor wasn't designed to let someone sit on the ground easily, so to save himself quite a bit of pinching in rather sensitive areas, the massive Mahuut youth had wisely decided to stand.

"Did you lose a draw, Camara?" Tarrin asked as he looked them over, Sapphire flying out from the stairs leading below and landing in the rigging, beside Chopstick and Turnkey.

"I got here last," she grunted, thumping her breastplate a few times. "I broke a strap."

Tarrin fully understood why that would make her late. The leather straps and buckles that held a breastplate together were very carefully measured to fit the wearer. Camara Tal would have to find a replacement strap that matched the broken one, and then fit it onto the armor. That wasn't something one did in a slapdash manner, for the fit of the armor was critical to minimize collateral injury should the Amazon have to rely on the armor to protect her from a weapon's blow. The armor may stop a sword, but if it wasn't fitted correctly, the impact could break her ribs, or do something

worse, like injure a vital organ. The steel protected from edges and points, but it was the careful fit that allowed the armor to absorb the shock without transferring it to the soft flesh and bone beneath it.

"Did you get it fixed?" he asked. "Need me to Conjure you one?"

"I got it, thanks. I keep spares, for just such emergencies," she declined.

"Wise," Tarrin nodded.

"I'm glad you finally decided to join us," Keritanima told him. "Ten more minutes, and I was going to send someone after you."

"It's not even dawn yet, Kerri."

"I know, but I want to be on that beach before the sun's all the way up."

"Jalis isn't going to like that."

"Jalis can't tell if it's sunrise or not," she winked. "I'm going to tell him it is and leave in the pre-dawn."

"That's underhanded, sister," Tarrin chuckled.

"I'm a queen, Tarrin. We call it political savvy. Underhanded is a very crude term for it."

"Correct, though," Dar murmured.

"I hope you saved me some," Kimmie said brightly. "I'm starving."

"You're eating for two," Keritanima told her with a grin. "That can't help but make you hungry."

"Sometimes, I feel like an absolute pig," she said with a laugh as Allia handed her a plate with ham steaks on it. "I've never eaten this much in my whole life. And it's not even showing on me! I can't figure out where all the food is going!"

"You Were-cats already eat enough for four people, and that's without being pregnant," Keritanima told her. "I don't know where it all goes on Tarrin either, but it must go somewhere."

Tarrin reached down over Dar and picked up a plate for himself, then used his claws to slice up one of the ham steaks. "When are we leaving?" he asked.

"As soon as we finish," Dolanna answered. "The longboats are already in the water. I am sorry, dear one, but we will have to row them ourselves."

"You mean I'll have to row," he said with a slight smile.

"Blame me for that," Keritanima told him. "I can't put you and Zak and Binter and Sisska in the same boat. You'd sink it. So Binter and Sisska go in mine, and you and Zak go in the other. Since you four take up the most room, you should row."

"I love it when she decides all these things without talking about it with us first," Tarrin noted to Azakar.

"She literally ran my life when I was with her in Wikuna," Azakar shrugged. "I'm used to it."

"I guess I can endure it this time," Tarrin told her.

"Notice that Kerri put Tarrin in the *other* boat," Kimmie laughed in Dar's direction. "Knowing him, he'd capsize it just to get her back for making him row."

"I can do that without having to be in the boat to do it," Tarrin told her. "But it would get everyone else wet too. I'll just have to find a way to knock her out of the boat by herself, that's all."

"You wouldn't dare!" Keritanima flared.

"Try me," he countered in a cool voice.

The breakfast was consumed quickly and without much more conversation. After it was done, Kimmie and Phandebrass returned to their cabins to get small packs that held their travelling spellbooks, and Azakar, Binter, and Sisska shouldered larger packs with some equipment they may need for a trek through the forest. Food, water, tools, two large tents in case they had need to pitch them, large enough to hold everyone in them, flint and tinder for fires, a small hand axe for chopping firewood, and a compass. Tarrin didn't see the need for it, for he could Conjure anything they needed, but on the other hand, it wasn't a good thing to depend entirely on one person.

While they were checking their gear, Jalis came from below decks and had one last fight with Keritanima. Actually, it was more like a lecture. He

argued with her about taking sailors as guards one more time, but she refused, so he lectured her for nearly ten minutes about how Wikuna had finally gotten a capable monarch after centuries, and she'd be doing the kingdom a grave disservice if she got herself killed. Then he blamed her for the black marks all over his record when he went home and they found out that he'd gotten their queen killed on his watch, and how she didn't care about him or his service, lamenting the dishonor he'd suffer in the eyes of the Royal Navy and the kingdom as a whole, the loss of his pension when he retired, and his becoming a social pariah whose end would be met at the hands of a lynch mob. All in all, Tarrin was rather impressed. Jalis could moan and complain as good as any woman, hitting all the important subjects and overdramatizing things rather well. Jalis wrapped up his horrible end with about ten warnings for her to be careful, and he assured her that even though nobody on the ship could see much past their own faces, he'd keep the sailors ready to move in a moment's notice and keep the cannons loaded. Just in case she needed them.

After everyone had everything they thought was needed and Jalis concluded his masterful tirade, they climbed down rope ladders and into the boats. Tarrin stepped down into his boat last, the boat holding Kimmie, Phandebrass, Camara Tal, Azakar, and Dolanna. Miranda, Binter, Sisska, Dar, and Allia had already gotten into their boat with Keritania and had pushed away from the steamship. Tarrin sat down in the boat and grabbed the oars as Dar took the rudder, pausing to look towards the island in the dim pre-dawn light, with only the stain on the eastern horizon and the Skybands illuminating them. They were here, and in a few short moments, they would be landing on that beach and begging their search.

It was time to get things done.

The trip to the shoreline took longer than any of them expected, mainly because the two rowers and the steersman had never done it before. Both Azakar and Tarrin foundered around a little until they got the hang of the rhythm involved in rowing a boat, and it took Dar nearly five minutes to comprehend that if he moved the rudder right, the boat would move left. Keritania shouted at them from her position at the stern of her boat, steering it, shouting and cursing at Dar while telling him over and over again that the boat would turn in the opposite direction from how he moved the rudder. The physics of that mystified the Arkisian for some reason, until

Dar was fired from his brief stint as pilot and Dolanna took over. She showed him that he was doing it backwards, and he was forced to watch in defeat as Dolanna correctly steered them towards the shoreline, moving at a fair clip once Tarrin and Azakar managed to get themselves organized.

It was an almost comical beginning to a very serious mission. Powerful strokes from the oars pushed their boat well up onto the beach, so far that Allia could step out without getting her soft boots wet. Tarrin helped Dar and Dolanna out, helped Kimmie and Phandebrass, then set his first foot down in the sand of this large, mysterious island. They had landed at the mouth of the very small, shallow cove in which the steamship had taken refuge, which was on the extreme southern tip of the island. The forest was deciduous, looking alot like the forest at home, even with trees he could recognize. There were oaks and maples interspersed with beeches, birches, ash trees, and an occasional pine. There were also rarer trees mixed in with them, blueleaf and redbark trees, and even a few sugarsap trees, trees that didn't appear as commonly back in Aldreth as they apparently did here. It was a forest like the forest of his home, and it had all the sounds and smells of a forest. They could hear birds deep in the forest singing and chirping, and Tarrin could hear a woodpecker beating at a trunk somewhere out of sight. He could scent squirrels even from the beach, probably because the adventurous rodents had probably come out to search for nuts. Squirrels were curious creatures.

"Where are the drakes?" Phandebrass asked, looking around. "Weren't they flying around over us?"

"They'll come find us when they get bored," Kimmie told him. "They're probably off exploring somewhere."

"I say, you're probably right."

Tarrin and Azakar pulled their longboat well up the beach, up to the treeline, then turned it over so it wouldn't fill up with rainwater while they were gone. Binter and Sisska were doing the same, and that gave Tarrin a chance to look beyond the treeline, into the dark interior, and feel just a little bit excited. Tarrin loved the forest. He grew up in one, had had a father who loved it and taught his son to appreciate it, and the Cat in him felt at home in it. He was anxious and a little nervous about what they were doing, but he was happy that it would be happening with trees around them. A

forest, any forest, was the best place in the world. He could smell the trees and the brush, smell the squirrels, and rabbits, and the small cat-like creatures that preyed upon them. He could smell the birds flying in the branches, and smelled a variety of other animals that he couldn't immediately identify, animals probably only indigenous to this place. That worried him a little, because a scent didn't tell him how big the animal was. It would only let him discern if it was reptile or mammal or amphibian or bird, and some scents gave away if the animal was herbivore or carnivore in their textures. Not all, and usually only mammal scents did so, but every little bit would help.

Binter and Sisska finished their task, turning their boat over beside the first, and they all gathered near the edge of the forest. They were all quiet a moment as they looked into it, as the first rays of the sun came up over the horizon, casting dim, eerie light into the wooded land before them. Somewhere, in there, the object of two years of searching was waiting for them. It was what men were killing for, what men were dying for, what entire kingdoms and nations were going to war over. It was what Faalken had died for, and what had nearly killed Tarrin more times than he could count. Everything that had happened for the last two years and more had culminated in that one moment, as friends and companions, siblings and mates, warriors and magicians, humans and Non-humans, all looked ahead of them and breathed a collective sigh of relief, as well as opening their senses and getting ready for the dangers to come. They all knew it wouldn't be easy. Getting there had only been half of the task. Now the final step of their long journey had arrived, the step that would put the Firestaff in Tarrin's large paws.

The only step that mattered.

"Are we ready?" Dolanna asked in a quiet, sober voice, heavy with the gravity of the situation. It was more than a question of the moment, it was a question that made each of them look inside themselves, look within and ask that same question in the vaults of each's deepest self. *Am I ready?* Tarrin asked himself, looking forward. Was he? Was he truly prepared for what was to come? Was he ready to face whatever untold dangers lay in wait for them on this large, mysterious island? Was he ready to face the formidable final guardian? Was he ready to take what the Goddess had asked, pleaded, ordered him to take? Was he ready? It was a deep question,

whose answer was one of soul and will more than one of mental consideration. Deep inside himself, he *did* feel ready. He was ready to complete this mad quest, he was ready to take the Firestaff and either hide it away or keep it in the *elsewhere*, safe from any seeking hand, until its day of activation came and went. He was ready to finish what he started, to honor Faalken's memory by completing the quest that had cost his dear friend his life. Faalken had come back in Suld to save Tarrin, so he knew that his cherubic friend was out there somewhere, looking down on them and urging them forward. He was ready to get his life back, to disappear into the forests west of Aldreth with Jesmind and Kimmie and Mist very close to him, the mothers of three cubs, and raise his children in peace. That all by itself was the most powerful of motivators for him to finish the quest, to come back to Aldreth alive, to see things through to their ultimate conclusion. He had started this quest by seeing it through the eyes of a single child, his little mother, Janette. Now he saw it through the eyes of his own children, children whose lives depended on him to do what the Goddess had bade him to do. He wouldn't let them down. He would protect the world in which they lived, he would give them that world for their own by preventing its destructions at the hands of war between gods.

Come what may, he was ready. Because now, he had more to live for than he did to die for.

"Let's go," Tarrin called in a quiet, almost growling tone, lifting a foot and setting it down, crossing the boundary between sandy beach and moss-covered forest loam.

The forest told Tarrin much as they penetrated it, moving steadily north as he kept his senses open for a hopeful detection of the magic of the Firestaff. He led the group along thick forest with plenty of undergrowth, vines and brambles and blackberry patches with their long thorns, following wide, well-travelled game trails. It was those game trails and the game that used them that told Tarrin things, things that only Kimmie understood as well as he did, because she was also a creature of the forest, bound to it and receptive to the subtleties of its whispering language. They had been moving north for about an hour or so, moving steadily and surprisingly quietly, with only Azakar's armor making any discernable noise. Tarrin and

Kimmie had separated from the others for moments during that hour to scout ahead, moving with a sureness and stealth that made them perfect for the role. They were forest-born predators in their natural environment, and even Allia could appreciate that that made them perfect to move about in the woods unseen. The two Were-cats didn't separate far from the others, keeping them in sight, but the separation allowed them to make some very important, very critical observations.

The forest game *feared* the party.

That was significant. That was beyond significant. Animals that had never had contact with a specific type of animal may show wariness about the newcomer if it was much larger, but the game and the small cats and the birds actively avoided the party, as its scent was carried before them by a southerly breeze. The animals knew the scents of one race in their party, and they scattered as it approached. The only way the animals could react in that fashion was if they had prior experience with that particular scent, and knew it to be an enemy.

That meant that there were either humans, Selani, Vendari, or Wikuni somewhere on the island. And they hunted the animals in the forest.

In a way, that wasn't a very big surprise to Tarrin. He was positive that the Ancients must have put additional protections on the island aside from the guardian, and setting a group of people on the island and telling them to defend it from all invasion would be logical. It would have been a huge sacrifice on the part of those left behind, as they literally abandoned the entire outside world, but some men would be willing to do that to protect the entire world. Tarrin would do it if it was asked of him, as would almost anyone in their group. There could very well be descendents of those initial defenders on the island, carrying out the task that their ancient ancestors began, even to this very day.

It made the two Were-cats much more cautious. Without talking about it, both of them pulled back closer to the others, close enough to respond to any threat almost immediately. Tarrin and Kimmie took the protection of the others seriously, so much so that Tarrin almost forgot that Kimmie was pregnant as she ghosted on the forest floor or went up into the trees to dance from branch to branch, moving through the trees with all the agility and grace of an Aeradalla. Kimmie may be pregnant, but nothing was going to

sneak up on her in the forest, and Tarrin knew it. She was much safer out in the woods by herself than she was almost anywhere else. But Tarrin did keep relatively close to his mate, ready to head off any surprises that may come her way.

Tarrin and Kimmie rejoined the others as they stopped briefly to drink some water. Tarrin kept his eyes on the forest as he handed the waterskin from which he'd just drank to Kimmie, watching two squirrels playing in the trees ahead of them.

"There are people here," Kimmie announced bluntly.

"You saw them?" Dolanna asked.

"No, but I know they're here," she said calmly, capping the skin and handing it back to Azakar. The Mahuut marked the skin and hung it off the side of his pack, marking it so nobody else would drink from it. The many months of being together made the others rather casual about their Were-cat companions, but they still always kept the intrinsic dangers they represented firmly in mind at all times. They all knew that one mistake could cause them to become turned, and they all saw the horror that Jula went through. None of the humans among them really cared to go through that. "The animals in this forest know at least one of the scents in our group, and they're running from it. That means they've had contact with at least one race here."

"Which one?" Dar asked.

"There's no way to be sure about that," Tarrin said. "Unless you separated into groups by race and got far enough away from each other so that your scents didn't mingle. But that would be a lot of time wasted, and be dangerous. We don't know what's out there, so we shouldn't split up."

"You're off by yourselves," Keritanima said with a teasing grin.

"We know what we're doing," Tarrin told her bluntly. "Besides, we're close enough to kill anything that may sneak up on you from behind."

"Just because you don't see us, it doesn't mean we're not there," Kimmie told her with a wink.

"The next time I take a bath, I'll be sure to check under the soap dish for you, Kimmie," Keritanima said with a toothy grin.

"How far have we come?" Camara Tal asked, holding a hand-drawn map in her hands. Dar had been making it, and so far he'd done a fairly good job of it.

"About three or four miles," Keritanima said. "About a league," she corrected. "Probably a little less."

"This island isn't much more than forty longspans across," the Amazon noted, looking at the map. "Ten leagues," she corrected with a slightly amused look at Keritanima.

"I thought it was more like thirty," Tarrin said. "Allia?"

"I would put it in the middle," she said. "It is more than thirty, but I do not think it is more than forty."

"Either way, we've gone about a tenth of the way in, and nothing so far," Camara Tal said. "If there are humans here, there wasn't any sign of them coming in. No villages on the coast--at least not the coast we saw--and no smoke from fires. Did you see any breaks in the forest, Allia?"

"No," she answered. "But that does not mean that there are none. These wooded lands are deceptive. They can be but paces wide, but appear to be much thicker if there is something behind them that covers the gaps with darkness. Distances are beguiling within them and looking into them, even for one blessed with my eyesight."

"We have a forest on Amazar," she nodded. "I know what it's like to travel in them." She looked at the map again. "We know that the volcano takes up the north side of the island, so we're not looking at *too* much wooded ground to cover. I say we march across the island right up the middle, and if we haven't found anything by the time we get there, we cover the halves one at a time."

"That seems a plausible idea," Dolanna agreed. "It will be more efficient if we search by sections rather than attempt to cover the entire island in one sweep."

When both Dolanna and Camara Tal agreed on something, it was virtually set in stone that that was the way things were going to be. The others didn't see anything wrong with Camara Tal's logic, so they agreed that that was what they would do. Tarrin and Kimmie led them out again,

adjusting their path slightly so they would stay more or less in the middle of the island. It grew thicker as they moved into it, but the island was definitely longer than it was wide. At one point, Tarrin climbed up into the trees and looked out over the canopy, and saw that the island was about seven or eight longspans wide at that point. From the looks of it, it grew just a little wider as they would approach the center of the island, and there were some low hills on the northern side rising over the canopy's edge. Low hills that looked to be also covered in trees. The island had a good deal of area, but it wasn't so large that thoroughly searching it would be impossible.

They encountered no dangers, no enemies, and no wandering monsters or nasties all morning, a fact that puzzled Tarrin slightly. He'd been sure that they would have run into something unpleasant by now, so much so that he felt slightly cheated and disappointed. He'd gotten himself worked up and prepared to battle foes to reach his goal, and he'd had no enemies to face so far. That was a good thing, but the competitor in him was distressed that it had been prepared to face opponents that hadn't bothered to show up. Part of Tarrin, quite honestly, loved a good fight. It was his mother in him, he knew that, but truth was truth. Ungardt thought fighting was both a serious matter and also a casual sport. Ungardt fought one another at the drop of a hat, and that same blood flowed through him as well.

Despite his disappointment that their enemies hadn't shown up yet, he was rather pleased with their progress. They'd gone not quite halfway, covering about eleven or twelve longspans from sunrise to noon, and had run into no traps, no enemies, no obstacles of any sort. They'd had a very easy time of it so far, truth be told. The worst thing that had happened so far was that Miranda had been pricked by a thorn when she got a little too zealous about reaching a particularly juicy-looking blackberry. Tarrin had had no change in his sense of the magic around them, meaning to him that they weren't close enough to their prize yet for him to feel its presence.

They stopped for lunch, and Tarrin found it to be quite enjoyable. The forest eliminated almost all of his bad feelings, and had relaxed and calmed him in ways he didn't fully appreciate until he had a moment to stop and think about them. It was almost like coming home. Things seemed familiar to him, even if they were half a world away from his home...it just had that same feeling as Aldreth did. A place of quiet peace. That sense didn't seem to affect the others as much as it did him, for they were all still a little edgy

and anxious. Everyone but Tarrin and Kimmie, and of course the Vendari, who never showed anxiety.

"Where are those drakes?" Phandebrass complained as he accepted a piece of bread from Dar. "I know they know where we are."

"They are probably out playing, Phandebrass," Allia told him calmly. "It is a large island, and they can find us whenever they wish to."

"Whenever they get hungry," Tarrin added.

"I should have left them on the ship," the addled Wizard grumbled. "Out having fun when we're on serious business, we are!"

"Give them a break," Tarrin defended them. "They've been cooped up on ships for over a month! They need a little exercise, and they'll get it flying around the island. Besides, if Sapphire sees anything interesting, she'll probably come and get me. She knows we're out here looking for something."

"How does she know that?"

"I told her," he said simply. "I taught her some Sulasian, remember?"

"I didn't think you taught her that much, I didn't," he mused.

"She's not fluent, but she certainly learned enough to comprehend most simple things, and 'I'm looking for something' is a relatively simple concept."

"Point taken," Phandebrass acceded.

They finished their meal, and then set out again. But they didn't get too far, not even five minutes after starting, when Kimmie called to him from a bit further ahead. Tarrin caught up with her and found her kneeling on the ground, her paws flanking an obvious footprint. It was about the size of a human foot and had the same shape, but it rather narrow. Its depth told Tarrin that the maker wasn't very heavy, and its size and shape lent credence to the theory that its maker was a youngster. Adolescent, wearing shoes of some kind that had no hard soles. Maybe slippers. Tarrin was too far away to scent the print, but he was pretty sure that Kimmie already did that. The print was pointing in the direction in which they were going.

"Well, here's our first sign of inhabitants," Kimmie told him. "It goes that way, and judging from the print, the maker wasn't in much of a hurry."

"Is there a scent?"

She nodded. "Human," she answered. "Male. It's about a day old."

"You can almost walk across the entire island in a day, if you're serious about it," Tarrin mused, scratching his cheek with a massive claw.

"Well, this person wasn't very serious about it," she told him, looking down at it again. "What do you think?"

"It's the first sign, so this must be far out from their base," he reasoned. "It's a small print, so it's probably a wandering adventurous youth. It's pointing ahead, so he must have come out this far then turned around and went home."

"Kind of like another wandering adventurous youth I remember," Kimmie told him, looking up at him with a grin. "You were almost a celebrity on our side of the Frontier, Tarrin."

"I know," he grunted, squatting down beside her. "Triana told me all about that."

"The only human brave enough to wander the forest alone," she continued. "You're lucky the Druid that controls that region told everyone to leave you alone. You almost wandered into a Were-boar's den once. He would have killed you if he hadn't been told otherwise."

"Human youths are always too full of themselves to have much sense," he said in a self-deprecating tone.

"Be glad of it," she said seriously. "I think who you were was more than half the reason *Fae-da'Nar* accepted you. If the Druids would have ordered you killed, many of the Woodkin who knew Aldreth would have revolted. They all liked you."

"I guess it's good to have friends," he said mildly, patting her on the shoulder. "Did you ever come to Aldreth, Kimmie?"

"Once, but it was before you were born," she told him. "Mist took me there once right after she found me, to drive home the point that I could never go back. It was a rather brutal lesson," she sighed.

Tarrin often forgot that Kimmie was so much older than he was. She looked like a woman in her twenties. But then again, Tarrin was only nineteen, despite the fact that he looked like he was middle-aged. With Were-cats, appearances did nothing to reveal age. Not even height was an indicator. Rahnee was one of the taller females, but she was only three hundred. Mist was five hundred, but was shorter than most of the ones that weren't even thirty. Then again, nobody could look at Mist and mistake her for a youth. Her body was all muscle, and her face was not the face of a child.

He wondered briefly how Jesmind and Kimmie felt about having a virtual child as a mate. And Mist, for that matter.

They waited for the others to catch up with them, then showed them the print. Tarrin told them his impression of it, and Dolanna nodded in agreement. "That does seem a reasonable explanation," she said. "I think we should be more alert. We need to find these inhabitants and talk to them, but I do not think we should tell them why we are here just yet."

"Why not?" Dar asked.

"Because they are probably the descendents of those who remained here to defend the Firestaff," she told him. "If we tell them we are here to claim it, they may attack us. So let us be cautious until we feel these strangers out and learn more about them."

"You've got the right idea, Dolanna, but you're not going far enough," Camara Tal told her. "They're going to know that we came for something important, given what we had to go through to get here. If they ask, we'll be honest and tell them that we're looking for the Firestaff, but we *won't* say we know for sure it's on this island. We'll say that we're exploring the island because it's along the path to where we think the Firestaff is. We'll say we're here just to make sure that it's not here, and then we'll move on once we find out it's not."

"A lie salted with the truth. That's the best kind of lie," Miranda said with a nod.

"I say, that's quite clever, Camara," Phandebrass said appreciatively. "Deception isn't something you often see in Priests, it's not."

"Neme doesn't restrict us from lying," Camara Tal said with a wolfish grin. "Sometimes deception is a critical element of a battle. If we couldn't sell the deception, we wouldn't be much good on the battlefield."

"I'm surprised Kerri or Miranda didn't think of it first," Dar chuckled. "They're our resident sneaks."

"They would have thought of it, eventually," Tarrin said mildly, giving Keritanima a good-natured poke with a finger.

"Who says we didn't think of it right off?" she said primly. "I was just being polite and letting Camara talk."

"Liar," Dar teased. "The last time I saw you being polite was when Rallix was with you."

"Children," Dolanna chided them. "Let us keep our minds on the task at hand. How far away do you think they are, Tarrin?"

"There's no way to be certain," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "Until we see more tracks or find more scents, all I can tell you is that the maker of the print was walking when he made it, he's a male human, he's young, and the scent is about a day old."

"We should slow down and go more cautiously," Binter said, breaking his long silence. He must have felt it to be very important. Neither of the Vendari would talk when they weren't in comfortable surroundings. "Until we understand the nature of our opponents, caution is only wise."

"You're right, Binter," Keritanima agreed. "Let's keep closer together and move slower, but let's not fly off the handle and attack the first person we see. They may not be enemies."

"Yes, your Majesty," Binter and Sisska said in unison, obviously thinking it to be a personal command.

They started out again on the game trail, but now they were moving more slowly, and all of them were alert and observant, watching the forest around them carefully for signs of movement or life. Tarrin and Kimmie ranged ahead just inside their sight, pulling back enough to be able to respond immediately to any sudden threat on the group. They moved thusly for almost an hour, as Kimmie and Tarrin spotted more tracks on the trail. The human must have stepped onto the trail back where they found the

print, and had been following it at a very stately, leisurely pace. Tarrin didn't feel very nervous over their discovery, mainly because he'd suspected that there had been people here all along. Or at least something not native to the island in any case. Dolanna's remark that they may be there to defend the Firestaff did worry him; he didn't want to have to fight people over it at this point, but he would if he had no other choice. They had no idea what kind of humans they were going to find, either. They could be stone-age barbarians, or as technologically advanced as the Wikuni. They could have magicians or Sorcerers, or may have Priests. Until they got a look at them, there was just no telling. The only thing he could tell from what he'd seen so far was that the humans wore shoes. That was the extent of his knowledge.

They crept along the trail methodically, as both Were-cats occasionally went down on all fours to test the ground with their noses. There were other scents now, human ones and ones so old and degraded that it was impossible to determine what they were. All of them were old--except for the scents of the animals that used the trails--and that made Tarrin confident that they weren't going to accidentally blunder right into the middle of the humans' base, be it town or village or even a cave. It told Tarrin that they were getting closer, close enough to where their single human youth had had company on the trail. They were starting to advance into the humans' commonly patrolled territory.

It was when Tarrin had stopped to sniff at a new track, one made by a barefoot male that was carrying something or was rather heavy, that he heard it. Tarrin lifted his head as his ears swivelled forward to lock onto the sound, a very faint sound that was almost drowned out by a breeze that was rustling the branches of the trees overhead. Kimmie paused when she reached him, then her ears were drawn towards that sound as well, and she crouched down beside him to hide her silhouette.

It was *singing*.

It was one voice. It sounded like either a female or a very young male, a high pitch, and it sounded like it was just ahead, right where Tarrin saw a faint light between the trees. It had to be a clearing or small meadow of some sort, and there was someone there. Tarrin and Kimmie looked at each other, then Kimmie nodded. They began creeping towards that clearing on

all fours, staying low and making absolutely no sound, slithering through underbrush and around old growth trees, getting closer and closer to the brightening light between the trees. Both of them paused to try to scent the owner of the voice, but the wind was coming in from the side, both hiding the scent they sought and preventing their scents from reaching the mysterious stranger. They slowed to a stop as they moved around a blackberry patch, then crept up to a large fallen log and looked over it, looked into the clearing through a few trees and a mulberry bush.

Tarrin looked on in shock and absolute amazement. The owner of that voice was in the clearing, sitting on a small stool in profile to them, looking to be tuning a small lute. It was a male, young, with dusky skin and platinum blond hair. He wore an elegant robe looked to be made of silk, and his elegant, long-fingered hands. Even from that distance, Tarrin could see his pointed ears and the fact that he only had four fingers on his hands.

It was a *Sha'Kar*!

A *Sha'Kar*! Tarrin was astounded! Everyone thought that the *Sha'Kar* were all dead! And yet there one sat, as calmly as he pleased, tuning his instrument with deft plucks on the strings. He didn't seem to notice the Were-cats, and Tarrin realized that the reason for that may have been that a female *Sha'Kar*, a breathtakingly lovely young female with a rounded, impish-seeming face and silver hair tied up in a tail behind her head was approaching the male. She wore a strange long dress consisting of many layers of a diaphonous material, see-through by themselves but layered enough to mask what was beneath the dress. It didn't completely hide, showing her brown-skinned outline in the daylight, yet succeeding in defending her modesty while also giving any who looked on her a teasing hint of the perfection beneath. She was walking towards the male across the meadow from her, and one of those tufted-cheeked wildcats they'd seen before in the forest trotted along behind her, a banded cat of black and brown that almost looked like a raccoon. Tarrin hadn't seen one that close yet, and he was impressed. It was a big cat, larger than the average housecat, sleek and nimble-looking, with a lustrous coat of long fur and a bushy tail.

"Is that a *Sha'Kar*?" Kimmie whispered in surprise.

"I think so," he replied. Sha'Kar, the ancestors of Allia's and Keritanima's people. Still alive! Tarrin had expected inhabitants, but in his wildest dreams he hadn't considered the possibility that the remote island would harbor a long-forgotten race thought to be extinct!

"Allyn," the female called in a sweet voice. "Uncle is looking for you." Her accent was a bit strange, but Tarrin found that he could adjust to it. Her Sha'Kar was informal in structure, using the personal forms of grammar, and her words were flowing, musical, much different from the exacting precision in which Spyder spoke.

"Why do you think I'm here, Iselde?" the male replied, also using informal forms. The two had to be related to each other, or were very good friends to drop all the polite and formal modes of speech. "I wanted to get away from the estate for a while."

"You know he'll be angry for you wandering the forest."

"He can't be angry over something he doesn't know, can she?" the male replied impudently.

The wind shifted, moving to their backs, but both the Were-cats were too absorbed in seeing the two Sha'Kar to react to it. The cat accompanying the female certainly did, as the wind brought their scents to it. The cat hissed and growled, trotting in front of the woman and raising its back threateningly.

"Whatever is the matter, Lura?" the female, Iselde, asked the cat.

Tarrin wondered for a moment what to do, but Kimmie beat him to it quickly. "Hush!" she shouted in the manner of the Cat, an unspoken language that the animal would certainly understand in one form or another. Were-cats didn't control normal felines, but they were usually obeyed.

The cat looked startled. Its eyes widened and it lowered its back, staring towards them in confusion.

"We're not hunting you," Kimmie told it bluntly. "We only watch."

That seemed to put the animal back at ease. It turned and sidled up against the female's leg affectionately, and she reached down and stroked its fur in reply.

The reprieve was only momentary, as the sound of Azakar's clanking armor began to tickle at Tarrin's ears. He realized that the others were still advancing. He knew that they had to make contact with the Sha'Kar, but he wasn't sure them seeing an armed party was the best way to go about it. It may frighten them.

When he looked back to the two Sha'Kar, he noticed that both of them were looking absolutely right at where he was hiding. He knew that they probably couldn't see him, but they still looked right at him. "Allyn, do you feel that?" the female asked.

"Yes, Iselde. I don't think I've ever felt Grand Syllis like this before."

"That's not the Grand," the female said sternly. "Whoever it is, the Weave draws as if there were a Circle."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive."

"Then who is it?"

"I don't know, but it's nobody we know," she answered.

Tarrin realized that they couldn't see him, but they were Sorcerers, and they could sense the effect he had on the Weave. The Weave pulled towards him, as his presence exerted its own effect on the strands. It was something very noticable to any Sorcerer. The old stories did say that almost all the Sha'Kar were Sorcerers. These two, though young, obviously had the talent, and had been trained to use it.

"They're Sorcerers," Tarrin told Kimmie in the manner of the Cat. "They can feel me."

"What should we do?" she asked. "Pull back and wait for Dolanna?"

"Whoever you are, come out!" Iselde shouted in his direction, using a very formal mode of speech. "I know you are there!"

"Well?" Kimmie asked him with a suddenly impish smile.

"I don't want to scare them, Kimmie."

Their lack of promptness caused the female to start walking towards them. Tarrin realized that there was no way he could hide from her, that the

force he exerted on the Weave was like a beacon that would guide her right to him. He wasn't sure he wanted to make contact by revealing to them that he had been spying on them. But, on the other hand, she probably already figured that out. He couldn't hide from her, and she seemed the kind that would simply march into the forest after him if he tried to retreat.

Tarrin didn't see much choice in the matter. With a resolute sigh, he stood up and stepped over the log, stepping out where the female could see him.

She stopped dead in her tracks and gaped at him as he padded out to the edge of the treeline, then stopped and just stared at her, his tail swishing behind him aimlessly. She looked surprised and amazed, but to Tarrin's pleasure, there was no look of fear on her face. She had probably never seen anything like him before.

"Wh-Who are you?" she stuttered as he stepped into the meadow, as the seated male stood up and gawked at him in utter astonishment.

"So much for scaring them," Kimmie teased with a light chuckle as she stepped out from behind him and regarded the two Sha'Kar youths.

"Who are you, stranger?" the female asked, in a more collected tone than before. She was obviously taken aback that he was there, but she didn't seem afraid of him.

"I should ask you the same question," Tarrin said in formal Sha'Kar. "I never expected to see a Sha'Kar out here."

"How did you get here?" she demanded. "Have our defenses failed us?"

"How I got here should be relatively obvious, little one," he told her seriously, in a tone that hinted that she already knew the answer. If she was Sha'Kar, and she was a Sorceress, then he had the feeling that she was much better educated than the *katzh-dashi*, having been taught the things that Spyder had taught to him and Jenna. She should be able to tell exactly who--and more importantly--what, he was. If she could, then how he breached their defenses should be a moot point.

She looked at him, then she stared wildly. And then she laughed. "You are *sui'kun*!" she announced in an excited tone. "Oh, the Elders are wrong! The Goddess has finally answered our prayers!"

Tarrin gave her a slightly confused look, his ears twitching.

"Please, please!" she said in an excited tone, reaching for him with her slender hand. "You must come back with us, please! The others need to see you. I can't believe it! The Goddess hasn't abandoned us after all!"

"Abandoned you?" Tarrin said in confusion as she reached out and took his paw. He resisted her tugging, looking down at her. "Hold on, small one, you're moving too fast for me. Besides, the others have to arrive first."

"Others? There are other children of the Goddess with you?"

"A few, as well as some important friends," he answered. "You're Iselde, right?"

She nodded. "Iselde Ai'shar," she said with a formal curtsy. "This is my brother, Allyn. Say hello!" she hissed at the dumbstruck young male from the corner of her mouth.

"Uh, greetings, revered Elder," he said with a formal bow, using the most stringently formal and polite mode of Sha'Kar speech.

"My name is Tarrin," he answered. "This is my mate, Kimmie."

"Mate? Such a strange term. Don't you mean wife?" Iselde asked.

"Mate," Kimmie said firmly, putting a paw on Tarrin's shoulder fondly. "We're not from a society you'd immediately understand, so our customs aren't what you're familiar with, little one."

"Yes, well, um, if you don't mind me asking, what manner of being are you?" she asked. "I've never even heard of anything like you."

"We're Were-kin, girl," Kimmie told her. "Both of us are. We're Were-cats."

"Were?" the girl asked curiously. "I've never heard any stories of your kind, though our books do mention you."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you come to be here?" Tarrin asked. "I expected that we might find humans here, but not Sha'Kar."

"There are humans here," she assured them. "This is Sha'Kari, honored *sui'kun*." *Sha'Kari*. In Sha'Kar, it meant *home of the Sha'Kar*. But this couldn't be the homeland of the Sha'Kar...it was too small, and the Sha'Kar

were descended from the Urzani, who were themselves descended from the namless ones, one of the First Races. Tarrin realized he'd translated it correctly, but he was thinking too strictly. They called it Sha'Kari because it was their home now. The last home left for the long-forgotten Sha'Kar. "And we have always been here."

"I think he wants to know when your people came here," Kimmie told her.

"Oh. Well, my grandfather told me that we came here to escape the Breaking."

The Breaking! So *that* was what happened! The Sha'Kar all disappeared during the Breaking. Everyone thought they were all dead. Maybe most of them had died, but at least some of them had managed to escape death by coming to this place, a place with a powerful Weave that was also *isolated* by the void. Could the local Weave have escaped the violent Weavequake that caused the Breaking? Could the void that surrounded this place have acted as a buffer to protect this area, and therefore make it safe for the powerful Ancients whose lives were in jeopardy from the tearing of the Weave? All of the Ancients were killed in the Breaking, as the powerful forces of magic went wild as the Weave tore, infusing anything with magical potential with more power than they could contain. It was why there were so rare few magical objects left from before the Breaking. The magical objects were infused and destroyed, and the Sorcerers were infused and killed. Only the weaker Sorcerers, probably those who had not yet become *da'shar*, had survived the Breaking. And those few that were left became the targets of lynch mobs when the *katzh-dashi* were blamed for the magical cataclysm. That was why such little knowledge of before the Breaking had managed to survive.

Questions, so many questions! But there wasn't time right now to get all the answers he wanted. He looked down at the slender female Sha'Kar, her scent hitting him in that moment. It was slightly like Allia's, slightly like Spyder's, a clear indication that she was related to both of their races. But the Sha'Kar's scent was too different for it to be called Selani. The Selani had obviously become a separate race after thousands of years of evolution in the desert.

"Please, come with us back to our estate," she told him in a pleading tone. "You must meet the Elders, and Grand Syllis! All the island needs to know that you're here!"

"We'll come with you, as soon as the others get here," he told her. "They should be here any moment. I can hear them."

"Are they *sui'kun* like you?" she asked with wide eyes.

"No," he replied gently.

"Are they your servants?"

"I don't have any servants," he scoffed. "I can do for myself, cub."

"A *sui'kun* with no servants? That's unheard of!" she gasped. "The Elders said that the *sui'kun* always had servants!"

"I'm not a *sui'kun* like they've seen before," he told her. "I'm not human or Sha'Kar, remember that. I have different customs than your people do. My kind don't like servants, and don't need them. So I don't have any."

"I'll remember that, honored one," she said with a curtsy.

Allyn, who had remained absolutely mute through the whole exchange, gaped and blurted out to his sister as the others arrived at the meadow. He had no doubt that they knew Tarrin was talking to someone, for they could hear the voices. That was why they were moving slowly, carefully, and non-threateningly. Dolanna was leading them. "Dolanna," Tarrin told her in Sulasian. "I think we need to rewrite our history books."

"Sha'Kar!" Dar gasped. "I don't believe it!"

"Dar, it is unseemly to speak without them understanding us," Dolanna chided him in Sha'Kar. "It's not polite."

Dolanna and the others took seeing the Sha'Kar alot better than the Sha'Kar took seeing them. Allyn gaped and gawked at them all, especially at the Vendari and Azakar. The girl Iselde greeted Dolanna with a kind word and a curtsy, but the small Sorceress only smiled at her in reply. "I am very glad that we found you here, young one," Dolanna told her. "We thought that the Sha'Kar had died out in the Breaking."

"No, honored *da'shar*, she said, which made Dolanna's eyebrow raise in curiosity. "There are nearly five hundred of us, as well as a few hundred humans and some servants. My grandfather told me once that we fled here to escape the Breaking, and we've been waiting here ever since."

"Waiting for what?" Keritanima asked.

"Are you a Were-kin too?" Iselde asked her curiously.

"I'm a Wikuni, girl," she replied. "Haven't you ever heard of the Wikuni?"

"Yes, but I thought they looked different."

"We all look different from one another," Miranda said with an impish smile. "It's how you know who we are."

Iselde looked at her strangely, then actually giggled at the mink's clever wordplay.

"What have you been waiting for, Iselde?" Keritanima pressed.

"For things outside to return to what they once were," she replied. "That's what Grand Syllis tells us, anyway. When the Weave is restored, we'll return to the towers and rejoin our brothers and sisters in service to the Goddess. Until then, we wait." She looked at Tarrin. "Has the time come?" she asked. "Has the Goddess sent you to bring us home, honored *sui'kun*?"

"I'm sorry, but no," he answered. "I've come for a different purpose. We'll talk about it with your elders, and this Grand Syllis."

That seemed to put Iselde back a bit, but she smiled and recovered herself. "Well, whatever the reason, it's good to have a visitor as esteemed as you, honored one. You and your servants will be welcome at my home. Please, follow us," she announced. "Come, Allyn. Let's take our honored guests home. Allyn!"

Tarrin looked at the male, and saw that he was staring at Allia. The Selani was staring back at him calmly. Tarrin figured that Allyn had seen her hands, and probably mistook her for a Sha'Kar. "Uh, yes, sister," he said with a nod.

"This way, please," she motioned in the direction that they had been travelling before the chance encounter had caused Tarrin and Kimmie to

detour.

Tarrin walked along behind the Sha'Kar female, his mind whirling. He still couldn't believe that they were here, and from what little he'd heard, the Sha'Kar weren't the only ones. There were also humans here, probably either Ancients themselves or descendents of the Ancients that had fled here either before or during the Breaking, seeking sanctuary. And they'd been here for over a thousand years, waiting for the day they could return. Didn't they realize that they could have returned at any time after the Breaking was over? It was the Weavequake that killed the Ancients, not any lingering effects. If they survived the Weavequake, then there was nothing more for them to fear.

Tarrin was distracted when Allyn spoke up. "Pardon my forwardness, maiden, but what family are you from?" he asked. "I've never met you before. I thought I knew everyone on the island."

"I am not from here," she told him. "I come from the mainland."

"You mean other Sha'Kar survived?" Allyn said brightly.

"I am not Sha'Kar," Allia told him bluntly. "I am Selani."

Allyn looked at her in shock, then he gasped. "You're one of the Lost!" he said in amazement. "They survived the Breaking?"

"Obviously," she answered him indifferently. Tarrin could tell that she was getting a little annoyed with the male, but she was trying to be polite.

"But, but, you're a Sorceress! I thought the Lost abandoned the Goddess and couldn't use Sorcery anymore!"

"Allyn!" Iselde snapped. "You're being insulting!"

"I meant no offense," the male said immediately and sincerely.

"I took none," she assured him.

Iselde and Allyn led them onto a large, well-travelled path at the far end of the meadow that was paved with brilliant white stones, a road that meandered through the forest almost aimlessly. The path screamed of magic to Tarrin; he could feel its residual energy in the pads on his feet. It had been either created or paved using magical means. The feeling of the forest changed dramatically to his senses. Before, it seemed like a forest. Wild,

grown, natural. Now it seemed more like the garden at the Tower, a pretty manicured place with no inherent dangers. The texture of the woods also changed, as all the underbrush disappeared, leaving open space between large trees, extending the distance at which they could see. Iselde continued to talk as she led them forward, repeating how happy she was to see them, and how they'd be so well received by the Elders and this person named Grand Syllis.

After about ten minutes, the path showed them a break in the forest. They stepped out onto a grassy plain that ran all the way up between the forested foothills at the base of the volcano, a huge place that was about five longspans wide, taking up the entire central portion of the island. It was surrounded by forest on all sides, which was why nobody saw any signs of habitation on the way in. The ground wasn't flat, rising and falling in very gentle hills. But it wasn't the grassy plain that had their attention. The place was filled with buildings, all of them made in a sloping, elegant, almost impossibly rounded architecture. Large buildings had domes atop them, and there were elegant spires and minarets rising from the corners. Almost all the buildings were white or brown, with those domes serving as rooftops. There were white-stone pathways between the buildings, and fences contained clusters of buildings here and there. Everything was very widely spread out, and those ornate fences hemmed in vast tracts of land. Each fence held land in it that could at least hold the entire village of Aldreth within them. And those were the *smallest* of the fenced areas. Looking around, he saw that even the smallest building was at least the size of the inn back in Aldreth, huge constructions that looked grand and magnificent. Tarrin could see the denizens of this town walking along the paths, not noticing their visitors quite yet, Sha'Kar and humans alike wearing shimmering robes of every color.

Tarrin looked around, and realized that he'd seen this place before. Long ago, just after crossing over, he'd had a dream about this place. About a town in a valley with no roads, where men and women in robes walked sedately, seeming to be ghosts to him. He'd seen it from the other side, looking down at the town from the foothills facing them, where it looked like a valley when it actually was a shallow depression at the base of the foothills. He looked up and saw the clear sky, remembering that in the dream, the sky had been black.

"Tarrin?" Kimmie asked. He didn't realize that he'd stopped, and that the others paused to wait for him.

"This is the place the Book of Ages is going to lead us to," Tarrin said, a memory of a memory tickling at him. Then he blinked. "I've seen this place before, a long time ago," Tarrin told them. "In a dream."

Tarrin paused to rationalize that. And it made him remember the other dreams. The one of Keritanima standing on the mountain of jibbering skulls one whose meaning he wasn't absolutely sure about. The one about Jenna and the iron door had been about her crossing over. The one about Jesmind holding the blazing light was an obvious warning to him about Jasana and her incredible power. The one about Faalken and Jegojah was a flat warning about the last time they fought, when Faalken's corpse was used against him in an attempt to kill him. But what about the dream about Dar? About the shadow that was over him, meaning he was in danger? Had he countered that danger by having Allia watch over him, or was that too something yet to be? He looked at his young Arkisian friend and decided to pay careful attention to him, to make sure nothing bad happened to him. The dream seemed to hint that the bad thing would happen in Suld, but there was no telling what its true meaning was. There was no reason to take chances with Dar's life.

"You told me about your dreams, but never about this one," Dolanna told him.

"I'd forgotten about it until now," he told her, picking up the pace again when Iselde and Allyn paused to wait for them.

Surprisingly, they didn't attract much attention outside of a few startled looks from Sha'Kar and robed humans coming out of gates along the stone pathway, as Iselde and Allyn brought them to a fenced complex on the fringes of the town's buildings, literally on the edge of town. She opened the gate with a spell of Sorcery, a surprisingly complicated weave of Air, Divine, and Mind, some kind of trigger weave that caused an old sustained spell on the gate to activate, making it swing open of its own volition. "Please excuse the rough appearance of our estate, honored ones," Iselde said, her face slightly reddening. "But we're a poor family."

This was *poor*? Tarrin stared at the massive central building. It was almost as big as some of the manor houses he'd seen in Wikuna! It was surrounded by four other buildings, all of them smaller, one of them looking like a barn or very large storage building. All the buildings were immaculately clean, and the central building had a stained glass window over the front door that had to be thirty spans tall and twenty spans wide, an image of a Sha'Kar female garbed in a flowing yellow gown, her arms open in warm greeting. There were humans milling around on the grounds, and Tarrin realized that they had a farm behind the cluster of buildings, taking up a considerable amount of land. From that distance it was hard to see, but Tarrin could tell that all the humans looked thin, and they wore old, dirty clothing. Farmers?

"If this is poor, I don't think I want to see where the rich Sha'Kar live," Dar said fervently. "This place is almost as big as a village!"

"Now I understand how a thousand people can take up the entirety of this plain," Allia announced.

As they got closer, they attracted attention from the humans. They looked like peasants from the West, wearing rough homespun clothes and looked to work hard every day to make their living. They had been working on the farm behind the buildings, looking to have stopped for lunch, and were now going back to their toil. They all stopped and stared at the strange group, and Tarrin realized that they were looking hardest at Azakar and Camara Tal. What made them so interesting?

Iselde led them up a flight of marble stairs, to the huge set of double doors that served as the primary entrance, which was made of bronze or brass and had silver and gold etched into its surface. It was elegantly designed in a flowing, fluid pattern of lines, an abstract relief that surrounded a Sha'Kar glyph in pure gold that denoted a family name. Ai'shar. The door screamed of magic, and Tarrin could sense a Ward laid into the space which the door occupied, a Ward whose design was unknown to him. Allyn put a hand on the door and used a similar spell that got them past the gate, and the doors swung open by themselves, revealing an absolutely cavernous entrance hall that went all the way up to the domed roof above, as colored light from the stained glass window shone into the

huge entrance chamber with its tiled floor and its grand staircase that led up to a huge balcony.

Tarrin followed Iselde and Allyn into the chamber, and felt himself pass through the Ward. He felt it seek out something within him, and once it found what it was looking for, it retreated from him. Dolanna's eyes widened slightly when she stepped across the Ward, as did Keritania's, but nobody else seemed to sense the presence of the Ward as they all filed into the massive chamber. Iselde sent Allyn to find their parents with hasty, harsh words, and then folded her arms before her and waited patiently, that same bright, excited look on her young, pretty face. "Would you like some refreshment while we wait?" she asked. "Anything at all?"

"We're fine," Tarrin told her as he looked around. The huge chamber reminded him of the Royal Palace in Wikuna, but it was much, much more elegant. There were fewer works of art here, but the ones that were there were stunning in their detail or their complexity. Paintings seemed to ensnare the eye and make one's mind fall into the unusual abstract patterns, sculptures of nude Sha'Kar in beautiful poses seemed almost alive. One in particular of a male and female in some kind of dancing pose, the male holding the female over his head as the female arched her back and held her arms out, seemed particularly life-like, mainly because feathery, delicate stone strands of hair billowed out from the female's head. How did the sculptor manage to carve out *individual hairs*? There was a large open passage between the flanking staircases, and that was where Allyn went scurrying towards when Iselde sent him off. There was another similar passageway at the top of the staircase, as well as two doors on each side of the passageway along the balcony. The doors were made of a dark wood and gilded with gold and silver. Even the walls seemed unusual, the same white as the outside with a strange, warm light issuing forth from them as well as from the stained glass window above. The entire interior of the building screamed magic at him, from everywhere. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, all the works of art, even the doors. Everything either was permeated with magical energy, or the rich magical presence of the place had somehow seeped into the most mundane objects over the centuries.

"Um, if you don't mind my asking, honored one, but what are those?" she asked, pointing at his shoulders.

"They're brands, Iselde," he told her. It's a rite of passage among the Selani. I'm brother to them, so I had to accept the brands to be accepted by them."

"You mean you *let* them mark you like a servant?" she gasped.

"These are marks of my friendship to the Selani," he told her in a careful tone.

"Why do you say that, Iselde?" Dolanna asked. "Is this how servants are marked among your people?"

"Not with brands," she said quickly, turning to face the Sorceress. "But with a tattoo. The tattoo says who the servants serves."

That seemed to get Azakar's attention. He stood up stiffly, and glared down at the small Sha'Kar in a dangerous manner. Azakar had once been a slave, and that made him very sensitive to such things. Marking a servant sounded to Tarrin a lot like *ownership*. He couldn't say that he much liked what he heard either.

Tarrin put a paw on Azakar's armored shoulder and exerted just enough pressure to make him pull back a little. The Knight looked at him hotly for a moment, but the calm expression on Tarrin's face made him regain his composure somewhat. Iselde, who had had her back to them, didn't notice the exchange.

"Excuse me, I'm going to see what's taking Allyn so long," she said with a curtsy, then she picked up her layered skirts and almost ran off down the huge passage. They all watched her go, and when she turned a corner and disappeared, Dar sighed.

"Is it just me, or is this place completely overwhelming?" he asked, looking up at the stained glass window.

"The Sha'Kar were said to love beauty," Dolanna said, looking over one of the sculptures. "In this place, they have brought that love to life, it seems."

"It's almost too much," Camara Tal grunted. "It seems like decadence to me. That, and that girl's attitude. I don't like it."

"I think we found something we can agree on, my dear," Phandebrass said seriously. "Notice that she didn't even so much as look at anyone but Tarrin, Keritanima, and Dolanna? It was almost as if the rest of us don't exist, we don't."

"She called us Tarrin's servants," Miranda recalled, putting a finger to her short muzzle and looking down the grand passageway. "It could be her excitement, but I'm not sure."

"Excitement about what?" Azakar asked.

"About Tarrin. Remember, Zak, he's something of royalty among Sorcerers. There are supposedly only seven *sui'kun*, and they were very, very important back in the Age of Power. If they've kept their customs from back then, it may explain why she seems to fixated on him."

"What do you think, Kerri, Allia?" Tarrin asked.

"I think you're rushing to judge," Keritanima told them. "Let's learn more about them before we start with the blanket accusations."

"Our sister is right," Allia agreed. "Let us give them a chance. Their ways are not ours, and we may have as much trouble understanding them as they will have understanding us."

"Well said, dear one," Dolanna nodded. "Given the diversity of this group, I am surprised that some of you are so willing to see the Sha'Kar in a darker light."

"Maybe it is cultural," Camara Tal said. "There's just something about them that gnaws at me."

They quieted when Allyn and Iselde reappeared in the hall, each of them holding the hand of a taller, more slender Sha'Kar male. He was rather tall, taller than Allia, but was very, very thin. Everything about him was thin, from his skinny arms to his long-fingered hands to his narrow face. He had white hair that flowed from his head in waves. He wore a white robe that almost radiated light, it was so pristine and clean, and the two youths were dragging him forward excitedly. He stopped dead when he saw the visitors, gaping at them, and then Tarrin sensed something magical ghost over him. He could feel the pull the man had on the Weave; he was a very strong Sorcerer. He must have probed them with his senses in some way.

Once Tarrin felt the wave pass him over, the man almost made his children--if they were his children, for neither looked anything like him--fall down as he surged forward with surprising speed.

"Goddess preserve me, you are *sui'kun*!" the Sha'Kar said in a lilting, surprisingly feminine voice. "Dear me, dear me! Please, allow me to welcome you to my humble home! I am Arlan Ai'shar, the patron of this humble estate," he introduced with a deep, sweeping bow. "You honor my home with your presence, honored one!"

Tarrin was starting to get a little irritated with how all these Sha'Kar seemed to fawn over him. First Iselde, now this one Allyn seemed too dumbstruck to do much more than stare at them all. "You are Iselde's father?"

"I'm her uncle, honored one," he said with another bow. "Unfortunately, her father died during the ceremony of ascendance." All three Sha'kar made a little gesture, tapping their fingers over their hearts. "May the Goddess bless his soul," he added. "Please, come in! My home is yours, honored one! Please, come in and be comfortable, and I'll send for the Council of Elders and Grand Syllis!"

"Iselde mentioned this Grand Syllis. He is your leader?"

"He leads the Council," Arlan replied. "He is the one named Keeper without a tower, but we felt uncomfortable with that title, so he decided to use the title of Grand."

That made Tarrin mull it over. Just like Sulasian, Sha'Kar was a language where a word could have more than one meaning. Tarrin had been thinking of the word as *grand*, for it was the most common use of the term, but they were dealing with Sha'Kar who probably thought differently. That word also meant *top*, *above* in a social sense, and also, rather archaically, *Prince*. But only if one was using the most extreme forms of formal speech.

"Please, come in. I'll have your servants bordered in my servant house, and--"

"I have no servants," he said immediately. "These are my family and friends. They will be treated as you treat me," he said deliberately and with great weight.

"I--well, yes, yes of course, honored one," he said with a bow. "Your friends will be treated with all my hospitality. Please, come in, come to my sitting room and make yourselves comfortable. I'll have my staff bring you refreshments, and you can tell me what miracle brings you to us while we wait for the Council and the Grand to summon you."

"That's fine with me, Arlan," Tarrin agreed with a nod. "Lead on."

The three Sha'Kar started into the great passageway, looking back to make sure the twelve visitors followed them. Tarrin led his friends and sisters deeper into the house, a sneaking suspicion growing in his mind. He had the feeling that Camara Tal was right. There was indeed something about these Sha'Kar he wasn't quite sure he liked. But then again, he wasn't used to being gaped at and fawned over as they were doing to him, and he figured that that had to be what it was.

At least he hoped so. Aggravating the Sha'Kar, who probably had all the information they needed, would not be a good idea. He needed their help right now, and if that meant that he had to endure their almost worshipful attention to him, then so be it. The only thing that mattered was that he left the island with the Firestaff.

It was all that mattered.

Chapter 12

The sitting room in which Tarrin and the others had been placed was absolutely palatial. Keritanima looked decidedly jealous as they sat in a massive room with a ceiling that had to be twenty spans high, the ceiling painted in a starry sky portrait. Live plants, some kind of broad-leafed ivy or clinging vine, climbed up one wall, flanking a fountain that bubbled happily on the wall which the majority of the furniture faced. Soft light radiated from the walls to light the room, a room with no windows, a room that smelled strangely fresh to Tarrin's keen nose. There were more sculptures in the sitting room, to the sides of the fountain, which seemed to be the centerpiece of the room. The walls not devoted to its living display had art hanging from them. One was a portrait of five Sha'Kar, a portrait so stunningly done that the people on the portrait literally looked alive. Tarrin recognized Iselde and Allyn on that portrait, as well as Arlan, the two children much younger than they looked now. There was a female adult Sha'Kar with red hair, of all things, a very beautiful female with soft blue eyes and a warm expression. She had the two children on her lap, who were but cubs when the portrait was painted. A Sha'Kar male with blond hair had his slender hand on her shoulder, and the resemblance made it clear that this one was the father of the children. He was a handsome fellow, not effeminately beautiful the way other Sha'Kar males seemed to be.

This was the second room they'd seen so far that seemed almost overwhelmingly beautiful. It was the same thing that the Palace in Wikuna tried for, but where the Palace bowled one over with displays of ridiculous wealth, this place assaulted one with the inescapable taste and beauty of its architecture, decoration, and feel. What this place gave up in quantity to Keritanima's Palace, it more than made up for in subtle taste. Tarrin didn't think that it was wrong for the Sha'Kar to want to surround themselves with beautiful things, but in a way, it almost seemed decadent, as Camara Tal put it.

And the way Iselde talked, this house was *poor* compared to some of the others. Dar was right...he didn't want to see anything else if this place was supposed to be *crude*.

There was that, and then there were the servants. Arlan had five human women waiting on them, literally hand and foot, all of them dressed in very simple silk black dresses that had skirts that ended at their knees, and dipped low enough to show off each girl's attributes. All five of them were very lovely young women, the oldest probably barely more than twenty, and they went about the business of serving their guests with exuberant, almost drowningly effective zeal. They tried to get Azakar and Camara Tal out of their armor, they tried to take everyone's shoes--Tarrin recalled that everyone here wore soft slippers, and most of his friends were wearing hard-soled boots--and they nearly smothered everyone with endless offers of food, drink, pillows, pipes, anything at all. And they meant *anything*. When one of the women caught Dar looking at her bosom, she gently yet boldly asked him if he wanted to take her into another room and have his way with her. That made the usually outgoing Arkisian blush to the roots of his hair and stammer out a disjointed, polite refusal.

What Tarrin and Azakar both noticed almost immediately that all the servants they'd seen so far had been human. The men and women outside, and now the five maids in the house. The five maids were all very lovely, almost as if no one that was not handsome or pretty would be allowed into the house to spoil its appearance. Azakar whispered his observations to Tarrin in Arakite as two of the maids were trying to get the Vendari to hand over their weapons and take something to eat and drink, and Tarrin had to agree with him. The two of them hadn't been very close since they'd been reunited, but both of them had an enduring, almost blind hatred of slavery and servitude. Both of them had suffered under the yoke of a master in different forms, and it was a tie that bound them together.

Another thing that Tarrin noticed about the women was that none of them were Sorcerers. So far, everyone they'd met that was not a servant was a Sorcerer. Of course, they'd only met three Sha'Kar, but Tarrin had seen some of the others on the very short walk between the edge of the forest and the front gate of Iselde's estate. He'd seen about twelve of the other citizens from relatively close distances, and that was close enough to sense their potential. But these five had no inherent talent for Sorcery. One of them, the

tall redhead with the pale freckled skin and the large bosom, actually had the potential to learn Druidic magic--he could feel it in her clearly--but not Sorcery. That one, Tarrin marked mentally to come back and revisit the issue. There were so few Druids, he was positive that Triana would want him to try to do something about it.

Triana. He hadn't talked to anyone in Suld since they entered the void. Jesmind must be going absolutely crazy, he mused, and making life miserable for everyone around her. He'd bet that Triana would only give him a couple more days, and then she'd contact him with her magic. He knew that she could tell through her ability to keep tabs on him through the bond she once held that he was well, so she wasn't quite ready to tip her hand that she was worried quite yet and break down and talk to him. It was already sunset or close to it in Suld by now, so there was no sense doing it today. He'd get in touch with them tomorrow morning, when it would be around noon or so there.

Tarrin stood by the fountain, which had a small relief of a nude woman holding a pitcher, from which the water poured, sensing the magic about the fountain. It was Sorcery, but it was a lingering effect, something that Tarrin had thought very hard to accomplish. But then again, Spyder only taught them a mess of spells, not little tricks like sustaining a magical effect after the Sorcerer stopped concentrating on it. High Sorcery could render some spells permanent, linking them directly to the Weave where the spell would draw its power out of the strand on its own, but he didn't sense anything quite so drastic used here. The little fountain was self-contained, recycling the water in the bowl at the bottom to gurgle it from the pitcher at the top. He picked through the weave used on it, and realized that it was a lingering spell, but not permanent. The spell would slowly unravel as it lost the power that had been charged into it, like a candle slowly burning down to the nub. When it exhausted the extra power woven into it, it would unravel, and the spell would have to be cast again. That was a trick that Tarrin hadn't considered using in average weaves. He used it in powerful spells, like summoning Elementals--in fact, it was required to do that for an Elemental, for that power was the magical energy that sustained the Elemental after the Sorcerer finished weaving the spell. He'd never thought to use it in a spell so simple. He thought of any number of ways to use that, like a gentle breeze that would blow by itself and keep someone cool, or a fire that

would burn by itself without fuel for hours, maybe even days. That would be handy in Keritanima's steam engine.

He wondered why Spyder hadn't taught him this trick, and it made him realize that these Sha'Kar were not to be taken lightly. He already could tell that they knew many of the oldest secrets of Sorcery, and they could be lethal adversaries if they decided to fight with them. Tarrin was stronger than any of them, but he was just one male, while they were five hundred strong. Even he could be overwhelmed if seven of their strongest Circled and confronted him. And if they did have human Sorcerers living on the island, then they could get around the limit of seven and come after them with a Circle as large as one hundred thirteen. Two branches of seven human Sorcerers acting as buffers between forty-nine Sha'Kar each, and one Sha'Kar merging the two branches together to act as buffer between the humans, who would also be leading the combined effort. That kind of directed power, it made Tarrin shudder to even consider it. That many Circled may very well have made the incredible dome that protected the island, or the wind that pushed all ships away, or the magical effects that had caused Keritanima's crew to mutiny. That was the power that the stories said was legendary, the mythical power of the *katzh-dashi*, the power to part the seas, sink islands, move mountains, or stop the moons.

With that many Sorcerers combined into a single Circle, all of them *da'shar* and *sui'kun*, they very well may have been able to *do it*.

That worried Tarrin. What if the Sha'Kar were here to defend the Firestaff? What if *they* were the final guardian? If they could bring that kind of power to bear against him, he wouldn't be able to defeat them. But, as Allia would say, if you can't steal the goat, then you trick the goat into coming to you. He could work around the Sha'Kar if it was needful. Just so long as they didn't oppose him when the time came to get the Firestaff. But that may be tricky. If they did know where it was and were here to protect it, it may get tricky getting that information out of them. But he'd find a way.

Tarrin looked away from the fountain, and saw that Azakar had taken one of the servant girls aside. She looked like a child standing beside the huge Mahuut, and he was leaning far down to talk to her in low tones. She was blushing quite a bit and giggling. Tarrin realized that he was sweet-

talking her. Azakar? Talking to girls? It seemed amusing, but then again, Azakar was a rather handsome fellow. If someone didn't mind the fact that he was nine spans tall, anyway. Dolanna was doing the same thing, talking with one of the maids pouring her some tea, and Keritanima and Miranda had another one cornered over by a sculpture, surreptitiously grilling her for information.

Iselde and Allyn returned to the room quickly, and Tarrin noticed that all five servants stopped what they were doing and curstied in their direction. The two Sha'Kar youths didn't even take notice of them, for their attention was fixated on Tarrin. Iselde came over to him and curtsied herself, her eyes bright and with a smile on her face. "Uncle Arlan went to escort the Council and Grand Syllis here," she announced to him. "He wanted to talk to them in person before they got here."

"I still can't believe that an honored one is in our house!" Allyn gushed, then he glanced at Allia. And kept glancing over at her. The young Sha'Kar seemed quite taken by the Selani, for some reason. That, or he just couldn't help looking at one of the Lost, one or the other.

"How long will it take for them to get here?" Tarrin asked the girl.

"Not long, honored one," she replied. "Once they hear that you're here, they'll come right away."

"The other estates are starting to hear about our visitors," Allyn said to them. "I saw alot of talking at gates when I went with uncle Arlan."

"Would you like to sit down, honored one?" Iselde pressed. "Have you been offered food and drink?"

"I prefer to stand, Iselde," he said, bringing his tail around and wagging it. "This makes some furniture a little uncomfortable."

"We can bring you a stool if you'd like."

"I'm fine," he said firmly. He looked down at them, and realized that these two, so smitten with a *sui'kun*, just might be able to give him some information that he wouldn't have to drag out of the older, more experienced Elders. He may have better luck with them than the others would with the servants. "I'm still a bit surprised to find you out here," he told them. "Why did your people come here? Why not a larger island?"

"Why, because of the Ward," she answered. "Uncle Arlan said that the First Ones set it a long long time ago, to keep the mundanes away from this place. He says that when we left the towers to wait out the Breaking, that this place would be the best place for us. Without our magic, we'd be defenseless!" She licked her lips. "What's it like outside, honored one? Is there magic again? Is it safe for us now?"

"There's always been magic, Iselde," he told her. "Once the Breaking was over, it was safe for us again."

"How did you survive it, honored one?" Allyn asked.

"I wasn't alive when it happened," he told them. "I was born afterward."

"Oh!" Iselde gasped. "You're one of the new *sui'kun*, the ones that the Elders talk about all the time!"

"What do they say?"

"That the Goddess will send her gifts back into the world, and that new *sui'kun* will be born to replace those who died. That's what we've been waiting for. They say when the seven are restored, the Ward protecting the island will fail, and that will be our sign to return."

And *that*, he realized, was why the Goddess had sent him. There were six *sui'kun* alive right now. Spyder had been the original. Then Tarrin and Jenna had been born. Then Jasana. The fifth had been born during the battle at Suld, and the sixth not long ago. There was only one *sui'kun* left unborn, and if Iselde was right, then its birth would cause the Ward defending the island to fail. It may also disrupt the other magical protections, leaving the Firestaff undefended. Especially if the Sha'Kar left the island after the Ward came down, left to return to the outside world.

That was why it was so important for Tarrin to get the Firestaff. He had thought that the defenses were a bit too fearsome for the Goddess to worry about it, and in a way, he was right. Only Tarrin, the *Mi'Shara*, could breach the Ward and gain entry to the island. That was why he had the best chance of succeeding, because he could make his attempt before anyone else could try, and thusly face no competition during his attempt. But if those protections were gone, then the Firestaff would be just sitting somewhere on this island waiting for someone to pick it up. It may or may not be defended at that time, depending on if the Sha'Kar were the final guardians

or not. If they were, it would be defenseless. If not, it would be guarded, but most of the other protective measures that protected it would be gone, thereby making recovering it a much simpler task. That was the whole reason why the *ki'zadun* had tried to both kill him and control him. If they controlled him, they would have first shot at the Firestaff. If they couldn't control him, they had to kill him, thereby making it a dead race, a race they had a good chance of winning. Only the Zakkites and the Wikuni would pose a real threat to their victory, for both were formidable naval powers. Both had the capability of surrounding the island and blockading it against anyone else.

Tarrin put that revelation aside for the moment, considering what else to ask. "How did your people know to come here?" he asked. "The Breaking happened so suddenly, there wasn't any warning."

"My uncle told us that some of my people can read the probabilities of the future," she answered. "It's not a gift of Sorcery, it's a gift of the mind. Some of them foresaw the Breaking and convinced enough of our people and some of the humans to come here and wait for that day to come. If it came and went without any disaster, then there would be nothing lost. But if it did, then our people would continue on and our ways wouldn't be lost to the world."

"Then your people were wise," he told her. "The Sha'kar are nothing but myth and legend now. Everything about your people has been lost and forgotten. Even your language has been forgotten by the outside world."

"If that's so, then how do you know it, honored one?"

"Good question," he smiled. "We found forgotten scrolls in a musty old cellar that held the key to learning the spoken form. Have you ever heard of the Book of Ages?"

Iselde gasped and gaped at him. "You've read from the holy book?" she asked him in wonder.

"I've held it in my paws, Iselde," he told her gently. "It taught us the written Sha'Kar language. We used that to piece together some things left behind after the Breaking, and that's what brought us out here."

"What are you doing here, honored one?" she finally asked. "If you're not here to come and get us, then why?"

"We're searching for an ancient artifact called the Firestaff," he told her very carefully, watching her expression and her eyes and analyzing her scent. When he said the word *firestaff*, he saw her eyes shift a little and her brow furrow, and her scent picked up a slight tang of concern. It was a word she understood, and it caused her to react with slight anxiety. "Ancient writings said that it was somewhere out here, and we've been looking for it. We thought it might be here, so we came to check before moving on."

"If you're *sui'kun*, then you know what it is, and what it can do," she said seriously.

"I do. That's why we're out here. I'm here to stop that from happening," he told her adamantly. "I was sent by the Goddess herself."

Tarrin saw the conflict in her eyes. Iselde knew something about the Firestaff, but she obviously wasn't sure if she should tell him or not. Tarrin was about to press her, to use her awe of him as a weapon to make her tell him what she knew, but Arlan chose that moment to return. And he was leading nine Sha'Kar, eight dressed in brilliant yellow robes that stood out against their skin and the ninth wearing a robe that almost looked to be made out of gold spun into cloth. All nine of them looked mature, but not old. Five were male, and four were female. All of them had the pattern Sha'Kar beauty, a similarity of appearance that probably went through the whole race, with only minor alterations of that base beauty to disseminate between individuals. Some had broader cheeks, some narrower. Some had larger eyes, some smaller. Some had larger ears or a sharper chin, some had a slightly narrower nose or more elegant brows. But the commonality of beauty went through all nine of them. Even Allia shared that same basic appearance, as did Var, Denai, and all the Selani he'd seen. In a fleeting instant, Tarrin understood why the Wikuni gods changed their children, who were also descendents of the Sha'Kar and Urzani. Those Sha'Kar had abandoned the Sha'Kar culture, but they still looked like Sha'Kar. The Wikuni gods wanted that change to be a complete one, so they altered the appearance of their worshippers.

All nine of them absolutely ignored everyone else in the room, didn't see the five human girls curtsy to them nervously. All of them were looking right at Tarrin. He could sense their power, and realized that these nine were not to be taken lightly. They were all *da'shar*, and from the feel of them,

they were alive during the Breaking. These were people who lived during the Age of Power, beings whose command of Sorcery would seem almost godlike to the modern descendents of the old *katzh-dashi*. They were at least a thousand years old, all of them, and they all had a similar sense about them that Triana did, a sheathe of wisdom and power that made them stand above those around them. These, Tarrin realized, were *Ancients*.

Ghosts of the past, resurrected into the future. Now that dream made complete sense.

"Honored one," one of the yellow-robed males said in awe, one with small eyes. "I never dreamed I'd live to see the day the honored ones returned to us."

The one in the gold robe stepped forward and bowed. "Honored one, I am Grand Syllis," he introduced in a nasal voice. "It's been too long since we've been graced with the presence of one such as you. Sha'Kari welcomes you with open arms. Our homes are your homes, and our wine is your wine."

"My name is Tarrin," he told them in a calm, almost gruff manner after glancing at Dolanna, who nodded. Diplomacy wasn't Tarrin's strong suit, but it was obvious that they didn't even know that the others existed. "I'll admit that we're surprised to find you here. We didn't expect to find Sha'Kar on this journey."

"He is the one," one of the females said. "With the others."

"The other two honored ones, are they perchance with you?" Grand Syllis asked.

"They're in Suld," he answered honestly. "How did you know about them?"

"Delande is quite adept at travelling the Weave," Grand Syllis said. "She's one of the few who can breach the barrier the Ward creates and travel back to the Heart. She has been visiting there from time to time, waiting for the day *da'shar* and *sui'kun* reappeared. She saw you in the Heart with another honored one, and she said she could sense yet another very close to you."

Delande had to be the presence that Jenna and Jula had been sensing. That mystery was solved. Judging from Iselde's reaction, the news about the *sui'kun* was information the Elders didn't bandy about with the other Sha'Kar.

"I'm sure we could chat back and forth about pleasantries, but I'm afraid I've come on business," he told them. He saw Dolanna's slightly disapproving look, but he didn't feel like smalltalk at the moment. He wanted to set things out right now and see how they reacted to what he said. "Me and my friends are on a mission, a mission directly from the Goddess herself. Have you ever heard of an artifact called the Firestaff?"

That got their attention. All ten of them--including Arlan--gave him a startled look, and almost as one, the Elders and Grand Syllis put their hands inside the sleeves of their robes. The scents coming off of them were ones of trepidation and worry. They *did* know about the Firestaff, and judging from the defensive reactions, they knew quite a bit about it.

"The Goddess tasked us to find it, because the whole world is turning itself inside out over it right now. She wants us to find it and take it away and hide it again so it can't be found." He threw his braid over his shoulder absently. "We know it's somewhere in this general direction. When we started encountering all the obstacles, we felt that there was a good chance that it may be here, that the obstacles had been placed to defend it. Now I see that the obstacles are there because you're here," he said with a slight sigh. "I don't think it's here, but maybe, if you know where it is, you could tell us."

There. That set everything up. They knew what Tarrin was doing, but Tarrin made a plausible reason *not* to think that it was on the island. They knew something about it, something important. Probably where it was on the island, but he could tell from the way they reacted that they wouldn't willingly tell him anything. But Tarrin had set up the trap, and now he wanted to see if they were going to fall into it.

"I'm sorry, honored one, but we can be of little help to you," Grand Syllis said with a sigh. "I'm afraid we don't know where it is."

He was lying. Tarrin could smell it all over him. He was nervous and a little upset, and he was lying. Tarrin had to admit, he was a good liar. He

didn't blink or shift or do any of the normal things that humans did when they lied. The Sha'Kar probably had no idea Tarrin's senses were so acute, that he could smell the change in the man's scent that was caused by his emotional shift when he had to lie.

"Then I'm afraid I have no more need to be here," he said bluntly. "Our mission is too important. We'll leave you and visit again when we return to Suld."

"Tarrin, what are you doing?" Kimmie demanded in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"Trust me," he replied to her.

"Please!" one of the Elders cried out, a short thin male with blond hair. "You only just arrived, honored one! Surely you can spare a few days from your quest!"

"Yes, honored one! Please stay!" one of the females called, almost pleadingly. "We hunger for news of the outside world!"

Syllis looked visibly annoyed with his council of Elders as all of them, as well as Arlan, Iselde, and Allyn, pleaded with Tarrin to stay, even if only for a few days. Tarrin let them plead and beg and cajole a moment, looking serious, then he turned and glanced at Dolanna. She nodded, and he held up his paws. "Alright, but only for a few days," he told them.

"Thank you, honored one!" one of the Elders exploded, a very tall, willowy female.

That same female stepped from the group and curtsied to him, holding up the hem of her dress, and introduced herself as Dalenne. Then Grand Syllis stepped up and bowed, and then led Tarrin back to the Elders and introduced them one by one, the females first, as if by some custom. They were Yvenne, Uralia, and Vendelle, and the males were Jordan, Alphon, Thince, and Basel.

Tarrin responded by introducing his friends, but he saw that they seemed only mildly interested in them, almost as if they didn't matter until Tarrin brought their presence to their attention. He introduced Dolanna, Keritanima, Allia, and Dar as *katzh-dashi*, and that got something of a cordial reply from Grand Syllis. Introducing Phandebrass and Camara Tal

as a Wizard and Priestess seemed only mildly interesting to the man, and he didn't even spare a glance at Azakar, a Knight, or the Vendari bodyguards. He gave Miranda a very strange look when Tarrin introduced her as Keritanima's friend and aide, one that made Tarrin wonder just what he could tell about his very special friend. When he introduced Kimmie as his mate, that made the Sha'Kar smile at her and offer his hand to her, something he didn't do for anyone else.

"I must ask what race you are, my dear," he asked Kimmie. "I've never seen your like before."

"We're Were-cats, Grand Syllis," she replied with a sweet smile.

"Were-kin? Our honored one is also a Were-kin!" Grand Syllis said with a bright smile. "I say, that is definitely very interesting. I didn't think any of the Were-kin had any potential as Sorcerers."

"The introduction of humans into the Were-kin broadened the abilities of our kind," Kimmie said carefully. "Many Were-kin are very capable Wizards and Priests as well, at least those that don't have enough Druidic aptitude to study it."

"I can sense something about you, dear lady. Are you perchance a Druid?"

"Wizard," she replied with a smile. "I'm afraid I wasn't lucky enough to have enough Druidic ability to train."

"At least you've managed to excel in some kind of magic, dear lady," Grand Syllis said with a false smile. His scent told Tarrin that the Sha'Kar was vastly relieved at that news. And that was *very* important information. Syllis feared Druids, and rightly so. Druids could block Sorcery. Syllis had just ensured that there wasn't a Druid among them to interfere with him, if it came down to it.

Tarrin looked at this Grand Syllis, and every moment that went by, he was more and more certain that the Sha'Kar was going to ultimately end up opposing him. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. Even now, before the first lines had been drawn in the sand, Tarrin was already sizing up this future enemy, puzzling out his motivations and preparing counters to deal with them.

"Well, let me be the first to congratulate you on your coming blessing, dear lady," Syllis told her with a smile.

"Thank you," she said calmly. "You have good eyes, Grand Syllis. I'm not even showing yet."

Tarrin realized that it wasn't because he could see it, but because he probably probed Kimmie with his magic, the same way Arlan did to him when they first met. He assented Kimmie and felt a second active intelligence within her. In a female, that was obviously a pregnancy. "Those who revere life are sensitive to the newest ones," he said with a sweeping of his arm. "Please, let us take you to the House of the Goddess, where we can give you rooms proper for your station. Not in this small hovel," he said with a slightly deprecatory glance at Arlan, who bowed his head.

"If it's all the same to you, Grand Syllis, I'm a simple man with simple tastes. I find this house quite satisfactory. If Master Arlan will have me, I'd prefer to stay here."

"You can have my personal chamber, honored one," Arlan said very brightly, almost falling over himself to accept. "You honor my humble home beyond words!"

"Are you sure, honored one?" Syllis pressed. "The House of the Goddess is much finer than this place. It's a place more suited for you."

"I'm not Sha'Kar or human, Grand," Tarrin said pointedly. "I have customs that will seem very alien to you. One of them is that I don't find a need to be surrounded by opulence and servants. Trust me, this place is almost too much. Were it any grander, I would go back into the forest and set up a camp there. I'd feel more comfortable out there anyway."

That seemed to scandalize all the Sha'Kar, but Syllis seemed to recover himself. "Anything you wish, honored one," he said smoothly. "If you would prefer to stay in this small cottage, then this is where you will stay. I'm sure Arlan will do his best to be a proper host to you."

"You will be well cared for, honored one!" Arlan said emphatically.

"For the moment, we of the Council need to withdraw and consult our books. We will search our histories for you and see if we can find what you

seek. Until then, please make yourselves comfortable with Arlan and his family."

"I'm sure Arlan will be a proper host," Tarrin said confidently.

"Very good then. I know you prefer to be here and that you don't like opulence, but we must celebrate your arrival in a suitable fashion. A feast, I believe, one for the entire city. Would that offend you, honored one?"

Tarrin glanced at Dolanna, who nodded imperceptibly. "That's fine with me," he answered.

"Very good, then! We'll make the arrangements. Tonight, you will meet all of us who wait to return to our place in the world."

"I'm looking forward to it, Grand Syllis."

The male smiled at him. It was an oily smile, one that put Tarrin's hackles up almost immediately. It was a *chilling* smile. "We'll do our best to honor your arrival," he said.

And then, with lengthy farewells, the Council withdrew. Tarrin watched them leave, and all he could feel was uncertainty over Syllis. Maybe it was just him, maybe it was just his feral nature, maybe it was his inexperience with Sha'Kar culture, or maybe it was real, but everything about that Sha'Kar screamed at Tarrin to either kill him or flee from him. The Cat saw him as an enemy, and Tarrin had a certainty within him that he was one. Syllis was going to be one he would have to watch carefully. Until then, there were Sha'Kar youths and human servants to quietly grill for information.

Arlan was true to his word, and pushed Tarrin to taking his personal chamber. To say that it was extravagant would have been a vast understatement. The bed itself was large enough to fit six Sha'Kar, on a raised pedestal of sorts at the far end of the room from the huge entry doors. It was round in shape, something Tarrin had never seen before, and was both soft and firm at the same time. The rest of the room was monstrous, fully as large as the sitting room, with paintings, a few tapestries, and more of those delicate sculptures. Some of them were decidedly erotic, although tastefully so, a window into the mind of the Sha'Kar. They obviously didn't

have the same hang-ups about sex as the humans did. The huge bed was only the first of a series of unusual decorations or furnishings, from two strange couch-like divans with no backs, only a raised section on one side for someone to recline upon, and there were very well carved bureaus for clothes, with large, deep drawers. A series of balls of light hung from the ceiling, *glowglobes*, something he hadn't seen anywhere but in the Tower, and they served to illuminate the room. By far the strangest feature of the room was the pool in a recessed area behind the bed, which was literally in a room of its own. The fact that there was no door between the pool area and the rest of the room made Tarrin consider it a part of the room, the two separated by a very large, wide, elegant arch with Sha'Kar script chiselled into the white stones. It was a short prayer of blessing to the Goddess. The pool's water was hot to the touch, and Tarrin could sense the magic that caused it to be so, as well as several other permanent spells that kept the water clean and fresh. The arch too was imbued with magical energy, causing the heat of the pool beyond to be contained in the pool room.

It took Tarrin a while to get used to the idea that a room for sleeping was nearly as large as a hall in a castle keep. Kimmie too seemed a little overwhelmed by the huge chamber and its delicate art and wondrous beauty, sitting on one of the divans and spending almost ten minutes just staring this way and that. She seemed quite impressed by the chamber, and looked longingly at the baths.

After Tarrin and Kimmie got used to the idea of the room, they had one of the servant girls send for the others. They all gathered in the room a few moments later, all of them looking quite shocked by what they'd found in the rooms to which they'd been taken. "Tarrin, this mansion has *twelve* bedrooms!" Dar told him in a shocked tone. "Twelve! As big as the rooms are in this place, I didn't think they'd have much room for more than two!"

"We're not here to talk about the rooms, Dar," Tarrin told him as they gathered around the two divans. The room wasn't meant to entertain large numbers of people, so everyone but Kimmie, Dolanna, Keritanima, and Miranda stood around the two backless couches as the four females seated themselves. "Has anyone managed to drag anything out of anyone yet?"

Keritanima paused, looking around. Then she wove a Ward that would prevent eavesdropping and placed it over them. "The Firestaff is definitely

somewhere on this island," she said. "I can see it in their eyes when I've asked about it."

"I agree," Dolanna nodded. "And more, it is not something they seem willing to discuss. I do not think the serving girls know much, but they will not talk about it."

"They're certainly friendly," Phandebrass coughed. "I was changing into a new robe when one of them came in. She made some entirely inappropriate offers, she did."

"You should feel lucky," Camara Tal teased him. "It's not often an old coot like you gets a lady's eye."

"It's more than that," Phandebrass said. "I say, I get the feeling that the girls are doing it out of duty. The young lady certainly didn't seem all that interested in me, she didn't. It was like she was offering for my benefit, not hers, she was."

