

The background of the entire image is a vibrant, fiery orange and red gradient. On the left side, a character is shown from the waist up, facing right. They are wearing a dark, intricately textured outfit that looks like a mix of leather and fabric. They have a large, circular, metallic-looking ornament on their left shoulder. They are holding a long, thin staff horizontally with both hands. The tip of the staff is glowing with a bright, intense fire, with a large plume of orange and yellow flames extending to the right. The overall mood is dramatic and intense.

WEAVESPINNER

**THE FIRESTAFF
CHRONICLES 5**
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

**This is a free ebook. If you paid for this,
either directly or via a subscription
website, you were scammed.**

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Chapter 1

It was a beautiful morning.

It was pleasantly warm, but not too hot. The air was cool, and there was the gentlest of breezes blowing across the rather unusual city in which they'd been staying. The sun shined down on them with pleasant warmth as Tarrin walked along the white stone paths with the Were-cat Kimmie, enjoying the outside and marvelling at the incredible buildings and homes that had been built by the Sha'Kar. The gentle wind rustled the lush trees of the forest along the edges of the large grassy plain in which the large town had been placed, swayed the grass in waves as the wind blew across the open areas inside the forest on the large island. The wind blew over him like a gentle caress, tugging at his long bangs and threatening to blow them into his eyes again, but it was an almost pleasant sensation.

It just felt good to be outside again. After nearly two days sitting in that bed under the watchful, almost smothering stare of the Were-cat Triana, she had *finally* relented to let him out. Her behavior towards him annoyed him greatly, for she treated him like some kind of helpless infant. She hadn't let him out of his room for those two days, tried to keep him in that bed the whole time as if he were dreadfully sick and would die if he set foot on the floor. He understood in a vague way why she was treating him like that, though. He wasn't what he was before, and to her, that was the same as him being ill. She had awed and thoroughly bullied him over those two days, until he finally screwed up the courage to stare her down and demand to be let out of her cage.

They were wandering the town without course or destination, he and Kimmie, while he gawked at the fences and the buildings and the sometimes outrageously lavish decorations they had on them. The house that was hosting them had a huge stained glass window. Another had a huge sculpture over the front doors, set into the wall, so lifelike that it seemed ready to move at any moment. Another had a magical image set on the side of the wall that actually did move. Every main building in those fenced

compounds had some kind of grand central decoration or magical effect that tried to outdo all the others. They passed Sha'Kar, who bowed to him or curtsied with smiles and called him "honored one," and passed humans, too, who bowed or curtsied and looked upon him like he was some kind of hero. Their gazes were absolutely adoring, and it unnerved him to no end when more than two or three crossed his path at the same time.

From what he was told, he had done something that had made them all extremely happy, but he didn't know what it was. It was why he was out there, getting his first good look at this place that was not supposed to exist, surrounded by a race of beings the whole world thought had died a long time ago. They had come here, he'd been told, seeking an ancient magical relic called the Firestaff. They had succeeded in getting it, having to actually confront the rulers of these Sha'Kar people because they wanted it too. Tarrin had been shocked to find out that he *killed* them. They had gotten the artifact, but its recovery had come with a price. Tarrin had lost his memory of the last two years, and from what he was told, it had stripped out of him what had made him a Were-cat.

Those two days had been spent listening to this odd assortment of people tell him all about what he'd done for those two years, and Triana had been right. Some of it was information he really hadn't wanted to hear. He'd been *cruel* there for a while, what Triana had explained as *feral*, like beating a dog until it turned mean. He'd done some pretty mean things. He couldn't imagine himself like that...it seemed impossible. There was that, and then there was hearing that Faalken had died. That was a shame, for though he'd only known the Knight for a few days, he seemed an amiable fellow, and Tarrin rather liked him. But all in all, the story did sound intriguing, full of danger, magic, and excitement. He had travelled all the way to Dala Yar Arak, had crossed the Desert of Swirling Sands. He had climbed high enough to touch the sky, and ridden on the backs of birds made of fire. He had been a Sorcerer and a Druid both, a warrior without equal, a single living being of such towering ability that he was virtually undefeatable. He had battled Demons, he had befriended lost races, he had become part of the Were-cat society's inner circles. He had held an ancient, priceless relic called the Book of Ages in his hands, and he had learned things lost to the world for a thousand years. He had done all of those things in search of the Firestaff, and that search had led him here, where--this was

the most exciting of it all--he had fought a *dragon* for ownership of the relic. It was just enough excitement to give flavor and purpose to the dark things they admitted he'd done, for he was a man so utterly focused on his goal that he would often resort to any means to achieve it. His parents would not approve of that, for they'd raised him better.

Triana and Dolanna spent many hours carefully explaining that to him, and they'd done a good job. They told him about the darkest things in his past, and then patiently and methodically explaining to him why they happened and why they were sometimes not only necessary, but preferred over choosing a different path. Sometimes it wasn't easy to understand why he would do such things, but Triana told him over and over again that it was because he had went feral. She explained the condition in detail to him, then they had to backtrack a bit to go over again the situation with Julia that had brought it about. That had confused him, because they told him that Julia was his adopted daughter and lived with his family.

That had been the most shocking thing he'd heard of it all. He had *children*! Two of them, and they were by *different women*! He felt absolutely scandalized by that revelation, and it only got worse when he found out that Kimmie was pregnant with a third. Tarrin had been in love with Triana's daughter, Jesmind. He had healed a woman named Mist with Sorcery because an old wound had made her barren, and agreed to father a child for her because she wouldn't trust any other man in her bed. But what seemed most shocking, most difficult to believe was that Tarrin *also* loved Kimmie, and they were having a child together. He asked how Jesmind felt about him leaving her like that, but they told him that he never dumped Jesmind, he just picked up Kimmie. He had two girlfriends at the same time, and wasn't even married to either of them. He had *two children*, another on the way, and he was never married! His parents were going to have an absolute fit! He didn't believe them when they told him that his parents knew about his two children. He just couldn't even fathom that they'd agree to something like that.

That made him feel a little uncomfortable with Kimmie. He could tell that she wanted to reach out and touch him. He could understand that she loved him, but since he lost his memory, she was really like a stranger to him. A stranger *he had slept with*. He was trying to be nice to her, but the way she looked at him sometimes unnerved him a little bit. She was nice,

he had to admit that. A lot different from Triana. Where Triana was all strength and power and intensity, Kimmie was soft and gentle and easy going. She was a very mellow woman who smiled a lot, and seemed to be quite happy with the world.

They saw that pale-haired boy Sha'Kar with the woman Allia on a path across from them, and they both waved. He waved back. From what he'd been told, Allia was his absolute closest, best friend in the world. Every time he saw her, it tickled at the back of his mind in the most peculiar way, and that inclined him to believe them. They had tried to restore his memory with a magic spell, but it failed. But it *had* reawakened very vague, almost dream-like flashes of memory in him, just enough that sometimes when they said something or he saw something, it caused one of those flashes that made him believe it. He got those flashes every time he saw Allia. She was, quite simply, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life. Allia was absolute perfection, with beautiful, large blue eyes, a heart-shaped face with sculpted cheekbones and chin, and elegant white brows over those expressive eyes. She had brown skin and pointed ears, her hair was the color of polished silver, and strangest of all, only had four fingers on her hands. She was wearing a baggy set of clothes that were brownish-tan, the color of sand, the desert garb that Selani wore in their homeland to protect themselves from the desert's heat. There was an aura about her, a feeling of control and power, a much reduced sense of what Triana had when he was close to her. She had brands too, the same brands he did, and he'd found out that she had given them to him so they could be brother and sister. That was how close they had been. She'd come into his room and sat with him several times during his forced bedrest, and though she seemed a little hesitant at first, she had opened up to him in rather startling ways. She'd told him all about Allyn, the Sha'Kar boy on her arm, and told him how much she liked him and her plans to kidnap him and take him back to her desert home. Before he lost his memory, Allia and her were "closer than a Faerie's toes," as Triana had eloquently put it. Best of friends, sharing their secrets with one another. Allia would tell him things she wouldn't tell anyone else, even now that he was no longer the person she knew. Despite him losing his memory, she treated him no differently than she had before. Despite one rather embarrassing episode where she undressed in front of him to change clothes, he felt utterly comfortable with her. She seemed quiet and reserved in company, but when they were alone, she became quite outgoing and

talkative. She had a rich sense of humor and a wicked eye for unleashing it on others, and he found her to be charming, engaging, and utterly likable. He had felt a little uncomfortable with her at first, but after only four hours, she had him giggling and gossiping and carrying on. She knew him very well, even with what happened to him, so she knew just what to do to show to him just how close they had been.

Her eyes reminded him of Kimmie's eyes. Her eyes were blue too, but they had vertically slitted pupils, like a cat, and they almost attracted his eyes right to them every time he looked at her. She was just a shade shorter than him, a tall woman actually, who was very slender, very lithe, but had very generous curves. She seemed to prefer plain dresses of brown or blue, dresses that didn't seem to clash very much with the ruddy orange tabby-cat fur that was on her arms. Her hair was dark, as dark as Dolanna's, long and very thick, but a pair of orange ears poked out from the hair in the front of her head. It creeped him a little to see that smooth skin where human ears would have been. Kimmie's ears were on top of her head, not on the sides, just behind the hairline. They weren't too large, poking just over the mass of her thick hair, but they did seem cute. And they moved alot, swivelling towards sound. She had a tail too, banded with orange and darker orange fur, like the rings on a raccoon's tail. Her tail was quite a bit longer than her leg, he had noticed, and she had to move it around alot to keep it from dragging on the ground. She was a very graceful woman, he noticed, her strange half foot, half paw feet making no sound as they padded along the white stone pathway, where his own sturdy boots--still not quite broken in--thudded into the stones loudly. The only sound she made was the swishing of her wool peasant dress, a dress that wouldn't have looked out of place on a village woman in Aldreth, the kind of sturdy, functional garment that a woman who worked alot would wear. Her dress was a peasant dress, but she did keep it clean and well maintained, and it looked good on her.

Kimmie and Allia weren't even the beginning of the strangeness of the people he'd been travelling with. If Tarrin ever wanted to define *diverse*, he felt that it had been justified in the group that had sought the Firestaff. Keritanima was a *Wikuni*, and from what Allia told him, she was also like a sister to him. She even had the same brands he and Allia did. She was a fox Wikuni, a bipedal version of a fox, complete with the fur and the tail and the head. Her arms and legs looked human in shape but covered in fur, and

her head was a fox head set on a humanoid body. But the face was humanized in a strange way, giving her a way to display complex emotion. She had a sharp, slightly boxy muzzle with white under her chin, white fur that went down her neck and disappeared under the expensive silk dresses that she wore. She had yellow eyes, a burnished amber that seemed to glow in low light, and she could somehow speak through that muzzle with its array of very fox-like teeth. She had fox ears poking up out of a mane of hair the same color as her reddish fur, complete with little black tips at the tufts. She also had a tail, just like Were-cats, bushy and furry with the red-white-black coloring at the tip that marked fox tails. Keritanima was a very animated girl, talkative and blustery. She was an honest to goodness queen, the queen of Wikuna, and she was used to people obeying her. But she was very friendly and had a wicked sense of humor that Tarrin rather liked. She was all smiles with him from the moment they met, talking up a storm and quite effectively subduing him into liking her. He could tell that she was very smart from the way she talked, and Dolanna seemed rather impressed by her sometimes.

Wherever Keritanima--she told him to call her Kerri, he had to remember that--went, there were those frightening Vendari. If Tarrin thought that Triana was big, these two Vendari made her look like a little girl who still played with dolls. They were absolutely monstrous, twelve spans tall at least, and they were heavily corded with thick muscle. They looked like big two-legged lizards, complete with scaly green skin that had white on their chests, and they had huge, powerful, muscled tails. Very much unlike the dainty tails of the Were-cats and Keritanima. They had boxy snouts complete with wicked teeth, long, sharp claws on the ends of fingers that were nearly as thick around as his wrists, but what chilled him the most were those cold, emotionless black eyes, soulless eyes that peered down at him like he was a bug about to be squashed. They wore simple kilts of undyed wool and leather harnesses of some kind that attached to wide belts. One of them carried the biggest hammer he'd ever seen in his life, and the other carried an axe he doubted he could even pick up. Tarrin had heard tales of the Vendari, and after meeting them, he found out that they were true. They were an unemotional race who prized honor above absolutely anything else. They were a race of warriors, and they spoke to him in a very polite, dignified manner. They seemed to have respected him before he got

changed, and that respect had not diminished now that he wasn't what he was before.

The last of Keritanima's little private clique was Miranda. She was a mink Wikuni, and she had to be the cutest thing he'd ever seen in his life. She was cheeky, with big eyes and a short, soft, slightly narrow muzzle complete with a black button nose, and her narrow little snout seemed capable of such cute smiles that he couldn't help but like her. She had silky white fur all over her and a head of very thick blond hair, through which two circular little ears popped free. She had a tail too, an almost luxuriously thick, bushy blond tail--very unusual for Wikuni, he'd been told, having a tail the same color as one's hair--whose fur was so incredibly soft it felt like whispers over the skin. She had playfully wrapped that tail around him yesterday, teasing him with that cheeky grin. She seemed a very outgoing woman, friendly and chatty, but he could see a calculating nature behind those luminous green eyes of hers. She was a lot smarter than she let people think she was. Miranda was sometimes Keritanima's maid, sometimes her advisor, and sometimes, she admitted freely, Keritanima's spy. The political world of Wikuna was very murky and very dangerous, full of intrigue and deception, and Miranda had served Keritanima ever since they were both little girls in whatever capacity was needed of her. He could tell that Miranda loved Keritanima very much, was probably her best friend, and that only seemed proper.

Dolanna's new Knight--or so he was told--was himself rather remarkable. His name was Azakar, and he had to be, beyond any doubt, the largest human being on the face of the planet. He was even taller than Triana, if only just, and was as wide and powerfully built as a bear. He was a Mahuut, a race of dark-skinned humans from the distant southern continent of Valkar, with broad features, thick lips, and a mane of tightly cropped curly black hair in the front that had grown down in wavy bundles over the back of his neck. Azakar seemed very quiet and guarded, and though he was nice to him, Tarrin felt that there had been some kind of bad blood between him and this big Knight in the past. He seemed rather contrite and not willing to talk to him. Tarrin hadn't had much time to talk to him much to see what it was, but they had time.

Azakar's friend and Dolanna's pupil was a young man of medium height named Dar. He was Arkisian, from the kingdom across the Frontier from

Sulasia, and Tarrin knew the Arakite language, which was what they spoke in Arkis. Karn Rocksplitter had taught him Arakite when he filled in for his apprentice one summer, working the forge while his regular apprentice recovered from a broken arm. Dar was only a year younger than him, and had a roguishly handsome face. His skin was swarthy, not as dark as Azakar's, but he had a very slender build and soft, sensitive hands. His hair was black too, but it wasn't curly, and he wore it combed straight back away from his face. He had hazel eyes that were very expressive, and looking at him, Tarrin could understand why all the human servants--and even some of the Sha'Kar girls--turned their heads to look at him as he went past. He was a rather handsome fellow. He had a quiet nature about him, but it didn't seem to suit him. Almost as if he felt overwhelmed by those around him. He seemed rather smart, but Tarrin hadn't talked with him long enough to get a good feel for him.

By far the two strangest members of the group were the other two humans. One of them was an Amazon woman--a *real live* Amazon!--by the name of Camara Tal. She was very exotic in appearance, with coppery skin and very long black hair that was perfectly straight. She kept it tied in a tail behind her head. She was an exceedingly handsome woman with exotic features to match her exotic skin, but she had a noticable scar along the left side of her face. She had a very narrow nose, pouting, full lips, and large brown eyes under thin, delicate black brows that were both inviting and intimidating at the same time. She was the most voluptuous woman he'd ever seen, and much to his shock, she was not afraid to show it off. She wore this kind of vest-like garment that went across her very generous breasts and tied in the front, absolutely straining to contain her formidable feminine amplitude, leaving the inside slopes of her breasts bare. She wore a battered swordbelt and a sword that hung there like it was part of her, and also wore a kind of red cloth skirt that Kimmie told him was called a *tripa*, barely managing to come down over her mid-thigh, and to his horror he had found out the wrong way that she didn't wear anything underneath it. That had nearly given him a heart attack. There was an intense sensuality about the woman that seemed to enslave his eyes, and whenever she was near, he could not help but look at her. She was like the forbidden fruit, seeming to have absolutely no modesty at all, but daring a man to look where he really wanted to look. Everything about her radiated that unusual strength. This was a woman so comfortable with herself that she would wear a garment

that revealed her most intimate charms with the slightest breeze, and it did not bother her in the slightest. Kimmie and Keritanima explained to him that the Amazon culture was radically different from the culture of the West, and her dress and behavior was a reflection of that. Nudity was not nudity in Amazar. Or, that was, it didn't have the same impact it did in the West. The Amazon was blunt, gruff, almost rude, and was very dominating. She also had something of a volatile temper as well, but he was used to that from his own mother. In many ways, she reminded him of Elke Kael, his mother, for she had many of the same qualities. Of course, his mother wouldn't be caught dead wearing what she was wearing, but many of their other idiosyncracies were similiar.

The man she seemed to endless argue with was himself rather unusual. Even his name was strange, an odd name for an odd fellow. His name was Phandebrass, and everything about him was an absolute puzzle. He looked very young, with narrow features, but had white hair like an old man. He was thin and bony and that made him look old, but he moved with a spry step that made him appear young. His blue eyes were befuddled at times, but they didn't have the look about them of a man debilitated by senility. In his case, that befuddled look came from the fact that his mind was sometimes so occupied by one thing that it seemed to lose track of everything else. Things like where he was, what he was doing, what his name was, who other people were, that kind of thing. He seemed absolutely scattered at times, asking the same questions over and over, looking for things that were oftentimes right in his hand, and behaving like some kind of insane old man that got loose from his keeper. But Tarrin could tell that he actually was rather smart. It was just that it seemed that his mind had to concentrate on one thing at a time, that was all. He was kind of funny, and Tarrin rather liked him, even if he did tend to be annoying at times. Phandebrass was a Wizard who was absolutely consumed by the passion of learning, and he had gotten himself bounced out of Tarrin's room when he showed up with all kinds of bottles and odd things with the intent of studying Tarrin's condition. Triana barely tolerated him for about three minutes, until he mentioned that he wanted to get a sample of Tarrin's brain tissue. It was about then that he got tossed out on his rump. Tarrin found it hard to believe that they were all absolutely depending on that odd fellow to find a cure for Tarrin's amnesia, and even Camara Tal, who seemed endlessly irritated by the man's scattered nature, admitted that Phandebrass

was probably one of the best Wizards alive. Once he did settle down and focus his attention on one thing, he was capable of startling intelligence and wisdom, and had quite a knack for solving very complicated or unusual problems. Kimmie was a Wizard too, and she had been tutoring under Phandebrass. She defended her mentor passionately whenever someone talked bad about him in her presence.

There were those people...and then there was that *dragon*. Tarrin nearly suffered a seizure when they told him about Sapphire. He had found her and thought she was a drake, a little reptile that looked like a dragon, but was only about five spans long. He had taken her in and taken care of her after she had been attacked by a pack of other drakes, and she had become quite attached to him. Little did any of them know, even Sapphire, that she was actually a dragon, hiding in the form of a drake because of what had happened during the Breaking. It sounded complicated and he didn't understand it, but when the Weave tore, all the dragons had to magically change themselves into drakes to avoid getting killed. And when they did, they were stuck that way, even taking on the minds of drakes. But the Weave was mended now, it was whole, and that meant that all the dragons had come out of their hiding places again. Tarrin had yet to see her in her dragon form, though. She had visited him three times over the last few days looking like a drake. Small enough to fit in his lap. She nuzzled him and even licked him once, and he found her affection to be quite contagious. He liked her alot, was surprised that she knew how to talk and was actually very smart, but he just couldn't believe that that cute little animal in his lap was actually bigger than the house in which he'd been staying. Kimmie had used a magic spell to make her small again, and she used the time under the effects of the spell to visit with what she called her "little friend." He was hoping to get a look at her now, his first time out of the house, in her real shape, but Kimmie said that she stayed on the far side of the volcano when not visiting him. She didn't want to terrorize the Sha'Kar, and her moving around tended to dislodge buildings from their foundations like miniature earthquakes when she did move around in town. Tarrin found that hard to believe until he remembered feeling the bed shake about ten minutes before Sapphire came in for one of her visits. If she was big enough to shake the ground with a step, then she really had to be that big.

Kimmie showed him her footprints when they came out, and that was proof beyond anything. The footprint she showed him was about ten spans long and was two spans deep, three wide fingers and a duke finger like an opposed thumb. That paw was so big that he'd fit inside it.

And they'd all come together to find the Firestaff. The story of their adventure seemed almost unbelievable at times, and the most unbelievable of all was that he was personal friends with a *god*. That stripe-haired woman with the glowing eyes was not a queen or the Keeper as he thought, but the mortal manifestation of that goddess. That blew his mind. Absolutely blew his mind. She was the goddess of the Sorcerers, and Tarrin had been her personal choice for undertaking the mission of recovering the ancient artifact. She certainly didn't *seem* like a god. No glowing aura, no trumpet fanfare, no displays of her godly might. She was almost *chatty* with him, he remembered. But Dolanna looked at her like she was a goddess, he remembered. She seemed on the verge of falling down and worshipping her at any moment. Dolanna told him that their Goddess didn't like such displays, that it was how they felt about her in their heart that mattered more to her than what they displayed to her. She seemed very nice, and Tarrin had certainly felt that she loved him. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. That goddess woman loved him, and loved him very much. And he knew that he loved her too. That was more than a flash of memory, that was a feeling that came from deep inside him. It took him a while to understand that, but now he did. No matter how outlandish it seemed, he knew that it was the truth.

It was just a part of that most intriguing story. A life of danger, magic, and excitement. The story certainly lived up to that. It seemed almost unbelievable, some of the things he'd done, the people he'd met, the things he'd seen. And he had some very unusual friends out there, friends that made Sapphire seem...*normal*. There was a Faerie named Sarraya who'd travelled with him as he crossed the desert. He couldn't remember her at all, but there was a flash, an impression of a very tiny thing with blue skin. That had to be her. There was Shiika, the Demoness, who was now the undisputed ruler of Yar Arak. That relationship was a very wary one, they told him. The Demoness seemed to like him, but he wasn't too keen on her. Tarrin didn't remember her either, but she certainly sounded like an exciting sort of person to know. He wondered what she looked like. There were Var

and Denai, two Selani he'd come to befriend while crossing the desert, and again, he couldn't remember anything of them. There was Ariana, an Aeradalla, an extremely rare and exotic race of human-like, winged beings. Now her he did vaguely recall, but it was little more than the briefest of images, a memory of a tall slender woman with blue hair and large feathery wings. Like all those images, it came with a splitting headache, as if it caused him pain to try to dredge up those lost memories. There were the Were-cats he'd befriended. Thean and Singer, Rahnee and Shirazi, Jeri and Triana's other children, Shayle and Nikki. They said he'd met her son, but he and her son didn't get along very well. He couldn't remember any of them either.

Quite a story. Quite a big story. But that part of it was over. Tarrin had the Firestaff with him at that very moment, in a magical place that Dolanna had explained to him. It was a magical function of the amulet around his neck, a special magical place where he could put things and not have to carry them around. The first thing she did was teach him about that magical device and show him how to use it. He'd put the Firestaff in that magical place, what Dolanna called the *elsewhere*, so that it wasn't visible. She told him never to take it out of the *elsewhere*, never to tell anyone else about the *elsewhere*, and never tell anyone at all that he had the Firestaff in the first place. It was the most sought-after thing in the entire world, the most valued and prized artifact of them all, and she warned him quite bluntly that people he thought were his friends would kill him to take it away from him. The only people who knew that he even *had* the Firestaff were those in his private circle of forgotten friends. And Dolanna made it clear to him that only they should know.

Not that he'd tell anyone else. He couldn't remember very much, but he'd been told what the Firestaff was and what it would do. It would turn someone into a god if they had it on a certain day, and that's why his goddess had sent him out to find it. The gods didn't want that to happen, because they couldn't let another god come to power. They'd have to try to destroy the invader, and that would cause a war between the gods that would ravage the world. That was a very terrifying thought, conjuring an image of a firestorm sweeping across the whole world, even setting fire to rocks and water, and it made him very serious about protecting what he had

with him. The idea of being a god had a kind of dream-like appeal, but not if it would cost the world such a heavy price.

Besides, the Firestaff was *creepy*. It didn't look creepy, being nothing but a length of petrified reddish wood, stone but looking like wood, even with the grain and a few old nicks and dings visible along its length. But when he touched it, it was hot, almost throbbing under his fingers, and there were these whispers coming from it. Strange whispers that seemed to be inside his head, promising all kinds of wild things to him. It promised him all sorts of things. Money, land, power, a harem of pretty girls to do anything he wanted--that made him blush a bit--magical might, absolute dominion. Promises to unlock the secrets of the universe, promises to show him things beyond the rational understanding of mortal man. Those whispers were frightening, but after listening to them for a few moments, they became more and more tempting. He'd told Dolanna about it, and that was when she was even more adamant about teaching him about the *elsewhere*. When the Firestaff was there, he couldn't hear the whispering. It was an artifact of great power, and that power had a corrupting effect on anyone that held it for too long, making them want to use that power. It was part of the diabolical nature of the thing, twisting even the most pure motives by exploiting the weaknesses of the one holding it. Dolanna had him get around that corrupting effect by sticking it where it couldn't reach him. Not even its power could reach outside of the *elsewhere*. And she told him to *never* take it out, not for any reason. Every moment he held it, it gave it that much more time to try to dominate him.

And so he carried it with him, even without carrying it. He thought about it alot, whenever someone wasn't keeping him occupied, wondering at just what those whispers meant, and if they could really do what they promised. They didn't say that he'd have to become a god to find out, either. He didn't really want to be a king or have a harem or be rich, but he did have an interest in learning about magic. He'd been one of the strongest Sorcerers alive, they all told him, but now he couldn't remember any of it. He still had his power, they said, but he had no idea how to use it, and Dolanna had refused to try to teach him. She told him that he'd get it back when he got back his memory, but he wanted to know *now*. Had he really had the power to blow up buildings? That seemed pretty impressive, but it was the stories of him healing people that held his interest the most. That

seemed a much more useful ability than blowing things up. Helping friends was much more rewarding than the exploding buildings and setting enemies on fire.

A Sha'Kar woman curtsied to as they passed her, and he had to admire her silently. All these Sha'Kar were very handsome or very beautiful. The women were nowhere as pretty as Allia, but they were still very attractive. They had large eyes and delicate bones, those pointed ears and four-fingered hands, and most of them were very voluptuous. He'd yet to see one woman that had a flat chest or narrow hips. They all wore shimmering robes that clung to those curves in a most appealing manner, and he'd started wondering what was under those gowns. That felt a bit dirty, but even he had to admit that a thinking about it was just fine so long as he didn't try to do anything about it. Tarrin was raised right, but he wasn't dead, and those Sha'Kar were *very* beautiful girls. And they always smiled at him so invitingly, almost like they knew he was admiring them, and they liked it. More than once he caught himself wondering what *would* happen if they knew he wanted to see what was under those robes.

Kimmie elbowed him sharply as he watched the Sha'Kar girl go by, his eyes dropping down to her posterior almost unconsciously. Her jab hit him right in the ribs, and it knocked the breath out of him and staggered him to the side. "Hey!" he wheezed.

"Keep your eyes in your head," she told him sharply. "If you want to look at a girl's butt, I'll pull my dress up for you, but you're not going to ogle those other girls."

Tarrin knew that Kimmie had feelings for him, but that was the first time she had ever displayed jealousy. Her bold statement caught him off guard. He had the feeling that if he said anything, she *would* pull her dress and show him her bottom. He wasn't used to a girl saying things like that. Boys said them in jest all the time, but not girls. It would be a scandal if a girl even joked about pulling up her skirts back home.

"You didn't have to break my ribs, you know," he said breathlessly, putting a hand to his side.

"Sorry," she said contritely, reaching under his shirt, and putting one of those big furry hands on his side. As always, her touch was very gentle,

very intimate, and it always confused him. He had *slept* with this woman, but he didn't remember her, or it. That made him a little embarrassed. She'd seen him naked, knew all kinds of very intimate things about him, and they'd done the most private things a boy and a girl could do together. Kimmie was around him all the time, either she or Triana, he'd noticed, almost hovering over him almost all the time. They'd even slept in his room for those two nights, Triana curled up on his bed in her cat form--it had been *amazing* to see her do that! Too bad she took off all her clothes beforehand, which made him blush to the roots of his hair. Triana was even more handsome naked, but even thinking that about her seemed absolutely scandalous to him. She was his *mother*, for goodness' sake! They wouldn't let him out of their sight, and he could see how defensive they got whenever stranger Sha'Kar or servants came close to him. They were being protective over him, as if he couldn't protect himself anymore. He knew that him not being a Were-cat anymore worried them and they thought it was unnatural, but he was getting tired of them thinking that he was helpless. When he finally got Triana to let him out of the house, Kimmie simply invited herself along and trampled over his desire to take a walk by himself. He found their hovering starting to get a little annoying, but he wasn't going to yell at them. No way he'd sass Triana, and Kimmie was just too sweet-natured for him to be mad at her for long.

A lot of their peculiar customs seemed strange to him. Were-cat women seemed blunt, direct, outspoken, a lot like human men. Triana was rough and rather harsh, but Kimmie was sweet and charming. That didn't mean that she wasn't as forward as Triana, though. They spoke their minds, and they had no qualms about talking about all sorts of very embarrassing things around him, almost like it didn't matter if he was there or not. When Triana checked Kimmie's belly, checking the progression of her pregnancy, she made some frank, downright nasty observations about Tarrin's ability to father children. He'd been absolutely mortified. And Kimmie had just given her a naughty grin and agreed with every word she said! Then she gave him this wicked smile, like she knew he was embarrassed by their talk, and *winked* at him. They were having fun with him, but he was just too embarrassed to try to fight back.

It still surprised him. Kimmie was carrying a baby, and he was the father. She'd told him all about what would happen when the baby was

born, how it would grow so quickly, how it would have some of the Were-cat traits at birth but would have to mature to gain the rest.

"Well, nothing seems broken," she said, keeping her paw against his bare side lingeringly. The pads on the palm of her hand were both rough and smooth, and they were very warm. Tarrin grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand out, then pulled her hand up to where he could see it. He hadn't looked closely at her hand before. She even had short fur on her fingers and on the fringes of her palms, with those dark brown pads on her palm and on the tips and middle sections of her fingers. She allowed him to run his fingers along those pads, touch the fur between them, and then she slowly extended the finger-long claws that recessed into those big fingers. He couldn't figure out for the life of him where they went. They were too big to not be noticable when they were in her hands, but there was no sign of them once they disappeared into the slots at the very tips of her fingers. She had no fingernails, which made her hands look a little strange.

"Where do the claws go?" he asked her as those claws fully extended.

"The bones in the tips of our fingers are forked," she replied. "The claw slides up between them. That's why our claws aren't longer than the tips."

"They look it," he said, measuring one of her claws, the one on her middle finger. It was nearly as long as his entire index finger.

"Well, the claws are hooked, so they can be a little longer than the finger as long as they bend in enough for them to fit. They recess all the way back against the joint, and the tip is right at the sheathe when they're retracted," she said, pulling in her claws. "Tap the tip of my finger." He did so. "Feel it?"

"Yeah," he replied. It didn't prick him, but the tip of that hooked claw was definitely there.

"That's why we have such big fingers," she told him calmly. "The rest of the finger is as wide as the tip, and the tip houses the claw."

"I didn't know that," he mused.

"Well, now you do," she said with a smile. "Any other parts of me you want to inspect? Wanna play with my tail?" she asked with a playful smile, bringing her tail around her body and wiggling the tip of it at him.

Before he could stop himself, he let go of her hand and gingerly touched her tail. It was surprisingly thick, with thick fur at its tip. He could feel the bones in her tail, but it wasn't bony. It had flesh on it, and it seemed to shiver a little in his grip as he parted her fur and inspected the skin beneath.

"Having fun?" she asked with a smile.

"Just curious," he told her. "I had a tail?"

"Mmm-hmm," she hummed in agreement. "It was longer than mine, but since you're taller than me, that's understandable. The tail is always exactly half again as long as the leg. It's a proportion true through all of us."

"It must be tiring to keep it up all the time."

"We're used to it," she replied. "Want to see where it comes out?" she asked with a wink.

"Not if you have to pull up your dress," he countered.

"You're no fun today," she accused with a smile. "I'll show you back in our room. Where it'll just be you and me, and you won't have any reason to be embarrassed. It doesn't bother me when you look at me, Tarrin. It's nothing you haven't seen before."

"I don't remember seeing it before," he said with a blush.

"Well, I remember showing it to you, so don't worry about it. Trust me," she grinned.

Tarrin cast about for a change of subject. "How long are we going to stay here?" he asked. "I heard Triana talking about us leaving."

"Probably in a couple of days," she answered. "The Sha'Kar are going to use magic to get all of us back to Suld really fast, but they need time to pack up all their things. So we're waiting for them. It shouldn't take them too much longer."

"They're coming with us?"

She nodded. "Now that the Ward isn't trapping them inside anymore, they're returning to the Tower in Suld." She laughed. "Boy, are they going to be shocked to see *them*."

Tarrin remembered that they said that everyone thought that the Sha'Kar were extinct. That it was a big surprise when they found them on this island. There were some five hundred or so of them, but that wouldn't be a big deal, Dolanna said. She said that the Tower was big enough to house five thousand Sorcerers, and currently there were less than two thousand there. More than half of the Tower's space was unoccupied, and settling in the Sha'Kar would be very easy.

"They seem nice enough," Tarrin said. "Not that you and Triana let them get close enough to me to find out," he added sharply.

"We're just protecting you while you're in this weakened condition," she said boldly.

"I did just fine before I met you guys, you know. I'm not a pushover."

"Certainly not," she said. Then she casually put her paw on his chest, and pushed. The power behind that hand was irresistible, and he found himself staggering back, tripping over his own feet, then falling down on his backside. He sprawled there for a moment, glaring up at her, but she just smiled down at him. Were-cats were *powerful* creatures. Kimmie didn't look it, but she could pick up a horse, and probably be able to throw it a goodly distance. Sometimes it amazed him that creatures with such incredible strength could be so exquisitely gentle. "Not a pushover at all," she teased.

"Well, not against other humans," he corrected sullenly as she reached down and helped him up.

"To us, Tarrin, you seem helpless," she told him honestly. "You've lost your strength, your speed, your senses, and most importantly, your immunities and regeneration. You're fragile now, just like the humans, and neither me nor Triana are going to let you out of our sight. You're too important to us. Until you're yourself again, one of us going to be right with you all the time."

"Well, I'm not helpless," he protested.

"Maybe not, but it's not going to change anything," she said mildly. "Get used to us, love. We're not going anywhere."

He glowered a little, but said nothing. Because he knew that no matter what he said or did, it wouldn't change things.

"I wonder where everyone else is," Tarrin asked.

"Well, Phandebrass is going through his books back on the ship, looking for information that may help him find a cure for you," she told him.

"Camara Tal went with him to make sure he doesn't get distracted along the way. Keritanima and Allia are up at the volcano with Dolanna. Sapphire said she and the red dragon lost alot of scales when they fought, and she wants to find some of them as souvenirs. Binter, Sisska, Miranda, and Azakar are with her. Dolanna is giving Dar his daily lesson, but Iselde and Allyn are with them, so it'll probably be Dolanna doing the learning instead of the teaching. I think Triana went back to Suld for a while to fill in Jesmind on everything."

"How does Triana do that?" he asked. "Isn't Suld across the ocean?"

"I wish I knew how she does it," Kimmie said sourly. "Triana's a very powerful Druid, Tarrin. She can do some *serious* magic. She won't even tell us what she's capable of. That really annoys me sometimes." She chuckled. "Now that the Weave is restored, maybe me and Phandebrass can engineer a spell that does the same thing. Being able to just appear halfway across the world would be really handy. I'd only be a spell away from you," she said, reaching over and taking his hand gently.

Tarrin still felt a little uncomfortable when she did that. She'd told him she loved him, but he couldn't even remember her. He didn't know her at all, though she certainly seemed to know him. He let her hold his hand because it seemed to make her happy; he wouldn't be cold to her. But it did make him feel a little strange. It was like waking up one morning and finding out he was married.

It wasn't marriage, of course. That seemed one of the stranger things. Were-cat's didn't marry, and males didn't spend their lives with one female. Kimmie told him, in rather lurid detail, that he was the recipient of the love of three Were-cat women. Herself, of course. Then there was Jesmind, who had been his first love. Kimmie admitted that he grew to love her *after* they started sleeping together. That they slept together just for the fun of it. That shocked his sensibilities, but he kept telling himself that they had a different

culture, and by then, it was his culture too. The third woman was Mist, the one he'd healed, who loved him because he had helped her so much. She told him that he'd never really gotten the chance to love her, but she had very much fallen in love with him from the moment he agreed to sleep with her to impregnate her. Because she wanted a baby, and she wouldn't trust any other male but him. They were a bit vague as to why she wouldn't trust any other male, but he'd take their word for it. For a boy raised to believe in the sanctity of marriage, it seemed almost unnatural to him. He had a, a, a *harem*. Kimmie hadn't gone into great detail about Were-cat society, telling him that it may shock him a bit, but he was starting to understand some things. Triana explained that they were part animal, with the mind and instincts of a cat mixed in with their human ones, so maybe that part of them affected a lot of things that the human parts of them didn't. Or affected them differently.

"Well, that would be nice, I guess," he said awkwardly.

"Don't worry, Tarrin. When you get your memory back, everything will make perfect sense," she said with a smile. "I just have to keep telling myself that."

"What do you mean?"

"It kills me to see you like this," she told him honestly. "To me, your very identity was stripped away from you. It's like someone changed you into something else with magic. And everything you knew is locked away. You're like a different person to me. I want to tell you things, but I know you won't understand. I want to be your mate, but that's just not possible like this." He felt her hand tighten over his. "I have to keep myself from biting you every time I touch you. I can't stand it, because I know I could change you back any time, but I can't do it, because without your memory, it would be a very hard adjustment for you."

"Well...do you still like me?" he asked. "I mean, do you like me now?"

"Of course I do!" she said. "You're still Tarrin, and there are hints of the Tarrin I know about you. In fact, now that I've seen you like this, I understand those parts of you a lot better. The turning changed you a lot, Tarrin. I won't lie about that. But seeing where you came from, it's opened my eyes about the true nature of you. I can see the young man that's been

buried under the weight of everything we've piled onto you," she said with a gentle, very loving smile. "In fact, given everything that happened to you and all the pressure and duties that's been thrown on top of you, I'm amazed that you've come through it as unscathed as you did. You're a very resilient fellow, my Tarrin," she told him with a wink.

"Well, I guess you can thank my parents. They raised me."

"I've met them."

"You have?" he asked in surprise.

"Mmm-hmm," she nodded with a smile. "Your mother reminds me of Triana. They have the same 'do it my way or die' sense about them."

Tarrin laughed. "That's my mother, alright," he agreed. "No wonder I liked Triana so much." He cleared his throat. "Uh, do they, uh, know about-"

"Of course they do," she told him with a grin. "Triana told them. They understand, Tarrin. They know you embraced our society, and that included embracing some of our more outrageous customs," she winked. "I had to as well. Don't forget, I was turned too. It was quite a culture shock, now that I remember," she said with a fond chuckle.

"Oh. I, I guess that's alright."

"Elke adores your daughter Jasana, and Jenna's the one who's been training her in Suld," she said. "And Triana told me that Mist brought Eron to Aldreth to meet them. She adores him too. Mist is quite taken with your parents. She even stayed the night with them. I never thought I'd see her do that," she mused, shaking her head. "So, your parents and your sister approve, Tarrin. They love you the same as they did before. They adjusted to your turning just as well as you did."

That had been a more surprising part of the tale. Jenna was also a Sorceress, but she was actually one of these *sui'kun* that Dolanna described, seven special Sorcerers that are tied to the Weave in ways that regular Sorcerers are not. Jenna had come to Suld and helped defend it against an invading army, and had remained behind after they won the battle to help train Jasana, who was also a *sui'kun*. She was on the Council in the Tower and everything, even though she was only thirteen--no, she was almost

sixteen now. He couldn't forget that. She wasn't a little girl anymore. She was a young woman now, a very strong Sorceress, and had a position of importance among the *katzh-dashi*. Tarrin wondered how much of a fit his mother threw when she left home. Elke was very attached to Jenna, since she was her youngest child. In Elke's eyes, Jenna would always be her baby girl, no matter how old she got. She'd still be calling her *janni*, which meant *baby* in Ungardt, when Jenna was married and had children of her own.

"Well, that's a relief," he said sincerely. "I'm a little hungry."

"Me too. Let's head back and raid the kitchen," she smiled.

They raided the kitchen as well as any pirate raided a fat tradesman, but the pickings didn't suit Kimmie. The Sha'Kar were primarily vegetarians, raising a large number of assorted fruits and vegetables on their farms. Tarrin didn't mind that, for his mother had a big garden herself and they had a lot of vegetables when he grew up. But Kimmie was primarily a carnivore, and she wasn't too fond of mutton. That happened to be the only real meat available on the island. She growled quite a bit about Triana leaving and not being able to use her Druid magic to make something edible appear, then made do with a piece of mutton that had been cooked the night before to feed the visitors.

After eating, Kimmie literally dragged him back to the huge room that the Sha'Kar had given to him to use while he was there. She didn't tell him what she was up to, but he could tell that she had some kind of mischief on her mind. That suspicion was justified when she closed the door behind them, leaned against it, and gave him a knowing smile.

"What?" he asked.

"It's time you found out."

"Found out what?"

"Where it comes out," she winked at him.

Tarrin blushed to the roots of his hair, backing away from her.

She laughed delightedly. "Calm down, silly," she told him, coming off the door and walking towards him. "Nothing's going to happen, I promise. But I do want to take a bath. Why don't you join me?"

"J-J-Join you?" he stammered.

"You saw the pool, Tarrin. It's huge. It can fit ten people, so I think you and me can manage to squeeze in it without too much trouble. And nothing's going to happen. I promise you that," she said, holding up her hand to emphasize her statement. "Nothing *can* happen. You're too fragile for me to be frisky with you. I'd break your arm by accident."

"B-But we'll have to take our clothes off and--"

"Get used to it, Tarrin," she warned. "We're going to the Tower, and didn't they tell you about how the Tower works?"

"No," he said hesitantly.

"They have one really big bathing pool for everyone. You bathe in public, and you do it in front of girls. If you're going to go red being in here with just me, I think you're going to get very smelly if you stay in the Tower for very long." She took him by the hand. "I know it won't be easy for you, but trust me. Don't you trust me, Tarrin?"

"I--Yes, I think I do," he told her as she took his hand in her paw.

"Alright then," she told him, pulling him towards the archway.

It wasn't easy, but he knew she wouldn't lie to him, so he realized he'd better get used to the idea of it. She undressed first, and she watched him the entire time, keeping his eyes on her by all but daring him to look away with her gaze. She pulled her dress over her head and then modelled for him a little bit, even turning around to show him exactly where the tail did come out of her back. He was surprised a little, but it was the fact that he couldn't take his eyes off her bottom that got his attention more than the striped orange tail that protruded from her back just above that bottom. Her bottom was *gorgeous*.

Gritting his teeth, he quickly pulled off his clothes and all but jumped into the pool as she slid in herself. She didn't stare at him while he was doing so, and he realized she did that on purpose. She was doing exactly what she said, helping him get used to the idea. She took up the soap and started lathering the fur on her arms. Tarrin relaxed a bit at this and waded away from her, to the other side of the pool, where it was very nicely hot.

"Lucky you," she told him. "I can't go over there."

"Why not?"

"It's too hot. It's about one step from boiling on that side."

"It doesn't feel that hot to me," he protested.

"You're *sui'kun*, silly," she said, splashing at him. "Heat can't hurt you."

"It can't?" he asked in surprise, looking down. He put his hand in the water and felt it. It was hot, alright. Steaming a little. But it didn't burn.

"Not a bit. Think about it, mate. You were in a *volcano*. Do you think you would have lived long in there if you could get burned?"

"I guess I didn't think about that," he said, mulling it over. So, he couldn't be hurt by fire. "You mean I could put my hand in a bonfire and it wouldn't hurt?"

"Tarrin, you could go swimming in the lava in the volcano and it wouldn't hurt," she chided. "Now come over here and wash my back."

Tarrin accepted that little bit of news like he accepted everything else they'd told him so far, believing it no matter how outlandish it seemed, and did as she asked. He began to relax with her a little, not feeling nervous about lathering soap on his hands and scrubbing her shapely back. "I meant to ask something," he said as was rinsing her back clean of the soap.

"What?"

"You said you were turned, like me."

"Yup."

"Where did you live before that?"

"Tor," she answered. "About a hundred years ago."

"A *hundred*?" he asked in surprise.

"We don't grow old, Tarrin," she told him. "Triana told you that."

"I guess I wasn't paying attention when she said it," he admitted. "You don't grow old at all?"

"Not at all," she said, turning her head enough to where she could see him out of the corner of her eyes. His eyes fell on her cat ear, though, and the smooth skin where her ear was supposed to be. She seemed to notice it,

turning around and facing him. "Go ahead," she said with a smile, leaning her head down and presenting one of those ears to him. "I know you're curious."

He was, in fact. He pinched the ear, felt that it felt just like a cat's ear, soft yet springy. He looked down inside it, saw that it looked just like the interior of a cat's ear as well. He ran his fingers along the interior edge of it, and was a little startled when her ear flicked, twitching under his touch. She giggled reflexively. "That tickles," she complained, and he almost jumped when her tail wrapped around his leg. He moved instead to where a human ear would have been, feeling nothing but smooth skin, but the bony ridge that was usually just above the ears in a human was indeed there.

"Alright," she said with a smile, turning him around so his back was to her. "Hand me the soap."

She scrubbed his back for him thoroughly, and yet she was very gentle, and her claws never so much as broke his skin. She did run them up his back, and felt very odd to feel those four points sliding up the skin of his back. "Now it's my turn to check something," she said boldly. He jumped when her fingers traced down his spine, coming to rest right where a tail would have been coming out of him were he still a Were-cat. He struggled to remain calm, and did become calm when he was sure that that was indeed the focus of her inspection. "That is *so* weird," she told him. "The bone even occludes back into the pelvis."

"I could say the same about you," he said. "What is occludes?"

"In Were-cats, the spine isn't fused to the pelvis," she told him. "The spine extends out as the tail. There's nothing holding the spine to the pelvis except a knob of bone, a modified vertebra, that has tendons running from it to the pelvis under and to the sides of it. We have nerves that run through the center of our spines, and there's a small knob of bone, where the spine bends. Right here," she said, touching him just below the small of his back, right above his own backside, "where the nerves come out of the spine and continue on down to the legs. The pelvis isn't the same shape either. Since it's the spine that fuses the pelvis together in humans, and we're not like that, our two pelvis bones aren't actually fused together like yours. It's one reason why we're so flexible. Because our spines aren't actually attached to anything and our pelvises aren't one solid piece of bone." She turned him

around, then turned around herself. "Go ahead," she said. "I won't mind. Feel how it's different."

He was a little hesitant, but he had to admit, he *was* curious now. He slid his hand under the water and touched the base of her tail, feeling that little knob she was talking about right at the base. There was a indentation of sorts a little more pronounced in her back down there. Where in a human, the back flattened out from its lined dimple formed by the spine, it continued on in her back, all the way to where the hips widened and the muscled curve of her bottom began.

"When did you learn all this, Kimmie?" he asked curiously.

"I'm a *Wizard*, Tarrin," she said pointedly. "Wizardry isn't just about learning how to cast spells."

"I didn't know that."

"Not many people do. A good Wizard is well versed in biology, chemistry, physics, alchemy, herbology, and also ancient history. That's all in addition how much we study the magic itself. We have to know those things because it helps us design magic to affect the physical world. So we study all about the physical world in our studies, from how rocks form to the anatomy of many kinds of creatures."

"Sounds like you don't have much free time."

"It's a good thing we don't age. I don't think I could learn everything there is to know about magic in a thousand years," she admitted. "I don't see how Phandebrass does it. He's only a little over forty, yet he's learned so much in that short time it's almost mind-boggling."

He accidentally slid his hand down to the top of that forbidden area under her tail, then pulled it back quickly with a bit of a blush. "Sorry," he apologized.

"I told you I don't mind, Tarrin," she told him with a smile, looking back at him. "If you stuck your hand between my legs, I wouldn't mind."

That made him blush furiously. "Does it hurt when you sit in chairs?"

"The tail is extremely flexible," she told him. "I can push it up against my side if I have to. But if we sit up against our tails like that, it cuts off the

blood flow and goes numb."

"Huh," he sounded. "It must be interesting to have a tail."

"Well, in a little while, hopefully you'll have yours back," she said. "Though I do like your curiosity," she admitted, wrapping her tail around her arm, like a snake. "You won't be putting your hands on girls' butts in the bathing pool at the Tower," she said with a wink, "but one that knows you may ask you to help scrub her back, just like I did. Think you can handle that?"

"I guess," he answered.

"You did with me, and I'm as good as a stranger," she assured him. "It's the ones that ask you to scrub the front that you have to watch," she told him with a smirk.

"You!" he said loudly, pushing her from behind, but she didn't go far, because her tail was still wrapped around his arm. "You said you'd behave!"

"I am behaving," she teased. "And I got you to relax. That's what I really wanted. I want you to relax around me, Tarrin. I want you to not feel nervous around me, no matter what I do or what I'm not wearing. I want you to feel comfortable with me, even if we're both wrestling naked in a pool."

That caught him a little off guard, and he chuckled ruefully. "Well, it's working," he admitted. "I don't really feel as self-conscious as I did when we started."

"Good," she said wading up to him and, to his surprise, wrapping her arms around him. He'd never been so close to a naked woman before, and the fact that he wasn't wearing any clothes either made it even worse. "Calm down," she said in a gentle tone, looking over at him with a smile and dancing eyes. "Boy, you weren't even close to being this jumpy when you were a Were-cat. I think it's kinda funny."

"You should see it from my side," he said bluntly.

"I did," she laughed. "Do you know what Mist did to me to break me of my modesty?"

"No."

"She made me go naked for almost a year. Then she made me walk through a village in Arkis naked, then she took me to a Druid and had him summon a male Were-cat to deflower me. She seemed to think that the fact that I was a virgin was the reason why I didn't like being naked."

"She *didn't*!" he gasped.

"Oh yes she did," she laughed.

"Did--Did you let him--"

"Of course I did," she said. "I was getting used to my instincts by then, and if you didn't notice, there are very strong instincts about that kind of thing in animals. I was curious, and truth be told, I was ready for some serious deflowering."

Tarrin felt distinctly uncomfortable talking about sex with a naked woman who had her arms around him.

"Now calm down and give me my attention, and I'll let you go," she told him.

He wasn't sure what she meant, but he did hold still when she pulled him close and hugged him to her. He could feel her body against him in a most intimate manner, and he struggled to not pay too much attention to it. She clapped her hands around him, gave him a gentle squeeze, then let him go with twinkling eyes. "There, it didn't kill you," she grinned.

"I have no idea what that was about," he told her.

"It's simple, Tarrin. I was getting my free feel."

"You're terrible!" he said with a gasp, then he laughed and splashed water in her face. "Taking advantage of me like that! Shame on you!"

Kimmie laughed and splashed him back. "Well, you *are* my mate, Tarrin!" she shot back. "I shouldn't have to trick you into getting my feels!"

"Oh, you're in trouble now, woman," he said in a dangerous tone, splashing her vigorously with both hands.

In moments, they were laughing and playing in the water like two little kids, splashing one another as quickly as they could. He redoubled his efforts when she shielded her face with her hands and turned around, but

realized too late that it was a ploy. Her tail whipped around right along the surface of water and sent a sheet of stinging spray over him, making him stagger back and wipe at his eyes.

"Alright, you two," Triana's voice called. "Out."

"Mother!" Tarrin said in surprise, clearing his eyes. She was standing in the archway, stalking over to them quickly. She was wearing a ragged sleeveless buckskin shirt and breeches, not too far off the color of her fur. She came up to the edge of the pool and glared down at them in a manner that Tarrin did not like to see.

"Are you nuts, Kimmie?" Triana said in an accusing tone. "I thought you knew better!"

"We're just taking a bath, Triana," Kimmie said.

"She hasn't messed with me or anything, mother," Tarrin affirmed, defending her. "We're just playing around, that's all."

"That's not why I'm mad at her, cub," she told him. "Out, both of you. Now!"

They both scrambled out of the pool, and he felt a little silly for a moment. There they were, standing naked at the side of the pool, both of them. Triana was between them and the towels, and neither of them felt like trying to go around her to get to them. She fixed Kimmie with a stern look, then snorted in that strange manner that she did. "Didn't you think that you'd pose a danger to him girl?" she said in a flat voice.

"I know he's fragile, Triana," she said quickly. "I was being very careful--"

"That's not what I mean!" she snapped, which made Kimmie flinch. "Foolish cub, you're a *Were-cat*! You just got in a pool with a human, and you unloaded the trees know how much spit into that water! Thank the furies it's a big enough pool!"

Kimmie suddenly paled, looking at Triana in sincere chagrin. "I never even *considered*--I'm sorry!" she said quickly. "I won't do it again, I promise!"

"I don't understand, mother," Tarrin said.

"She could have infected you," she told him gruffly. "Spit can do it, and it only takes a drop of it in your eyes or going up your nose with the rest of the water. The pool is big enough to where it diluted it down to the point where it was harmless. If that had been a smaller pool, though, you may have been turned again. Not that I wouldn't have been happy to see it, but we're going to play this by Dolanna's rules for now. That means we keep you human so that mad Wizard has a chance to find a cure for your amnesia. Don't get back in that pool until I have a chance to purge it, Tarrin. Now dry off and get dressed, both of you."

"Yes ma'am," he said obediently, and they both rushed past her to their towels.

A little chagrined, Kimmie dried off, dressed, and then lavished numerous apologies on Triana, who seemed a little too angry to accept them very graciously. "I had *no* idea, Triana," she said emphatically. "I mean, I know he's human, but he's still just *Tarrin* to me. I didn't think about that."

"Well, there was no harm done," she snorted. "Why were you dragging him in there, girl?"

"We were dirty, for one," she said. "And he's a little too shy. You know how they do things in the Tower. He'd be mortified. So I'm trying to get him used to the idea of it, that's all."

Triana swung that penetrating stare in Tarrin's direction, and he nodded in agreement as he pulled his trousers back on. "I see," she said slowly.

"How did it go with Jesmind?" Kimmie asked.

"Badly," she snorted. "First she threw a fit, then she demanded to bring her back with me. She *knows* I can't do that," she snorted. "Jasana took it alot harder than I thought," she said absently. "But I think it was a reaction to how hysterical Jesmind got when I broke the news. She's curious to see what you look like as a human, cub. That must be an old issue between you two. Jenna asked to come see you, but I told her no again," she added. "I think she can wait a couple more days, and I don't want her confusing you right now."

They told him about that. Jenna was a very powerful magician now, and she'd learned a trick where she could visit people thousands of leagues away. He didn't quite understand how it worked, but Dolanna explained that

it was an Illusion that they could see through, kind of like a magical window that bridged the distance. He was quietly hoping that she would visit, that he could see it, but Triana was keeping him out of everyone's sight for some reason. At least that was what he suspected.

"When are we going to leave?"

"That Sha'Kar woman, Ianelle, she said they'll be ready by tomorrow," she answered. "They're having trouble with the human Sorcerers that lived on the island, though. Some kind of minor rebellion."

"Ianelle doesn't seem like the kind to put up with that for long," Kimmie chuckled.

"I agree there. The humans and the youngest children don't want to leave. Dolanna explained what went on here before I got here, so I can understand their reluctance. They're about to go from kings to paupers, and they know it. They don't want to give it up."

"They'd better," Kimmie chuckled. "Or Ianelle will flog them."

"She looked about ready to flog her daughter this morning," Triana chuckled. "Her daughter Auli must be a serious troublemaker."

"Oh, she is, Triana," Kimmie grinned. "Auli was the town's bad girl, and I don't think being freed of the mind control is going to change that much. She's a free-spirited, adventurous girl, and she's probably been pulling on the leash that Ianelle put around her neck."

"I like her," Triana declared immediately. "Now finish dressing and I'll take you over to Phandebrass," she told Tarrin. "He wants to check something, and it sounds important."

"We're going to the ship?" Tarrin asked hopefully.

"We are," she affirmed. "Now hop."

He did hop. The opportunity to visit this amazing steamship, see it for himself, was an exciting proposition.

Of all the strangers that were his friends around him, the one Tarrin probably felt most comfortable with was Dar. Dar was only a year younger

than him--mentally, at least, for Tarrin still considered himself seventeen--he was a boy, which made it a little easier to talk to him, and he seemed as intimidated at some of the things around him as Tarrin did. Tarrin liked spending time with Dar, just talking to him, learning what it was like in Arkis and hearing what had happened over the last two years through Dar's point of view. Dar had once been his roommate in the Tower, so he knew Tarrin pretty well. Tarrin decided that it was only fair that he got to know Dar just as well.

That did, of course, require a little subterfuge. Tarrin didn't like talking about private things like that around the two Were-cats, and he privately bristled a great deal at them treating him like an invalid. He did like Kimmie very much, and respected Triana a great deal, but he felt that they were wrong. He was perfectly safe on the island. The Sha'Kar were all very friendly, calling him "honored one" all the time and doing anything he told them to, even when he didn't mean it. If he got in any trouble, all he'd have to do was yell. They all watched him pretty close anyway, so he figured that him calling for help would bring help to him before he finished shouting.

It was absolutely impossible to sneak out on Triana. She seemed to sense his chicanery even as the plans formed in his mind, and that withering gaze evaporated any fantasy of even trying to slip out of the room while she was in it. Kimmie, however, was much more easy to dupe. It wasn't that she didn't pay attention, but she often got distracted by her books, and she slept more soundly than his bond-mother did.

It was later that day, while Kimmie had her nose buried in a book that Triana had brought back from the ship, a book that Phandebrass had asked her to study, that he seized the opportunity. He was still excited from visiting the ship, meeting Captain Jalis and the crew and getting a very thorough tour of the amazing steam engine from Donovan, the ship's inventor and lead engineer. He'd even brought back the rest of his things from the ship, which someone had thoughtfully shrunk so they would fit him again. He didn't *want* to sit around the room and be bored, because Kimmie was too involved in that book. He had nothing to do, no one to talk to, and Tarrin was *not* the kind of boy that could sit still like that for very long. He wanted to go out and look around, and he wanted to find Dar and talk with him for a while.

While Kimmie was busy reading, Tarrin put on a comfortable pair of leather breeches and an old buckskin shirt like the ones he used to wear, functional clothes that were rugged and well suited for wandering the forest, put the hawk-hilt dagger in his belt that he'd won during the staffs competition right before he left--that dagger showed the wear of hard travel, another striking physical reminder that two years of memories had been taken from him--and proceeded to use every dirty trick his father ever taught him to escape from Kimmie's watchful eye. The key, of course, was not to tip her off that he intended to leave, and she was sitting right in the middle of the room, where the opening of the door would alert her immediately. So he required a diversion. That diversion came when he told Kimmie that he wanted something to drink, and opened the door and asked the serving girl that was permanently stationed right outside the door to bring back a tray with tea for both of them. She returned a few minutes later with a tray holding a teapot and two cups. She poured both of them a cup, and just as he expected, Kimmie didn't say a word, didn't even look down, feeling around until she found the cup and picking it up without her eyes ever leaving the book.

So, when the serving girl left, Tarrin crept out behind her, a finger to his lips and a mischievous look in his eyes. She grinned at him and nodded, then waved silently to him as he crept down the hall with his heart pounding a little with the excitement of it. Triana was going to kill him when she found out, but he'd take the punishment just for a little time to himself. They were smothering him with all that attention.

After he got far enough away to suit him, he broke into a dash, tearing through the house as Iselde and Allyn stared after him in surprise when he came around a corner and nearly knocked them down. He skidded to a halt and scrambled back to them. "Where is Dar?" he asked in a hasty tone. A little confused, both of them said nothing and pointing to a door in the wall. "Thanks," he said, rushing over to the door and opening it. He found himself staring into another one of those huge, stunningly beautiful bedrooms, but one could take only so much beauty before getting numb to it. Dolanna and Dar were sitting on a pair of backless chairs, sipping tea. Dolanna's back was to the door, thankfully, and Tarrin waved madly until he had Dar's attention. Dar noticed him and realized that there was no Were-cat with him, then nodded when Tarrin beckoned him. He excused himself

from his mentor, setting his teacup down on a little table between them and hurrying over to the door. "What's the matter, Tarrin?" he asked.

"Nothing. Come on!" he said with a conspiratorial smile. "Kimmie's going to realize I'm missing any minute now, and I need time to get away!"

"Get away?" Dar asked in confusion. Then it dawned on him. "Oohhhhhhhh!" he hissed. "Alright, come on!"

Tarrin and Dar ran, barely able to keep a straight face, through the house, through the entry hall, and then out the front doors. Dar paused to use his magic to obliterate their scent trails--he was fully aware of the keen senses of their hunters--and they dashed along the lush grassy lawn and out the gate. Dar paused to obliterate that scent trail, then they ran at full speed along the white stone pathways, often having to go around the stately Sha'Kar, who would stop and stare after them in confusion. They headed towards the middle of town then abruptly turned east, towards the treeline as Dar concealed the signs of their passing. They ran across the grassy clearing between the closest manor and the trees, then plunged into the wood like adventurers diving through some killing trap. They looked behind themselves and then started laughing. Dar was winded, but the run was nothing to Tarrin, who waited for his friend to catch his breath, then they started off through the woods.

It was almost like being home, but there were differences in this forest that reminded them of where he was. It had been getting progressively warmer since the Ward had been brought down, as the Ward and the magical wind's effects on the local weather were slowly being reversed, and the trees were showing it. A lot of them were breeds that were hardy in both heat and cold, and he knew that they'd be just fine after they adjusted to the change. After all, those same breeds had to have been there when the Ward was created, so their species had lived on the island. Tarrin led Dar through the woods at a leisurely pace as they talked about nothing of any great importance, laughing over their escape and worrying at how long it was going to take them to find them.

"It'll be over when Triana comes back," Tarrin admitted. "She'll find me in a blink. But I don't think she's on the island. I think she went back to Suld or something. I haven't seen her since we came back from the steamship. So let's enjoy it while we can," he grinned.

They wandered aimlessly through the forest as Tarrin listened to Dar tell him all about their time in the Tower, when they were sharing a room, and the suspicious things that went on. Then they talked about the others, Tarrin listening to Dar's impressions of the others. Dar was a good judge of character, and he had a surprisingly keen understanding of the others. He told Tarrin about Camara Tal's aggravation being because of her love for her husband, Koran Dar, who was resisting her every attempt to get him to go home with her. "Master Koran Dar loves her, but he thinks she'll make him sit in their house all day. He ran away to experience life, and now that he has, he's afraid to go back. He doesn't want to lose it."

"I don't blame him," Tarrin agreed completely. "There's got to be some way to make them patch things up," he mused. "If they love each other, it's a shame for them to be apart."

"Not anytime this century," Dar chuckled. "Camara Tal's been out of Amazar for a while, but her attitude hasn't changed at all. I think she *would* confine him to the house if she got him back. She may even chain him in his room to keep him from getting away. She loves him, but she wants to control him. Master Koran Dar is too strong to be controlled that way, and he's the kind that would wilt in those conditions, like a flower blocked off from the sun. She doesn't understand that if she did that to him, she'd be destroying most of the things in him that she loves the most. She wants to break him, but when she does, she'll realize how bad of a mistake it was. But by then, it'd be too late," he sighed. "I feel sorry for them. Camara Tal is too stubborn to change, and Master Koran Dar is too good of a man to survive what she'll do to him."

"That is sad," he agreed.

"Well well, look what I found," a voice called. They both jumped a little as a Sha'Kar came around a large tree. He'd seen her before. She was a very pretty girl with platinum blond hair and blue eyes that were always dancing with mischief. Her name was Auli, and she was one of Iselde's friends. He'd met her after losing his memory, and she had given him the most chilling smile...it was *predatory*. She stood there with her back against the tree, hands behind her back, staring at the two of them with a similar wolfish grin on her face. Tarrin couldn't help but admire her tall, curvy frame, being accented in a most appealing manner by the clingy nature of her shimmer

blue dress, the same color as her eyes. She had that ethereal Sha'Kar beauty and had a very attractive body, and though Dar may be used to it, Tarrin wasn't. She gave him a very inviting smile when she realized that he was staring at her. "You realize that this area is forbidden, don't you?" she said. "We're not allowed here."

It took Tarrin a little bit to get used to that. Triana had used some kind of very powerful spell to teach both herself and Tarrin their native language in about three seconds. It had left him dizzy for nearly an hour, but it had been very effective. He could speak the Sha'Kar language like a native now, literally because Triana had borrowed Auli's mother's knowledge of the language as the model to implant into both herself and Tarrin. Ianelle was two thousand years old--inconceivable!--and her grasp of the Sha'Kar language was beyond profound. Tarrin knew many words and phrases that younger Sha'Kar like Auli didn't know, because he had borrowed the knowledge of someone much more learned than she.

"Then why are you here?" Dar asked her in flawless Sha'Kar. All Tarrin's friends spoke the language.

"Same as you. Hiding from my elders," she said with a laugh and a wink. "My mother's really getting on my nerves." She strode forward boldly then, to both his and Dar's surprise, went around them and draped her arms over both their shoulders and laughed. "It's about time I had company. All the other youngers are too cowardly to come out here. So, let's go get in trouble," she said with a conspiratorial wink at Tarrin.

Auli virtually invited herself along, but neither of them were very mad about it after a few minutes. Auli had a truly wicked sense of humor and she was a lot of fun, laughing and telling them embarrassing secrets about other Sha'Kar youngers and flirting with Dar so shamelessly that his Arakite friend looked like he was continuously blushing. She was impossible to dislike, urging them deeper and deeper into the woods, playing on their pride as adventurous rulebreakers to goad them into taking her up on the dare. Tarrin found that he liked Auli a lot, for she was very brave and was very funny, as quick to laugh at a joke she made about herself as she was about someone else. She was completely comfortable with being with the two of them, a trio of youngsters looking for a little time away from the cloying presence of their elders.

They found themselves in the foothills not far from the volcano after a while, as Auli was goading Dar and Tarrin into scaring sheep and making them scatter on their bewildered keepers, then watching the hapless humans trying to round up the animals. "Watch this," she winked, and Tarrin felt something weird, like he always did when Sorcerers used their magic. The sheep that the tall human man was dragging back to the flock shuddered, then all its fleece turned a bright shade of pink. Tarrin and Dar had to clamp their mouths shut to keep from laughing and giving themselves away as the human staggered back at this amazing change in color, then he turned and shook his fist towards the trees. "I know that's you, Mistress Auli!" the man shouted. "I'm going to inform your mother about this, mark me!"

"Come on," she whispered with a wink at them, then they snuck away as the human tried to calm the terrified animal, that had probably just noticed its new fleece.

They did laugh when they got far enough away, and Tarrin was a little surprised. Auli was almost incorrigible, and he'd never seen a girl like that before. There were several chronic troublemakers back in Aldreth, like Walten, but Auli seemed even more fearless than they were. Girls just didn't act the way Auli acted in Aldreth. It was shocking, but in a way, it was quite appealing. Girls always seemed so stuffy and stuck up--alot of that was because their mothers didn't want their daughters getting interested in the handsome son of that witch Elke Kael--but Auli was outgoing, fearless, and utterly likable. Tiella had been the only girl that had been his friend back in Aldreth, and that was only because her parents, the village innkeepers, were friends of the Kael family.

"Come, I have a great idea," she said with bright eyes. "Let's go up to the volcano!"

"But Kerri and the others are up there," Dar said. "They may catch us!"

"So? What's the fun in going where we can't be caught? I want to go see that dragon! Come on, Tarrin! She's your friend, she won't eat us if you're with me!"

Tarrin wanted to see Sapphire in her dragon form too. "You think you can get us up there without getting caught?" he asked her.

"I know five ways everywhere," she affirmed with a grin and a nod, reaching out and taking Tarrin's hand boldly. "Come on, let's go!"

And so Tarrin, Dar, and Auli started up the many steep, winding trails on the sides of the volcano. Dar kept muttering to himself that they were going to get in trouble, but neither Tarrin nor Auli really cared very much. They were having too much fun. The paths got dangerous, and they had to shuffle along with a wall on one side and a sheer drop on the other, but Tarrin didn't feel in any danger. It was all some kind of grand adventure to him, even when he nearly slipped off the path once when a loose stone gave out under his foot. They worked their way around the side of the volcano to the north side, and a small peninsula of relatively flat land that was on that side, where they said the dragon was staying. As they came around the volcano, Sapphire did finally come into view, and Tarrin ran into Auli's back as she stopped to gawk at the beast. Dar looked around them and saw it as well. It was definitely Sapphire, with her midnight blue scales and the fact that she completely took up a rocky clearing between the base of the cone of the volcano and the trees just past it. She seemed to be reading from a book laying on the ground in front of her, a book that had to be thirty spans wide. Tarrin marvelled at how she looked just like the tiny little Sapphire that sat in his lap, but she was some kind of titanic replica of that little drake. She snuffled a bit and lifted her head, and then her gaze locked right on them.

"What are you three doing?" she demanded. "Oh, Tarrin! Come down, come down!" she invited, sitting up on her haunches. They were nearly a hundred spans over the clearing, but when she did that and craned her neck up, her head was suddenly level with them. Tarrin stared long and hard at that immense head, and he realized that she could swallow him whole without even having to chew!

"H-Honored dragon!" Auli said in awe, looking at her.

"I thought Kimmie would be with you," Sapphire said critically to him, her powerful voice vibrating inside him in the weirdest way.

"Uh, she's reading a book, Sapphire," he answered her. "I was bored, so we came out to look around a little bit."

"I'm reading as well," she said, pointing with a clawed finger nearly as long as Tarrin down at the ground. "I'm just starting to get my powers back. I'm surprised my gear all survived so long."

"Gear?" he asked.

"All dragons have magical powers, little friend," she said, rising up on her hind legs and holding out that huge forepaw at the edge of the steep incline. Tarrin realized that she wanted them to get into her paw. The three of them would fit, but only just. Auli daringly clambered out onto her paw and sat down, and Tarrin and Dar crawled out with her a moment later, Dar praying hastily under his breath. It was a tight fit with the three of them, one of Tarrin's feet dangling some hundred spans off the ground below, but the dragon was very careful with them. Tarrin's stomach rose as the dragon lowered them carefully to the ground, by the book. Tarrin helped Dar and Auli out of her paw, and they stared up at her massive head as she lowered herself enough to be about fifteen spans over them. "All dragons have Druidic magic, because we are creatures of the land. But since we are not bipeds, we are free to study other kinds of magic. Most dragons learn Wizard magic as well, because we are good at it. As my mind has cleared with the return to my true form, my powers are coming back to me. I hid this spellbook over a thousand years ago in a safe place, and I was surprised that it was still there."

"That's a spellbook?" Tarrin asked.

She nodded. "I used a spell to check on my other things, and they're all still there as well. Untouched after a millenia. It's amazing," she said with a raspy chuckle that blew hot, strangely charged air down on them. "As soon as I'm sure you're going to recover from this strange malady, I'll be returning to my lair."

"Where is that, great dragon?" Auli asked curiously.

"My kind prefer dry places," she answered, "where the static builds and the rain that does fall always comes with lightning. We prefer sandy caves. My lair is on the border of the desert and the dry steppes of Saranam, far to the northeast of here. The Sha'Kar agreed to transport me back to Suld, and from there I can fly back to my lair with little trouble."

Tarrin tried to imagine a cave big enough to hold her immense form. It wasn't easy. "Are all dragons as big as you, Sapphire?"

She shook her head. "I was very old, even before the Breaking," she answered. "Dragons grow larger as they age. A good indication of the age of a dragon is how big it is. Most dragons will be about half my size. The age we gained during the Breaking didn't affect us. I guess it was because the aging didn't happen while we were in our true forms," she mused.

Tarrin looked up at her. Even half her size was still absolutey gigantic. Sapphire could swat down a Giant with little difficulty.

"I was ruler of my clan," she said proudly. "Mother of all, and *shazil* of the eastern desert and the western steppes."

"What is *shazil*?" Dar asked curiously.

"Overlord," she answered. "We blues are much more organized and social than most other dragons. We cooperate with each other, and we live by rules. As *shazil*, enforcing the rule of law was my responsibility, and I oversaw a region that held about ten other clans."

Tarrin had absolutely no doubt about that. Tarrin couldn't imagine anything being even *bigger* than Sapphire. "What happened to your children?" Tarrin asked impulsively.

"I've managed to make contact with three of them," she answered. "I've yet to find the other two, but I've yet to give up hope. The youngest are taking a very long time to come out of the shock returning to our true forms induced. The oldest of us were starting to regain ourselves before we even returned to our true forms. That was why I got smarter and learned to speak, little friend," she told him. "The younger ones are still like that, just beginning to remember their pasts. In a few days, even the hatchlings should have regained their memories, and we'll be moving back to where we belong."

"If you started out in Saranam, how did you end up on that little island out in the middle of nowhere?" Tarrin asked.

"I have no idea," she replied with a smile. A very chilling smile. "I can't remember what happened after I enacted the magic to confine me into the drake form."

Auli strode forward a few paces. "Honored dragon, may I ask a favor?" she asked.

"What is it, small one?"

"Could you come down here and let me see you up close?"

Sapphire said nothing, but lowered her head to where she was just in front of and above Auli. The Sha'Kar reached out with a trembling hand and put it on Sapphire's snout, over the lips but under the nose, touching her small diamond scales tentatively. "Her scales are very smooth," Auli told them. "And they're warm. They feel nice." She traced her finger along the seam between two scales, and that made Sapphire snort and flinch away slightly. That act made Auli stagger back in sudden fright, into Tarrin, who grabbed her and steadied her so she wouldn't fall down. The Sha'Kar finally showed fear.

"Sorry, but that tickled," the dragon told her with an amused look. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Auli laughed ruefully. "Well, I almost wet myself, but it was worth it!" she told her with another infectious laugh.

"This is Wizard magic, Sapphire?" Dar asked, who was literally climbing up onto the book to look at what was in it.

"It is," she answered. "Your Wizards would be able to read these pages, young human. It is written in the same language as theirs. Even though we dragons use it a slightly different way, Wizard magic is still Wizard magic. If you weren't a Sorcerer, you may even be able to learn it yourself."

Tarrin and Auli climbed up onto the cover of the book and peered over huge pages that looked to be made of stiff leather and looked over the page. The pages were written in glyphs that were two spans long, large glyphs that the dragon could read easily. Tarrin realized that as big as Sapphire was, if she could even manipulate a human-sized book, the writing in it would be so incredibly tiny to her that she probably wouldn't be able to make it out. The humans and Sha'Kar were like small dolls to her, easily fitting in her forepaw, and anything smaller than them would be very hard for her to scrutinize. It was like sand. Tarrin could see a grain of sand, but Sapphire probably would not be able to do so. Sand seemed grainy to him, but to someone like Sapphire, it would be as fine as the most powdered

dust, almost as fluid as water. Even now the dragon's massive bulk loomed over them. From nose to tail, Tarrin realized that the dragon was about five hundred spans long. Over half of it was tail, and about another sixty or seventy was head and neck, but that still left about a hundred and fifty spans or so worth of body. Her legs had to be at least thirty spans long each. Probably closer to forty. Everything about her was massive.

Tarrin, Auli, and Dar climbed down off the book, and the dragon entertained them with a story about her five dragon children and her home back at the border between the desert and Saranam. She told them all about how they studied magic and enjoyed their existence, about her duties as *shazil* to watch over the clans in her territory and keep them from fighting too much with the copper dragons that shared their preferred territories, and how they would watch the Selani when the nomadic peoples filed through their range. The dragons knew that the Selani knew that they were there, but they were very good neighbors. They respected the dragon's territory, moving through it quickly, and never trying to find their lairs or bother them when they did see them up on the mesas sunning themselves. Because of their amiable nature, Sapphire and her clan discouraged humans from Saranam from trying to invade the desert, as they had a penchant for doing.

"Where is your male dragon?" Auli asked. "You know, the father of the babies?"

"Males live more or less alone, Sha'Kar. Female blues don't take permanent mates. When we are ready to mate, we make it known, and allow the males to compete for our favor. The one that proves himself strongest, most intelligent, and most magically experienced earns the right to sire my clutch."

"That sounds fun," Auli said with bright eyes. "At least your kind's advanced enough not to limit yourself to the same old male all the time."

"I've had the same mate for the last few centuries, Sha'Kar," Sapphire answered. "Tenshale is the oldest, wisest male in the eastern marches. Every time I want to raise a clutch, he proves most worthy. I've grown quite fond of him," she admitted.

"Sapphire isn't your real name, is it?" Tarrin asked suddenly.

"I've grown fond of it," she smiled at him. "Before they called me Midnight because of my dark scales," she said, unfurling her wings and letting them marvel at how handsome her scales were, "but called names are changed easily. Since I keep my given name a secret, I choose how I want others to address me. When I get back, I'll let it be known that from that day forth I am to be called Sapphire, and that will be that."

"Why keep your name a secret?" Dar asked.

"A name is a powerful thing, Arakite," Sapphire answered seriously. "Especially for beings of great power, like myself. You can control someone if you know their true name and the right spells. A Wizard that knew my true name could use it as a weapon against me. No dragon will take that risk, so the only time a true name is voiced is the day we give it to our hatchlings. We then give them a called name and use that from that day forward."

"I didn't know that," Dar mused.

"Then your trip here wasn't in vain," Sapphire said, looking down at them. "No journey is for vain if you gain knowledge in the course of it."

"You're really wise, Sapphire," Tarrin said appreciatively.

"After two thousand years, I would hope so," she said with an amused look.

"*Auli!*" an enraged voice came from Auli's amulet. It was Ianelle, her mother. "*Aulienne, you come back home this instant!*" she raged. "*And while you're coming back, make yourself useful and see if you can find Tarrin! Kimmie's frantic!*"

Auli looked at Tarrin and laughed. "I think it may take me a while," she said with a wink. "I just can't seem to find you anywhere!"

"Why aren't you answering her, Auli?" Dar asked.

"Because I never do," she told him with a mischievous grin. "She knows I won't. That's why she just yells at me."

"Well, at least tell her that Tarrin's alright," Dar said. "Kimmie's worried. You can do that without giving yourself away, can't you?"

She shook her head. "If I use the amulet, my mother can track it right back and pinpoint where I am. Then she'll Teleport here so fast I won't have a chance to get away. I made that mistake once before, Dar," she grinned. "I learn from my mistakes."

"You are here without permission?" Sapphire asked intently.

"Well, we didn't think we'd need permission to visit you, honored dragon," Auli said with innocent eyes. "After all, doesn't Tarrin have the right to come see you whenever he wants?"

"You talk fast, Sha'Kar," Sapphire said with amusement. "Almost as fast as Skulker, my youngest and an endless handful for me. Always getting into trouble. You two seem cut from the same cloth." She rose up a little. "But you received orders from your mother, and you will obey them," she said bluntly. "I will see that you get back to the town."

"B-Back?" Auli stammered. "You're taking us back? You mean you're going to *fly* us there?"

"No, child," she said with a smile. "You are going to answer your mother, and *she* will get you back to town."

Auli looked a little crestfallen, but even she wasn't crazy enough to defy the dragon. She put a hand to her amulet sullenly. "Tarrin's with me, mother," she answered. "Me and him and Dar were out walking, and we decided to come visit with the honored dragon. We'll--"

Whatever they were going to do would remain a mystery, as Ianelle, tall and regal and with her blond hair and handsome face reminding Tarrin that she was definitely Auli's mother, simply *appeared* not three steps in front of them. Her eyes were very cold, very hard, and she had her hands on her hips in an aggressive posture. "*What* are you three doing over here?" she demanded.

"I told you we were going to get in trouble," Dar muttered under his breath.

"I wanted to come visit Sapphire, Misterss Ianelle, and Auli knew the way," Tarrin said quickly to deflect the formidable Sha'Kar's anger.

"Of *course* she would know the way," Ianelle said scathingly, glaring at her daughter, who now looked a little sheepish.

"They did not bother me," Sapphire announced, seeming to startle Ianelle a little. Ianelle had her back to the dragon. She turned and looked up at her over her shoulder, seeing that the blue dragon looked a little amused. "In fact, I found their visit quite enjoyable. But it sounds like they are needed at home, so you may take them home now." She fixed those huge eyes on Tarrin. "Be sure to come again, little friend. At least if we stay here much longer."

"We will be leaving tomorrow, honored dragon," Ianelle told her politely. "We will be able to carry you as well as the rest, as promised."

"Very good then. Let me know when to arrive, and I will do so."

"We will," Ianelle nodded, then turned a steely eye back on the three youths. "As for you three," she said in a stern voice, pointing at the ground at her feet. "Here. Now. Join hands with me and form a ring."

They did so, Auli looking very sullen, and the most amazing thing happened. Tarrin felt that strange feeling whenever anyone used Sorcery around him, and they were suddenly *somewhere else*. There was no sensation to it. One second he was looking at Sapphire over Ianelle's shoulder, then he was looking at the manor house where they'd been staying. Ianelle let go of Tarrin's hand, but Auli, who was holding his other hand, did not let go. Tarrin was thinking of saying something, but her hand was warm and very soft, and he rather liked the way that it felt.

"Alright, Tarrin, Kimmie wants you back in your room," Ianelle told him calmly. "As for you," she said, turning on Auli with a dark look.

"Can we wait for Kimmie with him?" she asked quickly. "It must be lonely in that room by himself. We can keep him company until she comes back."

Ianelle gave her a searching look, then nodded. "As long as I know you're not out causing trouble," she said. "But mind you, if you're not back as soon as Kimmie returns, you'll get a serious punishment. And I'll be calling over here to make sure. Fail to answer me once, and I'll lock a tracking spell on you so fast you'll think you were born with it. Understand?"

"Yes, mother," Auli said with a slight frown.

"You still need to pack your room, girl," Ianelle told her. "Remember, one trunk. Everything else you leave behind. So you'd better decide what you're going to take."

"I know," she said with a pout. "I don't think it's fair."

"It's all we have room for," she said bluntly. "Outside of books and cultural artifacts, *everyone* only gets one trunk. Even me, and I'm First on the Council. If I get one trunk, *everyone* gets one trunk," she declared adamantly.

"But we can just come back for the rest," Auli protested.

"We could, but we must leave these indulgent ways behind, daughter," she said. "We have much to do. We simply don't have time for wasting days with parties and gossip any longer. We have to return to the *katzh-dashi*, return the order to its former glory, and that's going to take time. Silly possessions and frilly things are not our way."

"They're *my* way," Auli growled under her breath.

"Now go on. I'm sure Kimmie will be back soon. We have people out searching for her."

"Where is she?" Tarrin asked.

"Out looking for you," Ianelle replied. "She was having quite a problem with it. It seems someone knows about her kind, and intentionally wiped the traces of your passing so she couldn't follow."

Dar blushed and turned away from Ianelle, hurrying towards the house.

"Well, get on, you two," she said, shooing them. "Remember Auli. Back home as soon as Kimmie returns. And I'll be checking up on you."

Auli and Dar did go with him back to his huge room, and he was glad they were there. They sat on the divans and talked about their journey, laughing like old friends. Dar found it especially funny when Auli told them about touching the dragon's snout, and how it flinched away from her. "I thought I left a dark spot on your trousers, Tarrin," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "I've never been scared like that before in my life!"

"I'd better go see Dolanna and let her know we're alright," Dar said, slapping his knees.

"She probably already--" Tarrin began, but Auli cut him off.

"That's a good idea, Dar," she told him quickly. "Besides, you never know, she may have something for you to do."

"Probably," he agreed. "I'll see you two later. I did have fun, even if we did get caught," he admitted with a laugh, then he walked towards the door.

Tarrin was a bit wary now. Auli obviously wanted to get rid of Dar, and now they were alone. She was sitting on the divan across from him, not looking like she had anything on her mind, just smiling amiably. "Do you know how to play chess?" she asked him.

"No, not really," he answered.

"Well, we can't have that!" she said with a grin. "There's a chessboard on that dresser over there. I'll teach you how to play."

And so, they sat down on the floor, on a very thick, soft fur rug near the pedestal that held the bed, and she showed him how to play chess. It was a strangely complicated game, with six different kinds of pieces that all moved according to their own specific rules. She'd started on her side of the board when she started showing him, but then scooted around to sit beside him, showing him the rules of movement from his side of the board, saying that it would make a little more sense to him to see it from his own side of the board. Tarrin found Auli's nearness just a little disconcerting, for she was sitting with her hip touching his leg, propping herself up with a hand that was placed behind him. He found it a little hard to concentrate on the rules with her so close to him. He forgot which piece was the one that moved diagonally, and she had to show him again. "Now this is the queen," she said, touching the second tallest piece. "It's the most powerful piece on the board, because it can move in any direction, as far as you want it to move. It's the strongest piece, but it's also the piece you have to take the most care to protect."

"It can move anywhere?"

"Well, in a straight line, yes," she replied. "This way, this way, or this way," she displayed, tracing her finger on the checkered board diagonally, horizontally, and vertically. "The knight is the only piece that can't move in a straight line."

"Two in one direction, then one over," he repeated the rules for the knight.

"That's right," she said, turning to look at him, but he was looking at the board. "You should always protect your queen, Tarrin, but sometimes it's worth it to gamble with it a little. Take risks," she said in a slightly throaty tone, leaning towards him. "It can throw your opponent off."

And then, to his shock, she blew gently in his ear.

He nearly jumped out of his skin, but he didn't have time to even look at her, because the door opened and Kimmie came in. Auli looked towards the door and glared at Kimmie in a most hostile manner, but her face became all sweet and light again by the time the Were-cat noticed the two of them sitting on the floor on the far side of the room.

"Where have you been, Tarrin?" she demanded in a cross tone. "I've been worried sick!"

"I needed some time outside, Kimmie, and you were busy," he said.

"You shouldn't have done that!"

"I'm not helpless, Kimmie!" he said in a loud voice. "There's nothing on this island that's going to hurt me, and I didn't go alone! Dar and Auli here went with me. We went to go visit with Sapphire, that's all!"

Kimmie gave him a long stare, but then finally nodded. "I guess I wasn't paying enough attention to you. I'm sorry," she apologized. "But I'm only doing what *I* was told to do, Tarrin. I'm not about to disobey Triana any more than you are." She looked at Auli, and then back to Tarrin, and her eyes turned strangely suspicious for a moment. "Learning how to play chess?"

He nodded, and Auli smiled up at her. "He's a fast learner," she said. "We were about to start a game."

The way she said it seemed strange to him. It was throaty, slow, almost purring, and he realized that her words were a cryptic flirtation with him, one that Kimmie wouldn't understand. "But mother said I had to come home as soon as you got back, so I'd better get going. We can play some other time, Tarrin," she said as she gracefully got up. Tarrin did so as well, and while her back was to Kimmie, she winked at him. And it was not a

wink in amusement. "You'd better practice. I play to win," she warned with a slow smile, then she sauntered out of the room like she owned it.

Kimmie watched her going with narrow eyes, and when the door closed, she came up and sat down in front of the chessboard. "If you need some company, I'll be happy to oblige," she said with a kind smile. "I'm sorry I ignored you earlier. I'll make it up to you. Want to play?"

"Well, alright," he said, sitting down. "She showed me how the move, but I think there's more to this than just knowing how they move."

"You're right. While we're waiting for dinner, I'll show you," she promised, setting up the board.

Tarrin looked over Kimmie's shoulder, towards the door. Auli had been *flirting* with him, and alot more seriously than she'd been flirting with Dar. What was she up to? She was a Sha'Kar, and he was a human. Didn't that make them too different for that kind of thing? He had to suppress a flush when he caught himself hoping that they weren't. Auli was very pretty, and very funny, and very nice...and she flirted with him. What if she *was* interested? What would he do about it?

That wasn't the right question to ask, he realized, his eyes still on the door. The question was, what would *she* do about it.

Given where they were going, when he would meet Jesmind and his daughter Jasana, he had the feeling that if Auli was serious, she was going to cause some serious friction. Kimmie seemed rather mellow, but from everything he'd heard, Jesmind was *not*. Jesmind was supposedly a firebrand, and if she laid claim on him, she may be violently opposed to Auli's little games.

Tarrin had a sinking feeling that things in the Tower were going to be very sticky.

Chapter 2

It was one of those times when there just wasn't very much to do.

They'd gotten him up early, perhaps a bit too early. The night before had been relatively boring for Tarrin, since everyone else was getting ready for the big day today. The day when the Sha'Kar were going to use powerful magic to transport all of them to Suld. The Sha'Kar had been busy packing, and since Tarrin only owned one pack, for him it took about five minutes to get ready. Triana had gone back to Suld to talk to Jesmind, so he'd been left with Kimmie most of the night...which in itself wasn't a very bad thing. Tarrin chafed at them hovering over him, but Kimmie seemed to understand how it made him feel, and strove to make his forced restriction as entertaining as possible with stories, conversation, and even games and books. Tarrin didn't understand what they were talking about most of the time, but he had the feeling that the Sha'Kar had some kind of ability to talk to the Sorcerers in Suld. But just because they could didn't mean that it was a good idea. He heard Triana telling Kimmie before she left that the Sorcerers back in Suld were still in shock that the Sha'Kar were alive, and the Sha'Kar had decided that it would be best for them to only communicate with the Sorcerers in charge over there.

That had been quite a surprise. Triana had told him rather curtly when she woke him up that because of poor health, the Keeper of the Tower, some woman named Myriam Lar, had stepped down from her position as ruler and given the position to his sister. Jenna was only thirteen years old...what business did she have being the ruler of the *katzh-dashi*? But then he remembered that she was actually fifteen, nearly sixteen, and she was one of those *sui'kun* people. The Sha'Kar said he was one, and they all fell over each other to be nice to him and ask him what he wanted them to do. They thought of these *sui'kun* people as kings or royalty or something, and some calculating part of him saw the advantage in making Jenna the Keeper. If the Sha'Kar were as quick to obey her as they were to obey him, they'd need her in that position of power to legitimize her authority in the

eyes of both the humans and the Sha'Kar. There were bound to be some problems in bringing the Sha'Kar back to the Tower after a thousand years, so maybe the Tower was taking steps to make sure that thing went as smoothly as possible. Maybe this Myriam Lar really wasn't sick. Maybe that Goddess woman had told her to step down and stand aside for Jenna, for the good of the Tower. If the woman had half the reaction to that Goddess that Tarrin did, she'd walk through fire at her request.

Of course, thinking about that gave him a headache. It delved into those areas where Tarrin's lost memory tried to bubble back up, and that invariably caused him pain. Especially every time he thought of Myriam Lar. Odds were, there was some kind of history between the two of them that the others hadn't told him about, but Tarrin couldn't remember it. He only knew that for some reason, her name sent strange feelings through him that he couldn't explain, nor could he really identify them.

There were other things to think about, though, things that made less sense and caused him as much a headache. For some reason, he was of two minds about Auli. He liked her alot, since she was alot of fun, but her blowing in his ear had completely scrambled his idea of her. He'd only known her that one day, and he'd had a great deal of fun with her. He thought of her as a good friend. But when she flirted with him that way, she seemed to cross some kind of line in his mind. He'd noticed that she was very pretty and had a very appealing figure, but hadn't thought of her that way until she went and advertised the fact that she was interested. Once she had, she'd let the chickens out of the henhouse, and now he *was* thinking about it.

And that was the core of his dilemma. He felt he had some kind of an obligation to Kimmie, because of who he had been and how she felt about him. But he wasn't that person anymore, and there was no guarantee that he ever would be again. Kimmie represented who he was, but Auli's invitation urged him to continue on as he was, to not just stop in his life and try to regain what was lost. From what he'd heard, he hadn't been a very happy or nice person, and he was just starting to consider whether or not he wanted to go back to that.

He did want his memory back, though, and once he got it, he'd look back and decide what he wanted to do. But until then, he wasn't just going

to sit and wait. There were many things to see, many things to do, many things to experience. He had to keep living, keep going. He didn't want to hurt Kimmie, but he didn't want to become stagnant as Triana wanted him to do, to just sit and do nothing, see nothing, *be* nothing until they could return him back to what they thought he was supposed to be. He did want his memory back, he wanted to know who he had been, what he had done, and what kind of life he had been trying to build for himself. He wasn't going to turn his back on who he was, because that would be dishonoring his own memory. But on the other hand, he wanted to see things, experience things as he was now, and when he got back his memory, hopefully the combination of old and new could come together and make the best decision for his future.

Auli. He liked her, and he wondered just how interested she was in him. From what Dar had told him about her last night, as the two of them played chess, Auli had been the island's hussy back when all the Sha'Kar were being mentally controlled. Was her flirting just an echo of that past, or was she truly interested in him? What level of interest did she really have? She'd flirted with Dar too, was she only interested in playing with them, or did she want a relationship? It was too much of a gray area. Tarrin wasn't going to hold her past against her, since she couldn't help it from what he'd been told. The mind control had made all the Sha'Kar act like Auli to one degree or another. He could certainly see it in them when they went out. The Sha'Kar would blush a little when they met members of the opposite sex, probably past romantic interests. The Sha'Kar weren't half as morally strait-laced as the people in Aldreth were--after all, they did bathe in company and weren't quite as set against showing skin as where he came from--but some of them had seemed to cross some line in their culture that was not to be crossed back when they were under control. He knew they were a bit embarrassed about it, but he hoped they didn't dwell on it too much. One couldn't beat one's self over the head over things over which one had no control. They should just forgive themselves and others and then move on. It would be best for all of them.

Held against her or not, Tarrin couldn't deny an attraction to Auli. She was very pretty and she had a *very* attractive figure. But until he felt more comfortable with everything, he decided that maybe it was a good idea not to pursue things with her. He'd be a friend to her, though. She was too much

fun to be with for him to avoid her. Besides, he needed to talk with her, get to know her a little so he could figure out if she was just flirting for the fun of it, or if she'd been serious. That look she gave Kimmie certainly *looked* serious, but then again, not only was she a girl, but she was a non-human girl. Girls were mystery enough, but one from another culture? One that wasn't human? She'd be ten times harder to figure out.

That seemed the best course of action.

The boredom of waiting for the Sha'Kar to get up and get ready at least gave him plenty of time to think about all that. They were all standing just outside the fences in a large open area on the outskirts of town, and they weren't alone. Excited human servants were around them, gabbing excitedly at the times to come, when they would be free of the island. All of them had agreed to serve in the Tower as they gradually adjusted to freedom, since none of them were prepared to deal with the radical shift in lifestyle that would come with freedom. At least they were wise enough to understand that. There were also many Sha'Kar there, gathered with their trunks stacked in the center of the mass. The youngers looked extremely unhappy, since they were about to leave a life of pampered luxury for the demanding life that would come in the Tower.

That had been a rather amusing little event. Some of the youngers had actually tried to rebel the night before, stating flatly that the island was their home, and they were *not* going to leave it. The elders among them had debated, argued, shouted, even ordered them to give up on the idea, but they were all adamant. They were happy on the island, and they were not about to leave. They would continue with their lives of parties and fun, and not an elder was going to tell them that they couldn't do it. Ianelle, that clever fox, gave in to their demand and told them that they were more than welcome to remain behind, where they would be forever exiled from the culture of the Sha'Kar, and not be visited. For *any* reason. And then she told them quite absently that since the servants were technically still slaves, and they were owned by the patron or matron of each house, who all happened to be *elders*, that meant that all the servants would be leaving in the morning. All the serving girls, all the cleaners, all the pages, all the farmers, all the food gatherers, *every single human servant*. The youngers were more than welcome to remain behind, but they'd have to feed, clothe, and support

themselves. They could have their grand houses and their parties, but not much else.

It had been a devastatingly effective tactic. Faced with the prospect of having to grub in the dirt to feed themselves, the youngers had the wind sucked right out of their sails. And the human Sorcerers that had sided with the youngers quickly jumped ship, knowing that any human left behind, Sorcerer or not, would be seen as a servant in the making. That ended that rebellion faster than any other thing possibly could have done so.

For that reason, the Sha'Kar around them weren't all that good company. The youngest looked very put out and surly, and the elders all looked very aggravated with their children. That gave the place a feeling of hostility that put Kimmie and Triana a bit on edge, making them pull in a little closer to Tarrin, which made *him* hostile. The others with them hadn't come out yet, staying behind with Arlan, Iselde, and Allyn to make sure they'd gotten everything from their manor house that they wanted to take. The only one there was Dar, who in the days since his loss of memory had become one of his closer friends. He liked all the others, and Allia was probably the one he liked the most, but Dar was about his age, and he just felt comfortable with him. Besides, Allia spent alot of time letting Allyn fawn over her. Tarrin had never seen a man more totally enslaved by a woman than Allyn was with Allia. Allia seemed to enjoy it, and Allyn wouldn't take his eyes off of her even if she told him to.

Tarrin looked around and realized that he didn't see any babies among the Sha'Kar. There were plenty of very young Sha'Kar, no more than teens, but very few children and no infants. The youngest he'd seen looked to be about a six year old boy.

Only about half of the Sha'Kar had arrived, around two hundred or so standing or milling around on the grass, muttering or talking with one another. Tarrin stood near to Kimmie and Triana and watched them, listened to them as the older ones talked about the work to come and the satisfaction and eagerness to return to the life so long abandoned, and the younger ones growled and sulked over losing their homes, losing their decadent, pampered lifestyles. Though he'd been there, Tarrin couldn't remember the Tower, so he had no idea what kind of place was waiting for them there.

And he was interested in it. It was just one of the many things he was interested in learning.

Tarrin spotted the others, helping the three Sha'Kar with them carry out five large trunks. Azakar carried two, and each of the others was being carried by a Sha'Kar and one of their friends. Dar came right up to him with his single pack slung over his shoulder and greeted him, and they stood together and watched as the trunks were set with the others and the group reassembled. Tarrin saw the remaining Sha'Kar converging on the field from around the large, spaced town, moving in large groups, and he realized that they'd be leaving very soon.

"It looks like we're about to go," Dar noted, mirroring his thoughts.

"It's about time," Tarrin said in Arakite. "Triana got me up at sunrise."

"I know, Dolanna woke me up not long after," Dar said, switching to Arakite himself. "A little packing and a whole lot of waiting."

"Truly. They didn't even have anything to eat," he complained. "Triana had to use magic to get us food today."

"We'll live," Dar chuckled. "They'll have all the food you can eat in the kitchens at the Tower."

"I'm going to feel lost there," Tarrin said. "Except that they won't let me get lost."

"It's a big place, Tarrin," Dar said with a grin. "It's *easy* to get lost."

"Good," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

A human woman stepped up to them, and it was a very strange looking woman. She had *blue* hair. She was very tall, buxom, wearing a dress that looked to be made of millions of tiny little blue scales. Her eyes were amber, like Keritania's, and there was a sinister quality to them that put Tarrin just a little on edge. She smiled when she saw Tarrin, and reached out and took his hand. "I see you're well, little friend," she said, and Tarrin recognized Sapphire's voice.

"Sapphire?" he said in surprise. "Is that you?"

"Do you like it?" she asked, turning around for his benefit. "It was the best spell I could find on such short notice. Am I looking human enough?"

"Well, the blue hair and the yellow eyes are a bit unusual, but yes, you do look human. That's a magic spell?"

She nodded. "Dragons find it useful to sometimes go see what the humans are up to, and it's much easier to move around like this. When we arrive in our true forms, it always causes a panic for some reason. You humans are such jittery little things," she said absently.

"I think *little* is the key word there, Sapphire," Tarrin said. "It's hard to be nice to someone when they can step on you by accident."

"Probably," she said. "Was your night well?"

"A little boring, but otherwise fine," he said. "Are you going to be staying in the Tower?"

She nodded again. "For a few days. I'm still trying to track down my two youngest, and it'll be easier if I stay in one place. Once I find them, and I'm sure you're going to be well, I'll return to my lair."

"I'll miss you," Tarrin said impulsively, and it was accompanied by a slight flash of memory, him holding her in his arms, cuddling her, and that also brought a small shock of pain.

"I'll miss you too, little friend," she said, squeezing the hand in hers gently. "I never thought I'd feel so much kinship with a biped. The world is a funny place sometimes."