"You mean the servants here double as prostitutes," Azakar said stiffly.

"I'd say that's a pretty fair description," Miranda said calmly. "One thing I did notice, and that's that the human servants are terrified of the Sha'Kar. You should see the way they jump whenever one of them is in the room. It's almost pitiful."

"I did notice that," Tarrin grunted.

"I took a walk around the grounds," Keritanima said. "There's a farm behind the house, and all the people who work it are human. None of them would talk to me. I asked Iselde why they wouldn't talk with me, and she said it's because they're working. But I've never seen a farmer that wasn't willing to stop a moment and jabber with someone."

"Let us reserve judgement, my friends," Dolanna cautioned. "These Sha'Kar are *powerful*. Their ways are not ours, and I think that we had best not alienate them. They would be formidable enemies. Even if they keep the humans as slaves, we should not try to interfere or voice our displeasure. At least not until after we have what we need from them," she corrected.

"Dolanna raises a very good point," Allia agreed. "I can feel their power surround them like a cloak. Even Iselde and Allyn are powerful, and they

do not have the same sense about them as Keritania and Dolanna. I do not think they are *da'shar*."

"They're not," Tarrin told her. "I already thought about that, and you're right, Dolanna. If they oppose us, they'll win. It's that simple. So we'd better be very careful about how we go about getting around their lying. Syllis knows where the Firestaff is. I'm sure of it. We just have to think of a way to trick him or someone else into telling us where it is."

"He may have it, dear one," Dolanna speculated. "Perhaps the Sha'Kar are the final guardians."

"No, they're not," Phandebrass said, scratching his chin. "They came here just before the Breaking, and the Firestaff was here thousands of years before that. Did you hear what Iselde told Tarrin? I say, she said her people came here because of the Ward, they did. That means that it was here long before them. The Ward, I think it was set here to protect the Firestaff, it was, because the poem mentioned the Ward. So, logic tells me that the poem that doesn't mention the Sha'Kar was written before they came here, and that means that there *is* a guardian, there is."

"Unless the Sha'Kar destroyed it," Camara Tal grunted. "If they're that strong, they could have ganged up on it and taken it out."

"That is a rather unsettling possibility," Phandebrass conceded with a frown.

"The question now is, what are we going to do?" Kimmie asked.

They were silent a moment. "Move very, *very* carefully," Keritania answered. "We need information, and we can't really move until we get at least a rough understanding of what we're dealing with. So I guess for now, we spread out and learn everything we can about the Sha'Kar. The more we know about them, the easier it'll be to manipulate them when the time comes, if we have to go that far. I'd rather not. They may be potential enemies, but they *are* Socerers. They're our brothers and sisters. It'd be easy if you could tell the Goddess to *make* them obey us, Tarrin," she told him. "They seem to be faithful children. If she ordered it, they'd probably obey her."

"That's worth a try," he agreed, raising his head. "Mother? Can you hear me?" There was a long silence. Tarrin worried for a moment, then realized

that the sense of distance from the Goddess was still there. Unlike everything else that returned when they got through the Ward, that had not returned. "I don't think she can hear me," he fretted. "I think the Ward is interfering with me."

"I say, that's understandable," Phandebrass said. "There are gods after the Firestaff as well. It's only logical that whoever set the Ward hides it from gods as well as mortals. Since we're inside the Ward, we're on the wrong side of the line." He looked to Camara Tal. "I say, my dear, do you think you could cast a spell? If you can, then my theory isn't sound."

"My spell will work, Phandebrass, whether Neme can hear me or not," he said. "My connection to her where my magic is concerned runs through the Weave, same as your connection to your magic. Now, I could try to *commune* with her," she stated. "If that doesn't work, then you're probably right."

Keritanima shuddered. "Who can make something that blocks the powers of a *god*?" she asked in a sober tone. "Who made that Ward?"

"I'd say the Goddess did," Tarrin answered her. "I assented that Ward when I touched it, and believe me, I don't think any mortal, not even every Ancient there was Circled together, would have been capable of doing something like that. I could barely understand even the tiniest fraction of everything that that Ward is capable of doing. And she may have made it so well that it even blocks *her*. The other gods probably would have demanded that. An unopenable chest isn't very useful if the maker has a key."

"That's reasonable," Phandebrass nodded.

"Well, that's one good idea wasted," Keritanima grunted.

"It would have been too easy," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "So far, nothing has been very easy. I don't think we can expect our luck to change now."

"So, Kerri, you're the resident sneak. What should we do?" Dar asked.

Keritanima rubbed the side of her muzzle with the back of her hand, then slapped her hands into her lap. "We find things out," she said. "I think we should all go explore the house and talk to all the servants. At least any of them that will talk. The Sorcerers will go talk to the Sha'Kar, since they

seem to ignore the rest of you," she said with a snort, "and see what we can find out from them."

"What kind of questions should we ask?"

"Absolutely anything you can think of, Dar," she replied seriously. "And I mean anything. What they eat, when the Sha'Kar like to get up in the morning, what they do for fun, what kind of jokes they tell, anything. We need to get an understanding of how they think, and we'll get it if we can learn enough about what they do and how they act. Even something as simple as this room can tell you a lot about someone, if you stop and study it for a while."

"I know it may assault your sensibilities, Dar, but maybe you should take that maid up on the offer she made you earlier," Miranda said delicately. "Women love to talk, and they talk more in bed. Maybe you can loosen her tongue a little bit."

"Among other things," Camara Tal said with a wolfish grin.

"And she'll say more than she would have said in another situation," Miranda finished, then she turned to the Amazon. "That goes for you too, Camara," Miranda winked. "Human men are just as gabby as human women in bed."

Dar blushed furiously. "Are you serious?" he asked.

"Actually, Dar, she is," Keritanima told him soberly. "I know it's something of a sacrifice, but think about it. You may be the one that finds out what we need to know, and trust me, it's actually quite an enjoyable experience," she said with a slow smile. "You're a very attractive young human, and you're young enough that they may not take you as seriously as they take the rest of us. They may tell you things they won't tell anyone else."

"Well," he hedged, blushing purple. "I guess--I mean--oh, bloody Abyss."

That made the more progressive people in the group chuckle. Kimmie reached out and put a paw on the young man's arm and grinned at him. "That's right, soldier, sacrifice for the cause," she jibed. "I know going to

bed with those very pretty young ladies is going to be a terrible burden for you."

"You're a big help," he grunted under his voice.

"If I wouldn't kill the men that tried to mate with me, I would," she grinned. "You weaker races just couldn't survive a night with one of us. We'd tear you apart in the throes of passion."

"That's a creepy image," Dar shuddered.

"That does remind me of something," Tarrin said. "The Sha'Kar don't know about me and Kimmie, and what we're capable of. That's a trump card I'd rather not lose."

"What should we tell them?" Dolanna asked.

"That we're Were-kin."

"And if they ask for specifics?"

"They read about us in their books, so stick with the generals," Kimmie answered. "We're shapeshifters, we're contagious, and so on and so on. Nothing about our senses. I think that's what Tarrin wants to protect."

Tarrin nodded towards his mate.

"Even if they find out about you, I doubt they'll find out about *me*," Keritanima said. "For a Wikuni to have the senses I have is very, very rare. Even if they know about Wikuni, they'd never consider that."

"Good point," Tarrin agreed. "Remember, we don't want a fight with the Sha'Kar, people. Kerri is right. Even if they may oppose what we're doing, they *are* our brothers and sisters, and when the seventh *sui'kun* is born, they'll be coming back to the world. So we'd better not make them hostile to the *katzh-dashi*, or we'll be dealing with a huge nest of angry hornets when that day comes."

"This could get murky," Miranda frowned.

"I know, but until we know enough to make some hard decisions, let's not stir them up. Let's do what Kerri said, and go out and learn as much as we can. If we can trick the information we need out of them, we won't have

to put ourselves in a position where we may have to do something we'll regret later."

"Aye," Camara Tal nodded. "I know we have to plan for possibilities, but I think Tarrin hit the mark. Let's try *very* hard to make these Sha'Kar friends. Even if we don't agree with some of the things we've seen so far."

Azakar glared at her a short moment, then caught himself and nodded solemnly.

There wasn't much more to say at that point, so they broke up and scattered through the huge place. Tarrin wandered its passage aimlessly, gaping at the stunning works of art and sculptures, each more dazzling and breathtaking than the last, until he finally managed to bump into a Sha'Kar. It was Iselde, who was carrying a large book with her. "Oh, honored one!" she said with a curtsy. "I was looking for you, but you weren't in your room."

"Why did you need me, Iselde?" he asked.

"I wanted to give you this," she said, holding out the book to him. "It's a book of our history on the island. I thought you might like to learn what we've done while we've been here waiting."

Iselde handed him the book, and Tarrin was sure she had just put a gold mine of information in his paws. He tucked it under his arm, trying hard to feign only mild interest. "I'm sure I'll find it interesting, Iselde," he nodded to her. "Could you show me where the kitchen is? I'm a little hungry, and truth be told, I'm lost. This place is too big for me."

"Our house? Big?" she said, then she laughed. "You tease me, honored one!"

"To me, this place isn't just big, it's *damn* big," he told her bluntly as she started leading him along the passages. "I live in a cottage, Iselde. My entire cottage can fit in your uncle's bedchamber. In fact, I think you could get two of them in there," he amended after a moment.

She gaped at him. "How do you stand it? You'd have no room for anything at all!"

"I don't have much need for things, young one," he told her. "I can carry everything I own in a backpack, and I rather like it that way. Don't forget,

girl, I'm not Sha'Kar, or even human. Were-kin don't need much space to be happy, and we don't need things to fill what space we need."

"I'll try to not judge you by our standards, honored one," she promised. "I can already see that you're nothing like what I imagined a *sui'kun* to be."

"What did you expect? And be honest. I won't be insulted or embarrassed, no matter what you say."

She flushed slightly. "Well, I expected a handsome human to ride in on a magic chariot, or on the back of an Elemental, and sweep us away," she said in a slightly distant tone. Tarrin smiled slightly. The girl was a daydreamer. "And we'd go back to the towers and do what we did before the Breaking."

"What was that?"

"Serve the Goddess," she said simply. "Most of the adults were alive before the Breaking, and they tell us stories of how things were then. About the seven towers, and how we served the will of the Goddess. I think it would be a great thing to be able to do that again," she sighed. "I'd like to see her, just once, the way the *da'shar* have. But until the Ward fails, we're stuck here. Not even the *da'shar* can breach the Ward with Travelling and reach the Heart, except for Lady Delande."

They had trained her rather well, even if she wasn't *da'shar*. "You said you're stuck here. You can't get out?"

She shook her head. "The Ward destroys a Circle if it comes into contact with it, so only a *sui'kun* would have enough raw power to breach the Ward with Sorcery. Isn't that how you got *in*, honored one?"

He was impressed. This girl had seemed a little scattered at first, but she was proving her intelligence to him now. "A *sui'kun* came with you?" he asked curiously. She said only a *sui'kun* could breach the Ward. If they got in, then someone had to open it for them.

She shook her head. "Actually, it's still quite a mystery how we managed to get inside. Several tried to breach the Ward with Sorcery, but all of them died trying. Then a woman nobody knew tried, and she managed to succeed. Nobody's seen her since then, and what happened to her is still a topic of debate. She was on the ship with the others, they say. One moment

she was there, and then the next moment, as soon as they came through the Ward, she was gone. Some say the magic of the Ward absorbed her and trapped her within itself, some say the Ward disintegrated her, and some say the Ward wouldn't allow her to pass through. The ones that say that think she died on the outside, and that her ghost is still out there, haunting the seas surrounding the Ward. It's in the book, honored one. The very first chapter."

A woman opening the Ward? Only *sui'kun* could do it...could it have been Spyder? She was Urzani, and she'd be virtually indistinguishable from a Sha'Kar. That was probably why Iselde called her a *woman* instead of a *human*.

"Was this woman Sha'Kar?" he asked curiously.

Iselde nodded.

Tarrin chuckled in spite of himself. "You sneaky girl," he mused in Sulasian, reverting back to his native tongue. That had to have been Spyder. She'd never told him about this. Then again, she hadn't told him about just about anything. She was a woman of endless secrets, it seemed. He had a sneaking suspicion that Spyder knew absolutely everything about this place, and had chosen not to tell him for some reason. Whatever that may be. But whatever it was, from what little he knew of the Urzani, he trusted her. If she didn't tell him, she had to have had a good reason to do so. After all, it was in her best interest to keep him, a fellow *sui'kun*, alive.

"Excuse me, honored one?"

"Nothing, Iselde. Nothing. Lead on."

She continued to prattle on as they walked, but her chatting became more and more relaxed with him, and started making more sense. She had been almost awestruck by him earlier, and now that she was getting to know him, to find out that he happened to be an intelligent being as well as a *sui'kun*, she was starting to calm down a little. And he started to learn about the Sha'Kar from her ramblings. She talked on and on about how everyone was so excited about his arrival, how the entire island was on its toes, waiting feverishly for the feast, for their chance to meet him. It was going to be held outside, she told him, the tables already being made and set up in the center of their loose community, on the fenced grounds of the House of

the Goddess, the estate home of Syllis and meeting place for the Council of Elders. She talked about how all her young friends had all but begged to be invited into the house to meet him privately, but her uncle Arlan had forbade visitors without his personal approval beforehand. She admitted that her being lucky enough to meet him first had made her very popular in the talking circles of the youngest Sha'Kar females, of which she was part. She also admitted that it was a new experience for her, for she was from a poor family that lived on the edge of the community, and that made her not very popular.

It seemed strangely like the Arakites and the Wikuni...they attached social standing to how close their houses were to the center of their town. Those who lived on the outside edges were seen as socially inferior to those who lived in the center. Strange that three races would exhibit a similar social trait.

That statement also told him much about the concept of social standing among the Sha'Kar. Social standing was something of a universal custom among most civilized societies, but the Sha'Kar sounded strangely like the Selani on that point. To a Selani, standing was honor, and honor was everything. To the Sha'Kar, he guessed, it dealt with more than that, probably family history, wealth, and probably ability with the Weave. In the social circles of the *katzh-dashi*, the ones with highest social standing were the ones with the most power. He knew that the modern *katzh-dashi* did have some traits of their Ancient forefathers, and that was probably one of them. Tarrin suspected that Arlan's house was poor and his family not very socially connected because their powers in Sorcery were weaker than everyone else's. The fact that there were only three of them in the house may also have an impact of some sort.

The way the Sha'Kar treated him certainly backed up that assumption. They were all absolutely fawning all over him, even the Council of Elders. It was strangely annoying, though he felt that a human may have enjoyed that kind of attention. He suspected that right now, he had higher social standing than anyone else on the island, even Grand Syllis. Because he was *sui'kun*.

From what little he heard so far, he guessed that in this place, where they were cut off from the outside world and had little to do, the matter of

social standing had become a cornerstone of their society. And if that were so, then the methods by which one improved social standing were the most commonly pursued goals. If they prized Sorcery, then much of their time was probably spent improving their powers. If it was a question of wealth or prestige, then he figured that they'd be as deep into political games as the Wikuni noble houses.

She led him into a huge kitchen, which had no less than four strange metal plates on counters that radiated heat of varying degrees. Tarrin could sense the magic of them, yet another way the Sha'Kar had adapted Sorcery to serve them in everyday life. They had five large ovens, also magically heated. They also had a large room that was magically chilled. That reminded him of his own home, with the small cellar that had that strange magical object that radiated that constant intense cold. It was almost unheard of for such a rare magical object to be in the possession of a frontier family. His father had found it a long time ago, before he met his mother, and had kept it as a curiosity. After he got married, it served them well as a means to store food for very long periods without it spoiling. The Sha'Kar had obviously thought the same thing, so they used their magic to create a room for storing perishables, preserving the food by freezing it. There were about ten humans in the kitchens working hard to make Sha'Kar dishes, which were almost exclusively vegetarian. The only meat he saw them working on were strange birds with long-feathered tails, some of them already cooked.

Tarrin noticed something about them. All the humans were attractive. Not quite as pretty as the five maids, but they weren't ugly.

He also got his first view of the tattoo. It was on their chests, over their hearts, a small black tattoo that was the glyph of the family name. He saw it on a slender male who wore nothing but a pair of breeches, working to cook strange tube-like vegetables in a pan over one of the heated plates. Curiosity getting the better of him, he reached out and put two fingers on the back of the man's neck, assensing him. The man jumped slightly, and Tarrin had to suppress a sudden impulse to strike at the movement, to drive his fingers into the man's neck and kill him to prevent an attack. He still had a long way to go to fully conquer his feral nature. But he had to know. These Sha'Kar used Sorcery the same way the Wikuni used technology. He suspected that they were using Sorcery to control or intimidate their

servants into utter obedience. It was the only rational explanation for how afraid they seemed of their Sha'Kar masters.

He was right. The magic was exceedingly subtle, but it was there. The tattoos were magical, set down by Sorcery, and he'd bet that that was why the humans were so afraid of the Sha'Kar. He couldn't quite make out what the glyph's function was, but he was sure that it wasn't entirely pleasant.

Dolanna had been right. These humans, they were literally slaves to the Sha'Kar.

That hardened Tarrin to them. Tarrin despised slavery, having been on the wrong side of the whip himself once. That they would use Sorcery to control these humans, that they would defile the gifts granted to them by the Goddess in such a hideous fashion, it filled him with a towering contempt, and he had to literally fight himself to prevent him from turning on Iselde and ripping out her throat.

His paws visibly shaking with suppressed rage, Tarrin forced himself to calm down, fell back on the tricks of concentration that Allia had taught him. He pulled the Cat around himself in that moment, for it didn't care one way or the other about these humans, and lacked the moral outrage that the human in him felt at what he had discovered. Shaking his head, shivering his tail, Tarrin got himself under control, and found he could look at Iselde without killing her.

"Honored one? Are you well?" she asked in concern.

If only she knew how close she came to dying. Tarrin turned and looked at her, feeling the distance the Cat put between his human outrage and her, and was glad of it. "What is his name?" he asked, pointing at the human he touched.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "He's just a servant. I'm not sure they even have names."

Her casual attitude nearly got her killed yet again. She could tell she said something that offended him, staring up into his narrowing eyes, seeing his cold expression. A worried look passed over her face, and she addressed the cook in a firm tone. "You, servant," she called. "Do you have a name?"

Tarrin sensed a very subtle spell pass from Iselde, and touch the magic latent in the tattoo. No wonder she didn't know his name. She could somehow summon or get the attention of any servant bearing that tattoo with her magic. The man turned from the cooking and bowed to her quickly. "They call me Kur, Mistress," he said in a trembling voice.

"Go back to your duties," she told him, and he bowed again and returned to his cooking. "Does that satisfy you, honored one?" she asked in a small voice.

It didn't, not in the slightest. It actually made him even more furious. But he didn't want to alienate Iselde quite yet. He knew she knew something about the Firestaff, and he had to find out what it was. He was quiet a long moment, as Iselde looked up at him fearfully. This was not the time, he told himself. Not the time. Not now, not yet. "Why are they cooking? Aren't we going to that feast?"

"Each family prepares food when we have such a celebration," she said. "As much as we can spare. Each house makes its finest dishes for everyone to enjoy."

"Oh. That bird is the only meat you have?"

"I'm sorry, but yes, honored one," she said with a small curtsy. "Uncle Arlan thinks eating red meat is unhealthy."

"But it's not a custom of all Sha'Kar?"

"No, honored one. Just a peculiarity of our house, nothing more. Some houses that are near the hills raise sheep. I eat with their families when I can," she said with a conspiratorial whisper. "When Uncle Arlan isn't paying attention. I love mutton, and I think he's wrong about it not being healthy."

"It probably isn't," he said, looking at the humans going about their business. He needed to get away from them. Their presence was like salt in a gaping wound. "If you haven't guessed, I'm a carnivore, Iselde. I like some vegetables, but not very many. If you don't object, I'll take a piece of one of those roasted birds over there."

"You can help yourself to anything here, honored one," she told him. "Our house is yours."

Tarrin took one of the smallest of the cooked birds and put it on a plate, then started back to the room. Iselde trailed along behind him like an adoring puppy, quiet and a little anxious, from her scent. She could tell she said something that offended him, and he figured that she was trying to figure out some way to get back in his good graces. "Do you need anything else, honored one?" she asked when they reached the door of the chamber that Arlan had given him. "Anything at all?"

"I don't think so, Iselde," he said.

"I don't think your mate is there. Would you like a musician to entertain you? A poet to recite for you? A philosopher to debate issues with you?"

"No thank you, Iselde."

"Would you like one of the servant girls to come and pleasure you?"

Tarrin raised an eyebrow at the Sha'Kar. These Sha'Kar were certainly *nothing* like humans at all.

"I'd like to read this book you gave me, and I prefer reading in a quiet room," he told her.

"As you wish, honored one," she said with a curtsy. "If you do want a musician or philosopher or poet or one of the servants to pleasure you, just tell one of the servants. They'll bring you anything you desire."

"I'm sure they will," he said, maybe a bit too caustically. "What are you going to do now, Iselde?" he asked curiously.

"I've been asked to a friend's house," she said, looking a bit eager. "We'll take lessons together in the Art from her mother, who's one of the better Sorcerers on the island. Then we'll probably talk, or at least start off that way."

"You say it like you're up to mischief," he noted.

She blushed. "Auli is an adventurous friend," she said. "She always gets me in trouble. She likes to play pranks on people, and seduce boys, and go where we're not supposed to go, and she's always taking servants into her room to take pleasure from them. My uncle doesn't like her. He says she's more interested in pleasure than study. My uncle is a prude sometimes," she told him with a wicked little smile. "He doesn't take pleasure from the

servant girls at all, and he doesn't like music or dancing. Auli may like pleasure more than study, but Uncle Arlan doesn't do anything but work."

"What does he work on?"

"Bettering his Art," she replied. "He spends every day with the Elders as one of their pupils."

Tarrin picked through what she said earlier, and hit on something that surprised him. "Sha'Kar women take pleasure from the humans?" he asked curiously. In many societies, men were allowed to be promiscuous, but women weren't. That this girl Auli was doing so seemed not too unusual given what Tarrin had seen of the Sha'Kar so far, but Iselde had said it like it was yet another bad thing.

"Some women do," she answered. "Auli likes humans more than boys."

"That's not forbidden?"

"Not really, but some houses frown on it," she replied. "They say we may as well go out and take pleasure from the sheep. Auli has a reputation as a human-lover, so she's not very popular with some of the most prestigious women. Uncle Arlan says that me being friends with her is giving me the same bad reputation."

"What do you think, Iselde?" he asked.

"I think they're wrong," she replied honestly. "There's no harm in it. We can't get pregnant from it, and the humans can't get pregnant from the boys. Before the Breaking, humans and Sha'Kar married all the time, even if they couldn't have children. If our forefathers thought it was alright to take pleasure from humans, then why shouldn't we?"

Tarrin blinked. That was something rather important there. If the Sha'Kar thought highly enough of humans to marry them back before the Breaking, then what had caused them to change, and turn humans into slaves? Slaves that some Sha'Kar put on the same level as sheep? That needed a little further investigation. Keritania said if they could get to know the Sha'Kar, they'd be better prepared to deal with them if they opposed Tarrin's mission. Understanding their history and their customs was a good start, and coming to know when the Sha'Kar's attitudes towards humans changed would shed some light on things.

"Thank you, Iselde," he said sincerely. "You just explained quite a few things about your people that I didn't understand."

"Thank you, honored one," she said with a blush and a curtsy. "If you want to know more, just send for me. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"I will," he promised. "But first, I want to read this book. I'm curious about your people, and I think this book is going to answer many of my questions."

"I hope it pleases you, honored one," she said sincerely.

"We'll see. Go have fun, Iselde. I'll see you later."

She curtsied to him with a smile, and then trotted down the passageway.

Seating himself on the bed crosslegged, Tarrin put the book in his lap and started reading, his only movement his paws to turn the pages and his tail slashing back and forth behind him. The book was indeed very enlightening. It began as Iselde said it would, with the Sha'Kar seeress who predicted the Breaking. He glossed generally over that section, reading it for its general content rather, reading that the seeress managed to convince a group of Sha'Kar and humans that it was serious enough for them to take action. So the party of them, nearly a thousand strong, took to ships with their belongings and some of the servants that attended them at the Tower and used their magic to defeat the protections surrounding the Ward. He read about the miracle at the Ward, when the unknown Sha'Kar woman managed to breach the Ward with her power, but disappeared in the act of it. Her act was enough to get the Sha'Kar and their ships through the Ward, however, and they were safe.

Tarrin read about how they arrived and found that they couldn't get back out. They tried to contact the Goddess, but discovered that the Ward was so powerful that they couldn't communicate through it. They found themselves trapped in a prison of their own design, and they despaired until the Breaking. When that happened, the voice of the Goddess managed to touch them during the destruction of the Weave, telling them to hold strong, that when the *sui'kun* were reborn, the Ward would fail, and they would be free and would be welcomed home. With that knowledge bolstering them, the Sha'Kar and their human companions settled in. At first they wanted to

build a tower, but without a *sui'kun* to serve as its heart, it seemed an empty shadow of their past. Then one Sha'Kar rose up from the ranks and bestowed purpose to them. He was Grand Syllis, and he was the one that suggested they build estates rather than a tower, that they live in a community rather than a single building. Syllis established the Council of Elders and his position as Grand, a title that he would hold until they were able to return to the outside world. The idea worked rather well, the book said. The Sha'Kar found the system to their liking, for the Grand and the Council were much like the Keepers and Councils of their memory, and instead of sharing a single tower, all the Sha'Kar and humans could express themselves with their personal estates.

The book got a bit boring after that, as it talked about the rise of the seventeen Sha'Kar families that became the hub of the island's society. The book talked about how the forest was cut back to make room for the estates, and how the entire island became populated by the stranded Sorcerers and their servants. It then went on to ramble lengthily about how everyone was happy and prospered, and how they returned to their studies and created a quality of life they enjoyed.

Then it got interesting again, because tragedy befell the island. It came in the form of a sickness, striking the island about seven hundred years ago. It was a disease that started slowly, but then swept through the island rampantly. It affected both the humans and the Sha'Kar, but where it was merely inconvenient for the Sha'Kar, it proved to be lethal to the humans. In the span of five years, virtually all the humans on the island died from the deadly plague, cutting their numbers by more than half. All the human Sorcerers that had come with the Sha'Kar died, and the roughly hundred humans left at the end of the plague had been the servants, servants who had contracted the disease, but had survived.

Tarrin paused to consider that, consider how that may change the Sha'Kar's view of humans, and then he continued reading. With over half the population of the island gone, the Sha'Kar decided to tear down most of their houses and pull back to the shallow valley where the town was now, letting the forest reclaim the rest of the island. Since they had so much room, the fifty Sha'Kar families each were portioned a section of the land to do with as they pleased, and the Sha'Kar built the fifty estates that dotted the grassy plain, estates that Tarrin realized probably were still standing

today. The book talked about how each family tried to outdo the others by making a home of great beauty, as the Sha'Kar sought to transform the land they had taken for themselves into a garden of beauty to remind them of the wonders of the towers, memories that grew dimmer and dimmer as time went by.

Tarrin wondered at that. The outside certainly didn't look like a garden of beauty now. Surely, it was pretty, but there weren't the vast gardens and crystal statues that the book mentioned. Everything outside was actually rather plain, from what he'd seen. Sure, it was pretty, but it was all natural. Grassy lawns behind ornate fences, with simple white stone paths between them.

Tarrin's curiosity was answered very quickly. Fifty years after the plague, the volcano erupted, burning most of the town to the ground. The extravagant houses and huge gardens they'd built had acted like fire traps, fanning the flames set by small embers falling from the volcano's peak. The Sha'Kar endured, the book said, stoically rebuilding their estates, but this time the Grand decreed that only the buildings should carry the beauty of the Sha'Kar. That the land should be allowed to be grassy lawns, grass that can more easily be extinguished by magic if it was set on fire. What was more, fences were built, and into them an enchantment was placed that would prevent fire from crossing them, so as to isolate any further fires so they couldn't spread across the entire city as they had during the eruption.

Tarrin frowned slightly. He guessed those fifty estates he thought were still standing actually weren't.

The book droned on and on about how they rebuilt a third time, and how few of the children of the human servants displayed any power in Sorcery. It talked about how they were taken in by the Sha'Kar families and trained in Sorcery, what they called the Art, and then the matter of the humans seemed to simply disappear.

As well as anything of interest, because almost nothing had changed, according to the book, up to about fifty years ago, when the book was written. The book just repeated itself about how happy everyone was, and how the families continued to train in the Art. It did talk about every new Sha'Kar birth like it was a matter of celebration, but made no mention of the

humans. In fact, the history of how the humans had come to be marked like slaves and made to serve the Sha'Kar wasn't in the book either.

Tarrin put the book aside and pondered on its contents. Odds were, the change in looking at the humans came after the plague. He wondered how they had come to develop the system they had now, for the book made no mention of it. Then again, the book did mention servants. It mentioned that the Sha'Kar came with servants. They may not have been used to having grand mansions, but they *were* used to being served. Odds were, after the human Sorcerers died, they saw the humans more and more as just...servants.

It was the only explanation he could fathom, but it didn't answer the question. The Sha'Kar seemed to be decent folk. The book talked endlessly about how they worked together, how they cared for each other, how they strove to improve themselves and be happy. It just couldn't explain their change in attitude for the humans, humans they had considered as equals. Humans that most of the Sha'Kar had been *alive* to consider equals. These were not the descendents of the Ancients, these *were* the Ancients. It had been a thousand years since their isolation, but it didn't add up. The Sha'Kar were an ancient civilization, and he seriously doubted that a thousand years of isolation could have changed them that much, could have pushed them so far out of the culture they had practiced for millenia. If Sha'Kar were like Selani, then they wouldn't change easily.

He wondered how the Sha'Kar viewed the human Sorcerers among them. That would answer some of his questions.

The door opened, and Kimmie came in with Sapphire in her arms. The drake chirped happily and wriggled out of her arms, then flapped over and landed in Tarrin's lap. "Where have you been, Sapphire?" he chided her as he scratched her between the horns. "I was about to go looking for you!"

"We saw her and Phandebrass' drakes flying around the house," Kimmie answered him. "The Sha'Kar have never seen a drake before. I almost had to wrest her away from them."

"What were you doing?" he asked her as he Conjured a bowl of water for her, and set it on a stone table not far from the bed's pedestal. "I was reading this book on Sha'Kar history that Iselde gave me."

"I was slinking around in cat form," she answered, stretching languidly. "I couldn't get out of the fence, but I saw quite a bit."

"Like what?"

"Like they work their servants like dogs," she frowned. "Those farmers out there are trying to work the land with just a handful of beaten-up old tools. Most of them are doing it by hand. I saw Allyn out there too," she grinned. "Allyn has it hot and heavy for Allia. He was trying to impress her with Sorcery and poetry while she wandered around the lawn. I hope he doesn't go too far. Allia looks like the kind that deals with unwanted suitors permanently."

"She won't kill him," he assured her. "She may break his arm, but she won't kill him."

"I saw Kerri and Dolanna out there too. They were standing at the fence, talking over it with some of the Sha'Kar outside."

"Did you see any humans out there?"

"A few," she answered. "Most were servants, but I did see a couple in robes. Why do you ask?"

"This book is about what the Sha'Kar have done since they came here," he said, holding up the book. "It doesn't say anything about how the humans came to be slaves, but it did say that a plague killed nearly all of them about seven hundred years ago. All the Ancients who were human died in that plague, leaving only the human servants that were here, probably descendents of the original servants that came with them, alive. The humans here now are the descendents of the survivors."

"You think that has something to do with it?"

"I think it might have, but I'm not sure," he admitted.

"You seem hung up on the humans," she noted.

"Given how I feel about slaves, that shouldn't be a surprise," he said bluntly.

"No, I guess not," she sighed. "That Arlan fellow asked me if I was going to the feast in this," she said, holding her arms out. "I told him I'd come naked if he thought it would make a better impression. After he

recovered his composure, he suggested I borrow one of Iselde's dresses," she finished with a sly grin.

"Iselde said that her uncle is very uptight," he told her. "He's almost a human in that regard. Iselde was much more liberal." He scratched his cheek with a claw. "I remember what I read about the Sha'Kar at the Tower. A lot of the customs of the *katzh-dashi* were originally Sha'Kar customs. These Sha'Kar aren't like the *katzh-dashi*, so it makes me wonder how else they've changed."

"Well, I didn't find out very much," she admitted. "I was hoping to see them interact when they didn't think anyone was there, but I didn't see anyone but the humans. I guess there's only those three Sha'Kar here."

"Three people living in this place," Tarrin mused. "It's big enough for three *hundred*."

"No doubt there. Think you can get one of my dresses from the ship?"

"Not this time," he said. "They don't know I can do that, and I'd rather not give that away."

"Ah," she said, her eyes brightening in understanding. "I guess I'll just have to make do with this. I surely don't want to wear one of Iselde's dresses."

"Why not? You'd look lovely in something see-through."

"I know I would, but she's not my size."

"I can fix that," he assured her. "But Iselde's at her friend's house right now, getting into mischief. We'll have to wait for her to come back before you can ask."

"Getting into mischief, eh?" Kimmie chuckled. "She told you that?"

Tarrin nodded. "Her friend has a bad reputation. She's a notorious flipskirt and troublemaker. Iselde likes her because her uncle is so strict, and her time with the girl is a chance to feel rebellious."

"Children seem to be a universal constant, no matter what race they are," Kimmie chuckled.

"Her friend Auli sounds like a real firebrand," Tarrin said with a slight smile. "She said her uncle hates her."

"That's reason enough to be her best friend right there," Kimmie laughed.

"Her description reminds me of Walten, a boy from my village," Tarrin told her. "He was always getting into trouble, but he didn't do some of the things that Auli does. His mother would have killed him. But I guess it's the different culture."

"What different things?"

"Seems Auli likes to take humans into her room and have her way with them," he told her. "And she's quite an accomplished seductress of the Sha'Kar boys. That kind of behavior could get a boy or girl strangled back in Aldreth."

"They are a bit moral there," Kimmie grinned.

"If they ever caught Walten with his hands up a girl's skirt, that would have been the end for him," Tarrin chuckled. "He did it anyway, but they never caught him."

"You'd think the mothers would warn the girls away."

"They did, but it's a big village when a single girl is trying to get herself not noticed, and there are plenty of thick woods around the village. I stumbled on Walten trying to talk Cilia Whitebranch out of her dress one morning about a year before I left for the Tower. The girls were warned away from him, but the very act of warning them away drew them to him like bees to honey. Girls love bad boys, for some reason. Care to explain that one to me?" he asked her.

"It's rebellion," she replied with a smile. "Being the girl of a bad boy is a way to fling rules in the faces of her parents. Besides, human girls are just as interested in boys as boys are in girls. They just play hard to get. It's instinctual."

"It sounds like you speak from experience," he teased.

"A little, but I never let a boy get much more than a hand up my skirt," she told him.

"Tease."

"I was saving all my special charms for you, Tarrin," she said with a wink. "What were you doing out that day you caught Walten and Cilia?"

"The same thing I always did, Kimmie. Wander around where I wasn't supposed to be." He chuckled. "Walten wanted to make sure nobody disturbed them, so he took Cilia down a path most of the village children didn't know, one that didn't have a boundary marker on it. A path I made that ran from my house to that small meadow with the brook, and I made another that ran from the brook to the south end of the village, so I wouldn't have to go out of my way to get from the brook to the village. Walten took her into the Frontier using that path, the one place he thought he'd never be found. He forgot that I wandered around out there all the time, and the noise they made drew me right to them."

"What did you do?" she asked, sitting on the bed beside him, caught up in the story.

"Well, I really didn't do anything. I snuck up on them to see if they'd notice me, but when I got there I saw that neither of them were paying much attention to anything. I realized that they were doing something pretty stupid, coming out into the Frontier that way, so I pulled back to where I wouldn't get noticed and made sure nothing came along and killed them while they were busy."

"If it was so dangerous, why were you there?" she asked with a playful smile.

"I guess I was more stupid than Walten and Cilia," he chuckled. "They never knew I was there, even to this day. They better be glad. I found Centaur tracks a few hours later, and they were fresh. I think me being there may have scared the Centaurs away."

"The Centaurs wouldn't have hurt them," Kimmie told him. "They would have attacked an armed band of men, but not two human teens mating in the bushes. They probably would have found that to be quite funny. Knowing Centaurs, they would have barged in on them and tried to scare them, hoping they'd run naked back into the village. Centaurs are like that."

"I've never really gotten to know any Centaurs."

"But you probably were the reason why they didn't. All the Woodkin around Aldreth knew you, and they all knew you weren't to be taken lightly. They'd seen you track game and shoot your bow, and they knew that you were more than capable of killing a Woodkin if you thought they were being a threat. The Centaurs probably realized that if they barged in on your friends, you would have shot at them with your bow in retaliation. If they were locals, they respected your aim, and the fact that you could have gotten into a firing position before Walten jumped up with his pants around his ankles."

Tarrin chuckled. "Someday I need to find out just how much the Woodkin knew about me."

"Almost everything, Tarrin," she grinned. "You forget, every time you went into the Frontier, someone was watching you. Usually it was Were-kin in animal form, but sometimes it was a mother with cubs to show them a human, sometimes it was a Centaur or a Faerie or a Pixie, sometimes a Dryad or a Sylph or a Nymph, and sometimes it was even a Druid. You were an enigma to them. A human barely more than a boy wandering fearlessly around the Heartwood, not seeming to have a care for the danger. At first they wanted to kill you, but they watched you and saw that you respected the woods, that that Ranger father of yours had taught you very well, so they decided to leave you alone. They got to know your habits, and when your wanderings showed patterns, they'd line up youngsters and cubs along that path and show you to them as you went by. The youngsters would practice stalking you, because if they could sneak up on you, they were proficient enough in woodcraft to sneak up on almost *anyone*."

Tarrin laughed. "You know, that answers probably the biggest mystery I had when I was out there," he said. "Every once in a while, I could tell someone was following me. But when I backtracked, not only was there nobody there, but there was no sign anyone ever *was* there. That would always scare me, and I'd run back home and stick close the farm for a ride or so, until I forgot about it and went back out into the Frontier."

"I know, and boy, did the cub that messed up ever get it from his mother when you were out of earshot," she laughed. "They liked using you as a practice target because you were very good at woodcraft, and you were very

alert. Since you were so good, it meant that any cub that could sneak up on you was good enough to make it on his own."

"I must not have been very good if I was leading a parade around the Frontier," he grunted sourly.

Kimmie laughed. "You were a human, and a very young one, Tarrin, but remember who you were dealing with. Actually, that you noticed anything at all is a testament to how good you were. Any other human except your father would never have noticed anything." She laughed. "Boy, were they all *terrified* of your father, she admitted. "They knew he was a Ranger, and he was alot better than you. He almost caught Woodkin on several occasions, and he knew we were there. I'll bet he knew that we followed you around, but he must have realized that we wouldn't hurt you."

"Father never said anything to me."

"If he had, you probably would have stopped going into the Frontier, and then we'd have missed you," she winked.

"I thought you never went to Aldreth when I was alive."

"I didn't. I asked Triana about it. I was curious."

"Oh."

"Triana told me that there was this one Dryad that had a crush on you," Kimmie laughed. "She kept trying to sneak around the Druid and get close to you, so she could seduce you, but Sathon was too smart for her. The game between them is almost legendary in that part of the Heartwood."

"I forgot that Sathon was the Druid up there," Tarrin admitted. "I hope everything's going alright for them, now that the villagers know about the Woodkin."

"They always did," she reminded him. "But I think things will get back to normal. I think the Woodkin won't be as reluctant to visit the village now, but that may be a good thing. We need more contact with the humans, and the villagers of Aldreth have proved that they can accept our visits without being too nosy." She yawned. "What time is it?"

"I don't know, there aren't any windows in here."

"I saw them setting up tables across town, on that estate on the small hill in the center of the place. I guess they'll be coming to get us soon."

There was a knock at the door, and Arlan stepped into the room and bowed to him. "Honored one, the feast will be taking place soon, and it's customary for us to come in our finest clothes," he said. "I don't think you came with any other clothes, so would it offend you if we find you something appropriate?"

"Not really," he answered. "Kimmie agreed to wear one of your niece's dresses. I guess I can borrow one of those robes your people wear and we can adjust the fit a little with Sorcery."

"I was thinking the same thing, honored one," he nodded. He motioned behind him, and two of the serving girls rushed into the room. One was holding a shimmering dress made of a strange silver cloth, and the other was carrying a pair of slippers.

"The dress already looks lovely, Arlan, but I'm afraid I don't need shoes," she said, holding a foot up for him to inspect. "We Were-cats have our own soles, you see. Shoes are very uncomfortable--" she extended the claws on her foot for his benefit--"and as you can see, if we do wear shoes, they don't last very long."

Arlan smiled slightly, then nodded. "You have a good point there, my Lady. Five of them, in fact."

Kimmie giggled and flashed him a brilliant smile.

"I'll leave my servants to help you get dressed. If it pleases you, would you join us in the sitting room when you're ready? We'll be leaving for the feast as soon as you feel ready, honored one."

"That's fine, Arlan," Tarrin nodded. "But we don't need help dressing, if that's alright with you. May I go through your clothes to find something?"

"My house is yours, honored one. Take anything you wish, but you'll find my finest clothing in that closet over there," he said, pointing to a door near the archway to the pool. "I'm sure something in there will meet with your tastes." He clapped his hands sharply, and the girl carrying the shoes turned around and scurried out. The other one, the redhead that Tarrin meant to talk to, handed the shimmering dress to Kimmie with a curtsy,

then she too rushed out of the room at Arlan's bidding. "I'll be waiting for you whenever your pleasure brings you to us," he told them with a bow, then shut the door behind him as he left.

Kimmie held up the dress and admired it. "Wow," she said in appreciation. "This dress is amazing. It's soft as silk, light as linen, but it shimmers like it was made of silver thread."

Tarrin looked at the dress, and he had to admit that it was rather nice. It was too small for Kimmie, but he could fix that. It had a low neckline and flared sleeves, and came with a sash already tied around its waist. Tarrin would have to poke a hole in the back to make room for her tail, but he could mend it when Kimmie was done with it. All in all, he had to agree. It was a *very* beautiful dress. Kimmie would look smashing in it.

"Well, let's go indulge ourselves in that bathing pool, and then get ready," Kimmie said, getting up and setting the dress on the bed carefully, then starting on the buttons of her vest. "I've been dying to take a bath ever since I saw that pool," she said with undisguised longing.

"What do you think we'll find at that feast?" Tarrin asked as he got up and pulled off his vest.

"I'm not sure, but I hope that you and Zak don't lose your heads," she said as she shrugged off her vest, then started unlacing her breeches. "Remember what Dolanna said. We don't want to get on their bad side just yet." She stepped out of her breeches and folded them, and then set them on the bed. She started towards the pool as Tarrin removed his own breeches. She paused and looked back at him, wagging her tail at him in invitation. "Well, come on, Tarrin," she said with a smile. "Baths are no fun if you're alone."

Tarrin glanced at her tail, but his eyes were more interested in the lovely, heart-shaped bottom underneath that tail. He watched that bottom swagger seductively as she walked through the arch, realizing that Kimmie was playing for him. She usually didn't saunter quite like that. Jesmind was more beautiful than Kimmie in some ways, but when it came to bottoms, Kimmie won that contest paws down. Tarrin thanked Triana one more time before hurrying after her, thanking her for giving him the chance to know Kimmie as a mate, and the child that was coming.

He knew that the feast was going to be a chore for him, probably an assault on his sensibilities, but at least at the moment, his mind was oh so pleasantly distracted.

Chapter 13

The feast took place on the grounds of the largest estate on the island, the one sitting on the gentle rise almost in the exact center of the borders of the town. Seeing that estate made Tarrin understand why Iselde thought her mansion was small, for the estate of the Grand and the meeting place of the Council had to be three times larger than Iselde's home. It was monstrous, four stories high and easily taking up a couple of square longspans of land all by itself. It didn't have a stained glass window as Iselde's house did, instead it had permanent Illusions decorating its outside, Illusions of Sha'Kar in robes lining the walls, all of them looking down at the visitors with faces of gentle benediction. Tarrin could sense those Illusions even from that distance, over the background magical energy, but it was apparent even to someone without Sorcery that the decorations were magical in nature...mainly because they moved. That gave Tarrin the creeps the first time he noticed it, seeing one of the Illusory Sha'Kar males scratch his chin. The huge home of the Grand wasn't the only building on the estate. There were ten other buildings on the estate, all of which were about the size of Iselde's manor house, but they were all sitting behind the main building as one approached from the gate, so as not to get in the way of the view of the main structure. They lacked any decoration at all, only their white paint, and it made Tarrin curious as to why.

But there were too many things to look at for him to concentrate very long on just one. The grassy field between the fence and that main building was filled with many long tables, each with individual padded chairs resting around them, and those chairs were filled with Sha'Kar. Tarrin estimated that there were about five hundred of them in all, ranging from mere children to those who had that stately appearance that told him that they had to be thousands of years old. They sat and talked with one another energetically, not touching the huge amounts of food that had been placed on the tables in front of them, foods prepared in ways that baffled Tarrin. They were made as if they too were works of art, the cooks carefully arranging the food on the platters in specific patterns and styles. The result

was that not much food could be put on one platter, cluttering up the table space with five plates whose food would have easily fit on just one.

The food wasn't the only decoration. All the Sha'Kar were wearing their finest clothes, and to Tarrin's surprise, their taste in clothing was elegantly underdecorated. The Sha'Kar seemed to prefer not wearing jewelry or making their garments gaudy with goring or decorations. The cloth itself was the decoration, that same shimmering kind of cloth of which Kimmie's dress was made, and the only large jewelry any of them wore were their *katzh-dashi* amulets. Some of them were wearing rings and earrings, he saw, but they were all small and elegant, diamond studs in the ears and rings with designs etched into the metal or with small gemstones, not the huge, gaudy pieces that humans and Wikuni seemed to prefer. Some of the dresses the women wore were opaque, and one girl that looked to be Iselde's age had on a shimmering blue dress on that was so opaque that her figure was clearly visible beneath it. The fact that the platinum blond of her pubic hair, which was the same color as the hair on her head, was contrasted beneath the dress against her brown skin and was clearly visible told him just how see-through the dress really was. But this obvious bit of nudity didn't seem to bother the Sha'Kar very much. Some of them looked at the girl with slightly stern and disapproving looks, but nobody told her to go home and change. The girl, to her credit, strutted around in her see-through gown like she owned the whole island, and took delight in hanging on the younger males and revelling in their appreciative stares. Without really knowing how, Tarrin knew that that one was Iselde's adventurous friend, Auli.

The finery wasn't limited to the Sha'Kar and the human Sorcerers. Kimmie was wearing one of Iselde's gowns, but so were Dolanna, Keritanima, and Allia. Dolanna wore a golden shimmering gown that went well with her dark hair, not seeming to be too conscious about the fact that it was opaque enough to give a slight hint at what laid beneath it. Keritanima wore a cream-colored one that contrasted her fur nicely, and Allia wore a daringly low-cut dress that was a snowy white, just like her hair. Hair that had been carefully combed and arranged in tumbling curls, looking both wild and carefully arranged to look that way at the same time. Tarrin knew that her hair looked like that all the time, but it was hard to tell with how carefully it had been combed out and arranged. Tarrin had never

seen Allia wearing something so feminine before, and it absolutely blew him away how stunningly beautiful his sister was. Tarrin had gotten used to that beauty over the years, knowing she was lovely yet the impact of it losing its force after he'd seen her day after day after day. Tarrin saw that he wasn't the only one that noticed this. Quite a few Sha'Kar males couldn't stop looking at her as she crossed the lawn and seated herself on Tarrin's left, and he couldn't help stare at her either. She smiled at him and patted him on the leg quietly. Camara Tal and Azakar had shed their armor, Camara Tal wearing her haltar and *tripa*, and Azakar was wearing a robe that had been magically stretched quite a bit to fit him. Azakar didn't have any other clothes with him, and he looked quite uncomfortable in the robe. Phandebrass had magically refurbished his frayed robe, making it look new, but he still insisted on wearing that ridiculous conical hat. Miranda was also wearing one of Iselde's dresses, but it was a subdued brown color and didn't seem as grand or fine as the others. It didn't shimmer like Iselde's other dresses, making Tarrin think that she'd been giving something very plain so she wouldn't be quite so noticable. Binter and Sisska didn't change anything, even still carrying around their huge weapons in defense of the queen.

There were humans Sorcerers at the feast as well, but their role was clearly defined. All the human Sorcerers sat by themselves at the far side of the tables, as far away as one could get from the table that held Tarrin's friends and the table beside them that held Grand Syllis, the Council, and Arlan's family. Tarrin noticed that immediately, but the humans didn't seem to think that it was a bad thing. They talked amongst themselves quite happily, and they too had the artistically arranged food set before them, just like the Sha'Kar. The other humans, the servants, were there as well, and they were serving. A virtual army of them, each attending specific tables, pouring wine, fetching things, and those not busy stood exactly one pace behind and between the spaced chairs, hands folded in front of them, waiting for a call to duty. Tarrin found that to be hard to allow, for the Sha'Kar seemed to think of their servants as furniture, or hand tools. To use when needed, then to just forget once the task was complete. When he balled up a fist at the sight of it, Kimmie put a gentle paw over his, making him look at her and her slightly stern look. No scenes, Dolanna said. She was right, this wasn't the time or the place to address the issue.

Clearly, they were all waiting for something before beginning, but what it was, Tarrin had no idea. They all simply sat in their chairs and talked, sending gazes towards the Were-cat's table. It made him feel distinctly uncomfortable, but then again, they may be looking at the drakes. Sapphire was sitting on the table between Tarrin and Kimmie, and Chopstick and Turnkey flanked Phandebrass, both with their snouts eye-deep in silver bowls. Sapphire had a bowl of rabbit meat sitting before her, but she hadn't started on it yet. She was smarter than the other two drakes, and seemed to comprehend that since nobody else was eating, it must not be the proper time to do so. Tarrin and Arlan had a very short, one-sided argument about the drakes. Arlan said that nobody was allowed to bring pets to the feast, but Tarrin rolled his argument under by stating that if Sapphire didn't go, *he* didn't go. Leaving Arlan without a leg to stand on ended the disagreement faster than it started.

The wait seemed to be over when Grand Syllis stood up, then used Sorcery to create a platform of Air upon which to stand, which rose him over his chair and made him easily visible. He then augmented his voice with Sorcery so he could be easily heard by the thousand or so assorted Sha'Kar and humans, Sorcerers and servants. "Dear friends, for the first time since coming here, we find ourselves entertaining guests," he called. "And not just ordinary guests! The Goddess has blessed us today with the arrival of Tarrin, a *sui'kun*, a new honored one to replace those who died in the terrible tragedy of the Breaking.

"We gather today to celebrate the arrival of him and his servants and friends, and celebrate the coming of his unborn child. We gather to lift our voices to the sky and sing our thanks to the Goddess for saving us from the Breaking, and pray that soon the Ward will fail and allow us to return to her service. We gather to celebrate our gilded cage, this wondrous place that has sustained us and protected us during our long exile. We gather to celebrate!"

There was a long period of clapping, that seemed polite, but not overly enthusiastic. Then again, Sha'Kar didn't seem to be the type that got too emotional about those kinds of things. For them, maybe what he was seeing *was* enthusiastic.

"So, I'll not keep you sitting there with your mouths watering, my friends," he called. "Let us bow our heads in prayer to the Goddess." Tarrin

noticed that all of them bowed their heads, and everyone at his table did so as well, either out of faith or consideration for Sha'Kar ways. "O wondrous Goddess, we thank you for your guidance and your protection, and your actions that brought us to this place. We lament that we are beyond your voice, but hope our voices can reach you outside the Ward. We await anxiously the day when the Ward is lowered and we are again blessed by your light and love. Until that day, we abide here resolutely, still your faithful children. Please accept our humble thanks for sending your chosen one to us to give us new hope and a new sense of purpose. Please bless this feast and those who partake in it, and please continue to watch over us and provide for us."

All the Sha'Kar lifted their heads, and Tarrin followed suit. "I won't hold you hungry any longer, dear friends," Syllis said with a grand smile. "Let us feast!"

As feasts went, Tarrin wasn't terribly impressed. All the food was spiced, turning even bland potatoes into something that could be potentially dangerous. What was worse, the only meats on the table were fish, crab, mutton, those long-tailed birds, and rabbit. Some dishes were hot, some were sugary, some were heavily spiced with tastes Tarrin had never experienced before, buttery and tangy and sweet and acidic and sour. Tarrin didn't stay with any one dish, as the two human females that were serving him kept filling his plate with small amounts of everything on the table, for him to sample and decide which pleased him. Tarrin felt a little annoyed at the two humans, since he could serve himself, but Dolanna kept giving him stern looks throughout the meal, reminding him that this was the Sha'Kar way, and he'd best not start causing a scene in front of *all* of them. Tarrin did, however, decide that all this picking was too irritating, and ordered the two humans to fill his plate with the peppered fish. They seemed taken aback at that, but he calmly told them that he wasn't of a race they knew, and he ate quite a bit more than the Sha'Kar or humans.

The eating took up the better part of two hours, as the sun set and the night took over. The Council paused in their feast to use Sorcery to create an array of glowing lights that hung over the tables, lighting them as brightly as the sun had. After the meal seemed to be over, servants began clearing away the leftovers and carrying the trays of food out of the estate, towards the other estates, and the Sha'Kar began to wander from table to

table and talk among themselves. Quite a line formed before Tarrin's table, as the Sha'Kar tried to meet him and talk to him. Tarrin was assaulted by names from the many Sha'Kar, most of them fluid and musical, with a lot of vowels, who bowed or curtsied and shook his paw and smiled at him and acted like he was some kind of great celebrity. Some of them were nervous speaking with him, and their hands shook as they offered them to him, but all of them spoke formally yet with warm undertones, as if they were trying to make it sound like they'd been Tarrin's best friend since the beginning of time. Tarrin realized that they wanted the other Sha'Kar to think that Tarrin had taken a liking to them, a fact that would gain them considerable prestige. He remembered that Iselde said that she and Allyn had become quite popular since Tarrin had decided to stay in their house. They didn't seem to have more than a moment to speak, as another Sha'Kar was pushing the first out of the way before they could organize their thoughts, but they did manage to ask questions. Surprisingly, they weren't about Tarrin, they were about the outside. How many Towers were still standing, how the *katzh-dashi* had fared in their absence, what had happened in the world after the Breaking and if the world knew they were there. More than one asked that, if the *katzh-dashi* had tried to find a way to get them out of their gilded cage, as Syllis put it.

Speaking to so many of them, Tarrin had a chance to study the Sha'kar, and he wasn't sure he liked what he saw. Their postures were stiff, and their expressions were haughty when they weren't directly before him. They gave stony looks to the servants, when they noticed them at all. They came across to Tarrin as exceedingly arrogant people, putting on a good face to impress him.

Tarrin also noticed that again, he seemed to be the sole focus of attention. Some of the Sha'Kar did meet and talk politely with Keritania, Dolanna, Dar, and Allia as they got up and introduced themselves at many of the tables, but the Sha'Kar wouldn't even look at Camara Tal, Azakar, Phandebrass, or Miranda. They would simply turn their heads if one of them tried to address them, pretending that they didn't exist.

One of the very youngest Sha'Kar, a boy that looked to be about eight, bowed clumsily to him at his parents' prompting and introduced himself. The boy was quite cute, with a wide-cheeked face and a sharp nose, and

brilliant green eyes. He'd be a handsome adult. "My-my name is Andalan, honored one," he stammered nervously.

Tarrin put his cheek in his paw and regarded the youngster with a bit of amusement. After about an hour of shaking hands and talking briefly with Sha'Kar who seemed bent on showing him how polite and courteous and socially important they were, Tarrin found the boy's honest anxiety to be quite refreshing. "You know," he said slowly, looking at Kimmie, "he's about the same size as Jasana."

"He's almost as adorable as she is," Kimmie agreed with a smile.

"Hello there, Andalan," Tarrin said with a gentle smile, reaching down and lifting the boy's chin with a finger that was nearly as thick around as the boy's wrist. "You have pretty eyes, Andalan," Tarrin told him lightly. "They remind me of my daughter."

The boy looked stymied, but the looks on the faces of his parents were almost triumphant. "We didn't know you had other children, honored one," the mother said, a rather slim female that was tall, wearing a glittering gold dress that was seductively opaque, showing off her silhouette against the lights behind her.

"I have two," Tarrin told her. "A daughter and a son."

"It's unfortunate you couldn't bring them with you," the father said, wearing a plain white robe that seemed to almost glow with its snowy purity.

"Their mothers would have been very cross with me if I had," Tarrin chuckled.

"Your wife isn't their mother?" the woman asked, a bit shocked.

"I'm not his wife. I'm his *mate*," Kimmie corrected. "It's something of an informal marriage that will last as long as both of us are comfortable with one another. Marriage isn't a custom among our kind, my Lady. We don't have the temperment to spend all our lives with just one mate. We're a bit too volatile," she grinned. "As time passes, me and Tarrin will start to wear on one another, and we'll have to split up for a while. It's how we are."

"Oh. Well, please forgive me," the lady said with a deep curtsy. "I guess it was arrogant of me to think of you in frame with our customs."

"It's something of a universal failing, my Lady," Tarrin told her. "To anyone, his customs seem to be the best, so why shouldn't everyone else be the same?"

"Well said, honored one," the father nodded.

These two seemed to be quite a bit more aware of things than most of the other Sha'Kar. The woman was the very first to admit to her arrogance, and seemed a bit more open-minded than the other Sha'Kar. The father seemed to be much like his mate. "What are your names?" he asked.

"I'm Trevan Andiari, honored one," the man said with a bow.

"Tarielle Andiari," the woman said with a deep curtsy.

Tarrin noticed that peculiarity with the Sha'Kar. Female names always seemed to end with a vowel, either *e*, *a*, or *i*, and male names with *n*. Tarrin guessed that his own name seemed proper to them, since it also ended with *n*, and probably felt the same about the names of Keritanima, Dolanna, and Allia. Dar's name probably seemed unusual to them, and he wasn't sure if they realized that the rest of his group *had* names. All of them who spoke called everyone else the party his servants, and he'd gotten tired of correcting them.

"It's good to meet you," Tarrin told them.

"The honor is ours, honored one," Trevan bowed.

He wanted to talk with them some more, but they were effectively bulled out of his presence by the Sha'Kar who had yet to meet him. He did mark their names in his mind as Sha'Kar he intended to get to know, then returned to idle boredom accepting flowery greetings, shaking hands, and enduring attempts for the Sha'Kar to impress him into showing them more than just idle politeness. The tactic that the Andiaris had employed to garner his interest had to have been circulated among those who had yet to greet him, for most of them immediately congratulated Kimmie on her coming child, and tried to work around to asking Tarrin if he had other children.

After an almost insufferably long time, Tarrin finally ran out of hands to shake and greetings to accept. After all the Sha'Kar had greeted him, the fifty or so human Sorcerers finally shook his paw and bowed to him, and he got a chance to speak to them. They were very polite and lively, alot like the

Sha'Kar, but they lacked that haughty expression and the stiff frame. The humans were much more relaxed, more animated, and weren't quite so worshipful of him. They did show him respect, but their smiles weren't forced. He responded by being a bit more open with them than he had been with the Sha'Kar.

While Tarrin was greeting the human Sorcerers, servants cleared the tables away from the middle of the lawn, and Sha'Kar stood on tables to one side with instruments and began playing a light, delicately complicated song. It was strange music, with a complicated harmony, but it was quite lovely. Sha'Kar moved out into the clearing and began to dance, as those not dancing broke into large groups and talked among themselves. Sha'Kar would wander from group to group engaging in the many different conversations, and a group would often change all its membership over time as the originals left and new Sha'Kar joined to take their places. The dancing they did was very stately, very dignified, a kind of ritualized dance with a male and a female that was very structured. Everyone was moving in exactly the same manner, with exceptional grace and ability, a perfectly synchronized spectacle that moved in time with the music.

To his surprise, the music and the dancing and the food were starting to have an effect on Tarrin, and he began to relax a little. So far, nothing had happened that had outraged him, and the Sha'Kar had proven that though they seemed arrogant, they were very polite and didn't clamor around him harassing him with endless questions. Almost as if they were told that once they greeted him, to leave him alone. Tarrin found himself with only Kimmie for company, as all the others were out mingling with the Sha'Kar and the humans, trying to get to know them, as Keritanima told them to do. Camara Tal, Phandebrass, and Azakar were talking with the servants, Dar with the human Sorcerers, and Keritanima and Dolanna were circulating in the groups of Sha'Kar who were talking. Miranda was with Binter and Sisska at the fringes of things, and to his surprise, Allia was dancing with Allyn out in the lawn. She performed their dance flawlessly, and was actually smiling. She looked to be having a good time.

The music and dancing and talking went on well into the night, as Tarrin stayed at his table, not quite willing to go out there and get mugged by well-wishing Sha'Kar. His nerves probably wouldn't be able to take so many strangers surrounding him, reaching out to him, it would probably be a bit

too much. So he and Kimmie sat at the table watching things go on, and Tarrin noticed that the Grand and his Council were staying well away from the Were-cats. They were down in the throng, talking to the others, and it was something not lost on Tarrin. The Grand didn't want to get anywhere near him just now. Tarrin knew that his presence seemed to unsettle the Grand, probably because of the Firestaff. The Grand hadn't so much as talked to him during the feast, and neither did any of the Council. He knew he wasn't finding anything out, but everyone else was down there, and they'd probably have a better chance at it than him anyway. The Sha'Kar were too overwhelmed by his presence to make much sense when he did try to talk to them, too busy trying to make themselves look important to say anything that Tarrin wanted to hear. He realized that if he wanted to find anything out from the Sha'Kar, he'd have to talk to them privately, where the rest of their society wasn't there watching on and making the person he was talking to concentrate more on impressing them than answering his questions.

As midnight came and went, the feast died down, until the Grand announced that it was over. To his surprise, Tarrin had actually had a decent time. It had been a little boring sitting at his table all night, but the music had been interesting and new, and Kimmie's witty conversation kept him engaged through the night. He thought it was going to be a chore, and the part about meeting everyone had been, but the rest of the time actually wasn't that bad at all. He left the feast with his friends and his host family in good spirits, a little tired though, and ready to go back and get some rest.

Tarrin and Kimmie talked about what they noticed and what they saw during the feast until they went to sleep, but they found that they'd seen more or less the same things. They were awakened in the morning when Allia came into their chamber, singing lightly to herself and looking very content, wearing nothing but a very loosely tied silk robe that threatened to fall off of her at any moment. Tarrin knew that Allia only sang when she was very happy, almost like when a cat only purred when it was content, for singing was a form of worship to Fara'Nae. It was not done when the Selani's heart wasn't in it.

"You're in a good mood this morning, sister," Tarrin told her as he sat up in the bed, dislodging his mate. Kimmie grumbled in her sleep, then rolled over and wrapped her tail around his waist.

"I had a wonderful time last night," she told him with bright eyes, covering the considerable distance between the door and the bed as she spoke.

"I saw. You and Allyn danced all night."

"He is a good dancer," she said with a smile.

Tarrin looked closely at her. The way her posture softened when she spoke of him told him more than he was ready to accept. He gaped at her. "You like Allyn?" he asked her.

She gave him a flash of irritation. "He is a sweet boy," she said. "He's very kind and attentive to me. I've never been courted before. I find the custom very pleasant," she added with a warm, slow smile. "I rewarded him for his attentions last night," she announced with a slightly satisfied look about her.

"You slept with him?"

"Yes," she admitted. "And he may be young, but he knows how to pleasure a woman," she sighed lustily.

Tarrin laughed, making Kimmie grumble more. "I didn't think you'd be taken with him that much," he told her.

"It's been nearly two years since I've had a lover, brother," she told him. "Humans are too unattractive and boorish to be a good lover. But Allyn is handsome and kind, he's very intelligent and engaging, he gives me all his attention, and he's an exceptionally good bedmate. I'm quite taken with him."

"You may find his attention wane a bit now that he's gotten what he's after," Tarrin chuckled.

"Posh," she sniffed. "I know how to keep him interested in me, brother. I've got him firmly in hand."

"If you two are going to keep me awake, at least speak in a language I can understand so I don't miss anything!" Kimmie growled from the bed.

"Forgive me, Kimmie," Allia said in Sulasian. "I was telling Tarrin about last night."

"Allia got tired of Allyn following her around, so she slept with him to make him go away," Tarrin teased, grinning at his sister.

"Posh. I slept with him to keep him from losing interest in me," she corrected lightly.

"He's just a kid, Allia."

"Young males are more energetic in bed, so long as they have enough experience," Allia said with a wicked little smile. "Besides, he's only two years younger than me."

"He looks alot younger," Kimmie mused.

"The harshness of the desert does not show on him as it does on me," she said simply. "Had I been raised here, I would be as soft and fat as these Sha'Kar." She laughed. "Allyn was shocked once he had me out of my clothes. He has never seen muscle on one that looks as we before. He found it very sexy."

"So, Allyn has himself a buff studette," Kimmie grinned with a wink, rolling over on the bed so she was on her belly, facing Allia with her chin on her paws.

"A what?" Allia asked in confusion.

"A muscled playmate in bed," Tarrin translated into Selani.

"Oh. Yes, he does," she admitted shamelessly. "I have never shared a bed with someone so soft before. I thought I may be repelled by his weakness, but actually, I found it rather exciting."

"It's that aggressive warrior spirit in you, Allia," Kimmie winked. "You conquered him, so it was time to enjoy the spoils."

"The spoils were *very* enjoyable," Allia laughed.

"So...thinking of marriage?" Kimmie asked.

"Not quite yet, but I do like him, Kimmie," Allia answered honestly. "He is very kind and very gentle. He is just disobedient enough to be interesting, at least now that his awe of me is starting to wear away, and he has a clever and willful mind. And he is totally smitten with me," she said with a glorious smile. "I have never had a power like this over a man. It is

almost intoxicating. If I asked Allyn to stab himself in the heart, he would do it without hesitation."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Kimmie grinned.

"I am not planning on it. I am planning on going back to my room and enjoying my spoils a bit more, though," she said with an undisguised leer. "He should be recovered enough now."

"Take it easy on him," Kimmie laughed.

"Why'd you come here if you're not ready to get up yet?" Tarrin asked.

"Oh, Dolanna wants us to gather at lunch," she said. "I am not the only one sleeping off a long night. Dolanna got drunk last night."

"She did? It didn't show at all!" Tarrin said with a sudden laugh.

"She holds her composure very well," Allia told him. "But she probably has a headache this morning."

"Probably," Tarrin chuckled. Allia taking a lover wasn't a big thing, for Allia was no virginal maiden. She was as dirty-minded as many human sailors, if you were lucky enough to be as close to her as Tarrin was. But Dolanna getting drunk, now that was something very unusual, and a bit funny.

"Well, I am going back to Allyn," Allia told them. "I will see you at lunch."

"Go easy on him, Allia," Kimmie grinned.

"He is the one that has to go easy on me," pulling her robe aside and baring her left breast. It had a visible bite mark on it. Kimmie laughed like a little girl, pounding her feet on the bed hard enough to make the whole bed shake violently. "As I said, brother, he is quite an energetic lover," she added with a wicked smirk, then she started going into rather graphic detail of some of the other things that Allyn had done to her. Tarrin was used to this kind of talk from Allia, but Kimmie looked a bit startled that not only would she say some of the things she said, but that she used some of the very vulgar words that she used. She looked a bit shocked when Allia finished her lurid account of the night's entertainment, but Allia just smiled

that wicked little smile and pulled her robe back up. "I will be back when I wear him out," she told them, then she started towards the door.

"Tell me she didn't know what half of those words meant," Kimmie said in a stunned voice after Allia closed the door.

"She should. I taught them to her."

Kimmie looked at him, then exploded into helpless laughter. "I never thought she was that *dirty*!" Kimmie said in glee. "She sure had me fooled!"

"None of the others really understand Allia, Kimmie. Keritanima comes closest, but even she doesn't understand some things the way I do, because Allia is alot closer to me than she is to Kerri. Allia is nothing like what Dolanna or Dar or Phandebrass believe her to be. She doesn't talk very much, so they all think she's a quiet and reserved woman, like Binter and Sisska. She rarely speaks, but when she does, you listen to what she says. That's how the others see her. They know she's more open with Kerri and me, but they don't know that she usually won't completely let her guard down unless she's absolutely sure she's alone with us. That's why when they do walk in on us, Allia is still quiet and reserved, so they think she's just stuffy like that all the time. They have no idea what she's like when you get her behind a closed door."

"I'll say!" Kimmie laughed.

"When we're alone, Allia talks alot, and she talks a *lot* different than she does when we're with the others," Tarrin told her with a smile. "There are things she'll say to me that she won't say to anyone else, because we're so close. As far as she's concerned, I could be in the room watching her and Allyn, and it wouldn't bother her a bit. That's how close we are."

"Well," Kimmie said, the texture of her scent changing in a most appealing manner as she looked up at him. "Allyn certainly has a vivid imagination. Maybe we should try some of those things."

"I'm not sure a few of them would be very comfortable," Tarrin said as he leaned down and kissed her, putting a paw on her lovely bottom and patting it fondly. "I'd break your tail."

"I can live with that," she giggled girlishly against his lips as she rolled over and pulled him down onto the bed with her.

Kimmie seemed to still be quite stunned by what she saw of Allia after they got up, bathed, and dressed. She asked a whole bunch of questions about Allia of him as they bathed, as they dressed, as they ate the light snack that Arlan's servants left for them while they were bathing. They were rather insightful questions, Tarrin thought, as Kimmie tried to dig under the facade that Allia held up the world and get at the woman underneath it. Tarrin told her that in reality, Allia was a rather outgoing woman, talkative and with a wicked sense of humor. She was fearless in her speech, and where Tarrin was concerned, there was no subject that was too personal. Tarrin had to guiltily admit that there were things he'd tell Allia that he'd tell no one else. Not Kimmie, not Jesmind, not his parents, not even Triana. That was how close they were, and he struggled for a long time to explain the intense bond of love that existed between them, a love so powerful, so deep, that it defied his every attempt to quantify it in rational terms. Kimmie seemed to understand how he felt about Allia after he couldn't explain it; his loss for words said more than any words ever could. Kimmie kept on him about how Allia acted when they were alone, and he told her that she was a clever, funny, outgoing, slightly mischievous woman. She didn't play pranks, but she had a deliciously wicked mind, and she had the intelligence to apply that evil bent in wonderfully mean ways. She was also very observant, often seeing to the heart of things long before anyone else, and was very compassionate and caring. He told her about how she always seemed to know exactly what to say in difficult or sensitive times, telling her about the many times that a single sentence from Allia defused his anger or made him think about what he was doing before he made a terrible mistake.

Tarrin was surprised by Kimmie's curiosity about Allia, but then again, it was like seeing a woman they'd never met before that had Allia's face walk through the door and talk to them. Tarrin knew that Kimmie had never seen Allia like that before, and he was pretty certain by her reaction that she had never in her wildest dreams thought Allia would behave as she did.

The others gathered in Tarrin's room a little after noon, Tarrin raising a Ward to prevent eavesdropping, and realizing that it was going to be a bit wearing to do it every time they needed to talk privately. So he exerted a little extra effort and wove up a very strong Ward that would stop eavesdropping as well as prevent a physical barrier to prevent Sorcerers

from getting into the room using the Weave. He charged the Ward with more than enough power to make it last nearly a month, and then set it against the walls, ceiling, and floor of the room. He just finished up his work as his friends shuffled into his chamber, and he could see that more than one of them looked a bit worse for wear. Dolanna had dark circles under her eyes and looked a bit listless. Azakar flumped onto the floor on his backside, very hard, holding his head in his hands almost immediately. Dar kept yawning, and Tarrin saw that he'd put his robe on backwards and had forgotten to put on anything underneath it. Even Phandebrass and Camara Tal looked a little tender, both of them looking exhausted and scattered. For Phandebrass, that was no big deal, but it was in Camara Tal's case. She hadn't even combed her hair yet, and it stuck out at strange angles and had many stray strands escaping from the disorganized black mass. She and Phandebrass were wearing similar bathing robes, the Amazon's impressive bosom threatening to fall out of the loosely wrapped garment at any moment. Keritanima and Miranda were leaning against each other, both of them looking weary. Allia looked sleepy, the first time Tarrin had ever seen her like that, but then again, he knew that she'd not only had no sleep last night, but had also had quite a bit of exercise almost all the way through lunch. The only ones that looked like they'd not had too much fun last night were Tarrin, Kimmie, Binter, and Sisska.

"My, we're a happy little bunch this morning," Tarrin said with a chuckle, leaning over the raised part of the divan and looking down at Keritanima. "I never thought you'd get drunk, Kerri."

"I couldn't taste the alcohol in those drinks," she moaned. "I didn't think they'd do this to me."

"That is why I drank them," Dolanna agreed, rubbing her temples. "Had I known they were alcohol, I would have been more moderate in my enjoyment of them."

"None of you looked drunk when we walked back," Kimmie said.

"It did not really hit me until I got back to my room," Dolanna told her.

"Are you going to be alright? Zak? Dar? Phandebrass, Camara?"

"I'll be fine after a few months' sleep," Azakar grunted.

"I think I'm going to die," Dar complained in a pitiful voice.

"I have *never* had a hangover like this, in all my life," Miranda announced. "And I've done my share of drinking."

"Do you want to go back to bed, and we'll do this later?"

"Yes!" Dar, Azakar, and Keritanima said at once, then all three winced and held their heads.

"We made this bed, so we must sleep in it," Dolanna said in a quiet tone. "Things are too important for us to sleep away the day because of overindulgence. I guess we should start with what we have learned last night. Does anyone have anything important to disclose?"

"Well, the Firestaff is definitely here," Keritanima said. "I mentioned it in passing several times, and the older Sha'Kar all had the same reaction when I mentioned it. I don't think its presence here is common knowledge, but the older Sha'Kar definitely know it's here."

"I think Iselde knows something about it," Tarrin said. "She had a reaction when I told her why we're here. I need to go drag it out of her."

"Gently, Tarrin," Dolanna said. "We cannot let them know that we know, so we must be delicate about this."

Tarrin looked at his Selani sister. "Did Allyn have anything to say?"

"I asked him straight, my brother," she said. "He does not know if it is here or not. He did say that this island was enclosed in the Ward for protecting some forgotten artifact that nobody found when they came to the island, and he suspects that this *might* be where the Firestaff was placed. But he does not know."

"They searched the island when they got here?" Keritanima asked.

Allia nodded. "As I said, Allyn says that nothing was found."

"I did manage to pick up something," Miranda said. "From one of the servants. The volcano is off limits. Nobody's allowed to go up there."

"That could be where it is."

"The volcano is active," Dolanna said. "Did you not see the smoke? That it is off limits may be a rule of common sense. Let us not focus too

strongly on one thing when there are many other possibilities left unexplored."

"I talked to some of the servants about their serving the Sha'Kar," Azakar said woodenly. "I couldn't believe what they had to say."

"What?" Dar asked.

"They serve because they *want* to," he said in disbelief. "One of them told me that when they serve well, the Sha'Kar reward them. I asked why they all seem afraid of the Sha'Kar, and he said it wasn't fear, it was the desire to serve. He said they don't torture the servants or work them cruelly, yet the ones that work outside are all almost malnourished and work from sunup to sundown every day. I think there's a split between how the inside servants are treated and how the outside servants are treated."

"Did anyone notice that all the servants at the feast were attractive?" Phandebrass asked. "I looked around. Not a single plain face in the crowd. All the ladies were pretty, and all the gentlemen handsome."

"And the outside servants *were* plain looking," Kimmie mused. "The Sha'Kar seem to be obsessed with beauty. Maybe they choose who does what job based on how attractive the person is. The uglier you are, the harder your job is."

"That is possible," Dolanna said, still rubbing her temples.

"Did anyone talk to the Grand or the Council?" Tarrin asked. "They avoided me all night."

"I did not see them," Dolanna replied.

"I didn't talk to them," Keritanima said.

"I doubt they would have wasted time on me or Allia," Dar grunted. "The only Sha'Kar that would talk to me were the younger ones, the ones that aren't *da'shar*."

"Did anyone count and see how many are older and how many are younger?" Tarrin asked.

"There are about two hundred older ones, and three hundred younger ones," Keritanima answered immediately. "Some of the younger ones are already *da'shar*."

"Iselde said about five hundred Sha'Kar came here originally. What happened to kill three hundred Ancients?"

"That book you read said they suffered a plague and a fire that destroyed their town once," Kimmie reminded him.

"The book said that the plague wasn't deadly to Sha'Kar, and no fire could kill a *da'shar*," he replied. "Unless the fire made something fall on a *da'shar's* head, anyway."

"That's possible, if they were in the houses as they collapsed," Kimmie said.

Dolanna shook her head. "With the magic they have available to them, I find that highly unlikely. It is a bit strange that three hundred would die, when this place seems very safe."

"Did anyone find out something about the Sha'Kar's customs that may help us?"

"I found out that they don't even look at anyone that isn't a Sorcerer," Camara Tal growled. "I think I could have walked around that feast absolutely naked, and not a single Sha'Kar would have noticed."

"They would have noticed, Camara," Kimmie grinned. "You may be human, but as some of my kind say, what a human you are."

"Some Sha'Kar find humans to be attractive," Tarrin told the Amazon. "You'd have had quite a few appreciative eyes."

"That may be useful to know," Camara Tal mused. "Maybe I could drag one of those older Sha'Kar into bed under false pretense, and once I got him where I want him, throttle what we need to know out of him."

"Delicately," Dolanna reminded her. "We must move delicately, Camara. The last thing we need to do is make enemies out of the Sha'Kar."

"I wouldn't want to," Keritanima said. "They may seem a bit arrogant, but they're nice people if you talk to them."

"They are also our brothers and sisters under the Goddess," Dolanna agreed. "Even if they oppose our mission, it is because of the mission, not because of us. We cannot forget that."

"So, we know the Firestaff is here, but not everyone may know it's here. We know that the Sha'Kar won't tell us, and the ones that probably do know are avoiding us. Anyone have any ideas?"

"I think moving slowly is the best course, dear one," Dolanna told him. "So long as the Ward remains active, in reality, we have all the time in the world. Let us not be hasty and make a rash decision that we will regret afterwards. We have only had one night to come to know the Sha'Kar. I do not think that is enough for us to understand them."

"I have to agree with Dolanna," Camara Tal said. "She's right about the Ward. If you're the only one that can get through it, then nobody else can get in here and take the Firestaff right out from under our noses. So let's take our time and do this right, in a way that lets us get what we're after and not make enemies out of the Sha'Kar."

"I think that's a reasonable idea," Keritanima agreed. "I haven't had enough time yet to do much of anything, and I can't think straight at the moment anyway. So me giving advice right now would be a bad idea."

"I am on very good terms with Allyn," Allia told them. "I may be able to find the answers to delicate questions if I ask him to discover the answers for me. It would not look as suspicious if another Sha'Kar were asking the questions."

Kimmie grinned knowingly at Tarrin. Good terms indeed. *Very* good terms.

"Weren't you dancing with him all night last night?" Dar asked her.

"He is a good dancer, and I felt more comfortable dancing with someone I know rather than strangers," Allia said without blinking.

"I think he has a crush on you, Allia," Miranda told her. "All that singing and poetry and Sorcery? He's definitely trying to catch your eye."

"I know he is, and if it is needful, I can use that to our advantage," she said calmly. "But I must admit, I find his attentions flattering, and I have found that he is actually a rather innocent and sweet boy whose heart is in the right place. So I would prefer it if none of you would ask something of me that would put him in danger or damage our friendship. I happen to like him, and I do not want to hurt him."

"Why won't--" Kimmie started in the manner of the Cat, but Tarrin stopped her by putting his paw over her mouth. Even if that wasn't how the language was communicated, it served to make her stop. Tarrin gave her a direct look, a look that communicated the fact that that was not a safe mode of communication in current company, and Kimmie's eyes flashed in sudden understanding. "What do you think the Grand and the Council are going to do when we start getting pushy about the Firestaff?" she asked, Tarrin realizing that it wasn't the question she meant to ask.

"I'm not sure yet," Keritanima said, giving her a strange look. "I don't know enough about them yet to guess."

"I hope it does not come to that," Dolanna said. "But I do think we need to appear that we are not going to be as patient as we will be. Let us tell them if they ask that we are giving Grand Syllis and his people three days to search their histories for clues to the location of the Firestaff. That seems a reasonable period of time for those who are in a bit of a hurry, gambling on old lore to shorten their journey."

"That does sound pretty reasonable," Tarrin agreed. "Three days would be all I could wait if I wasn't waiting on something else."

"It is important you play your part, Tarrin," Dolanna told him. "Be forceful with the Grand, and on the third day, be very demanding, and be contrary if he asks us to stay longer. After all, we are on an important mission, so it would look strange if we do not remain vocal and do not leave soon. We just need a valid reason to stay past our deadline, that is all."

"I can take care of that," Keritanima said. "Let's tie a note to Sapphire and tell her to fly back to the steamship. I'll write Donovan and tell him to break the steam engine on the third day, so we have a very valid excuse for staying here past our deadline. We can fume and rant and curse at Donovan for not having it working, all the while as he drags his feet on the repairs. I doubt the Sha'Kar have ever seen a steam engine before, so they'll have no idea how long it will take Donovan to fix it. If I even let them anywhere near the steamship, that is," she finished with a sly smile.

"That's brilliant, Kerri," Dar said appreciatively. "Sneaky and underhanded. Right up your alley."

"We all do our part," she winked at him.

"Since they can't see like we can, it would take them even longer to make the repairs," Azakar reasoned, then he closed his mouth and bowed his head.

"That's true. That'll give us even more excuse to delay the repair. Maybe it won't seem suspicious if we're still here a month from now, because our blind engineers can't see what they're doing and keep messing the engine up."

"A trifle outlandish, but it may do as a last resort," Dolanna said, then she yawned. "I am sorry, but I *really* need to go lie down."

"I think just about everyone here feels the same way, Dolanna," Camara Tal grunted in agreement. "Let's go back to bed and take this up again when most of us can think straight."

"I say, that's the best idea I've heard yet, it is," Phandebrass agreed.

They all got up--a bit shakily--and filed towards the door like men and women on the way to their own execution. Keritanima, Miranda, and the Vendari paused long enough for the queen to write her letter to Donovan. Binter helped Keritanima along after she was done, and Sisska decided not to be quite so gentle with Miranda, picking her up like a rag doll and holding her under her arm as she walked after her mate. Miranda didn't struggle, didn't even move, hanging limply in Sisska's massive arm and accepting the rather rough assistance.

"They must have served them different drinks than they served us," Tarrin mused as Dar, the last out, closed the door with a listless wave to them. "I didn't smell any alcohol."

"Me either," Kimmie agreed. "Why did you cut me off?"

"Because Kerri and Allia can understand it when we speak that way," he told her. "The amulets they wear let them hear it where nobody else can. Allia may not have told Kerri yet, and it's not our place to do it. Until I know Kerri knows, we say nothing about last night."

"Oh. Well, I guess it's good I haven't said anything like that that may embarrass us," she chuckled. "I wonder why Allia kept it a secret. She certainly wasn't shy about talking about it this morning."

"That was because she was talking to me," she said. "Allia won't hide it, but she's not going to cry it from the rooftops either. As far as she's concerned, it's nobody else's business but mine and Kerri's, because we're her brother and sister."

"Oh. I think I understand." She yawned and stretched. "What are we going to do today?"

"I think I'm going to take a nap. Until Iselde wakes up, there's not much for us to do but wander around. Where's Sapphire?" Tarrin asked, looking around.

"I saw her fly into the pool room a while ago," Kimmie said, looking in that direction.

A little nervous, Tarrin got up and went to check on her. He wasn't sure if Sapphire knew how to swim, and if she fell into the pool, she may be in trouble. He looked in and saw that she was just fine, sitting at the edge of the shallower side of the pool, staring at the water's surface intently. Tarrin knelt down over her and looked too, and saw that she was looking at her reflection in the water. She saw him in the water and craned her neck to look up at him, chirping to him in greeting.

"I was worried about you," he told her conversationally, patting her lightly on the head. "What are you doing in here by yourself?"

She looked down at the water again, staring at her reflection. "That's you," he told her, scratching her between the horns. "It's your reflection, little one."

Sapphire put on the most curious look of concentration. "Shahie," she hissed sibilantly.

Tarrin gaped at her. She was trying to *speak*! He could barely make out what she was hissing, but he was certain she was trying to speak her own name. Curious if he was right, he looked down at her reflection and looked into her eyes calmly. "Sapphire," he said very slowly, pronouncing the word carefully.

"Shashire," she repeated, Tarrin seeing that she was trying to manipulate the scaly lips that surrounded her maw. Wikuni had the same problem, but virtually all of them had a second set of inner lips that allowed them to

speak with a full range of sounds. Sapphire wasn't blessed with that, and she was trying to learn how to move her lips to imitate the sounds that the humans and non-humans made, and it wasn't easy for her, for her scaly maw wasn't equipped with prehensile lips as most humanoids were.

"Sa-*Fire*," he enunciated.

Sapphire's eyes became intense. "Sha-*Feer*. Sha-*Fair*."

"I," Tarrin intoned slowly.

"Sha-*Fire*," she said.

"*Saaa*-phire," he called slowly.

"Sha-Stha-Stha," she hissed, then she growled in her throat. "Sapphire."

"That's it! You did it!" Tarrin said in surprise, laughing and picking her up. He twirled around in circles, holding the surprised drake out at arms length.

"Tarrin? What's going on?" Kimmie asked.

"Kimmie, come in here quick!" Tarrin shouted. "Sapphire just *spoke*!"

"What?" she gasped, then she absolutely raced into the pool room. "She spoke?"

"*Saa-Fire*," the drake said slowly, carefully, trying to learn how to make those sounds.

"By the river's draw!" Kimmie gasped in surprise. "She *did* speak!" Then she laughed heartily, stopping Tarrin and patting her on the head. "That's incredible, Sapphire! We didn't think you could do it because of the shape of your mouth!"

"Tha-rihn," she said sedately, trying to speak his name. "Kih-ngee."

"She needs a little work," Kimmie laughed. "But still, that's amazing!"

"We knew she was smarter, but I never imagined she'd try to learn how to talk," Tarrin mused, holding the little drake close. "But don't worry, little one. Me and Kimmie, we'll help you learn if that's what you want."

"Rrrrearn. Sapphire rrr-rrr-rrrrr." She hissed at herself in frustration.

"Put your tongue behind your teeth, like this," Kimmie said, showing her. "Llllllllearn."

Sapphire's tongue couldn't cut off all the air the same way Kimmie's tongue could, so the sound she made was rather rasping and sibilant. But it was an *L* sound. "Rrr-rrrngll," she sounded, then hissed again.

"She's impatient with herself," Kimmie grinned. "She's alot like you. Go gently, little one. What you're doing isn't easy, especially since your mouth doesn't have a good shape for making the sounds we do. It's going to take you a while."

"Lllllearn. Sapphire rr-rrwan-*tah* learn."

"Sapphire wants to learn," Tarrin mused, stroking her side gently. "Well, if you want to learn, we'll teach you."

Tarrin quite honestly forgot about everything else but the drake, sitting down with her and Kimmie on the bed and teaching her. They taught her all the sounds that she'd have to make using human speech, and let her practice them without piecing them together to form words. Sapphire learned incredibly fast, so fast that Tarrin wasn't sure if it was entirely natural, but then again, what had happened to her when the sixth *sui'kun* was born wasn't very natural either. Sapphire's mind was still growing, he could see that now, going from having enough intelligence to understand basic Sulasian to starting to become developed enough to begin to branch out on her own, trying to learn human talk. Perhaps what happened on that day had not been a bolt from the blue, but an opening in a levee that gradually allowed a dry lake bed to fill. When Tarrin thought that her intelligence had reached a plateau, it had actually continued to develop. But then again, with everything that had happened, he hadn't had time to teach her any new words, and hadn't been around her closely enough to see that her mind was continuing to expand.

Lunch came and went. Servants knocked on the door, but they weren't answered. Dinner came and went as well, and the two Were-cats continued working with the drake until she could make all the sounds she needed to know to speak. She had a very sibilant accent, due to the shape of her mouth and tongue, but she was understandable. And she could speak all the words she knew, knowing many more words than Tarrin and Kimmie taught

her, they found out. She even had a basic understanding of the structure and grammar of Sulasian. All that time she had been sitting around listening to them, to their friends, she had done more than listen. She had been *learning*. And Tarrin suspected that Sapphire was more intelligent now than he was.

"Tarrin," she said confidently, mastering the word, looking up at him. "Right?"

"Very right," he said in wonder, staring down at her proudly. "You're amazing, Sapphire. I'm lucky you're my friend."

"Lucky," she nodded, a bit arrogantly. But he guessed she deserved a little arrogance. She was the only speaking drake he'd ever heard of. "Teach more?"

"As soon as we eat something. Aren't you hungry?"

"Hungry. Yes. Want beef."

"I can't Conjure anything for us right now, Sapphire," he said. "These Sha'Kar don't know I'm a Druid, and I don't want them to find out. So I can't use my Druidic abilities."

"Enemies?"

"No, they're not exactly enemies, but rememeber when I used magic to speak with you? How I said that you had to be careful around new people until you were sure of them?"

Sapphire nodded.

"Well, I'm not sure of the Sha'Kar yet, so I'm not ready to trust them."

"Understand. Keep silent."

"That may be a good idea," he said. "The Sha'Kar don't know that you understand human speech. They don't know how smart you are, and I don't think I want them to know."

"No understand them."

"They speak a different language than what I'm teaching you."

"Teach. Use magic." Tarrin stared at her in surprise. "Use magic Tarrin use on Kimmie. Use on me."

Tarrin was stunned. Even *he* hadn't thought of that! Kimmie gaped at the drake, then laughed ruefully. "Damn, but that's brilliant!" she said. "I never thought of doing that!"

"Sapphire go with Sha'Kar and listen. Can hear what Tarrin needs to know."

Tarrin gaped at his pet in awe. That was *very very clever*. He should have thought of that!

"Outsmarted by our pet!" Kimmie laughed, flopping back on the bed. "But a pet no longer," she added. "Sapphire stopped being a pet the minute she was smart enough to understand us." She sat up. "Will the spell work on her, Tarrin?"

"Actually, it will," he said. "It's Priest magic, Kimmie. The only thing it requires is that the recipient of the spell be intelligent enough to understand, and Sapphire obviously is." He looked down at her. "It's going to take time."

"Dow-Dolanna say have time," she said calmly. "Camara say all time in world. Teach. Teach now, take less time. Teach later, take more time."

"She's got you there," Kimmie grinned.

"I don't have to do it alone," he told his mate. "All I have to do is cast the spell, and anyone can teach her."

"And the more people we tell, the better chance it has of getting discovered by the Sha'Kar," she said pointedly.

"That's a good point. Let's only bring in Allia, Kerri, and Dolanna. They know how to keep a secret."

"And Dolanna and Kerri can cast the same spell."

"They can," he nodded in agreement. "So can Allia, for that matter, once we teach it to her."

"Teach," Sapphire said impatiently.

"Let's eat first," he told her. "I'm hungry."

"Teach after."

"I'll start teaching you as soon as we finish eating, I promise," he said, scratching her between the horns in the manner she so favored.

"I just thought of something," Kimmie laughed. "We spent all day teaching her the hard way when we could have used magic in the first place."

"That wouldn't have helped her," Tarrin said. "The spell only aids in learning knowledge. Sapphire had to learn the *skill* of making human sound. There's a big difference. The spell can't teach things that depend on acting them out, like learning how to dance or speak. You can only learn things that don't depend on it, like languages or history or things like that."

"I didn't know that," Kimmie said, crawling out of bed. "Well, let's go raid their kitchen, and get back to work. I wonder if the others are up by now."

"As bad as they looked? I doubt it," Tarrin chuckled. "I'll bet my tail they'll all stay in bed until tomorrow morning."

"In Allia's case, she may have company," Kimmie sniggered.

"After two years without a lover, she may make up for lost time," Tarrin said absently, hoisting Sapphire up onto his shoulder.

After raiding the kitchen, Tarrin locked himself away with Kimmie and Sapphire and began. The Priest spell of learning still worked, and he cast it on Sapphire and started teaching her not Sha'Kar, but Sulasian. He and Kimmie took turns working with her, expanding her vocabulary to make her more fluent. Sapphire understood the need for it, the need to use the common language that all Tarrin's group used when speaking among themselves, and since she was already so far along, it would only take a couple of sessions to make her fully fluent. Late into the night they worked, far beyond when Tarrin and Kimmie both wanted to stop and go to bed, but the drake pestered them and demanded that they keep going until *she* was too tired to continue. So Tarrin and Kimmie took turns napping while the other continued to teach, Tarrin having to recast the spell every few hours as it started losing its potency.

By sunrise, Sapphire finally declared that it was time to stop. Then again, after nearly fifteen hours of constant teaching, much more than the two or three hour sessions that Tarrin usually employed, Sapphire was

completely fluent in Sulasian. She had the same grasp of the language that Tarrin, being the native speaker, had, and the full day of practice had cleaned up her sibilant accent somewhat. She was still obviously going to have that accent, she always would, but it wasn't quite so bad. It didn't make her words unintelligible as it had when she first began.

"I am tired," Sapphire said. Tarrin looked at her. Even though he and Kimmie had taught her, it still felt a little wild that she could speak now. "We can go to bed now?"

"If you want," Tarrin told her.

"I haven't stayed up so long before," she hissed, backsliding a bit into her bad accent. "I didn't know it would make me feel so lethargic." Then she yawned, showing off her mouth full of pointy teeth. "Is there anything else you need to teach me about Sulasian?"

"Not that I can think of," Tarrin told her.

"Then we can go to bed." She looked at them. "And keep it down, will you? You two are worse than a pair of rabbits."

Kimmie blushed furiously. "Well, we thought you were a pet," she shot back.

"You're already going to lay eggs, Kimmie. Why keep at him? He's served his purpose."

"Our species enjoys the act," she told her.

"Obviously," she sniffed, unfurling her wings. "Please enjoy it a bit more quietly today, for the sake of a good sleep, at least," she said, then she flapped across the room to her small bed, and then curled up atop it. "Good night."

"Good night, Sapphire," they told her in unison as she closed her eyes.

"It's going to take me a while to get used to that," Kimmie said in the unspoken manner of the Cat, then she too yawned, showing off her impressive fangs. "What time is it?"

"Sunrise, or some time past it," he answered in the same way. "I should start calling her the little general. She certainly is bossy."

"She's not usually like that," Kimmie said. "I think she's just so hungry to learn, it's making her act like this."

"Well, let's get some sleep. I have the feeling that today's going to be a long day."

In a way, it was a long day for Tarrin. Waking up only after about four hours, he got up and took care of something that had honestly slipped his mind in Sapphire's revelation, and that was send her off to the ship with the letter to Donovan. Luckily for him she was already awake when he woke up, gnawing at some leftover roasted bird that Tarrin had brought from the kitchen and set on the table. It was much easier to explain to her what he needed her to do now that she could understand what he was saying so clearly, and agreed to do it for him without complaint or argument. "You are my friend, Tarrin," she told him simply. "Don't friends help one another?"

Sapphire was quite an individual, Tarrin mused after he took her outside and let her go, told her to come back whenever she felt ready, then started wandering the massive palace, looking for Iselde. He found her in a room on the fourth floor, a music conservatory, one of the few rooms that lacked the subtly overwhelming art and decoration prevalent in all the other rooms. She was practicing playing a stringed instrument that looked vaguely like a lute, but with nine strings instead of the usual four or five, depending on the type of lute. The room was very plain, with only two padded chairs with no arms and a stand that held parchments of what Iselde called sheet music, as the music was written on the paper as a series of dots on a quintet of horizontal lines.

Tarrin sat down in the other chair and listened to her play her instrument, and he was impressed. It had a rich timbre, something he wasn't used to hearing, and he realized that the lute's hollow construction gave it that musical quality. Iselde was very good with the instrument, playing a complicated song with a lot of counterpoint. He just sat there and listened intently for almost an hour, enjoying her practice, and then when she seemed to be done, she put aside her instrument and they talked.

Keritanima said they needed to know what the Sha'Kar were like, so Tarrin started with something very basic. He asked her what a day in the life

of Iselde was like. She was only too happy to oblige his curiosity, and painted a typical day for him with her words, a day that gave him some insight into the minds of the Sha'Kar. The typical Sha'Kar didn't wake up until about noon. It wasn't that they were lazy, it was that they were descended from a nocturnal race, the Urzani, and still had instinctive tendencies to stay up at night. Humans were diurnal, sleeping at night, so the Sha'Kar split the difference. They rose around noon, and commonly went to bed somewhere between midnight and the false dawn. What some of Tarrin's friends thought was a late night at the feast actually hadn't been for the Sha'Kar.

Iselde would wake around noon or so every day and eat breakfast with her family. After that, she would go to Auli's house for lessons from Auli's mother, a respected teacher of Sorcery among the Sha'Kar, who was very picky about who she trained. Iselde was given a higher social worth because Auli's mother, Dayelle, was teaching her Sorcery. Of course, she lost a lot of it because she was friends with Auli, but Iselde was in her rebellious phase, where part of her wanted to shock her elders. After her daily lessons in Sorcery, she and Auli would go out and socialize with the other young Sha'Kar. Sha'Kar tended to gather in social circles of roughly the same age groups, where they had the most in common and had little trouble communicating with one another about things that older or younger Sha'Kar may not deem important or may not understand. In those social groups, standing was absolutely everything. In that respect, they sounded exactly like the Wikuni and the Selani. Both races, related to the Sha'Kar, considered social standing the highest priority in their cultures. To the Selani, it was a matter of honor, with those with the most honor holding the highest social positions. In the Wikuni society, it was a matter of both nobility and wealth. One had to have both to be in the elite of the social structure in Wikuna, and every Wikuni strove all their lives to gain both.

Tarrin realized that the Wikuni and Selani had not digressed too far from the basic tendencies of the Sha'Kar. They had changed some of those basic customs to suit their own needs, but they still existed in one form or another.

After Iselde and Auli would pal around for a while, Iselde would return to the manor for lessons from her uncle in the other aspects of what was considered a good lady in Sha'Kar society. He would teach her how to talk

and how to act to others, and how to play instruments and play certain games of strategy that were marks of intelligence among them. A high-ranking social member in the Sha'Kar culture, Tarrin reasoned, had to primarily be a good Sorcerer. That seemed to be the most important thing to them. Below that were things such as manners, behavior, reputation, and intelligence. The ability to play musical instruments, sing, or dance were also considered very important, those knowing them considered a cultured and civilized individual.

Again, Tarrin noticed parallels with the Selani and the Wikuni. The Selani also prized games and competition, but not on game boards. They preferred direct challenges, tests of skill or strength or speed or cunning. Tarrin couldn't help remembering with a smile Var and Denai, constantly challenging each other over the most ridiculously petty things. The Wikuni also showed that trait, but the game they played was intrigue. It was a much more dangerous game than what the Selani did, but it was still there, a game whose skill of playing was a vital element of the Wikuni society. Among the Sha'Kar, the game was, surprisingly enough, chess. Tarrin had thought it was a Wikuni game, but he realized that the Wikuni had brought it with them when they split from the Sha'Kar.

After her lessons at home, she would eat dinner with her family, and then again go out with Auli after sunset to the almost nightly parties that some family held that particular night. Those parties were very organized affairs, more like a tea that Janine may hold, where Sha'Kar of different social circles would meet and mingle, and probably exchange information and rumors. Iselde would stay out until about midnight, when she would come home, bathe, read from the library for a while until she was sleepy, and then go to bed. And then get up and do it all again the next day.

It was an eye-opening description, something that showed Tarrin a great deal of the social customs and behavior of at least a Sha'Kar youth. The older members would have some different patterns, such as Arlan's endless quest to better his skills of Sorcery and improve the social standing of his house, but he knew that there would be some basic comparisons to make between Iselde's behavior and the behavior of other Sha'Kar.

As he thought, the Sha'Kar's life revolved around status in their society. Being trapped on the island and unable to get much if any information

about the outside world, they had to find something to occupy their minds. And one can study or practice Sorcery so much without it becoming more of a chore than a lifestyle. So the Sha'Kar had concentrated on their society, turning it into the focal aspect of their lives. They weren't the first race Tarrin had seen that did that, for the Wikuni, Selani, Arkisians, Arakites, and even the Ungardt to a lesser degree did the same thing. That sense of society did make them compete for status, but it also acted to bind them together in a powerful way against any outside forces. They were all at one another's throats to improve their social standing within their society, but they would forget about their battles for status and unite against a common foe that threatened their social system. The Selani, the Wikuni, and the Ungardt all acted the same way. Ungardt fought one another just as enthusiastically as they fought outsiders, but if those outsiders harmed the Ungardt, even enemy clans would join together and wipe out the offender. Then they'd go right back to happily fighting each other.

Dolanna had been wise to push for caution. Tarrin had the feeling that if they threatened the Sha'Kar society, the whole island would turn against them.

"Would you like to come with me tonight?" she offered. "Samuaena Shelisa is sponsoring the party tonight, and she's a prominent lady. She always attracts a crowd. I'm sure there would be many people there to talk with you, honored one."

"I'm afraid not, Iselde, but thank you," he replied. "I don't do well in crowds of strangers."

"Why is that?"

"I'm not human, as you know," he told her, "but it goes past that. I have the instincts of an animal as well as the appearance, and that side of me doesn't like large crowds of strangers. They make me nervous if I don't feel I'm in control of the situation, and in my case, that can be dangerous for people around me. So I don't put myself in a position where someone accidentally startling me doesn't get hurt."

"I didn't know that. The books I have on Lycanthropes only talk about Were-wolves, and the basic condition. They never talked about that."

"I'm a rare form of Were-kin, Iselde, and we're quite a bit wilder than Were-wolves are. Cats are very strong-willed creatures, and that makes the instincts of them I have in my head very hard to control."

"You seemed to be well when you greeted everyone at the feast."

"I know, and I was surprised at it," he admitted. "But I think it was because they only approached from the front, and I had my friends around me. That always helps keep me calm."

"That makes sense, I suppose," she said. "I'd still like you to come to the party, honored one. I'll warn everyone to give you all the space you need."

"I'm sorry, but I'll probably be busy tonight, Iselde," he told her, deciding that now would be a good time to start setting his cards out on the table. "Remember, I didn't come here just to visit. I have to talk with my friends about where we're going to go after we leave here. We still have a job to do."

"You can't be thinking of leaving already!" she protested. "You only just arrived!"

"What I'm doing is very, very important, young one, and the Goddess herself sent me to do it," he said. "I'm not going to lay around and be lazy. I'd never forgive myself. I wouldn't be able to face the Goddess again."

Iselde looked a little torn, but she covered it up with a smile. "Well, I think you'll be here a while longer, so you can come to the party tomorrow," she decided.

She wasn't ready to tell him what she knew yet, and he decided that it may not be a good time to push her. Not until he knew her better and had an idea of how she would react if he did. Besides, they would have plenty of time, and there was no need to rush things.

"Three days, at least," he told her. "We did decide that we'll give your Grand Syllis and the Council three days to look through their books and see if they can find out anything for us. If they don't have anything by then, we'll be leaving."

"That may not be enough time, honored one," Iselde told him. "The books we brought from the towers are very, very many. It may take them two rides to go through them thoroughly."

"Well, they have three days," he said bluntly. "We're not the only ones looking for the Firestaff, Iselde. If the Zakkites or the *ki'zadun* find it first, it could be a disaster the likes of which hasn't been seen since the Blood War."

"I'm sure they won't find it, honored one," she said. "The Old Ones hid it very well."

"They didn't hide it well enough," he grunted. "If *we* could figure out roughly where it is, so could anyone else."

"You're a *sui'kun*, honored one," she said, as if that were all the advantage he needed. "Who could possibly find it before you?"

"You put too much faith in old stories, Iselde," he told her ruefully. "I may be a *sui'kun*, but I'm just as fallable as the next person. The only advantage I get from my power is that it makes me a little harder to kill, that's all."

"Well, the old stories were true ones, so I'll go on believing that you're special, honored one. Because you *are*." She looked up at a clock hanging on the wall, one of the few decorations in the room. Tarrin had seen very few clocks in his time, and this one was much smaller than any other clock he'd ever seen. "Where is Allyn?" she complained. "If he missed another practice session, Uncle Arlan is going to give him the rough side of his tongue!"

"That's what he was doing when we met you?"

She nodded. "He hates singing, and Uncle Arlan makes him sing. He would rather play his *simbalar* like me," she said, holding her stringed instrument out a little. "He's much better at it than I am, but Uncle Arlan says he's a better singer than a *simbalar* player."

"Well, I think he's not hiding from his lessons today," Tarrin chuckled. "I happen to know for a fact that he and Allia are getting quite fond of each other."

"He's not!" Iselde gasped. "Honored one, my brother is a notorious flirt! Please don't tell me that your friend is falling for his ploys!"

"They're not ploys, Iselde," he told her. "I can tell by looking at him. He's completely entranced by Allia, and she finds his attentions to be quite flattering. It makes her happy, so I don't want him to stop."

"I hope you're right, honored one," she said sincerely. "That Allia woman is one of the Lost. She's not one of us, and I'm afraid that my brother is going to treat her like she is. She may not understand our customs, and I'd hate to see frictions rise between us over it."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," Tarrin said with a light smile. "Allia's customs are different, but she finds the Sha'Kar custom of courting to be quite fun. She's more than content to let Allyn continue courting her."

"As long as she doesn't take him too seriously, honored one, things should be alright," she said with a relieved sigh.

"I don't think that's much of a concern, Iselde," Tarrin told her. "Allia will enjoy his attention, might take him to bed once or twice, and it will probably pan itself out about there. She's having fun with him, and I don't want to ruin it for her."

"As long as she enjoys it, then I guess it's alright," Iselde agreed. "But if my brother starts annoying her, please tell me, and I'll make him stop."

"Trust me, Iselde. When Allia wants him to go away, he'll find out in no uncertain terms," he promised. "My sister isn't one to play word games or say what she doesn't mean. If she wants him to leave her alone, she'll tell him so. And if he doesn't, she'll break his arm."

Iselde looked a bit amused, but then her eyes widened when she realized he wasn't joking. "She would do violence like a human servant?" she gasped.

"Doing violence is a core aspect of the Selani culture," Tarrin told her plainly, recalling the books he'd read and the story the Goddess told him. The Sha'Kar were pacifists, defending themselves with magic when necessary, but never raising a physical hand against another. It was repugnant to them to do so. That was a *far* cry from the aggressive, combat-oriented Selani. "They're very much different from your people, Iselde, but in some ways, they're actually quite similar. One of those ways is their attitude towards doing violence. They only do violence as a means of self-defense, or in the act of hunting for food. The Selani don't attack needlessly or cause harm for harm's sake. Those are very wrong things to do, and no

Selani would even think about doing violence to those who don't deserve it."

"I didn't know that," she mused. "Then again, I didn't know that the Lost would do violence either."

"Don't worry, Allia won't hurt Allyn in any way so long as she favors him. And she'll give him plenty of warning when she doesn't favor him anymore, so if he does get hurt it'll be his own fault."

"I knew the Lost had split from the true way long ago, but to be *violent!*" Iselde said in wonder.

"They live in a very hostile land, Iselde. When you live in a harsh environment, you become harsh yourself to survive in it."

"Our Elders always say that one must always behave properly, no matter the environment."

"It's easy to say that when you live on this safe island and have plenty of food. If you were starving and surrounded by dangerous beasts, I think your Elders would be changing their lessons a bit. Survival is always the primary goal, Iselde. That means sometimes you have to change in order to survive. The humans do it all the time. The Selani did it to survive in their desert. The Wikuni did it when they learned how to tame the seas with their ships. And your people did it when they adapted to life on this island."

"You speak like an Elder, honored one," she said soberly.

Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "I'll let you in on a little secret, Iselde," he said.

"What?"

"You're older than I am," he told her. "I'm only nineteen. You're what, fifty?"

"Forty-three," she admitted with a guilty smile. "Are all of your kind as large as you at your age? How old is Kimmie? Ten?"

"She's about a hundred," he answered. "I'm...unique, among my kind. It's a long story that I don't think I'd like to go over right now. Maybe later, but not now."

"A hundred? Your kind are long lived?"

He nodded. "It's a side-effect of being Were. We have very long life spans."

A Sha'Kar appeared at the doorway, and Tarrin saw that it was the same young Sha'Kar woman that had been wearing the see-through dress the day before, at the feast. She was very tall for a Sha'Kar woman, almost as tall as Allia, with a very lovely, fox-like face with sharp features and long wavy platinum blond hair. She was wearing a simple robe of light gold, almost the same color as her hair, tied so that it showed off the majority of her fairly large breasts. This one was the first buxom Sha'Kar he'd seen so far, and she made sure to advertise her blessing as much as she could.

"You're late, Iz!" the girl said in a seductively slow voice, using informal Sha'Kar. "Oh, honored one, I didn't mean to intrude," she said in formal Sha'Kar when she noticed him, giving him a deep curtsy, so deep that her bosom nearly fell out of her robe. "Please forgive me."

"It's alright. You must be Auli."

She flushed with a smile. "I'm Auli, honored one," she admitted. "Auliandra, but Iselde calls me Auli."

"Iz?" Tarrin asked, looking at Iselde.

"It's what she calls me, honored one," she said with a blush. "Sometimes she calls me Izzi too."

"Well, I won't keep you two from your party," Tarrin told them. "I need to go check on my mate anyway. She's probably wondering what happened to me."

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the party, honored one?" Iselde pressed.

"I'm sure," he told her. "I have some other things to do, so you two can go on without me."

"The others will be disappointed," Iselde pouted.

"Izzi told you about me, honored one?" Auli asked in a worried tone.

"She did, but only the good parts," he replied with a smile.

"Good parts, honored one?"

"All the parts that scandalize the other Sha'Kar," he said with a sly smile. "Those are the good parts to me."

"Honored one!" Auli gasped, then she laughed. "You have a sense of humor! I didn't expect that in someone as exalted as you!"

"I'm full of surprises, Auli," he told her. "Now you two get along. I need to go see my mate now."

"Yes, honored one," they both said, as Iselde got up and they both curtsied to him.

"And have fun."

"Is that an order, honored one?" Auli asked with bright eyes.

"As long as you don't use it to get ridiculous, I guess it is," he replied with a sly look. "But if I hear you tried to set fire to the Grand's house, I'll lie through my teeth if they ask me if I said it."

Auli laughed merrily, then winked at him. "I like you, honored one," she said. "You're not half as stuffy as I thought you were."

"I'm full of surprises, Auli," he repeated, giving her that same sly smile. "Now go on."

The two of them curtsied one more time, then scurried out of the room. Tarrin could hear their excited whispering as they left, long after they probably thought he couldn't hear them. He heard them talk about him, how he was nothing like they thought he would be. He was glad they thought that way.

Tarrin was sure that Iselde knew something about the Firestaff he wanted to know, and he needed to get that information out of her. The easiest way would be to win her trust. As for Auli, well, girls like her often knew alot more than they let on. Tarrin had a gut feeling that Auli was alot smarter than her friends thought she was, and she probably had heard or seen things that would be important to him. She reminded him a little of how he was in Aldreth. Not the promiscuity, but the adventurous spirit, always going where she wasn't allowed to go and doing things she wasn't

allowed to do. Tarrin had learned quite a few secrets of the villagers doing that, and he had a feeling that Auli had done the same.

Getting on Auli's good side seemed a wise move. There may come a time when what she knew would be important to him.

Tarrin got up and left the conservatory, paws behind his back and tail swishing lazily behind him as he padded off towards his borrowed room, feeling like it had been a very productive afternoon. He had quite a few observations to relate to Keritania, and he had the feeling that he'd made progress towards securing Iselde's cooperation when the time came to ask her the difficult questions.

He hadn't seen or sensed the invisible eyes and ears that had been watching him, the watchers in the Weave, lost in the strong background magic that imbued the area within the Ward. Watchers that had seen and heard every word exchanged between Tarrin, Iselde, and Auli.

Chapter 14

Sapphire was in the room when Tarrin returned, having come back with three letters for Keritanima, which had already been delivered. Kimmie was up, lounging in the bath with Sapphire sitting on the lip and talking with her. Tarrin heard some of their conversation when he came in, and he realized that Kimmie was pumping the drake for information, trying to figure out what had made her so smart, and trying to fathom the extent of her intelligence. She was asking questions of philosophy and logic, trying to expand the drake's mind and get an understanding of how she would act in certain situations. Sapphire's answers didn't surprise Tarrin, for they were in line with the personality she possessed before becoming intelligent. She was just like the Were-cats in that regard, her human-like intelligence heavily flavored by her drake's instincts. Even with a greater understanding of things, she was still powerfully attached to Tarrin, regressing to her drake state and chirping pleasantly as she jumped up into his arms, rubbing her head against his shoulder fondly.

"How was the errand?" he asked her, scratching her between the horns.

"Boring," she sighed. "I didn't want to tell them I could talk, since I think the Sha'Kar are watching them, so I had little to do. They know I understand some commands, so they managed to keep me there until the Wikuni that rules the others--what is his name?"

"Jalis?"

"That's the one. He wrote your furry sister-friend a long letter and had me bring it back to her. So did the human that rules the others, and that big one that looks like a bear, the one that wears the robes." She looked up at him. "Will you teach me to read?"

"Sure, but you wouldn't have been able to read what they wrote. It was probably in Wikuni, another language."

"I didn't want to read it. It's just that there are many things to learn in those books, but I have to be able to understand them to use them."

"What books?"

"The one that's the friend of the two males," she answered. I've seen him reading them all the time, him and Kimmie. I didn't understand what they were doing until you taught me to speak. Now I want to read them and learn what they hold."

"You may not be able to read those books, Sapphire," he warned. "Those are spellbooks they were reading. But I'm sure Phandebrass has some regular books that you can read, and the Sha'Kar probably do too. So I'll teach you to read Sulasian, and I'll also teach you to read Sha'Kar when we teach it to you." He looked to his mate. "You look happy," he noted.

She smiled up at him. "When I build my new den, you absolutely have *got* to make me one of these," she told him dreamily.

"Make you a new bath?"

"Of course. When we get back, I know you'll go back with Jesmind, but I won't go too far. I want our child to grow up with its father. So I'm going to build me a den just out of sight of yours, so my presence doesn't rub Jesmind raw."

Tarrin was happy to hear that. He squatted down facing her, and she leaned back against the lip of the pool and put her arms up on it. She let herself float a bit, rising up in the steaming water. He looked at her belly, and saw that it was peeking out of the water above the rest of her torso. "You're starting to fill out, Kimmie," he noticed with a smile.

She grinned at him, patting her slight bulge. "It's about time," she announced. "I'll fill up like a thin waterskin now, and do it quickly. In three months, I'll look like a human woman about to drop. I'll give birth about a month later."

"That sounds strange."

"If I were human, it would be," she grinned. "I'm going to break you of this habit of associating us with humans, Tarrin." She brought her tail out from under her, a soggy mess that looked like a drowned furry snake, and wagged it for his benefit. "As you can see, I am not human."

"I've noticed that from time to time," he told her dryly.

"I got spoiled with these baths when I was at Kerri's palace," she sighed, sinking back down into the water. "The Sha'Kar do it with magic, and the Wikuni do it with technology. Somewhere between the two of them, you can build me a bath where I get hot running water."

"I'll look into it," he promised her. "It does make you look like a drowned rat, though."

"It takes forever for my fur to dry, but it's worth it," she laughed. "Care to join me? You could do with some cleaning up."

"Only if I'm going to take a bath," he teased.

"Spoilsport," she grinned. "What about you, Sapphire? Do you swim?"

"Get in the water? Me? No thank you," she said with a shudder of her wings. "I don't like water."

Tarrin did decide that he could do with some cleaning, so he undressed and slipped into the bathing pool, which was larger than many ponds he'd seen in his lifetime. Just like the bathing pool at the Tower, it was hotter at one side, and a little deeper on the hot end. Tarrin couldn't be hurt by fire, but he could feel heat, and heat still felt nice on the muscles. So he joined Kimmie in a rather hot part of the pool, probably as hot as Kimmie could stand, and draped his arms on the lip of the pool and put his chin on them as Kimmie washed his back.

"Why do you do that, anyway?" Sapphire asked. "Get into the water."

"It's how we keep clean," Kimmie replied, splashing water on his back, then picking up a bar of soap from a tray on the pool's edge. She lathered up her paws and started scrubbing his back vigorously. Sapphire walked over to where Tarrin was laying against the side and sat down, looking down at him. He opened his eyes and looked up at her calmly, marvelling once again at how amazing the little drake was. Intelligence granted to her by the birth of the sixth *sui'kun*, and it had grown to the point where she could speak, where she was as intelligent as most humans. She reached out with one of her prehensile paws, paws that had an opposable thumb, and urged him to show her the palm of his paw. He did so for her, stretching out the fingers and extending his claws to let her look at it, to satisfy whatever curiosity she had.

"What is it, little one?" he asked in contentment, caught up in Kimmie's attentions.

"I have seen you crush things in this paw, and yet you touch me with such gentleness," she told him. "I know that you and Kimmie are far stronger than any but the ones that smell similar to me. How do you manage such gentle touches when you're so incredibly strong?"

"We have very sensitive pads," he replied, lifting a finger and presenting the black pad on his fingertip. "I've learned how to know how much pressure I'm exerting by how it feels on my pads. If I didn't have them, I probably would be crushing things by accident. I wouldn't know how much force I was putting into my grip."

"It's something we practice, Sapphire," Kimmie told her. "We know how dangerous we can be to humans, so we teach ourselves how to be able to work with them without hurting them. I don't think they understand how hard we work to make sure they never notice how strong we are. It's something we always have to be careful of. One moment's distraction, and we might accidentally crush every bone in a man's hand if we're shaking it."

"Some of the others you call friend are afraid of you. Especially the big human."

"It's something I may not like, but I understand it," he told her. "I don't hold it against them. You've never seen me lose my temper before, little one. I can be very nasty. They *have* seen it, so they're always cautious around me when they think I'm in a bad mood."

"You would hurt them?"

"Not on purpose, but it has happened," he admitted.

"And still they trust you?"

"Friends trust friends, Sapphire," Kimmie told her calmly, plainly, washing Tarrin's back off. "They know he wouldn't hurt them intentionally, so when it does happen, they forgive him and move on as if it never happened."

"I trust you," the drake told him seriously, putting both her paws on his palm pad and staring down into his eyes.

"I'm glad to hear that, little one," he smiled gently up at her.

"Do you love me, Tarrin?" she asked directly.

"Of course I do," he told her. "Ever since that first day, when you landed on my shoulder and nuzzled me. You had me from that moment on." He closed his paw over her little forepaws gently. "I'll admit it's a bit different now that you can talk, but I didn't stop loving you just because you changed. If I had, then I guess I really never loved you at all, did I?"

"That is profound," the drake told him soberly.

"It's truth. Truth is always simple, but it can seem profound."

"I think the wrong friend was teaching me philosophy," Sapphire said with a chirping sound. A laugh!

"You've got to stay on your toes around Tarrin, Sapphire," Kimmie giggled. "He may not look it, but he's been very thoroughly educated by people with about five different cultural viewpoints, and he's got quite a bit of common sense. That's always dangerous when you get into philosophical discussions."

"The most dangerous one is always the one you think can't be a danger," she said calmly, a fallback to her instincts. "Are you clean now?"

"I think Kimmie's dawdling on purpose," Tarrin told her with a smile.

"Then she needs to finish. I want to learn Sha'Kar. Will you teach me now?"

"Alright, but we're not staying up all night this time."

They didn't stay up until dawn, but they did stay up until about three hours before dawn. It turned out to be another marathon session, as Tarrin cast the spell of learning on the drake, and Tarrin and Kimmie took turns teaching her the language. Since they started well before sunset, it gave Sapphire almost twelve hours of continuous teaching, the equivalent of four of his normal sessions. After four sessions, Kimmie could speak broken Sha'Kar and could understand nearly three quarters of what she was hearing in the forms of speech he'd taught her. After that one session, Sapphire had exceeded Kimmie, showing that she was quite gifted at learning languages. She was almost fluent in the two most commonly used forms of Sha'Kar

speech, formal and semi-formal, and Tarrin estimated that if he taught her for about fifteen more hours, she would be fluent in the other forms, informal, personal, and high formal. Kimmie had become fluent after about ten sessions. Sapphire looked to be on pace to do it in eight equivalent sessions. Tarrin wondered if teaching her in marathon sessions was what was making her more reticent than Kimmie had been. Would constant, long-term exposure and repeated castings of the memory spell provide faster, more deep-seated effects? The problem with the memory spell was that it was implanted memory, not learned the hard way. Those implanted memories would fade if they weren't used consistently. If Kimmie didn't speak Sha'Kar every now and then, the memory of the language would slowly fade from her mind, until she'd forget it. It's why the *katzh-dashi* didn't depend on using the spell, because of that drawback. It was always best to learn things by study and not by magic, but if what was taught by the spell was something that the recipient would use in daily life, like a language, then using the memory spell was an efficient and effective way of cutting about six months of tedious language study down to about a ride of regular learning sessions.

Two things struck Tarrin when he woke up the next morning. One, that nobody had been knocking on his door. Not friends, not sisters, not servants, and not even the Sha'Kar family themselves. And two, that Sapphire could be *pushy* when she wanted something. He had to beg her off from starting right back up with the education as soon as they were up, because he wanted to know why Allia, Keritanima, Dolanna, or anyone else hadn't bothered to come see him the day before. The entire day had gone by without him seeing *any* of them. Sapphire's lessons had occupied his mind and made him lose track of that fact. Sapphire was quite adamant about getting the rest of the learning done, so Tarrin compromised by casting the memory spell on her and leaving Kimmie to do the teaching, bringing them a large breakfast from the kitchen so they wouldn't have to interrupt their lesson.

After he did that, he set out in search of his friends. Their scents were all over the house, so it was a simple matter of tracking whichever scent was freshest that left the kitchen. That happened to be Azakar's, so he tracked it to a chamber on the third floor, with a large, brass-bound door.

Tarrin knocked on it and waited, then knocked again. When there was still no answer, he opened the door and looked inside.

It was a huge room, but was about half the size of the one Tarrin was using. It had a bed about the same size as the one in his room, on a raised dais at the back of the room, and with quite a few delicate-looking pieces of furniture. It looked to be a woman's room. Azakar was laying in the bed, sleeping from the look of him. Tarrin decided not to bother him, closing the door and going off after the next closest scent, which was Dar's. Tarrin tracked him to his room and knocked. And when he got no reply, he opened that door and found himself looking into a room that was remarkably similar to Azakar's room. Tarrin realized that both were guest bedrooms, and as such weren't quite so liberally decorated as Arlan's room. Dar was also in his room, and he was also laying quietly in his bed. But in Dar's case, he wasn't alone. One of the servant girls was in the bed with him, sleeping with her arm draped over his chest.

Tarrin had to grin. So, Dar took Miranda's suggestion to heart. It was good for him anyway, he needed a little physical pleasure in his life.

Tarrin closed the door, and tracked down Dolanna's scent. He followed it to her room, on the first floor, and opened the door after she too didn't answer his knock. She had a bedroom somewhat larger than Zak's or Dar's, with ivy growing on one wall and a large statue of a nude Sha'Kar male standing before the living decor. Dolanna too was in her bed, sleeping. And to Tarrin's shock, she too wasn't alone. He had never seen the human in bed with Dolanna, sleeping peacefully, but he was a rather handsome fellow with dark hair and tanned skin.

That was three sleeping friends, two of which had company. In Dar's case, it didn't seem a big deal, but he was surprised to see Dolanna doing the same thing. Dolanna wasn't celibate or made of stone, but she didn't seem the type that would engage in a casual affair. She was too...*human*.

A bit curious, Tarrin scented and tracked down all his friends. Except for Allia, he found them all in their bedrooms, sleeping, and all the humans were not sleeping alone. Even Phandebrass had a pretty maid in bed with him. Allia wasn't in her room, probably out with Allyn somewhere. Keritania and Miranda were also asleep, but Binter and Sisska were

awake, playing chess near the door so they could move to defend it at a moment's notice.

"Hey," Tarrin called from the open door. "How long have they been asleep?" he asked, looking past them at the large bed on the dais, like all the other rooms, where Keritanima and Miranda were sharing the bed, sound asleep.

"A long time," Binter replied. "Her Majesty has been more or less sleeping since the night of the feast. She has awakened only long enough to eat and relieve herself."

"She's been sleeping for *two days*?" Tarrin asked with a gasp.

"She has. It was not alcohol they drank, Tarrin," Sisska told him. "We managed to find one of the bottles of drink they consumed. It was some kind of drug."

"A drug? They drugged us?" he asked in a dangerous tone.

"It was a drug they themselves drank, Tarrin," Binter told him calmly. "Perhaps they have a resistance to it, and that lack of resistance is why her Majesty has not recovered yet."

"They are alright, aren't they?" Tarrin asked. "Her and Miranda?"

"Her Majesty is just sleeping, Tarrin," Sisska assured him. "If you wanted, you could wake her up. But she would be in a very surly mood if you did."

"Probably," Tarrin grunted. "I can't believe that they drugged us."

"I doubt it was intentional," Binter said. "These Sha'Kar, they seem to automatically assume that we are exactly as they are. Perhaps they never conceived that the rest of us would be so strongly affected by their drugged wine."

"It doesn't affect us, or you, I see," Sisska noted.

"We'd burn it out of our systems before we'd feel it," Tarrin shrugged. "Every one of our friends are sleeping, Sisska, except you two, me, Allia, and Kimmie. And all the humans took a mate. Even *Dolanna*," he said in disbelief. "Do you think the drug might have induced some kind of mate-frenzy in the humans?"

"There is no saying, but it wouldn't be impossible," the female Vendari answered. "If even Dolanna and Phandebrass took lovers, then I would say that it would be more than possible."

"Have either of you seen Allia?"

"She visited last night," Binter answered. "She did not stay long after she saw that her Majesty was still sleeping. She was going to a party with the male Sha'Kar. Allyn."

"Allia went to a *party*?" Tarrin asked in disbelief. "What in the world is going on around here, Binter? Dolanna taking a mate, everyone getting drugged, and Allia goes to a *party*?"

"We were wondering the same thing ourselves, Tarrin," Sisska told him with a level look, those black eyes of hers boring into his own.

"Well, I'm going to go get some answers," he said bluntly. "I'll be back in a little while."

Tarrin left them, marched through the house with a grim look on his face, then reached Dolanna's bedroom door. He did not knock. But there was plenty of sound to alert those within to his arrival, as what was left of the door clattered to the tiled floor in a loud crash. Dolanna sat bolt upright instantaneously, staring across the room in total surprise, as the male beside her tried to roll over and see what was causing all the racket. Tarrin saw that both of them were nude, and the smell of their mating was still strong enough in the room to make it plain to him that Dolanna had indeed slept with the human. Tarrin stalked into the room as Dolanna stared at him in both annoyance and worry, letting the blanket she'd been holding to her throat drop as he padded up to the steps leading to the bed. "You," Tarrin said, pointing at the handsome male. "Out. Now."

Gaping and trembling, the male did just as Tarrin ordered, scrambling out of bed, down the steps, across the room, then out the door. He didn't bother to gather up his clothes beforehand either, rushing naked into the hall.

"Tarrin, what are you doing?" Dolanna demanded.

He didn't say a word. He came up the dais and to the bed, then reached down and put his paws on either side of her head, almost completely

covering it. He sent tendrils of Mind and Divine into her, a simple weave to assess physical condition, and found that alien substance still flushing through her blood. After two days, it was still there? It had to be quite strong! Changing tacks, he sent flows of Earth, Water, and Divine into her, the flows of healing, and wove them into a spell within her and released it. The weave attacked that drug in her system and destroyed it, making Dolanna gasp and grab his wrists in her small hands as it felt to her like icewater had just been forced into her bloodstream.

Dolanna's eyes were a bit glassy as she looked up at him after he pulled his paws away, then she put a finger delicately to her forehead. "What did you do, Tarrin?" she asked woozily. "I feel decidedly odd."

"Those drinks you drank at the feast had a drug in them," Tarrin told her. "It's something the Sha'Kar must drink all the time, so they're used to it. But you and the others don't have the same resistance to it."

"Indeed," she grunted, rubbing her temples. "I feel as I did when we spoke after the feast."

"What happened after you left?"

"Well, I returned to bed. I woke up in the late afternoon, and I felt *very* good. Almost deliriously happy. I wandered around the estate for a while, had a lovely chat with Master Arlan, and then I met a handsome young farm worker while Arlan and I walked the estate lawn and talked. Arlan saw I fancied him, and sent him to my room--I do not believe I did that!" she gasped, relapsing into Sharadi.

"It was the drug, not you," Tarrin told her, switching to Sharadi to make her more comfortable. "All the other humans are sleeping with someone else in their beds too. Even Phandebrass."

"It's a pity we can't isolate the drug and take it back to the West with us," Dolanna laughed. "They're always looking for the perfect aphrodisiac. I think the Sha'Kar have stumbled on one."

"How do you feel now?"

"Like I have a hangover," she answered. "But it's already starting to fade."

"The spell burned out the drug, but you must be feeling some kind of after-effect of when it fades," he reasoned.

"Most likely. Did you really have to break down my door, Tarrin?" she asked with a slight smile.

"Actually, yes. I wanted your undivided attention, and I didn't want any arguments. I knew if I used the direct approach, I'd get both."

She chuckled ruefully. "No doubt. Now then, let me get dressed, and we'll give all the others the same rude awakening you gave me."

"It couldn't have been that bad," he told her. "And last night couldn't have been that bad either."

"Why do you say that?"

Tarrin touched his nose meaningfully.

Dolanna blushed, which made her look quite lovely. "Knowing that I was drugged makes me feel a little violated, but I won't lie, dear one. I never met the man before, but he gave me a very enjoyable night."

"That's all that matters, Dolanna," he told her, picking up her robe from where it was laying on the steps of the dais and handing it to her. "You get dressed, and I'll fix your door for you."

"Thank you," she said, accepting the robe from him.

Though he wasn't as rough with the others, Tarrin and Dolanna visited all of their human friends one by one, and after ejecting the night's playmate, they took turns using the spell to burn out the drug that had affected them. All of them had the same story to tell, about how they awakened feeling almost euphoric, and all of them had somehow managed to find an attractive member of the opposite sex who seemed interested. One thing led to another, and they all ended up in bed. Camara Tal was rather casual about it, remarking that she may ask Arlan about buying her bedmate for a new concubine, but Azakar and Dar seemed absolutely mortified that it had happened. Phandebrass found it all to be rather interesting, and went off to the kitchens almost immediately to find a bottle of the drugged wine, so he could research its ingredients. He very nearly forgot to put on his robe.

After waking up all the humans, he brought them along with him as he went to Keritanima's room, and Tarrin and Dolanna used the healing weave to burn out the drug from Keritanima and Miranda. Both of them had been asleep during the process, but they both woke up when it was complete. Keritanima yawned and looked all of them over, all of them in morning robes, and blinked. "What time is it? Did I oversleep?" she asked.

"You've been sleeping for nearly two days now, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "That wine you drank at the feast had some kind of drug in it. It affected you and Miranda by making you sleepy. It had a, ah, different effect on the humans," he said delicately as both Dar and Azakar turned deep purple.

"Oh. Well, that explains that much at least," Miranda grunted, rubbing her head. "I *knew* I couldn't have gotten that drunk off the wine."

"Well, get a robe on or something and come to my room," he told them. "While you two have been sleeping and the others have been, entertaining friends, I've been busy."

Azakar continued to blush furiously, but Dar couldn't help but start laughing.

They convened in Tarrin's room not long after that. Kimmie came out of the bathing room with a towel wrapped around her, and Sapphire perched on her shoulder. The first thing he did was tell them about his long talk with Iselde, relating his observations to them. Then he told them about the book he read in great detail, relating what he'd learned about the Sha'Kar from it. Keritanima and Dolanna seemed absorbed in Tarrin's look inside the minds of the Sha'Kar. "Simply put, they're a conceited bunch," he summed it up. "But they're not nasty like some people like that are. Actually, they seem rather nice, but only if you're their kind of people. As Zak, Camara, Miranda and Phandebrass have found out," he added. "They just have trouble accepting that everyone doesn't act like they do. We didn't go into the servants, I thought that may be a bit confrontational, but that's the impression I get from them."

"It's a good start," Keritanima told him. "Dolanna, you and I need to go circulate at these parties and pick up their rumors. Rumors are always a good way to get to know a society."

"Where is Allia, anyway?" Dar asked.

"She's with Allyn," Tarrin answered. "She's working on things at a personal level, the same as I've been working on Iselde."

"Someone should work on Arlan," Camara Tal noted.

"I haven't even seen Arlan since the feast," Tarrin told her. "I think he's been spending his every waking moment with the Elders. Iselde said he's one of their students. Actually, I haven't seen much of anyone since the feast. I've been very busy with our secret weapon."

"What secret weapon?" Keritanima asked.

"Me."

As one, they all whipped their heads and stared at Kimmie and the drake. Sapphire looked very calm, very sober, regarding them with those staring amber eyes. "Tarrin taught me how to speak," the drake announced. "He's teaching me their language now. When he's done, I'll go spy on the others and report anything important that I hear."

They were all stunned into silence for a very long moment. Then Keritanima laughed. "That's quite a secret weapon, brother," she admitted. "I didn't know she was capable of speaking!"

"If you can understand, then you can speak," Tarrin said simply. "I didn't think the shape of her mouth would permit her to speak human language, but I seem to have been mistaken."

"This is quite an extraordinary drake," Phandebrass said in wonder. "I say, I must--"

"*No*, Phandebrass," Tarrin cut him off. "Don't you dare even touch her. I mean it!"

"Well, there's no need to be rude, there isn't," he grumbled.

"I won't let him touch me, Tarrin," Sapphire said with steely eyes. "I remember that last time he *examined* me."

"Hoisted by my own petard," Phandebrass chuckled ruefully.

"Have you read the letters from the ship?" Tarrin asked Keritanima.

"Not yet," she replied. "Binter gave them to me on one of the rare episodes when I remember waking up, but they're still laying on my

bedtable. I'll get to them as soon as I get back to the room."

"Sapphire delivered our orders to Jalis. I didn't read the response, but I'd guess that his letter tells us he'll be ready to do his part of the plan."

"I'd expect nothing less from him," Keritanima said proudly.

"You have a good idea there," Dar said. "It's too bad we don't have Sarraya, though. She could have found out everything we need to know by now."

"Who is this Sarraya?" Sapphire asked.

"A Faerie. She's even smaller than you, she can fly, and she can turn invisible. She's the ultimate spy."

"It sounds so," Sapphire nodded. "I am no Sarraya, but I will do what I can."

"Well, we've already lost a day, so let's get up and get cracking. The order of the day is still to learn about the Sha'Kar," Keritanima said. "I need to read those letters, and then me and Dolanna will invite ourselves to one of these nightly parties. It's still early enough to get ready, isn't it?"

"It's only a bit after noon, Kerri. The parties don't happen until sunset."

"Then we have time to do some other things. I think I'll wander around the town and talk to the Sha'Kar on the streets."

"Dar, you should talk to the human Sorcerers here," Dolanna told him. "We cannot overlook them."

"I'll do what I can, Dolanna."

"Iselde should be at her lesson with Auli's mother right now, but when she comes back, she'll be up in the music conservatory," Tarrin said. "Kerri, when she comes back, talk to her. She tried to invite me to one of those parties yesterday. I'm sure she'll bring you along with her and Auli tonight."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Go to a party full of pushy strangers when I'm alone?" he scoffed. "Do you want me to hurt someone, sister?"

"Oh. Well, I forgot about that," she admitted. "What are you going to do tonight?"

"Teach Sapphire Sha'Kar," he answered. "One more night should do it. She's a very fast learner."

"That *is* fast."

"It may be one night, but it should take about twelve hours," Tarrin grunted. "Sapphire seems to be very receptive to the memory spell, so she learns even faster than me or Kimmie did. But I still have to go through the teaching."

"Alright then. Tarrin and Kimmie are going to teach Sapphire. Me and Dolanna are going to crash that party. Dar is going to talk to the human Sorcerers. Azakar, Phandebrass, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to talk to the servants," Azakar said.

"I say, I'm going to see if I can't get someone to show me how they built these buildings," the mage answered.

"Arlan has a big library here, on the second floor. I think I'll curl up with a few good books today," Miranda announced.

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll join you, Miranda," Camara Tal told her. "It's better than trying to hold my temper with these arrogant Sha'Kar."

"Well, it sounds like everyone has a good plan for today. So I think we should get to it." Her stomach growled audibly. She grinned ruefully and put a hand over her belly. "As soon as we eat," she amended.

It was a plan, and a relatively good one. They broke up and raided the kitchen en masse, then split up to pursue their individual objectives for the day. Tarrin and Kimmie took Sapphire back to their room and started teaching her again, mainly because it was very important, and until Iselde came back and Allia turned up, there wasn't much else to do. He finished teaching her the forms of semi-formal and formal Sha'Kar, and went on to start teaching her the informal forms. There was a better chance she'd hear that if she was listening in on someone talking to himself than high formal Sha'Kar. As she had the two previous sessions, Sapphire, aided by the spell, soaked everything up like a sponge, not forgetting anything that the two of them taught to her. As was usual for Sha'Kar, Tarrin expanded her vocabulary as he moved into the new form, teaching her more and more obscure words as they progressed.

Allia turned up about three hours after they started with Sapphire. She walked into the room wearing a Sha'Kar robe while Tarrin and Kimmie were sitting on the divans while giving Sapphire a break to relieve herself, a scillinting silver robe that matched her hair, and looking rather lovely in it as well. She had her wild hair combed out to where it was almost straight, and had a strangely content look on her face. "You've gone native, sister," Tarrin told her with an appraising eye. "You look like a Sha'Kar now."

"I know," she admitted, looking down at herself. "Allyn gave me this. Isn't it nice?"

"It's very nice," he replied.

"Would you mind?" Kimmie asked. "It really bothers me when you two do that."

Tarrin looked at her, and realized they were speaking Selani. "Forgive us, Kimmie. It is a very old habit," Allia apologized. "Tarrin was making note of my dress. Is it not lovely?"

"It's very pretty," Kimmie agreed. "Did you have fun yesterday?"

"Oh yes," she smiled. "I wore Allyn out. After he recovered, he took me on a tour of the island. He showed me all the estates and told me the names and reputations of the families that live in them. Then he showed me the forest surrounding the town, where some Sha'Kar walk for seclusion, and a sand beach on the northwest side of the island, on the other side from where we landed. It was *black* sand. I have never seen that before."

"Volcanic sand," Kimmie said. "The black lava rock, worn down to sand. It must look pretty weird."

"Then he showed me a carving that a Sha'Kar who died carved into a cliff face on the west face of the volcano," she continued. "It is of two Sha'Kar standing in beckon to any who see it. It almost looks alive, and the carvings have to be a hundred spans high. It was quite impressive."

"I guess it would be. I've never seen any statue that big before," Tarrin agreed.

"I learned much of the Sha'Kar's daily habits, as well," she said. "They use magic almost as often as a Selani uses her feet," she complained. "They

will cast a spell to open a door when it is easily within their reach. They are completely dependent on their magic. I do not approve of that."

"I noticed that at the feast," Kimmie said. "There were plates of food flying all over the place by themselves."

"I have already started breaking Allyn of that," she told them. "He is taking me to a party tonight. Would you like to come? He asked me to invite you."

"No, but you'll see Kerri and Dolanna there," Tarrin told her. "They're trying to break into Sha'Kar society as well, but they don't have your inside edge."

"This is not about breaking in," she said. "This is about Allyn."

Tarrin looked at her, a bit strangely. She seemed almost...glowing. Had just two days with the Sha'Kar boy had such an impact on her? He knew she liked him, but she was talking like she was making long-term plans. Didn't she realize that they were just too different? Of course she didn't. Allia, if she wanted Allyn, would take him. And if she didn't like some of the things he did, she'd force him at swordpoint to change. In that way, Allia was nearly as arrogant as the Sha'Kar. It was her way or no way. Everyone else thought that Tarrin was the dominant in their relationship, but they had no idea how wrong they were. Allia ruled him as effectively as Keritanima ruled Wikuna. He had been the one that had to conform to her, throughout their entire relationship. But he really hadn't minded, because he loved her, and was willing to do it. Allyn would have to feel the same way if he wanted any kind of long-term relationship with Allia.

Allia would turn that boy into a Selani, when he was already trying to turn Allia into a Sha'Kar.

"Oh, we do need to tell you about one thing," Kimmie said. "Sapphire!" she called. Sapphire was in the pool room, using the privy. At least she started doing that after Tarrin explained the concept to her. The Sha'Kar privy, just off the pool room, was alot like Keritanima's running water toilets. They used magic to flush the waste out of the bowl with water, but Tarrin had no idea where it went after that.

Sapphire flew into the room a moment later and landed on Tarrin's lap. "Allia," Tarrin said with a smile. "Meet Sapphire."

"I know your drake, my brother," she said, looking down at the drake with a gentle smile. "How are you today, little one?"

"Doing well," Sapphire said conversationally. Allia gaped at the drake, then she burst out into surprised laughter.

"Clever!" she said. "You taught her to speak!"

"She started, and we decided to finish for her," Tarrin told his sister.

"You said she was intelligent. I did not think she had become *that* intelligent!"

"She's agreed to help us," Tarrin told her. "Since we don't have Sarraya, she'll go try to listen in on the Sha'Kar. We've been teaching her Sha'Kar to get her ready. We think they'll say things around her that they wouldn't say to us. She just has to get in where she can eavesdrop, that's all."

"The memory spell works on her?"

Tarrin nodded. "We were going to have Dolanna and Kerri help at first, but she learns so fast that we don't need them. We weren't going to say anything to the others about it yet, but when Sapphire offered to help us, we decided they'd better know." Tarrin scratched Sapphire between the horns with his claw, and the drake pushed up against his paw happily. "Even Sapphire's helping out as she can. With luck, we'll have what we need in a few days."

"Have the others made any progress?" Allia asked.

"Not really," Tarrin replied. "The drinks they served at that feast were drugged. It's some kind of drug that the Sha'Kar drink all the time, like alcohol for humans, so it didn't affect them much. It didn't affect the Vendari or us either. But it pretty effectively kicked the Wikuni and the humans in the backside. The Wikuni didn't really even get up until about noon today, and it had a pretty interesting effect on the humans."

"What kind?"

"It must be some kind of aphrodesiac to humans," Kimmie said. "Even Dolanna and Phandebrass ended up sleeping with strangers last night. We wondered if it had any kind of effect on you."

"Not that I noticed," she answered. "I doubt my interest in Allyn was spurred by this drug. I was starting to feel interest in him before the feast."

"That soon?"

"As soon as I saw him," she answered. "He is a very handsome boy."

"You're alot closer physically to the Sha'Kar than the Wikuni are," Tarrin speculated. "Maybe you're similar enough to where this drug really is no more than alcohol to you."

"That does seem reasonable," Allia agreed, adjusting the hem of her robe. "I feel uncomfortable in this. I am not used to feeling such a draft on my legs."

"Take it off," Tarrin told her.

"I want to look presentable for Allyn at his party," she said quickly. "He asked me to wear this, so I will wear it."

Tarrin reached up and put his paw on Allia's arm, and sent probing flows into her. Maybe the drug *had* affected her, because she wasn't behaving normally. His searching spell sought out the presence of the drug, but found none. Perhaps she was acting strangely without being affected by an outside source that wasn't Allyn. Perhaps it *was* love. Love made people do strange things. Tarrin himself was living proof of that.

Allia, falling in love? It wasn't absolutely outlandish. She was a very loving and emotional person. And she was certainly deserving of some happiness.

Tarrin let go of her, smiling up at her. "Well, if it makes you happy, then I'm all for it," he told her. She seemed to understand what he really meant, and smiled down at him, then kissed him on the cheek. "When will you be finished learning, little one?" Allia asked the drake.

"Tarrin tells me tonight," Sapphire answered her.

"Have Chopstick and Turnkey shown signs of this?"

"No, and that's driving Phandebrass crazy," Kimmie replied. "He's kept them locked up in his room since they got here. He said that the Sha'Kar keep wanting to take them home with them, and they don't know how to

care for drakes properly. He's afraid the Sha'Kar may hurt them by accident."

"So far, our little friend here is the only one to show us how smart she is," Tarrin said, patting Sapphire on the flank, right under the wing. "Maybe Chopstick and Turnkey will show the same intelligence, but it'll just take them longer."

"I, don't think so," Sapphire said slowly. "They seem...different. I don't know how to explain it. But they're different from me."

"They're another species of drake," Tarrin reasoned.

"It's more than that. They're not like me. I don't know how I know that, but I do."

"Well, we'll take your word for it, little one," Tarrin told her.

"How are they different?" Kimmie asked intently, staring at Sapphire.

"I'm not sure. But I feel that they're different somehow. They don't have the same sense that the drakes in my pack had. That's as well as I can explain it, I'm sorry."

"Well, they don't have magical powers like you do," Kimmie said. "Could that be it?"

"Maybe," the drake said, her amber eyes narrowing.

"Well, I am going to go, my brother. Allyn is going to treat me to some Sha'Kar desserts that were not served at the feast."

"You know, he is shorter than you, Allia," Kimmie said with a grin. "That doesn't bother you?"

"He is not short where it counts, Kimmie," Allia said with a wicked little smile, and that made Kimmie explode into gales of girlish laughter. "I will see you after the party?" she asked Tarrin.

"We'll be here. Drop by with Allyn before you drag him to bed and torture him some more."

"We will come see you," she promised. She kissed him on the cheek one more time, then sauntered out of the room.

"She's so bad!" Kimmie said, trying to recover her composure. "She's *evil*! I like her alot better like this than I do with what she shows everyone else!"

"You're lucky. I haven't seen her be so open with anyone other than me and Kerri. She must really like you, Kimmie."

"I feel honored," she said, then she broke down into fits of giggling again.

Tarrin and Kimmie got back to the business of teaching Sapphire Sha'Kar after Allia left, breaking briefly to get some food. Afterwards, Tarrin refreshed the spell of learning and let Kimmie take over for a while, and he went to go look for Iselde. It was just before sunset, meaning that she would be getting ready for her party tonight. He wanted to make sure that Keritanima and Dolanna had talked to her and arranged to have her escort them.

He found her in her room. He knocked politely to gain entry, and after he announced who he was, Iselde called for him quickly to come in. Iselde's room was about half the size of Arlan's chamber, but was much more cluttered. Iselde had a love for furniture, it seemed. She had three divans, two plush chairs, and two couches arranged in a loose circle near the door, and one of her walls also had ivy growing on it. The soft light that emanated from the walls seemed brighter in her room than in any other. She too had a bed on a dais near the back of the room, and had a bathing room just off from the bed, the arch on the far wall. She had several bureaus and dresser chests with drawers, and also several conventional chests stacked in corners. She had four bookcases, all of them holding an impressive amount of books, as well as little crystal figurings, tiny sculptures, little paintings, and other various types of small art. Iselde seemed to like minitature things. Iselde's room had a crystal chandelier, the first such decoration he'd seen, but it was not meant to hold candles. It was a piece of crystalline art, with carefully cut pieces of crystal hanging from the polished brass tines by fine golden wire. The chandelier caught the light from the walls and reflected it and refracted it, resulting in a dazzling display of multicolored light whenever the viewer moved his head to regard the thing. It was quite lovely, and the light it gave off was almost hypnotic. Iselde wasn't very neat either. There were dresses and slippers and frilly little things that had to be

underclothes scattered all over the furniture, looking like a human girl's room. She also wasn't alone. Auli was with her, and to his surprise, Iselde had asked him in while the two of them were in the act of changing clothes. Auli was completely nude, her back to him as she held up a shimmering blue robe that caught the light of the chandelier in a very appealing manner. Iselde's hair was wet, and she was wearing a bath robe.

"I didn't realize you were dressing," he said apologetically. "I'll let you finish."

"There's no need for that, honored one," Auli said, giving him a naughty smile while looking over her shoulder. "We Sha'Kar aren't quite as stuffy as the humans are."

"If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me," Tarrin shrugged, sitting on one of the divans. "Did Keritanima and Dolanna come talk to you today, Iselde?"

"They did, honored one. They asked if I would take them to the party tonight. I told them I would."

"I like the furry one," Auli announced. "What was her name? Keratimina?"

"Keritanima," Tarrin corrected.

"She's got a wicked sense of humor," Auli giggled.

"That sounds like her," Tarrin agreed smoothly.

"Are you coming to the party, honored one?" Iselde asked hopefully.

"Not tonight," he replied. "I'm helping my mate with something, and we can't be bothered."

"What are you helping her with?"

"It's something that has to do with being Were and her being pregnant," he lied. "You wouldn't understand, even if I told you."

"Oh. Alright then," she shrugged, holding the dress up again. "I think this one will do tonight," she told Iselde. "It's Thaline's party, and you know how stuffy she is. She'd throw me out if I wore something more fun."

"There's only the one party tonight?" Tarrin asked.

"There's only one party on any night," Iselde answered him as Auli pulled the dress over her head.

"That's alot of people."

"Not everyone attends a party every night, honored one," Auli said. "Us youngers tend to do it because we're bored and don't have anything else to do. Some Sha'Kar don't bother circulating. The social outcasts and the oldest, who don't have to worry about it the way we do. So there are some faces at a party every night, and others come when the mood hits them, or the host of the party is someone they're friends with."

"Ah. I understand."

Iselde shrugged out of her robe and held up a green shimmering dress. "I like this one," she told Auli. Tarrin admired her lithe form; it reminded him of Allia. Iselde wasn't nearly so generously endowed in the bosom as Allia was, but she had a similarly beautiful figure. Just thinner. And she lacked Allia's muscular appearance. She pulled the dress over her head and fussed with her hair after getting it on. "Do you think I should wear a chain in my hair?" she asked her friend.

"Well, I found out what I needed to know, so I'll let you two get ready," he announced, standing up.

"My mother asked me to invite you to our house tomorrow, honored one," Auli said to him. "So has about everyone else we know, but my mother threatened to do something nasty to me if I didn't deliver her invitation."

Tarrin chuckled. He remembered Iselde tell him that everyone she knew wanted her to invite him to their homes for them. Obviously Auli's mother had the same idea. "What's your mother's name?" he asked.

"Lienne," she replied.

"Do you know--what's their names--oh, Trevan and Tarielle Andiari?"

"Not really, honored one. They're a little too old to be in our circles. But they have a good reputation and they're good Sorcerers. Why do you ask about them?"

"Of all the Sha'Kar I met at the feast, those two are the only ones that stuck out," he replied. "I don't remember your mother introducing herself to me, Auli. But those two, they stuck in my mind. I'm not quite sure exactly why, but they did."

"Tarielle's come to buy art from my mother, and she seems nice enough," Auli told him, tying a sash around her waist.

"I was curious about something. Why don't Sha'Kar wear more jewelry?"

"Why would we want to do that?" Auli asked. "Jewelry is supposed to accessorize the woman, not the woman accessorize the jewelry. Aren't I beautiful enough without gaudy baubles to distract the eye from me?"

"It's an old custom that dates back before we came here," Iselde told him sedately, ignoring her friend. "Too much jewelry is seen as tacky among us, so we don't wear more than a ring or two, or earrings." She touched her golden amulet. "Except this, of course. But it's a symbol of our devotion to the Goddess, not something we wear to highlight ourselves."

"I think it's a silly old custom," Auli sniffed. "It's not like the Goddess can *hear* us or anything. I think the Elders make us wear them just to go through the motions." She got a sly look. "Actually, I think they make us wear them because they think it will impress the Goddess that we were so faithful even when we were separated."

"Why don't you take it off then?"

"And become a social pariah? I don't think so," she snorted. "That's the biggest blunder a girl can make. Lamidrelle Velsanse showed up in the city without her amulet two years ago, and they *still* gossip about it today. It didn't matter that the chain broke and she had it in her pocket, all that mattered was that she wasn't wearing it."

Tarrin reached behind him and scratched at the fur at the base of his tail absently. "Well, I think I'll leave you two to finish getting ready. I found out what I came her to find out."

"I've noticed that you always say you're leaving more than once," Auli winked at him.

"That's because certain talkative young girls keep trying to keep me from going," he told her with a slight smile. "I'll see you two tomorrow. Iselde will bring me over to your house, Auli."

"I'm not talkative. You just can't resist my beauty. That's why you don't want to leave," she teased flippantly.

Tarrin snorted in the way that Were-cats did, glancing at her. "It takes more than what you've got to keep my attention, Auli," he told her, then he started walking away.

Tarrin heard her give a huff and stamp her foot, almost drowned out by Iselde's sudden laughter. "I was wrong! I really don't like you!" Auli shouted at him as he left.

"That'll change in a few hours," he said absently, waving a paw noncommittally over his shoulder.

Tarrin returned to his borrowed room and continued with the task of educating Sapphire. He saw that Kimmie had a couple of her books in Sha'Kar open on the floor, sitting on a rug with Sapphire looking down at it, teaching her how to read as she taught her more words. He gave Kimmie a break to go stretch her legs after she told him how far they'd progressed, and took over Sapphire's education. She seemed to be having trouble making out the different systems the Sha'Kar used to write. He found that the spell was wearing off, so he renewed it and continued on.

It took until nearly midnight, but when they were done, after nearly seventeen marathon hours of education, Tarrin proclaimed Sapphire to be fluent in Sha'Kar. She possessed the same language skills in it that he did, him teaching her everything he knew about the language and its many nuances and subtle variations. Sapphire seemed very pleased with herself. She took him by surprise when, as soon as he said they were done, she asked him if he would teach her Wikuni next. He laughed and promised he would, but only after they were done what they were doing there. When they had the Firestaff, he promised, he would teach it to her on the way back to Suld. He told her he'd make sure she was fluent before they got back to Wikuna, so she would be able to understand what was going on.

About ten minutes after Sapphire laid down on her bed and got some much needed and well deserved rest, Allia barged in without knocking. She

wasn't alone, either. Keritanima, Dolanna, Allyn, Iselde, and a male Sha'Kar that Tarrin didn't know were with them, the male letting Isele hang off his arm. The unknown male was tall and narrow-featured, with unusually long fingers, and dull blond hair held back from his face by a gold circlet. Kimmie and Tarrin had just started playing chess, and they paused to look up at them as they filed into the room. Iselde was laughing happily and pulling on the male's arm, who looked a little nervous. Allia was smiling broadly, showing more emotion in public than he'd ever seen out of her, and Keritanima was wobbling very slightly. Dolanna looked a bit flushed. Were they drugged again? The smell of them reached him, and he couldn't mistake the heavy wine-smell that emanated from all of them. It wasn't a drug...it was good old fashioned wine.

"Brother," Allia said vibrantly. "It's too beautiful a night for you and Kimmie to be sitting in here. Come outside with us!" She was speaking in informal Sha'Kar, a clear indication she felt comfortable with the unknown male Iselde was using a prop. "The stars are out, all four moons are full, and the Skybands look very bright and beautiful tonight."

"Yeah, come on, Tarrin," Keritanima slurred slightly. "Stop being so stuck up and come out and have fun!"

"Stuck up?" Tarrin asked mildly, trying to cover his shock. He'd never heard Allia talk like that unless they were alone. "If anyone understands why I don't mingle, I thought you would, Kerri."

"Oh, bugger that," she told him. "Come on!"

"Are you drunk, Kerri?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know. Dolanna, am I drunk?"

"I think so, Kerri," she replied. "I think I am too. How curious," she said, looking down. The floor...it keeps moving." She grabbed hold of Kerri to keep from falling over. "How does it do that?"

Tarrin was stunned. They were all roaring, blind *drunk*! He thought that only one or two of them was so drunk, but it was all of them!

"I think I may be drunk too. Isn't it marvelous?" Allia asked with a brilliant smile, then she laughed lightly. "Come on. We can look up at the stars and just watch."

"I think the only stars you ladies are seeing are the spots in front of your eyes," Tarrin told them.

"Don't be a prude, honored one. You'll start sounding like an Elder again," Iselde giggled. "And here I went and told Oran here how relaxed you are. Don't prove me a liar."

"Relaxed and blind drunk are two different things, Iselde," Tarrin told her.

"Now you *are* being a prude, brother," Keritanima accused.

"Our dignity wouldn't allow us to get drunk," Kimmie said. "It's against our instincts. So is losing control of ourselves. Would any of you *really* like to see what a Were-cat is like when she's drunk? When she's not in control of herself?" Kimmie asked pointedly.

Kerri winced, and Allia looked a little concerned. Dolanna just kept staring at the floor. "Ah, not really, Kimmie," Keritanima said. "I don't think I'd want to clean up that mess. It would be monumental."

"Why would it be a mess?" the male asked.

"Were-cats are very strong, Oran," Iselde told him. "If the honored one got drunk, he'd be ripping doors off their hinges and shattering tables without meaning it."

Tarrin wasn't sure how Iselde knew that. Did Allia or Keritanima tell her? "Did you have fun at the party, outside of getting drunk?" Tarrin asked, trying to organize his thoughts. Seeing them all like this had shocked him so deeply that he couldn't even think of where to begin to try to figure out what happened that got them like *this*.

"It was a blast," Keritanima grinned. "We drank and talked and talked some more, then we danced half the night. Then we listened to Auli's mother sing, then we listened to a few Sha'Kar playing some old songs. Then they caught Auli in Thaline's parents' bedroom with Julian Orialis, and she got thrown out," she laughed. "I hope they managed to finish before that."

"Julian left the party afterwards," Iselde giggled. "I think he went to go find Auli so they could."

"Don't talk about that," Allia said, patting Allyn on the backside. "You may make us go to bed early."

"I won't complain, Allia," Allyn said with a worshipful smile as he looked up at her.

"What do you think Oran?" Iselde asked. "Uncle Arlan is at the Grand's house tonight. Want to go play?"

Oran groped her in a most obvious manner, grinning. "Well, sorry all, but me and Oran are going to go and take pleasure from each other," Iselde announced like she was going to run to the kitchens for a snack. "Have fun without us! Come on, Oran!" she giggled, pulling him out of the room.

"I think a night in bed with you is better than staring at the stars, Allyn," Allia told him.

"I won't complain, my heart," Allyn said with a bright smile. "I'll worship your body any time you ask it."

"I'm asking it."

"Then let's go," he offered.

"Sorry, brother. We'll talk in the morning," Allia told him, taking Allyn's hand and leading him towards the door.

"Man, what a time to not have Rallix around," Keritanima fumed. "I guess I'll just have to go out and look at the stars with you, Dolanna. I can lament over not having my husband here, and you can be my sympathetic ear."

"So long as you can get me outside," the Sorceress replied. "I do not think I can get across this moving floor without help."

Keritanima and Dolanna staggered out the door, and left Tarrin and Kimmie sitting, chess game forgotten, staring after them in absolute shock. What in the furies was going on! Keritanima and Dolanna getting drunk? Allia behaving like a Sha'Kar? what on earth caused this to happen? It was so out of character for all three of them! Keritanima would have *never* gotten drunk. She was too well conditioned to allow herself to lose her self-control. Neither would Dolanna have intentionally gotten drunk. And Allia! It was as if she'd completely shed her Selani reserve, ever since she'd

seduced Allyn. Had the Sha'Kar male had such a powerful effect on his sister? She was like a different person! They *all* were!

Tarrin looked at Kimmie in confusion, but she looked just as flabbergasted as he was. It was insanity! He was of half a mind to go after them, burn the alcohol out of them, and demand some answers. But that could wait until tomorrow. Besides, he wanted to get them when they were deep in the hangover, so he could punish them that much more.

It disturbed him, disturbed him greatly. But the thing that most disturbed him was Allia. She wasn't acting like herself, and as her best friend, that really worried him. Allia was like steel, unchanging before any force that sought to reshape it. He had never imagined her changing like she had since she met Allyn. Even if she was in love, it seemed *wrong* for her to speak so informally or behave as she'd been behaving. Even if she was head-over-heels, hopelessly in love with Allyn, her formidable dignity and sense of honor would not allow her to act like she was acting now, and it was a major transgression in the customs in which she'd been raised to laugh in public, or be so informal with strangers. Or even be informal with friends in the presence of strangers. Selani customs were very refined and almost ritualized, and he couldn't even count the number of customs he saw her break in that short conversation. It was almost as if she had abandoned her Selani ways, and was acting like a Sha'Kar.

That wasn't just frightening to him, or worrisome, or even astounding. That seemed *wrong*. Now matter how smitten she was or drunk she was, Allia *would not act that way in public*. It was that simple. It went against everything she was, the very fiber of her being.

Tarrin's eyes narrowed, the beginnings of suspicion starting to set in his mind. What was *really* going on around here? Allia would *never* act like that unless she was being influenced somehow. Had that drug had an effect on her that he hadn't noticed? There hadn't been any of the drug left in her system, though...was its effect lingering?

Questions, questions, more and more questions. And only time would provide him with answers. He glanced at Kimmie, who looked a little worried, and frowned. Tomorrow morning, he was going to get some answers.

One way or another.

Tarrin didn't sleep well that night, since he was so upset and worried by what he'd seen of his friends the night before. He was up before the sun, and for the first time since coming to the island, he walked the streets of the town unaccompanied, exercising his legs and getting some fresh air while he slept. It had rained during the night, leaving the iron fences and the lush grass wet and the white stones cold and slick beneath his feet. There was virtually nobody out except human servants, who were carrying bales of material, baskets of food, or were trundling out to begin a day's work in the fields. Tarrin watched the toil of the humans around them, doing their jobs without their Sha'Kar masters watching over them, and remembered what that servant had told him. That the Sha'Kar were good masters, and they served because it pleased them to serve. But they didn't look very happy now, with resigned looks on their faces as they bent over their heavy toil with a strange sense of reluctant resolve.

The walk cleared his head a little, and also reminded him about the plan they had. This was the third day, and that meant that today he had to confront the Elders and the Grand and give them his ultimatum. Then they'd make a show of leaving tomorrow, only to return and tell the Sha'Kar that their ship was broken and needed repair. That was the plan as they'd developed it, but now Tarrin wasn't so sure it was going to work. Allia seemed out of control, and Keritanima and Dolanna didn't seem much better. He hadn't talked to the others since the day before, but he hoped that they weren't going to be quite so bad.

But things weren't out the window yet. Around noon, he would go see his sisters and Dolanna and find out what happened the night before. He may have to kick Allyn out of Allia's chamber, but that was fine by him. He also needed to talk to the others, and find out what they'd discovered.

Tarrin paused to look between the two hills that formed the valley at the north side of the large, spread-out town, looking up at the volcano. It was still smoking, if only faintly, almost like the snoring of a sleeping giant. It had erupted once since the Sha'Kar had been here, but had lain semi-dormant ever since then.

"H-Honored one," a young, very pretty girl said with a deep curtsy. Tarrin hadn't noticed her until he was almost on top of her. She was very pretty, very pretty indeed, looking to be about sixteen or so, with a heart-shaped face and dark hair that was long and lustrous. Tarrin noted that she wore only a blue wrap-like skirt, vaguely similar to a kilt or Camara Tal's *tripa* which left her breasts bare. That was the first time he'd seen a display of overt nudity among the humans, but the girl didn't seem to be self-conscious about her lack of raiment. Tarrin's eyes locked for a moment on the elegant tattoo just over her left breast, the symbol of the house she served. She was very pale, telling him that she spent most of her time inside, and she was carrying a finely woven wicker basket full of what looked like cabbage leaves.

"Forget your top?" he asked her conversationally.

She blushed slightly. "My Master prefers me like this, honored one," she replied. "He says my beauty shouldn't be hidden behind clothes."

"You're the first human I've met who has an employer with such forceful opinions," he remarked. "And you're wearing clothes now."

She blushed a little deeper. "I have to take it off when I return to the manor," she told him. "My Master likes his view of me to be unimpeded."

Either they'd been told to speak to him truthfully, or she was so conditioned to speak truth, even at personal embarrassment, that it compelled her to do so.

"Well, to each his own, I guess," Tarrin said. "What are you carrying?"

"Lettuce, honored one," she said, holding up the basket. "For the morning salad."

Tarrin leaned down to look at the lettuce, but what he was really doing was getting his nose closer to the girl. That close to her, he could smell Sha'Kar all over her. Her "master" obviously was one of the ones that preferred the company of human females. Actually, she had more than one scent on her, and to his surprise, one of them was *female*. That put him a bit aback. Tarrin's Cat instincts precluded him from even thinking about that kind of unusual situation, for concepts of same-sex intimacy didn't exist in the more primitive mindset of the Cat. They existed, and were even natural, in sentient beings, however. Such acts were considered unnatural in

Ungardt, but the Sulasians were slightly more progressive, and the Arkisians and Arakites openly accepted such behavior. Tarrin had been taught to be tolerant as a boy, since his mother was much more open-minded than most Ungardt, and had he been human, he may have been able to rationalize that concept.

One thing did stand out in his mind as he surreptitiously sniffed the girl. The Sha'Kar used her for pleasure, and the mingling and freshness of the scents told him that they had all used her at the same time. They'd had turns with her, like they were marauding brigands raping a defenseless village girl. The Sha'Kar were a confusing paradox of conflicting impressions. Some of their behavior infuriated him, but they were just so *likable*. Iselde was a rather friendly girl that Tarrin had to admit that he liked a little bit. But this seemed...*decadent*. He knew that the Sha'Kar took liberties with their human servants, but this seemed a little bit too much.

Sometimes, it was what one didn't see that revealed the true nature of things. Tarrin's chance encounter with the girl showed him exactly how the Sha'Kar felt about their human servants. They were objects to them. Playtoys, to do the work that was beneath them, and entertain them in whatever manner they chose the rest of the time.

The girl saw his eyes narrow, and she gave him a very fearful expression, dropping her basket and staring up at him like a fawn staring into the eyes of a hungry wolf. Tarrin looked down at her and felt a seething, towering fury rise up in him, something he had to crush under his will almost immediately. It didn't matter how nice the Sha'Kar were or how interesting they were or how friendly they were. Not now. He couldn't leave this alone.

"Did they force you?" he asked in a calm, deadly quiet voice.

"H-honored one?" she asked in fear.

"I can smell them on you, girl. Several of them. Did they rape you?"