"If I told my friends one of my best friends was a dragon, they'd lock me in the cellar," he said with a wry smile. "But from what they tell me, I had all sorts of very strange friends. Wikuni, Selani, Knights, Sorcerers, Wizards, Amazons, Faeries, Were-cats, even Demons and dragons. I wish I could remember it all," he fretted.

"Give that crazy Wizard a chance, Tarrin," she said sedately. "He seems a bit addled, but I heard his mutterings and carrying on when he examined me. He's an *excellent* Wizard. I think he's better than I am, and that's no slight complement."

"They say Phandebrass is good," Tarrin agreed. "I haven't seen him for a couple of days, though. I think he's still on the ship."

"Where is that Sha'Kar that was with you?"

"Probably being punished by her mother," Dar snickered.

"She seems the type," Sapphire agreed with a smile. "I can't help but like her, though."

"Me too," Tarrin agreed.

The rest of the Sha'Kar arrived, and then a complement of about thirty Sha'Kar and five or six human Sorcerers split from the host and headed south, towards the ship. Ianelle stood up on one of the trunks, and her voice carried all the way across the field. "Everyone gather as close to the trunks as you can," she called. "The less space we take up, the easier this is going to be. Tight together now, don't be afraid to bump into someone!"

"Well, this should be fun," Camara Tal grunted from the far side, picking up her pack and her shield.

"Let's pull in," Triana ordered the others.

The large host of people gathered closely together around the pile of trunks, as Ianelle ordered, and Tarrin felt a little jostled and just a little uncomfortable for some reason. He'd never been squashed up with people like that before, and it wasn't an entirely fun experience. Kimmie was pushed up against his back, Triana just in front of him, and Dar and Sapphire were on either side of him.

"Do you think they're waiting for us at the Tower?" Tarrin asked Dar.

"I think they are. Ianelle's been talking to your sister through the Weave. I think they already told her where to have us appear on the grounds."

"I wonder what's going to happen," Tarrin said nervously.

"Me too. Guess we're going to find out," Dar said with a grin.

After everyone was scrunched up together, Sha'Kar and some of the human Sorcerers surrounded the area around them. They all looked towards Ianelle, and when she raised both her hands, all the others did the same. Tarrin felt something very strange happen then, some kind of magic that seemed to flow between all the Sorcerers taking part in the spell. All their hands suddenly began to glow with a strange wispy light, and Tarrin felt the magic build up all around them. For a moment, he got the impression that there were a whole bunch of little strings or threads or something flying

around them, bobbing and weaving around one another so fast that it was hard to keep track of them, and again he saw those strange faint white lines that seemed to be all over the place flare up. Keritanima told him that he was seeing the Weave, but he ignored it most of the time. But now all those lines seemed much clearer, much more visible, even overlaying over the real world instead of the real world overlaying them.

It was terribly anticlimatic. One moment he was watching Ianelle's hands, which were glowing more brightly than all the others, and he could see the forest behind her. Then the next second, her hands and the glow didn't change, but in a fast shimmer, the area behind her *did*. There was absolutely no sense of moving, no flash of light, no sign of any kind that they had just done something, mainly because the sun had jumped across the sky in dramatic fashion. Where it had been early morning a second ago, now the sun was at its zenith, marking it as noontime. But he could see behind her, and it wasn't the woods. It was a huge tower made of white stone, stretching almost impossibly high into the sky, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of spans. That huge spire was surrounded by six smaller towers, also of white stone, and some of them had slender bridges spanning from them to the main Tower so high over their heads that he couldn't see if there was anyone on top of them.

Tarrin was quite shocked by it, and the silence from the host told him that he wasn't the only one. He could do nothing but gape up at the Tower like a rabbit staring down the gullet of a wolf, awed at how impossibly high the thing was. Pristine and white, shining in the summer sun, the Tower was a gigantic monument to the lost power and majesty of the *katzh-dashi*. How could anyone look up at it and not feel overwhelmed?

"I never thought I'd see it again," he heard one of the Sha'Kar say in a reverent tone. "After so long, we have come home."

Home. He could see how a place like that could be home to so many. It was so *big*!

They weren't alone. He realized that as he looked down the Tower's wall, and saw a large complement of robed humans standing between them and the Tower. In the very center of them, flanked by Sorcerers in colored robes that seemed to mark some kind of rank, was Jenna. But this wasn't the Jenna he remembered. This was a much older, taller, and filled out Jenna.

Not the pre-teen girl he'd left behind in Aldreth, but a very pretty young woman with long dark hair falling over her shoulders straight and true, curling up as it touched her shoulders. She had grown into a very pretty young lady, with dark, full lashes, dark liquid eyes that seemed to shine, and her mother's cheeks. She stood regally, as if she owned everything and everyone, wearing a simple dress made of some kind of sheer fabric, like silk or satin, but then she abandoned that austere poise when she saw Tarrin, crying out his name and running forward. Tarrin stepped up and nearly got bowled over when she slammed into him, hugging him tightly and calling out his name over and over again.

"Look at you!" Tarrin said with a smile, pushing her out to arm's length. "You're almost full grown!"

"Look at you!" she said with a teary smile. "You look just like you did when you left! Triana said you can't remember anything at all. Is that true?"

He nodded. "Phandebrass is trying to cure me," he told her. "Is he here?"

"He's coming with the ship," Triana told him from behind as she looked down at them.

"They said you're the Keeper now," Tarrin said.

She nodded with a grin. "That's me. The regal ruler of this realm," she said with a wink. "Not that I take it very seriously. The Council keeps trying to tell me what to do, but they're going to find out that I don't think this is just for show. The Goddess told me that it's *my* throne, and I'll run this Tower as I see fit, not how they want me to." She looked around. "Where's the First? What's her name? Ianelle?"

Ianelle stepped up to her and gave her a very deep curtsy. "Honored one, as promised, we have come home," she said with a nod, in the most formal mode of Sha'Kar speech. "Is all prepared?"

"I've got everything ready for you," she replied in semi-formal Sha'Kar, a sign to Ianelle that she preferred to do without the flowery, formal speech. "The West and Southwest towers are yours, and as you requested, the servant staff there has been given those orders you passed to me. For now, until we sort things out, your Council is going to sit with the current one, and after we adjust, we'll choose a new Council."

"Those are good choices. Small chambers, frugal. That's what we need," she said with a slight smile. "Perfect."

"You've been here before?" Jenna asked in surprise.

"I was once on the Council at this very Tower," she said with a nod. "I was the Divine seat."

"Well, I'm sure we can sort things out. Do your people speak Sulasian?"

"Only some, and it is the Sulasian of a thousand years ago," she said with a rueful smile. "I'm sure we have terrible accents, but we will adjust."

"Well, you're going to have to learn," Jenna said with a frown. "Only about twenty of the Sorcerers here have managed to learn Sha'Kar. All of the Council does, as well as some of the more prominent Sorcerers among us. But all of them are learning as quickly as they can."

"We will help them along, and they will help us along with Sulasian," Ianelle said. "Sha'Kar was always the common tongue within the walls of the Tower."

"Until we can get the language barrier out of the way, I'll assign those *katzh-dashi* that have learned enough Sha'Kar to communicate to you to act as translators. Please don't be offended, but your translators may not know which form to use. If they speak to you informally, don't take it the wrong way."

"We appreciate it, honored one, and don't worry. We fully understand that Sha'Kar is a second language for them, and we will be very patient. May we settle in now?"

"Please, don't let me stop you," Jenna said with a warm smile. "You know where the Council chambers are?"

"Yes, honored one."

"When you get settled in, let me know, and we'll seat both Councils and have a conference. It's going to be nice to speak to you face to face for a change."

"Speaking in the Heart has its own charm, but there is much to be said for face to face conversation," Ianelle agreed. "It shouldn't take us long to

move our trunks into the towers and assign chambers. Two hours, I would say. May I call on you then?"

"Ianelle, you're the First. You can call on me any time you feel it necessary," Jenna told her calmly. "My door is always open for you."

"You honor me, honored one," Ianelle said with a curtsy. "By your leave?"

"You don't have to ask me for permission to withdraw, Ianelle," Jenna smiled.

"You are the honored one, Keeper," Ianelle said brusquely. "To us, you are a queen. We will treat you as one."

Jenna fretted. "I was afraid of that," she said. "Well, if that's the way it is, then that's the way it is. You're dismissed, Ianelle. I look forward to getting to know you."

"And I you, honored one," she said, giving her one more curtsy, then scurrying off to bark commands to the Sha'Kar.

"Queen, eh?" Tarrin said with a smile.

"That's right," she said primly, tossing her hair a bit. "So you'd better treat me like the queen I am, or I'll throw you in the dungeon."

"Yah yah yah," Tarrin retorted, slapping her lightly on the arm. "To me, you're just my little sister."

"Well, come on then, big brother," Jenna said with a smile as she took his hand. "Let's go in. Jesmind is bouncing off the walls to see you."

"Why didn't she come out here?"

"She didn't want to cause a scene," Jenna winked.

"Is she really that upset?" Tarrin asked nervously. From what he'd heard of Jesmind, she was emotional, short-tempered, and somewhat high-strung. He'd been worrying about meeting her for a while, because he had no idea what she was going to do when he met her face to face.

"Not really," Jenna laughed. "She just didn't want to bring Jasana out here. She was afraid that *Jasana* may cause a scene."

Jenna paused to greet the others warmly, and that told Tarrin that she knew them. Dolanna and Dar bowed to her, reminding him yet again that Jenna was now technically over him, that she was very much different from the little girl that still existed in his memory. Keritanima didn't bow to her, but from the way they talked, it was obvious that they knew each other. Keritanima was a queen herself, and Tarrin wasn't sure what kind of protocols existed for when one monarch met another, and those monarchs happened to be friends. If there were any.

It was times like this that Tarrin felt his loss of memory most keenly, looking at Jenna, watching her talk to the others. They all knew each other, they all knew so many things that he'd forgotten. How did Jenna come to know Keritanima? When did they meet? Were they friends, or were they just being nice to each other? He saw Jenna hug Allia like a sister, and saw the happiness in Allia's eyes. When did Allia meet Jenna, and why was she so friendly with her? Allia rarely showed that kind of emotion, he'd come to find out. She was a very cool, reserved woman, only showing emotion when she was with him--when her uncertainty and pain over what happened to him was evident in her eyes--and when she was with Keritanima or Allyn. But even then she didn't show much if there were others around. When she was alone with Tarrin, or with Keritanima or Allyn, she acted alot differently than she did any other time. But she would show emotion to Jenna. That meant that she truly favored his sister...but when did they meet? How long had they known one another?

He wanted to *know*. It drove him crazy that all those things that had happened were buried in his mind, and it was being denied to him. It was an entire lifetime of experiences and adventures locked away, and even though there were things there that he probably wouldn't want to remember, what he would gain would more than make up for what it would cost him to remember. He felt lost like he was, surrounded by people who knew everything, while he floundered around behind them, depending on them for almost everything.

And if any one thing ate at him more, it was that. Tarrin was a fiercely independent young man, having been cut loose from his parents' watchful eye when he was twelve. They had trusted him to be careful, and he hadn't violated that trust more than a few hundred times. But they'd never caught him. He hated having them hovering around him, but he hated the fact that

he had to depend on them even more than that. To someone like him, who was so used to doing for himself, being by himself, managing to make it by himself, being dependent on another was humiliating, aggravating, and intolerable.

There was very little that could be done right now, but he'd feel alot better after he established a little space for himself. Once he learned his way around the Tower, he'd feel more secure. And he knew that there was a fight coming over it, but he was going to demand his own room. He liked the Were-cats, but their stifling overprotectiveness had just gotten too irritating. It was a big Tower, and he was sure they could find him a room somewhere to himself. And since it was the Tower, they'd have absolutely no reason not to give him that room. It was one of the safest places in the world, the Tower was. He would be surrounded by Sorcerers, Knights, and servants, all of whom would keep him from getting lost and keep a wary eye out for intruders. Triana would have no valid excuse to giving him his own room. And if she refused, well, there were ways around that. He wasn't quite so intimidated by her now. She said she loved him, and he could use that as a weapon against her if necessary.

Holding Jenna's hand, his sister led him away from the Sha'Kar gathering with the others. Tarrin looked around and saw that though there were Sorcerers and servants standing around the Sha'Kar, there wasn't a large greeting party there. He asked Jenna about that, and his sister chuckled before she responded. "It was Ianelle's orders," she told him. "She doesn't want any fuss raised at all over their arrival. The Council did want to have a ceremony, but Ianelle refused."

"It's because she's trying to break the younger Sha'Kar of their habits," Keritanima told him. "She doesn't want them getting any idea that they're special or anything like that. Ianelle's even making them carry their own trunks, without using Sorcery or anything," she added with a snicker. "Ianelle can be brutal."

"She has alot of bad training to undo," Triana snorted. "I'd take a much more direct approach."

"I think she'd like to keep them alive, Triana," Kimmie said mildly.

"They can have more," Triana shrugged.

Jenna led him so fast that he didn't have much chance to take in things. They approached a side entrance of the main Tower and entered into a wide, carpeted hallway that had white stone walls and strange globes of light that seemed to hover in midair just at the ceiling. They gave him a strange feeling, and he realized they were products of Sorcery. Servants and Sorcerers stopped in the tracks and bowed or curtsied to Jenna, who looked a little uncomfortable about it, nodding to them as she led them past. They then reached a huge circular staircase and went around and around and around as they climbed it, so high that Tarrin was starting to feel just a little tired after a while. "Where are we going?" Tarrin asked with a little huff.

"Out of shape, brother?" Jenna teased.

"I didn't expect to climb up this far," he admitted.

"We're almost there," she assured him. "Just two more floors."

That reminded him of where they were going, and he started getting nervous again. He was going to meet another one of these Were-cat girlfriends of his, and this one had a daughter by him. A daughter, a child of his own. It was almost unbelievable. He wondered what she looked like, he wondered how she acted. He wondered if he would remember her when he saw her. If he didn't, he hoped that it wouldn't make her cry. He didn't want to upset her. They'd told him that she was as big as a seven year old, even though she wasn't even two. He was curious about that. Thinking about Were-cat children made him glance at Kimmie, whose belly was just starting to expand a little to show signs of her own pregnancy.

He was so caught up in worrying that he was a little surprised when they stopped before a large, ornately decorated door. Jenna wasted no time in opening it, revealing a large sitting room with a fireplace and three couches. Tarrin was pushed into the room from behind by Kimmie, who just grinned at him, and when he looked back into the room he saw them.

There was no doubt who was who, since they'd been described to him in detail. The tallest one was Jesmind, and he was amazed at how pretty she was, looking like the graven image of a younger Triana. She was her mother's daughter, that was for sure, but she had a thick mane of very wild red hair, poofing up at the top of her head and tumbling down her back in massive waves, and her fur was white. She was even taller than he was,

wearing a simple white linen shirt and canvas breeches like what sailors wore, and her expression looked intent, but he wasn't quite sure what it meant. The smaller one was Jula, his--what did they call it?--*bond-daughter*. She too was rather pretty, with a sharp chin and a pert little nose, but her fur was black, and her blond hair was tied behind her in a single thick tail. She wore a sleeveless doublet of sorts and a pair of black trousers, and her expression was very guarded. The child had to be Jasana, and if Jesmind was the image of Triana, then Jasana was the image of her mother. She hugged her leg shyly, a darlingly adorable little girl with white fur like her mother and strawberry blond hair, wearing a vest-like half-shirt that left her midriff bare and tattered leather breeches that had been given the rough side of her claws.

Dislodging her daughter, Jesmind charged across the room before Tarrin had much chance to get past the door, and Tarrin found himself swallowed up in her arms, face crushed against upper chest as she literally picked him up and squeezed the air out of him. She was half a head or so taller than him, and he was a very tall young man, but she seemed much bigger when she hauled him off the floor with absolutely no effort, threatening to break his ribs.

"You're going to break his ribs, girl!" Triana snapped quickly. "Ease off!"

"I'm sorry," she said in a strangled tone, setting him down and putting her paw-like hands on his face, his chest, his arms, feeling him for injury. "I'm *so* relieved you're back, my mate," she told him with her heart in her eyes. "Even though you come back to me a little indisposed. Any word from that crazy Wizard yet, mother?"

"Give him time, daughter," Triana replied. "This isn't an easy problem to solve." She came over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Tarrin, as you may have guessed, this is Jesmind. My daughter, and one of your mates. Do you remember anything?"

Tarrin looked at her, and he *did* recognize her. This was definitely the woman who attacked him in Torrian. He didn't feel any fear, however. They told him that it had been that collar controlling her, and he remembered the collar. He'd noticed she was pretty then, even while he was trying to avoid getting killed. Seeing her with clothes on and not infuriated drove the fact

home that she was very pretty. But outside of that, there was no memory, only a short flash, seeing her in the kitchen back at home, if that was possible. The pang of pain that accompanied that made him wince just a bit, which made her put her paws to his head, like a mother checking a scrape on a child. He *felt* like a child, looking up at her like that. "I remember her," Tarrin said. "But only from Torrian."

"It's a start," Triana grunted.

Tarrin felt a tugging at his belt. He looked down, and realized that Jasana had crept up on him and was tugging to get his attention. He looked down at her and marvelled at how cute she was, but he couldn't remember her. There was a flash, though, looking down at the top of her head as she turned the pages of a book in her lap. "Are you my papa?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"They tell me I am," he told her in a serious voice, kneeling down and looking into her eyes. "Did they tell you that I'm not like I was before?"

She nodded. "Mama said you lost your memory and that you were changed into a human. I think you look stupid like that, papa," she said seriously, looking him up and down. "You need to be you again."

"I guess I do look a little strange to you," he chuckled ruefully. He struggled to remember this darling child, anything at all, but he drew nothing but a blank. Only that one flash of memory, obviously looking down on her from behind as she was reading from a book. But despite not knowing her, just knowing that she was his daughter did make him feel something for her. A protectiveness if not a love, at least not yet. This was *his* child, and even if he couldn't remember her, he had a duty to her. Even if he couldn't remember her, even if he was an entirely different species now, he was going to try to be a father to her.

"Do you really have to be human?" she asked. "Mama said not to bite you, or I'd get in big, big trouble. Doesn't that mean that if I did, you'd be alright again?"

"No, he won't, cub," Triana warned. "He needs to get his memory back before we can change him back. If we changed him back before that, he'll get sick. You don't want him to get sick, do you?"

"No," she said hedgingly.

"Then remember, cub. *No biting*. You bite him, and you'll be in so much trouble that you'll forget what it was like when you weren't. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Gramma," she sulked.

"I'll have your word, cub," Triana said in a blunt tone. "I know you too well to trust a statement like that. Promise. No biting. I want to hear it."

Jasana actually glared at Triana for a long moment, then she lowered her eyes. "I promise I won't bite papa," she finally said, though it was very reluctant.

Tarrin was surprised. Was this little girl that dangerous? So dangerous that Triana forced a promise out of her? Tarrin knew what promises meant to Were-cats, so making her promise was setting it in stone that she wouldn't do it. Would she really have tried?

Then he realized that she was just a *child*. Children had a much different concept of the world than adults did. She would probably be more than capable of biting him if she felt that him being as he was was wrong.

"We're not there yet," Triana said. "No letting your spittle or your blood touch him in any way, and no touching any cuts or open wounds your father may have. Promise."

With another short glare, Jasana promised not to do any of those things. Tarrin could see the defeat in Jasana's eyes with those promises. Triana had just cut the legs out of from under any plan Jasana may have had to change him back. He was a little surprised that she would have thought of it, but Triana's words told him that it was in her character.

The other Were-cat, Julia, stepped up to him. He stood up and was surprised when she gave him a gentle hug, patting him on the back. "It's good to see you again, Tarrin, even if you are like this," she smiled.

"You're Julia, right?"

She nodded. "Your bond-daughter. I take it you don't remember me?"

"I'm sorry, but no," he said with a sigh. And he didn't. Not even a flash of memory, nothing at all.

"Well, don't worry about it," she smiled. "I'm sure they'll find a way to get your memory back. Until then, I'd be happy to get to know you all over again."

For some reason, that statement relaxed him quite a bit. He felt much more comfortable with Jula than he did with that penetrating gaze that Jesmind was giving him.

"Well, I'm sure we can make you at home, Tarrin," Jesmind told him. "I-
-"

"I'm sorry," Tarrin told her. "No offense, Jesmind, but I'd like to have a room to myself until I get my memory back. I hope it doesn't offend you."

Jesmind looked a little taken aback, but then she seemed to understand. "You don't remember us at all, do you?" she asked with sad eyes.

"I'm sorry, but no," he admitted.

"Well, we can put you in Jasana's room," Jesmind said. "She can sleep with me."

Tarrin screwed up his courage, rising up to his full height, and then said it. "I want my *own* room," he said firmly. "Like not in this apartment."

That got a reaction. Both Jesmind and Triana snapped at him almost at the same time that there was no way that they were going to let him out like that. "No way you go around without someone watching over you," Triana grated as Jesmind rambled "you think you're going to wander around in this condition, you're crazy!"

But it was Jenna who rescued him from having to shout at the Were-cat females. "I think Tarrin does need a little space," she said calmly, but in a brisk tone that brooked no argument. "You want an apartment like this one, brother?" she asked.

"Nothing quite this grand," he replied calmly, relieved that someone was going to side with him. "Just a room somewhere."

"There's an empty chamber beside mine," Dar offered.

"It is just down the hall from me," Dolanna added. "I assure you that I will keep an eye on him for you, Mistress Triana."

"Well then, there we go," Jenna smiled, then she fixed Triana with a very stern look. "Dar, why don't you take Tarrin down and show him his new room? In fact, why don't all of you drop off your things in your rooms, then we can all go get some lunch."

"You mean breakfast," Dar said.

"Lunch," she said with a smile. "Remember the time difference, Dar. It's noon here."

"Oh. I forgot about that."

"I would like to get something to eat," Keritanima agreed. "I haven't had a thing to eat all day."

Both Triana and Jesmind looked a bit put out that the subject had been changed on them so quickly. "I'm not letting Tarrin roam like this," she said flatly. "In this conditon, he's all but helpless."

That caused Tarrin's pride to rise up. "I can do for myself, Jesmind," he said with a short look. "I'm sorry to break it to you Were-cats, but I'm *not* helpless, and I *don't* need protecting."

Jesmind actually looked a bit chagrined, but Triana's expression didn't change. "If you're taking that room, fine. But I'll be there," she declared.

"No, Triana, you won't," Jenna told her bluntly. "This is the Tower, if you recall. He'll be quite safe here, so long as he doesn't leave the grounds."

"Who are you to order me around, girl?" Triana said with an ominous glare at Jenna.

But Jenna didn't seem to be very impressed. "I'm the Keeper, Triana," she replied in a stiff tone. "If you don't recall, you happen to be *my guests*. If you don't feel that you need to obey me within the boundaries of my own Tower, you're more than welcome to leave at any time."

It hung there for a long moment, as the Were-cat matron and the young woman, barely half her height, locked gazes and refused to look away. But then Triana blinked, and her stiff posture softened slightly. "As you say," she growled in acknowledgement.

There were more than a couple of shocked expressions among them. None of them had ever seen Triana bow to *anyone's* authority before. Even

though Tarrin had no memory of Triana, even he understood that he just witnessed something along the lines of the sun rising in the west, or the Skybands turning sideways in the sky.

To his surprise, Tarrin realized that that had settled the matter. Jesmind's hostile expression softened, then she glanced at Jasana and her eyes became calculating for a moment.

"Now, let's all get settled in, and then have some lunch," Jenna said briskly, so the silence didn't fester in Triana's mind. "Dolanna, Dar, make sure Tarrin finds the main dining room," Jenna said with a smile. "Let's all meet there in an hour, alright?"

There was a rumble of assent, and then the others began to file out. But Tarrin hesitated to say goodbye to the Were-cats, to make sure they weren't very mad at him. "I'm sorry, but I just need some space to myself," he explained to Kimmie as the others listened. "You've been hovering over me ever since I woke up, and if you didn't know, that really aggravates me."

"I should have known, it aggravated you before," Triana grunted. "Alright, cub. If you want a little space, we'll give it to you. But you'll still come sit with us and spend time with your daughter," she declared.

"I'm not abandoning you all," he said with a laugh. "And I want to get to know my daughter and my, uh, girlfriends. I just want my own room, that's all."

"Actually, it may be for the best," Jesmind said calmly, glancing at Jasana again. "All this has to be rather traumatic. And it's not like you're going to move across the city."

"Exactly," he said with a nod. That wasn't what he expected from Jesmind, but it warmed him to her rather quickly. If she was willing to see his side of it, maybe there was hope that they could be good friends. "You can come see me whenever you want. I'm not going to shut you out."

Jesmind tapped Triana on the shoulder, then nodded towards Tarrin. Triana nodded. "Jula, why don't you and Kimmie sit with Jasana a bit," Triana ordered. "We're going to go with Tarrin to find his room."

"Sure, Triana," Kimmie said quickly, picking up Jasana. "Hey there, halfling," Kimmie said with a grin. "Want to meet your brother, or sister, or

whatever it's going to be?"

"Mama said you were having a baby," Jasana told her. "Will you come back, papa?"

"We'll see each other at lunch, Jasana," Tarrin told her.

"Alright."

Dolanna and Dar led Tarrin and the two Were-cats out of the room, then back down the stairs. "I don't like the look in Jasana's eyes," Jesmind explained to Triana as they descended. "I think putting Tarrin out of her easy reach may be a good idea. You know how she is."

"I know too well," Triana grunted.

"Giving Tarrin his own room is going to keep Jasana's evil little mind from dwelling on it too long, and besides, I think he really does need a little space of his own. We're all strangers to him, and I think it would be uncomfortable for him to live with us."

Jesmind *did* understand. He nodded with a relieved expression, and impulsively reached out and took her hand, feeling the soft-rough pad on her palm on his fingertips. "Is Jasana really that bad?" he asked.

"Yes," both the Were-cats said in unison.

Tarrin laughed. "I think I like her already," he admitted.

"She can be so sweet and adorable that everyone loves her when she wants to be, but when she wants something, there's no such thing as going too far," Jesmind explained. "She's a real handful to manage."

"It sounds like it," Tarrin agreed. Jesmind squeezed his hand very gently, and she smiled down at him when he looked at her. He decided that he liked Jesmind right about then. She wasn't half as bad as the others had made her out to be. "I guess there's little doubt that she's my daughter," Tarrin chuckled. "Mother always said my children would be impossible to control."

"Ah, then it's all your fault," Jesmind grinned.

"You were just as impossible when you were a cub, daughter," Triana told her. "If anything, Jasana's the fault of *both* of you."

Tarrin tuned the others out a moment as Dolanna told Jesmind about the Sha'Kar to be very, very relieved. He thought that Triana and Jesmind were going to fight him about him wanting his own room, but thankfully, Jenna had intervened on his behalf, and Jesmind understood better than he thought she would. It wasn't that he didn't like the Were-cats, or he wanted to avoid them, it was just that he didn't *know* them. He wanted space, a little privacy for himself, and a chance to come to terms with this strange situation without someone looking over his shoulder every moment of every day.

He was still a bit surprised over Jasana, but he guessed that he shouldn't have been. Kimmie described her to him, and her thinking about biting him to turn him Were would definitely be within her character. He found that he was very much looking forward to seeing her at lunch, and sitting with her afterward and spending time with her. She was his daughter, after all, and he wanted to get to know her.

"...don't think they're going to be much of a problem," he heard Dolanna saying as he started paying attention again. "The youngers are a bit rebellious, but they are Sha'Kar. I think that when they get accustomed to the daily routines in the Tower, they will find them to be not nearly as bad as they believe. The respect and preferential treatment they will receive from the human *katzh-dashi* will soothe their egos enough for them to meld with the Tower customs."

"As long as it doesn't make their heads big," Triana grunted in reply. "Ianelle's going to have to pay close attention to the wildest of the children."

"She won't have to look far," Dar laughed. "Her daughter has to be one of the wildest."

"I heard all sorts of stories about her," Triana chuckled humorlessly. "If even half of them are true, I'm shocked Ianelle doesn't have gray hair."

"Here you are, Tarrin. Your room," Dar said as they stopped in front of a large oak door with a bronze handle. He opened it and stepped aside just enough for Tarrin to look in, and he found himself staring into a rather large bedchamber with a big four-poster bed dominating the left wall. It had a stand on either side of it, the curtains tied at the posts, and there was a huge chest at its foot. There was a writing desk on the right wall, directly across

from the bed, and there was a pair of bureaus on the far wall, both to the left of a glass-paned door that led out onto what looked to be a balcony of sorts. There was an actual full-length mirror in the corner behind the bed, a real silvered glass one that had be dreadfully expensive. Tarrin stepped in just enough to see a washstand on the same wall as the door, with a very expensive-looking porcelain pitcher and washbasin, white with elegant wavering blue lines circling the lip of the basin and the neck of the pitcher. A glowglobe hovered over the foot of the bed, in the exact center of the ceiling, shining milky white light down into the room.

"Wow," Tarrin said in surprise. It was *big*. Much larger than his room back home, and he had the largest room in the house, since it was the attic. The furniture all looked antique, Shacèan in style, with sculpted, curved legs on the chairs and burnished, tapering posts on the bed. Even the furniture looked expensive.

"It's not half as nice as our apartment," Jesmind sniffed. "You sure you don't want to stay with us?"

"I thought you said you wanted to separate me from Jasana for a while," Tarrin reminded her.

"It sounded like a good idea at the time," Jesmind grunted. "You belong with us, my mate. If this is what you want, I'll agree to it, but I want you to know that I don't like it."

"I'm sorry that you don't like it, but I need some space to myself, Jesmind. I'm not used to being so stacked up with people." Tarrin dropped his pack on the bed and sat down on it tentatively. It was a feather mattress, almost criminally soft. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do with all this space. I felt absolutely lost in that room back on the island."

"You could get lost in that room," Triana snorted.

"I think Tarrin could use some time to settle in," Dolanna announced. "Dar's room is just to the left as you come out of the door, and my room is at the end of the passage past Dar's room, dear one. If you need us, we will be there."

"Alright," Tarrin said with a nod.

"We'll see you at lunch, cub," Triana told him with a level look. "If you need me, just call my name. No matter where I am, I'll hear it, and I'll be here before the sound dies off."

"Even if I'm just saying your name?" he asked.

She nodded. "So don't name me unless you want me to come to you," she warned.

"Alright, Tri-uh, mother," he said.

"See you in a bit, my mate," Jesmind told him, leaning in and kissing him on the cheek chastely. Her lips felt strange, and it triggered another flash of memory, one that was rather intimate. Something about Jesmind kissing him.

They all said their farewells, and Tarrin closed the door behind him, leaned against it, and sighed in relief. All in all, it went better than he expected. Nobody fought about it--at least not too much--and what was more important, he'd gotten to meet Jesmind and Jasana. Jesmind wasn't half as bad as he thought she would be, and all in all, he rather liked her. He wasn't sure if she was just acting to try to keep him at ease or not, but regardless of why, he liked her. Jasana was adorable, and he found the idea of being her father pretty good. She was smart, cute, and he rather fancied her. She sounded like a real handful, but in actuality, he preferred having a child like that. At least one knew what to expect from a child like Jasana.

He just wondered how long their giving moods were going to last.

The meal to which they went at lunch looked more like a banquet, given the number of people that were there. All his friends were there, naturally, but there were also others there. Ianelle attended with her Council, and Jenna's Council was also present. There were a few Sorcerers Tarrin didn't know there that Dolanna told him he had known, the Lord General of the Knights, an elderly man named Darvon, and a few of the Knights with which they said he'd been very good friends, and there was also a merchant family from town present that Tarrin was told were very, very good friends of both him and his family. Tarrin couldn't remember any of them except the little girl, Janette. Seeing her brought several flashes of memory to him, the strangest of which was looking up at her like she was some kind of a

giant. The little girl, about nine or so with dark curly hair and wearing a very fancy lace-lined satin dress, invoked any number of very unusual feelings in him, a powerful protectiveness paramount among them. Tarrin knew that he looked at Janette like a daughter, like a member of the family, but he couldn't remember why he felt like that, when he met her, or how long he'd known her.

Tarrin felt a little lost again as name after name was given to him, face after face passed by him that he was told he had once known, yet now couldn't remember any of them except Janette. He sat rather firmly entrenched between Kimmie and Jesmind, and the two Were-cat females made him feel rather stifled. He felt again the loss of his memory as he looked out over the many people, knowing that he'd once known almost all of them, knowing that he'd once known the Tower grounds like the back of his hand. It was a strange feeling to see them, to know that he'd once known them, but have no memory of them. It was a helpless feeling, an aggravating feeling, and those were feelings that Tarrin did not feel often at all.

But the others didn't let him dwell on it too much. During and after the meal, they came over and talked with him, smiling and acting in a reassuring manner, trying to make conversation without bringing up the past. It wasn't easy for them, and it was plain on their faces that the way he acted now was much different from the way he'd acted before. It seemed to puzzle them somewhat...they'd been ready to see him as a human and knew he'd lost his memory, but a change in personality was something that they hadn't expected. They did cope, however, trying to be light and chatty, but without his memory, there was little they could really talk about outside his impressions of the Sha'Kar and the Tower and the weather. And those subjects got old after a while.

At least he wasn't the main focus of attention for long. The Sha'Kar present stole the thunder from Tarrin, at least among the human Sorcerers, and after they came to talk to him, they invariably ended up with the Sha'Kar. Sapphire too attracted a great deal of attention, for though she looked like a rather exotic human, just about everyone in the Tower knew that she was actually a dragon. Sapphire had come over early in the meal and told him that she'd been given a very nice room, and she was going to remain as a biped, as she called it, so as not to panic the city and also

because it was much easier for her to move around the Tower grounds in a form for which the grounds and structures had been designed to accommodate. She still had had no luck in magically tracking down her two youngest children, but she was still trying.

After the meal, Jenna basically thumbed her nose at her secretary, Duncan, who was rattling a sheaf of papers for her to deal with meaningfully and took Tarrin out on a tour of the grounds. They went alone, and as she showed him around, from the gardens to the kitchens to the library to the Heart, the center of the Tower, to the training grounds of the Knights, they talked. She told him all about everything that had happened to her and their parents during the time he'd forgotten, told him about the tutor that had died in a Troll raid on Aldreth, and their move to Suld. Then she told him about her time in Ungardt after the Doomwalker attacked them, her getting to know their mother's side of the family, and then her crossing over and becoming a Weavespinner. Then she described the move back, the battle at Suld, and her eventual rise to power as the Keeper of the Tower in Suld.

"We all thought that Myriam was really sick," she explained as they walked along the pristine pathways of the gardens, a place that was much cooler than the other parts of the Tower. Jenna had told him that a magic spell was placed over the gardens that kept them at a level temperature all the time, making them delightfully cool in the summer and nice and warm in the winter. "She lost a lot of weight and she looked really pale, and she was coughing all the time. After she stepped down, she told me that her sickness was just a spell that Duncan had cast on her to make her *look* sick, and give her a valid reason to step down. It was as much a surprise to me as it was everyone else when she literally hand-picked me to succeed her."

"I didn't think it worked like that."

"It doesn't," Jenna chuckled. "The Council is supposed to choose the next Keeper, and the Council did object. But then the Goddess manifested directly in the Council chambers and told them in no uncertain terms that I was *her* choice. Nobody objected after that."

"It must be amazing, having a god talking to you that way," Tarrin mused.

"Mother doesn't really seem like a god most of the time," Jenna said as she ducked under a low branch from a cherry tree that was hanging over the path. "She seems more like a friend than a god. It makes it really easy to talk to her, and in a way, I guess it makes it easier for me to follow her orders."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if she came down with flashes of lightning and all that fanfare, I'd be too afraid of her," she explained. "She's more personable than that, but I never forget that she *is* the Goddess. It's hard to explain."

"You obey her because you love her, not because you're afraid of her," he said sagely, then he blinked. Why did he say that?

"Exactly," she agreed. "So, what's it like?"

Tarrin knew what she meant. "I really can't say," he replied. "Since I don't remember anything from before, I don't have anything to compare it to."

"I guess I should have realized that," Jenna chuckled.

"What's it like being Keeper?"

"Well, everyone bows to me all the time, and that annoys me," she said. "And you wouldn't *believe* how much paperwork there is to do. I never dreamed how much time I'd spend sitting at a desk reading papers. Kings and queens may rule the land, but the paper rules *them*."

"Ban paper."

Jenna laughed. "I've been sorely tempted, but then Duncan would be dropping stone tablets on my desk, and that would murder the finish."

Tarrin chuckled. "Imagine trying to store them."

"I'd have stone tablets stacked up like bricks," Jenna said, holding her arms before her to emphasize the image. "They'd fill up my office until I had nothing but a little hole in the stone."

"You could build little houses out of them. Not only would you be storing your records, you'd be housing the homeless."

"At least until I needed it back," Jenna laughed.

"What exactly do you do as Keeper?"

"Well, most of it is just diplomacy," she answered. "I answer flowery letters from kings and queens with similarly flowery replies. Sometimes I have to go to the palace and talk to the regent, because of the treaties between Suld and the Tower, and the rest of it is just administration of the Tower. I have to direct the Sorcerers in their tasks, which is kinda silly since they already know what to do, and I send Sorcerers out on missions out into the countryside sometimes."

"Like what?"

"Well, last ride I sent ten Sorcerers to the Citadel of the Hill to replace the Sorcerers that had been pulling a yearly rotation there," she answered. "I have some others out searching for children with the talent, and I also lent Shiika fifty Sorcerers to help her clean up some parts of Dala Yar Arak."

"Shiika? The Demoness?"

Jenna nodded. "She's actually a pretty nice woman," she said. "I like her. She's already asked if I'm going to build a Tower in Dala Yar Arak. Before the Breaking, there was a Tower there, and now that the Weave has been restored, she's already sending treaty offers to me over me building a new Tower there. I hate to tell her, but I can't make that kind of a decision. I just rule this Tower. The Goddess is the one that has to order the building of a new Tower. I talked to Alexis about it--"

"Who's she?"

"Alexis Firehair is the Queen of Sharadar," she answered. "She's also the Keeper of the Tower of Abrodar, the capitol city."

"There's another Tower?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

Jenna nodded. "The only two that survived the Breaking. There were five others, but they were all destroyed. There was one in Dala Yar Arak, one in Arathorn, one in Nyr, one in Telluria, and the last one was in the Utter East, in a city called Xu Shen, which is the capitol of the largest empire in the East, called Shen Lung."

"I didn't know there were other Towers. Everyone talks like this one is the only one."

"The other one is all the way across the world," Jenna chuckled. "The Conduit that the Tower was built around comes out of the earth here in Suld, but it goes *into* the earth in Abrodar. It's on the other side of the world. Dolanna is from the Tower in Abrodar, didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't," Tarrin said. "Why is she up here?"

"Because the two Towers send Sorcerers between them, so we can keep in touch and so we don't grow too far apart," she replied. "That way our purpose is always the same, even if we're on opposite sides of the world."

"There's alot more to this than I thought," Tarrin admitted. "I wonder what it looks like. That other Tower, I mean."

"I saw an Illusion of it that Alexis made for me," Jenna replied. "It's not even half the size of this one, and it only has three splinter towers, instead of the six we have. This Tower was the main one, Tarrin. Before the Breaking. Think of this Tower as the capitol city of the Sorcerers. It was the largest, and most of the greatest *katzh-dashi* lived here."

"I didn't know that."

"Not many do," Jenna nodded. "I didn't myself until Spyder gave me all her knowledge."

"Who?"

"Oh, that's right, you don't remember that," she sighed. "Spyder is another Sorcerer, the oldest and most powerful of us all. When we were here at Suld getting ready for the battle, she came to us and taught us some of the old magic. She also taught me about the history of the *katzh-dashi*, so I could restore it to the order. So we'd know who we used to be and what our purpose is in the world."

"What *is* the purpose of the *katzh-dashi*?" Tarrin asked curiously. "I don't think I ever heard anyone say."

"To serve," she said simply. "We served the Goddess, and before the Breaking, it was our duty to watch over the world and make sure that the power of magic flowed seamlessly, and help other magic-users when they needed our assistance. Back then, magic was very powerful, and our primary job was to maintain the Weave. Repair damage caused by runaway magic and keep the Weave healthy. When we weren't doing that, we helped

Wizards and Priests create magical objects, since Sorcerers can prepare an object so that it can hold a permanent enchantment. We also spent alot of time helping the common people, providing healing and such for those too poor to afford hiring a Priest and such. The Weave is back to normal now, but most of the knowledge of those ancient magics has been lost, so we may not be called on to do most of what we used to do for a while. Until then, we're going to learn. Learn all about who we once were, so when the time does come that we'll be needed again, we'll be ready."

"You said only Sorcerers can make magical objects?" Tarrin said. "I heard Kimmie talking about some flying device that the Zakkites use. Didn't they make that themselves?"

"Well, I didn't say that exactly," she pointed out. "Wizards and Priests can make magical objects, but it takes them a *really* long time, and it can cost them alot in terms of money and effort. A Sorcerer can prepare an object in a fraction of the time and cost. What may take a Wizard a year to make, he could do it in a month if a Sorcerer helped him. Wizards and Priests do make objects that they don't want us to know they have, but in the past, for most other things, they'd bring it to us and ask us to prepare it for them. We'd do it for them because it's our duty to support magic in all its forms. Remember, brother, we're the followers of the goddess of magic. *All* magic, not just the Weave. So when other orders of magic need our help, we give it to them."

"I didn't know that, but it makes sense," Tarrin said after a moment. "If we helped them, why did they cause the Breaking?" he asked. "I mean, Dolanna told me about that. She said that someone killed the *sui'kun*, and that caused the Weave to tear."

"Nobody really knows who did that," Jenna answered. "Or Spyder didn't. Some people think some renegade Priests did it, some think that Wizards did it, but some think that some other group did it, some group that hated magic. Nobody really knows."

"It's too bad."

"I doubt it'll happen again. Not even the most rabid magic haters would want to cause another Breaking. Not now that they know what would happen if they did."

"Have you written to mother and father lately?"

She nodded. "Yesterday I used magic to talk to them. They're doing fine. Oh, they wanted me to tell you that they're a bit ticked off with Jesmind. She was living in our house, and she rearranged things. You know how mother is."

Tarrin laughed. "I didn't know she was living in our house."

"She was, while we were here in Suld. Mother said that if she comes back, she has to build her own house somewhere in the meadow."

"I wonder how Jesmind is going to take that," Tarrin said with a chuckle. "She doesn't seem like how the others described her to me, but if she really is like that, it's likely to start a feud."

"Jesmind is pretty much like how people describe her, but she loves you, brother," she said. "When you're concerned, she's capable of acting way out of her character. She's already established a pattern of doing that for your benefit."

"Like how?"

"Well, did they tell you about what happened when the two of you first met?" Tarrin nodded. "Okay, well, when you ran away from Jesmind, she was supposed to have to kill you, because you rejected the Were-cats and became a Rogue. But she didn't do it. She kept trying to talk you back, even steal you back a few times, and she wouldn't do what she was supposed to do. She even seduced you, which was *really* against what she was supposed to do," Jenna giggled. "When she got pregnant and left, she continued to rally for you with her mother, Triana, and that intrigued her enough for her to come and look you over before deciding whether or not to kill you. If Jesmind hadn't been so adamant about it, Triana would have just killed you and been done with it. I think Jesmind's loved you from the minute she saw you, Tarrin. Ever since that first day, she's gone way out of her way for you, in more than one way."

Tarrin was silent a moment as he considered that. And it made him want to talk to Jesmind, get to know her, even more.

"I feel bad that I don't remember her," Tarrin admitted with a sigh.

"I know it's not easy," Jenna said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "But she's here now, isn't she? Just talk to her, brother. Get to know her again. And when you get your memory back, it'll just give you another aspect of knowing her. You have a rare chance here, brother. You and Jesmind have always had a very stormy relationship. Jesmind loves to fight, even with you, and never a day went by when the two of you weren't shouting at one another over something insignificant and stupid. But now you get a chance to get to know her all over again, when she's *not* going to fight with you. She wouldn't dare, because she doesn't want to scare you or push you away."

"Why were we always fighting?" Tarrin asked. "If we did love each other, why fight?"

"Because of the Were nature," she answered. "Were-cats base most of their society on strength. Jesmind fought with you all the time to establish herself in your eyes, to show you that she wasn't weak. That she was a good mate that would produce strong children. And you fought back to retain your dominance over her, because among the Were-cats, only Triana was over you in their society, brother. You were above all of them but her, and sometimes you had to reinforce that dominance."

"That sounds, bizarre," he said.

"It's very simple, if you remember that you had cat instincts as well as human ones," she told him. "The Were-cats are part animal. Never forget that. Were-cat society is based on strength, first and foremost. And there were none stronger than you, Tarrin," she said proudly. "You bowed to Triana only because you saw her as a mother figure. And since you bowed to her, that put her above you in the eyes of the rest of the society. Don't think of the Were-cats as humans with fur, brother. They're very, very different from humans."

"I'll try," he promised.

"That's why you and Jesmind fought. But you and Kimmie didn't fight that way."

"Why not?"

"Because Kimmie's not the average Were-cat," she replied. "She knows her place, and unlike the others, she doesn't constantly try to reinforce it."

She was turned, just like you were, but she's alot more human than any other Were-cat, even you and Jula. You and Kimmie really got along. I think that's why you fell in love with her."

"That is so strange," he said. "I was in love with two women, and they didn't hate each other?"

"Were-cats don't marry, Tarrin," she said sedately. "You don't really have any obligations, you know, so you were free to love anyone you wanted. Jesmind didn't mind Kimmie, and Kimmie didn't mind Jesmind, because Were-cats can't stay together forever. Triana explained that to me, that Were-cats get increasingly aggravated with mates as time passes, and that their instincts and natures as independent creatures eventually overwhelms the desire to stay together. So Were-cats part ways after a time after they've been mates for a while. Jesmind and Kimmie don't mind each other because they know that the other one can't hog you. After you get tired of one, you can just go to the other. They can share you, and since they can, they don't really see each other as rivals."

That actually did explain quite a bit. "Hold on, Kimmie mentioned someone named Mist," Tarrin said. "Is she really the mother of my son?"

"She is," Jenna affirmed. "I've never met her, but I heard Triana say that she was going to go get her a few days ago. I think she's coming to Suld. I really want to meet her son. She named him after father, you know. Father's so proud of that he's almost walking on air," she giggled.

"I don't remember her at all."

"Every time you say that, just remember that it's only temporary," she said, patting his arm. "You will remember again. But until then, don't dwell on what you've forgotten. Just look at it as a chance to do it all again, to meet everyone again, to experience things that used to be commonplace to you and see them for the wonders they really are. This is your chance to get to know all of your friends in an entirely new way, and when you do get your memory back, it'll make those friendships that much richer and deeper. Don't dwell on the negatives, brother. Try to make something positive out of it."

"When did you get so smart, brat?" he asked with a smile, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"Blame Spyder, Tarrin," Jenna giggled, leaning her head on his shoulder. "She made me this smart."

"I'd rather kiss her," Tarrin told her.

It didn't take the others long for them to find his room. After lunch, he settled in, but was rarely alone. Allia and Allyn came first, and as Tarrin put his clothes away in the trunk, they talked. Or, more to the point, occasionally ignored them during those silences when they were either kissing or staring into one another's eyes. After that, Keritanima joined them, bringing in another Wikuni she named Rallix, her husband. He was a badger Wikuni, with a dark band of fur over his eyes that made him look like a bandit. But where badgers were bulky creatures, this Rallix was rather thin and scholarly looking. He was a soft-spoken fellow, and Tarrin rather liked him. He was quiet while Keritanima talked about how Ianelle had taught her how to Teleport, and now she could jump between her duties as Queen of Wikuna over there and come see him when she wasn't very busy. Rallix seemed a bit casual about his wife's magical capabilities, but all in all, what else could he do but silently accept it.

Camara Tal came in just as Allia, Keritanima, and their men were about to leave, and Tarrin found himself, to his surprise, playing the role of sympathetic ear. Camara Tal had just had another fight with someone named Koran Dar, the Amazon man that was on the Council, who happened to be Camara Tal's husband. The proud Amazon was surprisingly girlish as she lamented her woes to him, as she admitted that she loved Koran Dar, but he wouldn't come home with her because he didn't want the restrictions of a life as an Amazon man around his neck. There really wasn't much he could say or do more than assure her that things were going to work themselves out, and hint that perhaps the best way to get Koran Dar back would be to give in to some of his demands. That seemed to scandalize Camara Tal, but she did have a somewhat thoughtful look in her eyes when she left.

He was only alone a few moments before Sapphire knocked on his door and invited herself in. They had quite a nice little talk, and he kept finding himself staring at her and remembering how she had looked when she was a dragon. He had her tell him all about her lair in the desert and what it was

like there. Then he told her all about Aldreth, and the life he at least could remember before leaving home. He was in the middle of that when Azakar and a Knight that Tarrin didn't know arrived, a dark-haired knight named Ulger, who had been Faalken's best friend. Ulger didn't know that Sapphire was a dragon, which was probably for the best, for the man started flirting with her almost immediately. Sapphire seemed a bit shocked, but she almost seemed to be enjoying it as she excused herself to make another attempt to contact her missing children. She did reveal that fact just before she left, probably to see Ulger's reaction. She wasn't disappointed. Tarrin was surprised that the Knight didn't wet his trousers. He'd never seen a pair of eyes bug out that far in his life.

Azakar and Ulger had just stopped by to see how he was doing, and they left not long after Sapphire did, to go down to the training field and work out the cadets. After they left, Tarrin left also, going up to Jesmind's apartment. He spent the rest of the afternoon with Jesmind, Jasana, and Kimmie--Triana was gone again--and he had a very good time. Jesmind didn't push him or prod his lost memory too much, content to just let him play with Jasana for most of the time. He taught Jasana how to play chess, and read a book with her that she'd gotten from the library, a book about the seven thousand year history of the city of Suld. He found Jasana to be quite intelligent and very affectionate. Tarrin found having her sit on his lap with her hair just under her chin to be quite pleasant, and it made him realize just what that flash of memory meant. She seemed to fit perfectly in his lap, and being that close to her, even though she was a Were-cat and he couldn't remember her, he just knew that it was *right*. It only took one afternoon for him to find love for his adorable little girl. After they finished reading through the book, she put her arms around his neck and put her head against his shoulder, and it completely wrapped him around her furry little finger. He just sat there and held her close for a very long time, marvelling at the fact that she was his daughter.

She fell asleep like that, and after they put her down to bed for a while, Tarrin sat with Jesmind and Kimmie and they told her about the Sha'Kar island, and Tarrin listened while Kimmie told her about the parts that he didn't remember.

Jesmind growled a little after Kimmie finished, and it was an eerie sound. It was not a sound that a human throat could make. "If only that

crazy Wizard would finish already!" she huffed. "Where is he, Kimmie?"

"He's still on the ship," she replied. "He's going to move up here tomorrow, but he didn't want to leave the ship until he finished the book he was reading. He didn't want the distraction that moving up here would cause him. Don't worry, Jesmind, he's hard at work on it. I don't think he's slept for three days."

"I should go down there and make him go faster," she said with a frown.

"The more you bother him, the longer it'll take," she said sedately. "I'm going to go down and help him move up his books tomorrow, and then I'll see what I can do to help him in his research. But that's as far as anyone's going to be able to go to helping him. Usually it's just best to stay out of his way."

"Why is it taking so long?" she demanded.

"Jesmind, a *god* couldn't undo what was done to Tarrin," Kimmie said pointedly. "Does that give you an idea of how difficult this is going to be?"

"Are you serious?"

"Would I lie about something like that?" Kimmie countered.

"I guess not," she snorted. "It's just--you know."

"You can't stand seeing him like that," Kimmie said. "I know, Triana said the same thing. I can't wait to get him back to normal either, but I have to admit," she said, giving him a smile and a wink. "I think he's kind of cute as a human."

"Of course he's cute, but I can't touch him like that," Jesmind said shortly.

Tarrin blushed.

Jesmind looked at him and laughed. "I haven't seen you do that since we first met," she told him. "Since we met in the forest, after that Wyvern sank the riverboat you were on."

"Dolanna told me about that, but she didn't know what happened after we got separated," Tarrin said. "She said that I never really told anyone much more than I'd met you in the woods."

"Oh, she knew what happened," Jesmind said with a sly grin. "She just didn't want to tell you."

"What happened?" he asked.

"Well, I taught you how to shapeshift," she said, ticking off her fingers as she spoke. "Then we had our first fight. Then I seduced you the first time, then you pulled that stunt that separated us on either side of an impassable gorge. That's the short version of what happened after the Wyvern sank the ship."

"I, don't remember any of it," Tarrin said after a moment of trying to recall.

"Don't worry at it, my mate," Jesmind told him calmly. "It'll come back to you. You just have to be patient."

"I think I'm more patient than you, Jesmind," Tarrin told her.

"Probably, because I'm not particularly known to be a patient woman," she agreed. "But we just have to have faith. Besides, I think that Wizard knows that if he doesn't find a way to restore your memory, he'll have about ten angry Were-cats hunting him down. I don't think he wants to take that risk."

Kimmie laughed. "I don't think that's occurred to him quite yet," she said. "If it does, he may decide that running away is the better idea."

The apartment door opened, and Dar stepped inside. "Mistress Jesmind, I'm going to take Tarrin to go get something to eat," he announced. "Do you want to come with us?"

"No, that's alright, Dar," she told him. "I'm not really hungry right now."

"Kimmie?"

"I'm fine, Dar," she said with a smile. "Thanks for asking. You and Tarrin go ahead."

Tarrin wasn't particularly hungry either, but Dar looked like he had some other reason to come to get him, so he stood up. "I'll be back later," he promised, then he hurried over to Dar and let the Arkisian lead him out the door.

"Did I get here in time?" he asked in a hushed voice as they walked down the hall.

"Time for what?" he asked.

"To save you from them," he said with a grin.

Tarrin laughed. "Actually, we were having a good time," he answered. "But I can go see them again later. What did you want to do?"

"Eat," he said simply. "Then afterward, maybe we can go do something. Did Jenna show you around?"

He nodded. "Most of the common places. Kitchens, dining rooms, library, gardens, and some places on the grounds."

"Well, we could always take a shot at the baths," he grinned.

"What, you want to see me naked?" Tarrin teased.

"I already have. I'm more curious to see how you handle seeing girls naked," he countered with a wicked smile.

"You're evil, Dar."

"I had a good teacher," he said, slapping Tarrin lightly on the arm. "Seriously, though, you do need a bath. You smell like moldy fur."

"Then Jasana needs a bath," he noted, sniffing at his arm. "She was sitting in my lap most of the afternoon."

"How did that go?"

"Pretty well," he answered. "I like her. She's pretty smart, and she's completely lovable. I think she's got me pretty firmly in hand," he said ruefully. "It's a hard feeling to describe, Dar. She's my *daughter*. I mean, that alone is enough for me to love her. I look at her, and I don't see the fact that she's a Were-cat. I just see my daughter, and I find that I love her."

"I should hope so," Dar told him with a smile. "I thought she was going to try to bite you or something."

"Everyone thinks she will," Tarrin mused.

"Jasana's got a reputation, Tarrin. Did you know that she first used High Sorcery in an attempt to keep you from leaving her behind in Aldreth? She

heard you say that if she used magic, you couldn't leave her. So that's exactly what she did."

"Nobody told me that," he said in surprise.

"Jasana's a very dangerous little girl, Tarrin," Dar told him seriously. "She loves you, but don't drop your guard around her. If she decides she wants to turn you, she *will*. Be very careful."

"She can't," he told her. "Remember what Triana made her promise? There's no way she's going to get around that. Triana took away every possible way she could do it."

"You talk like she'll keep that promise."

"She will," Tarrin said seriously. "Trust me, Dar. She'll break her own arm before she goes back on that promise, more because she knows how much trouble she'll get into more than the fact that she honors her word. Even Jasana has to know that the trouble wouldn't be worth it, no matter how bad may want me to be a Were-cat again."

"I hope so, but I still say you keep an eye on her, Tarrin," Dar said soberly. "She's the most dangerous thing in this Tower, of that there is no argument at all."

"I'll be careful," he assured him. "Now I'm getting hungry. Let's go raid the kitchen."

With a kitchen like the one in the Tower, raiding it was a rather easy task. The cooks were very quick to offer up any food they wanted, as the *katzh-dashi* kept no regular schedules and came down to the kitchens whenever they were hungry. Tarrin enjoyed some roasted goose, a few slabs of roasted pork, and some spiced potatos and a thick meat and vegetable stew. Dar took a huge bowl of stew as well, but took some of the strange grain dish that they called rice, something not very common in the West. He filled a bowl with it halfway, then poured his stew over the rice. Tarrin tried it after he saw Dar do it, and he had to admit that the rice did make the stew taste better. They washed it down with some hot spiced wine, something of a specialty of one of the cooks in the kitchens, and after that rather large goblet of wine, Tarrin was feeling a little more adventurous, a little more daring.

"Alright," he said, rolling up his sleeves like a housewife about to tackle the dishes, "let's get this bath out of the way."

Dar looked at him, then nearly fell out of his chair laughing.

The wine did help. Dar led him down into the cellars, and showed him the baths with a grand sweep of his hand. It was a massive pool, about a hundred spans long at least and fifty spans wide, with one end of the pool steaming. The air was hot and muggy, from the hot water, and it smelled slightly like sulfur. Dar told him that the baths were fed by a hot spring, which was why the water was hot and it smelled like that. It was just after sunset, but the late hour didn't make the baths any less popular. About thirty people were currently using them, as Novices in white shirts or dresses scurried around with towels in their arms, staring at the two Sha'Kar who were drying their hair without wrapping towels around themselves. Tarrin already had an understanding of the Sha'Kar, and knew that that was in their character. Sha'Kar weren't too modest.

Tarrin would have felt a lot more self-conscious if he hadn't drunk the wine. But he did feel a little trepidation as Dar got towels for both of them and led him to one of the many stone benches that surrounded the pool, many of which had robes or clothes folded neatly atop them, slippers or leather shoes tucked under them. Dar grinned at him as he undid the belt of his robe, but Tarrin didn't give him any satisfaction. The wine had bolstered his nerve, and he boldly removed his clothes, even paused to fold them up neatly and set them on the bench, then he stood there without putting the towel around himself and waited for Dar to finish undressing.

"I shouldn't have let you drink that wine," Dar laughed as they slipped into the pool.

The pool was about waist deep on one side, but got deeper as one moved towards the other side of the pool. It had steps descending into the water at the shallow side of the end closest to the stairs leading back up to the main part of the Tower, but the far end of the long pool was empty, for the water was just under boiling and was much too hot for anyone to use. Tarrin and Dar had slipped in along the side of the pool on the shallow end, then they moved out into the middle into warmer water, which also moved them out more or less by themselves. Dar went back for some soap, and then they went about the business of cleaning up.

As Tarrin was scrubbing his face with soap, he was startled when someone literally jumped onto his back. The sudden weight nearly toppled him forward as arms wrapped around his neck from behind, and he realized that he was hearing laughter through the soap that had gotten into his ears. He spat out soap that had gotten into his mouth, and then realized that he was feeling the naked breasts of a woman pressing against his back. The mystery woman tightened her grip on him and jerked him to the side. She was trying to dunk him into the water! One of her legs dropped down and got between his ankles, and then she hooked the back of her heel around his leg and tried to yank it out from under him. She continued to laugh, and Tarrin finally got his ears cleaned out enough to identify that voice.

"Auli!" he barked, twisting aside and managing to make her slide partially off of him. The soap helped in that regard. He broke the grip she had with her hands around his neck, then pushed her out and away. He whirled around and got a face full of water as she splashed him, and as he tried to clear soap and water out of his eyes, she grabbed him by the arm, stepped her leg over his, then pushed him. Her leg kept him from catching himself, and he went under without much resistance.

He came up with an angry expression, but all Auli did was laugh even more. At that moment, the fact that Auli was with them in the baths hadn't impacted on him. "I'm going to show you an Illusion of the expression on your face!" she said with a riot of giggling.

"That wasn't funny!" Tarrin said accusingly, tilting his head to the side and palming his temple to shake water out of his ear.

"I thought it was," she grinned shamelessly. "What are you two doing?"

"What does it look like? We're taking a bath," Dar told her. Tarrin noticed that he was up to his neck in the water. Dar had bent his knees to let the water conceal himself. Auli, on the other hand, had no such reservations. Tarrin had wondered what had been under that dress of hers, and since the water only came up to her waist, he got a good view of some of the things he'd been wondering about. And he had to admit, they looked even better out of the dress than they did in it. She seemed to notice where he was looking, but instead of crossing her arms over her breasts to hide them, she thrust her chest out and advertised the fact that she knew he was looking.

Tarrin did flush a little at getting caught staring, but Auli only grinned at him and splashed him again. "It's about time I found you two," she told them. "What's the matter with you, Dar?" Auli asked.

"Nothing," he said with a blush. "We're taking a bath here, Auli. Can you go over there?"

"I saw you get in the pool, Dar," she grinned. "I've already seen it. You don't have to hide it anymore." She winked. "By the way, did anyone ever tell you that you have a cute butt?"

Dar turned a shade of purple Tarrin had never seen before. That only made Auli laugh harder.

Tarrin wasn't about to amuse Auli. He stared right into her eyes and didn't bend his knees like Dar was. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction the same as he wasn't going to give Dar the satisfaction.

"Thank the Goddess I found you," Auli said with a sigh. "It is *so* boring!" she complained. "Talk, talk, talk! That's all anyone has done all day! Do this, don't do that, go here, you can't go there, this is your room, this is what you can do, this is what you can't do, I'm tired of it!"

"There's alot you have to learn, Auli," Dar told her. "It's only helping you to learn it."

"I know that, but did they have to spend *all day* boring me to tears?" she huffed.

"Are you done for today?" Tarrin asked.

"*I* am," Auli said adamantly. "I haven't had a chance to do much of anything. I came down here to take a bath, and I guess the Goddess favors me, because you two are here. So, what do you want to do?" she asked with a mischevious grin.

"I want to finish my bath," Dar said in a slightly hostile tone.

"Don't let me stop you, Dar," Auli grinned at him. "Want me to scrub your back?"

"I can manage," he said in a sullen tone. "I'd just be more comfortable if you went over there."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you're a friend of mine," he told her.

"You told me that you bathe with your friends back in Arkis," Tarrin told him.

Dar glared at Tarrin. "Well, they're not Auli," he said.

Then he understood. Auli's flirting with Dar had unbalanced him, and it made him a little uncomfortable to be in the pool with her. Auli seemed to understand it as well, and she laughed lightly. "Oh, is that all?" she asked him, turning around. "Alright then, I'll talk with Tarrin. You go ahead and do whatever it is you need to do." She reached out and snatched up a cake of soap floating on the surface, then waded up to his side and circled behind him. He allowed her to put the soap to his back and start lathering. "What have you done today?" she asked him.

"Not much," he answered. "I moved into a room, and I spent most of the day with my daughter."

"The Were-cat?" she asked.

Tarrin nodded, pulling the braid over his shoulder again after his nodding made it slip behind him. "Sounds like you had a better day than I did," she grumbled. "I've never been so bored!"

"It'll get better," he assured her.

"It better, or I'm going to run away," she said in a slightly sulky tone. Her hands were very gentle on his back, thoroughly lathering every finger of skin above the waterline. He didn't jump when her hands slid down under the water, dangerously close to his backside, but she went no further. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed, and he realized she wanted him to rinse off. He did so, and when he came back up, she was already halfway around him. "Your turn," she said with a challenging smile. She was daring him to refuse to wash her back.

But Tarrin wasn't one to back down from a challenge. Without batting an eye, he put the soap to her back and started lathering her dark skin. He found it not hard at all to wash her back, mainly because those challenging eyes weren't locked onto his, and he couldn't see anything that would make him feel uncomfortable while he was behind her. He did notice that her skin

was very soft, very silky, and her blond hair stood out against it in a very appealing manner. She was very slender, but the flesh under her soft skin was surprisingly firm. He remembered Dar telling him that Auli wandered around a lot, and he realized that she was probably in better physical shape than the other Sha'Kar. All of them were thin and looked very soft. Auli had she-softness, but she was in better shape than the others of her race. He scrubbed her back all the way to the waterline.

"Don't be a coward, Tarrin," she said in a light, soft voice. "Do my whole back."

Without a word, he slid his hands under the water and scrubbed with his fingers all the way to the small of her back. But just as she stopped, so did he.

"Are you done yet, Dar?" Auli asked, looking at him as she rinsed off.

"I'm done," he answered. "What do you want to do after we get dressed?"

"We'll find something to do," Auli laughed.

Curiosity getting the best of him, Tarrin reached up and gently pulled Auli's hair away from her ear. Sha'Kar ears tapered up to a definite point, and they gave her a very exotic appearance, much more than her ethereal features. He'd seen their ears all the time from the front and the sides, but had never seen one from the back before. Auli tilted her head and allowed him to look. "What are you doing, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

"I'm looking at her ear," he replied calmly. "I've never seen one from this close before, or from behind."

"Just remember, I get a turn," Auli told him in a teasing voice. "And I won't be looking at your ear."

"Right," Tarrin drawled as he let go of her hair.

"Well, if we're done, let's get dressed and go do something," Auli announced, wading towards the lip of the pool. Tarrin moved to follow her, thinking she'd turn towards the steps once she reached the edge, but he was wrong. She put her hands on the edge of the pool and hauled herself out. Tarrin paused at the edge of the pool and looked up at her as she climbed out, and his view of her left absolutely nothing--*nothing*--to the

imagination. She turned around and looked down at him with that same slow smile, seeming to be aware that him looking up at her that way all but made him look right at her most intimate charm. "Yes, I'm a natural blond. See?" she said with a wicked smile, pointing to the proof.

"Auli, you're nasty!" Dar said in a shocked voice, then he laughed in spite of himself.

"I'm not nasty. I'm beautiful and I know it, boys love to look at me and I like them to look, so why not show off a bit for boys who'll appreciate my beauty?" she countered with a wink and a teasing smile, striking a little pose for their benefit, a pose like some of the sculptures he remembered in Arlan's room back on the island.

"The eyebrows proved that you're a natural blond," Tarrin said dryly as she hauled himself out of the pool. He was *not* going to give her the satisfaction of thinking he'd be afraid to come out of the pool with her standing there. The cup of wine he drank gave him more courage than he'd usually have, but that almost broke down as well when Auli made absolutely no pretense of excuse. She grinned at him then boldly looked down for a long moment, then looked him in the eyes again and winked.

"You're a natural blond too. And by the way, it should be a *crime* to cover that up," she said with a very sly little smile, then she turned and sauntered towards her towel. Tarrin was glad she missed him blushing.

Auli's boldness took Tarrin a bit aback, but he knew her, thought he had an idea of her personality, and realized that such behavior would be somewhat normal for her. Auli was Sha'Kar, from a different culture than him, and it was a very different, permissive culture. The others had told him about that. Sha'Kar found the nude body to be a very beautiful thing, a work of living art, so they had very little reserve about showing it off, especially Sha'Kar who were very beautiful. All that nude sculpture in Iselde's house certainly proved that to him. For Auli, looking was no big deal, either boys looking at her or her looking at boys, because it was little more than the appreciation for the beauty of the form. That's why it didn't bother her to have both of them see her nude, even to have them see *everything*, and it was why she wanted to see all of them in return. Because to her, it wasn't only alright for them to look, she *wanted* them to look, to see her beauty and appreciate it, and she wanted to look at them in return and appreciate

the beauty their forms could offer. Many of the Sha'Kar were like that, he realized. The two who'd been there when they arrived weren't making any attempts to cover themselves up either.

When he understood that, he suddenly did not feel uncomfortable at all in Auli's presence. After all, she was only admiring him, *all* of him, and what could be wrong with that? She only made the remark to tease him. Were she not in such a playful mood, she wouldn't have said anything.

Dar wasn't quite so quick to grasp that concept. He jumped out of the pool and literally ran to his bench, wrapping the towel around him as quickly as he could.

They dried off and got dressed, Auli in a dress-like robe that was belted at her waist, and then set out to do mischief. Tarrin had enjoyed the last time they'd been together, and Auli did not disappoint this time. Dar showed them around the Tower, and it wasn't ten minutes before the Sha'Kar youth used Sorcery to trip a servant trundling down a hallway with a bundle of folded sheets in her arms. They scrambled out of sight before the plump woman could right herself and cast an accusing gaze across the passageway.

They ranged from the roof of the main Tower to the lowest cellar they could find, from one side of the fence to the other, sneaking around in the darkness and seeing what doors were unlocked and where they could go. They ended up walking in on quite a few sleeping Sorcerers and servants, and even Auli wasn't brave enough to invade the barracks of the Knights on the grounds, but aside from locked doors, they spent most of the night, well past a reasonable bedtime, skulking around just to explore. Auli made it fun to wander around, telling jokes, harassing hapless passers-by with Sorcery, and always speculating what they may find behind the next closed door. Auli had a rich imagination, if a bit lurid, but she could infuse excitement into every closed door, sparking Tarrin's imagination at what they may find on the other side. Auli had turned something as simple as exploring the endless hallways of the Tower into something very fun, very exciting, and very rewarding. When Auli wasn't joking or flirting with Dar, they would all talk, revealing what life was like where they came from and getting to know each other much better. Auli wasn't bashful about her past, admitting it to Tarrin with a straight face, but she did mention that the mental control that had been put on her had made her like that. Tarrin assured her that he

knew about it and that it didn't bother him, and when he said that, Auli seemed to relax a great deal. They all found themselves sharing some rather embarrassing secrets with one another, even Dar admitting that he had a huge crush on Tiella, something that he hadn't outright said to anyone, but none of them felt very self-conscious about it. They were all friends, very good friends, and he felt very comfortable saying very personal things to both of them. Every hour that passed brought the three of them closer together, until Dar stopped blushing when Auli flirted with him, until he felt completely comfortable with her.

The best part had to be when they crept into the Novices' quarters. Auli gave both of them a roguish grin, then used Sorcery to open every single door along the long passageway. Tarrin watched in amused dread as the doors hovered open for a moment, then they all slammed shut in perfect unison, sending a shockwave of startlingly loud sound echoing up the long passage. The three of them darted away as they all struggled to suppress laughter, laughter that would give them away as Elsa Gaarnhold, the Mistress of Novices, came barelling out of her private chamber wearing nothing but an angry scowl. One Torian Novice staggered out of his room, a boy that looked no more than thirteen, and he gaped at the tall Ungardt in all her unclad glory until she raged at him to return to his room and if she saw his face again before sunrise he'd be sorry he was ever born. They did manage to get out of Elsa's hearing before erupting into gales of helpless laughter.

The exploring did manage one thing, if nothing else. By midnight, Tarrin knew the passages of the Tower so well that he thought he'd been living there all his life. They must have gone up and down every single one at least three times. They had to have walked twenty longspans in the hours that they'd been wandering around, and his feet were starting to get a little tired.

It was well after midnight before any of them started getting sleepy. They had been sneaking around the cellars, trying to find a secret passage that everyone said a building as old as the Tower had to have, just to see if they could manage to do it, when Dar yawned widely. "I think it's about time to turn in," he said. "We can always try again tomorrow, and I'm starting to get sore feet."

"Me too. Let's call it a night. You can show me where your rooms are, so I can find you easier from now on," Auli agreed.

They took her back to the hallway on the fifth level, where their rooms were, and Dar pointed at the doors. "That one's mine, and this one is Tarrin's," he announced. "I'll see you two tomorrow. Night," he yawned.

"Night Dar," Tarrin said as Auli gave him a kiss on the cheek by way of farewell, and he shuffled to his door and went in.

"Well," Auli said, leaning against the wall opposite him and looking at him. "I'm really not that tired. I just wanted to make sure Dar didn't think he was holding us up. "Want to play some chess?"

Tarrin remembered what happened the last time, when she offered to teach him to play...and part of him wanted to see if it would happen again. But the rest of him discounted that. Auli was his friend, he doubted he flirting had been anything more than what it was with Dar. Just a way she played with them. "I hate to say it, but I'm a little tired myself. I don't think we have time for chess, but you can come in and sit for a little if you want," he told her.

"Sure," she said with a smile. "I want to see if your room is better than mine."

She followed him into the room and looked around as he went across and opened the drapes that hid the door leading out onto the balcony. "Good Goddess, did I get raped over the rooms," Auli complained. "My room is like a closet. This one is bigger than mine, and it has better furniture." She plopped down to sit on the bed, and bounced up and down on it a few times. "This is a nice bed," she noted. "Not as soft as mine, but on the other hand, I don't like sinking into my bed like it was quicksand." She looked over at him and patted the bed beside her. "Come sit down," she invited.

"Are you going to blow in my ear?" he asked bluntly.

She looked at him, then laughed. "Only if you want me to," she said with a sly smile.

"Well, I don't," he said to her, and he sat down on the bed by her. "What are you going to do tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure yet," she replied. "Probably more talking."

"What are the Sha'Kar going to do after the talking is over?"

"Teach," she replied. "The humans here are woefully undertrained, and none of them can speak Sha'Kar. We're going to teach them up to our level. I think that's going to take a few decades," she grunted sourly.

"If anything, we have time," Tarrin said.

"It's going to be *boring*," she complained, flopping down onto her back. "Day after day after day of nothing but teach, teach, teach."

"Before, it was nothing but day after day of party, party, party," he pointed out.

"But parties are *fun*," she said with a sour look at him.

"Then make teaching fun," he said simply.

"If only it was as easy as saying it," she huffed, looking up at him. "Besides, before I was doing what I wanted to do. Now I have to do things I don't want to do."

"Welcome to the world of growing up," he teased with a chuckle.

"I'd rather be back on the island," she admitted. "I *liked* it there."

"It was a gilded cage, Auli."

"Maybe, but what a gild," she grinned. She propped herself up on her hands and looked at him in a slightly different way. "I have a question."

"What?"

"Do you remember anything at all from when you were a Were-cat?"

"Not really," he replied. "Sometimes I get these flashes, but they're more like images, pictures, or feelings. Nothing really solid."

"So you don't remember your girlfriends or your daughter at all?"

He shook his head with a sigh. "I feel sorry for them," he told her. "I know it kills them to see me like this, and it must hurt that I don't remember them. I know it would hurt me if my sister suddenly couldn't remember me."

"I can understand that," Auli nodded, sitting all the way up and turning a little towards him. "I have another question."

"What?"

"What would you say if I did this?"

And then she leaned forward, put an arm around his shoulders, and kissed him.

It was not a chaste, friendly kiss. There was a passion in it that curled Tarrin's toes in their boots, and he suddenly couldn't remember how to make his arms work. Auli pressed herself against his side more and more as she kept kissing him, pushing at him until she was literally in his lap with her hands on either side of his face to keep him still, continuing to kiss with with that same unbridled passion. Tarrin had never kissed a girl like that, or been kissed like that, at least not that he could remember, and she effectively paralyzed him with her sensual lips. The only way he could seem to move was to put his hands on Auli's shoulders, but he couldn't find the strength to push her away. He didn't *want* to push her away. He began to kiss her back as the passion in her kiss started working its magic on him, and all his careful plans to not get involved with Auli went up in smoke as soon as the passion of her kiss told him that she had no intention of stopping.

Depending on how one looked at it, what happened next was either good luck or bad luck. Tarrin had no idea the door had been opened, but Jesmind's rather angry shout startled Tarrin so badly that he nearly fell off the bed. Auli whipped her head towards the door so fast her hair smacked Tarrin in the back of the head, and was about to stand up. She did manage to shout in a rather unpleasant voice. "This is a private room!" she said angrily. "Excuse yourself!"

"Just as soon as you take your hooks out of *my mate*," she said in a vicious tone.

"He can't be your mate," Auli said in a hot tone. "I asked. That means he's *available*."

"Not for you, Sha'Kar," Jesmind hissed, extending the claws on both her hands meaningfully. "You have a choice. Walk out that door now, or they'll carry you out in six seperate buckets. Decide."

It hung there for a very long moment, and Tarrin used it to try to regather his wits. He'd never kissed a girl before--at least not that he could

remember--and he never knew that it could have so much power in it. All he could think of was how nice it felt, and a part of him was furious with Jesmind for barging in and ruining the moment. But that other part of his mind that told him that getting involved with Auli would probably be a bad idea managed to resurface, at least now that Auli hadn't clubbed it into silence with her powerful presence, and he felt a little abashed at having been so easily wooed. He thought that he had a little more self control than that, but then again, he'd never met a girl quite like Auli. Tarrin didn't think many men at all could say no to her, not if they were kissed like *that*.

With all the grace of a queen, Auli stood up and smoothed her skirt. "I'll see you later, Tarrin," she promised with an inviting smile. "Count on it."

Jesmind glared at the Sha'Kar woman as she swept past her, not even bothering to look at her, then glided out of the open door. Jesmind slammed the door behind her, then stood before it giving him a withering look. "And just what do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Well, I certainly didn't plan that," Tarrin told her.

"*She* did," Jesmind snapped. "You should know better than to get mixed up with a girl like that, Tarrin. She doesn't care about you. She just wants to conquer you."

"Isn't that what you did to me when we met?" he asked pointedly.

Jesmind spluttered slightly, looking a little embarrassed, then she cleared her throat. "That was different," she said waspishly.

Tarrin had been a little grateful that she'd interrupted them before it got too serious, but now he was having third thoughts. What was Jesmind doing outside his door? Was she following him around? And what right did she have to barge in that way? His life was his own, and he didn't appreciate Jesmind trying to interfere.

He looked her right in the eyes. "It seems awfully convenient that you just happened to be walking by at the right time," he said in a dangerous voice. "Or was it more than coincidence?"

"I was following you," she admitted without batting an eye. "I'll give you space, Tarrin, but I'm not going to let you wander around alone. This Tower isn't as secure as Jenna likes to think."

Her admission surprised him, yet it didn't. But it certainly made him angry. "I don't *need* protecting, Jesmind!" he said hotly. "When I moved down here, it was so I could have my own space, my own time. You and Kimmie and Triana aren't going to get around that by standing outside my door and following me everywhere I go!"

"Until you're back to normal, I'll follow you around if I damn well please," Jesmind snapped. "You're too vulnerable like this!"

"I am *not a child*!" Tarrin shouted at her, jumping to his feet. "Why won't you Were-cats get that into your head?! I don't need a nurse, I don't need a bodyguard, and I damn well certainly don't need you three hiding in my closet!"

"You're in no condition to dictate terms," she said in a seething tone. "Until we can change you back I'll--"

"Whoever said I *wanted* to be changed back?" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "This is *my* life! Ever since I woke up, everyone's been telling me where to go, what to do, and you're all trying to plan my life for me, and I'm sick of it! Do you hear, I'm sick of it! It's my life! If I want to change back, I will, but if I want to stay like I am, then *that's what I'm going to do*!"

The sheer vehemence in his angry voice took Jesmind aback. She stared at him in shock, putting the back of her large, furry hand to her chin and gaped at him with wide eyes. "T-Tarrin!" she said in a startled tone. "I--"

"I don't care what you think!" he shouted, cutting her off. "I like you, Jesmind, but I don't need you treating me like I'm another one of your children! So if you don't mind, kindly *butt out*!" he said in a mighty crescendo, shaking his fist and stamping a foot to emphasize his ultimatum that much more. When she didn't say anything, he shooed her with his hands. "Go on! Get out of my room! And if you don't want me to avoid all you Were-cats completely, then stop following me around! Do you hear me? Stop it! Just leave me alone!"

Jesmind stared at him in shock, and, to his surprise, fear. She was looking at his hands, and she took a step backwards when he raised both arms to look down, to look at where she was looking. He nearly jumped back himself when he saw that both of his hands were glowing with a strange magical light!

It made him feel something inside, a power, a force that had filled him. He'd been too angry to notice it before, but now he could feel it. It was a very warm energy, a very strong one, and it was like the light of the sun boiling around in his belly. He had no idea how it got there or what he was supposed to do with it, but it simply drained away by itself as he was trying to fathom how it got there to begin with.

He understood. He'd gotten mad, and in his anger, some part of his mind that still remembered had reached out and touched the power of Sorcery. Even if he couldn't remember how to use it with his conscious mind, some other part of his mind could, and had done so.

"I--We'll talk tomorrow, Tarrin," Jesmind said in a hesitant voice as the magical light faded from his hands, and he stared at them in surprise. "When you're calmer."

He heard her leave, but he didn't look up at her. All he could do was stare at his hands in wonder.

Chapter 3

It was all just too confusing.

The first issue, obviously, was Auli. Tarrin hadn't been prepared for her to do what she did, and though half of him wanted her to keep going, the other half of him didn't. Part of him was embarrassed for being so easily seduced, but another part of him was angry that he hadn't gotten to see how far Auli was willing to go. He believed Jesmind when she said that Auli probably had no feelings for him, was only out to conquer him, but another part of him saw absolutely nothing wrong with that. If all she wanted was a good time, then that part of him was more than willing to accommodate her. That in itself seemed wrong to him; he was raised to believe in marriage, and not fooling around until he was married. But there was another part of him, probably something left behind from his time as a Were-cat, that thumbed its nose at that moral conditioning and saw Auli as a good time waiting to be had.

His feelings for the Sha'Kar complicated the issue. He *liked* Auli. A lot. She was funny, friendly, adventurous, and he thoroughly enjoyed spending time with her. Even now, knowing that she had tried to seduce him--or at least he thought she did, he'd never know thanks to Jesmind--he found himself looking forward to the next time she and Dar and himself all went out and had fun. He didn't *want* to avoid her, even if he didn't want her chasing him. He really liked her as a friend, and he wasn't going to stop talking to her, no matter what Jesmind said.

He honestly wasn't sure what to do about her. He spent almost all night sitting or laying in bed thinking about it. A good deal of that time was thinking about how nice it felt when she kissed him, he had to admit. He still was of two minds about her pursuit of him. Part of him wanted to pursue her, the other part didn't. Part of him was loyal to Jesmind and Kimmie, the other part realized that he was a different person now, so there was no true reason for him to remain so. Part of him realized that getting involved with Auli was probably going to cause more trouble than it would

be worth, and the other part of him was willing to take the punishment if only to enjoy the crime. Part of him thought it improper to think things like that until he was married, the other part called that moral part of him all sorts of names and told him to seize the moment. Part of him saw Auli as a temptation, as a test of his moral character, the other part reminded him that so long as they were both willing, what harm could it do? Auli couldn't get pregnant by him. They were two different races. So there could be absolutely no harm done if she truly was willing to take it to that ultimate level.

And besides, Auli was *beautiful*. What healthy, sane man could look at her and not want to be with her?

That, he realized, was the half of the main part of the problem. If she'd been a plain woman, an average woman, he probably would have said no. But she was Sha'Kar, ethereal, almost breathtakingly beautiful, and that beauty was a more effective weapon against his morals than anything else could have been. The other half of the problem was the fact that Auli was his friend. He liked her, he enjoyed spending time with her, and he wasn't going to ignore her, even if he decided that he didn't want to pursue a relationship with her. That would make spending time with her tricky, he knew, but he'd try. She was too much his friend to distance himself from her just because she wanted to take their relationship to another level. As long as she wasn't bitter about him rejecting her, he was more than willing to keep on being her friend.

The other issue was with Jesmind and the Were-cats. He was surprised that Jesmind had been following him around, but he guessed that he shouldn't have been. What bothered him more than that was how they were treating him, like he was a toddler still in diapers and tied to his mother's apron, trying to run his life. Triana had done it to him from the moment he'd woke up, and now Jesmind was trying to do it. Kimmie, thankfully, didn't seem to be willing to do it, only obeying Triana's orders. At least she partially understood how their controlling him made him feel. Tarrin was a very independent young man, and having them lord over him like that was really aggravating him.

And what was worse, he really hated how they simply decided that he *was* going to change back. It was like they didn't care at all how he felt

about it. What right did they have to determine how he was going to control his own life? Until he got his memory back and could make a conscious, rational choice, he honestly had no idea what he was going to do. He really didn't think about it that often, because until he got his memory back, there was really no good reason to do so. He expected the Were-cats to think that he would change back, but the way they'd decided that he *was* going to change back really infuriated him. Even Kimmie seemed to be doing it, planning her future around the fact that he was going to change back.

And what exacerbated that was the fact that they seemed to think that since he couldn't be changed back *right now*, that he should simply stop living. That he should sit in a nice safe room and do nothing but wait for Phandebrass to finish, so he could get back his memory. If they even bothered to wait that long. Part of him angrily wondered why Triana was keeping the others from simply biting him and being done with it. If they really did intend to make him change back, then why wait? Why not do it now, before he got his memory back, before he had a chance to choose for himself?

Not long after Jesmind left, he told himself to just ignore them until he got back his memory, but just as he wasn't willing to ignore Auli, he wasn't willing to ignore the Were-cats. He did like Jesmind and Kimmie, but he just couldn't ignore his daughter. He'd been totally ensnared by the wide-eyed child, and though some of the things she said surprised him at times, he just couldn't deny that he loved her. She was *his daughter*, and no matter what, he was going to love her. He wanted to spend time with her, and he was already looking forward to seeing her. He felt as much a duty and responsibility to Jasana now as he knew he must have before he lost his memory. No matter how mean he'd gotten or cruel he'd been, he just knew in his heart that he could never have distanced himself from his child.

The only problem with that was how to be mad with Jesmind and Triana and not have it affect his time with Jasana. The easiest way would be simply to take his daughter out and away from them, but he wasn't sure he could manage that. As paranoid they were over him, it'd go up several notches if he took his daughter out from their protective presence. He still wasn't sure about that one, but he'd figure something out before the time came. He was sure of it.

What to do, what to do. He did manage to get a little sleep, but not a whole lot. He was standing out on the balcony, which faced the ocean, and he could see it between two of the smaller towers that surrounded the big central one. He watched the lanterns begin to wink out as the sun started to rise on the other side of the Tower, but none of the many ships in the harbor had begun to move quite yet. There was a lot he had to figure out to do. Firstly, about Auli. Did he *really* want to enter into a relationship with her? Still, part of him did, but part of him didn't. He *really* wanted to get Auli back in his room and kiss her again, but for now, at least for a few days until he got things hammered out with Jesmind, he decided it may be best to leave that alone. If Jesmind or one of the other Were-cats walked in on him and Auli when they were doing more than kissing, things could get very, very ugly. Tarrin had no doubt that Jesmind meant it when she threatened to tear Auli limb from limb. Besides, the few days would give him time to work out what he wanted, give him time to decide if he wanted to pursue her or not. Until he did know one way or the other, it was probably best to gently decline any of her other invitations. Since he knew he'd feel a little guilty if he did let her seduce him before he made up his mind, he decided that a short time of frustration and disappointment was better than days and days of guilt.

That layered into the other problem. He was still very angry with Jesmind, and he didn't expect to forgive her for a while, mainly because he knew she'd never apologize for what she was doing. Triana would be just as recalcitrant. Kimmie would probably show some compassion for his position, but she would not go against Triana, so he didn't expect much in the way of help from her. At least he could talk to Kimmie, and Jula, and pass any information he wanted on to Jesmind and Triana. He had a feeling that he wouldn't be talking to them very much by the end of the day. He was going to step on this now, before the Were-cats got it settled too firmly in their minds that he would do what they wanted, and that he would be easy to push around. He had to establish his autonomy now, before things got out of hand.

Of course, now he knew he had a weapon to use against them. The problem was, he didn't know how it worked. He'd used Sorcery somehow when Jesmind angered him, but he still had no idea how he did it. And he wanted to know how he did it. He hadn't noticed at the time, but using

Sorcery had felt so familiar to him, like it was more than just a forgotten memory. Almost like it was a part of himself that he had only just rediscovered, something that hadn't been taken from him when he'd lost his memory.

That problem wasn't a very big one. He was absolutely surrounded by Sorcerers, and any of them should be able to teach him how he'd done what he did so he could do it again. Jenna would probably be the best one to do it, if he could get her to devote enough time to his education. She was also one of those *sui'kun* people, like him, and it would probably be best for her to teach him what he wanted to know. He had the feeling that his magic worked a little differently than other Sorcerers--he'd only seen that glow when Ianelle and the Sha'Kar used powerful magic to Teleport them to Suld--so it would be best if another *sui'kun* was the one who taught him.

It shouldn't be *too* hard. She was his sister, after all, and if she didn't have time for him, then who did she have time for?

Oh yes, he wanted to learn. Jesmind had been afraid of him, and he wanted that option to be available in the future. He wanted those high-and-mighty Were-cats to be afraid of him, he wanted them to understand that he would not be pushed around. He wouldn't go and pick a fight with them, but he wasn't going to let them bully him into doing whatever they wanted him to do either. He remembered the very poignant lesson that Kimmie had taught him. Their physical power made the Were-cats supreme, at least when one played them by their own rules. Sorcery would allow him to take them to a level they couldn't reach, and give him the advantage over them. If he wanted to establish his independence from the Were-cats, he'd need an advantage. And, he had to admit, there might come a time when he'd have to defend himself against them. If he chose not to be changed back, he felt that there was a good chance that they may try to force the issue. If it did come to that, he wanted some kind of way to protect himself from them.

He wondered again what Auli was doing, and just how serious she had been. Was she flirting with him? Was she playing with him, or was she being serious? If Jesmind hadn't come in, just how far would Auli have gone? He chided himself when he daydreamed a bit about her going all the way, and the image of her standing on the edge of the bathing pool nude wouldn't get out of his mind. Gods, she was so *gorgeous*. Like a living

piece of art, all perfect lines and curves, and she had a unique personality that attracted him just as much as her body did. She was the first girl he'd ever met who was so adventurous and fun-loving, who did what she wanted and didn't worry about what her parents or the others might think. She had such a rich sense of humor, and she was so fearless! That probably attracted him more than anything else. Auli was fearless, alot like he was, but in slightly different ways. Despite those differences, he felt a communion with Auli that wouldn't let him get her out of his mind. She was very much the kind of woman he'd always wanted to meet. Strong and outspoken like his mother, drop-dead gorgeous, a woman that wasn't afraid of being feminine, a woman that wasn't afraid to be strong when it was needed. She was so many things that he found appealing in a woman. No wonder he was having so much trouble putting her out of his mind. He wondered if Jesmind or Kimmie had similar qualities, if they were reasons why he'd fallen in love with them.

Jesmind certainly seemed fearless. And she was very strong. Kimmie was very feminine, the most feminine-seeming of the four adult Were-cats he'd met so far. After all, she wore a dress. But he knew that she'd put aside that femininity in a heartbeat if it was necessary, and from what he knew of Kimmie, she was very smart and very, very brave. In her own way, she was fearless. Jesmind seemed rather calm to him most of the time, very much unlike the stories he'd heard of her. Jesmind was supposed to be wild, hot-tempered, fiery in nature and very confrontational. Kimmie was the opposite of that. She was calm, mellow, and she avoided such confrontations whenever possible. It wasn't that she couldn't win those confrontations, she simply preferred to avoid them. She was the most peaceful of the three Were-cats he'd known long enough to compare. Thinking about it, he *could* see qualities in Kimmie and Jesmind that would have attracted him to them. The fact that both of them were very attractive didn't hurt, either.

Weird. The last thing he ever expected to have happen to him when he left home was to have girls chasing him around. He wasn't used to it...and in a way, it felt oddly appealing. They were going to give him a big head, with them virtually fighting over him the way they were.

But it was sunrise, and despite the fact that he hadn't had much sleep, it was time to get up. He wanted to find his sister and she if she could teach

him any magic. He had the feeling that it was going to come in handy in a very short period of time.

"Hold on hold on hold on!" came an excited call from down the hall as Tarrin trekked the distance towards Jenna's office. It had certainly taken long enough to find someone who knew where it was, mainly because he didn't want to ask anyone who may willingly or unwillingly get that information back to Triana. It wasn't that he was worried that she'd find out that he went to see his sister, but he certainly didn't want her to know that he was trying to learn how to use magic again. At that moment, though he liked her, he had to think of Triana and the other Were-cats as potential enemies. It was only wise, mainly because if they did resist if he chose not to be changed back, they would *definitely* become enemies. It pained him to think so, but something deep inside him warned him over and over again not to underestimate anyone. That had to be the feral nature that was gone now, some memory of it that echoed inside of him. The last vestiges of paranoia.

The speaker was Phandebrass, and the white-haired Wizard, who was a riot of contradictions, jogged up holding his old gray robes up so he wouldn't trip on them while he ran. He was alone, his white hair flying behind him, that ridiculous pointy hat somehow managing to stay on top of his head when it would be best for everyone involved if he'd simply lose it. "I say, hold on there, lad!" he called, running up to him. "I've been looking everywhere for you, I have!"

"What's the matter, Master Phandebrass?" Tarrin asked curiously, stopping in place and waiting for him to catch up.

"I need to check some things before I can continue, I do," he answered, reaching him and pausing to pant a little after his exertion.

"What things?"

"I say, I need to get a better understanding of the kind of memory loss you're enduring, I do," he answered. "And for the best results, I need a Sorcerer to help me, one good with Mind weaves. Do you know of a good one, lad?"

"I don't really know anyone, Phandebrass," Tarrin reminded him.

"Oh dear, that's right. I guess you wouldn't at that, would you?" he grunted. "Ah well, let's go find someone who can point us in the right direction, lad. We need to get this done, we do. I can't move any further."

"Alright," Tarrin said. "I was going to see my sister. She'd know who could help us."

"Capital idea!" Phandebrass said happily. "Lead on!"

Tarrin led the white-haired Wizard along the passages, trying to remember the exact directions that would take him to his sister's office. "How is it going with that, Master Phandebrass?" he asked curiously.

"Call me Phandebrass, my boy," he replied. "I don't need all those frilly titles, I don't. As to the research, it's going very well," he reported. "Thanks to the very extensive library here in the Tower, I've found no less than four possible approaches to restoring your memory, I have. I say, that's why I need to do some checking on you, so I can decide which would be the most effective approach to utilize, I can."

"Oh. Any idea how much longer it's going to be?"

"I say, not really, lad. Depending on which technique I use, we could be trying to reverse the damage as soon as next ride or as late as next year. It's all going to depend on what the tests reveal, it will."

"How can there be different approaches? I mean, I lost my memory. Why would there be differences?"

"I say, you're right, you lost your memory, but the *how* of it is what's important," he said. "I need to determine as closely as I can exactly how the magic attacked your mind. That will tell me which approach would be most effective in restoring it. After all, you haven't completely lost your memory, you know. It's buried deep in your mind, it is, so deeply that it's going to take some very powerful, very specialized magic to bring it back out."

"I haven't forgotten about that," he answered as they came up one of the long spiral staircases. "How many different ways could there have been for it to affect me?"

"Well, several of which I can find," he replied. "I say, firstly it could have simply erased it from your mind, like blotting out ink. It could have put something in its place, like filling a pie pan with clear water. There's

something there, but you can't see it unless you look at it the right way. It could have left it there, but placed a block over it, like laying a blanket over a mirror. You can't see yourself in the mirror because the blanket is in the way. It could have buried it--I mean to say, it could have pushed those memories so deeply into your mind that even you can't find them. Or it could have not done anything at all to the memories, but tricked your mind into thinking that they weren't there."

"Wow, I didn't think there would be that many ways."

"I say, those are just the ways *I* can think of, lad," he grunted. "The magic that did this to you was very powerful, and it was done by a god. Gods can think in ways we can't even imagine, they can. It may be that I simply don't have the intelligence to undo it. Just to warn you, lad. I think it's fair that you understand the full situation, I do, unlike some of the others."

"I appreciate that, Phandebrass," Tarrin told him sincerely. "You're one of the first people around here that isn't treating me like a child, or an invalid."

"Whyever would they do that?" Phandebrass asked curiously.

"That's what I'd like to know," Tarrin agreed.

As he expected, they found Jenna in her office. The office of the Keeper was a remarkably spartan affair, with just a single banner on the wall behind her large rosewood desk with a multicolored *shaeram*--the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*--on it, and portraits on the two walls to each side holding a dark-haired man and a blond woman, each holding a strange staff and with an amulet looking like it was carved out of diamond around their necks. They had to go through another office to reach hers, the office of Duncan, who had faithfully served three Keepers with quiet efficiency over the years. Duncan rarely spoke, and when Tarrin and Phandebrass had entered his office, he simply led them into Jenna's private domain. Jenna looked a little piqued, sitting there chewing on a tendril of her hair as she read from a scrolled parchment in her free hand.

"What's wrong, Jenna?" Tarrin asked as Duncan bowed silently and withdrew.

"Oh, not much," she replied. "This is from Shiika. Her messenger gave everyone down at the gate quite a shock."

"What happened?"

"Well, one of her daughters delivered it, and it seems that they can Teleport now just like their mother, any time they want. I guess the restoration of the Weave also restored some of the powers of the Demons too."

"Why would that surprise them? Don't they see magic things all the time?"

"You don't remember seeing them, do you?" Jenna asked with a smile.

"No, not really."

"Well, let's just say that you don't forget seeing one of the *Cambisi*." She set it down and rubbed her temple. "Shiika's starting to annoy me. She's *really* hot about us rebuilding a Tower in Dala Yar Arak. This is the fourth proposal I've gotten in three days. I can't make her understand that I can't make that decision. Alexis can't either. It has to come from the Goddess, and she hasn't told me to do anything about it yet."

"Why would she be so serious about it?" Tarrin asked.

"I say, you don't understand the power and advantage a city has when there are Sorcerers present," Phandebrass told him. "No city that has a Tower would usually ever get attacked by anyone, except for recent events, of course. They were rather remarkable circumstances, they were."

"Odds are, Shiika has some kind of ulterior motive," Jenna said. "I like her, but she *is* a Demon. I don't trust her."

"How can a Demon be a queen, anyway?" Tarrin asked. "Don't the people hate her?"

"Actually, she's the best thing to happen to Yar Arak in a thousand years," Jenna admitted ruefully. "She's not like other Demons. She's actually got a kind heart, at least compared to other Demons. She's very smart, she's amazingly organized for a Demon, and she's cleaning up Yar Arak much faster than I anticipated. Give her a hundred years, and she's going to have

an empire as well run as Wikuna. I'd better make a note to keep an eye on things over there."

"Maybe you should build another Tower."

"Until we get our numbers back up, we're not rebuilding anything," Jenna said sourly. "There aren't enough *katzh-dashi* to staff a third Tower right now."

"Why don't you tell her that?"

"I say, it's never wise to reveal your weaknesses, lad," Phandebrass told him seriously.

"Yah," Jenna grunted. "So, what brings you two to my door? I doubt this is a social call."

"Actually, it's not, Keeper," Phandebrass told her. "I need your best Mind weaver to help me isolate the exact means your brother's memory was attacked."

"I was hoping you'd ask for our help," Jenna smiled at him. "Our best was Amelyn, but I don't think you want to use her. Koran Dar is probably the best after her."

"I say, Amelyn is still alive?"

Jenna nodded. "I put a shield around her that won't let her use her power, and she's currently residing happily down in our dungeon." She put a hand to her amulet. "Koran Dar," she called in a light voice.

"*Yes, my Keeper?*" his voice seemed to come out of the amulet, but it was a bit tinny, like a higher-pitched echo.

"Could you come to my office? We need your expertise for a rather complicated problem."

"*I'll be there in a few moments, Keeper.*"

"I see you wasted no time learning that," Phandebrass smiled.

"It does come in handy, Phandebrass," she said with a smile. "I thought Duncan was going to kiss my feet after I told him that he didn't have to send runners and pages quite nearly so often anymore."

Tarrin spent the time waiting for Jenna to tell her about the fight he had with Jesmind, and then he outright asked her if she would teach him Sorcery. To his surprise, she looked him in the eyes and shook his head. "No," she said bluntly.

"Why not?" he demanded, just a bit petulantly.

"Because you'd be like a bull in a glassblower's shop," she answered. "As strong as you are, there is no way you're going to go monkeying around with Sorcery right now."

"But you're teaching Jasana," he pointed out indignantly.

"Jasana isn't you," she said a bit crisply. "Look, Tarrin, you lost your memory, but you're very sensitive to echoes in the Weave. If I start teaching you and you get one of those that shows you something you can't control, there's no telling what might happen. To say that it would kill you would be a mild understatement."

Tarrin was considerably disappointed, but the sincere look in Jenna's eyes convinced him that she was being serious. Right now, she certainly knew more than him about that kind of thing. "All right," he said in a slightly sullen tone.

"Just be patient, brother. You'll get it all back soon."

"I hope so."

Koran Dar arrived but a moment later, and Tarrin had to pause to admire the man. He was very, very tall, even taller than Tarrin, and had the same coppery colored skin that Camara Tal had. He had raven black hair too, just like Camara Tal, and he had ruggedly handsome features. He also had huge hands, Tarrin noted. No wonder Camara Tal was pining for him. He looked a very handsome fellow.