She gaped at him, putting a hand to her chest in surprise. "We live to serve, honored one," she said. "The serving is all."

"They passed you around like a dinner plate, little one," he said in a seething voice. "You say you were willing?"

That got a reaction out of her. She flared up a moment, her eyes turning indignant, and then her anger broke. She began to cry uncontrollably, putting her hands over her face and turning away from him. Tarrin felt a little foolish. Here he went and made her cry. He put a paw on her shoulder, and before he realized it, she had turned and buried her face in his chest, sobbing in heaving shudders.

What was wrong with *him*, he wondered? She was a human, a stranger. He shouldn't give a damn one way another about her. She was a *stranger*. His own bad experience with being a slave hardened him to the outside world, but it had also softened him to those who suffered the same plight. He had been too angry, too full of hate when he was in Yar Arak to feel as he did now. The time with Jesmind and Kimmie, the time to conquer some of his ferality had changed his outlook on such things. The Sha'Kar were slavers, the worst kind, for their slaves knew without any doubt that their fate was sealed. There was no escape from the island, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. If they did run away, their masters would just use Sorcery to track them down, and the punishment could very well make death look more favorable than being recaptured. To the Sha'Kar, it would be no different than putting down a sick animal. That was all they saw when they looked at their servants. Objects to play with, workhorses to do the work that was beneath their dignity. And they were just *humans*. Sheep, Iselde had hinted some Sha'Kar regarded their servants. Sheep to slaughter when they were no longer useful.

Dolanna preached delicacy. Tarrin couldn't forget that together, the Sha'Kar were more powerful than he was. He couldn't let his anger rule him now. He couldn't lose his temper and do something stupid. If he turned the Sha'Kar against him, they would defeat him if it came to a fight. For one of the very rare times since turning Were, the human in him managed to take control of the Cat, to conquer the outrage and the indignation that it felt at the situation, to calm it down and explain that this was not the time or the place. He had to choose his battleground carefully if he wanted to do anything about this. This was not the time for wild rampaging. This was the time for careful, cautious, delicate maneuvering. This was time to stalk, not to pounce. The pouncing would come later.

Tarrin vowed that to himself. When he left that island, there would be no *servants* left behind to continue their hopeless bondage. If he had to take

them all with him, then so be it. If he had to wipe the Sha'Kar off the island in an orgy of violence and bloodshed, then *so be it*. One way or another, things were going to change for these poor, defenseless people.

And in this little one, Tarrin could sense that change. He had been too emotional to feel it before now, but now that he had his paws on her, it was as clear to him as the ringing of a bell by his ear.

The girl had Druidic potential. *Considerable* potential.

That was *two* Druids he'd come to meet in a matter of days, when he'd not come across a single untrained Druid before. Was this place making the humans Druidically apt?

One of them was in Arlan's house, and within easy reach. But this one, this little one, she was in another house, outside of his view, where something may happen to her. He could leave the redhead where she was, but not this one. He had a duty to try to help her, because she was a sister to *Fae-da'Nar*, an honored Druid. The Were-cat in him wouldn't let her go back to that house where they used her for whatever depraved entertainments pleased them at the moment. No, this one, he had to bring home. They were abusing her where she was now, and he would not abide allowing a Druid to be abused. Everything that Triana taught him rebelled against that idea. This time, he had to do something. He just had to.

It shouldn't be that hard. He was *sui'kun*, after all, that alone should be enough to convince her master to give her to him. And since he was already upset and outraged at how they were using her, he'd have plenty of steam behind his words to convey his displeasure to the man.

"Gently now, little one," he soothed, patting her back with his paw. "Take me to your master. Now."

"I-I-I don't want to," she hiccupped in a small voice.

"I'm not asking you, little one. I'm *telling* you," he said in a steely voice, a voice that she could not hear and willingly disobey without wetting herself in terror over what he may do to her if she refused. He took off his vest and draped it over her shoulders gently. "Take me to your master."

She looked up at him, touching the leather vest with her fingers before pulling it around her, and smiled up at him with such a heartbreakingly

somber, wan smile that it nearly made him fly off the handle and kill every Sha'Kar he could find.

The basket left behind, forgotten, the girl clutched the vest around her like it was a robe made of gold and led him along the white stone pathways. She took him to one of the largest estates on the island, fully three times the size of Arlan's estate, with a massive main mansion and eight buildings arrayed behind it, with a very large swath of farmland hemmed in the fence beyond them. Tarrin focused his anger into a tight, controlled fury, like the cold anger he'd felt when Jegojah had revealed Faalken's undead body the last time they fought. This was no time to lose control of himself and slaughter everyone in the estate. He was so focused he didn't even pay attention as the girl led him in through a modest entrance in the back of the house, through a kitchen staffed with handsome men and pretty women, all of which, Tarrin noticed, were wearing clothes. Up a majestic set of stairs covered with mother-of-pearl, along a passageway with beaten gold tiles paving the floor. She led him right to a door layered with gold and with gems encrusted in it, and pointed with a shaking finger. "He's inside, honored one," she quavered.

Tarrin put a paw on the door and pushed, but it was locked. Bound by some kind of spell. Not feeling like bothering with the pleasantries, Tarrin took a step back, extended the claws on his paws, and then drove them into the door. He gritted his teeth and growled savagely as his inhuman strength assaulted the door, until the magic holding it closed simply could not resist the raw power he exerted against it. In a horrific squeal or tearing metal, Tarrin ripped the door off its hinges, pulling it right out of the wall. He tossed it aside almost negligently, its loud bang echoing down the silent corridors of the huge mansion.

Inside the room, twice as large as Arlan's chamber, a Sha'Kar male and female sat up in their immense bed and stared in shocked horror as the Were-cat ducked his head and stepped through the gaping wound in the wall, his face cold and his eyes flat and dangerous. The male was one of the old ones, an Ancient, but the Sha'Kar female with him looked to be one of the youngers. The male was handsome, the female beautiful, and they gaped at him like he was a Gorgon rampaging through their bedroom.

"H-Honored one?" the male asked in surprise and dismay. "What is wrong?"

Tarrin beckoned at the serving girl in the hallway imperiously. She looked hesitant, but the look in his eyes made her obey him against her own will. She shuffled into the room slowly, and did nothing but clutch at the vest like it was some kind of magical armor and stare at the floor.

"She is yours?" Tarrin asked in a deadly voice.

"Did she insult you, honored one?" the man asked with sudden cold fury in his voice. "I assure you, I'll punish her in the most severe manner."

The girl gasped and broke into tears, taking a few steps backwards, trying to reach the door--

the Sha'Kar male narrowed his eyes, and Tarrin felt clearly him weaving a spell. "Pain," he said in a soft tone.

The girl suddenly screamed like someone put a branding iron to her. She dropped to the ground and writhed convulsively, shrieking as if the man was standing over her with that branding iron, shoving it in her belly. She writhed and clutched at her chest, beating her feet against the carpeted floor, froth bubbling up from her mouth as shrieks of agony were torn from her. "Stop!" Tarrin shouted as the girl continued to scream, the screaming getting into his ears, echoing in his mind, striking him in his aroused anger and triggering his protective instincts. She was a Druid, a sister of the Were-kin, and he had to protect her. "Stop it!" Tarrin shouted forcefully at him, clenching his paws into fists as his eyes erupted into the greenish aura of his fury, and then turned white as he started making his connection to the Weave. His vision hazed over with red as the blood pounded behind his eyes, as the fury, the rage boiled up in him and threatened to spill over and send him out of control.

"I--said--*STOP IT!!!*" he shouted in a voice that suddenly took on the power of his magic. Tarrin's paws limned over in Magelight as he gripped High Sorcery in a crushing grasp, then turned and assaulted the Sha'Kar with the terrible might of his full power. He had never attacked another Sorcerer before, but he instinctively knew what to do. He smothered over the Sha'Kar with his power, finding his link to the Weave, and began to squeeze it like a boa constrictor would squeeze a meal. Tarrin's power

quickly and thoroughly overwhelmed the weaker Sorcerer, severing his connection to the Weave. Tarrin kept his power over the man like a shielding blanket, preventing him from reestablishing his connection to the Weave as the girl stopped writhing, coughing and sputtering between sobs, curling up on the floor in a fetal position. He wasn't sure when or how he did it, but he had the man out of his bed, his naked body pressed up against the wall behind his bed, like an invisible, giant hand were crushing him into the stone. In that moment of fury, when he had the man under his control, Tarrin felt the powerful urge, compulsion, desire, *need*, to kill the man, to vent his fury and make him feel what he had just put that poor girl through, to slowly tear him apart and let his screams echo like sweet music in his ears. But that knowledge in the back of his mind stayed him, reminded him that individually, he was more than a match for any Sha'Kar, but together, they could defeat him. This was not the time for mindless retaliation.

It hung there for a long moment, as the infuriated *sui'kun* held the Sha'Kar's life in his paws. And then, with slow, determined, reluctant deliberation, he relaxed his hold on the Weave, his grip on the Sha'Kar. The aura of Magelight dissipated from his paws, and the incandescence of his eyes reverted back to the glowing, ominous green aura that marked his anger. Breathing deeply, Tarrin tried to let go of his anger, tried to regain his composure, but it wasn't easy. Every time the girl on the floor whimpered, it threatened to send him flying into a rage.

The male dropped to the floor and took in a deep, ragged breath, as the female in the bed scrambled out of it and rushed to him.

"If you *ever* do that to anyone again, I'll come back here and personally rip out your throat," he said in a seething hiss, showing the man his long, curved, deadly claws. "The gift of the Goddess was *never* meant to be used to torture people! I can't believe you! Have you completely forgotten what it means to be *katzh-dashi*!?" he said with a sudden, infuriated scream, which made both of them cringe and shrink back from him. "Has a thousand years on this island turned you into something no better than the Demons you swore to oppose? I know *murderers* with more decency than what I just witnessed!" he raged at them.

They stared at him in terror, clinging to one another.

"If I *ever* see you again," Tarrin said, pointing a clawed finger at the male, "you won't live to see me walk past you! You may claim to be pacifists, but *I'm not*. I'll do everything to you that you just did to her, and more than you could ever imagine besides," he said in a truly hideous voice, claspings his paws back into a fist without retracting his claws. The result was that a rivulet of blood boiled up around his fingers and poured onto the floor. The eyes of the two Sha'Kar seemed locked onto that blood as it flowed onto the floor in a steady stream, forming a wider and wider stain in their plush rug. They seemed absolutely horrified by the sight of it. More than anything else, the sight of that blood seemed to terrify the two Sha'kar into almost gibbering senselessness.

Tarrin snorted several times, getting his breathing back under control, then opened his fist. His regeneration sealed the deep puncture wounds quickly, and he wove a quick spell that stripped the blood off his paw, then sucked the water out of the blood on the floor, leaving it as a fine, powdery red dust. That dust he carefully pulled up from the carpet and contained, compressing it down into a rust-colored solid mass about the size of a child's fist. There were humans in this place, and they may get turned trying to clean up his blood. Even in his intense fury, he had presence of mind to prevent that from happening. Tarrin palmed the ball of solidified, dehydrated blood so it would be safely contained.

"This one is *mine* now," Tarrin said in a seething, hissing voice, his fury clearly obvious in his tone as he pointed at the panting girl. "If you argue about it, I'll kill you. If you take this to the Grand or the Elders, I'll kill you. If I hear anyone talking about what happened here today, I'll kill you. If I hear that you torture one more human servant, I'll come back and do the same thing to you, *then* I'll kill you. And if I ever see you again, I'll do *worse* than kill you. You had best not put one toe out of this house until I'm long gone from here," he said viciously.

He picked up the girl, who was still trembling, and regarded the two with a cold look. "If *this* is what the Sha'Kar have come to, then I pray to the Goddess that you *never* get off this island," he said emphatically, in that same brutal, cold tone. "Evil like yours deserves to be imprisoned. And may you choke on it," he said with vicious finality, carrying the semi-conscious girl towards the door, where other Sha'Kar of varying ages and their human servants watched on with horrified expressions. They all melted out of his

path quickly when he reached them, and then he walked through them, looking an adult among children, without a word or even a sidelong glance.

Whatever they had to do, whatever they needed to discover, Tarrin prayed with all his heart that it came soon. After seeing what he had seen, learning what he had learned, he knew that his outrage wouldn't be contained for very long. This atrocity had nearly caused him to lose control and lash out. If he stayed among the Sha'Kar for much longer, it would come down to a war.

And it was a war that he knew he could not win.

Chapter 15

Her name was Zarina, and she had absolutely no idea what was going on.

She sat on the divan in Tarrin's private chamber, but she didn't know his name. She watched in mute, almost terrified wonder as the huge--so incredibly *tall!!*--creature paced back and forth angrily in the room, which didn't seem very large to her, his anger and hatred showing clearly on his face. Zarina didn't understand why he was so furious. She didn't understand why he had made her go back to her Master's estate, and why this strange creature confronted him. The only memory she had of that was the pain, the pain of punishment, something any servant on the island strove mightily to avoid. She sat there and did what a servant did, did what she was told and did everything she could to avoid attracting attention to herself when it was obvious that one of the masters was not happy. She was told to sit down, and by the Goddess of the Sha'Kar, that was exactly what she was going to do. She was going to sit there and be silent and wait until she was told she could get up.

For his part, it was all Tarrin could do to keep control of himself. Frightening the Sha'Kar into wetting himself didn't hold the same sweet satisfaction he'd have felt if he would have bitten the man's throat out with his own teeth and drank his blood. Even now, nearly a half an hour after returning with the servant girl to an empty room--he had no idea where Kimmie and Sapphire went--he still had to labor to retain his composure. Every time he let his attention wander, he could see nothing but that Sha'Kar using Sorcery to torture the poor girl, and that sent him right back to the edges of utter rage.

How could he *do* such a thing! The Ancients prided themselves on their vow to never use Sorcery against another except in self defense! How could they have become so twisted...so *evil*? Tarrin thought he had a sadistic bent, but to inflict that kind of terrible pain for no reason other than one was displeased...that was absolutely *monstrous*! At least Tarrin had *reasons* for

doing what he did, not torturing a young girl because he thought she had caused an honored one displeasure! And what was worse, the Sha'Kar didn't even bother to find out what happened, and he did it *right in front of him!* The Sha'Kar were so arrogant that they just assumed that Tarrin's ways were their ways as well, but he would never adopt a practice of torturing the innocent for its own sake!

Back and forth, back and forth, Tarrin stalked up and then back down the middle of the room, as the servant girl watched him from the corner of her eyes, keeping her head down and her shoulders hunched. She still clutched his vest around her like it was some kind of magical armor that would save her from harm, and seeing her like that, so utterly *defeated*, it made his blood absolutely boil. No wonder the servants were so obedient, if *that* was what they experienced when they displeased their noble masters!

Perhaps it was bad timing that the knocking on the door was lost to Tarrin while he seethed in his rage. Getting no answer, the door was opened, and Iselde and Auli were standing outside. They were wearing their shimmering robes, and Iselde stepped just inside the door and called out. The servant girl glanced at the two of them and seemed torn, as she found herself in a serious predicament. The masters were looking at her, looking at her sitting on the divan and not serving, presuming to be above her station. But the honored one had told her to sit down, and she was *not* going to disobey!

It was their scents that he noticed. Not their calls, getting more and more worried, or the sight of them by the door. Those Sha'Kar scents touched his nose, and he almost lost control. He whirled on the door with his eyes glowing in their unholy greenish aura, narrow, with his fangs bared and his ears fully back. When his tail went straight out behind him, Iselde gasped and took a step back from him in fear. "H-Honored one?" she asked in anxiety. "You asked--"

"*GET OUT!*" Tarrin roared at them, extending his claws and actually starting to move towards the door with all his most formidable weapons bared, his manner telling the two Sha'Kar females that if they were still there when he reached them, he would *use* those claws and fangs on them. With gaping looks of shock, terror, and confusion, the two Sha'Kar females scrambled out of the room as quickly as they could manage and slammed

the door behind them. Tarrin could hear their footsteps as they bolted down the hall, and not even Iselde's squeal of fear shook him out of his fury.

All the ground he'd gained went right out the window after the Sha'Kar had barged in. Tarrin went back to pacing the floor in a stalking, aggressive manner, his tail slashing behind him so hard that it knocked over the second divan when he passed by it. The servant girl watched him, trying not to move, though she was trembling so hard he didn't see why she wasn't sliding off the divan, and the smell of her fear was almost acrid in his nose. That fear did make him calm down, when he realized that she was afraid of *him*. And she probably had good reason to be. The Sha'Kar didn't intimidate with physical violence, and though using magic was more sinister, there was something elemental, instinctual about a good old physical threat that never failed to traumatize the victim. Especially when delivered by a creature twice one's height and strong enough to tear one in half at the waist. Tarrin had a lot of practice laying down those brutal ultimatums, and he knew how to present himself in the most intimidating manner possible. He wasn't trying to do that now, but he hadn't told the girl what was going on, and she probably didn't realize what he'd done. That spell had left her so scattered after Tarrin cut it off that she couldn't even walk. He doubted she understood why she was there.

Slowing to a stop with his back to her, he clenched his fists several times and relaxed them, trying to calm down enough to be rational. He let out his breath explosively as he felt himself calm down enough to face the girl without terrifying her, his tail slowing to a stop behind him. He turned and faced her, saw her still keeping her head down, but watching him out of the corner of her eye. She was still wearing the wrap and his vest, and Tarrin realized that he must look even more intimidating, being stripped to the waist, where all his formidable muscle was clearly visible.

Blowing out his breath one more time, he scrubbed his paw through his hair, then flicked his ears. "Look at me," he said in as calm a voice as he could manage, which probably didn't sound all that calm to her.

She did so reluctantly, raising her head to meet his eyes. He could see her fear plainly, smell it sharply on her.

"Calm down, little one," he said shortly. "I'm not angry with *you*. I'm angry with your former master."

She didn't miss him use the word *former*. She put a hand over her chest, over the tattoo, and looked away from him. "I will serve you faithfully," she said in a tiny voice.

"You'll serve no one but yourself," he snorted. She cringed when he advanced on her, putting her hands up to protect her face. He reached under her arms easily and put a finger over the tattoo. He meant to weave a spell to remove it, but the instant he touched it he felt the magic of its creation. It was more than a spell of marking. It had complicated Mind weaves in it, and since he wasn't human he couldn't fathom what they were supposed to do. There were also some other kinds of weaves that he couldn't make out in the intricate interlaced knot of multiple spells. The tattoo was more than a mark of ownership, it was a magical spell that probably helped the Sha'Kar control their human servants, which outnumbered them by more than three to one.

Tarrin realized that only a *human* could have made the spell. It was a Mind weave, and only humans could use Mind weaves against other humans. The human Sorcerers on the island were creating these Mind weaves to control the servants!

The strong background magic of the interior of the Ward had kept him from sensing its magic the first time he came into close proximity to a servant. He hadn't noticed it before. Regardless, he picked through the amalgamation of several weaves and found that it wasn't going to be easy to remove. The Mind weaves were all embedded in her mind, and since he couldn't tell what they did, he'd have to be careful getting rid of them. He studied the cleverly woven spell and puzzled out that any attempt to remove it would do harm to the girl's mind, so he had to attack it in another fashion. If he couldn't unravel the spell, then perhaps if he cut off all magical power to it, it would fade on its own and dissipate without causing the girl any mental damage. He studied the spell's layering in her mind and concluded that that would indeed be the case. The weave wouldn't do her any harm unless someone tried to unravel it without knowing exactly what they were doing. It had some kind of layered architecture that would cause a cascade effect, as flows broke and interacted with other flows to create a new spell completely different than the one first created. Tarrin knew it could be done, for Spyder had done it against him when they fought, and he had also done it to her by infusing her Fire weave with Air and making it explode. This

spell was much more complicated than that, but it would behave in a similar manner. If he poked around it and made a mistake, he would trigger that trap and harm the girl's mind. But by starving the spell of all energy, cutting it off from the Weave the same way he had cut off the Sha'Kar, it would kill the spell without it doing any harm. It would just cease to exist. He did just that, and didn't have to resort to High Sorcery to have enough power to do it. Cutting off an active Sorcerer was *much* harder than simply choking off the flow of energy into a relatively weak spell, by Weavespinner standards, anyway. It may be a complicated spell, but it drew very little energy, and that was the only energy he had to overwhelm to cut it off from the Weave. He put his magical will over the spell and quickly choked the life out of it, cutting it off from the source of its power. He sensed the spell in her wither, and then simply evaporate when the magic fueling it stopped. The entire spell simply died out without disrupting its weaving, and thereby not doing the girl any lasting harm. In the span of a heartbeat, the spell simply ceased to exist.

He removed his paw from her chest and saw the tattoo visibly fade, but the look in the girl's eyes caught his attention even more. It was as if they had suddenly had a fog pulled away from them. She shook her head and put a hand to her temple, then looked up at him in confusion. "What happened, honored one?" she asked weakly.

"I removed that damned mark," he said, tapping her on the chest meaningfully.

"I am ready, Master," she said resolutely, putting her hands behind her back and presenting her chest to him.

He realized she was waiting for him to put *his* mark on her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Zarina, Master."

"Mine is Tarrin, and *don't* call me Master," he said bluntly. "You'll stay with me until we get off this island, but once we do, you'll be a free woman."

"Free?" she asked in a tiny voice. "Me?"

He nodded. "Well, not exactly free," he amended with a rueful look. "I have to deliver you to my bond-mother."

"I live to serve. To serve is all," she said in a hopeless voice, a voice of utter defeat. Even without the enchanted tattoo to influence her mind and her actions, she still had the mentality of a slave. And it infuriated him all over again.

"You can stop sticking your breasts out at me, girl," Tarrin growled. "I'm not going to mark you. Like I said, you're as good as free. I don't want you going far because I don't trust these Sha'Kar, but I don't want you thinking you have to serve me, either."

Zarina blushed and pulled the vest around herself again.

"You'll travel with us until I get you back to my bond-mother. She'll take good care of you."

"As you wish, Master."

"*Don't* call me that!" he snapped at her, and she winced and looked at the floor, trembling visibly. He blew out his breath and reached under her chin, then lifted it until she was looking him in the eye. "If anyone ever needed a gentle hand, it's you, my little fawn," he told her. "You'd do best with Dolanna. She'll take very good care of you. I think I'm a little too intense for you."

"What do you mean, Ma-" she cut herself off, then she cringed.

"Dolanna is a gentle and loving person. You've been conditioned to be a slave, Zarina. Dolanna will help you overcome that and be your own woman."

Zarina was very quiet, but there were tears sheening her eyes. "You truly mean it? I am to be free?"

"As free as you can be, given you'll have to undergo some mandatory training," he chuckled. "My mother will be chomping at the bit to get you."

"I am to serve her?" she asked, the disappointment in her voice bitter.

"You'll *learn* from her," he said firmly. "You have a special gift, little fawn. I'm not going to tell you what that gift is yet, because it will confuse you and may put you in danger, but it's very special. My mother will teach

you all about it, and help you become the best you can be. Is that too much to ask in exchange for me freeing you?"

She broke into tears, putting her hands over her face again. Tarrin knelt in front of her and put his huge paws on her shoulders in a very delicate, gentle touch. She looked at him, her face absolutely adoring, all fear of him gone from her eyes and her scent. "*Why?*" she managed to ask, and he understood what she was asking. Why her? Why get into a fight with a Sha'Kar over her?

"Because to me, you're more than just a *human*," he told her with gentle eyes. She reminded him so much of Julia. So confused and afraid, so desperately needing guidance and love. Tarrin couldn't give her love any more than he could have given Julia love, but he could give her guidance and support. Dolanna would be best suited for fanning the embers that had once been the fire of her independence, a fire the Sha'Kar had thoroughly squelched with their magical control and their horrific torture. She had done a wonderful job keeping a terrified turned Were-cat from going insane, teaching him how to cope with his new life. He felt she'd be just as good at taking a terrified former slave and teaching her to be her own woman.

She cried a little longer, and Tarrin even collected her in his arms and let her cry it all out on his shoulder. He could have shown Julia this kind of support, but he hadn't. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Then again, he had hated Julia, where he had no reason to hate this young, tormented girl.

She sniffled a little, and Tarrin pushed her back out to his arm's length. "Feel better now?" he asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes, Ma--uh, Tarrin," she managed to say with a meek smile, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, but my kind are very high strung, and when we get angry, it can take us hours to calm down," he apologized.

"It's alright, Master," she said. He could tell that that *master* was an automatic thing for her, so he didn't berate her for it. She probably didn't even realize she said it. She had to consciously stop herself from saying it, and even then, she couldn't stop herself entirely.

"The first thing we need to do is get you some clothes," he said, looking down at her. "Then I'll take you to Dolanna. You'll be best off with her. Like

I said, I may be too intense for you right now. I know this all must be traumatic. Like your whole life was just turned on its ear."

She nodded with a sniffle.

"Well, living with me wouldn't make that go away," he admitted. "I'd be very bad for your state of mind right now. Especially right now, given how angry I still am over all this. I think you'll be good for Dolanna too," Tarrin said with a grim smile. "She's been getting very strange lately. A project like you will get her focused again."

"Why would you be angry, honored one?" she asked.

"Because what that Sha'Kar did to you is against everything he claims he believes in," he said with a snort, his ears flicking in irritation. "He outraged me so completely with that act that it was all I could do not to kill him. I'm still thinking of going back over there and tearing his head off," he admitted with a flat look that made the girl flinch. "Sorcerers are *never* supposed to use their magic against the innocent. Only in self defense," he told her with a rising voice.

"It was his right," she said, speaking like a slave. "He is the Master."

"He had *no right* to do that to you!" Tarrin hissed in sudden fury, laying his ears back as his eyes exploded from within into the unholy greenish aura that marked his anger. The girl flinched away from him again, looking to want to fall backwards off the divan and crawl across the floor, but something kept her absolutely rooted to the spot. He gave her a chagrined look and quickly calmed down, his eyes returning to normal as he put a paw on her trembling shoulder. "I didn't mean to frighten you," he said ruefully. "Now maybe you see why it's best you stay with Dolanna. My temper is going to get the best of me for at least a few days, until I completely calm down and get all this out of my head. I don't want to terrorize you, even by accident."

Standing up with the girl looking up at him with a mixture of fear, surprise, and the first hints of elation at having been taken from that horrible place, Tarrin closed his paw into a fist and debated the wisdom of going out of the room. He was still broiling inside, and the scents of the Sha'Kar all over the hallways and chambers were going to make it worse. But he needed to get the girl some clothes, and he needed to go find

Dolanna. It would be best for her to get her into Dolanna's care as quickly as possible. He was obviously making her afraid, and he didn't want to continue tormenting her like that.

The door opened again, and Tarrin's reaction was swift and immediate. Kimmie found herself staring at an incensed Were-cat, eyes glowing, ears back, fangs bared, feet wide, back coiled, and claws ready to rend her apart. "Tarrin!" she said in surprise, stopping in the doorway. "What's gotten into you!?"

Tarrin realized it was his mate, then blew out his breath and calmed down, standing fully erect again. Kimmie looked at him in surprise, then noticed the human with his vest over her sitting on the divan. And the other divan knocked over. "Uh oh," she breathed as she closed the door and entered the room. "What happened?"

In a tightly controlled voice, Tarrin told her what had transpired. About meeting her on the street and scenting the way they used her, and then delicately going around revealing she was a Druid. He only told her that he sensed *potential* in her. Then about the confrontation with her master. His voice became filled with rage when he told her about how the Sha'Kar had tortured her with magic.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Kimmie asked fearfully.

"I almost did," he seethed. "I don't know how I managed to stop myself. I put the fear of the Goddess into him, though. He won't set a foot out his house until a month after we're gone."

"He deserves it," Kimmie said vindictively. She sat down beside the girl, who started trembling again. She flinched a bit when Kimmie put a paw on her shoulder, keeping her eyes closed. "It's alright, little girl," she said in a soothing tone. "I'm not going to hurt you. Such a pretty little thing," Kimmie said, picking up the wealth of the girl's dark hair. "Could you fit one of my dresses for her? She needs something other than that towel and your vest."

"It wouldn't be too hard."

Kimmie stood up and offered her paw to the girl. She looked at her worriedly, and put her hand into Kimmie's large paw, but wouldn't get up. "What's the matter?" she asked her.

"The master told me to sit," she said in a small voice.

Tarrin snorted. "I told you not to call me that," he told her. "If you want to get up, you can get up. You can do anything you want to do, as long as you don't wander too far from me or one of the others."

"There, see?" Kimmie said with a gentle grin, pulling on her hand until she was getting up despite wanting to sit down. "Now let's get you into a nice dress. I think brown would be a good color for you, with your skin and hair. And I just happen to have a nice brown dress that won't take much shrinking to fit you." She blinked. "Oh, no! I forgot, I left it on the ship!" she moaned.

Without blinking, Tarrin touched the Weave and wove the complicated spell to summon an Elemental. He charged it with enough energy for it to last several hours, and set it into a form that was small enough to fit through doors. He also set it so it could be visible as a misty gray man-shaped cloud if it so chose. "I need to ask a favor of you," he said as it appeared. "I know it's a menial task, but it's very important to me."

The Elemental told him that no task is menial so long as it was a successful one.

"I'm glad you think that, because this is nothing more than fetching something for me," he said with a rueful look. "I can't go myself. Don't worry, you only have to go a few longspans. It should only take you a minute to get there." Tarrin looked around. "Can I borrow a piece of paper and a quill?" he asked Kimmie.

"Sure, let me get it out of my pack," she said, letting go of the girl's hand. She stood there looking confused, for as far as she could see, her huge savior was standing there talking to *nothing*.

"I need you to bring back a chest for me," he told the Elemental. "I'm going to give you a note to give to the people watching the chest for me, telling them exactly what I want them to put in the chest. When they're done, you need to bring it back here. Is that alright with you?"

The Elemental assured him that it was quite willing to do as he asked.

Kimmie brought him a quill, ink pot, and a piece of rumpled parchment. Tarrin sat down on the divan and scribbled out his note, in Wikuni. *To Jalis,*

captain of the ship. If you're reading this, you're standing in front of a cloud that just handed you this letter, he wrote. The cloud is an Elemental, and it was sent by Tarrin. It's doing me a favor. Go to the cabin I share with Kimmie and pick up the smallest chest by the bed. Open it, remove the books from inside, and replace them with Kimmie's clothes that you'll find in the larger chest beside it. Make sure to put the brown dress in the smaller chest, but as for the rest of the clothes, use your best judgement. When you finish, put the books you took out of the small chest into the large one and bring the small chest back to the cloud. It will take it and bring it back to me. Oh, and to let you know, Queen Keritanima is doing just fine, he added. He figured that Jalis would want to know that. He signed it with his name and handed it over to the Elemental. "Make sure you become visible when you hand them that," he warned it. "I need you to go to a ship. It's anchored in a shallow cove on the south tip of this island. It's about ten or so longspans south. When you get there, become visible and present this letter to anyone you can find. They'll make sure it gets to the person it's intended for, and he'll take care of everything for you. He'll bring you back a chest. When he gives it to you, bring it back here to me. I'd really appreciate it."

The Elemental assured him that it could handle the task with little difficulty.

"Can you find your way out of this house?"

The Elemental assured him it could.

"Alright. We'll be waiting for you."

The Elemental told him it would return quickly, then zipped away, pausing only to open the door.

If the girl hadn't understood what just happened, she didn't show it. Then again, she was probably used to magical things happening around her. "The Elemental will bring us back some of your clothes, Kimmie," he told his mate. "I told Jalis to put more than just that one dress in the chest. I figured you'd want a dress too."

"You're right," she said, patting her hip, getting his attention on her breeches. "These things need to be cleaned, and besides, I hate pants. I much prefer a dress." She got a serious look. "What are we going to do now?"

"Well, as soon as we get the clothes, we'll give the girl here something proper to wear. Then, if you don't mind, could you take her to Dolanna? I think she won't be very comfortable with me until she gets used to freedom, and Dolanna can help her in ways I can't."

"That's a good idea," she nodded. "What's your name, sweetie?" Kimmie asked the girl.

"Zarina, Mistress," she replied.

"Don't call me mistress, it makes me sound like I run a brothel," she grinned. That put the girl back a little, but then she giggled in spite of herself. "My name is Kimmie. If you didn't notice, me and Tarrin are kind of a couple." She jerked a thumb at him. "Don't let him scare you, girl. He may look big and mean, but he's actually a pussycat when you get to know him. All that blustering is just for show," she winked.

"He's very good at it, Mistress," she offered in a meek tone.

"He's had alot of practice," she said with a wink at Tarrin.

Kimmie fussed with Zarina's hair after that, taking the girl in paw and trying to make her relax. Kimmie was a chatty soul, but she had a keen mind and understanding of both humans and Were-cats, and knew how to defuse people. She'd been doing it to Mist, and then Tarrin, for years, so she had plenty of practice at it. She managed to calm the girl down as she played with her hair, debating hairstyles with her that would make her look pretty. Zarina fell under Kimmie's spell quickly, and even almost laughed once when Kimmie made a light joke. She didn't completely relax, her conditioning as a slave made that impossible for her so soon, but she did calm down quite a bit, and her body language softened as Kimmie won over her trust.

The girl felt completely comfortable with the fussy Were-cat by the time the Elemental returned with the chest. It carried a letter as well, and as Kimmie opened it and found the brown dress she wanted right on top, Tarrin unfolded it and read it. *Good to hear you're doing alright, Jalis wrote back. This is the third one of these letters I've gotten since yesterday morning, but I don't think you know that. You had the same idea her Majesty did in having these magical servants deliver them. You should have been a little more specific about which dress you needed, because there*

were four brown ones in there. To save myself the trouble of trying to fathom the mind of a woman, I just put them all in there and I'll let Mistress Kimmie sort things out. Tarrin had to chuckle at that, and continued reading. Things here are going a little strangely. The steam engine did break down last night, for real, while Donovan was bringing it up to test an adjustment they were trying. Donovan says it'll take about five days to fix. The part that broke is in the middle, and they have to take the whole thing apart to replace it, then put it all back together, but they can't do that until they manufacture a replacement part. At least Donovan said he can make a replacement part without your help, but it'll take a couple of days. I don't understand all that technical mumbo-jumbo they throw at each other, but I did get the impression that this replacement part has to be very carefully made. I'd rather not lose another five days to shoddy workmanship, so I told Donovan to be damn sure he makes it right the first time. Anyway, I need to keep this short. Hope you got what you wanted. Jalis.

Tarrin folded the letter and nodded his thanks to the Elemental. "Do you want to go back, or would you rather fly around on your own and explore or something until the spell ends?" he asked it.

It seemed very pleased he would ask that, telling him that dismissing it now was what it preferred.

"Alright. Thank you for the help. I appreciate it. You can go now."

Tarrin Dismissed the Elemental, and a short gust of wind heralded its departure.

"Now this dress will look smashing on you," Kimmie said, holding it up to her as she still clutched his vest around her. "But first things first. No girl can get into a new dress without taking a bath," she announced. "Let's get you cleaned up and dressed, and then we'll do something with your hair," she said lightly as she pulled the girl towards the bathing room. "Then I'll introduce you to Dolanna. You'll like her. She's a gentle woman, and she'll take good care of you."

Tarrin let Kimmie work with the girl as he began to ponder what was going on. He still just could not believe what he had seen today. It was the last thing he would have ever believed would happen. What had happened to the Sha'Kar to make them change so drastically? It almost seemed unreal.

They acted like they were still *katzh-dashi*, abiding their return to the outside world, but if the two towers saw them do what he'd seen today, they'd throw them all out. If the Goddess didn't strike them dead on the spot first. She'd be even more outraged than he was, and may very well chastise her wayward children personally, in a most severe manner.

As Tarrin calmed down, slowly uncoiled from around his fury, he began to understand that finding out what had caused this radical change in the Sha'Kar wasn't as important as finding out from them where the Firestaff was. But seeing this made him see that if they would do that to a servant, then he was going to have to be *very* careful. If they opposed his seeking the Firestaff, they very well may come after him, and they would not be gentle. They wouldn't just defeat Tarrin and his friends, they very well may try to *kill* them. Tarrin could defend himself against Sha'Kar in small numbers, but if they built a big enough Circle manned with strong enough *da'shar*, he would be overwhelmed by them. Given how powerful these Sha'Kar seemed to be, he figured it wouldn't take much more than five or six of their strongest, five or six on the Elder Council. It would take several more of the lesser powerful Sha'Kar to overwhelm him without their help.

Things were going to get very tricky, he could see that. Sapphire wasn't with Kimmie, so Tarrin figured that Kimmie had set her loose out in the town and told her to see what she could find out. Keritanima, Dolanna, and Allia...were they going to be any help at all? They seemed completely taken with these Sha'Kar. Keritanima and Dolanna were spending more time getting drunk and partying than working, and Allia--what was he going to do about her? She was *acting* like a Sha'Kar! When he told her about this, she might turn on Allyn, or may even turn on *him*! She boasted that she had Allyn well in hand, but it looked to him that *Allyn* was the one holding *her* in hand. Allia was going to be a *very* touchy subject.

He couldn't believe what he was doing. He was *doubting* his sisters and friends. He actually wasn't sure if they were going to do what needed to be done. Allia only had eyes for Allyn, and Keritanima and Dolanna too seemed entangled in the Sha'Kar's honey coated net. In that moment, he doubted the wisdom of handing the girl over to Dolanna. Dolanna would be best suited to help her, but would she? Or would she ignore the girl to go to the parties and get drunk?

Dar. He seemed not as taken with the Sha'Kar as the others. He could depend on Dar. He could also depend on the others. Camara Tal and Phandebrass, Azakar and Miranda, Binter and Sisska. Miranda was in the best situation to help him find out where Keritamina's mind was, since she slept in the same bed with her.

Tarrin berated himself for going so far with his conjecture. They'd only gotten drunk one time, at one party. And before that, it was the drug that nobody knew was in the wine. That wasn't their fault, and he could forgive them for one night of partying. Everyone needed a break like that from things from time to time, even Dolanna. But Allia...that was another matter. He loved her, but could he *trust* her now? Had she been pumping Allyn for information, or was it Allyn learning all their secrets from Allia? If they were even thinking like that. Every time Allia looked at him when they came to his room last night, she was looking right through his clothes, undressing him with her eyes. Maybe she did love him, and maybe he did love her, and they were too busy dampening bedsheets to worry about anything else.

It was a grim, unbelievable thought, and it turned Tarrin's world on his ear. Ever since coming to the Tower, Allia was the one person he had trusted utterly. He still loved her, considered her his deepest, closest, best friend, but what was she telling Allyn? Allyn may have worn down her defenses and gotten her to reveal secrets. If he did, he really couldn't blame Allia. Even she wasn't perfect, and love made people do strange things sometimes. But could he *trust* her? If she had to choose between Allyn and him, who was she going to choose?

Tarrin saw the little rust-colored ball sitting on a bedtable near the bed, a physical reminder of his encounter with that Sha'Kar. He remembered Triana warning him never to leave pieces of himself laying around, and absently Transmuted the dried blood into a rough-surfaced ball of iron to destroy its danger to him. He needed to talk to the others. Preferably *without* Keritamina, Dolanna, and Allia there. He had to tell them about his suspicions, then talk to each of them alone to find out just what was going on.

Putting a paw to his amulet, he started the process. "Dar," he called. "Put your hand on your amulet and answer. I'll hear it."

"Tarrin?" his voice came from the amulet. *"I didn't know you could use your amulet to talk to me. What do you need?"*

"Find Azakar, Camara, and Phandebrass and bring them to my room. And swing by Kerri's room and ask Miranda to join us. Keritanima's probably still asleep, so let her sleep. We can fill her in when she wakes up."

"What about Dolanna?"

"Let her sleep."

"Alright. I'll go get them. We'll be there in a few minutes."

He could hear the uncertainty in Dar's voice. He wished he could have explained things a little better, but as Dar said, they were only a few minutes away. Besides, it wasn't safe to--

Tarrin blinked. *It wasn't safe to speak using the amulets!*

Why hadn't he thought of that sooner!?! These Sha'Kar were Ancients, and the weave that allowed that distant communication *was a common trick used by the Ancients*. They all wore amulets, they probably used that weave to talk to each other all the time! And if Tarrin could figure out a way, he could eavesdrop on those conversations!

All this time, one of the most effective and efficient ways to get an idea of what was really going on with the Sha'Kar had been sitting under his nose!

Well, there was hiding in the Weave, too, and he'd considered that. He could sit in a strand and weave out spells to see and hear what was going on in the real world without being seen. But these Sha'Kar were Ancients, and if he could sense it, then so could they. That's why he hadn't tried it already.

But he *hadn't* sensed the spell in the girl's tattoo, not until he physically touched it. He rose an eyebrow, wondering if the strong background magic that drowned out his ability to sense weak or distant magic wasn't also interfering with him detecting Sha'Kar doing the very same thing to *him*. If he thought of it, he was certain that they had. After all, they'd had thousands of years to get accustomed to falling back on tricks he had only learned over the last few months. That was probably the *first* thing they considered.

Tarrin felt a little stupid. Here he was, thinking of mundane ways to learn things from people that would always fall back on *magical* means of accomplishing the same goal. Allia said that they were totally dependent on their magic. If they were confronted with a task, the first thing they would do would be to figure out how to solve it with magic.

And then again, their utter dependence on magic, and their arrogant compulsion to automatically assume that Tarrin and his friends would behave as *they* did, seemed to him to be a hidden advantage. Tarrin would always think of a mundane way to do something, first, then resort to magic if he couldn't find a mundane solution to his problem. If the Sha'Kar couldn't think of any way to do a task aside from using Sorcery, then maybe those mundane ways of doing things would be things they'd never consider. Something as simple and easy as sending Sapphire to spy on them may be something that they'd never even conceive of, and that meant that it would work.

In any case, he realized that now he fully considered the Sha'Kar to be the enemy. He was already considering ways to get around them, and when the time came, to go *through* them. After seeing that male use Sorcery to torture that poor girl, he couldn't think of them in any other way. Maybe not all Sha'Kar were bad, as not all humans were bad, but he didn't feel that he could trust any of them. Even if he did like Iselde and Auli, he knew that they were Sha'Kar, and if they had to choose sides, they'd side with their own. They were enemies as well, though they were enemies Tarrin rather liked. He'd work around Iselde and Auli and make sure they didn't get hurt, but that was as far as his consideration would go.

Kimmie brought the girl out of the bathing room with wet hair, wearing her dress. It was too big for her, for Kimmie was much taller and had a more generous figure, the garment hanging off the girl like a sack, drooping down so low in front that the girl's breasts threatened to pop out of the neckline at any moment. "Well, it's your turn, Tarrin," she told him with a smile, motioning at the girl, who looked a little anxious.

Tarrin looked at her, then wove a spell of Fire and Earth that infused the fiber of the garment and caused it to shrink. He controlled that shrinkage masterfully, and the girl gasped as the garment suddenly pulled in, contracting to fit her perfectly. She looked quite the little lady in Kimmie's

dress, modified to show off Kimmie's cleavage for his benefit. It showed off the girl's pert breasts quite admirably. Dar was going to keep his eyes locked on her, he knew. Dar was Arkisian, progressive in outlook, but he had a certain weakness for girls. It was because of his age. He loved looking at them, but always did it when he thought they weren't looking. He wasn't sure why he did that, but he did. It seemed odd that he was quite willing to undress and bathe with a girl and not be embarrassed at all to look at her every charm, even scrub her back, but looking at a girl's bosom or her butt when they were hidden by a dress was something he didn't want them to know he was doing. Weird. But then again, humans were like that.

The girl looked down at the dress in wonder, picking up her skirts and looking down at herself. "It's beautiful!" she said in a meek yet impressed voice. "I've never worn such a beautiful dress! Thank you, Master, Mistress!"

Kimmie handed Tarrin his vest back, which he shrugged over his shoulders and set in place. Kimmie was still in her vest and trousers, her breeches a little wet from the water in the pool. "I think she's alot cuter this way," Kimmie said to Tarrin, tapping her cheek with a finger. "When you have it all hanging out like that, it doesn't pique a boy's curiosity and imagination. Not like hinting at what you've got."

The girl blushed rosily. "When a Master wants me, Mistress, I must serve," she told her in that same programmed tone that told him she was reverting to her conditioning.

"Well, not anymore," Kimmie told her. "You'll go to bed with a man only if *you* want to. He'll have to court you and woo you, and that can be alot of fun sometimes."

"I've never been courted before, Mistress," she said hesitantly. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"We'll teach you, don't worry," Kimmie said with a smile.

"As you wish, Mistress," she said absently, continuing to admire her dress. "I hope it doesn't mean that I can't serve a Master, though. Sometimes, with the right Master, it can be very sweet."

"That's a healthy way of looking at it," Kimmie told her. "I was afraid that them doing what they did to you would make you frigid. But now you

get to decide which man you allow into your bed. You can make sure that *only* the right man is with you, to make it a sweet experience every time."

"What is frigid, Mistress?"

"A woman afraid to go to bed with a man," she answered. "Some human women get like that if men abuse them. And you were definitely abused."

There was a knock at the door, and Dar opened a moment later. He had the others with him, as well as Sisska. Sisska was the one that commonly accompanied Miranda when she was alone, and Binter stayed with Keritanima. He was probably with her now, watching over her as she slept. "We're here, Tarrin," Dar said. "Everyone you wanted."

"Come in and close the door," Tarrin said in a grim tone, a tone they could tell meant that he was not happy. They filed in as Tarrin set the divan back upright, and beckoned for the girl to sit down. She did so immediately, fussing with her skirts as she sat and waited for her next order. Kimmie sat down beside her, which made her seem to relax a little.

"Everything changed today," Tarrin announced with a grim look at them after they joined him at the divans. Camara Tal and Miranda were sitting on the divan as the others stood behind and around it, forming a semicircle facing the two Were-cats and the unknown girl wearing one of Kimmie's dresses. "I got a good look at the true nature of the Sha'Kar today. And it chilled me."

Grimly, methodically, and thoroughly, he related the story of what happened that morning. He left very little out, even going so far as telling them about the way they'd sexually abused the girl, but he intentionally omitted the fact that her being a Druid was the main reason that made him take the course of action he did. But then again, even if she wasn't a Druid, he probably would have done something about it. Their violation of her had struck a nerve in him, that same nerve left open and raw from his experience at the hands of Jula's collar.

"I can't believe that they would do that!" Dar gasped as Camara Tal shook her head grimly, and Phandebrass had a rather resigned, disappointed expression. The look on Azakar's face was one of barely contained fury, and Miranda looked shocked. "It's against everything they teach us in the Tower!"

"I know," Tarrin growled. "The little fawn is with us now. I couldn't just leave her there to be used like that, and certainly not to be tortured."

"I just can't believe that they did that," Dar said, over and over again. "They seem so *nice*!"

"They're nice to you because your'e a Sorcerer, Dar," Camara Tal grunted. "You don't see the way they look at me or Zak or Phandebrass. To them, it's like we don't exist. When that man used magic against the girl, he probably thought of it along the same lines as punishing a dog for staining the carpet." She snorted. "You may be surprised, but I'm *not*."

"It's going to cause problems," Tarrin said in a strangely cold tone. "Kerri and Dolanna are quite taken with the Sha'Kar. And Allia--" he closed his eyes and turned his back to them. "I don't know how she's going to react to this."

That made them all quiet for a long time. If even Tarrin wasn't sure what Allia was going to do, then *nobody* did.

"What do you think we should do?" Dar asked him.

"What we're doing now," he replied, looking over his shoulder at the young man. It wasn't right to call him a boy anymore. He was sixteen now, nearly seventeen, grown tall and with the faint beginnings of a moustache. "But now it's very important to finish here soon. If I stay here too long, I'll kill someone."

"So, we're back to square one," Camara Tal growled. "Find the Firestaff."

"And try to work around the Sha'Kar doing it," Phandebrass added. "I say, there are some things that don't add up about them. I read that book you got from Iselde, Tarirn, I did. Did you know that there are some three hundred or so Sha'Kar who are missing?"

"Missing? Missing how?" Dar asked.

"I say, I'm not sure. The book mentions every death of a Sha'Kar since they arrived. But I sat down and did some math, I did, comparing the numbers of those who arrived and the births in relation to the deaths. There are three hundred and forty-one Sha'Kar who, according to the book, should

still be alive. But they're not here, they're not. It's as if the book simply stops mentioning them, and they vanish from the island."

"I didn't notice that, Phandebrass," he admitted. "I didn't think to count the Sha'Kar."

"Trust Phandebrass to do something like that," Dar grinned.

"It took me a little digging, it did, but I found that almost all of the missing Sha'Kar were firstcomers," Phandebrass said, patting his robes meaningfully. He rifled his pockets and his pouches, then his eyes brightened and he pulled a piece of parchment out from under his hat. "Ah, here we are," he said, then he started patting his robe again. "I say, where did I put that parchment?"

"It's in your hand, you old bat!" Camara Tal snapped at him.

"It is? Oh, here it is." Tarrin almost chuckled. His mind was completely preoccupied, and that made him a bit scattered, as usual. "Yes, here it is. Three hundred and ten of them were firstcomers, and most of the disappearances took place between the third and fourth centuries of their exile here. There were thirty-one other disappearances, scattered from the fourth century to fifty years ago."

"That doesn't explain why the Sha'Kar have gotten nasty, old coot," Camara Tal said sourly.

"No, but I say, it's a mystery. I find mysteries to be irresistible."

"The third century. That was the century of the plague, and then the volcano erupted and burned the city fifty years afterward," Tarrin mused.

"It still doesn't mean anything," Camara Tal pressed. "We have more important problems. Like what we're going to do about Kerri, Dolanna, and Allia."

"I say, that's a touchy subject. They're friends with the Sha'Kar, they are."

"I just can't believe that they'd do something like this," Dar sighed, putting his hand over his face and shaking his head.

"You can be disappointed on your own time, Dar," Camara Tal snorted. "Me, I'd rather bust some of their heads open." She looked at him. "Why

didn't you gut that miserable excuse for a life?" she demanded of him.

"Strange that you would feel that way, Camara," Azakar said stiffly. "Since you keep slaves of your own."

"My men aren't slaves like this," she snapped, glaring at him while pointing at the very quiet, very inobtrusive girl, who watched them all in a kind of fright-tinged interest. "Men are property on Amazar. Not only is that custom, it's the natural order of things. But men have *rights*. We don't torture them for fun. What kind of woman do you think I am?" she demanded hotly.

"I say, let's not start bickering," Phandebrass called. "We have enough trouble as it is without you two snapping at each other, we do."

"Put a sock in it, old man," she growled at him.

"All of you shut up," Tarrin hissed at them. "Phandebrass is right. We have a serious problem here, and we can't waste our energy biting at each other's tails. What are we going to do about Kerri and Dolanna?"

"Tell them," Kimmie said simply. "Give them the truth. They're going to find out eventually, so let's just put it all out on the table. If they don't want to believe us, that's their prerogative. If they decide that we're lying, then we go on without them."

It was a chilling statement, but Kimmie was right. Things were too important to stop, even if Kerri, Allia, and Dolanna chose not to continue on with them.

They were quiet and a little reserved. Keritania and Dolanna were the brains of their group. Without them, much of their ability to plan and organize was lost.

"Miranda, you know Kerri better than anyone," Tarrin said calmly. "What will she do?"

"She's devoted to our cause, Tarrin. Even if she were married to a Sha'Kar, she wouldn't take their side."

"I hope so, Miranda. I really do," Tarrin said grimly. "Everything's all mixed up now. The Sha'Kar showing their true stripes, Kerri and Dolanna,

and Allia--it's all just a big mess," he shuddered. "Of course, we may be blowing it all out of proportion."

"But we can't take that chance," Kimmie said calmly.

"We can't," Dar sighed in agreement.

"I say, we have much to do, and it turns out that we don't have much time," Phandebrass said. "I'm going to see if I can't get into the library at the main house. Dar, you should come with me. If I have a Sorcerer with me, they may let us in."

"I'll keep at the servants," Camara Tal said.

"Don't bother. Those tattoos they have are actually spells, and there are Mind weaves tangled up in them. We'll need Dolanna to pick through them and figure out what they do."

"Why can't you do it?" Camara Tal asked.

"Because they were made by a human," he replied. "You may as well ask me to write my name in the sky with the stars, Camara. I can't make out Mind weaves set by and affecting humans. It's a fundamental rule of Sorcery. Only those of similar race can be affected by or fully comprehend a Mind weave woven by another. My mind is too different to understand the nuances involved, because all Mind weaves are very delicate. The slightest shift in them can have a radically different effect in their targets' minds."

"It takes a human to understand a human's weaving," Miranda reasoned.

"Exactly. Dar doesn't have enough experience to do that kind of delicate work. If he makes a mistake, he could do permanent harm to the servant he was probing."

"Let's just hope Dolanna will do it for us," Dar sighed.

"I'm going to go pay a visit to Grand Syllis today," Tarrin said in a flat tone. "It's time me and the ruler of the Sha'Kar had a little talk." He flexed his fingers in a most ominous manner, extending and retracting his claws.

"Don't do anything stupid, Tarrin," Dar warned.

"I know I can't outrage the Sha'Kar yet, Dar," he said grimly. "But they know why we're here, and even if we're having trouble, we can't let them

forget about us. I have to remind them I'm still waiting. They're about to find out that a Were-cat has very little patience and an even shorter temper. Maybe a little good old-fashioned intimidation will shake something loose for us."

"I'm, going to go talk to Kerri," Miranda said. "She has to know this. I think it'd be best if it came from me."

"I'll talk to Dolanna," Kimmie said. "She and I are on good terms, and she knows that Were-cats don't lie."

"Let me deal with Allia," Tarrin said with a determined look. "When she finds out the cousins of her lover are monsters, she may take it out of the hide of whoever tells her. I'm best suited for dealing with her if she gets nasty."

"I don't think she'd do that," Dar said somberly.

"I don't know, Dar," Tarrin sighed. "I really don't know. And that scares me more than anything else."

Tarrin was in no mood for games. He stalked across the town, from Iselde's house to the massive central building at the center of town, the estate house of Grand Syllis, from which all official business was done. Everything about him radiated his bad mood, from his aggressive posture to his dark look, and the Sha'Kar in his path that started with flowery greetings trailed off to hesitant murmurs as he moved past them without so much as looking at them. None of them followed him, at least overtly, as Sha'Kar and a few humans in those shimmering robes began to congregate in a group that moved behind him by degrees, frantic whispering and pointing taking place. That the honored one was finally making an appearance among them was one thing, but for him to be so angry! All of them whispered that their hosts had done something to displease him, and he was on his way to the Grand to arrange quarters more suited for his eminence. There were other rumors, that a servant had insulted him, for the servants had gossiped that the honored one had taken one of Thalen Briliani's servants back to his estate, then carried the servant out by the hair some moments later with the entire household watching him leave from the door. But those rumors were unsubstantiated so far. Sha'Kar began to appear at

their gates as he passed, word spreading my means of Whispering and amulets ahead of him. The Whispering he heard, a warning to all to stay out of the honored one's way, that he was obviously upset over something. It would be audible to any who was *da'shar*. The *da'shar* warned off the youngers among them, heading them off before they moved to greet the honored *sui'kun* and quite possibly brought shame on themselves. The honored one was obviously on his way to the Grand, so the Sha'Kar simply got out of his way. The Grand was the one who should receive the honored one and help him solve whatever problem that had upset him so.

He kept looking straight. If he lingered his gaze on any one Sha'Kar, he may prematurely lose his temper and do something rash, so he kept his eyes on the building with the Illusions that moved gracing its walls, kept his eyes on his goal. The Grand.

They were waiting for him, of course. He was expecting it. Two Elder Sha'Kar were standing at the door in the shimmering robes, bowing to him before his feet touched the stairs up to that most austere of entrances. They led him into a receiving hall about the size of a noble's manor, stunningly done with chased gold etched the walls like vines of ivy, frozen in their climb to the ceiling. The light glowed from the walls, light that bothered Tarrin in a way, for it never dimmed, even when it was night. The Sha'Kar lived inside their homes in eternal light. He was led between immense staircases with silver plates on the steps, down a cavernous passage with an arched roof that had incredibly detailed paintings along its surface, Sha'Kar after Sha'Kar looking down on them in gentle benediction. Then the Sha'Kar gave way to silvery, web-like lines that crisscrossed the ceiling and the walls, even the floor, an artist's rendering of the Weave and its many strands. Then, at the end of the passage, was a set of double doors, upon them painted a relief of the Tower of Six Spires, in Suld. The detail was exacting and precise, and though the city skyline beyond the seven towers was unknown to him, the towers themselves were quite recognizable. It was the Suld of a thousand years ago, a Suld that had buildings as large as the Tower's main spire surrounding it. Not like the Suld of today, with its slapdash architecture that was a blend of old and new, Sulasian and other architectural styles.

Those doors opened, and he found himself looking in on the council chambers of the Elders. It was even larger than the receiving chamber, but it

was completely empty. It only had a single round table in its exact center, sitting atop a raised dais just like the daises upon which the Sha'Kar beds stood. The table had nine chairs, and seven of them were occupied. The two leading him took places at the empty chairs, and then sat down. Eight male and female Sha'Kar wearing those shimmering yellow robes, and the ninth, the Grand Syllis, decked out in his golden splendor. That one, with the serpent-like face and the golden eyes under golden hair, matching his golden robe, stood up and opened his arms. "Honored one, welcome to the Chamber of Wisdom," he said in his nasal voice. "We have awaited you."

Tarrin summoned all his courage, all his will, and used it to push down the irrational, almost uncontrollable urge to go flying across that table and take off the arrogant ass' head. For a long moment, he dared not speak. All he could see was the girl, Zarina, writhing on the floor. All he could hear were here shrieks of mindless agony. His vision even hazed over with red, a clear warning to him he was bout to snap, but tight, controlled breathing and an unshakable knowledge that attacking the Council would get everyone killed kept his fury in check. *The key to living with the rage is to learn how not to hurt those you care for while in rage*, Triana had told him so long ago. In this case, he had to keep from hurting his friends by *not* flying into a rage. And so far, that had been enough.

"You know where I am, Syllis," Tarrin said in a cold tone. "If you were so hungry for my company, you should have paid a call."

"We have been busy with your quest, honored one," he said smoothly. "I personally and all of the Council have consulted our books of history and lore. But I regret to tell you that we found nothing of use to you within them. I am sorry we could not help you, honored one."

Syllis was an accomplished liar. Had Tarrin hadn't had prior experience with Allia's scent, he may not have been able to smell the lie in Syllis' own scent. But it was there. His heart's rhythm changed slightly, his breathing shifted, and the faint fear-smell that came with lying appeared briefly in his scent, though it took it a moment to cross the table and reach Tarrin's nose. He was silent during that time, as he waited for the scent to reach him, staring at Syllis like he could kill him with a gaze. That brutal stare made the members of the Council shift a little in their seats, and one of them, the

shortest female, pulled at the neck of her shimmering yellow robe uncomfortably.

"I'm sure you did your best," Tarrin said in a tight voice. "We'll be here for five more days, as the ship we came in is repaired to make it seaworthy. When it's ready, we'll be leaving."

"And how many will be leaving with you, honored one?" the Grand asked with a penetrating stare. "From what I've heard, your Lost companion is being courted by the nephew of your host. And I've heard that your *da'shar* servant and the Wikuni are enjoying our hospitality quite enthusiastically. Will they be leaving with you, or perhaps, will they stay and learn our customs? It would behoove both us and those in the towers for some of their own familiar with us to be there when we return to our ancestral positions within the towers. To smooth over any wrinkles that may arise as the humans readjust to us," he said with an oily smile.

Was the man *trying* to set him off? The members of the Council seemed a little fearful as Tarrin's clenched fists shook briefly, and his expression became absolutely intense. What did the man know? He knew that Allia was indeed being courted by Allyn. Did he know how much it upset him? Did he know that Tarrin wasn't sure if he could trust his own sisters and the one human that had been his friend from the first day he'd been turned Were? Just what did he know? Whatever it was, it was putting the Sha'Kar at an advantage over him, and he needed to even the playing field. He needed a reply just as shocking to them as that had been to him. "They can stay if they wish. But I'm taking a few of yours back with *me*," he said. "Two of your human servants."

"Yes, I've been informed. Whatever the servant did, and whatever you intend to do to her, I know you'll be glad to hear that we will bow to your judgement in punishing her."

"That has nothing to do with it," Tarrin said, his eyes narrowing. Perhaps this *was* a good time to reveal that little bit of information. "I'm sure you'll be glad to get rid of them, Grand."

"Why is that, honored one?"

Tarrin gave him an absolutely monstrous, thoroughly evil little smile. "They're *Druids*."

That one word sent a barely perceptible but monumental shockwave through the Council. He could see every one of their faces stiffen, every one of their jaws clench.

"H-How do you know that, honored one?" he asked in sincere concern.

"I'm a Were-cat, Syllis," he said with a slightly smug look. "I can sense a Druid. It's part of what I am. It's something you wouldn't understand." He looked at them. "Since I can see that the idea of a Druid among you makes you uncomfortable, I'll be glad to remove them from the island for you."

They stared at him fearfully. Now he was certain that they were feverishly wondering what *he* knew. If they'd talked to that Sha'Kar he'd nearly killed earlier, they probably knew that he'd been outraged by his actions. If his actions were considered acceptable to all the other Sha'Kar, he knew that now they considered this a troubling problem. Tarrin was *sui'kun*, an honored one. He was one of the spiritual and political leaders of the *katzh-dashi*. That the honored one would show such violent outrage at an accepted custom among them could not make them feel very comfortable. He could see it in their faces. What did Tarrin know? Why bring up Druids? What did he know? He remembered them being so relieved when they found out Kimmie wasn't a Druid. That was the one thing they feared, above all others. But why?

Why? That was very simple. Druids could block Sorcery. They feared anyone that had power over them.

And they didn't know that their honored one was also a *Druid*.

"We, ah appreciate your concern, honored one, but that's not necessary," Syllis said. "We would welcome these Druids with open arms."

"I have a duty as a Were-cat to take them and deliver them to the Druids, Syllis," Tarrin told him calmly. "So they can be properly trained and take their place in *our* society. Which is much different from yours."

"Ah, yes, *Fae-da'Nar*. I remember fondly my dealings with them before the Breaking. They were an honorable and actually a quite pleasant group with which to work. You are right, of course. Your duty as a member of *Fae-da'Nar* would compel you to take the two from here and deliver them to the Druids for training. I completely understand, honored one. You may take them with our blessing."

Tarrin missed something. Syllis was calm again, even if the others at the table were not. Something Tarrin said had bled the worry out of him. What had he said? Nothing that could have relaxed the man, that much was certain. Just that he'd take them back with him because they needed to be trained--

--maybe that was it. If they weren't trained, maybe Syllis wasn't afraid of them. At least not yet. After all, they couldn't do any harm until they were trained in the ways of Druidic magic.

"Would your servants on the ship like our assistance?" Syllis asked. "I'm sure our magic can help them finish their work and return you to your most important task."

"What they're doing is very delicate, and they'd be insulted if you barged in on them, Syllis," Tarrin answered coolly. "They'll finish on time. And it's only five extra days."

"As you wish, honored one," he said with a very relaxed posture. He was completely calm now. "Are you comfortable with your hosts? Would you like us to get you anything special?"

Tarrin looked at him. He was just too calm now. He had to stir him up again. A calm man wasn't apt to blurt things, where an upset man was. He quickly and furiously tried to think of something that may be a little controversial, but not outright damaging, like how he knew about the spells in the tattoos or something that would touch on his outrage. He didn't want to lose control of himself right now. Then he remembered Phandebrass' ramblings. It was something at least, something to buy him some time to think up something *good*. "Actually, I was wondering about something, and since I'm standing before the pearls of wisdom among the Sha'Kar, this would be a good time to ask."

"We will help in any way we can, honored one," Syllis said grandly.

"Me and the human Wizard read a book on your history since coming to the island, that our hosts gave us. It was an interesting book, but you see, some of its numbers don't add up."

"Excuse me, honored one?"

"Well, by our reckoning, there are three hundred and forty one Sha'Kar that are *missing*," he said calmly. "Their names appear in the book as arrivals or births, but there's no listing of their names concerning deaths. They're not on the island, and yet there's no record anywhere of them dying or leaving that we can find. I was wondering if you could explain this mystery to us. It has us quite baffled, since your people are such excellent record keepers."

That hit something. All nine of them suddenly went pale beneath their brown skins, and they stared at Tarrin in shock. Tarrin had just thrown it out there because Phandebrass had mentioned it, and it was still very fresh in his mind. He'd needed something to try to stir them up, and it was the first, the only, thing he could think of. But to get a reaction like *this*? What did it mean? Why were they all so shocked, and now they looked *frightened*!

"You say you read this in a book, honored one?" the Grand asked, his voice slightly worried.

"A book given to me by Arlan's niece," he answered. "I think she got it from her family library."

"Well, it's not much of a mystery, honored one," he explained, his voice strained in its attempt to stay calm. "Those ones missing from the records died in the ceremony of Ascension. They tried to duplicate the miracle that got us through the Ward, tried to escape outside and let the *katzh-dashi* know that we are here, and wait for our exile to end. Most of them attempted it when the plague struck us, and again after the volcano erupted and destroyed the city. We don't list them as having died in our records, for it's custom for us to pretend that they still live, trapped in the weaving of the Ward, waiting to be relased when it fails. So they were never listed as having died."

Tarrin mulled that over, and found that his dates did more or less match. Phandebrass said most of them disappeared during that time. It was a reasonable explanation...but it wasn't a reasonable excuse for them to react so powerfully to him bringing it up. It was a good excuse...but it was still a lie.

Something else had happened. Something *serious*.

Whatever it was, it involved Iselde's father. They said that he died in the same ceremony.

"That does coincide with what we found," Tarrin said calmly. "Phandebrass will be very happy you could explain it, Grand Syllis. He's something of a nitpicker. He can't stand it when he finds something that isn't complete."

"Be sure to let him know we were happy to assuage his anxiety, honored one."

Tarrin nodded, realizing that this was a mystery, and a very important one. If he could find out what *really* happened to the Sha'Kar that disappeared, he would have a weapon so formidable against the Council that they would do anything he wanted. And the best place to start would be Iselde.

When he got back, he was going to kiss Phandebrass. The prattling mage, with his scattered thoughts and his half-baked observations, had struck on something that had put the fear of the Goddess into the Council and the Grand. Phandebrass' uncanny knack for noticing small details, often at the expense of remembering to eat or what continent he happened to be on, had become critical. The disappearances of those Sha'Kar was something *very* important, judging from the reactions of the Council and the Grand. It was something that he had to find out, and find out quickly.

Tarrin silently thanked the Goddess that it had stuck so freshly in his mind. He'd been looking for something, anything, to throw at the Council to unbalance them. He had struck gold. Absolute gold.

"I won't take up any more of your time, Grand," Tarrin said coolly. "I'll return to my host's estate. If you want to talk, you know where to find me."

"We will continue to search for you, honored one. If we find anything, we'll let you know."

"I'm sure you will," Tarrin said quietly, turning his back to them and walking away.

He had a piece of this puzzle now. Something to do with the disappearances of the Sha'Kar had frightened the Council when he brought it up. It was big, very big, something that he suspected would rock the

Council back on its heels. Now he just had to figure out what it was. Once he did, he would have the ultimate weapon to use against them, something that would secure their unswerving cooperation.

But there were other things to consider. There was coming a reckoning with Allia. He could feel it. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but it was almost hanging in the air. Allia was not going to take what he was going to tell her very well, and as strangely as she'd been acting lately, he had no idea how she was going to react. That frightened him. That he didn't know his own sister's mind...it was almost inconceivable. Allia's behavior had completely confused and worried him, because it was so irrational for her, and he didn't know how she was going to react when he broke the news about Zarina to her. He seriously doubted it would come to blows, but as strangely as she'd been acting, he just wasn't sure what was going to happen. She would either calmly accept his information, not believe him, be angry with him for telling her, or become furious with either him or Allyn. He fervently prayed that her reaction was not a violent one. Allia was Selani, and that meant that if she reacted with anger or outrage, if she felt her honor had been violated, she would strike to kill if she lashed out at Allyn. She wouldn't kill Tarrin if her anger was directed at him, because he was as her brother, and Selani did not kill Selani. It was the most sacred law of Fara'Nae, their goddess. That didn't mean that she wouldn't beat him senseless, but she wouldn't kill him.

At least that would be the *Selani* reaction. If Allia was acting like a Sha'Kar, there was no telling what she would do. She may very well forget her Selani custom and attack Tarrin, and attack him with intent to kill. She was one of the few living things that had a good chance of pulling that off, and that was why he had such a foreboding feeling about this.

His day wasn't over. Not by a longshot.

Chapter 16

There was little time.

Tarrin could understand that now, saw it in the faces of the Council and the Grand as he walked back towards the estate hosting him, as Sha'Kar lined the sides of the pathways and along the fences and watched him go by. Their whispers echoed in his ears, burned at him, teased him. The Council now knew that Tarrin had hit on something quite damaging, and if he were them, he'd make sure that the explanation he gave out had been fully accepted. The fact that Tarrin *knew* they were lying was going to cause problems, and he expected for them to spy on him in any way they could from now until he left. He couldn't let them know he was on the trail of this mysterious secret. Not yet.

But there was another problem to deal with. Allia. That was a problem he did not want to face, but he had no choice. If she wasn't awake by now, he'd wake her and throw Allyn out--no, wait. It would be best if he stayed and heard what Tarrin had to say. But he couldn't alienate Iselde. He needed her information, and she was probably frightened enough after Tarrin turned on them when they barged into his room. He'd have to make up that lost ground.

Moving quickly and deliberately through the Sha'Kar that lined his way, his mind so preoccupied that their scents no longer induced his fury, Tarrin rushed back to the estate that hosted him with a long list of things to do. He had to tell the others about this, get them to work on finding out, but warn them that they were going to be watched the instant they set foot out of his room. So they had to do it *carefully*. If the Council caught scent of what he was doing, they may take drastic measures to put a stop to it. Though he hated them for what they had become, even Tarrin had to respect their raw power. If they attacked in concert, even Tarrin couldn't stand up to it for long.

Or could he? All this time, he'd been thinking like a Sorcerer. Now it was time to think like a *Druid*. Triana taught him how to defeat Sorcery. It could be done to a person, or it could be done to an *area*. He remembered clearly the fight he had with her in Den Gauche, when she protected herself from the power of his magic by nullifying it when it tried to come into the space surrounding her. Tarrin could use that same technique, cancel magic in an area surrounding the Council or cancel magic immediately around himself if they were spread out too wide, and that would protect him from them long enough to get close enough to attack them hand to paw. In that situation, they didn't stand a chance. The fact that he was a Druid was the most powerful weapon he had against them, and the fact that they didn't know he was a Druid made it even more potent. They'd never consider it, because of the stricture against a mortal being able to employ more than one order of magic. Tarrin told Iselde they had a long life span, but not that they were effectively immortal. And since Tarrin was a Sorcerer, the Sha'Kar would automatically assume that his powers worked the same way theirs did. That he was a Sorcerer with minor Priest powers, associated with his status, but nothing else.

Tarrin reached the gate of Arlan's estate faster than he thought he would, and used the same spell that Iselde had used to gain entry. The gate swung open for him smoothly, and he marched right by it without giving it a second thought. The elaborate front door opened for him before he reached it, one of the serving girls curtsying to him fearfully in the foyer, but he didn't even see her. He swished right by her, moving so fast the wind he was causing disturbed her hair, and was immediately down the passageway that would lead to his borrowed room.

When he arrived, he found Kimmie and Dolanna sitting on the divans, facing each other and talking. Sapphire was perched on the top edge of the inclined side of the divan, preening her scales, and the serving girl sat self-consciously beside Dolanna, picking at her skirts. Dolanna's face looked haunted, an expression he'd seen on her before when she found out the Council and the Keeper had had Tarrin turned, and after Faalken died. Kimmie had obviously laid down the facts for her, and from the looks of it, what she heard had horrified her. That was a *good* sign. If she was that horrified by what she heard, she wouldn't continue her descent into their decadent lifestyle.

"Tarrin," Kimmie called after they turned to see who came in. "What happened--"

Kimmie cut herself off as Tarrin stalked right by them, then stopped. He sent out his awareness into the room and carefully inspected that Ward that he had absently raised not long ago, a Ward that, by some grace of the Goddess, he had set to defeat attempts to spy through the Weave as well as prevent eavesdropping. Its integrity was good, but it was weakening as the charged magic he set into it began to wane. Tarrin reset the weave slightly, spinning a small strand out from the nearest strand and anchoring it to the heart of the Ward in a manner that he had seen around them, a manner he had actually used before. The strand, connected to the core of the weave, would supply it with an endless supply of magical energy. It rendered the Ward permanent.

Dolanna sensed what he was doing, her eyes speculative as he turned and looked at them. He didn't look at her too long, however, staring at his mate. "You told her?"

Kimmie nodded solemnly.

"What do you think, now, Dolanna?" he asked bluntly. "What do you think of the Sha'Kar?"

"I find it hard to believe that it happened, dear one," she sighed forlornly. "Had Zarina not been here to confirm it, I would not have believed it to be. But I cannot deny the truth. I think that not all Sha'Kar are like that, but still, it is something that I cannot condone."

Tarrin was inwardly ecstatic. At least Dolanna had seen the truth, and for one, she wasn't willing to explain away or try to defend the Sha'Kar for that heinous act. Dolanna was with them. That was one. Now, they had to convince the other two. Tarrin continued on with relief evident in his voice. "You may be right," Tarrin admitted. "But I'm not taking any chances now. Not after the talk I just had with the Council." Tarrin told them about his meeting, how they had shown little concern of the two Druids, and then the bombshell that Tarrin had quite accidentally dropped among them. "You should have seen how they reacted to that, Dolanna," he told her earnestly. "I thought they were going to faint! When I see Phandebrass again, I'm

going to kiss him for his nitpicking ways. If he hadn't have been prattling on about that, I wouldn't have said it to the Council."

"I don't think he'd like a kiss from you, Tarrin," Kimmie teased with a grin. "But if this is that serious, then we need to find out what really happened to the other Sha'Kar. If we do, and the Council *knows* we know, they may suddenly get very cooperative."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Tarrin told her with a nod. "But now that they know that I know something about it, I think they're going to watch all of us like a hawk. They're not stupid. I think they know that I saw their reactions when I mentioned that. They'll suspect that I suspect something, and they're going to watch us very carefully to make sure I don't follow up on it. If I were them, I wouldn't lay off until was convinced that the explanation I gave for it was completely believed."

"You have a suspicious mind, dear one. Not everyone is like that. But in this case, we cannot be too careful," Dolanna admitted with a serious look.

"And whatever we do, we'd better do it *fast*," Tarrin said. "Somehow, I get the feeling that the Council isn't going to sit on this for long. The instant they get a whiff that I'm not completely content with their explanation, they very well may come after us. We need to keep them from knowing what we're doing, but because it is so serious, we'd better find out quickly. The longer it takes, the more dangerous it's going to get for us." He looked at the nervous girl. "Are you well, Zarina?" he asked her.

She jumped a bit. "I am well, Master," she replied instantly.

"I have much work with her ahead," Dolanna said, glancing at her. "But there is hope for her."

"I hope you don't mind me dropping her in your lap, Dolanna, but I couldn't think of anyone else better suited to help her than you."

"A appreciate your confidence in me, dear one. And your trust," she added with a sober look. "I know she is important to you."

"Her and that redhead are the two greatest treasures on this island. Probably even greater than the Firestaff. At least from a Were-kin's point of view."

"There's another one?" Kimmie asked in surprise.

"The redhead that serves in this house," he replied with a nod. "I haven't claimed her yet because she's right where I can keep an eye on her. But this one, this one needed to be where I could keep her safe," he said, reaching down and lifting Zarina's chin with a finger. She stared up at him with wondrous eyes, shocked that anyone would think she was worth anything.

"Do you think it was wise to tell the Council what she is?" Dolanna asked.

"What can they do?" he shrugged. "They're happy I'm taking them with me, and I think that since they're not trained, they don't feel they're a threat. Syllis calmed right down when I told him I'm taking them back and they need to be properly trained. I think he thought I meant that they had their power already before I said that."

"Possibly," Dolanna agreed.

"They can figure out that this one is the first, but they don't know who the other is, so she's safe," Tarrin continued. "All things given, though, I think I'll be tracking Arlan down today and telling him he's losing a servant. I think it'd be smart to put them under our wing now, so they're not wandering around out there with wolves stalking them." He withdrew his finger from Zarina's chin, but she continued to look up at him with those fawn-like eyes. "We need to tell the others what's going on," he told them. "I'll leave that to you, Dolanna. I need to go see Allia."

Dolanna's expression darkened. "She does not know yet?"

He shook his head. "As strangely as she's been acting since we got here, I'm not sure what she'll do, Dolanna. If she loves that Sha'Kar boy enough, she may turn against us."

"That would be unthinkable!" Dolanna gasped. "She is your *sister*, Tarrin! Think about what that means to her!"

"What it means to a *Selani*," he corrected. "She hasn't been acting like a *Selani*, Dolanna. She's been acting like a *Sha'Kar*."

That put a worried look on her face, and she nodded.

"Bring the others in, Dolanna, and explain things to them," he told her. "Make sure you do it here. Remember, the instant you set foot out that door,

you're going to be watched. Everything you say out there is going to be on the Council's table before you take in another breath."

"If that is so, is it wise to tell Allia where it can be overheard?" Dolanna asked.

"They already know why I was so outraged, so it's not a secret, Dolanna," he said. "They also seem to know about Allia and Allyn, so again, it wouldn't be a stretch that I would confront her over this." He blew out his breath and clenched his fists. "I can't put it off any more," he announced. "I'll be back soon. Pray I don't come back alone."

Tarrin left the room, grim and foreboding. The fact that he had no idea what was going to happen worried him more than anything else. Before coming to the island, Tarrin could have predicted exactly how Allia would have reacted to such news, almost predicted exactly what she would say. But things were so crazy now. She was so...so taken with Allyn, and he'd affected her behavior so severely, it was like she was a different person. Not knowing his sister's mind was the one thing that worried him more than anything else. More than the Firestaff, more than the Council and the Grand, even more than Kimmie's safety. Allia could be extremely volatile if she was approached the wrong way. Tarrin prayed fervently that she hadn't changed that much.

He found her in the room she had been given, and as he expected, she wasn't alone. She and Allyn were still in bed, sleeping, when he opened the door without knocking. Again, another indication that Allia was not herself. The Allia he knew would have been awakened instantly the moment he put his paw on the door handle. But she still slumbered peacefully, splayed out on the bed with Allyn's arm thrown over her chest. He looked at them, then remembered that the Elders were watching, so he laid a Ward over the room that would make their conversation a private one, then he stepped inside to get it overwith.

Tarrin felt his heart pounding in his chest. He didn't want to do this. Allia was happy. Despite what he knew, despite everything that was going on, Allia was quite happy with Allyn. And now he had to try to drive a wedge between them, and that pained him. She had always been there for him, always supported him, even in his darkest moments. He didn't want to have to do this. He didn't want to have to tell her the truth. But he just

couldn't leave this alone. Allia had to know, had to decide for herself how she wanted to see it.

Tarrin took in a deep breath.

"Allia."

Her eye snapped open, and she whipped up to a sitting position with all the speed and reflex of a desert-born warrior. Those beautiful sea-blue eyes focused on him, and then she did the one thing he never expected.

She *laughed*.

"Tarrin!" she said in relief. "I haven't been startled like that since I was a sand-eared child! What brings you to my door this early in the morning?"

Her light mood vanished when she saw the grim look on his face, the stiffness of his posture. The fact that his tail was stock still behind him and his ears were partially back told her much. Tarrin was *extremely* uncomfortable, and that drained away her smile.

"Mmff," Allyn groaned, his hand seeking Allia out. "Come back to bed, my heart. I can't sleep without you near me."

"Get up," Tarrin said in a nasty voice, his ears laying back as he regarded the Sha'Kar male.

That got Allia's attention. She gave him a penetrating, slightly hostile look as Allyn sat up in bed and saw the Were-cat, his expression slightly startled. "Oh, honored one!" he said. "I didn't know you were here. How can we serve you?"

That word caused Tarrin's back to coil. *Serve*. His fury with the Sha'Kar was starting to get to him again as he looked at Allyn. Had Allyn ever punished a servant like that? Did he know what went on? Did he approve of it? Allyn's reaction to what Tarrin was about to say was almost as important as Allia's, for his reaction would influence hers. He was sure of it. If Allyn was indifferent to the actions of his bretheren, it may make Allia more hostile towards him. If Allyn was also outraged, then perhaps this wouldn't be as bad as Tarrin feared it would, and it may give him hope that maybe not all Sha'Kar were as bad as he thought. But if Allyn denied it, then Allia might believe him, and that was where things might get very unpleasant.

Tarrin's hostile posture was not lost on the Sha'Kar youth. He leaned back and clutched the blanket with one hand, as his other sought out Allia's and clasped it.

"What troubles you, my brother?" Allia asked in slightly worried concern.

Her calling him *brother* made him wince. Was she truly his sister now? In a few moments, he was going to find out.

"What troubles me isn't easy to say, Allia," he said in a flat voice, glaring at Allyn. "It's not something you'll want to hear. I'm sure of it."

"Then it's best not to dance around the issue," she said calmly.

She was right, of course. So he did. Without emotion, Tarrin related her the tale of finding Zarina, and going back to her estate to have a talk with her master for the abuse they were inflicting on her, and then he watched her eyes carefully as he quite callously described the torture that the male had inflicted on the girl.

Tarrin was taken aback. There was *no reaction*.

"I don't see what's wrong with that," Allyn yawned. "Sometimes a servant needs to be punished. It's not like it does them any permanent harm. It's just a spell that induces cooperation."

Allyn had no idea how close he came to death in that moment. Tarrin's eyes exploded into their unholy greenish aura, the visible mark of his anger, and he reflexively extended his claws and opened his stance, his feet trembling to send him forward to rip off the boy's head. Allia saw that quick and extreme shift in Tarrin's mood, and quickly rose up on the bed, standing nude between him and Allyn, arms out wide.

"What has gotten into you, brother?" she demanded in Selani. "The use of pain as a teaching tool is an accepted practice among us. You know that! If the spell did the girl no true harm, then there was no harm done!"

He couldn't believe it. His eyes drained away of their aura as he stared at Allia in abject shock. But then his anger returned in full fury, and to his horror, now it was directed at *Allia*. "You would protect those who torture?" he demanded. "You would protect people who use the gift the Goddess gave

us to inflict harm like that?" he hissed. "It's the first rule, Allia! Never use Sorcery to harm another except in self defense!"

"It's not as if you haven't done much worse with your *own* power," she shot back. "Should we count the number of people who have died at the hands of your Sorcery, brother? Fifty? A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand?" She glared at him. "I supported you and loved you because you are my brother. But can you stand there and accuse in moral purity when I know how much worse you are than *them*?"

There was nothing she could have said that could have been more devastating to him. The wounds that those actions had inflicted on him had never healed. They were raw, open, they still plagued him, and Allia knew it. She had struck at him with words that were like daggers, seeking to tear him apart. She knew him so well...so she knew exactly what to say to inflict upon him the most harm.