But it was his mind that Tarrin realized Camara Tal liked so much. After exchanging polite greetings with the Keeper, Jenna sent them to a different room where Koran Dar and Phandebrass could do their work in peace and quiet. Tarrin had the chance to talk to Koran Dar, then listen as he talked to Phandebrass, and he was impressed by how smart the man was. He was able to meet the addled mage on many intellectual levels, going way, way over the young man's head. Tarrin felt a little lost by the time they reached a

quiet chamber with no windows, that had nothing within but a table and four upholstered chairs, with one of those ever-present glowglobes suspended over the table. Some kind of small meeting room. But he did know that the two of them had been working out what Koran Dar was going to do.

"Alright, Tarrin," Koran Dar said in a calm, bass voice. "Sit down here, and let me say right now that you need to relax. I'm going to be using magic on you, and you're going to feel it inside your head. It's important that you don't fight with it. It's going to feel strange, but it's not going to hurt you, alright?"

"Alright," he said a little uncertainly, sitting down in the chair Koran Dar had indicated. The Amazon man pulled up a chair and sat down in front of him, and then reached out and put his hands on either side of Tarrin's face. Tarrin felt a little anxiety, but he figured that that was natural, considering that he was about to allow this man to use magic to look around inside his head. That took a considerable amount of trust, and only his trust in his sister's judgement was allowing him to go through with it. Tarrin felt it when Koran Dar used his Sorcery, felt that strange energy build up inside him, then could literally see the magic snake out of the nearly invisible magic that moved through the room and converge behind his eyes.

He was more than aware of when it started, for he did indeed feel the man's touch inside his head. It was the strangest feeling, and it wasn't entirely comfortable. Tarrin tensed up at the initial contact with it, as he felt something decidedly *unnatural* appear inside his head. It was like a little star floating around in the darkness of his mind, and it was like he could see it with his inner eye, like a daydream, moving here and there inside his mind. He tried his best to relax, but it wasn't easy. The little star kept touching on old memories and some secrets, and Tarrin wasn't sure if Koran Dar could see or understand anything that the star was touching inside his mind.

Gripping the arms of his chair tightly, Tarrin strove not to get too screwed up as Koran Dar's magical spell dug deeper into his mind, going past memories and dreams and into the more autonomic places, like subconscious and ego and even instincts. Every time Koran Dar's spell touched something, Tarrin felt it surge through his mind, like the touch had

triggered it into action. He endured any number of primal impulses, anger, fear, even a strange overwhelming superiority to everyone else, and then Koran Dar's star moved even past those, even deeper, down into the blackest depths of his mind, where the only light was coming from the star itself. Even Tarrin lost the sense of the star as it went beyond his capacity to track, into the darkest tunnels of his mind that had known no conscious thought. He knew it was there, and for some reason its presence in that blackness made him feel cold, and very, very anxious. Almost as if he knew there was something there that he didn't want him to find. Deeper and deeper it went, closer and closer, until it had reached the very bottom, the deepest part of his mind, the bottom of the well. Tarrin was sweating, but was very cold, and the sweat made him feel like ice as the star formed by Koran Dar's spell seemed attracted to something it found there in the very darkest part of his mind, floating closer and closer to it, nearly touching it. It turned its light on that area to see what was there--

--even Tarrin was not prepared for what happened next. Magical power flooded into him like a tidal wave, and before he even understood what was happening, It lashed out at Koran Dar with that raw magical power, almost of its own volition. Tarrin fell backwards with his chair as he recoiled from the bright light and ear-splitting *crack* as the energy manifested in the real world. The ceiling and the floor traded places a couple of times as he rolled to a stop on his back, his legs still tangled in the chair, feeling like someone had just sucked all the energy out of his body.

"Sizzling lizards!" he heard Phandebrass exclaim. "Koran Dar, I say, are you alright?"

"Sizzling is a good word," the Amazon man said in an unsteady voice. Tarrin managed to sit up and saw Koran Dar lying on the floor a good ten spans from where he'd been when he started, the front of his robes smoking and blackened. "If I hadn't deflected most of that, it would have burned a hole through me," he admitted.

Tarrin was too disoriented yet to feel guilty at having hurt Koran Dar. His head was spinning in a very uncomfortable manner, and even sitting up was making him so dizzy that he couldn't tell which was was up. He laid back down on the floor staring at the ceiling as it rotated in a wobbling manner around the glowglobe, and he wondered how he was staying on the

floor when gravity kept changing directions on him. He was certain that his legs trapped in the chair was the only thing holding him down on the floor.

There was more. There was something else in his mind with him, something *alien*...yet there was a familiarity to it that he could not dismiss. It was like another being, but it was also a part of him. It had been that other thing that had lashed out at Koran Dar, for it had objected to his presence in their shared mind so strenuously that it had attacked the Sorcerer to chase him away. It was a non-thinking entity, primal, nothing but a bundle of feelings and emotions and impulses and instincts. Something *primitive*, but its power was more than Tarrin could deny. It may be simple and instinct-driven, but it was very, very strong. He felt it retreat back down into that chasm inside his mind unwillingly, as if it were fighting against the force holding it down there, but was not strong enough to counter its power. And as it retreated, Tarrin felt his disorientation and dizziness ease, but it did little for his dazed condition. The reaction and abrupt appearance of that other entity was too much for his mind to easily accept, and he wasn't sure how long he lay there on the floor before he became aware of Koran Dar and Phandebrass kneeling over him.

"What, what happened?" he asked in a bleary tone.

"I found what I was looking for," Koran Dar told him in a rueful tone. "I just didn't expect it to attack me."

"A-Attack you?" Tarrin asked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"The part of you that made you a Were-cat, at least mentally, is still inside you, Tarrin," Koran Dar explained. "You always called it the Cat, so that's how I'll refer to it. It's still in your mind, or at least an echo of it is. I guess it couldn't be completely separated from you. It's part of what you lost, trapped with the memories that were taken from you. That's the key there, young one. The memories you lost are intertwined with the Cat. That's going to make recovering your memories without bringing that back into the forefront of your mind very, very difficult."

"But we can do it?" Phandebrass asked.

Koran Dar nodded. "I managed to discover how the memory was pulled out of him, Phandebrass. It was an attempt to erase it, but it only managed to erase the part of it that was locked in his human mind. When whatever

happened to him stripped his Were nature out of him, it couldn't purge it entirely. The Cat had become a part of his mind, and not even tearing out his Were nature was enough to destroy it in him. It made the Cat retreat into the very core of his mind, and it took those memories, or at least copies of them, with it. Everything he knew since losing his memory is still in his mind. They're just locked up in the lost part of his Were nature."

"I say, restoring his Were nature would most likely restore his memories as well," Phandebrass mused.

"I'd say most likely, but we were told to find a way to give him back his memory as a *human*, Phandebrass," Koran Dar reminded him.

"I say, I think I can do that too," he said brightly. "Now that I know how his mind was affected, I think I can research a suitable cure, I can. I'll need to borrow the resources of your library, good Koran Dar. Would you mind terribly?"

"I think I can say with certain authority that you have the run of the library, good Wizard," Koran Dar said with a slow smile.

Tarrin looked at them in uncertainty and a bit of anxiety. The lost part of his Were-cat nature had possession of all his lost memories? It was still inside his mind, even though he was human again? He guessed it was possible; Triana had admitted that what had happened to him was something she considered absolutely impossible. She said that any attempt to cure Lycanthropy would kill the Were-creature in the attempt, for the nature and magic of being Were utterly infused the one turned. Whatever had separated that out of him could not do it with absolute certainty. It had left the tiniest of pieces of it inside him, and that fragment was holding onto all his lost memories.

"You mean if they made me a Were-cat again, I'd get back my memories?"

"I'd say yes," Koran Dar said with a solid nod. "The Cat is holding onto those memories, and I'll bet that it's trapped in the deepest part of your mind because what made you a Were-cat was stripped from you. If you were a Were-cat again, it would return to its rightful place in your mind, and I'd bet that it would restore your memory in the process. But I'm not saying that's

the *only* way, Tarrin. Give Phandebrass some time, and I think he'll find an alternate solution to the problem."

"I say, I should have an answer by tomorrow evening," he said confidently.

"Why did I attack you with magic when you touched that--whatever it was?"

"I say, because the Cat in you rejects mental communion with unlike minds," Phandebrass told him calmly. "It was a phenomenon you'd displayed before. You can't Circle with any other Sorcerer, because your Were mind wouldn't accept the mental connection necessary to form the link, it wouldn't. I say, I think when Koran Dar touched the remains of the Cat in you, it reacted just as it did the other times others have tried to touch your mind. The Cat doesn't seem to like humans very much," Phandebrass said with a grin.

"You didn't attack me, Tarrin. The *Cat* attacked me," Koran Dar said calmly. "You are the same being, but sometimes you and the Cat can do things independently of one another. Like two sides of a coin. Both are different, and they can mean different things, but they're still the same coin."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want to scare you, but I'll be blunt," Koran Dar said evenly. "The Cat is a part of you, but as you just saw, it's capable of acting of its own volition when its instincts are suitably provoked. The Cat saw me as an intruder, an invader, and it took steps to protect itself from me. That's why it attacked me. You had nothing to do with that magical spell. The Cat did that all on its own."

That did scare him, and he had to admit it to himself. Triana and Jesmind had said that the Cat would make them do things, but he'd never experienced it quite like that before. He barely had any memory of it, and it frightened him that he was capable of reacting so violently and having no real idea why. He could kill someone and have no inkling as to why he'd just done it, or what it meant.

"Don't worry about it, Tarrin," Koran Dar smiled. "The Cat won't manifest like that again. It simply *can't*, because you're not a Were-cat

anymore. The only reason it could was because I was so deep inside your mind that I could touch it."

"It's a scary idea, knowing that there's something in me that may hurt people when I don't want it to," he said in a small voice.

"When you had your memory, you had control over it," Koran Dar assured him. "The Tarrin I knew may have been intimidating, but he didn't go around killing people for no reason. You weren't a monster, Tarrin. You simply had special circumstances that meant that people had to treat you in certain ways. That's all."

"What if they didn't treat me in those certain ways? What did I do?"

Koran Dar chuckled. "They only did it *once*, that's for sure," he said. "Usually, you made your displeasure abundantly clear."

"Breaking limbs was always your preferred method of education, it was," Phandebrass laughed.

"I sound like I was a bully."

"You weren't a bully, Tarrin. You were the king of the hill, and you *knew* it. There's a difference."

"That makes me sound arrogant."

"You were," Koran Dar smiled. "But all Were-cats are arrogant. Think about Triana and Jesmind. Aren't they arrogant?"

Tarrin considered that, and he realized that Koran Dar was right. Both of them were rather arrogant. And even Kimmie and Jula displayed traits of superiority, though not to the same degree. The Were-cats were bigger and stronger than humans, and they knew it. And they made sure everyone else knew it too.

"You were more modest than most of them, you were," Phandebrass told him. "But you still walked like the sun followed you around." He patted the pouches on his belt. "I say, I really must get to the library. I know exactly what books I need to study first, and I'm sure half the Tower is waiting for me to find an answer, it is."

They waited for Tarrin to feel completely recovered, and Phandebrass rushed off towards the library with an expectant gleam in his eye. Koran

Dar escorted Tarrin along the carpeted passages of the Tower, taking him to the kitchens so they could get some breakfast. The revelations that had been placed on him made him quiet and thoughtful as he tried to work through them. The trauma of a sort that had come with finding the Cat still inside his mind--though he couldn't remember it--had been considerable. He'd felt...*helpless*. Though it was only hitting him now. He could have killed Koran Dar, and he had no idea that it had happened until it was over. That really frightened him, and all he could do was wonder if someone else was going to do something that would make him attack them too. Everyone around him, the servants, the *katzh-dashi*, the guards, they all seemed almost menacing to him now, as if one misspoke word or unconscious gesture would cause that buried part of himself to rise up from its dark prison and attack again. It made him very withdrawn, unwilling to speak or even look too long at anyone, afraid that he may hurt someone.

Another serious fear was over what the information that Koran Dar had discovered may mean. The absolute instant that Triana and Jesmind heard that restoring him as a Were-cat would most likely restore his memory, they'd be looking for a good place to sink their fangs into him. Tarrin wasn't sure if he *wanted* to be a Were-cat again, and he was positive that they were not going to give him a chance to decide one way or the other. As far as they were concerned, making him a Were-cat was the only possible course of action. They wouldn't even consider anything else. They'd both so much as admitted it. Even Kimmie had stated something to that effect. He'd become a Were-cat the first time by accident, when he had no choice in the matter. Now he did, and he didn't want the Were-cats trying to take that choice away from him.

He had to admit, after seeing himself do something like attacking Koran Dar, he didn't think he wanted to be a Were-cat. If he was, then the Cat would be in his mind again, and it could do that again much easier the next time. How had he stood it before? It must have been terrifying, living in constant fear that he may go off and kill people at the drop of a hat. No wonder he sounded so withdrawn and moody in the stories the others told him about himself.

"I know, it's a lot to consider," Koran Dar said in a reassuring tone as they passed a quartet of men in chain jacks, Tower guards patrolling the

halls. "I bet right now you're wondering if you want to be a Were-cat again."

"A little," he said with a bit of a flush.

"Don't dwell on the negatives, Tarrin," he said in a gentle voice. "You had alot of trouble with it at first. I won't lie to you about that. But when you came back the second time, before the battle, you seemed to be completely in control of yourself. You were even happy. I think you really were happy, Tarrin. You had found peace within yourself and had embraced your new life completely. I honestly believe that if you had your memory back right now, you'd want to be a Were-cat again."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Camara's told me alot about what happened, more than most of the others know," he disclosed. "There was alot of pain in your past, but you had come through all of it and managed to keep your sanity. That's the mark of a strong mind and an unbreakable will."

"She really loves you, you know," Tarrin blurted. "Camara Tal does."

"I know she does," he sighed.

"You love her too, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Tarrin," he admitted. "But you know Amazon custom. No matter how much I love her, I simply can't go back with her. Not knowing what's waiting for me there."

"You know," Tarrin said in a pondering tone, "Camara's starting to get desperate about getting you back. If you did things right, you could wring some concessions out of her."

"Really?" he asked with an amused look. "Like what?"

"Well, now that the Weave is restored, I'm sure you could figure out some way to use magic to travel between Amazar and one of the Towers," he proposed. "As long as you can get here and do your work, does it really matter where you live? I think Camara Tal would agree to letting you stay as a *katzh-dashi* if it meant she got you the rest of the time." He touched his own amulet. "And these let you talk with the other Sorcerers when you need to, so alot of the time, I bet you wouldn't have to come all the way to the

Tower to do some of your work. And when you did, even if you couldn't use magic to travel yourself, you could always call one of the Sha'Kar to come and get you. Jenna *is* my sister, you know. I can make her agree to anything it would take to let you arrange things with Camara Tal."

"My, it sounds like you've thought about this," Koran Dar chuckled. "And why bother? My problems with Camara aren't really your problems."

"Camara Tal's my friend, Koran Dar," Tarrin told him honestly. "I really like her, and I don't like seeing her in pain like that. I like you too, and I know you can't like what's going on either. Not if you love her."

"No, not really," he admitted. "The only thing keeping me from Camara is the society we live in."

"She's changed alot since you last really talked to her, Koran Dar," Tarrin told him. "I think that if you met her and bargained hard, you could get her to give over on some of those things."

"She's a High Priestess of Neme, Tarrin," Koran Dar sighed. "She's a paragon of Amazon society. There is absolutely *no way* she'll relax the rules."

"Well, there's no way she'll relax the rules that others can see," Tarrin said shrewdly. "I bet that if you agreed to keep your agreement a secret and at least pretended to go by the Amazon rules, you know, put on a public face, she'd let you break them in private. That way she saves face, you keep your freedom, and you two can finally be together."

Koran Dar gave Tarrin a very surprised look. "You know something, Tarrin?" he asked with a laugh. "That makes sense! I hate to admit it, but I think you've hit on an idea here. If I *did* at least pretend to behave like a proper Amazon husband, I think I just might be able to wring some concessions out of Camara concerning my freedom. And you're right. If the Sha'Kar can't teach me how to Teleport, then I'm sure you and me and Jenna could work out some kind of arrangement where they could come and get me."

"Well, you could always talk to her and see if you can't work it out," Tarrin offered.

"I believe I will, Tarrin," he said, patting him on the shoulder fondly. "I believe I will. You know, it shows much about your character that in the midst of so many of your own personal problems, you'd be so willing and able to help others with theirs. You're a remarkable young man, and I'm honored to know you."

"It's nothing, Koran Dar," he said with a blush. "Mother always says helping people solve their problems sometimes helps you solve your own."

"Call me Koran, Tarrin," the Amazon man smiled, "and it sounds like you have a very wise mother."

"I think so," Tarrin affirmed.

"So do I."

Tarrin walked along with the Amazon, his own fears and worries momentarily forgotten. In all the chaos in his life, at that moment, it just felt good that he could help solve at least *someone's* problems. Even if they weren't his own.

After a good breakfast with Koran Dar, the Amazon left him to seek out Camara Tal, and that left him alone. He wandered the halls of the Tower aimlessly, then found himself on the gravelled pathways of the gardens, walking by himself to sort things out in his mind. The distraction of Koran Dar was long forgotten as he worried over how the Were-cats were going to react to the news, and what it would mean to him personally.

He had a choice to make. He knew that, but he had been trying to discreetly avoid the issue over the last couple of days. He really didn't want to think about it now, but Phandebrass' revelation was forcing his hand, and he knew that he had to start really thinking about it.

He'd heard all the stories now, and from what he'd heard, the Tarrin who had been a Were-cat had been a very dark, menacing fellow, full of anger and pain and shockingly brutal at times. He didn't sound like a very good person to be, and he had been carrying around a lot of pain. He'd heard of all the things he'd done and the many people he'd killed, all the evil he'd both witnessed and perpetrated in the name of his mission. That Tarrin was

ruthless, monstrous, almost evil in his own right, probably just as bad, if not worse, than the very ones he opposed.

But on the other hand, that Tarrin had two children, had two women who were utterly devoted to him, and he had been trying to build a future for himself. Triana had known that Tarrin better than anyone else possibly could have known him, and she told him about how he had managed to come to terms with the darkness inside him. How he had learned to let go of the anger and pain, how he had changed so much since entering the desert with the Faerie Sarrya. It was like he was a different person. When he thought of that Tarrin in those terms, he seemed courageous, almost inhumanly courageous, battling against all odds to manage to come out on top. That Tarrin may have been cold and ruthless, but it was just that. He *had been*. That Tarrin had changed, had shed some of the ferality that made him so nasty, had found acceptance within himself and had again learned to love, and to trust.

But if he decided to be a Were-cat again, which Tarrin would he be? Would he be the ruthless monster, or the Were-cat he had been just before he lost his memory, the one who had been fighting for happiness rather than making the rest of the world share his pain? Triana had pulled no punches. She admitted that she had no idea how this ordeal was going to affect him. It could make him feral again, or it may not. There was no telling how he would be if he was restored to his Were nature.

And on the other hand, what if he decided to stay human? He could build a new life for himself, the life of a Sorcerer, or anything he wanted to be. The possibilities were endless before him, because it was as if he had been given a second chance, another bite at the apple. He had no memory of his life before, and if he decided to stay human...perhaps it was best to leave those memories forever buried in the depths of his darkest mind. He could be a Sorcerer in the Tower, he could learn all over again, he could be what he was meant to be from the beginning, before Jesmind's bite had so radically altered his life. Or he could leave the Tower and go back to Aldreth, or even decide to travel the world. He could be whatever he wanted to be, he knew he could.

And there was Auli.

That thought just crept in there out of nowhere, but once it got into his mind, he couldn't let go of it. If he stayed human, he could explore just how far Auli wanted to go with him, an idea that had been eating at him since she kissed him. He just couldn't get the Sha'Kar girl out of his mind, even though he knew he had to get her out of his mind. He'd told himself he couldn't get involved with her right now, he needed to make an objective decision, and she was clouding the issue. But he *liked* her, alot. And she was so much what he wanted in a woman.

Auli wasn't the only reason to stay human. The simple fact of knowing that the tortures and horrors of the past years would never haunt him again was also a powerful piece on the board. And he was *born* human, wouldn't it be only natural to want to stay the way he'd been born, the only thing he'd ever known? He couldn't remember being a Were-cat. It felt natural, perfect, for him to be as he was, even if there was a large hole in his memory.

Memory. He thought before that it wouldn't be right to make his decision until he got back his memory so he could make a decision based on all the facts. But if he did get back his memory and decided to stay human, then the memory of what he had once been would always be there, and he had the feeling that it would haunt him for the rest of his days. Not just the memory of what he had lost, but the memory of the things he had done. Tarrin the Were-cat may have had the mental control and willpower to be able to cope with such awful memories, but he wasn't sure if Tarrin the human could. They may be too much for him to handle, and that would permantly stain any life he may be able to enjoy as a human.

No, if he wanted to stay a human, then it would be best if those memories were never awakened again.

But there were some things that he really did need to know, things that he had to understand before he could make such an important decision. And he didn't want to learn those things from Triana or Jesmind. Their bias was obvious, and he didn't want them flavoring things to sway him. He wanted an honest opinion, a clear one, a consice one. And he knew who would have one. It wouldn't be Allia or Keritanima, for they were *too* close to him. It wouldn't be Dolanna or Camara Tal, it wouldn't be Azakar or Miranda.

If he wanted an honest opinion uncluttered by personal view, he knew Dar would be the best one to give it to him. The young man was very smart

and quite insightful, and he had a very formidable ability to see both sides of an issue, a trait instilled in him by his parents, who had been training him to be a merchant. Merchants had to understand both sides of the issue in order to be able to assume the most profitable posture in the bargaining.

Looking for Dar was one thing. Finding him on the vast grounds of the Tower was quite another. After checking his room and Dolanna's room, he found himself suddenly having no idea where to look. He didn't really know what Dar and Dolanna did in the Tower. For that matter, he really wasn't sure what all the other Sorcerers did in the Tower either. He guessed they went off and did magic things or studied or such things, things he probably wouldn't understand without his memory. The only one whose job he really understood was Jenna's, and that was only because she had explained most of it to him. He decided to just wander around and try to find someone he knew, and maybe they could show him to Dar or use magic to tell him where to go. Besides, it was a very nice summer day, and he really didn't want to spend it sitting in a room somewhere or wandering stuffy hallways.

Where he eventually ended up was on the periphery of the sand-covered ground used by the cadets of the Knights, and he stood there and watched as ten armored Knights prowled around on the large field and oversaw about fifty armored cadets going through sword exercises. They practiced with wooden replicas of swords, swinging them at one another but not close enough to make actual contact. The ten Knights paced up and down the lines of the cadets and corrected forms or stopped a cadet and explained something to him. He hadn't seen them practice before, and it reminded him of his own dream to be a Knight, to be out there on that training field and swinging one of those practice swords. It didn't look like wearing that armor in this heat would be very comfortable, but it was what he had wanted to do. Personally, Tarrin didn't see much use for armor. He never really had, at least not the kind of armor the Knights wore. That kind of heavy armor weighed a man down, restricted his movement and his mobility, and sometimes became more of a liability than an advantage. A fast opponent, more lightly armed, yet with enough strength and a suitable weapon to penetrate that armor could take down an armored foe easily. But that was a rather specialized situation. On the average, and in the furtherance of protecting Sorcerers, Tarrin could both see and understand why the Knights wore heavy armor. They did a lot of travelling, and their horses bore most of

that weight. Knights were trained extensively for mounted combat. That armor may be useless against a special foe, but it did grant a very formidable advantage against most others. The average peasant with a knife or threshing staff or pitchfork was not going to be taking a Knight. He probably wouldn't be able to take a Knight who was totally naked and unarmed. Knights were some of the most expertly trained warriors in the world. They were even respected by the Ungardt, and one had to be a *very* good warrior for an Ungardt to respect him.

He'd wanted to be out there, but he knew that even if he decided to remain human, he never really could. After all, he already *was* a Knight. He remembered that part of the story that Dolanna told him. He and Allia both were Knights, though they'd never gone through the same training as the others. They were special Knights, answering only to Darvon, the Lord General, who really didn't order them around. Dolanna told him that they'd Knighted the two of them because they'd become so close to the Knights. Allia and Tarrin had trained many of them in their forms of fighting, to give the Knights a stronger base in unarmed combat and make them more effective. Dolanna said that the Knights even branded themselves now, because of the brands on Tarrin and Allia. She said it was the code of the Knights, *We are one under Karas*, meaning that what one Knight did, all did, and when one Knight needed help, all of them answered the call. Since Tarrin and Allia had had the fortitude to allow themselves to be branded, all of the other Knights had had themselves branded as well as a symbol of their unity. That kind of powerful brotherhood was a weapon in and of itself, and it made the Knights even more feared as a whole than they were individually. Nobody--*nobody*--insulted or irritated a Knight. He very well may have the entire order lined up at his front door the next day, waiting their turn to demand satisfaction.

He tried to remember what Dolanna had told him. Knight Champion, that was what she called it. Darvon had Knighted both him and Allia and given them that title. Darvon had given them that title, and it meant that he was outside the structure of command in the order itself. He and Allia only answered to Darvon, and Darvon had basically told them to do whatever they pleased. He'd done it to give Tarrin more leverage to use against the Council to make them give him more freedom, so they'd told him. But after

they'd Knighted them, the Knights had accepted both of them as if they had undergone the training. They truly were members of the order.

Tarrin wondered what the Knights would think of what happened to him. He didn't remember any of them but Faalken, who had died, but he'd heard a great deal about Darvon. He was supposed to be a very wise man. He wondered if Darvon was down there in the compound right now, and if he'd see Tarrin if he asked around for him. Maybe Darvon would have some good advice for him, or maybe he could tell him some things about his time in the Tower that the others didn't know. Besides, he was supposedly a Knight, and he had a problem. The code of the Knights meant that if he had a problem, then it was a problem that the entire order would try to help him solve.

He realized he was just trying to make excuses to go in there and see what it was like with the Knights. He had no memory of them, and he doubted any of them would even recognize him like he was now. But it was a childhood dream to be a Knight, to wear the spurs, and the knowledge that he had accomplished that goal seemed empty without any memory of how it had come to pass.

Looking away from them, he wandered back towards the main Tower, by now a bit numb to its enormity. He slowed to a stop, however, when four Sha'Kar glided towards him in their stately, graceful walk, four young women wearing simple robes and gowns, not those shimmering garments they'd worn back on the island. And one of them he recognized as Auli. Seeing her caused his mixed feelings for the girl to rise up in him, both his desire to be with her and his resolve to stay away, and seeing her made him happy to see her and worried about it. He liked her as a friend, and perhaps was willing to let her lead him astray, but he knew that getting involved with her would cause nothing but trouble. On many different levels. He considered turning and going the other way, but they had already seen him, and he didn't want to insult Auli by blatantly running away from her. Despite what she may feel, he still considered her a friend, and he wasn't going to be mean to her. He simply jammed his hands behind his back and clasped them together and ambled forward quickly, like he was late for an appointment. He didn't want to drag any conversation between them out, especially since she was in the company of three of her friends. They were talking among themselves in what seemed to be casual tones, four friends or

acquaintances that seemed to like one another. They all stopped when Tarrin got near to them, and then they curtsied to him gracefully when he was but a few steps away.

"Good day to you, honored one," the lead one said, a very tall, willowy Sha'Kar with the strangest mix of coloring. She had the dusky brown skin of the Sha'Kar, but she had flaming red hair. It was a very unusual combination, and it made her stand out from the other three, who had varying shades of blond hair. The redhead wore a red robe that closely matched her hair, as if to advertise her unusual hair.

"Hello, Tarrin," Auli said in silky tones, giving him a strangely naughty, knowing smile. "What's got you in such a hurry?"

"I'm looking for Dar," he said in what he hoped was a hurried, dismissive manner. "It's kinda important."

"I haven't seen him. Do you want me to call him for you?"

Tarrin stopped abruptly. Actually, that would help him out a great deal. "If you wouldn't mind," he said gratefully.

She gave him a short grin, then put her slender fingers to the amulet around her neck. "Dar," she called. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the library," came the tinny response, which was still Dar's voice despite the slight distortion. *"What's the matter, Auli?"*

"Nothing, Tarrin's looking for you, that's all."

"Oh. Well, I'll stay where I am until he gets here, then."

"We're all going to go watch the Knights practice," Auli said with that same naughty smile. "They're certainly one of the few things about having to come here that's been good so far. Isn't that right, Janelle?"

The redhead gave Tarrin a slightly embarrassed giggle and nodded. "I never knew humans could be so much fun to watch," she agreed.

"Of course, they all fall over each other when we're there watching them," Auli added with a smirk. "I guess they can't concentrate when such beauty stands in their presence."

"At least it's fun til that wrinkled up old prune comes out and chases us off," another of the Sha'Kar girls said sourly. "He's always so rude!"

They were talking about Darvon, and Tarrin didn't want to say something unpleasant to them. From the sound of it, Darvon would take care of that when they arrived. Tarrin didn't remember Darvon, but he was the Lord General of the Knights, and Tarrin figured that he had to have some kind of duty to stand up for Darvon against them. But then again, Darvon probably wouldn't be impressed by the four Sha'Kar girls. Tarrin realized that the younger ones, the cadets, they probably would get distracted by the four very lovely girls standing on the edges of the grounds and watching, but the trained Knights wouldn't. Knights were trained to ignore distractions, even ones as lovely as the Sha'Kar.

In a way, Tarrin guessed that maybe them watching on would be a good thing. It would certainly teach the cadets how to concentrate on what they were doing, despite whatever may come along to distract them.

"Want to come along, Tarrin?" Auli asked with bright eyes, holding her hand out to him. "We could have fun."

"I'm sorry, but I'm busy, Auli," he said carefully. "I really need to go see Dar. And after that, I think I'll be spending time with my daughter for a while."

"Ah well, I can't compete with family," she said with an eerily predatory look. "But I'll walk with you for a bit. I'll be along in a little, Janelle."

"Alright, Auli," she said with a look, and then the three girls scurried off. Then they all started laughing loudly. Tarrin looked back at them sourly, wondering if Auli had told them about what happened in his room last night. Knowing Auli, she probably would.

Walking with her was both exciting and nerve wracking, because he wanted to walk a little closer, and he knew that that was a very bad idea. Her very presence had a powerful effect on him, and for a moment he felt like one of those cadets with those glowing eyes looking down at him. He kept a good distance from her, hands behind his back, as she walked along without any seeming discomfort. She didn't even seem to notice his own, at least until she glanced over at him and smiled. "I see you're all out of sorts," she said with a flash of white teeth. "Don't let that crotchety old she-cat get

to you, Tarrin. She can't watch us all the time, you know," she added with a seductive purr, reaching over and grabbing his arm, leaning into him as they walked.

"I don't think you appreciate just how nasty Jesmind can get, Auli," Tarrin said carefully. "She wasn't joking. She *will* hurt you if you--"

"I can handle that fleabag," she said confidently, cutting him off. "So, are you going to be in your room tonight?" she asked with smoldering eyes. "I'll come after you finish visiting with your daughter."

"I, don't think that's a good idea, Auli," he said delicately. "I mean, you're very pretty and all, and I really like you, but I'm not sure if I'm ready to have a girlfriend right now. Not with my memory all full of holes."

She looked at him, then she laughed. "Girlfriend?" she asked loudly, probably a bit too loudly. Tarrin blushed slightly when two passing Sorcerers glanced at them as they went by. "You have an imagination, Tarrin!" she giggled. "I don't want to be your girlfriend."

"B-But you kissed me, and--"

"So? I like you, Tarrin, and I think you're very sexy. I know you like me, and I know you think I'm sexy. I want to go to bed with you, and the kiss you gave me last night told me you want to go to bed with me. Who says we have to say we love each other to share pleasure?"

Tarrin was shocked, more than he thought he would be, because Auli knew he did have interest in her, and Jesmind had had her pegged from the start. He *was* little more than a conquest to her. Some men probably wouldn't mind that at all, more than happy to let such a gorgeous woman conquer them all she wanted, but Tarrin had been raised quite differently than her.

Or was he just a conquest? Tarrin remembered that she had in fact been raised in a very, very different society, one that had been perverted and depraved, and he wondered how much of that upbringing was affecting her behavior right now. Was Auli trying to take things to that level because that's what she thought she was supposed to do? Or was it one of the ways that decadent culture displayed friendship? Did she want to sleep with him because she did like him, or because it was what she had been conditioned to offer?

"I-I think it's a bad idea," he repeated. "No offense, Auli, really. I do really like you, but with everything going on right now with me, with Jesmind, and the fact that I don't think your mother would like it very much if you and me--"

"I can handle my mother," she interrupted with a snort. "And I can handle your furry girlfriends. So what's stopping us?" She reached down with her other hand and patted him on the backside, which made him jump. "You can say no all you want, Tarrin, but you're no different from some of the other boys who've said no to me. Your mouth says no, but your body says yes. And I know how to get your body to ignore your mouth." She let go of him and they stopped. She looked up at him with unashamed, hooded eyes, her expression one of strange expectant pleasure. "I'll get you yet, Tarrin," she purred. "Mark me on that. You should never have said no," she added with a wink. "Now I'm really, really curious."

Tarrin really couldn't say anything to that, so Auli took advantage of his silence to step up and lean into him, making sure to press all those things the dark side of Tarrin's mind liked to think about against him as she whispered in his ear. "I'm going to get you, Tarrin," she said huskily. Then she kissed him passionately on the lips for a brief moment, paralyzing him. She pushed away from him with twinkling eyes, full of mischief, and then turned and sauntered towards the training grounds as if she owned the entire Tower.

Tarrin felt her lips still ghosting against his, and he could only watch her go and berate himself for handling that so badly. Not only did he not try to reason with her, he had somehow almost made it some kind of challenge to her. Now she would think of it as a game, and she was the kind that would play it until she won. He had really messed things up, and he had only himself to blame. He should have tried to be more sensitive to her position, or tried to understand her motives a little better, he should have tried to talk with her much longer and gotten to understand what she was after before trying to deflect her. Instead, he had just blurted out *no* and piqued her curiosity. Piqueing Auli's curiosity had to have been the worst thing he could have done. He knew Auli well enough to know that when she got curious, absolutely nothing would stop her from satisfying that curiosity.

Woodenly, Tarrin remembered the library as he realized he was watching Auli walk away, and his eyes were *not* on her back. He growled at himself for doing exactly what he asked Auli not to do and then turned around and stalked towards the main Tower.

He found Dar in the library with Dolanna, and after a pleasant, short conversation with her, Tarrin borrowed her student and they walked along the outside grounds of the Tower. Tarrin had a lot to talk about with his Arkisian friend, and it took him a while to try to organize things in his mind, so he'd know what to ask and how to say it. Until then, he disclosed to Dar his debacle with Auli, telling him what she'd done with him after Dar left a those two times and then telling him about the confrontation they had earlier. That made Dar flush, and then he laughed ruefully.

"I really wish you would have come to see me before you said that," he said. "I may have been able to help."

"She flirted with you too, Dar. Did she try to seduce you?"

"No," he said, and he sounded a little disappointed. "But you said it to her all wrong, Tarrin."

"I know," he sighed. "Now she's *really* going to come after me."

"Just keep one of the Were-cats with you."

"That's even worse than having Auli after me," he grunted.

"Well, then let her catch you and be done with it," Dar shrugged.

"Then Jesmind would kill her," Tarrin told him. "I don't think Auli realizes I wasn't joking about that."

"Well, then I guess you have a problem," Dar grinned.

"You're a lot of help," Tarrin accused.

"I've never been very good with girls, Tarrin," Dar said. "I mean, look at me. I want to ask Tiella out, but every time she comes near me, I get all tongue-tied and forget what to say."

"I thought you and her were friends."

"Well, we are, but back then I thought she was just cute. I really wasn't looking at her that way."

"This from the man who boasts about how many naked girls he's seen," Tarrin teased.

"Looking at them is a bloody lot easier than talking to them," Dar admitted with a rueful laugh. "Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about, Tarrin?"

"I need you to help me," Tarrin told him. "Phandebrass found something out today."

"What?"

Tarrin told Dar about what they'd managed to discover earlier that day, and Dar's eyes turned sober when Tarrin explained the possible ramifications. "I don't know what to do, Dar," he admitted. "Jesmind and the other Were-cats keep pressuring me about being a Were-cat again, but I just don't know if that's what I want. And if it isn't what I want, I don't know if I should try to get my memory back."

"That does sound like a problem," Dar agreed.

"So I need to decide that first," he continued. "I thought I had more time to think about it, but as soon as the Were-cats find out that I should regain my memory if I'm turned again, they're going to be lining up to bite me."

"That's no lie," Dar agreed. "So, Tarrin, how can I help?"

"I want to know the truth, Dar," he said grimly. "Not this person's version of the truth, or that person's version of the truth. I want to hear the whole story, and I think you're probably the best person to ask. I know that the Were-cats have already decided what to do with me, but I think that even people like my sisters and Jenna and Dolanna and Camara Tal probable also have their own opinions, and they'd try to sway me one way or the other if I asked them."

"You're right about that," Dar admitted in a low tone. "Dolanna's been talking to me about you, and she doesn't think you should be changed back. I heard Jenna talking to her parents, and she's talking like they got you back from the dead, so I think she's decided you should stay like you are. I know that Keritanima and Allia are your sisters, but right now they're arguing

about you. Keritanima thinks you'd be better off staying human, but Allia thinks that you're less than what you're supposed to be as a human, and that all the suffering and work you did to get where you were before you were turned human again would be for nothing, and all the honor you gained as a Were-cat was lost when you became human again. Allia's got funny ideas sometimes. The funny thing is, both of them told me that it's because they think it's what you would want. I guess they don't know you as well as they thought they did."

"They *did* know me, Dar," Tarrin said.

"I know what you mean," Dar nodded. "Miranda thinks you should be a Were-cat again too, so Kerri's getting it from both sides."

"What do you think, Dar?"

"Well, I think that it's your decision," he replied.

"That's why I asked for your help," Tarrin said with a relieved smile.

"So, what can I tell you?"

"I want to know what I was *really* like, Dar," he said seriously. "I've heard what Dolanna said and my sisters have said and Triana's said, but they all seem to be holding things back. I want to know the whole truth."

"Actually, they did a pretty good job," Dar admitted, scratching his chin.

"Then I really was like that?" he asked.

"For a time," he agreed. "But you've changed alot since I met you, Tarrin. The Were-cat I met was nothing like the Were-cat you became after Julia betrayed you. I think everything bad you became goes right back to that one act. And the Were-cat I knew right before this happened was alot different than the one you were before. You went into the desert paranoid and pretty mean, and when you came out, you were alot more mellow and friendly."

"They said I'd changed."

"Alot," he agreed. "When you and Kerri and Allia were in the Initiate, you were actually alot like you are now, but not quite. I guess that's because it was closest to who you were before you were bitten."

"Was I happy, Dar?"

"I really can't say," he said honestly. "You seemed happy sometimes. You were definitely happy with Jesmind and Jasana. But most of the rest of the time, it was too hard to tell. You were a very hard man to know, Tarrin. You never let anyone get very close to you, even among us. Only Allia and Kerri and Dolanna understood you, and they'd never talk about you with the rest of us. Even at the end, what happened with you and Jula had permanently scarred you. Between that and the mission, it really didn't give you much room to be *you*. It was very hard on you."

Mention of that reminded him of what he was carrying at that moment, in the magical regions of that place Dolanna called the *elsewhere*. The Firestaff. The one thing that the majority of the world was struggling to find, and he was the one who had it. The quest to find that artifact had been the whole reason he and the other had come together. For that, at least, he was glad it had happened. But from what he'd heard, that was about the only positive thing to come about from the whole thing.

"If you're trying to find out if you were happy being what you were, I don't think anyone can answer that but you, Tarrin," Dar told him soberly. "You'd need to get back your memories to find that out, because can any one man really say he knows what's in another man's mind?"

"A Sorcerer could," Tarrin said with a teasing smile.

"Well, I guess in that case yes, but you know what I mean," he said defensively.

"It's hard to believe that I was really like that."

"I know, but it was," Dar nodded. "I guess in what we were doing at the time, it was almost a good thing. Everyone was afraid of you, even our enemies."

"You were afraid of me?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

"Not the same way that someone that didn't know you would be," he said cautiously. "I'd call it more understanding your personality."

"I asked for the truth, Dar."

Dar blew out his breath. "Yes, I was afraid of you at times, Tarrin. Any sane man would have been."

"Were you afraid of me the whole time?"

"No," he answered. "When we first met, I liked you alot. Like I said, you were alot like you are now, with some pretty obvious differences, given you were a Were-cat then. But after Jula betrayed you, and we left to go find the Firestaff, those two things consumed you. You turned feral, and you were driven by the need to finish the mission and regain your freedom. Anyone that got in your way was putting his life in his hands, and when you were feral, you were very nervous and unpredictable. That can make any man nervous, since you were strong enough to kill a man with your bare hands."

"I don't think I would have ever hurt you, Dar," Tarrin said after a moment.

"I doubt you would have either," he answered. "You risked your neck too many times to count to keep the rest of us out of harm's way. That happened after Faalken died." He sighed. "You took that harder than the rest of us. I liked Faalken and I miss him, but you blamed yourself for it. After he died, you'd all but stick your neck on a headsman's block if it kept the rest of us out of danger. That really infuriated Allia and Camara Tal, you know," he chuckled. "They were trying to protect you, but you were running off and protecting them and putting yourself in harm's way in the process." He looked over with darkening eyes. "After Faalken died, I never really was directly afraid of you again. I'd be afraid of what you might do, and what might happen, but I was never afraid you'd hurt me."

They walked out into the gardens in silence, as Tarrin mulled over what he'd learned. Dar hadn't really told him much that he hadn't heard already, except for some personal insights. "What do you think I should do?" he asked finally.

"I think you should make the decision that makes you happiest, Tarrin," Dar answered after a moment. "I think you should make it for *you*, not for who may be angry with you for making it, or for who may not be. It's your life, after all."

"If you're talking about Jesmind and Kimmie, I know," he said. "I thought that nobody would really care if I decided to be turned again, but just about everyone would object if I decided to stay human."

"I think you'd find out how much some people care about you going back to being a Were-cat if you announced that you were going to," he said. "Dolanna told all of us to keep our opinions to ourselves, that's why nobody's really said anything to you." He chuckled. "Well, there's that, and then there was when the Goddess came to you. She more or less told all of us that you were going to make your choice yourself, and we'd better not interfere. So nobody's interfering."

"I guess Jesmind didn't get the message," Tarrin chuckled. Then he remembered something that that strange Goddess lady had told him. *You were quite happy being a Were-cat*, she had told him. *If he got his memory back, I dare say he would demand to be restored. For him to be as he is now would seem unnatural to him*, she had also said.

If that was true, then maybe he had been happy as he was. She kept telling him that it would be his choice, *after* he got back his memory. She had wanted him to make an educated choice, not a blind one based on fear or rumor or feelings. And he had to admit to himself, any choice he made before gaining back his memory probably wouldn't be a thorough one. He'd wanted to choose beforehand, in case those memories brought pain. But he saw that he was only thinking in the moment. He'd let his fear of what Jesmind and the Were-cats might do rush him, when he had forgotten that he really had all the time in the world. If the Goddess had told the Were-cats not to bite him unless it was his choice, then they'd behave. He doubted any of them would really care to cross swords with a god.

"Dar," Dolanna's voice came from his amulet. *"Is Tarrin still with you?"*

"He's right here, Dolanna," Dar replied, touching his amulet.

"Good. Could the two of you please come to the Keeper's office? It's important."

"We're on our way," he answered immediately.

"I wonder what Jenna wants," Tarrin mused.

"Well, we can continue talking about this later, I guess," Dar said.

"Maybe. I think I have some of my answers already, Dar. I forgot that the Goddess personally told the Were-cats not to bite me unless I agreed to it."

"I didn't know she said that," Dar said with a chuckle. "I guess that means that you really don't have anything to worry about at all, doesn't it?"

"Maybe," Tarrin said.

When they reached Jenna's office, Tarrin was surprised to see that Jenna wasn't alone. Keritanima and Allia were with her, Keritanima sitting in the chair facing the desk with Binter standing behind it resolutely, and Allia standing by Jenna's chair. Phandebrass was also there, as was Dolanna, Jesmind, and Kimmie. Julia stood just behind them, her head down and her large furry hands folded before her demurely, as if she was trying hard not to attract attention to herself.

"What's wrong, Jenna?" Tarrin asked.

"Nothing's wrong, Tarrin," Jenna answered. "I just thought you may want to be here, that's all."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I say, I think I've found a solution," Phandebrass announced with a clap of his hands. "As soon as Koran Dar gets here, we can find out how feasible it is."

"You mean you can restore Tarrin's memory?" Jesmind asked quickly.

"I think I can," he nodded. "But I'll need to talk with Koran Dar, or maybe Camara Tal. The cure is a potion, and its key ingredient is a rare plant that only grows on one of the isles of Amazar. One of them should be able to tell me if we can get that plant right now."

"What is a potion?" Tarrin asked.

"A potion is a magic liquid," Kimmie answered for Phandebrass. "A Wizard makes it, and then the person he made it for drinks it. When he does, the magic in the potion takes effect."

"You won't need Koran Dar for that, Phandebrass," Jesmind scoffed. "All you need is my mother. She can Conjure anything you need."

"And I'm sure Triana will be happy to Conjure the plant as soon as she comes back," Kimmie said mildly. "But it's going to take time to prepare the potion."

"I say, most definitely," Phandebrass agreed. "At least a month."

"A *month*?" Jesmind said hotly. "You call that a *solution*?"

"These procedures are very delicate, they are," he said defensively, "and the draught has to be simmered for days on end at certain stages before the next ingredient can be added. I say, we are talking about some very delicate, very powerful magic here, Jesmind, we are. Did you think it would be as easy as chanting a few spells?"

"Yes," she said flatly, glaring at him.

"I say, I'm sorry to disappoint you, then," he said diffidently. "But the unusual circumstances that robbed Tarrin of his memory means that we have to use some very strong magic to try to reverse the damage, we do. And unfortunately, in the Wizard world, powerful magic often takes time."

"Are you sure that this will work?" Jenna asked.

"I say, assuming that I can get all the ingredients, I do think it will work," he replied brightly. "The potion was specifically designed to restore memories lost through magical attacks, and Tarrin qualifies. I read the description of the potion several times, and I'm convinced that Tarrin is a prime candidate for its use. It is almost perfect."

"What do you mean by *almost* perfect?" the Keeper asked quickly.

"The potion was specifically designed to restore the memory of a Wizard who lost it to a powerful magical spell left behind in a spellbook as a trap," the Wizard told her. "Afterwards, they discovered that it had wide-ranging effects on anyone who had lost memory, but its potency varied depending on the means by which the memory was lost, it did. Tarrin lost his memory to a magical curse. That very closely matches the original intent for which the potion was designed, it does. It should work perfectly on him. I'm convinced of it, I am."

"It does look *very* promising," Kimmie agreed. "I read the summaries myself, and I have to agree. This potion looks to be the best option we have."

"I feel alot better about the idea of it now that you agree, Kimmie," Jesmind said curtly.

Phandebrass snorted. "The simple fact of the matter is, the power of the curse that affected him leaves very few options available to us, it does," he continued. "Only the strongest magicks will have any chance of affecting him, and I say, we don't have the time to just try them one after another until we stumble across the one that works. We don't have that kind of time, we don't."

"What do you mean?" Jenna asked.

"Well, firstly, this kind of damage is going to set in his mind as time goes by," the addled Wizard replied. "The longer he stays thusly, the harder it's going to be to reverse the damage. That's why I've gotten so little sleep over the last few days trying to find the most effective way to restore him, because I know we don't have much time, we don't. The month's brewing time for this potion is going to be pushing it, it is. Secondly, after doing some reading about the Firestaff, I found a reference to when it was used. I took the time to consult some astronomical charts and a few ancient calendars, and I've worked out the exact day that it's going to activate again."

"Really? When will that be?" Dolanna asked curiously.

"Gods Day," he replied.

Tarrin looked at him. God's Day was a holiday of sorts, a day that came only once every five years. It was an extra day placed just after the day of New Year to keep the calendar balanced, a leap day. It was called Gods Day because it was said in myth and legend that the very first day of the world, the day of creation, was Gods Day. It and New Year were the only two such days that fell outside of the months.

"That's only a little more than three months from now," Jenna noted, scribbling down the date on a piece of parchment, and circling it several times.

"I say, not very far off at all, is it?" the Wizard asked. "If Tarrin is supposed to hide the Firestaff, then he needs his memory back as quickly as we can manage it. After all, so long as he's here, everyone knows where he is, and they know where to come in order to try to take it from him. We

have to get him healthy and whole, and then he can disappear off the Tower grounds and defend the Firestaff until Gods Day comes and goes."

"I didn't realize it was so soon," Jenna growled. "Where did you find that information, Phandebrass? I've had my Lorefinders tearing our libraries apart looking for something we could use to find that out."

"I say, Jenna, it was right in your library. It was written in Sha'Kar, that's all. Your library is probably one of the most complete in the world, you know. It was just that most of the books there you couldn't read. I found it quite by accident. When I saw a book titled *Ancient Artifacts and Their Use Over the Ages*, I just had to stop and leaf through it."

Jenna laughed ruefully. "I was the only one in the Tower that can read Sha'Kar before the Sha'Kar came back, so I guess you'll have to forgive me for missing that," she said. "I haven't had much time to go through the library, not with all my duties as the Keeper."

"I wasn't blaming you, Keeper," Phandebrass smiled.

"I think Phandebrass makes a valid point," Dolanna said. "If there is indeed only three months, then we truly do not have much time. We must bend every effort into having Phandebrass make this potion and restore Tarrin's memory. Because as time grows short, those who want the Firestaff and are willing to use extreme methods to get it are going to get desperate. The sooner Tarrin disappears from sight, the better for everyone."

"I guess that means that I'd better quadruple the guard," Jenna said seriously.

"Quintupling it would be more wise, Jenna," Dolanna said calmly. "We must turn the Tower into a fortress until Tarrin can escape with the Firestaff. Because, and you can mark my words. If we do not turn the Tower into a fortress no man would dare assault, they *will* assault it."

"No doubt," Keritanima nodded in agreement. "I'll have some of my Marines brought in, Jenna. We'll give you a hand."

"Right now, I'll take all the help I can get, Kerri," Jenna said sourly. "I think I may even ask Shiika if I can borrow the Arakite Legions she left behind in Suld to help garrison the city. They're still here, and I'd be crazy

not to want them on the grounds. Between them and the Knights, I'll have some of the finest soldiers in the world defending the fence."

"Just be careful what you give in return," Kimmie smiled. "It's always dangerous work, bartering with a Demon. They have ways of getting more than you thought you gave at the end."

"No doubt there," Jenna agreed soberly. "I'd better call both Councils and make some arrangements. I should go see the Regent, and talk to Shiika as well. We need to lock up the Tower as tight as a drum, and I'm going to need dependable men to do that."

"And the sooner the better," Keritanima agreed.

Chapter 4

A month.

That was what Phandebrass said it would take in order for him to make his magical potion, in the hopes that it would restore his memory without having to resort to being bitten. Tarrin had left the meeting with Jenna and the others just a little bit worried about what he'd heard, and the time was only a part of it. The idea of spending a month in the Tower didn't seem all that bad to him, though he knew that it was going to cause some friction. The part that worried him was the idea that they were going to lock down the Tower, and he was the cause for it. Some part of him was a little embarrassed by that idea, that all this trouble was going to happen because of him, but another part of him resented the idea that they were going to turn the Tower into a fortress just to keep him safe. He'd gone through that once already with Jesmind and Triana, and the idea that now Jenna and the others were going to start doing it too kind of defeated the purpose of him trying to establish his independence in the first place. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the fact that they were willing to go as far as they were, but it was still a little annoying.

Of course, he was only a very small reason for it. It was all about him, true, but the truth was that it was much more all about what he was carrying. Jenna was defending the Firestaff, and the only reason that she was defending Tarrin too was because he happened to be the bearer of that old artifact. They wouldn't let him give it to anyone else, and Dolanna wouldn't even let him take it out of the *elsewhere* at any time.

He knew why, and understood. The Firestaff was almost a living thing, possessed of a kind of willpower of its own, and its willpower and desire was to be used, to serve the function for which it had been created. That was the *last* thing that Tarrin wanted to do, because he'd already been warned that if it was used, it could destroy the world. It was why they had lain the trap on it that had stripped him of his Were nature and had also caused him to lose his memory, a last-ditch attempt to strip the one who

managed to take it of the desire to use it, a ploy that would render the artifact's corrupting effect powerless. The Firestaff would try to convince its holder to use it, but the curse would have destroyed that desire, leaving the artifact with no desire to exploit in order to reach its own goals. The Firestaff had even tried to whisper to him before he put it in the *elsewhere*, and he knew how seductive it could be. Almost like Auli. That's why he was glad it was where he wouldn't have to listen to it all the time. It couldn't reach through the *elsewhere* and try to subvert his will, and that made it safe for him--and *only* him--to carry it. And it was absolutely not something that they would put in a locked chamber somewhere and try to guard. It was safest where it was at that moment, out of physical reach and in a place where its insidious magic couldn't affect those around it.

At least with Tarrin, the Firestaff was safe, and everyone else was safe from it. That was why, even though he had lost his memory, he still held it.

A month. He wasn't sure what he was going to do for a whole month, but he already had some ideas. He was going to try to stay away from Auli. That much was for certain. Her declaration had more or less put their friendship on hold until she got over the idea, because he wouldn't trust her enough to be alone with her, or even alone with her and Dar. Or, more to the point, he wouldn't trust himself to be alone with her, or with her and Dar. He also wanted to learn more about who he had been and what it meant, and also if he had been truly happy. He wanted to find out before getting back his memory, so he could compare what he had discovered with the return of his memory and see how close he got to the truth. The combination of what he managed to learn now and what he would regain later would help him decide once and for all what he was going to do. That meant that he needed to talk to all his friends extensively, work around Dolanna's warning that they weren't supposed to influence him, and get them to describe as much to him as they could. And he wanted to get to know his daughter all over again, spend as much time with her as he could, because maybe he would learn something about her as a human that he hadn't known about her when he was a Were-cat.

That was the most important thing to him. Jasana was his daughter, and even if she was a different species than him, he loved her and he wanted to be around her. He understood now how his own parents must have felt when Tarrin himself had been turned. It was a terrible thing, but he was still

their child, and no matter what, they would love him. He'd never really understood that until he was on the same side as them, with a child of his own. That kind of boundless love was usually unfathomable to anyone who had not experienced it for himself. Now that Tarrin had looked into the eyes of his own child, he completely understood how his parents must have felt, and understood how they could have accepted him as what he had become. No matter what happened to him, no matter who he became or what he did, no matter how evil he had acted, he was still their son, and that kind of bond was too powerful for almost any worldly act or situation to sever.

Sometimes it surprised Tarrin how he could feel so much love for a little girl of another species that he barely knew, and was admittedly just a little bit afraid of. But then again, she was his *daughter*. That was all the explanation he needed anymore.

Walking along by himself, invariably ending up in the cool gardens, he thought about what he'd heard at the meeting. After they'd decided to lock up the Tower, they'd talked about who they'd get and how much it would take to secure their cooperation. Keritanima promised to send her Marines, and they were going to get some of the Arakite Legions to come onto the grounds, and even some elements of the Sulasian army that were still in Suld to ensure another attack wouldn't be attempted. They already had the Sorcerers, and he wondered why they were going to try to get anyone else in the first place. Wouldn't the Sorcerers be enough to stop just about anything? Now that they had the Sha'Kar back, he couldn't think of any reason why they'd need any additional support. Weren't the Sorcerers the most powerful of all the magical orders? Why would they need additional help?

For the moment, he guessed that really didn't concern him. All that mattered for him was trying to keep his own rather crazy life from getting any crazier until Phandebrass finished that potion.

He still felt wild mood swings about that. He wanted his memory back, but on the other hand, he was afraid of what it may mean. He knew that some of those memories may be absolutely awful, and he was honest enough with himself to admit that he was terrified of the idea of having memories of being so vicious. He knew he couldn't make a sincere decision without those memories, but he was afraid of having to remember the bad

as well as the good. It was a touchy situation for him, and he felt trapped between the need to regain his memory and the desire to stay away from them.

It was about more than what he wanted anymore, and that was another thing that concerned him. He'd honestly forgotten what he was carrying, but he realized that everyone else not only would not forget, they were still working to protect it. It was easy to forget about the Firestaff when he never took it out to look at it, and he had no memory of searching for it or finding it or what it did to him when he did. It seemed more like a story he'd been told that the actual past, and that made it much easier for him to discount or ignore than it was for those who remembered what they'd gone through in order to get him into a position to acquire it. He knew that he had a duty to all those others to take back his memory, that because even if he was incapacitated at the moment, he was *still* the chosen guardian of the Firestaff, and he had to do what he could to protect it from everyone else until Gods Day came and went.

That was the one thing he didn't really want to think about. The Goddess had said that it would be his choice, but making that choice, he knew, would mean much more than simply what he wanted. After he got his memory back, he was afraid that there really wouldn't be a choice. It would be a lot easier for Tarrin the Were-cat to protect the Firestaff than it would be for Tarrin the human. That Tarrin was bigger, stronger, faster, more magically powerful, and lacked the comparative morality that may make Tarrin the human hesitate in a moment of extreme danger, and put everything at risk. He wanted it to be his choice, his decision, a choice based on nothing more than his own desires. But he had a feeling that it was going to be a lot more complicated than that. Maybe it was selfish and childish for him to think that way, but he couldn't help it. It was *his* life, after all, and he wanted the chance to make of it what he wanted, not what others would need of him.

Worries, worries, worries. Nothing seemed simple now, not even for him and his altered sense of being. They'd given him time to himself, kept him out of the loop of information to spare him heavy thoughts, and at least for that he could appreciate their looking out for him. But no matter how much he liked being distanced from the center of things, the simple fact of the matter was that he *was* the center of things, and he couldn't be outside

the hub for very long. Any decisions that were made were going to affect him in one way or another, and he'd learn about them one way or another.

But there was little he could do about that right now. What he could do was what he'd already decided to do. Learn as much as he could about who he had been and what he'd been doing, stay away from Auli, and spend time with his daughter. They were rather simple things, but he had to start somewhere, and he had to get busy with the task of trying to make his choice.

Things were going to work out. He had faith in that, and after all, there was little he'd be doing to make that come about. He'd just have to let things go on their own and hope that the currents they made caused him to go in the right direction.

The decision to stay away from Auli was a very simple one. After all, it was a simple concept, that being to avoid the girl whenever possible and make sure that when he did see her, he wasn't alone. It seemed easy enough, taking little more than a watchful eye and caution when venturing out from his rooms.

The problem was, he didn't take Auli herself into account when he decided how simple a matter it would be.

He knew that she was clever and rather cunning, and he knew that she was very bold. What he didn't count on was how persistent she could be. Everywhere he seemed to go, she was never very far away. Either alone or in the company of other Sha'Kar girls, he seemed to encounter her in the passages, in the library, in the kitchens, in the gardens, on the grounds. It seemed that no matter when he left his room, no matter how short his trip was, Auli found some way to put herself where she would cross his path. When she did, she would always try to get close to him, brush up against him, or whisper something seductive in his ear. The other Sha'Kar girls, seeing what Auli was doing, thought it to be devilish fun, and they even began to help her by blocking his path and giving her more time to try to work her magic on him. Tarrin realized that when he left his room, the Sha'Kar network of shallow girls got the word back to Auli that her prey was out of his protective den, and she would swoop in to try to make a kill.

Tarrin countered by always keeping someone with him when he went out. Dar was usually his escort, but much of the time, it was Koran Dar or Camara Tal, one of his sisters, Azakar Kanash, Jenna, or one of the Werecats. He was still a little angry with them for how he treated him, but in that one narrow instance he was usually happy they were around. Auli seemed unafraid of Jesmind, Kimmie, and Jula, but she wouldn't come anywhere near him when one of them was with him. For the few days after Auli started following him around, he made sure that he wasn't too far from one of them. They would often take him up to Jesmind's room, where he would spend hours and hours talking with Jesmind, his sisters, and whoever happened to be visiting, and playing with his daughter. She taught him all sorts of things about herself and himself, chattering on animatedly about things that nobody else had really said to him, very private and somewhat embarrassing things about how he and Jesmind carried on when they were together.

One thing that did concern him a little was that Triana was still missing from the Tower. Nobody really knew where she went or what she was doing, but Jesmind wasn't very worried. She simply said she'd show up when she was ready, and that was that.

Tarrin's room was not as protected as he had once believed. Three days after the meeting, after he came back at night from a long visit with Jasana, he found her in his room. She was sitting on the bed sedately, and she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. The only thing she was wearing was a seductive smile. Fortunately for him, the shock of seeing her there overwhelmed his very real desire to want to find her just like that some evening. Tarrin both wanted Auli and wanted to stay away from Auli, and he knew that he'd let her win as soon as she caught him in a position where she could overwhelm his decision to stay away from her. That, and the fact that she was on the other side of the room. He certainly enjoyed seeing her like that, but luckily for him, he wasn't close enough to let himself fall under her spell.

It had perhaps been too easy for him to back out of the room and flee from her, but this raise of the stakes in her little game upset him quite a bit. His room was one of the few things that he considered his and his alone in the Tower, representing what little identity he could manage to find with the loss of his memory, and he was sincerely angry with Auli for violating his

private space. He made sure to let her know the next day, and for the first time ever, that slow smile of hers dropped into a chagrined frown when he snapped at her hotly for coming into his room without being invited. She seemed to realize that she had crossed a line that should not have been crossed, and her rather contrite apology actually convinced him that she wouldn't do it again.

She actually left him alone for a couple of days after that, and Tarrin took advantage of it by spending as much time of it as he could outside. He took Jasana with him, and with Jula following behind or accompanying him, they would run around the gardens exploring. The gardens were huge, and it took quite a while for someone to get to know his way around. They took up almost all the space behind the North Tower, almost all the way up to the fence, filled with almost every flower, plant, tree, and vine imaginable. Tarrin was carrying Jasana on his shoulders, feeling with a bit of eerie curiosity as her tail slid back and forth against his back, holding onto her furry little ankles. Jula was with them, walking alongside him. Tarrin felt strangely comfortable around Jula, but he could tell that she didn't seem to be as comfortable with him. He wasn't quite sure why, but he could tell that she was. She was always very quiet, almost stiffly polite, and had trouble looking him in the eye.

"Oooh, what kind of tree is that?" Jasana asked in excitement, pointing at a rather large tree swaying in a gentle wind. "It's pretty with those blue leaves!"

"That's a blueleaf tree," Tarrin told her. "They're common in the north. This is a little south for there to really be much of them. They like cold weather."

"I've never seen those before."

"You should have. There are lots of them around Aldreth."

"Well, I don't remember them."

"I guess that's a fair excuse," he chuckled, bouncing her a bit. "They certainly gave it a clever and descriptive name, didn't they?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nevermind," he chuckled.

"Papa, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What?"

"What's it like to not rememeber?"

"Well, it's not something I can explain, Jasana," he answered. "Since I can't remember anything, there's really nothing I feel about it. Everything seems new and strange to me, just like it's my first time seeing it."

"How can you not remember? That doesn't seem to make sense."

"Don't you forget things?"

"Well, yeah, but nothing *serious*."

"Well, it's kind of like that, but I guess in my case, it was serious."

"Mama said that a magic spell did it to you."

"I guess it was. I really can't remember."

"She also said the silly human with the white hair is going to fix it."

"He's working on it," he affirmed.

"Mama said when you get your memory back, you'll be just like you were before. Does that mean you won't be a human anymore?"

That startled him a little bit. "I'm not sure yet, Jasana," he answered seriously. "I'm supposed to decide if I want to be a Were-cat again or not. I can't really do that until I get back my memory, so I guess we won't find that out until I get back my memory."

"That seems like a silly thing to say, papa," she chided. "You look funny like this, and you can't be with us if you're a human. Mama said so."

"I k now."

"Well, you promised you'd come back, and we'd be a family again, Papa. If you're not like us again, you'll be breaking your promise to me."

Tarrin was a little surprised by the vehemence in her voice. "If I do stay like this, I can still be your father, Jasana," he said in the mildest tone he could manage. "Can't I do everything that I could do before?"

"No," she said bluntly. "You can't kiss me goodnight, and you can't teach me how to hunt, and you can't teach me magic anymore, and you're not in Mama's room where you're supposed to be when I want to sleep with you."

"Well, I guess you have me there," he chuckled. "But I still love you, and I'll still be there when you need me. Wouldn't you still love me, even if I end up staying like this?"

"Well, yes, but it won't be the same."

"It wouldn't be the same for me either," he assured her. "But I think you're getting too far ahead of yourself, Jasana. It's going to be another three rides and more before they can give me back my memory. Since I can't decide until then, I think dwelling on it makes it hard for us to enjoy the time we have now. Don't you?"

"It bothers me, Papa."

"It bothers me too, but I don't want to spend the whole month worrying."

"I'm hungry," Julia cut in, obviously trying to distract the Were-cat child. "Do you want to go get something to eat, Jasana?"

"Umm," she sounded. Tarrin had learned that it meant *yes* for her.

Tarrin set Jasana down on the ground, and she held onto his hand for a long moment. "How did you bite Julia, Papa?" she asked curiously. "Mama never told me."

Tarrin gave her a strange look, but it was nothing compared to the strangled look that Julia gave the Were-cat girl. "Don't you remember, Jasana? I lost my memory."

"Oh," she frowned. "How did it happen, Julia?" she asked.

"Tarrin didn't bite me," she said shortly. "I did this to myself."

"How can you bite yourself?"

"It's hard to explain, cub," she told her. "And I don't think it's something that a little girl should hear."

Jasana pursed her lips, but said nothing more.

They had told Tarrin about that, that Jula had used his blood to turn herself after he had mortally wounded her and left her to die. It was a testament to both how nasty he'd become at that time and how far Jula would go to stay alive. But from what he'd been told, Tarrin had more or less forgiven Jula for everything she did to him, had even accepted her as an adopted daughter, which was why she remained with Jesmind and Jasana.

They met Jesmind in the kitchens, and as usual over the last few days, Tarrin greeted her with guarded manners. He was grateful that she was keeping Auli at bay, but the truth of the matter was that he still wasn't very happy with her for her following him around. She was *still* doing it. The only reason he knew that she was was because Jasana had a big mouth. He hadn't seen her, and she wasn't showing herself to warn off Auli. He guessed she decided not to intervene unless things got serious. Jesmind gave him that same look she always did, a look of concern, pity, irritation, and anger as she picked up Jasana. "It's time for her lesson," she announced curtly. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, it's alright," Tarrin told her. "Look's like fun's over, Jasana," he told her with a smile. "I guess you have work to do now."

"Aww, I don't wanna go to lessons today," she complained.

"You almost tore off my tail to get Jenna to teach you again after she punished you, and now you don't want to go? I don't think so, cub," Jesmind told her sharply.

"What did she get punished for?" he asked curiously.

"Using magic outside of lessons," Jesmind said. "She's not allowed to do that."

"I just wanted to see if it would work, that's all," Jasana said in a slightly challenging tone. "I didn't do anything serious."

"You call turning the Southeast Tower pink *not serious*?" Jesmind scoffed.

"It's not like I broke anything," she complained.

"Maybe not, but you have no idea how ugly that was," Jesmind told Tarrin offhandedly.

Tarrin was silently impressed. To have enough magical power to change the color of something as big as one of the splinter towers, that was some magic.

"Enough chatter, cub, we're going to be late. You coming up for dinner, Tarrin?"

"I guess so," he told her.

"Don't be late," she said with a slight smile, and then she carried her daughter out.

Jula stayed with him as they got something to eat, and then him and the Were-cat woman walked back outside. Tarrin didn't like staying inside, not when the summer weather was so warm and beautiful. She walked along with him in silence, but he could tell that she was a little tense. She always seemed to be tense when they were alone, and he wasn't sure why. Well, there was one way to find out.

"Why are you always so nervous around me, Jula?" he asked directly.

It seemed to surprise her that he would ask that. She looked away for a moment, and Tarrin realized how pretty she was, looking at her profile that way. "Since you lost your memory, I know that they're telling you about your past."

"They have been."

"Then I'm sure they've told you about our, history," she said with a telling pause.

"That's all that has you worried?" he asked in surprise. "Even if I did remember it, it's old news, Jula."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Did you think I was going to hate you for what I've heard?"

She looked a little chagrined. "I guess I did," she admitted.

"Well, it's not what happened before, it's what I see now that's important," he said. "I may not remember anything that happened, but the fact that you're virtually a member of my family tells me everything I need to know. People change, Jula. I'm pretty sure about that, given what I've

heard about myself. There may have been something very bad in our pasts, but that doesn't really matter. From what I've heard, I let it go, and you must have let it go, so consider it nothing to worry about."

"I'd like to believe that, Tarrin, but I don't think you understand."

"I understand perfectly," he said. "What you did to me made me feral, and that's the main reason I did some of the awful things I did in the past." She was silent, looking at her feet as they walked. "But I changed. They told me that I was feral when I went into the desert, and I wasn't when I came out--well, not completely. So everything turned out alright. Does it matter what happened before that?"

"It does to me," she muttered.

"Alright then, answer me this. Why do you stay with Jesmind and Jasana?"

"Because I'm not a full adult yet," she answered. "I'm still a child. I have to stay with Jesmind."

"Staying with her isn't the same as living with her," Tarrin noted. "I've seen how she acts towards you, Julia. She treats you like a daughter, and Jasana thinks you're her sister. You're a member of the family, and you act like one. You help watch Jasana, and you do what you can for Jesmind. You don't *have* to do those things. Why do you do them?"

Julia was quiet a long moment. "Because you took me in when everyone else threw me away," she answered in a quiet yet emotional voice. "You were kind to me when no one else was. You took me in when I was all but mad and ready to kill myself, and you wouldn't give up on me. I promised you I'd be a good daughter, and I owe you much more than that. More than I'll ever be able to repay."

He'd known about that, but to hear about it from her point of view, it explained everything now. She was terrified that the biggest person in her life that mattered to her, the one she saw as her father figure, was going to reject her. That, and he could tell that she just couldn't forget the past, because she was the one that they were all talking about. Julia had been the one to betray Tarrin and turn him feral, and no matter how many people forgot about that, she never would. She still felt guilty over it.

"Don't worry about it, Julia," he said gently. "You don't owe me anything. I'd much rather you be my friend than my servant."

That statement, carefully weighed as the easiest way to relieve her fears without coming right out and addressing them, seemed to have the effect he intended. Julia relaxed visibly, and then gave him a look of such profound gratitude that it nearly made his emotional. She reached out and put her big hand on his shoulder. "Triana said you'd be full of surprises," she said with a wan smile. "Am I that transparent?"

"I just knew what to look for, that's all," he smiled. "I'm not going to turn my back on you, Julia. I didn't before, and I won't now."

She gave him a glorious smile, then actually hugged him gently. "Even now, you're still too good to me, father," she said sincerely.

It felt strange to hear her call him that, but she meant it, so he wasn't going to raise a fuss about it. "Tell me about how you ended up as a Were-cat," he asked.

They stepped out of the Tower and out onto the pathway that led to the gardens. "I'm sure they already told you," she said, "so I don't have to go into all the details. After Kerri and Allia rescued you from the Cathedral of Karas, you caught up with me here in the Tower before I could get away. You crippled me and left me to die. I don't blame you for that," she said quickly. "After everything I'd just done to you, I more than deserved it. I had a vial of your blood with me, and I used that to turn myself in order to survive."

"How did you get a vial of my blood?"

"The Council had several of them, as well as some bits and pieces of your flesh, hair, claws, and such. Things you'd shed in some of your fights on the Tower grounds. I knew they were there, so I decided it may be wise for me to take some of your blood, just in case. I've always been a survivor, Tarrin. I knew there was a chance I may end up needing to be a Were-cat just to survive, so I took precautions. It turns out I was right."

"Why would that make a difference?" he asked. "I mean, why go to that extreme?"

"Extreme conditions sometimes call for extreme measures," she told him. "I knew that if I was captured or mortally wounded, turning myself would be my only chance. If I was captured, they couldn't use Mind weaves on me if I was a Were-cat, and torturing me wouldn't work either because I'd regenerate. They wouldn't kill me so long as I had information they could use, so I'd still be alive. It would also give me a much better chance to escape, given the advantages that Were-cats enjoy. And if I were mortally wounded, I'd be healed during the transformation into a Were-cat. Either way, in those two worst cases, I'd have a way to survive them."

"Triana said it backfired on you."

"Boy did it," she sighed. "I survived, but without anyone to teach me how to control the Cat, I went mad. And it wasn't a quick and simple process," she said with a shudder. "I degenerated slowly, and that bastard Kravon chained me to the wall in his lab and studied me, just so he could observe the process. I'm glad he's dead," she spat viciously. "Jegojah did all of us a favor when he bled Kravon like a yearling pig."

From what he'd heard, such spitefulness wasn't misplaced. That man Kravon had hurt a lot of people. Some people were more use to the world dead, and Kravon was one of them. "Jula, I have to ask. If you had my chance right now, would you stay human, or would you be a Were-cat again?"

"You're not being fair," she teased lightly. "I really don't know, Tarrin. I hated what I became at first, but now it's not so easy to decide anymore. Before, I was alone and afraid, and I hated what I'd become. But I understand things better now, and I have people like you and Jesmind and Jasana to be with. I miss being human, but if I wasn't a Were-cat anymore, I think I'd miss that too."

"Why were you working with those people, anyway?" he asked. "You just don't seem the type."

"Being a Were-cat has changed me a lot more than most people think," she answered honestly. "I worked for the *ki'zadun* back then because I thought it was what I wanted. That they could give me the power I craved." "It's hard to imagine you as a powermonger, Jula."

"Oh, I was," she said in a self-deprecating manner. "It was all I could think about. I even dreamed about getting power, any kind of power. Power in Sorcery, political power, personal power, anything that put me over others. The *ki'zadun* gave me that power, and a lot of it, but I know now where that kind of power leads. It led me to a set of manacles bolted to a wall. The *ki'zadun* is about nothing but power, and if you don't help them or you're not useful to them, you stop being a part of that power and become a liability. They don't bother finding other uses for things once they decide it's no longer useful."

"It sounds like a lonely way to live."

"I didn't really care about other people," she said candidly. "All that mattered to me was my power. The only thing I really saw in other people was how I could use them to get more."

"That sounds *really* lonely," he said. "Didn't you have anyone you cared about?"

"I never really have, Tarrin," she told him. "My parents died when I was very young, and they'd just travelled to Ultern from Jerinhold. So there was nobody there to take care of me. Because of that, I grew up on the streets of Ultern as a street urchin. I learned from a very early age that the strong take what they want from the weak. If it wasn't for the fact that I'm a Sorcerer, I would have died on those streets. But being a Sorcerer let me come here, and it gave me what I thought was a chance to be so powerful that nobody would ever attack me or steal from me again. I learned Sorcery, but then my desires changed from wanting to be strong to protect myself to wanting power so I could be over others. I think that's what made them come to me. I hadn't even heard of the *ki'zadun* until they approached me and recruited me into their organization. I was still in the Initiate then," she said in a distant manner.

"How did they know to approach you?"

"They watched us, Tarrin," she said. "They had a good idea who'd join them and who wouldn't. I suppose that the ones that didn't join were probably killed, so as not to break the secrecy of the group."

"How did they watch you from inside the Tower?"

"Because they already had people inside the Tower," she explained. "Not just Sorcerers. Staff, guards, and servants too acted as spies for the *ki'zadun*. There was quite a little network here before you came along and destroyed it," she chuckled.

"It's hard to believe I did all that," he said.

"You did, father, trust me," she told him. "You may not have done it intentionally, but you did. When you broke free under the Cathedral and announced to the world we were here, you started a chain of events that put the *ki'zadun* where they are now. You have no idea how powerful they were, father. They owned entire kingdoms. But yet all it took to break them was a single Were-cat with the strength to oppose them. In its own way, I guess that's pretty remarkable."

"It sounds like I ran around and chased them."

"Actually, you beat them by destroying several critical plans," she explained. "At first, they were trying to kill you because they knew you were the one that would find the Firestaff, and they failed. They sent almost everything they could manage to get onto the grounds, even Trolls, and none of them could kill you. After you disappeared from the Tower and started looking for the Book of Ages, they changed tactics. They didn't think they were going to be able to kill you, not between you and the very powerful people that were with you, so they tried to drive you insane instead. They knew how unbalanced you were."

"How could they do that?"

"By putting so much pressure on you that it made you snap," she answered. "They saw it happen to me, so they tried to make it happen to you. They sent Jegojah after you, they hired thugs in every city to attack you if you showed up, and they were trying to devise a magical means to try to influence your mind. But you proved to be much stronger than they calculated," she said with a smile. "That, and the Wikuni truly hamstrung that plan when they nearly killed you in their operation to get back Keritanima. That put you under Triana's care, and once that happened, they knew that not only could they not get anywhere near you, that you'd also get the training you'd need to not go mad. So they had to change plans again. About that time, they sent me to Dala Yar Arak to try to get the city guard

to turn against you, so I really don't know what they planned after that. Outside of the big one, anyway."

"The fight at Suld?"

She nodded as they turned down a path that led towards the hedge maze. "That's what everything they've done in the West for the last twenty years led up to. The battle at Suld. Their goal was to banish the Goddess and eliminate the *katzh-dashi* from the race to find the Firestaff. That was alot more important than before, since they knew you'd managed to get the Book of Ages and nobody would dare come into the Desert of Swirling Sands to try to take it from you."

"Why not?"

"The Selani, father. Not even the *ki'zadun* are stupid or crazy enough to take on the Selani. That's one hornet's nest even they knew better than to stir up. Anyway, since you had the Book of Ages, banishing the Goddess seemed the best way to go about handling you. They knew that if they were successful, it would kill you and just about anyone else strong enough to cause them problems, and they could literally take the staff unopposed. But they probably never in their wildest dreams imagined they'd be facing what they faced in that battle," she said with a vicious smirk. "I doubt that facing people like the Ungardt, Selani, Wikuni, Vendari, Were-kin, Centaurs, Demons, Aeradalla, and Arakites was anything they even thought would come up in the wildest situation. I'll bet that Demoness that led them had a cow when she found out what she was facing," she added with a smug look. "And all that was you."

"Me? How was it me?"

"Simple, father. You're blood related to the Selani and the Wikuni, you're the grandson of an Ungardt clan king, you were a Druid and a Were-kin, and you were personal friends with the rulers of Yar Arak and the Aeradalla. That allowed you to ask all of those groups for help, and they obliged you because they knew how serious the situation was. I'll bet they didn't tell you that, did they?"

"No, not really."

"Well, I hope it doesn't give you a big head, but you're the sole reason Suld is still here," she told him calmly. "If not for you, the *ki'zadun* would

have taken Suld, banished the Goddess, and they'd probably have the Firestaff right now."

Tarrin thought that she was stretching the truth a bit there, but he said nothing and let her continue.

"After they lost here, everything went downhill for the *ki'zadun*," she said. "They probably threw almost everything into this attack. They even revealed themselves to the world, something they've never done before. It was a huge gamble, and truth be told, if not for you, it probably would have paid off. Anyway, since they lost here and got a huge chunk of their army killed, I guess they retreated to one of their most remote and defensible strongholds. Castle Keening, probably. That, or they withdrew all the way to Zakkar."

"Where is that?"

"It's on Valkar, right where it connects to southern Godan-Nyr," she answered. "A very long way off. It's the seat of power for the *ki'zadun*. Zakkar uses it as an underhanded army to try to rule the world, the same way their skyships try to rule the oceans."

"Isn't that a kingdom of magicians?"

"It more or less is," she affirmed. "But it's always been eclipsed by Sharadar. I think that really rankles their fur. No matter how powerful they get, Sharadar is always so much more powerful that they can slap them down with ease. I think you can say that everything else that goes on with the *ki'zadun* and such can always be traced back to that one rivalry. Half of what goes on in the world concerns the battle between Zakkar and Sharadar. They've been fighting a clandestine war for over five thousand years."

"Like two stags fighting in a cornfield. They have no idea what they're trampling."

"That's a pretty good description," she nodded. "They don't fight openly, because that would be a war like nothing since the Blood War. Sharadar virtually owns all of Arathorn, and Zakkar has influence over about half of Valkar and much of Godan-Nyr. If they declared open war, there'd be armies numbering in the millions clashing all over the southern continents. It would not be pretty," she concluded with a sniff.

"It certainly sounds a little scary," he said. "So, the *ki'zadun* was part of Zakkar?"

"One of many parts of Zakkar, father," she replied.

"Why did they want the Firestaff, anyway?"

"The same reason everyone else wants it, father, but with a slightly different idea in mind for its use. Everyone wants it to become a god. The *ki'zadun* and Zakkar want to get it to free the one they already have."

"I think I remember that part," he said. "Jesmind told me about it. That their god was trapped by some woman named Spyder."

"That's right. He was imprisoned in a statue as punishment, because he was the reason the Blood War happened in the first place. The Firestaff can give him the power to free himself from the statue and use his power in the world again."

"You mean even after he got imprisoned, his people didn't abandon him?"

"No, not really."

"Well, they're faithful to him. I guess you can't fault them for their devotion."

"I guess not," she chuckled.

"It's too bad they had to do it this way. I'm sure if they would have asked for help, someone would have tried to free him."

"I doubt it," she smiled. "That particular god has been nothing but trouble ever since he became one. He started the Blood War in an attempt to take over the world. If they freed him, he'd probably try to take over the world again."

"Oh. Well, if he's just going to do it again, I guess he's better off in god prison."

"God prison. That's a very funny concept," Julia said with a little laugh.

"It all sounds a little too much to believe," he admitted.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen so much of it," she said with a smile. She sniffed at the air a moment, then her ears laid back a little. "I'm

going to go cut that girl's nose off," she growled.

"Who?"

"That Sha'Kar girl that's been following you around."

"She's here?"

"She's behind us," she answered, glancing back over her shoulder.
"Probably around that last bend."

"She's not going to give up easy, Julia," Tarrin sighed.

"She will if I go back there and fix her."

Tarrin wasn't sure what that meant, and something told him he didn't want to know. "Just leave her alone, Julia. She'll give up once she finds someone more interesting. It's too bad really, because I really like her. I miss running around with her and Dar. She's a lot of fun to be with."

"I really don't understand why you're avoiding her, Tarrin," she said. "If all she wants is a roll in the sheets, give it to her. That would probably make her go away a lot faster than all this avoiding her."

"I'm really not sure why I'm avoiding her so much," he admitted.
"Something just tells me that getting involved with her would be a very bad idea."

"Don't you like her?" she asked pointedly.

"I think that's the problem," he said honestly. "I like her *too* much."

"She is pretty," Julia admitted. "And all those Sha'Kar have those to-die-for bodies. Afraid getting into a relationship with her is going to influence your choice?"

He blinked. "You know, I think that may be one of the reasons," he said with a nod. "If I had an affair with Auli, I think it would make me want to stay human."

"It's not like you're looking at a desert on this side, father," Julia laughed. "Jesmind and Kimmie are probably going to fight over who gets to keep you."

"I know. But what's on your plate is more on your mind than what's in the pot, you know." He threw the heavy braid back over his shoulder. "And

besides, all Auli wants is a fun time. I'd want something more permanent, and doing what she wants to do would *really* make me want something permanent."

"Those rural morals," Julia chuckled. "Sometimes I'm surprised you far-flung villagers manage to have any children at all."

"Girls just don't throw themselves into boys' beds back home," he agreed with a nod.

"But you have to admit it, father. She wouldn't be dragging you kicking and screaming into that bed."

"No, she wouldn't," he admitted with a sigh. "Every time she gets close to me, half of me is thinking about getting away, but the other half is hoping I won't. If she managed to trap me, I don't think I'd put up much of a fight."

"Want to get rid of her?" Julia asked with a smile.

"I don't want to be mean to her or make her mad, Julia," he cautioned. "She is my friend. I'm hoping after she loses interest in me, we can be friends again."

"I promise, she won't hate you afterwards, father," she smiled. "If you want to really get rid of her, then let her trap you."

"What?"

"Let her trap you somewhere, give in to her advances, and then do everything wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Be a total disaster in bed," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Do everything wrong, and make it a complete chore for her to make love with you. It won't matter how eager you are afterwards. She'll avoid having you back in her bed like you were carrying the plague. You should try to get her back in bed yourself a few times after that, until she gives you the immortal 'let's be friends' speech. Then you agree, and you're friends again. And she won't even think of seducing you again."

Tarrin thought that over, then he laughed heartily. "Julia, that's wicked! It's funny, but it's totally evil!"

"You just have to approach these kinds of problems the right way, father, and they can solve themselves."

"How do I know if I'm doing it wrong, though?"

She looked at him. "I forgot, like this, you're mentally a virgin. If it won't offend you too much, I can tell you what to do to make sure Auli never tries to seduce you again. But I warn you, it's going to be graphic."

"It can't be any worse than some of the things Triana and Jesmind have said to me," he said calmly.

"Probably not," she chuckled in reply. "And remember, I'll be teaching you the *wrong* way. I don't want to hear your next girlfriend complaining, understand?"

He laughed, and to his surprise, he didn't feel embarrassed at all. "You can explain it, and if I find myself pinned by Auli, I'll try it your way," he told her.

"It's the least I can do, father," she said with a gentle smile, as they turned the corner on the border of the hedge maze. They walked along the path with patches of beautiful multicolored flowers on one side and the hedge wall on the other, and Julia began teaching Tarrin how to get rid of Auli.

Neither was aware of the eyes following them.

Tarrin felt rather reassured after his talk with Julia. He'd gotten to know her a lot better, and she actually had quite good advice when it came to dealing with Auli. He thought that she had quite a good idea there with acting the dunce. It probably would make Auli lose interest in him faster than anything else. He just hoped he'd have presence of mind to try to do it.

He spent the rest of the afternoon with Jasana in her apartments, and though Tarrin had a good time, he wasn't so sure about Jesmind. She was there, and she kept staring at him in a way that made him uncomfortable. She wouldn't really talk to him outside of noncommittal grunts or dismissive looks, and he had no idea what was bothering her. But something obviously was, and he reminded himself several times over the afternoon that technically he was still angry with Jesmind, so he didn't want

to try to find out. Showing too much interest in her mood may make her think he was making a peace offering.

After a very pleasant day, he and Dar went down and got some dinner, and ended up wandering around the grounds aimlessly and talking. He told him about much of what he discussed with Jula, including touching on her idea to make Auli go away. Dar found the subject to be quite interesting, and thought Jula's idea was both amusing and possibly workable.

"I'm glad I finally heard Jula's story," he said as they walked around the hedge maze. "She won't talk to anyone, so she's been a real big mystery here in the Tower."

"Why would anyone want to know things like that?"

"Only a very few people here trust her, Tarrin," Dar told him. "If she wasn't in Jenna's favor, they'd probably run her off. They remember that she betrayed the Goddess, and many of the *katzh-dashi* feel that that's an unforgivable offense."

"I trust her."

"You didn't at first," he said mildly.

"But she's my daughter."

"That had nothing to do with it," he replied. "You watched over her as a daughter, but you didn't trust her. I didn't think even you could forget who she was and what she did, but you surprised me. After the battle, I realized that you'd completely accepted her. I was happy for that. Jula was a very lonely woman, even among the other Were-cats. The Sorcerers couldn't forgive her, the Were-cats wouldn't forgive her, and she was stuck with both groups. I really felt sorry for her."

"Didn't you try to talk to her?"

"I did, but she wouldn't talk to anyone," he sighed. "Only you. From what I hear, now she's been accepted by Jesmind and Jasana, so at least she had someone to talk to while we were gone."

"Well, she's not alone anymore, so I guess things all worked out," Tarrin shrugged.

"Ugh, I'm a mess," Dar grunted, scrubbing his hair with his hands.
"Let's go take a bath."

"Sure."

The baths weren't very busy, since it was sunset and people had better things to do. There were only a few Sorcerers and servants using the baths, and since it was after hours, there were no Novices to hand out towels or clean up the bathing chamber. When there were no attendants, towels were stacked on a large shelf near the stairs, and the two of them helped themselves to towels and moved towards the closest available benches.

"What do you do every day, Dar?" Tarrin asked, finally remembering to do so.

"Well, right now, I've been working with the Lorefinders," he answered. "Since I can read Sha'Kar. I've been working with them and a few of the Sha'Kar to teach them the language."

"What do all the other Sorcerers do all the time?" he asked. "I don't really see what they do all day."

Dar laughed. "Believe it or not, not a whole lot," he replied. "Being a *katzh-dashi* isn't a very strenuous occupation. Most of them spend most of their time studying Sorcery or history. Being *katzh-dashi* is about learning things, and that's what most of us concentrate on. There are some who like to go out in the field and gather information, or search for new Novices, and some have just started concentrating on Sorcery used in combat. They call themselves the Swords of the Goddess," he said with a roll of his eyes. "I think they just like blowing things up."

Tarrin laughed, then handed Dar the soap. "What, don't all the Sorcerers learn battle magic?"

"Of course they do," he nodded. "That's what makes all this talk of War Sorcery such nonsense. Like I said, I think they just like marching around and looking important, and exploding targets in some vain attempt to impress people."

"Who knows, maybe they'll actually be useful," Tarrin speculated.

"Maybe as the ones crazy enough to go first," Dar snorted. "Those kinds of nuts can have it."

"If that's what they want, who are we to gainsay them?"

"I have better things to do with my life than throw it away like that," Dar grunted.

"Have you seen Tiella?"

He nodded. "She's out of the Initiate. She decided to stay with the *katzh-dashi*, so she's in indoctrination."

"What's that?"

"The period between being an Initiate and a full *katzh-dashi*," he answered. "Where you learn about the politics of the Tower and the customs and such, and where they teach the kind of Sorcery that they don't want the freelancers to know. The Initiate concentrates on magic, and since you don't *have* to join the order after finishing the Initiate, they don't teach those things there. They save that and the really advanced magic or dangerous magic for those they can keep an eye on."

"What kind of magic?"

"Almost all the Mind magic," he said as he washed the soap off himself. "They don't teach Mind weaves to people that may go out and use them on people to get rich or control people. The only Mind magic they teach in the Initiate is mostly how to defend against it and how to recognize mind-affecting magic used by the Priests and Wizards."

"I guess that's a good idea," Tarrin shrugged. "What else do they teach in indoctrination?"

"Healing," he said. "Anything that takes four or more spheres too. The Initiate is about teaching Sorcerers enough not to get themselves killed. They save the advanced magic for those who are willing to devote their lives to its study."

"Don't they teach--what do they call it--oh, Circling in the Initiate?"

"They do, because what harm can it do?" he asked in reply. "You can only Circle with other Sorcerers, and they're not likely to find others out in the world. There are few enough as it is, and those that leave after the Initiate often don't advertise the fact that they're Sorcerers. Most of the

world still blames us for the Breaking, so it's never healthy to advertise the fact that you're a Sorcerer."

"I guess not. How have the other Sorcerers handled the Sha'Kar?"

"Pretty well, actually," he said with a chuckle. "All the humans are falling all over themselves to learn Sha'Kar as fast as they can. All the Sha'Kar are a bit overwhelmed by all the attention they're getting."

Tarrin pulled the braid over his shoulder and untied the thong. It had been a while since he'd taken it out and washed all his hair. He'd been considering cutting the thing off. It was very heavy and it pulled at the back of his head uncomfortably, and when it was wet it gave him a headache with its weight. He wasn't sure why he hadn't done it yet. Maybe because it was the only thing he had outside the brands that reminded him of everything he'd forgotten. Without it, it would be easy to pretend that it had only been a few rides since he left home, instead of two years and more. "Think about it, Dar. How would you feel if living legends suddenly showed up at your doorstep?"

"I guess travelling with you numbed me to that kind of thing," he chuckled. "I'm used to outrageous things now." He dunked himself under the water's surface, and then came up and slicked his black hair back from his face. "I need a haircut."

"I need one more," he said, wagging the end of his long, long hair at Dar.

"If you cut that off, people would scream," Dar smiled. "You tried once before, but it lasted about a day. Kimmie gave you one offhanded remark, and you regrew your hair by supertime."

"You make it sound like they controlled me," he noted.

"Not in the slightest, but Kimmie and Jesmind could make you do things when nobody else could," he amended. "Because you loved them. That let them get away with more than anyone else could have possibly gotten away with."

"As long as I wasn't henpecked," he laughed.

"Well, I'm getting waterlogged here, so I think I'm going to get out and dry off," he said. "And I have some work to finish. You don't mind, do

you?"

"No, go ahead," he said. "I want to finish washing this, then I'll probably go spend the rest of the night with Jasana."

Dar climbed out of the pool, and Tarrin bent to the considerable task of washing the entirety of his hair. He debated again whether or not he should cut it off the whole time he was washing it. Scrubbing hair longer than the height of a small child is a time-consuming task, and the population of the bathing pool completely changed, then slowly dwindled as Tarrin scrubbed from the roots of his hair to the very tips, having to gather up the long locks and keep them out of the pool to lather them. It seemed a ridiculously boring chore, and he had all but decided that maybe something of a trim would be in order tomorrow. Maybe not take all of it off, but he wouldn't mind losing about half its length. It would be much lighter, a lot less inconvenient, and it would probably stop the headaches. He didn't mind the idea of having a braid, but it was just that it was so long and so heavy. If it was neither of those things, he probably wouldn't mind it at all.

Finally finishing, he waded towards the cooler, slightly shallower end where the stone steps leading out of the pool were located, sat down on them, and bent to the task of rebraiding his hair. It took him nearly a half an hour, mainly because he wasn't very good at doing it to himself. He'd braided his mother's hair many times, but it was a lot different when he couldn't see what he was doing. He had to take the braid out and rebraid it three times when he realized that it was all uneven and probably looked like a big knot at the base of his neck. If he had to have it, he was determined that it wasn't going to look unkempt.

At long last, he was done. He retied the leather thong at the base of his braid to cinch it, and instead of getting out, he decided to go down towards the hot end and enjoy it a few minutes before leaving. Most of the bathing he'd done was in cold water, and that didn't tend to make him want to linger for very long. The hot baths he took at home didn't stay hot for very long in the winter, and in the summer a hot bath was the last thing anyone wanted. Aldreth and Sulasia lay in a temperate zone, where the winters could be very cold and the summers very hot.

The only problem he could see was the depth of the water. It only came up to his stomach, and he had to bend his knees to let the water come up to

his chin. That, and he felt the strange desire to lay down in the water, to simply relax and let the water's heat soak into him. There really was no way to lay in the water other than to swim, and that seemed like too much exertion to him at the moment. Despite that disappointment, he found the water quite relaxing, and he was content to sort of float there with his feet on the bottom of the pool but not supporting his weight, half-floating, half-standing with the water lapping at his ears and its heat surrounding him in a most pleasing manner.

He was so relaxed, he didn't realize that someone was pulling on his hair until there was enough force behind it to move him. Someone had a firm grip on his braid, and that grip was pulling him. He opened his eyes, and to his shock, found himself staring up into the amused, hungry eyes of Auli.

He rose to his feet so quickly that the water erupted around him, but Auli had a very firm hold on his braid, and her grip on it pulled his head up short. His head was yanked to the side painfully as he rose up over her, a mixture of surprise and shock and a little embarrassment over being taken so completely by surprise showing on his face as he grabbed his braid with his free hand and yanked it free. Auli was nude, and there was a look of smug victory in her eyes as she moved towards him. Tarrin's eyes moved to and fro, and he realized that he and Auli were the only ones in the baths. There would be no others to put her off this time. She had truly caught him alone. "Hello, Tarrin," she purred as she reached out and put her hands on his chest. "I've been waiting a very long time to get you alone."

Tarrin recoiled from her, not quite sure why he was doing so. He liked Auli, he was attracted to Auli, and part of him wanted Auli. But something else was there, and it told him that getting involved with Auli would be a very bad idea, and at the moment, that part of him was in charge. "A-Auli," he stammered, backing away from her. His attempt to retreat was met with her advancing, and the water slowed him as she was pulled along in his wake. "I told you to leave me alone. I don't want to--"

"Of course you do," she said with bright eyes, keeping her hand on his upper chest. "You just don't want to admit it."

Tarrin kept backing up, but he ran out of pool. His back and shoulders hit the high edge of the pool painfully, and in a blink she was against him,

wrapping her arms around him, even hooking one of his legs with her own, locking him in place. Thought became hard when she pressed up against him, when he could feel her body pressing against his, feel all those things he'd been dreaming about touching him in the most intimate ways.

With a hungry look, she leaned completely forward and kissed him with the same passion and exuberance that he remembered from before, a kiss that caused what little thought he had to scatter and quite effectively subdued all those nagging warnings that were still trying to run through his mind. So close to her, with her naked body pressing against his, with her kissing him, no amount of objection was going to pierce the powerful sensations her kiss and her touch had evoked in him. All of Jula's advice was completely forgotten, scoured away by the power of Auli's kiss.

He knew beyond any doubt that Auli had won when she grabbed his wrist and ever-so-sensually set his hand on her backside, and he did not move it away after she removed her hand. But even that realization was drowned by her as she overpowered him with the raw energy of her touch and her kiss, and he found himself surrendering to her willingly, eagerly, wanting to accept the delights that she offered. The thought that they were in a public place, that almost anyone could come down those stairs and catch them making love in the bathing pool, that Jesmind was going to try to kill her when she found out, and then she was going to kill him, that this was a terribly bad idea, all of them were wiped away, and there was nothing left but the desire to finally experience what part of him had imagined and fantasized over the days.

To give in to Auli and let her do whatever she wanted.

It was both everything he imagined, and everything he feared it would be.

Tarrin didn't feel quite so good about it in the morning, after Auli was gone. She had taken him in that bathing pool, and if that wasn't enough of a blow to his pride, she had convinced him to take her back to his room, where she was about ten times as aggressive and almost shocking in her behavior. He never imagined a girl could act like that. She had been--even thinking about it was both wildly exciting and somewhat unsettling. He had

been overwhelmed by her raw sensuality, her overpowering femininity at first, but it was nothing but his own weak will that had caused him to bring her back to his room afterwards, when he had a chance to think rationally. He had *wanted* to make love to her, and there was no way to excuse it. Despite all his bad feelings about it, he had thrown all of them aside and abandoned himself to the moment.

Despite beating himself over the head for his own shortcomings, he had to admit the fact that it had been very enjoyable. Auli was a very aggressive girl, but she had never once forgotten his needs or wants. She had been exquisite, and just thinking about her, about holding her nude body, about finally being able to touch all those places only his eyes had enjoyed before, it was almost intoxicating. Auli was so beautiful, so sensual, so free with herself, and so fearless, even in bed, to make love with her was almost like satisfying one's deepest fantasies and desires. It had been nothing like he had imagined it would be.

And that was one of the dangers he could comprehend. Just as he feared, the night with Auli made him want to have more of them, and that was going to upset all his plans for making an unbiased choice. Not unless he backed off, tried to forget about her, and moved on. Auli had had her conquest, and he decided that that had better satisfy her curiosity. He'd give her her victory this time, but there couldn't be a next time. If there was, he was going to fall more and more under her spell, and he knew that that would be a very short road. Auli didn't love him. He was pretty sure that she didn't really care too much about him. He was nothing but a toy to her, a thing, a conquest. And when she was bored with him, she would throw him away, regardless of how his feelings for her may evolve. And she was definitely the kind of woman a man could find feelings for, despite knowing exactly what kind of woman she was.

It wasn't that Auli was cruel or evil, it was simply that she didn't understand. She didn't understand what kind of an effect she had on human men, men not raised in the same society in which she had been raised. Tarrin would gain feelings for Auli if he slept with her enough times, and he knew he would. He knew himself enough to understand that, because Auli was already a very good friend. He liked her. And if she kept seducing him, kept getting intimate with him, he would invariably make that leap and decide that he loved her. Auli, on the other hand, thought everyone would

be like her, and that making love was something fun, something enjoyable, and something to be done with anyone she fancied. That was all it was to her, a fun night of pleasure. That it had any kind of lingering emotional attachments was a completely alien concept to her. Tarrin equated sex with love in his mind, where Auli didn't. It was a clash of culture, and it was going to cause him some serious problems if he didn't put a stop to it quickly.

A flash of memory, an echo of the past, a beautiful woman with flaming red hair...and bat-like wings. Something about her was similar to this, to Auli, but he couldn't remember anything more than that.

In any case, he was certain that he'd better stay away from her. What she could do to him was nothing compared to what Jesmind or Kimmie might do to her if they found out what happened last night. Auli just didn't understand that he was staying away from her as much to protect her as it was about him not wanting to get involved with her. Jesmind especially showed a great deal of possessiveness over him, almost jealousy, and she was a lot more hot-tempered than Kimmie. If Jesmind knew that Auli had seduced him, she'd march off, find the girl, and turn her inside out. Literally. He was sure of that. So he had to keep what happened secret.