Tarrin's eyes blasted back to their green radiance, and he bared his fangs at her. Her attack on him in his most sensitive area had caused his fury to boil out of him like the volcano not far away would boil out lava and ash. How *could* she? How could she say that to him, when she knew how much that hurt him? How could she have changed so much in three short days? He glared at her viciously, her protected status in his mind degrading more and more by the moment. His sister would *never* have said that to him. The woman he loved would never have been so cruel! Who was this woman? Whoever she was, it couldn't be Allia!

"Leave, Tarrin," she said coldly. "When you can come back and see things rationally, as they truly are, instead of how your past flavors them, we'll talk about it. But until then, leave us."

Tarrin hissed in a furious voice, his injured soul bare on his face, twisted by his mask of suppressed rage. "I will *not* leave!" he said in a tight, deadly voice. "Who are you, *sister*?" he demanded with hot eyes. "My sister would never have said that to me! The woman I know and love would not shrug me off like my opinions and concerns didn't matter!"

"My love for you is the only reason I'm not trying to take off your head," she replied coolly. "I think your fears are misguided, and maybe unfounded. That you would come in here and accuse my Allyn of such

things in front of me is dishonorable. You know that to insult the honor of my lover is the same as insulting mine!" She glared at him. "Custom forbids me from killing you to avenge my honor, so to lay bare your greatest secret is suitable vengeance to satisfy my honor. There are many kinds of pain, brother. Inflicting that pain is the satisfaction of your slight on my honor."

"Is that so?" Tarrin said in a low, very dangerous tone. "So, there is nothing wrong with securing their cooperation, is there? So long as it does no true harm?"

"There isn't."

"So be it."

Tarrin raised a paw, and then clenched it. He had a good memory, and remembered how the spell was done. He wove that same spell and then released it.

The target was not Allia. It was Allyn.

The Sha'Kar youth suddenly sucked in his breath, and then shrieked in mindless agony, clutching at his stomach. He convulsed on the bed, kicking Allia's shins so hard that he swept her feet out from under her. She tumbled on top of him, but was violently thrown aside as his wracking convulsions pushed her away, as he continued to scream in mindless agony, his feet slamming down onto the bed so hard the entire bed shook with each blow. Allia jumped atop him and grabbed his arms, trying to pin him down, but the pain-induced power of his arms was too much for her. She got clear of him, looking at him in terrible concern, and then turned a seething, furious face on her brother.

"Stop this!" she shouted. "Stop it *now*!"

"I'm only using pain as a way to teach, Allia," he said in a deadly cold voice, his expression utterly emotionless. "It is perfectly acceptable. You said so yourself. After all, I'm doing him *no true harm*."

She glared at him, her eyes hot, as Allyn continued to shriek behind her.

"Are my fears misguided now, sister?" he demanded. "Am I overreacting? *This* is what that Sha'Kar did to that girl. Is this acceptable in the eyes of the Selani? Is this an honorable way to teach?"

"You lie!" she accused, tears forming in her eyes. "It cannot be! Release him, brother! You're killing him!"

"I am doing him *no true harm*," he hissed. "It's a spell that induces the nerves to *believe* there is pain. Nothing more, nothing less. This is only half of what I could do to him, sister. Do you want to see the spell at its full power?"

"Let him go!" she demanded, reaching down over the bed and coming back up with one of her shortswords. "Don't make me force you stop, Tarrin!"

With the opening of his paw, Tarrin let go of the spell. Allyn stopped screaming, stopped writhing, sucking in his breath between racking sobs, coughing and nearly retching on the bed. "You'll find him to be completely unharmed, sister," Tarrin said in a cold tone. "As I said. I did him *no true harm*."

"How *could* you?" she demanded, tears forming in her eyes as she threw the sword aside and literally dived down to Allyn, cooing gentle words to him as her hands checked him for injury.

"How could *you*!?" he shouted back at her. "Am I something to just throw aside now that you have him? Do I matter to you at all, Allia? The sister I know would have at least *considered* my side of the story. She wouldn't have just dismissed me like I was nothing!"

"Does your jealousy of Allyn make you so vindictive?" she shouted at him. "Are you angry that I finally found someone other than *you*? Does it infuriate you that I'm happy, Tarrin?" she demanded. "Did you have to come here and try to destroy my happiness?"

"I was hoping that Allyn would agree with *me*," he said in a voice that could not conceal his regret. "I was very happy that you are happy, Allia. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do was come in here and jeopardize that happiness. I wanted Allyn to be with us, to be part of our family. But this is something that just could not be left alone. *My* honor wouldn't allow it."

"You *lie*," she hissed through clenched teeth. "You have no honor, *brother*," she sneered. "May the Holy Mother wipe the brands from you!"

That was it. She said he had no honor. Among the Selani, that was about the worst thing that one could say. She had told him that he was now nothing in her eyes, and if she could, she would take his life.

She had rejected him. Utterly, completely, and irrevocably rejected him. To her, he was now nothing. Only an empty shell that should be deprived of its life at the earliest available opportunity.

The sadness of that washed away his anger, left him feeling cold and empty inside. His sister...gone to him. No more long talks, no more laughter and sharing secrets, no more of her soothing presence with him to make all the bad things stay away. All of that was over now. She had made her choice, and she had chosen against him. In a manner that had burned the bridge behind her. Now that it was said, there was no going back.

His tail drooping, his shoulders slumping in defeat, he bowed his head and stared at the floor. He could hear Allyn's labored breathing, hear Allia's tightly controlled breaths as she tried to contain her anger. "I'm sorry you feel that way, sister," he said in a quiet tone. "I really am. But know this. If you are not with me," he said, his eyes erupting with incandescent white light as he raised his head to look at them, "then you are *against* me." He raised a paw, limned over with Magelight.

It hung there for a long moment, as Allia stared at him in steely resolve, not showing any fear of him, despite how easily he could destroy her. "By all rights, I should strike you down here and now," Tarrin continued. "Both you *and* him. You know too much about me, and that information could get me killed if you decided to give it over to the Sha'Kar. But I won't do that. You may not love me anymore, but *I love you*. I can't hurt you. Not now, not ever." He allowed the Magelight to dissipate, his eyes returning to normal, and then he turned his back to them. "If you ever loved me, Allia, then keep your silence. Out of respect for what we once shared, if anything else."

There was nothing more to be said. The space between them was like a wall to him now, separating them, and he could feel it growing wider and wider. He walked away from her, walked away from his life, feeling like someone had just torn out his soul.

Sacrifice, he remembered the Goddess said. That he may have to sacrifice, that the Elder Gods wanted to make sure that he could make the

hard decisions that must be made. There had been no harder decision than that, no sacrifice greater. Tarrin had just destroyed one of the most important cornerstones of his very existence. He had turned Allia against him. There was nothing worse that could possibly be done.

Allia watched him go, her mask of fury breaking after he longer looked upon her. She began to cry softly as she held Allyn's head, putting her cheek against his fine hair, her eyes locked on the small, almost unnoticable dark spots on the floor where Tarrin had been standing.

The water of his tears.

They knew it had gone badly.

They came to visit him, but it was as if here dead. He sat on a divan, his expression blank, his body rigid and motionless, head in his paws and hunched over. He didn't hear their words, didn't register their presence as the dark, black reality of what had happened assaulted his mind, assaulted his soul. Not even Kimmie could rouse him from his black depression, something that had Dolanna so concerned that she couldn't bear to leave his side. There was nothing but the pain of his loss, nothing but the echo of Allia's voice in his mind.

You have no honor...you have no honor...you have no honor....

He had no idea how long he was like that. The light glowing from the walls eliminated any sense of time. He only became dimly aware things had changed when he felt Kimmie's inhumanly strong arms pick him up, and then set him gently down in the bed. He felt nothing, saw nothing, only the hole inside him, the loss of something that had mattered more to him than life itself. It consumed his consciousness, threatened to suck him down into its unfathomable depths. Were it not for Kimmie's closeness, her touch, her sweet voice in his ear murmuring to him, and the memory of the life she carried inside of her, he very well may have let go and drowned in that sweet unknowing blackness willingly.

That had been what had finally made him claw his way out of that black pit of despair. Kimmie's closeness to him reminded him of the world outside, her gentle touch on his shoulders and face and neck recalled him from the emptiness inside, and her murmuring about how beautiful their

child was going to be, how strong, how much joy it would bring to both of them, it was enough to bring him back from the emptiness.

Tarrin registered his senses. He was laying on his back in the bed, and Kimmie was sitting on the edge, staring down at him with concerned eyes, her paw stroking his face as her other held onto his own in a crushing grip. Her expression didn't match the gentle composure of her voice, as her worry and fear were clearly stamped on it, and her scent betrayed her wild panic at seeing him that way.

"Tarrin," she said with a relieved, gentle look as his eyes fluttered, and he looked up at her. "Are you alright?"

He sighed. "No," he said honestly. "Kimmie, she--"

"Don't talk about it," she said with tenderness, putting a finger over his lips. "We know. I'm so sorry, Tarrin. I know how much she means to you."

Tarrin sat up, and accepted her gentle embrace. He held her close for a long time, letting her scent drown out everything else, feeling her closeness, allowing her to comfort him. He was surprised to hear that she was crying, felt the wetness of her tears on his shoulder. She sniffled ruefully. "Here I promised myself I wouldn't be all weepy for you," she told him. "Some comfort I am."

"Kimmie, you're exactly what I need right now," he told her in a powerful voice.

She held him a while longer, and then pushed out so she could look at him. "She, she went to see Dolanna. She tried to give her side of the story, but--" she looked away. "Dolanna was very cold to her. She showed her Zarina and really let her have it. Dolanna said that it was like she was doing everything she could not to look at the girl or face the facts. Dolanna said it was like she was possessed or something. Maybe she didn't mean to hurt you, my mate," she told him delicately. "Maybe it was just her anger talking."

Tarrin heard her words, and something just *clicked*. It was a realization, or at least a hope of one, something that he realized may come back to help him later. If he did things right. But it did little to soften the newness of his pain. No matter what he was thinking, the raw wound Allia had opened in

him would not close itself so quickly or easily. He still needed time to recover from it.

"No amount of anger would have made her say what she said to me," he sighed, feeling that hole begin to gnaw at his insides again. "She said I have no honor, Kimmie. That's the *worst* thing you can say to anyone who understands Selani custom."

Kimmie gave him a compassionate look. "Well, I'll always be here for you, Tarrin, whenever you need me. I love you."

He looked into her beautiful blue eyes, and then kissed her gently on the cheek. "You have no idea how honored I feel when you say that," he told her. "I'm not good enough for you, Kimmie. You should find some male that can love you with all his heart."

"A third of your heart is worth more than the hearts of all the other males put together," she said fiercely. "I'll take my piece of you and be happy with it."

"A third, eh?" he asked with a gentle smile. "What happened to half?"

"Mist gets the other third," she said with a teary grin. "We're your females, Tarrin, we're the mothers of your children. And you're our man. Jesmind, Mist, and me, we all love you. We love you so much that none of us can give you up. It's why we decided to share you." She gave him a tender look. "I know we can't replace what you've lost, but we can at least help the pain go away," she told him. "Let our love fill up what was taken away, my mate," she said in a whisper. "Let me take away your pain."

He looked at her with defenseless eyes, and she leaned down and kissed him with such exquisite tenderness that he could not help but be moved by it. If only for a moment, Kimmie's deep love for him did fill the void inside, did smooth away the gaping wound in his soul. He surrendered to her in that embrace, allowing her to do as she wished, for he knew that he could trust her. Trust her as much as he once trusted Allia...and still did. No matter how she felt about him, she would always be his sister, and he would always love her.

And if he was right, maybe that trust was justified.

He surrendered to Kimmie's kiss, surrendered to her touch, and then surrendered up to her his soul as she laid him back down on the bed. In that moment, he knew her love had conquered him. He knew in that moment that it *was* possible to love two women, equally and passionately. He would always love Jesmind, and her place with him would always be secure as his first mate. It was something that Kimmie herself understood, and accepted. But Kimmie was now his love as well, and when the time came, his sorrow at leaving Jesmind would be mixed with his joy of joining Kimmie. He could only hope that Mist would understand.

He had realized the hidden love he felt for his devoted mate on the same day his sister had rejected him. In the balance of things, they should have been equal. But inside him, one could never replace the other.

But if Tarrin was right, one would not have to try.

Kimmie's tender attentions had done a great deal for his state of mind, but none of them could miss the haunted look in his eyes, the defensive set of his stance as he regarded them. They were all there, all gathered in his room...all of them except Allia. Keritanima looked deeply embarrassed and hurt as she sat on the divan with Miranda, who looked stunned. The others, who weren't as close to Allia as Tarrin and Keritanima, still looked on with profound compassion and sorrow. Allia had been one of them, a member of their rather unusual family. But she had decided that a life with Allyn and the Sha'Kar was worth more to her than those she left behind. And so she too had to be left behind.

Tarrin summed up that mood with one three words. "Allia left us." They looked up at him in compassion and concern, but he wrapped himself in his duty to the Goddess, in his mission. *Sacrifice*. "But it doesn't change what we have to do. We have to move on. I'm sure Kimmie and Dolanna told you what happened when I visited the Grand."

"We can't leave her behind, Tarrin," Camara Tal said fiercely. "And we sure as the Abyss can't let her walk around now. Not knowing what she knows."

"Leave Allia alone, Camara. She's made her choice. She has to live with it now."

"She'll put us all in danger!" the Amazon argued. "If she tells that boytoy of hers what she knows, he'll tell Arlan, and Arlan is all but up the rear of the Council. Spends all his time with them, I've heard. They'll know exactly what we're doing and exactly how to stop us."

"She doesn't know everything, and it's what she *doesn't* know that's most important," Tarrin told the Amazon bluntly.

"She knows about me," Sapphire said in a calm voice. "It seems all that teaching was for nothing. My use as a spy is pretty much well over."

"Education is never a waste, my dear drake," Phandebrass told her. "Never a waste at all."

"I'd have to agree with you, Wizard," Sapphire told him calmly.

Zarina gaped at the talking drake like it was the most wondrous thing in the world.

"Allia doesn't know about the missing Sha'Kar, or what we intend to do about it. And in a way," he said with a shudder, then continued in a brutal kind of tone, "it's best this happened *now*. If Allia really is telling Allyn what she shouldn't be telling him, at least that hole in our kettle is patched."

"It pains me to say it, but Tarrin is right," Dolanna sighed.

Keritanima sniffled, and looked about ready to break down and cry. Miranda put her arms around her gently, and Dar patted her on the back from behind.

"We can't stop now," Tarrin said intensely. "Not when we're so *close*. Not even because of Allia." He looked at Phandebrass. "I want you to go visit the library at the Grand's house, and I *don't care how you do it*," he said adamantly. "Sapphire, help him. You can get in there without being noticed, and if he can't get in, he can tell you what to look for, and you can steal it. They may know you can talk, but they *don't* know that you know how to *read*."

"It will be done, Tarrin," Sapphire said in a calm, confident tone.

"Camara, Zak, I want you to take one more shot at the servants. I want you to find out all the rumors going around, no matter how outlandish or

crazy they may seem. New ones, old ones, even ones that they thought they forgot. All of them."

"That won't be a problem, Tarrin," Camara Tal said. "The head servant girl has a crush on Dar, and she seems to be the center of the rumors that fly around among the servants. He can take her to bed and boff the answers out of her."

"Must you be so *crude*?" Dar asked in a stiff voice.

"Crude or not, it'll work," she told him bluntly. "That girl can't stop talking to save her life. Once you get her naked, she'll talk about the things that she's not supposed to talk about along with everything else."

"Actually, she may not," Dolanna said. "I studied the spells that the Sha'Kar have placed on their servants. Among them is a Mind weave that interdicts speaking of things the Sha'Kar do not wish them to say. It is how they protect their family secrets that the servants overhear. Point this girl out to me, Camara. I can remove that interdiction without anyone knowing it, then replace it when Dar is done with her and block out the memory of her doing so. All she will remember will be a romantic encounter with Dar. She will spill all the secrets we wish to hear to Dar, and never know she did. That protects her *and* us."

"Why not just take her to a room and make her talk?" Dar asked hopefully.

"There must be a valid memory to cover my work, Dar," Dolanna told him. "You act like we are forcing you to move a mountain."

"It's just that I don't feel comfortable sleeping with a stranger," he said with a blush.

"After you get her naked, she won't be a stranger anymore," Camara Tal snorted.

"I thought we didn't want to move fast, Tarrin," Kimmie cautioned. "Sending Phandebrass to raid the central library? Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"Circumstances have changed," Dolanna said grimly. "If Allia completely betrays us, then we do not have much time. The Council will know we suspect they are lying about the Firestaff and will know we intend

to discover the truth. So we must move *quickly*, before they can find out what Allia knows and move against us."

"Just the point," Tarrin sighed.

"Then let's just shut Allia up," Camara Tal said with an ugly tone.

"*No*," Tarrin said. "Leave her alone, Camara. Allia may have left us, but she can't abandon her feelings for us that quickly, no matter how much she likes Allyn. She knows that anything she says to him will end up in the Council's ears. She's no fool. She'll keep quiet, at least for now. But they'll get to her eventually. I'm counting on it," he said in a fierce voice.

Kimmie and Keritanima looked at Tarrin strangely. Tarrin obviously had some kind of a plan, and it looked like he wasn't going to clue them in on it.

"What matters right now is to learn as much as we can before they can get Allia to talk," he told them. "Because when they do, they're going to discover that I'm a Druid. And when that happens, there's no telling how severely they're going to react to the news. Their sense of security over the fact that they can handle me is going to disappear when they find that out. I don't think they're going to be quite so willing to let me run around when they find out."

That made them a little quiet and sober.

"Now listen to me," he said calmly, yet intensely. "I don't want anyone going around alone. Not now. Everyone will have someone with them all the time. And I mean *all the time*. You're going to have to double up in the rooms, and don't even go to the bathroom unless you're in pairs. Pick a partner, and absolutely *do not let him or her out of your sight*. Do you understand?"

"Why is it so important, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

"Because, if I'm right, these Sha'Kar play dirty," Tarrin said with a grim look. "Dolanna."

"Yes, dear one?"

"I want you to check the others for evidence of Mind weaves every few hours. They always leave a lingering trace behind. I want you to check for tampering."

"I--" Dolanna said, then she gasped. "*Allia!*"

Tarrin nodded grimly. "I think she's close enough to being Sha'Kar for them to get to her," he said, revealing his suspicions at last. "She can't be *that* much different from them, not different enough to be immune to their Mind weaves."

"You think Allia's being controlled, Tarrin?" Dar asked in shock.

"It fits," he grunted. "She's been acting too strangely. It can't be anything else but that. Nothing else makes sense, even if she were completely in love with Allyn. And no matter how much she loves him, she would *never* have said what she said to me of her own free will. Not in a million years. It took me a while to understand that, but it's very true. Allia and me are too close for what she said to have truly come from her heart. I would have seen it coming a long time ago." He snorted. "In fact, I should never have taken her words for truth. I've suspected something was very wrong with her. And after I sensed the Mind weaves they used on Zarina, I should have realized that they'd do the same thing to Allia. The Sha'Kar *always* resort to magic to complete any task or chore, and finding out what we're up to is no different. They need information, they need a spy, and who better could they possibly have than one of *us* to be their eyes and ears?"

That made all of them whisper and sigh, and Keritanima got a sudden hopeful look. "Kerri," Tarrin said.

"What do you need me to do, brother?" she asked.

"Allia tried to talk to Dolanna, but Dolanna wasn't too nice to her," he said. "She'll try to talk to you. When she does, I want you to be nice to her. I want you to not abandon her, so she doesn't feel like we've completely rejected her."

"I can do that, brother, but it won't be easy," she sighed.

"It's important, Kerri. She's your sister. Sometimes siblings fight, and a third has to act as a go-between with the ones that are fighting. But I don't just want you to be her friend, Kerri. When she gets close enough and she's let her guard down enough, I want you to probe her for Mind weaves the same as Dolanna will for the humans."

"But she's not a Wikuni," Keritanima objected.

"You don't have to probe deeply, sister. Even I can sense it when someone uses a Mind weave, even if I can't understand what it does. But what you're going to be looking for will be very subtle, something only one with a similar mind could find."

"But I'm not Selani."

"No, but you *are* related to her. The Wikuni gods may have changed your bodies, but they didn't change your minds *that* much. I've noticed enough similarities between the Wikuni and Sha'Kar to understand that. Just get close to her, and check her."

"What do I do if I find something?"

"*Leave it alone*," he told her intently. "If they have tampered with her, I don't want them to know we know it. In fact, I'm counting on their hold over Allia. Do you understand?"

Keritanima looked at him, then realization dawned in her eyes. "Ohhhh!" she breathed, then she smiled broadly and even laughed, clapping her hands happily. "I understand! That's so *clever*, Tarrin! I'm so proud of you I could kiss you!"

"What?" Dar asked intently.

"Tarrin's going to use Allia to lead the Council around by the nose," Camara Tal told him calmly. "If they take whatever she says as the truth, then they'll believe whatever Kerri tells her."

"Exactly right," Keritanima nodded. "I know just how to play it, brother. I can have them eating out of my hand." She grimaced. "It's not going to be easy dealing with her like that, but I think I can handle it."

"We can spoon-feed them so much misdirection we'll have them running into each other trying to keep up with it all," Tarrin grunted. "Remember that you'll be watched at all times when you leave this room. So, a little word here and there to substantiate what Kerri tells Allia, and we've got them hooked on our bait."

"And off chasing a red herring," Miranda giggled.

"That's what all this activity is all about," Phandebraass realized. "You're not *that* serious about me breaking into the library, are you?"

"Of course he is," Miranda said. "Because it is what they would expect of us. And why not take the chance while we can? After they start getting information from Allia, they'll relax when they think we're not getting anywhere. She'll tell them that our adventure into their books turned up nothing of any value."

"Ah, I see," Phandebrass nodded. "But why should we move now?"

"For the same reason," Tarrin told him. "They have to know that me and Allia split, so they'll expect a flurry of activity. Kerri's going to tell Allia about Phandebrass and Dar boffing answers out of the servant," he said with a quick grin at his young friend, "and that's going to help make the Council think that Kerri's connection to Allia is too strong for her to break it off. They'll think they still have a window into our secrets, and they'll back off, content to hear what we're doing and arrange things to stop us from learning what we want to know. Sha'Kar don't like direct confrontation, and they don't want to tip us off that they know what we're up to. They'd be happier letting us mill around in seeming frustration. It's alot easier to handle us that way."

"Tarrin, when did you get so politically savvy?" Keritanima laughed. "That's *brilliant!*"

"It is indeed," Dolanna said with an appreciative smile.

"Actually, I didn't intend to tell you that," he said ruefully. "Only Kerri, so she could pump information to Allia. I wanted all your reactions to be genuine. But then I realized that if all the work I sent you on kept either coming up empty or getting interrupted, you'd suspect a spy among us. Now we know exactly who the spy is," he said, pointing at Keritanima. "There won't be any unforeseen complications. All of you just have to learn how to be good actors."

"Better feigned anger than real anger," Camara Tal grunted.

"So, the plan is to use Keritanima to feed false leads to the Sha'Kar, who will move to block our attempts to learn what we want to know. What will our real move be?" Dolanna asked.

"Our real move is the same as it was when we started this talk, Dolanna. Find out what happened to the missing Sha'Kar. Somehow, I'm sure that that's the missing piece. If we can find out what happened to them, we'll

have everything we need to deal with the Sha'Kar. When we do, I'm going to get my paws on Grand Syllis, and when I'm done with him I'll know what his mother called him in the cradle," he said with a seething voice, clenching a paw before him. "And repay him for what he did to Allia!"

"So, it comes down to that," Phandebrass nodded. "A mystery. I say, I love mysteries."

"So do I," Keritanima told him. "I think you and I are going to have a busy few days, Phandebrass."

"I do believe so, dear girl," he agreed. "I do believe so."

Tarrin's idea had a great deal of merit, but like most of his plans, it was heavy in guts but short in organization. Tarrin knew that he didn't make extensive plans well, tending to go by the seat of his pants and roll with the punches rather than create a detailed plan of attack. Keritanima, who was the plotter among them, holed up with Tarrin after their meeting and discussed exactly how to go about finding what they needed to know, where it might be hidden, who might know what they were looking for, and how to get at it without getting discovered.

They both realized that there was very little chance to discover what they needed to know from a book. If this information was damaging, it wasn't going to be lying around in a library. It may be in a personal journal, but that journal would be very hard to get hold of. They both agreed that their best chance lay with the Sha'Kar themselves. Many of them had been alive since before the Breaking, and they had to have seen what was going on. One of them had to know what they needed to know. The only question was how to get at it.

They sat down and puzzled it out. If it was damning information, it wouldn't be common knowledge. Tarrin and Keritanima had to agree that a member of the Council was their best bet, or one of the older and more eccentric Sha'Kar. But reaching ones like that wouldn't be easy.

Before they tried something like that, however, both of them agreed that getting more background information, learning as much as they could about the missing Sha'Kar and this so-called ceremony of Ascension would be a

good idea. They needed a base of information upon which to build, and that was going to require some research.

And few were better at research than political spies or Wizards. Miranda and Kimmie were pressed into service as the primary researchers, since Phandebrass would be too busy misleading the Sha'Kar to help them. Phandebrass, Dar, Tarrin, Dolanna, and Keritanima would serve to act as the misleaders of the Sha'Kar, the ones they had to pay most attention to in order to stop. That meant that their secret weapons in this were the ones that the Sha'Kar really didn't notice. Azakar, Camara Tal, Kimmie, Miranda, and Sapphire. Sapphire especially, since Allia didn't know the extent of the drake's capabilities.

And so they began. It was about midafternoon when Phandebrass took Sapphire out to raid the library at the Grand's estate, and Dar and Dolanna left so Dar could perform his rather unwanted bit of sexually flavored interrogation. Kimmie and Miranda visited Arlan's library to search for books that may have information they could use. Azakar was accompanied by Camara Tal as they went out to talk to the servants on the other estates, to try to discover some rumors from them. Binter and Sisska did as they always did, did what they could not be stopped from doing. Protect Keritanima and Miranda. Binter was with Keritanima in Tarrin's chamber, and Sisska was with Miranda in the library. For the moment, Zarina, who had not said a word all day, sat in his room with him, waiting for Dolanna to come back.

The pain of what had happened between Tarrin and Allia was still raw inside him, and it was something that he and Keritanima shared. Knowing that she may not have acted of her own free will didn't soften the pain as much as the thought it would. The words had still been said, and if he didn't feel pain at her rejection of him, he felt pain of compassion on how she would torture herself if she was indeed being controlled. But if she *wasn't* being controlled, as he suspected, if she had spoken truly from her heart, it would be devastating to him all over again. He couldn't believe that she had. He just couldn't. He'd known her too long, they'd been through too much together. She knew his heart, she knew he wouldn't be jealous of Allyn. She knew that he did what he did with only the greatest reluctance. He could only wait for Allia to come looking for Keritanima, so she could get in there and check Allia for tampering.

Keritanima, for her own part, felt nearly as bad as he did. They were a *family*, she and Tarrin and Allia. It hurt her incredibly that Allia seemed to have turned her back on what they shared, and she did more than a little crying into Tarrin's vest, now that the others couldn't see her in such a state. It was going to be hard for her to pretend in front of Allia, pretend to accept what Allia had done so long as she didn't break away from Keritanima as well. She too seemed bolstered by the idea that Allia had not acted willingly. She too had to believe that it had to be some kind of outside force that had caused her to turn against her own family.

She just *had* to have been tampered with. He was sure of it. It couldn't be anything else! All the strange behavior, the abandoning of her Selani custom, she'd never have done that just to please a boy. If anything, she would have made him wear desert garb to please *her*. She should have taken control of their relationship from the start, not conform herself to his whim and will as she had. Allia was alot like Jesmind like that. She would fight with her male, make him prove his strength to her over and over again. It was a Selani custom, just the way Var and Denai constantly fought with one another and competed with one another. It was how they kept themselves sharp, kept their ability and worth as a strong mate high in the minds of their mates. Allia wouldn't just knuckle under the way she had. It was completely against her very being.

The only question Tarrin really had was, how much did Allyn know? Had *he* enchanted Allia? Was he responsible for that? He doubted it. It would have taken a truly powerful and *very* experienced Sorcerer to tamper with Allia, because the simple fact of the matter was that she was *not* Sha'Kar. It would have taken someone able to deal with the differences between a Selani mind and a Sha'Kar mind, someone that could draw on the commonalities between them enough to perform delicate mental alteration.

Spyder had managed to perform a Mind weave on Jenna, and she said she could because of her extensive experience with the human mind. If they had a Sha'Kar among them with that kind of extensive experience with other Sha'Kar, he very well may be able to bridge the gap and affect a Selani, a descendant of their race.

Tarrin didn't have long to wait for things to start happening. About two hours after the others left, a servant came to the room looking for

Keritanima. The Wikuni was about to dismiss her, but when she said that Allia had sent her, she jumped up from the divan where she had been talking with Tarrin and ran towards the door, telling him she'd talk to him soon. Binter had to lumber along behind her to keep her from getting too far away from him.

After she left, Tarrin found himself alone. Alone in a huge, quiet chamber, alone with his pain and uncertainty over what happened to Allia. He decided that now would be a good time to try to listen in on the messages of the Sha'Kar when they used their amulets. He took hold of his own out of reflex and pondered how it worked. It caught the words and sent them into the Weave, where they would arrive in the other amulet and emanate from it as if the speaker were inside the amulet. The trick of it, he reasoned, would be to intercept those voices as they moved through the Weave, be in a position where they had to pass by him. The best place to do that would be in a Conduit, but he couldn't sense one with such strong background magic fouling up his ability to sense magic. The strands were so thick inside the Ward, it was like trying to look through a league of forest to see a boulder on the other side of a hill. His sense of magic was simply overwhelmed.

Tarrin pondered some more. Maybe he didn't have to join the Weave and seek them out. Maybe...he could bring *them* to *him*. They were magical spells, and they travelled through the Weave. There was Sorcery that could affect the Weave itself. Maybe....

It seemed possible. The concept of it was sound. It would be a pretty unusual thing to try, but he thought it was possible. After all, he had his own amulet to help guide him, help him sort through things and find what he wanted.

It wouldn't hurt to try, but not with his amulet. Doing something he probably should not do, Tarrin Created another amulet, being very careful to make sure it wasn't Conjured instead, and then set to work.

He knew what he wanted to do. He was going to empower this new amulet with a weave that would attract *all* voices in the Weave and make them come to it. Then it would touch them, read them, and then allow them to pass through to continue on to their intended target. The speed of magic in the Weave was beyond rational explanation, so there would be no lag

time to tip off the sender and receiver that their communication had been intercepted. The amulet would literally be linked to every other amulet on the island, even his own, and every amulet communication made would also be heard by him using that amulet.

Knowing what he wanted was easy. Doing it was not. Tarrin puzzled and puzzled, built several experimental weaves to test the theory, all of which failed. For over an hour he labored on it, continuing to design weaves that failed, one of which very nearly detonating in a Wildstrike, had he not been paying careful attention to it and moved to stop it from happening. He knew it could be done, he just had to stumble on the right combination--

No. This had to be something that someone else had thought to try at some time in the past. That meant that an echo of it may be in the Weave.

The Goddess said that he was strong with the Weave, that the echoes of the Weave would be drawn to him when he needed them. And right now, he *needed* them. Blowing out his breath, clearing his mind, Tarrin partially bridged into the Weave, opening his consciousness up to its power without leaving his physical body. He remained calm, using the techniques of meditation and concentration that Allia had taught to him--he had to struggle to retain his calm after thinking of her--and tried to draw the echo that he needed to him, the echo of the memory of how to eavesdrop on amulets. He felt the magic touch him, flow through him, calling out to the magic and beseeching it to come to his aid.

And then it was there. A floating echo of memory touched him, in the form of a weave formula. It was a suprisingly complicated spell, and even more suprisingly, it required High Sorcery to cast. Tarrin felt it ghost past him, but his memory allowed him to hold it in his mind, locking its image into his mind long enough for him to draw in the power of High Sorcery and duplicate what he had seen. It was a very complex formula that was built primarily of the flows Air, Mind, Divine, and the difficult to draw Sphere of Confluence, with token flows of the other Spheres to grant the spell the power of High Sorcery. It was woven with a strange looping knot in its heart that locked the flows together, a knot of sorts within its center that he realized would create a semi-permanent spell. Tarrin marvelled at it a long moment, wondering why he had never thought of that before. When a Sorcerer stopped maintaining a spell, the flows unravelled, and the spell

ended. But this strange looping knot in the weaving would make all the flows of the spell pull against one another when they tried to draw back into the Weave, pulling in opposite directions, using one another to lock themselves into place. It could only be achieved with High Sorcery, he realized, but its effect was very impressive. That spell would have the same kind of duration as a Ward, which meant that its duration would depend on how well he wove that looping knot in the center of it. If he wove it loosely, it would unravel in a matter of minutes or hours. But if he built a very tight redundant knot, it could last for rides, maybe even months.

Tarrin stopped admiring the ingenuity of the Ancients and snapped down the spell, paying special attention not to overly shift the weaving that formed the knot, then he released it.

The amulet in his paws shimmered with magical energy for a moment, and then it returned to normal.

Tarrin put his paw on it, knowing that he had to concentrate on the amulet to make it work, just like any other. He was rewarded almost immediately by a jumbled cacophony of many voices all speaking through the amulet at the same time. That startled him so badly he nearly dropped the amulet. But he patiently started picking through them, knowing from weaving the spell that he could suppress some voices and bring others to the top, where they could be heard clearly. He only knew nine voices, the voices of the Council, but there was much more to learn by listening to everyone, so he practiced by bringing only certain voices up to where he could understand what was being said.

He learned quite a few dirty little secrets during those couple of hours. The Sha'Kar used their amulets to talk to each other all the time, and they felt that they were secure enough to say very nasty things about one another using them. They loved to gossip, and the fastest way to spread gossip was to use amulets to talk to one another without having to bother with walking to someone else's estate. There were quite a few wild rumors about Auli, and the speakers, mostly girls, were very vulgar in their descriptions of them, how she would go to bed with more than one male, humans and Sha'Kar at the same time, even rumors whispered in the lowest voices that she had a fondness for young human girls. He didn't believe a fraction of what he heard, and in a way, he thought Auli probably revelled in so dark

and colorful a reputation. She probably started half the rumors he was hearing.

For two hours he practiced working with the amulet, until he had down how to listen to the many voices and listen for a word or voice that interested him, then instantly suppressing all the others and listening to that conversation. He learned how to couple up both sides of a communication so he could follow their chatting, since each voice travelled through the Weave on its own. And he learned that Sha'Kar loved to gossip and chat, and the more lurid and debauched the talk, the better. Even the most austere, distinguished members of the Sha'Kar were quite nasty once they got behind closed doors.

That surprised him. Being such an old, established culture, he thought that they'd be talking about something other than *sex*. That seemed too common for such a cerebral, introspective race. There was almost no talk of Sorcery, just gossip, gossip, and more gossip. Who was going to bed with who, and how kinky they were.

That was nothing like the Sha'Kar he'd read about in the histories in the Tower. Those Sha'Kar were very reserved, but not stuffy. They were wise and not showy, but they did enjoy humor and dancing and song. They were a very outgoing, progressive race, and even celebrated physical pleasure in several obscure ceremonies, they weren't half as utterly obsessed with sex as these Sha'Kar seemed to be.

It wasn't an obsession with sex, not quite. The race had become decadent, hedonistic, seeking only pleasure and entertainment. They had become slaves to their own desires, wanting nothing more than good food, good drink, gossip, fun parties, and physical pleasures. Their study of Sorcery had even taken a subservient role to their need for fun. Iselde and Auli proved that. Out of their day, they only studied Sorcery a couple hours at the most. The rest of it was devoted to gossiping, practicing singing or dancing or playing instruments, and going to parties. No true study of Sorcery, no practicing the old ways, no doing anything other than self-gratifying activities.

It seemed....*wrong*.

It wasn't the first time he had noticed such strangeness. The Sha'Kar male torturing that girl was just as wrong, just as unbelievable as what he was hearing now, but it didn't outrage him quite so much. How had the Sha'Kar changed so much in only a thousand years? What had caused such a radical change in them, for them to be so *different* from what they were when they came? When did they change, and how did it come about?

Unbelievable.

Getting a bit of a headache from the concentration, Tarrin tucked the enchanted amulet in an inside pocket of his vest and sat down to clear his head and ponder the things he'd learned.

Dolanna and Dar returned not long after that. Dar looked a bit sheepish, but Dolanna had a beaming smile on her face. "It worked," she told him. "The girl was very talkative."

"She was *listening* to us," Dar hissed in indignation, glaring at her.

"I could have been *watching* you, dear one," she told him with a penetrating stare. "Be lucky I respected your privacy as much as I did, but I did not want to take the chance that you missed something important."

Dar blushed furiously.

"After I removed the interdiction from her, I, ah, hinted to her that Dar had been depressed and needed some companionship," she said delicately. "Camara Tal was right about the girl's interest in him. She took the bait immediately, and Dar did his part. After he took her to bed, he drew out the rumors and secrets she knew."

"What did you find out?"

"Iselde's father died in the ceremony some ten years ago," she told him. "Their mother also died in the ceremony, five years before that. The girl was not alive then, but her mother was, and her mother had imparted the tale on her."

"She said that the Council showed up at the estate and took the woman into a room for a long time," Dar said. "She said that when they came out, Iselde's mother looked pale and out of sorts. She didn't talk to anyone or do anything. She said that the woman just stood there a moment with blank eyes, then walked out the door. They never saw her again. Renina said that

that's what happened to their father too. The Council showed up, took him into a room, and then he came out all blank and then walked out the door. She was just a little girl when that happened, but she saw him walk across the lawn, out the front gate, and towards the center of town."

"That is not half of it," Dolanna said. "Renina's mother was a house servant before she became too old to work inside, and she said that Iselde's parents would talk long into the night about strange things, and acted very secretive, even among the servants. That is very odd, for a Sha'Kar will make love to a spouse in the presence of a servant without thinking twice about it. It is as if they do not exist to them unless they need something done."

Tarrin nodded, pondering on their tale. "So it sounds like the Council is behind these disappearances," he grunted. "That seemed obvious before, now that I think of it."

"It is something," Dolanna told him. "Maybe the Council uses this obscure ceremony to eliminate potential threats to their power."

"That doesn't make much sense, Dolanna," Tarrin scoffed. "I've been listening in on the Sha'Kar, and from the way it sounds, they don't *have* any ambition. All they care about is the next party, the next meal, the next round of gossip, or who they can lure into their bed tonight. They're a very *shallow* people, I've come to discover."

"Are you sure?"

"I've been eavesdropping on them using their amulets to talk to each other," he told her. "It's all been a bunch of trivial nonsense."

"Tarrin, the amulets are not secure. Think. They would not say anything *important* while using them. That is why you hear nothing but trivial nonsense."

He frowned. "I guess you have a point there," he admitted. "They must use the amulets as some kind of magical gossip rumormill."

Phandebrass staggered into the doorway with Sapphire flapping in behind him. His arms were loaded with books. "I'm back!" he called, as Sapphire landed in Tarrin's arms and rubbed her head against his chest in greeting. "You won't believe what happened, you won't!"

"Well, what did happen?" Tarrin asked as Phandebrass set them on the table near the door.

"I say, they *let me in*, Tarrin," he announced. "Isn't that remarkable? They saw me coming at the fence, asked me what I wanted, and I told them, I did. They just let me in and told me I could take any book I pleased, so long as I bring them back in three days. I say, wasn't that nice of them?" He grinned brightly. "You should have *seen* their library! It was fantastic, it was! Three times bigger than this room!" he said grandly, waving his arms. "Shelves and shelves of books, in every language you could imagine! Sha'Kar books, human books in Sulasian, Sharadi, Mahuut, Arakite, Shou, and every regional language there is! I say, they even had Dwarven and Gnomish books!" he said in excitement. "But no Wikuni books," he amended. "But it was amazing! They wouldn't let me stay and read, of course, but they did say I could take home any books I wanted, so long as I bring them back in three days."

"You already said that, Phandebrass," Dar told him.

"I did? Sorry, I guess I'm a little excited, I am," he said with a beaming smile. "Where to start, where to start?" he wondered, looking hungrily at the pile of books.

"Why don't you take them up to the family library, so you, Miranda, and Kimmie can go through them?" he offered.

"Capital idea!" he agreed with a clap of his hands. "Now then, I say, let's get these books gathered up and get along!"

"Dar, help him carry them up," Tarrin said. "Remember, nobody goes out alone. Sapphire's staying, so you need to go with him. You can stay up in the library and help them until one of them is ready to come back down."

"Alright, Tarrin," Dar nodded. "I'd like to look at some of the books myself. Hold on, Phandebrass, you're going to throw your back out!"

Tarrin and Dolanna watched as Dar and Phandebrass split the burden between them and left. "I wonder how he managed to carry them all the way over here," Dolanna mused.

"He used a magical spell," Sapphire answered. "He remembered that you enchanted the room to block magic, so he cancelled it before opening

the door and carried the books in."

"Was there any trouble, little one?" he asked her.

"It went as the crazy one said, my friend," she answered calmly. "They saw us coming, and when they asked what we wanted, the Wizard told them. It was that simple. I thought he would at least try to use deception, but he is woefully inept at it."

Tarrin chuckled. "They just let you in?"

"They did," she affirmed. "One of the ones in yellow robes that Kimmie told me to watch for met us in a grand entrance hall, and then guided us to the library herself. She told us we could take any book we wished, so long as it was returned in three days' time."

"Perhaps they have nothing to hide," Dolanna speculated.

"Or perhaps they know there's nothing damaging in the library," Tarrin grunted in response.

"Perhaps. But sometimes the greatest clues can come from the most innocent-seeming sources. Perhaps what we need is waiting in one of those books for us to find."

"I hope so, Dolanna," Tarrin sighed, scratching Sapphire between the horns with a claw. "I really hope so."

"What do we do now, Tarrin?" Sapphire asked.

"I think today's been a bit too busy for something else, Sapphire," he answered. "Let's give Camara and Zak a chance to return with new information, and give Phandebrass and the others a little time. Tomorrow we're going to lead the Council around by the nose for a while. I don't want to start anything else until we have them on the defensive."

"And when we have them confused?" Dolanna asked.

"Then we find our answers, Dolanna," he said calmly, yet there was intensity behind his calm veneer. He looked down at her. "You said the greatest clues can come from the most unexpected places," he told her. "I have a sneaking suspicion that the answers we're looking for are all around us. We just have to talk to the right Sha'Kar."

"You sound as if you know where to start."

"I know exactly where to start," he nodded. "And if I play my cards right, I may get a chance to talk to them as early as tomorrow. I should be able to talk to them without it looking too unusual."

He knew exactly who he needed to speak to first. A pair of adventurous children. Tarrin had suspected from the start that Iselde knew something about the Firestaff. And Auli...dear Auli, always getting into trouble, always going where she wasn't supposed to go, doing things she wasn't supposed to do. Tarrin knew from experience that kids like that learned secrets. Dark secrets, terrible secrets, things nobody else was supposed to know. Secrets a girl like Auli was smart enough to keep a secret.

Secrets. Yes, Auli was a keeper of many secrets, whispered to her in the beds of the males, discovered in her forbidden wanderings. What secrets did she keep? And how would they help him?

He would find out soon. Very soon, he hoped. Maybe even tomorrow. Soon, he would have Auli's darkest secrets, when he was able to talk to her without the Council getting scent of it.

He only prayed they were enough.

Chapter 17

It was a tense night for Tarrin, but in its own way, it had a gentle beauty that he would not soon forget.

With all the insanity going on, with the pressure he'd felt over what happened with Allia and the Council, Tarrin had not had the chance to explore his feelings for Kimmie with her as he should. He did that that night, after finding out from Camara Tal and Azakar that they had nothing worthwhile to report, after Phandebrass, Dar, Miranda, and Kimmie had gone through the books and found nothing of worth for them. He sat her down on the bed, held her paws, and told her what he'd felt in his heart when she tried to comfort him after he returned from his traumatic fight with Allia.

To say that she was ecstatic was a woeful understatement. In their entire time together, through everything that had happened, with all of her confessions of love and loyalty and support for him, all she had ever wanted from him was his attention. She knew he loved Jesmind, she knew that Jesmind had a claim over him with which she couldn't compete. That he had told her that he loved her was far beyond anything she had ever dreamed. She knew already, of course--it was hard to hide anything from Kimmie--but to hear him say it to her, to hear it for herself, it was what she had hoped beyond hope to hear, a dream not dreamed except in her happiest meanderings. She laughed and cried and kissed him, then looked into his eyes and assured him that when they got back to Suld, she'd still be happy to step aside for Jesmind. After all, Tarrin promised her he would come back to her, and a promise among Were-cats was as serious a thing as one could give.

She was such a wonderfully understanding person. Tarrin felt so lucky to have her with him, so lucky Triana had the wisdom to see what he could not.

And after all, she couldn't hold onto him forever, just as Jesmind couldn't. She and Jesmind and Mist would have to wait by turns, so there was no jealousy in her heart. She had taken him for mate knowing that she would have to give him up. But she knew that in time, the wheel would come full circle, and he would once again be standing on her doorstep. That knowledge, that sweet knowledge, was all that she needed.

Tarrin laid in bed after a very passionate night with Kimmie and pondered the change in his life. Kimmie had made him forget all about Allia, if only for a little while. She had indeed taken away the pain, a pain he still felt when he thought about it. But it wasn't the pain of losing Allia now, it was the pain of uncertainty over what had motivated her to do as she did, the pain of knowing that she may be under the power of the Sha'Kar, the pain of knowing that maybe, somewhere inside her mind, there was the Allia that was his sister screaming and raging and struggling to break free, just as he had screamed and raged and struggled against the collar that had been put around his neck. Screaming in rage yet unable to overcome the powerful magic that controlled her, aware of everything she did yet unable to do anything more than watch in helpless futility. Tarrin knew that feeling well, still shuddered every time he remembered it. Was Allia suffering as he had? Did she know what she said to him, and how it had crushed his spirit? Or was she blissfully unaware of what she was doing under the control of another? He fervently hoped so. It would be so much easier on her if she had no idea what she was doing, and wouldn't remember it when she was free.

If she was under their control. Keritanima was taking her damn sweet time finding out. But then again, after the fight with Tarrin, Allia had to be very tightly wound, very defensive. It was going to take Keritanima time to talk her down, relax her, get her into a position where Allia wouldn't feel it when Keritanima checked her mind. Allia was a deceptive woman in many ways, and her power was the most deceptive aspect of them all. She was actually a very strong and well-trained Sorceress, and she would feel it if Keritanima went poking around in her mind unless she'd been specifically set up to be probed without her knowing. Only Tarrin and Keritanima could get her that relaxed, get her to lower her defenses that far. And since Tarrin was now her enemy, that left only Keritanima.

But that was a worry for tomorrow. That night belonged to Kimmie, only to Kimmie, and he wasn't going to ruin it by dwelling on things that he could do nothing about at the moment anyway. He held her close and mused contentedly how Jesmind was going to take this news. That she had to share him was bad enough for her. But to find out he loved Kimmie? She would probably have a fit. He'd have to break that to her very gently, and only after proving to her in lavish fashion that not only did he still love her, but he still loved her with a passion and enthusiasm that eclipsed what he felt for Kimmie. That wasn't entirely true, of course. Tarrin found that there was no love by degrees. There was no loving one person a little, and loving another alot. Love was love. Tarrin loved Jesmind, but he also loved Kimmie. He found that though his heart was divided, each one of them received all of his heart in their turn. He loved them because what Jesmind was, Kimmie was not. And what Kimmie was, Jesmind was not. They were diametrically opposing females, each representing an extreme of the spectrum of Were-cat behavior. Jesmind was blunt, coarse, direct, and exceptionally volatile. She was a pain in his butt, constantly fighting with him, challenging him, forcing him to battle her for control. She had a nasty temper, and she could hold a grudge forever. But she was also an exquisitely tender woman whose outward personality masked an incredible ability to love. When she was happy, when she was content, when she was feeling kittenish, Jesmind could be almost irresistably appealing. It was those moments of softness that Tarrin lived for, those moments where their love for one another outshined Jesmind's need to be contrary and showed the radiant woman lurking beneath the rough bark of her pretty exterior.

Kimmie could not be any different. She was kind, she was gentle, she was compassionate. She had no temper at all, and had a methodical intelligence about her that made her seem very wise. She had an incredible patience that seemed almost unnatural to Tarrin, an ability to wait and endure that far outstripped any other Were-cat's limits. Were-cats were not known for patience. And she had such a sincere, understanding nature, a kind generosity that seemed so out of place in a Were-cat. Kimmie would give of herself freely and expect nothing in return, finding contentment in the pleasure it gave her to help others. She was just as direct as Jesmind, but she was much more tactful in the application of her opinion, guiding with gentle suggestion rather than direct, possibly explosive statements. In many ways, Kimmie was the human wife part of Tarrin had always wanted, the

kind, demure lady that would nurture him and help guide him through the pitfalls of life with her exceptional intelligence and her keen understanding of him and their world.

Two women, so different, and yet so similar. Both Were-cats, though Jesmind represented the wildest of the wild nature of the Were-cat, where Kimmie represented the human aspect of their dual being. Jesmind was hot sensuality and passion, the intensity of the moment...the Cat, where Kimmie was gentle, boundless love, the comfort of long, nurturing relationships...the Human. That didn't mean that Jesmind couldn't show boundless love, or that Kimmie wasn't as passionate as any female he'd ever known. No matter how wild a Were-cat got, the human was always there. And in Kimmie's case, the Cat lurked within her, waiting for its release. Kimmie told him that she had a very vile temper, but it just took a lot to set her off. If that was true, he hoped he never saw it. As calm as she was the rest of the time, when she did finally go off, it would be an explosion of truly monumental proportions.

Two women, and yet both had found their way into his heart. Jesmind had done it with her fiery nature, catching his attention, as his own personality had somehow gotten to her heart long before she had found his. Kimmie had found love for him when she saw the compassion in him, the gentle giving nature that his ordeal had buried inside him, the gentle boy lost within the Were-cat's body. His act of healing Mist had bound him into Kimmie's heart, and she had waited patiently, quietly, calmly, as was her nature. She waited for her chance, and when it arrived, she got everything she had ever wanted when her own acts of kindness and love towards him had bound her in his heart as well. His love for Jesmind was born out of conflict, where his love for Kimmie was born from gentle compassion. Love and war, light and dark, smooth and rough, good and evil, they were two women who were opposite sides of a coin...but both sides were still the same coin. So it was with Jesmind and Kimmie in his heart, each on one side of it, yet both sides still being only part of a unified whole. He found that he could love them both without tearing himself apart trying to choose between them. He was lucky...he didn't *have* to choose between them. He could have them both.

Sometimes he thanked every god that was listening that he had been turned. All the pain he had suffered for it meant nothing when he thought of

that one wonderful fact. That he loved two women, and he didn't have to choose one over the other. That he could have *both*.

Not at the same time, of course. Jesmind would have a fit, and Kimmie wouldn't be very happy about it either. In their own ways, they were very similar in that regard. Both of them wanted his undivided attention. They wanted all of him, and weren't about to share him. Not even with each other. And given their personalities, he wouldn't be able to make both of them happy if he had to split time between them. Jesmind was way too high-maintenance, and Kimmie would be extremely unhappy with his lack of attention.

In that regard, Kimmie had to be worse than Jesmind. It wasn't exactly a flaw, but Kimmie could be *extremely* demanding of his attention, even more than Jesmind. She was almost like a human in that regard. But then again, she had warned him of that when he first took her for mate.

Snuggling with Kimmie could only last so long, though, for the sun had to come up eventually, and it would mark the beginning of what Tarrin expected would be an eventful day. There was a lot on the queue, and there wasn't much time to get it all done. But until the day did begin, it was still the night, and that night belonged to Kimmie. And he was going to enjoy every minute of it.

He leaned over his smaller mate and kissed her gently on the lips. Her eyes opened immediately, and those beautiful blue eyes stared up at him with undisguised happiness. "Still feeling frisky, love?" she asked with an impish grin. "Woop, nevermind. I just caught your scent," she added with a hungry look, her own scent showing how his interest affected her. "Come down here," she said with a throaty purr. He leaned down and kissed her, and quickly forgot what he'd been worrying about.

What they needed was cunning, sneakiness, and complete audacity. They needed someone that could think up ways to make the Council run around like beheaded chickens, scrambling to block one carefully devised plan after another that would come flying at them with such speed that they barely had time to catch their breath. They needed someone with no morals,

someone that would take devilish delight in confounding the opposition, someone that they couldn't out-think in those fast-paced games of nerve.

They needed Keritanima.

And get her, the Council did. All of her. After a furious night of planning with Miranda, the devious pair visited Tarrin before dawn that morning still wearing their bedgowns and, first off, alleviated Tarrin's long anxious waiting with the most important news of all.

"There *is* something there," she told him with a broad, utterly relieved smile. "There's some kind of trace in Allia's mind of a spell. I think it's a Mind weave, but it was too degraded for me to make anything out."

That made Tarrin's heart absolutely leap for joy. A great deal of the crushing pain he'd felt over his fight with Allia disappeared immediately, and Kimmie put her paw on his shoulder as he blew out his breath, then laughed in relieved delight. "That's the best news I've ever heard, Kerri," he told her with a happy look. "Mind weaves linger even after they dissipate, so she's probably still under the influence of it. Why didn't you come tell me sooner? I've been going crazy!"

"You know how long it took me to get at her?" she retorted. "I had to wait for her to go to sleep! And she was too wound up to sleep, so I had to talk her down to where she could! And *then* I had to get rid of Allyn!"

"He was there the whole time?"

"He wouldn't leave her side," Keritanima snorted. "I will say this. I may hate him for what his people did to Allia, but I really think his feelings for her are genuine, brother. No way what I saw was faked. Allyn loves her."

"That's going to cause a problem," Tarrin growled. "When I told Allia about the torture, Allyn acted like it was as right as rain."

"He's young, Tarrin. We can train him," she said with a toothy grin. "If Allia loves him, he goes with us. It's that simple. We'll make him see the light, even if I have to hang him naked off the mast and flog him."

"I knew there was a gentle quality about you that I loved, Kerri," Tarrin said with a light smile.

"I know. I'm just the sweetest little girl you'll ever meet, aren't I?" she asked with bright eyes.

After they revelled in the fact that they knew that their sister wasn't acting of her own right mind, Keritanima and Tarrin gathered with Miranda and Kimmie, and they got down to business. Sitting on Tarrin's bed, Tarrin and Kimmie not bothering to dress--it was *only* Kerri and Miranda--and with Binter and Sisska standing in silent protection over them, Keritanima outlined her plan to Tarrin. It was a devillishly clever plan that would send Azakar and Camara Tal, Dar and Phandebrass, Miranda and Kimmie, Dolanna and Keritanima, and Sapphire and Tarrin out on five independent missions, each with a totally separate goal. She would set it up that morning with a talk with Allia, where she would give only slight hints at what each team would be searching for. That would be enough for the Council to puzzle out what each team's objective was, and give them a chance to intervene.

They were very widely scattered objectives. Camara Tal and Azakar would try to talk servants at the Grand's palace to bring them a personal journal or private book of the Grand, even resorting to blackmail, bribing, sexual favors, or even physical intimidation. Whatever it took to get a servant to do what they wanted. Tarrin and Sapphire were going to take a worthless trinket that Phandebrass would enchant with a useless Wizard spell to throw off the Council and pretend that it could lead them to the Firestaff, then wander around the woods and hills surrounding the town like he knew where he was going. Dar and Phandebrass were going to take the books back to the library and go crazy looking for *one specific book*, and be wild and adamant about finding it. It was a book that they knew would be in the Grand's library, mainly because it was in Arlan's, and act like the secrets of the universe were in that book. Keritanima and Dolanna were going to talk to some of the youngest Sha'Kar in their social circles, friends of Iselde and Auli, and try to find out if there were any rumors of old relics being hidden on the island, as well as any other interesting tidbits. Kimmie and Miranda were going to do what they did last night, compile the information they'd received so far and see if they couldn't find a pattern or some bit of unnoticed information. Zarina would spend her day with Kimmie and Miranda, since they would be staying in the house all day, and they could look after the girl. She could even help, since she could read Sha'Kar.

Keritanima intended to set the plans in motion first, give the Council a little while to panic, then whisper her secrets to Allia and let it get back to the Council just in time to counter the plots before they reached their culmination. The plans centered on the Firestaff, not their primary goal, which was to dig up the dirt on the Council and blackmail them into cooperation. That protected their interests while forcing the Council on the defensive, where they could only react and couldn't actively interfere with what they were really doing.

Five separate plans with five separate objectives. It would spread out the Council and make them respond by misdirecting the servants or outright protecting them from the two humans, hiding the book--and every other copy of the same book on the island, heading off Tarrin, making the chatty Sha'Kar girls tight-lipped (which would be by far the hardest of all their required tasks), and attempt to infiltrate Kimmie and Miranda and disrupt their work. Some of the jobs may look easy, like hiding the book from Dar and Phandebrass, but those two could make it a very heavy chore by making a nuisance of themselves and interrupting the Council continuously to request the book. It also happened to put them right where they could hear what was going on. Keritanima and Dolanna expected that they'd eventually hear *something* of use to them before the Council managed to shut the girls up. Camara Tal and Azakar could quite effectively disrupt the smooth operations of the Grand's estate, where all the business of the Sha'Kar was done, by forcing them to pull back their servants and keep them away from the pair, thereby aggravating what could already be a very chaotic situation. But by far the most important of the tasks to worry the Council would be Tarrin. The *sui'kun* was very powerful, and if they thought that he may be on the trail of the Firestaff, he would take up a vast amount of their attention. They'd leave him alone if they thought he was going the wrong way, but if he did start moving towards it, Keritanima was positive that they'd have no choice but attempt to intervene. It would be obvious that they would, but they'd be forced to take steps to defend the Firestaff, as they all suspected they were doing already. That intervention may give them a clue where to look for real, depending on where Tarrin was when it came. Keritanima didn't think they were quite so stupid as to draw attention to its location that way, but her plan depended on them being forced to show their hand before the bets were on the table. They knew that Tarrin was powerful, and if he got close enough to the Firestaff by

wandering around, he would sense its presence. Above all things, the *absolute last thing the Council wanted* was for Tarrin to wander freely around the island. That one plan alone, Keritanima surmised, was going to cause the Council to go absolutely crazy, and may even make them do something rash to prevent him from leaving the town and going out where he could do irreparable harm.

Tarrin was impressed. Not only did all of Keritanima's ideas succeed in causing mischief for the Council, but they also had tertiary qualities that advanced their own cause. Keritanima was indeed extremely cunning. Even in a plan of delaying tactics, Keritanima still sought to get them to their objective.

Kimmie yawned languidly, stretching her arms over her head, even sticking her tail straight out behind her. "I guess we should get dressed," she told Tarrin. "We have alot to do today, and if we can get the Council out of bed early, maybe they'll be too sleepy or hung over to be very effective against us." She grinned. "Maybe one of us may actually succeed. You never know."

"Maybe," Miranda grinned.

"The idea is to harry them, not beat them, Kimmie," Keritanima reminded her. "But if one of us *does* happen to stumble over the location of the Firestaff today, I won't complain," she added with a toothy grin.

"That would be nice. We wouldn't have to keep playing with the Council. We could sweep them aside and do what we came here to do," Tarrin grunted, scratching at the fur on his knee. "Sapphire!" he called to the drake, which was sleeping on her little bed on the table across the room.

She rose her head blearily. "Yes, Tarrin?"

"You feel up to some exercise today? You and me are going exploring."

"Outside?"

"Outside."

"Yes!" she said emphatically, jumping up and unfurling her wings. "Get dressed, let's go! I need a good fly to exercise my wings."

"We have to stop by Phandebrass' room first," he warned. "We need him to do something for us."

"Let's go, let's go!" she said pushily, flying over the the bed and grabbing his tail with her forepaws, pulling on it. "I've been dying to go flying!"

"Let me put some clothes on," he told her. "I'll look a little strange walking around the town naked, won't I?"

"Why do you insist on wearing those ridiculous things?" she asked. "They seem useless, and you never seem to wear them for very long once you get inside."

"It's a foolish humanoid custom," Tarrin shrugged, crawling out of bed. "I don't see much use for it myself, but we always have to respect the customs of our hosts."

"True," she agreed calmly. "You should grow scales. They're much more useful than those clothes. Scales will help protect you from harm."

"If I could grow scales, it'd be something," Kimmie laughed. "I think I'll wear that dress Iselde gave me today," she mused. "I like the way it feels on my skin, and it doesn't pull at my fur the way wool does. Besides, I want to look good for when the cronies the Council sends comes and tries to interfere with us," she added with a wicked grin.

"You should wear silk, Kimmie," Keritanima told her.

"I can't afford silk, Kerri," she replied with a smile.

"Bother that. You're my friend. I have tons of silk dresses. You can have them if you want. We'll let you raid my closet when we get back to Wikuna."

"Sounds good to me," she grinned.

Tarrin dressed quickly, as Sapphire continued to impatiently urge him on. "I'll stop by Phandebrass' room and wake him up, and let him give me a trinket," Tarrin told them as he leaned down and gave Kimmie a long kiss goodbye.

"Be careful out there, love," Kimmie told him. "The Council may decide to play dirty."

"Out where nobody can see us, I think that's the *last* thing the Council wants to do with me," he replied. "They got a taste of my temper yesterday. I don't think they want to see me when I'm *really* mad."

"Love, eh?" Keritanima said slyly. "That's the first term of endearment I've heard out of either of you. What's going on in here when I'm not around?"

Kimmie and Tarrin just gave Keritanima a long, knowing look.

Keritanima burst out into laughter, falling back on the bed and kicking her heels into the mattress. "Jesmind is going to have a cow!" she managed to wheeze between bouts of helpless laughter. "Oh, I've got to be there to see that! Please, let me know before you tell her!" she wheezed.

"For your information, how me and Tarrin feel about each other has nothing to do with Jesmind," Kimmie said primly. "We Were-cats aren't like you Wikuni. Tarrin can love me and love Jesmind at the same time, and neither of us will mind."

"At least *you* won't," Keritanima panted with a wide grin, then laughed again.

"Jesmind won't care, Kerri," Tarrin told her calmly. "As long as I'm all hers when I'm with her, what I do and how I feel when I'm not with her is none of her business. Besides, she *likes* Kimmie, and she'll probably be happy that Kimmie finally got what she wanted."

"Did you get what you wanted, Kimmie?" Miranda asked.

"Everything I ever dreamed and more," she said with an absolutely radiant smile, putting her paw over the paw Tarrin had on her shoulder.

"Well, congratulations, then," Miranda said with her cheeky grin.

"We need to marry you off, Miranda," Tarrin told her with a smile. "You need a husband."

"A husband? Me?" she said, then she laughed. "Why should I limit myself the same old boring man when I can have any man I want?"

"By the sails, she has a point there," Keritanima mused, then she chuckled. "Not that I'd want any man but Rallix. But if I did, that's the way I'd think of it too."

"Some men are said to be born bachelors. Well, I was born to be available," Miranda grinned.

"Flirt," Tarrin chuckled.

"Naturally," Miranda said with a toss of her hair.

Tarrin chuckled again. She was quite a character, Miranda was.

"Well, I'm off. Wish me luck."

"Have fun, Tarrin," Kimmie smiled after kissing his paw fondly.

"I hope they play dirty for you!" Keritanima called as he padded across the room.

All in all, it was a fun day.

Tarrin got a useless bit of crystal that Phandebrass used as a spell component and hung it on a string, and Phandebrass cast a spell on it that would make it glow different colors depending on how high Tarrin held it off the ground. Phandebrass created the spell--Phandebrass' Amazing Altimeter--and though it seemed useless, it actually came in *very* handy that day.

Tarrin and Sapphire started on the south edge of the town, not far from where they arrived, near the meadow where he met Iselde and Allyn. Tarrin silently worked out the system that he would use to follow the crystal, assigning a different direction to each of the eight colors it would glow so as to look like he knew what he was doing, and then set off.

Sapphire flew around him, leaving for periods to dart across meadows or over the trees to tell him how far he was from the city, and he methodically worked his way up the east side of the island. He pretended to have a lot of trouble with his gadget, audibly cursing Phandebrass for making it so loopy, and then banged it on a tree and pretended like it was working correctly now by travelling due north for nearly five longspans, just to the side of the foothills surrounding the volcano.

He did enjoy himself. He was out in the woods alone, with nothing but him, Sapphire, and the breath of the trees on him. He relaxed tremendously, his relief that Allia was not really against him allowing him to put that out

of his mind for the moment and just have fun exploring the forest like a little kid, like he did when he was younger.

It was well past noon before he saw any signs that he had company in the forest, but it turned out to be two Sha'Kar youths looking for a bit of excitement out in the woods. It reminded him of Walten and Cilia, and for a moment he considered doing what Kimmie said the Centaurs may have done, sneak up on them while they were in the throes of passion and frighten them into running naked back into the city.

He was about to leave them to their amusements when the male gasped something that made the Were-cat stop dead in his tracks.

"Auli, we're going to get in trouble!" the male said in a scandalized voice.

Auli? That was *Auli*? He hadn't really gotten close enough to them to take a look, and they were downwind of him.

"Oh come on, don't be such a mama's boy," he heard Auli's voice reply.

"I know you don't care, but my family will punish me if they catch us out here!"

"The danger is half the fun," she purred to him, and Tarrin, who was stealthily stalking up on them, heard the rattle of a chain. "Now stop being such a willynilly."

Tarrin slinked up into a position where he could see, and found them in a small hollow, an open space with no underbrush. They had brought a blanket--quite forward-thinking of them--and Julian had Auli as good as undressed, with her bodice pushed down to her waist and the skirts pulled up over her hips. Julian had his robe open in the front, but since enough of his back was to Tarrin, he wasn't sure what was under the robe.

"Come on," Auli told him impatiently. "The sooner we get started, the sooner we can leave, since you're so afraid. Personally, I think the danger makes it more exciting," she finished with a throaty laugh.

"This is the *forbidden* part of the forest, Auli!" he told her in a fearful hiss. "Bad things happen out here!"

Tarrin considered that. Bad things, eh? Was it forbidden because of some hidden danger, or just because they didn't want anyone out here? He poked around with his senses and found nothing out of the ordinary. Then again, the background magic was so strong that he couldn't even sense the amulet he wore around his neck. He realized that if he wanted to sense anything at all, he'd have to get closer to the Weave. So he Bridged so he could get a better sense of things, and assensed the area around him, looking for a magical signature that might be the Firestaff.

Instantly he realized that he *was not alone*. There was a Sorcerer very close to him, joined to the Weave, and Tarrin hadn't noticed him! The background magic that fouled his ability to sense magic was hiding the lurker from him!

Tarrin furiously debated what to do to this spy. He ran through several options, from leaving him be to killing him, but then decided that to really worry the Council, he had to let them know he found out how they were watching him. He'd have to make them come personally to stop him. He choked off the strand in which the Sorcerer hid on one side, preventing him from going that way, and then began wringing it back to where the Sorcerer was, compressing it and forcing him to move. When the wringing reached him, there was a start of surprise, and Tarrin sensed a spell to look into the real world fixate on him. He could clearly feel the Sorcerer's shock.

If I catch anyone else spying on me, I'll cut the strand you're hiding in on both sides and let your mind die when the strand unravels, he said nastily into the Weave, directing it at the lurker. *I do not like to be spied upon. Take that back to the Council, and warn them that from now on, they spy on me at their own peril. Now go!*

The presence seemed to falter, and then he felt it retreat quickly after Tarrin took hold at the strand at its other end, threatening to trap the lurker within it.

That dealt with, Tarrin turned his attention back to the lovers. The male still had his back to him, but Auli had talked him out of his fear, giggling as he leaned over her.

There wasn't much point in watching them mate, so he quietly withdrew himself.

Tarrin kept a cautious eye on the Weave, Bridging every so often to check for spies and also for a strong source of magic, but he abandoned the trinket and started moving around on his own. He scoured that part of the forest for most of the late morning and early afternoon, but found nothing but an old golden amulet, probably once belonging to a Sha'Kar, stuck under a log about a longspan from shore. The amulet was tarnished a little and fairly dirty, but it seemed to be in good condition. He could sense that it had weaves in it, a few of them that seemed to be utility weaves, like talking to other amulets. That didn't seem to be too unusual; it was only common sense to put a few useful weaves in one's amulet. His own had quite a few handy little spells that helped him a great deal. He pocketed it without really thinking about it and continued searching.

About an hour after that, Tarrin realized that he had messed up. If they couldn't spy on him, they wouldn't know where he was, and therefore they couldn't send someone to stop him from going where they didn't want him to go. It seemed a good idea at the time, but he hadn't thought it all the way through. As usual. He hoped that Keritanima wouldn't get *too* angry with him, but he wasn't ready to abandon the plan quite yet. If they couldn't spy on him, then this was a good time to try to find the Firestaff, to go right around the Sha'Kar and get at what he was really there for.

Tarrin worked his way up into the foothills at the base of the steep-sloped, smoking volcano. He came to a small clearing and looked up at it, seeing how steeply it sloped and how hard it was going to be to climb, if it came down to that. He really didn't think they'd hide it on the slopes of the volcano, mainly because it was hidden five thousand years ago. Volcanos had a habit of growing over time. It wouldn't be on the slopes of the volcano, because those slopes weren't there five thousand years ago. The Sha'Kar said the volcano erupted seven hundred years ago, and it was smoking now. That meant it was active. He was pretty sure that when the Ancients arrived and hid the Firestaff, that volcano was about the size of the hill upon which he stood.

Sapphire landed on his shoulder as he turned from the volcano, debating where to search next. "Did you see anything interesting, little one?"

"A few birds," she replied. "Not much else. Are we done yet?"

"Are you tired?"

"Hungry," she replied.

"Go catch one of those little rodents."

"I did. They don't taste very good."

"You like rabbits," he said. "I know there's some on the island. I scented them."

"Not here," she said. "The only things I've seen in these hills are those wooly animals the Sha'Kar herd."

"Sheep," he told her, thinking about it. He knelt down and nearly displaced her as he sniffed at the ground, then stood up again and took in a deep breath, analyzing the various scents on the wind. She was right, there were no rabbits up here. None of those strange rodents or those little cats either. He could smell the sheep, they weren't too far away, and there was a faint brimstone smell from the volcano.

"Ah, that must be why," he mused aloud. "The volcano. Can't you smell it?"

"Of course I can."

"I guess the animals don't like that smell," he said. "Their sheep must not have good senses. That, or they're used to it. Guess we know why they herd the sheep up here now," he chuckled. "No competition from the wildlife."

"*Tarrin!*" Keritanima's voice emanated from his amulet. It was very excited.

"What is it, Kerri?" he asked, putting a paw to his own.

"*You need to come back to the estate,*" she told him in a breathless voice.

"Alright. I'll be there in about an hour or so."

"*Alright, but don't take too long!*" she demanded.

Tarrin could tell from her tone that she wanted him back *now*, but he didn't want to come out of the forest on the north side of the town. He intended to skirt around the town through the forest and come back out just by the estate.

Tarrin worked his way back towards the estate, following his own scent for a while, since he'd been going straight. His path took him back towards where he'd seen Auli. It was out of his way to go back in that direction, so he veered west and started along a game trail.

He stopped when he heard a distant sound. He turned his ears that way and closed his eyes, concentrating on it, and realized that it was the sound of someone crying. Sapphire danced between limbs, flying through the trees, and landed on his shoulder. "That female we saw earlier is over there," she said, pointing with her forepaw. "She's crying for some reason."

"I can hear her. Do me a favor and head back to the estate. Tell Keritanima I'm on the way, and get yourself something to eat."

"I never thought you'd say that. I'll tell her. See you soon," she said with relief, then vaulted off his shoulder and flapped out of sight quickly.

Tarrin crept up on her quickly and quietly, getting into a position where he could see what was going on. Auli was there all right, sitting on a fallen log with the blanket she'd brought tossed crumpled on the ground, and she was crying like a spanked child. She had her head in her hands, elbows on her knees, bent over and sobbing like a girl who just lost her mother.

Tarrin stepped out into the very small clearing and looked at her. She didn't look like she'd been in a fight. Her dress was clean and whole, not ripped. She had her slippers on, and they didn't look very soiled. Only carrying the dirt and loam of the forest floor. So what had upset her?

"Auli," Tarrin called. Her head whipped up, and she stared at him in shock, her hands snapping up to her chest.

He realized why she'd been crying immediately. Auli wasn't wearing her amulet.

"What happened?" he asked gently. "Why are you crying, little one?"

"I-I was in the woods with Julian," she sniffled, obviously not very effected by the scare he gave her yesterday. "We were walking back to town, and I realized my amulet was gone. The chain must have broke, it breaks all the time. I hid it from him and told him to go on without me, that I wanted to go relieve myself, and came back to look for it. But I can't find

it!" she wailed. "I'll be a pariah! Nobody will talk to me ever again!" Then she started crying again.

"It's just an amulet, Auli," he told her. "Here, I found this one in the woods earlier today. It's not yours, I can tell you that, but it's just as good." He took the amulet out of his pocket and held it up. "See? You'll need to clean it up a little, but now you can go into town without anyone ever knowing you lost yours."

He held it up a little more. It spun to a slow stop, and Tarrin glanced at the back of the amulet absently. He hadn't looked at the back before.

He very nearly dropped it.

Etched into the back of the amulet in elegant Sha'Kar script were the words *To Aliani, May the Goddess bless our union and give us happiness. Love, Theran Ai'Shar.*

The amulet bore the name of *Iselde's family*.

He snapped his gaze up to Auli. "What was Iselde's mother's name?" he asked her intensely.

"Aliani," she replied uncertainly. "Whyever would you ask that, honored one?"

Tarrin looked down at the amulet, and then up at Auli. "This amulet has her name on it."

"Truly? Can I see it?" she asked, getting up and wiping her eyes. Tarrin held it up to her and let her look, and she turned it over and read the inscription. "It has her name on it alright, honored one. This is the amulet that Iselde's father gave to her when they got married. Auli's mother failed and died in the ceremony of Ascension some fifteen years or so ago. How did her amulet end up out here?"

"That's a good question, isn't it?" Tarrin said in a very grim, worried tone. How did it end up out here?

There was one way to look for answers.

"Come on," he told her quickly, turning and marching back into the forest.

"Where are we going, honored one? Aren't you going to let me borrow the amulet so I can go home?"

"In a while," he said. "We're going back to where I found it, Auli, and we're going to look around."

"Oh. Alright."

Tarrin quickly tracked his own scent back to the log, and he looked at the place with his eyes this time, instead of only paying enough attention to avoid bumping into trees while he tried to sense the Firestaff. It wasn't a clearing, but there was a very faint trail, or what was once a trail, that went right by the fallen log. It was a very old log, rotted in the center, having been felled a very long time. At least the fifteen years since the amulet found its way out here. Tarrin was facing the ocean, facing east. He knelt down and put his claws into the log's underside, then heaved it up and tossed it over its end as if it were little more than a toothpick.

"They said you were strong, honored one," Auli said with an impressed look. "I didn't think they were serious."

"I'm full of surprises, Auli," he said in a quiet tone, putting his paws down on the wet, bug-filled dirt that had been under the log. There was nothing else there, just a little divot where Tarrin had pulled the chain out from under the log. It had settled over the amulet, or the tree had fallen on it. After fifteen years, nature had done much to hide anything else that may have been there. Just the amulet survived.

"This area is forbidden, right?" Tarrin asked her.

"Yes, honored one. Nobody's allowed in here."

"Why?"

She seemed a bit startled. "I really don't know," she answered. "There's always been rumors that there's an old monster that lives out here. Some nights we can hear strange sounds from the east edge of town, so the Council made this part of the forest off limits, so we don't disturb whatever it is, and nobody gets hurt. I've never seen it, and I've looked for it, honored one. I don't really think there's a monster out here, I think it's a vent from the volcano that makes moaning sounds when it gives off gases."

"I see you break the rules as often as I did when I was a young boy," Tarrin told her. "You and me are alot alike, Auli. Free spirits."

She gave him a beaming smile. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, honored one," she said with a little curtsy.

Why *was* that amulet out here? It didn't just get here by magic, that much was certain. Aliani had to put it here, since the chain wasn't broken, and Sha'Kar never took off their amulets. She had to take it off, or maybe she was hanging upside-down out of a tree or something weird like that and it fell off. Had she lost it? Was it that simple? Had Aliani been wandering around out here, lost her amulet, gotten scared, and then ran out without it? And hadn't had the nerve to break the law again and come back to search for it?

"How long has this place been forbidden, Auli?" he asked.

"Since before I was born, honored one," she answered.

"You made it sound like it was recent," he said sourly.

"Sorry. I don't know when, but it's been a rule for a long time."

"You're a Sha'Kar, Auli. Tell me, why would Aliani take off her amulet?"

"She *wouldn't*, honored one," she replied emphatically. "We don't take them off. It's the worst scandal if you're seen without your amulet."

"She had to have," he growled, looking at the amulet. "The chain isn't broken. And I don't think she was hanging upside down out of a tree."

"Maybe something happened to make her take it off, and she forgot where she left it," Auli offered.

"But you just said that she'd never take it off," Tarrin said. "What can *you* think of that would make you take off your amulet, Auli?"

She pondered a moment. "Nothing," she replied. "I do take mine off when I bathe, because I don't want it getting tarnished, but I'm always alone when I do it, and it's the *first* thing I put back on." She blushed. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't repeat that, honored one," she said with slight chagrin. "Even that would be enough for the rumors to bury me in the eyes of the others."

"I never heard it," he said absently, fretting. It didn't make any sense! Why was the amulet of a dead Sha'Kar laying out in the forest? Why--

Tarrin blinked, then stood straight up so quickly his feet came off the ground. A cold fist seemed to have punched him in the stomach.

"Oh, Goddess," he breathed. "No, it can't be that."

"What, honored one?"

"They couldn't have gone that far," he said in disbelief, handing the amulet to Auli and then summoning the power of High Sorcery to him. He allowed it to fill him to a reasonable degree, and then sent out a sweeping, loosely woven weave of Earth and Divine, a weave that sank into the ground and fanned out in every direction, a weave that had been woven to search for something very specific.

To his horror, he received almost immediate responses. They were ahead of them, the closest about two hundred spans ahead, just past a particularly thick snarl of thorny plants.

"Oh, no," he said under his breath, his flesh actually creeping. "Goddess, they *did*. They did it. I can't believe it."

"What, honored one?" Auli demanded. What did they do?"

But he didn't answer. He broke into a sprint quickly, moving towards the closest of those responses, coming up to the thorns. He swept them out of his path with a weave of Air, smashing them to the ground, and then stepped over them, into a strangely clear area with large, old trees, and plenty of space between the trunks. Those thorns grew in a wide circle around the area, and Tarrin realized that all the responses were coming from inside the circle. He took ten steps, just past a big, old oak, and felt that he was standing right in front of the closest of them.

Auli managed to catch up to him, and saw him staring at the ground. "What is the matter, honored one?" she asked in breathless anticipation. She could tell that he was upset by whatever it was, but her nature wouldn't let her leave it alone. She was curious now, and she just had to know.

Tarrin pointed both palms at the ground, and a weave of Earth caused the forest floor before him to literally explode outward. Dirt flew in every direction, washing over them as Auli screamed in surprise and flinched

away from the cascade, then she laughed ruefully and shook dirt out of her platinum blond hair. "Warn a girl next time, honored one!" she told him with another laugh, starting to look down. "It's going to take me...all...day...."

Auli trailed off as she looked into a six span deep pit before them, with roots hanging out of the edges of it. And at the bottom of the pit, crumpled in on itself and dishevelled, was a skeleton.

And around them, inside the barrier of thorns, there were three hundred and forty other responses to his searching spell.

Tarrin found the missing Sha'Kar.

"I didn't know they had a old cemetery out here," Auli said in a nervous tone. "Those are Sha'Kar bones."

"Look at them, Auli," he said in a tightly controlled voice. "They're not that old. I'd say about *ten years*."

"Ten years? Nobody's died here for thirty," she scoffed. "Only--" she gave a great, horrified gasp. "No!" she said in protest. "It can't be one of the ones that died in the ceremony! They died at the Ward!"

"Oh, yes," he said in a cold, emotionless tone. "This is the most recent grave. I'd say that this is Theran Ai'Shar. Over there is the next recent." He pointed about fifteen spans to the left. "That would be Aliani Ai'Shar. There are hundreds of other, Auli. I'll bet every single Sha'Kar that supposedly died in that ceremony is buried here."

"But-But-But how did they get *here*?" Auli demanded uncertainly. "Did someone retrieve their bodies and bury them?" Tarrin dropped down into the grave and knelt over the bones, putting his paws on them. "What are you doing?" she said in shock. "Honored one, don't disturb the rest of the fallen! It's not right!"

"I'm not going to move anything," he told her, closing his eyes and Bridging into the Weave. "Now be quiet, Auli. Let me concentrate."

"What are you doing, honored one?"

"Finding the memory of what happened here, but I need *quiet* to do it," he growled at her.

It had to be in the Weave somewhere. *Theran Ai'Shar, this is your chance to tell your story*, Tarrin thought to himself as he Bridged, raised his mind into the Weave without leaving his body. *If there's anything of you left in the Weave, come to me now. I need your memory. I need your echo. Come to me!* He emptied his mind, tilted his head back and let the magic flow with him, through him, opening himself to the faint echoes of the Weave, searching for that one specific fragment of history to touch him.

And it was there. A brief flash, an image, of a blond Sha'Kar standing blankly before a pit he himself had just excavated with Sorcery, standing there for quite a while. He simply stood there, and then there was another behind him. A flash, a glint of light, and then it was over. Theran Ai'Shar toppled lifelessly into the grave he had dug for himself, and then the grave began to fill.

She said that when they came out, Iselde's mother looked pale and out of sorts, Tarrin remembered Dar telling him the day before, when he was relating the story of what happened to Iselde's parents. *She didn't talk to anyone or do anything. She said that the woman just stood there a moment with blank eyes, then walked out the door. They never saw her again.*

A blank look, walking out the door and into the city. And Tarrin would bet that they walked right out here, got past the thorns, dug themselves a grave, and then patiently waited for their executioner to arrive and do them in. Then the executioner fills the grave, and the Sha'Kar is forgotten. Yet another failure in the ceremony of Ascension. *Thank you, Theran Ai'Shar*, Tarrin thought to himself in grim satisfaction. *You showed me exactly what I needed to see. Rest now, and let me handle avenging you and your wife.*

"I don't understand, honored one!" Auli said as Tarrin lifted himself out of the grave and then carefully refilled it.

"It's very simple, Auli," Tarrin told her in a distant, emotionless tone. "The Council didn't send Iselde's parents to the Ward to try to breach it. They had them come out here, under control of a Mind weave, and then someone came along and murdered them."

"M-M-M-Murdered?" she said in stunned disbelief. The very thought that a Sha'Kar might do violence was inconceivable to her. But to *take a*

life? It was impossible! "Goddess, honored one, *why* would they do that? It makes no sense!"

"That, my dear Auli, is the question," he said in a focused tone.

Tarrin had expected to find something damning, but in his wildest dreams, he never *dreamed* he'd find something like this. No wonder the Council reacted so strongly when Tarrin mentioned it. Because they'd *killed the missing Sha'Kar*.