The first step to doing that was to get her scent off of him. He'd had enough experience with the Were-cats to know that that would give him away faster than anything else. Auli's scent had to be absolutely all over him, and probably permeated the entire room as well. He had to get it scrubbed off of him, and if at all possible, change the linens on the bed and turn over the mattress after soaking it in something like vinegar, something to either cover or destroy the scent of Auli.

He moved quickly, knowing that any of the Were-cats may show up at his door any moment. In their unpredictability they were predictable. He threw open the windows and stripped the bed of its linens, then dressed in the same clothes he wore the day before and rushed down to the kitchens for some vinegar. He realized about halfway into his boots that using vinegar wouldn't work, he'd need something to completely pull out the scent. Fortunately, just such an agent happened to be next door, and at least from Dar he could expect the secret to be kept.

It took a few knocks to get him to open the door, and he looked half asleep when he did. His black hair was dishevelled and sticking up in all directions, and his eyes were sunken into his head in a very odd manner. "What's the matter with you?"

"I have a hangover, but I can't for the life of me remember drinking anything," he answered blearily.

Tarrin's suspicions went wild immediately. "Did you happen to meet Auli last night, Dar?"

"Yeah, as I was leaving the baths. She gave me--she *didn't*!"

"I'd say she did," Tarrin nodded grimly.

"That little--just wait til I get my hands on her!" he said angrily. "She *drugged* me!"

"That's not half of what she did to me last night," he admitted.

"She caught you, didn't she?"

A bit contritely, he nodded. "I never had a chance. She caught me in the baths. I had nowhere to go."

"You could have said no, you know."

"Look me in the eyes and say that again, Dar," he said seriously. "I don't think there's a man in the Tower that could say no to Auli when she's all up against you like she was me. I mean she had me dead to rights, Dar. Alone and naked in the baths, and she managed to sneak up to where she got a hold of me before I realized she was there. I couldn't have said no in that situation."

"I guess not," he sighed. "Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"No, actually, I need your help," he said. "She managed to get me to bring her back to my room, and I need to purge her scent out of it before one of the Were-cats finds it. If Jesmind finds out about this, she'll kill Auli, so I need to get this done before Jesmind comes around."

"I don't really know how to do that, but Kerri does," he answered. "Don't worry, Tarrin, Kerri can keep a secret. Let me wake her up, as soon as I find my amulet."

Though Tarrin could tell that Dar was a little amused by the situation, he took it seriously enough. So did Keritanima, to his surprise. After waking her up by calling to her using the amulet, she rushed down to his room wearing nothing but a nightrobe, with Binter ambling along behind her, an eternal presence. Wherever Keritanima was, one of the Vendari was as well. "Alright, now what's so important that you'd wake me up at the crack of dawn, Dar?" she demanded as she shuffled off the staircase and towards them.

Rather abashedly, Tarrin explained what had happened, which made her laugh. "Is that all? Good grief, Tarrin, you take these things too seriously. It's not like Auli's going to marry you. You didn't have to wake me up to tell me that."

"Jesmind's already threatened to kill her, Kerri," he explained. "That's one of the reasons why I was trying to stay away from her. If Jesmind finds out, she'll go after Auli, so I need your help destroying the evidence."

"In here, eh?" she nodded with her muzzle, then she opened the door to his room and put her head in. She then chuckled humorlessly. "Oh, Auli was in here all right, and it's obvious you and her were rattling the headboard. I can smell it from here."

"Kerri," Tarrin said in protest, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"You were alot more fun as a Were-cat, Tarrin," she teased with a toothy grin. "Alright, I'll take care of this, but I can smell Auli all over you. Take some clean clothes down to the baths and scrub every finger of skin you have with soap twice, and wash your hair at least three times. Auli's sweat is all over you, and that kind of a scent is very hard to wash off."

"I was getting ready to do that," he assured her.

"Well, Tarrin, was it any good?" she asked shamelessly.

"Kerri!"

"It's alright, Tarrin, I'm a married woman," she said wickedly. "I'm allowed to talk about these kinds of things now."

"Well, I'm not a married woman, so I'm not going to talk about it," he said adamantly.

She looked at him and laughed, then patted him on the shoulder. "Go get cleaned up, and I'll help you cover this up," she winked. "But you owe me a big one."

He didn't really answer that, taking a clean change of clothes down to the baths and getting to work. He nearly scrubbed himself raw with soap as he labored to get Auli's smell off of him, and he had to hurry. There was no telling when Jesmind or Kimmie was going to come looking for him, if they weren't watching him already--

That brought him up short. If Jesmind *had* been watching him last night, then she may already know about him and Auli. If that was the case, then she may already be on the warpath. But he hadn't heard anything about it yet, so there was a chance that it hadn't happened. Or at least hadn't happened yet. There was no screaming in the hallways, none of the other bathers were talking about any kind of fighting last night, so he was a little encouraged that she'd not been tailing him last night.

He went back to it, spending nearly an hour washing Auli's scent off of him, and then laboriously scrubbing his hair for a second time in so many days. He was waterlogged by the time he climbed out, and his skin was decidedly pink from the brisk scrubbing, but he was relatively certain that he'd gotten all of it. That knowledge made him relax a little. If Keritanima did her part, any scent evidence left in his room had been wiped away, and now there was nothing but him, Auli, Dar, and Keritanima to say anything about it. He knew that Dar and Kerri wouldn't say anything, and he certainly wouldn't. He just hoped that Auli had the sense to keep her mouth shut. He'd have to find her, to talk to her and tell her that her life very well may depend on her keeping what happened last night to herself.

He dressed in the clean clothes he'd brought with him and carefully wrapped the dirty ones so he could minimize their contact with him, then wrapped them in a towel and put them under his arm. He was pretty sure that he'd gotten everything, and that made him feel quite a bit better. He started back to his room feeling quite relieved about the whole thing. If Keritanima finished, then all that would be left would be the clothes under his arm, and that would be easy enough to attend. He'd burn them if nothing else. He hurried back to his room, confident that everything was going to work out alright--

And found Jesmind standing in the doorway. And she did *not* look happy. Her beautiful face was very tight, very flat, and her eyes were very narrow as she glowered into the hallway. Those eyes locked on him, and she moved towards him at a fast walk that made him realize that she'd break out into a run and chase him down if he tried to get away from her. And that would only make her angrier. She stalked up to him, and he felt honest fear of her as she looked the slight difference in their heights down at him with that same flat, angry expression. He swallowed reflexively as he backed into the wall behind him, out of room, and then flinched when her open hand slammed into the wall just beside his head. The other hand snatched the towel-wrapped bundle from his hands and threw it aside.

"I leave you alone for *one night*," she hissed at him, "I decide that I can trust you by yourself for one night, and this is what happens!"

Tarrin's fear of Jesmind was suddenly displaced by indignation and not a little anger. "I'm not your child, Jesmind," he said in a level tone. "I didn't want it to happen, but it did. Even if I'd wanted it or not, what I do is *none of your business*."

"You'd better believe that it's my business!" she suddenly raged at him, making him flinch as drops of that dangerous spittle flew from her mouth, nearly landing on his face. "You are *my mate*, Tarrin! Even if you are human, you're still mine! Mine, do you hear? You're not free to go sleep around with anyone until I let you go!" She slammed her other hand into the wall on the other side of his head, trapping him, but he did not flinch. He looked up at her with steady nerve, the calm taught to him by his parents when facing an enemy. Never show fear, they had both taught him. Fear is a good emotion, but not when someone you're facing knows you're afraid. "I just want to know one thing," she growled in a very inhuman voice. "Did she come after you, or did you go after her?"

"I'm not going to answer that," he said in as steady a voice as he could manage. "Because no matter what I say, it won't matter to you. You've already made up your mind."

Jesmind laid her ears back, and her eyes suddenly went from their normal state to glowing all green. It was quite an unnerving sight to see, especially when those eyes were barely a nose's length from his own.

"You're right," she hissed. And then she recoiled from him and dashed down the hallway.

"Jesmind!" Tarrin called in surprise and worry. He knew exactly what she was doing. She was going to go hunt down Auli. And when she found her, she was going to try to kill her.

Knowing that there was nothing he could do to stop her, he instead ran to his room. Dar and Keritanima weren't there, and the room was a disaster. The bed had been completely destroyed, furniture smashed, sheets torn apart, even the art on the walls destroyed. Jesmind must have come in and discovered the truth, and then ripped the room apart in her anger.

Good Goddess! *Auli*! As furious as she was, Jesmind was really going to do it, she would really try to kill Auli, no matter who saw her or what stood in her way!

Tarrin couldn't stop her, but he *could* warn someone and try to get word to the Sha'Kar. The Sha'Kar could handle Jesmind, they could stop her and hopefully not hurt her. He just needed to find a Sorcerer.

He knew exactly where to go. He ran down the hall, down to the end, where Dolanna's door was, and then banged on it feverishly. "Dolanna!" he shouted, then he realized she wasn't there. If Jesmind tore his room apart, she was bound to make a whole lot of noise, and that would have alerted everyone in the area. It was why he hadn't met anyone in the halls coming back to his room. They'd cleared the halls because they knew that Jesmind was being violent. Or at least he really, *really* hoped so.

If he couldn't find Dolanna, then he needed to find someone else, anyone else. He scrambled down the hall and down the stairs, thinking that his best bet was the kitchens. Someone would be there to get word to Jenna and the Sha'Kar and warn them that Jesmind was coming. He ran down the circular staircase so fast he nearly fell twice, and he did fall when he came around the steps and out into the hall and slammed headlong into the scaly back of Binter. Tarrin wasn't heavy enough to even budge the massive Vendari, and he ended up bouncing off of him and nearly tumbling down the stairs behind, had Binter's huge clawed hand not reached down and grabbed him by the leg.

"Tarrin!" Keritanima called in concern, rushing over and kneeling by him. "Are you alright?"

"Kerri, we have to get word to Jenna!" he said. "Jesmind's out of control!"

"It's already taken care of," she said with a reassuring smile. "Triana just got back a little while ago, and she's going to intercept Jesmind before she can do any harm."

"You're sure about that?"

Keritanima grinned. "Nobody can get past Triana, Tarrin. Trust me on that one."

"That's a relief," he said with a sigh as Binter helped him to his feet. "Did she hurt you? Where's Dar?"

"Dar's gone to tell the Keeper what happened," she answered. "I figured you'd come this way, so we waited here for you."

"What happened?"

"She showed up while I was purging the smell from your room," she shrugged. "She realized what happened, and about that time she had a hissy fit. Started throwing furniture around and cursing alot. About that time, Binter decided that it was time for me to withdraw," she said acidly at the Vendari.

"I was not going to let you stay in danger, your Majesty," he said calmly. "And Jesmind is family to your brother, so I was not going to stop her. Out of respect for him."

"I could have handled her, Binter," she accused. "If you hadn't have grabbed me like a doll and slung me over you shoulder, I could have stopped her from tearing Tarrin's room up."

"I have seen Were-cats fight against Sorcery before," he said, nonplussed. "I do not take chances with your life, Majesty."

"Someday you and I are going to renegotiate this little agreement, Binter," she said in a steely tone.

"You are free to try, Majesty, but our oaths to you are very clear. You are our child, and we will not let you come to harm."

"Dar and Dolanna went to go warn the Keeper, and they told us that Triana was back on the grounds, and that she'd take care of Jesmind. That's a good thing. As mad as Jesmind is at the moment, I don't think most of the Sorcerers could manage her."

"Exactly why I removed you from her presence."

"Oh, shut up," she snapped at the Vendari.

Tarrin was a little worried, and not a little embarrassed. All this madness was his fault, be it directly or indirectly. And what was worse, everyone in the Tower was going to find out that he and Auli had slept together. Auli probably wouldn't care at all, but Tarrin did. Such a rumor could completely destroy one's reputation back in Aldreth, be it a boy or a girl. "Great," he sighed. "This was the last thing I needed."

"You just never seem to catch a break, brother," she chuckled. "Come on, let me take you down to the kitchens and we can get something to eat. Something tells me we're both going to need all our energy today."

"I think you're dead on, Kerri," he agreed as she took his hand in her own, and he paused to feel how soft yet rough it was, and how silky the black fur on her hand was. Just like a fox, her hands and feet had black fur on them. Her coloring was totally faithful to the animal she resembled.

Things were going to get very unpleasant. He just knew it. And the least of it was how all this made him feel. He was very angry with Jesmind for her words, making it sound like he was nothing but her possession. He had his own life, and damnit, he'd been trying to be as objective as possible. But maybe that was the problem with her. Jesmind had absolutely decided that he *was* going to be a Were-cat again, and him fooling around with Auli was a very direct threat to that future. He could see that now, and he could understand why it made her so furious. If Tarrin got involved with Auli, Jesmind was afraid that the relationship would make him want to stay human. It was the exact same thing he'd thought himself, so it was no stretch to think that Jesmind had reached the same conclusion. The others talked about how tempermental Jesmind was, but most of them didn't

understand how intelligent she was, either. She was alot smarter than most of the others thought she was.

That knowledge was going to cause him no end of problems, he was sure of it. The next time he saw Jesmind, he could foresee quite a shouting match.

Chapter 5

Tarrin ended up waiting in Jenna's office, and truth be told, it was one of the places where he felt safest. Jenna was his sister, his blood relation, and at least she was someone he had known before he lost his memory. Even if the time had changed her a great deal, at her core she was still the sweet little girl she'd been back in Aldreth, considerate and thoughtful, and at least she understood how upsetting all this had been for him. She set him in a very comfortable chair, and then after shoos everyone else out of her office, she and him talked about what had happened as adults. It was a little strange to him to admit that he'd slept with Auli to his sister, but in many ways, she'd become more than just his sister in his eyes. She was very young, only fifteen, but she *was* the Keeper, and that authority made it alright in his mind to discuss such things. Her position and the knowledge she had gained from that mysterious Spyder woman had changed her, and though he knew she was different, at least the feel of her had not changed. She was older, much wiser, and she ruled the Tower, but she was still Jenna. She would look out for him, and as long as he was with her, he had the confident feeling that things weren't going to go wrong.

But for now, there was nothing but waiting. Waiting and talking. Jenna showed a great deal of maturity when he described the trouble he'd had with Auli, how she'd been chasing him, and he also made sure to explain that regardless of her behavior, Tarrin liked her and considered her a friend. It was why he was keeping it more or less to himself, and why he wasn't being more aggressive in rebuffing her. That, and the fact that part of him *wanted* what happened to happen. He didn't want Auli to get angry with him and have the situation cost him her friendship. It was hard for him to work it out, mainly because of his inexperience with such things, and he admitted as much to Jenna as they talked. He'd handled the situation all wrong, and as a result, Auli had seduced him, Jesmind was on a rampage, and the whole thing was almost mortifyingly embarrassing for him. Everyone was

going to know that Auli and him had slept together, and that Jesmind's fury was because of it.

The situation with Jesmind was a different problem, and Jenna managed to urge the truth out of him about her. He liked her, but he was very resentful of how she and the other Were-cats had been treating him. Only Julia had shown any kind of neutrality in the matter, and she was the only one he found he could confide in to any degree. She was the mother of his daughter, and that was the only thing that linked them together in his mind. He didn't see Jesmind as a mate or lover or wife, only as a shadowy figure from a lost past, a woman who had once been the love of the Tarrin that had been forgotten. But it was like he was a different person now, and instead of trying to get to know him or talk to him, Jesmind had simply decided that since he was going to change back to the Tarrin she knew and regain his memory, there was no need to go through that. He didn't understand why she was being like that, but Jenna told him that Auli's chasing of him had put Jesmind on the defensive, and he suddenly understood. She probably felt that she couldn't compete with Auli because she couldn't be intimate with him, but what she didn't understand was that a lot of how he felt about Auli came from the fact that she was such a good friend to him. If Jesmind had spent the time to get to know him, to talk to him and try to understand him, he may not feel the way he did towards her now, and maybe Jesmind would have gained enough understanding of him to know that what happened between him and Auli was generally unintentional, and also that it was by no means permanent.

The first person to manage to reach the office, to his surprise, was Auli. She was literally being dragged by the ear by her mother, the formidable Sorceress Ianelle, and Ianelle did not look very happy. "I'm sorry it took so long for us to answer your call, Keeper," she said in a brusque tone in formal Sha'Kar, curtsying and kicking her daughter in the shin to make her do the same, all the while keeping a firm grip on the girl's ear. Tarrin almost found the scene funny, but he knew that if he laughed, Auli would hate him until she died. Auli was all about image and status, and if he humiliated her now, she would never forgive him for it. The trip through the Tower had probably been humiliating enough. "I had to actually use Sorcery to hide her from the Were-cat. I've never seen such determination."

"Triana hasn't caught her yet?"

"From what I've heard, she tried," Ianelle said. "But the one Jesmind attacked Triana and actually managed to get away from her."

"Jesmind *attacked* Triana?" Tarrin gasped. Maybe nobody would have to worry about Jesmind for much longer. Triana probably wouldn't take very kindly to that. It seemed shocking that Jesmind would attack her own mother, but then again, she'd been really mad. Triana herself said that when a Were-cat was enraged, they were capable of such drastic actions.

"Just outside the main Tower," she nodded. "It was over quickly. I think the attack startled Triana, and that was enough for Jesmind to get away from her. They've cleared the Tower halls, and the Wikuni is laying a trap for Jesmind by putting down a magical false scent trail. They're going to lead her into a position where she can't get away."

"They may need some help."

"They have it," Ianelle noted. "There's another Were-cat with Triana now, a very short one with short black hair. She looks more than capable of handling Jesmind. She's quite intimidating."

"That would be Mist," Jenna chuckled humorlessly. "You're right about that. Jesmind couldn't possibly get past Mist."

Tarrin remembered the stories he'd heard of her. Mist was the mother of his son, and she was one mean, ornery Were-cat. Triana had left the Tower to bring her here, he was sure of it. Had she brought his son as well? Why had Triana done that? It worried him, unsettled him, that Triana would bring yet another Were-cat to the Tower, and one that had such a big stake in things as she did. He had no doubt that Mist was going to be just like Jesmind and Kimmie, and would do anything she could in order to make him change back.

"Anyway, as you requested, here she is," Ianelle said, pushing Auli forward. "Explain yourself, daughter. Have you any idea how much trouble you've caused?"

"I didn't cause any of this," she said indignantly. "What me and Tarrin do is none of her business. I made sure that Tarrin wasn't attached to anyone first."

"But you completely ignored it when he warned you this may happen."

"I can handle that fleabag."

"That fleabag will tear you apart if she gets her claws in you," Ianelle snapped. "And your magic won't be enough to stop her. She's a *Were-cat*, foolish girl. She has her own magic, and had she caught you, you would have found out that your Sorcery would not have saved you."

Auli glared a little at her mother, but said nothing.

Ianelle pushed Auli into the chair beside his, and even after all this, he found himself thinking about the night they'd shared. The trap she had woven was still working on him. "What possessed you to push things this far, girl?" Ianelle demanded. "I've been told what happened. That you've been following him around, trying to seduce him for several days now. Explain yourself!"

"He said no to me," she said in a challenging manner, as if that explained everything.

Ianelle looked about ready to explode. "That's *it*?" she said incredulously. "All this was over your *ego*? How shallow and self-centered can you be, daughter?" she raged. "Have I taught you nothing about our proud traditions and your heritage?"

"Those are *your* traditions and *your* heritage!" Auli shouted, standing up and facing her mother. "I didn't *want* to come here! I wanted to stay in Sha'Kari and live the life I had! But no, you and the other Elders had to drag us back to this doghouse of a Tower and impose the most ridiculous restrictions on us! I was happy there, and I mean to be happy here! And if being happy means seducing a man I find very handsome and attractive, then that's *exactly* what I'm going to do!" Auli snorted almost like Triana, then sat back down.

Ianelle didn't seem to be quite as easy with the confession. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she actually balled her fist. Sha'Kar were pacifists, but sometimes Tarrin thought that Ianelle was pacifistic only because of her adherence to tradition. At that moment, she looked about ready to slap her daughter across the face, and the slight twitch in the corner of Auli's lip told him that Auli wouldn't be surprised to have it happen either. "I think I need to have a little talk with Auli," Jenna said in a commanding tone, heading off any such outburst.

"I will deal with you later," she promised in a harsh tone. "Will you need anything further of me, honored one?"

"No, Ianelle. Give me a little time with Auli."

"As you wish," she said with a curtsy, then she swept regally from the room.

Auli sat silently, and Tarrin felt a little uncomfortable as Jenna leaned forward on her elbows on her desk, fingers interlaced, looking at the two of them like some kind of instructor catching students passing notes. "So," she finally said. "This was nothing more than seeing if you could." Auli was silent, simply sitting there and giving the Keeper a slightly challenging look. "And you did. I guess for that, you can feel proud. But I don't think you ever once stopped to think what success may mean, did you?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's very simple, Auli. What do you think is going to happen now?"

Auli was silent a moment, then she put her hands in her lap demurely. "Nothing much," she answered. "Jesmind is going to calm down, and then things will get back to normal."

"For you, I guess they might," she agreed. "Oh, you're going to have a big fight with your mother, but I get the feeling that that happens all the time." Auli smiled a little at that. "But you never thought about what's going to happen to Tarrin, did you?"

Her amused look faded.

"I didn't think so. You just put him in all sorts of trouble."

"She's not his girlfriend," she said defensively.

"No, but she *thinks* she is," she pointed out. "And that's all that really matters for her, isn't it? Just like getting Tarrin was all that mattered to you."

Auli was silent, and she didn't look quite as confident as she did before.

"All this over the fact that you couldn't accept the fact that Tarrin said no," she sighed. "Now then, I want you to listen to this. Now Tarrin is going to have all the Were-cats angry with him, and that's going to make it very hard for him to see his daughter. He spends a lot of time with her, and he

loves her very much, and now he's not going to be able to do that as much as he'd like. Your need to satisfy your ego is going to force him to stay away from her for a while. It's going to make him very upset, and it's going to make his daughter even more upset. After all, she doesn't really understand what's going on. Now we have to tell her that her father can't come up and be with her because her mother is mad at him."

Auli glanced at Tarrin and flushed guiltily. Jenna's remarks must have finally struck bone.

"Tarrin tried to stay away from you, as I'm sure you know," she continued. "Did you ever once stop to think *why*?"

Auli glanced at him again, then looked at her hands and shook her head.

"He's very attracted to you, you know. I'm sure he's not completely unhappy you got him." Tarrin blushed slightly. "It wasn't because he didn't like you or he didn't want you. It's because he was trying to protect you. He knew what Jesmind would do, and he didn't want to put you in harm's way. We all knew that, of course, and almost everyone that knows him offered to discourage you from chasing him. But he told us not to. Do you know *why*?"

She shook her head, her long blond hair slipping over her face.

"Because he really likes you, Auli," she said in a level tone. "He didn't want anyone doing anything to make you angry, because he still wanted to be your friend. I don't think you have any idea how much he likes you, and how much easier you were making it for him to deal with his amnesia before you started trying to seduce him. He thinks of you as a friend, and he didn't want to lose you over something as silly as your trying to seduce him. You put him in a terrible position, because Tarrin is very loyal to those he considers a friend. He couldn't sleep with you because of Jesmind, but he didn't want to lose your friendship either. Even now I guarantee you he's worried about you, because Jesmind *will* come after you, Auli. Never forget that, and I suggest you keep one eye over your shoulder until Jesmind leaves the Tower. He's trapped again, because he's Jesmind's friend, and he's your friend, and now two of his friends are going to be fighting with each other. Do you like Tarrin, Auli?"

She was silent.

"Well? Do you?"

"Yes," she said sullenly, in a very small voice.

"Do you consider him a friend?"

"Yes," she answered, much more quickly.

"Then tell me, how could you do this to a friend? How could you disrupt his life and cause so much trouble for him if he's your friend? Aren't friends supposed to look out for each other? Aren't they supposed to help each other? Is he really your friend, or is he just someone you happen to like, who you'll use when it suits you?"

Auli looked away from both of them.

"It's unfortunate it had to come to this. Tarrin did everything he could to protect you, because he is your *friend*. And you ignored all his warnings, never once considered how what you were doing was going to affect his life. You just barrelled ahead, because he said *no*. You've turned the entire Tower on its ear, because he said *no*. You've caused a rift between Tarrin and his daughter, and it was all because he said *no*. What do you have to say for yourself, Auli? I'm waiting for an explanation."

She was silent for a very long moment, and then she jumped up from her chair and ran towards the door. Tarrin heard it clearly; she was crying.

Tarrin felt sorry for her, but he was more impressed with Jenna. With quiet words, she had driven the point home more effectively than Ianelle had. Then again, Ianelle acted out of anger, and Auli responded with anger. Jenna had come at her with reason, and Auli could not defend herself against it. Jenna had made Auli see what her actions had caused, and to his surprise, she had actually made her feel guilty. Something Ianelle probably never could have done.

Jenna's eyes narrowed, and she put her chin on her interlaced fingers. Then she looked at Tarrin and smiled as Auli fled from the room, sobbing loudly. When she ran out the door, Duncan made a move to block her.

"Let her go, Duncan," Jenna called.

Tarrin looked at Jenna with newfound respect. Clearly, whatever Spyder had done to her had affected her more than he realized.

"She'll be alright," she said with a smile. "And it isn't half as bad as I made it sound. Jesmind's going to be fairly ticked off for a while, but she'll calm down. And she'll blame Auli, which means that she's not going to hold a grudge against you. Actually, after she realizes she trashed your room, she'll probably be as sweet as she can possibly be to you."

"I hope you're right," he sighed. "At least she may be afterwards. I intend to yell at her a little for being so ridiculous."

"She doesn't consider it ridiculous at all, Tarrin," she said soberly. "Jesmind loves you, and she's not quite sure what to do about you. She sees Auli as a very powerful threat. Do you know why?"

"Not really."

"Because she's afraid Auli is going to make you want to stay human," she answered. "That's why she reacted like this. She doesn't want you to have anything to do with her, because she can't compete with Auli directly."

"What do you mean?"

"She can't be what she sees Auli trying to be," Jenna explained. "She sees Auli kiss you, and she knows she can't do the same. She hears you slept with her, and she knows she can't do the same. She thinks Auli is stealing you from her, and there's nothing she can do about it. The only thing she can really do is make you stay away from her, or her from you, but she's found out that that's only managed to alienate you. So, she's trapped in a bad situation."

Tarrin knew something about that, but hadn't had it explained to him quite in that context. Jenna made him see through her eyes, and he realized that Jenna was right. Jesmind couldn't be a girlfriend to him, and that's what she thought Auli was trying to be. Him and her had been on bad footing ever since he came back to the Tower, because she refused to treat him like an adult. And now this was added to that bad blood. He was still angry with her for treating him like a baby and not trusting him, but at least he could understand her anger.

"Why can't she just trust me?" he lamented.

"Because she doesn't know what you're going to do," she said. "If you told her you wanted to be a Were-cat again, you'd see all her contrariness

disappear. But she doesn't know if you're going to do that. Nobody does. So she has to fight for you, and this is the only way she knows how."

"I didn't consider that."

"I rather think you didn't. There's a lot at stake here for Jesmind, Tarrin. And Kimmie, for that matter. I know you've heard them tell you that they love you, but I don't think you've believed it. Well, does this convince you?"

He was a bit startled, and her words made him think. She was right. Hearing people tell him that didn't really make an impact for him, but to see it like this, now he understood. If she did love him that much, then she would go to such extremes. After all, she was fighting for her love, and he could see that his choice was a *very* important thing to her. If he chose to stay human, then there was no way he could be to her what she wanted of him, what she *needed* of him. She would be pushed out of his life in the role she desired, and she would lose him as everything but a friend. And she didn't want to be just his friend. She wanted to be as close to a wife as Were-cats got, what they called *mates*.

"It's hard to know the feelings of another, and when Were-cats are concerned, it's *very* hard," she said with a slight smile. "They're very hard creatures to know, but they're very easy to understand once you get to know them."

"What do you suggest I do?" he asked.

"I'm not going to suggest anything, Tarrin," she told him. "Mainly because it won't do any good for several days. Jesmind is furious, and she's going to be acting out on her every emotion for a while yet. So you'd better be careful around her. She may be nice to you, but she'll be a powder keg with a lit fuse. It's not a matter of if she goes off, but when."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"And I know that you're still a bit angry with her. Just do me a favor and before you start shouting, look at things from her side."

"I guess I can try. Jenna, can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"What do *you* want me to do?"

She knew exactly what he meant, and it made her take on a very grim expression. "I wish you wouldn't have asked me that," she sighed. "I have two positions, brother. As your sister, I would very much like to see you stay human. You *are* my brother, and I saw how hard it was on you to be a Were-cat, and how much it changed you. I could accept what you were, but it always pained me to see how much different you were from the brother I remembered. But as the Keeper, I would prefer to see you be a Were-cat again. You'll be a great deal more effective in protecting what you're carrying if you're Were. Just thinking that kills me sometimes, but unfortunately I can't look at this from a purely personal viewpoint."

He understood completely, because he'd been thinking the same kinds of things lately. That he may have to make his choice based on what was needed of him, not what he wanted to do. "It just never seems to be easy anymore, does it?" he asked.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever left Aldreth," she said with a wan smile.

"Me too."

"Well, I'll send you someone to help you put your room back together, Tarrin," she promised. "They can fix everything that Jesmind broke, so don't worry. After that, I suggest you hang around your room a while. Triana's going to be looking for you, and I suggest you be where she can find you quickly."

"That's a good idea."

They both got up, and Jenna came around her desk and gave him a very tight hug. Then she kissed him on the cheek and smiled up at him. "Alright, if you need me, just send word. I'll be here whenever you need me, alright?"

"I appreciate that, Jenna. I guess it's good to have a relative in the big chair," he said with a smile.

She giggled. "I guess it is. When you're sitting in one, I'm going to be there with my hand out."

"Like that's going to happen," he scoffed.

It was an absolute disaster.

Tarrin shuffled through the remains of his room, stopping every few seconds to try to identify something laying on the floor. He'd never seen such a mess. Not satisfied by destroying the furniture, she must have turned around and started destroying the pieces as well, systematically breaking everything into smaller and smaller pieces, until there was nothing left larger than a child's head. The debris was nearly ankle deep on the floor of the room, a jumbled mess of torn wood, ripped cloth, and broken metal. She had destroyed the furniture, torn up the tapestries, ripped up every stitch of clothing, broken every decoration, and destroyed all his personal effects. There was absolutely nothing left that he could find as he picked through the debris, nothing even remotely identifiable. He knelt and frowned when he found the hilt of his dagger, the dagger he'd won the staves competition in Aldreth just before he left with Dolanna. The blade was snapped off at the hilt, and the hilt itself, fashioned to look like a falcon, was twisted and bent, as if crushed in Jesmind's hand. He was a little dismayed to see that; Jesmind had to be a lot stronger than he thought in order to bend the steel like this.

Continuing to rummage through the wreckage, he could find nothing else even remotely resembling anything that had once been in the room. There were bits and pieces of fabric that he could only identify because of its color, the blue bedspread and curtains, the white sheets, the leather bits that had once been his favorite leather breeches. He found some fragments of the wash basin and pitcher, for they were the only pieces of porcelain in the room, and he did find enough of a piece of one of the legs of the washstand to identify it. Aside from that, nothing was recognizable. The Sorcerers that arrived on Jenna's behest took one look inside the room and shook their heads, and tersely informed him that everything was simply too far gone even for magic to restore them.

Nearly a half an hour of searching rewarded him, however, for he finally found something that wasn't broken. It was a tiny wooden doll, painted to look like it was dressed, but most of the paint was faded or worn away. It had scratch marks in it, and a string had been tied around its neck, which was now frayed. He didn't remember the old thing, but touching it conjured up an image of a darling little girl with big eyes and long, lustrous hair. The memory of the little girl caused a sense of peace and contentment

in him that was almost scary. He realized that the little girl had to be Janette, the girl who had taken care of him when he'd fled from the Tower. She certainly was cute. He held the doll in his closed fist, understanding that this little trinket had to have tremendous meaning to him for him to keep it all this time. Maybe it was reminder of the time with her, or just a keepsake of her. If that flash of memory was any indication of his feelings for Janette, then he must have loved that little girl as deeply as he loved his own daughter.

It was, literally, the only thing he had left. He didn't have much, but all of it was now gone. All he had was what he was wearing, the things stored in the *elsewhere* like his staff and sword, the Firestaff, and this little doll. Everything else had been destroyed in the wake of Jesmind's wrath. All his clothes, all the little keepsakes and knick-knacks he'd gathered up on his travels, it was all destroyed.

Despite not remembering gathering any of it up, looking around the room offended Tarrin in the most intimate manner. Jesmind had tried to control his life, and now she had destroyed everything that could have reminded him of who he had once been, everything that he had called his own. All of it gone, much of it before he had a chance to find out what it was and what it had meant to him. It was like she was smothering him, depriving him of what happiness he could try to find in his current condition in some kind of attempt to force him to do what she wanted. He had spent a night with Auli, and Jesmind punished him for it by destroying everything he owned. The only happiness she seemed willing to afford him was spending time with his daughter. Everything else was not acceptable in her eyes. The only friends he could have were the ones she approved of. The only life he could have was the life she wanted him to live. He was just about sick of it.

Gently putting the little doll in his pocket, he looked over the room one more time and shook his head. This just couldn't go on anymore. He had to put a stop to it. If he didn't, Jesmind was going to completely take over his life, and it would be like he was a toddler again, tied to her apron strings and forced to do nothing but follow her. It didn't matter how much she loved him or what he meant to the other Were-cats. They had to understand that it was *his life*, and that meant that it was him who would decide its course.

Jenna was right. This was going to put a rift between him and his daughter, because he didn't think he could stand sitting in the same room with Jesmind right now.

"Tarrin?"

It was Triana. He turned and looked at her, and saw that she wasn't alone. A rather short Were-cat female with very short black hair, black fur, and wearing torn old leather trousers and a half-vest of sorts stood just beside and behind her. She was a handsome woman, not pretty in a feminine way but still attractive, and she looked into the room with a mixed expression. Her face was grim, but her eyes looked at him with a strange light, as if she were very happy to see him, but surprised at how she had discovered him.

"They said she had a fit. I see they weren't exaggerating," she grunted.

"Did you catch her?" he asked in a grim tone.

"Mist did."

"She put up quite a fight," the smaller Were-cat said in an amused tone.

"Then keep her away from me," he said. "I don't want to see her, I don't want to talk to her. I don't even want to think about her."

"It's not that bad, cub," Triana said in a worried voice. "We can fix all this."

"That's not the point!" he shouted, turning on her. For a moment, he realized he was shouting at Triana, but he knew that he couldn't back down now. "I'm tired of all of you trying to run my life! I didn't *want* what happened with Auli, but Jesmind decided that destroying *everything* I own was a good way to get back at me for it! Look, Triana! All I have now are the clothes on my back! She had no right to do this!"

"She wasn't in control of herself, cub," Triana said defensively. "She was in a rage. If she had, she wouldn't have done this."

"That's no excuse!" he shouted. "She got like that because she doesn't want me to live any kind of life like this! Well, I'm sick of it! I'm not going to sit in a closet and just do nothing waiting for Phandebrass to finish his magic! And that's exactly what she wants me to do! She doesn't want me

doing *anything* I might like! She wants me to be miserable and bored because she thinks it'll make me want to be a Were-cat again! Well you tell her that this little stunt doesn't do anything but make me want to stay *human*! If this is the real Jesmind, then I don't want any part of her!"

Triana actually seemed taken aback. She looked down at him with eyes that seemed to be storming with emotion, even though her expression never changed. He knew that she was offended and upset by his declaration, but in the face of what she was seeing, she could not deny him the right to be furious. Jesmind had destroyed everything he owned, and there was little she could say to even make that seem close to being justified.

"Cub, I--"

"I don't want to hear anymore!" he shouted, actually cutting her off. He almost bit his lip when he realized he did that, but he couldn't show any throat now. They said that Were-cats respected strength, and he couldn't back down now that he'd set himself to challenge her. It would only make him look weak. "Just leave me alone, mother! I'm in no mood to talk to *any* of you!"

To his eternal shock and surprise, Triana simply nodded and stepped back from the doorway. She was going to leave! She was actually going to do it! He watched her go with narrow eyes, afraid of what he had just done but not stupid enough to show it. Angering Triana for any reason was a very dangerous proposition. The other one, the short one, she looked at him for a moment, her eyes calculating, and then followed Triana without speaking a word to him.

For a minute, he felt rather foolish, and then a little scared, but he knew that he had to do it. If he didn't put his foot down now, they were going to keep butting into his life more and more and more, until he was completely under their control. He really didn't want to do it like that, but he knew that there was no way he was going to be able to reason with them. They had their plans for him, and nothing, not even his own choice, was going to stop them from bringing it about.

If anything, this was an eye-opening experience. Now he really understood what they were talking about when it came to Were-cats and rages. Jesmind wouldn't have done this if she was rational. She'd know that

it would only make him angry. Yet she had done it anyway, because she just couldn't help herself. Now she had to suffer the consequences of her inability to contain her anger, because he *was* mad at her.

He stood there for a long moment, surveying the destruction of his room and pondering on what had happened and the things he'd said to Triana. They wouldn't be put off by him, no matter how mad he was, but he had a feeling that him telling Triana that her actions made him want to stay human was a bad thing to say. If he gave them any hint that he didn't intend to be a Were-cat again, they just might do something drastic. He'd have to be very careful around them now.

There was little reason to stay there. Tarrin turned and walked out of what was left of his room, not quite sure what to do now.

It turned out that he had plenty to do after he left the room. Not long afterwards, Jenna tracked him down, and she had a virtual army of servants, Sorcerers, and laborers with her. They went back down to his room, and then he stepped back and watched in surprise as Jenna personally oversaw the cleaning out of the room by the Sorcerers, then the refurnishing of it by the servants. It took those four Sorcerers about five minutes to clean the room, gathering up all the debris and forming it into a big ball of twisted, jagged refuse, then picking it up off the floor with magic and floating it out the door. Then the laborers and servants filed in in a continuous line, bringing in the pieces for a new bed, a pair of bureaus, a writing desk, nightstands, a washstand, a new, larger chest, and two glaziers got to work replacing the shattered window. Carpenters started hanging a new door, and by the time they were done, the laborers had finished assembling the sections of the new bed, an even larger one that took up a sizable amount of floor space.

He was surprised at how fast they finished. All the furniture was in, a new door hung, new glass in the window, and the bed set up complete with linens in about an hour. After that, Jenna only smiled at him and led him out of the room, not telling him where they were going. He followed along behind her, until they went outside and he realized that the carriage sitting just out of the main entrance hall was waiting for *him*. Jenna only smiled at him and ushered him into the carriage, then she climbed in behind him.

Behind her came two fully armored Knights, one of them very aged, and the other a tall willowy man with dark hair and a broken nose, and a scar on his chin from some past battle. He looked very intimidating.

It took him a moment to realize that the aged one, with silver hair, was none other than the Lord General of the Knights, Darvon. He almost banged his head on the roof of the carriage trying to stand and bow to the man, which made the wrinkled man's face crack into a smile.

"No need for that, lad," he said in a gruff, no-nonsense kind of voice, the voice of a man used to giving orders. "When the order came down for a Knight to escort you, I decided I wouldn't trust your safety to anyone but me. I'll be your Knight this day, if that's alright with you."

Tarrin was startled. "I'm not worth that, Lord General!" he said in a scandalized tone.

"I say you are. Prove me wrong."

Tarrin was a bit taken aback by that comment, then he laughed ruefully. "I can't do that."

"Then you have nothing to complain about," he said with a sudden smile. "This ugly one here is Ulger. You and him were friends before you lost your memory. He was the other half of the Trouble Twins."

"Trouble Twins?" Tarrin asked.

"The two Knights that caused the most trouble. Faalken was the other, may Karas watch over him," he said sadly.

"I'm sorry about that," Tarrin said.

"No need," Ulger shrugged. "He lives on in us. As long as you don't forget him, he's never really gone."

He didn't expect such philosophical words from a Knight, and he had nothing to say to that, so he fell silent.

Their trip out into Suld was very exciting to Tarrin. He had never seen it before--at least not that he could remember--and it was amazing to see the legendary mixed architecture of the city, from squat stone buildings to wattle rowhouses to elegant towers, a wide array of different buildings and techniques. All were altered from what had to be other cultural styles to

take the city's weather into account, for it snowed quite heavily in the winter, but aside from that the buildings were very faithful to their original models. Suld was known as a melting pot, a city where anyone was welcome, and the city's skyline seemed to reinforce that reputation. He looked out the window in awe as they passed huge mansions, then great warehouses, then seemingly endless lines of rowhouses and buildings built right up against each other, making the streets seem like shallow canyons hewed from the ground. They went quite a ways into the city, until the carriage stopped at the edge of a very large open area, a square, which was filled with tents, wooden stalls, merchants, and the people there to buy their wares. It was one of the four market squares of the city, and Tarrin knew that at its center would be one of the fabled twelve fountains for which Suld was famous. There was a fountain in each of the four market squares. The carriage pulled up on the street just at the edge of the cobblestone square, and the handservants attending the carriage opened the door and set a stepping stair at the carriage so they wouldn't have to step down so severely. Darvon was first to get out, then Ulger, and they stayed in front of the carriage as Jenna and Tarrin got out behind them.

Jenna, being the Keeper, caused quite a row in the city, as the two Knights shouldered everyone out of their path. Everyone seemed to know who Jenna was, and there was a crowd following her around in a matter of moments. She took it all rather well, smiling and shaking the hands of very excited men and women, even touching beaming children on the face as she passed. Jenna was quite famous, he realized, and all the people absolutely adored her. Merchants offered her gifts of their wares as they passed the stalls in the open market, women and men tried to hand her little trinkets and gifts, and several women asked Jenna to bless their children like she was some kind of priestess. Tarrin didn't quite know what to make of it, seeing all the people of Suld lining up, crowding around them, trying to get close enough to touch Jenna. What had made the people of Suld so warm towards her?

They hadn't come out just to meet the public, however. Jenna had them moving in a specific direction, across the crowded market square, towards what he realized was a tailor's shop on the far side. Ulger and Darvon were muscling them in that general direction, trying to get the throngs of people to back up enough to give the Keeper room to pass, relying on their

armored weight to push out a path for those behind. "Next time we bring a phalanx!" Darvon growled.

"I forgot it was market day, Darvon, I'm sorry!" Jenna called back, pausing to shake a very old man's hand and accept a bouquet of roses from a gushing young girl who looked up at Jenna with total adoration.

They finally reached the tailor's shop, and Darvon pushed Tarrin inside as Ulger gave Jenna enough room to slip in behind him. Then the big Knight planted himself in front of the door and refused to let anyone in behind them, as the crowd of citizens gathered around the door and the windows, looking into the shop. The interior was a very small room with a counter on the far side, with a curtain behind it leading into the back. There were no wares or displays in the small receiving room, meaning that the tailor was either very good, very poor, or very bad. Given that Jenna had come all this way to come to this one particular shop when there had to be closer ones, Tarrin figured that he had to be one of the best in Suld.

"Why are they following us around?" Tarrin asked. "It's like they think Jenna is some kind of hero."

"She is," Darvon told him as Jenna straightened her dress, still holding onto the roses. "You don't remember it, but Jenna was one of the most prominent figures in the battle here. Everyone saw her, this little slip of a girl out there right in the middle of an army of undead and Goblinoids, and I guess it just stuck with them. Everyone in Suld thinks Jenna is a gift from the Gods. It's why I agreed to come out only with two Knights; nobody in this city would even dream of laying an ill hand on her. The people in the city would track anyone who did down and tear them apart."

"I doubt that it would come to that, Lord General," Jenna smiled. "I just seem to be the one they think did all the work, that's all. They have no idea that you're the one they should really be thanking, brother. Cass!" Jenna shouted.

"I'm here, Keeper!" a male voice called from behind the curtain. "I'll be out directly, if you'll pardon my audacity!"

"Take your time, Cass," she called with a smile. "We're not going anywhere anytime soon."

Tarrin absorbed that. It was a little hard to believe, but the reaction of the people to Jenna told him that it was true. He knew that Jenna had been in the battle at Suld, but he had no idea that the people had seen her and turned her into a folk hero. It was almost a little funny, actually. Jenna had never been one to like too much attention. She was a very sedate, quiet, domestic girl who, back when he could remember, really didn't think of anything more than finding a good man to marry and settling down. It was all she had ever really wanted in life, and now, here she was, the ruler of the *katzh-dashi* and one of the most famous and powerful people in Suld. Maybe even all of Sulasia.

Strange, how fate never seems to cooperate with plans.

The tailor Cass came out, and Tarrin was a bit startled. It wasn't a human being. Cass was a Wikuni, a silver fox Wikuni. He vaguely reminded him of Keritanima in his face and tail, but where Keritanima's fur was red, brown, white, and black, Cass' fur was silver, white, bluish, and a white-beige the color of bone. His muzzle was a bit sharper than Keritanima's, and he was taller and a bit more stocky than she, but that had to be because he was a boy. He had the strangest hair, for it was a definite shade of blue, cropped close and with silver ears with white and bluish tips jutting out from it. He wore a very elegant linen shirt under a blue doublet that was very well made, gored with red satin on the sleeves and with a strange crest of some sort on the left breast. His trousers were made of some kind of very sturdy yet soft-looking fabric Tarrin had never seen before, cut in a strangely baggy style that gave him lots of room. He wore leathers shoes on his feet, which was unusual for Wikuni, he had noticed. Of all the ones he'd seen around the Tower and such, only Keritanima and Miranda seemed to wear shoes. Both of them had very small, dainty feet, though, so it was probably no effort to put them in shoes. He bowed with fluid elegance to the Keeper, his tail flourishing behind him in a rolling manner. "It's good to see you again, Keeper," he said, looking down at her. "What can I do for you today?"

"This is my brother, Tarrin," she introduced. "He had an accident today, and lost all his clothes. So he needs a full set."

"I see. It is good to meet you, Tarrin," he said, looking Tarrin up and down in a critical manner. "I am Cassiter, tailor and leatherworker, but you

may call me Cass. You are definitely the Keeper's blood. I can see it in you. What did you have in mind, Eminence?"

"Nothing fancy," she replied. "Functional clothes. Rugged would be good. Tarrin is rather hard on clothing."

"I have nothing right now that will fit him, Keeper," he said confidently. "I can have something ready tomorrow, and the rest done by the end of the tenday."

"Good. Tarrin, tell him what you want."

"Uh, nothing fancy, your honor," he said. "I don't like frilly things. Just plain old shirts and trousers will be fine."

"Plain can be challenging sometimes," he said, clicking his teeth in an eerie manner. "I can make them in the same style as the clothes you're wearing. It this alright with you?"

"Uh, fine."

"Very good. Is cost an issue here, Keeper?"

"Not really," she said. "But I don't think we need anything made of dragonhide."

"Not quite that exotic, but I do have access to some Selani fiber cloth. It's rather expensive, but it makes very rugged clothing."

"That sounds fine to me," Jenna smiled. "I think five sets would be good. And could you make a couple of cloaks?"

"I'd be delighted to do so, Keeper," he said with a nod.

"Then we're done?"

"I would say so, Keeper," he nodded.

"Don't you need to measure him?" Ulger asked.

"I've already done so, good Knight," Cassiter said mildly. "When he came in. I can guarantee his clothes will fit perfectly."

"Well, I'm not paying for them, so I guess I don't have much say," he said with a grin. "Then again, it doesn't sound like you've reached a price."

"It's very simple, good Knight. I charge twenty percent more than it costs for me to buy the materials. Flat rate, whether it takes me an hour or a tenday to finish the order. I find haggling to be very tiring and a waste of time."

"How do we know what that was?"

"For those who don't do regular business with me, they receive a bill," he said calmly. "My regulars know they won't be cheated."

"Cass is the best tailor in Suld, Ulger," Jenna said, a bit accusingly. "He's never cheated me on a contract. He made almost all the clothes I own."

"Well, that's alright then," Ulger grinned. "Though the idea of an honest Wikuni seems a bit far-fetched."

"Not all of us are money-grubbing cheats, sir Knight," Cassiter said calmly.

"I think we'd better go, before Ulger here says something we'll regret," Darvon grunted.

"I'm not offended, Lord General," Cassiter said mildly. "Most Wikuni merchants *are* money-grubbing cheats. I don't make excuses for my people."

"Well, you're better than most of them," Darvon said with a slight smile. "And I'm surprised you know who I am."

"I have eyes, my Lord General. Your breastplate denotes your rank."

"Not many know that," he said in an impressed manner.

"It's not hard to find out," he shrugged. "If one is willing to take the time to learn, anyway. I'll have the clothes sent to the Tower, Keeper. Shall I drop them off at the gate?"

"I'll make arrangements. Send me the bill when you're done."

He nodded. "Then if you'll pardon me, I have a customer waiting for me on the fitting stand. Holding her arms up with about fifty pins threatening to jab her in many different places. I should really get back to her."

"We'll see ourselves out, Cass. Thank you."

"Any time, Keeper," he said with a nod.

They plunged back out into the crowd, and it was slow going once again. Tarrin didn't feel very comfortable with all those people surrounding him, shouting and calling to Jenna, but his sister wasn't trying to extend the situation. She had the Knights get them back to the carriage, and once inside, the footmen tending it got the carriage out of the crowded square.

Tarrin thought they were going back to the Tower, but he found out that he was mistaken. They moved deeper into Suld, to the edge of the wall near the harbor on the south side, and once again they got out. This time there were no throngs of adoring citizens, for they were in what looked to be an area of craftsmen rather than merchants. The carriage stopped before a silversmith's shop, from the looks of it, with all the silver plates and goblets hanging and standing behind a window protected by a very heavy set of iron bars to prevent a thief from simply breaking the window and making off with the display pieces. Jenna told the two Knights to wait in the carriage, then got out and beckoned him to follow her. She entered the shop, and Tarrin was a little curious as to why the Knights were told to wait in the carriage. What was more, he was curious why they obeyed her. They weren't supposed to let Sorcerers go off on their own...but then again, Darvon had said that Jenna was completely safe in Suld. Maybe they were only going to be a moment, and the Knights had a hard enough time climbing in and out of the carriage in their heavy armor. It was a very large shop, from the look of it, with many different pieces of both silver and gold sitting on shelves behind a long counter that separated the long, rather narrow display room. Two armed men wearing chain jacks stood near the door, guards to protect the merchandise, and both nodded to Jenna as she led Tarrin inside. "Is he in?" she asked immediately.

"Aye, my Lady," one of the men replied. The man reached beside him and pulled a rope hanging from the ceiling, and Tarrin realized it was a bellpull when the bell rang behind the door behind the counter. Tarrin spent the time looking at the display pieces, goblets and plates, statues of people and things, even a very impressively detailed one of what he thought was an Aeradalla, with her wings outstretched. He thought it was one, since the statue matched the descriptions he'd heard of them. All of the work was very detailed, very exacting. Tarrin realized they were in the shop of a master silver and goldsmith.

That master came through the door, and Tarrin wasn't entirely surprised. The man was a Dal, a short, stocky, heavy-set fellow with a bald pate and enormous hands. He was wearing a burned, scarred leather apron over a doublet and heavy leather trousers, to protect him from the sparks and bits of hot metal. Dals were very good at metalsmithing, and some of the best smiths and metalworkers in the world were Dal. He figured it was in their blood or something.

"I've been waiting for ye, yer Ladyship," he said with a rough voice, damaged from years of breathing in the smoke from his forge.

"It's ready, then?" she asked immediately.

"Aye. I'll fetch it for ye."

"What's ready?" Tarrin asked, looking at the two very large guards, noticing that their armor was very, very well made. Light yet strong, and kept in immaculate condition.

"Oh, just a little present I wanted to give you later," she replied with a smile. "But since you lost everything, I guess it'll be a good way to start rebuilding."

"What is it?"

"They, and you'll see," she said with a smile.

The man scurried off into his forge for only a moment, then returned with a fairly large towel or cloth or something. Tarrin realized that whatever it was that Jenna had gotten was wrapped in the cloth. The cloth bundle was about four spans long or so and very thick, and just about anything could be inside it. The Dal set it on the counter and stepped back, obviously waiting for Jenna to inspect the merchandise.

"Well? Go ahead, Tarrin," Jenna smiled. "After all, they belong to you."

A little curious, Tarrin approached the bundle, seeing that it was folded in such a way that would allow him to reveal what was inside without having to pick it up. He grabbed the cloth and peeled it back, then peeled back the inner fold, and looked down at what was inside in both surprise and amazement.

There were three things within the bundle. The first was a sword, an absolutely magnificent slightly curved sword whose pommel and hilt were worked to resemble a dragon. Tarrin looked very closely at that hilt, and he realized that Sapphire had been the model for the hilt. He recognized the general shape of the head, which served as the pommel. Tarrin picked up the sword and unsheathed it, and saw that it was sharpened only along one edge. The blade was very thin and almost unnaturally light, and drawing the entire weapon revealed that it had a chisel-style tip instead of a point. This was no thrusting sword, it was designed to slash. And the edge looked sharp enough to be able to slice through armor.

"It was based on the sword you used as a Were-cat," Jenna explained with bright eyes. "Just a little smaller, so you can use it as you are."

Tarrin resheathed it, and looked at the other two objects. They looked like wristguards or bracers, but were long enough to be forearm greaves for armor. They were elaborately decorated with several different etched designs. He saw Sapphire again in those designs, as well as Allia's Selani silhouette, and an Aeradalla, and Keritanima's silhouette as well--the tail gave her away--and swirling roses and vines. And on the top of each of them was an etched form of the amulet he wore around his neck, the *shaeram*. Tarrin reached down and picked one up, and its touch made his fingers tingle strangely. The metal was blackish in color and almost ridiculously light, but somehow he could tell that its strength was without equal. Just the touch on them told him that. And there was something more...an *energy* that seemed to infuse them, something that made his fingers tingle and feel hot.

"Go ahead," she urged. "Put them on."

Tarrin turned the one he was holding and put his hand through it, and he jumped in fright when the thing shrunk down to fit his arm! He grabbed at it to rip it off, but Jenna put her hand over his and laughed. "I'm sorry, I forgot," she told him. "It was supposed to do that."

"It changed its size!" he exclaimed. "It's magic!"

"It *is* magic," she said seriously. "Now put the other one on."

A little disturbed by that surprise, Tarrin warily picked up the other one, and then reluctantly slid his hand through it. When it was in place, it too

shrunk down. And when it did, Tarrin felt the strangest tingle roll through his body.

"Good, they work," she said with a mysterious smile. "Very good work, Ardon," she nodded to the smith.

"All was done to yer specifications, yer Ladyship," he said in his rough voice.

"I see your reputation is well deserved." She reached into a pocket in her skirt, and handed the smith a small piece of paper that was within it. "There you are, Ardon. Thank you very much."

"Any time, yer Ladyship," he said with a wave of his hand. "I should be thanking ye to trust me to handle such a job."

"I needed the best, goodman. Skill knows no political boundaries."

"All in all, I still thank ye. When word got around that the Tower had consigned me for a job, the customers that left because I'm Dal came back. Ye saved me business, yer Ladyship. I can't thank ye enough for that."

"Then I'm happy I could help out," she said with a smile. "Good day to you."

"If ye need me hammer, it's yers, yer Ladyship. Half price."

"I'll remember that," she said with a light laugh.

Tarrin was a little disoriented when they left the shop and got back into the carriage, where the two Knights were still waiting. What did the two metal bracers do? Why did he feel that strange tingle when he put them on? They were magical, he knew that, but what kind of magic did they possess, and why did the smith have to work on them?

"I know, you're full of questions," Jenna smiled as they climbed back in and sat down. Tarrin had his new sword on his lap, and that too was a little strange. Jenna knew that he didn't like swords very much. Why had she had one made for him? His staff was stored safely in the *elsewhere*, and even though he wasn't entirely sure how he was supposed to get it out, he was sure he could do it if he really needed to do it. After all, Dolanna taught him how put things in there, he was sure that it worked more or less the same for getting things out. "Did you feel something when you put on the bracers?"

"Yes, it was like a cold tingle," he answered.

"Then it worked," she sighed. "I was afraid that they might not."

"What are they? What was that tingle?"

"They're magical devices, brother. As you are now, you're rather vulnerable when compared to the kinds of people or things that may try to attack you for what you're carrying. Mother showed me how to make those bracers. They're going to help protect you."

"But what do they do?"

"They do two things, Tarrin. The first is a defensive magic that surrounds you, like a phantom suit of armor. That's what that tingle was you felt. Your skin is as strong as steel, and if someone hit you in the head with a rock, you'd barely feel it. Given who you are and the fact that I doubt we could get you into a suit of armor, we figured that giving you the same protection without making it apparent would be a good idea."

Tarrin was intrigued and amazed by that statement. The bracers were like a suit of magic armor? He didn't feel any different, and didn't feel heavy or anything. Curious, he unsheathed his sword enough to expose the edge, and was about to see if it could cut him, but Jenna laid a hand over his to stay him. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she cautioned. "The sword will make you think that the bracers are phony."

"What do you mean?"

"The sword was enchanted as well. It can cut through virtually anything, and the blade is made of Adamantite, which means that I don't think there's anything you could do to it to break it. That sword will go right through the magical defense of the bracers, so testing the bracers with it is not a good idea," she winked.

Tarrin looked at the sword in awe. It could cut through anything? Well, she said almost anything. It didn't seem that sharp, and it didn't really feel magical, not like the bracers did.

Or did it?

Tarrin held the hilt firmly in his hand and tried to feel the sword. He closed his eyes and tried to really feel it, to feel past what his fingers

sensed, to reach beyond to where those ghostly images of strings were, always just on the edge of his vision but never intruding to the point where they interfered. He ignored that most of the time, but now he wanted to look into it, he wanted to feel what was on that other side.

It was there. He could feel it now. It was an exceptionally powerful enchantment, but it had been actively concealed so as not to give away the true nature of the weapon. It was almost like an army hiding in the fog, a tremendous force hiding behind a veil of ambiguity. The weaving was crisp, exacting, detailed, and it was absolutely flawless. It had Jenna's hands all over it. He recognized the style of that weaving almost immediately. It was the same style of concealing weave that been in the amulets back on Sha'Kari, but had been modified to conceal the active weave hidden within the sword.

For the briefest fleeting of moments, close to the Weave, Tarrin almost felt like another person. He could feel something close to him, and he could feel the power of the Weave all around him, very strong, almost alluring in its enticing closeness. An entire lifetime of forgotten memories seemed tantalizingly close to him in that fleeting sensation, but they were like a cloud. Sharp and detailed from a distance, but hazy and indistinct the closer one got to them.

Tarrin nearly felt like his eyes were going to pop as a shockwave of pain roared through his mind. He had *remembered*! It was just a flash, but it was the most detailed flash of memory he had yet to experience! He absolutely *knew* that Jenna had made the magic in the sword and the bracers, and for that one fleeting moment, he could feel the closeness of the Weave, could sense its power, almost beckoning to him. Tarrin flopped back in his seat and put a hand to his forehead, but he had a big smile. "Jenna, I remembered!" he said excitedly. "I wanted to see if there really was a magic spell in the sword, and for a short moment, remembered something!"

"What did you remember?" she asked quickly.

"I recognized the style of weaving used on the sword, and I remembered that the concealing weave in the sword was based on the ones in the amulets back in Sha'Kari. I have no idea what half of that means, but I remembered it!"

"You did? That's wonderful!" Jenna said happily, clapping her hands and then hugging him. "Kimmie said that you'd possibly have more detailed flashes of insight over time. I see she wasn't wrong!"

"I hope it happens again, but next time without the headache," he said, rubbing his temple delicately.

Jenna laughed. "She said the headaches would be part of the remembering," she warned him. "But it's good to see that you are getting back some of it, even if it is in bits and pieces. I hope that means that Phandebrass' potion is going to work perfectly."

"Well, I hope so," he said. "You said that the bracers do two things. What's the other?"

She grinned. "You're like a child with a new toy," she teased.

"I just don't want to sneeze and blow something up by accident," he warned.

Jenna laughed richly. "Well, I guess I can see that," she winked. "I wouldn't want you going around knocking down walls. The repair bills would be ghastly." She chuckled with him, then put her hand on the bracer. "They don't blow things up, but their second function is a weapon," she told him seriously. "I made them so you'll never be unarmed. Mother told me to name them *the Cat's Claws*, and I think that tells you what they do."

Tarrin looked down at the two black metal bracers. "Claws come out of them?" he asked. "From where?"

"It's a bit more involved than that," she said. "Let me show you." Jenna reached down and put her hand over one of the bracers, and he felt something strange happen. She had done something to them, and he realized that she had triggered them with her magic.

Tarrin had had his hand out to look at the bracer, and he was amazed at what he saw. The metal of the bracer seemed to turn liquid, and it *flowed* over the back of his hand. It felt strangely warm as it did so, very quickly, like a black shadow racing down his hand, over his knuckles, and over his fingers. The metal encased the back of his hand and fingers and when it reached his fingertips, it kept going out, extending over his fingertips and forming very long, slightly curved and hooked metal claws. But where a

cat's claw was thick, these metal claws were as thin as dagger blades, sharp only on the inside curve, and ending in a very wicked looking point. They were extending a good span over his fingertips, and they had almost no apparent weight.

"And that," Jenna said with a smile, "is why they're called the Cat's Claws."

Tarrin stared at the weapon merged with his hand in awe. He had full flexibility in his hand, as the liquid-seeming metal moved with his hand. It didn't even pull at the hairs on his fingers. The metal was like a part of his skin, moving just as easily, and was not uncomfortable in the slightest. The metal only covered the back of his hand, leaving his palm clear. The four individual claws reaching out over his fingers seemed attached to the tips, moving with them. He turned his hand over and very slowly and carefully closed his hand, watching the claws fold over with his fingertips until the four inside edges were just barely touching the heel of his hand.

"Don't worry about these," she told him. "They won't ever cut you. If you close your fist, they'll simply bend around your skin. You can even make them release from your fingers and stick straight out from the top of your fist if that's what you want. These are Adamantite too, so I don't think anyone's going to manage to cut your hand off while the claws are active."

Tarrin looked down at it, amazed by it. What amazing things! And they were *his*! To own even one magical object was something the richest man could only dream of, but to own *three*! It was almost unreal! His amulet, the sword, and these amazing bracers! How much luck could one family have?

"Do you like them?" Jenna asked with a smile.

"Like them? Jenna, I don't know what to say!" he exclaimed. "They're incredible! How can I ever match gifts like these?"

"It's very simple, brother," she said soberly. "You can live. I made these specifically to help you. Don't forget what's out there. I think these will help you stay alive, and so I made them for you. I'll do whatever I can to help keep you alive, because you're my brother, and I love you."

It was said in a calm voice, but he could see the emotion behind her eyes. She meant every word of it, and for the first time, he saw how worried she was about him. He couldn't remember what had happened to him or

what he was doing, but that one statement rammed home the fact that it was very dangerous more effectively than anything else ever could have. He had seen the waiting as a chore, something of an obstacle, but he saw that to Jenna it meant precious time to arm her brother as best she could so when he did leave the safety of the Tower, he would be as safe as he could be. He remembered someone saying that the only reason they'd come back to the Tower was because it was the safest place to take him, but even its sanctuary wouldn't last. As the time of the staff's activation grew nearer, those desperate to gain its power would be willing to risk assaulting the Tower itself in order to somehow achieve the nearly impossible, to take the staff from him. He realized what kind of a terrible risk that Jenna had taken bringing him out of the Tower, and with only two Knights, but he could also see that as his sister, she had done what she thought would be most comfortable for him. He had been very upset by Jesmind destroying his room, and she had done this, taken this risk, because she had wanted to cheer him up and not terrify him with the realities of his situation. Bringing him out into the city with only two Knights let him feel normal, if only for a little while, and for the first time he understood that. It had felt nice to be able to walk out into a crowd, even if the crowd was trying to mob Jenna with kindness and good intentions.

She had told him that she was two people where he was concerned. She was the Keeper, responsible for the success of his mission, but she was also his sister, and she had known just what to do to cheer him up. He felt a tremendous wave of love, trust, and gratitude for his all grown-up little sister in that moment. He reached out and took her hand with the hand not armed with the almost living claws and let his eyes and expression tell her what he'd be too embarrassed to say in front of the two Knights. She gave him the softest look of gentle love and held his hand tightly, then a slow smile graced her pretty face. "Let me put those back for you. When we get home, I'll teach you how they work. I don't want you accidentally skewering Ulger in the carriage. It'll destroy the upholstery."

"Not to mention my good mood," he added with a smirk and a wink.

"As if your mood mattered," Darvon told him with a stern voice but a twinkle in his eye.

Despite the destruction of his room, the event had done much to open his eyes as to the nature of things, and he had to admit to himself that on the whole it had been a good thing.

The time with Jenna had shown him that he should take what was going on a lot more seriously than he had been. It was very easy to forget what he was doing when all he had were the stories from the others to tell him what was going on. They didn't have the same impact or weight as the memories of it would have, and so it was much easier for him to dismiss them in the safe confines of the Tower, where everyone watched out for him and he never really felt unsafe. He had left Jenna vowing to be more careful, to pay more attention to what was going on around him, and to try to get a better understanding of the risks and dangers involved with what he had left to do. He wasn't done yet, because the Firestaff was still a potential disaster waiting to happen. Only after Gods day would its threat end, and so it would be his duty to defend it until that day came and went. And as that day got closer, people were going to try to come into the Tower to get him. He understood that now better than ever before. The only safe thing he could do for everyone involved was to disappear with the Firestaff. If nobody knew where he was, nobody could find him, then they wouldn't know where to bring their armies and their magicians and their unnatural magical beasts to try to subdue him. They had put everyone he cared about under a watchful eye so nobody could be taken hostage to try to blackmail him into giving over the Firestaff, and if he was nowhere to be found, then doing something like that would be useless anyway. If nobody could find him, then how would they even deliver a ransom demand? It would be a useless exercise, and beside that point, everyone Tarrin knew and loved were themselves exceptionally formidable individuals. Tarrin very nearly laughed himself hoarse just at the thought of a band of brigands trying to take someone like Allia or Keritania or Jesmind or Jenna or one of his parents hostage. They'd get slaughtered trying. All his friends and family were every bit as dangerous as he was, and that made taking them literally more trouble than it was worth.

And now he had two new magical objects! Just the thought of that gave him a thrill. He owned a magic sword and the magic bracers! He just couldn't help putting his hands on the bracers sometimes, or touching his amulet, or looking at his new sword, knowing that they were magic.

Magical objects were things of exceeding rarity. The richest man could not buy one, and the most powerful king could not use all his power to get one. It was a matter of the wildest luck to even find one, and if one did find one, keeping it an absolute secret was the only way to avoid an armada of thieves lining up for a chance to steal it. The metal plate that father had found when he was younger was a good example of that. He hadn't told a soul he found it, just wrapped it up as best he could and endured the numbing magical cold it radiated as he literally deserted from the Rangers to hide it in the forest. He had to talk very fast when he came back, but managed to avoid getting in trouble. He then took leave, came back and got it in the dead of night, and hid it again in a place he was sure nobody would find it. He retrieved it when he married Tarrin's mother and settled down, and it had turned into a means for the Kael family to keep food stored. That his family owned a magical object was a matter of tremendous prestige, but it was the kind of prestige that was kept an absolute secret. Even in Aldreth, if people knew about that cold-radiating metal plate, there would have been thieves in the cellar trying to steal it. It made Tarrin both wildly proud and almost neurotically paranoid that he owned three. *Three!* But then again, only one was really in any danger of being stolen. Jenna had made him absolute swear never to take off the bracers, since they had been made to protect him.

Jenna's precious gifts had done wonders for his mood, so much so that he returned to his newly furnished room in high sprits, not very mindful of the large pile of boxes and paper-wrapped objects laying on the bed. His anger with Jesmind was forgotten in the thrill of his new possessions, as was just about everything else. He spent a goodly amount of time literally playing with them, making the claws come out and then go in and then come out and then go in, both practicing the trick of making it happen and just revelling in the fact that he owned them. It was a mental trick, something almost magic but not quite, kind of like pushing against them with his willpower. He had to *think* them to work, like moving a muscle he didn't know he had. But after he figured out where it was, he had become quite easy to make the claws come out, and a little experimentation showed him how to control them after they were out. He could make them stick to his fingers or separate from them and simply extend from the top of his fist. He realized that that would let him hold something in his hand with the claws out, for whatever reason. And Jenna was right, the claws would not

cut him. Even if he tried to make them cut him. They simply melted away from his skin the same way they flowed out of the bracer, refusing to do him harm.

He had asked her why she had taken them to the smith when she had created them, and she just smiled and told him that he was the one that did all the etching and artwork on them. She had needed someone of great skill to do the artwork, yet who was delicate and careful enough not to damage the weaving that gave the items their magical powers.

But he could only play with his new toys for so long before the novelty of them wore off, and besides, they reminded him that they were very serious objects specifically created for a very serious reason. It really wasn't proper to treat them like toys, when Jenna had put her heart and soul into making magical objects to help protect him. It demeaned their purpose to play with them like that. Of course, he thought that *after* he got tired of playing with them, but it was still a poignant reminder of the reality of things. He calmed down after that, settling down and taking stock of the large pile of boxes, bundles, and wrapped items that had been placed on his bed. He had literally ignored them at first, so caught up in the bracers as he'd been, and after he did finally notice them, he thought that they had to be garbage and unused furnishings still in boxes left behind by the people who had come in after they left to go into the city and hung up the four paintings, tapestry, and the satin curtains on the window. He had picked up the largest box intent on using it to put all the other things in so it would be easier to give to the servants, but when he opened it he found a note on the lid, and inside the box was a small mahogany chest that could fit in the palm of his hand, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and silver. He gave the little box a curious look, and then opened and read the note. It was written in Ungardt. That got his attention almost immediately.

I heard that you lost all your possessions. I'm sorry to hear about that, and I know it

must have made you rather upset. I found this shopping in the city the other day, and I

realized that it would help you refurnish your room, so I went back and bought it for you. I hope you

like it.

--Elsa Gaarnhold

P.S.-- I don't think you remember me. I am the Mistress of Novices, and you caused

me no end of trouble when you were under my care. But I won't hold it against you.

He didn't remember her, but he was moved that she had thought of him enough to buy him the little chest. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with it, but it was a gift, and Ungardt took both the giving and receiving of gifts very seriously. He'd find a use for it.

Everything else on the bed was also gifts, from everyone he knew and a whole lot of people he didn't. He had no idea who Sevren was, or Lula, and the only reason he recognized the names Jinna, Darrian, and Ahiriya was because they were Council members. There had to be others there from the other Council members, but he couldn't remember their names. There were gifts from Darvon and several Knights, as well as a small box holding a silver comb and brush from Ianelle, complete with a very contrite note asking him to forgive her daughter for all the trouble she'd caused him. Tiella had sent him a box of her mother's sweetbread all the way from Aldreth, and Walten had sent him a note telling him he could have his bow back along with a box holding a strange knife with a blade that actually folded back into the handle, a handle sheathed in ivory. Tarrin had never seen anything like that before, and he was quite impressed by it. It looked very easy to carry around, and he could even put it in his pocket and not worry about getting cut.

There were all sorts of things on the bed, from decorations to things that were downright useful. Tiella had sent him a pair of soft leather shoes to be worn around the room, Keritanima had sent him a stout robe made of a strange material that was thick yet soft, and not very heavy, and Azakar had

given him a swordbelt. It would be something that Azakar would send. Miranda sent him a rare and frightfully expensive self-contained fountain pen, one of those ones from Telluria that held the ink inside it. He was shocked that she would give him such an expensive gift, and he was almost afraid to take it out of the small wooden box in which it had been sent. He'd be afraid to use it, terrified that he'd break it somehow, but the sight of it stirred images and faint memories. He associated Miranda with that very pen in some way, and seeing it conjured an image of her sitting at a table with it in her hand, scribbling on a long piece of parchment, looking totally cute even in her serious work. Phandebrass had taken a break from his work with the potion to send Tarrin a little wooden songbird that would warble and sing off-key whenever he touched it. It startled him at first, but then he couldn't stop laughing every time he touched it. He wasn't sure if Phandebrass meant for it to sound like that, but the poor thing sounded like it was choking on a beetle, and it got funnier and funnier the more he listened to it, until he had to put it away or collapse his lungs from laughing so hard. Camara Tal and Koran Dar had sent him a strange little steel trinket that their note said was called a Hope Charm, a little thing that Camara Tal had been carrying around for years, but now she wanted Tarrin to have. It was a very tiny silver-colored disc, like a coin, and he recognized the relief on its only stamped face as the same as the image on Camara Tal's amulet that she wore at all times. It was the holy symbol of the goddess of the Amazons. Dar sent him a real, working clock, something that was very expensive, small enough to sit on his desk, but needing to be hung on the wall so the pendulum and weights on small chains that served in some way to make the clock work could hang freely. Dar said in the note that the weights would lower over time, and he had to pull on the loose side of the chains for the two weights to put them back at the top every day for the clock to keep running. Allia had given him a strange little piece of crystal shaped vaguely like a pair of oversized spectacles, and her note said that he'd kept one of these as a souvenir before, so she was giving him another to replace the one lost. He wasn't sure what it was, but he was certain that someone would explain it to him eventually. People he didn't know sent him little knick-knacks, decorations and little porcelain figurines and such, one of them a very impressive black metal cat or some kind of feline with a broad jaw, sitting on its haunches with two tiny emeralds for eyes. It was incredibly detailed, even with the hairs in the fur distinguishable, looking

like it was about to get up and walk at any moment. Tarrin put that one on his nightstand, by far his favorite of the decorations. Dolanna sent him a large book titled *A History of the Tower of Six Spires*, and he was grateful for it, for she knew that he wanted to know more about almost everything, being so frustrated with not remembering anything. Someone he didn't know sent him a book titled *Magical and Semi-Magical Plants of Northern Sennadar and Their Uses*. It seemed a little advanced for him, but a book was a book, and it would be certain to dispel boredom at some point, and maybe even teach him something. There were also any number of personal items, like a razor and small shaving bowl sent by someone named Sevren, and Jula had sent him a new backpack that looked remarkably like the one he'd had when he left Aldreth, complete with the inside pockets. Being a young man always ready and eager to pack up and explore some hidden corner of the forest around Aldreth, something like a backpack was both a welcome and useful gift.

The strangest gift by far had to be from Sapphire. She had sent him a little crystal bell, and the note with it told him that not only was it a decorative knick-knack, if he picked it up and rang it while speaking her name, she would hear it, know exactly where he was, and would be able to hear what he said for exactly thirty seconds after that. He knew that Sapphire was a Wizard as well as a Dragon, and he was quite impressed that she would waste magic on him. It wasn't the either misfiring or intentionally comical spell that Phandebrass had used, this seemed like *serious* magic. He had to thank her for it next time he saw her. He knew it was only proper to be very polite to Sapphire. She *was* a dragon, after all. It was always prudent to stay on the good side of someone who could literally step on you.

He was a little overwhelmed at getting all the gifts, but he flushed a little when he realized that what had happened between him and Jesmind had to be common knowledge, and that meant that what happened between him and Auli probably was too. That embarrassed him more than a little bit, but at least none of the notes made any mention of that. All they had all said was that they hoped that the gifts helped him feel more at home in his room since he'd lost all his other possessions.

So many things, and all of them for him. Some were *very* expensive, but they'd been given as an act of kindness, so it wasn't how much they cost that

made him treasure almost each and every one of them, it was the thought behind them. Even things that he didn't understand or really couldn't use, like Allia's strange crystal spectacle-like thing or Phandebrass' odd badly singing bird were dear to him, and he suddenly felt very attached to almost everything in the room. At least those things that were sent to him as gifts, anyway. He'd lost a room full of things he couldn't remember, but now had a room full of things that made him very grateful for the very people and things that he couldn't remember now. It was a forgotten life, but it had been a very rich one.

There was a knock at the door. Tarrin set the little panther or cat or whatever it was on the nightstand again after regarding it, looking into those two tiny emerald eyes, admiring it once more and called for whoever it was to come in. He was a little startled to see Auli come through that door, hands folded before her and looking quite reluctant. He looked past her and realized that she was alone. "May I come in?" she asked in a small voice.

"Sure," he said after a moment. Seeing Auli made him remember the night before, and part of him reminded the rest that he'd better forget about it. That couldn't happen again, no matter how good it had been.

"I see they fixed things," she said, looking around. "I'm, I'm sorry I made all this happen, Tarrin. I was being selfish and inconsiderate and stupid, and I had no idea you were trying to protect me. I'm really sorry."

Tarrin was surprised to hear her say it, but he was more surprised that she *meant* it. He realized that Jenna had struck the girl to the bone, making her see what she'd done in a way that her mother never could, and it had made her truly repentant.

"That's alright, Auli," he said after a long moment. "Sometimes the only way you learn is to put your hand in the fire."

She laughed ruefully, and then finally looked up at him. Her chagrin was all over her face, and her eyes had a strange desperate quality to them he'd never seen before. "I feel likes such an ass," she continued. "I didn't even stop to think what would happen to you."

"It's alright, Auli. In a way, I'm sorta glad it happened. It's giving me a chance to show Jesmind just how much I hate how possessive and jealous

she is. I'm hoping that after this she'll back off and give me room to breathe and live my own life, without her trying to control me."

"I'm really relieved to hear that," she said sincerely. "I, I hope that you're not mad with me too," she said, looking away. "I know we were friends. I hope this didn't poison that."

Tarrin realized she was serious, and it made him look at things in a new way. Was his friendship with Auli poisoned now, even though they'd spent the night together? He looked in himself, and realized that it wasn't. He certainly looked at her differently now, but he didn't think badly of her. He understood that her actions were the actions of a spoiled, overindulged child. But now she seemed very much unlike that. He knew that every time he saw her he'd remember that night and want to experience it again, but he felt he could control that. He understood the kind of trap that was.

"I don't think it did," he answered honestly. "I have to admit that I've never done that with a friend before, but I don't think badly of you."

It was like someone took a horse off her shoulders. She raised up and gave him a look of glorious relief, and even rushed over and hugged him, then kissed him on the cheek. "Thank the Goddess!" she exclaimed. "I can't stay, Tarrin, but would you mind if we had breakfast tomorrow? I know we have to be careful about Jesmind, but I don't want to lose you as a friend."

"Sure," he said with a smile. "I'd really like that, Auli."

"Good. After we're all done with our work, you and me and Dar can have dinner and pal around a while. Is that alright?"

"It's fine with me," he said with sincere enthusiasm. "I'd really like that."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow, then," she said. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then stepped away from him. He couldn't help letting his eyes wander all over her as she walked away, remembering what all of it looked like when she didn't have clothes on, but he shook himself free of that. He'd see her without clothes on again, he was sure of that, but it wouldn't be like what it was on that night. He told himself silently that he'd better forget all about the fact that they'd slept together and accept her in the role she wanted. It wouldn't be easy, since that night was like a firebrand in his memory, hard to ignore and tending to spread into the rest of his mind

when his mind was wandering, but it had to be done. If he wanted to keep Auli as a friend, he'd better do it. He wasn't sure a single night of passion was worth losing Auli's friendship, and that was what was going to happen if they slept together again. It wouldn't be that Auli would hate him, it was the simple fact that Jesmind would certainly kill her, no matter how he felt about it. And if that didn't happen, Auli's mother would certainly separate her from him forcibly to keep her from interfering with him, no matter if she initiated it or he did. Ianelle certainly looked furious with her for sleeping with him the first time.

What a day. Tarrin sat down in the chair by the fireplace and looked back on it. He's slept with Auli. He'd had a confrontation with the Were-cats. He'd lost everything he owned and got very mad at Jesmind. Then he'd been given all these wonderful gifts, even objects of incredible value like the Cat's Claws and the sword. And he'd learned many things about himself and had discovered things about others that certainly changed his mental view of them. Seeing Jesmind so furious had darkened his view of the Were-cats, while seeing Jenna working as the Keeper and then seeing her being so loving with him, it reminded him that his little sister was not the girl he remembered, but she was still family and he still loved her with all his heart. It was almost too much to consider.

In any event, this day would certainly go down in his personal history as one of the most eventful. It was definitely one that had changed his outlook, in many ways. There were several things left to address, but in a way, he was glad that would happen tomorrow. He'd had enough for one day.

As eventful as yesterday was, Tarrin knew that the bad things were going to have to be done today.

He got up early and used the new robe Keritania gave him to shuffle down to the baths before they got too crowded. He was going to have to confront the Were-cats today, and that was something he'd rather do early, to get it overwith. He intended to go up to Jesmind's room and lay down the law, then leave as quickly as possible. He was going to tell her exactly how angry he was, and then tell her to leave Auli alone and back off. Tell her that she was smothering him, and if she wanted to push him away from her, she was certainly doing it right. She'd pushed all his buttons the day before,

and he was going to make sure she knew that. He'd never completely forgive her for destroying his room, but he did understand that it hadn't entirely been her fault. He wasn't going to let her know that, because he wanted her to really think hard the next time she found him doing something she didn't like. He wanted every choice she made to be one with that ultimate threat hanging over it, the threat to have nothing to do with the Were-cats anymore and decide to stay human. If he didn't lay down the law, he'd find himself living under *their* law, and he knew what kind of life that would be. They would keep him chained to a wall, bored and miserable, until he finally decided to be a Were-cat again. They were doing everything they could do to make him want to change back, and he realized that they were going to play dirty. If they wanted to play that way, that was fine with him. Now that he knew that there weren't any rules, he felt he could compete with them on that level.

The baths were a bit more crowded than he'd hoped, since the Novices were down for their daily bath, but that wasn't really a problem for him. The far end of the pool was too hot for just about everyone but him, Jenna, Keritanima, Dolanna, and Jula, so it literally gave him an entire section of pool all to himself. They all stared at him a bit wildly when he slipped into the pool where it was so hot that it steamed, but he ignored them and got down to the business of cleaning up quickly. He had important things to do today.

To his surprise, he wasn't alone for very long. He'd forgotten that many of the Sha'Kar were like him, immune to the pool's heat, and he was a bit surprised to see Ianelle standing on the edge of the pool, in the act of disrobing. He looked at her and flushed slightly, for she was very much similar to Auli. It was obvious that Auli was Ianelle's daughter, for they had similarly beautiful bodies. He looked away from her before thoughts of that night with Auli got him in trouble and scrubbed more diligently with the soap on his arms. Ianelle seemed harsh sometimes, but seeing her naked drove the point home that she was Sha'Kar, and that meant that she was exceedingly lovely and had a body any human woman would kill to have.

Much to his dismay, she decided to come right to him. The pool only came up to the base of her ribcage, and it was hard to look her in the face when those bare breasts almost begged his eyes to wander over them. She greeted him in formal Sha'Kar, then smiled and took the soap from his

hand. "Auli said you forgave her for her actions," she said, going around him and starting to scrub his back. He suddenly felt alot more comfortable with her behind him, where he couldn't see her. "She said you're to meet her for breakfast."

"Yes," he answered.

"I appreciate your compassion, honored one," she said sincerely. "I don't know what the Keeper said to her, but when she came home, she was almost inconsolable. I've never seen her so upset."

"Jenna made her see what her acts did to me," he answered. "I've never seen Jenna like that before. She's changed alot."

"I'll have to thank her," Ianelle said seriously. "After she recovered herself, she and I had a very long talk. She understands things now, understands how her behavior can harm others as well as herself. She even promised to try harder. From Auli, that's almost a complete turnaround."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," he said cautiously. He hoped it didn't change her *too* much. Auli's irreverence and her love of fun, coupled with her fearlessness, was what made her so much fun to be with.

"I'm sure it won't last long," she sighed. "Auli's very stubborn. It will be a long time before she completely changes."

Tarrin was silently happy to hear that. "Thanks for the gift," he said. "I really liked it."

"It's the least I could do for you, honored one," she said dismissively. "I just wanted you to know that if you need my help for anything, you have but to ask," she said in a serious manner. "It is more than you being an honored one for me now. After what happened with my daughter, I find myself in your debt. You were very considerate of her."

"She's my friend, Ianelle," he told her.

"I know. And you have no idea how much it pleases me to see such loyalty in our human counterparts. It gives me hope for the future."

"Be relieved, honored one. I told her if she touches you again, I would break five thousand years of honored tradition and whip her like a common criminal. She will not do it again."

He was both relieved and a little disappointed to hear that. With a threat like that, he was sure that Auli wouldn't even think about it. He knew that it was a good thing, but that part of him that had enjoyed the night they shared was disappointed that there wouldn't be a second encounter. "I'm more worried about me," he confessed.

She paused a moment. "If it pleases you, take her," she said calmly. "My warning was for her to touch you. If you want her, then I have neither the inclination nor the right to object."

That wasn't entirely what he wanted to hear, at least not the majority of him that knew another night with Auli was a very bad idea. "You shouldn't have told me that, Ianelle," he admitted.

"You desire her, but you don't want to succumb to temptation," she said simply. "I understand your view, honored one. No human could forget a night with one of us." With that remark, Tarrin was reminded of the deep-seated, almost cultural arrogance of the Sha'Kar. It wasn't that they were pushy about their advantages, but they didn't play them down either. Sha'Kar were very attractive people, and they knew it. "But unlike many humans, I think you understand the dangers involved in that kind of a relationship." He did indeed. He nodded in agreement. "Good. I won't tell you no, honored one. Some humans *can* handle a relationship with one of us, and you seem to have the mental capability and will to handle one of us. But you shouldn't think of pursuing it without keeping those dangers in mind."

"I think of them every time I see her, Ianelle," he admitted. "Usually right after remembering last night."

"You're young, honored one," she said gently. "The first time always stays with you. I remember my first lover like it was yesterday. It's perfectly fine to think those things and feel that way, so long as you remember the dangers involved."

"I'll do that," he said. It felt odd talking about this with Ianelle, but strangely enough, he felt at ease with her. Ianelle understood, and he was sure that she wouldn't bandy their conversation about.

"Don't worry at it too much, honored one," she said, reverting to completely informal Sha'Kar. She had never spoken to him like that before.

"If you want, I can tell Auli to rebuff you. That way there's no danger of anything happening."

Tarrin almost laughed. "She wouldn't obey you."

"I know, but offering was the least I could do," she said with a very relaxed chuckle. She patted him on the back. "Go ahead and rinse off, and then you can wash my back."

Tarrin felt much more relaxed with this intimidating Sha'Kar matron, and he felt little reservation at scrubbing her back. "Ianelle, why is it alright if I went after Auli?" he asked, sincerely baffled by the difference.

"Auli chased you with nothing in her heart but selfish need," she answered, pulling her platinum blond hair off over her shoulder and displaying her exceptionally lovely neck and shoulders. "You, on the other hand, probably have more in your heart than that. Besides, you are an honored one. It has long been Sha'Kar custom to bow to the desires of an honored one, so long as they don't violate our own custom and law. Human honored ones in the past often shared company with Sha'Kar women. It was considered an honor for a Sha'Kar to be favored by an honored one in such a manner."

Tarrin was a little shocked by that. "You mean if a *sui'kun* wanted to spend the night with a Sha'Kar woman, she'd say yes because of custom?"

"Sha'Kar aren't quite as moralistic as humans, honored one," she said, glancing back at him with a slow smile. "Sharing pleasure is not confined to the bonds of marriage, and there is nothing wrong with two consenting adults exploring their attraction to one another. My objections to what Auli did with you stem more from her interfering in a very delicate situation, and the fact that she still pursued you even after you told her no. She defied your word, and as you know, in our custom, an honored one's word is as law. If you weren't in such a position with Jesmind, and you had not said no to her the first time, I would not have said a word. In fact, I would have been honored that you found my daughter appealing enough to ask into your bed."

"But what if the Sha'Kar woman didn't like the *sui'kun*? Wouldn't that be forcing her?"

"I guess it would, but such things didn't happen."

"That seems wrong," he told her. "Almost like making a woman a--" he almost said *prostitute*, but thought that may offend her.

"Whore?" she asked, startling him with her frankness. "I told you, such things didn't happen. If a lady truly disliked the honored one, she would send another in her place that was willing to share a night with him. In the dark, it is hard to tell one Sha'Kar from another, you know," she said with that same slow smile, glancing back at him again. "We do look similar, and so long as we don't speak, the human probably wouldn't know the difference. So long as a lady found another with the same length of hair and same size bosom, the honored one would never know they'd switched."

It seemed a bit outrageous, but he had to admit that she was right. He'd noticed that Sha'Kar looked similar himself, that they had the same general proportions and appearance of body. Only the face, hair, and chest seemed to vary from woman to woman, and even those didn't vary by much. They were a race of dolls, all of them beautiful, all of them similar to one another. He chuckled ruefully as he carefully and gently scrubbed her neck. "I hate to say it, but you're right," he said. "When I saw you, the first thing I noticed was how similar you are to Auli."

"She is my daughter," she sniffed. "She'd better have my looks."

Tarrin laughed. "Well, I think you're just as beautiful as she is. Maybe even more so, since you seem so austere. You have an elegance that Auli doesn't have, probably because you're older than her."

"I appreciate the complement," she said in a suddenly girlish manner, as if his praise sincerely pleased her. "I find the idea that you would find me a pleasing bedmate even more of a complement."

Tarrin blushed. "I never said--"

"You compare me to my daughter, whom you admit you enjoyed very much," she said, looking back at him. "Logic dictates that you would find me as enjoyable. I'm flattered, honored one."

Tarrin blushed furiously.

Ianelle laughed lightly. "I meant no offense, honored one. Sometimes we must seem both very refined and very crude to you."

He had to nod in agreement.

"It is a difference of culture, nothing more," she told him. "We assign different importances to different things than you. What you consider in one manner, we consider in another. I'm sure you understand that."

"Understanding it and experiencing it are two different things," he said seriously.

"Spoken with true wisdom, honored one," she said with a smile.

After washing off, he and Ianelle climbed out of the bathing pool and dried off, and then parted with kind words. He found her to be not nearly so intimidating now that he'd talked to her a little, and he had to admit that he rather liked her. He also found himself much more comfortable with being around Sha'Kar. She had reminded him that theirs was a different culture, and he felt that it would let him deal with the Sha'Kar on better footing in the future.

The bath was enjoyable, but the knowledge of what followed after it weighed on him. Not even the neatly packed bundle sitting on his bed lifted his spirits very much when he came back into his room, but he was impressed when he opened it and found a shirt and pair of trousers. The promised clothes from Cassiter the tailor, and he was very impressed. They were very simple clothes, a short-sleeved tunic of sorts, in the style of a linen undershirt but with a long tail. The material of the shirt was a strange one, that plant fiber that Cassiter had mentioned. It was very light, rather soft, and he suspected that it was exceedingly tough. He wasn't sure if it was dyed or not, but in any case, he found the shirt's dark blue color very pleasing. The trousers were leather, but it was a kind of leather he'd never seen before. It was thin as cloth, as pliable as cloth, and as soft as down, but there was no doubt that it was leather, and that meant that it would be very rugged. Somehow someone had tanned the leather in such a way as to make it like cloth in wear, but with leather's rugged durability. The package didn't include shoes, but he still had his very comfortable soft leather boots, and he rather preferred them. The package did include a belt of sturdy leather, and it had a small buckle with a *shaeram* etched into the bronze

He donned his new clothes, and he had to admit, they fit perfectly. Cassiter had to have an uncanny eye for sizing people. The shirt was soft and comfortable, the pants like they'd he'd owned them for years, so well they fit and how soft they were. He put the folding knife that Walten gave

him in his pocket, the little steel charm Camara Tal had given him in the other pocket, and put the bracers Jenna gave him on his arms. There had been a belt pouch among the numerous gifts he'd received, and he lashed that to his belt. It seemed a bit redundant to have a belt pouch when his trousers had pockets, but some things were too big to fit into a pocket comfortably. He didn't really have anything to put in the belt pouch, but at least he'd have it, just in case. Besides, it was a gift, and it was Ungardt custom to use a gift to honor the one who had given it.

Strangely enough, putting on the clothes almost felt like putting on armor. He was finished now, and he knew that he couldn't really put it off anymore. He had to go confront Jesmind. He'd like to get it done before breakfast, so at least he could eat without it hanging over his head, but he was rather reluctant to do it. He didn't really like doing things like that, and he knew that no matter how easy he tried to make it, he was either going to make her angry or hurt her feelings. Reaching into his pocket, he clasped his hand around the little hope charm that Camara Tal had given him. She said in her note that she'd carried it around for years, and now she wanted him to have it. He wasn't sure why, but if he was supposed to hope on the little thing, he supposed that hoping that things weren't going to get out of control with Jesmind would be a good one.

Well, there was no use waiting any longer. Working up his nerve, he put his hand on the door handle and opened it. He already knew exactly what he was going to say, and the demands he was going to make. There was little need to go over them again in his mind. He left his room and started out, moving slowly yet steadily along the halls, his expression serious and distracted at the same time as he tried to imagine the various ways that Jesmind and the other Were-cats were going to react to what he had to say. Given the shouting he'd thrown at Triana, they had to know that something like this was coming.

Along the hallway, up the stairs, up more stairs, and then across to another stairway, passing by servants, Sorcerers, and the much more heavily present guards that were now patrolling the Tower's passages. It seemed to take forever to get there, but it also seemed like it was way too short a time before he was in the carpeted hall that led to Jesmind's door. He paused there at the landing, looking down the hall, where the door ended it. He stood there for a long moment, stepping forward a little when footsteps

coming up the stairs reached his ears, not wanting to seem like he was crowding the stairway. He knew it had to be done, but he *really* wasn't looking forward to this. Jesmind was very willful, and he knew that it was going to become a shouting match. He didn't really want to hurt her feelings, but it may come to that just to make her back off from him and give him a little breathing space. If he could only make her understand that the best thing she could do was leave him be, she wouldn't be angering him and jeopardizing the very thing she was working to accomplish. She had to understand that he wasn't even thinking about the choice he'd have to make until he got his memory back, or at least that was his plan right now. It had changed several times in the last few days as new information reached him, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't be trying to make that choice tomorrow if some other new information came to him.

Despite being human again, and having his mind occupied, there was enough training in him to pick up the sudden change in the footsteps behind him. There were more than one sets of them, and they suddenly went from a leisurely pace to a frantic staccato, a sound of boots running. Tarrin's first reaction was that nobody wearing boots like that would be running up or down those treacherous circular staircases unless there was a fire, and that alert conclusion was what made him turn around and look down the stairs.

He turned around just in time to see the sword coming at him, wielded by a large man with a scar on his cheek wearing the Tower guardsman's uniform and chain jack, with two others behind him. There was no reaction of fear or shock, no surprise that he was certain the men were depending on to finish him quickly. He twisted aside like a snake, letting the sword lance just by his shirt, then grabbed the man's wrist as he overextended the thrust, twisted it, turned his arm, and then twirled and flung the man back at the other two. He did it with such speed and grace that the other men had no chance to get close enough to him to try to stab him with those swords. It was the Ungardt disarming move, a technique for an unarmed warrior to disarm an armed opponent, something his mother had taught him. But instead of breaking the wrist and forcing the hand to drop the sword, he instead turned the man against his companions, making all them slow down for that critical half second for Tarrin to back away from the landing. He knew better than to fight three men alone, but he knew that assistance wasn't very far away.

"Jesmind!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, backpedalling furiously as the two other men caught the first and prevented him from knocking all of the down the stairs. "Triana! Julia! I need a little help out here!" He remembered the Cat's Claws when he raised his hands in a defensive posture as the first man was back on his feet, and the three men suddenly didn't look quite so enthusiastic about the odds when Tarrin caused the magical claws to come forth. He held out those claws and his hands in a wide stance, letting them see them, and he realized that the unbreakable metal that covered the backs of his hands and his forearms would serve perfectly to block and parry their weapons. He literally had two offensive and defensive weapons on each hand, and it didn't take but a second of consideration to understand how to use them in the tight confines of the passageway, even if he hadn't had the time or opportunity to practice with them and learn how to use them properly.

With hoarse cries, the three men rushed up onto the landing and charged him. Only two could fit in the passageway at a time, and Tarrin closed his fingers to cover his hands with the claws, to form shields, then brought his hands together as he carefully considered the angles and heights of the two swords that were rushing at him. The one on the right was taller and had longer arms, and he was just a little in front of the other. That worked in his favor. He held his ground and prepared himself to meet their charge, wondering where in the Nine Hells those Were-cats were when he needed them.

With a quick shift, Tarrin parried aside the leading sword with the back of his hand, letting it hit the metal covering it and doing him no harm, then he sidestepped and let him come almost right up on top of him, literally putting his own shoulder against the wall. He stabbed all four claws on the other hand into the man's side, making him hunch up around the four blades as they punched through the man's mail shirt and into his side, then pushed him into the path of the other, using him as a shield to protect himself from the second attacker's weapon. He slithered around the wounded man as the second tried to stop or get his weapon around the first to hit him, but he was going too fast to make such a sudden change in direction. Tarrin put his shoulder into the wounded man, still keeping his sword wide of him with his other hand, and physically bulled him into the shorter one, slamming both of them up against the wall. He did that just in time to duck under the

swing of the third's sword, and heard with some satisfaction as it dug into the shoulder of the man Tarrin had injured. The man screamed this time, but it was a ragged, gurgling scream, telling him that one of his metal claws had pierced the man's lung. Tarrin spun around and backed away as the wounded man leaned heavily against his trapped companion, and the third squared off against him as the trapped one struggled to free himself.

Nonplussed by wounding his own man, the third shuffled forward quickly, and his footwork told Tarrin that this man was an experienced fighter. Tarrin gave ground to him, backing closer and closer to Jesmind's door. What was keeping that woman when he really needed her? Tarrin turned his hands palm inward, displaying a maximum amount of shielding metal to that weapon. Until he practiced some with the Cat's Claws, he'd be a clumsy opponent at best. He didn't think it prudent to try to fence the man when he was using weapons with which he was unfamiliar. What he really needed was his staff. In the confines of the hallway, the end-grip would be perfect for keeping the shorter weapon out of reach of him.

He *had* his staff!

How did it work? He feverishly tried to remember how the amulet worked as he was forced to use the Cat's Claws as shields, parrying several attempts from the man to stab him with the tip of his sword. The closed fingers enclosed his hands, letting him bat the sword away with either the back or the front of his fist. The man seemed intent on stabbing him, not trying to swing at him despite the fact that he had the room, almost fanatically obsessed with the idea of stabbing him. He was using a longsword, which was a weapon suited for either stabbing or slashing. Why the intense need to stab? He swatted away another stab at his belly, then one trying to stab him in the face, then another that tried to stab him in the shoulder. He glanced at the blade and realized that it wasn't entirely clean, it had some kind of oil smeared on it.

Not oil. *Poison!*

No wonder he was so intent on stabbing him! A stab wound would introduce the poison much more quickly than a cutting wound. He slapped the sword away again, taking another step back as he gave ground. He'd already been backed halfway down the hallway. He twisted aside from the next one and tried to cut the man's hand off at the wrist, but he withdrew his

thrust with impressive speed, and sparks flew when the Cat's Claws raked across the poisoned edge of the man's sword, cutting furrows into the steel which proved who had the sharper and superior weapon. This one had seen him use that move on the other one, and he wasn't going to let it happen to him. Tarrin had the sharper, more dangerous weapon, but the poison gave the attacker every advantage. All he had to do was break Tarrin's skin once, and that would be it. The poison would do the rest .

Now he absolutely had to have his staff. Its greater reach would put keep that poisoned blade away from him, and it would even the playing field between them. He had to think fast, the shorter one was free! He felt the heel of his foot strike wood, and he realized he'd backed into Jesmind's door. Couldn't they hear what was going on? Of course they would have, *if they were in there!*

To his chagrin, he realized that nobody was home!

He was on his own in this!

That knowledge made getting his staff even more critical, but not when he was backed into a corner. Tensing an arm after parrying yet another attempt to stab him in the belly, he elbowed the door heavily as the flat of his foot struck it at the same time. Tarrin was a very strong young man, though he didn't look it, and the combined blow was enough to knock the door open. He was going to kiss Jesmind for not bothering to lock the door after she left. He backed into the room and suddenly opened his hands, taking a fast swipe at the man's sword as the he tried to follow him in. As long as he could hold the door, keep that man on the far side of the threshold, he could do nothing but try to stab into the room. The confines of the doorframe would hinder his movement, but he couldn't capitalize on that unless he had a long weapon to make the man fearful of trying to gain entry!

How did it work, how did it work? Dolanna had told him to *will* the Firestaff to disappear. It took him a little while, but it finally did work. Did all it take to get something out was *willing* it to appear? He figured that it had to be. Giving a sudden shout, Tarrin took a quick step forward to surprise the man just as he was about to try to invade the room, freezing him for just a split second. He gritted his teeth and did the only thing he could really think of, *willing* the staff to appear.

To his shock and surprise, a staff did appear in his hands. But it was not his trusty Ironwood weapon. It was a long shank of what looked like black steel, and it was hot to the touch.

He had accidentally summoned forth the Firestaff.

"That's it!" the shorter man said from behind the first. "That's the Firestaff! Get him before he makes it disappear!"

He was a bit dismayed that he had blundered so monumentally, but he had to work with the situation. Retracting the Cat's Claws, he took up the Firestaff in an end-grip and set the end of the artifact towards the doorway. That move should have made the lead man a bit wary to enter the room, but the man suddenly screamed and backed up a good three steps, nearly about to dive out of the doorway. Tarrin realized that the man thought he was going to use magic on him!

He nearly dropped it himself when the entire length of the old artifact suddenly erupted into brilliant flame. He could feel its heat, but it did him no harm, and he could clearly hear the thing's unspoken voice in his ears. It was urging him to strike, to trust in the power of the Staff, to raise it up and use it to smite his enemies. It *wanted* him to use it, it *wanted* him to unleash its power. But Dolanna had said that it could only work on Gods Day!

It whispered to him, told him that it was capable of much more than just that, that he could use it to destroy those who threatened him. All he had to do was wish it, and it would be so. Its power would be his, all its power, and he could use it any way he wanted. Power like the magic they said he once knew, power to vanquish these three thieves, power to kill them with ease. It would be all his, and nobody else's. All his, all its power, the power to protect himself, the power to defend...the power to rule, the power to conquer. All its power would be his, the power that would make him a king. All he had to do was wish it, and it would be his....

Shaking his head, he realized that, free of its prison in the *elsewhere*, the Firestaff was trying to subvert him. The offer of power was very tempting, but his talk with Jula made him understand where the road for those who craved power usually ended. Its offer of power was a sincere one, but in the end he would end up being a slave to *its* will, and its will was only that it be

used as it had been created to be used. And that would get everyone he cared about killed. It was a road that ended in a cliff.

Struggling to fight the Firestaff's mental temptations, he gritted his teeth and tried to remember how to make it go back where he had it. Will it, she said. He had to will it. Will it to go away, to be put in the *elsewhere*. He had to do it quickly, because the Firestaff was assaulting him with images of godhood, of him being the most powerful being on Sennadar, where he could fix all the things that were wrong with the world and create something that he would consider to be perfect. A world molded by his hands, a world shaped so that nobody was ever hungry or sick and everyone was happy. It would be a perfect world, a wonderful world, and everyone would love him and sing praises to him and--

"No!" he said with a gasp, nearly dropping the priceless artifact. He looked at the two men in the doorway, and saw that their eyes were glazed in a strange way. The Firestaff was tempting them too! He realized that just in time to see looks of utter determination stamp on their features, and they raised their swords almost in unison. The Firestaff had them, and they were going to come through that door and try to get it with no fear about getting injured!

They started in, struggling to get through the door at the same time, and Tarrin jumped back. He felt both relieved and very nervous when the taller one yanked a dagger out of his belt and stabbed the shorter one in the side, making him cry out and fold around the weapon. But he didn't fall, he just kept trying to push through the door. If they were going to fight each other over who was going to get to the Firestaff first, that was fine by him. It gave him a few more seconds to try to remember exactly what he did the last time he made it go, and he finally realized that he had to be holding it in one hand, his left hand. His other staff was attached to his right, Dolanna said that things in the *elsewhere* were arranged around his body, and that no two objects could go there that would be occupying the same space. He had to let go of the staff with his right hand, or it wouldn't disappear. He did so quickly and *willed* the Firestaff to go back into the *elsewhere*, where its infernal whispering and temptations could not reach him.

And just like that, it disappeared.

He was startled by the sudden cry of pain from the doorway. The shorter one, with the dagger still in his side, hunched over with a scream and fell into the room, clutching at the weapon in agony. When Tarrin put the Firestaff away, its whispering ended, and the pain-numbing mindless desire it had put into the two men stopped.

Now there was only one of them, and this time, Tarrin managed to call forth the right staff. His Ironwood staff appeared in his right hand, and he quickly hefted it into the end-grip and used its greater reach to jam the end into the man's mail-covered chest before he could get his sword within reach and before he recovered from the mind-influencing power of the artifact. A staff was a bludgeoning weapon, meant to deal damage with impact, and chain mail was not designed to absorb that kind of a blow. It did offer the man some protection, but not enough to matter. Tarrin's thrust hit him just at the base of the sternum, and the mail gave too much to prevent the man's breastbone from being broken. It was a killing blow, designed to shatter the breastbone and make the bone shards cut into vital organs, or at the very least severely hamper a man's ability to breathe. The strike didn't kill the man, but he doubled over and fell to his knees, his helmet sliding off his head, and blood absolutely poured out of his open mouth. But Tarrin was not in the mood to take any chances, not against men who were using poisoned weapons. He took up the staff in both hands and smashed it over the man's bare head, dropping him to the carpeted floor like a sack of meal. That blow was fatal, causing some of his brains to seep out of his ears after he came to rest on the floor. He didn't waste time standing over the man, he levelled his staff at the injured one who fell into the room, but he was already dead. He had vomited after falling, and Tarrin realized that the dagger with which he'd been stabbed was also poisoned. The eyes, wild and with the pupils so constricted that it looked like he had none, made it apparent that something other than a rather superficial stab wound to the side by a small dagger had killed him. Tarrin prodded him with his staff just to make sure, then rolled him over and watched to make sure he wasn't breathing. When he was satisfied the man was dead, he stepped out into the hallway and found the third one crumpled in the hall. He too was dead, and after Tarrin rolled him over, he saw why. When he fell into the other man, the man's sword had cut him on the upper arm, just under where his chain jack protected him, and the third had struck him in the other shoulder, which had penetrated his mail shirt and drawn blood. He too had been

poisoned, but Tarrin doubted he would have managed to live very long with a punctured lung. If the poison hadn't have killed him, he would have drowned in his own blood. And if he had managed to survive that, he would have been no match for Tarrin, being both poisoned and with a lung full of blood.

Jenna had been right. She said that they'd start coming into the Tower to get at him. These three had snuck in pretending to be Tower guards, and Tarrin had had the misfortune of being caught alone and away from any help. He knew that he'd better not let that happen again. No matter how much it annoyed him, he knew that he'd have to have a companion or bodyguard with him from now on. If only to have another set of eyes watching his back if nothing else.

Jesmind and the Were-cats were going to have a conniption over this. It was going to make them even harder to deal with, he was sure of it. They'd insist he move in with them, that they be with him all the time, and all that rot. He didn't want it before, and he didn't want it now. He'd keep someone with him all the time, but it wasn't going to be one of them all the time.

He realized that standing here was not a good idea. There may be others, and he couldn't risk getting caught alone. He'd gotten lucky this time, but he wasn't stupid enough to think that that luck was going to last. Stepping over the bodies, his staff held confidently in his right hand, Tarrin hurried towards the stairs, fully intent to go down, back into the populated areas of the Tower, and then find someone that could get Jenna. She had to know about this.

It had gone generally as he had expected. After getting downstairs, he found a Sorcerer and had her call ahead to Jenna, then demanded she accompany him to her office personally. The short, rather plump woman looked a bit offended, but she could tell that Tarrin was very agitated, and the bloodstain on his staff probably told her that something very bad had just happened. She took him to Jenna's office, and once he was there, he told Jenna what happened quickly and concisely. Jenna was both worried for him and relieved he was alright, and then she got really mad. She shouted for Duncan, then she gave an order to sweep the Tower using the

Knights in a blistering tone, even ordering the Sorcerers to check every servant, visitor and Guard using Mind weaves for knowledge of the attack.

Word of the attack raced through the Tower faster than he thought it would. Within two minutes of him reaching Jenna's office, Sapphire came in through the door, glaring down an indignant Duncan and sweeping into the room. She was wearing a very pretty blue dress with white lace around the neckline, but it was her dark expression that got Tarrin's attention. Everyone handled Sapphire very, *very* carefully. She was a dragon, and absolutely nobody that knew her wanted to upset in her in any way. They were all afraid she'd knock down one of the Towers or something. Tarrin hadn't seen her for a couple of days, and he figured she had to be busy. She always made it a point to come visit him every day, if only to talk for a few minutes, but she'd been absent yesterday.

"I heard what happened," she said. "Are you alright, little friend?"

"I'm alright," he assured her. "Lucky for me that mother taught me how to handle an armed opponent. I managed to get away without a scratch."

"You said you could protect him, Keeper," Sapphire said in an accusing manner.

"The men were wearing Tower guard uniforms," she said defensively. "I have no idea how they managed to get them, but those would have let them onto the grounds."

"They killed the former owners, of course," she sniffed. "You should not go around alone, little one. Not after this."

"I realized that," he told her with a nod. "I think I have enough friends to manage to keep company."

"You have me," she said simply. "I have little enough to do as it is, and I finally made contact with the last of my brood last night, so my attention isn't divided anymore. I will stay with you."

He was a little surprised by her declaration, and he was a little leery of having Sapphire accompany around everywhere he went. He did like her, but it just bothered him for some reason. Almost like it wasn't right for a *dragon* to be playing nursemaid for him.

"I won't invade the privacy of your room, but any time you set foot from it, I will be with you. And I'm sure that the Keeper will arrange to have your door guarded."

"Guards, certainly, but only Knights. Their loyalty is an absolute, especially since they see Tarrin as one of their own. And I'm going to set a Ward," she answered. "I'll set it so no one can pass through his door or window except him and his friends, and I'll set it to permit the Knights and the Were-cats to pass. That way Tarrin and our circle can pass through his door without hindrance, and the Knights and Were-cats can enter his room in case they need to defend him."

"A sensible precaution," she agreed. "Just make the list of approved people very short."

"It's only going to be about ten people," she said. "Tarrin, Allia, Keritanima, Camara Tal, Miranda, Binter and Sisska, Dolanna and Dar, and Phandebrass. Nobody else has any business coming into his room without an invitation."

"What if I want someone not approved to come into my room?" he asked.

"That kind of Ward will let someone pass through it if someone who is approved is touching them," she said. "If you want to invite a guest into your room, you'll have to hold her hand while crossing the threshold." Jenna looked at him with a very slight smile, and he realized that Ianelle must have told her about their talk. Auli told Ianelle what they'd talked about, and Ianelle told Jenna.

"Add me to your list," Sapphire said bluntly.

"I didn't mention you because you're standing right here, Sapphire," Jenna said mildly. "That you would have access to Tarrin's room was a given."

"Very good then," she said in a soothed tone.

"I'm very happy that you would want to be with Tarrin when he goes out, Sapphire," Jenna said. "I'll feel completely at ease knowing that you're watching out for him."

"He is clan to me," she said simply. "Among us blues, clan is all."

"He couldn't have a better guardian," she said in appreciation.

"Naturally," she sniffed in reply. She stepped back slightly, and to his surprise, her form seemed to shimmer like a heat mirage. When it was over, a tiny replica of the huge dragon he'd seen was sitting on the floor where she'd been standing. He recognized her immediately, realizing that this was the drake form in which she'd been trapped before the Weave had been restored. A flap of her leathery wings put her up on his shoulder, and she settled sedately. Her weight was very slight, and it was a very odd sensation to feel her tail slide back and forth across his back. "If you and I are going to be together, I much prefer it this way," she said from his shoulder. "I have very fond memories of my time in this form, and I'll be more able to watch out for you. I lose my senses in human form. In this form, I have them again."

Tarrin reached up tentatively, and it conjured flashes of memory of her sitting on his shoulder just like that. She nuzzled his fingers affectionately, and that suddenly made him feel completely at ease with the idea of her being with him. She may be a formidable, mysterious dragon, but this reminded her that no matter who she was or how powerful she was, she was his friend first. And all those other things didn't matter in the face of that.

With Sapphire watching his back, he felt very, very safe.

Chapter 6

It was very strange.

He couldn't help but think about it as he returned to his room, with Sapphire riding comfortably on his shoulder, his fearsome little guardian that would ensure that absolutely nothing or no one threatened him again. He had been involved in a fight for his very life, and there had been very little fear. He'd never had to fight like that before, not when it mattered so much, or at least not that he could remember. And yet there had been very little fear. There had been worry over the poisoned weapons, a little desperation when he accidentally summoned the Firestaff by accident, and definite concern and awareness of the finality of losing the fight...but no real fear.

In a way, it had felt...familiar. They said he'd been quite a dangerous fighter, and he'd been in so many fights that it was probably second nature to him to fight like that. But that Tarrin was lost for the moment, buried in the deepest tunnels of his mind, ensnared in the submerged alternate consciousness that had once been merged with his own. Had that other him somehow emerged during the fight? Or was it such an automatic response for him to fight by now that even with amnesia, he could respond to such a dangerous situation without fear paralyzing him? He certainly felt some of that fear now. The understanding that one scratch may have killed him certainly seemed more frightening to him now than it had during the heat of the moment. The fighting had been nothing like what he had expected.

And then there was the knowledge of the finality of it. Three men had died in the course of the fight, and Tarrin had been directly responsible for two of them. The third had died at the hands of one of his own companions, victim of the spell that the Firestaff had placed over them. Tarrin's pinning move had killed one from the very poison meant for him, and the second was his direct responsibility. He had killed the man ruthlessly, knowing that his poisoned weapon was a threat to him no matter how injured he was. Tarrin had made a conscious choice to kill him.

And there was no guilt. Of course, all his friends would tell him he was crazy for thinking that he should feel guilty. Those men had tried to kill him, and they had tried it with a tool so underhanded and cowardly that it would offend a man with honor. Poisoning was considered the lowest form of cowardly backbiting among the Ungardt. Any man not strong or brave enough to face an enemy like an Ungardt didn't deserve to own an axe. But still, some part of him told him that he should feel *something* for what he had done.

In reality he did, but it wasn't what he expected to feel. He felt relieved. He was relieved he had gotten away from them, relieved that he'd killed them. If any of them had gotten away, they would try again. And again, and again, and again, until they either died or got to him. What he was carrying, men were going to willingly risk death to try to gain it. If anything, now he perfectly and completely understood that one simple concept. There were some things that some men were willing to die over, and the chance to become a god would certainly reach that level of devotion. He doubted those men had acted on their own. He was certain that someone sent them...but on the other hand, how could an organization trust men enough to send them to acquire an item that could give those very men the power to rule the world? Either they didn't tell them just what it really was they were after, or they had to trust those men absolutely to bring the prize back. One of them had called the Firestaff by its name, so he had the feeling that those three knew what it was. They must have been very devoted to their organization to be willing to give away the power to be a god.

If it had come to that. The Firestaff had them in its spell, and he had the feeling that if they would have taken it from him, they wouldn't have been handing it over to anyone. They would have killed each other over possession of it, and the winner, if there indeed was one given that all of them had poisoned weapons, would have run away with the prize. The Firestaff's corrupting power over men would make it very difficult for one man to send another to retrieve it for him and expect him to return with it. It made him see the deadly, destructive power of the artifact. As long as it was present, no man could be trusted, and the one who possessed it couldn't even trust his own friends. The Firestaff did not choose its owner, it called to all, seeking one who would take it up and use it in the way it had been created to be used.

Should he feel guilty over killing two men and being responsible for the death of a third? Should he have felt fear? Serious questions, and he had the feeling that the answers to them were locked up with the missing memories in his mind. He felt that fragments of his lost personality were starting to reassert themselves. He had remembered in the carriage, remembered things forgotten. Was it a stretch to think that in the heat of a fight, with such emotion surging through him with the adrenalin and the knowledge that it was a fight for his very life, that the part of him best suited for dealing with the situation would resurge within him? It wouldn't have been the first time fragments of his old self made their presence known. The Cat had literally attacked Koran Dar when his magic got too close to it. Maybe the old Tarrin had been released from his prison inside him for a few brief moments and gave him the courage and experience and proper mindset he needed to get out of a very bad situation.

Whether he liked that Tarrin or not, if that was the case, then he was very glad that he was still around.

But maybe it wasn't all the forgotten Tarrin. He'd been rather calm even after the fight. He knew exactly what he had to do, and he did it. Even after that, going to see Jenna, he didn't have a breakdown or go into histrionics. Someone had just tried to kill him, and it was like it was just something that occupied the time between bathtime and breakfast.

Well, maybe he wasn't quite that nanchalant. There had been a little heart-pounding, that was for sure, but it came more or less after he was safe. Almost like that was when he realized he had the time to let it out.

The whole thing had disrupted his plans for the day, that was for sure. He was back in his room, where they were waiting for Jenna to come and set the Ward. There were already two Knights at his door, and what was more, pairs of Knights were stationed at every passage intersection and stairway landing on his room's floor and two floors up and two floors down. If anyone even wanted to get within two floors of him, they'd have to get past a virtual gauntlet of fiercely protective Knights. And they were *fiercely* protective. They were standing outside his door in full armor and with their swords drawn, as if wasting the time to draw them would be too long a time to wait. A servant needing to do work on Tarrin's floor had to explain himself and subject himself to search about ten times. Nothing that even

might be used as a weapon was being allowed to pass the Knights. No brooms, no buckets, not even long-handled feather dusters. Sapphire was in his room, sitting on his desk and looking at one of the porcelain figurines that had been given to him as a gift curiously. It was a figurine of a small child kneeling with her little hands pressed together in prayer.

"Not a single dragon," Sapphire sniffed in disapproval. "If I knew you fancied trivial decorations, I would have sent you one."

"Well, it's not that I fancy them," he said. "But they were gifts. Custom among my people is that if something is given to you as a gift, you have to use it or display it. I'm really not that fond of some of these things, but they were given to me. It's an insult to the good wishes of the giver for me to just put them in a box and stick them under the bed."

"You take much stock in custom even now," she said. "Before you lost your memory, you were much the same. I see that some elements of your personality were yours before you were turned."

He pointed to the little crystal bell she'd sent him. "There's yours. Right by the bed, where I could get my hands on it in a hurry if I needed to."

"It pleases me that you took my gift seriously," she said with approving eyes.

"I'm just now starting to appreciate how serious all this is."

"I dare say you would," she said with an eerie reptilian grin.

"I do really like that one, though," he said, pointing at the cat with the emerald eyes.

"Who sent it?"

"I forgot. One of those people I can't really remember," he answered.

"It is an excellent piece," she said, studying it. "Refined and elegant, yet with an understated simplicity that makes it very bold."

"I don't know about all that, I just like it," he told her in a simple manner.

"You have no soul for art, Tarrin."

"I guess not," he shrugged in agreement.

There was a sudden commotion outside the door, as one of the Knights raised his voice for some reason. There was a pause, and then the door was thrown open, and much to both his irritation and concern, Jesmind was standing in the doorway. He could tell almost immediately that she was either upset or angry. She wasn't alone; Triana was just behind her, and Mist was with her.

"Are you alright?" she asked immediately, sweeping into the room so quickly that it surprised him, coming over and putting those large padded hands on him, checking him.

"I'm alright," he said neutrally. He couldn't be mad at her for being concerned, but what happened earlier hadn't changed his intention to lay down the law. He reached up and put his hands on her forearms, and then gently pushed them away.

That one move seemed to convey the entirety of his emotion to her. She looked at him with surprise and just a little chagrin, and she stiffened. "Listen, Tarrin," she said quickly. "I'm sorry. I know I--"

"Sorry isn't going to fix it this time," he said in a steely tone. "Look around you, Jesmind. Looks a little different than the last time you were in here, doesn't it?" he accused. "You had no right to destroy my room!" he shouted at her suddenly, and it made her take a step back.

"Someone nearly kills you, and you want to fight about *that*?" Jesmind said in surprise.

"People try to kill me all the time!" he said pugnaciously. "I don't remember it, but I know it because you told me so! Why shouldn't I be used to it by now?"

He knew that sounded a little ludicrous, and Sapphire couldn't suppress a hissing giggle. Jesmind wasn't laughing, though. "I've had about enough of it, Jesmind," he told her bluntly. "This is what's going to happen. You're going to stop following me around. You're going to make sure the other Were-cats don't follow me around in your stead, and you're going to give me the space I want. You're going to leave me alone, because if you don't, I can *guarantee* you that you won't see me anymore. I'll have you thrown out of the Tower."

"You wouldn't dare!" she shouted, looming over him threateningly.

It was an empty threat. Tarrin knew that Jesmind would not hurt him, no matter how angry he made her. Not in his *weakened condition*.

"When my sister is the Keeper, I think I can easily manage that," he said coolly, with narrowing eyes. "Just back off and leave me alone," he repeated. "If I forgive you for what you did, I'll start visiting you again. Until then, just leave me alone. And you'd better leave Auli alone too," he added. "If I hear of you harassing her, I'm going to be very mad."

"I'm not letting that little tart get away with--"

"With what? Doing to me exactly what *you* did to me?" he said, flinging that matter back in her face. "Me and Auli had a talk. She's sorry she did it now, and she's promised to not do it again. Auli is my *friend*, Jesmind. I'm going to spend time with her, whether you like it or not. So live with it."

"What I did was different," she said, crossing her arms before her and glaring at him. "You are *mine*, Tarrin. I spent too much time protecting you and teaching you and helping you to give you away now. If you think I'm going to just do what you say, you've got another thing coming. I fight for what I want, and I want *you*."

"If you don't give me what I need, you're guaranteeing you'll never get me," he shot back. "That choice is *mine* to make. Antagonizing me before I make it is a *very* bad way of influencing my decision. Nothing's decided until I get back my memory. Goddess, woman, can't you understand that? Everything going on right now, none of it really matters! So I slept with Auli. Big deal! If I love you as much as you say I do, do you really think that's going to matter once I can remember it again? Given what I know of Were-cats, do you think I'll care about it when I get back my memory, since it'll be the memory of me as a Were-cat? I'm going to make that choice, Jesmind. You're not going to make it for me, but damn it all, you're doing a good job of making me make the choice you don't want me to make!"

Jesmind growled in her throat, taking a step forward, but Mist interposed herself between the two of them. With one hand on Jesmind's shoulder and one on his, she pushed them apart. "I'm surprised with you, Jesmind," she said calmly. "This is *Tarrin* we're talking about here. If you can't trust him, how can you call him your mate?" she demanded. She looked at him, a very calm, very rational look. "And he's talking truth. If I

were him, I'd be really mad with you too. I'd probably think you were the biggest bitch to ever walk the earth and never want to talk to you again. Trees, woman, you tear up his room and try to kill his bedmate, and you think he's going to welcome you in here and offer you tea and cakes?"

"Don't you start with me, Mist," Jesmind growled.

"I'll start with you all I want," she said with a flinty look. "You forget your place, *girl*."

That certainly pressed some hidden button that should not have been pressed. Jesmind hissed threateningly at Mist, putting her ears back and slapping the shorter Were-cat's hand off her shoulder. Blood spattered with the arc of Jesmind's hand, and Tarrin realized she'd used her claws and raked Mist a good one while doing it. If it hurt Mist, she didn't show it. She just looked up at the taller Were-cat and raised a clawed hand, claws out and fingers flexed in a crooked manner that exaggerated those wicked claws.

"Children," Sapphire said in a strong yet measured voice, flapping over and landing on Tarrin's shoulder, "if you start fighting in here, you're going to answer to *me*. Do you understand me?"

Tarrin doubted anything could have made those two separate faster than that. Mist and Jesmind glared at each other, but didn't make any hostile moves towards each other. That they may actually fight surprised him, but it also fell into what he'd been told about their kind. "All that goes for you too, Mist," Tarrin said firmly. "I don't want you picking up where she leaves off." He pointed at Jesmind.

"That's not a problem, Tarrin," she said calmly. "Unlike Jesmind, I understand the situation. I won't pressure you one way or another."

"I understand the situation better than you!" she shouted. "We may lose him, Mist! Do you really want that?"

"I'd rather lose him as a mate over losing him forever," she said coolly. "If we *make* him become a Were-cat again, do you think he'll ever forgive us, even if that would have been the choice he made? He'd never talk to any of us again, and where would that leave us? He'd be Were once more, but he'd be worse than feral. He'd never have anything to do with any of us ever again. He'd be totally alone. Is that what you want for him? Are you so set

on keeping him that you'd drive him away just to prove your point? Are you willing to destroy his life, Jesmind? If so, then keep right on doing what you're doing."

Jesmind gave Triana a helpless, pleading look, but she was rebuffed. "Don't look to me, daughter. I've been trying to drive that through your thick skull for days now. I want him back just as badly as you, but not at the risk of him washing his paws of us."

"None of you understand!" she shouted, then she looked at Tarrin. "You are *mine*, Tarrin! I won't ever give you up! Never, do you hear me?"

"I belong to no one!" Tarrin screamed at her, dislodging Sapphire as he stepped quickly towards her. "I'm not the person you remember! Can't you understand that? I'm sorry if it hurts you, but it's the truth!"

"Oh yes you do belong to me," she said in a cold hissing voice, narrowing her eyes. "When you get your memory back, you'll understand just how much you belong to me."

"If that's what you believe, why won't you leave me alone?" he demanded. "Do you really believe that, or is that just what you want me to believe? If I was this devoted to you, why are you so dead set on making up my mind for me? Don't you trust me, Jesmind?"

It hung there for a very long moment, then she hissed. "No!" she snapped. "I leave you because I'm pregnant, and you end up with Mist. I send you off with Kimmie, and you impregnate *her*!" she screamed lividly. "And now you're chasing that Sha'Kar tramp! How can I trust you when you've proven you'll chase any girl who shakes her breasts in your face!"

Tarrin wasn't the only one surprised by that declaration. Triana gave her daughter a startled look, and Mist looked both shocked and rather angry. One of those accusations was levelled right at her, and Jesmind probably didn't realize that she'd just indirectly accused Mist of being a flpskirt.

"I can see now that jealousy is not going to give you a clear view," Triana said in a grim tone. "I never expected this out of you, daughter."

"You mean all that talk of sharing Tarrin meant nothing to you?" Mist asked dangerously.

"Of course it did, but this isn't the same thing!" Jesmind said defensively.

"Well, let's just look at that a minute," Tarrin said hotly, getting so mad he really didn't realize what he was saying. "You never *told* me you were pregnant, if you recall, and I don't remember you ever saying much about me being yours. You never really said much to me at all! Just a couple of seductions, and most of the rest of the time you left me so confused about you I never knew what to think! I hardly call that a declaration, and I hardly think that means that I was ever yours back then," he said in a belligerent tone. "Why shouldn't I have taken Mist for mate? She needed me more than you ever will! And let's just look at Kimmie a minute," he said in a hiss. "You *knew* how Kimmie felt, and you *knew* that she would act on those feelings! Should that have shocked you? You allowed me to go with her, and you knew what was going to happen! So don't put that back on *me*! I--"

Whatever he was about to say, it was suddenly lost in one of the most intense dizzy spells he had ever experienced. The entire room seemed to swirl around him, and his head began to pound with remarkable pain. He grabbed his head and bowed under, swaying as he tried to stay on his feet, then he dropped unceremoniously on his rump, so hard that it made him bite his tongue. His brain felt like it had turned to liquid, and it was sloshing around inside his skull. And every time it piled up against the inside of his head it made a throb of considerable pain lash out from behind his eyes and roll right down his body.

He was dimly aware of large, strong hands on him, and when they touched him the pain eased greatly. He was a little dazed and somewhat confused, and he had almost no inkling of what had just happened. He looked up and saw Triana, and the only thing he could manage to think was to wonder when she had come into his room. Mist and Jesmind were there too, both of them kneeling by him with concerned looks, and he couldn't remember them coming in. He guessed it was a good thing Jesmind was there...he had to set her straight. It needed to be done, and--

--no, wait. He'd been doing that. His brain slowly started to untangle itself, and he remembered shouting at her, and her and Mist nearly getting into a fight. The memory of most of it came back to him, but whatever he'd been saying right before he got dizzy was still lost in the haze. The room

was still spinning around like a top, and it was only the Were-cats holding him that kept him from flopping back on the floor.

"What's wrong with him?" Jesmind said in intense concern, looking at Triana. "Is he sick? Should we take him to Jenna?"

"I think a little too much memory came back all at once, that's all," Triana said. "They tried restoring his memory before, but about all it did was what you just saw. Sometimes he remembers tiny bits and pieces of things, and whenever he does, it gives him a headache. I guess this time he remembered too much at once, and it nearly made him pass out." She patted his shoulder with her huge hand. "Just give him a few minutes, and he should be well enough to look straight."

He could certainly accept Triana's explanation. He did sometimes recall little things, and it gave him a good headache. He had no idea what he'd remembered, but it must have been big, because he thought his head was going to explode. During that acute attack, if he'd had a sword in his hand, he would have happily lopped off his own head if only to make it stop hurting.

"I think we'd best not work him up," Triana said sternly. "I think when he got angry, it triggered that, and I don't think I want him to experience too many of those. They may do damage to his mind."

"What do we do?" Jesmind asked.

"We leave him alone," she said bluntly. "And I'd better not catch you arguing with him, daughter," she said flintily. "He doesn't need that kind of excitement right now."

That did not sit well with Jesmind, he could see. There was a distinct hardness in her eyes when she looked at him, almost as if what he'd said to her before he got dizzy had antagonized her, and now she was robbed of the opportunity to reply. He still couldn't remember what he was saying before he got dizzy, but from the look on Jesmind's face, it probably hadn't been very friendly.

"I think you three have done enough damage," Sapphire said from the bed table. "Put him in bed and leave."

"I think that's a good idea," Triana agreed. "Tarrin, you lay down a while. Don't get up until Sapphire tells you that it's alright. You need to rest. I'll tell Jenna about this, and she can send one of those Sorcerers down here to make sure that you didn't suffer any kind of mental damage."

"That would be prudent," Sapphire agreed.

Three pairs of powerful hands picked him up, but with the utmost gentleness. He still felt a little dazed, and his head was still spinning, but he could think rationally again. They set him in bed, and he obediently laid back and put his head on the pillow. That helped his dizziness quite a bit, and the room went from spinning wildly to only feeling like it was slowly rotating around an axis just underneath the small of his back. The strange confusion he'd felt after the attack eased, and much of the memory of his confrontation with Jesmind returned to him, but he still could not remember what he'd said just before he fell over. He guessed that since it had been gleaned from the forgotten memory, he forgot it when the memory fled from him.

"Just lay back and try to rest. I'll have Jenna send someone to check on you," Triana said in a reassuring voice, brushing the hair back from his forehead gently. She had to be angry with him, but he saw that she still considered him one of her children. Triana didn't show such softness to anyone that wasn't her child. "Will you remain with him, dragon?"

"I will care for him as long as is needed," she said simply.

Triana nodded, knowing that her child was in good hands. "Alright, let's get you two out of here before he gets angry again," she told Jesmind and Mist. "I'll be back a little later to check on you cub."

"Alright," he said in a disjointed manner, feeling the room stop spinning horizontally and start spinning vertically. He grabbed the bed as it seemed to stand on end, and he was afraid that he was about to slide out of it.

They left him after that, and in a way, he was relieved. He really wasn't sure if he was done fighting with Jesmind, mainly because he couldn't remember what he'd said to her. In any event, their argument was on hold for now, and he doubted that Triana was going to let it degenerate to that level again. If he suffered these large flashbacks and the ensuing major

attack that accompanied them when he got angry, then Triana wouldn't let him get angry.

If anything, he'd know in a while.

Jenna had sent Koran Dar not ten minutes after Triana hustled the other two Were-cats out the door. He knew so because he'd watched the clock hanging on his wall. His dizziness eased considerably over those ten minutes, enough to where he didn't have to hold onto the bed, but it got worse whenever he tried to sit up. Sapphire discouraged him from trying that by sitting on his chest. Her slight weight couldn't possibly hold him down, but when she stared at him with those reptilian eyes and told him not to get up, he couldn't really do much other than obey her.

Sapphire filled him in on what he said to Jesmind, what he couldn't remember, and he almost whistled. He had no idea any of that had happened, but he'd sounded plenty mad. Jesmind had accused him of being unfaithful, when in one case he never knew he was taken, and in the other she'd all but handed him to her competitor. It let him understand her seething hatred of Auli a little better. She thought that he was going to fall in love with her too, like he had with Kimmie, and if that happened, he wouldn't want to be a Were-cat again. She wasn't about to take his word for it, either. She obviously felt that him giving his word wasn't enough. He had the feeling that he may have made some kind of promise to her over Kimmie, one that he hadn't kept. A promise not to touch her or something, he wasn't sure. He couldn't remember anything about that.

Sometimes it was beyond frustrating. He knew that the answer was there, but he just couldn't remember what he needed to remember to find it. Having amnesia was at times a little interesting, since everything seemed new to him, but most of the time it was just a royal pain. People said things to him that he knew had to have some deeper meaning, but he'd lost the knowledge that would let him see it. Most of them didn't quite know how to treat him, and most of the things they talked about were beyond him. He knew that was why Keritania and Allia hadn't been coming to see him quite as often as they had before. But then again, Kerri was married--and Teleporting back and forth between the Tower and Wikuna--and Allia had her own boyfriend. He couldn't begrudge either of them the chance to enjoy

their own domestic lives, but a part of him felt that since they just didn't know or understand him as he was now, they weren't quite as willing to spend time with him. He wasn't really mad at them for it. Then again, he really didn't know either of them very well. He had to take it on faith that Allia was the closest friend he had and ever would have, and Keritanima was just as close to him as any other member of his family.

At least Allia made an effort to visit him every day. Even if was for just a few minutes, and often in the company of that Sha'Kar boyfriend of hers, Allyn, she would always stop by and have a chat, or they would go eat. Keritanima was much more sporadic, than that.

He couldn't really blame them. He knew they worried about him, but he was a stranger to them now. He was probably alot stranger to them than they ever imagined. From what he'd heard, he was very much different from the Tarrin they knew. He knew it had to be hard on them to come and talk to him and try to be upbeat and positive, when the radical alterations in both mind and body were so apparent, so blaringly obvious to them. He himself, to his own chiding, didn't miss their company as much as he knew he should have. He was a stranger to them, but they were also strangers to him. They called themselves his friend, but their friendship was virtually one-sided. Oh, he liked them, but he just didn't know them well enough to feel for them the same way they felt for him. About the only exceptions to that were Dolanna and Dar. He trusted Dolanna a great deal and he both liked and respected her, and he'd managed to learn that that was exactly how the Were-cat Tarrin felt about her too. That Tarrin, who dominated everyone around him, bowed to Dolanna in almost all things because of the towering respect he had for the diminutive Sorceress. Dar was also someone he very much called friend, but probably for different reasons. The Were-cat Tarrin probably had never seen Dar as a boy around his own age, someone that would understand the things he said in ways that most of the others never could. Dar understood becuase he could see it from a much more personal perspective.

There were also new friends. Koran Dar, he decided, was one of them. Tarrin rather liked the tall, dark-haired Amazon man, and he allowed him to do his magical examination without raising any fuss after he arrived. He answered all his questions as well as he could, and tried to relax when he felt that magic spell go into his mind and look around. He could only

remember what happened last time Koran Dar snooped around his mind, when the Cat had attacked him. He didn't want that to happen again, and from the feel of it, neither did he. He was very careful this time not to wander into the deeper parts of Tarrin's mind, only checking around near the surface and looking for any signs that the attack had done him lasting harm.

"Well, that's that," he said with a nod. "Nothing's broken. The dizziness and disorientation you're feeling will fade after a while. Until then, stay in bed, see if you can take a short nap, and it would be a good idea for you to try to get some food down. I'll have the kitchens send you up something."

"Thanks," Tarrin said as the Amazon man rose from the side of his bed and started towards the door. "Koran Dar," he called.

"What is it?"

"I'm confused about something."

Koran Dar stopped in midstride, turned around, and sat back down on the bed. "What's troubling you?"

"It's nothing really serious," he said. "When I got all those gifts, Camara Tal gave me something," he said, pointing to the little steel charm sitting on the bedtable. "She said in her note that she'd been carrying it around for years, and she called it a hope charm. I don't really understand what she was trying to say, but I know there's more to it than that. What does it mean?"

Koran Dar picked up the little steel trinket, turned it over in his hands a few times, then chuckled softly. "She was carrying this because of me," he said in a distant tone. "I guess it's another indication of just how she feels about me. A hope charm is something an Amazon carries when they have a unfulfilled dream or wish," he explained. "It's said that if you carry it long enough and prove your devotion to Neme, she'll grant your wish. I guess this proves that old story," he chuckled again.

"What, you reconciled with her?" he asked.

Koran Dar nodded. "After all this business with the Firestaff is over, I'll be going back to Amazar for a year," he answered. "After that, I'll be resuming my duties here in the Tower. The Sha'Kar already agreed to ferry me back and forth until I can do for myself."

"That was nice of them."

"Jenna made them agree," Koran Dar laughed. "She may be young, but that's one steely little girl sometimes. She's definitely your sister."

"I guess that's a complement," he said uncertainly.

Koran Dar laughed heartily. "Yes, it is. It's funny that she gave this to you. You're the reason she's not carrying it anymore."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because sometimes, Tarrin, the best advice can come from the most unexpected sources," he replied with a smile. "Your reasoning made me think about things. I love Camara very much, but before now, she was never willing to concede anything to me, because of her pride and her social standing in Amazon society. I guess I was never willing to concede anything to her either, because I've always been very indignant about how I'm treated in our society. We were both too stubborn to give a finger, and it cost us years of potential happiness," he sighed. "But then you come along and revealed to me just how she felt about me, and how much she wanted me back. It made me realize just how much I wanted that very thing. We got together a few days ago and put everything on the table. She made some concessions, I made some concessions, and we realized that we've wasted fifteen years on petty bickering and foolish pride. If we'd been honest with each other and done this fifteen years ago, we could have been very happy."

"I'm glad to hear that, Koran Dar," he said.

"I guess I shouldn't let you call me that," he chuckled. "At least don't do it when Camara's around. My married name is Koran Tal."

"You take her name?"

"Women are dominant in Amazar," he reminded him. "In our society, the man takes the woman's family name."

"Huh," Tarrin mused, mulling it over. "Well, I'm happy things worked out for you, Koran--uh, Koran Tal."

"Thank you," Koran Tal said with a smile. "Now then, let me go get that dragon back in here and arrange for a meal to be sent up here. Remember,

stay in bed for a while, no excitement, and if you can, see if you can take a short nap. A little sleep will speed along your recovery."

"I will," he said, accepting the hope charm from the Amazon man and holding a moment. "I think I'm going to carry this with me. Maybe it will help me out."

"What wish would you put on the hope charm, Tarrin?" he asked. "It won't do anything unless you do."

"That's easy, Koran Tal. I wish that everything works out alright. That nothing bad happens because of the Firestaff, and after all this is over, we can all go home and live happily ever after."

"That, my young friend, is the best wish I've ever heard," he said seriously, reaching over and putting his hand on Tarrin's shoulder. "I'll pray to the Goddess for that, Tarrin."

"Me too," he said, then he yawned. "I don't think me taking a nap is going to be a problem. I do feel a little sleepy."

"Then lay back and rest, and try to get a little sleep. But not too much," he warned. "I'll tell Sapphire to wake you when the food arrives. After you eat, then you can sleep as long as you want."

"Alright," he said. "Thanks."

"It's nothing," he said with a smile. "I'll see you later."

Tarrin watched him leave, then felt the bed tilt in a new way, now rolling over and over like an alligator rolling food to death. It was starting to get strangely entertaining to have the bed feeling like it was spinning, almost like he was flying. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, letting the spinning of the bed act almost like the rocking of a cradle.

Tarrin's breakfast with Auli was more or less cancelled by his confrontation with the Were-cats, but he did manage to meet her for lunch. After a nap, a meal, and another short nap, he had awoken free of the dizziness and mild disorientation that had restricted him to bed. By noon, he felt right as rain and ready to get up, and after Sapphire made him walk a

straight line up and down five times, she allowed him to get up and go about.

It was a meal both of quiet relaxation and subdued tensions. Tarrin liked Auli a great deal, but it was a little strange to be there and talk with her with Sapphire hovering over him. He knew that there was no way around that, but he was pretty sure that she'd be discreet if she happened to overhear anything that was private. Auli completely understood why he wasn't there for breakfast, and just laughed and told him better late than never. They took their plates outside and ate in the summer sun in the gardens, where the magic kept the air pleasantly cool and the sun was delightfully warm. Tarrin and Auli weren't the only ones out enjoying the perfect cloudless day, as many Sorcerers also sat with plates or books in their laps, doing their eating or their studying out in the beautiful day. Beautiful days weren't very common in Suld, for the summer days tended to be cloudy, and rain wasn't uncommon during at least some part of the day. At least usually. That summer and the one before had been unusually dry, not quite a drought, but rather a dry stretch that had gone on for two years. The rains weren't as heavy or plentiful as usual, and the winter snows hadn't piled up even half as much as was normal, even though it was more than cold enough to keep it on the ground.

Tarrin always enjoyed spending time with Auli, and she didn't disappoint him. He just listened to her prattle on about this or that, complaining about the punishment her mother had given her for what she'd done, complaining about how boring it was in the Tower, and then suppressing laughter when she mused aloud about the things she could do to liven up the place a little. She behaved herself immaculately, not even putting a hand on him in passing. She kept him entertained and happily distracted all through lunch.

That was the enjoyable part. There had been a little discomfort for him at first, since she was who she was. All he could remember at first was that night, and he wasn't sure if he should treat her any differently than he had. She solved that by treating him the same way as always, so he tried to do the same with her. The desire for her was still there, it had not gone away, but he found after spending some time with her that it was easy to control.

The meal went along fine until his hunter's senses warned him that he was being watched. He didn't look around, but he realized that one of the Were-cats was watching him, and from the burning sensation on his neck, he was pretty sure that it was Jesmind. He didn't do anything about it, but he was a little distracted from then on as he tried to figure out where she was without giving away the fact that he knew she was there. He knew that was going to be very hard, because he'd come to find out that if a Were-cat didn't want to be seen, they usually weren't seen. They were masters of stealth, just like the cats of which they were part, and there was really no way to find her unless he made a show of it. Furtive scans of the area produced nothing, and that was about the most that he could do. So he kept one eye on the area around him and his ears attuned to Auli's chatter, making sure that the Were-cat didn't jump out and attack the Sha'Kar.

Things did get *very* tense when two of the Were-cats showed up in the gardens. It was Mist and Jula, and to his surprise, they was herding along *two* Were-cat children. One of them was Jasana, but the other, he realized, had to be Eron, his son. Tarrin had never seen him before, and he was amazed at how much he looked like a little version of himself. He had the same hair, the same face, and the same lanky frame that Tarrin had, but he had black fur on his arms and feet and little cat ears poking out from his wild, unkempt blond hair. He was chasing after Jasana, who was taunting him over her shoulder as she skipped along, while Eron tried his best to chase her down without tripping over his own big feet. Eron looked to be about two, maybe three, and though he was much more agile and physically developed than a human toddler, his ungainly movements showed that he was still rather clumsy, still mastering the nuances of moving himself around.

They saw him and Auli and immediately changed course to come over. Sapphire flapped her wings a few times on his shoulder and reset herself, as if to vault off his shoulder and intercede, but they weren't running and they didn't look belligerent. Tarrin was a bit tense, and Auli looked decidedly nervous as the two intimidating figures approached them at a leisurely pace.

"I didn't think you'd be out here," Mist told him. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you," he said politely, unable to keep his eyes off the Were-cat boy long. "Is that--"

"Yes, that's your son, Tarrin," she said with a smile. "Eron!" she barked.

The boy gave off chasing Jasana immediately, but the girl passed him by when she saw her father. Sapphire evacuated his shoulder to the safety of the back of the bench as the two Were-cat children approached, as if knowing that she was about to get spilled when he bent over to pick them up. They both raced over to him, and Jasana jumped up into his lap and hugged him exuberantly. "Father, you're here!" she exclaimed happily, just as Eron reached Mist. He stopped short and hid behind her leg, looking up at Tarrin in surprise, and then gaping at Auli.

"Go ahead, Eron," she said, pushing him out from behind her with her large hands. "Go say hello."

The boy sidled up to him warily, then put his little hands on Tarrin's leg and looked up at him. "Are you my papa?" he asked in a slightly indistinct voice, as if not entirely sure of the pronunciation of the words he was using.

"Of course this is papa, lunkhead," Jasana said snippishly.

"Be nice!" Julia snapped in reprimand.

"Papa!" Eron said, then he climbed up Tarrin's leg using his claws. It was not a pleasant experience. Tarrin reached down and picked him up and held him as Jasana sat in his lap, looking into the child's intensely green eyes. So this was his son. He looked so much like him! He wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel, holding onto his son that way, but he did know that the first bonds of love were forming for him. Though he didn't know him at all, though he'd never seen him before, it really didn't matter. All that really mattered was that this was *his son*, named after his grandfather. Eron was his child, and he was beautiful.

"Hello Eron," Tarrin said calmly, holding onto him.

"Mama said you were sick. Is this what happens when we get sick?"

"It's a very rare illness," Tarrin said with a smile. "I don't think you'll ever get it."

"Nuts. I think you look neat like that."

Tarrin looked at Mist, who only laughed. He was surprised that he could form such complete sentences, and he was supposedly only a little over a year old. He guessed the Were-cats really did grow up fast, both in body and mind.

"What's it like to not have fur?"

"Just touch your tummy and you'll know," Tarrin winked. That wink turned into a wince when Eron's claws dug into his hip. "Not so hard, Eron," he chided gently. "I'm not as strong as your mother."

"Careful, cub," Mist warned. "Remember what I told you. Your father's sick, so you can't treat him the way you do me. You have to be gentle."

"Alright, Mama," he answered with a nod. "Who's this? Is the the mean lady Aunt Jesmind wants to kill?"

"I'm not a mean lady!" Auli said indignantly.

"She's a friend of mine, and your Aunt Jesmind has the wrong idea about her," Tarrin said mildly.

"Mama said you're trying to steal Papa," Jasana accused.

"What would I do with him, child?" Auli said with an outrageous grin. "I don't want to marry him, so what would I do with him except keep him as a pet? He's too big, I think he'd tear up the furniture, and I'm not entirely sure he's housebroken. He's really not worth stealing, if you ask me. Too much trouble, he doesn't know any tricks, and he eats too much. If I want to steal something, I'll steal a dog or a cat."

Jasana looked at her, and then a helpless giggle escaped her. Jesmind may hate Auli, but Tarrin saw that Jasana's opinions of her weren't quite so set in stone.

Tarrin put them both down after that, when Eron started to fidget too much, and he watched them play in silence for a long moment. He could see almost immediately that Eron was very much different from Jasana. Jasana was a sedate child, happy to sit and read books or play with her toys, where Eron absolutely could not stop moving. He had to run everywhere he went, and he had alot of trouble sitting still for very long. He understood just how hard it was for him when he came back over and climbed into Tarrin's lap as Jasana chased one of the many butterflies in the gardens,

chattering on and on and on at such a high rate of speed that Tarrin could barely understand him. He talked about his cabin and the trip to Suld and seeing Triana and being with Jasana again and how big his bed was here in the Tower and how big and scary the Knights looked and how everyone was so nice to him despite what his mother said about humans and how good the food was. Tarrin could barely put in a word edgewise, and eventually just gave up and let him ramble on until he ran out of patience with sitting down, then set him down and let him go chase Jasana again.

"He's talkative," Auli noted.

"He can't sit still a minute," Mist sighed. "It's a phase or something. He's been driving me crazy for almost a month now with it."

"I'm surprised he can talk so well," Tarrin told her.

"He's about where he should be," she answered.

Tarrin looked at Julia, and realized that she was being unusually quiet. She hadn't even said a word yet. He looked to her and then to Mist, and realized that Julia was almost terrified of the short, stocky Were-cat. She was doing a good job hiding it, but Julia tensed up every time Mist so much as moved. "How are you, Julia?" he asked casually.

"I'm fine," she said in a slightly strained voice. "I'm just watching Jasana for a while, that's all."

"Have you two known each other long?"

"Just a couple of days," Mist said, glancing at the blond Were-cat. "I haven't made up my mind about her yet."

Tarrin was pretty sure that there were any number of subtle levels present in that one statement. It certainly put Julia in a submissive mood, he could tell. She wasn't about to challenge Mist over anything. Then again, they said that Mist was the one that caught Jesmind. She had to be a pretty formidable Were-cat to be able to do that. She wasn't as big as any other Were-cat he'd seen, but Tarrin knew personally that size wasn't everything.

"I have to get back to my classes, Tarrin," Auli announced. "I'll see you tonight?"

"After dinner," he affirmed.

"Don't forget Dar," she reminded.

"I won't."

She smiled at him, patted him on the shoulder, then got up and gave the two Were-cats a sidelong glance. Then she sauntered back towards the main Tower.

"What are you two going to do?" Mist asked.

"Three," Tarrin corrected. "Me and Dar and Auli are going to go out walking for a while. That's usually a precursor to her getting us in trouble," he chuckled ruefully. "Of course, we think it's great fun while we're doing it, at least until we get caught. Auli's a very wild-natured girl."

"So I've heard," Mist said flintily.

"Don't let Jesmind poison you, Mist," Tarrin said. "If you knew Auli at all, you'd understand why she did what she did. It's not out of her nature. But now she understands how much trouble she got me into, and that's one thing she really regrets. We're not going to fool around again, but we're also not going to stop being friends."

"I don't think you tried very hard to get away," she noted.

"I did try, but after she cornered me, I gave up," he admitted. "And by then I didn't want to try anymore. I'm not dead, Mist. Just look at her. Auli *is* beautiful."

Mist actually laughed. "She is that," she agreed. "Not much else, but she is beautiful."

"I'm surprised you're not as angry as Jesmind," he told her.

"I'm not as foolish as she is," Mist snorted. "Unlike her, I *trust* you, Tarrin. I know that when you get your memory back, you'll choose to be with us again. I have faith in you, because I know you, and I'm not going to let my jealousy rule me as it is with Jesmind."

"You know me that well?"

"Tarrin, anyone that knows you at all knows what you'll do if you get your memory back," she said confidently. "Some of them don't like it, because they want to see you stay human, but they know which path you'll

take. That's why I'm not going crazy like Jesmind. That's why Kimmie isn't either. She's busy helping that crazy Wizard with that magic to restore your memory, and it's why she has the patience and concentration to be able to help him. She knows, just like I know. If Jesmind wasn't thinking with something other than her brain, she'd know too. And she'd know how silly she's being."

"I really don't know what I'm going to do, Mist," he admitted.

"You can't, not until you get your memory back," she told him calmly. "So what difference does any of this really make? Until they finish their magic, all any of us can do is wait." She looked at him. "And if you want to live a little like this, do some of those things humans do that you can't do anymore, have a little harmless fun, even do a little mattress hopping with wanton Sha'Kar, why should I care? It won't change things. When you get your memory back, who you were will be all you need to make your decision. I believe that with all my heart."

Tarrin was a little surprised by the vehemence in her voice and in her words. She really did believe what she was saying. She really thought that once he got his memory back, those memories would have him choose to be a Were-cat again no matter what happened to him as a human. He knew he couldn't make an honest, thorough decision until he got back his memory, but he was a little dismayed that those memories may take away his ability to choose. He remembered what that Goddess lady had said, that once he got his memory back he'd want to change back again. That he'd feel unnatural the way he was now. Was that really true? Would regaining his memory really make him not want to make a true choice between his old life and his new one?

That was an irrational thought, and he knew it. He couldn't decide which life was the better one until he could remember them both. If he'd choose to be a Were-cat with his former memory, didn't that mean that despite the strife and ordeals he had suffered, he had found true happiness in that life? Wouldn't that be enough of a reason to change back? After all, he had children and something approaching wives in that other life. Wouldn't returning to them make him very happy indeed?

Probably, but not until he really got Jesmind for her behavior. He was tempted to tell her he was staying human just to rub her nose in it a little bit.

He still intended to keep an open mind about that future decision, but he did feel a little better about whichever choice he made. He could choose either of them and have a very good chance to be happy. Either as a Were-cat or as a human, he could continue on after that choice and probably have no regrets, because he knew he'd be happy with the choice he made. No matter which path he chose.

So, if he couldn't lose no matter which way he decided to go, why worry so much about it? He should approach it like Mist said, just enjoy the time he had as a human and leave the heavy thinking for later, when he had all he needed to make that decision.

"I'm glad someone told me that, Mist," he said with a grateful look, standing up. "I think I will go enjoy myself. And the first thing I'm going to do is go over there and play with my children."

"I think they'd be happy to have you. Just watch out, Eron likes to claw when things get rough."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "If you'll excuse me."

"Go right ahead," Mist said with a smile, stepping aside to let him pass. The two Were-cats sat down on the bench he and Auli had been occupying, and Tarrin did just what he said. He went over and played with his children. He did so for hours, playing games, chasing them, talking with them, and just spending quality time with them. He came to know Eron very well, and found him to be a rather hyper boy, but also possessed of a sharp mind and an almost unnatural awareness of things. He also had a good memory, allowing him to remember those tiny things that he noticed that others did not. Him and Jasana were very close, siblings by more than blood, and they complemented each other well. He was very proud to have such talented and capable children as them. Just as he had with Jasana, Tarrin formed an immediate bond with Eron, finding the kind of love that only a parent could have for a child in his heart. No matter what, Eron was his son, and he would love him. Be him human or Were-cat, with him or away from him, dead or alive, it was an eternal bond that could never be broken. Tarrin realized that Eron was much different from Jasana in that he didn't show Jasana's devotion to him. He was sure that Eron liked him, liked being with him, but it was more like he was a friend of the family than his father. Mist was all the family that Eron had ever known, perhaps that was why he acted

like that. He knew that Were-cats were a lot different from humans, and their children were also much different. Was Eron's behavior part of that? Tarrin suspected that it was. It didn't make Tarrin love him any less, though.

After the two children had thoroughly worn him out, he lay with them in the lush grass off one of the gravel paths, looking up at the few clouds that were drifting in the afternoon sky. A glance showed him that both Were-cat females and Sapphire were still sitting on the bench, and to his surprise, Sapphire was talking with them. Then again, why should it be a surprise? Sapphire was a dragon, a mighty and powerful creature, but she also liked to talk with people smart enough to keep up with her. He felt that both Mist and Julia qualified. Sapphire didn't stay very long after that, saying something to the two of them and flapping off. Sapphire obviously felt secure leaving Tarrin in their company, and he didn't really expect her to completely suspend her own life to shepherd him around.

"That one looks like a bunny," Eron bubbled, pointing into the sky with his little clawed finger. Tarrin was truly surprised that Eron had managed to sit still for nearly ten minutes, as they looked up into the sky. Perhaps after all that running, even Eron needed to stop and rest a little bit.

"What are clouds made of, papa?" Jasana asked.

"Clouds are just fog way up in the sky," he told her.

"How do you know?" Eron asked.

"Your grandfather told me," he said. "He went to the Skydancer Mountains once, and he told me that the clouds are low enough that the peaks of the mountains are inside them. He climbed up one of them and found out that clouds are really just fog that doesn't burn off with the daytime sun."

"You mean if we were really far away, fog would look like a cloud?" Eron asked.

"I suppose it would," Tarrin agreed, impressed anew with his son's keen observational ability.

"Have you ever been to the mountains?" Eron asked.

"No. But there was this one time," he said distantly, staring up at the sky. "I, I remember...climbing up the side of a huge rock wall, so high that it

climbed into the clouds." He blinked, and then winced as a shock of pain hammered in his head. That had to be another memory. This one came with images, a dark stone face, seeing black-furred hands, huge hands, digging into the stone with their claws....

His hands.

Tarrin held up his arm and looked at his hand, comparing them. That furry hand was almost three times bigger than this one. Truly huge, and tipped with claws nearly as long as his little fingers were. So, that was what his hands had looked like. They were definitely Were-cat, that was for sure.

"Mama told me about that," Jasana said. "She said you did that in the desert."

"I guess I did, Jasana. I really can't remember."

"How can you remember that, but not remember anything else?" Eron asked.

"I only have little bits and pieces of my memory, son," he answered. "And sometimes someone will say or do something that makes me remember a little bit more. Like it jars my memory."

"Oh. If I hit you in the head, wouldn't that jar all your memory back?"

Tarrin laughed. "It'd probably knock me out," he told him. "No, it wouldn't do any good, son. They've already tried that."

"Oh. Are you sure they hit you hard enough?"

"I'm sure," he laughed again.

"I'm hungry," Eron complained.

"Me too," Jasana agreed.

"Well, so am I," Tarrin chuckled. "So let's go get something to eat."

After collecting up Jula and Mist, they went down to the kitchens and got some food. Tarrin stepped back and more or less unleashed his children on the hapless cooks and servants, who struggled to keep an eye on their cooking and keep the two of them out of trouble at the same time. Eron was definitely the worse of the two, trying to put his hands in everything, getting underfoot, and doing his best to disrupt the entire kitchen. They finally

decided on what they wanted, and they left the kitchens with plates full of food and a staff of exhausted, frazzled cooks.

Tarrin's good mood evaporated when, as they turned a corner, they found Jesmind standing squarely in the middle of the passageway. She was fully erect, her arms crossed before her, a very aggressive stance, and the look on her face reinforced that assumption. Jasana went up to her and tried to get her to pick her up, but Jesmind ignored her daughter, keeping a withering gaze on Tarrin. Jasana's crestfallen look was lost on her mother, and Tarrin realized that she wasn't going to let him pass without giving him a piece of her mind.

Sighing, he handed his small plate of fresh tarts to Jula. "Here, you take this," he said. "I get the feeling I'm about to lose my appetite."

Jula gave him a compassionate look, then nodded and took the plate.

Mist, however, proved to be more than just an acquaintance to him. She marched right up to the larger Were-cat and looked up at her. Tarrin couldn't see her expression, but it made Jesmind's furious look waver. "Get out of my way," Mist said flatly to her.

Tarrin learned one thing at that point. Jesmind was afraid of Mist. She reluctantly stepped aside, glowering at the smaller Were-cat as her ears seemed to strain to lay back, but did not. He didn't really understand Were-cat society very well, but it was obvious that Mist occupied a higher rung than Jesmind. That, or Mist would kick her butt if she didn't obey her, one or the other. Probably both.

"Come on, Eron," Mist said. "I think your father needs to straighten out your aunt."

Eron obediently came up and put his little hand in hers, and then padded up the hall. Jula stepped back after beckoning to Jasana, and the little girl evacuated the area between her parents.

Jesmind didn't waste any time. She blocked the passage again after Mist passed and pointed at him. "How dare you bring my daughter within spitting distance of that Sha'Kar!" she accused hotly.

"And how would you know that, unless you were following me?" Tarrin retorted. "Isn't that exactly what I told you not to do?"

"Make me," she hissed. "You're too weak to tell me to do anything, *cub*."

That was just about enough. "There are many kinds of power, Jesmind," he said with a glare. "I may not be able to *make* you stop following me around, but I can make sure it stops. Go pack your things, Jesmind. You're going to be spending the next few days in an inn."

"You wouldn't *dare*," she declared indignantly, stepping up to loom over him.

He didn't even blink. "I would dare," he replied evenly, completely unafraid of her. "If you won't leave me alone, I'll see to it that you're not here to bother me."

"If you do that, you're never going to see your daughter again," she hissed.

"An empty threat," Tarrin said grimly, taking a single step back. He'd never seen her get this belligerent before, and he was starting to doubt his seeming immunity to her wrath. "Jasana can't leave the Tower. If you go, Jesmind, you go alone. Remember that."

Tarrin realized almost immediately that that was the wrong thing to say. He'd just threatened Jesmind's rights to her daughter, and since she was half animal, the protective instincts concerning her children were very powerful. Jesmind's eyes erupted from within with a brilliant greenish radiance, making her eyes two glowing slits of evil green. With blazing speed, Jesmind reached down and grabbed him by his new shirt and then hauled him off the ground. She held him at arm's length, cocking back her other arm with her claws extended, as if to hit him with it. Tarrin responded out of reflex, causing his staff to come out of the *elsewhere* and appear in his right hand. With exceptional aim, he jammed the long weapon straight down and struck the top of Jesmind's foot, cracking the bones in the top of it. Jesmind hissed in pain and let go out of reflex, and Tarrin took a quick two steps back and levelled his staff at her in the end-grip. He was still too startled to be afraid, shocked that she would do such a thing.

Hurting her was probably taking things a little too far. With a growling cry of pain and outrage, Jesmind reached out towards him with those claws leading. Tarrin reacted quickly by jabbing Jesmind squarely in the face with

his staff, snapping her head back and faltering her reach towards him. The Were-cat grabbed the staff with her clawed and and wrested it aside, but Tarrin didn't abandon his hold on it quite yet.

"Stop it!" someone shouted, and then someone grabbed the staff. Someone short. Tarrin and Jesmind both looked down to see a teary-eyed Jasana, grabbing the staff and tugging on it with all her might. "Don't fight! You promised me you wouldn't fight anymore!" she accused in a sobby voice.

Tarrin let go of the staff like it was a live snake, not wanting to even accidentally hurt his daughter. To his surprise, Jesmind did the same, and the little girl yanked the weapon away. "I hate it when you two fight!" she cried. "Just stop it!"

"Cub, I--" Jesmind started in a contrite voice, but Jasana threw the staff down and ran down the hall, her bawling audible almost down to the stairs. She was running towards the stairs leading up to Jesmind's apartment.

Tarrin felt both embarrassed and a little foolish. Jesmind probably wouldn't have hurt him. There was no reason for him to react that way. She was just trying to scare him, that was all. Jesmind was looking towards her daughter. "I'm, sorry," he apologized. "I shouldn't have hit you."

"I shouldn't have grabbed you," Jesmind said in a reluctant voice. "I'll go talk to her. Julia, stay with him. We can't leave him alone."

Jesmind rushed off after her daughter, and Tarrin sighed. Picking up his staff, he tried to figure out how that had gotten out of control. She had made the mistake of grabbing him, and he'd made the mistake of threatening her parental duties with Jasana. He hadn't meant it as a threat, only as a way to deflate her threat to withhold his time with his daughter. But after he thought about how he said what he said, it certainly did sound like a threat. So both of them were at fault.

"Well, that was exciting," Julia said in a calm voice as Tarrin sent his staff back into the *elsewhere*. He was getting really good at that.

"I didn't mean for that to happen," he sighed.

"It's nothing major, Tarrin," she told him. "Jesmind is probably going to respect you a little more now. You fought back against her, and she'll have

to respect that. The fact that you're you will make her see that if she gets physical with you again, she's going to hurt you because you're not just going to fold up as soon as she tries to intimidate you. She's not going to hurt you, so she can't do that again."

"Maybe, but I'm really sorry Jasana got so upset."

"Jasana wants you and Jesmind to be a family with her," she said soberly. "That girl has alot more human in her than most. Most are like Eron. He likes you, but you're not quite so central in his life. I think you noticed that."

"I did," he agreed.

"Jasana's alot like a human child. She wants her mother and her father. Eron knows that you're his father, but it doesn't matter to him quite as much. The mothers are all the family that most Were-cat children ever know. Few even meet their fathers until they're adults."

"I didn't know that. Who told you?"

"You did," she said with a smile. "Now, let's get you back to your room where Sapphire can find you."

There were consequences of what happened, he was sure of that. It also didn't take very long to find out what they were, for both of them.

He wasn't there to see it, but Julia came down and told him what happened not long after he returned ot his room. Jenna had gone up there and basicly thrown a fit on Jesmind, ordering her to back off and warning her that she *would* be exiled from the Tower if she could not control herself or obey Jenna's orders. That his sister had the nerve to do something like that was one thing, but to have Jesmind agree was something completely different. He'd marvelled many times since coming back to Suld at how much his sister had changed, and that act had to be the biggest indicator. The mild, meek Jenna he knew from Aldreth would never have done that.

Tarrin didn't escape unscathed. Jenna unleashed her temper on Jesmind, but Tarrin got it from Sapphire. She railed at him for quite a while about keeping himself safe, about not antagonizing Jesmind since Auli was probably antagonism enough, and how he had nearly ruined her day by

nearly getting himself killed at Jesmind's hands. Tarrin tried to explain, tried to tell her that it was all just a big misunderstanding, but she wouldn't hear of it. She somehow managed to make him feel guilty over the inconvenience and hardship his actions had placed on *her*, rather than the fact that he'd just gotten into a fight with someone that it was not wise to annoy. Then again, Sapphire was a dragon. She'd had that *me* mentality long before she'd met him. Big and powerful creatures tended to think that the whole world revolved around them anyway.

Others weren't quite so fast to chide him, however. Allia came in for a visit not long after he returned to his room, and she told him that he should have hit her harder. Keritanima blew the whole thing off as yet another in a very long string of spats between the two of them. The circumstances had changed slightly, she had joked, but the end result never did seem to change.

For his own part, he was a bit sorry that it had come to that, sorry he'd made that mistake, but he wasn't sorry about holding his ground. He knew that if he knuckled under to Jesmind, she would just use that crack to split all his defenses in half and overwhelm him. Jesmind seemed incapable of taking him seriously, and he was pretty sure it was that Were-cat mentality that the others had described to him. They based almost their entire society on personal strength. She considered him a part of that society, but since he had lost all his strength, he had comparably lost all his position. She saw herself as over him now, and she probably was very upset that he *wasn't* obeying her. After all, to her, it was what he was supposed to do. She was thinking of him as a Were-cat, not as a human, and that was where all the problems were coming from. It was even worse because she didn't even want to *think* about treating him like a human, he was sure of that. He'd gotten to know Jesmind pretty well from Jula's descriptions, and he knew that if she told herself to think of him as a human, it would hit on that very raw nerve about his precarious position, at least in her eyes. If she thought of him as a human, he may decide to stay so. That was an irrational concept, but he knew, he just knew, that it had gone through Jesmind's mind at least once already. Unable to accept him as a human but unable to treat him like a Were-cat, it left her in a very bad trap. And it was a trap that was only serving to drive the two of them apart. Tarrin wasn't the Tarrin she'd

once known, and his change in personality was not meshing well with her treatment of him.

That was what was so frustrating. She could understand it all and be assured if she'd just talk to him, accept what was going on, but she absolutely did not want to do that. She didn't want to know him as a human, she didn't want to see any side of the problem but her own. She was not going to budge from her position, and that position was that he was a Were-cat, and by all the gods, he was going to be one again. That also frustrated him, because he was sincerely curious about her. She was the mother of his child, after all, and he had the feeling that if she'd just talk to him, they could be friends. But she didn't want to deal with him at all, not as a human. She wanted the Were-cat back, and that made her totally reject him as a human.

They were simple things, but he had the feeling that he was right. It certainly explained a lot about how she was acting. He described his feelings to Triana when she came to check on him not long afterward, and she could only smile at him in that strange way of hers and nod in agreement.

"You're full of surprises, cub," she said. "I thought a lot of what you are came from the Were in you. I see that was a wrong conclusion. You're probably one of the most remarkable humans I've ever met."

Tarrin was rather thrilled by that complement, and the fact that she seemed to have accepted the fact that for right now, he *was* human. "Why won't she listen?" he complained. "Why won't she understand?"

"Cub, there's one simple constant in the universe, and that's that there are absolutely no bounds to that cub's stubbornness. She's dug in her heels, and there's nothing that anyone can say to move her. Not you, not me, not even if all the gods came down from the sky and wrote it out for her on a steel tablet in flaming letters. The only thing that's going to change her mind is *her*. And that's going to take time." She snorted. "Jesmind was born with the two worst combination of traits. She has a short temper and a wide stubborn streak. They've gotten her in no end of trouble over the years."

"I can imagine," he sighed. That really was a bad combination. It meant that she was very easy to anger, but her stubborn nature would make her unwilling or unable to forgive or forget. There were probably a long line of

people she'd once called friend, but were now on her black list because of past slights that any other Were-cat would have forgiven long ago. "She's easy to anger, but she won't get over what made her mad."

"Exactly. There's one example of that that you'll remember when you get your memory back, and that's Rahnee. She and Jesmind were best friends, then Rahnee seduced Jesmind's mate at the time. That's not *too* serious among our kind, but it is against the rules, and Jesmind had a right to be angry. But where most females would have let it go after a few rides, Jesmind wouldn't. She wouldn't talk to Rahnee for over a hundred years because of that. That's how she is, cub. You can't change her, you just have to learn to work around it."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to do that," he sighed.

"Probably not," she agreed. "And since you can't change her mind, the best thing to do is just avoid her. She's more angry with herself right now, but even that won't last long if you show up."

"Why is she angry with herself?"

"Because she almost hurt you," she answered bluntly.

"She wouldn't have hurt me," he said dismissively.

"I'm glad you think that, cub," Triana sarcastically, said with an intense stare. "It's a good way to get your neck broken. Jesmind *will* hurt you if you make her angry enough. It won't matter how much she loves you or how careful she's being. It's all a part of our natures, I told you that. If you enrage her, nothing is going to protect you from her. She's tried to kill *me* several times, and she meant it when she did it."

"Why would she do that?" Tarrin gasped.

"Because I made her that mad," she answered bluntly. "And if she'll take a swipe at *me*, cub, don't ever think that she wouldn't do the same to you."

Tarrin was a bit worried about that statement. "Maybe, maybe I should avoid her for a while," he said in a hesitant voice.

"I think that's a good idea," Triana agreed. "And if she confronts you, keep what I said in mind. It's alright to stand up to her, but for the forest's

sake, *don't* get physical with her, and don't do whatever it was you did that set her off this time."

"I know what happened," he said glumly. "It's my fault, Triana." He quickly told her about his error in choice of words, which turned a rather innocent exposure of the falseness of her threat to refuse his rights to see Jasana into a very real threat against her rights to her daughter.

"That would do it, alright," she grunted. "You hit the one nerve bigger than her love for you. I suggest you don't do that again."

"I won't, I promise," he said fervently.

"Good. I'll be back later, cub."

"Alright," he acknowledged.

When Triana left, he was a little less assured of the whole thing. He knew now that Jesmind could be dangerous, but only if he did something *very* wrong. The problem he could see now was that he wasn't sure what was in the forbidden zone anymore. He'd got her mad and said some bad things to her. He still did not intend to break off his friendship with Auli, and that was certain to infuriate her. So maybe what Triana said was for the best. Maybe just staying out of Jesmind's way was the best thing to do. If he wanted to see Jasana, Julia could arrange that for him. Her or Mist. Either way, he could continue spending time with his children without having to worry about saying something in passing that may get Jesmind just that mad.

The incident with Jesmind passed over the course of the day, and Tarrin worried less and less about it. He didn't worry about it at all once sunset came, and Auli and Dar knocked conspiratorially on his door. He did manage to convince Sapphire that he'd be quite safe with two Sorcerers along with him, but he was sure that she could see through his subterfuge. For whatever reason she had, he was very thankful for it when she deigned to let him go out with Auli and Dar without her accompanying him.

That turned out to be a good thing. Auli wasted no time in taking command of the host, and she immediately bent them to causing mischief. The first act of the evening was to go down into the baths and change the

color of the water into something that very closely resembled blood. While people were bathing. It didn't really phase the Sorcerers, since they probably knew that someone had just used magic, but it caused a hysterical fit among the Novices and few Initiates that were currently using the pool.

That was just the start. Auli managed to get Dar into the spirit of things, and it wasn't long before Illusions stalked the halls scaring people, or the baked rolls cooling on a kitchen table were suddenly filled with live worms, or some of the suits of armor that served as decorations along the halls on the lower floors started moving around by themselves, figures in the paintings and tapestries started to move around in them, or passages and intersections suddenly seemed to change directions or disappear, thanks to Dar's Illusions. Auli ran the gambit of the Tower in that one night, coaxing Dar into helping her cause magical mischief, while Tarrin could only watch and struggle not to give them away every time he all but exploded into laughter.

In one short night, Auli and Dar had managed to infuriate, scare, terrorize, confuse or shock almost everyone in the Tower. From the horde of rats in the cellars to the rather risque image of a Sorceress holding open her robe that now adorned the top of the South Tower for all of Suld to see, from the cute, pink, floppy-eared, horse-sized rabbits that were grazing on grass on the east side of the grounds to the smith's forge that had water gushing out of the furnace on the west side, Auli made sure to leave no part of the ground untouched by their night's marauding. The worm-filled rolls seemed to be the pinnacle of the evening's activities, for it turned out that they were served to the Novices for dinner. The screams of horror and disgust were audible down almost every passage and hallway. Though it certainly was not a fun night for most of the Tower residents, it was grand fun for the three of them. The only place they didn't go to cause trouble was the Knights Academy, and it wasn't because Auli didn't want to go. She had this great idea to scare all the cadets and make them run out of their barracks, and all because she wanted to see how many of them were naked. But Tarrin intervened rather forcefully at that point. Since he was a Knight, he felt it his duty to protect the order from Auli. At least not without the permission of the Lord General, anyway. He knew that Darvon may very well approve of such a thing, to give the cadets an exercise in dealing with the unexpected. Auli saw no reason to do it if the "wrinkled-up old boring

Elders" knew about it or condoned it. But when Dar teased her about only wanting to do it to see the cadets naked, she actually seemed to reconsider. Perhaps Auli's desire to see the cadets naked was stronger than her resistance to the idea of misbehaving with the blessings of someone in charge. Tarrin promised to break the idea to Darvon in the morning, and that idea was shelved for the immediate future.

All in all, it was an absolutely wonderful night. Tarrin got to indulge in a little harmless fun--at least harmless for him--and it vastly improved his mood. After the day he'd had, he needed to vent a little, and Auli provided the perfect means to let him relax.

This wasn't to say that their activities went unnoticed. The next morning, Jenna called him into her office and blasted him for going along with Auli, but even she laughed helplessly when she told him about the terrified Knight cadets who had been sent out to round up the magically enlarge bunnies before they got into the gardens and did some real damage. It turned out that none of them really had any experience in wrangling horse-sized rabbits, and they caused something of a stampede among the herd. There were huge pink fuzzy bunnies everywhere, trampling cadets, knocking holes in walls, even a few that managed to jump over the fence and terrorize the city. Jenna may be the Keeper, but she was young enough to appreciate the joke. Her amusement ended when she told him just who had to pay for all the damage, and she gave him a blistering ultimatum that any further "walks" with Auli and Dar had better not lead to the same chaos the next day. She threatened to make the three of them go down into the cellar and round up every single rat that Auli had managed to put in there. Then she laughed and told him that one of the Sorcerers, a strapping big Dal, had literally fainted when he saw all the rats. It turned out the man had something of a phobia for rodents. Then she laughed again and told him that he'd better not see the bunnies, or he'd have a heart attack.

Despite the trouble, Tarrin had had too much fun the night before to be easily dissuaded, even by Jenna. Being a troublemaker was new to him, but he had to admit that it was tremendously entertaining.

The only one that even made him feel anywhere near sorry about the night before was Jasana. Julia and Mist brought them out to the gardens and he spent time with them. While Eron ran around aimlessly, Tarrin carried

Jasana on his shoulders as they walked along the paths between fruit trees and beautiful flowers. "You're being mean to Mama," she accused in a grim voice.

"She was mean to me too, Jasana," he said mildly, knowing what this was about.

"No, last night. You went out with the Sha'Kar."

"I did," he said calmly. "She's my friend, sweetheart. I like to spend time with her."

"It makes Mama sad when you do that, Papa," she accused.

"That's your mother's fault, not mine," he said with quiet adamance. "I wasn't alone with her. Dar was with us, so you know that nothing went on that made her mad at me in the first place. Me and her and Dar just went out and had fun, just like you and Eron come out here and have fun."

"You should be having fun with Mama."

"Your mother is furious with me right now. I wouldn't dare come near her."

"Well, you're not making it better by going out with the Sha'Kar."

Tarrin already knew that arguing with Jasana wasn't easy. She was a very bright girl, and she had a maturity and grasp on subtle adult nuances that were beyond any child her age. She was a fierce debater. She already had her arguments lined up, and she was assaulting him with them one after another.

"I may not be making it better, but I'm not about to alter my life to suit Jesmind," he told her in a voice brimming with parental authority. "And I'm not going to make Auli feel bad just to suit Jesmind. If she wants to be mad at me, that's fine. But I'm not going to stop my life because she is mad at me, daughter."

"I hate it when you two fight," she said in a small voice. "I hate it. I want it to stop."

"So do I, Jasana," he sighed. "But until your mother accepts me like I am, it's just not going to happen."

"But you're not going to be like this forever," she complained. "Why do we have to like you as a human?"

"You don't," he told her. "All I ask is that you take me as I am right now, *just* for right now. Is that so hard?"

There was a long pause. "I don't know. You're alot different now, Papa. I don't understand you."

"I know I am, kitten. I don't really understand you and your mother either, but I'm *trying* to understand you. But Jesmind won't even do that. Now do you understand what I'm saying? I just want her to *try*. I'm not asking for anything more than what I'm willing to give in return, but she doesn't want any part of it. That's what makes me so mad, kitten. Your mother won't have any part of me unless she can have what *she* wants. I don't think she's once thought about what *I* may want."

Jasana was silent. Obviously, Tarrin had struck on the one argument that she couldn't refute.

"I'm not asking for you to accept me as a human, kitten. I just want you and your mother to accept me as I am for right now. I want to spend time with your mother. Truth be told, I like her, and I'd like to get to know her better. But she won't talk to me, she won't let me get close to her because she doesn't want to like me this way. It's easier for her to be angry with me as a human, that way she doesn't have to like me."

"Mama loves you, Papa. I do too. Can't you be with us again? You promised me we'd be a family. You can't do that unless you're Were again."

"The future isn't set, kitten," he said soothingly. "Until I get back my memory, nobody knows what's going to happen. Not even me. That's what we're all waiting for. Once I get back my memory, I'll know what to do. Until then, we just have to go with things as they are, one day at a time."

"I don't like it," she said sullenly. "I want you back."

"I don't like it either, kitten. You have no idea how much I hate not being able to remember things. I see people they tell me were my best friends that don't talk to me as much as they would have if I did, because they don't know me. I see people and places and things and know that they once had meaning to me, but I don't know what it is. I know I loved people,

but I can't remember them. Don't you understand how that makes me feel? When I first met you, I was heartbroken that it upset you to see me the way I was. It hurt me to know that I couldn't even remember my own daughter's name. I love you, Jasana, but I can't remember you at all. That kills me inside."

"But it'll all be better, Papa," she said. "When you're you again, you'll know everything again."

"I'll be me as soon as I get back my memory, kitten. Whether I'm the human me or the Were-cat me doesn't make a difference, because both are still *me*. Until I get back my memory, I really don't know who I am or what I want, so we're all waiting until Phandebrass finishes his magic.

"It won't be you," she said in a small voice. "At least not the you you're supposed to be."

"That's what all this is about, Jasana," he told her. "To find out who the real me is supposed to be. And I won't know until I have my memory back."

"You still shouldn't go around with that Sha'Kar," she said, coming full circle. "It makes Mama sad."

"That's your mother's fault," he told her bluntly. "I won't bow to her, kitten. Not in this, not in anything. Not until she can accept me as I am. Until that happens, she can be as miserable as she wants to be."

Things went generally downhill at that point. It was impossible to explain things like that to Jasana, since she was a child, and what was more, she had set her mind in stone about how things were supposed to be. It hurt him that his refusal to be what she wanted of him upset her, but not even she could make him change his mind. He was more than willing to meet Jesmind halfway, but he would not budge a finger over that line that marked the halfway point. It was Jesmind's responsibility to come to him, and he was not going to give in, no matter how angry she was, no matter how sad she was, no matter what.

Jasana's teary retreat from him turned out to be an omen of things to come. Much to his surprise, the incident with Jesmind had literally torn apart his friends and family. A talk with Miranda over lunch revealed that she and Keritanima had had a very rare fight over his situation. "Kerri thinks you'd be better off staying human, but I think that you'd be very

unhappy if you did," she said calmly as they walked along the passage towards the kitchen. "She knows you pretty well, but I don't think she's thinking with your mindset."

"Why do you think I'll be unhappy?"

"Oh, you aren't now," she said. "But when Phandebrass heals you, I'd lay odds that you'll ask to be changed back. I know you alot better than Kerri thinks I do. You and I were very good friends. Better friends than Kerri thinks."

A talk with Kerri turned out to be an endurance match. She was angry with both Miranda and Allia, and she shouted alot of threw things a few times. "They're both so thick-headed!" she told him. "They're not thinking about *you*! Allia think it's all twisted up with your personal honor that you have to change back, and that's just damned stupid! This isn't about what you need to do, it's about what's best for you! I think she's being really damned inconsiderate to want you to change back when you may not want to! And Miranda had the nerve to tell me that she knows you better than I do!" she shouted. "As *if*! You're my brother! I know you a hell of alot better than she does!"

Allia's point of view wasn't much better. He met her after lunch and walked along with her in the halls with Allyn at her other side. She wasn't as vocal as Keritanima had been, but she was just as mad. "Kerri is being a fool," she snapped. "Doesn't she see that when you regain your memory, your honor will make you return to your former self? Your honor is great, and your obligations will demand you return to Were. For you not to live up to your obligations would be saying that the sun would not rise in the morning. It just cannot happen."

"What if I don't want to change back?" he asked.

"That will not matter to you, my brother," she said simply. "I will grieve with you if it turns out that comes to pass, but you would not turn your back on your duty. It carried you through your darkest times. Many times, only your devotion to the Goddess and the mission before you kept you sane. It was the one thing you could cling to, and I do not doubt that once you can see it with your old eyes, you will know what must be done. After all you have suffered through in your duty, you will not stop until you see it done."

As is only right and proper. The burden is heavy, but the honor it brings you is worth twice the suffering." She looked at him. "Duty is honor, and the price of that honor is blood. Honor and Blood, my brother. It is a tenet by which you have lived for two years. It is the Selani way, and you will not dishonor yourself by not doing what is needed, even if it is against what you desire."

The divisions didn't stop with his immediate family. Dolanna and Dar had had quite a spat with Phandebrass on one of the rare occasions when he stopped tending his work, leaving it in Kimmie's capable hands while he took a very rare but much needed break. As if that wasn't bad enough for the weary Wizard, Camara Tal had let him have it not long after that. Phandebrass consoled himself to Tarrin over it as he performed yet another magical examination to make sure that Tarrin's mental condition had not altered. He did that about every two days or so, to make sure that he could tailor the potion specifically to address the problems in Tarrin's mind. "It wasn't like I was trying to be contrary, I wasn't," he fumed. "I just mentioned that I thought that you'd probably change back after your regained your memory. I say, Dolanna almost threw her shoe at me!" he exclaimed. "She said I have no right to presume anything, then she had the gall to turn around and say that all of us would be better off if you stayed human! I say, as if that's not the pot calling the kettle black, it is!" he almost shouted. "I told her so, and then Dar accused me of wanting to change the potion to make you do what I wanted!"

When Tarrin confronted Dar about that, he admitted it willingly. "Of course I said that," he said. "You know how unbalanced he is! He once stopped in the middle of a battle to ask the enemy questions! You have no idea what he's capable of, Tarrin. And with Kimmie in there with him, and all her chances to coax him into changing his mind about being neutral, it makes it worse. When they do give you that potion, I'd be careful, my friend. It may very well be a poisoned pill!"

"He wouldn't do that," Tarrin said defensively. "I think you're being paranoid, Dar."

"I wouldn't put it past him, Tarrin," he grunted.

"I think more than one person is showing a little bias," he accused.

"Maybe," Dar said with a snort. "I saw how hard being a Were-cat was one you, Tarrin. You seem much happier now, and I'm hoping that you'll always be this happy. You've done so much for me, for the Tower, for everyone, I think it's only fair that you get a little reward for it. It just doesn't seem fair to make you go back to being unhappy."

Dolanna's opinion of the matter was surprisingly close to Dar's, as he coaxed an explanation out of her over a game of chess. "It is not right to force you to make a decision that you may regret later," she said adamantly. "I watched you for two years, my friend. I watched you struggle with the Cat. I saw it nearly destroy you, and I cannot bear the thought of seeing that happen again. They cannot guarantee that you will not have to go through another period of adjustment, even after you regain your memory. I do not want to see you suffer anymore. So yes, I would rather see you stay human."

Camara Tal's view on things and her fight with Phandebrass weren't quite as black-and-white as Dolanna's view. "That crazy old Wizard is going to cause a disaster, I just know it," she accused. "He shouldn't be making that potion if he can't keep his opinions out of it. I should have broken his arms. But then again, Kimmie's not much better. Her motives for making you change back are pretty damn clear. I don't think she should be helping him."

"I don't think he'd hurt me, Camara," he said carefully.

"He doesn't mean to do alot of the things he does," she snorted. "The man's a walking accident, Tarrin. If there's any earthly way to mess this up, he's going to find it."

"I don't think he's the only one with an opinion," he told her.

"You're right," she said honestly. "I think you should do whatever makes you happiest, Tarrin. I personally think you'd be better off as a human, but it's what *you* think that matters. My opinion is just that, *my opinion*. I just don't want to see that crazy Wizard and that love-sick Were-cat making your decision for you. That's why if you decide to change back, it'll never sit right with me. I'll never know if you chose to change back yourself, or one of them didn't add a little extra to the potion to make up your mind for you."

The only one that tried to stay out of it was Azakar. He stayed in the Academy, and it took Tarrin almost an hour to finally get him to come out on the practice field and talk to him. Tarrin and Azakar sparred very lightly as they talked, as Azakar taught him how to use the heavy broadsword and shield that the Knights commonly used. Tarrin had never used a shield before, and he found out that it could be just as effective a weapon as it was a defensive tool.

"I knew this was going to happen, Tarrin," Azakar grunted. "Bring the shield out, Tarrin. Don't tuck it in that close to your body. You don't hide behind a shield. You present it to your attacker and his blow. If you keep it tucked in like that, he's going to knock you right off your feet, and it won't be any good to you when you're on your back. And don't forget to keep your elbow unlocked. If you lock your elbow, blocking a heavy blow will break your arm. Bending won't break. Remember that."

"Like this?"

"Good," he nodded. "I guess with the people in our circle, opinions weren't going to be kept forever. But they shouldn't be arguing about it. After all, what we think doesn't mean squat. It's what *you* think that matters, and it's the *only* thing that matters."

"Camara Tal said something like that."

"Camara Tal's alot wiser than some of the others," Azakar complemented her. "I guess that's only right, considering she's a Priestess. They're supposed to be wise."

"I guess that means you'd be a good Priest," Tarrin told him.

He snorted. "I'd never be a good Priest," he chided himself. "I don't have enough patience, and I enjoy bashing people too much to be a kind and caring minister of a flock."

Tarrin laughed. "I guess that's as good a reason as any."

"I can see it now," he said. "My only advice to my parishoners would be to take a club and hit the other guy in the head with it."

Tarrin laughed even harder. "Well, you'd have a pretty tough congregation," he said with a big smile.

"I'd probably preach like a general," he went on. "I'd have the only church where the congregation could build fortifications and repel attackers."

Tarrin laughed again. "Those may be good skills nowadays," he said.

"Like it'll ever happen," he snorted lightly. "Shield use is a game of angles, Tarrin. If you present a good angle to the attack, it glances off your shield and overextends your opponent, which lets you strike back before he can recover. A bad angle will push you out of position and give your opponent a free shot at you. So it's a good idea to learn the good angles from the bad before it becomes a life-and-death matter."

"Using a shield is more complicated than I thought," he admitted.

"It's like any tool of war," Azakar said brusquely. "The man better trained in its use is the one that's going to walk off the field alive."

After an exhausting couple of hours learning how to use a shield, Tarrin returned to his room. He had a sore arm, quite a few bruises, and a newfound towering respect for the huge Mahuut Knight. Azakar was alot smarter than he thought, alot wiser than he thought, and he knew alot more about what was going on that anyone thought he did. He was always so quiet, so inobtrusive, like the Vendari, it was easy to dismiss him. But Tarrin learned that Azakar was more than just a really big man with really big muscles. He was very intelligent and quite observant, and he was much wiser than many of the others. His quiet nature and unwillingness to bring attention to himself were matters of personal choice for him. He preferred being in the background, that was all. Even though he was more than capable of arguing logic with Keritania and debating philosophy with Phandebrass and Camara Tal.

The division among his friends was very unusual. He'd never seen them acting like this before, and he wasn't quite sure what to do about it. It wasn't that odd for Camara Tal and Phandebrass to toss barbs at one another, but it was *very* odd to see Keritania bickering with Allia and Miranda. That seemed almost unnatural. It even tickled at his lost memory, because it was something that just did not happen. But now it was, and Tarrin found himself stuck in the middle of it all.

He hoped that his fight with Jesmind would fade from everyone's memory over time, but as the days passed, he found that it was only festering. The arguments between Keritanima and Allia were getting more and more heated. Dolanna and Dar talked to Allia, Miranda, Kimmie, and Phandebrass less and less during the meals and times when they were all together. Miranda got into a very loud argument with Keritanima right in the middle of the hallway four days after the fight, and their shouting was about Tarrin and what was best for him.

For them, it was a hotly contested issue. For Tarrin, it was embarrassing, humiliating, saddening, and infuriating that they would act like they were acting. It became less and less about him and more and more about what they thought was best. Tarrin avoided them whenever he realized that they were either arguing or about to argue or had just come from an argument, which was pretty much well all the time after about five days. The only ones that wouldn't argue were Camara and Koran Tal, Jula, Azakar, and Mist, so they were the ones that he started spending time with after it became very difficult for him to spend time with his other friends. The only time he could spend time with Dar was when Auli was with them, when her irreverence and her presence made Dar forget about his feuds with Miranda, Allia, Phandebrass, and Kimmie, when having fun or talking or just relaxing was all that really mattered. He hated seeing his friends fighting with each other, he was embarrassed that he was the reason they were fighting, and he was angry that they couldn't just drop it. None of them seemed to remember that the wait for the potion was the only thing that mattered right now. And they also forgot that the choice was *his*, not theirs.

It got worse and worse as the days passed, and Tarrin had a very hard time trying to avoid the issue. It also became very hard for him to try to enjoy himself. All his spare time seemed consumed with the problem, as he tried to think of ways to solve things without making everyone furious with one another and without making them angry with him, but there seemed to be no real way to do it. The only time he found that he could really forget and be happy was when he was with Auli. She didn't care about all that, she didn't care about the arguments. She could see that they were depressing him, so she did her best to keep him cheerful, oftentimes coming to get him in the middle of the day and having the two of them sneak off to get into

mischief. He welcomed her diversions, many of them calculated, and she never once tried to even touch him the wrong way.

That, of course, only inflamed the core of the argument between his friends in the first place, and that was Jesmind. True to his word, he did not talk to her after the fight, and she did not talk to him. She didn't just disappear, however. Many times during the day or evening, he saw her, or could feel her presence close by. She was still following him, still hovering near him, and he knew that every time she saw him with Auli, it only made her more furious. But truth be told, he really didn't care about that anymore. If it made her mad, then that was just fine by him. Maybe after seeing him with her enough, she'd finally realize that Auli was nothing more than a friend to him. Nothing more, nothing less. And Goddess only knew that at that time, she was probably the best friend he had. She was the only one that tried to make him feel better, the only one that really seemed to care about *him*, and not his predicament or his impending choice. She accepted him for what he was, something that nobody else could seem to do anymore, and it drew him to her like a moth to a flame. With Jesmind all wrapped up in her stubborn tizzy, most of his friends fighting with one another over what was best for him, and each day becoming more unbearable than the last, it was only natural for him to want to spend time with the one person that did her best to make him forget about all that and just have fun.

Tarrin found himself counting the days with a strange kind of dreadful eagerness, counting to the day when Phandebrass said that the potion would finally be ready. He was afraid of what the potion would do to him, its importance to him and his future, afraid to find out just who and what he had once been. But, on the other hand, it would finally stop all this stupid silly arguing among his friends and family, because once and for all, there would be a *decision*, and all of them would have to live with it for good or ill. Including him. He was worried and anxious about regaining his memory, which was probably only natural, but it would be a relief to finally have it back and be able to put all this senseless bickering behind them all.

It all came to a head about ten days later, when Phandebrass came out again for another of his rest breaks and a check of Tarrin. He submitted to the examination, a Wizard spell cast that was designed not to detect mental state, but only a change in that state. It was a very specific spell that had

been written down with the formula for the potion, to be used to help make the potion more effective for the recipient. "I say, Tarrin, your mental state is agitated," he said in concern. "It's enough to show to the spell. Whatever is the matter?"

"Nothing you can fix, Phandebrass," he said with a sigh. "Will it mess up the potion?"

"I say, not at all, lad, not at all," he assured him.

It was probably bad timing that Dolanna and Dar chose that moment to enter his room, but Tarrin suspected that it was more by design than coincidence. "The potion's going to be ready in about five days, it will," Phandebrass told him. "The brewing time is set, but its sitting time depends on the season and the room temperature. If it stays as warm as it has, I say, it'll shave a day or two off that, it will."

"Assuming the potion works as intended," Dolanna said in a dangerous voice.

"I say, I stand by my work, Dolanna," he said confidently.

"It is not your work I find unsettling, Phandebrass," she said. "It is Kimmie's. Has she had any hand at all in the preparation of the potion?"

"Of course she has," he said immediately. "I say, what better way to teach her the art of potion making than to have her assist on a big one?"

"That is what concerns me," she said with dark eyes. "Kimmie's neutrality in this matter is suspect." Phandebrass looked at her a minute, then he put on an indignant expression. "I say, now see here!" he said with impressive authority, sticking his chest out. "Kimmie's position may be apparent, but you go far in thinking she would use magic to enforce her own desires! And with *this*!" he said in outrage. "Do you know, madam, that if we don't prepare the base formula of this potion *exactly* as the formula states, it could permanently erase Tarrin's memory? I say, neither of us would even *dare* trying to alter the potion in such a manner! Why, to even suggest it is outrageous!"

"It is only outrageous to you, Phandebrass," Dar said. "We've seen how insane Jesmind's gotten over this. It's not a stretch to think that Kimmie may act the same way. Just not as obviously as Jesmind has."

Things degenerated *quickly* from there. Phandebrass had an absolutely apoplexy, livid that they would accuse Kimmie of doing such a thing, and accuse him of allowing it. Phandebrass started shouting in a language that Tarrin didn't know, but one that Dolanna obviously did, for her grim expression turned into a mask of outrage after about two sentences. Dolanna's demeanor of a calm, measured woman evaporated when she started shouting back at him, shaking her finger up into his face, then balling her fist and threatening him with it. Dar had to physically restrain Dolanna when Phandebrass retorted something, and Tarrin had a flash of memory, of little Dolanna clasping her hands together and striking a tall Sha'Kar man in the belly with them as hard as she possibly could.

They were angry, but Tarrin was absolutely mortified by the outburst. "That's *enough*!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. The three of them stopped shouting and threatening each other and looked at him in surprise. "I can't take this anymore!" he screamed, jumping to his feet. "I'm sick and tired of all of you fighting over this! Get out of my room! And I don't want to see any of you, talk to any of you, or even *think* about any of you until after I get my memory back! Do you hear me? Get OUT!!!"

There wasn't much they could say to that. Silently, a little shocked and dismayed over what had happened, the three of them filed silently out of his room. Tarrin walked in circles a few minutes to calm down, humiliated by their actions and furious that they just wouldn't let it go. Even though he didn't feel very calm, he opened his door and asked a Knight to find Sapphire, then told the other that he didn't want to see *anyone* unless he asked for them. He even went so far as to tell them to club anyone senseless who tried. They could tell that he was furious, and they'd heard the shouting from before, so it was probably no stretch for them to understand that it was his friends that had gotten him so angry.

It didn't take long for Sapphire to come. She landed on the bed, patted it with her tail to make him sit down beside her, and had him tell her all about it. She'd been with him on enough trips from his room, and had talked with him enough to know how all the fighting had upset him, but even she seemed a bit surprised that Dolanna nearly took a swing at Phandebrass.

"I know it upsets you, but this is a very emotional issue for them, small one," she said in a calm voice. "They may not seem like it, but they all love

you very much. They care about what happens to you. That's why this has gotten them so worked up. I care about you even more than them, but at least I understand the core of things. As long as you are happy, then I am happy, no matter what you choose to be."

"Why can't they understand that?" he asked plaintively.

"Because they look at you in a way flavored by themselves," she said simply. "Dolanna and Dar are human, so it is natural for them to want you to stay that way. Jesmind and Kimmie were your mates, so they want you back. Allia sees you through her honor, and Miranda sees you through your devotion. Keritanima sees only what she wants in you," she said sourly. "Each of them sees you a different way, but it's a way influenced by themselves. It is only natural for one to see another through shaded eyes. I often think it a great waste you were born a biped," she admitted with a slight smile. "Not all of them think that way, though. The Were-cat, Mist, she understands. So does Camara Tal, and Azakar. Wise humans, those two. They even impress me. They see the truth of it. But it's not a truth you can just say to another. It's a truth that each of them must discover for himself."

"Maybe, but I'd really appreciate it if they'd discover it already," he said petulantly.

Sapphire actually laughed. "Spoken like a true child," she teased. "It is always now now now for you young ones. The years will teach you that time is not an enemy, and each thing comes at its proper time and in its proper place. To rush such things is inviting disaster."

"It already feels like a disaster," he complained.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps now they will see with eyes untainted by what comes from within. Only time will tell. Just don't forget that no matter how much they annoy you, they are still clan to you, small one. Clan is all. Things like this, they pass with the blowing sands. Clan is the rock beneath, the rock the sands cannot change. Keep your feet on the rock, small one. Reach through the sand and always keep your feet on the rock."

Strangely enough, that made him feel better. Sapphire was a very wise dragon, and though she hadn't comforted him in so many words, her assurances eased his mind in ways that cooing and baby talk never could. She reminded him that all the fighting was because his friends cared about

him and only wanted what was best for him, and that in time, it would all be forgotten. The foundation of the friendships shared among their circle ran too deeply for them to be eroded by so petty a division. All he had to do was wait it out. If anything, the potion would end all of it. When he got his memory back, this would be a moot point.

He just had to wait for that day.

Though Tarrin calmed down after his outburst, his resolve became as steely as his feud with Jesmind. He told them that he didn't want to see any of them or talk to any of them, and he held by that declaration. He stayed in his room most of the day, and he made sure that the Knights did not let anyone past them. The only ones allowed into his room were Jula, Mist, his children, Auli, Jenna, Triana, Azakar, Camara and Koran Tal, and Sapphire. He exiled everyone else from his presence, and would not have anything to do with them. He wasn't angry now, but he wanted to drive home the realization that their petty fighting had seriously upset him, and it was not something that just saying *I'm sorry* was going to fix. He didn't want to hear their excuses, he didn't want to hear them accusing one another of misconduct, and he certainly didn't want to turn into a referee at some kind of grotesque mass wrestling match. And that would be exactly what he would become if he listened to them, he was sure of it. They'd come to him and lay down their case and want him to say they were right, and he wasn't going to do that. It would only make everyone even madder, and he wasn't going to justify their squabbling in any manner at all.

What his decision did was literally imprison himself in his own room. He knew that if he walked the halls, they'd track him down, and he'd have a hard time getting away from them. He didn't like not talking to them, but in this case it was a simple matter of it hurting him more than them. But he knew that it had to be done, or this stupid dispute was never going to go away. He had to make them understand that it didn't *matter* who was right or who was wrong. When he did go out, it was with a quartet of Knights and Sapphire, and that entourage kept everyone away from him very effectively.

The only other time he went out was at night, and it was with Auli. They would sneak out and get into trouble, though nobody could ever pin

anything to them because they were too good at sneaking away. Tarrin's fury included Dar, and that excluded him from their nightly wanderings. Tarrin missed his friend, but he was not going to give in on this. Because they were so good at sneaking, it also let them avoid his other friends, even when they were actively out looking for him. The nightly excursions with Auli weren't done in secrecy, for Jesmind's nearness touched on Tarrin from time to time, as she shadowed the two troublemakers and kept an eye on him, ready to pounce if she saw Auli do anything forward.

The exile of his friends and family made slow days become almost unbearable. Every day was a monotony of sameness, and he got tired of his room very quickly. Spending time with his children was always good, though the room was too small for the energetic Eron, and it didn't take him long to break things. Auli played chess with him--more like humiliated him on a consistent basis--and Jenna kept him apprised of what was going on outside his room, with both his friends and the potion. Mist and Jula spent a lot of time with him, talking to him about his past, and also telling him about Were-cat society and some of the other customs of the other woodland folk, what they called *Fae-da'Nar*. Camara Tal brought him books, and Sapphire actually started teaching him the language of the dragons as a way to pass the time. Tarrin found out quickly that he had something of a knack for languages, and though he couldn't make some of the sounds Sapphire produced for him, he found that he could understand their meaning after only a few hours of learning the basic grammar and structure of the language. Dragon was a language dependent on the shape of a dragon's maw, and they could make sounds that no human ever could because of the radical difference in anatomy.