He now knew what happened to the missing Sha'Kar. Now he needed to know *why*. This wasn't about digging dirt on the Council anymore. They were murdering their own people, and they had to be stopped. But before he could put a paw in, he needed to understand what motivated the Council to start killing their own subjects. The other Sha'Kar would be safe enough now that Tarrin knew what was going on. If they showed up at someone's house and enchanted them to take this final walk out to this graveyard, he would intervene. He wouldn't let this happen again. But between now and killing the Council, he wanted to find out why this had happened. What could have driven Sha'Kar to do violence, something that was absolutely against the very fiber of their being.

And not just violence. To commit the ultimate sin. Murder.

"Auli," he said in a very calm, very rational voice. "Don't leave my sight from now on, do you understand?" he asked. "What you know now, girl, it could get you killed."

"You can't be serious!" she gasped.

"I've never been more serious in my life," he told her earnestly. "You and I, Auli, we're going to sit down and talk. You're going to tell me everything you know about the Council, the Sha'Kar, this ceremony, and anything else that may help me. You're a free spirit, a wanderer, a mischief maker. I was once one myself, and I know how you can accumulate secrets when you go where you're not supposed to go, and do things you're not supposed to do."

She flushed slightly, then took on a nervously pleased look. "I've overheard a few things, honored one," she told him.

"When we get back, you're going to tell me everything, Auli. And I mean *everything*." He looked at her. "And I don't think I need to tell you that we keep what we found here a secret."

"I wouldn't dare tell anyone. They wouldn't believe me if I did," she said with a rueful, half-hearted chuckle.

"Someone would," he told her pointedly. "Whoever did this. And then he'd be looking to have you join the rest of them."

"That's not a very pleasant thought."

"It rarely is," he told her, finding a grim kind of satisfaction in it. He was horrified at what he found, but in finding it, he would be taking the first step to putting a stop to it. He still couldn't believe it. Maybe he should have, though. Missing people, a tight-lipped governing body? It would stink of murder if it had been humans or Wikuni. But not Sha'Kar, who almost worshipped pacifism as a religion. Tarrin had suspected that the Sha'Kar had somehow escaped, or went after the Firestaff and failed, not be murdered by their own Council and then have it all explained away as failing a dangerous ceremony.

He just needed a little more information. Knowing that the Council killed the missing Sha'Kar didn't explain why it had happened, what could have driven them to that. There was more here, a lot more, and they needed the whole picture before they moved in any way.

It was a very short yet very tense walk back to the Ai'Shar estate. Auli seemed temporarily traumatized by the ghastly secret she had learned, so much so that she completely forgot to put on the amulet that Tarrin gave to her. She carried it in her hand as they broke the treeline right behind the estate. Tarrin didn't bother going around, he put a paw around Auli's waist and jumped the fence, landing in neatly tended rows of vegetables. People may talk about Auli, and right now Tarrin didn't want anyone so much as noticing a hair out of place on her pretty head. A quick question from a servant had the man leading them to a servant's entrance in the back of the main house, opening into a storeroom that was just off the kitchen.

Once inside, Tarrin breathed a sigh of relief. He quickly scanned for another lurking watcher in the Weave, something he'd been doing every few

moments after they carefully restored the cemetery and Tarrin repaired the thorn wall he'd flattened, covering the evidence of their visit. He even scoured away their scents and wiped away their footprints, leaving nothing behind. Tarrin's mind worked furiously on their trip back, as he tried to fathom what could have driven the Council to start murdering the others. What kind of insanity, what madness possessed them? He still had no answers by the time he and Auli tread cautiously into the kitchen. Tarrin didn't want to run into Arlan right now. He was one of the Council's pupils, and he had the feeling that anything Tarrin said around him would get back to them before it finished coming out of his mouth.

"We made it back," she said in a trembling voice.

"We're safe now, cub," he said, assuming a protective role with the girl. Right now, she was important as any of his children for what she knew. "Once we get back to my room, everything will be just fine."

A very fast, harried walk along the grand passages brought him back to his room, and he threw the door open and ushered her inside with a quick look for servants, then came in behind her. Auli almost cried in relief when she ran into the room, and Tarrin couldn't help but feel the tension flow out of him. The Warded room was isolated from prying eyes and ears, and they'd be safe there. It also wasn't empty. Keritanima waited for him on one of the divans, as Kimmie and Binter sat on the floor just beside it with a chessboard set between them. His sister jumped up as soon as Tarrin moved into the room behind Auli. "It's about time!" she said hotly, putting her fists on her hips and glaring at him. "You said you'd be right back!"

"We found something," he said, nodding towards Auli. "Something *bad*."

"It was horrible!" Auli said in a shuddering tone. "It's a nightmare! I can't believe this is happening!"

"Kimmie, could you take Auli over to the bed and help calm her down?" Tarrin asked. "She just had a very nasty shock."

"Certainly, love," she said with a gentle smile. She got up and came over, then put an arm around the Sha'Kar girl and led her towards the raised bed, talking to her in low, reassuring tones. Kimmie's gentle nature should get the girl to regain her composure, but it may take a little while.

"Well, it looks like both of us have some news," Keritanima said. "Who wants to go first?"

"You'd better. After I say what I have to say, you'll forget about what you have to say."

"I'm almost aflutter with anticipation," she said in a humorless voice. "I went to visit Allia again around noon. She was asleep with Allyn in her bed, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to try checking her again, when she *really* has her defenses all the way down."

"What did you find?"

"I found an *active* Mind weave inside her," she said. "It was very, very hard to find, because it's buried so deeply in her subconscious that it was like digging up gold. I'd have never found it if she was awake."

"That sounds like it's just confirmation of what we already knew."

"Tarrin, Allyn was there. When I was done with her, on an impulse, I checked *him*."

Tarrin's eyebrow rose. "You mean--"

"He has one too, but it's *alot* stronger and alot more complicated," she answered. "Actually, it's more than one, and they're active weaves. They seem to be inserted into his subconscious and the more primitive sections of his brain. Emotions, impulses, desires, the things that connect us to animals. Basic urges."

Tarrin stared at her emotionlessly for a long moment, and then it all just seemed to fall into place. The Sha'Kar seemed hedonistic, driven by nothing more than the desire to pleasure themselves. Decadence. Auli was a perfect example of that decadence, a woman that would sleep with anyone that would willingly--and perhaps unwillingly--climb into bed with her. That radical change from their racial culture wasn't the result of a thousand years of exile, it was the result of *outside interference*. And only a Sha'Kar could weave Mind weaves on other Sha'Kar.

The Council.

Their fingers reached far beyond murder, he realized. They were using Mind weaves on their own people, turning them into self-indulgent pleasure

seekers. But why? What made that necessary? What gains did they reap from it? They had to have some kind of reason for doing it.

"Tarrin, someone's been tampering with the Sha'Kar," she told him. "And it has to be another Sha'Kar. This is way too complicated for it to be any other race."

"I know," he said in a quiet tone, looking down at her. "It's the Council."

"That's what I thought too, but it could be anyone with talent for Mind weaves." She fretted. "But that's not what has me so confused. The Mind weaves in Allyn were *effects*, not the actual weaves themselves. There wasn't enough inside Allyn for it to have been a full spell. Almost like the other half of a Mind weave that had somehow been split in two. They were just fingers stretching out from the main spell, to let the spell affect him. Since they're active, that means that the Mind weave has to be active as well. I swept the entire room for signs of the spell, but I couldn't find anything."

"You tried tracing those fingers?"

She nodded. "They just appear out of nowhere inside of both of them, and I can't trace them back. It's like the spell is hiding from me."

Tarrin looked to Auli. Poor girl. He wondered if *she* understood what was happening, if the Sha'Kar too were trapped inside themselves, screaming and raging against the control that was making them do what they were doing. Somehow...he doubted it. If this spell was provoking their basic impulses, they were simply being overwhelmed by the overpowering desire to seek pleasure. Tarrin didn't think anyone would find that to be too wrong. But how did it explain the Sha'Kar male torturing Zarina?

"Well, that's mine. What's yours?"

He looked down at her, his face grim. "I found the Sha'Kar."

"The missing ones? You found out what happened to them?"

"I *found* them," he said in a neutral tone. "They're all dead."

"We suspected they were dead, brother. It's a small island."

"They were buried in a part of the forest that's off limits. They were all murdered."

Keritanima looked about to say something, then she stopped with her jaw hanging down. "Murdered?" she gasped.

Tarrin related the tale to her of him finding the amulet under the log, running into Auli, and then the circumstances that had led him to the thorn-walled graveyard. "I found an echo in the Weave of what happened to Iselde's father," he told her. "He was controlled by Mind weaves to go there, and then he dug his own grave and waited patiently for whoever came along and killed him. They're all there. I counted them. Three hundred and forty-one."

Keritanima looked a little flabbergasted. She took a step back and put a hand to her chest, then her eyes turned calculating. The political animal in Keritanima had taken over, and now it was processing this new information. "I guess it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise," she admitted. "If it were anyone but the Sha'Kar, anyway."

"That's how I felt about it," he said.

"Still, that seems pretty extreme. If they had to go so far as to kill their own, it makes me wonder what those Sha'Kar found out, what they discovered that would force the Council to kill them."

"I can't think of anything."

"Maybe I can," she said, glancing at Auli.

"You think they were killed because they found out about the control?"

"It's a possibility, but I doubt it. If they're that good at Mind weaves, why wouldn't they just erase that memory? There doesn't seem to be any reason to kill them, does it? Not when they can control what they do, what they think, and what they remember."

"You're right," he said. "So it's still a question we need to answer."

"It's a question that doesn't seem to have any rational answer," she told him. "They were killed for some reason, but I can't think of any reason so serious that would force them to do it. Not when they can control the people so completely."

"I think maybe the answers we're looking for are right over there," he said, looking at Auli.

"Why would she know?"

"Because she's friends with Iselde. She may have heard something when her parents were alive that we may be able to use."

"Couldn't hurt," Keritanima said after a moment.

Kimmie had her calmed down, but her hands were still trembling. Tarrin and Keritanima sat down on the bed with her, Tarrin pulling his legs in crossed and wrapping his tail around them, patting the bed before him meaningfully. Auli scooted up and seated herself before him as Kimmie and Keritanima joined them. Tarrin reached over and put his paw on her leg, a reassuring touch. "Alright, you've seen what I saw, Auli," he said. "Can you think of *any* reason why the Council would kill Iselde's parents? Anything? Any rumor, any story that may make sense of this?"

"That's a bit too broad, brother," Keritanima said. "Auli, tell me about Iselde's parents."

"Well," she said hesitantly, in a trembling voice. "Iselde told me that her parents had always been very secretive, and they were, well, a little vocal in their displeasure with some of the decisions the Council and the Grand made."

"That's all you can remember?"

"I didn't know them very well," she said. "I was very young when Iselde's mother died, and after I got to be friends with Iselde, I never really saw her father that much. He spent almost all his time in his study, and stopped going to parties and socializing with the others. When I did see him, he always looked awful. His hair was a mess, his robes were dirty, he was bone thin, and he always stared at me like I was some kind of boggart. He was *creepy*." She looked at Tarrin briefly. "Everyone said that when his wife had been chosen for the ceremony and she failed, he never recovered. Iselde told me her mother and father loved each other as much as life itself. When Iselde's mother died, he was never the same."

"What were they like when they were both alive?" Keritanima asked.

"My mother told me that they were both very wild when they were younger, but when they married, they settled down a great deal and started really applying themselves to learning the Art. They took lessons from my

mother and everything. That's when they started getting secretive, and they started disagreeing with some of the things the Council did. The Grand offered Aliani a seat on the Council at one point, so she could be a part of the Council and offer her opinions, but she refused. Everyone thought that the Council respected Aliani's mind. That's why they were so patient with her displeasure. She would have been a good member of the Council, my mother thought. She was certainly smart enough, and strong in the Art."

Tarrin mulled that over. Could they have killed Aliani because she was too vocal? No. They could control her easily enough, probably allowed her to be vocal about some things to make it appear that her opinions hadn't changed. But it was pretty obvious that Theran was devastated by the death of his wife, and had spiralled down into misery as the years dragged by after her death.

Now it was Tarrin's turn, and he'd been waiting too long to ask this question. He couldn't wait any longer. "Auli," he said calmly. "I know you get around. I know people tell you things. So I'm going to ask you right here, right now. Is the Firestaff on this island?"

She looked at him a very long time, almost seemed unwilling to say anything. Then she bowed her head. "Yes," she told him. "I know where it is."

"Have you ever told anyone?"

"Only Iselde," she answered. And *that* answered that mystery.

"Where is it?"

"It's in the volcano," she told him, looking into his eyes. "But you can't go after it, honored one! Nobody can get in!"

"Why can't anyone get in?" Keritania asked.

"Because the way in is protected by an old spell," she said. "You can't break it, and I've seen them try." She bit her lip, and gave them all a very worried look. "I know I'm not supposed to talk about it. I know it's wrong, but--but you're an honored one. I can't disobey you. I just *can't*!"

"Who? Who was trying to get in?" Kimmie asked.

"I, I can't tell you," she said in a slightly strangled tone. "I'm not allowed to say."

"Auli, *who* tried to get in?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

It hung there for a moment, and she could see the conflict in her eyes. "T-The Grand," she finally stuttered. "And the Council."

"Why were they trying to get in, Auli?" he demanded in an intense tone. "Tell me what happened."

"T-they were on the volcano," she said. "I was wandering around the foothills and saw them go by, so I followed them. They went up a steep path, one of the paths the artist used when he carved the figures on the side, and it led to a little cave just under the figures, a cave that the artist must have uncovered when he excavated the rock to form the relief for the sculpture. It had a magical spell blocking the way in. I hid behind a rock at the edge of the landing and I watched them Circle and try to break the spell. But they couldn't do it. They tried a long time, and then they finally gave up and went back down the path. I waited a long time for them to get back to the city, and then I went home." She looked at her legs. "I heard them talking. The Grand was really mad. I've never seen him like that before. He kept saying over and over that the Firestaff was just beyond his fingers. A couple of the Council members said that it wasn't any use, that if they couldn't do it after centuries of studying it, that nobody could break the spell. I heard the Grand say that they had no choice but to try to find the keys."

Everything seemed to be starting to fit now. If the Grand was after the Firestaff, and he was willing to go to nearly any length to obtain it, it very well may lead him to controlling his people and killing them. maybe they found out about the Firestaff, and instead of just editing their memory, he decided to finish them off. Dead men tell no tales.

The allure of godhood could drive a man to extremes.

If this was as simple as the Firestaff, then alot of the things that seemed be irrational suddenly weren't. Kingdoms were fighting wars over the artifact, groups were throwing all their chips into the pot in an all-or-nothing gamble to claim it, where failure would mean extermination. Why wouldn't the Grand and the Council be doing the same things?

But there was another feeling in him. Cold, deliberate resolve. He now knew where the Firestaff was. He *knew where it was*. There was no more waiting, no more searching, no more suffering. At that moment, he could walk up that volcano to that cave, and try to get it. If he could, then he could finally, *finally*, do what the Goddess had charged him two years ago to do.

Recover the Firestaff.

But there was a problem. If that spell blocked the Grand and the Council, then he probably would fare no better. Auli had mentioned keys, though.

"Auli," he said in a quiet tone. "What are the keys that the Grand mentioned?"

"I don't know," she said. "But there was an old set of symbols on the side of the cave, just inside the entrance. A star, a staff, a flower, and pair of hands clasped together. Those have to be the keys, but I don't think they have them. From the way they sounded, they didn't have the keys. They were too disappointed for them to have them."

"But they probably know what they are," Kimmie mused, scratching her chin.

"I think they do," Auli agreed.

"Well, that's it, brother," Keritanima told him soberly. "That's what we needed to find out. The Council doesn't really matter now."

"Yes they do," Tarrin said. "If we try to get to the Firestaff, they'll try to stop us. And they know what these keys are, and we don't. So we still need to go pay them a little visit."

Kimmie, however, didn't seem satisfied. "Auli, you said you knew it was wrong to tell us," she said. "Why did you say that?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," she said woodenly.

"You told Tarrin."

"He's an honored one. I can't disobey him. I know I shouldn't have said something, but I can't disobey." She put a hand to her head, her eyes a little scattered. "I feel a little strange."

Keritanima moved before Tarrin could say anything. She put her hands to either side of Auli's head, and Tarrin felt her send probing tendrils of Mind into the girl. She looked at Tarrin quickly, her expression both sober and a little excited. "There are traces of a Mind weave in her, but they're lingering effects. They're not active. They're trying to stop her from talking, but they're not strong enough. Her conditioning to obey those over her is overriding the compulsion. It's why she wouldn't answer anyone but you, brother."

Tarrin looked at Auli. Why wouldn't they be active? She was Sha'Kar, just like the others, bound under the Council's control.

And she wasn't wearing an amulet.

It clicked. That was why it was such taboo to be seen without an amulet. The amulets were the instruments of control the Council used on their subjects! When Auli lost her amulet, the Mind weaves that affected her were removed, and now she was just suffering from the lingering effects, which were themselves fading.

Tarrin snatched Aliani's amulet out of her hand, which she was still holding, and assensed it carefully. He'd sensed weaves in it before, but hadn't bothered to inspect it.

Clever. Damn clever! They were in there, the other half of the Mind weaves Keritanima mentioned, clear as a bell and still active after fifteen years of laying in the forest. There was much more, however. There was a powerful spell covering those Mind weaves that prevented any other weaves from interfering with the spells it protected, a defensive spell that prevented anyone from accidentally tampering with the Mind weaves below. There was also a very clever little weave over that that concealed the spells in the amulet, only showing the latent weaves that allowed the amulet to be used for distant communication, or whatever weaves the Sha'Kar had placed in it himself. The defenses were so cunning, so subtle, that it would take a very strong *da'shar* to discover them, someone with the power to see past that clever little weave that hid what was underneath it, and only if they were holding the amulet and had their full attention on it.

And the truth of what had happened to Aliani rested in the amulet. Beneath it all, under the Mind weaves, behind the defensive spell,

concealed itself by yet another weave that hid it from probing Sorcerers, Tarrin found a little weave, a small little thing, that effectively blocked all the mental control the amulet attempted to instill in the wearer by tricking the Mind weaves into thinking they were working properly while they actually did nothing at all. They *looked* active and functional, and they did indeed work, but Tarrin saw that Aliani's counter made them forget to communicate with the host, with the other half of the weave that the amulet would place in the mind of the wearer, sending their commands and instructions nowhere. And since Aliani didn't do anything to the weaves, only added a little bit to misdirect their effects, she managed to circumvent the very powerful spell that wouldn't allow the weaves it protected to be altered. Aliani had discovered the true nature of the amulet, and had cleverly defeated its power without making it apparent that she had done so. It was why the amulet's Mind weaves didn't affect Auli while she was holding it.

Damn clever! Aliani had defused her amulet so cunningly, so carefully, that only someone with Tarrin's keen sense of magic would have detected it. Not even the strongest *da'shar* would have detected that tiny little weave in all the other weaving, so cunningly was it concealed. Aliani had broken the Council's control!

And *that* was why they killed her!

"Now it all makes sense," Tarrin said, tossing the amulet to Keritaima. "There's the other half of your Mind weave, Kerri. It's in the *amulet*."

"I don't sense anything," she said, holding onto it.

"It's hidden by a very powerful spell," he told her. "And there's another spell under it that Aliani put in it, a spell that defeats the amulet's Mind weave without making it apparent that it was. That was why they had her killed. Because she'd managed to break free of their control, and they didn't want to take the chance that she'd do it again."

"And if Aliani did it, then other Sha'Kar had to have done it too," Kimmie reasoned. "That's why they're dead."

Auli stared at them in horror. "There are Mind weaves in the amulets?" she asked in disbelief. "They're *controlling* us?"

"I'm sorry, Auli, but yes, they are," Tarrin told her. "The Mind weaves affect your more primitive emotions. They make you want to seek pleasure, even over other activities. It's a very subtle and *very effective* technique. People who think only of singing, dancing, eating, drinking, gossiping, and having sex are very easy to lead around."

"But why would they want to do that to us?" she asked with a trembling lip, her eyes sheening over with tears. "They are our own people!"

"We'll have to ask them," Tarrin said, flexing his claws in an ominous manner.

"We can't just go marching up the Council and start making accusations," Keritanima warned. "Remember, they *control* the Sha'Kar. I'm sure there are lots of weaves about loyalty and obeying their commands. They'll order the Sha'Kar to attack us, and we won't stand a chance. They may be controlled, but they're still very powerful Sorcerers."

Tarrin frowned. She was right.

"If we want to take out the Council, we have to cut their legs out from under them," Keritanima told him. "Can you cancel that spell they use to control the Sha'Kar?"

"I can, but it'll take High Sorcery," he told her. "And I have to do it one at a time."

"Is there an easier way to do it, at least temporarily?"

"Several," he answered. "But I can't get all of them at once, Kerri. There's just too many. They'd have to literally be standing shoulder to shoulder. I can't think of any way we could trick them into gathering into one place like that. Not without the Council getting suspicious."

"Hold on," she said suddenly. "You said that Aliani defeated the Mind weaves in her amulet without altering them. Can you do *that*?"

Tarrin looked at her, and it was like a light flickering behind his eyes. "That's *genius*!" he told her. "It's an easy spell, and it won't take High Sorcery! I'll still have to do it one at a time, but I could weave that one without anyone knowing it."

"Good. I think we need to get everyone in here. *Including Allia*, as well as Auli, Iselde, and Allyn," she added. "I think it's time for a war council, and we can't have one without Allia. We'll just break the control they have on her. And you three are going to know things we need to know," she said to Auli.

"What about finding out everything we can?" Kimmie asked.

"We already know everything we need to know, Kimmie," she replied. "And it took a hell of a lot shorter than I thought it would. Now we know what happened to the missing Sha'Kar, and why things around here have been happening the way they have. If I were a gambling woman, I'd say Aliani dropped her amulet in the forest for you to find, brother. If you hadn't have found it, and if Auli hadn't lost her own, we'd still be stumbling around. A moment of luck has changed everything."

"Maybe the Goddess did it," Auli said in a small voice, obviously still shocked over what she'd learned.

"If so, I'm going to kiss her the next time I visit the Heart," Keritanima said gruffly. "Now then, go track down that drake of yours, Tarrin, and I'll send out the call. It's time we all had a little early supper, and I'm just dying for some company. Don't you agree?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he said.

It wasn't an early supper that had been planned, but a late one. Tarrin and Keritanima realized that before they could make plans, they were going to have to break the control that the Council had over Allia, Allyn, and Iselde. Breaking the Mind weaves would be a simple matter, but he'd have to get them close to him. He wanted to do it all at once, and they'd have to be in proximity to him for his Sorcery to affect them. For Allyn and Iselde, this wasn't a big deal, but Allia was another matter entirely. For him to break the Council's control, he'd have to nullify magic in the area, destroying the Mind weaves quickly, before the disruption of them could do permanent harm to their subjects.

That was going to be the sticking point. Allia would sense his magic, and her suspicious nature would cause her to strike at him almost immediately. Tarrin was going to be very careful, because nobody else

could use magic to subdue Allia, and no one else had the physical ability to stop her if she sought to kill him.

About an hour after he and Keritanima had decided to call council, Tarrin was ready for the ordeal. It was going to be painful to attack Allia with magic, but a part of him was anxious to do it, almost eager. It meant that he would get his sister back, back where she belonged. Tarrin could look into her eyes, hold her in his arms, and forgive her for what she said, and everything would be alright again. After all, it hadn't been her talking.

Tarrin chose his ground carefully. He was sitting on the bed, and Kimmie and Sapphire were with him. Everyone else was out of the room. Tarrin would make his attempt as soon as the three of them came into the room, and Keritanima and Dolanna had been stationed in the house to make sure that they got to the door at the same time. Kimmie and Sapphire both would be there to delay Allia if she managed to evade Tarrin's attempt to destroy the Mind weave controlling her, giving him enough time to get her before she could reach him and force him to abandon Sorcery in favor of trying to keep his head on his shoulders. Tarrin heartily respected, even feared, Allia's incredible prowess with her shortwords, and no matter what she was wearing, she'd have them with her. Allia knew his weaknesses, and she was one of the few living things that Tarrin respected enough to take those kinds of precautions. She could kill him if she got close enough, if his mind was still involved with his magical attempts. He didn't want to hurt her, but on the other hand, he didn't want to get his head chopped off either.

Tarrin waited restlessly in the room, watching the door across the room, counting the paces it would take Allia to get to him if it came to that. Kimmie and Sapphire should stop her about the middle of the room. Tarrin already warned Kimmie not to engage Allia in a fight, to slow her down by throwing things at her or, if she could, try magic. Sapphire too was warned, but Sapphire told him that she could drop Allia from twenty paces if she had command of her lightning power. They should be able to stop her, if it came down to that. If things went as he planned, she'd never take a step towards him.

The door moved, and Tarrin stood up quickly before the bed and set his will against the Weave, readying himself. High Sorcery would give him away too quickly, and he really didn't need it for what he was doing. Allia

was a deceptively strong Sorceress, but she could not match Tarrin's skill at weaving quickly. Tarrin could have the spell woven and released before she knew what was going on, and if he did, he'd have her without her taking a single step. It opened, and Tarrin saw, much to his nervous delight, Allia, Allyn, and Iselde standing on the other side of it. Dolanna and Keritania were behind them, shooing them in, and Tarrin could clearly see Allia's hostile expression, and her suspicious eyes.

"I have nothing more to say to you, *brother*," she hissed from the doorway, refusing to step inside.

What Allia didn't count on was Keritania bodily shoving her into the room. "Well we have plenty to say to you!" the fox Wikuni said in a hot tone. "Now then, sister, you're going to stand here and hear what we have to say. You owe us that much!"

Dolanna quietly shooed Iselde and Allyn into the room, and then stepped back and closed the door. It was her and Keritania's task to make sure they didn't get out after Tarrin started.

Allia, who was wearing the dress that Allyn gave her, turned and glared at Tarrin viciously. Tarrin didn't pay her much attention, as he carefully gauged the distance between the two Sha'Kar and the Selani. They were close enough together. Keritania quickly stepped back, and that motion caught the attention of all three of them for a critical split second.

Perfectly done!

Tarrin already had the spell in mind, so he pulled the flows from the strands and wove them together with a blazing speed that would have stunned Iselde and Allyn, if they could have sensed what he was doing. Allia's eyes widened as she sensed his action, but by the time she had turned and reached for the dagger at her belt, Tarrin snapped the spell down and released it.

This was the critical part. If Allia dashed forward, out of the spell's area of effect, before it could affect her, Kimmie and Sapphire would have to intervene and give Tarrin enough time to try again.

But she didn't move quite fast enough. The spell's borders solidified, and a dome around the three of them shimmered into being as the spell absolutely nullified all magical activity within it. It wouldn't strip their

amulets of their spells, but those spells wouldn't function so long as they were within it.

Allia took two quick steps forward, but then she faltered. She dropped her dagger and put a hand to her head, wincing in pain. Iselde and Allyn's reaction was far more dramatic, as both of them wailed in pain and grabbed their heads with both hands, doubling over. Killing the Mind weaves like that was a very dramatic thing, and the mind did not like dramatic, radical change. Tarrin knew it would hurt, but he saw little other choice.

Allia raised her head and looked at Tarrin in confusion. "Brother, what am I doing?" she asked woozily. "I wanted to kill you!"

"Allia, do what I say, and do it fast," Keritanima said as she rushed forward. "Go to Allyn and take off his amulet. Quickly!"

"I--As you say, *deshaida*," she said in slight confusion. Allia reached Allyn and had a little trouble getting the amulet off of him, having to pull his hands away from his head as he panted and huffed from the blinding pain. Keritanima wasn't quite so gentle with Iselde, grabbing the delicate chain of her amulet and literally ripping it off of her, jerking her backwards so badly she toppled over. The chain snapped from the stress and came free from the Sha'Kar female, and Keritanima held it high and away from herself, almost like it was a live snake.

Tarrin ended the spell and started rushing forward with Kimmie, as Keritanima helped Iselde get back to her feet. Allia was a little woozy on her feet, putting her hands on her knees to stable herself. Allyn wheezed a little as he slowly stood erect again. Dolanna came back into the room and took over for Keritanima, walking Iselde slowly and carefully over to the divans so she could sit down and try to recover. Tarrin moved swiftly and confidently, stalking up to Allia and immediately putting his paw over her ivory amulet, assensing it. Keritanima said that the Mind weave in Allia had been whole, probably a spell, but Tarrin wanted to make sure of that. He assensed her amulet, and found that it had not been tampered with in any way.

She looked up at him with those beautiful blue eyes, eyes that were a little fuzzy and uncertain. "*Deshida*, what's going on?" she asked in Selani. "I, I had the strangest nightmare. I dreamed I rejected you."

Tarrin looked down at her, then laughed. "It was a nightmare, sister, for both of us," he said, pulling her into a crushing embrace, holding her tight, letting her scent wash over him. "But it's over now."

"The Council put a spell on you, sister," Keritanima told her bluntly. "A Mind weave. They made you fight with Tarrin, probably to upset him."

"Made me? How could they?" she asked, looking at Keritanima with a bit of a wheeze from where Tarrin was squeezing her. "I am Selani. They are Sha'Kar!"

"Remember, you're cousins, sister," Tarrin told her. "It seems your minds are similar enough for the Sha'Kar to use Mind weaves on you."

"Is this true?" Allia asked Tarrin with horrified eyes. "Did I *really* say those things to you, my brother?"

"I realized that you didn't mean them, Allia," he told her gently, putting his paws on her shoulders. "I realized it not long after I left your room, at least after I got over a fit of self-pity and depression. My sister would never have said those things of her own free will. I don't blame you, and I don't want you to punish yourself over it. I'd rather we punish the ones that *did* make you say it," he said in an ugly tone. "Together."

"Together. It is as it should be between us," she said with a glorious smile. "I'm happy you didn't take my words to heart, my brother. I would have felt miserable if I caused you pain."

"There was some pain, but it was the pain of not having my sister with me," he told her.

"Oh, Tarrin. I'm so sorry!" she said with a sudden bout of tears, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. Tarrin held her for a long moment, eyes closed, chin buried in her shoulder, just revelling in her scent, her touch, her closeness. Allia was herself again. She was home.

She was his sister once more.

Keritanima joined them, and they shared a long, silent, intimate moment of togetherness, a moment of *family*, a moment that was theirs and theirs alone, despite those watching on. Tarrin, Allia, and Keritanima. The three Non-human Sorcerers that had joined forces in the Tower to find out what was going on, but had found bonds between them more powerful than love

or duty. Unbreakable ties that had sustained them through countless ordeals and suffering.

"Now then," Allia said with a weepy voice, pulling away to look at her brother and sister. "Tell me who did this to me. He is a man with no honor, and he must be punished!" she finished in a furious snarl.

"We don't know the exact person, but we'll bet that it was the Council, Allia," Keritanima told her. "There are quite a few very nasty little pieces of news you haven't heard yet. The Council is a pack of heartless, ruthless monsters, no better than the *ki'zadun*."

"Then tell me," she said intensely. "Tell me now."

"Not quite yet," Keritanima told her. "The others need to hear this too, and it's not the kind of thing I want to repeat more than once. We freed Iselde and Allyn because they'll know things we need to know, and Auli is with us too."

"*Freed* them?" Allia asked in concern.

"You weren't the only one under the control of the Council, sister," Tarrin told her. "They're controlling *all* the Sha'Kar. Allyn and Iselde too. That's part of what we're going to talk about as soon as the others get here."

"Why are they still so hurt?" Allia said in concern, her eyes fearful as she looked at Allyn, who was now being supported by Kimmie, who was leading him over to the divans where Dolanna sat with Iselde. Dolanna was patting the Sha'Kar female on the back and saying reassuring things to her as she regained her composure.

"Because the spells in their minds were alot more complicated than the one in yours," Keritanima answered. "They had more for Tarrin to pull out, so it caused them more pain than it did you." She patted Allia on the back. "Don't worry, sister, answers are coming. Everyone else is waiting in Camara Tal's room, and that's right down the hall. Let me go get them, and we can get you up to speed in just a blink."

"Thank you, sister," Allia said with a sincere look. "For believing in me."

"I knew you were being controlled, Allia," Keritanima grinned. "If you want to know the truth, me and Tarrin were going to use you to feed

misinformation to the Council. We knew whatever we told you would somehow end up on their desks. But we got wildly lucky, so we decided to dispense with that plan."

Allia looked at her wildly, then laughed. "You would use even me? Your own sister?" she asked in insincere indignation.

"Honey, when things get that serious, I'll use my own husband," Keritanima grinned in reply "Now let me go get the others, so we can get going."

"Sapphire, go with Kerri," Tarrin called. "Remember, nobody goes alone," he reminded her.

"Oh, right. Sapphire, come on!" she called as she opened the door. The drake landed on her shoulder, and they exited quickly.

While they waited, Tarrin had Allia sit down on the divans to recover herself. She sat beside Allyn, and held his hand and looked upon him in sincere concern. Allia's feelings for the boy had not changed, and in a way he suspected that they had never been part of the controlling spell over her, and he was glad of that. She deserved love and happiness. And if chose Allyn, then Tarrin would accept that choice as freely and as happily as he had accepted Keritanima's choice of Rallix. Now that he knew that Allyn had been controlled, Tarrin found no animosity in his heart towards the boy. He was certain that some of his bad angles were ingrained by training and conditioning rather than control, but he could be changed, made to understand the true culture of his people and learn to accept it. Or, Tarrin suspected, Allia would train him in the Selani way and take him home with her. Allyn probably wouldn't be able to stand up to Allia for long, but he'd better learn. Allia would get annoyed with him if she could control him that easily. Allia wanted a strong mate, someone to compete with her, challenge her body and mind, make them both better in their competition. That was the Selani way. The boy was going to have to learn quite a bit in a very short time if he wanted to keep Allia's interest.

Tarrin leaned down and put his paw on Allyn's shoulder, and the boy looked up at him in bleary confusion. "Honored one? Why do I have such a headache?"

"It'll pass in a few moments, Allyn," Tarrin told him gently. "I had to sweep a few skeletons out of your closet. I'm sorry it hurt, but there was no other way."

"What are you talking about, honored one?" Iselde asked.

"I won't explain it yet. You may not believe me," Tarrin answered her. "Let's wait for Auli. She'll be able to confirm everything I tell you. That way we don't have to waste a lot of time with stubborn bickering."

"Why would we not believe you, honored one?" Allyn said with simplicity. "What reason would you have to lie to us?"

"In a moment of time, dear heart, you will find one," Allia told him with powerful eyes. "What he will tell you is the truth. I know it. If you do not believe him, then believe *me*."

Allyn looked at her, his eyes clearing and his expression slowly showing his recovery from his pounding headache. "I would never doubt you, my heart," he told her calmly.

Tarrin looked at Allia, she at him, and the unspoken declaration passed between them. She smiled fondly at him and patted the paw on Allyn's shoulder. Tarrin accepted her mate. That pleased her greatly.

"You look ridiculous in that dress, sister," he told her with a smile.

"I feel a little ridiculous," she admitted in Selani. "I think my desire to wear it was put in me. I think they took my love for Allyn and twisted it into my only passion."

"That would make sense," he told her. "Since you're Selani, I don't think they could control you with the same weaves they used to control the Sha'Kar. You maybe related, but you *do* have a different mind. So they had to use something simpler on you, something that could be easy and simple yet dominate your thinking. Working on an emotion like love can definitely do that." He grimaced. "I think if I wouldn't have taken sides against Allyn, you wouldn't have reacted the way you did when we had the fight. If I would have been a little more diplomatic, I don't think it would have come out the way it did."

"You were being *you*, brother. Don't kick yourself for it," she told him gently. "Just as you told me not to blame myself for what I said, I'm telling

you right now not to blame yourself for how it started. It's over, it's in the past, and it meant nothing. So it's not even worth our time to remember it."

As always, she knew exactly what to say. Tarrin leaned down and put his forehead against hers. She giggled a little and rubbed her forehead against him. "I love you, sister," he said sincerely.

"And I you, my brother. Now that we've made up, sit down and let me introduce you to my lover the *right* way."

Chapter 18

It was a crisp, cool night. The stars were out and shining brightly, and though only one moon, the Red Moon Vala, was high in the sky, the Skybands provided more than enough light for those on the ground to see. They were Sha'Kar, returning home after a party held by one of the most prominent women on the island, a party that had been attended by nearly half of the island's inhabitants. They walked along in a good mood, many of them flushed with wine and drug, talking animatedly about nothing of importance, rumors and gossip and whispered promises of the delights to be indulged once they returned to their estates. They moved in boisterous security, assured of their safety by the nature of their island and centuries of established habits.

They had no idea they were being watched.

Tarrin squatted on the corner of a roof of one of the estate houses near to the central estate, the estate of the Grand, with Sapphire perched on his shoulder. He had been stationed there for nearly two hours now, waiting for the party to break up, waiting patiently. They could not move until the Sha'Kar were off the streets, until they had returned to either their own estates or a companion's and either went to bed or engaged in other forms of entertainment.

Everything was planned. They had gathered and talked about things a very long time, and after interviewing Auli, Allyn, and Iselde, a plan had been formed. Not that it had been easy. The first thing to overcome had been the disbelief of the two Sha'Kar siblings. They didn't want to believe what they were told, and in a way, he empathized and understood that. They had just learned that the very people they respected the most were responsible for using the vilest forms of mind control on them, and had murdered over three hundred of their own. It had shocked and horrified them, and much of the long session had been devoted to nursing to two of them out of their stupor and learning from them the patterns of the Sha'Kar, and most importantly, their uncle Arlan. Arlan was the wild card in the

plan, for if he noticed all his guests were missing during the night, the Council was going to know something was going on. Tarrin, Keritanima, and Dolanna had sat down and devised a means to prevent Sha'Kar from spying on them from the Weave, a spell that would attack lurkers from them in the form of their connection to their bodies. It was a hastily engineered spell, but it worked. When woven, it forced a lurker to return to his or her body. They would cast it over and over again before anyone left the house, sweeping the house clean of spies, and then, after they gave up trying, they'd start to move.

Most of the others weren't moving yet, but they would soon. Tarrin had a very important task in their very delicate plan, and that was rather simple. There were some Sha'Kar who were very old and very strong. Tarrin would visit them during the night, while they were sleeping, and defeat the control that their amulets put over them. He wouldn't have time to do it for all of them before sunrise, but he knew which ones to visit first. Auli, Iselde, and Allyn had given them a complete list of the strongest Sorcerers, and Keritnaima had compiled it with Auli's help into a list in descending order of ability. The very first woman on that list was Auli's mother, regarded as the strongest and most skilled Sorceress on the island outside the Council. He had his list in his pocket, complete with where their estates were, who they were known to associate with, and what times they commonly went to bed. That was the information that Keritanima wanted from the Sha'Kar, a very detailed itinerary of the patterns Tarrin's targets. Between Auli and Iselde, there was very little that they didn't know about the habits of the other Sha'Kar. They were prominent gossippers, and such things always ended up in gossip. Using that information, Tarrin would find them, either in their own beds or someone else's, find them and defeat the control the amulets had over them.

Keritanima's target number was fifty. She wanted him to free at least fifty before sunrise. Fifty of the strongest of the Sha'Kar. Keritanima reasoned that that many would be more than capable of fending off the rest if it came down to a fight, especially since if it did come to a fight, the Council wouldn't be in it helping the others. They'd have their hands full with Tarrin.

A trickier problem had been with the humans. The Sha'Kar couldn't control *them* as they had their own, so that meant that some of them were

working for the Council. Tarrin doubted that they all were, and he suspected a similar pattern. A few humans were free and working with the Council, but the rest were under the effects of mental control. The key was to find out which were willing and which were not, and that also hinged as one of the cornerstones of the plan. Without the humans to help them, the Sha'Kar would be limited to seven in a circle. So to prevent them from building up a Circle that could wipe them out, they had to eliminate the humans as an asset to the Council.

That enviable task had fallen to Dar, Dolanna, and Keritanima, with Binter along to defend the queen. It wasn't going to be easy, and they only had one night. They had left first, going to a party that the humans had thrown for themselves, since they tended to not be welcome at the Sha'Kar parties. Keritanima had gone along to help the two humans as they would try somehow to work their way into a position where they could check amulets for signs of mental control. Tarrin had shown them specifically what to look for, and armed with that knowledge, they would be able to detect the weave that sought to keep everything else hidden, including itself. They would attend the party, try to discern just who was under control and who was not, then move to break that control in the same manner that Tarrin was with the Sha'Kar. Keritanima didn't need all the Sha'Kar to be freed for the plan to work, but it was absolutely imperative that all the humans were taken out of the equation. To the point where Keritanima told them that the humans may have to be physically removed if necessary. Dolanna assured her that she knew a way to put all the humans out without hurting them, and Keritanima acceded to Dolanna's idea. A simple mind weave that induced sleep was easy to cast, and it could be set to linger for hours and hours. So long as the effect lingered, it would be virtually impossible to wake the victim up.

There were other tasks, important ones. Kimmie and Phandebrass were already hard at work trying to find or create a spell that would summon a Demon. Tarrin had one *specific* Demon in mind, and that was Shiika. If they could get Shiika onto the island, the Succubus could run wild all over the Sha'Kar. They wouldn't be able to do anything to her, and she could put them down without much effort with her powerful mind-affecting magic. Without Shiika's True Name, Phandebrass admitted to Tarrin that it was going to be very difficult. Between the limitations of Wizardry and the

Ward around the island, they may not be successful. But it was a worthwhile gamble, and they all agreed to that. Shiika by herself could all but guarantee victory for them. If she did hear their summons, there was intense speculation as to whether or not she could penetrate the Ward. The Ward was a creation of magic native to this world, and as such Shiika would be absolutely immune to it. But it was *also* a creation of the gods, and *that* may give it the power to hinder her. They were split as to whether or not Shiika could breach the Ward, but they all agreed that it was still worth their time to try. As they all knew, Shiika could take the Sha'Kar and put them in the palm of her hand with very little opposition. Shiika's powers were not flashy or destructive as they were with most Demons, but in truth, hers were the most powerful. She was no warrior or magical powerhouse, and in a fight, she would quickly lose to one. But she *controlled* those who were much stronger than she, and that gave her more power than those who thought that they were above her. The Council had shown Tarrin the incredible power of being able to control others, and there was no being on Sennadar more effective at controlling others than Shiika.

Azakar, Camara Tal, Sisska, and Miranda also had a task, but it was one which they were not happy to accept. They remained behind in the estate, and in their guard was placed Zarina, Auli, Iselde, Allyn, and the redheaded girl that Tarrin had claimed earlier that night, whose name was Liza. Liza didn't know she was being guarded, only knowing that the honored one *himself* had asked her to come to the room and act as a personal servant and maid to the group while they were there. The presence of the three Sha'Kar didn't make that an unusual request.

The planning had a specific goal. To break enough of the Council's hold over the Sha'Kar so that tomorrow, the Sha'Kar would not cause them any serious problems once the Council was dethroned as the ruling body of Sha'Kari. That would take place at sunrise, and that plan, another of Keritanima's, was absolutely brilliant in its elegant simplicity. Tarrin would simply call the Council together and announce he was *taking over*. Sha'Kar society and culture recognized him, a *sui'kun*, as a ruler. The seven *sui'kun* were the seven Keepers of the towers before the Breaking. That was why they called him *honored one*, and Auli had demonstrated the deep-seated impulse the Sha'Kar had to obeying those above them. If that was one of the functions of the amulets, Keritanima saw no reason to use it against the

Council. And the Council would have no real reason to deny him his rightful place. It would go against Sha'Kar tradition, and that was one of the traditions the Council had kept alive, so as to retain a sense of continuity among the Sha'Kar and also use as a tool to help keep the rest of their people under the Council's control. Keritanima could think of no rational reason the Council could give to him or their own people as to why Tarrin should not replace the Grand and lead the Council. The Council had created the tenets of the society they controlled, and Keritanima intended to use it as a weapon against them.

That was the plan, and it seemed to Tarrin to be a good one. It wasn't exhaustively complicated, addressing the main obstacles to taking down the Council and allowing them to do so with a minimum of bloodshed. That was very important to all of them, because as far as they were concerned, the only guilty parties on the island were the Council, the Grand, and the humans that were willingly working with them. They didn't want to have to be forced to fight people who were fighting them because they were being magically controlled. That could very well happen if the Council got wind of what they were doing before they finished, or they moved to protect themselves when Tarrin came to pay them a call. If things worked as they all hoped they would, Tarrin would simply walk in, take over the rulership of the Council, and then dissolve it. Then he'd turn around and kill them all.

After all, there was no way he was going to allow them to live, after what he'd seen what they were capable of. He hadn't told Keritanima that yet, but she'd find out once he started slaughtering them.

Another advantage of the plan was that all of it didn't have to succeed in order for the plan itself to be successful. Tarrin could fail to get fifty, Dar, Keritanima, and Dolanna could fail to discover who was controlling the humans, and Phandebrass and Kimmie could fail to Summon Shiika. The main core of the plan was Tarrin's hostile takeover of the Council. The freeing of the Sha'Kar and the containment of the humans were conditional actions they needed to take in case the Council refused and attempted to turn all the Sha'Kar against them. And that wasn't even an absolute, because even Keritanima wasn't sure what the Sha'Kar would do if the Council ordered them to attack the honored one. That may take things too far even for them, control or no control. But being wise, none of them were going to

assume that the Sha'Kar would not turn hostile if they were commanded to do so.

"They're thinning out," Sapphire said in a low whisper from his shoulder. "How much longer?"

"As soon as they're all off the streets," he answered in a quiet tone, surveying things. There were only a few scattered pockets of slowly ambling Sha'Kar, probably the most drunken ones.

"Where do we go first?" she asked.

Tarrin pointed to an estate on the southwest edge of the town. "That one," he answered.

"Do you want me to go scout it for you?"

"No, let's both stay out of sight," he told her. "Thanks for the offer."

"I'd rather check things out before you go. I don't want to see you get hurt," she told him.

"I love you too, little one," he said absently yet sincerely, reaching up and patting her forepaws fondly. "But I'll be fine. These Sha'Kar aren't very alert, especially now that half of them are drunk and the other half either asleep or very distracted. They don't post guards. Goddess, they don't even lock their doors. They'll never see us."

"I hope so."

"Me too."

They waited in silence for about ten more minutes, until the last pack of Sha'Kar, a large family, finally piled into their estate. Tarrin silently climbed down the wall of the manor home on which he was perched, then ran across the lawn and jumped the fence in utter silence, his black fur and clothing blending in with the dark shadows, making him all but invisible. His instinctual understanding of stalking and moving without detection made him little more than a ghost, and he could have literally ran right in front of a Sha'Kar, and they would not have noticed him, so silently and stealthily he moved. He covered the ground to Auli's estate in a tenth of the time it took the Sha'Kar, moving with speed of purpose along the winding white stone pathways. He vaulted the fence without breaking his stride, and

covered the considerable distance between the fence and the main manor house very quickly. Auli had described her home to him fully, and he knew that a servant's entrance on the east side of the house would give him the fastest and most direct route from the outside to her mother's bedchamber. That was where he moved, skirting around the house and skulking up to the door, which was remarkably plain. Tarrin put his ear to the door and listened, for the kitchen was on the far side and Auli warned him that one of the servants may be in the kitchen that time of night, for one of her sisters and one of her uncles both liked meals just before bed. And of course, the servants prepared and delivered them. But there was no sound coming from inside, meaning that the coast was clear.

Tarrin opened the door quickly and slipped inside, then closed it behind him. He was indeed in a kitchen, a huge chamber of a kitchen with two firepits, three stoves, and four ovens dispersed between countertop after countertop and pantry after pantry. It looked like a barracks kitchen responsible for feeding hundreds of men, not a kitchen to prepare meals for sixteen Sha'Kar. That was Auli's extended family, the population of the estate. Tarrin took stock of his surroundings, pausing to sniff at a few stoves, and could tell that it had been a while since the last meal had been prepared. He must have gotten there before those late eaters ordered their nightly dinners from the servants. There had been a couple of female servants in the kitchen not long ago, but their scents had them leaving towards the two rooms that the eight human female maids were allotted in the main house, down a small side passage off the kitchen.

With a nudge at Sapphire to get her off his shoulder, Tarrin shapeshifted into his cat form, the kitchen blurring and then taking on another perspective, as he looked up at everything rather than down. His cat form was a lot less conspicuous, and there was always a chance someone was going to come out a door while he was walking past. With sixteen Sha'Kar and the Goddess knows how many guests they had tonight, the chances were quite good. Sapphire landed on the ground beside him and nodded, folding up her wings. She'd seen him shapeshift before, but since he'd had mates in his beds lately, he saw little reason to shapeshift anymore. But this was one of those times when it was very useful. After a quick moment of negotiation as the Cat came more fully into the forefront of his mind, he padded towards the passageway that Auli had described. Her mother's

chamber was at the end of that passage, a huge double door set at the end of the hall, and Auli warned him that the passageway traversed almost the entirety of the manor. Auli's mother preferred living on the ground floor, so she wouldn't have to climb any steps. It was very unlike Arlan's room, which was on the third floor of his estate.

Tarrin and Sapphire padded into the hallway, and moved both quickly and carefully. Tarrin put his nose to the floor and checked for recent scents, and found none. None at all, except for a few servants. That struck him as odd. There were eight bedrooms along that passage. None of them had returned to them yet? As often as the Sha'Kar slept over at another estate, that was a possibility. Auli admitted that she slept in her own room about one night in six, and even then she usually wasn't alone.

They encountered no one along the long walk to the end of the passage, where a huge set of double doors with massive crystal handles rested, the house name chased in silver on doors that looked to be sheathed in beaten gold. There were little clear crystals also embedded in the gold, making the whole thing shimmer as the light that radiated steadily from the walls caught in the crystals and was refracted. It was, by far, the gaudiest display he'd seen from the Sha'Kar so far. Most Sha'Kar decorations weren't half as loud as this one. Auli said her mother was a little eccentric. These doors tended to agree with that observation.

It was the place, however. With a quick look around, Tarrin shapeshifted back into his humanoid form, and then put his ear and his paw against the door. There was no sound from within, a good sign. Auli said her mother was an early sleeper, and tended to wake up earlier than most other Sha'Kar. Tarrin grabbed the pull ring and opened the door, doing it slowly, so its weight didn't make the door squeak on the hinges.

The room beyond was absolutely palatial. It was much larger than Arlan's chamber, and was almost spartanly decorated. There was only one sculpture, on the far side of the room, near the raised dais upon which the bed sat. There were five paintings and two tapestries, and there was also an ancient shield hanging from the wall, that had a coat of arms of some sort on it. It looked to be thousands of years old, from the archaic design of the shield. There were a couple of bookshelves near a trio of bureaus near the bed as well, and there was a whole lot of empty space between the chamber

door and the nearest chair. There were about five chairs and a divan sitting on the far side of the room, probably where the woman received visitors, and there was a very large, ornate desk with a padded chair before it against the back wall. There were strange little cabinets to each side of that desk, probably for holding papers. Each had several small drawers. Arlan did his family paperwork in a study down the hall from his bedchamber. It looked like Auli's mother preferred to do it from her room. On the far wall were three other doors set closely together, probably closets, and an archway in the corner that opened into a bathing room that held a pool that, from that distance, looked to be the size of a large pond.

In the bed, Tarrin could see a single figure, laying still. The blankets were pulled up around it, so he couldn't get a good look, but the very faint scent told him it was a female Sha'Kar. Auli said she'd probably be alone. She preferred her male company in the morning and afternoon, saying that night time was for sleeping, not fooling around.

Quietly closing the door behind him, Tarrin motioned for Sapphire to stay put, standing on the floor next to the door, and padded quietly towards the woman. He wasn't sure how lightly Sha'Kar slept, but he was pretty sure he could get close enough to her without waking her up. He didn't need to see her amulet to weave that counterspell into it, but the proximity would make it much easier. The closer he got, the easier it would be.

Tarrin padded closer and closer to the woman, and then his ears picked up. Something wasn't right. He was getting closer, but the smell of her wasn't getting any closer. He should be able to scent her much more strongly now, but there was still nothing but that faint scent. Tarrin stopped about ten paces from the closest chair, looking carefully at the woman that was still about thirty spans away from him. She wasn't moving and she was laying on her side, so he couldn't get a good look at her, but the braided blond hair marked her as Auli's mother, all right. Auli had described her to him. Long blond hair, and she'd have it in a braid so she could sleep comfortably. He was only thirty spans away. Why hadn't her scent become stronger?

Tarrin hunkered down on all fours and carefully checked the floor, but there was no scent there. He rose up again and thoroughly tested the air, and

realized that the scent was faint because it was *old*. Not very old, but there was no fresh smell of the woman in the room. And yet, there she lay.

That wasn't just not right, that was downright suspicious. He took a very cautious step back, away from the bed, not turning around so as not to turn his back on a potential enemy. His eyes scanned the room quickly as he crushed all his wild speculations on why things were wrong, what had happened. He'd think about what the hell was going on once he got out of the room, got to safety. He couldn't see or smell or hear or even sense any threats to him in the room, but the lack of congruency about this situation made him nervous and alert. He reached out with his senses and checked the woman on the bed, and to his shock, he realized that it was nothing but an Illusion. That was why she had no scent!

It came so quickly that it honestly took him by surprise. Absolutely out of nowhere, Tarrin felt a very strong power in Sorcery. By the time he felt it, registered its presence, he felt that power surround him, enclose him, seek to smother his magical self beneath it. Tarrin instinctively understood that that was what he did to that male Sha'Kar to cut him off from the Weave, that he was experiencing it from the wrong side. Tarrin struck back, blasting his will against that power in an attempt to break through it and reach the Weave, but the power was too heavily reinforced, too well created for him to be able to break it with brute force.

Tarrin realized what had happened immediately. Only a Circle could cut *him* off from the Weave, and there was only one Circle that would have reason to try!

The Council knew what he was doing!

Shock and betrayal raging through him, Tarrin turned on the sense of that power. The shield they had put around him didn't interfere with his sense of the magic, it only stopped him from using his power. They were *behind* him. Inside the room!

They were there. All nine of them, and seven were joined in a Circle. They had been standing in the room the whole time, and Tarrin hadn't seen them, heard them, or even smelled them! He *still* couldn't smell them! They must have used some kind of magical Ward to prevent him from sensing their presence! Sapphire, startled by their miraculous appearance, vaulted

into the air flew over to land on Tarrin's shoulder, hissing at them dangerously from her perch.

They looked smug. How did they know? They had swept out all the spies. Had they missed someone? Had they managed to get eyes and ears into their war council? They must have, for they had no other reason to be here. Tarrin fought back a wild fury, and also an almost overpowering fear. They had him cut off from the Weave. They had him partially under their control, and the Cat was raging against that. It wanted to attack them, destroy them, do anything it had to do to regain its complete freedom. Tarrin had to fight a desperate, furious battle inside himself to retain control. If he tried to charge the Council, the two not busy holding him powerless would be free to attack him. And besides, he reminded the Cat, he could kill that shield with his Druidic power whenever it pleased him to do so. No, they thought they had him in the corner. He wanted to see what they were going to do with him. If he didn't like what he heard, he'd take them down.

"So, we meet again, honored one," Grand Syllis said in a light, conversational tone. He was holding a silvered dagger in his hand. "It's fortunate that this will be the last time under these circumstances."

Tarrin almost went wild at the sight of that dagger, but gritted his teeth and remained calm. If he wanted to talk, then Tarrin would make him talk. He may get them to say something useful. Besides, Syllis would be a maniac for trying to get close enough to use that dagger on him. "If you think your little spell can hold me back, think again," he said in a dangerous tone, his eyes narrowing dangerously as they exploded from within with that unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger. "You were complete fools to come into this room with me alone. I can slaughter the lot of you and nobody will ever know what really happened. As far as they'll be concerned, all nine of you failed the ceremony of Ascension." He glared at them. "I'll even bury you with the others, just so it feels more proper."

"Oh, we've taken all the necessary precautions, honored one," he said with a smile. They all seemed to step aside, as if on cue, and Tarrin very nearly did go wild at what he saw behind them.

Kimmie, stripped naked, unconscious, laying limply on the floor with her hands and feet bound by very sturdy-looking chains. He couldn't smell

her. Why couldn't he smell her! But it *was* her. It was no Illusion, he could sense that. She had the Wizard-sense that permeated his mate, and there was no way they could fake that.

Tarrin took an involuntary step forward, then caught himself. Clenching his fists as Sapphire yowled at them in indignant fury, sparks starting to emanate from her body, Tarrin fought another furious battle to remain calm. Charging over there was only going to get Kimmie killed! That dagger wasn't meant for him, it was meant for *Kimmie*!

Grand Syllis made a gesture, and Kimmie raised off the floor as if held by an invisible hand. She floated over to him, her feet dragging the ground as she was lowered to the Grand's level, and he set the dagger against her naked breast lightly. "If only you would have *left*, honored one," he sighed. Tarrin bit his tongue when Syllis drew the dagger across Kimmie's smooth skin, leaving behind a thin red line of blood as the silver cut her. Proving to him that it could. "We had no intention of doing this, but you left us little choice."

Now they'd gone too far. It was time to end this! Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, reaching for the endless, boundless energy of the All. All he had to do was kill their shield and then--

"Don't bother trying to use your *Druidic* powers," Syllis warned quickly. "That takes time, and we'll sense it through the shield. Not even Druidic power can go unnoticed, honored one. If we sense that rise up in you, your mate will lose her throat."

Tarrin almost wanted to howl in impotent fury. He knew that Sorcerers couldn't sense Druidic magic in use, but there were too many uncertainties here. These were Ancients, and they already had the shield over him. If it could detect him drawing on the All, Syllis could plunge that dagger into Kimmie's throat before he could release the energy of the spell. He couldn't break their shield, he couldn't use Druidic magic against them, and they were too far away for him to reach them before they could kill his mate.

With a murderous glare, Tarrin put his paws down at his sides, fists still clenched so tightly that blood was starting to drip from where his claws had punched into his palms. Sapphire still hissed and growled, still had

electricity dancing around her, but she too seemed to understand that for the moment, they were at a severe disadvantage.

"Ah, I see you've accepted the inevitable. I'm sure you're wondering how we came to be in this sticky situation. Would you like to know?"

Tarrin said nothing. He just glared death at Grand Syllis.

"Ah, I see you've lost your sense of humor," he said with a wicked grin. He nodded towards one of the other Sha'Kar, and the male--he couldn't remember which one that was--stepped over and opened the door to the chamber.

Dolanna was standing behind it.

She walked into the room, not even looking at Tarrin, and then curtsied before Grand Syllis deeply. He nodded to her, and she stood just beside him with her eyes on the floor. "You were on the right trail, honored one, but you *checked the wrong woman*. The work we did on your Allia was just a diversion. Dolanna was our true eyes and ears. Weren't you, my dear?"

"Yes, Grand Syllis," she replied in a wooden tone.

Tarrin was absolutely furious with himself. Damn them! They had read him like a book! With Allia under their control, it consumed all his attention. Dolanna and Keritanima had acted *normally* after Tarrin confronted the group with what he'd learned about the Sha'Kar, where Allia had not. And that caused all of them to drop their guard. Tarrin had never even considered the possibility that they could control Dolanna, because she was *human*. Too late he learned that some of the human Sorcerers were working for the Council...and he hadn't pieced those two important clues together!

"So, as you may realize, we've already rounded up all your companions. The humans, the Selani, and the Wikuni will make fine additions to our happy family here on the island. They are descendants of our race, so we can affect them, make them see reason. But you and those lizard creatures...well, I'm afraid there's little we can do about you."

"If you kill Kimmie, they won't find enough left of you to put in a thimble," Tarrin warned in a very deadly cold, ominous tone.

"Yes, yes, we know. Dolanna told us. She's carrying your child, and you have those fairly nasty Were instincts. You may even find the power to break our shield if we enraged you to that degree. But we're not that foolish, honored one. This one will live," he motioned at Kimmie with the dagger, "but the rest of you, I'm afraid, you'll have to sleep until we reawaken you. It won't be long, I can assure you of that. As soon as we get the Firestaff and I use it to take my rightful place among the gods, I'll restore you and the Vendari and all the children we had to put to sleep, and you can worship me for my kindness and generosity."

That made Tarrin's blood cold. Syllis wanted to use the Firestaff. He wanted to be a god.

No wonder he killed the Sha'Kar who opposed him. He sounded like he was a Sha'Kar in that regard, sounded like he truly regretted killing, but to him, it was just temporary. As soon as he was a god, he could bring all the Sha'Kar he had murdered back, as if nothing had happened.

"That's why we saved their bodies," he noted, as if he knew what Tarrin was thinking. "It pained us to have to go to those extremes, but they just didn't understand. I will be the new god of the Sha'Kar. Why was that so hard for them to accept?"

"You are mad," Tarrin said in a grim voice, a voice full of barely contained fury.

"One man's madness is another man's genius," he shrugged. "But we digress, honored one. That is my offer. Accept your sleep willingly, and your mate and unborn child will not be forced to sleep with you. The woman will survive the sleep, but the child...I'm afraid it won't be so lucky. You can save both, or certainly lose at least one. The choice is yours."

"You can't get the Firestaff," Tarrin said in a savage growl. "Your offer lacks backing."

"Oh, but we can, thanks to you," he grinned. "We had the Wizard and the Priest and the Sorcerer, but we couldn't find the Druid. But you pointed her out to us. That was very thoughtful of you, honored one."

"What are you talking about?" Tarrin demanded.

"The spell blocking entry into the volcano requires that all four orders of magic be there to bring it down. We keep one human Priest and one Wizard trained so they can serve. But we were missing the Druid. Now we have your Zarina and Liza, and we should be able to train one of them enough to serve our purposes. We were afraid we'd have to use *you*," he admitted with a smile. "That would have been very, very difficult. At first, we were afraid you'd discovered that secret, when you addressed us at the Council. It was before we'd had the time to fully learn about you from Dolanna. But when you told us why the Druids were so important to you, we realized that you hadn't yet figured things out."

That fit. They'd about had a heart attack when he brought up the Druids, then Syllis calmed right down after Tarrin told him that he was taking them back with him. He'd inadvertantly revealed the last piece of the puzzle that Syllis and the Council needed. They weren't afraid of the Druids, they were afraid of what Tarrin might know! And they'd asked Kimmie if she was a Druid when they first met her, to see if she was the one they needed!

"So, honored one, now you know that I'm not offering a false bargain. Save both or save one. The choice is yours. I'd appreciate it if you'd make it, for we need to get you to sleep and safe and turn our attentions to finally recovering the Firestaff."

Tarrin stared at Syllis in barely contained fury. What was he going to do? He couldn't attack Syllis, or he'd kill Kimmie. But there was *no way* he believed that Syllis really intended to resurrect him from the dead. And yet, he could see no other way but to agree to his demand.

You must be able to make the decisions that must be made.

Tarrin cringed at that memory. Not this. No, not this! He wouldn't have to be forced to allow his own mate to die! She was his life, as much as Jesmind was, and his every instinct screamed at him to protect her, to protect his unborn child. He just *couldn't* abandon them!

No, he wouldn't. He *couldn't* kill Kimmie. He would not lose another friend. Faalken would *not* have company. If he agreed, then maybe one of the others could escape and get the Firestaff first--

You must be able to make the decisions that must be made.

Tarrin remembered Jesmind and Jasana, his precious mate and cub. What would become of *them* if he let Syllis get the Firestaff and then the gods destroyed the world trying to destroy him? What would become of his parents, his sister, his friends, of his little mother? Was Kimmie's life, the life of his unborn child, were they equal to the rest of his family? Were their lives worth destroying the entire world?

Tarrin struggled in silent agony for a long moment, but in the end, there was only one decision he could make.

Taking in a deep breath, a single tear escaping the corner of his eye, Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, reaching for the golden power, the boundless energy of the All.

Forgive me, my sweet mate, Tarrin thought in anguish. *Mother, forgive me!*

"Master, he's trying to use his Druidic magic!" one of the Council gasped.

"I'm sorry you couldn't see things my way," Syllis said sadly, moving to slit Kimmie's throat.

It happened in a flash, and it startled Tarrin so badly he almost forgot what he was doing. Docile, demure, obedient Dolanna, who had been standing there as still and quiet as one pleased, suddenly clasped her hands together, turned, and struck Syllis in the chest with every ounce of strength her diminutive little body could exert. Dolanna was small, but she was an active, well-travelled woman, and that gave her slender frame some impressive power. Dolanna's physical assault caught Syllis squarely in the chest, knocking the hand with the dagger wide of Kimmie and staggering him back with an explosive release of breath, his eyes agog with shock and dismay.

Tarrin watched in stunned horror as Kimmie's body dropped lifelessly to the ground, Grand Syllis' concentration broken and the spell holding her up disrupted.

"Tarrin, *NOW!*" Dolanna screamed with all her might as lightning crackled around her clasped hands, as she quickly wove a spell together while the Council seemed stunned into momentary paralysis by Dolanna's sudden attack. Dolanna sent that lightning into the Council, raking it across

them, but one of the members not in the Circle managed to deflect the lightning with some kind of counterspell.

The shield around him began to weaken, falter. The Circle was taken aback by the little human Sorceress' gutsy, almost insane attack on them, willing to fight vastly superior numbers of Sorcerers who were vastly stronger than she. Tarrin managed to reach the All after redoubling his efforts, and when it touched him, it saw the image and read the intent in his mind. Tarrin's intent was to disrupt Sorcery, *all* Sorcery, within the bounds of the room.

Without their powers, the Council members were nothing more than defenseless mice. And the Cat was hungry.

Just like that, the shield around Tarrin vanished. The lightning raking the defensive shield protecting the Council vanished, as did the shield itself.

With a howl of utter fury, Tarrin allowed the Cat to take him, and he flew into a rage. Claws out, he threw himself at the suddenly terrified Council, who were turning and trying to flee from him. Blood pounded in his ears, shivered his eyesight as the outraged and utterly infuriated Were-cat displaced his drake companion and covered the distance between him and the Council before the first of them could even reach the door.

Dolanna flung herself at Grand Syllis and punched him dead in the nose, her weight crashing him to the floor with her as Tarrin reached the scrambling Council. They had all been running for the door, but then scattered in every direction when they realized that Tarrin was going to beat them to it. Two of them tried anyway, and he managed to reach them just as the tall female put her hand on the door. She almost made it. The enraged Were-cat grabbed her by the back of the neck and crushed it, then picked her up and used the body like a club, smashing it into the second one, a short male. He struck the male so hard that he was smashed into the door behind him, leaving a gruesome bloodstain where his head hit the beaten gold. The impact of the blow tore the head off the female's body, the body bouncing to the floor as the head came off in the Were-cat's paw, separated by the grip he had on the neck. He threw that head aside contemptuously and charged off after the next closest fleeing figure as Sapphire unloaded her full charge of lightning on two Council members who were fleeing towards the archway leading to the pool. Both of them shrieked in agony as

the lightning blasted into them, and though the heat of it could do no damage, the electric current most certainly did, destroying their nervous systems. The power of her lightning dropped them both stone dead to the floor, twitching and jerking spasmodically. Sapphire's powers had grown much stronger since the birth of the sixth *sui'kun*.

Tarrin reached his prey and drove it to the floor, then killed it with a claw slash to the neck as the Sha'Kar screamed in terror and tried to put up his hands in defense. The Were-cat simply swept those hands aside with the fatal blow. He looked up and saw the last three, one of them running into the pool room, another trying to get a closet door open but unable to find the strength of coordination to work the handle, and the third dashing towards the bed. Sapphire was airborne, and he saw her discharge what lightning she had left into the one that was running towards the bed, dropping the female but not killing her. Dolanna was straddling Grand Syllis, a look of utter hatred on her face as she punched the Sha'Kar repeatedly with her little fists. Even in his fury, that image both surprised and amused the Were-cat. Little Dolanna, beating down a man much taller and stronger than she with pure savage hatred boiling in her veins. Dolanna had found her own rage.

The Were-cat dispatched the one Sapphire had shocked with a kick to the head, more than strong enough to snap the neck, then vaulted into the air just as the one at the closet door managed to get it open. He screamed in terror when Tarrin's paw shut the door on him, then his other paw grabbed him by the back of the neck, picked him up, and slammed him into the door with enough force to punch a hole the polished dark wood. The blow crushed the Sha'Kar's skull, sending a gory spray of blood and brains into the small closet along with the shards of bloody wood. The body hung limply from the hole in the door that his head had made, and Tarrin left it there, vaulted up and then down the platform of the bed, and met Sapphire in the archway as the pair of them went after the last Sha'Kar.

They found him floating in the bathing pool, face down and not moving, with a cloud of pink surrounding him. Tarrin reached in and grabbed the body by the foot and hauled it out of the water, regarding it hanging upside down from his grasp as his rage began to ease. The male was dead, and from the looks of it, he had taken his own life with a dagger to the heart rather than suffer death at Tarrin's paws.

Tarrin dropped the body back into the water as the Cat retreated from the forefront of his mind, and he came down out of his rage. He blinked and felt a bit scattered, and the actions he took during the rage seemed a little fuzzy and indistinct. He knew that the Council was dead, and he felt a little dark thrill go through him at that wonderful thought. Kimmie was virtually unharmed, with only a shallow nick, as well as whatever they'd done to her to knock her out. Dolanna had taken down Syllis, and was still fighting with him.

Syllis. He was still alive! Tarrin snarled and felt the Cat rise up in him, but then the rational part of him realized that it would be best to keep him alive, at least for the moment, so the Sha'Kar could hear of his horrible acts from his own mouth.

"Are you well, friend?" Sapphire asked, panting a little as she landed on his shoulder.

"Yes, thank you. That was good work. I didn't think you had three in you."

"I only had two and a half in me," she said breathlessly. "It drained me."

"Let's go pull Dolanna off the Grand before she kills him," he told her. "We'll need him alive, at least for now."

Dolanna was still beating on Grand Syllis when Tarrin arrived. He grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and hauled her off of him. Spitting and screaming, she tried to kick at the senseless Sha'Kar, managing to land a good one right in his side, which drew a gasping "*oomph*" from the dazed male.

"Easy, tiger," Tarrin chided. "Going crazy is my job."

"How *dare* he violate me so!" she screamed in fury. "I'll tear out his eyes!"

"Dolanna, I can't check Kimmie with you going nuts, and I *really* want to check my mate," he warned sternly. "Calm down, and watch him. The spell I used to cancel Sorcery is going to end any minute now. Don't let him touch the Weave."

Panting laboriously for a moment, Dolanna pulled herself free of his grasp, a bit more aggressively than he'd hoped, but she made no move to

continue pummeling on him. "I am alright now," she said in a more composed tone, in Sulasian.

Tarrin quickly knelt down by Kimmie and pulled her up into his arms. She had been struck by something, the blunt force knocking her out. Tarrin's Druidic intervention faded, and he wove a quick spell and sent it into her to make sure that what he'd seen was indeed the truth. His searching spell found no other signs of injury, just a concussion suffered by whatever had struck her. That kind of trauma was one of the few things that a Were-cat's regeneration couldn't heal immediately. It was going to take her body time to recover from it.

Tarrin used a weave of Earth to break the locks holding the chains on her, then threw them aside. She'd make sure she never woke up to that horror. Kimmie was a mild, calm, sedate, very friendly Were-cat. Tarrin would make sure she *never* suffered with the ordeal of being feral.

"Is she well?" Dolanna asked.

"Concussion," he replied. "It's going to take her a while to wake up."

"Probably," she agreed.

"Alright, Dolanna," he said grimly, collecting his precious mate in his arms and standing up. "What just happened?"

"A terrible risk," she answered.

"What do you mean?"

Dolanna sighed, and shuddered slightly. "Keritanima made the very connection Syllis taunted you about not making," she explained in Sharadi. "But it was too late to stop what was happening. She thought to check me just before we reached the party, when I guess I acted too strangely for her. When she found it, she freed me, and I was able to tell her that I'd already told the Council about the plan using a spell they taught me. At that point, me and Keritanima decided to take a very serious risk. We couldn't stop what we'd set in motion, because they had used magic to summon me to Auli's house. We knew it was too late to try to contact you by then, so Keritanima showed Dar how to make it *seem* that I was still under their control. We hoped that I'd be placed in a position to thwart the Council, because they had summoned me to join them. Keritanima felt that Syllis

would be the kind to bring me before you and taunt you with me. She was right."

Tarrin stared at her for a long time. What a risk to take! But Keritanima, who was so good at predicting the actions of others, had made the right decision. He was a little angry with them for putting him and his mate in such danger, but part of them thanked them for it. If they had tried to pull him out, Kimmie may have suffered at their hands, even been killed because she had already been captured. He held his precious mate close to him, just thankful that she was alright. The fact that they'd just wiped out the Council and captured Syllis meant nothing to him compared to that.

"We gained much more than I thought we would," Dolanna said with a release of breath. "Syllis was kind for explaining what we need to do to get past the barrier. We already *have* the necessary people. Tarrin, we can go after the Firestaff any time we want."

"We can," he said, finding that that thought both made his blood run cold, and filled him with a kind of grim excitement. There was still that guardian to deal with, but at least there were no other obstacles to defeat now.

The way was clear.

There were some loose ends, however. He wanted to make sure the Sha'Kar wouldn't attack them when they came back. He'd just killed the majority of their ruling body. That was going to cause some serious problems. But then again, they had Syllis, and they had him alive. Tarrin could free the nine strongest Sorcerers on the island from his control and bring them to him, let them see and hear the truth for themselves. They could be the new Council and Grand, and he'd show them how to release the others from their magical control. Tarrin had hated the Sha'Kar for their behavior, but now that he knew that it wasn't their fault, he found no animosity towards them. He knew what it was like to be enslaved to the will of another. He felt their pain. If anything, he felt an overpowering need to watch over them, almost as if they were children.

Tarrin nuzzled his unconscious mate for a moment, then put a paw to the thin cut on her chest and wove a spell of healing. The cut sealed over, leaving no scar, and he collected her spilled blood carefully and Transmuted

it into pure water. He would leave no chance of an accidental turning in this room.

Kimmie's eyes fluttered a moment under her eyelids, then they opened to reveal her beautiful blue eyes. They were unfocused, woozy, and they regarded Tarrin for a moment as if he were a stranger. Her regenerative powers were starting to reverse the injury of her concussion. "Mmm, good morning," she said in a distant voice.

Tarrin held her close. He'd come so close to losing her. It would have destroyed him to watch them kill her, but even she would have made the same decision, would have told him what he had to do. The whole world was not worth two lives. Had Tarrin not had others he loved, he may have chosen differently. But to protect them, he would have been forced to sacrifice his mate. She put her arms around him weakly, and she looked a little startled when she saw the tears in his eyes after she pushed him away. "What's the matter, love?" she asked. "Where are we? Why are you *crying*?"

"He nearly lost you, Kimmie," Dolanna answered for him. "Had not blind luck and the Goddess been smiling down on us, we would have lost you."

"Lost me? What happened?" she asked, her voice more focused as the effects of her concussion were swiftly healed away. "Where are we? This isn't the library."

"Someone hit you in the back of the head," he told her.

"The Council used you as a hostage to try to make us cooperate," Sapphire added from his shoulder.

She looked at him, and it dawned in her eyes. "Oh, I see. Well, I hope you told them to go to hell, my love," she said sternly.

"I didn't have to, Kimmie," he said with a loving smile. "Dolanna beat the stuffing out of Grand Syllis with her bare hands, and I killed the rest of them. Dolanna saved me from having to make that choice."

She'd never know he *had* made that choice. He would never tell her how close she'd come to losing her life, and losing it because of his decision. She

put her paws on his face and kissed him tenderly, lingeringly. "I think I can stand now, Tarrin," she told him.

"Dolanna hit the leader of them in the stomach, and that surprised the rest long enough for us to attack them without them hurting you," Sapphire told her.

He set her on her feet, but kept a paw on her as a precaution. She looked down at herself and gave a rueful chuckle. "How do I keep ending up losing my clothes?" she fretted with a smile. "And I didn't even shapeshift!"

"They know you are a Wizard, Kimmie," Dolanna answered. "Stripping you would be the most effective means to ensure you are not hiding any spell components."

"True," she admitted. "Would you Conjure me a dress, love? I feel a little out of place here. Nudity isn't something you practice alone when in company," she added with a darling smile.

Tarrin Conjured one of her dresses for her, and she seemed stable enough as she pulled it over her head. "That's better," she said, patting her belly. "Though it is a bit tight in the middle now." Tarrin relaxed the wool for her, and she kissed him on the cheek in thanks. "Alright, someone tell me what happened. And we'd better clean this place up. It's a mess."

Dolanna explained what had happened with a self-blaming tone in her voice, but Kimmie tutted her with a wave of her hand. "You can't be responsible for what you do when you're under someone else's control," she said dismissively. "Don't blame yourself for what happened. Instead, be happy that things turned out the way they did."

"That is hard when it is you who was the cause of it," Dolanna sighed.

"Talk to Tarrin. He has a lot of experience with that kind of thing. He can help you get over it. I'll bet it was Phandebrass that hit me in the head," she mused. "I didn't smell anyone else in the room, and they would have put their control over all the others rather than try to wrestle with them."

"It is a possibility."

Sapphire nuzzled Kimmie lovingly, jumping onto her shoulder, and the Were-cat female laughed. "I'm alright, little one," she assured her. "I'm glad you were here."

"She killed three of them herself," Tarrin said proudly.

"Two, and I shocked a third well enough to let Tarrin finish it off," she amended.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're a very handy drake to have around, Sapphire?" Kimmie laughed.

"You are family. I can't just let you run around without watching over you. You bipeds get into too much trouble on your own."

Kimmie laughed and hugged the little drake to her, and Sapphire rubbed her head against Kimmie's shoulder in reply.

"Let us get the others and free them of the control," Dolanna prompted. "And work out what we are going to do now. We cannot leave this issue as it is, the Sha'Kar may very well turn on us."

"Just don't show them this room," Kimmie said, looking at the bodies. "At least it's alot neater than what I would have expected. No guts hanging off the walls or anything."

"I didn't have time to deal with him the way they needed dealt with," Tarrin said calmly. "I was a bit pressed for time."

"Hey, at least we don't need a chisel this time," she said with a wink, looking back towards the door. "Woops, I spoke too soon. You did dismember one of them, I see. What is it with you and heads, Tarrin? Do you always have to pull them off that way?"

"It was an accident. If she had sturdier neck, she wouldn't have lost her head."

Kimmie laughed, but Dolanna shuddered a little at the graphic exchange. "Let us pick up the pieces, dear ones," she prompted. "We need to be ready to move before the Sha'Kar wake tomorrow. So we have some planning to do."

The demise of the Council didn't surprise the others very much, at least after they'd been gathered. But things weren't quite as bad as Grand Syllis had led Tarrin to believe. They had taken control of Phandebrass, but it turned out that he was the *only* one they had managed to get. Keritanima

defended Dar at the party, for as long as they were there before they scrambled back to their hosts' estate, where they found four dead human Sorcerers piled up just inside a barricaded door. Sisska, who had been watching over the rest of the humans, turned out to be the heroine in that little scuffle. The Sorcerers came in and attempted to cast Mind weaves on the humans, but the one that had been assigned to incapacitate the female Vendari with Sorcery had not been educated as to the nature of the Vendari race. They were a creation of magic, and in that creation they had gained a powerful resistance to magical forces and influences. The same resistance that allowed them to rebel against the Zakkites allowed Sisska to come right through the binding magic that the Sorcerer had tried to use against her. She slaughtered the attackers so quickly that the ones trying to take control of the humans with Sorcery nearly didn't realize she was there. They never dreamed something so massive could move with such blazing speed. Sisska killed the Sorcerers, then they barricaded themselves in Tarrin's room, safe behind the Ward he had erected to prevent anyone from finding out what happened to the Sorcerers that came to take them until someone noticed that they hadn't completed their task. They had been noticed, and Sorcerers sent by the Council had tried three times to get into the room and take them, even resorting to Illusions and magically-generated fake voices to try to trick Sisska into letting them in. But the Vendari, highly trained and very protective, would not back down, not for anyone or anything.

It took some pretty serious negotiations to get Sisska to take down the barricade. Tarrin tried, Keritanima tried, even Allia tried, but it was Binter who finally convinced her that they weren't another trick, hissing at her in the Vendari's native tongue and probably telling her things that only the two of them would know. After they proved their identities, Sisska cleared the obstacles blocking the door and allowed them inside.

After they got Sisska calmed down and the furniture more or less righted but not bothering to put it back where it belonged, they sat down on chairs and couches that Tarrin Conjured for everyone, and Tarrin told them what happened in detail. He left out the part where he was forced to decide between Kimmie and his mission. That dark secret would never leave his lips. "We sealed off the room and left the bodies where they were," Tarrin said, pointing at an unconscious Grand Syllis, who was trussed up and laying on the floor with Binter and Sisska watching him very carefully.

"Dolanna managed to take down Syllis, with a punch to the stomach. I think her attacking him with physical violence was the last thing he ever expected."

Phandebrass laughed. "I say, I think your Goddess as watching over her children today," he said.

"I'm just *so* glad it worked," Keritanima said with an explosive sigh. "They knew what was going on, and it was too late to try to stop it. It was the only thing we could think of on such short notice. We were a bit harried at that point."

"It worked. That's all that matters," Camara Tal told her.

"I am sorry I brought us to this," Dolanna said glumly.

"You are not the only one to blame, Dolanna," Allia said in a steady voice. "I have my own shame in it."

"How do you think we feel?" Iselde asked miserably. "They've been doing that to us since we were born! They killed our parents! How could they?"

"Syllis wanted the Firestaff," Tarrin told her. "He was mad for power, and men like that do monstrous things."

"They made all of us monsters," Allyn said soberly. "They made us reduce our human friends to nothing better than sheep," he said, looking at Zarina and Liza, who sat off to one side, almost clutching one another. They were both still quite afraid of everything that was going on. "They twisted our desires in the worst possible way."

"How do you think I feel, Allyn?" Auli asked tartly. "I've slept with just about every man on the island! Not that it wasn't fun, but I feel...*violated*," she amended.

Tarrin had to chuckle. Control or no control, Auli was Auli.

"The question is, what do we do now?" Dolanna said, still looking quite abashed at how she had betrayed them.

"That's easy," Auli said. "We find my mother. Then we free her of their control and let her hear it from his lips personally," she continued, pointing

at the unconscious Syllis. "My mother's very respected. If she says it's truth, then she'll be believed."

"That's a start," Keritanima said. "Can she talk down the rest of the Sha'Kar?"

"If there's no Council here and no Grand to give us orders, who do you think they'll listen to?"

"She has a point," Dolanna agreed.

"It's a start," Keritanima said again. "Allyn? Iselde? Any ideas?"

"Actually, I think Auli's right, but we'll need more than her mother," Allyn said. "If we get the ten most respected Sha'Kar and bring them here and explain what they did to us, they can take care of things. With the Council dead, we'll need a new one, and they'd be its members anyway."

"Did you have to kill them, honored one?" Iselde asked.

"Yes," he said flatly. "After what they did to you and to the humans, they deserved nothing less. What happened to Zarina was more than enough reason. Because of what happened to her, I nearly decided to kill *all* of you."

They paled a little at that, but they could see that he wasn't joking. Zarina flushed furiously and sat a little closer to Liza, who had had a doe-like, thunderstruck look about her ever since they'd dragged her out of her daily life.

"I'm not like your people, Iselde," he reminded her. "In many ways, I'm probably just as ruthless as the Council was. But at least you know where I stand. I don't hide things the way they did."