Tarrin got quite caught up in his language lessons, and though he lamented at being confined to his room by his own choice, it seemed like only a blink of the eyes between an interminable half-month wait to Jenna's excited declaration that the potion was done brewing, and now only had to sit and steep for two days before it was ready to be used. This news startled Tarrin, and filled him with that same expectant reluctance, that crazy mixture of excitement at regaining his memory, and also fear and anxiety over regaining his memory. He had no idea what he would find out about himself on that fateful day, and he was both looking forward to it and worried about what it would mean.

For one, it would mean that the vacation would be over. He couldn't stay in the Tower, not when everyone and their brother knew he was there, and they knew what he had. He had to leave, to disappear, and he had to do it very quickly. The only reason he hadn't done so already was because he was literally in no condition to do so. In his present state, it would be comparatively easy for someone to capture him and take the Firestaff. Even he could admit that. In his present state, he was literally a farmboy on his first trip outside the protective domain of his village. He didn't know anyone or anything, and he'd be easy prey for an experienced hunter.

Another worry was the simple knowledge that he would again have the mind of the man he had once been. He was sincerely worried about what was going to happen to *him*. Would he, this Tarrin, simply cease to exist? Would he remember anything at all that happened to him during the loss of his memory? Would the Tarrin of the now be destroyed by the Tarrin of old, or would they join together and become a single person? It seemed a silly thing to worry about, but it had taken to him quite forcefully, and he worried about it quite a bit. But he was too embarrassed to admit his fear to anyone else. But it seemed quite a plausible thing to worry about for him. After all, no matter what anyone else thought, that other Tarrin seemed to be *alien* to him. He was radically different, an unknown, and he seemed ominous and quite dangerous. Fear for himself seemed senseless when they were both the same person, but it was a fear of losing his identity than losing his life.

Then there was all the fighting with his friends. He hoped fervently that him getting his memory back was going to settle those issues, but there was still a lingering worry that some of them may not accept his decision. Camara Tal had said that she wouldn't feel right if he decided to be Were again, because she didn't entirely trust Phandebrass and Kimmie. He was worried that that would be a prevelant concern among all his friends that wanted him to stay human. If he decided to be Were again, they very well may accuse Kimmie and Phandebrass of tampering with him. He couldn't have that. An accusation that serious and horrible would destroy the bonds of friendship that existed within their circle, and no matter how big and bad and dangerous and powerful he was, he knew that if he didn't have his friends, *all* of them, his chances of success would be greatly diminished. He *needed* Dolanna's cool reasoning. He *needed* Keritanima's cleverness. He

needed Allia's determination. He *needed* Dar's friendship, and Miranda's cunning, and Camara Tal's courage, and Azakar's strength, and Phandebrass' intelligence, and Kimmie's devotion. He was going to need all of them, and if they couldn't look at each other, then they couldn't be there when his life may depend on them.

Two days. It seemed a short time, but to him, it was an absolute eternity of frenzied worry and fear and uncertainty. He couldn't concentrate on anything but his own worry. He had trouble eating and sleeping, and he both didn't want to be alone and was distant from the others when he wasn't alone. They seemed to understand that it was a very trying time for him, and they all tried to be supportive without prying. Even Mist seemed willing to give him a little space without going so far that he felt their separation. Jenna was about the only one he really felt comfortable talking with, but he knew that her own loyalties were split within herself. His sister wanted her brother back, but the Keeper needed the Were-cat Tarrin to protect the Firestaff. He could only imagine what kind of torture that was for her, but she never showed any of it to him. She was always smiling, always supportive, and always ready to comfort him if he needed it.

Time had never seemed to drag by so slowly, and more than once he felt like a man waiting for his own execution. Counting every moment, trying to forget about the end but unable to think about anything else. The clock on his wall, that expensive gift, turned into both blessing and curse for him, because it allowed him to see how much time had passed, but also how much there was left. The ticking of the clock seemed to be laughter, as the fickle fates taunted him with every second about what was to come, and the fateful decision that very well destroy the tight circle of friends that had come with him so far, had been through so much. The clock mocked him all day and all night, unable to sleep at all because of his mental turmoil, the sound of its ticking like a raw wound inside his mind that only got worse with each tick. It to be so bad for him that he got out of bed and stopped the clock, unable to take the constant reminder that time was going by too fast, and that it could not go by fast enough.

The first day was an absolute eternity, but the second was even worse. It was like time had stopped, even going backwards, as if stopping the clock caused the gods to punish him by stopping the time that it represented, and he became very moody and irritable. Sapphire stayed with him the entire

day, trying to soothe him with her presence and an occasional supportive word, but it didn't do very much good. He had other visitors that day, as Auli came in and tried to get him into a game of chess but failed, then told bawdy jokes and stories to try to make him laugh. But there seemed to be little entertainment in it for him. Camara Tal came in and fed him Amazon *zamo*, a dish composed of raw meat, ground up and spiced heavily. She said that it would do good for him, and he had to admit that it was rather tasty, but about all it did was give him heartburn.

The only real excitement of the day that caused Tarrin to break his morose reverie was when Julia came rushing in and asked immediately if the children were with him. "They haven't been here today," Sapphire answered for him as he looked up at her.

"Oh, damn," Julia grunted. "Mist is going to kill someone. You know how she is about Eron."

"What happened?" the dragon asked.

"They snuck out of the apartment," she answered. "I thought they came down here. Mist is checking the gardens."

"It's not the first time Jasana's wandered off, I'm sure," Sapphire said calmly. "And you have a nose, if I don't recall, Julia."

"Jasana knows how to lay a false trail," Julia said defensively. "We already tried that."

"Then see Jenna. She can find her inside a heartbeat."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Julia said self-deprecatingly, then she rushed back out of the room.

Jasana and Eron turned up, so he was told, not a moment after Julia scrambled away, found in the baths, where Eron was trying to float a small boat made of oiled parchment and wooden sticks in the bathing pool. Mist didn't like Eron to go into the baths when there were humans present, but it turned out that he had been desperate to test out his boat, so he enrolled Jasana in his conspiracy to escape the apartment and delay the adults long enough to christen his little craft on its maiden voyage in the dangerous waters of the bathing pool. Unfortunately for Eron, Jasana sank his boat with a boot from a Sorcerer taking a bath while shouting that a sea monster

had appeared, sending Eron into indignant hysterics and angering the Sorcerer who'd just had his fine leather boot dunked.

The recovery of the children relieved him, but that relief didn't stand long in the face of the enormity of tomorrow. He sank back into his grim worry and excitement, a riot of conflicting emotions that made it hard for him to feel any one way for very long. His mood shifted violently all day, from anger to almost giddiness to depression to fear to almost neurotic concern to stark terror. Sapphire endured it with remarkable stoicism, seeing Tarrin probably at his very worst, consumed by worry and fear and uncertainty over what was to come. She did her best to reassure him, but his own worries and doubts gnawed away whatever comfort her words could instill in him, and made the day creep by with almost maddening slowness.

It was only raw exhaustion that allowed him to get any rest at all. He'd not slept a wink the night before, and the worry and chaos in his mind had expended most of his energy over two days, allowing him to fall into a deep, blissfully dreamless slumber before the sun even went down.

He was shaken out of his heavy sleep, and the return to consciousness made his heart seize. He opened his eyes and sat up quickly, and found Jenna leaning over him, hand on his shoulder, with Sapphire perched on her shoulder. "It's time, Tarrin," she said simply, with a neutral expression.

"A-Already?" he asked in a fearful voice.

She nodded. "Phandebrass is waiting outside, and he has it all ready for you. Do you want to drink it here, or somewhere else?"

That question seemed ludicrous to him. As important as this was, and she was worried about where he wanted to drink it? But then again, if something went wrong, he didn't want anything to happen to his room. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he'd already lost all his possessions once, and wasn't willing to risk it happening again. But if he asked to drink it somewhere else, Jenna may think he was being paranoid.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked, a desperate edge to his voice.

"I think you should do whatever makes you feel most comfortable," she told him. "I you want to drink it here or somewhere else, or if you want someone to be there with you, it's all up to you."

"I," he said, then he bit his lip. It was a silly fear, but if it would make him feel better.... "I want to drink it outside," he said. "In the gardens. I like it there. It's peaceful."

"Then that's what we'll do," she said with a pat on his shoulder. "You're already dressed, but I think putting your boots on would be a good idea," she winked. "You can't go outside barefoot. People will think you're poor."

The absurdity of her statement struck him, and he laughed despite himself.

After putting on his boots, Tarrin stood up and steeled himself. It was time. All the agonized waiting was over. No matter what happened next, he didn't have to wait for it anymore, and for that, at least, he was glad. He looked down at his little sister, wondering if it was her or the Keeper staring up at him with those beautiful eyes, and he nodded grimly. "Let's get it overwith," he said with surprising calm, belying the turmoil in his mind.

He simply could not remember the trip out into the gardens. Even much later, no matter how hard he tried, he could not remember. It seemed to him that one second he was walking out the door of his room, between the two Knights stationed there to defend him, and the next he was standing in his favorite place in the gardens, by a lovely rose bush surrounded by assorted flowers of every shape, size, and color. It was a place where two widely travelled paths converged, and there was a large white marble bench sitting on the edge of a grassy flat, one of the many grassy lawns interspersed through the gardens to give people somewhere cool and relaxing to lay. Tarrin was sat down on the bench by his sister, and he looked up at them. Jenna was there, with Sapphire silently sitting on her shoulder, and Phandebrass stood beside her, in dirty robes and still wearing that stupid pointy hat, but it was the surprisingly small black stone cup in his hands that had Tarrin's attention.

That was it. That was the potion that was supposed to restore his memory, and could very well destroy everything. But the time to worry about it was over. It had to be done, because if he didn't do it, then nothing would ever get resolved. Besides, he just had to know. He had to know who he had been, who he *was*, and if that was what he wanted to be once again.

"Drink it quickly," Phandebrass warned him, holding the black stone cup out to him. "Just to warn you, it's going to taste absolutely vile, it will. You have to drink it all, Tarrin. I say, you can't spill a single drop. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he nodded, reaching out for the cup with shaking hands. Jenna reached out and put her hand over one of his, and she gave him a reassuring smile. He felt a little better with her display of compassion, and his hands didn't shake quite as badly as they had just a moment before.

The stone cup was hot, strangely hot, and the blackish liquid inside it smelled acrid and unpleasant. This was it. All his worries and fears would either be dismissed or justified in just a moment. All his almost neurotic fear over losing his identity would either be confirmed or denied, in just a moment. No matter what, things were about to be settled, and the moment had already passed.

It was time.

He couldn't let himself dwell on it anymore. With a gulp of air, he raised the cup to his lips and let the potion pour in. Phandebrass was not lying about how terrible it tasted, but almost as quickly as he drank it, it seemed to numb his tongue, and then his throat. He felt it wash down into his stomach, like hot, acidic water, burning his belly just before that strange numbness began to creep in. His mouth and tongue felt weird from where they had touched the potion.

"How long will it take to affect him?" Jenna asked.

"I say, there's no definite timeframe," he answered. "It depends on how well the potion was made for him and how accepting his mind is to the magical effect. It could be seconds, or hours, but it *will* work. The time is the only variable, it is."

"How do you feel, Tarrin?" Jenna asked in concern.

"Strange," he answered. "I don't feel any memory coming back yet, but the potion is making my mouth and stomach feel weird."

"That should pass," Phandebrass told him with calm assurance.

The numbness took full hold of his stomach, and seemed to run its course in his mouth and on his tongue. Then, the strangest sensation

replaced it. It was a strange kind of hot buzzing sensation, like pins and needles in his mouth, and it travelled down his throat and gullet and started taking hold in his stomach.

"I feel pins and needles now," he said with a slightly slurred voice. "It's almost tickling."

"What was that?" Phandebrass asked with sudden, intense attention.

"It's tingling," he repeated, then there a very real sense of *pain* in his mouth. He put his hands over his mouth and winced. "It's burning me!" he said in sudden fear, as that burning sensation seemed to sweep down his throat, following the path of the potion.

"It shouldn't do that," Phandebrass said with sudden worry, looking at Sapphire. "The formula neer mentioned anything about it causing pain!"

"Sometimes formulae leave out the unpleasant side effects," the dragon said calmly.

The burning sensation turned out to be a pittance. All the sudden, Tarrin felt like someone had stabbed him in the stomach with a knife. He doubled over and let out a cry of pain, snapping his jaws shut so tightly that he felt like his teeth were going to shatter. But even they hurt from inside, by whatever it was the potion did to him, filling him from the inside with a burning pain that swept through his body like wildfire. Red haze filled his vision as he struggled to figure out what was happening, what had gone wrong, but conscious thought was scoured away as a pain unlike anything he had ever experience all but consumed him. It roared through him like a flood raging down a canyon, infusing itself into every tiny bit of him inside and out, suffusing him with its searing, burning agony and tearing a scream from him so mindless, so elemental in its conveyance of his pain that it made the two humans cringe and step back.

There was only one thing that touched his mind in that eternal moment, as the vestiges of the potion actually did manage to perform its task.

That he had experienced this once before.

Sliding off the bench, scrabbling at the clean, neatly arrayed white walkway stones, Tarrin tried to writhe, tried to think, tried to stop what was happening, but he knew that it could not be stopped. He cried out once

more, but it was not a cry of pain, it was a cry of outrage, of indignation, of fury, before the pain of it descended his cry into a mindless shriek of absolute mindless agony.

His right of choice had been *denied to him*.

Lost in the completeness of the internal fire, the pain of the changes did not touch him. Lost in the unending scream torn from him, he could not stop what was happening. The bones in his back split, grew in number and grew smaller, and every bone within him shifted, grew longer, became more dense. The bones in his hands split, cracked, thickened and then reset, enlarging his hands. The comfortable boots on his feet stretched grotesquely, then were split asunder as the same process took hold in his feet, lengthening and enlarging them as the balls of his feet widened unnaturally. Skin split and then resealed as the bones continued to expand, longer and longer and longer, blasting shockwaves of pain through him as the flesh was torn and the organs violently displaced.

But the changes to body were not the only ones. The Cat was released from its prison within as the first sweeping wave of the change took hold, as the body began to become accommodating to the mind. With it came the memories, two years of memories, a lifetime of memories. The bad and the good, the horror and the joy, the pain and the pleasure, it swept over his pain-maddened mind like pouring salt into an open wound, assaulting him from within as the pain shattered his body. The memory was there, all of it, every bit of it trying to sweep the others and the pain aside and take hold inside him all at once, augmented by the memory-kindling potion that was still in him, whose magic had not lost its potency despite the betraying extra addition to it.

Memory and change suddenly competed with lost power as the lost connection to the core of his power was restored. Tarrin's hands, still in the process of transforming back into paws, suddenly erupted with Magelight as the pain-maddened soul, caught between human and Were, found within memory and body forgotten capabilities, fought against the inevitable with all the righteous indignation it could muster. The shriek of pain became a powerful cry of fury, as rage overcame the agony, rage at this most shocking, most horrific of betrayals. The power surrounded him, infused him even as the magic of the Were-cat and the magic of the potion stormed

through him. The power picked him up from the ground as his hands became paws, his feet set into their permanent hybrid form, and his body continued to grow taller and taller. The back of his pants split as his spine extended out from its place, separated from his pelvis and tore through his skin, snaking out like a sailor lowering a rope flailing in a gale as the spine formed a tail, and that tail quickly fleshed out and began to grow black fur.

The Magelight around his body coalesced, then shimmered into the brilliance of the four-pointed star around him as the totality of the Weave sought to flow into him, through him, become part of him, make him a part of it. The Conduit that flowed through the Tower behind him suddenly erupted into blazing brilliance, shimmered with an audible ringing sound, responding to his pain, and the entire Weave around Suld shuddered and writhed as every major strand, every feeder strand, every wisp of every flow suddenly glowed with bright white light and sang out in the choral shimmering from the Conduit and through them, showing the mundane citizens of Suld for that one brief moment what had always surrounded them, the power the *katzh-dashi* utilized, revealing what had once been hidden before becoming hidden once more. The Weave was caught up in the throes of his pain, reacting to him in a way that it would not for any other, shuddering and shifting as the pain roared through him. His mind, with the memory-restoring potion taking hold inside him, was reaching up into the Weave, trying to find solace, find refuge there to protect itself from the eternal firestorm of the pain caused by the transformation. That pain was easing as the greatest of the physical alterations were complete, as the human ears vanished and cat's ears poked up through his hair, as fur quickly grew in on his arms and legs, along his tail, on his new ears, and his teeth shifted in their shape, shifted by the power of the magic that changed him, his incisors growing out into impressive fangs. He finally opened his eyes, but instead of the Were-cat's vertically slitted green, they were a blazing, incandescent white as the power of the Weave surrounded him.

The change was done, and it could not be undone. The pain eased, but the chaos within his mind did not stop. The magical potion that was still coursing through his body sought to restore memory, but found that memory already restored. The magic of the potion was touched by the power of the Weave, altered, and it reached into the Weave, through him, seeking to restore memory. As was its function.

Tarrin sucked his breath in when something inconceivable happened. The echoes of the Weave, the fluttering remnants of lost information, of *memory*, reacted to the powerful mingled magic within him. It called out to the echoes, and the echoes responded, flooding into him with a speed that nearly drove him mad. A nightmarish jumble of images, sounds, impressions, things and places and feelings and memories flowed into his mind. The magic of the potion, still powerful, augmented by the power of the Weave, drew in all the memory of the Weave and showed it to him in one great moment of utter lucidity. In the blink of an eye, the *entirety* of the memory of the Weave was laid out before him, like some vast, unfathomably huge tapestry that was both too massive to understand yet arrayed in a manner that made it make sense. In that fleeting moment, with the entirety of the Weave's stored memory open to him, he knew that he had touched the mind of the Goddess. He had seen what no mortal was ever meant to see, the answers to everything, the totality of existence, and it was more than his mortal mind could comprehend.

This is not for you, my kitten, her voice seemed to flutter to him from some great distance. This will only drive you mad. Forget what must be forgotten, and find peace once more.

Her power reached back through the Weave, touched him, and undid the magic of the potion. Her hand passed through his mind, sweeping away that which would drive him mad, but not touching many of the other things his mind had learned during that moment of utter communion with her. What Jenna had learned from Spyder, now Tarrin had learned from the Goddess.

The touch of the Goddess disrupted the power of the Weave flowing into him, through him. The four-pointed star which formed the heart of the symbol of the Goddess wavered around him, then winked out. The power holding him off the ground was disrupted, and he fell back to the earth.

The Tarrin that touched the ground, fell limply and blissfully unconscious to the soft, welcoming earth, was once again a Were-cat.

Jenna and Phandebrass could only stare in shock. Sapphire landed by his limp form, nudging him worriedly with her snout.

She couldn't believe it. The potion hadn't restored his memory, it had changed him back into a Were-cat! He looked exactly as he did the last time she'd seen him! He was just as tall, as tall as Triana, and he had the fetlocks and the drawn sense about his face that made him look more mature. His face was calmly reposed, a welcome sight given that but a moment ago, the mindless agony of the change had contorted his handsome features.

What had just happened? How did it happen? How could the potion change him back? That was *impossible*!

And Goddess, what had he done to the Weave? She thought it was going to rip itself apart! He must have regained his ability to use it in the middle of his transformation, and it was that raw, elemental creature, half human, half cat, and totally consumed by the pain, that had managed to make the connection. She had never sensed anything like that before, and it was a shivering display of the tremendous power her brother possessed, a power far greater than her own, despite the fact that they were both *sui'kun*.

She knelt by Tarrin, put her hands on him, feeling the hardness under his skin, knowing that the change was complete and thorough. He was a Were-cat once more.

"By the holy circles of Denthar!" Phandebrass finally managed to exclaim.

"Phandebrass!" Sapphire said in a suddenly furious tone, snapping her head around and up to glare dangerously at the Wizard. "What in the blazes did you do!?!"

"B-By my honor, Sapphire, it should *never* have done that!" he said in flabbergasted confusion. "It couldn't have! The power to change humans Were is a function of *magic*, and it's not Wizard magic. It's Druidic by nature, and you know we can't duplicate that!"

"Perhaps there was some part of it left in him," Sapphire said, but Jenna reached down and picked up the cup. Phandebrass was right. There was *no way* the potion should have done that. Only a Were-cat could change him back into a Were-cat. She sent searching flows down into the cup, searching the traces of liquid still clinging to its interior as a light film, knowing what she would find, but dreading the enormity of the consequences if she did.

It was there. Goddess, it was the worst thing that could have been. She shook her head and groaned audibly.

"What is it?" Sapphire demanded of her.

"The potion didn't do it," she said in a trembling voice. "There's Were-cat blood in the cup."

She held the cup in trembling hands, her gaze down on her brother. "Someone put Were-cat blood in the cup," she said, tears actually coming into his eyes. "Someone--" She couldn't finish, breaking down into wracking sobs. Phandebrass knelt beside her and comforted her, and she cried into his robe unashamedly.

"Someone changed him against his will," Sapphire said in a voice of doom. "And the list of suspects is a very short one." She hissed, and lightning crackled around her body, a display of her growing fury. "I will find out who did this and make them wish they were never born!" she vowed in a voice that cracked like a whip.

Someone had changed him against his will, and Jenna knew that more than blood was going to be spilled over it. Someone was going to pay, and from the fury in Sapphire's voice, they were going to pay dearly.

Goddess help her, whoever she is, Jenna thought, knowing that it had to be one of the females. Jesmind, Kimmie, Jula, Triana, or Mist. One of them had to do it. Nobody else *could*. The only question was which one.

Which one would die because of their impatience.

Chapter 7

He knew before he even woke up.

It had been so long...so long. The presence of the Cat within him was all he needed to tell him what had happened. It could not be there any other way, even if the potion did restore his memory. Without the magic, the mind of the Cat could not exist. He could feel that too, the subtle magical power of Were infused into him once more, linked into the All by delicate threads. As he rose up from the blackness, he knew. He knew what had happened, because he knew that he was once again not alone within his own mind.

He had been turned once again.

The memory of it was blurred. It had happened when he drank the potion, that much he could remember clearly. He could remember it so clearly because he had understood what was going on, and had sensed the truth of it. The potion hadn't turned him, something *in* the potion had done it. Someone had put something in the potion, blood or spit, and it had turned him. He remembered the absolute outrage he'd felt when he realized that, when he realized that someone had stolen from him the one thing he had left to him with his amnesia, the only thing that had given him any sense of control over his own life. The right to choose his own path.

Someone had chosen it for him, and even now he was absolutely furious about it. It was not the rage of the Cat, however, it was the cold, ruthless kind of anger that came from the human in him. The human Tarrin had coveted that right, the right to be whatever he chose to be, and it was taken away from him. There weren't enough words in existence to describe how that made him feel. Shock, outrage, indignation, they were paltry attempts to gauge the depths of his emotion over what had been done to him. That towering resentment had been the first thing to awaken in his mind as he climbed from the black void, and it was joined by his icy anger, his absolute hatred of whoever had done it to him.

But such a thing had trouble competing against the sense of reawakening he began to feel. Senses long throttled by human inadequacy were again restored to him, and he could smell absolutely everything in the room. The ears that were now on top of his head could hear the silence in the room, but could also hear the breathing of the two humans who were standing outside his door, with the occasional clink or shifting of metal armor. Knights. He could feel every finger of the soft linen sheets against his skin, as well as the soft leather of the trousers that were still on him. The room had lingering traces of his own scent, but the scent was different to him, seemed unusual. It was the scent of him as a human.

Opening his eyes slowly, seeing the intensity of the colors, the brightness of the glowglobe hanging in the center of the room, he knew that he was alone. A body that felt light, agile, powerful, responded to his commands as he rose up from the pillow, swung his feet over the edge of the bed, and set them down where not that morning the human Tarrin would have needed a stepstool to set his feet on something solid while sitting in the bed. He focused on his arm and paw, mystified over seeing the black fur once again, turning his paw over and looking at the dark pads. He clenched his fist, feeling every muscle and tendon shift as his body obeyed his commands, feeling once more the power in that act.

There was more than that. The Weave was much more present to his eyes now than it had been before. The strands were more than ghostly, almost solid to his eyes, but he found that he could sort of ignore them and make them disappear from his sight when he needed to see behind them. The sense of the Weave was much stronger as well, and he could feel it out there, almost aching to have him wield it, its power gathering around him in preparation for any task he set it to do. He was used to that effect from before, but it was much stronger now than it had been, as the strands not only pulled towards him, but saturated with the floating energy of the Weave that wasn't tied to the currents of the strands. He attracted both the Weave and the extra power within it, and he could feel the flows almost pulling free of the strands of their own volition, as if he were some kind of powerful magnet drawing iron filings across a table.

It was the strangest feeling. The human Tarrin had been afraid of losing his identity with the return of the memories, but it had turned out to be a false fear. That part of him was still there, merged once more with the

collective whole of human, Cat, memories, fears, and mental impulses that formed the core of his personality. He had not become another person, he had merely been restored to the person he had once been. All the memories of his time as a human were there, neatly arranged with the older memories that had been denied to him. The newness of things was gone now, though, and in a way he regretted that. The human Tarrin had been trusting, almost naive, and had had a youthful innocence about the world that made everything seem interesting and good. But that was gone now, educated by the dark experiences of memory, and he knew things would never seem so fresh or new to him again.

Putting his face in his paws for a moment, he tried to mull through the fresh chaos in his mind, as the last traces of the potion were still trying to affect him. What they did, curiously enough, was open the entirety of his own memory to him, and he realized sitting there that he could remember *absolutely everything* that had happened to him since before his own birth. The images and fear of being born were as clear as they had happened yesterday. Hour by hour, day by day, month by month, year by year, the accumulated events of his entire life were fresh in his mind, rekindled from the darkest recesses of himself by the magical power of the potion Phandebrass had crafted for him. The good and the bad, the proud accomplishments and the humiliating mistakes, the moments of boredom and the moments of abject terror, they were all there, arranged for him within his mind, able to be called forth whenever he wished. He found it curious that he could literally see within his mind's eye every page of every book he had ever read, even ones he had but paged through absently. Every building in every city, every face that met his eyes, every sound, every smell, every thought that had crossed his mind, all of it was there. It didn't cause him any pain or discomfort; truth be told, it was more a curiosity than anything else to him.

There were other things there as well. He distinctly remembered the potion getting swept up in the power of both the Weave and the All as they reconnected with him, and it had caused the potion's power to rise up into the Weave. The entirety of the Weave's drifting echoes of memory were called to him, and he could remember them filling him with thousands and thousands of years of memory, using him to complete themselves. He also remembered the Goddess reaching into his mind and wiping away those

things no mortal was ever meant to see, those things that would have destroyed his mind were he given any chance to reflect on them. She had been very selective, very careful in her pruning of that lore, though. She had not touched much of it, like the history of the order, the Sorcerers who had lived before him, the things they had accomplished.

It was all there. Ten thousands years of history, the complete history of the *katzh-dashi*. It was all there, and he was amazed. The *katzh-dashi* had originally been created to do just what he was doing. They were the guardians of the Firestaff, using their power to protect the artifact from misuse. They had been formed in the first days of the Urzani dynasty, just after the Urzani completed their conquest of the Known World, and but days after the Firestaff was very nearly used by someone. They had been formed by the Goddess, formed from the only Sorcerers at that time, the Urzani themselves, formed to take possession of the Firestaff and keep it out of the hands of those who would misuse its power. At that time, there was no Wizard magic, only Sorcerers, Priests, and Druids, and only Sorcerers had the numbers and the detachment necessary to undertake such a mission. They set their roots in Suld, which at that time was nothing but a plain by the sea, where the first of the majestic towers had been constructed to take advantage of the Conduit that rested there. They hid the Firestaff in the Tower, and settled in to strengthen their powers of Sorcery to better defend the artifact from those who would dare try to use its power.

Tarrin knew that Suld had literally built up around the Tower, but he hadn't known that it was the *Urzani* that had originally founded Suld. And it made him realize that Suld was probably the oldest city in the entire world. Not even Dala Yar Arak had been in existence as long as Suld had.

That exploration of their powers was what caused the foundations of what they knew now to come to pass. A special Sorcerer was born, one with powers far greater than any other, and this Sorcerer survived being Consumed. She *crossed over* into a new realm of magical power, and she became the first of what were now known as the *sui'kun*. That woman was Spyder, and her power had caused her to become the Empress of the Urzani Empire, the absolute ruler of the entire Known World. But she disappeared not long after being put on the throne, and Tarrin knew that she had given up the duties of the empire to answer the call of the Goddess to become the

Guardian of Haven, the only place in the world where magical gateways that led into the world from others existed.

The Goddess was the soul of the order, but to Tarrin's surprise, Spyder was its mother. It was she who showed the others the path into the realm of the Weavespinners, and it was her footsteps in which everyone else walked. Spyder was the first *sui'kun*, the first of the seven to be born, and the only one to survive to this day.

The destruction of the Urzani empire thousands of years later had caused them to lose the staff, having it stolen by someone who had fallen under the spell of its corrupting influence, and over time their self-imposed mission changed from protecting the staff to exploring the limits of the power of Sorcery as the realities of their situation changed drastically. It was those Urzani that had been among the first to approach the other races after losing their homes, beseeching the humans how had taken over the ancient city of Suld--ancient even then!-- to allow them to return to their beloved Tower and exist among them in peace. The humans agreed, and that started the slow and harmonious integration of the Urzani back into the lands of civilization, their long exile finally ended.

Then came the Blood War. The *katzh-dashi* rose up from their study to try to repair the damage done by Val and the Firestaff, and ended up forming a pivotal role in the defense of the world against the Demons. The vast majority of the *katzh-dashi*, tempered by their thousands of years of peaceful study, had come to reject war and devoted themselves to peace, but also devoted themselves to protecting the world from another Demon incursion. They were the ones that became the Sha'Kar, and it caused the order's focus to shift once more, from quiet study to both defending the Firestaff and protecting the world from Demonspawn. The Firestaff, they decided, was best handled by completely removing it from all possible temptation, so it was placed in the care of a mighty dragon and sent off to a lone island, thousands of longspans from any shore, where it would be well protected, and also where its power to corrupt could do no harm.

They continued to grow in power and learning, spreading to other Towers, and establishing themselves as the most powerful magical force in the world. Not even the introduction of Wizard magic by strange visitors from beyond the boundaries of the fabric of the universe, strange men from

other dimensions of reality, weakened the might of the *katzh-dashi*. It was they who caused the Age of Power to come to be, as the learning of the Sorcerers and the growth of their numbers and influence quite literally affected the entire world. The Weave grew strong, rich, and it touched all the people of the world, giving the most mundane soul at least a minor amount of magical capability.

But the Age of Power ended in the Breaking. Not even the memory of that time he had gained from the Weave told him much about it, only that some group attacked two of the Towers and managed to kill two of the *sui'kun*. The Weave, which depended on the *sui'kun*, faltered, and then it tore. That caused the Breaking, which killed uncountable numbers of Sorcerers, Wizards, and Priests and sent the entire world spiralling down into a black century of war, famine, pestilence, and upheaval. The Sha'Kar vanished, thought to be extinct, and all the rich history and lore of the order, all their magical accomplishments, were lost as well, locked away in books that the descendants of the Ancients could no longer read.

It was a rich history, and Tarrin felt honored to be a recipient of that lore. He knew that what he knew was what Jenna had learned from Spyder, or at least parts of it. Spyder had been alive through almost all of the history of the *katzh-dashi*. She was the very first of the *sui'kun*, and in many ways, she was the icon of the order, the literal handmaiden of the Goddess. He felt even more honored that she had personally trained him.

Knowing where the order came from and where it was going was important, he could see that now. The *katzh-dashi* had lacked direction after the Breaking, lost its history, and finally things were getting back in the direction they were supposed to go. It would be thousands of years before the number of Sorcerers were enough to cause another Age of Power. Perhaps next time there was one, they'd have the wisdom of experience to not cause another Breaking.

It was a very strange thing to wake up with memories that weren't there when one went to sleep. That meant the lore of the Weave as much as it did regaining all the memory he had lost to the curse placed on the Firestaff. But his memory was whole again, beyond whole, and it was senseless to dwell on it for very long. It was over, it was done, he had been graced with

knowledge beyond the scope of his awareness, and what was more important, he was Were once more.

He looked at his paws again, looking at the fetlocks on his wrists. Now that he had his memory back, now that he could look into his own feelings, he had to admit it to himself. Miranda was right. Given what he knew now, were he still human, he *would* have chosen to be turned again. The memory of himself as a human seemed strange, bizarre, almost frightening. He had been so *weak*. So dependent on others, so *limited*. He would never have been happy like that, not so long as the memory of what he had once been was with him. Despite the pain he had suffered, despite the terrible things he had done as a Were-cat, he knew that the change had been absolute. He *was* a Were-cat, and always would be, in mind and sprit if not in body.

But that did *not* justify what had been done to him. Despite the fact that he would have chosen to be Were, it did not make this alright. He had been denied the one thing the Goddess herself wanted for him, the right to choose his own future, his own fate, for good or ill. He had been violated at the core of his being, in the most intimate manner possible, and he meant to find out who did this to him and unleash his wrath. Someone had changed him back, had done it against his will, and what was most outrageous, had done it in the most cowardly way imaginable. The culprit didn't even have the guts to look him in the eye and bite him. No, this person had put Were-cat blood in the potion or had spat in it, not wanting him to know who had done it.

The possibilities were rather obvious. Of everyone involved, Jesmind and Kimmie had the most at stake. But that didn't mean that one of them did it. It could have been any of the females, even Jula, though he had the feeling that it wasn't her. Jula would never deprive him of the one thing she herself probably wished was hers. The right to choose. Jesmind certainly was capable of it, and so was Kimmie. Spiking the potion would be more Kimmie's approach than Jesmind, since she'd probably just bite him if she meant to change him back.

Whoever it was, she was going to be *very* sorry she did it. He didn't care who it was who did it. First he was going to beat her to within an finger's breadth of her life, then he probably wouldn't speak to her again for a *very* long time. As angry as he was, he was more than capable of even thrashing

Kimmie, who was pregnant with his child. Not even that would protect her from his vengeance if it turned out that she was the one who did this to him. He wouldn't kill whoever did it, but she'd be on his bad side for the next few hundred years. It may take that long for her to heal from the thrashing he intended to lay down on her.

Standing up, feeling the lightness and total freedom that was his once again, the freedom to jump incredibly high, to run faster than a horse, feeling his unnatural Were-cat strength flow through him, he padded over to the chest and pulled out one of the shirts that the tailor Cassiter had made for him. It was too small for him now, but that was easily fixed. As if the time as a human had never happened, Tarrin wove a quick spell to enlarge the garment, feeling full and complete control over the Weave once again.

Strange. The Goddess said he wouldn't have the height, but she was wrong. He was just as he'd been before the Firestaff stripped him of his Were nature, eye to eye with Triana. And he felt exactly the same as he had before that happened to him, as if being a human had never happened. All he had was the memory of it, and the influences of that time on his outlook now.

Whatever became of this, he knew it had to be fast. The return of his memory meant that the weight of the mission was again heavy on him, and he knew that the Tower was not a safe place. He could spend no more than three days here. That was all. Three days to make sure there were no lingering side-effects of the turning and the potion, and three days to track down the culprit and punish her in the most brutal manner possible without killing her. After those three days, whether he found her or not, he had to leave. It was only two months before the Firestaff activated, and summer would soon be winding down into fall. If he wanted to travel, it would be best to get out there and get a jump on the autumn storms, and give him as much time as possible to lose any pursuers and disappear with the Firestaff. Time was of the essence now, both for him and for anyone who intended to try to take the Firestaff away from him. He needed time to escape, and they needed the time to find him.

He already knew exactly where he was going to go. The one place in all of Sennadar no man, no matter how desperate or insane he was, would *dare* set foot. The Desert of Swirling Sands. It was also one of the few places on

Sennadar where a man could hide from an army with a reasonable chance of getting away with it. The brutal heat and rugged terrain would work to his advantage, and his magical abilities would allow him to draw those pursuers deeper and deeper into the Holy Mother's deadly embrace and let the desert do the killing for him. And then there were the Selani. Even without them, the desert was the ideal place to hide, but not even the most fanatical army was going to risk a confrontation with the Selani in their homeland. They'd get annihilated, and they knew it. With the Selani and the desert itself to protect him, he knew that he could do what the Goddess needed of him, and that was keep the Firestaff away from everyone else.

It wouldn't take him long to get there, and it would be a *very* short trip if he could get Ianelle to teach him how to Teleport. If he could learn how to do that, protecting the Firestaff was going to be a very simple affair. If he found himself threatened, he could jump halfway across the Known World in the blink of an eye. He'd like to see them follow him after he did *that*.

No, wait...he already *did* know how to Teleport. That was right there with the memories, and with calm surprise, he realized that the vast majority of the spells that had been lost to the human *katzh-dashi* lived on within him now. He had absorbed them when the magic potion sucked in all the memory of the Weave, and the Goddess had not bothered to erase them from his memory. He knew how to Teleport, he knew every spell that Auli had used in her rampages of troublemaking through the Tower, he knew the spells that Syllis and the old Council had used to control the Sha'Kar. He even knew spells that they did not know, such as how to safely Transmute into certain known forms. Shapeshifting. Shapeshifting through Sorcery, an art lost since before the Breaking, before the Sha'Kar, an art lost with the Blood War.

Touching a finger to his temple, he sorted through this new knowledge quickly yet thoroughly, understanding each new spell and how it worked, and how it could be altered to conform to a given situation. There were *hundreds* of them, myriads of possible alterations of those weaves

Those spells, added to the ones he had figured out on his own and the ones Spyder taught him, gave him a truly vast command of the Weave, and tremendous versatility. It helped that he was *sui'kun*, that a great many of

them required High Sorcery in order to be used, and that he could use them by himself when he needed them.

Teleporting. Tarrin snorted in mild amusement when he realized that his idea wouldn't work. A Sorcerer could only Teleport to a place he knew intimately. Not a place he had seen, not even a place he had visited, but a place where he had spent time and had come to know the area. He knew that he could Teleport easily to Aldreth, his home, and to the Tower. He could Teleport to Dala Yar Arak, or Shoran's Fork, places where he had spent much time and had come to know specific places very well. He could Teleport back to the deck of the *Star of Jerod* or the *Dancer*, two ships where he had spent much time, even if the ships weren't where he last remembered them to be. He thought he could Teleport back to Amyr Dimeon, for though he hadn't spent very long there, he had certainly made sure to know the place. And he knew he could Teleport to Keritania's palace in Wikuna, or Iselde's house back on Sha'Kari. It wasn't the power to jump all over the world, but he could certainly go from one side to the other in a big hurry if he needed to do so.

Strange to wake up with such an expanded memory. It was almost confusing, but the memories didn't seem jumbled or hard to comprehend. They were just there, just like all his other memories, and they only stood out when he skimmed through them looking for something specific. Both the ones that were his and the ones that were not, the ones that were normal and the ones that had been resurrected by the magical potion, which had faded from his memory. Or at least he'd thought that they had. He knew, even though he wasn't sure how, that the effect was over. He wouldn't remember absolutely everything for the rest of his life, because the potion's power wouldn't be there forever. It was already almost gone, and though its magic wouldn't give him a perfect eidetic memory, he wasn't sure if the memories he regained from its magical power would remain as they were, or slowly fade over time. Only time would answer that question, he was sure of it.

But this was not the time to be pondering such trivial matters. He didn't have much time, and he had a lot to do. He walked over to the mirror, feeling his tail act to counter-balance him, and he felt oddly whole once more, rather relieved to be free of the debilitating constraints of the human form, to be himself once more. He had enjoyed the time as a human, but

now that his mind was once again whole, it would never have been content to remain in that confining body. He leaned down and looked into it and found the reflection staring back at him exactly as he remembered it to be, the maturity that had been put into his features by Shiika's aging kiss, the height, the fetlocks. He wondered why he had regained his height, when even the Goddess said he wouldn't have it if he was turned again. She said it was a measure of age, and that age was stripped when the Were magic was torn from him. But he was his tall self once more, the age taken from him replaced when the Were nature was imparted to him again. He touched his cheek, then his jaw, then reached up and delicately pinched the tip of his cat ear, feeling it both in his fingers and in the ear, which flicked irritably from the pressure. Yes, everything seemed the way it was supposed to be.

He was whole.

Conjuring a new vest--he was rather fond of vests now--he put it on over the shirt, and then realized what he'd just done. Obviously, his Druidic powers hadn't been damaged by the trauma of losing and then regaining his Were nature. Then again, he didn't remember thinking about Conjuring it either. It had just happened. He remembered Jenna's gifts, and went over to the night table and picked up the Cat's Claws. They were too small for his wrists now, but that was no problem. Picking through the weaving of their magic, he worked out how to enlarge the bracers without disrupting the impressively complicated spells that Jenna had woven into them. He tended to that little task, and after taking on human hands to let him get them on without making the bracers grotesquely large, he slid them into place.

That was an idea. It had been a month or more since he'd talked to the Goddess, and he felt that she may tell him some of the things he wanted to know. Besides, a month in human form meant a month without talking to him--though why she stayed away was beyond him--meant that there were things going on out there that she may need him to know.

"Mother," he called in a grim tone.

And then she was there. It was not the voice, it was not an image or projection of her, it was *her*. His new memory told him that this was her material form, and using it brought along very real danger. It was her *icon*, the very one that usually stood out in the hedge maze, animated and breathed into life. It was still stone, but it was *living* stone, and a stone

made to feel and act as flesh. Infused with the power of the Goddess, it acted as her direct agent in the material world while the rest of her power remained out wherever it was gods were. Even his newfound knowledge didn't contain that information. She looked exactly as he remembered from the two times he'd seen this before, the tall, stately, breathtakingly beautiful woman with glowing white eyes and hair striped in the seven colors of the rainbow, the seven colors that represented the Spheres of Sorcery. She wore that same dress that looked to be made out of captured starlight, shimmering with her every movement, and now he understood why the Sha'Kar wore those shimmering fabric gowns. Not to be ostentatious, but to honor the Goddess by wearing clothes similar to those she preferred to give to her icon. Many of the things the Sha'Kar did were honors to the Goddess, even the smallest trivial customs. He had never realized how devout they were.

"Mother," he said with calm devotion, reaching out his paws to her. She stepped up and took them, looking fondly up into his eyes, then she took one of his paws between her hands and stroked the black fur gently.

"My sweet kitten," she said in her choral voice, as if so much power lay within it that no one voice could contain it. He had to fight the urge to kneel before her; he knew she hated that.

"Who did it?"

"I'm not going to tell you," she said bluntly. "If you want to find out, then you're on your own."

That was a disappointment, but he bit back a waspish retort. She wanted him to treat her like a friend but he still knew there was a line that he would not cross.

"Why did I get back my height?"

"Because the person used your *own* blood," she answered. "That changed things considerably. When you changed back, you changed into what you *wanted* to be, not what the transformation would force upon you. Probably for the first time ever, a Were-kin had total control over his own transformation. Had it been another female's blood, even Jesmind's blood, your turning would have been as if it happened the first time. Your physical abilities may have been different, your Druidic aptitude would certainly

have been different, and you may even have had different color fur. That's not set, you know. It depends on the one that turns you."

"I didn't know that."

"Since it only happens once, it's not the kind of thing even the Were-cats ever managed to find out," she said with an impish smile.

Tarrin realized what she'd said. "They used *my* blood?" he asked in surprise. "How could they get that?"

"From the stores of it the Tower still holds," she answered simply.

"Then it could have been *anyone*!" he said with a groan.

"That's right. It could have been anyone," she said calmly. "So you don't have to be nasty to the females. I'm not saying one of them didn't do it, but you shouldn't blame them all before finding out for yourself."

"I guess, but Jesmind is really going to hear it from me," he warned. "I'm still mad about how she treated me when I was human. It's not all just going to be alright now that I'm Were again."

"That's your choice, kitten," she said evenly, betraying no hint of her personal feelings in the matter.

"You've given me a place to start, at least," he grunted. "Not everyone knows about that blood, and it shouldn't be too hard to find out who's been there in the last few days."

"Just don't let it consume you, kitten. You have other things to do."

"I know, Mother," he said, leading her over to the bed and helping her sit down. He, on the other hand, remained standing before her, still with his paws between her hands. "I'm giving myself three days, then I'm leaving. Whether I find my answers or not."

"I don't object to that," she smiled. "I know you know where you're going to go." He nodded, but she cut him off before he could speak. "I know where it is," she said in a cautioning tone, shifting her gaze to the door, and the two Knights that stood beyond it.

"It was the best place I could think of," he explained.

"I agree with you," she smiled.

"Mother, what happened to me when I was turned again?" he asked. "With the potion and all. I feel a little different now than I did before."

"That's to be expected," she said calmly. "Your Druidic powers are stronger now than they were before, because of the irregularity of your turning. You may be a warrior, but your soul is that of a magic-user, and that caused you to strengthen your ties to the All with the second turning. Since you knew it was there, you reached out for it this time much more willingly than the last, and it responded to you. You've reached a level of ability that's going to make it a little more complicated to use. You'll need Triana's instruction, and I suggest you don't use your Druidic talents unless absolutely necessary."

He nodded in understanding, a little surprised. He had managed to strengthen his own Druidic ability? He wondered how that happened, because he certainly didn't remember reaching out to the All...and he could remember every excruciating moment of the process of being turned. Maybe it happened on a level beyond his senses, or maybe the pain had blinded him to what was going on. Either was a reasonable explanation.

"I think I told you once before, kitten, that the Weave and the All are connected. I won't bore you with an exhaustive explanation of what happened, so I'll sum it up for you. Part of what makes you so powerful is that fact that you're both a Druid and a Sorcerer. Each feeds off the other in a way that you can't understand, and your ability to use both forms of magic makes both of them stronger. Without your Sorcery, your Druidic powers would have been only slightly stronger than Thean's, and without your Druidic ability, you would have been only marginally stronger than Jenna in Sorcery. When your Druidic abilities increased, it caused a proportional increase in your powers of Sorcery."

"The Weave is part of the All," he reasoned immediately. "A body attuned to Sorcery would be more receptive to the power of the All, and a person capable of touching the All would have more power to use against the Weave."

"Very well done, my kitten," she said with sincere delight, smiling gloriously at him.

"That's why Jasana is so much stronger than I am," he concluded with a slap of his tail against the floor. "She's a strong Druid!"

"She's strong in both," the Goddess nodded. "But she's not too much stronger than you now. You could easily handle her, because of your experience."

"I could do that before."

"No, you could have handled her before, but only with great difficulty and considerable risk. You never faced her when she used her full power against you, kitten. Even you are going to be very surprised when you finally see it. Now it will be much easier for you to contain her if it's needful."

Tarrin nodded grimly. That was something he'd long worried about, but it was a worry for another day.

"Am I going to lose all this memory?"

"Some," she nodded. "The memory of your lifetime will fade over time until your memory will be as it was before, but the memories you gained from the Weave are branded into you. You couldn't forget them if you tried."

"I wouldn't want to. Is this what Jenna learned from Spyder?"

"Most of it," she answered. "You learned considerably more than Jenna did, mostly things pertaining to Sorcery itself."

"I noticed that. I can do almost any spell any Sorcerer has ever used," he said without any boasting in his voice.

"Jenna is the repository of the order's history and culture. You are now the repository of its magical lore. I want you to teach Jenna absolutely every spell you know that she doesn't, Tarrin," she said, using his name to drive her order home. "I want it done by tomorrow night."

"It will be done, Mother," he said solemnly.

She took a hand off his paw and reached over, touching his cheek. He closed his eyes and submitted to that touch, leaning his face against her hand. "I have missed you so much, my kitten," she said lovingly. "I stayed away from you while you were human because I didn't want to interfere. I

know how you felt, and I knew my involvement would only overwhelm you. That Tarrin wasn't prepared to handle someone like me."

"I think it would have," he agreed. "I don't think that other me could have managed to be very rational when he realized just who he was talking to." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "You said you wouldn't let anyone interfere with my choice," he told her, his voice just reaching the edges of accusation.

"I said I'd be extremely cross with them if they did," she said. "I never said I'd directly interfere."

"I hate it when you have an answer for everything," he growled.

"I wouldn't be much of a god if I didn't," she teased with a bright smile. "Don't worry, kitten. I *am* rather cross with the culprit. The extent of my irritation will become apparent to the offending party very soon."

"Then maybe the wrathful bolts of lightning will guide me in the right direction," he mused.

She laughed lightly, a cascade of choral bells, and patted him on the cheek. "I see you're back to your old self," she winked.

"Would you have expected anything less, Mother?"

She grinned. "No, probably not," she admitted. "So, what are you going to do now? There are several people who are very anxious to see you."

"I can imagine," he grunted. "I guess I'll let Triana know I'm alright. I'm not sure I want to see anyone else at the moment."

"Don't be nasty, kitten," she said. "Jesmind and Kimmie are both very worried about you. They love you."

"I know they do, Mother, and I love them," he said in an annoyed voice, "but sometimes love isn't enough. Jesmind was inexcusable in the way she acted, and I'll bet Kimmie would have been the same way if she hadn't been so busy helping Phandebrass with the potion." He did feel a sudden twang. "I hope all that work wasn't hard on the baby," he said in concern.

"The baby is fine," she said. "Kimmie knows her limits. She's also getting noticeably thick around the middle. She'll pop in a couple of months."

"So soon?" he said with a sigh. "And I missed so much already. I guess I'm going to miss the baby's birth, too."

"I'm just asking you not to be like them," she said. "You know what I mean."

He sighed. Of course he knew what she meant. To be unforgiving and hold a grudge. "I'll probably settle down once my temper cools off, but it's still too new," he told her, flexing his fingers in an ominous manner. "I intend to remind Jesmind just where she stands," he warned.

"That's all I can ask for, kitten," she smiled gently. "Now, I've held you here long enough," she announced, standing up. "You have a few things to do, and so do I. Oh, kitten, I think an old friend is waiting to hear from you. You should let her know what's going on...and that you might need her."

Tarrin looked at her. The only old friend that wasn't here now, and one that was that much of an asset, was Sarraya. "Is it safe for her to come back?"

"She's been in her colony a good couple of months," she nodded. "That's enough time for her to rest and recover. She's good for as long as you may need her."

"I'll have Triana contact her," he assured. "Knowing Sarraya, she'll be here before Triana says goodbye."

"Not that soon. Triana's going to have to go get her, but she can be here before you leave in three days' time."

That was as obvious as a hint as the Goddess ever gave. Whatever Tarrin did and wherever he went, the Goddess wanted Sarraya to be with him. He actually looked forward to it...it would be like old times. And he missed his Faerie companion more than he was willing to admit. Her obnoxious manner and her irreverent, combative personality was actually rather entertaining from time to time.

"One other thing," she said, finally letting go of his paw. "I want you to reign in Sapphire."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She's been stalking around the Tower looking for who did this to you, and she fully intends to kill the offender when she tracks the party down. I don't think that would be a very good idea, and she's being very disruptive in her search. You're the only person in the Tower that can talk to her when she's like this, kitten. Everyone else is nothing but a biped to her, but you are clan. That gives you a voice she won't ignore."

"I'll pull her leash," he said. "She won't like it, but then again, neither will I."

"Carefully, kitten. She loves you, but she *is* a dragon."

"I understand the danger. She can't be much harder to manage than Jesmind or Triana."

The Goddess laughed. "Yes she is, but I'll leave that fun little surprise untouched," she winked. "Now then, I have to go. Don't be a stranger, kitten."

"I won't, Mother," he promised, stepping away from her and bowing his head. She reached out and touched his cheek one more time, and then she stepped back and vanished like smoke.

His obedient demeanor evaporated as fast as she did. He would be respectful and compliant to the Goddess, but not to anyone else. That ancient Were-cat drive was just as primal in him as it was in everyone else. He was the king of the hill, the biggest child in the sandbox, and he knew it. Only Sapphire could challenge him, and he knew that she would not. He would not cow under to the others, and it was about time to re-establish some of the dominancy that certain others seemed to have forgotten was his during his convalescence.

Clenching a fist tightly enough to crack all the knuckles, he looked to the door. He did have a lot to do today. Calm Sapphire down, have Triana go get Sarraya and bring her back, punish Jesmind for her behavior, and start teaching Jenna the spells he'd gained through the ordeal. That he'd let everyone know that he was well never really crossed his mind. After all, they'd find out once he was out and about. He was sure that as soon as he stepped out that door, they would find him. They'd have to move pretty quickly, but they would eventually track him down.

First things first, however. The top of the list was Jenna, to let her know he was well and to have her show him where they'd stored his blood. He also wanted to let his sisters and friends know he was alright, and when he was calmer, he'd go see Triana and the other females. And he also needed to calm Sapphire down. He'd ensure that she let him take care of it. The punishment laid down for what was done to him would come from him, not from her. After all, as the injured party, it was his every right to control what happened to the guilty party.

Standing fully erect, his tail slashing behind him a few times before calming down, he looked to the door. It was an old life, the life he'd once had, but he had to admit, there was a strange kind of newness to it now. Not everyone had a chance to relive the comforting times of youth, to see the world as a place both strange and exciting, to feel the kind of trust that only someone that naive could feel. Those were gone now, but the sense of them was still inside, only tempered by the history that made him so careful. It was an old life, old customs, old ways, an old duty, but the time as a human had cast them in a new light. Things did seem curiously fresh, curiously new, as if stepping out that door would most certainly be just like the same old Tarrin.

Reaching out and taking hold of the doorknob, feeling how small and fragile it seemed to him now, he turned it and opened the door.

He wasn't entirely surprised to see Jenna running, all dignity cast aside, down the passageway towards his door. Obviously someone had told her that he'd woke up, and now she was coming to see him. Her run didn't falter when she saw him, but she did call out his name breathlessly as the two Knights guarding his door stepped aside respectfully for him. He lowered down as she approached and let her literally jump into his arms, wrapping his around her as she called his name over and over again with a mixture of joy, relief, and worry, hugging him tightly. He felt how tiny she was now, how fragile and delicate, and he hugged her with the practiced exquisite care he had come to learn when adjusting to his Were nature the first time.

"Thank the Goddess!" she said in a heavy sigh, then she gave a sobbing kind of laugh. "I'm glad to see you!"

"I notice that there wasn't anyone waiting this time," he noted with a sardonic little smile as she pulled away to look at him.

"Everyone wanted to, but Triana--" she bit her lip. "She wasn't sure how you'd react."

"That was wise of her," he murmured.

"Oh, brother, I'm so sorry," she suddenly blurted. "I--"

"Calmly," he told her, setting her back on her feet. "It's not really a problem, sister. I know what happened. I don't like it, but I'm not entirely displeased with the result."

She looked up at him. "You mean--"

He nodded. "It's what I would have chosen." Then his eyes hardened. "But that doesn't excuse whoever decided to make my mind up for me. When I find out who did it, I'm going to show them just how upset I am."

"Sapphire's already working on it," she said quickly. "She's turning my Tower on its ear," she said with a frown.

"Mother told me about that. She wants me to pull on Sapphire's leash a little."

"Tarrin! You can't do that to a *dragon*!" she gasped.

"I can," he said grimly, flexing his paw in an unwholesome manner. "I'm probably the only one in the Tower who can."

She gave him a speculative look. "Maybe you can. I'll find out where she is, so we can head her off."

"Where are the others?"

"Hiding from Sapphire," Jenna replied as she led him down the hall. "She got hold of Mist very early on. It was *very* ugly. Mist isn't the kind to back down from anything, and they came to blows."

Tarrin frowned. "Is Mist alright?"

"She will be," Jenna said. "Triana is with her. Mist tore her up pretty thoroughly. For a little while I didn't know if Mist was going to survive, but she's alot tougher than she looks."

That concerned Tarrin. He was a little peeved at most of the Were-cats, but not Mist. She and Lula were the only ones that had backed off and given him room to breathe, room to be himself. Mist's devotion to him, while not

quite love, was still very powerful, and it allowed her to put faith in him that even Jesmind couldn't quite match. It was very much unlike Mist--for that matter, it was very much unlike a Were-cat--for her to exhibit such a trusting display. But Tarrin was probably the only Were-cat she trusted, and it made her trust him with a kind of blind faith and absolute certainty that overcompensated for her lack of trust in others. Mist trusted him out of blind devotion, but Julia had given him the space he needed because she was probably the only one--except for Kimmie--that could possibly understand what he was going through. Kimmie was usually a very insightful Were-cat, but her love for him and probably blinded her. He really didn't know...she'd been very scarce over the last month. She'd been spending almost all her time helping Phandebrass, but Tarrin had the feeling that it was more than just her work. He had the sneaking suspicion that she'd been avoiding him. He wasn't sure why, and it never really occurred to him while he was human, but maybe seeing him like he was, and his attitude towards the females, may have put her off a little bit. Kimmie loved him, but she had tremendous competition from Jesmind, and he had the feeling that she was trying to withdraw from him because of her. It wouldn't be beyond Jesmind to push Kimmie out of the picture, make her feel uncomfortable, and Kimmie's weak status in Were-cat society meant that she would have no choice but to submit. Jesmind had shown a very shocking and extremely ruthless kind of selfish possessiveness towards him that startled him even now, especially now that he could see the situation through the eyes of his Were nature. Jesmind didn't care about how anyone else felt, not even *him*. In her eyes, he absolutely and irrevocably belonged to her, and she wasn't going to relinquish her claim, no matter what. He had the feeling that if he'd chosen to be human, she would have broken virtually every law in *Fae-da'Nar* and bitten him against his wishes, even though she would know beyond any doubt that it would make him hate her for the rest of time. She just couldn't see that, couldn't see anything beyond her nearly obsessive need to keep him, and keep him for her and her alone.

That was going to stop. Jesmind was going to learn a very, very hard lesson this day.

"I need to put a muzzle on Sapphire before she gets out of control," Tarrin said grimly.

"She's *already* out of control," Jenna warned him. "But nobody dares cross her, not even me. I know I'm no match for her, and right now she'll kill anyone she thinks is standing in her way."

"Come on," he said, starting down the hallway, holding Jenna's hand and half-dragging her behind him. It was no trouble for him to find Sapphire, for her impression on the Weave was very unique. He could sense her from a league away. Right now she was on the upper levels, not far from where Jesmind's apartment was, on the floors where the higher-ranking Sorcerers resided. "Mother told me how it was done. It could be *anyone*," he said grimly.

"How was it done?" Jenna asked.

"You don't know?" he asked in surprise, looking back at her.

"I've been busy trying to keep that maniacal dragon from knocking down my Tower!" she said indignantly.

"That's what she's doing?" he asked. "Hunting down the other females?"

"Yes," Jenna replied. "After what happened to Mist, the others starting hiding. Triana has them gathered up, and she's protecting from the dragon's seeking magic with her Druidic power. That's why Sapphire's trying to track them down. How did they do it?"

"They used *my* blood, from stores Mother said they have in the Tower," he told her. "That means it could be *anyone*, Jenna. Anyone that knows about that blood could have done it, not just the females."

"*What?*" she gasped. "They kept it?"

"Didn't you know about it?"

"Well, yes, but I didn't think they'd keep something that dangerous laying around! Myriam said they'd saved it, but I never paid it much mind to it."

"Well, someone did," he said, starting up one of the main spiral staircases.

"Who would want to do this to you, Tarrin? If it wasn't one of the females, that is."

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," he growled.

It didn't take him long to track down Sapphire. She was storming down a passageway towards the landing on which he had just stepped, in her human form. She was furious, that was apparent from the look on her face, a kind of stark, determined, cold fury, but it was the lightning dancing around her body in numerous arcs, snapping along her form and occasionally striking out to touch the walls of the passageway, leaving burn marks on the polished wood panelling, that made it abundantly clear just how furious she really was. Her blue eyes widened when she saw him, and the lightning slowed to a stop as she stopped in her tracks and looked at him. Then she rushed forwards without much dignity and when she reached him, she slowed to a stately stop and grabbed his paws in her hands. "My little one!" she said with sincere relief. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Sapphire," he said calmly. "I heard what you did to Mist. You have to stop this."

"No," she seethed. "One of them turned you against your wishes, when you made it *abundantly* clear how much you cherished the opportunity to choose for yourself. I *will* find her, and I *will* punish her," she declared, her eyes blazing with outrage.

"It may not have been one of the females," he told her immediately, then he told her what the Goddess told him. "Anyone that knows about that blood could have done it, my friend. It's still most likely it was one of the females, but we can't put this on their heads until we've narrowed the field a bit."

Sapphire looked a little dubious, but her hard look didn't waver. "No one else has the motivation to do it," she declared.

"I was turned against my will by humans once," he reminded her. "Someone may have decided to take matters into his own hands again. Running around hunting down the females isn't going to solve anything, Sapphire. And I think it's only fair that *I* get to punish him--or her--when they're found. It was done to *me*, after all. I appreciate the concern, my friend, and it pleases me that you think so much of me. But for now, please, you have to calm down. I could use your mind much more than your temper right now. Someone as old and wise as you should be able to find the guilty

one very quickly." He knew that was abject flattery, but when one was trying to talk a dragon out of a furor, one did it with *exceptional* care.

Sapphire's eyes were still blazing. He could see that he wasn't getting through to her. He reached out and put his paws on her shoulders, holding her firmly yet gently in his grip. "Calm down," he said with steely resolve. "I'm not going to let you hurt any of the other females, Sapphire. If I have to, I'll stop you. I really don't want to do that, but if I have to, I will."

She looked at him, then the fury in her eyes wavered. Then she actually laughed. "You must be serious to make such an outrageous statement," she said without any hint of teasing or insult. She was merely stating fact. Tarrin doubted that he *could* stop her. Not even he was a match for a dragon. At least not one as old and powerful as Sapphire.

"You know me, old friend. I can find a way," he said dryly. "Accomplishing the impossible is what I do for a living."

"It would bring the Tower down on us," she said with a slight smile.

"So? As long as it stops you, what difference does that make?"

She laughed again, a fond laugh, and patted his forearms with her hands. "I see you are once again yourself, my little one. Only the Tarrin I remember would say such a thing."

"Maybe," he conceded. "Are you going to keep frothing at the mouth?"

She seemed a bit offended by his choice of terms, but that flickered through her expression quickly. "I am calm now, at least calm enough," she said in a bristling manner. "I will never forgive who did this to you, but I won't continue hunting the females. Not if it's not given that one of them did it."

"We don't know yet. Give me a little time to go deal with the females, and meet me in my room in about an hour. You and me and Jenna are going to go find out who did this."

"You can find them?"

"I know what to look for," he told her calmly.

"I'll go with you."

"No, you won't," he said sternly. "I'm not taking the fox into the chicken coop, my friend. Not until you calm down."

"I'll do as you ask, this time. But don't get comfortable with it," she warned. "I'm not in the habit of acceding to the demands of bipeds."

"I'm not used to browbeating a dragon. We can both admit we're not comfortable with the situation, and hopefully it'll never happen again."

She looked at him, then laughed helplessly.

"Keep her out of trouble, Jenna," Tarrin told his sister. "And don't let her follow me."

"*Me?*" Jenna said incredulously.

"You're my sister, so that makes you related to clan," he told her evenly. "Sapphire may get pecky with you, but she won't hurt you, if only because killing you would annoy me."

"I'm so glad," she said weakly, putting a hand to her stomach.

Sapphire gave Tarrin an amused smile, then fixed Jenna with a steady predatory kind of gaze that made the young Keeper flinch.

He was confident that Jenna could keep Sapphire out of any major trouble for an hour. Sapphire would probably play with her a little, see how brave the girl was, but he could tell that she would do as he asked this time. When they met again in an hour, he could explain everything to her in detail, and they could combine their rather formidable resources to track down his assailant. Until then, he wanted to get to the females while his temper was somewhat muted by what the Goddess told him. If he left it, it was going to fester, and he'd be in a much more furious mindset when he finally dealt with them.

Finding Triana and the females was significantly more challenging than finding Sapphire. Triana was actively protecting the females from location with her magic, and Druidic magic was exceptionally powerful, especially when wielded by one with as much power and experience as Triana. He couldn't rely on the easy ways, sensing their location through the Weave, tracking scents, even using the trick of sweep-location with pulses of Mind. He had to get a little creative to puzzle out where Triana was hiding the other females. He knew how Triana thought, and that meant that the

magical defense she had erected would be both powerful and very thorough. Triana would think of just about any way they could be located and protect themselves from it. She knew who was looking for her, and more to the point, *what*, so it meant that she would take no chances. Not even the rather clever idea of looking for the protective shield itself would work, because Triana would be very careful to hide it.

It took him nearly ten minutes to finally puzzle out a means to track them down, and he was forced to fall back on the one thing that Triana could not stop, and that was their purely non-magical, mundane presences. Among the myriad spells that Tarrin had learned in his turning was a rather clever little weave that allowed one to use their senses through stone. It was meant primarily for a Sorcerer to see and hear through stone, but the weave would work for any sense, and Tarrin had other senses just as keen as his eyes and ears. Triana would actively block any kind of sound from giving them away, so trying to listen for them would be pointless. She would also prevent prying eyes and seeking noses; she was more than aware of the formidable senses of the dragon, so those too were dead ends. But the one thing she probably did not stop, probably had not conceived of as a danger, was the *feel* of Were-cats on stone. So long as they weren't standing on a carpet, he knew that the spell could find them. Were-cat feet were *very* unusual, and he knew he'd have no trouble discerning the feel of them on the stone floors of the Tower.

Putting a paw on the bare stone of the passageway, he released the quickly woven spell into the stone and let it do its work. He sent his awareness into the stone, and became aware of the pattering of countless feet all over him, like little ants crawling over his skin. It took him some time to puzzle through those strange sensations, but it took him but a moment to sort through the feet touching the stone once he had a sense of which sensation belonged to what kind of material. He first discounted all the leather and cloth, knowing that the ones that moved were shoes. Then he discarded the ones that were skin, since Were-cats had no bare skin on the bottoms of their feet. Only fur and thick pads, as well as the clawtips from the claws on the feet that never fully retracted. After putting those aside, it left a very few sensations behind, and it took him little time to discern the three sets of scaly feet belonging to the Vendari and a reptilian Wikuni on the grounds--one of Keritanima's Marines, probably--and the

three sets of unique feet he could feel that could only belong to a Were-cat. There had to be a carpet where they were, but not one that covered the entire floor.

Tarrin was surprised and a little amused when he found them. Triana was *very* clever. She had hidden them in the first place Sapphire had looked, and the *last* place she would check twice.

The apartment right down the hall from Jesmind's apartment.

After all, after the dragon checked the first time, what reason would there be for her to return? The likelihood that they would think to go there, so close to a hotspot like Jesmind's apartment, was remote. But Triana was a devilishly crafty old Were-cat, as clever as a fox, and she understood that the place would be very safe *after* Sapphire checked it over.

He wasn't very far from there, so it took him only a few minutes to stalk down to the door. That close to Triana, he could feel her power even behind her shield, a curiously sharp sense of her that he hadn't noticed before. Now that he could feel it, now that he understood what he was feeling, he realized he could have easily found her without having to use Sorcery. And that, he realized, was what Sapphire was trying to do to find them. Just wander around and try to get close enough to Triana to sense her formidable presence.

His emotions turned rather flat once he reached that door. He knew what had to be done. He wasn't going to necessarily enjoy it, but he knew what he had to do.

Putting a paw on the door, he pushed until the latch broke, and then shoved it out of the way.

Inside were all the Were-cats. Mist was laying on a couch, unconscious but looking otherwise unwounded, and Kimmie was sitting on a chair by the couch, worry stamped on her face as she held Mist's paw in her own. Eron sat on the end of the couch, by Mist's feet, quiet and very subdued. Triana was standing in the center of the room, her eyes closed and a look of intense concentration on her face, as Jesmind paced back and forth between Kimmie's chair and the door on the far wall beyond. Jula and Jasana were sitting on a second couch by the fireplace, and Tarrin realized that the apartment was of similar design as Jesmind's, with only different furniture.

They all looked at him in almost perfect unison, except Triana, and they all started in shock when he boldly stepped into the room.

"You can stop that now, mother," he said grimly. "Sapphire's been muzzled."

"Tarrin!" three separate cries issued at once, from Jula, Kimmie, and Jesmind. Jasana called out "Papa!" but Triana only opened her eyes and gave him a strange, worried look. Only she seemed to sense his aggravation. Jesmind rushed past her mother, rushed towards him, and seeing her filled him with a sudden seething anger that he simply couldn't control.

Ears suddenly laying back and his eyes exploding into the unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger, he reared his paw back, and then he lashed out with it as she blindly rushed up to him. His paw slammed into her face, striking her a massive backhanded blow. The power in it sent her flying, crashing to the floor by Triana and rolling to a stop, completely stunned. Had Tarrin struck a human with that much power, it would have been instantly fatal. It very well may have ripped a human in half.

Jesmind laid very still, and Jula and Kimmie looked at him in startled horror. Triana gave him a narrow-eyed, steely look, but did not move.

"If I find out that one of you did this to me," he hissed in a savage manner, with a look of unmitigated hatred on his face, "you'll wish I'd killed you here and now." He locked his baleful gaze on each of the three staring females in turn, making all of them, even Triana, flinch from the power of his stare and look away.

It was primal, but he couldn't control it. He showed them his fangs, a dangerous snarl, crouching somewhat in a very aggressive posture, his claws out as he pointed at Triana. "Do you know who did this?" he demanded in a voice that would brook no hedging in the matter.

"No," she answered levelly. "But are you sorry for it?"

"I'm sorry I never got the chance to decide," he said in a hissing tone.

"That's not saying it wasn't your choice."

"It *was* my choice, but taking that choice away is as good as turning me against my will!" he said in a furious tone, almost shouting.

Triana lifted her chin, a nearly challenging act, staring him in the eyes. "Then you chose to be what you were meant to be."

"I was satisfied with it after it was made for me," he said in a hot manner. "It's not the same."

"The end justifies the means. You say so yourself. Don't get hypocritical on me now, cub."

Unable to reply to that, trapped by his own words, he could only glare at her coldly, but his anger had lost its bite in her eyes. He knew that. He may be able to intimidate the others, but Triana wouldn't be patently afraid of him. Then again, little he could do would put Triana off for long. She was too old and too wise and grizzled to be afraid of him for long.

Jesmind finally stirred, and her moving seemed to break Jasana of some kind of paralysis. She ran over to her mother and knelt by her as she sat up woozily, her eyes glassy and blood flowing liberally from both corners of her mouth and her nose. Tarrin's blow probably crushed every bone in her face, and it probably poured a great deal of blood into her mouth and nasal cavity before the damage was repaired. She looked up at him in confusion, and not a little bit of hurt.

"Don't cow eyes at me, witch," Tarrin said brutally. "I'm furious with you over how you treated me when I was human. I'm not going to forgive you any time soon."

"I did what I had to do to keep you," she declared, but her voice was a bit slurred.

"What you did was drive me away!" he shouted at her.

"You'll get over it. If I have to wait a few hundred years, that's fine. I'm patient."

"Now you're patient," he said with barely disguised contempt.

"I got what I wanted," she said shamelessly, looking up at him. "Now that I know you're Were again, I can rest easy. That's all that mattered to me."

Tarrin was a bit outraged by her declaration, but it fit in with what he knew of her, and he knew her very well. Jesmind *could* be rather patient

when she needed to be. After all, she'd moved to Aldreth and waited there for him for nearly two years, knowing he would come back eventually. But the fear and uncertainty of what happened to him, the prospect of losing him as a mate forever, had affected her judgement very greatly. She had acted with great rashness, despite knowing that she was only making him angry and pushing him away from her, but in her rather precarious position, it was all she could think to do, and her need to do something made her do whatever seemed most able to achieve her desired goal in the quickest manner, despite how it may damage their relationship. She was more than willing to accept him being furious with her, as long as he was Were. She knew, as he did, that no amount of fury would hold in him forever, and even if it did, all she had to do was bait him into a fight to make him release his anger on her. After that, the matter would be settled, and it would be forgotten. It was ever that way between Were-cats. The fight settled all, and after the fight was done, it was as if it never happened. She'd done it to him before, and she knew how to go about it. She knew him almost as well as he knew her.

It took having his Were nature back to see that, to finally understand Jesmind's actions. She did everything she did with only the goal of making him Were again, because she knew that no matter how mad she made him, she could fix that with a little time and a willingness to get beaten up when the time came. It all made perfect sense now, and he had to admire her audacity. Then again, being able to again think like a Were-cat made everything clear.

But it still didn't excuse it. Just because he could understand her actions didn't mean that he was going to forgive her for them. And unlike the last time, when she baited in into a fight that made him lose his anger against her, he had *no* intention of making it nearly so easy for her this time. He wanted her to feel like he did, like she was being overwhelmed by the will of someone else. She had overwhelmed him with her obsessive need to control his life, and now he was going to repay her by not giving her any chance to let her work back into his good graces.

"Papa, why are you being mean to Mama?" Jasana asked in a tiny little voice, not even looking at him.

"Because she had it coming," he said in a furious hiss. "You'd better be patient, Jesmind," he said with seething disgust, "because it's going to be *years* before I can look you in the face without wanting to rip your head off. So just stay clear of me." He turned his back on her. "And may every god there is help you if I find out you turned me, Jesmind. I'll come after you, and there's nowhere in this entire world you can go to hide from me."

Tarrin stalked away, towards the door, but Kimmie jumped to her feet and called his name. "What about us?" she asked plaintively. "Are you going to shut us out too?"

"Until I know who did this, none of you come anywhere near me," he said over his shoulder. "I'll kill you. As far as I'm concerned, you're *all* guilty, even if you didn't do it."

"Not even the children?" Kimmie gasped.

"Not even the children," he growled. "I won't be good company until I find out who did it. I won't punish them for my own temper."

"Cub!" Triana said quickly as Tarrin reached the door, ducked under it absently. She took a step forward, but a withering glare from the male stopped her dead in her tracks.

"I said *none* of you come near me, and I meant it," he said with an evil look, then he remembered what he came here to do in the first place, or at least one of them. "If you want to be of any use to me, Triana, you'll do as I ask."

"What do you want?" she asked cautiously.

"The Goddess wants Sarraya here. I know you can bring her quickly."

"I can have her here by tomorrow morning."

"Then do it."

"I will, but only if you agree to one thing."

He turned and looked at her, a single eyebrow rising in curiosity while his face showed his irritation, almost anger, that she would dare bargain with him right now.

"I can feel it in you, cub. You're stronger, alot stronger. Things are different for you now, and you're going to have trouble with it unless you get some serious instruction. You *need* to be taught."

"The Goddess warned me about it," he said bluntly. "Until I calm down, I don't think I could stand to be in the room with you, Triana."

"This goes beyond spats of temper, cub. This is important. Unless you get some training, you're going to hurt yourself, or even worse, someone else. We can agree to meet and not kill each other, because if we don't, you're going to have an accident." She looked at him. "Have you done anything yet?"

"I Conjured this," he said, touching the vest.

"Did you mean to do it?"

The question took him off guard, and caused a little of his anger to bleed off. "Now that you mention it, no," he admitted.

"That's what you have to be careful of, cub," she said with intensity, almost desperation, in her voice. "When you're at the level you're at now, the power comes to you even when you don't want it to. You have to keep a tight rein on your emotions, and don't let your mind wander too often, or you'll miss the telltale signs that warns you that it's reaching for you. You could slip, and it's going to act on whatever it finds in your mind, no matter how outrageous or disastrous it may be." She put her arm out, reaching towards him. "I know you're ticked, cub, but be careful. Keep an eye on the All, and be watchful for the sense of it. If it seems to be getting close to you, that's the sign that you need to get your mind under control, and do it *fast*. You can't stop it from touching you until I show you how it's done, so you have to make sure that it doesn't do anything you don't want it to do when it does. So please, for everyone's sake, be careful of that."

Tarrin could appreciate the frankness of that warning. Druidic magic had no limitations. The only limits came with the Druid using the power, and if he tried to do something that required more magical power than his body could withstand, it would destroy him. Tarrin understood that danger, but it was the thought of Druidic magic running wild that frightened him more. He'd had experiences where Druidic magic unleashed through him with no control, and the results had been nearly disastrous. The All was

notoriously fickle and unpredictable, and any time a Druid lost control of a spell, just about anything could happen. Very rarely were those wild misfires beneficial to the Druid, or anything in his general vicinity. He saw her warning for what it was. It was no ploy or attempt to get into his good graces, it was a very serious, very sober warning from a master Druid to an acolyte Druid about the very real dangers of the demanding magic they commanded.

He nodded once, eloquently. "I will. After you bring back Sarraya, we'll meet so you can teach me what I need to know," he said in a neutral tone.

"I can live with that. Just please, be careful."

"I'll be careful," he promised, then he turned and stalked back through the door, slamming it behind him.

He didn't have much time to think about what Triana said, but what time he had made him appreciate her warning that much more. He did feel much closer to the All now, and it didn't seem much of a stretch for it to reach into him rather than him reaching into it. The Weave did things like that itself sometimes, as it was an active, dynamic force, where the All was also very dynamic and, in its own way, nearly alive. The All had a kind of animating force in it, the part of it that allowed it to interpret what it found in the mind of a Druid and decide on the manner in which the task would be accomplished. It was why Druids had to be extraordinarily careful, for that awareness within the All had no concept of human limitation, and it often took wild liberty if the Druid didn't envision the spell *exactly* as he wanted it to function. Triana's warning was a very serious one, and Tarrin was serious about heeding it. From the moment he left the females, he kept one part of his mind on his outrage and anger, and another part kept steadfast vigil over the All, ready to warn him should it seem to come closer to him.

That suitably done to his satisfaction, he bent to the task at hand, and that was finding out who turned him. He was so consumed by it that even going to greet his sisters and friends seemed hollow in comparison that burning need. Only his desire to have it out with Jesmind and his duty to carry out the will of his Goddess superseded that singular compulsion.

That didn't prevent them from coming to him, and that was exactly what happened. The first to find him was Keritanima and Allia, guided by Keritanima's magic. They rounded a corner almost on top of him and gave out cries of delight, and even his anger was brushed away by the sight of them. He embraced his two sisters tenderly, lovingly, having their scents fill his nose with the rightness of them, the perfection that he seemed to feel whenever they were together. It took him a moment to calm them down to where he could speak rationally to them, and they spoke Selani, as was always their habit when conversing privately amongst themselves.

"Brother, they told us what happened!" Allia said as Keritanima blurted "they wouldn't let us sit with you!"

"I'm alright," he told them gently, putting a paw on each shoulder. They were so different from one another, and a thousand forgotten memories of them, of the tediums of everyday life in the Tower and on the road, their every expressions and moods, it all came back to him and made him love them that much more. Both weren't without their thorns, but his love for them was stronger for their faults than it was for their perfection.

"Who did it?" Keritanima asked immediately.

"That's what I'm going to find out," he said grimly. "It's why I didn't come running to you as soon as I woke up. I have to start while the trail is freshest."

"Did they tell you what Sapphire did to Mist?" Allia asked.

He nodded. "Mist is alright, or at least I think she was," he said. "All the females were in her company, so I wasn't very sociable when I saw her."

"I can imagine," Keritanima snorted. "Which of them do you think did it? I think it was Jesmind, myself."

"I'm not sure, but it may not have been any of them," he said grimly. He told them about his talk with the Goddess, and when he was done, Keritanima whistled sharply through her muzzle.

"That certainly complicates things, but we'll be looking for someone with a *motive*, brother. Just anyone that knows about the blood is a suspect, but we can do things to narrow down the field some."

"That's what I'm on my way to do. Me and Sapphire and Jenna are going to where the blood is so we can see what we can find out."

"Well, you're not doing this without me," Keritanima said flatly. "I'm much more devious than you, brother. I think in ways you don't, and I can be a real use to you."

"Both of you can," he said. "Just being here is enough. I have to keep a tight rein on my temper, and you two always did have a calming effect on me."

Keritanima looked at him in a strange tilt-headed manner. "You're...different, brother," she said hesitantly. "I didn't sense it before. I guess I was too excited. But I can feel it now."

Allia looked at him carefully. Then her eyes turned sober. "Even *I* can sense it," she agreed. "He is like a lodestone within the Weave, drawing its light to him."

"That's part of why I have to keep my temper in check," he said ruefully, then he explained what Triana and the Goddess had told him as they moved towards his room, where he was to meet Sapphire. "I'm not sure I understand all of it, but I do know that my increased Druidic ability is dangerous," he told them. "Triana warned me, and I believe her. She had no reason to lie, not about something like *that*."

"At least some part of your brain is working," Keritanima chided with a toothy grin.

He let that pass. "She told me what I need to do to make sure nothing bad happens until she can teach me what I need to know, so I should be alright, at least for a short time. But I can feel it there, Kerri. It's just like Triana said. The All seems to be lurking out there, just the same way High Sorcery did back before I could control it. It's just waiting for a chance to connect with me, and I have to be very careful to make sure not to have anything go wrong if that happens."

"Can we do anything to help?" Allia asked.

"Just stay near me," he said. "I need a level head, and you two always were able to cool my temper."

"That's no great chore," Allia said with a loving smile.

"I hope not."

"Brother, I must ask. Are you happy?" Allia asked in a voice powerful with emotion.

"I'm content," he told her simply. "Had I had the choice that was stolen from me, I would have chosen this. But it's the theft of it that makes me so angry. Nobody had the right to steal it from me, and I mean to punish whoever did it. Thoroughly," he added in an ominous tone, his eyes narrowing.

"It can't be thorough unless we get our licks in too," Keritanima told him, rubbing her hands together. "I have quite a few little ideas brewing. I'm pretty sure that they're not much nicer than yours."

"I guess we'd better start drawing numbers. Sapphire intends to kill whoever did it. I'm going to have to talk her out of that, because whoever it is won't fully appreciate how furious I am if they're dead."

"He *is* angry," Allia mused to Keritanima.

"Was it ever in doubt?" she replied impishly.

"I win, sister," Allia added.

"You did not. Someone else turned him, so it's invalid."

"What is this?" Tarrin asked.

"When you went nuts on us about us fighting over what you should do, me and Allia made a little wager," Keritanima explained. "I bet you'd stay human, she bet you'd want to be Were again."

"I won," Allia said stubbornly.

"It wasn't his choice," the Wikuni fenced. "It's an invalid conclusion, so it's a draw."

"What was the wager?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing serious," Keritanima said. "Just ownership of Sha'Kari."

"*What?*" he gasped.

"Well, nobody lives there anymore, do they?" Keritanima said defensively. "All the Sha'Kar left. And it's a perfectly good place. Lots of

nice empty buildings, and someone has to keep up the maintenance on them, don't they?"

"Don't you realize that the Sha'Kar own all that?" he said.

"I asked Ianelle. She said when they abandoned it, it became nobody's property. That means it's there for whoever wants to claim it."

Tarrin had a sneaking suspicion. "When do they get there?" he asked bluntly.

The fur on Keritanima's cheeks ruffled, her version of a blush. "They should be there already," she admitted. "I haven't gotten any recent reports."

"Who got where?" Allia demanded.

"Kerri's fleet," Tarrin said. "I'll bet she sent them out to claim Sha'Kari about two seconds after Ianelle told her it was up for grabs."

"It was more like ten minutes," she said modestly.

"And you wagered possession of it against me?" Allia asked, her eyes flaring slightly.

"I knew you wouldn't do anything with it, Allia," Keritanima said smoothly. "In the end, it was going to be mine anyway, so why are we fighting about it?"

"Get out your purse, sister," Allia said coolly. "You are about to pay me rent."

"But you didn't win the bet," Keritanima said stubbornly. "When Tarrin was turned before he made a choice, it invalidated the whole thing. We don't know what he *really* would have decided, since he never got the chance to think without the Cat influencing him, do we?"

"That's nothing but a flimsy excuse for you to weasel out of your word," Allia accused.

"What would you do with a place like that, Allia?" Keritanima asked.

"I thought it might be a nice place for me and Allyn to spend our honeymoon," she said simply. "I have some *very* pleasant memories of some places there," she added with a wicked little smile.

"You proposed?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

"Not yet," she admitted with a slow smile. "And don't you dare warn him. I don't want to give him any chance to run away."

"We wouldn't dream of it, but why Allyn?" Tarrin asked. "He's not even remotely Selani."

"You and Kerri have shown me that there is strength in diversity," she said simply. "With the Selani strength and the Sha'Kar magic in their blood, our children will be powerful. And I like Allyn, brother. He's very attentive to me, he makes me laugh, and I know I can depend on him when I need him. He'll make a fine husband, even someone my clan can accept after I've suitably trained him."

"He's a bit soft for the Selani life, sister."

"Don't let Allyn's demeanor fool you, brother. He has steel in him. His is a Sha'Kar upbringing, but he has the soul of a Selani inside. There's more to him than you realize. Even I'm surprised by him from time to time."

"As long as you're not thinking with something a little south of your brain," he told her bluntly.

"That had a say in it," she said with a smirk.

"It would," he accused.

"We knew this would happen," Keritanima told her.

"What?"

"That you'd whip him into shape," she said with a grin. "I knew you were too much man for him."

Allia looked at her, then laughed brightly. "I'm too much woman for him, you mean," she corrected.

"Humans call it henpecked," Tarrin said dryly.

"We call it sensible," Allia said. "He'll learn that my way is the only way. If he doesn't, he'll have a very unpleasant marriage."

"No wonder she doesn't want to give him the chance to run away," Keritanima teased, giving Tarrin a bright, mischievous smile.

"Allyn won't be easy to tame," Allia admitted. "But I'll enjoy the challenge of it."

"Well, we forgot to say congratulations, so congratulations, sister," Tarrin told her.

"Yes, congratulations, sister. Now we're all married," Keritanima said with a smile. "Or at least something approaching it. Now we can sit up all night and gossip wickedly about our spouses."

"We do that already," Tarrin shrugged.

"But at least now some of us aren't left out," Keritanima said with a bright smile.

"That was your fault. We couldn't help it if you were a virgin," Allia told her frankly. "We could have fixed that for you any number of times, you know. There were any number of suitable men handy, but you were stubborn about keeping your royal chastity. So don't complain if you missed out."

Keritanima's face poofed out as all the fur on her face stood on end, then she laughed helplessly. "And I thought I was dirty-minded!" she admitted. "I submit to your even dirtier mind, fair sister," she said with a mocking smile. "I'm yours to train in all those kinds of things."

"If you want training, talk to Miranda," Tarrin told her bluntly. "She's more corrupt than all three of us put together."

"That's certainly saying something," Keritanima chuckled. "I'm not sure it's a good thing, but it's certainly *something*."

Bantering with his sisters had done much to leech off the majority of his blinding anger, but it didn't totally vent it. He was still plenty angry, but it was again the cold, calculating anger of the human in him, the anger that would allow him think rationally without losing his ire. Vengeful anger, his father Eron would call it. A kind of anger he'd always warned Tarrin not to cultivate in himself, for good things rarely came of it. It allowed him to approach the problem before them with more than a driving need to hunt down and chastise someone--anyone--in the most vicious manner possible. Now he could follow leads, think calmly, and then let that blind fury go when he was sure of who did it.

They met Sapphire and Jenna as soon as he returned to his room, where the two Knights still stood silent vigil. They came out as soon as he

approached the two armored men, and Jenna was swept up in the arms of Keritanima and Allia both when she reached them. Tarrin had his memory back, and he knew intimately well now just how close Jenna was to his adopted sisters. Allia had become close to her before they left the Tower, and Keritanima had done so after they had returned to the Tower while Tarrin was in the desert, after Keritanima herself had returned from Wikuna. Keritanima and Allia were accepted by his parents as an intimate part of his immediate family, and his mother often absently called them both *daughter*. Sapphire still looked incensed, but at least lightning wasn't flying all over the place.

"Are you ready, little one?" she asked in a tightly controlled voice.

"Let's go," he said. "Allia and Kerri are going with us. Both of them are very observant. They may catch things we miss."

Sapphire looked profoundly skeptical of that notion, but sniffed indifferently and swept in the direction that Jenna pointed.

Where they kept that blood turned out to be the destination of a very long trip. It took them nearly a half an hour to get there, a cellar in a part of the lowest basement as remote as one could get in the Tower. It was a hallway he hadn't even known was there, and that was saying a great deal, because he and Dar and Auli had explored what they thought was absolutely everything. He was surprised that they'd missed something, but they obviously had. It was a large room filled with a very thick layer of dust, and under the dust was contained boxes upon boxes upon boxes. They were stacked on the floor. They were stacked on old, old tables. They were stacked on heavy stone shelves carved directly out of the rock of the walls themselves. They were piled to the very top of the low ceiling in the far corner. And every single box had not a single mark on it to discern it from any other box. All the boxes were uniform, made of wood slats nailed together, and all their dimensions were proportional. Some were larger, some were smaller, but they all appeared identical to one another in that all of them looked to be perfect cubes or long rectangular boxes.

Tarrin stared in dismay, Keritanima sneezed, and Sapphire glared at the room as if it was the room's fault that it looked that they were going to have to undergo a rather exhaustive search just to find out in which box the blood was stored.

"Hold," Sapphire said quickly, holding an arm out to stop Jenna from entering the room. "The dust itself is a clue."

"It is uniform," Allia announced. "Whoever came was careful to upset the dust so it would resettle and hide evidence of their visit."

Tarrin's eyes scanned the thick dust, and he had to agree. It was of an even thickness on the floor and on the boxes, giving no hint as to where the culprit had looked, or where the culprit had gone in the large storeroom. Without giving it much thought, Tarrin wove a quick spell of Earth, Water, and Divine, a spell that lifted up faded scents and made them glow with a ruddy light. To his surprise, not only did the spell fail to locate any recent scents, it failed to find any scent at all except dust, stone, and wood.

Tarrin's ears laid back slightly, and his eyes narrowed. Whoever had done it knew that someone was going to try to find out who they were, and more to the point, had known a Were-cat would be involved. Whoever it was had absolutely erased every trace of scent in the room, scouring it completely clean, making it as if the room had never been entered by anything larger than an insect.

"What's the matter?" Keritanima asked him.

"The room's been purged of scent," he replied. "Totally. There's not even any old traces of the workers who cut the stones."

"So whoever came along before us knew someone was going to be looking," Keritanima concluded grimly. "And they were familiar enough with your kind to take steps."

Tarrin turned the spell into the hallway, turning as he moved it, and again he was set back. The only scents laid into the passage were their own. But Tarrin realized that the purging only went in *one* direction in the continuing passageway, as if the culprit hadn't thought to do both sides to cover his passing, or perhaps didn't bother to think that purging in both directions would make a difference. It did make a difference, however, because now Tarrin had a trail to follow, a trail of anti-trail, for the purging itself marked the passing of the guilty party indirectly.

"I'm going to follow this a little," Tarrin told them.

"Follow what?" Allia asked.

"The purging only goes in one direction," he told Allia, pointing the way they themselves had come. "Maybe whoever did it messed up, and we'll be able to get something where it ends."

"A reasonable idea," Sapphire nodded. "You follow that, little one, while we try to find clues in here."

"I will come with you, brother," Allia offered, and Tarrin nodded in agreement.

"Keep us posted," Keritanima said, tapping her amulet meaningfully.

"I'll Whisper if I find something," he answered, then he and Allia started down the hall.

Moving with good speed, for Tarrin could sense the purging as easily as he could smell Allia, the pair traced it along the meandering, confusing passages of the cellars of the Tower. Tarrin realized quickly that whoever had done it had gotten lost more than once, for the purging would go off in two directions at intersections, and one of those trails would end abruptly, as if the culprit had realized that he was going in the wrong direction. They went up another level, up a tiny, narrow, dank staircase that Tarrin hadn't known was there, and probably hadn't seen the passage of anyone other than the two of them and the culprit in hundreds of years. He realized that the culprit *had* become lost, and was meandering around looking for something he could identify. He could only follow behind that trail, which led him in a roundabout manner.

The trail did, after about a half an hour, come to an end, and much to his chagrin, it came to an end just down the passage from the staircase that led down to the baths, probably the single-most heavily trafficked passageway in the entire Tower. The culprit had been very clever in making sure that his trail ended in the one place where it would be absolutely impossible for anyone to pick it up, for in a matter of hours any trail left behind would be destroyed by the passing of so many others. Tarrin knelt in the middle of the passage, making two curious Sorcerers, a dark-haired woman and a Sha'Kar, go around him and look at him curiously as they passed on their way to the baths. He put two thick fingers on the floor and realized that though the purging robbed him of the ability to identify the culprit, the purging itself may give him some information. He sank himself

into the remnants of that spell. The ghostly vestiges of the spell may still be lingering in the rock, for here in the Tower, spells had a habit of leaving behind traces of themselves. It was because of the very rich magical atmosphere...flows and spells could often linger long after the Sorcerer stopped concentrating on it. And if it were Wizardry or Priest magic, even Druidic magic, there may be some lingering trace of it he could identify.

From the feel of it, it was rather old, maybe two rides or so, but that was all he could really tell. The magical power of the Tower had infused whatever was left and drowned it in the ambient magical energy that thrived here, an environment just like Sha'Kari, where he had trouble sensing the more delicate things because of all the interference. The only thing he could sense was the age of the magic, but the texture of its remnants gave no hint as to the kind of magician that created it. It was one of the few times when he couldn't be sure about what kind of magic he was confronting. But even if he could tell which order did it, the magic itself told him some things. It told him that whoever did it had done it well before he intended to carry out his plan, and it showed that his target had had both the time to think things over, and more than enough time to get everything ready to keep himself hidden. His target had had two rides to make sure that every trace of his activities had been destroyed. The person also was either a magician or had a confidante that was one, for them to use magic to cover their tracks. They may be looking for a single person or a pair or trio, but *someone* in the guilty party was definitely a magic-user.

He realized, without much enthusiasm, that this was not going to be as easy as he thought. They were chasing someone that obviously knew what they were doing. Even a fool with a little magical assistance and two rides to prepare could do a good job in destroying the trail that led back to him.

Raising his awareness partially up into the Weave, he became immediately aware of the many conversations taking place among the Sha'Kar. He'd never noticed that before--at least not here--and he had to make a few adjustments just as the Sha'Kar did to speak to Jenna and Keritanima without disturbing other conversations, and also without letting anyone else currently bridging into the weave eavesdrop on what they were saying.

"Sisters," he called.

"Any luck?" Jenna's voice responded immediately.

"It peters out in front of the stairs leading to the baths," he said sourly. "I checked the spell itself, and it's about twenty days old. It was made by a Sorcerer."

"I've found some traces of that here too," Jenna told him, and Tarrin quickly adjusted what he was receiving to make it audible from his amulet so Allia could hear what was being said. "Whoever stole the blood was very careful. One of the crates, the one with your blood in it, was moved by Sorcery, and it's the only crate that seems to have been touched. The culprit knew exactly where the blood was."

"That's not a damning fact, Jenna," he said. "My blood would be easy to detect with magic. It's not exactly normal."

"Kerri mentioned that. She said she could make up a spell on the spot to find it."

"I know. So could either of us, for that matter."

"Sapphire tried to use a couple of spells herself, but that purging effect has destroyed everything they could find, even Druidic and Wizard spells can't get any information. That's a strong spell, brother. I don't think any Sorcerer would be capable of it, not as powerful as its effect is. I'm not even sure what spell it is."

"I can't tell either," he admitted. "I can only tell that it was made about twenty days ago."

"That's something, at least. We can always grill everyone in the Tower and find out where they were that day. But we do know now that it has to be a strong Sorcerer that did it."

"No, we just know that a magician had a hand in covering it up," Tarrin told her. "We're coming back, Jenna."

"We'll be waiting."

Tarrin mulled it over as they went back, following a more direct route. A magician had a hand in things, so that more or less excused all the females except Kimmie at least directly. None of them were magicians, and more to the point, none of them would probably trust a human magician

with that kind of a secret. Mist certainly wouldn't, and as far as the collusion theory went, that left only Jesmind. If Jesmind did it, then she had help. He'd never get anything out of her, but if he could find whoever helped her--if it was really her--then he'd get the truth. So, if it was an individual, it was Kimmie, but if it was a group effort, it was Jesmind. At least right now. He knew things would change in his mind as he got more information, and he told himself several times, over and over, not to get his mind set in stone about who he thought did it. It could have been *anyone*, even one of the original Council taking steps to put him back the way they'd put him the first time. It simply came down to the fact that they had to get more information before they could start eliminating possible suspects.

Once they got back to the storeroom, they found that all the dust had been carefully pushed up against the walls, not removed, and Sapphire, Keritanima, and Jenna were carefully inspecting a single small wooden crate. He looked over them--an advantage of height--and found that inside it, laying on a pillow and with shredded straw strewn around it, were six small vials of dark, reddish liquid. The array of the vials made it abundantly clear that there were two of them missing.

"Those are it?" Tarrin asked over them, making Keritanima jump.

"Don't do that!" she said with a nervous laugh, putting her hand to her chest. "You scared me out of my pelt!" She touched her face. "If I start shedding, it's going to be all your fault!"

"These are," Jenna answered. "Two missing. The one Jula used, and the one whoever it was used on you."

Tarrin reached down and picked up one of the tiny vials, inspecting it. It had a mark of warning on it--the mark of death, actually--telling anyone who picked it up that what was held within was a substance of incredible danger. He could sense the magic of the blood within, his blood, blood he had shed fighting the Wraith. They had picked up his frozen fingers and other pieces of him lost to the icy touch of the Wraith and milked the blood out of them. Why they did such a thing, why they found the need to keep something so dangerous, was completely beyond him.

"Any clues?" he asked.

"Only one," Sapphire said, reaching down and picking up the lid, then turning it over and showing him the underside, where the nails stuck out from it. She pointed to the edge of the lid, and Tarrin peered there.

He could see them. Four small depressions in the wood, small lines, looking like where a tool of some kind had been used to pry the lid free of the crate. They were straight and rather close together, but they had caused some very minor flaking of the wood. Whatever it was that they used had had some force behind it.

"That rules out the females," he said grimly. "They'd just use their claws."

"If they *wanted* to be found, sure they would," Keritanima said dismissively. "Whoever did this used a tool. Look, here's where they put in a crowbar," she said, pointing to a depression on the lip of the crate. The depression was strangely narrow, and was deeper along the edges than it was in the middle. "See how they rocked it back and forth to pry the lid up?"

"I doubt any of the females would have done that," Allia mused. "As strong as they are, it would have been nothing for them to pry the lid with a crowbar. Rocking would have been pointless." Allia looked down at the crate, then her eyes seemed to focus on the floor by it. She knelt quickly and pushed Keritanima out of the way, then put her finger on the flagstone of the floor delicately. "There is a scratch here," she said. "It is fairly fresh, but not made today."

They all peered at the scratch. It was visible, but it was very faint. It was about a finger long, deeper at one end than the other, as if something had been pushed along the floor that had dug into it and slowed the object to a stop. Allia's eyes peered in scrutiny at the floor. "There's another here, much lighter, and another here," she said, tapping the floor to the left of that scratch, but Tarrin's eyes could barely make those out. Only Allia's exceptional vision, that would let her read a book from across an open field, could make out such minute details. Allia put a finger on each scratch, and Tarrin saw immediately that they were roughly the same distance apart, about half a finger, and the scratches were deeper towards one side of the trio. That really didn't mean anything, but it did jump out at him.

"Your eyes are very sharp, Selani," Sapphire said intently. "Tell me, what else do you see that we cannot?" She motioned them away. "Step back, let her inspect without interference."

That was a *good* idea. Allia's vision would pick out things all of them would miss, and giving her unrestricted access to the crime scene would let her study things carefully. They all stepped back and let her do her work, and Allia bent to the task quickly and quietly. She looked at the outside of the box, then the inside. She reached in and adjusted the six remaining bottles carefully, fingering them and looking at the cushion upon which they rested. "Did any of you disturb anything within the box other than Tarrin?" she asked.

"We pushed the packing material out of the way," Keritanima replied.

Allia nodded and started rifling through the packing material, a kind of shredded plant-like material that looked like straw, smelled like flax, and was quite curly and springy. She pulled it out of the box and searched through it meticulously, and they all watched on in uncertainty, not sure what she was looking for. Keritanima finally broke the silence. "What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Hair," she answered. "We all lose hair, sister. It falls out all the time, and I am forever seeing it on the floor. I was going to look for it on this floor, but you swept the dust away, and now I will have to pick through the dust piles. This is much cleaner, much faster, and we know that any hair we find within had to come from whoever did it. It is the only way it could get *inside* the box."

"That's damn clever," Keritanima said appreciatively.

"Most people do not think about hair," Allia said. "Only when it falls out over one's eyes or they find it on their clothes does one really consider it. Whoever did this was very careful to cover his tracks, but I do not think that even he considered that such a thing may be traced back to him. If we can find but one hair, we have a solid lead on our target, and maybe magic can supply us the identity of its owner."

"I am impressed," Sapphire said honestly. "You are a formidable woman, Selani."

"I am but my father's daughter," she said modestly, continuing to carefully sort through the packing material.

Allia had struck on an idea that was marvellous in its elegant simplicity. Tarrin was certain that she was right, that whoever had done it had never thought to check the box to make sure his hair hadn't fallen inside. He, like Keritanima, and even Sapphire, put a paw to his head and patted it. All his hair was bound up in his braid except for his bangs, which hung over his face, so it would be hard for him to leave any hair behind that didn't come from that one place. But not everyone wore a braid, and besides, his arms and legs were absolutely covered with hair. Fur, actually, but it *was* hair. He pinched his bangs and pulled very, very gently, feeling the hair slide between the pads on his fingers, and when they came free, a single blond hair had come away with them. He looked at it intently for a moment, seeing the little root at the end, then he reached aside and dropped it to the floor deliberately.

They watched on in breathless silence for what seemed to be half of forever, as Allia methodically and painstakingly sorted through the flaxen-seeming packing material, shredded plant material that had dried out to be springy and voluminous. She stopped, and then tensed, and that made all three of them take an impulsive step forward. "Ah, here we are," she announced in a delicate, quiet voice, pulling her hand out of the box.

She came out with a single hair. It was quite short, rather thick, and looked rather tough and resilient. Tarrin looked at it for a long moment, and a growing horror began to sink into the pit of his stomach.

The hair was *white*.

Looking down, he set his foot against the floor and dragged it. It left behind a quartet of deep scratches in the floor, the scratch made by his big toe respectably deep while the one made by his smallest was barely more than a skim on the gray slate. They were set at regular intervals apart, and those intervals were more than five times wider than the scratches Allia had found.

Tarrin felt his knees weaken, and he staggered back until a tall stack of crates kept him from falling over. He stared at that little hair in absolute

horror, his heart pounding. It all fit. It fit! The purging spell, the scratches, and that was the key, that one little hair.

Not hair. *Fur*.

With a dreadful click of things, things in the present, things in the past, it all fell together, and it all fell together neatly and perfectly. His expanded memory let him go back over every moment of it again and again, read the inflections within the words, the set of shoulders, the hidden meaning behinds questions and statements. It made his mind whirl, and he nearly felt like he was going to black out for a moment. Shock, outrage, and fury clashed with other feelings, feelings of protectiveness, of love, of gentleness. They warred in him openly as his outrage contended against one of the few things within him that could stand up to it.

His protective instincts.

Staring at the little hair like it was a Demon, he put his paws to his head and literally howled in his confusion and conflicting desires.

"Tarrin!" Sapphire said in sudden concern, "are you alright?"

Allia, however, had narrowed her eyes on the little hair, and the truth opened itself to her. "May the Holy Mother forgive her," she said in a trembling voice.

"Who is it?" Keritanima asked, then she too seemed to understand. "Oh, Goddess!" she wailed, putting her hands to her muzzle.

"Who?" Sapphire asked in a voice that would brook no opposition. "Who has done this?" Jenna looked at the little hair, and she put a hand to her stomach as her expression turned a bit sickly. Sapphire put a hand on her and made her look into her eyes. "Who did this?" she demanded. "It is white, and it looks like fur. Was it Jesmind?"

"No," Jenna replied in a weak tone. "It was *Jasana*."

Chapter 8

The world was tearing itself apart.

Struggling to remain standing, struggling to remain conscious, Tarrin wilted against the boxes behind him, paws to his head as the awful truth struck down on him, crushed beneath a weight that he could not bear. Jasana. Jasana had been the one to turn him. His own daughter!

It was a truth he could barely comprehend. The depths of his shock and betrayal were equalled only by the love he had for that little girl and his need to protect her. It went over and over again in his mind, seeing the single white hair, realizing that the scratches in the floor came from Jasana's claws, his expanded memory allowing him to look back on the conversations he'd had with his daughter and pick out every single one that had warned him of this possibility. Of course, that Tarrin was ignorant of the depths of her determination, and even now he was stunned that she would actually do what she had done. But Jasana had proved one thing in the time he'd known her, and that was that she was capable of almost any action if it meant getting what she wanted. He didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to know what she had done, but it was something he could not ignore, not deny, not forget.

The room spun around and around like a top as mental shock wreaked havoc on his physical body. How could she do it? What possessed her to risk his wrath, when she *knew* how he would react? How could she betray him so utterly? He couldn't understand it, he just couldn't understand it! Feeling his knees buckling, he turned and leaned over the boxes, his tail convulsing and trembling uncontrollably. How could she have done it? And why did it have to be *her*? If it had been anyone else, he could have justified his rage. But he could not bring himself to harm his daughter, and it meant that his righteous indignation had no release, his fury had no outlet. It only made him more furious that it was her, that one of the most dear people to him had been the one to betray his trust. That rage built up inside him,

mingled with the shock and confusion and consternation and chagrin that came with finding out that his own daughter had been the one to betray him.

Claws sank into the wood as his mind, overwhelmed by incredibly powerful, intense emotion, began to lose coherence. The rage was overwhelming, and it wanted to go up and destroy the girl. But she was his *daughter*, and he could not bring himself to harm her. His need to lash out at her was defeated by his very powerful instinct to protect her, and the frustration of being unable to satisfy his dark need was like an infection in his mind, festering and consuming rational thought, a rusted nail driving into his brain and leaving nothing but pestilence in its wake. Claws sank deeper and deeper into the wood as his fingers clenched, as a buzzing between his ears made it harder and harder to think, as his vision seemed to fade and become hazed. All rational thought seemed to flee from the fury building inside him, fury at Jasana, fury at his frustration, rage caused by knowing that one of the people he loved most dearly in the world had done such a terrible thing to him. Jasana had done the unforgivable, but he could not pass judgement on her. Her position as his daughter both made him even more furious at her for her betrayal, but also protected her from his retaliation. It was a trap, a deadly cycle that only caused his fury to build higher and higher.

Like the snapping of a twig, Tarrin's rational mind lost control, and it succumbed to the rage. Eyes exploding into the green aura that so clearly marked his anger, unholy beacons of pure evil, Tarrin threw himself into his rage. Claws crushed wood beneath them, pierced them, and the Were-cat was suddenly overwhelmed by an overpowering, almost mindless need to destroy. If he could not destroy the one responsible for the rage, then he would destroy everything else.

With an animalistic roar, Tarrin hefted up the wooden crate caught in his claws, lifted it over his head, and then hurled it at the wall with every bit of strength he could muster. It struck the wooden wall with such incredible force that the stones of the wall were actually buckled by the impact, and the wooden crate literally exploded into tiny shards that flew all over the room, with enough velocity to drive into the Were-cat's chest and arms and become lodged, like huge splinters. The pain barely registered on the Were-cat as he clasped his paws together and smashed them down on the crate

that had been below the first, sending wood and pieces of old crystal that had been within it flying in every direction.

It was a rage unlike any other he had ever experienced, and even the Cat within understood it, in some deep, instinctive manner. There was no thought, absolutely no thought, only the burning, blinding, utter and complete rage, complete fury, almost pristine in its elemental purity. Fury destroyed thought, rage swallowed up memory and experience, transforming the dual mind of the Were-cat into nothing more than a murderous machine reacting only to stimulus, unable to even think in the submerged manner in which it usually did when operating in a rage. There was no thought, no thought at all, only driving, insane fury and an overwhelming compulsion to destroy. And since memory and experience were locked away by the rage, the unthinking mind could not reach out and smash things with Sorcery, which would have been its first response had it been in a normal enraged state. The unthinking mind could only lash out physically, could only satisfy the need to destroy with claws and fists and feet and teeth.

"Goddess!" Jenna called in shock as they scrambled to protect themselves from the flying shrapnel. "He's lost it! Everyone get out *now*!"

On hearing the voices, the Were-cat turned around and found himself facing four females. In his fury, he could not recognize any of them, they were all but red-tinged figures, objects to destroy, things to kill. With a snarling, hissing roar of challenge, the Were-cat dropped into a deep slouch, paws wide, ready to kill these unknown figures. Two of them backpedalled furiously, one stood stock still, but the last drew two weapons from beneath a baggy garment and brandished them at him. "Go!" that one shouted, though in his current state, the Were-cat could not understand the meaning of the sound. "I will keep his attention!"

The Were-cat lunged at that armed figure, but even in his rage, the Were-cat was honestly taken aback by the lightning speed of this adversary. With such grace and quickness that seemed impossible, the figure danced to the side of him, and he barely registered feeling a sword slice into his side, but felt no pain. The Were-cat, beyond such concepts of fencing and strategy, mindlessly flailed at the figure, but its speed and reaction to his blows were so complete that he may as well have been trying to catch fog in

his paws. In but a heartbeat, the Were-cat was struck many times, but each wound healed over as quickly as the sword was removed. The blows only served to enrage him more, if that were even possible, and the other three figures dissolved into meaninglessness as the Were-cat focused on destroying this speedy one before him.

Jenna had *never* seen such a display.

She pushed Sapphire unceremoniously before her as Keritanima rushed for the door. They both fully understood what was happening. Tarrin had snapped, and now he was as much a danger to them as any Troll ever was. Allia had somehow gotten his attention, though, and she desperately wanted a single second to stop and watch her. She knew Allia was fast, but she never *dreamed* that any living thing could move with such blazing, absolute speed. Now, finally, she understood why her brother was so respectful of Allia's fighting ability. She was one of the few beings on this entire world that Tarrin feared enough to not want to fight. Allia didn't have Tarrin's strength, nor did she have his magical might. But she had speed, inhuman, unbelievable speed, and Jenna finally understood that against such speed, strength was meaningless. His strength advantage was nullified if only because he wouldn't get an opportunity to lay a hand on her.

Every bit of that speed was on display in that dank storeroom as the Selani danced, darted, weaved, and twisted around the wildly thrashing Were-cat, confusing him and frustrating him to an extreme that Jenna didn't think imaginable. Short swords struck and struck and struck again, but the magical bracers on his wrists, the very items she created for him, were now protecting him from those light slashes and stabs. Only one out of every four or five had enough power behind it to breach the invisible magic that protected him, where Allia had the opportunity to put more into the attack, and those drew blood. But those wounds healed over as fast as she could inflict them, and they were probably doing little more than making him even more angry.

"Do *not* push me!" Sapphire snapped in outrage, trying to dig in her feet.

"Don't argue with me right now!" Jenna said in a savage manner, the voice of a woman trying to save her own life. "We have to get away from him!"

"He is in a rage?" the dragon asked.

"Yes!" Jenna shouted in exasperation. Could it be more *obvious*? Did he have to wear a sign declaring his mental state? "Kerri, Allia, let's get out and trap him inside!" she shouted. "He can trash this room all he wants, but we can't let him get out into the hallways like this! He'll kill anything in his path!"

"I'll pin him to the wall!" Keritanima announced, stopping and raising her hands.

Jenna's heart seized in her chest, and she nearly felt like she was going to faint. "Kerri, *no*!" she shouted. If she used Sorcery, Tarrin may respond with Sorcery! And in his state, she knew that even if the three of them Circled, the chances they could stop him would be miniscule at best! "Don't use Sorcery! Don't do it!" she screamed hysterically.

"Right, right!" Keritanima shouted as she reached the door. "I forgot about that!"

"A bloody fine time to forget!" Jenna seethed as she literally dove to the floor, pulling Sapphire down with her as the furious battle raging between the Were-cat and the Selani drifted too close to them. Allia's face was a mask of intense concentration as she labored to keep the Were-cat's killing claws off of her, continuing to slash and stab at him with her lightning thrusts, using her incredible speed and agility to keep out of his clutches. Tarrin was inhumanly fast, but Allia's speed defied rational explanation, moving so quickly that her hands almost seemed to blur, the flowing of her silver hair as she moved catching the light and drawing the eyes, helping to further confound an enemy facing her.

In a rapid series of weaves and bobs, the Selani finally managed to get into a position where she could do more than jab at him. She turned and brought up her foot and kicked him dead in the face, kicked him with such incredible force that his head snapped back, and she turned a complete circle after the blow to play out her momentum. If Allia had struck a man like that, she would have broken his neck. The blow barely phased Tarrin,

managing only to stagger him back a single step, but that was a lifetime to Allia. She slipped to his side, rotated her body, ducked under a swipe of Tarrin's claws, got herself behind his blow and into a position where he was vulnerable to her. And then, with a sickening spatter of blood, she drove one of her shortswords through the side of his neck. The blow was carefully measured and expertly delivered, causing the blade to shear through the bone of his neck and sever his spinal column, but not severing his major arteries or veins or cutting his throat.

It had a spectacular effect. Tarrin crumpled to the floor like a sack of meal, and he did not move. He did not even breathe. He was face down, so she couldn't see his expression, but something told her that she didn't *want* to see his expression. Allia held onto her sword, held it in place even as he fell, and her wild look at them told her that this was by no means over yet. "Get out, quickly!" she ordered. "If I hold his spine apart for too long, it will kill him! We must be out before he regains his movement!"

Jenna was stunned for a very short moment before self-preservation took control of her again. Incredible! Allia had *defeated* Tarrin in a fight, even when he was in a rage!

The three ladies did not dwell on this sudden change of events for long. Keritanima bolted out of the door, and Jenna pushed Sapphire through before her. Allia watched them get out of the room with intense concern, and then yanked her sword free and darted towards the door. She literally flew out of the room, and then Jenna and Keritanima grabbed hold of the door and slammed it closed. "We have to brace this thing!" Jenna said feverishly, pushing on it as if a horde of Trolls were pushing from the other side.. "He'll break it down like it was made of paper!"

"Back!" Sapphire shouted in a commanding voice, waving them away with one arm. The three Sorcerers scrambled out of the way just as a howl of fury vibrated the door from the other side, and Sapphire chanted in a strangely discordant language, making several very precise gestures with her hands. Jenna felt a magical force travel through the Weave into the shapechanged dragon, and then it was released from her and infused the door. The door seemed to shimmer visibly for a second, then returned to seeming normalcy.

"How did you do that, Allia?" Jenna asked breathlessly as the door shuddered as if struck by a heavy piece of furniture, but it held.

"Jesmind taught me long ago how to kill a Were-cat," she answered in a panting tone. The short fight had pushed the Selani a great deal more than she first thought. "To put Tarrin down should he become too great a danger. Done briefly, it can serve to immobilize one without doing permanent harm."

"It worked well enough," Kerri said nervously as the door shuddered again. "But now what do we do?"

"We keep him in there, no matter what it takes," she answered in a loud tone as Tarrin started roaring in frustration as he continued to pound on the door. But Sapphire's spell was holding, and he was incapable of breaking it down. "I think you really ticked him off, Allia!" Jenna remarked in a dry tone.

"He will get over it. If he even remembers it," she answered calmly, but she had a white-knuckled grip on her two swords.

Sapphire's eyes widened, and she jumped back. "We must flee *now*!" she said with desperate urgency.

"What's wrong?" Jenna asked.

"Do not argue! Run, you foolish bipeds!"

Jenna paled when Sapphire, a mighty dragon, turned and fled with all speed away from the door. If anything, that was a fair indication to Jenna that whatever was about to happen was *not* going to be good.

Within the room, the Were-cat's rage had only doubled since regenerating from the ghastly wound inflicted by the speedy foe. Humiliation was added to the volatile chaos of emotion that roared through his brain, wounded pride making his volcanic temper erupt as never before. He had recovered fully from the blow, but the moment of incapacitation gave his quarry time to escape. The door was solid, and it would not budge despite his most powerful blows, and that only frustrated the Were-cat that much more.

Drowning in a sea of fiery rage, the Were-cat was only dimly aware of a strange, awesome power that seemed attracted by his intense emotion, drawing nearer and nearer to him. He felt it hovering just on the edges of his awareness as he slammed his fists and shoulder into the door again, and again, and again, trying in vain to burst it from its hinges. His claws could do no better, for they could not penetrate the wood, no matter how hard he pushed. When he broke all the claws on his left paw trying to sink them into the wood, he reared back and kicked the door, but only managed to rebound from it. The door was like nothing the enraged mentality of the Were-cat had ever experienced before, a baffling invulnerable barrier whose very existence was a direct challenge to the Were-cat's strength and dominance. Roaring in impotent fury, the Were-cat reared back, sank his claws into the floor, and then drove his shoulder into the door and pushed. He pushed with all his might, not trying to break the door with a sharp blow, but with inexorable pressure. His fury-tinged vision seemed to blur, blood pounded behind his eyes, bones in his shoulder threatened to snap under the monstrous force that he exerted against the door, but still it would not budge. Deep furrows were dug into the floor from his scrabbling claws, trying to gain purchase, but still it would not budge. He threw his entire might against that door, a might that every living thing would respect if not fear, and still the door would not budge.

The strange power seemed to rush in on him then as he found himself faced with a problem that could not be conquered by brute force. It flowed into his mind, searched through it, searched, and joined with it. It sensed that which infuriated the Were-cat so, the immovable door, and it seemed to respond to his animalistic, base impulse, his utter *need* to break down the door, to destroy it, to show it that he was the stronger. That power joined with that will, and even in his fury, the Were-cat felt it flow through him from wherever it came from and take up the task that he could not accomplish alone.

The door, which had been invulnerable to his physical attacks, shattered like crystal when that unknown power struck it, struck it with raw, elemental force, unshaped energy, unrefined might. The power of the blow shattered the wall on the opposite side of the passage beyond the door as well, hurting the Were-cat's ears with the loudness of the detonation, and sending a cloud of choking dust billowing into the room. Broken and whole

stone blocks were littered in the passage and the dusty storeroom that had been on the other side of the wall, some of them smoking as if on fire.

The power did not flee from him after accomplishing this task. It remained joined to him, joined to his fury, and it became a welcome tool to the furious Were-cat in his need to lay waste to all things. Stepping out into the hallway quickly, he saw the four fleeing figures, among them the one upon which his fury had become temporarily affixed. The power within responded to the sight of them, sending another blast of unmitigated power down the passageway, a wave of incredible force that shattered the walls, the ceiling, even the floor as it passed by, shrouding the passage in a dense fog of dust and flecks of stone. He couldn't see them anymore, and losing sight of them in the middle of that wave of destruction pleased the Were-cat, made him certain that the object of his attention had been destroyed.

Losing the focus of his rage, the Were-cat returned to wild, uncontrolled destruction, but instead of flailing about with his arms and body, he now flailed about with this strange power that had joined to him. Walls collapsed and shattered from the monstrous power unleashed by the enraged mind of the Were-cat, sending thunderclaps of detonation echoing in all directions. The floor, which was solid stone beneath neatly cut and arranged stones, buckled and heaved as the stone was exploded from within, showering the rubble in the destroyed passage with red-hot jags of shrapnel. The ceiling collapsed on the Were-cat, but the power joined to him shrugged off the tons and tons of jumbled debris, forcing it back up, then sending it flying with a surge of repelling force.

The passage was a rubble-choked ruin, and it pleased the Were-cat in a dark manner that destruction had been achieved. But he was still enraged, still in need of destroying to appease his unsatisfied lust for destruction. The passage was sealed, but the collapsed roof exposed another level above the current one, a new place to destroy. Picking himself up within the strange power joined with him, the Were-cat lifted off the floor and floated up towards that new area, a new thing to destroy.

Not even in the Battle of Suld had Jenna come so close to being killed.

Whatever Tarrin had done--it wasn't Sorcery!--it had come down the hall at them, shattering the walls, ceiling and floor, like an avalanche of invisible force that destroyed everything it touched. The four of them had just barely managed to reach a side passage, and they literally dove into it and huddled on the floor, hands over their heads as the shockwave or whatever it was continued on down the passageway, with only a small wave of force passing harmlessly over them. But then came a rain of stones and a cloud of choking dust as the walls and ceiling in the passage were ripped apart and collapsed, forcing Keritanima and Allia to scramble forward on all fours to get clear of the avalanche of smoking rubble that blocked off the passage. Jenna was hit on the head by a rather large rock, and after a moment of seeing stars and feeling her head swim, she recovered enough to realize where they were and what had just happened.

It wasn't Sorcery, so it had to be Druidic magic. That was bad in its own right, but at least it wasn't Sorcery. If he touched the Weave, he could bring the Tower down around them!

"He's going to bring the Tower down around our ears!" Keritanima said, mirroring Jenna's fears as they all got up and ran blindly down the passage, a passage whose walls were now shivering and buckling in a very unsettling manner, as smoky dust was shaken from the arched ceiling above.

"The All has touched his anger, and it's responding to it!" Sapphire shouted as they ran towards the stairs. "He will not stop until he either exhausts himself or the All tries to do something his power can't support! And that will kill him!"

"Neither of those are acceptable, Sapphire!" Jenna said in a commanding voice. "I'll either lose my brother or the Tower! How do we stop him?"

"It takes a Druid of greater power than him," she replied. "I can do it, but I don't want to face him in a confined space! We must lure him outside!"

"Why not?" Keritanima demanded.

"Because I don't relish the idea of being buried alive!" she answered honestly. "I have to *subdue* him, Wikuni, and I don't think this structure can withstand that!"

There was an ear-splitting *BOOM*, followed up almost immediately by a violent shaking of the earth beneath their feet. One of the walls behind them fell in, but it was hard to see or hear in the pall of dust and the loud rumbling of the shifting rubble and earth all around them. The shaking of the ground was enough to spill Jenna to the buckling floor, but Sapphire's curses were even louder than the echoing thunder of the explosion.

"What's happening?" Keritanima asked fearfully. "That wasn't Sorcery!"

"That fool!" Sapphire raged, then cursed for several seconds. "It is the Were-cat Druid, Triana! She's engaged Tarrin within the Tower walls! She'll kill us all!"

Despite his unmitigated fury, the Were-cat had never faced an opponent of such power, and it took him aback.

Her body literally glowing with an angry light, the unrecognizable Were-cat female squared off against him in the ruins of another shattered passageway, a passageway that *she* had destroyed in an attempt to gain his undivided attention. It had worked. Something about this female tickled at his memory. He knew that he should somehow know her, but his fury-stained mind could not reach through the haze to make the connection. He could only see her as an opponent, as an enemy, and her might challenged him in a way he could not ignore. The primal force in him demanded that he meet this challenge, defeat it, prove his superiority and establish dominance.

Rising up, the Were-cat male danced from pile of broken stone to pile of broken stone in a dazzling display of agility, running forward over the uneven ground with claws extended and a look of mindless brutality twisting his features. The female stood her ground, spreading her feet and opening her arms, in a twisted mockery of a mother's opening embrace. Then she brought her paws together, and it was like the air itself sought to crush him in an invisible grip, literally catching him as if he'd run headlong into an invisible wall and dropping him ankle-deep in loose stone debris. He responded almost immediately with the power in him, using it to push back this unseen attack. The powers battled against one another, causing savage lights to erupt around the male, raking the walls with lightning as two

overwhelming magical powers contended directly against one another. It was a battle of strength, a tug of war using the magic as the rope, and they seemed to be evenly matched.

But that was an illusion, and even the Cat, who was in control, understood that. Rage and emotion made it impossible for the Cat to fully draw on the memory and knowledge of the Human, a rage of truly blind proportions, a rage so intense that even the Cat was inhibited by its power, unable to fully draw on all the resources within the mind it shared with the Human that were commonly available to it. It knew that there was experience with this power in the mind, it knew that there was extensive knowledge of another form of power that it could wield against her, but all of that was locked up inside the fury, and even the Cat could not touch it. It could only respond with raw emotion, base instinct, and the power within was limited to those primal actions, joined to a mind that had degenerated into nothing but stimulus and response, coupled to an overwhelming need to destroy.

But it would not just give up. The Cat would work with what it had and prevail, as it always did.

Diverting just a tiny bit of attention, the Cat struck at the debris separating them, causing a shower of dust and small bits of rock to lash out at the female. The design was to distract, not harm, but the female brushed that spray of debris aside like swatting a fly, then made a slashing motion with her other arm. Something caught him high in the side and slammed him into the debris of the rockfall to the side, then she slashed in the other direction, causing him to sail across the destroyed passage and slam into the rock on the other side. The pain was barely registered as the treatment she gave him served to make him even more indignantly furious, and it was like his mind had become fire. The power within picked up on the idea of fire, and searing flame exploded around his paws. He thrust those burning paws in the female's direction, creating a hellish blast of superheated flame to roar down the passage towards her, faster than an arrow was shot from a bow.

The female didn't flinch. She simply rose her paws, and it was as if the fire struck a solid wall, blooming out over its unseen surface, unable to reach her. She closed her fist and raised it, and all the loose debris on

the floor, surrounding him, debris she had created, suddenly lifted up from the broken floor and hovered unwavering in the air, all around him, concealing her from his view. Then, as if struck by something to propel it forward, all of the debris raced towards him, seeking to crush him just as the invisible hands had done. The force exploded out from him, catching the stones between two opposing forces, and most of them shattered into gravel from the stress. When the pressing force disappeared, the cloud of gravel exploded away from him, embedding into the rockfalls on either side of him, the floor, the ceiling, and rocketing down either side of the passageway.

The Cat started in its fury, confused. The female was gone. The stones and gravel had hidden her from his eyes, but she wasn't there now. Not even her scent remained.

The Cat felt that she had fled, though it couldn't understand why. He had not done anything to make her flee. She had no reason to run.

That lack of comprehension turned into shock when living flesh impacted him from behind. The female's arms wrapped around him as she collided with his back, sliding up and around, locking under his arms, snaking up over his shoulders, and lacing her fingers behind his head. It forced his own arms up and away from his body, removing their usefulness to him, and the sudden overwhelming pressure she put on him, driving him down towards the floor, locked both his feet to the floor. Her tail immediately sought out his own and wrapped vice-like around the end of his, seeking to keep it from hooking her legs and trying to unseat her foundation.

The Cat realized almost immediately that since he couldn't see her, he had trouble focusing the power within on her. He tried blowing her off with that power, but she used her own to brush his aside like dust, cancelling it out. That power suddenly smothered all over him, clamping down on his own power and trying to throttle it, feeling like a thick molasses that had been poured over his body and mind. That smothering power assaulted him on myriad levels, body and mind, as tendrils of her power sought to burrow through the fury imprisoning his rational mind. The Were-cat could only struggle physically against her as her power both covered over his own,

making it useless to him and sought to break into his mind for some inconceivable reason.

"Stop fighting with me!" she hissed from behind, tightening her hold on him to such a degree that the pain registered to him, and he could feel the tendon and ligaments in his shoulders threatening to tear. He could feel her power starting to peel away the layers of fury that submerged his consciousness, slicing through the desperate defenses the Were-cat tried to erect in its path. "Stop it! I don't want to hurt you, cub!"

In desperation, the Cat finally managed to reach down through the fury and touch on knowledge denied to it earlier. It reached out and made a connection to yet another form of power, the one it had used so many times before, the magic of the Weave. But, to his horror, the Cat felt the female's power slash that connection with some kind of invisible knife, and then erect a barrier between him and it that made it unreachable.

Even in his fury, the Were-cat found tremendous respect for this opponent. She was simultaneously maintaining several forms of magical pressure on him, and still had the ability to physically restrain him. She seemed capable of multiple actions all at the same time, something that was very, very hard to do. She was an extraordinary foe.

"I said stop it!" she said seethingly, and then there was something like an arrow of her power lancing into his mind. She stopped simply wearing down his defenses, she penetrated them in a fast, powerful strike, a strike that made his mind go numb and caused him to lose all the strength in his body. He was driven down to his knees, felt her pressing down on him as her myriad magical assault stripped away all his defenses, felt her magical attack drive into the heart of his mind. But once it was there, it did not seek to harm him. Instead, it freed his rational mind from the prison of his fury, returned his senses to him, reassured him with its gentle, loving presence within him. Her touch on his mind allowed him to recognize her as his adopted mother, and her touch joined their minds in a way he had never before experienced. It was a window between them, and he found he could look into her mind as easily as she could look into his. Within her mind was a crushing fear, a fear of hurting him, and a strange exhilaration of using her Druidic power at its peak, as if subduing him appealed to her competitive nature. He could see beyond the moment, look in and see the towering

protectiveness she had for her children, all her children, a need to nurture and defend that stemmed from the trauma she had been forced to suffer a thousand years ago, when she and the other first-born, children of the Breaking, children born radically altered from their parents, had been forced to destroy them. He could feel the pain she still carried within her over that, for she had loved her parents despite everything that had happened. Just as he absolutely would not allow another friend to be killed during the course of this mad quest, she would not permit any she called family to die. He saw faces, faces, an endless line of faces, all of them faces of those who had died, faces that had great meaning to the Were-cat matriarch. Were-cat faces, both those of the old ones and the new, faces of humans, faces of other *Fae-da'Nar*, faces of humans, even several faces of Wikuni. All friends, family, acquaintances, teachers, mentors, lovers. All dead. All gone now when she continued on, feeling a strange guilt that she was the last of the oldest ones, the last to remember. It reminded him of the dreams he'd had, the dreams of where he was confronted with the endless faces of those who had died from his hands. Triana carried many scars inside, scars she did not show to the world, scars her own children did not know were there, and it made his feelings for her become that much stronger. He felt her emotions run wild when she touched on the reason he was out of control, and in that wild moment the only thing that kept her from doing the same thing he did was because her mind was anchored into his own.

Let go of the All gently, her thought mirrored into his mind, and he knew that she meant it for him. *Slowly and gently*.

Doing as she ordered, he slowly, carefully distanced himself from the All, using the newfound control and calmness her touch on his mind had instilled in him. Drawing from *her* experience with the All, he knew exactly what to do to break his connection safely. The All acted oddly when it was wielded in anger, and it required exceptional care to let go of it without it doing something while in the act of letting go.

Much to his surprise, what he was doing was something Triana had to do from time to time, and that was make a clean break from the All when her emotions would make its use unstable and dangerous.

The lock around his shoulders, pinning his arms, was released, and her arms slid down and embraced him from behind. She put her head against his shoulder, and he could feel her sympathy for him, feel the powerful love she held for him in her heart. A little dazed from the shattering of the rage and the enormity of touching her mind, a mind a thousand years old and possessed of memories and experiences both wonderful and horrible, he could only lean against her and both revel in and recoil from that touch. She had been forced to deal with him in the one state in which he never wanted anyone he loved to see, but he was glad that of all of them, it had been her. If there was anyone that would understand, it was Triana. Her hold on him also helped to hold him up. He was also tired, very tired, a weariness that was partially because of the emotional energy he'd expended in the rage, and energy he'd burned up flailing about with Druidic power. He wasn't as tired as he should have been, another indication that his powers in Druidic magic had increased, but he was still tired enough to feel it.

She was silent for a very long time, just holding onto him, as if he would return to his mindless rage the instant she released him. She also kept that strange window open between them, no longer actively rooting through his memory, but watching his emotional state with intense scrutiny, making absolutely sure that her breaking of the rage was a permanent situation. That, and he had the feeling that she was reluctant to break the contact, if only because it pleased her to hold it thus.

"I'm alright, mother," he said in a weary voice. She held him tightly for a long moment, and then finally let him go. "That was pretty clever," he complemented. "You shattered the walls just to put the bricks on the floor."

"I've had experience in this kind of thing," she remarked dryly. "It was a little more complicated given who you are, but it works more or less the same." She patted his shoulders, then stood up and helped him up. "The key of it is having you lose sight of me," she explained. "The only safe place to attack a raging Were-cat is from behind. I'm just glad you didn't think to try Sorcery until after I already had you."

"I, I think I was too angry to think about using it," he said dully, a paw to his head to try to remember. "That, and the Druidic power was already there. I never really thought of trying anything else until after it wasn't any use to me anymore."

"That's what I have to teach you to control," she said in a tired voice. "I'm, sorry, cub."

He knew exactly what she meant. "In a way, I guess I'm *glad* it was her," he said grimly. "If it had been anyone else, even *you*, I probably would have tried to kill them. Jasana's probably the only one that could do it and live."

"That doesn't excuse it," she said in a similarly grim manner. "I think a good thrashing is just the beginning of what needs to be done to put that cub in her place." She flexed her fingers in an ominous manner. "Next time, she may kill someone with her good intentions."

Tarrin realized that Triana was deadly serious. She was furious, just as angry as he was, but at least she had more control than he did. "It would be a start," he agreed. He didn't like the idea of laying such a punishment on her, but she had done something almost unspeakably wrong. No matter how good her intentions were, there was no excuse for it, and something had to be done. This was twice now that she had gone to extreme, dangerous, even reckless measures with him to get what she wanted. First she intentionally used High Sorcery to make him stay with her, and now she had turned him, despite his vociferous assertion that it was his right to choose, because it was what she wanted. Before, he had generally ignored or brushed off her manipulative ways, partially because she was very good at wheedling her parents into getting her own way. But now he saw how dangerous she could be, and it just couldn't be allowed to continue. He had never before seen a child that was willing to go to such great extremes to get her own way. It defied just the description of *spoiled*, it reached into an entirely new realm of selfishness that defied rational explanation.

They all knew that Jasana was a devious, cunning little manipulator, but now he had his eyes opened as to just how far she would go.

Tarrin stood up and took Triana's paw in his. He looked over at her--strange to see eye to eye with her again--and a wealth of unspoken feelings and understandings passed in his gaze. He had seen into her mind, her incredibly old, wise, and powerful mind, and he understood things a little better now. He found that he loved her even more than ever because he fully understood her deep feelings for him. He was the son she had been waiting for for five hundred years, the one child to which she could pass her wealth

of knowledge of Druidic magic. He knew she loved her other children, but had always felt disappointed that of all of them, only Nikki, the youngest, showed any measurable Druidic talent. It wasn't very strong, only a bit stronger than Thean's, and she didn't have any desire to explore it. His power was now almost as strong as hers, and she felt confident in her heart that training would bring him up to her level. He would be the keeper of Druidic secrets that only she knew, and they would not be forever lost if she happened to die. There were other Druids stronger than her in raw ability, but none of them were as old, except the dragons, and none of them had taken the risks that she'd taken in her lifetime with the power to explore its boundaries.

It surprised him to find out that his solid-minded mother was a wild gambler in her younger days. Some of the things she'd tried made him look like a timid housewife. And though she was much more cautious now than she had been, she still regularly risked death to explore the boundaries of her ability. He also knew where Jesmind got her fiery nature from. In her younger days, Triana was even wilder and more temperamental than her daughter. Some traits breed true, and Jesmind was proof of that. She'd inherited her mother's looks and her mother's temper. After a thousand years, Jesmind may be as mellow as her mother. For a temper that hot, it *took* a thousand years to cool it down.

She gave him a rare smile, breaking that emotionless mask that so thoroughly hid her emotions and her thoughts. "I know," she said simply. "Are you surprised by what you saw?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Well, I wasn't," she said with a very tender look. "I knew I was right about you. The bond told me much more than what others could see, but I saw that I was right."

"About what?"

"About taking you as my son," she said simply. "You make me proud, cub."

"I take it you're not going to explain?"

She only smiled silently.

"I thought not." He looked around, then blew out his breath. "Jenna is going to kill me," he muttered.

"It can be fixed," she said dismissively. "If anything, it'll give these lazy *katzh-dashi* and Sha'Kar something to occupy their minds and keep them out of trouble."

"Maybe we should go find her and let her know things are alright."

"She knows," Triana said bluntly. "She'll find us. Well, let's go."

He knew exactly what she meant, and where they were going. To go punish Jasana for her actions. But first, he wanted to know how she did it. Somehow, she had stolen that blood and managed to slip it into the potion without anyone, not even Triana or Jesmind, catching her. Either she had help--which was a possibility--or she was much smarter than even he thought she was.

After crawling through a narrow choked-off rockfall, they got out into the undamaged parts of the passageways. He knew where he was now, so he led his bond-mother confidently to the main staircase, which would take them up to the apartments. He wasn't looking forward to this. Facing down people he hated was much easier than looking that little girl in the eyes and standing in the face of the storm of tears and snivelling apologies that he knew was coming. Jenna was devious, and he knew that she'd resort to playing on his affection for her to try to avoid getting punished. But her crime this time was much too grave to be smoothed over by a bit of crying and a little constructive cuddling.

One thing did gnaw a bit at him though. "How did you get behind me?" he blurted.

They stopped on the staircase. Triana, smiling in a mysterious way, stepped over to the wall. He felt it distinctly when she made contact with the All, and then she pushed her paw towards the wall.

And it passed right through!

"A trick I learned from a creature called a Phase Spider," she told him calmly, sinking her arm into the wall up to her elbow. "They're subterranean creatures, feeding off things in the network of caves below the Skydancer mountains. They could pass through solid objects, and they

used it to ambush prey and as an escape mechanism. It took me nearly ten years to learn how they did it."

Tarrin whistled as she pulled her arm free and put his paw on the stone. It was unyielding to him, as he expected it to be.

"That's a neat trick," he said appreciatively.

"It was a neat trick after I learned not to get things stuck when I ended the spell," she grunted.

"Did it hurt?" he asked with a shudder.

"You have no idea," she growled, holding up her right paw. "This is about my fiftieth paw, and I lost count of how many feet I've lost about five hundred years ago. Materializing inside solid rock is *very* painful."

"I can imagine," he breathed, looking at the stone wall and feeling a little pang of chilly sympathetic pain ghost through his arms.

"Just one of the things I'm going to teach you, cub," she said calmly, starting up the stairs again. "When I'm done with you, you'll wonder why you ever bothered to use Sorcery."

Tarrin chuckled reflexively at that rather bold statement, but he didn't doubt that Triana believed what she said. He followed after her, his expression turning stony as he remembered what they were about to go and do. There was no place for humor in it.

As they climbed up the stairs, Tarrin's mind raced about what was to come. The fact that they knew who did it seemed to pale now in the light of two very, very important things. How, and why. The why of it seemed rather straightforward, though. Jasana had been complaining about him not being Were, and had been carefully and quietly trying to sway him. He knew because he could look back over every single word she said, and intimate knowledge about his daughter's mannerisms, things the human Tarrin didn't understand, made things clear to him when he looked back on those conversations with opened eyes. She hadn't been more obvious because, quite honestly, she wasn't sure how to try to sway him. He could see that. She was being careful because the human Tarrin was very, very much unlike the father she knew, and in a way, that protected him from the majority of her conniving. Jasana could manipulate her parents rather easily,

but the change in him had isolated him from her games, if only because she didn't know how to proceed against him. Of course, since she couldn't sway him, and didn't know enough about him to try--that, or she realized that in this case no amount of wheedling, cajoling, or pleading was going to make him change his mind--she had decided to do things without his permission, and *that* was what worried him the most. He wasn't sure if Jasana had the ability to plan out and execute something like this, not without anyone suspecting her. And if *Triana* hadn't suspected her, then *nobody* would. He hadn't. Not in the slightest, at any time, did he conceive that Jasana had been the one to turn him. He certainly would respect her ability to try, but not respect the idea that she would be able to execute her plan. No, in this case, Tarrin suspected that Jasana had help. That was what he wanted to know. Jasana had been the one to turn him, but she may have had a little outside help to pull it off, and she *was* going to tell him. Jasana would know that in this situation, telling the complete truth would make things better for everyone involved. After what she saw him do to Jesmind, and that over nothing more than bad treatment, she'd realize that if she didn't tell him who helped her, if he had to find out for himself, it would be much worse for that guilty party when he did. This was going to be the one time that Jasana wouldn't be able to worm her way out of trouble.

Before he realized where he was, they were on the floor where the apartment was. His own scent was still fresh on the floor, and he realized with some surprise that he'd only been there a short time ago. After the rage, it felt like he'd been here yesterday, or even longer. He felt drained, tired, like he'd been awake for a month, but he had too many important things to do to bother with being tired at the moment.

"How do you want to do this?" Tarrin asked as they approached the door. They could be calm and rational, or go in there and start with the punishment immediately. They could be stern and unbending or at least give Jasana a chance to defend herself.

Without saying a word, Triana reared back her fist and smashed it into the door. Though it was a big, metal-bound door, it was no match for Triana's power. The door held, admirably enough, but the latch and hinges had never been made to withstand the awesome stresses that the blow to the door put on them, and they tore like fine parchment in a child's uncaring hands.

"Alright then," he said grimly as he followed his bond-mother into the apartment. Jula and Kimmie were standing up by their seats, Mist was awake on the couch but had not moved to get up, and most importantly, Jesmind was standing at the doorway leading back to her bedroom. Jasana and Eron were sitting on the floor in the corner playing with some wooden blocks that Jenna had given them.

"Mother, that was a good door!" Jesmind protested, but that protest died away when she saw the barely contained mask of fury that contorted the matriarch's usually unemotional expression. The apprehension turned into a deep frown when she saw an equally irate Tarrin just behind her, and the fact that both of them were covered in dust, and in Tarrin's case, a little blood here and there. "What happened to you two?" she asked.

"You've been *fighting*!" Kimmie said in shock, looking at them. "You mean you two are the ones responsible for all that shaking?"

"JASANA!" Triana absolutely roared, pointing at the little girl with a clawed finger. "Come here right now!" She pointed to the carpeted floor immediately before her imperiously, and Tarrin realized, as did everyone in the room, that Jasana's very life hinged on her immediate and unequivocal obedience to her grandmother's command.

Soberly, her lower lip trembling as her half-brother looked at her in confusion, Jasana got up from the floor and shuffled over, *very* slowly, deathly afraid of what was coming, but even more afraid of what would happen if she did not obey. She stood before her grandmother, head bowed, tail drooping, and her paws clasped before her in a stance of supplication. Tarrin stepped up beside his bond-mother, staring down at the little girl, feeling that same fury begin to rise up in him again. He wanted to thrash her so badly his claws actually itched to taste her blood. She was the object of his rage, but he could not satisfy it as he so desperately wanted to do. If it were anyone but her, they would be dead by now. Anyone but Jasana.

"There is absolutely no excuse for what you have done!" Triana said in a furious tone, the mask of emotionless slipping from her face. "Do you have any idea how many laws you've broken? Do you realize that by all rights of law and custom, I should *kill* you right here and now?" She hunched over the little girl, looming over her like a shadow of Death herself. "Well? Answer me!"

Jasana looked up at them, her green eyes wet with tears, and they were all Tarrin could see. No matter how furious he was with her, he still could not deny that he loved her. Her punishment would be severe, but her life would never be in jeopardy. There was a pleading look in her eyes, on her face, but she flinched away into an expression of chagrin and good, honest fear when she saw her father's grim face.

Kimmie was the first to see to the heart of it. She gasped loudly and actually collapsed back into her chair by Mist's couch, her paws over her mouth and a look of sincere shock in her blue eyes.

"What are you talking about, mother?" Jesmind demanded, coming around the couch.

Triana looked up at her daughter, and the coldness in her eyes made Jesmind stop in the act of walking forward, with her foot still hovering off the floor.

"Jasana was the one that turned Tarrin!" she announced in an dark tone that was literally dripping with cold fury.

Jula paled, her tail sticking almost straight out, Mist closed her eyes and muttered several choice curses, and Jesmind just stared at her mother, still with her foot in the act of coming down onto the floor. Jasana fell to her knees and began sobbing in very loud waves, paws over her face and her tail thrashing behind her like a dying snake.

"She what?" Jesmind asked in a low, cold tone.

"She turned Tarrin," Triana seethed. "We know she took the blood that turned him."

"*Jasana!*" Jesmind gasped in shock, almost falling to her knees herself. "How could you do such a thing!" she demanded, then she did stagger back and sit down hard on the couch behind her.

Eron wandered over to her mother and put his little paws on her arm. "Mama, what's going on?" he asked in an innocent manner. "Why is ev'one mad at Jas?"

"Jasana did a *very* bad thing, cub," Mist said in a low tone, but it was not one of disbelief. "And now she has to be punished for it."

Tarrin could see, sense, that all the animosity in the room was going to make Jasana unintelligible. All the adults were mad at her, and the very real fear of the kind of punishment that someone like Triana could hand out would be the only thing dominating her mind. He wanted answers, and he realized that that meant taking a less dramatic approach. He put a paw in front of Triana to tell her that he would handle this, then he knelt in front of his crying daughter, now bent over with her paws over her face and weeping uncontrollably. His looming over her seemed to make her come out of it a little, and she looked up at him with her heart in her eyes, a heart that was breaking. She gave out a forlorn wail and threw herself against his chest, cowering between his arms and gripping his vest with her little claws digging into his skin.

He did not comfort her, but he didn't yell at her as Triana had done either. "Look at me," he said in a level tone, a tone that demanded obedience. She sniffled and looked up into his eyes with apprehension and a little stark terror, still gripping his vest.

"Why did you do it, Jasana?" he asked in a surprisingly calm voice.

She could only blubber for a long moment, then she sniffled loudly and bowed her head, unable to hold his penetrating gaze any longer. "B-B- Because everyone was sad," she hiccupped. "Everyone was sad, and it was all because you were a h-human," she continued. "You an' Mama were fighting, an' you were mad at each other, an' you promised me we'd be a family again. I just wanted everything to be the way it was supposed to be!" she wailed in a plaintive tone, looking up at him with anguished eyes, clutching at his vest so hard that she was rending it. "B-But you're alright now, and we can all be together again!" she said in a desperate voice. "Don't be mad at Mama, Papa! It makes her so sad when you're mad at her!"

Putting a huge paw on each of her little shoulders, he pushed her out away from him. She refused to let go of his vest, trying desperately to hold onto him, tearing the leather away in her little paws. "I am *very* mad at you, cub," he said in that same calm voice, a voice probably more terrifying to her for its even temper than the raging outburst that would have probably been more what she would expect. "Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you have any idea how much it hurt me that you'd do this to me?"

"B-But you're the way you're supposed to be!" she objected tearfully, as if that explained everything. "Everything's supposed to be alright now! It's supposed to all be alright!"

"It *wasn't your choice to make*," he said in a seething manner that made the little girl flinch from him. "You were with me all that time, girl. You knew how I felt about it! Why did you take that away from me? Why?"

Her eyes quivered, and she started crying again, holding onto his paws, trying to get them off her shoulders so she could collapse against him, but he wouldn't let go of her. It hurt him to do this to her, but it had to be done. She had to be made to understand that if she didn't stop, she was going to do something that would be absolutely unforgivable. As if what she'd done to him wasn't unforgivable in the eyes of the law of *Fae-da'Nar*, but these were rather special circumstances.

"Did you once think about the consequences, girl?" he asked in a level tone. "Answer me," he ordered after a moment of listening to her sob.

"Everything was supposed to be alright," she said in a miserable tone, sniffing. "You and Mama would be happy again, and we'd be a family."

"So you didn't," he surmised. "You decided you knew what was best for everyone, and you just went and did it without ever once thinking about how it was going to make anyone else feel."

"I just wanted--"

"It's not about what *you* want!" he cut her off in a sharp, angry tone. "Now you're going to learn, cub, that there are *consequences* to the actions you take. If you'd have left things alone, they would have worked out. I would have decided to be Were again, and I'd have come home. But because you interfered, now I'm mad at your mother, and I'm so mad at you I can't even explain it to you. I am so mad at you I went into a rage and very nearly killed my own sisters, and your grandmother had to risk her own life to stop me. Because of what you did, I almost killed several people that I love as much as I love you, and if that would have happened, I would have never been able to live with myself. Because of what you did, I came *this* close--"he took his paw off her shoulder and held his finger and thumb the barest of spaces apart in front of her--"to destroying almost everything in my life that matters to me. And it all happened because *you interfered*. I

want you to think about that, Jasana. I want you to really think about that, and I want you to know how close you came to losing me forever because you couldn't wait, because you didn't like things and you decided to try to make everything the way you wanted them to be. Well, you've done that, but now nothing is like you want it to be, and it very well may *never* be that way again. And it's all because you interfered."

Gently, the voice of the Goddess touched him in a very private, intimate manner. To keep Jasana from overhearing it. *Remember, she's only a child. You're getting close to destroying her life.*

I'm about done, Mother, he thought grimly. But she was right. Jasana had the mind of a six year old child, and he was treading very close to shattering the entire foundation upon which that life was set. It was time to reassure her of a few things.

"In a while, I'll get over being mad at you," he told her as she wept with her paws over her face. "You're my daughter, and I still love you very much. But you have to be punished for what you've done, Jasana. You have to learn that every act you take has consequences, no matter how much you believe what you're doing is right. And I won't be mad at your mother forever either. As soon as I get over that, I'll come home, and if I think you've learned your lesson, we'll be a family again."

She looked up at him with those beautiful green eyes, shining with tears, and her hopeless expression brightened just a little. "W-We can be a family?"

"*Only* if you prove to me that you've learned your lesson," he said firmly. "I'll forgive you, but only when I'm sure that you won't pull an insane stunt like this again. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said in a little voice.

"Now you're going to answer me, and you're going to tell the whole truth. No hedging. Do you understand?" She nodded vigorously. "Did anyone help you?"

She shook her head.

"How did you find out about the blood?"
"Jula told me the story about how she became my sister."

"Did she tell you where the blood was?"

She shook her head. "Jinna Brent told me."

Jinna Brent was the Water seat, and Tarrin couldn't put any real blame on her. Odds were, she had no idea just why Jasana was asking. Julia blew out her breath when she realized that Tarrin was hunting for any possible accomplices, and there was no doubt that he would *not* be as gentle or forgiving with them as he had been with his daughter. "How did you get it without anyone knowing?"

"I just went down and got it when everyone was asleep," she sniffled. "Nobody ever goes down there, so all I had to do was get out of the house without Mama catching me. I thought someone may find out I stole it, so I tried to hide who took it by using magic that Aunt Jenna taught me. I hid it in my room after I took it. I knew nobody would find it there, because it didn't have any smell, and mother makes me clean my own room. She won't let any of the maids come in and do it."

"How did you get it into the potion?"

"I talked Kimmie into showing me where they were doing the magic a long time ago, before I even decided to do it," she said after a moment. "I put it in the day before you drank it. The old human was sleeping, and Aunt Kimmie was here taking a nap. I snuck out with Eron and left him in the kitchens, did it, then came back and we went down the baths with his boat."

Tarrin recalled that Jasana *had* turned up missing that day, and they they had been found in the baths. "Eron, did Jasana leave you in the kitchens?" he asked his son directly.

"I didn't see her go," he said in a casual manner. "Cook Golin was giving me sweetcakes."

"You and your stomach, cub," Mist growled at him, but in a loving way.

"And that's it? Nobody helped you?"

"N-No," she said.

"That doesn't sound very certain," Triana snorted.

"Well, nobody *helped* me," she said, looking at the floor. "But I didn't think of it myself."

"Who did?" he asked bluntly.

Jasana wouldn't look at him for a moment, then she finally did, and when she did, she looked ready to break out into tears again. "You did, Gramma," she blurted. "You and Mama and Aunt Kimmie and Aunt Mist. You were talking about ways to make Papa himself again, and when Mama said that someone should bleed on him accidentally on purpose, I remembered Jula's story about how she used Papa's blood. I promised you I wouldn't use *my* blood, and I couldn't get anyone else's without getting caught, so I used Papa's blood."

Tarrin levelled a very frosty stare at his bond-mother. Triana coughed delicately and gave him a helpless look. "Well, we were desperate," she said defensively. "And it was just talk. We didn't actually *do* it, cub."

"No, but this little eavesdropper here was alot braver than the lot of you," he replied in an icy tone.

"I wouldn't have imagined that she'd actually try it," she answered.

Tarrin realized that he'd gotten all his answers. Everything Jasana said fit in with what he already knew, and it also fit in with the way things happened as he understood them. Despite his anger with her, he was privately very proud of her, proud that she could take an idea mentioned in passing and develop it into a marvelously well thought-out plan. If the simple fact that they used things that she had no experience in to track her down, she very well may have gotten away with it. Jasana had decided on her objective, decided on what she needed, organized things to acquire them, then executed her plan, and she did it all without anyone suspecting that she was up to no good. She was only two years old--around six or seven in human years--but already displayed remarkable intelligence and cleverness. Were it not for the fact that he was the victim of her scheme, he would have been tremendously impressed by it. He really was impressed by her, but he couldn't let her know that.

He was satisfied that that was everything he needed to know. He was confident that she had acted alone, and in his own mind, that was the end of it. The fury he'd felt before was actually starting to cool, as he heard her and understood things. He was very angry with her, but his love for his daughter had already started to nullify the blind rage he'd been experiencing, and it

pulled at him a little bit to know that she would suffer through her punishment. He didn't want to see her suffer, but in this case it was an absolute necessity. If they didn't choke off this habit of hers of altering the entire world to suit herself, she was eventually going to do something for which there would neither be forgiveness nor leniency. Her turning him was a crime punishable by death, and she had to be made to understand that. It was something that just *was not done*, and the laws of *Fae-da'Nar* were explicit about it.

Taking his paw off her shoulder, he looked down at her with stern, almost cold eyes. She gazed up at him with teary eyes, her desperate fear evident on her face, as was just a glimmer of hope. "I'm not the one who's going to punish you, cub, though I'm sure you would have preferred it if I did," he told her. "Your grandmother is already chomping at the bit for it, and I'm not going to gainsay her. Besides, I think I've already punished you enough," he added thoughtfully.

Jasana threw a wild look at her furious grandmother, and it dawned on her that she wasn't going to get out this quite as easily as she was starting to think she was.

"I'm sure your mother's going to have a few things to say to you as well," he said soberly.

"Oh, you'd better *believe* that!" Jesmind said hotly, stalking up on them from where she'd stumbled into her seat.

"Stand in line, cub," Triana told her grimly. "I get her first."

Jasana blanched, almost unconsciously trying to sidle up to her father for protection, but he stopped her with a paw, then stood up before her. She barely came up to the middle of his thigh, and she seemed so small and defenseless. Then he reminded himself how much chaos that defenseless little child had caused.

"I'm going to leave this in your paws, mother," he told her calmly. "I'd better find Jenna and get my scolding overwith. I know she's going to let me have it over all the damage I caused. She'll probably make me fix it."

"I think she'll be happy enough you're alright," she said in an absent manner, her hot eyes fixed on Jasana.

He looked down at his child one more time, a serious, grim look, seeing her tears and fighting against them moving him to take pity on her. There could be no pity this time, or else he may lose her to her own cleverness in the future. "I'm going," he announced.

"I'm coming with you," Jula announced, moving towards him. "I, really don't want to be here for this."

"Alright," he nodded, turning his back on his sobbing child deliberately. He traded knowing looks with Triana, then padded away from her. He absently picked up the door on his way out and repaired it with a quick weave of Earth and Fire, then closed it behind him. Jasana's howls of pain started almost immediately after that, as Triana probbly put the girl over her knee, raised her tail out of the way, and proceeded to flay the skin off her backside. Tarrin considered it a necessary act. He had laid in the mental punishment, making her see just how much damage she had caused, and now her mother and grandmother were going to make her sorry she ever thought of doing it in the first place. Hopefully the combination of the terror of being punished so again and the very real threat Tarrin made to not forgive her if she ever did anything like that again would be enough for her to start thinking about the consequences of her actions before she did them.

"I really didn't want to see that," Jula said with a shudder. "I feel sorry for the cub. She only did what everyone else wanted to do, but was too afraid to try."

"I know, but if she were older, Triana would have killed her. You know the law."

"I know," she sighed. "What happened down there? The whole Tower shook."

"I was in a rage. Triana stopped me, and she did it faster than I thought she could have. I think she has experience in dealing with raging Were-cats."

"With Jesmind as her daughter, I wouldn't be surprised," Jula said with a slight smile as they reached the stairs, Jasana's howls still ringing in their ears.

"I remember every moment of it," he grunted. That was very unusual for a rage. Usually he had no memory of it initially, but the memory slowly

bled into him afterwards. He remembered every minute of this one, from Allia besting him in the storeroom to laying waste to the lower levels of the Tower to the very, very short confrontation between him and Triana. "I've never been handled like that before," he admitted. "Triana must have practiced for the day she'd have to subdue me. It took her all of about half a moment." He put a paw to his head. "I was *too* enraged," he told her in a distant tone as they descended down the staircase. "I was so mad, so completely enraged that I couldn't even remember things I usually remember when I'm in a rage. I couldn't even use Sorcery."

"That's a *good* thing, father," she said with a shudder.

"I'd have to agree with you," he nodded. "I don't think that would have happened anyway, Julia. Mother was watching, and she wouldn't have allowed me to use Sorcery against her Tower. Remember, what she gives to us freely she can withhold when it's needful." He was silent a moment. "I do remember trying for Sorcery there at the end, and I think I could have used it if Triana hadn't been on me. I was shocked, daughter. I'm still shocked. Triana's a *lot* more powerful than I thought."

"I thought you said you couldn't remember how to use Sorcery."

"Triana had me in some kind of locking move," he told her, "and she was overwhelming me with Druidic magic. I think that shocked me out of the depths of that rage, enough for the Cat to regain access to some parts of our mind. I reached for Sorcery because Triana had taken everything else away. And she was *waiting* for me to try that," he admitted with a grim chuckle. "I didn't think a Druid could cut me off, but I know now I was wrong about that."

He thought back over that episode, and realized once again how much of a liability the rage could be. He'd been so furious that he didn't even try to defend himself from Allia, didn't understand the danger she posed. He just attacked her wildly, and in that wild, undisciplined flailing, Allia picked him apart and stuck her sword in his neck. He had been so enraged that he couldn't even remember how to use his magical abilities. The only reason he had Druidic magic was because the All connected with *him*, not the usual system where he reached into the All. And even when he had the power, he could do nothing with it than crude, elemental bashing, flailing about with the magic like it was an extra arm, using nothing but raw,

unrefined eruptions of naked power. He had had no control, no finesse, none of the usual exacting precision with which he usually wielded his Druidic magic and his Sorcery both, and his fury severely limited the possible ways he could have used the All. In this case, that was a *good* thing, since he was too angry to get creative in his destruction, but in any other case it would be a very, very bad thing to have happen. Then with Triana, he was so enraged that he couldn't use his full power, couldn't even use the power he had at hand in a rational manner, and she beat him because of it. Tarrin was glad they'd beaten him, but that competitive part of him still objected to being bested, no matter what the contest. Besides, they were very important lessons for him, lessons in how *not* to act when facing a powerful foe. He'd learned long ago that rage was an asset to his opponent, not to himself, because it reduced his capacity to think rationally, and now more than ever using his magic required a great deal of rational control. Jegojah had taught him that lesson in the most bitter fashion, when his rage had caused Faalken's death. In a way, it was good to be reminded of that fact. If he was in a rage, all he could do was use heavy-handed, crude magic, relying on power. Now he knew so many spells, so many spells that could protect him or help him win a fight, but he couldn't use any of them if he was so enraged that all he wanted to do was blow things up. It was even more critical with Druidic magic, for in a fury he may try to sink a mountain into the sea or something else like that, and it would end up getting him killed. It was good that he had lost his temper *inside*, where the confined space also limited the available options for destruction. Since all he had around to destroy were crates and walls and ceilings and floors, he didn't try something that he wasn't capable of accomplishing, like exploding one of the buildings on the Tower grounds or something like that. The restrained nature of the underground passages were actually an asset to him that time, and their simplisitic monotony protected him from himself.

Yes, he realized, if he had lost control anywhere else, there was a very good chance he wouldn't have lived for very long.

He thanked the Goddess for small favors, and continued down the staircase with a new, sober sense of determination. He could *never* have that happen again. Who he was and what he could do meant that it would most likely be fatal the next time.

Jasana's howls of pain were lost to his ears now, and he was secretly glad of that. Maybe he was a doting father, but he really didn't relish the idea of seeing his child in pain. Any of them. And from the look in Triana's eyes, she was certainly feeling pain right now. Triana could be very heavy-handed when she punished someone, an extension of her dominating nature. She would beat some sense into the child, she would *make* her see things her way. In her own way, Triana was the best available choice to punish Jasana, for she would show no favoritism, and she would not relent until she was certain that the child had learned her lesson. Triana could be ruthless that way.

"She's that strong?" Julia asked.

Tarrin realized they were still talking, and he shook his head. "It's not her power, cub, it's how she uses it. I think at one time, she was using about six different spells on me. That means she had to be actively concentrating on each and every one. And she was physically struggling to keep me in that strange armlock, *and* she was using a very delicate spell designed to reach into my mind and shake my conscious mind free of the rage. That's not something I'd try if it was the *only* thing I was doing. She's a very powerful Druid, cub, I can't say she's not, but I don't think I'll ever see anyone in my life that's not a god that has more control over magic than Triana. I don't think even *I* could do what she did."

"After a thousand years, I think you'll admit you lied just now," she teased.

"Maybe, but I doubt it," he grunted. He could sense Jenna and Keritanima clearly now; they were coming up the stairs. Jenna was actively searching for him, sending faint magical pulses into the Weave in waves and looking for the responses as they made contact with Sorcerers. It was an old Weavespinner trick called *sounding*, something she had learned from either Spyder or the Sha'Kar. The modern *katzh-dashi* knew of a weaker form of the trick they used in the form of a spell, which they used to ferret out untrained Sorcerers, for they would register to the technique, albeit very faintly. Because Tarrin had such a powerful effect on the Weave, he would have the strongest response, and that would tell her exactly where he was. It was a trick that let her get around the nondetection ability in his amulet, which protected him from almost any other form of magical detection.

After all, she wasn't looking for *him*, she was looking for the effect he had on the Weave. That was a very different thing, and it was something that the amulet did not--could not--conceal. "Here comes Jenna and Kerri."

"I can feel them. I can feel Jenna sounding for us."

"I get the feeling I'm in for a scolding," he said ruefully.

They met on the staircase, and if he were human, he would have fallen over when all three of his sisters embraced him on the uneven, dangerous staircase. They all talked at once, quickly, rashly, and he had to call loudly to interrupt them. "I'm alright!" he almost shouted, looking over them at Sapphire, who stood in a dignified manner, though her eyes told him that she wanted to run up to him and hug him too.

"What happened?" all three asked, almost simultaneously.

"Triana broke my rage, somehow," he answered, putting a paw on Jenna's shoulder. "I'll tell you thins, I've never been manhandled like that before. She knew exactly what to do."

"I felt her. I thought she was being rash, but I see she had a good plan," Sapphire said.

"Mother's experienced in handling Were-cats in a rage, Sapphire," he told her calmly. "She calmed me down before I could do any more damage. Sorry, Jenna," he said sincerely. "I hope you're not too mad."

"I understand why, brother," she told him compassionately. "I can't really be that mad. If I were in your place, I probably would have done the same thing."

"I guess I'll have to fix everything," he sighed.

"You're too important to be doing menial labor," she said firmly. "I have a whole Tower full of laborers, brother. Besides, this'll give the Sha'Kar an opportunity to train the *katzh-dashi* in some of their magic. There's nothing like practical training."

"I guess," he chuckled. "I'm, sorry I attacked you."

"It's no big deal, brother," Keritanima grinned. "Allia managed that."

"I see you haven't forgotten, sister," he said wryly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I do not forget," she said coolly, but she was smiling.

"The Selani was very impressive," Sapphire complemented.

"I'm just amazed that she could beat you," Jenna admitted.

Tarrin looked at her. "Sister, it was very easy for her to beat me," he told her. "When I'm like that, I can't even think. That means I can't act with any kind of plan or strategy, and I can't use any of the techniques I've learned. When I'm in a rage, I'm actually much *easier* to kill. That's one reason why I try *very* hard not to get into them."

"Oh," she said in understanding, nodding her head.

"I've never suffered a rage like that before," he said hesitantly. "I was so far gone, I couldn't even use Sorcery."

"We noticed, and you have no idea how glad we are of that," Jenna said honestly.

"Did you come from Jesmind's apartment?" Keritanima asked.

"I came from where they are," he nodded grimly. "Me and Jasana had a little chat. Right now, she's being punished by Triana and her mother. I have no doubt that it's *very* unpleasant."

"She needs it," Keritanima said hotly. "It's time that little brat learned the rules."

"Fine one to be calling her a brat," Tarrin teased.

"At least I knew there was a place I couldn't go," Keritanima said bluntly. "I love her like my own daughter, but I could strangle her right now."

"She is just a child, sister," Allia said in defense of her. "Were she older, she and I would be discussing this as a matter of honor," she said ominously, "but her age protects her."

Tarrin winced inwardly. That would have been a discussion only one of them survived, and he seriously doubted that it would have been Jasana.

"I know she did something terrible, but I don't want everyone to alienate her," Tarrin said imploringly. "Let's give her a little time to understand just how much trouble she's in, but don't shut her out. Remember, she *is* just a child. She didn't do what she did out of malice."

"True," Allia admitted.

"Sapphire?" Tarrin asked meaningfully.

She sighed. "I won't harm her, little one," she assured him. "She is your daughter, and as you said, there was no malice in her heart. Only misguided need. I can understand why she did it. I will take my own turn in her punishment," she added fiercely, "but I won't kill her, and I won't exile her from the clan."

"I'm glad to hear that, my friend," he said with a sincerely appreciative look.

"I think we can move off these stairs now," Keritanima chuckled. "Let's go find a room somewhere and sit down. And I think the others might be happy if we let them know what was going on."

"That's a good idea. I have some things to tell them anyway," Tarrin nodded.

And he did. He'd initially given himself three days in order to find out who had turned him, but that had been found out, thanks to Allia's keen eyes. Now that that was over, his mind was once again focused on his mission, and right now that mission was to hide. But just hiding wasn't going to be good enough, he realized. He needed a little more to happen in order to make things clean and take some of the pressure off Jenna, and he had a fairly good idea of how to go about that. There were too many eyes watching the Tower, and he didn't want those eyes to stay on the Tower after he left. He needed to dislodge those eyes, and an idea had already started forming in his mind. But before he could set it in stone, he needed to put it in front of the others. He'd need their help in order to pull it off.

"Jenna, talk to Dolanna, and have her assemble everyone in the *courtyard*," he told her, stressing that word so she'd know just which courtyard he meant. "What I have to say can't be overheard, and that's the one place on the grounds where I'm absolutely sure that it won't happen."

He scratched his chin with a claw. "I think we'd better ask Darvon and Ianelle to join us. I may need their help."

Jenna nodded soberly, then put her hand on her amulet.

"Not like that. In person," he warned.

"You have some nerve ordering me around, brother," she teased with a wink.

"Would you rather I made you?" he asked bluntly.

She laughed. "No, I don't need you to beat me into doing your bidding," she grinned. "I'll go take care of it."

"Jula, go with her. It's not seemly for the Keeper to wander around undefended right now."

"As you say, father," she said immediately, and the two of them split off at the next landing.

"Courtyard?" Sapphire asked.

"You'll see, and please don't ask," Tarrin said.

"That is a good idea," Keritanima nodded in agreement.

Tarrin looked at her. "Where is Binter?" he asked, noticing for the first time that the massive Vendari wasn't with her. He was so used to seeing him standing behind her that he had just accepted the idea of it blindly.

"Binter will let me go out with Allia," Keritanima said with a toothy grin. "He trusts her to look after me, and it gives him and Sisska time to be by themselves for a while."

"I don't think you could be any safer," Tarrin nodded in agreement. "But what about Miranda?"

"She's with Azakar," she answered. "He's the other one they'll let escort us by ourselves."

"Well, we need them. Will they be hard to find?"

"Not hard at all." She touched her amulet lightly. "Binter, I need you and Sisska. Find Miranda and meet me in the kitchens." She gave Tarrin a smile. "I gave Binter an amulet, so I can talk to him when we're separated."

"Good idea," Tarrin complemented.

"I guess we will wait in the kitchens," Allia mused.

"That's fine. I find myself hungry," Sapphire announced.

They waited in the kitchens for only as long as Sapphire could manage to eat a drumstick off a roasted goose before Binter and Sisska appeared with Miranda and Azakar in tow. They looked as serious as ever, but they both did look at Tarrin a long moment when they appeared. Binter stepped up to him boldly and looked him up and down as Miranda gave him a warm hug, wrapping her hands around his chest. "I see you are well, friend Tarrin. Have you punished the guilty one?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said grimly.

"Such a crime deserves death."

"I know, but it was *Jasana*, Binter. I can't kill her."

Miranda whistled in surprise as Binter simply stared at Tarrin. "Were she a Vendari child, she would be killed."

"Well, I'm not Vendari," he shrugged. "I think she'll be *very* sorry. Triana and Jesmind are punishing her as we speak."

"Perhaps death isn't necessary," Binter said directly. "Those two could invent a punishment just as severe."

"That's kind of what I'm counting on," Tarrin said with a slight, humorless smile.

"Are you alright now?" Miranda asked. "We heard some of it, and felt the Tower shake. We realized that you were venting down in the cellars."

"That's a good description of it," he said dryly. He wasn't going to admit that he'd attacked Keritanima in front of Binter and Sisska. "Triana managed to snap me out of it."

"It's good to see you up and about, Tarrin," Azakar said to him. "I hope you're feeling well now."

"Well enough, Zak," he answered. "I've already attended to finding out who did this to me, and *Jasana*'s getting her just desserts as we speak. So I'm going back to what I'm supposed to be doing."

"It didn't take you long to find out," Miranda said in appreciation.

"Thank them for that," Tarrin motioned at his sisters and Sapphire. "Between the three of them, they managed to find out it was Jasana after about a half an hour. Don't *ever* try to hide something from them," he warned with a slight smile.

"I'll keep that in mind," Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

They left the Tower grounds, and then entered the gardens and the maze. Sapphire started looking a little irritated after they'd been within the maze for about twenty minutes, but nobody would tell her where they were going. The four who had just joined them realized where they were going when they left the Tower and started towards the gardens, and they were smart enough not to say anything aloud. The courtyard at the center of the maze was still one of the Tower's most closely guarded secrets, for it held the icon of the Goddess herself, and that made it a place that the *katzh-dashi* would defend to the death. And defending it was much easier if nobody knew it was there.

The courtyard was exactly as he remembered it; he doubted that the Goddess would allow anything to change. The entrance was still choked off, making them squeeze into the place, and he looked at it with calm, relaxed pleasure. It was all as it should be, with the very large grassy courtyard with the white stone pathway surrounding a large marble fountain surrounded by beautiful rose bushes and stone benches. The two tier fountain was massive, and the sound of its water tinkled merrily throughout the courtyard. And at the center of the top tier, hands held out in a gesture of loving welcome, was the statue of the Goddess, the icon of the Goddess, her link to the physical world and the representation of her power. As always, the statue was nude, and was so remarkably detailed that every single hair on her head was easily discernable, even from that distance. The others knew now what that statue was, though they had not for a very long time. Not even Keritanima or Allia had known until the planning for the Battle of Suld, when Keritanima figured out the truth. It was one secret that Tarrin had been very careful to keep.

Sapphire, however, was quite a bit more observant than his other friends. She took one look at the fountain and the statue atop it and paled visibly. She gave Tarrin a wild look, but his calm, reassuring gaze and a

single nod of his head told her that he knew, and that it was perfectly alright for them to be there.

"Now do you understand why nobody will eavesdrop on us here?" he asked her.

"I do," she said in a reverent voice. "I also understand why you didn't want to say anything. They don't know, do they?"

"Everyone here knows," he told her. "All my closest friends know, as does the Council. It's not the kind of thing we want advertised."

"It's quite an overwhelming presence," she admitted.

"I feel cheated," Keritanima laughed. "I never felt anything. I still don't feel anything."

"You aren't a dragon, little one," Sapphire sniffed arrogantly. "We are much more sensitive to such things than you."

He saw Keritanima draw herself up to respond with a blistering retort, but Tarrin's sudden hard stare quelled that. Aggravating Sapphire was *not* a good idea. Sapphire was friendly with Allia and Keritanima, but that friendliness only extended so far before she would lose patience with them. He was surprised that she would have forgotten that, since she'd spent a month and more in the dragon's company after they all discovered she was a dragon.

"We may as well get comfortable," Tarrin said. "It may take a while for Jenna to round up the others. I think a few of them won't be easy to find."

"They'll be close," Keritanima said. "We were all waiting to hear word about your condition, and after the earthquake you set loose in the basement, they'll stay where they can be found quickly."

"Good point," Tarrin acceded.

They waited perhaps a half an hour or so in relative peace, as Tarrin deflected several questions from his sisters about the rage he'd suffered and how Triana had beaten him. He didn't want to think about that right now, it was still a little raw in his mind. Miranda entertained herself with a bit of paper that she meticulously folded and refolded and folded again, until Tarrin started seeing a shape form from the folds, that of a bird. "Something

the Shou ambassador taught me a few weeks ago," she said with a cheeky grin when she noticed Tarrin staring at the piece of parchment in her hands. "He calls it *origami*. It's quite challenging."

"Shou? I didn't know the Shou had an ambassador in Wikuna."

"They do now," Keritanima said with a frown. "They actually managed to get a ship to Wikuna, and it was carrying the ambassador. Since they went to all the trouble to get there, we allowed him to set up an embassy. So far they're the first humans to reach Wikuna without our help, and I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"Because if they can get to Wikuna, then they can get a *fleet* to Wikuna," she said sourly.

Tarrin snorted. "Kerri, no nation on Sennadar would dare engage the Wikuni in a naval war," he said flatly. "It's suicide. Not even the Zakkites are willing to try that. That's why they always try to ambush your ships, and they run away as soon as warships appear on the horizon."

"True, but humans are devious little suckers," Keritanima said with a toothy grin. "You can't take your eyes off them for a minute, or they'll be getting into all kinds of trouble."

"Amen," Sapphire agreed in a fervent tone.

"I think I'll have the Admiralty increase the patrols in the Sea of Silks," Keritanima mused to herself. "I think we'd better keep an eye on those damned Shou. Next thing I know, there'll be Imperial dragonships showing up on the shores of Tlaztexcolta, or maybe even Sha'Kari."

"Tlaztexcolta?" Tarrin asked.

"A small continent due south of Wikuna," she replied. "An interesting people live there. They worship strange gods, they don't have any iron, and the place is literally overflowing with gold."

"Uh oh," Tarrin chuckled.

"We trade for their gold," she said defensively. "We have quite a market down there for steel tools and such, and they trade us gold, spices, some stunningly beautiful native crafts, and other things. Some of their native

birds are starting to become all the rage in the noble houses. It's now a status symbol to own a parrot, because they can be taught to say words."

"They can talk?" Allia asked.

"Not like we can, but you can teach them to mimic words," she answered.

"I wonder how they do things without iron," Tarrin mused.

"They're *very* resourceful, brother," Keritanima said in a very complementary manner. "You'd be surprised at some of the things they've learned to do with stone and obsidian. They have cities as big as Suld, and they built it with stone blocks that are larger than a woodshed. They're geniuses at engineering and construction, and it's even more impressive when you consider the fact that they don't have iron tools and they don't extensively use wheeled transportation, because there aren't any domesticated animals like horses native to their lands. The biggest domesticated animal I know of that they have are goats, and goats aren't very good at pulling wagons. We could learn a few things from them. They're quite advanced, all things considered. Western society would consider them barbaric because of their religion and their customs, but they're actually quite civilized and very intelligent."

Tarrin mused at that for a while, trying to imagine what it would be like to live in a place with no iron, no horses, and with a culture advanced enough to build things out of blocks that weighed more than a hundred men. How did they move them without horses? He couldn't even imagine how they did it, and he became very impressed with them, despite the fact that he'd never heard of them before. They certainly *sounded* quite impressive.

He didn't have too long to muse about it, though, for Dolanna, Dar, Camara Tal, and surprisingly enough, Koran Tal, pushed through the choked opening and into the courtyard. Koran Tal's eyes almost immediately affixed on the statue of the Goddess, and Camara Tal had to push him from behind to get him out of the way. Almost immediately behind them were Jula and Kimmie, and a very hot-eyed Triana. Now Tarrin understood why they were trying to get out of the way, with Triana

breathing down their necks. "Mother," he greeted standing up. "I didn't think you were coming."

"I'm not quite done dealing with your daughter, cub," she said in a grim tone. "Jesmind is putting her paw in right now. As soon as I'm done here, I'll go back and finish what what needs to be done."

Tarrin almost felt sorry for his daughter; in a way, he did, but he knew that it had to be done, so there was no use in having remorse over it. Triana looked at Camara Tal, and her eyebrow raised slightly. "You shouldn't be here," she announced flatly.

"I have more right to be here than you," Camara Tal replied coolly. They were old friends, and that was probably the only reason Triana didn't thrash her for her tone.

"You spend ten years trying to get pregnant, and you're going to put it all at risk *now*?" Triana said with a slight smile.

Camara Tal's eyes widened, and her hand went to her knotted, washboard stomach. "You mean--"

"It's only a few days along," she told her. "In nine months, you'll be gracing us all. Want to know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"*No!*" she said in a strangled tone. "Leave that much a surprise, at least!" she proclaimed, then she laughed helplessly. Then she threw her arms around Koran Tal and kissed him passionately.

"I say, congratulations, Camara!" Phandebrass said happily, and suddenly the Amazons were surrounded by well-wishers, congratulating her and her husband. Tarrin smiled warmly, happy for a little good news this day. Camara Tal had been adamant about having Koran Tal be the father of her children, and she had waited ten very long years before finally getting her wish. He was happy for her, but in a way, he was a little irritated with her timing. He may need Camara Tal in the time to come, and her pregnancy was going to complicate things.

"Well, it doesn't change anything," Camara Tal finally said after Kimmie gave her a warm hug. "Amazon women don't run and hide in their bedchambers when they're pregnant. I'll be with you until I'm too ungainly to be any use to you."

"Are you sure, Camara?" Tarrin asked.

"Just try and stop me," she declared.

"I hope you don't mind me joining you, then," Koran Tal said. "I won't leave her when she's pregnant. I know how crazy she is. Someone has to be around to remind her that she's got two lives to worry about."

"She'll have any number of people to hold her back," Keritanima chuckled.

"I don't need a *man* holding my hand!" Camara Tal snapped at her husband.

"You need someone, and if you don't forget, that's *my* child too," he said in a frosty tone. "And I thought we agreed that there were going to be a few changes," he reminded her in a dangerous tone, rising up and looking over at her defiantly.

"Careful, Camara," Keritanima said with a toothy grin. "You're on dangerous ground."

"Stay out of it, fuzzybutt!" Camara Tal told her hotly. That made Keritanima collapse in helpless laughter, and Camara Tal looked a little sheepish afterwards. "We'll discuss this later, husband. In private," she said to him, glancing at the laughing Wikuni Queen.

"I'm sure it's going to be a lively discussion," he said icily, glaring at her a bit.

Jenna arrived a moment later with Ianelle, Darvon, and each of them had a youngster in tow. Darvon was escorted by Ulger, and Ianelle had Auli with her. Auli gave Tarrin a regretful look, but smiled and kissed him on the cheek when he greeted them. Darvon clapped him on the shoulder in his gruff manner, about as close to a show of emotion one would get from the Lord General, and Ulger shook his paw with a smile. "We hear that was you shaking up the Tower earlier today," Ulger said with a grin.

"I was a bit peeved," he said in a short manner.

"Leave it, Ulger," Darvon warned in his powerful voice. "I see you decided to return to the Were-cats," he said. "It wouldn't have been my choice, but if it's what makes you happy, then I'm glad for you." He gave

Tarrin a slight smile. "I was hoping you would stay human and come over to the Knights, where you belong."

"I'm afraid they've managed to put the hooks into me a little too deeply for that to happen, my Lord General," Tarrin replied with a smile.

"One can always hope," Darvon said.

"I hope you don't mind me being here," Kimmie told him hesitantly.

"I'd feel strange if you weren't," he answered gently. He could see that he'd been right. Jesmind was trying to push Kimmie out of the way, it was all over her face. He was going to have a very long talk with her about that. "How is Mist?"

"Up and moving," she answered. "She'll be whole in about an hour or so."

"How are *you*?" he asked, taking her paws. Telling her that even though Jesmind didn't like it, she was still very much a part of his life.

She gave him a glorious, worshipful smile. "I'm just fine, my dear friend," she told him truthfully. "I'm just very glad to see you whole again."

"I'll step on Jesmind's neck for you."

"I can manage it, Tarrin," she smiled. "If you interfere, it's only going to make things more difficult. She'll think you're showing me favoritism. This is a *female* matter, love. Let us females handle it."

"Mother?"

Triana snorted and nodded. "Kimmie's handling it well enough, cub. Leave her to it."

"You're sure?"

"I'm very sure. If you put a paw in, you'll only make things messy."

"You look well, honored one," Ianelle greeted in formal Sha'Kar. "The Keeper told us what happened. All of it."

"Then I don't have to explain things to you," he replied.

She shook her head. "Are you content with it?"

"I'm content."

"Then things are well," she decided simply.

Tarrin looked around and saw that everyone was here. His sisters, Triana, Jula, and Kimmie. Triana, Dolanna, Darvon, and Ianelle. Azakar and the Vendari, Miranda and Dar, and Phandebrass. Jesmind wasn't here, but she'd have no say in what was to come, and besides, he was still mad at her. It was everyone he needed to be here. "Alright, everyone find a seat," he said in Sha'Kar, reinforcing the seriousness of things. "I have some things to say, and we have plans to make."

"Pardon me, son, but if you're going to speak that language, I'm going to need a translator," Darvon announced.

"Mother," Tarrin said absently to Triana.

"I'll take care of it, cub," she said. "Can you speak Sha'Kar?" she asked bluntly of Ulger.

"Uh, no, my Lady," he answered hesitantly.

Without saying a word, Triana put her paws on either side of Ulger's head. Tarrin clearly felt and sensed what she did, and what was more important, he realized that with a little instruction, he could do the same thing. She took some of her own knowledge, copied it, and directly implanted the copy into Ulger's mind, making sure not to put it where other memories were being stored. Ulger's knees wobbled a bit, and Triana had to hold him up. "You'll be dizzy for a while, but now you can understand," she told him in Sulasian.

"I feel like the ground is spinning," Ulger complained.

"That will pass," Triana told him gruffly. "Darvon?"

A little hesitantly, Darvon stepped up to the intimidating Were-cat matriarch and submitted to her touch. Seconds later, he too had to be held up. Azakar tended to Darvon, helping him to a seat on a stone bench as Jula helped Ulger to sit beside him.

They gathered on stone benches, and Camara Tal and Koran Tal sat on the grass with Kimmie and Auli in front of them. Tarrin stood before them like a Novice instructor, looking over his friends and associates, and feeling a momentary sensation of pride. They had come far. They had put up with him, helped him, nurtured him, and protected him for two long years. They

deserved much more than what they had, and Tarrin vowed to himself to make things right with each and every one of them, to show him how much he appreciated everything they'd done for him. But that would have to come later.

"I think most of you know what happened," he began. "I was turned against my will. I already found out who did it, and that punishment is taking place as we speak."

"Who was it, son?" Darvon asked, wobbling a bit in his seat.

"It was my daughter, Jasana," he replied, which made Darvon whistle much like Miranda had done. "Her mother and grandmother are teaching her the error of her ways. It's not my place to interfere in that, because Jesmind's her mother, and in Were-cat society the males don't interfere in how the females raise the cubs. But I have every faith in my mate and mother," he added with grim satisfaction. "They'll set her straight, or she'll die resisting."

"She's already *very* sorry, cub," Triana told him with flat eyes.

"Needless to say, finding that out set me off. That's what all that shaking was this morning. I kind of rearranged the geography in the cellars of the Tower, but Triana stopped me before I could do anything drastic." He looked to his sisters and Sapphire. "I'm sorry about that," he said sincerely. "I hope I didn't scare you."

"We were too busy running like frightened squirrels to be scared," Jenna said with a grin.

"What possessed you to face him inside, Were-cat?" Sapphire asked.

"I have experience in dealing with raging Were-cats, dragon," she answered calmly. "I knew exactly how to go about it, and the confined spaces down there were actually exactly what I needed. If he'd been outside, it would have been *much* harder to subdue him."

"You'll have to show me how you did it."

"Later," she said absently.

"Now that that little thing's out of the way, it's time we got back to business," he said. "I have my memory back, and I've already decided what

I have to do now. And I'm going to need everyone's help to pull it off." He started pacing back and forth. "Everyone knows I have the Firestaff, and they're probably gathering around the Tower like vultures, waiting for me to come out. If I *don't* come out, then they're going to come in, and I don't think we'll have much luck stopping them. They've shown that they can find ways to get in. We all knew that I had to get out of the Tower to keep the Firestaff safe, but now that we've been surrounded, it's not going to be quite as easy as riding out of the front gate."

"No doubt there," Keritanima agreed.

"I can Teleport you to any number of places, honored one, Ianelle offered.

"It's not quite that easy, Ianelle," he told her. "If I just disappear, then they'll all *still* be here at the Tower, and that's going to cause Jenna some serious problems. I don't want anyone here getting killed because they think I'm still hiding in here. I want them to see me leave, to keep them out of Jenna's hair, but I also don't want them on my heels every step of the way."

"That's not going to be easy," Darvon frowned.

"It's going to be very easy, at least for me," Tarrin told him grimly. "I have a plan, but it's going to be *very* dangerous for some people. Unfortunately, those people are you," he sighed.

"Go ahead, my brother," Allia said.

Tarrin nodded. "Everyone knows I travel with you," he began. "It's a given. Sometimes it was much easier for them to find me by looking for Keritanima or Allia, or any of the other rather unusual members of our group," he added, glancing at Binter and Sisska. "It's a given that if they can see any of you, then I can't be too far away. I'm going to use that against them. Tomorrow, everyone outside is going to see all of you and me march out of this Tower under heavy guard from the Knights, go down to the harbor, and board a Wikuni vessel and sail away. That's what they're going to *see*," he said sharply. He turned and looked at the statue of the Goddess, then turned back. "I won't be with you. Tomorrow, I'm taking Sarraya and Allia, and we're Teleporting to the Desert of Swirling Sands. If there's anywhere in the world where I'll be safe, it's there. Nobody would dare

come in after me, and if they do, both the Selani and Fara'Nae will make them pay for every step they take."

"But you said they'd see all of us leave," Dar said in confusion.

"That's right, they will," Tarrin said, looking at him. "Remember what we did in Dayisè?"

"That's brilliant!" Keritanima said with a bright look.

"Oh!" Dar said in realization, then he laughed. "That's a good idea!"

"Darvon, I want you to find your biggest, strongest, and hopefully one of your smartest Knights," Tarrin told him. "He's going to be me for a few days, and he's going to have to be able to act the part."

"How can he be you?"

"Dar is a master of Illusion, and Dolanna's no slouch at it herself," Tarrin told him calmly. "They used those gifts to hide us several times while we were on the road. We're going to do it again to misdirect our foes."

"We'll need an Allia," Dar noted.

"I think Auli here can be a convincing Allia," Tarrin said, giving his whimsical friend a calm look. "She actually looks a little like her, and Auli's a *very* good actress. It won't take much to make her convincing."

"I think I can do it, Tarrin," she said mildly.

"Are you sure that's going to work, Tarrin?" Darvon asked dubiously.

"It works very well, Lord General," Keritanima smiled. "There's a girl in Wikuna named Kalina, that looks so much like me that we look like twins. She made it easy for me to be in two places at the same time. Kalina was very good at acting, and she had everyone absolutely convinced that she was me. Trust me, what Tarrin's proposing isn't just effective, it's *damn* effective. As long as Auli and your new Tarrin don't mess up, they'll have every single person in Suld thinking that we all got on a ship and sailed off towards the horizon." Keritnaima frowned. "I'd rather not be on a ship, brother. Can I Teleport us all to Wikuna after we get out to sea?"

"We'll need a little more misdirection than that, sister," Tarrin said. "When you get on that ship, I want you to sail for Dusgaard, in Ungardt,

and I want you to make a show of it."

Keritanima narrowed her eyes, then she laughed brightly. Miranda too was smiling in a malicious manner. "Tarrin, you impress me," she said sincerely.

"I don't understand," Ianelle admitted.

"The Ungardt are notorious for not liking outsiders," Miranda explained to her. "Tarrin *is* Ungardt, and he has close kin there. If he asked them, they'd take all of us in and protect us like we were part of their clan. By having us go to Ungardt, Tarrin is putting us in a place where it will make it very hard for any spies our enemies have to keep an eye on us, and he's also making anyone that tries to follow us have to wade through a forest of axes and swords to get there. And the Ungardt are *not* to be taken lightly, my dear Ianelle. They're respected as some of the toughest fighters in the world. That means that anyone that wants Tarrin has to face an army of big, strong, well-trained, and very nasty foes to get to him. It's not something that *anyone* would undertake without a great deal of hesitation."

"My grandfather would probably enjoy the whole thing," Tarrin agreed with a nod. "He needs to give his warriors some exercise from time to time. My grandfather also happens to be a clan-chief, Ianelle, something of a king. Anrak will protect your daughter and my friends with an army, and its no army that any sane man would want to cross."

"They sound like they enjoy violence," Ianelle sniffed.

"Moderately so, yes," Tarrin agreed bluntly. "Nothing makes an Ungardt happier than a nice little war."

"I think your grandfather will be disappointed if we *don't* bring him some people to kill," Miranda teased. "And his warriors may not like getting their hopes up and end up having nobody to fight."

"Anrak'll have to take that up with his kinsmen," Tarrin shrugged. "Besides, if they can't fight with outsiders, they'll just fight with each other. They do it all the time anyway." Tarrin looked at his bond-mother. "I know it's asking alot, but I *need* Sarraya, mother," he told her. "We work well together, and I'll need her if I'm going back to the desert."

"I can have her here by midnight," she said confidently.

"Good. Thank you."

"Why can't I go with you?" Keritanima said. "Why just Allia?"

"Because I'm Selani, sister," she answered simply. "Tarrin did not undertake the desert alone the first time. Remember, he travelled with two Selani. My brother's wise in knowing that he will need a Selani with him."

"It makes things easier, Kerri," he nodded. "I don't have to worry about Selani groups attacking me outright, and Allia's knowledge of the desert will be very useful. Besides, they're going to need you in Ungardt to maintain the misdirection. It's not going to end as soon as you get there, because we have to make everyone believe that I'm there. That's important. Besides, Var and Denai taught me enough to survive in the desert, but it's still going to be much easier on me if Allia's there."

"What dangers are there in the desert?" Darvon asked. "I've heard that it's a barren wasteland."

"Well, first off, just about everything is poisonous," Tarrin said, ticking off a finger. "Then there are the *inu* and *kajat*, and quite a few other nasty desert animals that make life there very interesting."

"What are those?"

Immediately, Tarrin turned and wove an Illusion of a *kajat*, a very detailed image that appeared to the side of them. It was fifteen spans tall, with mottled brown skin, and a huge mouth full of dagger-sized teeth.

"Karas' hammer!" Darvon swore as they all gaped at the massive Illusion. "Is it really that big?"

"This is an image of a *small* one, Lord General," Allia said sedately. "The adults are considerably larger."

"*Inu* are about the height of a man, with the same general build as a *kajat*," Tarrin said. "But they're very fast, smart, and they hunt in packs. Even the Selani fear them."

"We *respect* them, brother, but we don't fear them," Allia said pointedly.

"I'd fear them," Darvon muttered honestly, staring at the Illusion.

"After we get to the desert, I'm not quite sure what we'll do," Tarrin admitted. "Probably join up with a Selani clan and simply wait until Gods'

Day comes and goes. After all, it's the getting there that's important." He looked at Allia. "Maybe we'll go see Ariana. I've always wanted to show you Amyr Dimeon. I think you'd be amazed by it."

"I would like to see it," she nodded with a smile.

"So, what do you think of my idea?"

"I think it's bloody clever," Keritanima said. "You're going to give gray hair to everyone chasing us, brother."

"I think that is the general idea, Kerri," Dolanna told her with a smile.

"It has merit," Jenna said soberly, tapping her chin with a finger. "We'll be pinning down the eyes and ears of our enemies, and putting them in a position that they will *not* enjoy. Besides, I like the irony of it. You pretend to seek shelter with one group of dangerous people only to go take shelter with another. It's a plan inside a plan. Even if they do realize that Ungardt is just a ruse, they won't have any better luck trying to ferret you out of the desert." She looked at him. "There's just one little flaw."

"What?"

"You know Grandfather, Tarrin. He'd never believe Kerri. I'll have to take a little trip up to Dusgaard and have a talk with Grandfather. You know how he likes to argue."

"That's true," he conceded. "Since mother and father are back in Aldreth, I guess you *would* need to set things straight. Think you can Teleport up?"

"I don't know how," she admitted.

"Sister, by tonight, you'll know more about Sorcery than Ianelle," he told her confidently. "I haven't told anyone this yet, but when I was turned, the memory potion was affecting me. It has several, *interesting* side effects. One of them is that I picked up a great deal of information from the echoes of memories in the Weave. I can weave almost any spell any Sorcerer has ever used, and Mother told me to teach them to you. I only have one day, so you'd better be very attentive."

"How did that happen?" Jenna asked in surprise.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But it did. I've also had something of an expanded memory since I woke up. I can remember absolutely every second of my entire life, even from before I was born. It's a very weird feeling," he admitted.

"I say, what an amazing turn of events!" Phandebrass said brightly. "I really *must* talk with you, lad, I must! I thought that there may be some unusual side effects of your turning, but I hadn't expected this! I say, why, I may be able to manufacture a new potion that enhances the ability to remember! I may make a potion that increases intelligence, I may!"

"It'll have to wait, Phandebrass," Tarrin told him bluntly. "I have too much to do today."

Phandebrass looked a little crestfallen, but said nothing.

"Mother told me that the life memory will fade, but what I learned from the Weave never will," he told them to assure them. "She said that though it was a bit hard on me, I wasn't permanently harmed by the ordeal. My memory will return to normal after a little time, except for those things I learned from the Weave."

"That's a relief," Jenna said sincerely.

Tarrin looked to Sapphire. "I know you were just waiting for me to recover, my friend," he said. "As you can see, I'm well now. What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to return home," she said calmly. "Since you are going to the desert, I guess I will leave with you tomorrow. You'll cut a great deal off of my travel time."

"You're more than welcome to come with us," he told her honestly.

"I need to get home. I have no doubt that my brood has destroyed our caves with their revelling in my absence, and I must be there to set things right."

Tarrin chuckled. "I guess young ones are young ones, no matter what species. They all seem to have this knack for upsetting parents."

"Truly," she agreed with an impish smile.

"Well, I guess that's about everything," he said. "What we need to do now is get ready to leave. And don't make a secret out of it," he told them. "We *want* them to know that we're leaving, remember that. Jenna, I need to start with you as soon as we can."

"I will handle the arrangements, my Keeper," Ianelle told her.

"I appreciate that," she nodded.

"I have just the Knight in mind, son," Darvon told him. "He's an overly clever young Senior Cadet that calls himself Fox. He's half Ungardt, just like you, and he's a born troublemaker. I think he can do the job nicely."

"He'll need a crash course in how I behave," Tarrin said.

"I can handle that," Keritanima told him. "Me and Dar need to go see him to tailor the Illusion to him anyway." She took on a thoughtful look. "Darvon, do the Knights still have those Trollskin gloves?"

Darvon looked at her, then laughed. "That's quite clever, your Majesty," he said. "Yes, we still have them. And if we put them on Fox, then he can have a little help convincing people he's Tarrin."

"My thoughts exactly," Keritanima nodded with a wicked little smile.

"I can help with that," Triana told them bluntly. "Bring him to me. I'll make him as tall as Tarrin, and then the Illusion will only have to change his features. I've noticed that Illusions that change height have trouble dealing with the physics of movement."

"Can you put him back, Mistress Triana?" Darvon asked.

"As easily as I grow him, I can shrink him," she said confidently. "It won't be too pleasant, but it'll work."

"That will make the Illusion much more convincing," Dar said professionally. "It's a good idea."

"I already know how Allia acts, so I think I can handle being her," Auli added. "I hear about nothing but Allia from Allyn anyway. If I didn't know her by now, I never will. And since I'm about her size, you shouldn't have to do anything to me to make it believable," she said quickly.

"You'll be fine as you are, girl," Triana said to her absently.

"I say, I need to make a few preparations, and break down my lab," Phandebrass said.

"I'll be staying here, Tarrin," Kimmie said. "I'm getting a bit too round to be travelling just now."

"I didn't want you to go," he told her. "I'd rather have you and our child out of harm's way from now on. I think Julia can serve well enough as the party's resident Were-cat."

"Me?" she said in surprise.

"You," he told her. "They may need our unique abilities before it's all said and done, and you're also a Weavespinner, daughter. I'd rather have that kind of power protecting my friends. Is that alright, mother?"

Triana looked to Julia. "Only for a short time," she said bluntly. "Julia is still a child."

"I know, but I don't think a couple of months alone will hurt her too much."

"I don't like it, but it's necessary," she said sourly. "I'll be stopping by to check up on you, girl, so don't think you'll be out of reach of my arm," she warned.

"Yes, Triana," Julia said obediently.

"Mist won't like it, but I'm going to have her stay here," Triana said. "It'll be easier to keep an eye on the cubs if they're together, and she can replace Julia as a babysitter."

Julia flushed a little at that, but wisely said nothing.

"If I want to get Sarraya back here by midnight, I have to start getting things done now," she announced, standing up. "It won't take me long to stretch this human, but I have a few other things to do before I can leave."

"Yes, we have much to do," Ianelle agreed. "Keeper, I'll be at your earliest convenience."

"I'll let you know when we're done," she said.

They broke up then to prepare for tomorrow. Tarrin did pause to talk lightly with them, with Dolanna and Dar and Camara and Koran Tal,

answering a few questions and assuring them that he was alright. He wanted to spend more time with them, tell them all about what happened to him, but they all had too much to do now to waste time on idle chitchat. Things were starting to come to a head, and everyone knew it. When they all left the Tower tomorrow, nobody doubted that their leaving wouldn't cause shockwaves through all of Sulasia, all of the West, that could possibly lead to another war. Only this war would be fought in Ungardt, and the odds were going to be stacked most decidedly in the other direction. Tarrin wouldn't *need* to assemble an alliance of different peoples to stand against that. The Ungardt would use their rugged, hostile homeland as all the ally they would need to protect it.

Summers were very short that far north. Very soon now, as summer wound down into autumn, the first snows would fall, and not long afterwards the countryside would be a snow-choked quagmire, hostile to any kind of large-scale action. Ungardt weather was never very good, and all those elements would combine to make any idea of forced invasion very costly. Any attackers would be faced with two overwhelming opponents if they invaded Ungardt. The Ungardt people, and the Ungardt winter. Both were equally formidable, and equally merciless.

And if things worked as he hoped they would, they would all be bashing their heads against the proverbial rock to get to him, and he wouldn't even be there. If everything was done right, every eye in the world would be affixed to Ungardt. That meant that since he'd be in the desert, he'd be relatively safe. As if he wouldn't be safe enough. Even if he *did* tell everyone where he was going, he doubted they could do anything about it. The desert was even more hostile to an invading force than Ungardt, but he wasn't going to take any chances. Not over this. The Firestaff was too valuable, too precious, too *dangerous* to take any risk whatsoever. With Tarrin leaving, Jenna could seal the Tower to protect his mates and children, and anyone who tried would find themselves facing an army of Sorcerers and fanatically loyal Knights. Anrak Whiteaxe, his grandfather, would use every resource at his disposal to make his friends unassailable in Ungardt, and Tarrin would do the same in the desert to make the Firestaff just as unreachable.

If everything worked as he hoped, then leaving and diverting the attention of his enemies to the fortress kingdom of Ungardt would prevent

them from getting any kind of hold in any one place. And if he could keep them off balance and guessing for just a few short, critical rides, then he would slip completely beyond their reach. The Firestaff would be safe in the desert, Gods' Day would come and go, and then he could finally end this madness. He would put the Firestaff somewhere safe, wherever the Goddess told him to leave it, and not worry about it for another five thousand years. He could then return to Aldreth with his mate and children, with Mist and Kimmie close by, and settle into the life of wonderfully ordinary domesticity that he so desired.

All they needed was a little luck.

Chapter 9

There were a great many things to do, and it almost seemed to Tarrin like they weren't going to have enough time to get to all of it.

After they split up from the meeting at the courtyard, Tarrin and Jenna withdrew from the others and returned to her personal rooms, one of the few places where nobody would disturb her, and Tarrin got to work. After Jenna used the Priest spell to augment her ability to retain knowledge, he started training her in the many, many spells that he'd learned through his unusual turning. There were a great number of them, and having to think about each one to teach Jenna let him get a little better understanding of them and how they were used. Some were battle spells, like one nasty one that created a very powerful acid out of flows of Earth, Water, Fire, and Divine, which was sprayed forth to injure an opponent. There were many new Transmutation spells, including the one that allowed the Transmutation of a being into another kind of being. Shapeshifting. It was one of the spells, though a Sorcerer wouldn't use that particular spell on himself. Sorcerers were wary of spells that altered the body, because it may damage or destroy their connection to the Weave. There were few ways a Sorcerer would Transmute himself, and crossing over, changing the body to make it invulnerable to heat and fire, was one of them. Sorcerers *could* Transmute themselves in other ways, but a tiny mistake could strip them of their powers, so Sorcerers, even the Ancients, were *very* wary about doing so. It was such a dangerous and unused sphere of Sorcery that even Tarrin's knowledge of it was strangely incomplete. Then again, given how extraordinarily dangerous it was, there was little surprise in the fact that a very, very rare few *katzh-dashi* would even dare to experiment in that area. Some were spells of an aspect of Sorcery the modern *katzh-dashi* had never even seen before, Divination. The reading of signs and portents to predict a possibility in the future. Divination was terribly unreliable, for the future was not set, and elements of the present changed constantly to alter the lines of possibility in the future. The one spell that Tarrin had learned in that field of study that had any kind of reliability at all was a rather interesting little

weave that predicted the probability of success of an impending action, provided that the action was accomplished within a minute of the casting of the spell. But even that one was unreliable if other factors influenced the possibilities of success, especially when other sentient beings were involved. So, the spell would be fairly accurate if Tarrin used it to see if he could successfully break down a door, but it wouldn't do him very much good in predicting a winner if he and Allia decided to race down a passageway. There was another spell that tried to gauge the severity of possible danger in the near future, but the spell couldn't determine the type of danger, nor its cause. But it did operate with at least a modicum of success, but it was notoriously fickle about what it considered *danger*. The concept of danger was a very personal one, and what Tarrin felt was not dangerous, others would. That made the spell very erratic, especially when the danger would be caused by another sentient being, or the danger another caused was purely accidental. That made it moderately useful for a Sorcerer trying to detect the possibility of being attacked by brigands in an alley, as they intended to cause danger to the Sorcerer, but would not warn of a thief on a rooftop above that accidentally knocked a roof tile loose that fell on the Sorcerer's head and killed him.