"Small favors," Miranda grinned at him.

"This is second hand to the more important issue," Dolanna told them. "Thanks to Syllis' talkative bent, he has told us everything we need to know. We can get the Firestaff now, any time we so wish."

"You mean we can *try*," Allia warned. "Remember, there is still one more obstacle. The Guardian the legends speak of."

"I'm not sure it's there anymore," Camara Tal said. "It's been sealed in a cave for five thousand years! If it was a living thing, how could it go that long without food?"

"Don't put anything past magic, Camara," Keritanima said. "Until we see otherwise, let's assume that there's a nasty monster or something guarding the Firestaff. Since the Council never got into the volcano, we know that they didn't conveniently kill it for us."

"We know where it is and how to get to it. The only question now is *when*," Dolanna said calmly.

"We go tomorrow," Tarrin said. "As soon as we can. We'll let Iselde, Allyn, and Auli work things out with Auli's mother and the other Sha'Kar. They know the truth, and they can tell them what happened. As for me, I'm not waiting another day. We've spent too long searching for that damned thing to just let it sit out there for anyone to get. I won't be happy until I have it *in my paws*."

"Why not go now?" Dar asked.

"Because some of us are tired," Dolanna replied. "And I think Tarrin would like a little time to prepare."

"I'm ready now, Dolanna," he snorted. "If anything, my exercise with the Council warmed me up. I feel ready to fight with something. But Kimmie's recovering from an injury, and I won't leave her until I'm sure she's completely well."

"Leave me? Who said you were leaving me behind?" she scoffed.

"I did," he said, giving her a flat look. "I will *not* risk you and the cub, Kimmie. Not under any circumstances. If you want to fight about it, that's fine. I'll leave here with you chained to the bed and Sisska standing guard over you."

"That's dirty pool, love," Kimmie frowned.

"I may not think you're an invalid, but I'm not going to let you risk both your life and our baby's like that," he told her. "Not when we have no idea what we'll be facing."

"I think you're being completely unfair," she accused.

"You're right. I am. Can you do anything about it?" he asked in a dangerous tone.

"No," she sulked.

"Then live with it," he told her.

"That goes for you two as well," he said, pointing at Zarina and Liza. "You two are too important to risk. And that means that someone is going to have to stay behind to watch over them. Kimmie will be one, but we'll need one more. Who wants to do it?" He looked around. "None of us are going to think any less of you, because you'll be doing something important."

"Dar," Dolanna said to him, "I want you to stay. You are young yet, and have great potential. But your potential is not fully realized. If there is any one person I would wish to survive on if we fail, it is you."

"You make it sound like you're not coming back," Dar said fearfully.

"My friend, there is a good chance of that," she said grimly. "We were warned repeatedly of the great, fearsome guardian of the Firestaff. We cannot just happily assume that we will all stroll in and claim it without suffering casualties." She looked around at them. "There is a good chance that some of us may not return."

Tarrin did *not* like the way that sounded, but he couldn't refute Dolanna's statement. If this guardian really was that dangerous, then there was a good chance that it was going to kill someone. Part of him refused to accept that. He had kept all of them alive since they lost Faalken, and he vowed not to lose another friend on this mad quest. If anyone was going to die, it was going to be him. He wouldn't allow anyone else to die. Not if he could help it. Even if he had to die for it, he wouldn't lose anyone else.

"Miranda, you're staying," Keritanima ordered. "Binter, Sisska, so are you."

"No, your Majesty," Binter said bluntly. "Our place is with you."

"I won't split you up like that," Keritanima said. "If Miranda stays, then-
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"You are our primary task, your Majesty," Sisska told her. "If Miranda stays, she will stay. But we will not abandon you. You may need us."

"I'll be fine by myself, Kerri," Miranda told her. "Kimmie and Dar will be here. I think Sisska won't mind if they watch over me in her place."

"I'm going," Camara Tal declared bluntly.

"We need you," Dolanna told her. "You have no choice."

"I'm going," Azakar declared. "Between me, Tarrin, Binter, and Sisska, we should have enough muscle to handle almost anything, and you could always use an extra sword. There aren't enough of them in this group as it is." He looked to Dolanna. "Would you object if I asked if I could take Faalken's place by your side, Dolanna?" he asked in a sincere tone. "I know I'll never be able to replace him, but you've gone long enough without a Knight to protect you."

"My dear one, I will accept you happily," she told him with a warm smile. "Faalken would have wanted you to take his place. You were one of the few he respected enough to entrust with my life."

Tarrin couldn't help but feel very happy about that. Azakar had never asked that of her, probably out of respect for his friend and the close bond Dolanna and Faalken had shared. They had been good friends as well as Knight and Sorceress. Dolanna couldn't have gotten a better Knight. Azakar was young, but he had been trained by the best warriors in the world. She could do no better than him.

Phandebrass, who had seemed strangely muted by having had himself taken over, finally spoke. "I say, I'd like you two to watch my drakes. They're getting very restless, they are, being locked up in my room and all. They're lonely and they need some company, they do."

"Sapphire, I know it's asking a lot, but would you stay with Kimmie?" he asked her. "I'll feel much better knowing that you're watching over her. If anything, you've proven yourself in that respect."

"I will protect her, dear friend," she told him with her usual dignified air.

"That makes me feel a lot better," Tarrin said. "Well, I think we're about done here."

"Agreed," Dolanna nodded. "I will go with Kerri and Auli and try to find Auli's mother. Iselde, Allyn, choose the nine strongest Sha'Kar and

please ask them to come. We have much to tell them. Dar, please go with them. Tarrin, if you do not mind, could you watch the Grand for us? He may wake up soon, and we will need your power here to prevent him from using his."

"I'll keep an eye on him," he agreed.

"The rest of you should remain here with Tarrin until we return with the Sha'Kar. Then we will explain things to them and then allow them to question the Grand. When we are certain they understand the situation, we will get some rest. Remember, we will have a very, *very* busy day tomorrow."

"That's an understatement," Camara Tal grunted, summing up the very thing Tarrin had been thinking.

Tomorrow was it. *The* day, the day he'd worked and labored and suffered for over two years to reach. Tomorrow, if luck was with him, by sunset, he would finally have the Firestaff.

His only worry was for the dreadful toll it may exact from his friends.

Auli's simple idea worked, and it worked perfectly. They assembled the ten most austere members of Sha'Kar society, and after Tarrin defeated the control that had been placed over them and gave them a moment to recover, they brought out Grand Syllis. They'd been outraged by his appearance and their treatment of him at first, but that outrage turned against him when Tarrin and Dolanna explained what had been going on. Tarrin killed the hiding spell in Auli's mother's amulet, a tall, handsome woman with blond hair and a serious demeanor named Ianelle, and she saw exactly what had been in her amulet the entire time. Their outrage reached a fever pitch, to much so that Tarrin feared they would kill Syllis when he told them about the bodies, and how the Council had been killing anyone that escaped from their control.

Then it was Syllis' turn to talk. Ianelle took Syllis's face in her hands and wove the most powerful Mind weave Tarrin had ever seen, a weave that absolutely dominated the Grand's mind and turned him into little more than a puppet. The the ten Sha'Kar questioned the Grand extensively, hearing from his own lips what he and the others had done.

It was a chilling story. After the plague began killing the humans, Syllis and the Council had been seeking some way to cure it. They stumbled on the buried information about the Firestaff during their frantic search for an answer, and though it could not help them, Syllis became progressively more and more obsessed with the artifact, and the promise of godhood for the one who possessed it. It was little more than a dream to him until the Sha'Kar sculptors that had been making the figures on the volcano excavated the tunnel opening, and the spell that protected. That was when Syllis realized that getting the Firestaff was a viable dream, and his want for it completely dominated him. He became absolutely consumed with trying to claim the Firestaff, but he knew that the Sha'Kar would not permit him to do such a thing. They became an obstacle to him, and so he devised a way to make them more tractable.

Syllis was an expert in Mind weaves, and devised the weaves in the amulets himself. He did his first work with his lover in the Council, taking her amulet and casting the spells into it to make her utterly obey him without question, and waiting to see what happened. She became completely under his control, the Mind weaves making her accept anything he said as the truth and as the best thing. She all but worshipped him, and Syllis found it extremely satisfying. So with her help, he carefully managed to enslave the rest of the Council without arousing the suspicions of the others, who had been so preoccupied with trying to find a cure for the disease. As they knew it had, he succeeded, and had complete control of the Council.

But he decided not to use the same weaves on the general population, because such dominating control would eventually be broken. Syllis found that he had to renew his controlling weaves every few rides, as the minds of the Council began to shrug the effects off. He knew that there were Sorcerers out there, like Ianelle, that would be strong enough to break its control much more quickly than the Council, and he'd eventually face a rebellion. So he devised an alternative, the sinister, cunning weaves that he had used against the others, weaves that rewired the mind of the victim to make them seek out only pleasure. Syllis was a master of Mind weaves, and understood the mind better than most. Such an means of attack would be very hard to detect and even harder to resist, for blocking pleasure was almost impossible, where blocking pain was not.

Infecting the rest of the population with the weave was a simple matter. The Council announced they thought they had a cure, and asked the Sha'Kar to come in, one by one, to be treated. And while they were there, their defenses down, the Grand and the Council set the weaves.

What to do with the humans was another problem, one that had no quick solution. Only a handful of humans survived the plague, and some of them, seeing the drastic change in the Sha'Kar, tried to find out what was going on. Syllis had them quietly killed, sacrificing the humans he couldn't control for a more sinister solution to the human problem.

That was training. The human children born after the plague that showed potential were taken aside and conditioned from infancy to obey the Council without question. It took some trial and error, but the Council eventually found a raising regimen that made the humans that would grow up to be Sorcerers just as decadent and hedonistic as the Sha'Kar had suddenly become, so as not to stand out too greatly in their society, and completely under the Council's control. They did the Council's bidding, and they did it willingly. To keep the humans and Sha'Kar from interfering with one another too greatly, since they had to use different techniques of control on them, they instituted the caste society they had today, where humans were second class citizens, and humans with no talent for Sorcery were slaves. The human Sorcerers accepted it willingly, since it was the Council's bidding, and they also preferred being second class citizens to slaves.

The new children of the Sha'Kar received a similar treatment. As Auli had shown them, among the younger Sha'Kar, it was as much a function of how they were raised as much as it was the control the Grand had over them. They had been raised to believe that everything they did was good and proper, and like the humans, they were going to have to be retrained to think for themselves and function in a new society. Auli was a very good example of that. She had lost her magic-influenced sex drive, but her upbringing made her see no shame in it, and she would probably remain very loose with her favors even after the control had been removed, because she was raised to believe that it was alright to be promiscuous. It would be the same for all the children that had been raised on the island, who had been brought up in the decadence.

The volcanic eruption that had destroyed the city had not been an eruption at all. The Grand wanted to reorganize things, draw the Sha'Kar closer together so he could keep a better eye on them as they settled into their altered routines without risking them finding out what he'd done to them, so when the volcano started smoking more than usual and a little lava appeared at the top, he burned the city and blamed it on embers from the volcano. It gave him an excuse for it that wouldn't seem so out of place that the Sha'Kar would begin to suspect that they were being influenced.

But some did. Every once in a while, a Sha'Kar would break free of the control, and attempt to expose Syllis and the Council. Those, they regretfully put down and buried, so their bodies would be near so Syllis could resurrect them after he became a god.

The society endured like that, and as Tarrin listened to Syllis describe the years roll by without any success in breaching the spell defending the tunnel, he realized that Syllis was truly mad. He all but believed himself a god already, and carried on as if what he'd done was for the best for all. Ianelle seemed to understand that as well, and asked a series of very personal questions that confirmed that Syllis was indeed completely insane. But that insanity hadn't affected his reasoning or his cunning, and that was what had made him so dangerous. The society he built was, to him, absolutely perfect, where everyone was happy. He saw the debauchery and decadence as pinnacles of societal evolution, seeing absolutely nothing wrong with anything that went on the island. As long as no Sha'Kar were hurt and they found pleasure in it. The fortune and fates of the humans meant nothing to him. He saw the Sha'Kar as the greatest race on the world, and all other races existed to serve and give pleasure to them.

"We do not condone you killing the members of the Council," Ianelle told Tarrin sternly. "There is nothing so severe that requires the use of violence. But given the circumstances, we can understand why someone with your instincts would do what you did. We may not condone it, but we understand that you felt it was necessary, honored one. Those Sha'Kar were slaves as much as we were. It pains me that they had to die for crimes they weren't responsible for committing, but there was little choice in the matter."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Tarrin told her. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"We will mourn and move on," she sighed. "But for this one," she said, looking at Syllis, "his insanity is so advanced that we may not be able to cure it. For him, death may be the only solution. We obviously can't let him loose, not with his power and his past record. If that decision is made, we would ask you to do it. We cannot take his life, honored one. It goes against everything we stand for. We cannot do violence unless actively defending ourselves. But we know that *you* have no such restrictions."

"If you ask it of me, I'll do it, Ianelle," he said. "I'm sure you'll do what's best. I think the Sha'Kar would do well to have *you* as their new Grand."

"No," she said flatly. "The concept of the Grand obviously failed. *Da'shar* just aren't meant to stand in the place of the *sui'kun*. The temptations of power are just too great for us. So then, we accept your authority over us, honored one," she said with a curtsy. "You are the chosen one. We are yours."

"I'm not going to have time to be your leader, Ianelle," he protested. "What if I just told you to act in my place? That way you're getting your orders from a *sui'kun*, and this time, it's all legal since I ordered it?"

"It will not do," another Sha'Kar, a short male with rare red hair named Endelian, stated. "We have decided to form the new Council as ten. None other than the *sui'kun* can lead us. Ianelle can act as First among us, but you are the one closest to the Goddess. That place is yours, and no one else's."

"I just don't have time--"

Keritanima cut him off. "I'm sure the honored one just needs a little time to accept that," she said, stepping on his foot. "As you've noticed, he wasn't raised to command people. I'm sure the idea of him being your ruler is a little frightening to him."

"We aren't that difficult to rule, honored one," Ianelle said with a smile. "Our society and custom teaches us our place. The youngest of us are going to have to be retrained in the proper ways," she said, putting a steely eye on Auli, "for they were raised in the perverted system instituted by Syllis. It will fall to the elders among us to teach our children our true ways."

"I'm sure you know why I'm here, Ianelle," Tarrin told her. "I intend to finish my task tomorrow. I came for the Firestaff, and I mean to take it. When I have it, I'll be leaving."

"Then we will go with you," she said calmly. "You can breach the Ward, or you would never have gotten in. This island will be too much of a reminder for our children of the ways they first learned. We need to teach them properly, teach them the truth, and that will be hard here, with these ridiculously lavish homes and the servants and the lack of contact with others. These are not our ways. I feel lost in this room as it is," she admitted, and the other nine Sha'Kar nodded in agreement.

"We don't have room for you on our ship," he warned.

"Why would we travel by means of such an antiquated contraption?" she asked. "Get us outside the Ward, honored one. We can bring all of us home within minutes. Sha'Kar, humans, and your people all."

Keritanima looked at her. "How are you going to do that?"

"Why, Teleport, of course," another Sha'Kar said, a flat-chested--which was quite remarkable among the buxom Sha'Kar--white-haired woman named Riana. "With the help of the honored one and the humans, we can build a Circle large enough to transport all of us, as well as your vessel. How else would we travel?"

All the magic-users in Tarrin's party stared at the woman in shock. "I didn't know we could do *that*!" Dar gasped, breaking the silence.

"You couldn't do it, young student," Ianelle told him bluntly. "It is *da'shar* magic. When you have grown into your full power, the world will be open to you. But not until then."

"Nuts," Dar growled.

"Patience, pupil," Ianelle said with a smile. "With patience, diligence, and devotion, all things will be open to you. But you must work for them."

"How is it that you didn't know?" Riana asked, looking scandalized.

"Most of what the Ancients--what *you* know was lost after the Breaking," Dolanna said. "The only ones left alive afterward were the youngest Sorcerers, those without an intimate enough contact with the

Weave to kill them. After the Breaking, there seemed to be no one left that could read Sha'Kar, so the history of the *katzh-dashi* was reduced to what the survivors could remember, and most of them had been but novices, with only the most basic understanding of the Weave. Without written descriptions of the old powers, we became trapped on a plateau of ability that has held us where we are for five hundred years."

"I am shocked," Ianelle said with a sincere expression. "When we saw the honored one, and saw his power, we assumed that our written lore had been regained, and the new *katzh-dashi* would have used the lore left behind to rediscover the old powers."

"Most of those powers would be useless to us," Dolanna told her. "There have been no new *da'shar* since the Breaking. At least not on the outside," she amended. "The new *katzh-dashi* developed a great fear of the very thing needed to become *da'shar*, and those that did find themselves being Consumed died before crossing over. They were not ready."

"I see," Ianelle mused. "Well, fear not, Dolanna. We will return with you and bring truth back to the towers. We will be stretched very thin among the seven of them, but we will manage."

"There are only two towers left," Tarrin told her. "The one in Suld, and the one in Sharadar."

That made all the Sha'Kar elders wince, and they all looked profoundly saddened. "Such a pity," Ianelle said with a somber expression. "The symbols of our order, and only two remain. Such loss."

"With your people back, maybe we can rebuild what was destroyed," Tarrin told her.

"I hope so, but it will take time," she said with a brusque smile. "We have much to do, and from the sound of things, so do you. You may take the Firestaff with our blessing, honored one. After all, you are *sui'kun*. It's not our place to order you around."

"And when you have it, may we return *home*," Riana said hopefully.

"May the Goddess make it so," several of the Sha'Kar repeated.

It was the last night.

Tarrin couldn't help but feel like that over and over. Dolanna's words haunted his attempts to sleep, made him toss and turn, and filled him with worry and anxiety. *There is a good chance that some of us may not return* echoed over and over in his mind. He couldn't accept that. He just couldn't. He *wouldn't*. He vowed that no one else would die, and he was a Were-cat. He honored his promises, kept his vows. He would not allow anyone else to die. Not so long as he lived and breathed, he would not let anyone else die.

It was hard to rest, hard to relax. Kimmie did everything she could to distract him, from blowing in his ear to threatening to brain him if he didn't lay still, but he was just too wound up. She did seem to understand his fear and worry, but this time, she couldn't talk him down. Nothing could.

The weight of it crushed him. It was the last night where things would be as they were. He could feel that tomorrow night, everything was going to be different, one way or another. He would have the Firestaff, the focus of the last few years of his life. Some of them may not be there to celebrate that happy day. He was torn between his eagerness to fulfill his promise to the Goddess to get the Firestaff and the sorrow and pain he'd feel if someone else died in the course of trying to claim it. It was the last night where they were all there, all together, all friends, all unified in their common interest. Tomorrow, they would be done. Camara Tal would have no reason to remain, and would go home. Keritanima would have too many duties in Wikuna, and would return home. Allia would probably abduct Allyn and take him back to the desert, returning home. Tarrin...well, he would defend the Firestaff. He was sure that the Goddess already had a plan for what he should do with it. As soon as they were outside the Ward, she would tell him what she wanted to do. For him, it wouldn't be over until the day when the Firestaff activated came and went.

Whenever that may be.

That was all assuming they survived the final challenge. Dreams of the future could not hurdle the obstacle laying in his path, and he did not take it lightly. Whatever it was defending the Firestaff had to be incredibly powerful, or it wouldn't have been chosen for the task. It could be some mythical beast or some kind of magical creation, or maybe even someone like Spyder, a mortal of godlike power that would be summoned to defend

the artifact. Or perhaps a god himself, whose sole reason to exist was to defend that ancient relic. There was no telling what it was, or even if it was still there. But no matter what, Tarrin felt that he was ready to face it. He was at the pinnacle of his power, and his friends and sisters were utterly dependable.

But this night, this last night, it was all he had, all he was trying to concentrate on. Kimmie's concussion completely faded not long after they all went to bed, leaving her frisky and attentive, but he had been too worried and nervous to take her up on her carnal invitations. He knew she was luring him just to try to take his mind off things, and he could appreciate her for it. But he found just holding her close and taking in her scent to be just as good as losing himself in the delights she offered. She was his mate, one of the two women he loved, and inside her belly there was a new life, his child, his legacy. He was glad she was staying behind. He wouldn't be able to think straight if she was there, if she was in danger.

The night was an eternity that didn't last nearly long enough. Tarrin got no sleep that night, but the knowledge that the day would change everything worried him as much as he looked forward to it. The time seemed to drag by, but when one of Arlan's servant girls opened the door and politely called that it was just before dawn, when Tarrin wanted to be fetched, he couldn't figure out where all the time went. Kimmie was asleep, having succumbed to her need to rest after her injury half a night ago, and he laid over her, beside her, just looking down at her while she was sleeping, marvelling at her and the new life inside her. No matter what happened to him, no matter what people remembered, the best things of him lived on in his children. He could only hope that Kimmie would go on in case he failed this last challenge. But she was a strong woman, much stronger than any of the other Were-cats imagined.

Tarrin got up and dressed, maybe for the last time. His old leather breeches were starting to show their wear again, the ankles tattering from the claws on his feet. His black leather vest was much nicer looking, but was starting to get a little shiny from wear. They were simple clothes for a simple Were-cat, servicable, utilitarian garments that served him well. He put a paw over his black steel amulet, feeling its presence on his neck for the first time in over a year, it had grown to be so much a part of him. But he could feel its weight now, the weight of the duty that had been laid

across his shoulders. The amulet pulled on the back of his neck, a reminder of the bond between him and the Goddess, a warning that his service to her was about to enter its most dangerous phase.

The last night was over. Now, the changes would come.

Tarrin debated furiously whether or not to wake up Kimmie. He didn't want to say goodbye to her. He wanted her to be there when he came back, flushed with victory over having claimed the Firestaff. But she would never forgive him if he did that, even if he did come back without a scratch.

He put a paw on her shoulder and shook her very gently. "Kimmie," he called in barely more than a whisper.

Her eyes snapped open almost immediately. She rolled over and looked up at him, her expression sober. "It's already time?" she asked.

He nodded. "I had one of the serving girls come get me before dawn," he told her. "I want us to be out of the city before it gets light, so the Sha'Kar won't have as good a chance to notice us."

"Let me get dressed," she said, sitting up.

"No," he said, sitting down on the bed beside her. "I, I want us to say goodbye here, Kimmie. Where the others can't see us. I don't want them to see me like this," he said, looking at her with his heart in his eyes.

Her eyes softened, and she put her arms around him and almost crushed him in a fierce embrace. He took in her scent, let it brand itself forever into his memory, felt her touch, just revelled in the closeness of her. "I love you, Tarrin," she said fiercely, in a low tone. He closed his eyes and put his cheek against hers, then she grabbed his head in her paws and kissed him with a fierce passion that curled his toes. "I put too much into trying to win your heart to lose you now!" she said with shining eyes, full of tears. "Don't do anything stupid, my love! Remember that your women are waiting for you. Don't forget about us. Come back to us. Come back to *me*!"

"I'll find a way," he promised, holding her close again. "I love you, Kimmie." He held her out so he could see her again, paws on her shoulders. "And if I can't find a way," he said, his eyes somber, "tell Jesmind I love her. Tell her I'm sorry I broke my promise, but we can't always keep our word."

"I won't have to," she said petulantly. "Because nothing is going to happen to you!"

"I hope you're right," he said emphatically, kissing her one more time before he stood up. She took hold of his paw, her teary eyes staring up at him from a worried, anxious face, almost refusing to let him go. "Watch over the Druids for me, love," he said, gripping her fingers in his paw, then slowly, almost forcefully, pulling his paw free of her. She wouldn't let go, making him slide his paw out of her grip, and when he finally did pull free of her, her paw opened as her fingers sought to close over his once more.

"I'll see you tonight, Kimmie," he said forcefully, trying to be strong. But wasn't easy.

"Be *careful*!" she said with tremendous effort to make him listen to her, understand her.

He stood there, looking down at her, imprinting her in his memory just like that. Nude, covers in her lap, staring up at him with such tremendous love that it nearly broke his heart to leave her, to put her through the inevitable worrying that would come while he was gone. But there was no other choice. He had been forced to take actions that would have killed her, and he would never let her know that had happened. But leaving her felt like it would kill him

He only hoped she knew how much she meant to him. She knew he loved Jesmind, and that his obligations to her took precedence in things. He just hoped she knew how much he loved her.

Forcing himself, he turned his foot, and then turned around, made the last act to separate them. He turned his back to her. He strode from the dais quickly, before he changed his mind, and padded across the room. Sapphire was still sleeping in her bed, but he didn't wake her. To delay now to say goodbye would break his resolve. He had to get out of Kimmie's presence quickly, before he turned back around. He reached the door, opened, it, then stepped through and closed it behind him.

Then he leaned against it, wiping a tear from his eyes. Leaving Jesmind hadn't been half as hard as that. But then again, when he left Jesmind, the possibility of his death hadn't been so tangible in the air. If it had been, then he was sure it would have been even more emotional, with him having to

physical pull himself free of her as she refused to allow him to go off into danger.

They were to meet in the entrance hall. Tarrin was first there, taking a pastry from a tray that the serving girls had set out for them, a light meal to prepare them for the ordeal to come. He was there only a moment before Keritanima, Allia, Binter, and Sisska arrived. Keritanima was wearing a red dress that blended well with her fur, a very simple one with no frills or accessories. A travelling dress for a woman about to exert herself. Keritanima looked somber, but very determined. Allia was dressed in her desert garb, the color of sand, its baggy volume concealing her form. The turban-like headgear was atop her head, the veil hanging loosely from the side of her face. She looked very intense, very focused, very ready. Binter and Sisska looked as they always looked, wearing the same kilts and bandoliers, carrying their huge weapons, hovering just behind their queen and ready to defend her life at a second's notice.

Dolanna, and Azakar arrived just behind Keritanima. Dolanna wore her favorite blue silk dress, the very one she'd worn the day he met her. She looked calm, but with Dolanna, one could never really tell how calm she actually was. Azakar was wearing his full plate armor, which had been laboriously cleaned, polished, and readied for the day's activities, with his shield strapped to his back and his huge sword hanging from his wide belt loosely. Just behind him was Camara Tal, wearing her red *tripa* and her breastplate that had the hawk etched into its front, stretching its wings across her breasts. Her sword, the magical sword that Tarrin had given her, the one that had belonged to Faalken, rested comfortably at her side. Tarrin couldn't look at that sword without a pang of guilt and pain over the loss that it represented, the loss of a good friend, the one that was no longer with them.

Nothing was said. They were all reserved, somber. They all knew the importance of their task, and they all seemed afraid to break the silence. Tarrin thought that they had been pondering Dolanna's warning the night before as well, fully aware that they all may not live to see the sunset. Tarrin put Allia's hand in one paw and Keritanima's in the other, but that was the only act any of them took in greeting.

Phandebrass prattled in, wearing the same gray robe he'd been wearing since they arrived on the island, though he had magically cleaned and pressed it the night before. His belt with its many pouches and little cases was around his waist, and he still wore that ridiculous conical hat. The mage seemed completely unaffected by the importance of the day, lively and talkative, greeting them all in an excited voice. "Morning, morning, morning!" he said breathlessly. "Busy day, busy day today! I say, I can't wait to see the Firestaff, I can't! I really must study it!"

That seemed to break the ice. "You would," Camara Tal accused.

"I say, who's missing?" he asked, looking around. "We have to go, we do! We can't dawdle around here, not today of all days!"

Tarrin looked around, slowly, deliberately, looking at them one by one and taking in how they looked one final time. Allia. Keritanima. Dolanna. Camara Tal. Phandebrass. Binter. Sisska. Azakar. Kimmie, Dar, Miranda, and Sapphire were left behind to watch over the two Druid girls, Zarina and Liza.

"We're all here," Camara Tal told him. "We just need to know where we're going."

"Allyn showed me that carving," Allia told her. "I can find it. It should not be hard for us to find the path leading to the cave entrance."

"Then we have nothing holding us behind. Is everyone ready?" Dolanna asked.

Nobody said a word.

"Then let us go. The sooner we begin, the sooner we finish."

Phandebrass wolfed down a few of the pastries. "Yes, I say, let's!" he said excitedly. "Imagine all the wondrous and amazing things we may see today! Why, I'm all aflutter with anticipation, I am!"

"You'd be excited to go to your own funeral," Camara Tal said sourly, her hand drifting to her sword reflexively, as if to make sure it was still there.

"Let us not fight now," Dolanna said. "If no one has anything to do or say, then we should begin."

"Let's go," Keritanima said.

"Before I change my mind," Azakar admitted.

"Fear is a good thing, as long as it does not control you," Binter told him in a calm voice. "I find the prospect of battle exciting, but the unknown nature of the foe concerns me."

Concern in a Vendari was about as close to fear as one would ever get.

"Whatever it is, we'll find out, we will," Phandebrass said happily, patting his many pouches. "I say, I think I forgot my powdered manticore tail spikes. That will never do, it won't. I say, how will I cast Azak-Kazim's Flying Spike Barrage? Oh, nevermind, here it is!" he said, patting a pouch.

"Well then, let us go before Phandebrass forgets something else he has with him," Dolanna said with a light smile.

"Or we'll be here all day as he takes inventory," Camara Tal snorted.

"I say, inventory. What a good idea," he prattled. "Now, where did I put that checklist of components?" he asked himself, starting to pat his pouches and satchels again.

Camara Tal grabbed him by the upper arm and started dragging him towards the door.

Phandebrass' humorous nature did more than break the ice. They were all talking, albeit in very hushed tones, as Allia led them through the strange Sha'Kar city. The talk was focused on possible guardians, as Phandebrass rattled off a long list of creatures Tarrin had never heard of. And considering he was *Fae-da'Nar* and had been educated in various kinds of exotic creatures, that was no mean feat. "I say, I hope it's a Catoblepas," Phandebrass said expectantly. "I've always wanted to see one."

"What kind of creature is that?" Allia asked him.

"It's an ugly brute that looks like a big fat lizard with a warthog's head on a long neck. It's said that any who meets its gaze dies instantly."

"If it can kill you on sight, why would you want to look at one?" Azakar asked with elegant simplicity.

"Well, it would be one way to find out if the myth is true, isn't it?" he asked with a smile.

"A very short way," Camara Tal snorted. "And it wouldn't be like you could tell anyone after you found out."

"I say, you have a point there," Phandebrass said with a thoughtful frown. "Hmm, how would I get around that?"

"Well, your dead body would certainly let the rest of us know it's not a myth," Keritanima told him with a glance. "So we'll let you go first."

"I say, that would work," he said in all seriousness.

They quieted again as Allia led them into the forest in the foothills, closer and closer to the volcano. Tarrin concentrated on listening to Phandebrass, Camara Tal, and Keritanima banter back and forth, the two females ganging up on the mage to shoot down all his wild, hair-brained ideas and schemes about what they'd do when they found out what they were facing. He got so caught up in it that he barely noticed it when Allia led them out of the woods and started up the slope of the volcano on a very steep path that had sheer rock on one side and a cliff on the other. "I saw this when Allyn brought me out here," Allia told him in Selani. "I didn't see the cave entrance, but I think it's because my eyes were filled with the carving. This trail will lead to the base of it. We'll circle around the edge of the volcano and come up under it in a little while."

"Not a very friendly path," Dolanna noted, stepping carefully in one rather narrow section of it. She looked down the hundred span sheer incline, virtually a cliff, to the trees below them, which grew up to the edge of the very steep cone of the volcano. "And an even less friendly result should one misstep."

"They just want to keep us on our toes, Dolanna," Keritanima told her lightly.

"Literally," Azakar grunted.

The light mood evaporated when they reached the landing that Auli described. A massive bulge that resembled the bottom of a foot jutted out over them in the dawn's light, and they stood on the inside edge of the rock cleared away to form the relief which contrasted the sculpture over their

heads At the center of the relief, where a bit of volcanic rock jutted out to form a very wide ledge with a few boulders resting upon it, was the dark shape of a cave entrance. As they approached, they saw that it was the entrance, a black hole in the side of the dark stone, about fifteen spans wide and ten spans high. There was no evidence of a magical barrier protecting it, at least to mundane eyes, but Tarrin could see the powerful barrier stretched across the entrance of the tunnel about ten spans into it, on the far side of the four symbols etched into the wall, just inside the tunnel entrance. A star that remarkably resembled the star in the center of a *shaeram*, resting a span from a staff. On the other side there was engraved a pair of hands clasped together, and beyond it an image of a three-petalled flower. Representations of the four orders of magic. Sorcery, Wizardry, Priest magic, and Druidic magic. They all glowed in the darkness of the tunnel mouth, shining white against the dark stone from the glow of their magical power.

They had arrived.

"According to Syllis, we must only touch the symbols," Dolanna told them gravely. "Each to his own order. Then the spell will be lowered and allow us to pass."

With sure dignity, the four magicians moved just inside the tunnel's entrance. Dolanna put her hand on the image of the star, and its faint illumination turned brilliant. Phandebrass laid his hand on the image of the staff, and it too brightened. Camara Tal set her hand against the image of the clasped hands, and that image also flared to brilliance.

Without hesitation, Tarrin put his paw on the image of the flower. It flared as well, and then there was a shimmering in the air further down the tunnel as the magical barrier erupted into visibility. The sound of that magic became louder and louder as the barrier glowed more and more brightly, and then it changed from an angry red to a brilliant white-blue.

And, to Tarrin's surprise, a disembodied voice called from the tunnel, from the barrier itself, speaking in stately cadence as it performed its task:

The four become one, the four unite;

Beyond this portal, beyond the night.

*Four join as one to unlock the door;
But only one passes to enter the bore.*

*Sorcery, Wizardry, Devotion, and Nature;
Choose wisely which holds the power most sure.
Four did begin, but one may walk past;
To face this challenge, most dreadful, held last.*

*Make your decision, choose and be timely;
Choose which of you, and choose very wisely.
Beyond, if successful, it carries a price.
To gain what you seek, you must sacrifice.*

*All that defines you, all you have been;
That which defines you shall be taken.
All that defines you, all you shall be;
Success will cost you all of those three.*

*Choose now between you, and choose anon;
Choose now the Champion to challenge beyond.
Choose with great caution, and choose with great care;
For the one chosen will surrender all there.*

*Make your decision, step forward most sure;
Make your decision, the heart that beats pure.
Make your decision, a choice without gaffe.*

Only one champion may lay hands on the staff.

They were all silent for a very long moment, as the blue light of the visible barrier continued to pulsate and undulate over them.

Only one could pass, and that one, the poem stated, had to be willing to sacrifice everything. To face death in the face, to die to further the goal.

It's not something I would ask lightly, my sweet child. It will be a dangerous road, and its outcome is uncertain. There is a very good chance that you won't live to see the end of it. The Goddess said those words to him, so very long ago. Right before he agreed to be her champion.

Is this what it meant? Was he to walk down that passage and die? And do it willingly? No! Not now. Not when he had so much to *live* for! Jesmind and Jasana, Kimmie and their unborn child, Mist's son Eron. The family he wanted, the life he wanted. They were within his grasp! Were they all nothing but fantasies, paper dreams meant to give him what little comfort they could before the end? Not now! He couldn't throw his life away, when he was so *happy*!

Or would he be throwing it away? The poem said that only one could lay hands on the staff, and all through this mad quest, he'd been told over and over again that he was the chosen one. To lay paws on the staff, he'd have to survive to reach it. And that meant that he'd live, since he wouldn't be touching it until the guardian was eliminated.

If that made any sense.

There was little he could do. He had a duty to the Goddess. He made her a promise to find the Firestaff and take it, and he had to do it. She was depending on him. His children were depending on him, Jesmind and Kimmie and Mist were depending on him, his little mother was depending on him. They needed him to get the Firestaff. They needed him to protect their world, the world they would inherit. No matter what it cost him, what they needed of him mattered more to him than anything else in the world. He would kill to protect them, and he would die to protect them. They were everything to him.

So what if he died? All that mattered was that the Firestaff could not be used. What happened to him...it just didn't matter.

Duty is honor, and the price of that honor is blood. Honor and blood.

And after all, the outcome wasn't set in stone. Nothing was.

He'd better make his intention clear before Phandebrass had a wild notion to try to choose himself. Knowing him, he'd do it.

Tarrin took his paw off the symbol, certain of his choice, and the light of the symbols and of the barrier itself changed from white-blue to an emerald green.

The others looked at him, expressions of shock and fear and worry and anxiety, but they did not interfere. They all knew that if only one had to go, then it had to be Tarrin. He was the strongest magician of them all, and he had physical qualities that the rest of them lacked, qualities that would allow him to survive. He was the *only* choice.

The poem said to step quickly and with certainty, so he did so, moving towards the barrier with long strides and suppressing his fear and uncertainty under a steely resolve. It *had* to be him. He *had* to do it. The others wouldn't be able to do it alone! He let the Cat come up a little into his mind, using its powerful instincts to live in the moment, to ignore the very real fear he felt at what he was doing, to be calm and strong and sure of himself. Closing his eyes just before he would make contact with it, Tarrin walked deliberately right into and through the barrier. He felt its power seep into him, through him, infuse him. But it did not hinder him. He felt himself pass through it, and when he did, he suddenly became aware of intense, lethal heat. The air in the passageway had to be hot enough to boil water, but the barrier blocked it from escaping. Tarrin sighed in relief. Had anyone but Dolanna or himself passed through, they would have died almost immediately. The air smelled heavily of sulfur and brimstone, assaulting his nose and burning it, and burning slightly at his eyes.

The light of the barrier vanished. Tarrin turned to look and saw all his friends, his sisters, their mouths moving but no sound coming from them. The barrier stopped sound as well as heat, he realized. --*I can't hear you*,-- he told Allia in the hand code of the Selani. --*The magic wall is blocking sound*.--

--*Be careful, my brother!*-- Allia said with her urgency showing in her hands, her expression.

--*Tell the others to be careful, and to get away from the opening. It's hot enough on this side to kill you in a matter of seconds. If the barrier comes down, the heat will wash over you and kill you.*--

--*We'll move away as soon as you start down the tunnel. Be careful!*--

--*I'll try. Wait for me, sister. Pray for me.*--

--*May the winds ever blow at your back, and may the Holy Mother guide your steps through the holy land,*-- she told him, one of the most solemn and intimate of Selani farewells. He looked into her eyes and saw her love in them, as well as in Keritania's and Dolanna's. He saw the solemn worry in Camara Tal's eyes, the look of grim pride in Azakar's, and the look of slight disappointment in Phandebrass' that he hadn't thought to choose himself first. Binter and Sisska nodded to him gravely, a recognition of his impending challenge. For Vendari, that was a wish for good luck.

--*I'll be back in a while. Save me a spot at the table,*-- he said with nonchalance in his movements and a forced smile on his lips. But they could see the intense concentration in his eyes.

Go, Dolanna's mouth said, he could make it out. She pointed down the tunnel, behind him. *Go*. Then she put her hand on her amulet and did something he never thought he'd see her do.

She *curtsied* to him.

Had it not been such a serious situation, he would have laughed. But he understood it for what it was, a salute to him, and a reminder of who and what he was.

He was *sui'kun*. He was a being with magical powers among the strongest of any on the planet. Whatever was down that passage, it had better be ready for a serious fight. Because Tarrin wasn't about to lay down and die for it. If it was going to protect the Firestaff, then Tarrin swore it was going to have to work like mad to earn its daily wage this day.

Tarrin nodded to her, his expression one of complete seriousness, all fear and anxiety melting away. If he had to go alone, then so be it. If he had

to sacrifice, then so be it. One way or another, he was coming back down this passage with the Firestaff.

And woe be to anything that tried to stand in his way.

Tarrin turned his back to his friends and moved with careful deliberate slowness down the hellishly hot passage, towards the dimmest of faint lights far down the tunnel. Towards his date with the legendary guardian of the Firestaff, towards his date with his destiny.

Moving towards the end of it.

Chapter 19

The tunnel was very long, very dark, and was roughly circular in shape. It descended down into the heart of the volcano, and every step that Tarrin took brought him down deeper into the depths of the place, where the air became hotter and hotter, and the smell of sulfur, smoke, fire, and brimstone burned more and more at his nose and eyes. The stone beneath the pads on his feet grew warmer and warmer, but there was very little sound in the tunnel but the sound of his own breathing. At the end of the tunnel there was a very faint, wavering red light, barely visible it was so far away. Tarrin reasoned that the tunnel had to be more than a longspan in length.

There was more and more fear now. Every step down into the heart of the volcano took him further and further away from the surface, and the alien environment of the tunnel unnerved him. The bolstering he had felt at Dolanna's gesture had faded, and every step down deeper into the volcano was one more step away from his friends, away from their support. He was alone now, beyond their aid, beyond their reassurance. Whatever lay waiting for him at the end of the tunnel, he would have to face it, conquer it, alone.

Alone. He was alone. The sense of the Goddess was still distant, blocked by the Ward. Always before, she had been there for him, with him, watching over him. She wasn't there now. It was almost like being a child again, knowing he was in trouble and not having mother there to save him. Not even she could help him here, help him now. It was a situation of the most desolate loneliness he had ever experienced, and that alien feeling caused him fear. Fear itself was not a strange emotion, but this unnatural need to have others near annoyed and confused the Cat, and felt them extraneous.

He was depending on the Cat now. Its mentality would serve him well by making him ready for anything, living in the moment, his every sense awake and alert. It caused him to creep slowly along the tunnel, for there was no need to rush. Not here, not now. When facing an unknown, it was

best to learn as much about it as possible before committing to a course of action. Even the Cat understood this, adhered to this, and it caused him to pick his way very carefully, like a cat stalking prey, moving with a slow sureness that made no sound and caused no sudden movements that may catch the eye.

Glancing back, he saw that the light at the opening of the tunnel was no longer visible. The tunnel had curved slightly a while back, hiding the opening from him now. Perhaps it was best that he couldn't see the opening, couldn't dwell on it. He couldn't go back. Not now. Too much was depending on this. No matter what happened, no matter what he ended up facing at the end of that tunnel, only one thought raced through his mind.

I must not fail.

Failure was not an option. If Tarrin couldn't defeat the Guardian, then he doubted that any of the others could either. And they would try. If he didn't come back within a reasonable amount of time, they were going to try. And they would come down here, one by one, and die. He couldn't allow that. It was a masked blessing to him that he had to come alone, because it meant that none of the others were going to be in any danger. None of the others could get killed. But if he failed, they *were* going to come, and they would probably die.

And that was only his friends. If he failed, someone else may get the Firestaff. And if they used it, then everyone he cared for would be in danger. His children, his two loves, Mist, Triana, Janette, his parents, his sisters, his friends. Everyone would be in danger, and it would all be his fault. He couldn't allow that, not under any circumstances.

No, there was absolutely no room for error in this. *This* is what the Goddess had tasked him to do. *This* is why the Tower had him turned Were. *This* is what he had devoted his life to accomplishing. Everything that had been happening in the West for nearly ten years all boiled down to this place, this time, this event. The *ki'zadun* had planned for ten years to prevent this, but they failed. The Tower had searched for years to find him, so he could be there at that moment and do what he was doing now. The Goddess had gone far beyond what she afforded other mortals with him, being his friend, building his trust in her, being there for him and supporting him, just so he would obey her and take up the quest, so he could be where

he was now, acting as her champion, striving to protect the world from being ravaged in the throes of a war between gods. The eyes of man and god both, if they could perceive them, would be fixed upon him at this moment, as he stepped out of the end of the tunnel and faced the final obstacle set in his path, the final challenge to overcome.

This was the time. This was the place. There was no more need for planning or travelling, searching or solving puzzles. All that was said and done. Now it came down to one confrontation, and the result of it would probably alter the course of the future of the entire world.

The light at the end of the tunnel grew brighter and brighter. It looked like firelight, and the heat was becoming stronger and stronger. It was already hot enough to boil water in the tunnel, and the heat was getting greater as he reasoned that he was getting closer to the source of the heat. There was no wind in the tunnel, as it was blocked by the barrier at the top, making it stale and thick with the smell of brimstone, sulfur, and smoke. That defeated his sense of smell, and it also burned at his eyes a little, forcing him to stop from time to time and wipe his eyes with the fur on the back of his paw. His eyes did slowly become accustomed to the acrid air, and as the opening of the tunnel loomed larger and larger before him, he found he could focus on it.

He could hear sounds now. A bubbling sound, and a whooshing sound, and a hissing sound, like water on fire. He was about fifty spans from the end of the tunnel, and he could see that it opened onto a level area that blocked him from seeing anything of the chamber into which it opened. Tarrin dropped down to all fours and crept down the angled passageway with agonizing slowness, moving a single limb at a time, curiosity starting to seep into the relentless anxiety and fear that he'd been feeling as he walked down the tunnel. Going down headfirst let him see more and more of the landing as he got closer and closer. Twenty spans. Fifteen spans. He could see a landing of rock now, and more light. Ten spans. It was a wide landing, the rock irregular at the mouth of the tunnel. Five spans. The landing seemed to drop off, and he could make out red-illuminated rock behind it. He slowly crept down to where he could see out level, and he had to gape in amazement.

The tunnel opened into a vast chamber in the heart of the volcano, nearly a longspan wide. The roof of the massive chamber was a dome of volcanic rock, the roof of which probably formed the cauldern at the top of the volcano on the outside. The light was from lava, and the landing to which the tunnel opened was nothing but a wide ledge on the edge of that lava lake, lava that had gouts of gas and flame erupt from it from time to time. There were glowing boulders of rock dispersed through the lava, the solid rock smoking and hissing as the heat of the lava sought to melt it. The lava formed a moat of sorts around an island in the center, roughly circular with irregular edges. The island's middle was gone, melted by lava from underneath, forming a ring of lava around a ring of island which enclosed a pool of lava, which had a single spire of rock jutting up from the middle of it, a hundred spans high.

And there, at the top of that spire of rock, protected by deadly lava, was the Firestaff.

It looked to be hovering in midair just a span over the tip of the spire, and Tarrin was a little surprised. He had never really tried to imagine what it would look like, and if he had, he would have been disappointed. It was a piece of reddish wood, or at least something that looked like wood, like cedar or cherry or firesap. It looked remarkably nondescript. But at closer inspection, as he wiped his eyes again to clear the tears from them and peered at it, he saw a wispy tongue of flame licking at the top of the staff, dancing over the surface without seeming to consume the wood. If that was what it was. He also realized that it was emitting a soft white radiance about it, drawing his eye, which hadn't been apparent before with all the light cast by the glowing lava. Tarrin realized that the Firestaff was sitting directly in a very large Conduit, probably the main Conduit that fed this enclosed area of the Weave. The Conduit rose right out of the volcano, through the Firestaff, and then terminated into an explosion of strands just before it reached the roof of the chamber. Tarrin had never seen the *end* of a Conduit before. It was like a tree trunk that yielded itself to the many branches beyond it.

Tarrin froze and looked around. He saw nothing that could be classified as a living thing in the chamber. No Giants, no Catoblepas, no Salamanders or Fire Elementals. No lava slugs--if they really existed, Tarrin felt that maybe Phandebrass was pulling his leg about that one--no nothing at all.

Granted, it was a big chamber, but he could see almost all of it. And there was nothing there.

Tarrin smelled smoke, and realized that the heat was getting to his leather clothing. He wove a quick spell and released it into the leather, fortifying it against the heat of the lava, making it resistant to fire. Getting his clothes burned off wouldn't be a good thing, especially if there was a guardian, and it thought it amusing to face a naked opponent. Tarrin had no modesty, but to be laughed at was another matter entirely.

No Guardian, though. At least nothing that he could see or hear. Was Camara Tal right? Had the Guardian actually died after five thousand years?

It was a possibility, but he wasn't going to assume it to be true. Tarrin remembered the Demon that came out of nowhere when he went after the Book of Ages, how it had very nearly killed Sarraya because she rushed headlong into the chamber without thinking about the possible danger. Tarrin was not going to make the same mistake. He may see his goal and not see a defender, but that didn't mean that there wasn't one lurking around somewhere.

He crept out of the tunnel slowly and carefully, slinking out onto the ledge while still on all fours. He would not stand up and draw attention to himself. He looked over the ledge and got superheated blasted in his face, drying his eyes, and had he not been immune to fire, it would have boiled his eyes right out of their sockets. There was lava about fifteen spans down from the ledge, and the stone under his pads was so hot that it would have set fire to clothing or parchment placed atop it. His leather breeches would have burst into flames if he put his knees down on the ledge, had he not used Sorcery to protect them.

Still no sign of an adversary. Tarrin pondered for a moment how to get across the lava. It looked like the consistency of thick mud, and while it couldn't burn him, it could still quite effectively drown him. He didn't think it would be a good idea to try to swim across it. The idea of using Sorcery to cross did occur to him, but if something did jump out at him, he didn't want to be caught high in the air and at the mercy of something that may be able to fly.

Using Sorcery *would* work, and still allow him to keep his feet on the ground--as it were--where he would feel most in control. Using a weave of pure Fire, Tarrin sucked the heat out of the lava directly before him, diffusing its energy into the Weave. The result was that the lava suddenly crusted over and solidified, then hissed savagely as the lava beneath it sought to heat it. The cooled lava suddenly split in half with a loud *crack*, so loud it startled him nearly into falling off the ledge. Tarrin had never expected it to do *that*! He looked around desperately for a moment, fearful the noise alerted some hidden lurker, but there was still no sign of an opponent and no movement from anywhere in the chamber.

But his idea would work. Using the same weave, he sucked the heat out of the lava on the surface and to a depth of about five spans down, over a width of about five spans, and across from the ledge to the island, forming a solid bridge between the base of the ledge and the solid ring island in the center. It was about a thousand span walk from the edge to the island, and the rock bridge he created was already starting to break and undulate as the dynamic lava beneath it churned.

Dropping down onto his unstable creation, Tarrin realized that speed of movement was going to be necessary to get across without falling in. He'd never swam in lava before, and he didn't think that this was a good time to try it and see what it was like. So he rose up onto his legs and moved both quickly and trying to be quiet, dancing along the broken sections of his rock bridge as they rose and fell in the hellish tides of the boiling lava. Despite the shifting of the rocks, he managed to get across both quickly and gracefully, jumping up the ten spans from the surface of the lava to the top of the rock island without much difficulty. As soon as he alighted, he again dropped down onto all fours and surveyed the ringed island thoroughly.

It was the same as it looked before. Relatively flat but with enough knobs and protrusions to make footing tricky in some places. Its interior sections were noticeably lower than the edges, almost as if some Giant had scooped out the middle with a great spade. Spats of cooled lava along the edges formed irregular formations and grooved or ridged rock along those borders, where bubbles of lava spat chunks of the gooey substance up onto the island, and it would cool, harden, and build up the rock. That was why the edges of the ringed island were higher than the middle.

His gaze rose higher and higher, until he looked up at the Firestaff. It was *so close* now! Just a little more, and he would have it!

No rushing. He told himself that over and over, conjuring an image of that Demon swiping Sarraya right out of the air and holding it firmly in his mind. Haste could get him killed, and this was no time to die. Not when he was almost in physical reach of his goal! It couldn't be this easy. There had to be something here. Maybe he had to get closer to the Firestaff before it would show itself and challenge him.

And so, with painstaking care, setting each foot or paw on the ground as if it would break through and cast him down into a bottomless pit, Tarrin slowly and cautiously shuffled his way towards the inner pool of lava, towards the Firestaff. He stopped almost every time he set down a foot or paw, staying on all fours, and swept the area with his eyes to look for any change, any sign of motion. Before he made his next move forward, he would carefully check the rock for any sign of foreign material. He would not be blindsided, and he would not fall into a trap.

About halfway across, as he looked down to check the ground, he noticed something that stood out. It was red, like glowing lava, and it was wedged into the rock. He pinched it with his claws and yanked it out, and found himself staring at a roughly diamond-shaped thing about the size of a small book, with chipped edges. It was scarlet, like dark blood, and it had the hardness and consistency of stone.

Tarrin peered at it for a very long moment, until a memory tickled him, a memory that made his blood absolutely run cold.

That thing was a *scale*. And it had the same shape as the scales on the drakes. But where theirs were the size of flakes of snow, this one was as big as a book. It had to be a hundred times larger than Sapphire's scales...and that meant that it had to be *a hundred times bigger than Sapphire*.

Tarrin stood up, forgetting himself, holding the scale in front of him with both curiosity and fear in his eyes. What could have shed something like *this*? He couldn't smell anything off of it, so covered over with the smells of the volcano it was, and it looked very, very old. It was chipped and nicked and scratched, and it just didn't seem like it was fresh. If it really was that big, then where was it? There was nowhere something so huge

could hide in here. There was nothing but flat rock and lava. What was it doing, hiding in the rock itself?

No matter if it was there or not, it spooked Tarrin badly. He stopped where he was and looked up at the Firestaff, almost yearning for it now that it was so close. Maybe, he considered, he should stop thinking like a Were-cat and start thinking like a Sha'Kar. He didn't *have* to get any closer to it than this to recover it. Sorcery could bring it to him, and since he knew it was safe the way he came, he could retreat back that way and get out of the cauldера before anything happened.

It was worth a try. What could it hurt?

Setting his feet, he considered what spell to use. An Air weave would be simplest and easiest. That would be best. He set his will against the Weave and pulled out flows of Air and Divine, readying to create a net of soft Air to capture the floating Firestaff and bring it towards him.

There was a rumbling beneath his feet.

Tarrin stopped what he was doing and felt the tremors beneath his pads. Was it an earthquake? Was the volcano about to erupt? He looked around, and saw no Guardian. There was nothing there. He realized that it had to be an earthquake. They happened all the time around volcanos. He was just getting jumpy. He bent himself back to the task at hand, and looked up at the Firestaff. He set his will against the Weave--

And then hell exploded in his face.

He was staggered back as the lava in the pool between him and the Firestaff erupted in a massive geyser of spraying, flying lava, and the rock beneath his feet shuddered and vibrated from the power of the eruption. But the mass of the eruption didn't scatter as the lava did, and it caught his eye. Two dark masses spread out from the central one, above and to the sides of it. Tarrin backed up a few more paces as the dark mass seemed to rise even higher, and then it dropped slightly. Tarrin felt the stone under his pads rock as if the cauldера dome had fallen down on it. The dark mass loomed more and more as the lava of the geyser fell away.

And that was when he saw the *eyes*.

Eyes as big as the Twin Moons at zenith, eyes bigger than kite shields, two amber, serpentine eyes that stared down at him from an unfathomable height, so far above him, blocking his view of the Firestaff.

Tarrin gave ground, trying to fight a sudden wave of mindless panic. The Cat, for the first time ever, fled from him, unable to comprehend, to face, to stand against what now rose before him in all its terrible, majestic glory.

It was a *dragon*!

Dumbstuck, absolutely shocked, and almost terrified into insensibility, Tarrin gaped at the monstrous beast as its incredibly huge forepaws shifted on the edge of the rock pool. It was so *huge*! He could only see half its body, and the tips of its wings were higher up than the Firestaff was! It had to be *five hundred spans long*! Covered in iridescent red and scarlet scales, the titanic replica of the drakes looked down at him with those huge eyes, regarding him, assessing him. It had the same general build as Sapphire, with the wings and the long, serpentine neck, and the backswept horns over those massive eyes. It had a boxed snout, unlike Sapphire, with flares at the tip for nostrils and containing a huge maw full of teeth that were as long as bastard sword blades. It too had spines growing down the backbone, as well as hair-like tendrils that grew in tufts between the bony spines. Those tufts of tendril were also under its chin, giving it the appearance of having a dark red beard of sorts.

Tarrin felt as nothing compared to something so absolutely immense, like a flea staring up at an angry dog that it had just bitten. He would fit in the grasp of its forepaw! It could swallow him whole with no effort!

How was he supposed to fight something like *that*?

It shifted, and he saw the Firestaff again, right between its wings. No! He couldn't give up now! He couldn't bow to fear! His children were depending on him! His mother, his mates, his parents, his sisters, they all needed him! He couldn't give up!

No matter how big it was, if it could bleed, then it could die. He realized that he just had to survive long enough to figure out *how to kill it*.

Sorcery. He couldn't fight something that big with claws. He had to use Sorcery!

Screwing up his courage, Tarrin set his feet apart and stared up at it, hopefully without an expression of terror marring his attempt to stand against it. He felt the nearness of the Conduit, felt it singing in his soul, and he reached out to that power--

--And it *was not there*.

Tarrin blinked in shock. He could *feel* it, but it was as if something had set itself between him and the Weave! He tried again, and felt the Weave dissolve away from him, as if something had grabbed it and pulled it beyond his grasp.

He didn't understand. What was happening? His power had never failed him before! No, wait, he had felt that once before, a long time ago. It was a city, with strange devices called cranes. He was hiding on top of a warehouse, hiding from Triana--

Triana.

Tarrin backed up even more as the dragon seemed to comprehend, and it looked *amused*.

That thing was a *Druid*!

It moved with a speed that defied imagination. Nothing that big should have been able to move that fast. Tarrin barely registered it through his shock and dismay, his consuming chagrin that the dragon could block his power, and just barely managed to dive aside as one of its forepaws blasted into the rock right where he'd been standing. The ground shook as if an earthquake had struck and bits of rock flew in every direction, pelting him stingingly, and that pain shocked him back to reality. It was a Druid. He couldn't do anything about that. But he couldn't give up! Not *now*! He rolled to his feet and turned tail to the dragon, dashing back towards the outer ring of lava. That thing was half in, half out of the inner pool, and the time it would take it to get up onto the ring would buy him precious time. His mind worked feverishly as he ran through his options. It wasn't attacking him with magic, so it seemed content to use its vastly superior physical advantage to finish him. And it was *vast*. One blow would finish him, regeneration or no regeneration. It had just proven its speed to him, and if it was anything like Sapphire, it would also be deceptively agile and surprisingly light on its feet. Everything about it was a weapon. The

forepaws and the mouth were the major ones, but a strike from that long, long tail would cut him in half, and a blow from those wings would send him flying. There was no safe approach to try to get close to something with its incredible physical size and power. Its advantages were speed, power, sheer size, and its Druidic ability to cut him off from the Weave.

Tarrin's advantages were agility, a little bit of insanity, and the fact that he had other magical means at his disposal.

To the dragon's surprise, Tarrin turned in midstride and summoned his sword from the *elsewhere*. If he could keep it a little off balance, maybe he could survive long enough to come up with a plan. That meant that he would need to do the unexpected, make it pause to try to figure him out. And turning and attacking something that was so overwhelmingly superior would definitely make it think.

The dragon had climbed up onto the rock, and he realized that all its vital organs were hanging about twenty spans over his head. It was so big that when it reared up on its hind legs, the only thing he could possibly strike were its legs and tail. A blow there would only irritate it. It leaned forward, looming over him like a mountain of death, and he sensed more than saw that forepaw hurtling towards him. He slipped aside with barely room to spare, nearly losing his footing as the stone beneath his feet buckled from the crushing impact and dust and bits of stone shrapnel shot out from the dragon's paw. He reflexively slashed his sword across its scaly wrist as he ran by at full speed, slicing the scales neatly and getting a satisfying eruption of blood from the wound for his troubles. The dragon recoiled its forepaw with a hiss of surprise, but Tarrin still rushed madly towards its main body. He jumped over the whipping tail, moving so fast it cracked the air like a whip, evaded another forepaw crushing into the ground, then literally dove between its jaws as it tried to snap over him. He rolled and came up running, getting closer and closer to its soft underbelly, the target of his mad rush.

The dragon reared up a bit more and then flexed its wings sharply, beating them down. The sudden blast of wind picked up the ash and dust and smoke from the chamber and hurled it into the air, stinging at Tarrin's eyes. He faltered in his charge, and just barely managed to sense the oncoming of another forepaw. He jumped aside as it slammed into the rock,

and he sliced another bleeding gash in that same forepaw as it tried to withdraw it. It beat its wings again, kicking up more ash and dust, and Tarrin had to turn his back to that onslaught to protect his eyes, running at full speed to the side of the dragon, his frontal charge thwarted. He got out to where the dust and ash weren't so thick and immediately turned around, found the body of the dragon hazy and partially concealed by the cloud of dust and ash. If he could get close enough to throw the sword, he may have enough force behind it to--

--he never saw it coming. The dragon's tail whipped around its body, coming out of that concealing cloud of dust with terrific speed, and the tip of it hit Tarrin squarely on the side. Bones shattered as his body was bent in double around the very tip, a wave of agony as split skin sprayed blood and bits of bone onto the stone to hiss and bubble from the heat. He was virtually catapulted across the chamber, sailing a hundred spans in the air after his broken body came free of the tail, and he slammed so hard into one of the jutting boulders of rock rising out of the outer lava pool that it split in twain. The impact knocked him senseless, and he was only dimly aware of his body falling into the mud-like lava, sinking down into it as liquid rock seeped into the hideous wound in his side. Somehow, he wasn't sure how, he had protected his head. He could feel his regeneration already at work repairing the ghastly damage done to him, and he was honestly surprised that the blow from the tail, whipping with such incredible force, had not torn him in half. He *felt* like he'd been ripped in half, that was certain. He lay partially in the lava, its gooey nature allowing him to sink only very slowly, then he clawed at it with a ragged intake of breath as his lungs were restored to the point where he could breathe again. He clambered across the surface of the lava, half swimming half crawling on its elastic surface back towards the ring of rock, which only about ten spans from where he landed.

There was no fear now. The pain scoured it out of him, and left him calm, almost emotionless. He had to come up with some way to fight the dragon, or it was going to kill him. There was no way he could attack it physically, and he couldn't use Sorcery.

But he'd bet that it didn't know that he was also a *Druid*. A wild plan formed in his mind, a crazy scheme that probably didn't have a prayer of succeeding.

That would work. After all, what other choice did he have?

The dragon's greatest advantage was its titanic size. Tarrin had to eliminate that advantage, either physically or forcing it into a situation where it couldn't use that size against him.

It regarded him with some surprise as Tarrin clawed his way out of the lava pool and back up onto the ring of stone. There was still an unnatural bulge on one side of his torso as his regeneration sorted out the massive damage done to his midsection, having to grow new organs to replace ones virtually liquified by the impact of the tail. His skin split and grisly blood and ichor spewed from that bulge as his body purged itself of the excess matter. Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, and made a connection to the boundless energy of the All. Firstly, he Summoned his sword back to his paw, and then he touched it again with a new image and intent clear in his mind.

The dragon seemed startled when Tarrin used Druidic power, and it suddenly sucked in its breath.

Tarrin tried to concentrate on what he was doing, but it seemed like hell itself blasted out of the dragon's open mouth, a withering inferno of intense fire that roared towards him. It could do him no harm, but the sight of it startled him badly, so badly that he lost his concentration. The All, still in touch with him, lost his image and his intent, picking up on the first wild thought that crossed Tarrin's mind. It was the worst thing that a Druid could have happen, to lose concentration and have the All read what was not intended. It often had disastrous results.

The fire could not hurt him, but the physical force it exerted against him was like trying to stand in the face of a tidal wave. Tarrin was picked up off his feet and hurled backwards. That caused the first wild thought to cross his mind, an attempt to stop himself from falling back into the lava, and the All picked up this thought, puzzled on the lack of image, the lack of direction that usually accompanied a Druid's use of its power, and then simply decided to accomplish the task in a manner of its own choosing.

Tarrin felt the power of the All blast through him like an avalanche as an enormous amount of energy used him as a conduit to the material world.

Behind him, a large patch of the lava lake turned solid in the blink of an eye, a circular area nearly fifty spans across.

Tarrin landed hard on his back on that newly cooled stone and rolled to a stop, feeling completely drained. That damned clever dragon! It felt him use Druidic magic, and had breathed that fire at him to scare him into losing his concentration! He saw it advancing on him, but the amusement was gone from its face. He felt it touch the All itself, and he realized if he didn't do something fast, it was going to do something very nasty.

He tried again, trying to ignore the dragon. He closed his eyes, centered himself on his Druidic magic. He reached to it through the Cat, felt it make touch with him. His image was pure thought, pure *need*, and his intent very simple.

The Weave is part of the All, he told himself. So I should be able to touch the Weave through the All!

It was an idea elegant for its simplicity. Tarrin felt the All shudder at his idea, at his command, and for a moment he felt it...*crawling*. And then he felt it, sensed it, touched it. The power of the Weave roared up through the All like a fountain of life, and he drank it in like a man dying of thirst in the desert. The power of Sorcery filled him, being channeled through a protective sheathe of Druidic power, which insulated it from any attempt to cut him off from it. He filled himself with the power of the Weave, the power of the Goddess, a power that made him suck in his breath as his entire body exploded into Magelight, and then that Magelight formed the four-pointed star that marked a *sui'kun* holding power near or at his maximum.

It was like trying to control a hurricane inside him, but he was fully aware that if he did not do something *right now*, the dragon was going to kill him. He opened his eyes and found that the dragon was taken aback, a look of intense concentration on its face now. He felt it use its power, sensed it as a magical attack of raw power, but of monstrous proportions. This dragon could give Triana lessons in Druidic magic! Tarrin countered with a counterspell of Sorcery, that chaotic weave of Fire, Air, Water, Divine power, and token flows of the other spheres to grant his weave the power of High Sorcery. With a primal scream, an audible declaration that he was not about to lay down and die for its benefit, Tarrin raised his free paw

unleashed his weave just as the visible magic erupted from the dragon's outstretched forepaws.

The power of the All struck the power of Sorcery, and in their meeting came a spectacular explosion of force. A gigantic broiling ball of pure energy expanded between Druid and Sorcerer, and then it detonated like a keg of gunpowder. The entire volcano rocked and shuddered, great blocks of stone dropped from the domed ceiling. Tarrin quickly shielded himself from the wave of magical fire with a shield of Air, felt it eating at the integrity of its protection as he was engulfed in the magical chaos caused by the collision of two such powerful magical forces.

After it cleared, the air between the dragon and the Were-cat was literally alive with wild magical currents, as the two of them continued to hurl magical power at one another, trying to break the stalemate. Fist clenched so tightly around the sword that Tarrin lost feeling in his fingers, he kept drawing on the Weave through the All, feeling the exertion quickly, struggling against the stress and demands that using two orders of magic simultaneously were placing on him. Tarrin dropped the sword and put both paws out, as if using the other paw would give him more push, teeth tightly clenched as spots danced before his eyes, so fully he committed to the assault. He drew on the power of the Weave faster than the All could siphon it from the Weave, and he realized that it was just too inefficient and exhausting to do what was was doing. If only he could touch the Weave directly! But the spell the dragon placed had not lost its energy yet, and he could do nothing until it consumed its reserves and was exhausted.

It was winning. It was winning! Tarrin felt its power push against him, crush down on him, forcing him to commit more and more just to holding it back. His concentration began to suffer, and he realized that that was what it was trying to do! It could tell that he was using Druidic magic and Sorcery at the same time, so it was again trying to disrupt his concentration. He had to break this contest, but it took everything he had to keep its power off of him. He couldn't even move!

A flash of memory, a fight in a domed room, with a book in its center. How similar it was to this, he realized! He remembered that Demon, how it confounded him with its ability to Teleport. It--

Why, Teleport, of course. How else would we travel?

In an instant, the echo of how that was done touched him. It was a complicated spell, requiring more power than someone not *da'shar* could bring to bear.

With a ragged scream, Tarrin redoubled his efforts and pushed against the dragon's power with all his might. He felt it give ground to him, finger by finger, little by little, until he had actually started turning the tide. But instead of pressing his advantage, Tarrin suddenly withdrew his power from the contest and turned it into the weave of Mind, Divine, Earth, Water, and Air, the flows weaving themselves together around him like a cocoon even as the dragon's power suddenly roared back at him without resistance. Tarrin finished the spell and snapped it down around him. He felt it reach out to his target area, felt tendrils of Air and Earth enclose an area on the other side of the spell--

--and they *exchanged*.

There was no flash, no sense of motion. First he was looking the dragon's power in the face, and then he was standing *behind the dragon*, still crouched down with his paws out, as if to push the power away. The dragon's power slammed into the rock where he'd been and destroyed it in an angry explosion of fire and flying stone. The dragon didn't sense this sudden shift in his position, and the dust and debris of the explosion would keep its attention off of him for a few critical seconds. The battle of power with the dragon had drained him, weakened him, and he needed time to recover, time for its choking spell to wane so he could touch the Weave without having to go through the All. He couldn't capitalize on his advantage quite yet. He first thought to just grab the Firestaff and Teleport back into the tunnel mouth, but he remembered the poem's warning. If he died touching it with that dragon still here, then he would accomplish nothing. Not wanting to risk Summoning his sword and giving away his position, Tarrin turned and ran behind the dragon, towards the Firestaff, and then shapeshifted into cat form and hid under a large rock protrusion. Panting from exertion, he tried to regather himself, tried to buy time. He knew it was a terrible risk to be in cat form right now, for he'd given away his mobility, the only thing that would save him from the dragon's massive forepaws. But it would see him if he stayed in his normal form, and he needed the time.

He needed time!

Then, to his horror, the dragon *spoke*.

"Clever move," it said in flawless Sha'Kar, an impressed voice, a voice so deep that it vibrated the rock beneath his paws. "I can smell you in here, invader. Trying to delay the inevitable? Or simply buying time to recover?"

Tarrin felt the shuddering of the rock under him. The dragon was moving, each monstrous paw coming down and shaking the island with its tremendous weight. The sound of its voice shifted as he realized it was moving its head great distances on that long, serpentine neck. "You're not invisible," it mused. "I would sense your power. You're too large to hide behind a rock. You're *da'shar*, so you may be hiding in the lava. It can't harm you any more than it can harm me. Yes, that would make sense. But you're also a Druid, and a very clever one at that. I never thought you'd think of something like drawing the Weave through the All. You are a worthy opponent. It's a pity I must kill you."

The shuddering grew stronger and stronger, and he realized that the dragon had turned around, and was moving in his direction. He fought a Cat-induced impulse to flee in panic, to run and climb high, climb out of its reach. If he moved, it would see him! He hunkered down on his belly, still panting from the exertion as well as from more than a little terror, feeling very small, very vulnerable, and as if it was going to step on him at any moment.

"Two orders of magic," it mused. "I never thought I'd see that in a biped. You must be *Fae-da'Nar*. Were, from the look of you, but a type of Were-kin I've never seen before. I know I took alot out of you. Using both of your magical gifts at the same time? I'm impressed you could even manage it. A Were-kin needing time to recover will always revert to his instincts, and I'd say your first instinct was to hide. So, are you cowering in your animal form in here, my worthy adversary?" it asked in a conversational voice. "Trying to recover your strength and challenge me again?"

Tarrin felt his heart seize. It was as smart as it was powerful!

"Say, about...*here*?"

Tarrin scrambled forward just as the rock over his head was shattered into fine dust by the huge forepaw of the dragon. The shockwave it caused

sent him flying, and he shapeshifted back into his base form even as he tumbled through the air. He barely managed to come down on his feet, and was off to the races, trying to get out of reach of that hundred-span long tail, a weapon that gave the dragon a reach that extended almost over the entire ring of rock. He could hear it whistling, he knew that it was coming.

He knew that it was coming.

Tarrin scanned both sides of him, and then he saw it. A blur of red, glowing in the light of the lava, coming from his right side. Tarrin swerved quickly to his right and Summoned his sword to him. He could see it now uncoiling, lashing out at him.

Bracing himself with his feet, digging his claws into the rock beneath him, Tarrin turned his sword before him vertically and braced the tip of the blade against his other arm before him and locked his elbows, presenting a deadly cutting edge to that whipping tail. The dragon didn't react to his sudden change of tactics quickly enough, as it tried to raise its lashing tail over the Were-cat's sword. Tarrin was knocked to the ground with dragon blood sprayed all over him as two spans of his sword dug into the tail as it tried to go over him. The arm bracing the top of the sword was broken from the impact, and as the dragon roared in sudden pain, Tarrin grabbed the arm and wrenched it back into place, feeling a shockwave of pain.

He grabbed his sword from where it had fallen to the ground and sprinted away, feeling refreshed enough to try to use Sorcery again.

"Agh, damn clever!" the dragon growled. "*Audo mosenthi gratta--*"

Tarrin almost fell down in shock. The dragon was casting a *Wizard spell*! He knew the sound of those words, he heard Kimmie mutter them all the time!

--montho compendus sensi ingratiat!"

Everything turned insane. The floor and the cavern walls began to undulate wildly to his eyes, the floor beneath him buckled and rolled like he was standing on the surface of a churning sea. The scents in his nose went wild as he smelled grass, then rabbits, then humans, then wood, then honey. The bubbling and hissing sounds in the cavern took on a surreal quality as they grew louder and softer, then started sounding like things that made no sense, like pans banging together, then a baby's crying, then the laughter of

an old man, then the sound of wind blowing through tree branches and rustling leaves. Tarrin teetered like a drunken sailor trying to cross the deck in a hurricane, staggering this way and that as the floor tried to throw him off his feet. Only by supreme concentration and his Were agility did he keep his feet, but the assault of nonsense to his ears, eyes, and nose distracted and confused the Were-cat, nearly to the point of blind terror. Tarrin was a being completely ruled by his senses, for they defined his reality in a way that no human could comprehend. The Cat roared up into his mind in confusion, unable to make sense of the avalanche of bizarre things it was seeing, hearing, smelling, interfering with his rational mind at the worst possible time. Dimly, Tarrin realized that the dragon's spell wasn't causing reality to go crazy, it was attacking his *senses*.

Fighting a wave of sudden panic, Tarrin realized that the dragon was going to use this moment of incapacity to crush him. With a speed born of pure self-preservation, Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, and the instant he felt his connection to the All, he caused it to bring forth the power of Sorcery. He wove that same spell again, Mind, Divine, Air, Water, and Earth, and wrapped it around himself. It exchanged space with an area on the far side of the cavern, to the far side of the ring of rock, so that the rock spire that had the Firestaff atop it was between them.

A paw to his head, he shook it as he felt the Wizard magic attacking his mind, attacking his senses and feeding them nonsense. What a clever spell! Again in touch with the Weave, Tarrin killed the spell inside him by cutting its connection to the magical energy that fed it. Mercifully, the wild undulation of the ground ceased, his ears and nose cleared, and the rolling nature of what was before his eyes solidified.

Tarrin took that brief moment to change his strategy. He couldn't fight the dragon with magic, because so long as it used its power to block his and forced him to draw Sorcery the way he was, it simply outpowered him. He couldn't use any sustained spells, like summoning an Elemental or flying or walking on the walls, because the dragon could kill his spells. That limited him to fast spells with immediate effects, things the dragon could only counter by out-thinking him, outguessing his intent. And Tarrin respected this foe enough to grant that it probably could do just that. That meant that he had to attack it physically, and use his magic in a manner that would allow him to get close enough to try to figure out a way to kill something

whose vital organs were so far inside its body that his sword would never reach them. He could cut it so much that it bled to death, but that would take *hours*, and he wouldn't last that long.

Wait. There was *one* vital organ he could reach. Its *brain*. It couldn't be too deep inside that huge head. Either his sword or staff should be able to reach it if he could get in a position to try to stab it in the head. Tarrin drew on his knowledge of Sapphire's anatomy as he watched the dragon's mighty head swivel around the rock spire and lock its eyes on him. Its skull would be too thick on top or in the back. Trying to go through the eye was out, it was too great a distance from the eye through the eye socket to the skull, and it could easily shake him off before he could get a weapon in that far. But if he tried attacking it *upward*, from inside the mouth...

That was absolutely insane. But sometimes, crazy works.

All he had to do was trick the dragon into trying to swallow him, and somehow avoid getting torn apart by those deadly teeth after he ended up in its mouth. Then he could recall his staff from the *elsewhere* and make his move. It had a greater reach, and since it was wood, Tarrin could charge it with his Druidic power and make it grow, becoming a living spear that would eventually get to its brain. But he had to do it in the thin bone between its palate and its brain, bone the staff's blunt end could penetrate with a good strong thrust. Then grow the staff out, like slowly impaling a victim on a stake, until the staff hit brain and put the dragon down.

That may work. It was the only thing he could think of, a desperate plan for a desperate situation.

And desperate times called for desperate actions.

Reaching within once more, through the Cat, Tarrin came into touch with his Druidic power, joined in communion with the All. He showed it his image and let it read his intent, and it responded.

The dragon began to slow down, more and more as it waddled along the rock towards him on all fours, until its tail seemed to drift behind it lazily, and every step became a slow ballet of ponderous movement.

He'd used this spell before. He knew what kind of a toll it was going to take on him, and he knew he could only hold it for a few moments at the very most. He raced towards the dragon with a speed that, to it, would be

absolutely unbelievable, a blur of black on the dark stone that moved like living lightning. That would be its perception. To Tarrin, it moved with an almost ridiculous slowness. Bubbles of lava popped languidly, throwing blobs of lava through the air that were almost pretty as they drifted along in the air, slowly changing their shape, and all sound had taken on a deep, basslike quality, a rumbling slowness that his ears had trouble comprehending.

Tarrin blazed right by the dragon, evading a smashing forepaw with such ridiculous ease that he could have gone down on all fours and crawled out of its path. He raced behind it and picked up his sword, then turned and darted right back at it, as he saw its comprehending expression slowly bloom on its face. It was a Druid, so it probably understood the nature of the spell, and it also probably knew that all it had to do was stall him until the demands of the spell forced him to release it. It tried to back away from him, but now Tarrin had the advantage, slashing at its ankle on its back right leg as it put its weight down on it, trying to sever tendons. The sword caused an eruption of blood that boiled lazily out from between scarlet scales, not spraying out fast enough to touch him as he whizzed by. He turned and bore down on the other back leg, in the air and moving back towards the inner lava pool. The dragon was going to try to get into the pool, where Tarrin's sudden speed and agility would do him no good.

But then the foot changed direction and came down *towards* him, and he had to swerve to avoid getting trampled. It outguessed him! He did manage to stab his blade into the top of its huge foot after he jumped out of the way, feeling his heart pound harder and harder in his chest and his ribs ache from the incredible strain the spell was putting on his body. He glanced up and saw the wings unfurl, realizing it was going to kick up another storm of ash and dust to blind him, further reducing his current advantage. Tarrin took the sword in both paws and released the spell of acceleration, and before the strain of it could hit him, he called forth Sorcery once more and again wove the spell of Teleportation.

Much to the dragon's eternal shock and dismay, Tarrin suddenly *appeared* about ten spans in the air over its head. He landed on its snout, a snout wide enough for him to stand upon easily, and then drove the sword in his paws down into the scales beneath his feet, plunging more than half his blade down into the dragon's nose. The sword caught in bone or

cartilage or something hard in there and became wedged. The dragon roared in sudden pain and whipped its head from side to side as it turned in place, swinging them over the inner lava pool, but Tarrin refused to let go, getting snapped back and forth as his body began to feel the effects of the speeding spell, as his muscles burned and throbbed and his heart raced like a rabbit in his chest, but he gritted his teeth and kept his grip, despite the wild, punishing ride. Those two huge eyes looked down at him in sudden baleful hatred, chilling his blood, and he sensed the oncoming paw well before it reached him. It would be the dragon's automatic reflex to something stinging it on the snout. Swat it.

Tarrin let go as the dragon ducked its head to get it within reach of its forepaws, and couldn't help but feel a grim satisfaction when the dragon slapped at its own snout, driving the sword even deeper into its own nose. He plummeted nearly eighty spans from the dragon's snout to the pool of lava beneath and had the breath knocked out of him as he splashed into it. This lava was much hotter than the lava on the outside, and was much more fluid, lacking the rubbery consistency of the cooler lava. It was thicker than water, but he found that he could almost swim in it. He was about twenty spans from the nearest rock, but that would be too far in any case. The weariness of the spell he had used left him weak and disoriented, but he couldn't stay in one place too long. He reached within, through the Cat, and it became very hard to him now. He was getting tired, losing his edge, but he couldnot stop. He barely managed to gain communion with the All, and he again called forth the power of the Weave from within it. Weaving the spell of Teleportation once more, he moved himself to the far side of the rock spire once more, as far as he could get from the dragon and still be on the ring of rock.

He left his sword behind on purpose. He wanted the dragon to think that now, he was unarmed. And he doubted he'd have the strength to Summon it out of the dragon's snout in any case. He was breathing so heavily that his breath rattled in his throat. His heart hammered in his chest, and his muscles all felt like they were made of water. All he could do was bend over and pant like a winded runner, feeling the blood rush though his veins, feel and see it pound behind his eyes, feel the pulse in his neck and wrists, even in his legs. He hadn't exerted himself like this since he was in the Desert of Swirling Sands!

"Oh, you are a clever one!" the dragon called, sounding *amused*. "I never dreamed a biped would give me this much trouble. But I can hear your heart, Were-kin. You don't have much left, do you?"

Maybe he didn't, but he only had to have enough left for one more spell. If only he could get into a position to use it.

Rising up, not showing his weariness, Tarrin first started walking, then jogging, then he was running around the ring, his ears back, his eyes glowing green, and showing this titanic adversary that he would not go down without a fight.

Far away from the great battle that was taking place in Sha'Kari, far from the small island, far from everything, there was a tiny village settled in the mountains of Nyr, along the Spine of Gold. It was a very rural place, where the common Nyrians cultivated their golden fields, taking advantage of the rain that the mountains above them wrung from the sky as the wind blew the clouds over them. Nestled on a small plateau along the windward side of the low mountains, it was a place of peace and happiness called Shora Myrr, which meant Child's Gold in the Nyrian language.

It was a place where nothing exciting ever happened. The four hundred villagers scattered across the plateau spent their days working in the fields, and then they would come home and enjoy the rewards of their labor. It was a dull place, if not a happy one, but most of the villagers much preferred dull over exciting. There were no raiders that far out, no Goblinoids in the mountains, only an occasional rock lion or bear intruding on the humans' chosen range. A place of peace and security, a good place to raise children.

But today was a day of excitement for Parl and Kiki Shon, a young couple only a year on their new holding, a small farm on the very edges of the community. They were newlyweds, only a year together, and today Parl paced nervously along the wide porch on the side of his cottage, a place that remained dry during the daily rains that were common during the summer. The rain came down this day, as it did every afternoon around that time, pattering the wooden slats of the roof and dripping to the grassy lawn, where ducks and geese waddled up from a small artificial pond dug for them in the barnyard.

His wife was pregnant, and right now she was in labor, trying to give birth.

He had been waiting for hours and hours, as he heard his wife groan and shout within with the village matrons. She had been in labor too long! He was growing worried that there were complications. Childbirth was never an easy thing, and sometimes it could be threatening to the life of the mother. His excitement and happiness at the impending birth had become dark worry and despair, for he feared that something was terribly wrong, and he would lose both his wife and his new baby. It had been too long!

And then someone touched him on the shoulder. He whirled around in surprise, and found himself staring at the strangest woman he had ever seen in his life. She had *white* skin. He had never seen that before! The merchants that visited said that the people on Arathorn and Draconia had pale skin, like parchment, but he never believed them. But here she was! She was tall and statuesque, this woman, much taller than a Nyrian. Her hair was wild, a clash of seven different colors that were arrayed in stripes on her head, and her eyes actually *glowed* with an amber radiance that hid the pupils and irises. She was beautiful, this woman, something out of a man's wildest fantasy, a kind of beauty that any race, any culture, any society would appreciate. She wore a shimmering gown that sparkled as she moved, clung to her curves in a very appealing manner. And she was smiling at him, a most wondrously gentle and reassuring smile that it caused him to immediately relax, despite the fact that never before in his life had he met someone quite like her.

"Easy, my friend," she said in perfect Nyrian. "All goes well with your wife and daughter."

"D-Daughter?" he stammered. "How do you know? Who are you?"

"See? Here she comes now," she said distantly, raising her head to the sky and closing her eyes. "She's about to open her eyes," she said in a dreamy tone. "That's the moment, you know. When they take their first look at the world and discover their place in it. That is...the moment."

"Parl! She's come through!" Matron Vila called from inside the cottage. "It's a *girl*!" she said with a relieved laugh.

From inside the hut, there came a slight smack, and the sound of a baby crying.

"Open your eyes, my darling," the woman said in a strange voice, a voice that almost seemed to be more than one coming from a single mouth. "Open your eyes. Take your place, my daughter. *Complete me!*"

Within the hut, the wet, birth-stained infant, dark of skin but with red hair, the most unusual thing that the mother and matrons had ever seen, slowly opened her eyes. They were *blue*, and within them was a comprehension, an awareness of things that seemed absolutely unnatural. They focused on the first thing they saw, their sweaty, crying mother who looked up at her in absolute joy, and then they simply *understood*.

Parl stared at the woman, and then to his absolute shock, she simply *vanished into thin air*.

What a strange and exciting day!

She was the seventh *sui'kun*, and her birth restored the last of the seven major Conduits, restored the final missing section of the Weave. The Weave was again complete, and the Goddess burst forth from the Heart as her power was completely restored.

To again be *free*.

Within the domed volcanic chamber, Tarrin felt the Weave around him suddenly began to *writhe*, as if someone has set fire to a cobweb. It was a Weavequake! The violence of the Weavequake struck him as hard as the dragon's blow ever could have, causing him to crash to the ground as his insides squirmed and wriggled like the weave, sending a shockwave of debilitating pain through him. The Weave had reached out and touched him in its throes, and Tarrin had been too weak and exhausted to prevent it! So intimately connected to the Weave, its turmoil was his turmoil, and the strain of the strands translated into a pain that shot through him unprotested. His claws scrabbling on the stone, all he could do was lay there and gasp for breath and find some way to marvel at the sheer *power* of it, the unmitigated violence of what was happening within the Weave. Was it

another Breaking? Had Spyder or one of the other *sui'kun* somehow been killed?

He could feel the enormity of it. Whatever it was, it was happening *everywhere*. Not just within their isolated section.

The pain, it was incredible! Tarrin rose up on his knees and put his paws to his head as Magelight exploded from him, screaming out as it felt like his insides were being turned inside out, and pain blasted behind his eyes with every beat of his heart.

The dragon too could sense the magnitude of the event. It looked around in confusion and fear, and then it suddenly gave out a great cry, dancing aside as a massive boulder dislodged from the ceiling and nearly struck it on the back. But its eyes were locked on Tarrin, and after it evaded that rain of rock, it advanced on the incapacitated Were-cat with designs to finish the battle.

Tarrin struggled to find rational thought, and when he did, he sought to cut himself off from the Weave. It was because he was connected to it, that was what was causing the pain! He had to get away from it! Hissing with intense concentration, fighting through the massive onslaught that threatened to drown him into unconsciousness, Tarrin turned the power within him against itself, sought to use it to sever his ties that was making him share the Weave's turmoil, which caused the incredible pain. But it was too much. He was too tired, too weary, in too much pain to bring enough will to bear to fight against the avalanche. Defeated, Tarrin slumped to the ground, slave to the racking pains the Weave tore through him. He could feel the shuddering of the rock beneath him, knew that the dragon was within striking distance, but he could do nothing.

The Weave itself had betrayed him at the worst possible moment, and now he was going to die.

And then there was...peace. The pain eased. The throbbing behind his eyes stopped, even as he knew that it still continued in the Weave. An old power, long forgotten, washed over him, isolated him, protected him, a gentle power that had laid submerged in the depths of his soul, a power that cradled him as a child in its mother's arms. A power placed inside him by

the gentle lips of a Goddess, a long time ago. It rose up and defended him from the power of the Weave, protecting him in his most dire hour of need.

He became aware at the last possible instant. His writhing stopped and he scrambled forward even as the dragon's forepaw shattered the rock where he had been laying, leaving a rubble-filled crater in its wake. Panting from the aftereffects of the pain and his own weariness, he managed to get to his feet and ran right under the dragon, between its hind legs.

The Weavequake reached even to the Sha'Kar. They screamed in fright as the *da'shar* among them distanced themselves from the Weave as quickly as they could. They had never sensed its like before, not even during the breaking.

It reached through all of Sha'Kari. The spells causing the wind were torn asunder by the Weavequake, their ancient weavings undone. The void in the Weave that separated that within from that without suddenly bloomed with new strands, as the Weave mended the lingering areas of damage that still existed since the day of the Breaking. The strands grew out from the newest Conduit, which thrust itself directly into the heart of the void, main strands and feeder strands stretching out from that core of power like cracks creeping through a piece of broken glass.

When the new strands reached the massive construction of the black dome of the Ward, they plunged into it to rejoin the strands on the other side. The weaving of the Ward reacted violently to the intrusion, and the Ward's delicate weaving was pierced in too many places at once for its monumentally complicated patterns to hold themselves.

The black dome that was the Ward shimmered, the sheer featureless black boiling like great clouds within, and then, in a surprisingly fast motion, a blazing glow appeared low on its south side and quickly stretched for longspans in a diagonal line up its side. A hole in the Ward. The hole tore the weaving of the Ward like a man pulling on torn cloth, ripping it asunder. The entire Ward wavered at that fatal blow, and then all the *millions* of individual flows that made up its staggering construction suddenly lost their connection to one another as the core of the Ward's construction was compromised, the source of its power cut off.

With no sound, no flash, no sign at all to those who could see it, the black dome that had enclosed the island of Sha'Kari simply *vanished*, evaporating like smoke before the wind, and then it was gone.

The Ward came down.

Dar was in awe of what was happening. It had to be another Breaking! It had to be! What else could cause something like this...unless it was *Tarrin*! But he couldn't do this, Dar could feel it. It wasn't just here. He could tell that whatever it was, it was massive in scale, affecting the entire Weave. What had happened? What could have caused such a violent Weavequake, if it wasn't another Breaking?

He clutched at the chair in which he was sitting in Tarrin's borrowed room as Iselde, Allyn, and Auli held onto one another, fully aware of what was going on. Iselde was whimpering with terror, and Auli was looking up at the ceiling like it was about to collapse on them at any moment. But there was no shaking of the earth, no violence being done in a physical sense. The strands were shaking and shifting with more violent action than he ever dreamed possible, but they could not affect the physical world. The land went on as it always had, and those who had not magical aptitude would not feel what was happening.

It wasn't limited to Sorcerers. Kimmie held Sapphire very close to her as she looked around with wild eyes, fully sensing what was going on. The drake was hissing and squealing, as if in pain, and there was a desperation about her that Dar noticed even in his moment of terror.

Even Zarina and Liza seemed to sense what was happening, clutching one another and bowing their heads, keeping their eyes tightly shut.

The Weavequake began to ease. Dar could feel the strands slowly begin to settle down, but he was awed at how they had changed. If it was possible, they were even stronger now than they had been before. Some of them had broken, but those left behind were even more richly charged with magical energy. The Weave seemed to be almost *alive*, thriving with magical power, almost visible to him with their newfound vigor.

Dar stared at them in awe. Now he understood. It wasn't a Breaking, it was the birth of the final *sui'kun*!

The Weave was again whole!

"O-Outside!" Sapphire gasped, keeping her eyes tightly closed.
"Kimmie, take me outside! Quickly!"

Sapphire? What's the matter?" she asked, putting her paw over the drake's shoulder.

"Take me outside! Hurry! There is no time!"

Kimmie didn't argue. She jumped up and, clutching the drake tightly to her, she ran to the door and raced out. Dar rose and raced after them, but he was no match for the Were-cat's speed. He knew where they were going, however, so he wasted no time getting to the entrance hall and saw that the door had been left open. He reached the door and looked down the steps to see Kimmie kneeling on the lawn, putting Sapphire down on the grass, and the hurried down the stairs to find out what was wrong.

"Back up!" Sapphire told Kimmie. "Kimmie, move away from me! Do it quickly!"

"Sapphire, what's the matter? Can I help?"

"No! Just move away! I can't control it much longer!"

Fearful, Kimmie backed away, as she was told. Her paws to her chin in concern, she watched as Sapphire writhed on the grass, her scales shining with the morning dew. Wings beating, she put her four legs under her, and then raised her head to the sky and screeched, as if in pain.

Her entire form suddenly radiated intense white light, a powerful magical brilliance that concealed her beneath it for a long moment. Then it exploded away from her forcefully, flowing over Kimmie, who shielded herself from it like it was some kind of physical attack. Dar rushed to her side as the drake began to back up, swinging her head from side to side.

And she began to get *bigger*.

Dar could see it, watching in awe as she grew from her small size to the size of a small dog. Then a large dog. Then the size of a small elk. Then she was the size of a lion, and still she was growing! Her growth became faster and faster as she grew, her claws tearing the earth as the elongation of her body skidded her paws across the grass. Kimmie grabbed him as they

backpedalled furiously to get out from under her as she grew so large that they could have walked under her without their heads touching her belly, and still she grew! He had to look up higher and higher to look at her head, a head that grew as big as a horse, then as big as a wagon, then the size of a small cottage! Wings unfurled as the creature gave out an ear-splitting shriek, a voice so incredibly powerful! Wings that cast shadows over the entire front of the manor house!

And then, it was over. The blue-scaled creature stared down at them with powerful amber eyes. It was the same Sapphire, with the same body and the same appearance, but before, where she could sit on Tarrin's shoulder, now she had to be *five hundred spans long*! She was the size of the manor house itself! Her head was a fifty spans over their head she craned her neck, then bent it down to look at the two tiny creatures.

She was gigantic! She was immense! He had never seen anything as big as she was in his entire life.

"By the river's draw!" Kimmie gasped. "She's a *dragon*!"

She was majestic! She was magnificent!

Dar looked at her in terror.

She was *angry*!

"Tarrin!" she screamed, a voice that shook dust from the walls of the manor, turning her head towards the volcano. "No! *He will not harm you!*"

Those unbelievably large wings, bigger than sails, almost as big as a caravel, they unfurled and beat down with such force that it sent a powerful blast of wind over the Were-cat and the human, making Kimmie grab hold of Dar to keep him from being blown off his feet.

The wind was like a hurricane, pulling at them, threatening to even knock Kimmie over. A shadow passed over them, and the wind began to calm. They looked up and saw in utter amazement that that massive animal was airborne, flying towards the volcano like an arrow fired from a bow.

"A--A--A *dragon*!" Dar stuttered in shock, clutching Kimmie so hard his knuckles turned white. "Oh, Goddess! *Chopstick and Turnkey*!" he gasped. "They're still in the house! They'll destroy it!"

"They won't," Kimmie said with tears in her eyes. "Don't you understand, Dar? Don't you see? Sapphire said she was different from the drakes, but she didn't know how, or why. *This* is why! Sapphire is a *dragon*, Dar, and she didn't even know it! She's been hiding as a drake all this time!"

"She's going after Tarrin!" Dar gasped.

Kimmie laughed happily. "Whatever Tarrin may be fighting in that volcano, I think it's about to get its butt kicked!" she said in glee. "What in this world can possibly fight a *dragon*?"

With a savage snarl and a growling cry, Tarrin just barely managed to avoid getting his body ripped in half by the slashing rake of claws as long as his legs.

He was virtually underneath the dragon, and it had reared up to put its vital areas out of his reach, and was now trying to kill him like a cat playing with a capture mouse. But it was no game of fun for the dragon, which growled and hissed and got more and more frustrated as the agile Were-cat proved to be a wily adversary. No matter how hard it tried, no matter how fast it moved, it just couldn't pin its diminutive foe down in one place long enough to kill it. He was like the most annoying fly in the world, buzzing in the dragon's face but just too fast for it to swat him. It kept him trapped, blocking him off every time he tried to get behind it, back away from it, keeping him jumping in a direction that kept him squarely out in the open.

He was running out of options here. He was too tired to try to use magic, and the dragon had him right out in the open, where he had no protection, no defenses. He scrambled aside from another claw slash, then dove forward to avoid another. He rolled over and jumped up using all four limbs as that tail came flying at him once again. Landing on all fours, he scuttled forward to avoid another forepaw, and then leaped clear over the other as it raked at him.

The dragon wasn't trying to crush him now, it was trying to *catch* him! That's why it had its paws open like that, trying to scoop him up. He scrambled backwards, trying to get out of reach of those forty span long forelegs, give himself more room to maneuver. He jumped clean over its swiping forepaw again, giving himself the opportunity to back up further

and further, to where he could turn and run, hoping he could get outside its reach before it leaned forward and got itself back in range.

The dragon slammed its tail against the rock near him just as Tarrin landed, and the shock shifted the abused, tortured stone. Tarrin stumbled when he hit the ground as the rock slipped out from under him. He caught himself with one arm before he completely fell over, his feet scrabbling on loose rock to try to find purchase. His claws struck a solid foundation and he pushed off, diving forward--

--right into the palm of the dragon's forepaw.

Tarrin impacted those tight diamond scales and rebounded off of them, but the fingers closed over him tightly before he went far. His arms pinned to his body and breaking his tail, he struggled against that powerful hold on him, trying to wriggle free. Trying just to *breathe*. The grip was incredible, but he realized with a wheeze that it could have been *much* stronger. It could have crushed him like a bug, but it did not.

It lifted him up, fifty spans off the ground, sixty, eighty, a *hundred*, and he found himself staring right at the dragon's face. Maybe...maybe this wasn't a bad thing. If it tried to eat him, he could try to kill it, if he could survive those vicious teeth. But he could not look at that massive face and not feel raw terror flow through him like water under a bridge. It was like staring into the eyes of Death Himself.

"You have been an aggravation," he said in a hissing tone, his voice vibrating Tarrin's teeth with its deep bass power. "But, I haven't had that much fun in centuries," it added in an amused manner. "Were it not for my duty, I would let you go. But alas, that is impossible. But in recognition for your worthiness, I will end you quickly and without pain. Brave souls like you deserve to die with honor. Any last words?" it asked conversationally.

Tarrin wheezed in his breath as the dragon relaxed its grip on him just enough to breathe. It was going to let him talk!

"Yes, I have something to say," he said in a pant, staring up at the dragon's eyes. "*Audo mosenthi gratta montho--*" the dragon suddenly looked at him wildly, and Tarrin felt the tendons in its forepaw bunch to crush him before he could finish-- "*compendus sensi ingratis!*"

He finished with a ragged shout, pouring his whole being into the words. Tarrin felt something *inside*, something appear from something else, move through him, and then leave him, taking some of his own energy with it, energy that left him utterly drained and weak as a kitten. There was no other action, no other indication that anything had happened.

Then the dragon's grip loosened, and it began to sway like a reed in the wind.

It had *worked*! He couldn't believe it! He had cast a Wizard spell!

The dragon weaved back and forth as if drunk, completely letting go of him as it put both forelegs down to steady itself, shaking its head violently from side to side. Tarrin plummeted the hundred spans to the floor and tried wildly to twist, to orient himself to the ground. He did so, but it was so far to fall! He struck the stone like a musket ball, breaking both of his legs and one of his arms from the tremendous impact of the landing. The sudden icy numbness in his limbs told him that it was an injury caused by an unworked weapon of nature, and that meant that he would not regenerate this time. He lay there in teeth-biting agony, suddenly feeling very cold. There were going to be no more tricks now. He had broken both his legs, and he could no longer move. Unless the Goddess sent him a miracle, this fight was over.

The dragon staggered backwards, and then it seemed to right itself and glared at him. Then it *laughed*! "You are full of surprises!" it said. "You learned that spell by listening to *me*! What talent! What an amazing talent! I am so impressed with you, my worthy foe! If only there was some way to spare you!" Then its face hardened, and it started towards him, its footsteps shuddering the rock beneath him. "But I have my duty, I'm afraid. I can see your legs are broken, so there will be no more running, and I'll not get close enough to let you pull another clever trick on me. But I promised you a quick, clean death, and I am a dragon of my word. Hold still, and it will be over before you know what happened." It was right over him now, looming over him, staring down at him with serious eyes and a resolute expression.

But he would not hold still. Rising up, raising his one good arm, Tarrin decided that if was going to die, it was going to be on *his* terms. He reached within, through the Cat, trying to find his connection to the All. It was going to kill him, but he'd make sure the dragon wasn't going to be there to hinder whoever came looking for him.

Before he could make his connection to the All, the dome of the chamber shuddered in a strange manner. The rock under him shivered. Then it shuddered again. Dust and stones fell from the domed ceiling, pattering down on the both of them.

Then the whole roof *exploded*!

A cascading avalanche of stone and dust blew out from the roof of the chamber and tumbled down. As if by wild luck, the dragon hunkered down to protect itself from the rain of stones, and it leaned down directly over Tarrin as the terrified Were-cat saw the roof collapsing on top of him. He hunkered down himself and put his good arm over his head, then realized that the rocks that would have hit him were bouncing off the dragon's back. Whether it knew what it was doing or not, it had saved him from being crushed! There was the deafening din of falling stone and choking dust obscuring everything, and still more rock fell from the domed roof, a roof that now had sunlight spilling into it.

The dome had collapsed!

The dragon moved, and it moved enough to let Tarrin see the roof above him. What he saw made him gape in absolute awe.

It was *another dragon*! A blue one, and its massive claws were tearing the stone roof apart! It had torn a huge hole in the ceiling, and another great chunk of roof fell away and plunged into the lava below. It was tearing the stone apart like it was nothing more than paper! What *power*!

With a shriek, it tore enough of the roof open for it to squirm inside, and it began to do so. The dragon over him stared up at this interloper with as much surprise as Tarrin did, clearly not expecting an uninvited guest. It dropped down to the ring of stone, making the entire volcano shudder with its landing. It was fully as big as the red one, but was sleeker and had a narrower snout. It stood facing the scarlet-scaled dragon with flat eyes and a clearly hostile demeanor, squaring off against it, hissing at the red dragon as sparks of lightning danced around its wicked teeth.

Lightning? Tarrin looked very carefully at this blue dragon, and he saw the sameness of the features.

It was *Sapphire*!

What had they done to her!? Did the Sha'Kar use magic to make her grow? Had they sent her to help him?

"Get away from him!" Sapphire hissed at the red dragon with fury in her face, her amber eyes boring into the dragon that loomed over Tarrin. "He is *mine*!"

"S--Sister!" it said in Sha'Kar. "Is it time? Has it happened?"

"It has," Sapphire told him with narrow eyes. "Now get away from him! He is clan to me!"

"Let me explain," the dragon said quickly, raising its forepaws in a mollifying gesture towards her.

"*Wrong answer*," Sapphire hissed savagely, and she sucked in her breath.

Tarrin seemed to understand what was coming. So did the red dragon. Tarrin flattened himself to the ground, looking at her feet--

--they were being *burned*. Sapphire wasn't immune to the heat! She was going to die if she stayed in here very long!

"Sapphire, no!" Tarrin called quickly, desperately, trying to stand up. No more would die. No more! Despite intense pain, he managed to get up on his broken legs, trembling and wobbling dangerously. He raised his arm, the other drooping uselessly at his side. If she got into a fight with the red one, he'd drag her into the lava, and it would fry her! "Sapphire! No! Listen to me!"

But it was too late. With a thunderclap, a raking cascade of intertwined bolts of lightning issued forth from Sapphire's mouth, raking across the gulf between her and the red. But the lightning didn't touch him, bouncing away from him harmlessly to discharge into the rock and the lava. He felt it tingling under his feet.

With a shrieking bellow and an unfurling of her wings, Sapphire launched herself at the red dragon, going *right over him*. The sound of their impact was deafening, shaking the very cauldrea as the red was driven back by the blue's furious charge, her claws and teeth tearing gaps in his scarlet scaled armor. It was a clash of titans, as they bellowed and struggled against one another, claws flashing red in the light of the lava, the ground beneath

him buckling and shuddering from the two behemoths as they struggled against one another. He stood transfixed by the awful sight, as two beasts from legend flailed at one another with their clawed forepaws, tearing away scales and drawing blood, pushing against one another, maws snapping and jockeying to sink those deadly teeth into the soft underportion of the neck of the other. Sapphire clamped her jaws on the upper portion of the red's neck and wrenched its head to the side as a searing blast of hellfire roared from its mouth in a great gout, pulling its head so that killing fire went harmlessly to the side of her. All he could see were the black singe marks on Sapphire's feet, from where the heat of the place was burning her. She had to get out before the heat killed her! Why wouldn't she *listen*? The red clamped its forepaws on Sapphire's shoulders and pulled her back with it as it gave ground, backing up towards the lava.

"No!" Tarrin screamed, feeling the red dragon's concentration finally waver, and the spell blocking him from the Weave dissipate. The red almost had her at the edge, and she didn't realize it! She was going to get killed, and it was his fault! Why wouldn't she leave? She had to leave! There wasn't going to be another Faalken! No, he wouldn't allow it! Nobody else was going to die! In utter panic, Tarrin opened himself completely to the Weave.

He sensed the change in the Weave immediately, and understood what had happened. It was *complete*! The Weave was pulsing with magical power now, almost overflowing with it. It was rich in power, so much so that it almost seemed as if the Goddess had poured her very soul into the strands! That power responded to him, washed over him, infused him as he let down every barrier, surrendered his very being up to the power so that it would answer his call.

"I--said--*NO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*!" he screamed as the brilliance of the Magelight around him outshone the light from the lava, the light from the sky above. Tarrin was at the center of the Sorcerer's Star, its power picking him up from the rock.

The power was *incredible*! It was like the Goddess herself in the strands, and it flowed over him, obeying his every command. It kept coming and coming, beyond every limit he had once had, beyond everything he dreamed possible, beyond his wildest imagination! It was like

having the Goddess doing *his* bidding! He hovered in the air, power flowing through him like blood, expanding his consciousness in ways he never imagined. He could feel the Goddess around him, holding him in her hands, shining her love down on him, and her love brought her power to him, more power than he had ever been able to handle before, power that obeyed his every command. Power that healed the broken legs and arm, rejuvenated his exhausted body and restored him as if he were whole and rested. He was one with the power, and its might was his to command. Not just what power he could hold. *All* of it. The entire might of the Weave would obey him in that moment, and there was nothing he could not do.

Now he understood the difference between *da'shar* and *sui'kun*. *Da'shar* had limits. But so long as the *sui'kun* was in the favor of the Goddess, was doing her will, he *did not*. It was not he holding that power, it was the Goddess, acting *through* him, granting the ability to exceed his maximum potential. So long as her will was done through him, he could draw enough power to do absolutely anything needed of him.

If this was what being a god was like, he could understand why Syllis wanted it so badly.

The two dragons paused in their battle to stare at him in shock, the red but one step from the boiling lava. "*STOP THIS NOW!*" Tarrin screamed at them in a voice that made the volcano shake. "Let go of her!" he commanded the red dragon with a furious snarl. "Your fight is with *me!*"

"Tarrin!" Sapphire gasped, looking at him with a stunned expression. "What are you doing? Run, run quickly! I will keep him from hurting you!"

The red one gaped at him with a blank stare. And then it *laughed*.

It released Sapphire, who just then seemed to understand where she was, backpedalling furiously and pulling her most burned foot off the stone wincingly. Tarrin wrapped Sapphire in an invisible weave of Fire and Divine, protecting her from the killing heat, and he blew out a sigh of relief. "Are you insane, Sapphire?" he demanded. "You could have died coming in here!"

"It would be worth it to save you," she said diffidently, putting her paw back down on the stone, now that it couldn't hurt her.

The red dragon laughed again, sitting down quite sedately. "If you would have given me the chance to *explain*, this would not have been necessary," he told her with a chuckle. "The Ward is broken. The Weave is restored. My term of service with the gods stated that my servitude would end when the Ward was no more. It is no more. Therefore, my duty has been fulfilled, and the rules to which I agreed to defend the Firestaff are no longer binding against me." He looked to Tarrin. "I can do whatever I wish now. I'm not forced to fight you now, and I will not. You risked your life to use your magic and defend her, and displayed admirable qualities to me during the battle. Intelligence, courage, tenacity, cunning, amazing resourcefulness, and an almost ferocious will to succeed. I find you a most noble creature, and I will not fight you now."

"You-You mean...I win?" Tarrin asked in disbelief.

"You win," he said with a smile.

Tarrin felt the power slip away from him. He alighted on the ground, absolutely stunned. All that fighting...and the dragon simply *gave up*. Because Tarrin had tried to save Sapphire's life.

Tarrin just couldn't help but laugh. Long and loud, laughing at the dark irony of it all.

"Now then, since I promise not to hurt you...will you *please* take this sword out of my muzzle?" the dragon asked in a plaintive tone. "It stings like all fury!"

Tarrin didn't quite know what to do. He was confused. Mightily confused. The dragon was suddenly a friend? After they tried to kill each other? It seemed almost...jovial. It certainly seemed sincere, and Sapphire wasn't going to attack it again, it seemed. Poor Sapphire. The spell they used on her must have been painful to make her grow that big.

"What did they do to you, Sapphire?" he asked. her. "They made you gigantic!"

"*They* did nothing of the sort," she snorted, looking down at him. "Dear friend, this is my true self."

He stared at her in surprise.

"When the Breaking came, the Weave could no longer sustain us," she told him. "So we regressed to the state of a drake, changing ourselves into something not quite so dependent on the magic. It made us forget who and what we were, and we actually *became* drakes, simple-minded and bound by instinct. But we survived. When the Weave was restored, the magic that sustains us was renewed, and it caused us to revert back to our true selves. I am not a drake, my friend. I am a dragon."

"You mean--you lived as a drake for a *thousand years*?" he asked in surprise.

"I don't really remember much of it, but yes, I did," she told him. "I'm sure others survived as well. They have all probably woken up by now, returned to their true shapes."

"The dragons are restored to the world," the red said with a very big smile. "That means that the Weave must be whole."

"Why didn't you regress?" Tarrin asked the red one in sudden insight.

"The magical power of this trapped section of the Weave was enough to sustain me," he said. "I laid in torpor until about twenty years ago, when the birth of a new *sui'kun* finally brought enough to the Weave to sustain me while awake. I would guess that birth was *you*," he said with a smile.

"Would you *please* remove your sword? It *hurts*!"

Tarrin Summoned the sword to him without much thought or effort, and sent it back into the *elsewhere*. The red dragon scrubbed at its snout with its forepaw and blew out a sigh, accompanied by a hiccup of flame. "Thank you ever so much," he said amiably. "It was starting to throb a bit." He looked up at the sky with a longing expression. "If you two will forgive me, five thousand years in one place can make a dragon a little stir crazy," he told them. "My service is done, but I don't think I'm leaving what I defended in bad hands. I surrender to you the Firestaff, my worthy friend. I'm confident you'll know what to do with it. Defend it well."

"Th-Thank you," he said in confusion.

"Defend him, sister," the red dragon said to Sapphire. "For him, this ordeal is not over. He will need you."

"He is clan. For us blues, clan is all. I will protect him," she said with a stately nod.

"That's why you blues are so respected," the red told her with a toothy grin. "Someday us reds are going to have to try cooperation. But it never seems to work out. Ah well. Farewell, and may the Eternal Dragon grant you prosperity and happiness."

The red dragon nodded to them, then jumped up and beat its wings. Wind blew over him as it pulled itself up to the hole. It wriggled itself through, and then the sound of its wings heralded its departure.

Tarrin stood there with only the sounds of the volcano echoing in his ears. That...was...*bizarre*. Just like that, it was over. Timing. Timing was everything. Had he been an hour earlier, they would still be fighting, as the red dragon would still be under the strictures of its agreement. An hour later, and he may not have had to fight it at all. It may have clawed its way out of the volcano and left the Firestaff behind, for anyone to come and claim.

And *that*, he realized, was why they had sent him. The Ward was gone, the dragon was gone. Had Tarrin and his friends not dealt with Syllis the day before, he would be up here *right now*, trying to take the Firestaff. There were no protections left--except the wind and that reef--to defend the Firestaff from the wrong hands. Little did anyone know that the wrong hands had been on the island for a thousand years. They had come *this close* to losing the Firestaff to the mad Syllis, who would have taken it, Teleported away, and made getting it back a serious challenge before that appointed day.

The act of protecting Sapphire caused the dragon to yield to him, to yield to him the Firestaff.

The Firestaff.

He looked up to where it was, fearful that the collapse of the roof had swept it away, but it was still there, still hovering just over the rock spire, still waiting for him. And it was now his. His promise to the Goddess was about to be fulfilled. He had persevered. He had survived the *ki'zadun* in the Tower. He had survived Jegojah and Triana on the journey to Dala Yar Arak. He had survived the desert and his own personal demons on the

journey back to Suld. He had survived the attempt by the *ki'zadun* to banish the Goddess in Suld. And he had survived to get to where he was now, to stand before the Firestaff and to know, to finally know, that he could reach out and claim it any time he wished.

He had *won*.

It was a heady feeling. It was almost over. Almost over! All he had to do now was hide the Firestaff, move it and protect it until the day of its awakening came and went harmlessly. Then he would be *free*!

Touching the Weave, exercising the endless power that the Goddess had imparted to him, Tarrin froze the lava in the center of the stone ring, making it solid. Then he caused the rock spire to lower, the Firestaff lowering with it, sinking the spire down into the lava beneath their feet and putting the Firestaff where he could finally claim it.

Sapphire sat on her haunches and watched silently as Tarrin walked up to the Firestaff, step by step by step. The red one said it wasn't over, and that reminded him of the poem. He would have to sacrifice to take the Firestaff. That's what the poem said. It very well may kill him. He came to a stop but arm's length from the priceless artifact, staring at it with careful eyes. It was made of stone, not wood. A reddish stone, the color of blood, that seemed to throb like the beating of a heart before his eyes, but that throb was the pulsing of the power of the Conduit that shimmered around it. It was about six spans long, and had that flicker of fire dancing about the top of the staff like a candle wavering in the breeze.

This was it. This was what he had come to claim.

He assented the Conduit, and felt no magic about other than the Conduit itself. If there was a magic spell on it, it was well hidden.

He paused, flexing his fingers. Sacrifice. Was he ready to sacrifice? Now that the end was in sight, the possibility that everything would turn out as he wished was within his grasp? It was right there. All he had to do was reach out and take it. But it would cost him. Everything he was, everything he is, and everything he would be. That sounded like death to him.

He was afraid. He had to admit it to himself. He didn't *want* to sacrifice everything now. Not when he was so happy! But he had a duty. He made a

promise. He vowed to the Goddess that he would find the Firestaff and protect it from all others.

How many times had the Goddess helped him? Protected him? Blessed him and forgave him? How many times did she cheer him up, did she make him feel better? He was a coward to be afraid now! So what if had to sacrifice? After everything the Goddess had done for him, he was going to back out on his promise to her *now*?

And what about his children? His mates, his parents, his sisters, his friends? If *he* didn't take the Firestaff, which of them would have to sacrifice everything in his place? Who would he send in here to die, because he was *too afraid*?

Several of them would do it. Dolanna would do it. Camara Tal would do it. Allia would do it without blinking. Azakar would do it. Because they understood that sometimes, in the course of doing right, one had to sacrifice.

No! No one else will die! There won't be another Faalken, even if I have to die to make sure of it!

And in his mind's eye, he saw his children and the uncertain world which would be theirs if he did not do what had to be done.

Gritting his teeth, his face a sudden mask of ultimate determination, Tarrin reached out and snatched the Firestaff out of the Conduit.

It was hot. He could feel it in his paw. He looked at it, watched the fire at its top suddenly flare like a torch, its fire and heat washing over him. It suddenly exploded into a bonfire of flame that enshrouded him, a magical fire that enveloped him, and to his horror, *infused* him.

That was the spell! That was the final defense!

He felt it descend into the core of him, a lance of white-hot fire, seeking out his soul. He could not hide from it. He could not defend against it. It found his soul and looked within it, he could feel it searching, searching, searching. Searching for something.

All that defines you. All that you were. All you will be.

All that defines you. All that defines you. ALL THAT DEFINES YOU.

It found what it was looking for. The lance of fire plunged into his soul, and it felt as if fire had consumed his body. Fire he could feel, heat that burned into him, incinerated his flesh, blackened his bones. A great agonized scream was torn from his lips as the power of the final defense lashed out against him, scouring into and through his body, a magical fire of purity that burned away all that defined him. It burned through his bones, seared his muscles, set his blood boiling, blackened his skin. It felt as if he were being Consumed all over again, as the magical fire infused the totality of his body, causing him to burn with white-hot flames, flames that roared around him, roared through him, roared into his mind, burned him, burned his brain, burned his memory, burning away--burning away--

NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

The fire ceased as quickly as it had appeared.

Sapphire, the blue dragon, blinked from the sudden darkness, her head literally right over him from where she had rushed towards him in near panic. Spots danced in her draconic eyes as she blinked them, trying to fathom what had just happened.

Tarrin, her beloved friend, had taken the Firestaff. He seemed strangely reluctant to do so, standing there for a long moment and just staring at it. That confused her slightly, but she did not interfere. Then, when he did finally take it, it surrounded him with that bright fire. That didn't concern her at first, for fire couldn't harm him, but then he screamed in pain! She had rushed over to see what was wrong, to try to wrest the artifact from him, but the light was so strong! And then he cried out *no* in a voice of such tremendous loss that it nearly broke her heart. Such great pain tied up in that forlorn wail!

She blinked, found that her vision was clearing, and looked down. He was unconscious, all his clothes burned off, laying there with the magical staff in his limp hand, laying on his back. But he was...*different*. He had no fur, no tail. The ears were gone, the hands and feet were different. He was much shorter. She gasped.

He looked *human*.

She was confused. She didn't know he could do *that*!

Being careful with him, Sapphire collected up her friend and his prize in her mighty forepaw, then jumped up towards the hole. Strange that he would shapeshift like that. She didn't know he could. In any event, he needed someone to care for him, and his mate Kimmie would know what to do. She wriggled out of the hole she had made quickly, losing a few scales in the process. She would take him to her. Kimmie would know what to do.

Across the cauldery, standing on the ledge from which he had arrived, a solitary figure stood. She was a tall woman, delicately beautiful, with amazing rainbow-striped hair, glowing amber eyes, and a dress that looked to be spun of silk made from stars. She had her hands to her chin, a look of profound sadness about her, and tears were sliding down her cheeks.

"Oh, my sweet kitten," she said in an anguished tone. "I'm so sorry! I wish it could have been different for you. Please forgive me!"

Wiping the tears from her face, the mysterious woman simply vanished, as if she had never been.

Chapter 20

It was over, but there were too many mysteries to unravel.

Sapphire had come back not long after she left, carrying an unconscious, *human* Tarrin. And in Sapphire's massive paw with him had been the Firestaff.

She had handed him over to Kimmie, who immediately carried him into the manor and put him in bed. He was ashen, cold to the touch...and he was in his human form. How had that happened? When did he shapeshift into his human form, and for what purpose? Had he had to do it to get the Firestaff for some reason?

It was a puzzle beyond puzzles, and Kimmie and Dar sat there and mulled over it for quite a while. It was so much a puzzle that neither of them paid much attention at all to the stone-like, red artifact that had been brought back with him, that looked rather unremarkable. After all, it looked just like a red stone rod, a petrified staff. It meant very little to Kimmie, not compared to her precious, beloved Tarrin.

What had happened in that volcano? Why was Tarrin in his human form? She had never seen him in his human form before, and struck her as...odd. He looked too young, barely more than a teen. His scent in human form betrayed no trace of his nature, but that wasn't too unusual. In cat form, all Were-cats' scents became much more cat-like. In human form, since they had no trace of the Cat about their physical form, it radically altered their scents. The basic element of his scent was there, it was just lacking the extra texture she could identify when he was in his normal form. What had happened in that volcano? Sapphire had flown off, and then returned very quickly, carrying him. Had it been over when she arrived? Did she find him like that? She'd been so concerned about her mate that she ran off without asking any questions. She needed some answers, but Sapphire was way too large now to fit into the house. She'd have to go out to see her, but she wasn't about to leave her mate's side until he woke up, or

Dolanna arrived. Dolanna knew how to care for Were-cats. She had been tending Tarrin since he'd been turned.

The absolute last person she ever expected to be there arrived not long after Kimmie put Tarrin to bed and began to try to unravel this perplexing mystery. The door blew open, and an infuriated Triana burst into the room. *How* did she get here? They were thousands of leagues from Suld! She had traversed two entire oceans!

"Where is he!" she shouted hotly, slamming the door behind her. "Where?" Her eyes locked on Kimmie. "Kimmie, where is my son?"

She seemed....agitated. Almost *afraid*. "He's here, Triana," she replied quickly, standing up. "They only just brought him back. He, he did it, Triana. He got the Firestaff!"

"Who gives a *damn* about that!" she snapped at her as she literally ran to the bed. She leaned over the pale Tarrin, who looked discomforted in his unconsciousness, stroked his cheek with infinite tenderness.

Her paws were trembling.

"I, I didn't believe it," she said in awe, touching his face with both paws, searching his features. "I can't believe it!" she gasped, pulling the covers down and putting her paws on his bare chest. "It's impossible!"

"What's impossible, Triana?" Kimmie demanded as Dar quickly joined them, silent and respectful in the powerful Were-cat matriarch's presence.

"It's *gone*!" she declared in fear. Fear, from Triana! That in itself was a miracle! "There's nothing of it left! It's like it had never been!"

"What, Triana? What's gone?" Kimmie demanded anxiously. She did *not* like the tone of Triana's voice.

"Kimmie, Tarrin is *human*!" she gasped, looking down at her with wild eyes. "His Were nature is *gone*. He's even younger, as if the clock was turned back to before he was bitten!"

Kimmie stared at Triana for a very long, very quiet moment. Dar gaped at Triana in shock. "He's not a Were-cat anymore?" she asked woodenly.

"Kimmie, it's just *gone*. Like it was ripped out of him!" Triana said in a tightly controlled voice. "Has he woke up? Did he speak at all?" she asked

quickly, nervously.

Tarrin, not a Were-cat? She couldn't believe it! It wasn't possible! Nothing could take the Were nature away, not without killing the Were-kin! Her head spun and her vision swam. Her one love, not a Were-cat! What was going to happen to him? Was he going to survive whatever had done the impossible to him? She felt a little dizzy, and had to sit down on the bed to keep from passing out. Dar was there then, holding her paw and patting the back of it, trying to keep her from swooning.

"I felt his bond *shatter*," she said in a nervous voice, splitting her time between checking Kimmie and putting her paws on Tarrin. "I thought he was killed! I got over here as fast as I could, but now I see why it did that. He lost his bond because that part of him was stolen from him!"

"Stolen? Mistress Triana, what could possibly do this to him?" Dar asked her in a worried tone.

"*Nothing* could do this, boy," she said grimly. "It's supposedly impossible. We need to find out what happened. Who was there? Where are the others? Where is Camara?"

"I don't know," Kimmie said with a fret. "They left before sunrise. Sapphire brought Tarrin back alone."

"That bloody big dragon?" Triana asked. "I nearly wet myself when I saw that thing laying on the lawn. I didn't think there were any left!"

"That was Tarrin's pet drake," Kimmie told her. "She was actually a dragon, all this time!"

"Then we have some questions she needs to answer," Triana said bluntly. "You, Dar. Sit here and tend him. If he's not at least as well as he is now when I get back, I'm going to grind you up and feed you to him. Do you understand me?"

"Absolutely, Mistress Triana," Dar said in a sturdy voice, looking up at her with steady eyes. "He's my friend too. I'll watch him like he was my own brother."

"Come on, Kimmie," Triana ordered. "You know her. Let's go ask her what the hell is going on around here!"

Kimmie found herself being literally pulled along by the Were-cat matriarch, her mind spinning so badly she had trouble making her legs work. Tarrin, not a Were-cat anymore! It was inconceivable! Triana acting so uncharacteristic for her, but she loved Tarrin like her own son. What had happened to him was absolutely ghastly, as far as Were-cats were concerned. It was worse than death! Something had stripped away his very identity, taken away everything that he was!

Sapphire still lay calmly on the lawn, sedately as you pleased, with the entirety of the Sha'Kar population of the island looking at her from a very safe distance. Her tail, which had to be two hundred spans long, swished absently across the grass, but it stopped and she stood up as soon as Kimmie appeared in the doorway. The Sha'Kar gave out a collective cry of alarm and backed up several paces as the indescribably huge creature stirred. "Kimmie, is he well?" she asked intently.

"You are Sapphire? His *drake*?" Triana asked in reply.

Sapphire regarded the Were-cat matriarch with a penetrating stare. "You are Triana. His mother," she said after a moment.

"I am," she said in a blunt tone, now showing the massive creature any fear at all. "What happened to him, dragon? Tell me everything you know."

"Is he well?"

"If I can find out what happened, he may recover what he's lost," she replied immediately. "Tell me."

Sapphire hunkered down so her head wasn't fifty spans over them, and then described things that she had seen. She told them about sensing the other dragon after the restoration of the Weave, and her flight there to defend Tarrin from it after she was fully restored to her rightful power. Then she told them about clawing her way in and challenging the rival dragon, and the most unusual way the battle ended. "He just *surrendered*," she said in a perplexed tone. "I guess after five thousand years, once freedom was his, he decided to take it despite the situation."

"What happened to Tarrin after that?" Triana prompted.

She went on to tell them about how Tarrin had brought the Firestaff down and stared at it for quite a while, then took it. She described the fire that

surrounded him in detail. "When it stopped, I found him like he was when I brought you to him, Kimmie. Before the fire, he was like he always was. But afterward, he looked like he does now. I didn't know he could do that, Kimmie. I knew you could change into cats, but you never told me you can change into humans too."

"The Firestaff did it to him," Triana said with a sour look.

"What can we do, Triana?" Kimmie asked fearfully.

"Well, we need him to wake up so he can tell us what happened. After that, well, we'll see."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I guess it'll be up to him, Kimmie," she said with a stern look. "Any of us can restore him. We just have to bite him. But you know the law. It has to be *his* choice."

"What kind of stupid remark is that, Triana?" Kimmie flared suddenly. "That's *Tarrin* in there, not some hinkypink guttersnipe! We wouldn't be biting someone against his will, we'd be restoring an *accepted* member of *Fae-da'Nar*!"

"Oh really," Triana said archly. "If he *refuses* and you bite him anyway, how do you think he's going to feel about it, girl?" she demanded in a nasty tone.

"But, but it's Tarrin!" she said worriedly. "He's--it's what he *is*, Triana! I love him!"

"I love him too, Kimmie," she said with sudden compassion. "Believe me, it's all I can do not to march right back in there and bite him while he's still unconscious, and he has no idea what happened. But I'm not going to do that. Not yet. Until I can inspect him thoroughly and make sure what happened to him doesn't have any permanent side effects, I'm not going to be rash."

Kimmie was on the verge of tears, feeling her nose burning. But it was *Tarrin*! It was unnatural for him to be laying in there the way he was! She sniffled when the tears did come, wiping at her cheek with the back of her paw.

"I know, cub, I know," she said gently, putting her paw on her shoulder. "I feel the same way. But until we know what's going on, we have to leave things the way they are. And it's not like he died or anything, is it? He's still there, and he's still Tarrin."

"I guess you're right," she sniffled.

"What happened to my friend, Tarrin's mother?" Sapphire demanded. "It sounds serious, from the way you two talk."

"It is," Triana said honestly. "Whatever happened to him stripped him of his Were nature. He's nothing but a human now."

"Well, fix him," Sapphire told her imperiously. "I know what it's like to be forced to be something other than what you are. If he's become something he's not supposed to be, you have to fix it. Before it causes him pain."

"I'll do what I can, dragon," she promised. "He's not in a room with a window. Do you want me to make you one, so you can look in and see him?"

"That crazy Wizard, Phandebrass, he knows a spell that temporarily changes someone from one shape to another," Sapphire said. "I guess I'll have to ask him to use it on me."

"It only works on humans, but I know a spell that will shrink you, Sapphire," Kimmie offered. "I can make you the size you were before you changed, and it should last about an hour. Will you trust me to cast a spell on you?"

"I trust you much more than I trust *him*," Sapphire snorted. "Go get what you need, Kimmie. I want to be with Tarrin."

"I'll be right back," she said brusquely, then she and Triana went back inside.

Kimmie was really worried. What could have done this to her beloved mate? It seemed absolutely unbelievable! And yet the proof was laying in that bed in Arlan's room. If Triana said that Tarrin was human, then Tarrin was human. She wouldn't lie about something so deadly serious.

Her poor mate. Stripped of his Were nature, it was like a human losing his humanity. She just hoped that he wouldn't suffer like that for very long, and that they could restore him to what he was meant to be as soon as possible.

Tired.

He was so very tired.

But he was in a warm bed, and there were soft voices around him. All in all, he was rather comfortable, so much so that going back to sleep seemed like quite the good idea. They were very soft voices, speaking a strange musical language he had never heard before. There was light shining on his closed eyelids. Strange language. It sounded like singing. Maybe he was actually dreaming, and they were nothing but figments of his imagination. Some of the voices seemed harsh, but others were very sweet and melodious. Some were very deep, and others very high. He didn't recognize any of them, though, so maybe it really was a dream. Besides, he was tired. Maybe he should drift right back where he was before he became aware. Yes, just a little more sleep....

Then he heard a voice he could identify. It was Dolanna. She sounded a bit harried, and her voice was very distant from him, like she was across a small meadow.

Maybe it wasn't a dream. And maybe what happened before hadn't been a dream either.

It certainly seemed like a dream. After all, things like that certainly didn't seem very real. It was still fuzzy in his mind, but then again, nightmares tended to be like that. Some kind of wild-looking half cat, half human creature, with burning green eyes and white fur and a tail. She had been naked, and he could only barely recall hazy impressions of him and her wrestling around in a room with a big open window. They'd wrecked the place. She'd broken his arm, torn him up with her claws, but then everything just went...blank.

He struggled to remember. The last thing he remembered...no, it had to be a nightmare. It was him sticking a dagger in her chest. She fixed him

with a baleful look after that, moving her head. She bared *fangs*, and then sank him into his arm--

--and then nothing. The next thing he knew, he was just waking up in his nice, cozy bed. It certainly was a nice bed. Duke Arren had been very nice to give him such a nice room, and make sure he got a good meal and a bath. He was a friend of Dolanna's, and he knew Tarrin's father! That surprised him quite a bit.

Dolanna was speaking in a language he could understand now. "He still has the braid and his brands," she said adamantly. "There has to be some trace of it left. It took it away, changed him, but not *completely*. If the change had been absolute, then his hair would be as it was two years ago, and the brands would have been wiped away."

"What is that going to mean?" a stranger asked.

"I am not sure. Everything that he knew for those two years is gone from him. I can even affect him with Mind weaves," she said in a surprised tone. "For all intents and purposes, he *is* human, Triana. I think those memories are still within him, but they are lost in the dark tunnels of his subconscious. The change back was not an absolute."

"Would a bite restore his mind?"

"I do not know, but I doubt it," she answered. "It would return him to his former condition, but I doubt it would restore his height. That was a function of age, and the age has been purged from him by whatever did this to him."

"Damn his height. I just want my son back," the woman called Triana said bluntly.

"You must go gently, Triana," Dolanna said. "His mind is as it was before he was bitten. I am the only person he is going to know. He will wake up thinking he is in Torrian, on his very first journey from home. And we both know what happened that night."

"Will he remember that?"

"I cannot tell you, but I think he will remember some parts of it. Enough for you and Kimmie to startle him. We must introduce you to him very gently, or he will be afraid of you. But what I remember of him from that

time should make it easy. He was a very receptive and good-natured boy, and he had a very open mind. As soon as I put his fears aside about what happened with Jesmind, he would meet with you and not be afraid." There was a pause. "He will be nothing like what you remember, Triana. The boy before the bite was a completely different person. It may surprise you."

"What about his magic?" another voice asked.

"That is the interesting part," she said. "His powers of Sorcery are still intact."

"But his Druidic powers are gone," the woman Triana growled. "They were an extension of his Were nature. Without that, he has no power."

That seemed to upset this woman Triana. Tarrin was rather glad she wasn't mad at him. She certainly didn't sound like she was the type to cross. She reminded him of his mother. Nobody crossed Elke Kael if they wanted to enjoy the rest of their lives in peace.

"Do not do anything rash, Triana," Dolanna warned. "Remember that his mind is not as it was. If you bite him, the shock of it will cause him to suffer through the adjusting all over again. If he regains his memory, then it may not affect him. But if he does not, then it may be better to leave him as he is."

"Leave him? That's *my son*, woman!" the woman Triana snapped hotly at her. "Seeing him like that is the same for me as it would be for you to see your own child laying in a bed with his arms and legs cut off! He managed it once, he'll manage it again. It's that simple!"

"I can understand that, but you should at least give us the chance to try to restore his memory," Dolanna said in an almost pleading tone. "You know how much he suffered the first time. I do not want to see him have to repeat it!"

The woman Triana snorted in a peculiar fashion. It didn't sound like a sound a human could make. "You're right," she growled. "I can't bear to see him like that, but we have to try to restore his mind as well as his body. Who he is is what he knows as much as what he is. Without the memories to go with the body, it just won't seem like my son."

"He is your son, Triana," Dolanna assured her. "When he gets accustomed to you, you will see that. His personality will be different from what you know, but it will be your son. Maybe now you will get a chance to know him as I have known him, to understand why I love him so dearly as a friend. He is a remarkable young man. Perhaps more remarkable in how far he has come than from where he originated."

There was a long pause. "I think I'd like that, Dolanna," she told her.

Tarrin decided that it wasn't interesting enough anymore to bother. He drifted back to sleep, wondering just how much of that strange dream he'd remember when he woke up. Boy, he'd have a couple of wild ones to tell Walten and Faalken in the morning.

Light.

There was light touching his eyes. It had to be morning.

Without opening his eyes, Tarrin stirred. He was in a soft, warm bed with covers that felt like *silk*, they were so soft. He certainly felt rather well, if a little sleepy. The weariness of the days on the road had been completely wiped out by that good night's sleep. Even if he had had a few strange dreams.

Very strange dreams. Dreams of some great journey or voyage, where he was running off to the far corners of the world. Where he was meeting the strangest people and doing the weirdest things. Travelling across vast plains, sailing in ships across the sea. There were faces in those dreams, but he could never make any of them out, and there had been voices without words. That had been the strangest part. Voices that called, that he could understand, but he couldn't remember anything any of them said.

Yawning, Tarrin sat up slowly in the bed, still yet to open his eyes. He put his hand down as he rose up, rubbing at one of his eyes--

--and something pulled painfully at the back of his head.

Looking down, opening his eyes, he found himself looking at sleek, sheer sheets and a dark blue cover that looked like it was made of satin. They certainly didn't look like the covers that had been on his bed the night before. Under his hand, pinned between it and the bed, was a *braid*. A braid

of very thick blond hair, and from the feel of it, it was attached to the back of his head.

He moved his hand and picked the thing up. It was surprisingly heavy, nearly as thick around as his wrist, and it had to be long enough to touch the backs of his thighs were he standing. What *was* this. He didn't have this when he went to bed! Had Faalken convinced Dolanna to come in and play a trick in him? He certainly seemed the type.

Putting his hand to the back of his head, he realized that it was *real*. They hadn't glued some woman's braid to the back of his head. It was his own hair. It had to be Faalken. Dolanna was a Sorceress, he was sure she knew some kind of magic trick to make hair grow. Faalken and Walten had probably snuck into his room with Dolanna last night and convinced her to make his hair grow. Then they braided it up the same way his mother did and left him.

It was about then that he noticed Dolanna. She was laying on the side of the bed--a *circular* bed!--with her dress on, feet on the floor but laid out on the bed, sleeping. Looking past her, he realized that he wasn't in his room anymore. Where was he now? This place was, was *huge*!

It was a room so big that they could have put the family farmhouse in it! A vaulted ceiling over a truly palatial chamber. There were a bunch of fancy looking chairs and backless couches right in the middle of it, and there was very expensive art hanging from the huge walls, as well as marble stands holding delicate sculptures along the walls. There were strange chest-like things with drawers in the front not far from the bed, and on the wall behind it were two doors and a big archway that led into some other room. Was this the main hall of Torrian Keep? They'd walked through it the night before, and it looked nothing like this! But it was the only room in the castle that could be large enough! There was light in the room, but there were no fires, no windows, and he couldn't figure out where the light was coming from. It was just *there*. It was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. He couldn't deny that the room was very beautiful, maybe some queen's grand bedchamber, but how had he ended up there?

Tarrin was about to get out of bed and try to figure out where he was, but he realized he didn't have any clothes on. What happened to his nightclothes? He couldn't get out of bed *naked* with Dolanna in the room!

Dolanna stirred then, then quickly sat up, her eyes opening. She looked at him very carefully for a long moment, then she gave him a warm smile and her expression became very relieved. "You are awake," she said with a sigh. "Finally. How do you feel?"

"Uh, I'm fine, Dolanna," he replied respectfully. "Where are we? This isn't my room."

"We, had to move you to another room," she said carefully, scooting around the circular bed until she was sitting on it closest to him. She reached out and put a hand to his forehead. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"Well, going to bed," he said.

"Nothing after that? Not even something that may seem like a dream?"

"Well," he said, his expression turning thoughtful. "I did have this strange dream," he admitted. "There was this weird woman with fur and a tail. She tried to kill me. But it had to be a dream. She tore me up pretty well before the dream was over. Strange, I can remember feeling pain. I didn't think you could feel pain in a dream."

She smiled wanly. "Good," she said. "That did happen, my dear one." Tarrin blinked, looking at her. She'd never called him that before. She was nice and all, and he did kind of like her, but he thought that maybe it was a bit too soon for her to be saying things like that. "Can you remember anything else? Any dreams, anything?"

"Sort of," he said, straining, as if trying to look through a cloud. "There was this long journey, but I can't remember anything other than that. I sailed on a ship, then walked across a desert."

"It is as I feared," she sighed. "Kimmie's spell only barely affected you."

"Spell? Who is Kimmie, Dolanna?"

"I am afraid that I am the bearer of bad tidings. As usual, it seems," she said with a rueful chuckle.

"What are you talking about, Dolanna?" he asked. "Where are my clothes. If we don't get going, we're not going to have much time to travel today."

"Where are we, dear one?" she asked intently.

"Torrian," he replied. "We just got here last night."

"We are not in Torrian, dear one," she told him.

He scoffed. "How can we not be in Torrian, Dolanna? Have I been sleeping that long?"

"In a manner, I guess we could say that you were," she said. "You have lost your memory, dear one. It was an...injury of sorts. We left Torrian two years ago, Tarrin. Your injury has caused you to forget everything since then."

Tarrin looked at her in surprise. An injury? What was she talking about? It seemed outlandish! And yet, the braid....

Tarrin put his hand on the strange braid, feeling it. She had no reason to lie to him. This thing certainly wasn't here when he went to bed--or at least when he *thought* he went to bed. They certainly weren't in his bedroom anymore, and this place didn't look like it belonged in Torrian. It looked like some queen's personal bedchamber.

She could certainly be telling the truth. She would have no reason to lie to him, and he didn't think that Faalken and Walten would be cruel enough to put her up to that kind of a sick joke. Dolanna wouldn't be the type to go through with it. She was one of his best friends--

How did he know that? He looked at her, looked at the expression of compassion on her face. He had only known her a few days. She seemed nice enough, and he could remember every moment they'd been together. But there was something else...something, *distant*. Yes, Dolanna was a friend. A very good friend.

"I, I think I believe you, Dolanna," he said hesitantly, feeling his head pound in an unusual manner. He put his fingers to his forehead, bowing down. "I feel strange."

"Kimmie tried to use a spell on you to restore your memory," she told him, reaching over and putting her hand on his shoulder. "It did not work as she intended, but she did say that it rekindled something. That vague dream of the long journey, my dear one, that was real. The spell seems to have jogged only very little, but Kimmie said its effects will linger. Flashes of

lost memory may come to you from time to time, and when they do, there will be, unpleasant side effects."

Tarrin had to believe her. He trusted Dolanna with his life.

"Who is Kimmie?" he asked again.

She smiled. "I think you are not quite ready for that," she told him. "For the moment, let us say that she is a Wizard, who happens to be a very good friend. She and another Wizard named Phandebrass are even as we speak attempting to research a magical method of restoring your lost memory. We know it was not completely wiped from you, that it still lurks within you. That in and of itself is a miracle."

"It's no miracle, Dolanna," a voice called from the far side of the room.

Tarrin and Dolanna both looked, for he heard no door open. On the far side of the room stood the strangest woman Tarrin had ever seen. She was very tall, nearly as tall as his mother, shapely and sleek. Her face was exceedingly beautiful, and Tarrin had the strangest feeling of peace when he looked at it, but she had qualities that seemed downright unnatural. Her eyes were glowing pools of amber light, and her hair was striped in the seven colors of the rainbow. She wore a sparkling white dress that looked to be made out of silk. She strode towards them in an elegant manner, and Tarrin could feel...*something* in him respond to her. He knew this woman. He didn't know how he knew her, but he did. And that flash of memory caused another sudden headache. She came over to them and started up the three steps that led to the platform on which the bed rested, and Tarrin couldn't miss the look of absolute adoration on Dolanna's face. She stood up as the woman offered her hand to her, and Dolanna actually knelt down and kissed the back of it.

"I just wanted to hold your hand, daughter," the woman said with amusement.

"Forgive me, Mother," Dolanna said in the most profound manner, rising again. "I lost myself."

"That's alright, daughter," she said, putting her hand on Dolanna's face in a loving gesture. "How is he?"

"Kimmie managed to rekindle something of what was lost, Mother," she answered. "But only the vaguest impressions. We do not know how he managed to keep anything at all."

"That was my doing," she answered. "Before you left Suld, I placed my power in him to try to protect him from what happened. Unfortunately, that power activated prematurely to protect him from the Weavequake," she said with a frown. "A miscalculation on my part. But there was enough of it left to at least manage to save some part of it, burying it so deeply that the curse could not find it. That's why Kimmie's spell failed. It just couldn't reach deeply enough into him to get it back. I'm quite impressed you managed to figure out it wasn't complete."

"The braid and the brands, Mother," Dolanna answered. "He did not have the braid or the brands before. We knew that there had to be something there, or his hair would have been as it was two years ago, and the brands gone."

"Clever daughter," she said with a smile. "I'm quite proud of you, you know. You're one of my very best children."

Dolanna absolutely beamed.

The strange woman sat on the bed by him, and that close to her, he could feel her aura of *power*. This woman had to be the most powerful Sorceress alive! Her appearance tickled at him in the strangest manner, as if he had met her before...but he couldn't remember. She smiled at him lovingly and reached out her hand, and he automatically offered his own. Her touch was warm, thrilling, a little shock of energy, and her grip was very gentle. She looked at him with those glowing eyes, and Tarrin felt just a tiny bit uncomfortable.

"So," she said after a moment of regarding him. "How do you feel, kitten?"

That seemed familiar to him. He tried to remember, but it made his head throb painfully. "Uh, fine, my Lady," he said in a nervous tone.

"Call me Mother, kitten," she smiled. "I'm rather fond of it."

"Can you restore him, Mother?" Dolanna asked.

"I'm afraid not," she sighed. "To do so would be to break a vow to my own parents. I swore not to interfere in what is. I'm only allowed to try to plan for what may be. That's why I hid my power in him, to try to prevent this. I knew of it. It may have partially failed, but at least it managed to protect him."

"What would have happened if you had not granted him that power?" Dolanna asked.

"His memory would be completely gone," she answered. "As if it never was. When it is done like that, there is nothing that can be done to restore it. We are just lucky that his memory was not the spell's intended target, or not even my power would have saved him."

"What was its purpose?" Dolanna asked. "The poem said it would take all that was, is, and would be. We thought it meant that it would kill."

"The purpose of the spell was to strip the person who touched the Firestaff of the one thing that had brought them to it. To take away the *desire* to use it," she said. "But Tarrin *had* no desire to use it. His intent was to *protect* it. The quest for power did not consume him as it did others, and his need to protect it was not the center of his life. So the spell instead took away the one thing that defined his existence, the one thing that made him what he was."

"His Were nature," Dolanna breathed.

"If there is one thing that defined him, wouldn't that be it?" she asked with a nod. "His magic didn't define him, because he didn't center his life on it. The quest didn't define him, because he was only doing it because I asked him to do. The one thing that defined my kitten's life was what he was. And so it was stripped from him. In that stripping, everything that he was when he was Were was also taken, including the memory of him being one. My power couldn't stop the taking of his body, but it *could* protect his mind. Had it not misfired in the Weavequake, he wouldn't have lost any of his memory at all," she frowned.

Tarrin looked up at them. What were they talking about? What was a *where*? Had he misunderstood? Had he been one of these *where* things? Was it some kind of organization, like the Knights?

"Can we restore his mind, Mother?"

"I'm sure Phandebrass will think of something," she smiled. "He may be a bit of ditz, but when he rolls up his sleeves, you won't find a better Wizard."

"Should we allow the human Sorcerers here to try?"

"Not until you can trust them, Dolanna. The way they were conditioned doesn't make them dependable, and I'll not let a hand touch my kitten that isn't doing it for his own benefit."

Tarrin looked up at this strange woman, and felt...*love*. It was radiating from her, and he found it very nice to be in her presence. He gripped her hand gently, feeling the thrill of her touch. "Mother," he addressed her. "What happened to me?"

"It's a very long story, my kitten," she smiled. "And I don't have the time to tell it to you. But Dolanna will tell you everything. Believe her, kitten. No matter how outlandish or ridiculous what she says may sound, believe every word of it. You led a very unusual life for these last two years, my kitten," she said with a charming smile. "Full of danger and magic and excitement. It wasn't all happy for you. I won't lie to you in that regard. You had some very dark times. But you came through them, and you made me proud of you. You did everything you promised me you'd do, everything and so much more. I'm so proud of you I could just burst!" she declared, squeezing his hand gently. Tarrin felt a strange thrill that she seemed so happy with whatever he did for her. "So, for right now, just rest, my kitten. You have done well, and you deserve it. While Phandebrass and Kimmie research a means to restore your memory, you should meet your friends, let them see you and know that you're alright. I'm sure they're curious to know what you were like before all this happened."

"Uh, Mother, about that," Dolanna said delicately. "Triana wants--"

"I know what she wants, daughter," the strange woman answered, cutting her off.

"Can it be done? I mean, the magic stripped it out of him. Can it be replaced?"

"Easily," she replied. "Triana was right in that regard. But this time," she said, looking down at Tarrin seriously. "This time it will be *his* choice. I've

already warned Triana. If the Were-cats do anything without his permission, I'll be extremely cross with them."

"Will he be as he was before?"

"Shorter," she said with a smile. "You were right about that, daughter. But he'll have the fetlocks. Those became a part of his nature when he grew, like growing a beard. You can't ungrow one, you know."

"But he will be the same in, in personality?"

"Just the same," she smiled down at him. "When he gets back his memory, it will be as if this never happened to him, from a mental point of view. Physically, there will be that one little change." She smiled down at him. "I dare say that when he gets his memory back, he'll demand to be restored. Being like this to him would be *unnatural*."

Tarrin listened to them, and realized that something pretty dramatic must have happened to him. Something big, that had changed his life. And whatever it was, something had taken it away from him, and robbed him of the memory of ever being that way to begin with.

Tarrin mulled that over, remembering that last thing he could last night--at least last night to him. It was that fight with that furry woman. She had torn him up with her claws. He snatched his dagger off the bedstand and stabbed her right in the chest with it. She didn't seem to be phased by it at all. She just fixed those glowing green eyes on him, baleful with hate, and sank her fangs into his arm--

And they said *Were*. Now *where* as in a place, but *Were*. As in *Were-kin*!

It all came together in his mind, and his grip on the woman's hand suddenly clamped down like a vice. She was a *Were-kin*! His father had taught him about some of the various creatures of the deep forest, and the *Were-kin* were one of them! She'd *bitten* him, and if she really was a *Were-creature*, she would have infected him too!

"Figured it out, I see," the strange woman smiled gently. "It's not as bad as you may think, kitten. And yes, that's why I call you *kitten*," she grinned. "After you adjusted to it, you were actually quite happy being a *Were-cat*. You had good friends, you had a very prominent position in their society, you had an adopted family among them--you'll meet your mother in a little

while--and you had wonderful plans for the future. But the first time it happened, it happened when you had no choice," she said with a compassionate look. "You didn't want it, and the one who bit you certainly didn't intend for it to happen. That caused you quite a bit of pain, kitten. This time, if, after you get back your memory, you look back on what you had and decide it's what you want, you can let them bite you and return to that life. But, if you decide that you don't want that again, you can say no and remain a human. *This* time, my dear kitten, you will have a *choice*. It's the one thing I could never give you before, and I want you to know that your future is your own, and you can be anything you want, have any life you want."

That calmed him down. He, he had *liked* being a Were-cat? He couldn't remember, but it was certainly possible. His mother had taught him to approach any situation and not look at what could go wrong, but consider the benefits he may gain. He certainly had to admit that it was possible that he did get used to that and came to like it. After all, he couldn't remember, but those around him certainly could. If they said he was happy being a Were-cat, he'd have no reason to disbelieve them.

"You-you mean it was all an accident?" he asked. "You said that that other one didn't intend for it to happen."

Her expression turned serious. "That's a subject we'll leave for later on. Without your full memory, what I have to tell you may make you take it the wrong way. But you understood before. When you get your memory back, you'll understand again."

She seemed a little reluctant, but he'd bow to her for now. It sounded like what happened to turn him into a Were-cat was a pretty sticky subject. But he'd find out. Mother taught him to be patient, and he had time.

It seemed all too wild to believe, but their statements tickled at something in the back of his mind in a peculiar way. He knew they were telling the truth, even if he couldn't remember it himself. He was a little frightened by what he heard so far--he'd been a *Were-cat*!--but he was sure things would make more sense to him as they told him more and more about where he was, why he was there, and what had happened to him during the lost period in his memory. Actually, it sounded like quite a

fascinating story. Danger, magic, and excitement, eh? He must have been leading quite a life before he lost his memory.

He scratched absently at his shoulder...and felt a *roughness* there that hadn't been there before. He looked down at his shoulder and saw that he had a *brand* there, a brand depicting a sword and a spear crossed over one another. They weren't very large, but they were definitely noticeable.

"Those are a legacy of your past," the woman told him with a smile. "There's one on your other shoulder too. Look at it," she said, releasing his hand so he could look.

She was right. On that shoulder, there was a brand that had a circle with what looked like a horizon inside it, and a crescent moon rising over the horizon.

"When did I get these?" he asked. "They must have hurt."

"Fara'Nae wasn't about to let her mark on you be erased," the woman chuckled. "She took steps, the same as I did."

"Who is Fara'Nae?" he asked. "One of my friends?"

"In a way, she is," the woman grinned. "She's a cousin of mine, actually. She and I, we take turns watching out for you." She laughed. "We fight over you quite a bit, truth be told. Neither of us likes to share."

That made absolutely no sense to him. Given everything else he'd heard so far, he decided it was something best left to figuring out later. He continued to look down at the brands, marvelling at them, silently glad he didn't remember getting them. That had to have *hurt*.

"Well, I'm afraid I have to go now," she said to him with a smile. "Don't worry, kitten. We'll see each other again." She leaned down and kissed him lightly on the forehead, and Tarrin felt a shockwave of power flow through him at the touch of her lips. It felt...*familiar* to him somehow, and everything about the strange woman put him at ease. She was a dear friend, someone he loved very much. "I think he's ready to meet the others, Dolanna," she told her as she stood up. "But go slow with the story about what he's lost. There's a lot there, and if you leave out the wrong things, it may upset him. Make sure you explain all of it in turn."

"I will be careful, Mother," Dolanna said, taking her hand again and holding onto it as if letting go would kill her. "What will you do now?"

"Put the fear of their lives into the Sha'Kar," she said with a grim smile. "My children had strayed."

"It was not their fault, Mother."

"Not for *some* of them," she said in a dangerous tone. "But there's a lot of bad upbringing I need to reverse, and a little direct intervention seems to me to be the best way to go about it. My older children will understand, but the kids are spoiled. They need to be whipped into shape."

"I am sure they will embrace their culture," Dolanna said. "Now that they know their worship was not empty."

"I heard every word," she growled. "Even if I couldn't answer back. Some of them are going to learn a little etiquette."

"Will you come see me again, Mother?" Dolanna asked in a small voice.

"Daughter, this kind of direct action doesn't happen often," she said with a warm smile. "It's not like we wander around this way all the time. But you can come see me any time you want. The Heart is where you and I commune and enjoy company. We can even gossip like girlfriends if that's what you want to do," she added with a light smile. "If you ever feel lonely for me, come to me. I will always be there for you."

Dolanna bowed her head, and Tarrin was surprised to see that she was *crying*. Just who was this strange woman?

She raised Dolanna's chin with a slender finger and smiled down at her. "Such a good daughter you are, Dolanna. I'm proud of you, and you'll never know how thankful I am you've been with me."

"Your thanks mean all to me, Mother," Dolanna said in a trembling voice. "I am a faithful and dutiful daughter."

"You've proved it a thousand times over, daughter," she smiled, touching her face one more time. "Now let me go and show my more wrathful nature to some children who haven't been quite as devoted as you two have been."

"Be easy with them, Mother. It was not their fault."

"True, but I still want them to sweat a bit," she said with a smile and a wink.

Dolanna and Tarrin watched the strange woman walk away. She certainly was unusual. Was she one of those amazing things that had happened to him during that time? She seemed to know him very well. Was she some kind of queen? She certainly seemed like a queen. Dolanna looked to adore her, and she talked like she commanded everyone and everything around her. And she just seemed like a queen to him. Elegant, beautiful, regal, a woman accustomed to obedience from those around her. She was obviously some kind of powerful magician as well. Whatever had done that to her hair and eyes certainly wasn't natural. But in the strangest way, they didn't look too weird, almost as if they belonged on her, as if she wouldn't look right unless her eyes did glow and her hair was all different colors like that. Was this her house? Was he sleeping in her personal bed? Anything was possible, he guessed. Until they told him what had happened, he could do nothing but guess.

She certainly was nice.

"Dolanna, who is that?" Tarrin asked quietly as she walked towards the door.

"Dear one, if I told you right now, you would not believe me," she said with a loving smile. "Who she is will become clear when you hear the tale of the time you have forgotten."

"Alright," he said calmly. "Could you get me some clothes?"

She laughed. "Already the change is apparent. The Tarrin I know now would not have thought twice about getting out of that bed in my presence."

"Well, that other me sounds a bit shameless," Tarrin said.

Dolanna smiled fondly at him. "I would not call it shameless. It was more of an indifference," she said to him. "Triana foresaw this, and brought clothes for you."

The woman reached the door and opened it, and paused within it. Tarrin then saw what had to be one of those *Were-cats* barge into the room. And he was shocked! She was a very handsome woman, with a strong face that was quite pretty, but her stony expression subdued her attractive features. She

had strange tawny fur with slightly darker stripes in it on her arms, and her arms ended in oversized hands with really big fingers. Her feet were oversized too, bare, looking like some kind of cross between a slender human foot and a wide cat's paw. No shoe would have fit those feet. She had a *tail*, it was lashing behind her, and she had cat's ears poking out of an unruly mane of hair that was the same color as her fur.

But what made her amazing was how tall she was. The nice queen was a very tall woman, but she didn't even come up to this Were-cat's collarbones! Dolanna could stand beneath the swell of her breasts! Never in his entire life had he seen someone so tall!

That tall, tall woman took one look in his direction, then started towards him at a very fast walk. He felt rather intimidated as she kept getting bigger and bigger as she neared. When she was at the base of the three steps leading to the bed, her head was on level with his! When she came up those steps, she absolutely towered over him. He looked at her with undisguised awe, feeling a sense about the woman, a sense of absolute power that would make anyone obey her without question. This was a woman that told people what to do, and they *did* it. This was *not* a woman to sass.

"Triana," Dolanna greeted fondly. "As you can see, he is awake and well."

She sat down on the bed, and that stony mask broke as she gave him a very gentle, very loving smile. She didn't seem half as scary now as she had just a moment ago. She reached out with a hand so huge that both of Tarrin's hands would fit inside it. He felt like a little boy compared to her, still hanging onto his mother's apron strings.

If her appearance was intimidating, that smile was not. It did show her rather nasty-looking fangs, but he could see her gentle demeanor in the way she looked at him. This had to be the adopted family that that woman had mentioned. He reached out to her timidly and put his hand in her paw, and she closed her hand around it in a gentle grip. "My sweet cub, you look so strange now," she told him in a strong voice, but a very gentle, nearly crooning one. She reached out with her other massive hand and put it on the side of his face. She could have palmed his head, and he had the feeling that those hands were tremendously powerful, but she touched him with an almost incredibly moving tenderness.

"Y-You're the woman that that queen mentioned?" he asked. "My adopted family?"

"I'm your bond-mother," she told him with that same smile. "You're my son, cub. As much my son as any of my natural children. What does he know, Dolanna?" she asked.

"Very little, Triana," she replied. "Kimmie's spell only stirred the vaguest of impressions about what happened. Our Mother told him what he used to be, but little else."

"She would," the woman Triana grunted. "So, you know you used to be one of us?"

He nodded.

"What do you think about that?"

"I'm not sure what to think," he replied. "I don't remember any of it. But the queen said I was happy. I...I think I remember something about you, my lady," he said hesitantly as a flash of memory touched him, accompanied by a stabbing headache. Her sitting at his bedside, holding his hand--paw--*hand*, tending to him with great care while he was ill. "Did, did you help me once when I was sick?"

Triana gave him a loving smile. "It was a while ago," she answered in a very gentle tone. "I think that was when I found I loved you as my own, my cub. You were so young, but there was a strength in you that impressed me very much."

That flash of memory calmed him considerably. She was someone he did care for, he was certain of that. "Why am I here?" he blurted without really thinking about it. "I mean, what am I doing here? What happened to me?"

"It's a very, very long story, cub, and I'm still trying to piece all of it together. What happened here, that is," she replied. "But I can tell you much of what happened to you a long time ago, cub. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, I would," he said immediately.

"Carefully, Triana," Dolanna warned. "Remember, there is much to the story, and not all of it is good. He must understand the whole of it, or it will

not make sense and will frighten him."

"You can fill in anything I leave out, and he can always ask questions, Dolanna," the tall, tall Were-cat said absently. "He asked. If he's ready to ask, then he's ready to hear the answer."

"And there are other parts of the story, Tarrin," Dolanna told him. "Myself and Allia, Dar and Keritanima, we will tell you things that Triana does not know. After all, we have been with you longest. But for now, I think your mother can begin the tale."

"Well, cub? Do you think you're ready to hear it? I warn you now, I don't honey-coat things. You'll get the truth from me, and not everything in your past is all sweetness and light. You may actually be shocked at some of the things that happened, and some of the things you did. So, knowing that, do you want to hear the story?"

Tarrin looked at her. If she was right, then it didn't sound like all his time as a Were-cat was as happy as it sounded he had been lately. He heard the stories from his father, who understood the true nature of the Were-kin alot better than the wild rumor-flinging villagers. He wasn't sure which to believe, his father or the villagers, but he did always keep an open mind about those kinds of things. He wasn't the type to discount a version of a tale when there was no way it could be proved one way or another. He already had an idea that they were going to tell him about how he did mean things to people, and he thought he could accept that.

Besides, it sounded like a fascinating tale. Danger, magic, and excitement. Those had been the ingredients of many a childhood fantasy for a young boy who dreamed of being a Knight, dreams of riding his charger with his armor shining in the sun, facing hordes of dark, evil enemies and vanquishing them. Where the hero always won and things always turned out right. This didn't sound like one of those kinds of stories, but he couldn't help but be enthralled by the idea of hearing what he was like, a forgotten version of himself, who had lived two years into his own future. And now the younger version of himself had the chance to look through that window and see himself after two years of living an interesting life, as the queen woman put it, a life of danger, magic, and excitement. He wondered what he had seen in that time, who he had met, where he had been. What wonders he had seen, what dangers he had faced. And what he had been

doing that whole time. From the sounds of things, he was on some kind of mission or journey. The queen woman said he'd performed up to her every expectation, and the sense of it he got was that he was out here doing something specific. Since he was going to the Tower, maybe that meant that the Tower was the one that sent him on this task. Was the queen woman the Keeper? Was he in Suld now? The Keeper was supposed to be a very strong Sorceress...maybe the magic did that to her hair and eyes. And Dolanna certainly was obedient to her.

Danger, magic, and excitement. Whether he was ready to know what had happened to him, the allure of hearing a tale with those three most interesting elements was just too much of a temptation for a dreamer like him to ignore.

He drew up his knees and looked up at her, leaning his head on his hand. "I'd like to hear it," he said enthusiastically.

"Even if you won't like what you hear?"

"Life can't always be what you want to hear, Lady Triana. Besides, if I was happy at the end, does it matter what happened in the middle?"

"He *is* different," Triana said to Dolanna. "But he's still the cub I remember. This, it's the side of himself he never showed to anyone else."

"Now you understand, Triana," Dolanna said with a gentle smile. "Now you understand."

"Right then. The story. And cub, call me mother. Don't call me Lady Triana. It sounds too weird."

"I--alright, uh, mother," he said.

His hand still in this strange Were-cat woman's oversized hand, he listened with rapt attention as she started at the very beginning. It was going to be a very long story, told to him by more than one person, but he was looking forward to it. He wondered what it was he was doing. He wondered what dark obstacles had been in his path. He wondered who he had met, what he had seen, the places he had gone, the dangers he had faced. He wondered how it all ended, he wondered if the end had truly come at all. In any case, with a little patience, he was sure he would find out.

After all, it was the story of his life. A life he couldn't remember, but his life all the same.

A life of danger, magic, and excitement. What more could a dream-filled boy from a rural village want?

"I guess it all started the night you met Jesmind, cub. She's my oldest daughter. I wasn't there, but from what I understand, she was sent to your room...."

Epilogue

It was the only man-made construction within a thousand leagues.

It was summer now, the so brief summer that was gone almost as soon as it arrived, bringing the temperatures up to an actually comfortable level during the day, but it was still quite cold at night. The tundra was in its summer glory, a vast moor of greens and grays, and the large black pyramid and the virtual city of tents and soldiers that had formed around it clashed with the beauty of the plains around them. It was a flat land covered with short-lived grass between stones covered with moss and lichen, where vast herds of caribou had migrated from their southern ranges to take advantage of the bounty the tundra provided. The local wildlife had grown accustomed to these human and Goblinoid invaders over the monts, learning to stay well clear of their encampment, learned to avoid the hunting parties that fanned out each day to find food for the ten thousand or so creatures that had gathered around the old stone pyramid.

They were the *ki'zadun*, a dark organization with designs to conquer the entire world. For ten years they had been working laboriously towards reviving their fallen god, Val, who had been imprisoned within his godly icon nearly five thousand years ago by the Aleax, a mortal of boundless power known to most history as Spyder. Using the power of the gods, this mortal struck down their god, limited his power and imprisoned within the icon that gave him the power to affect the mortal world. For ten years they had planned, plotted, moved silently, and everything had gone according to that plan.

At least until the accursed Were-cat appeared. He was the one, the *Mi'Shara*, the one mortal who had the best chance of taking the Firestaff, a mystical artifact that could restore their god to his former glory. For ten years they planned to acquire that priceless relic, but the Were-cat interfered with them again and again, destroying their base of power in Suld, rooting out their spies, ruining their attempts to secure the Book of Ages, and then, in the final insult, almost single-handedly raising an army that turned back

their final stroke in the plan, the attempt to take Suld and banish the Goddess of the Sorcerers from the world. All by himself, one mortal had destroyed centuries of patient waiting, ruined dozens of carefully laid out plans, and had destroyed or killed some of their best operatives. The Were-cat was responsible for the banishment of Sha'Baket the Marilith, the death of Kravon, the death of Irvon and the turning of Jula back to her old comrades.

But this, this was the final straw. Everyone in the army knew that the Master was very displeased. They all moved carefully under the eyes of the Wizards, who had been meting out very harsh punishments in the days since the sky lit up, and some of the soldiers whispered that the Age of Power had returned. The Wizards all seemed flushed with power now, and their spells were much stronger. But where that increase of power should have made them happy, they were instead all very distressed, and the soldiers could hear the raging of Val, their god, from inside the black pyramid which housed his icon.

Within that fortress of black stone, in a chamber so dark that its walls and ceilings were hidden in the gloom, that icon stood on a raised area in the very center of the pyramid. Flanking it were two braziers casting what light was within the dimensionless chamber, as well as four writing desks where six *ki'zadun* secretaries sat, reading reports or writing out the orders they received from the voice that emanated from within the icon. Pacing before that icon was a rather pretty woman of medium height and voluptuous dimensions, her hands behind the back of her high-necked black silk dress as she swished to and fro, to and fro, her dark brows furrowed and her pouting lips pursed into a thin line. Her name was Lyselle, and she was a woman of almost cold passion. She was much like Kravon, those around her had noted, with the same cool demeanor and cold cruelty. But she was a woman that did show some emotion, unlike the stony Kravon, and was notoriously called the Black Widow by many of the Wizards in the pyramid. She had a taste for handsome men, men who never came out the door of her chamber after they were led inside. Nobody even speculated what happened to those men, most of them handsome slaves, but they all knew that their demise had to be the ultimate conclusion of it. There was that, and there were the screams....

Lyselle paused to read a dispatch placed into her hands by a nervous servant, who bowed deeply to her and backed away. She read it again, then again, then once again, and then she smiled. It was a cold smile, malicious, and it would make any man's blood run cold.

"It is done, Master," she called.

Report.

"The Firestaff has been claimed. The Were-cat has done it."

It was expected. Are you prepared?

"Yes, my Master," she replied. "My people are already in place. The child of the short one cannot be found, Master, because not even we can get into the Frontier. But the other one, the one by the redhead, she is in the Tower. We already have men in position to take her."

Excellent. Remember that she has power as great as the Were-cat, Lyselle. Any attempt to take her will lead to failure unless care is taken.

"I have already taken steps, Master," she said confidently. "She will lose her powers for a time if she crosses over. We will wait for that to happen, and then take her while she is defenseless. Our spies report that it can't be very far off. Her power is amazing everyone in the Tower, and she can't progress much further without crossing over. And if she doesn't before we need her, well, we can provoke it by attacking her. I've set expendables in the Tower to handle that should it be necessary."

A sensible plan. When she is taken, I want her brought here.

"Master? Is that wise?"

Do not question me, Lyselle, or you will suffer Kravon's fate. I want to see the Were-cat die before me. When we take his child, he will bring the Firestaff here. I want to watch him die with my own eyes.

"As you command, my Master," Lyselle said with a bow. "I will make the arrangements."

Proceed. I am pleased with your performance thus far, Lyselle.

"Your approval is all the reward I need, my Master," she said with an eloquent nod.

As it should be.

Lyselle swished off to do her master's bidding. Soon now, very soon. The Were-cat had recovered the Firestaff for them. Now they just had to make him hand it over to them.

And there was nothing he would not do to protect his children.

***Thus ends The Shadow Realm, book
four of the Firestaff Chronicles. In the conclusion of
the series, book five, Weavespinner, Tarrin
struggles to regain his memory, and must choose
between being human or Were-cat. He must
also make the ultimate choice, a choice
concerning his daughter, a choice that may
destroy the world.***