There were a great, great many useful spells, many of which Auli had demonstrated in their endless games of fun. Sorcery was capable of battle and other things, but the Ancients had concentrated on finding ways to make Sorcery useful. That was why there was a weave to do almost any kind of chore or labor, there were weaves that affected clothing, mended broken items, and even trivial ones that changed the color of things. The Ancients placed greater value on spells that could do things for them, not spells that could kill people. Then again, back then the Sha'Kar dominated the *katzh-dashi*, and their pacifistic ways had influenced how they researched the ability. Tarrin taught Jenna an absolute plethora of handy little weaves that did any number of small, useful things, as well as a few that weren't quite so small, like weaves that determined the age of an object, or a weave that would tell the Sorcerer who had last touched an object, and more importantly, exactly where that person was, or even a weave that

After that, they moved into a more serious aspect of Sorcery, and that was healing. There were many spells of healing that had been forgotten, even by the Sha'Kar, and many of them were spells that affected more than

just injury. There were weaves for helping the body fight disease, though the weave couldn't outright cure the disease itself. There were weaves that helped a Sorcerer heal mental damage, such as trauma or shock, but only a Sorcerer of the same race could do that. The boundary of species was a constant throughout all of Sorcery when it came to using Mind weaves, even to the Ancients. Only under truly extraordinary circumstances could that barrier be breached. Spyder was the *only* example of such an extraordinary circumstance. After ten thousand or so years, the Urzani had come to understand humans to such a detailed, exacting degree that it allowed her to use Mind weaves against humans. There was even a weave that partially reversed insanity, though it was not a permanent effect.

After that, they started with sphere-specific spells, going through a myriad of different Air weaves and Fire weaves and Water weaves and Earth weaves, which weren't really anything new. Sorcery was a very fluid, dynamic magical power, which allowed for a great deal of latitude in its use. It didn't demand the exacting words and gestures of Wizard and Priest magic, and it didn't require the immense clarity of intent and discipline of Druidic magic, which meant that the results of Sorcery could often be quite different from casting to casting of the exact same spell. It was also why a spell's effect often had different potency from one Sorcerer to another, depending on any number of variables, including the concentration and experience of the caster. This margin of relaxation gave Sorcery a unique aspect that didn't exist for the other orders, except perhaps Druidic magic, and that was the ability to improvise. Experienced Sorcerers could improvise on the spot, make up new spells as they needed them, and many of the things he'd learned through his turning were more formal variations of spells that he or Jenna or Keritanima or Dolanna had invented when they had a need for them. Druidic magic was capable of such improvisation, but the consequences of failure were so drastic that making things up as one went along was a very dangerous practice.

The only sphere-specific spells that *were* carefully used were Mind weave spells, because of the risk of damage to the mind affected by them. One did *not* improvise when using Mind weaves, so the spells that he taught Jenna, a great many of them, were new to her, new and somewhat useful. Spells to interfere with a mind's operation, spells to put a victim to sleep, spells that were more refined versions of the *phantasm* aspect of Mind

weaves, spells that made someone *believe* that he could see or hear or smell or touch something that actually didn't exist. Illusions fooled the senses, but Phantasms tricked the mind. They were well researched because not many Sorcerers were very adept with Illusions. Dar was one of a very rare few that showed such aptitude for Illusions, for it was a very demanding field of study and also required a very vivid imagination. There were spells to delve into the memory of a victim, allowing a Sorcerer to access memories of another, and spells to hear the thoughts of others. There was also a spell that instantly allowed a Sorcerer to lift an entire language out of another's mind and learn it, but it was a Weavespinner spell, meaning that only Jenna and Dolanna would have any real use for it, since it too was restricted to only being able to be used against members of the caster's own race.

After that was done, and they broke to get a late lunch, they came back to start learning the Weavespinner spells. These were powerful spells, ones so strong that only a Weavespinner could use them. Spells like Teleportation, a spell that would instantly kill a victim by disrupting his body's processes and leave no trace of its use, a spell that could interfere with gravity itself in a small area, either increasing it or lessening it, even changes its direction of pull for a short time. There was a spell that allowed a Sorcerer to take complete control of someone's mind, turning him into a puppet, and a spell used against Sorcerers that would strip them of their powers for as long as the caster kept the spell active. Sorcerers could block one another from using the power, but that required strength and a great deal of effort. The spell made that a little easier, but it still depended on the strength of the caster and the strength of the victim. Jenna could use it to block almost anyone in the Tower except Tarrin, Jasana, and perhaps Keritanima, Dolanna, and Ianelle. Those three weren't *sui'kun*, but they were both very powerful and very experienced, and could possibly break the spell. There were a great many other spells, fighting spells, useful spells, even some trivial spells, showing that the Ancients still placed a greater value on Sorcery as a useful tool or means of entertainment than a weapon of war.

As the sun began to set, they moved on to the most powerful of all the spells he'd learned, the spells of High Sorcery. These were the most powerful of all, and a vast majority of them were battle spells. The Ancients did study magic as a weapon of war, but they seemed to concentrate on

using it thus only at its highest level of ability. This too seemed to make sense to him, since the Sha'Kar had dominated the culture of the Ancients, and their aversion to fighting meant that if they had to do it, they were going to do it fast and be sure about the results. High Sorcery was the most efficient and fastest means to win such a fight, and as such it was developed mainly with spells used in combat. There were non-fighting spells in Tarrin's memory that relied on High Sorcery, but the majority of them were battle magic. The Sunbolt, a spell Tarrin had learned very early on, was just one example of the kind of raw, unmitigated power that High Sorcery could unleash, and other spells of the same ilk had the same kind of destructive ability. There were spells for making rock explode, spells for turning air into a lethal poison, spells to change blood into a poison. There was a spell that caused a massive earthquake in a confined area, a spell that caused a deluge of razor-sharp shards of ice to rain from the sky. One spell even called down a meteor and made it strike where the Sorcerer indicated. Something falling from the sky had such speed and energy built up in it that when it hit the ground, it would explode with the power of thousands and thousands of kegs of Wikuni gunpowder, absolutely annihilating everything around where it impacted. Tarrin's memory told him that that particular spell had only been used in battle *once*, and it was used to destroy a city in the southern kingdom of Stygia, the immediate neighbor of Sharadar. The *katzh-dashi* had been so horrified by its effects and what they'd done that the spell was outlawed and the war between Sharadar and Stygia was immediately ended. It was the only war Sharadar had ever lost in its entire history, and they lost it because they surrendered to the Stygians in apology and repentance for what they'd done. For their own honor and pride, the Stygians accepted that apology, and it led to the strong alliance that the two nations now enjoyed.

It was a sobering thought, that one, one that Jenna brought up. The *sui'kun*, single, individual beings, could call forth the power to destroy entire cities. She remarked that perhaps that was *too* much power for a mortal to hold. Tarrin didn't really engage her in the philosophy of that debate, for the memory of what he'd done at Torrian was still fresh and raw in him. He knew how it felt to destroy an entire city, and he fully understood the horror of the *katzh-dashi* after doing it themselves. He did not blame them in the slightest for outlawing the spell, but he realized that it was a very rash act. Any spell, even that one, could be altered in its power

to be made less potent. That was a core rule of Sorcery, any spell could be made as strong or as weak as the Sorcerer desired, up to the limits of the Sorcerer himself. They could have simply decided to call down a smaller meteor, one that devastated a much smaller area. That would be very handy in eliminating an army.

After they were done, both of them were quiet and reflective. Now Tarrin understood why those who had caused the Breaking were so afraid of the *katzh-dashi*. They really *were* that powerful. Had they really wanted to, they could have conquered the entire world. But that was then. The *katzh-dashi* of today weren't nearly as powerful or as numerous, and though they could help an army conquer a much larger force, the effort of wielding magic on that scale would make them only useful for short periods. Even Tarrin himself, one of the most powerful, couldn't use that kind of magic in a sustained manner any longer than a few minutes at the most. The most powerful of all spells were vast in size and intricate in construction, meaning that they took a long time to weave, and that would wear him out by the time he started the second, or possibly the third, depending on how angry he was. They were spells more suited for a Circle, where the effort to weave them was distributed among the members of the Circle.

But that too was a moot point. The *katzh-dashi* were an order of peace, and they would only use that power in defense of itself or for the protection of those placed under their care. They would never use it to conquer or rule, and with Jenna as the Keeper, he was sure that that would never change.

It was well past dark when they finally finished, not far from midnight. They were both tired, but there was an excited light in Jenna's eyes. She was thrilled at having learned so much about Sorcery in such a short time, and he couldn't really blame her. If he'd been in her shoes, he'd be very excited about it too. Jenna's short life was totally devoted to Sorcery now and all it entailed. The Tower was her new home, and the *katzh-dashi* were like her children. She was unswervingly devout to the Goddess, just as he was. Tarrin couldn't see how anyone who'd been touched by her *couldn't* be devout.

They went down to the kitchens for a late dinner, since they'd both only had that one meal and were both ravenous. As always, the kitchens were busy, but now the business was concentrating on cleaning up and preparing

for tomorrow's cooking than cooking for today. Pots and pans were scrupulously cleaned, fireplaces swept of ash, tables and countertops wiped down, kettles scrubbed. But the instant the Keeper appeared, they fell over themselves offering her anything she wished. When she asked for a bowl of beef and vegetable stew, one of her favorites, a kettle was pulled off the peg, ingredients were retrieved, and the head cook, a large fellow named Golin, assured her that it would be ready very soon. He pushed breads and pastries at her, meat pies and a large platter of fruits and vegetables, urging her to eat a little before her meal was prepared. She took a little bread and a small bowl of grapes, Tarrin filched a joint of beef that had been roasting for most of the day, and they retired to the main dining hall, where the Novices were seated and dined three times a day. It was empty now, the long benches and tables cleaned and waiting for breakfast.

"This place brings back memories," Tarrin mused as they sat down at the table nearest the doorway to the kitchens.

"You know, I never had to sit in here," Jenna chuckled. "Sometimes I come in here and eat, just to see what it's like."

"It's a lot different when it's empty," he grunted. "Try eating with the Novices some day."

"It would be just as quiet now as it would if I did that," she winked. "I'm the Keeper, Tarrin. I'm not someone that a Novice would feel comfortable eating with, you know."

"True," he admitted. "But maybe you could wear a disguise or something. You're young, sister. If you put on Novice white, I think that you could probably fool some people. Not all of them, but some of them."

"I don't think so," she said. "It's a small Tower, brother, and everyone knows me."

"Then use an Illusion."

"I'm not really very good at Illusions," she admitted sheepishly. "I can make image Illusions well enough, but there's a trick to making them move I haven't quite figured out. All my Illusions look like painted portraits, and they look silly when they start moving."

Snorting, Tarrin set down his joint. "Make one. Let's see where you're making your mistake."

She did so, an Illusion of their mother, Elke Kael, and he saw immediately that it wasn't her weaving that was the problem. "You're doing it right, but you're weaving it like it's a spell, Jenna," he told her. "Illusion is an art form, not a formula. You don't weave it, you *create* it. You have to breathe life into it, or it's going to look exactly like that one. A picture."

"Now I understand why they all say that Illusions are so hard," Jenna said with a furrowed brow as she tried again. The image was just as detailed as the first, but it too had that empty, soulless quality that made it apparent that it was an Illusion.

"Don't think about how mother looks," Tarrin said. "Think about *her*. Her presence, her personality, what makes her who she is. Then put them into the Illusion."

Frowning, Jenna banished the Illusion and took a moment to mull things over, then she tried once more. The resulting Illusion looked as the other two did, a faithful reproduction of their mother's appearance, but now there was just something a little more in it, a kind of presence that made it seem more real than the first two.

"Now you're getting it," Tarrin complemented. "It takes practice, Jenna. It's not the kind of thing you can just start doing. Just work on it a little, and you should get the hang of it."

Jenna laughed. "And I thought everyone was blowing Dar's talents out of proportion," she said ruefully. "I didn't think that being good at Illusions was such a thing to take notice of."

"Dar's very talented, sister. He has the soul of an artist. That's what gives his Illusions such power. When he weaves an Illusion, it doesn't just look real, it *feels* real."

"I think I'll ask him for some lessons," she smiled.

"I wonder where he is," Tarrin mused.

"Right now? I think him and Tiella are walking," she answered. "Tiella has the biggest crush on him," she added with a conspiratorial smile.

"Dar really fancies her," Tarrin added. "I think they'd be a good match."

"Maybe we should," she trailed off, waving her hand slightly.

"I don't think we need to do anything," he said. "As soon as Tiella works up the nerve to tell Dar how she feels, she'll have him. She's intimidated by him."

"Everyone is. Whatever you and Dolanna did to Dar, brother, it has quite an effect. He walks around the Tower with a confidence that makes everyone take him very seriously, despite the fact that he's still technically an Initiate. He knows more than some *katzh-dashi* ten times his age," she chuckled.

"After going through what he went through, he'd *better* have learned," Tarrin grunted. "Dolanna took him under her wing and taught him almost everything she knew. And Dolanna is a *very* good Sorceress. She's got some tricks that most other *katzh-dashi* would say are impossible."

"I've noticed," Jenna smiled. "I think it's no big surprise she was the very first of the new *katzh-dashi* to cross over."

"None at all," Tarrin agreed. "Even before she crossed over she was probably stronger than anyone on the Council, but it's not her nature to want a position like that. She seems more comfortable out in the world, using her abilities in direct service to the Goddess. She's a natural field *katzh-dashi*." Tarrin glanced towards the door. "Mother is very pleased with her," he told her. "She told me not to tell Dolanna, but I don't think she'd mind me telling you. She told me that whenever she has a delicate or serious problem somewhere, Dolanna is usually the first name on her list of children to send to take care of it."

"That's not all that surprising. If I had a serious problem somewhere, Dolanna would be the first person I'd think of to go take care of it." Jenna chuckled. "I guess I know now why Kerri is so good."

"Another pupil of Dolanna," Tarrin nodded. "Then again, she has quite a bit of natural aptitude. Dolanna helped her along, but alot of it came from Kerri herself."

"True, but if there was a better way to get started, I don't know what it would be, except maybe getting lessons from Mother herself."

"After all this is over, sister, I think the best thing you could do is bring Dolanna back to the Tower for a while," he told her. "She's an excellent field agent, but she's also an incredibly gifted teacher. She can teach anyone almost anything. I think you'd do *very* well to bring her in and let her teach for a while."

"That is a very good idea," Jenna agreed with an enthusiastic nod. "With results like you and Kerri and Dar to her credit, nobody can gainsay her credentials."

"Why would they gainsay?" Tarrin asked. "You're the *Keeper*, Jenna. When you say do something, they do it. It doesn't matter if they like it or not, they *do it*. If you have people backtalking you, remind them of just who is in charge."

"I was speaking figuratively, Tarrin," she smiled. "Nobody openly defies me. I've had too many lessons from you and mother and Myriam to allow that kind of impertinence. Some of them think I'm too young, and a few on the Council are quite miffed that I was selected over them, but nobody openly challenges me."

"If there was any, I think the Sha'Kar killed it," Tarrin mused.

Jenna laughed. "I think that's a good point," she agreed. "*Nobody* argues with Ianelle. She's very polite and has exquisite manners, but she has a sense about her that makes you feel very reluctant to cross her. She's alot like Triana that way." She popped a grape into her mouth. "And since the Sha'Kar all recognize me as the Keeper, it leaves the *katzh-dashi* that don't like me out on a breaking limb."

The cook, Golin, scurried into the hall and bowed. "I'm sorry for the delay, my Keeper," he said. "It will be ready for you presently. How soft do you want the vegetables?"

"It doesn't matter, Golin," she said calmly. "As long as the stew's hot, I'll be happy with it."

"We'll keep a kettle on for you at all times from now on, my Keeper," he said in an embarrassed tone. "You'll not catch us napping again."

"It's the middle of the night, Golin," Jenna laughed. "I didn't really think you were napping to start with."

"It's a matter of pride, my Keeper," he said honestly. "I pride myself on providing you with whatever you want, whenever you want it. I didn't have what you wanted on hand."

"I don't expect the kitchen to be on call for me every hour of the day and night, Golin," she smiled. "I tell you what. You can make it up to me tomorrow by making me some peach cobbler. I've been dying for some peach cobbler for days now."

"You had but to ask, my Keeper!" he said in a shocked tone.

"If I got everything I wanted all the time, I'd get spoiled, Golin," she winked. "Besides, it's something of an excitement when the kitchen has something I've been craving, like an unexpected windfall. I enjoy that much more than having my every craving satisfied on demand."

"You're a complicated young woman, my Keeper," Golin said with a wry chuckle.

"Yes, I know," she said with a mysterious smile.

"I'll see to your stew, my Keeper. It should be on the table in a few moments."

"Thank you, Golin," she said. "And go to bed. You have to get up early tomorrow."

With a deep bow, Golin excused himself. Jenna looked at Tarrin, at his amused expression, and she turned a trifle perturbed. "What?" she demanded.

"Quite a change from the little sister I remember," he told her honestly. "But I'm glad to see that you're keeping your head about it. Some girls would get wrapped up in all her newfound power. It's good to see you're keeping your feet on the ground, even if your head is in the clouds."

"Why thank you, brother dear," she said with a teasing smile.

They could only spend so much time talking about serious things before the subject changed to reminiscing about life back on the farm, and that was probably the part of the night that Tarrin enjoyed the most. Golin brought Jenna her stew, and she ate as they talked about old times. But the smalltalk abruptly ceased when they both sensed a surge in the Weave, a surge that

was curiously familiar to them as a presence inside the Weave. Then, just to the side of them, they both saw a spell pull itself out of the strands and weave itself into an Illusion. It was an Illusion of a rather tall, shapely redheaded woman wearing a low-necked blue gown and a small golden tiara, her thick hair entangling the tiara like an overgrown weed before tumbling down her back in crimson waves of unmanaged curls. The Illusion seemed to brighten, and then it began to move, as the maker animated the spell with her own mind.

Tarrin was mildly surprised. That was a Weavespinner trick, and this woman was completely unknown to him. But Jenna didn't seem all that surprised. She smiled at the projection and put down her spoon in the nearly empty bowl. "Alexis," she said fondly. "I see you figured it out."

"You're not much of a teacher, Jenna," she teased.

"Tarrin, this is Alexis Firehair, Keeper of the Tower of Abrodar. Oh, she happens to be the Queen of Sharadar too," she added nearly as an afterthought.

"I've heard much about you, Tarrin," she said with a graceful bow.

"I'm not much one for ceremonies, Alexis," he told her calmly. "I didn't know you crossed over. I didn't feel it."

"I'm half a world away, Tarrin," she smiled. "And it was about two months ago. Not long after the Weave was restored. I think that was while you were suffering from amnesia."

"It was," he agreed.

"I meet Jenna in the Heart every day, and she gives me lessons. But she's not very good at it," she winked at the young woman.

"Be nice, Alexis," Jenna fussed.

"Never," she said impudently, then she looked at the two of them. "Well, I was going to talk to you a while, but if you're busy, I can come back later," she said.

"You're lucky you got me at all," Jenna said accusingly. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"It's about two hours to noon," she said.

"It's nearly *midnight*," Jenna told her.

"I know what time it is there, Jenna," she said patiently. "When I came over, I could feel you were awake. If you'd have been asleep, I wouldn't have disturbed you."

"I think you were trying to catch me asleep," Jenna accused, but she had a sly smile on her face.

"You'll never know," Alexis said with a swaggering grin.

"I take it you two are rather good friends," Tarrin observed.

"I'd say we are," Alexis agreed. "Enough to play pranks on each other. Your sister brings out the worst in me," she admitted with a wolfish smile.

"You're like a little girl that never grew up," Jenna accused.

"I am," she admitted shamelessly. "It keeps things from getting dull. When you're as old as I am, Jenna, you'll do the same thing to keep your mind entertained. Things get kind of boring after about four hundred years," she said with a sour expression.

"I won't find that out for another three hundred and eighty four," Jenna said with a wicked smile.

Alexis winced. "It's not fair to bring up my age like that."

"You're the one who brought it up," Jenna told her smugly.

Alexis wasn't lying. They *did* act like a couple of girlfriends when they were together.

Alexis was about to say something else, but she looked beyond them. Tarrin followed her gaze, and to his surprise and delight, Triana was padding into the dining hall. And sitting sedately on her shoulder was a tiny blue-skinned creature with mottled multicolored wings. Sarraya. Those wings began to buzz as she lifted off Triana's shoulder and zipped in a direct line towards Tarrin, calling out his his name happily. Tarrin lifted a paw and let her land in it, then he brought her up to his face with a gentle smile, a thousand memories, some of them actually good, flowing through his mind about his little Faerie companion. She could be a terrible pest sometimes, but she was a good friend and a solid, dependable partner. He felt better with her with him already.

"Tarrin!" she squealed again happily, leaning forward and kissing him soundly on the end of his nose. "It's so good to see you! Triana told me all about what happened, and why you asked me to come back, and--"

He cut her off before she could say anything in front of Alexis. It wasn't that he didn't trust her, but he didn't know her yet, and he knew that their enemies could be listening even now. "Careful," he warned her in Sha'Kar, then he reached up with a finger and very tenderly and carefully pressed it up against her side. She grabbed his finger with both hands and pulled it up her her face, nuzzling it. Tarrin had often marvelled at how exquisitely tiny Sarraya was, how tiny and yet how perfectly formed, and that wonder hadn't simply ceased because she'd been away. Seeing her again only made him marvel at her anew.

"A rare treat for me," Alexis smiled. "I've always wanted to meet a Faerie. How do you do?"

Sarraya looked at the woman, and then her eyes seem to peer through her. "I see you've been teaching them tricks, Tarrin," she said. "She feels far away."

"This one is from Abrodar," he told her calmly. "This is Alexis Firehair, Keeper of the Tower in Sharadar."

"Oh. Nice to meet you," she said casually, then she zipped over and landed on Jenna's hand, then kissed her on the cheek. "Jenna!" she said happily. "You've grown!"

"Only a little," she said wryly in reply. "How are you, Sarraya?"

"I'm well rested and raring for another go," she said with a bright, enthusiastic buzz of her wings. "A couple of months back home, and I'm feeling good as new and ready for action!"

"I think now would be a good time for me to go, Jenna. It looks like you'll be busy, so I'll come back another time."

"That would be a good idea," Jenna agreed.

"I'll see you later, then. Good to meet you, Tarrin," she said with a smile, and then her projection vanished, and the sense of her raced away from him within the Weave.

"Mother," Tarrin greeted, taking her paw as she approached. "That was good time."

"We would have been here sooner if Sarraya wasn't so fidgety," Triana grunted.

"I've never done that before!" she said indignantly. "It was so bizarre!" she laughed to Tarrin. "It was like were travelling a hundred leagues a second! The whole world went by so fast it was like a blur!"

Tarrin raised an eyebrow at his bond-mother. She just smiled and patted him on the cheek. "Don't worry, I'll teach it to you when we have the time," she told him.

"I can feel it in him, Triana. When did he get so much stronger?"

"Didn't you listen to a word I said on the way, bug?" Triana asked in a tone that, for her, was exasperated.

"It was hard to hear with all that rushing in my ears. And besides, I wasn't paying attention to *you*," she answered. "I had more interesting things to pay attention to."

Tarrin laughed in spite of himself. Sarraya was indeed back.

Sarraya flitted out of Jenna's hands and landed on his shoulder, and it immediately felt *right*, like something that had been taken away from him had been restored. "Now then, I want details," she said from his shoulder. "Everything that's happened while I've been away, Tarrin. And don't you dare miss a single thing!"

"You'll have time for catching up later," Triana grunted. "It's late and we don't have much time. You can go to bed now, Jenna. Until dawn, he's *mine*."

"I'll take that as a peremptory dismissal," Jenna laughed.

"It was one. Now off to bed with you."

Jenna laughed again. "Yes, mother," she said in a mocking tone, but there was a definite warmth in her eyes and a gentle smile on her lips that said that she was very comfortable using that term.

Triana gave her a hard look, but it was a look of pure bravado. Tarrin could see it in her posture. She was pleased that Jenna had called her *mother*, but she wasn't about to show any softness. Jenna seemed to see that too, chuckling lightly as she passed by Tarrin, reaching up and putting her hand on Triana's shoulder, then pulling her head down so she could kiss the Were-cat matriarch on the cheek. It was more than a display of affection, he knew. By kissing Triana, by putting herself at risk of being turned, she was showing how much she trusted her brother's bond-mother. That act *did* break Triana's emotionless mask, as her eyes softened and a gentle look flushed her handsome features, then she was all stone again. "Sleep well, cub," she ordered in a very motherly tone that belied the emotionless mask.

"I always do knowing you're near us, mother," Jenna answered calmly, then she waved to Tarrin and Sarraya and gracefully swept herself from the hall.

Triana put a paw on her cheek, over where Jenna had kissed her, and watched the girl pass, then she fixed a boringly dangerous look on Tarrin and Sarraya. Naturally, it had no effect whatsoever. Sarraya exploded into gales of laughter, and Tarrin gave his bond-mother a knowing little smile. Because of the touching of their minds, he knew his bond-mother alot better now, and he knew how gentle and loving she really was. It was just something she didn't show to the outside world.

"O, how the mighty have fallen!" Sarraya said with a snigger after recovering from her mirth. "I thought you were about to let her scratch you behind the ears!"

"That will do, Sarraya," Triana said in a dangerous tone.

"Aww, you want your widdle belly rubbed, Twiana?" she asked in an outrageous manner. "Does kitty want her widdle back scratched? If I scratch the base of your tail, will you stick your widdle butt up in the air for me?"

Despite knowing the consequences, Tarrin suddenly couldn't help but to succumb to a fit of laughter. Triana glared hotly at both of them, and her expression made it abundantly clear that was going to be retribution. She snorted loudly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and waiting out Tarrin's fit like an impatient teacher waiting out a student's floundering for

an answer. "If you're done, we have a lot to do and not much time," she said tartly.

"I'm sorry, mother," he sniffed, still smiling. "I take it I'm not getting any sleep tonight?"

"Judging by how fast you learn? I doubt it," she said acidly and turned towards the door, waving him to follow.

"Ouch," Tarrin grunted.

"She'll get over it," Sarraya giggled. "It's good to see you! Triana told me about what happened. What was it like? How did Jesmind take it? What did you do all that time?"

"We'll have plenty of time to talk about it later, Sarraya," he told her calmly, moving to follow Triana. "I don't think I want to keep mother waiting. Not after what you said."

"Posh. She needs someone to tease her every now and then."

"Then you can do it," he said fervently. "I'm not that crazy." Then he started laughing again. "But it *was* funny."

"Of course it was," Sarraya said airily. "I said it, didn't I?"

The instruction he got from Triana and Sarraya was surprisingly simple, and it was also very similar to some things he had already learned from Allia. The problem was that when a Druid reached a certain level of ability or had enough natural aptitude, he attracted the All to him. This attraction increased dramatically whenever a Druid was emotionally upset or afraid, as the turmoil of the Druid was like water running downhill for the All and its power, drawing it towards him. And when the power reached the bottom of that hill, it would act just as if the Druid had reached to the All himself, looking into his mind and acting on whatever it found there. This was what Triana and Sarraya had to teach him to prevent, and there was a twofold method of it.

The first method was simple control of emotion. It was why Triana always seemed so grim and emotionless. It wasn't that she wasn't a very emotional person, it was that at her level of power, it took very little to

attract the All to her. It would virtually come at a whim, and any time she even thought about Druidic magic, the All began to respond to her. She always had to be extremely careful, and she kept an almost perpetual check on her emotion. This wasn't going to be easy for Tarrin, and he knew it, but she drilled it into his head again and again that he had to at least try to maintain a throttle on his emotions. She didn't completely suppress her emotion; in fact, she had gone past the need to really control her emotion to protect herself from the All, but it had become such an ingrained practice for her by now that it was second nature. But she always kept control. She offered to teach him some mental exercises that caused one to relax and regain control, but he explained that Allia had already taught him several of those things, as well as how to meditate. He had used a similar mental technique to remain in human form much longer than any other Were-cat, a method of thought and preparation that allowed him to ignore the pain. She had also taught him techniques for remaining calm and focused in the face of great turmoil, exercises to help him prevent a rage and keep his head in the many desperate situations he had faced. Tarrin had a very disciplined mind, as Triana had learned from her touch with it, and she seemed comfortable with what he had already learned. It was the only reason why she had been willing to leave him at all, because she was confident that, now that he understood the danger involved, he could keep control of his mind and not cause an accident.

The second method of defense against the All was learning how to resist it when it did come. This was the part that, to his surprise, Sarraya was much better at explaining than Triana. The whimsical little Faerie was a very powerful Druid, and that meant that she had the All coming at her all the time, since she had such little control of her emotion. So she was a master of blocking it when it did reach out to her, much better at it than Triana, and much better at explaining it in terms and images that he could easily understand. She explained that the key was sensing it the instant it began, because it was like a boulder rolling downhill, much easier to stop at the beginning than at the end, when it had built up so much momentum that stopping it would be a very dangerous proposition. If he could catch it at that stage, she told him, he could *shield* himself from it, using a tiny bit of Druidic power to create something of a barrier of sorts which he would put between him and the All. It would seek him out, but encounter the barrier and turn back on itself, which would do nobody any harm. She taught him

the spell for that, a very simple, very easy spell that any Druid with his level of aptitude could cast without even having to reach into the All. Just the desire to cast it would be enough for the All to do it; and since it was already starting to roll towards him, it would be partially in touch with him and would respond instantly.

This concept would seem illogical to someone not accustomed to working with magical energy, which had its own rules that occasionally seemed contradictory. Sorcery also had a behavior like this, when one cut one's self off from the Weave, turning the power back against itself until it disrupted its own flow and was cancelled out. The idea of using magical power against itself was not new to Tarrin, and he found that he could embrace the idea with an ease that most other Druidic Hierarchs, a term describing Druids of their ability, did not. Tarrin noticed that when dealing with the All in a raw state, it behaved with surprising similarity to other orders of magic. It was only when it got into the mind of the Druid and was released by his will that the rules that governed it changed so radically. Perhaps in its raw state, in any magical order's raw state, magic was magic, and the rules that governed it *all* were a constant that could not be changed. Only after it reached the one who had summoned it did it change, transformed by the mind and body of the summoner into the form of energy he was trained to unleash.

That was a strange thought, a very strange thought, but it seemed eerily accurate to him. It seemed to be reinforced by the fact that the magical power of different orders could interact with one another. Wizards could dispel Priest spells and vice-versa. Sorcerers could disrupt the spells of Wizards and Priests as well as each other's, and Druids could disrupt everyone else's magic, as well as being able to affect other Druidic magic. The form and tradition of the magic overshadowed the fact that it *was* magic, and maybe, after all the rules and ceremonies and customs were thrown out, it came down to that one simple thing.

The Goddess wasn't just the Goddess of the Weave, after all. She was the Goddess of *magic*, in all its forms. That meant that they all had to be related in ways that most mortals didn't consider.

It took him a few hours of constant practice and supervision from his two Druid mentors to master the techniques and spells that Triana and

Sarraya taught him. Sarraya taught him her technique for deflecting the All, and Triana admitted that it would probably be very effective. Tarrin was much younger than Triana, and as such had a harder time keeping a handle on his emotions. Triana went over with him what Allia had taught him, then taught him a last-ditch action to take if the All did connect with him unbidden, a trick that his mother and father had taught him long ago when he was learning to fight and shoot a bow. To empty his mind and become nothing. If he did that when the All was in his mind, it would have no image or intent, and without those, it could not manifest into the real world. It would simply be there, and would retreat from him without doing any harm to anyone once it found no guidance or release through him. His mother had taught him that when she trained him how to fight, how to keep emotions and cluttered thoughts from interfering with the task at hand, and his father had taught it to him as a means of focusing on the target and being an accurate shot. Triana refined those lessons somewhat with her vast experience, teaching him some exercises to practice that would allow him to enter that unthinking state with exceptional speed. If the All was that close to him, then erecting that final defense as quickly as possible was essential to preventing an accident. It was why she warned him before to empty his mind if he felt the All coming nearer, to deprive it of the necessary image or intent it needed to go through him and into the real world.

After that, Triana taught him something that he'd wanted to learn for quite a while, and that was a few of the spells she used to communicate with others. She taught him the spell she used that opened that window of sorts in the air and let people see and hear back and forth between it, and she also taught him the three variations of spells that Druids used to send messages to one another. There were three different versions to satisfy specific needs. The first was a simple message that reached through the All and was placed in the mind of the recipient, a mental message that was only one-way. Druids conversed most often using that spell, for it was the easiest to cast and was considered the most polite form of communication. The second method was similar to the first, but it didn't go through the All. It had the All create a direct link between the two Druids, and that allowed a message to pass between them without the chance that a strong Druid may eavesdrop on it as it passed through the All. The third version of the spell was similar to the first, but it created a message that was audibly heard, so a

Druid could pass information to both the other Druid and any people that happened to be with him.

"Won't we reject that kind of communion?" Tarrin asked when she explained how it worked. "Were-cat minds don't like contact with others."

"The All acts as a buffer," she answered calmly. "The Cat doesn't object to the All, because it's always been connected to it. Remember, cub, the magic that makes us Were is *Druidic* in nature. The Cat doesn't reject a part of itself. All the information comes through the All, so it's as if the All was the one talking to us."

"Oh. I didn't think about that," he admitted.

"I see. You have to stop thinking like a Sorcerer, cub."

"I was trained as one, mother."

"I can't help it if they've ruined you," she snorted. "You just have to unlearn those lessons."

"If I unlearn those lessons, I won't be a very good Sorcerer."

"This is a problem?" she asked pointedly.

Tarrin laughed. "You're biased, mother."

"You're right. I am. Now do it again, just as I showed you, and step it up, cub. We're running out of time."

After practicing her spells for a while, Tarrin yawned. He wasn't really that sleepy, and his nature allowed him to stay awake as long as he pleased, and sleep whenever he wanted and for as long as he wanted. But sitting in one place for so long was starting to get to him. He needed a break. "What time is it?" he asked.

"About an hour before dawn," Triana answered. "They're going to come looking for you in a while, cub, and we're not done yet."

"I'll be with him, Triana," Sarraya reminded her. "We can work on it in the desert. Trees only know, we won't have much else to do," she said acidly. "Except maybe run from big lizards and try to avoid getting stung by poisonous beasties."

"I hope I'm not included in that," a voice came from the doorway. They all looked, and Sapphire strode into the hall calmly, still in her human shape.

"I wondered when you'd show up," Triana said.

"Little things bore me, biped," she sniffed. "Now that you're done with the basic instruction, I can bear it."

Sarraya gave the dragon a very long, very hard look. "She's not a human, is she?" she asked.

"How observant of you, sprite," Sapphire said dryly.

"Sarraya, this is Sapphire. Sapphire, this is Sarraya," Tarrin introduced.

"The dragon?" Sarraya asked. "She doesn't look all that impressive."

"That will do, bug," Triana said sharply.

"Looks can be very deceiving, insect," Sapphire said, somehow managing to sound very polite and urbane while loading the word *insect* with vast amounts of scorn, as if the only reason she acknowledged the Faerie was because Tarrin introduced her.

"Hmph," Sarraya sniffed.

Tarrin moved quickly to step on any kind of feud. Sarraya was picking on the *wrong* female. "Sapphire's going to go with us to the desert, then go on to her home on her own. So she'll be travelling with us at least a little ways, Sarraya. Remember that."

"How go the lessons?" Sapphire asked Triana.

"He'll be good enough until I can sit him down and give him some *real* lessons," she replied. "At least he won't blow anything up by accident."

"Can he blow them up on purpose?"

"That was never his problem," Triana said with a slight smile. "Blowing things up is something of his specialty. He's very good at it."

Tarrin flushed.

"When the time comes for that, I think I might like to take my turn with him," she said absently. "His abilities are stronger now. He *might* be capable

of using some of the magic I know. As might you, Triana."

"I'd be willing to sit down and trade spells, Sapphire. I think we could learn a few things from each other."

"It would please me to do so," she nodded. "It's not often that three Hierarchs that don't know one another's abilities meet. To waste the opportunity to expand each other's knowledge would be a crime."

"What about me?" Sarraya said indignantly.

"What about you?" Sapphire asked. "Since I am not so impressive, surely there is nothing that I can teach one such as you," she said in a level tone, but her eyes shone with amusement. "I will be back presently. I find that some of the food your bipeds cook is actually quite good. The cook Golin agreed to give me a few recipes."

Sarraya glowered hotly at Sapphire's back as the dragon sauntered into the kitchen, but Triana's humorless chuckle drew her eyes away. "And that, bug, is why you should learn to think before you open your mouth."

"Oh, shut up!" Sarraya snapped waspishly.

There wasn't much time left before dawn, but it was time enough. They broke up their lesson and Tarrin returned to his room to rest a while. He was a little too wound up to sleep, and he really didn't feel like it anyway. So he just sat down in a comfortable chair by the fireplace and stared into the fire for a while, thinking about what was going to happen over the next few days. He was hopeful that his idea was going to work, for it would protect everyone without putting anyone in too much danger. Grandfather wouldn't mind the opportunity to give his warriors a little exercise, and he was actually looking forward a little to going back to the desert. He had always wanted to go there with Allia, and now they were going to get their chance. The only place in the desert where he'd spent enough time to be able to Teleport was that ruined dwarven city in the northwestern regions, quite a distance from Amyr Dimeon, which was his goal. But that wasn't a problem. An Air Elemental could get him there in a day, maybe two. All he had to do was get them to that city. He thought back to that city, and the great happenings that had taken place there. It was where he and Jegojah had fought for the last time, and where Faalken's body was now entombed in the marble crypt he had made for him. It was where Jegojah had given

him the information that had allowed him to defend Suld. In a real sense, it was where everything that had led up to where he was right now had begun. Perhaps it was fitting that he returned there, to that somber place, a city left behind by the brave Dwarves who had sacrificed their entire race to save the world.

Two months. It was all going to be over in about two months. The morning outside was surprisingly crisp, as the late summer--actually early fall now--had a bite to it not normal for that time of year. About now in Aldreth, all the crops were either in or in the process of being harvested, and the trees were just getting ready to change colors. There would be colors on the trees on the foothills and low mountains north, and there would be snow on the peaks of the high mountains behind them. Everyone would be hard at work right now. Father would be bringing in his crops of barley and whey, and running around procuring the fruits and other vegetables he needed to do his fall brewing. Mother would be getting on him about hunting up enough to restock the basement cold room for the winter; the Kael household almost never resorted to eating the farm animals. They did slaughter an occasional pig or sheep for ham or mutton, but the sheep were for wool, not meat, wool that mother was probably spinning into cloth and yarn right now, taking off the thin summer coats and getting them nice and ready to fill out to protect themselves from the coming cold nights.

It would be a little harder on his parents without him and Jenna there. Tarrin did most of the hunting, freeing his father to pursue his love of brewing, and Jenna was quite good at spinning the wool, which left mother with plenty of time to tend the sheep. But now that the Sorcerers had fixed father's knee, he should be able to hunt up a full storeroom in a short amount of time; this time of year, there were so many deer and elk infesting the area around Aldreth that they had to shoo them out of the yard to get to the sheep pens in the morning. They were slowly migrating south, moving out of the mountains as fall took hold in them and moving slowly towards the more hospitable forests in the Frontier to spend the winter. As autumn progressed, they would move farther and farther south, and the Kael cold storeroom would be filled to the ceiling with deer and elk meat, carefully dressed and packed to maximize storage space. They wouldn't touch those stores usually, using it as an emergency reserve for when the hunting turned

lean, and the food they could buy from Aldreth became more and more expensive and less plentiful.

Well, in two months, if he was lucky, he'd be heading back there. He wasn't going to live on his parents' farm; he was a grown man now. No, there was a little clearing in the Frontier, not far from the Keal holding, that had a nice little stream flowing along the edge. It was where he'd always wanted to build his own house, because he spent a great deal of time in that meadow. It was a crossroads of sorts for the many trails he'd followed in pursuit of game, or just wandering around where he knew he wasn't allowed to be. It was the heart of the territory that that young hunter had considered his own, and it would serve him now as the heart of his territory as a Were-cat. From Watch Hill to the Broken Gulley some two days east of the Kael farm in the Frontier, from the foothills of the Skydancer Mountains down to the Nameless River some two days south, that would be his claimed territory. A very large area, but he was a very large Were-cat, and he would have no trouble protecting his claim. He could have as big a territory as he could defend, and he could defend a *big* swath of land.

Strange that he would be thinking of *after* now. He'd never really allowed himself to do that before, but then again, things had never looked so optimistic. He had the Firestaff, and what was more important, he had a tremendous advantage now. They couldn't catch him, they couldn't take it from him, and everyone else he cared about would be well protected. His sisters and friends would be in Dusgaard under the protective banner of his grandfather, and his mates and children would be entrenched firmly under the watchful eyes of his sister, who was just as formidable as him. For the first time in a very long time, he felt very confident that things were going to turn out alright.

Very soon now, he'd have the peace and quiet he so craved. It made him very calm, as the Cat within finally found contentment in enduring just another couple of months, and it would be a couple of months that would actually seem quite pleasant. No running for his life, no armies chasing after him. Just peace and quiet, a holiday of sorts to wait out the year and get past Gods' Day. Provided, of course, that everything worked as he hoped.

There was a knock at the door. It annoyed him slightly, and he was too far away from the door to be able to catch the scent coming under the door to identify whoever it was. "What?" he called.

"Can I come in?" a voice called from the other side. Much to his surprise, it was Jesmind, and she was being strangely polite. Usually, she'd just barge in. Obviously, his anger with her was making her rather tractable. He still was angry with her, but he was about to leave, and he felt that she deserved at least the chance to say goodbye.

"Alright," he called.

She opened the door and stepped in. She was dressed as she always was, in clothes she favored. She liked canvas breeches because she felt they were tougher than leather, and she always did like loose shirts of linen or cotton, light and breathable, with short sleeves. She closed the door behind her and padded up, and he could tell from her scent that she was a little irritated over something. Seeing her reminded him of how angry he was with her, how inexcusably she had acted while he had been human. But on the other hand, he was about to leave for about two months or so, so it would be necessary for them to talk now. Talking through the amulets was an option, but it just wasn't as good as face to face communication. Seeing her reminded him of how much he loved her, but right now that love was stained with an oily film of annoyance and anger.

"How is Jasana?"

"Locked in her room," Jesmind said flintily. "After the thrashing she got, she won't think about coming out for a while."

"Is she going to be alright?"

"She'll be fine," she assured him. "She'll whine and cry for a while, but when she realizes that no amount of conniving is going to make us change our minds, she'll start doing things our way."

"It's about time," he said bluntly.

"It was overdue," Jesmind admitted. "I guess it's both our faults. We knew how she was. We should have done something about it sooner." She sat down on the bed, bouncing on it slightly. "Mother told me what you decided. I think it's a good idea."

"I'm hoping it's going to work," he sighed. "It's putting some people at risk, but the risk is spread out. This way, Jenna doesn't catch it all, and Kerri won't catch it all."

"Mother said we have to stay here. Mist isn't very happy about it."

"She'll get over it. Keeping Mist where Jenna can protect her is what matters right now."

"I can understand that. If they can't get to you, they'll come after those you care for."

"And that's why Kimmie, Mist, and Eron are staying in the Tower with you and Jasana," he affirmed. "I'm keeping my whole extended family right where my sister can defend them if it comes down to it."

"Strange that I'll be seeking protection from a little slip of a human girl," she chuckled ruefully. "If she wasn't who she was, I wouldn't even notice her."

"It's not protection, Jesmind. It's more like deterrence," he answered. "They've gotten into the Tower before, no matter what the old Keeper or even Jenna have done to stop them. Not even the Ward managed to keep out Jegojah. But with Jenna and the Sha'Kar here, it's going to make any attempt to get at you very dangerous, and it will take a great deal of planning and careful preparation. That will be even harder with the Knights roaming the grounds, ready to kill anyone or anything that isn't where it's supposed to be."

"Kerri came to check on Jasana, and she said that some of her Marines are going to be stationed here to help," she told him. "She still had that garrison here from the battle. She never pulled them out."

"I remember that," he mused. "Shiika still has some of her Legions here too, to help garrison the city. They're not needed anymore, but they're waiting for Kerri and Shiika to hammer out the agreement for the Wikuni to carry them back to Arak. Jenna should ask to borrow them."

"That should be funny," Jesmind smiled. "Every time Jenna talks to Shiika, she's pulling out her hair by the time it's over. Those two don't seem to get along very well."

"Actually, they're rather fond of each other. But Shiika's been after Jenna to build a Tower in Dala Yar Arak, and Jenna can't commit to that right now, so it's causing Jenna a little stress. Shiika's been *very* persistent."

"She's a Demon and an Empress both, Tarrin. I guess she's really used to getting her own way."

"Maybe you, me, and mother should go pay Shiika a visit and straighten her out," Tarrin said with a grim smile. "I think we've managed it with our little empress. Another shouldn't be too much work."

Jesmind laughed. "I never thought I'd be mixing in the same circles as kings and queens," she admitted. "It's weird."

"I guess I never really did either," he sighed. "Things just kind of got out of control."

"Mother said you're a prince, my mate. Is that true?"

"In a *very* loose sense, Jesmind," he told her. "My grandfather is an Ungardt clan-chief. That's not exactly a king, and the Ungardt don't really pay much attention to titles. Everyone just does what needs to be done and that's that. Grandfather's only real duty is to resolve disputes between clansmen, and when there's a war, he's the commander of the army. The rest of the time, he sails around in his ship to make money for the family. He doesn't really need to do anything else, because the clan knows what to do, and they do it."

Jesmind was silent a long moment. "How long are you going to be gone?"

"Two months," he answered firmly. "If everything goes as we hope, I'll be back right after Gods' Day."

"Mother said Sarraya, Allia, and that dragon are going with you."

"I'm just giving Sapphire a ride to the desert," he told her. "She'll be setting off for home as soon as we get there. But Sarraya and Allia are staying with me. I'm going to need their help in the desert." He stared into the fire a moment. "Besides, I'll need Sarraya's help with the things mother taught me."

He scented a change in her scent, and looked up to realize that she was standing right beside his chair. She looked down at him with her heart in her eyes, and his anger with her suddenly had serious competition from the desire to pull her into his lap. Had he not been about to leave for two months, he probably would have been less likely to want to do that. He was angry with her, but he didn't want to leave her again on bad terms. That was the mistake they'd made the first time. She knew why he was upset with her, and she'd have plenty of time to think about it while he was gone. He'd fully expect her to make it up to him when he came back, but for right now, perhaps a cessation of hostilities would be better for both of them. He looked up at her, a carefully neutral expression, keeping his scent restrained.

It didn't take her long. She slid herself into his lap and wrapped her paws around his neck, laying her head against his shoulder. Jesmind was a very affectionate female, if one could strip off all her bark. Such a display from her wasn't unexpected. He gathered her up and held her close, taking in her scent like it was the sweetest perfume, just enjoying the moment. A moment without fighting, without anger keeping them apart, a sincere and intimate exchange between two people who loved one another very much.

It was a moment that lasted an hour, and among the many things in Tarrin's life that he could say had been good, the time in that chair, sitting before the warm fire, his beloved mate in his lap, just being together without any words or anger to push them apart, had to be one of the best.

So as not to ruin the time they had together, almost as if they had both thought the same thing, they parted without ceremony or fanfare, and without any kind of farewell. Jesmind knew she could talk to him whenever she wanted, and that seemed enough for her. Seeing the light of dawn through the window to the side of the chair, Tarrin nudged Jesmind. She looked at the light, sighed, and then put her paw on his cheek and kissed him intimately. Everything she was feeling, everything that mattered to her was in that kiss, communication so much more effective than words that it made speech seem like grunts and snorts. After she kissed to him all her feelings, all her love for him, all her anxiety over him leaving, all of her

worry over his anger towards her, she got up and walked out without saying a word.

After all, it wasn't a farewell. It was more of a brief parting. They both knew he would come back, and they both knew where he was going to end up. His love for Kimmie was sincere, but Jesmind had been his first love, and he had vowed to come back to her. He was a Were-cat, and that made his word as good as his life. He would honor that promise, honor his love for her, and he would come back to her. They would be together until time and their natures pulled them apart, and he would not deny her a single day he felt she was owed.

Perhaps two months in the desert would be good for him. After those two months away from her and his daughter, it would do much to cool his temper. He could come back anxious to see them, willing to forgive, and Jesmind would have two months to reflect on her behavior and be ready to apologize.

But that time wasn't here yet. He still had a very serious thing to do, and that fact was never far from his mind. The most active part of it was over now. He had gone from seeker to hider, from hunter to the hunted, from the chaser to the chased. He had been chasing after the Firestaff for two years, trailing along behind him a long procession of those who would either kill him before he could find it or take it from him after he succeeded. Now everything was different. They were all chasing after him now, but for an entirely new reason. And he no longer had to look both ahead and behind, towards the Firestaff and back at those who sought to bring him down. Now all his attention was set firmly behind him, at those who wanted what he possessed, and were willing to go to any means to take it from him. They were desperate now. It was only two months until Gods' Day, two months until the five thousand year cycle of the Firestaff reached its climax, and it became active. One day out of every five thousand years, that was all. And the memory he had gained from his turning told him that it wasn't just that one day, it was a specific moment in that one day.

Approximately every thousand years, the four moons of Sennadar were part of a rare phenomenon called a *conjunction*. When one occurred, the four moons would align in the sky, one in front of the other in front of the other in front of the other, four bodies occupying the same space in the sky

directly in front of the sun, forming a grand eclipse. Eclipses weren't unusual for Sennadar, having four moons to take turns blocking the sun on various parts of the world. Tarrin himself had seen seven in his nineteen years to varying degrees, from only partial blockage to the most severe, when the White Moon Domammon, the largest of the four, blotted out the sun with its massive bulk for nearly two hours some three years ago. The most unusual had been the very rare Hourglass Eclipse, when the twin moons, Duva and Kava, blocked the outside edges of the sun with their own edges and turned the sun into a round-ended hourglass, like the core of an eaten apple. Tarrin had only been five when he saw that one, and an Hourglass Eclipse only came around to a particular region once every few hundred years. The cycle of lunar movement caused a conjunction to happen on Gods' Day only once every five thousand years, at the beginning of its cycle--or end, depending on how one viewed it--renewing the cycle for another five thousand year rotation. It was that one day, when the four moons joined on Gods' Day, that the Firestaff would activate, and it would be active *only* so long as the four moons were aligned. That was a period of about twenty minutes. Vala, the Red Moon, was the fastest of the moons in its orbital movements, and it would be the first to move out of alignment and break the conditions necessary for the Firestaff's activation.

Twenty minutes out of five thousand years. Everything he had done, everything that had happened to him, everything that mattered, it all came down to that one simple thing. To defend the Firestaff, to keep it out of anyone else's hands, for only twenty minutes. That was all he had to do.

Standing up, snuffing out the fire with the barest of conscious thoughts with a weave of Fire, Tarrin turned and bent to the task of packing. None of it was what he'd come to the Tower with, gifts to replace what Jesmind destroyed, but everything he needed was there. The pack Jula gave him held the knives and clothes he'd received as gifts. All the knick-knacks and trinkets would stay here, but Tarrin did pack with him the crystal bell Sapphire had given him and the metal cat sculpture that had been a gift from one of the Sorcerers. He also packed the little doll that was a constant reminder of his little mother, something that still brought a gentle smile to his face whenever he beheld it. All of it went into the pack, which was sent off into the *elsewhere* once it was put on his back. He brought out of the *elsewhere* his sword and staff, to check them and make sure all that time in

that magical place wasn't harming them. The sword was fine, but the staff was feeling a bit dry and brittle, and he realized that the living wood was starting to deteriorate in the magical place his amulet created. He sent weaves of Water and Earth through it, restoring its moisture and enriching it with the nutrients the Ironwood required to survive, even after being cut from its parent tree for years. The staff almost seemed to strengthen in his paw, the wood regaining its luster and vibrancy, the feel of it on his pads that seemed so comfortingly familiar. After restoring it, he again sent it back to the *elsewhere*, but made a mental note to himself to take it out every day and let it bask in the sunlight and get some fresh air. A little attention every day would keep it strong and dependable.

There was another sword now, one he had almost forgotten. It was the one that Jenna had given him, the one enchanted to have such an edge that it could cut almost anything, standing patiently in the corner and waiting for him to have need for it. It was very small to his paws now, almost unusable, the hilt too small to fit in the palm of his paw, but that wasn't an overwhelming obstacle. He was confident he could enlarge the sword without disrupting its magic, getting it large enough for him to use. It could certainly be useful. His black metal sword was keenly sharp and very strong, and it had the strange ability to harm extra-dimensional beings like Demons. This sword could chop basalt apart and slice through steel, especially given the amount of power he could put behind it, and it would be extremely useful. It took him a moment to get everything organized, having to pull everything *except* the Firestaff out of the *elsewhere* and rearrange it. The swords were put under the pack on his back, crossing between his back and the leather pack, and his staff remained in his right paw, with the Firestaff occupying his left. After he got everything arranged, it was all sent back to the *elsewhere*, leaving only his clothes and the Cat's Claws out in the real world.

In a matter of minutes, he was done. His pack was packed and stowed, his weapons were checked and stowed, and he'd ensured that he didn't forget anything. After he got a little breakfast and told a few people he was going, he'd be ready to leave.

For obvious reasons, his leaving was not going to be a big event. Almost everyone in the Tower, even his own close friends, would find out about it after he was gone. He didn't want anything unusual going on to

even hint that things were not as they wanted them to appear. He would tell Jenna and Keritanima that he was leaving, Dolanna if she was awake and happened to cross his path, but no one else. He wanted to be gone before they started talking, and he wanted Keritanima and Jenna to tell them he was gone to keep them from wondering what happened to him.

Stepping from his now unguarded room, he went down the stairs, considering that. He was a little regretful that he couldn't say goodbye to his friends, but it was for the best. Any protracted goodbyes would seem odd, given that he wanted everyone to think that he would still be with them. So it couldn't look like he was going anywhere, and that meant that he couldn't visit all his friends and tell them he was going. Everything had to maintain an illusion of events as they wanted them to seem to unfold. Him visiting people he intended to travel with was not normal for him. His pattern would be to gather with them only when they were ready to leave, not go out of his way to visit all of them before hand. But him visiting his sisters at any time of the day or night, sometimes for no reason at all, were *not* unusual. That was why him visiting Keritanima or Allia or Jenna wouldn't seem unusual.

It turned out that he didn't really have to worry about that, for he came across Jenna, Julia, Dar, Allia, and Allyn in the kitchens. They had all also gotten up early, and Dar was wearing a rugged pair of undyed leather breeches and a stout brown wool shirt, with a brown cloak pinned over it. Travelling clothes. Allia was already in her desert garb, a small, simple pack sitting by her feet as she waited for a pair of cooks to finish cooking her some ham steaks. Allyn too was wearing desert garb, but it looked a bit baggy on him, and he didn't look very comfortable. This made Tarrin smile a bit; Allia was already starting her re-education of her husband-to-be. If he even knew what she intended for him yet.

"What is this?" Tarrin asked lightly, pointing at Allyn. He spoke in Sha'Kar, which was actually a necessity when dealing with the Sha'Kar. Only a *very* few of them spoke any other language, and all of them were original Ancients, like Ianelle. But a thousand years of disuse had made most of them forget most of it, and they had to refresh themselves in its use. Tarrin had heard Ianelle speak Sulasian once before, and she did so with a very strange accent, using archaic words that had fallen out of use long ago. But Ianelle had learned Sulasian back when those words *were* common. It

was a strange testament to how things changed over time, even things that seemed immutable, like language.

"I wanted to see what it was like, honored one," Allyn replied after giving him a graceful bow. "It's not quite what I expected, I admit. These things are a lot heavier than they look."

Desert garb, at least desert garb actually worn in the desert, was very loose in fit, and was done in layers. There was a layer of loose-fitting trousers and a long-tailed shirt, and a very full, almost robe-like cloak that went on over the outer shirt. A very long, wide strip of cloth was wrapped around the head, a tail of it hanging down to serve as a veil against blowing sand, and some Selani had cloaks that had hoods for additional protection. Since Allia had silver hair, she preferred to leave it uncovered, flowing out from the bottom of her wrapped headgear, since it was much more effective at reflecting the sun's heat than any cloth. Tarrin had noticed that though white or silver hair were uncommon among Selani, those that did have it tended to leave it out as well. Allia would let it fan out over her back and let it help protect her from the sun's heat. Since her hair was so thick, she could probably go without the headgear, but then she'd have no easy way to wear a veil against blowing sand. When Tarrin first saw it, he wondered how they could wear all those clothes out in a desert and not bake. It turned out that the layers of clothes created an effective barrier against the heat. Tarrin at that time had been thinking in terms of keeping heat *in*, when the purpose of the desert garb was to keep heat *out*. Heat created by the body and trapped by the layered clothing was much preferable to allowing the searing heat of the desert in against their skin. In comparison to the desert heat, it was comfortably cool under those layers of baggy cloth. The Selani made their clothes out of a plant fiber that was very light, breathable, and exceptionally strong. It wouldn't accept dye, but the fibers were naturally tan or brown, and in the desert, those were camouflaging colors, the colors of sand and rock.

"It takes some adjusting," Allia told him in a gentle manner, looking at him with open affection. "Don't worry, *deshida*, you'll get used to the weight."

Tarrin had to suppress a smile. Allia had called Allyn *deshida*. Next would come the term *jisha*, which meant *beloved*, and then *dejisha*, which

meant *husband*. He wondered if Allyn had any idea the trap into which he had fallen. That Allia was addressing him as a friend as close as her own brother meant that she had obvious designs for him, so obvious that anyone with even a passing familiarity with Selani language would instantly realize it.

"I feel like a bolt dowel," Allyn complained. "Like I have cloth wrapped all around me."

"It can't be too much different than those robes you wear," Julia noted.

"Robes are open, Mistress Julia," Allyn answered. "I don't think I've ever worn something that rides up between my legs. It's almost a nervous feeling."

Julia laughed, and Tarrin smiled. "He fears a sense of restriction," she said delicately to him, winking in Allyn's direction.

"In Allyn's case, that's a real fear," Tarrin told her absently. "He has a bit much to restrict."

Allyn blushed furiously, and Jenna gave Tarrin a shocked look before bursting into laughter. "Tarrin!" she finally managed to say. "Behave yourself!"

"He only speaks truth, sister," Allia said with a wicked gleam in her eye, glancing at her intended in a rather sultry manner.

"You're as bad as he is, Allia!" Jenna laughed.

"Probably," she agreed without a hint of embarrassment. "Don't worry, sister. We'll find a good man for you, and then you'll be as bad as us."

"I'm not ready for marriage, Allia," she chuckled, waving a hand before her.

"Who says that you have to marry a man to enjoy him?" Allia asked with pointed amusement.

Jenna blushed to the roots of her dark hair, then laughed helplessly. "You're not as bad as Tarrin, you're worse!" she accused.

"She's young, Allia," Julia told her sagely. "Give her a little time." She then swung her head and looked at Dar, who had been very quiet so far.

"Oh, no, Jula," he chuckled, putting up his hands. "I learned too long ago that I can never get out of these kinds of talks unscathed when Werecats and Selani are involved. I'm not coming anywhere near this conversation."

"I see he learned alot more than Sorcery in your care, brother," Jenna laughed. "He learned wisdom too."

"He's not as moralistic as you may think, sister," Allia told her with a smile at him. "Dar is Arkisian, and they're quite progressive. Much more progressive than your very strait-laced Sulasian culture."

"You see?" he complained to Jenna. "I try to stay out of it, and they find ways to drag me in!"

"That's because they like you," Triana's gruff voice called as she came up behind them. She put a paw on Jula's shoulder, and the smaller Were-cat female deferred to her almost immediately, stepping aside so she could stand beside Tarrin. "Is everything ready?" she asked, looking at Jenna.

"Kerri has the ships waiting," Jenna answered her. "Miranda went to go wake her up. As soon as we get her Majesty's sleepy backside out of bed, we can get all of them herded onto the ships and on their way. Is everything ready?" she asked in reply.

Triana nodded. "I've made all the arrangements you needed," she elaborated.

"Where is Sarraya?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Fetching Camara Tal and her husband, but that was too long ago. She probably told them to get up and then got distracted. You know how Faeries are," she said dryly.

"I'm mad at you for stealing Koran, Tarrin," Jenna flared. "He's one of my most trusted advisors."

"You'll live, sister," Tarrin told her. "Besides, you'll have to take that up with him. I'm not pulling his strings. He's going because he wants to be with Camara."

"I heard she's pregnant," Allyn said. "Is that true?"

Tarrin nodded. "Koran's going with her to keep her out of trouble. She'll need him."

Tarrin looked to Triana. "How long are you going to stay here?"

"Not long," she answered. "I want to make sure Mist isn't going to have a fit, and then I'll be off again. I'm getting a bit stir crazy staying in one place so long," she said with a snort.

"I hope Sapphire's ready to go," he said pointedly. They all knew that Tarrin had other travel plans, and Sapphire was part of them.

"She's down the hall, in one of the private dining rooms," she told him. "She's ready whenever we tell her it's time to go. She's too dignified to stand around and wait with the rest of us."

"That's probably for the best," Jenna said. "I really like her, but she does seem a bit rough-tongued."

"She's arrogant and overbearing, and for her kind, that's perfectly normal," Triana told her bluntly.

"I think this waiting for me to get better put her on edge," Tarrin explained. "Her temper's gotten worse over the rides. She's usually a lot nicer than this."

"Well, we can all hope she calms down," Jenna sighed.

Tarrin realized that things were actually falling into place rather nicely. If Sapphire was alone, then him going to see her to say goodbye wouldn't be strange. He could arrange things to appear very clean and smooth while he actually made his getaway. He needed to see either Jenna or Keritania and tell them he was leaving, and here was Jenna. He was a bit disappointed that he wouldn't get to say goodbye to Keritania properly, but it was her own fault for being so lazy. "Well, I don't think I told you, but she plans on leaving today," he said pointedly, looking right at Jenna. "She's not going with us. She's going home."

"She's going to cause quite a row flying over the city," Jenna said, her eyes serious, and a bit annoyed. She obviously thought she was going to have to make an Illusion of a manor-sized dragon flying over the city.

"She's going to use some kind of magic to send herself home," Tarrin told her. "I don't think she'd enjoy flying all the way, especially when she has her own ways of travelling."

Jenna picked up on his hint immediately, and her expression turned slightly relieved. "Is she going to see you off?"

"I doubt it," he answered. "She was just waiting on me to get better, then she was lingering because of what happened to me. Now that I'm better and all that's been settled, there's really nothing holding her here. It's not like her to be sentimental enough to go see me off."

"No, I guess it's not," Jenna said with a smile. She understood perfectly.

"I need to go tell her goodbye," he said absently. "Before everything starts getting crazy."

"I'll go with you, brother," Allia said after Jenna inobtrusively elbowed her in the ribs, reaching down and picking up her pack. "I've been meaning to ask her a question, and this will be my last chance."

The look that passed between them was understanding. Tarrin was going to leave, using seeing Sapphire as the excuse he'd need to disappear for a few moments. Dar said goodbye with his eyes, and Jula put a paw on his upper arm in a warm touch of farewell. Tarrin bridged up into the Weave, and Whispered in such a faint and tightly focused manner that only Jenna and Jula would be able to hear him. *"Jenna, go get the imposters and have Dar put the Illusions over them, then either you or Ianelle Teleport with them into the room where Sapphire is. Make sure you fill them in on everything we just said, so they don't look confused. Just make sure you do it fast. I can stall a little with Sapphire, but it's going to look strange if we're in there for an hour."*

"They're already waiting," Jenna told him in a similarly tight manner. *"We knew we were going to have to pull a switch, but we hadn't had the chance to get with you and work out the details. Jesmind was with you, and, ah, we didn't want to disturb you,"* she said delicately. *"This is going to work well enough."*

"Did mother get the human ready?"

"He's a little stiff, but he's ready," Julia answered. *"Triana stretched him like taffy with Druidic magic. He's as tall as you now, and he's a very clever and fast-thinking human. He'll do fine pretending to be you."*

Tarrin nodded to Julia, then looked at Allia. "Well, we'd better get moving," he told her. "Where is Sapphire?"

"The small formal dining room," Jenna answered.

Tarrin nodded again, then reached within, through the Cat, and made a connection to the vast energy of the All. His intent was all he needed for the All to do what he needed, and that was use the spells of sending messages that Sarraya and Triana had taught him but hours ago. *Sarraya, we're leaving*, he cast his thought into the All, directing it to send that message to Sarraya. *Come find me, and make sure you're invisible. Don't let anyone know you're there.*

I'm on the way, came her immediate response, like her own thoughts filtering into his mind through the All. Triana had been right, the Cat did not reject that strange communion. Because it was a communion with the All, not with the mind sending the messages from the other side of it.

"I forgot, I need to tell Darvon we're going to be leaving soon, or the Knights are going to slow us down as they try to get organized," Jenna grunted. "I'll be right back."

Jenna gave Dar a short look, and he seemed to understand. "I'll go with you," he said. "I know that without you here, the Were-cats and Allia are just going to try to get me in trouble," he said, giving Tarrin a friendly grin.

"I know, they're all just big bullies," Jenna teased.

Her pack on her shoulder, Allia stepped up with Tarrin as he separated himself from Triana and Julia. "I'll be back in a little bit," he said, but they all knew that he was actually saying goodbye.

"See you in a while," Jenna said with a look that warned him to be careful.

The silent look that passed between Allia and Allyn was intense, and Allia's hand flicked in the Selani hand-code. Tarrin was a bit surprised that she'd been teaching it to Allyn already, but then again, it was something he'd have to know to fit in with the Selani. She spoke brokenly in hand

language, probably only using the gestures she'd taught to him, but it was enough to get her message across. --*Leaving. Be careful. Love to you.*--

His response was a bit unsteadily formed, but legible to Tarrin's eyes. --*Will do. Love to you. Return soon.*--

Tarrin suppressed a sigh. He knew that leaving Allyn was not what Allia wanted, but the circumstances left little choice. Allyn's disappearance would be too hard to explain, and he'd only be a hindrance to them in the desert. This was not the time to take Allyn into the desert for the first time. Even with Allia, Tarrin, and Sarraya looking after him, he didn't know enough to not be an extreme danger to himself.

They parted from the others and walked silently down the hall. Tarrin could tell that Allia was suppressing the urge to turn and look back over her shoulder.

Sapphire was right where Jenna said she would be, in a large, richly appointed dining room. It was one of the formal rooms where Jenna would entertain royalty, and it was furnished to accommodate the rich. A deeply polished mahogany table was surrounded by what had to be twenty plush upholstered and cushioned chairs, the mahogany chairs similarly polished and with red velvet covering them, complete with shined brass tack rivets holding the velvet onto the wood. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling by a golden chain, a brass contrivance with a multitude of small crystals hanging from it like icicles, each crystal glowing with a soft, pleasing magical light. Four small service tables were set in each corner of the room, stacked with expensive porcelain china, delicate crystal goblets, and gold-plated silverware, all arrayed neatly or stacked in ivory and gold plated boxes on shelves beneath the burnished cherry tabletops which were covered with delicate lace throw cloths. The room had no other furnishings, but two huge tapestries adorned the walls on either side of the door, one of them a massive depiction of a *shaeram*, and the other an impressive depiction of the flag, crest, and Lion device that were the symbols of Sulasia. Sapphire was seated at that very grand table, fingers rapping on the polished mahogany of the table idly as she seemed to be waiting. She stood up immediately when Tarrin and Allia came in, and the Selani closed the door behind her. "I was getting worried," Sapphire said. "Is everything going alright?"

"It seems to be," he said, then he quickly and efficiently Warded the room against eavesdropping, and hid it from any Sorcerers that may be looking for such a thing. "We can speak freely now," he told her.

"You're quite good at that," she said appreciatively, as he could sense her probing his Ward.

"I've had enough practice," he said dryly. "We're leaving as soon as Sarraya gets here, and they bring in the people that are going to pretend to be us," he said. "You waiting alone gives us a perfect excuse to disappear for a bit, and that's all we need to pull the switch."

"I hadn't thought of that, but you're right," she agreed. "How long?"

"Jenna said she has Auli and this human Triana prepared waiting. She just has to get to them, have Dar put the Illusions on them, and then they'll be Teleported into the room. Sarraya should be here by then. She can move very fast when she needs to."

"Very good," Sapphire nodded complacently.

Sapphire wasn't one for idle chat, and for that matter, neither were Tarrin and Allia. So they waited in general silence for several moments, Sapphire's fingers continuing to rap rhythmically on the table after she took her seat once again. That silence was broken when the door cracked open, and the incessant buzzing of Sarraya's tiny wings beating the air heralded her arrival. The door closed on its own, Druidic magic, Tarrin sensed, and then the Faerie's slight weight touched his shoulder as the sound of her wings ceased. "I'm here," she announced. Tarrin couldn't see her, but from the way Allia and Sapphire's eyes seemed to fix on his shoulder, he knew she must have returned to visibility.

"Did anyone see you?" he asked.

"That's a stupid question, Tarrin," she said chidingly. "Of *course* nobody saw me. I was invisible, you ninny!"

"You know what I mean," he said tartly.

"Then say what you mean," she replied impudently.

"This had better go quickly," Sapphire noted. "I don't think I would like being in her company for very long."

Tarrin mirrored that notion. He didn't mind the Faerie's acidic comments and constant badgering, but Sapphire was not the sort to harass. He'd like to get those two separated before Sapphire did something unpleasant to the Faerie.

But Sarraya seemed to take the hint. She fell silent, and Tarrin was silently thankful that the Faerie wasn't going to be her usually obnoxious self. Fortunately, they didn't have to wait for much longer, for he felt the probing tendrils of a spell reach into the room. They moved very quickly, so fast that only Tarrin could sense and track them, locking into a space on the far side of the room. They enveloped that area like a cocoon, and then the spell triggered, exchanging everything in that space with everything on the other side of the spell.

To the others, in a wavering flash, three people appeared on the far side of the room. Jenna, and what *looked* like Allia and Tarrin, complete in every detail, all the way down to the clothes they were wearing, but Tarrin's new closeness with the Weave let him actually see beyond the Illusions, behind them, to the people beneath. One was obviously Auli, and the other was a human man with strong Ungardt features. He was as tall as Tarrin, the result of Triana's tampering, and he moved with a stiffness that demonstrated how unpleasant that had to have been for him. He had a strong jaw and a slightly larger nose than Tarrin, and his hair was red and eyes green. Redheads were quite common among Ungardt.

"Alright, we're here," Jenna said quickly. "Think they look the part?"

"Dar had to have done that," Allia said critically, looking the two of them over. "It is absolutely perfect."

"Who else would we turn to when we need a convincing Illusion?" Jenna smiled.

"Sir Tarrin," the human said with a nod. "I hope I can act as good as this supposedly looks."

"Just act like everyone annoys you, and you'll do just fine," Jenna told him seriously.

"Well, I'm looking forward to this," Auli said in Sha'Kar with a bright smile. "A chance to get out from under mother's eye. A chance for a little honest adventure, not the stuff we made up around here!"

"I'm sure they'll do their best to make it everything you hope it'll be," he told her.

"Who cares?" she said with an honest grin. "I've never been on a ship before, and I've never been anywhere that wasn't under mother's rigid control," she said with notes of vast irritation in her voice.

"This is not your chance to go wild, Auli," Tarrin told her disapprovingly.

"I know that, Tarrin. I'm just saying I'll be glad to go out and do something new and exciting, that's all."

"Remember, it is *my* honor you are borrowing, Sha'Kar," Allia warned in a *very* dangerous tone. "If you dishonor me, I will repay you for it threefold. Do I make myself clear?"

Auli swallowed, and then nodded with with an anxious look.

"Good. I am glad we understand one another."

"I'll do my best to keep her under control, Sir Tarrin," the human said in flawless Sha'Kar, which surprised Tarrin a little. Triana had obviously prepared him in other ways.

"Be careful of this one," Tarrin warned him. "You may think you're controlling her, but she'll end up controlling *you*. She's a dangerous one."

"Well thank you for warning him!" Auli snapped at him waspishly.

"It's only fair he understand just what he's getting into," Jenna said with a sly smile. "Darvon told me that you're quite a sneaky little devil, Fox. I think you and Auli are going to get along very well. Being sneaky is what she prides herself on."

"Oh, is that so?" Auli asked with a sudden bright smile, looking at the Knight Cadet hopefully.

"Not when I'm carrying Sir Tarrin's honor, it's not," he said grimly. "I admit, I have my share of fun when it's harmless, but this is serious. It's not the time or place for it."

"You could learn from this one, Auli," Tarrin told her with a steady look.

"Time is pressing, little friend," Sapphire reminded him.

"You're right, we can't be in here too long without it looking funny," he nodded. "We have to go, Jenna. Keep everything nailed down around here, and tell everyone that missed me I said goodbye."

She stepped up and hugged him warmly. "I'll do that. You be careful out in the desert, and make sure you tell me what's going on. The Heart isn't exactly empty anymore now that the Sha'Kar are back, but it's private enough for us to talk without it going any further."

"I'll send word through Jesmind or Julia whenever I need to talk to you," he said. "Their amulets are linked to mine in a way that won't allow anyone to eavesdrop."

"That'll work," she nodded, then she turned and embraced Allia. "Keep him safe, sister," she said.

"Always," Allia answered as Sapphire stood up. "Be careful, little sister, and remember that help is but a call away whenever you need it."

"Good luck, Tarrin," Auli smiled. "I'll miss you."

"May the hammer of Karas sweep your troubles clear, sir Tarrin," the human Fox said gravely.

Tarrin nodded to them and motioned Allia and Sapphire to draw close to him. Jenna stepped back as Tarrin set his will against the Weave and began the spell, weaving it on his side and sending the probes far to the west, to that ruined Dwarven city. The place he wanted to go was the empty square of sorts where Faalken's tomb now stood, for it was a place with which he was very familiar, and it was open enough to let them see everything around them as soon as they arrived. He didn't want to appear right in front of a hungry *kajat*. That would not be a good thing. The probes found where he wanted to go, and they wrapped around the space on that side. Tarrin completed the spell from his side, and the flows of the Weave surrounded them in a blindingly fast display, weaving and twisting together even as they enveloped the four of them. When they finished their intricate pattern, enclosing them, the weave discharged its energy, and then it exchanged everything in the space enveloped in one side of the weave with everything enveloped in the other side.

In the blink of an eye, Tarrin, Allia, Sarraya, and Sapphire were transported thousands of longspans to the west, appearing in a windswept ruin of such antiquity that perhaps not even Sapphire could remember it.

Faster than the span of a heartbeat, the four of them were in the Desert of Swirling Sands, and as soon as he felt the heat of the noontime sun beating down on his uncovered head--the desert was further east of Suld and as such it was later in the day there--and saw the sandy ruins, he knew they had arrived.

And for the first time in a very long time, he felt *safe*.

Chapter 10

Everything was even in the same place.

This was the only place in the desert where to which he was absolutely sure he could Teleport, and seeing it again made him go through all the memories anew. It was the broken arena in the Dwarven city that Jegojah had called Mala Myrr, with the collapsed tower on one side and the clear field on the other. Tarrin and Jegojah had fought in this arena, the grandest of all battles it had ever seen, a duel of sword and staff, magic against magic, cunning against cunning. Tarrin had won that battle, and in the course of it had freed both Jegojah's and Faalken's souls of the Soultraps, devices used to imprison them and make them do the bidding of Kravon. Tarrin had spent days memorizing this arena, coming to know intimately where every single pebble was located, to give him every possible advantage in his fight with Jegojah. That exacting familiarization was more than enough to allow him to Teleport back to this place. Since he wasn't very close to where he wanted to go or couldn't see it, it meant that he had to have a good knowledge of the place in order to Teleport there.

They had only just arrived, but it was like he'd been there for years. It had been many months since he'd last been there, but part of him expected to still find his and Jegojah's footprints on the ground. His life had changed in this arena, and it was here where events were set in motion that saved the city of Suld, saved the *katzh-dashi* from destruction. It had been many months, but the pain he felt at seeing the crypt was almost like new. He, Sarraya, Allia, and Sapphire had appeared facing its magnificent marble walls, gleaming like snow in the midday sun. It had been months since he'd last seen it, but it was completely untouched by the elements. Its white marble was just as brilliantly white, and the inscription etched into it was still clean inside, with no sand built up in it as it tended to do in nooks and crannies.

Faalken. How he missed his old friend, even now. The only one to die, and who had died because Tarrin, in a fury, cared more about killing

Jegojah than he did about protecting his friends. He had been indirectly responsible for Faalken's death, and though he didn't let it consume him, it was a fact that he would never allow himself to forget. Just as he'd worn the manacles to remind himself of Jula's betrayal, he carried inside him a scar that would never disappear, a scar he would never allow to vanish from his mind. It was his reminder of what happened when he lost control, of how those around him he loved could pay the price for his own failings. Creating this wondrous crypt in the ruins of a Dwarven city, a race who had allowed itself to be exterminated in order to save the rest of the peoples of Sennadar during the Blood War, was the least he could do. And it seemed right to lay him to rest here. A new hero to rest beside those of antiquity, to add his name to their countless unknown ones, to remind everyone of the sacrifices that had been made both in the present and the past.

Tarrin had brooded a long time about the Dwarves when he first came here, he remembered. He had a towering respect for a people who were willing to sacrifice absolutely everything for others, who had been destroyed to the last man, woman, and child in order to defend their home. That was *courage*, and it was something that everyone on Sennadar, even now, five thousand years later, did not forget. They had been gone five millenia, but the songs and stories of the legendary bravery and sacrifice of the Dwarves still echoed from taprooms and parlors all over the Known World. In their own way, they had had a profound impact on his life. They had built the city where he and Jegojah had fought, but their sacrifice and his memories of this place had had quite an effect on him, and it was here that he had started significantly shaking off his feral nature. On many levels, in many ways, both blatant and subtle, Tarrin owed the long-dead Dwarves a great deal of gratitude and thanks. Though dead five thousand years, their hands had stretched across time and helped shape the present, and Tarrin thought that they would have been satisfied, even happy, to know that they had had one final chance to help protect the world that they had died to save.

Tarrin stared at the marble crypt a long moment, every memory he had of Faalken swirling unbidden through his mind, and then he turned his gaze to look past the broken walls of the arena. The city was exactly the same, every tower exactly where he remembered seeing it rise up over the walls

and the rubble. He knew exactly where he was, and could guide them with unerring accuracy to any part of the city they wanted to go.

Mala Myrr, the Lost City of the Dwarves, protected from looters by the desert and the Selani, cradled in the arms of the Holy Mother. If there was anywhere he would want to begin a journey through the desert, it was this place.

A thought occurred to him. In all the confusion after leaving here, he had forgotten that the Goddess had moved a great deal of priceless Dwarven art after he had stupidly left it sitting out at the mercy of the howling winds. She had never told him where she put it, and after a while, he'd forgotten to ask any more. But the turning had restored all his memory, even things he had forgotten through time and nature rather than a curse, and it was again very fresh in his mind.

He was going to take this up with Mother as soon as he got back. He wanted that art put back where he'd gotten it from. To take it seemed wrong to him. It belonged to the Dwarves, it belonged in Mala Myrr. "Is this it?" Allia asked quietly in Selani.

"This is Faalken's crypt," he affirmed, looking at it again. "This is where I fought Jegajah."

"I remember this place," Sapphire said, looking around. "It looks much different from the air, though. It looks like time hasn't touched it very much. It looks the same now as it did a thousand years ago."

"I kind of like it that way, Sapphire," he told her. "This place is very special to me. I like the idea that no matter how much things change, this place will remain the same."

"Dwarves lived here?"

"They did," he answered.

"A pity I'm not old enough to know them. They look to have been quite remarkable stoneworkers."

"How old are you?" he asked curiously.

"About two thousand," she answered. "But a thousand of that was the time I spent as a drake, so it doesn't really count in my mind."

"Shew," Sarraya huffed. "I forgot how hot it gets out here."

Tarrin turned his attention to himself. He could feel the heat, but it didn't really bother him. His Weavespinner protection from fire made the searing heat of the desert actually rather pleasant. And it was *hot*. The heat shimmered off the stones and sand of the city in undulating waves, hot enough to burn unprotected skin that may touch it, and the sun struck down like a hammer on anything its rays touched. It was late summer in the desert, and summer in the Desert of Swirling Sands was one of the most hostile environments in all the world. But as summer waned, the famous storms that gave the desert its name would begin to spawn off the Sandshield, howling across the desert like tidal waves of raging destruction, scouring the rocks and threatening to scald and strip exposed flesh off the bone. "I like it," he told her.

"You would," she said acidly. "Mister immune to heat."

"Be thankful it is just hot," Allia told her. "This is the quiet season. Not long from now, the storms are going to begin."

"Don't remind me," Sarraya grunted. "I still feel a little tender from a few of those. But right now, I may actually prefer a little skin-stripping sandstorm to this heat."

"Stop complaining and shield yourself, like you did back then," he said dismissively. "When are you going to leave, Sapphire?"

"As soon as we get clear of the city," she replied. "If I return to my true form here, I'd knock down several buildings. That would defile this place, and it's not very pleasant for me either."

"How long will it take you to get home?"

"Not long," she smiled. "My lair is on the eastern edge of the desert, but conditions this time of year are perfect for flying east. The winds aloft will push me along. I should be home in about seven days."

"Well, let's get started. It's going to take us about an hour to get to the edge of the city," he told them. "This place is pretty big."

After climbing up to the stands to get out of the arena, they exited near the grand open courtyard or plaza or whatever it had been in antiquity and

turned up one of the wide avenues leading to the eastern edge of the city. "Why did you bring us here, *deshida*?" Allia asked curiously.

"This is the only place in the desert I'm sure that I'm familiar with enough to Teleport to, sister," he answered.

She frowned. "How familiar do you have to be?"

"*Very* familiar," he answered.

"Then how did Jenna Teleport into the dining room?" she asked. "Surely she did not study it."

"No, but it's what you'd call *local*," he answered. "There are two ways to Teleport, *deshaida*. There's local and long distance. They have different rules."

"Explain them," she said.

"Well, if you're going to Teleport a very short distance, the rules are very lax," he answered as they passed the building where he, Sarraya, and Jegojah had taken shelter from a sandstorm. "If you're Teleporting where you can see, or someplace within just a few hundred spans, you can do it without knowing the area very well. There's another rule about Teleporting in a confined area called *domain*, too," he continued. "Jenna could Teleport into the dining room because it's *hers*. She's the Keeper, and the entire Tower is her domain. She can Teleport anywhere in it or on the grounds, because it's all hers." He stepped absently over a place where he knew a Dwarf skeleton lay buried under the sand. "Jenna can do it, and most of the Sha'Kar can do it too, though they can't go *everywhere*. They can only go to public places or areas that they consider their personal domain."

"Why is that different?"

"Mother makes it different," he told her. "It's the Goddess' influence that changes the rules. She wanted it to be much easier for us to Teleport in the Tower, I guess. Though why someone would Teleport when they can walk is beyond me." He threw his braid back over his shoulder after a gust of wind pushed it around him. "The third rule is the rule concerning what I just did. If you're Teleporting a great distance, or somewhere that isn't your domain, you have to be very familiar with the area to do it. You have to know exactly what you're looking for in order for the spell to find where

you want to go. You don't have to get down and study every rock and pebble, but you *do* have to be able to conjure up a very detailed memory of the place you want to go. And I mean *detailed*. I could come here because I spent three days studying every rock and pebble in a longspan-wide radius of that arena to give myself an advantage over Jegojah. But I didn't need that kind of preparation to be able to Teleport here. I could have done it just by spending a day or two camped in one place in the city, staying in that one place long enough to get a good detailed feel for it and a good memory of it. I *might* be able to Teleport to Amyr Dimeon, but I'm not sure. I also might be able to Teleport to the Great Canyon, but again, I'm not sure. I spent a goodly amount of time in both places, and some pretty memorable things happened, memorable enough for me to possibly be able to make a connection with those places."

"Could you Teleport to Dala Yar Arak?" Allia asked.

"Easily," he replied. "I could also Teleport to the *Star of Jerod* or the *Dancer*, because I was on both ships a long time."

"But they are not where they once were," she protested.

"That doesn't matter," he told her. "I'm Teleporting to the *ship*, not to the place where the ship *is*. No matter where it is, I can Teleport onto the deck, because it's that *deck* that's my target. Not the location where the ship happens to be."

"Ah. I understand," Allia nodded. "What happens if you try to Teleport to a place you are not familiar enough to reach?"

"The spell fails," he answered. "It can't find the destination, and the spell unravels before you can release it."

"Quite a restricting rule," Sapphire said. "Wizardly Teleportation is much more liberal. You can try to Teleport anywhere you want to go, but the less familiar you are with a place, the greater the chance that you miss."

"Miss? What is a miss?" Tarrin asked.

"Not appearing where you intended to appear," she answered. "If you happen to Teleport inside a solid object, you won't live to learn from your mistake. That's why it's not done without extreme care or a great deal of desperation."

"Ouch," Sarraya said, and he felt her shudder a bit on his shoulder.

"Can you do that?" Tarrin asked.

She shook her head. "There's a size limit for the Wizard version, and dragons are just a bit past it. Besides, I'd much rather fly. I've never in my life felt a need to get somewhere faster than my wings can carry me."

"I wonder if there's a Druidic version," Tarrin mused.

"I doubt it," Sarraya answered. "Transplanting yourself like that absolutely defines *unnatural*, Tarrin. You know how the effort goes up when you cross that boundary."

"It's theoretically possible, but not even I would care to experiment," Sapphire agreed. "You'd either succeed, or you'd die trying. I'll leave making that kind of a choice for when I have nothing more to lose."

"I think I agree with you, my friend," Tarrin nodded sagely.

It took them about an hour to get to the edges of the city, where there was much, much less sand. The winds blew predominantly from west to east through the wide valley in which the city was nestled, and the stone buildings of the city formed a barrier that broke up the wind and caused the sand to pile up on the western edges. After they passed the last building, Tarrin and Allia followed Sapphire as she got what she considered to be a safe distance from the outlying edge of the city, out onto bare, windswept rock that was strewn with rounded stones from the size of Tarrin's fist to large boulders, too large for the summer winds to pick up and carry away. She stopped suddenly and turned around, then opened her arms expectantly. Tarrin stepped up and embraced her warmly.

"Now you be careful, little friend," she said. "Did you think to bring my bell?"

"I have it with me," he told her with a smile.

"That's a good boy," she said, looking up at him with a satisfied smile. "If you need me, call me. I'll come."

"I appreciate that, my friend," he said as he let her go. "Have a good journey, and try not to be too hard on your brood when you get home. Remember, they're young."

"That's the problem," she said with a dry smile. "Take care of him, Allia," she called.

"He will be safe with me, honored dragon," Allia replied confidently. "This is my home. I will not allow its dangers to take him unaware."

"That is the only reason I'm letting him out of my sight," she told the Selani calmly. "Step back now, both of you. I need some space."

The space Sapphire needed, as they both well knew, was a good hundred or so spans. They retreated well away from her, and then they watched in mute fascination as the human female shell that had held her was cast aside, and she quickly expanded and regained her true shape. She was absolutely majestic in her true form, a proud, handsome, noble and stately creature, and her gigantic immensity still did not fail to boggle Tarrin's mind. She had to have blood vessels inside her body so big that he could stand inside them without having to stoop. It was almost unbelievable that something could be so huge. She only had to take a few steps towards them and crane that seventy or so span long neck over to get her head almost directly over them, and amber, serpentine eyes, each larger than Tarrin was tall, regarded them with unblinking intensity. Sarraya had never seen Sapphire in her true form before, and the little Faerie's hands were clutching the fabric of his shirt so tightly that she was about to punch her fingers through it. Tarrin was only as large as one of Sapphire's clawed fingers, but Sarraya wasn't even as large as one of her *scales*. The difference in size between the dragon and the Faerie was as profound as one could possibly imagine.

"Am I impressive now, sprite?" Sapphire asked with light humor in her deep bass voice, a voice that actually vibrated the air around them, making them *feel* the words more than hear them.

Sarraya could not reply rationally. All Tarrin heard was a series of high-pitched squeaks and stutters. Tarrin wondered idly if the dragon, with its huge eardrums, was even capable of hearing so shrill and mumbled a sound.

"I thought so," she noted with eyes narrowed in amusement. "Well, little one, this is farewell," she sighed. "I hate leaving clan alone, but you have your duties, and I have mine. I'm sure we'll meet again."

"I'm sure we will, Sapphire," he called to her.

Her massive head bobbed in a single nod, and then her neck carried her head away, faster than Tarrin or Allia could have run the same distance. Tarrin wondered absently what it would be like to be so incredibly immense, to be able to cover in one step what would take a human more than fifty, and move with a deceptive speed that came with the strength and size of the form that could outpace anything else alive. Putting things in a perspective of relative sizes, Sapphire's movements, though stately to her and very graceful from a distance, were amazingly fast when viewed from so close. Tarrin was sure that he moved with the same incredible swiftness to an insect gazing up at him from the ground, who would have to walk along for several moments to cover the same distance he could traverse in a single step. The ground shook noticeably when her huge paws struck it, as she turned and walked several steps away from the Selani and the Were-cat, and then her sail-sized wings unfurled from her body.

"Uh oh, turn away, sister," he warned quickly in Selani.

"I want to see her take off," Allia protested.

"You won't *see* it," he warned quickly. "Her wings are going to kick up their own little sandstorm."

"Hmph," Allia snorted, reaching under her shirt and producing a crystal visor the the Selani wore to protect their eyes from the brilliant sun and the sand-stinging wind, a single piece of crystal that was tinted violet to reduce the power of the sun's light.

"Good idea," Tarrin mused, absently Conjuring a new visor for himself and settling it over his eyes as Sapphire's wings snapped down in the first stroke, even as her legs pushed her titanic frame off the ground. A virtual shockwave of air rushed away, expanding on the ground under her and blooming out, carrying with it a cloud of dust and sand. It blasted over them, pulling fiercely at their clothes and making Allia have to reset her feet to keep the wind from pushing her backwards. The sand and dust concealed the dragon's ascent into the air for a moment, and when the dust cleared enough to see, she was already a few hundred spans in the air and about a quarter longspan away.

"Now that was an experience," Allia said, pushing her turban-like headgear back down over her bangs. The wind had nearly pulled it off.

"You're going to make sure that I have an entire lifetime of things to sing about when I return home, brother."

"Who wants a dull life?" Sarraya piped in.

"I didn't know you speak Selani, Sarraya," Allia said with some surprise.

"Neither did I," Tarrin added.

"Triana put it in there last night," she answered. "I think she thought I may have a need for it this time."

"It's best to know that now, I suppose," she mused. "Before I say something."

"You wouldn't talk about me behind my back, would you, Allia?" Sarraya asked challengingly.

"No, I'd tell you to your face, then comment on it to Tarrin," she replied immediately.

"I thought so," Sarraya laughed.

"Well, brother, where are we going?" Allia asked.

"Amyr Dimeon," he answered. "I want you to see it, and I want to see how Ariana's doing."

"The Cloud Spire is only about fifteen days' run from here," Allia said. "Ten if we push."

"It took us nearly a month the first time," Sarraya said.

"Then you weren't going very fast," she snorted in reply.

"I was thinking of having an Air Elemental carry us, sister," he told her.

"Posh. It's been too long since I've had the chance to stretch my legs, and I am *not* going to be carried like a child. Besides, *deshida*, we have two months. Does it matter how long it takes us to get there, as long as we get there?"

"Alright, that's a good point," he acceded with a chuckle. He could see her opening up already, shedding the protective manner she kept when surrounded by the others. She was home, she was very comfortable, she

was in her own element, and the Allia that he knew when they were alone was going to be right there all the time. She had no reason to subdue her true personality out here. In the desert, she could breathe free, and Sarraya was about to get the full Allia experience. He had no doubt that the Faerie was going to be quite surprised at how playful and emotional his Selani sister really was.

"Come on then, Tarrin," she said with a wonderfully glorious smile. "Let me show you *my* home. I've waited too long to do this with you, and I won't wait any longer."

"I just hope you can keep up, Allia," he teased as he brushed Sarraya off his shoulder with a paw.

"Well *excuse* me!" Sarraya snapped, flitting in front of him. "Should I try to sting you now, or just buzz in your face until you swat me?"

"Save your energy, Sarraya," Allia said with a quirky smile. "You're going to need it."

And with that, the sleek Selani female turned and started loping off towards the east, towards the Cloud Spire, in easy strides that ate up shocking amounts of ground with each step. Tarrin burst off after her, catching up with her quickly as Sarraya zipped along behind them, cursing and shouting at them. Together the two of them ran on, in the traditional and effective Selani mode of travel, setting a pace that would kill just about any other living thing within an hour. They ran in silence, but fully aware of one another, and both showed with glances and smiles just how much both of them were looking forward to spending time together, spending time in Allia's home, renewing a bond of love and trust that often defied rational explanation. Tarrin's relationship with Allia was one of the main cornerstones of his life, and without her, he wouldn't know what to do. Time and need had separated him from her more than once, and his amnesia had made it difficult for them; harder on Allia than it was on him. The journey before them, those two months, would renew the ties that bound them soul to soul, forever together as brother and sister.

For them, there could be nothing better than what was right now. Together in the one place where Allia felt relaxed and open, with nothing

but welcoming desert before them, and all the time in the world to spend with one another.

Allia set a murderous pace, but Tarrin felt she did so not to punish him, but to get her legs back. Two years of comparatively sedate inactivity had marked his sister, reduced some of her endurance, and he could tell that she meant to get it all back as quickly as possible. They moved across the windswept fields of stony rubble at a fair speed, up and down the rugged hills that surrounded the ancient Dwarven city. The heat of the day cooled into a somewhat pleasant afternoon, and as the sun crept closer and closer to the horizon, the winds began to pick up with greater and greater force. They blew in from behind them, raising up a low cloud of sand and dust that dimmed the light of the sun and made the Skybands almost invisible.

They decided to camp for the night near a wide, broken rock spire, one that Tarrin remembered passing some months ago. He'd passed it in midmorning then, however. It was a quiet campsite, because Allia was a little tired from her running, and Sarraya was a little put out with him for brushing her off as he did. Tarrin didn't mind the silence, however, because it was a silence filled with the companionship of his sister, and that made him perfectly content. As they'd done the first time, Tarrin and Sarraya Conjured everything they would need for a campsite, including the food and water served at the fire, and the tents were left behind the next morning, still standing, waiting to be Conjured to the new campsite that night.

The pace the next day was just as hard as the first, as was the day after that. Those two days were nondescript, seeing no Selani and no major predators. They did pass a wild flock of *sukk* grazing in an isolated patch of tough desert scrub, which supplied them with a midmorning meal the first day, and they came across the stripped skeleton of a *kusuk*. Tarrin hadn't seen one of those on his first trip across the desert, but Allia had no trouble identifying the remains because of the large, heavy plates of what looked like bone that surrounded the skeleton. *Kusuk* meant "shielded," and the animal, a low, squat thing with short legs and overlapping ridges of heavy plating on its body, supposedly looked like a twelve-span high walking suit of living armor. Tarrin envisioned it as looking like a wide-headed armadillo. The thing had a huge bony club-like growth on the end of its tail,

a very powerful and formidable weapon used to fight off predators like *inu* and *kajat*. Whatever had killed this one had had to literally tear off vast sections of bony plates to get to the flesh beneath.

The *kusuk* was strangely out of place. They were in a section of desert with very little vegetation. What was it doing way out here?

That would be a mystery forever unsolved, as they moved on, and the skeleton behind slowly faded from Tarrin's memory and care.

After stopping to rest in the midday heat, Tarrin took the opportunity to let Jenna know that he'd made it and was on his way. He did it through the Heart, going there and using her star to find his way back to her, then Whispering in her ear, so to speak, to deliver his message. It was a trick he'd learned from the expanded knowledge he'd gained from the Weave, one of the little things he'd forgotten to teach Jenna. The Goddess said to teach her spells, and that's what he did. But there were other aspects of Sorcery besides spellweaving, and he'd learned a few nifty tricks from the Weave when he'd been turned. He would have taught her if he'd had more time, but he'd been pretty pressed that day and night, between teaching Jenna and getting instruction from Triana. Tarrin Whispered in Jenna's ear that they were safely in the desert, Sapphire had already left, and they were basically just taking things easy for now. He told her how safe he felt now that he was in the desert, and that he missed her. He asked her to let him know when Keritanima and the others got to Ungardt, and also to let him know after she went to go see Grandfather and ask him for his help.

He considered trying to Whisper to Keritanima, but he had the feeling that she was mad at him for not saying goodbye. If she wasn't, she would have projected out to see him by now--no, she couldn't do that. He forgot, she was on a ship, and as long as the ship was moving, she couldn't join with the Weave. So he took the time to find Keritanima and Whisper to her as well, repeating what he told Jenna, and also asking her to come see him as soon as they docked somewhere.

That done, he opened his eyes and reflected a little on what he'd said to them. He *did* feel safe here. In the desert, with the Selani and their fierce goddess protecting him, he truly felt safe. He knew that nobody would dare come in after him, if they even knew he was here at all. He hadn't realized before how calm that made him, how calm and relaxed and quite happy. It

had been so long since he'd felt safe anywhere, so long since he'd truly let his guard down, but he could do it here. It was a very liberating experience. He felt safe and secure, and he had good friends along in Sarraya and Allia, people to talk to, and people he would enjoy talking to. All in all, despite the pangs he felt at being separated from his children and Jesmind, not being there to take part in the progression of Kimmie's pregnancy, he was probably more happy at this time than he'd been in a very long time, even the time he spent in domestic bliss with Jesmind.

Strange. Since coming to the desert, thoughts of his mission had been very far away from him. It was almost like a vacation, him not having to worry about the Firestaff and who may try to take it from him every waking moment. He knew he was here on serious business, but it just didn't feel serious. It really did feel like a holiday, a vacation, an escape from the intensely nerve-wracking experience that was his daily life.

It wasn't freedom, but it was the closest thing he'd felt to freedom since the morning Dolanna and Faalken led him away from Aldreth, the day all this insanity began. And he wasn't about to squander the opportunity to enjoy his sense of freedom.

And so, when they got up to continue on, he started running with a renewed sense of peace with himself and with his situation. He was going to enjoy the two months in the desert, if only because for the first time in years, he truly felt like the crushing weight of the burden of his responsibility had been lifted from his shoulders.

When they made camp that night, Allia ghosted off and then returned moments later carrying an *umuni* by the neck. It was a big one, its tail dragging the ground, and to Tarrin's surprise, it was still alive. Allia hadn't killed it, she had *caught* it.

"How about this for dinner?" she asked him lightly, holding up the struggling lizard.

"Allia, are you crazy?" Sarraya challenged. "That thing's going to bite you the minute you let it go!"

"I'm immune to *umuni* venom," she told the Faerie calmly. That wasn't a big surprise. The years and years in the desert, surrounded by an absolute onslaught of venomous creatures, had bred a very strong resistance to

poison into the Selani, and some were completely immune to some kinds of venom. Allia was one of them. "For that matter, I'm quite lucky. I seem to be immune to most venoms of the more common animals."

"What, did you go sticking your hands in burrows when you were a baby?" Sarraya teased.

"I was born with it," she shrugged. "Some Selani are blessed by the Holy Mother in that way. Others instill it into their children with time and careful work. Smart parents introduce the poison in very small amounts to their children when they're young, so they can build up a resistance to it. Well, *deshida*?"

"Let's see," Tarrin mused. "Eat a tough, tasteless lizard, or Conjure anything I want. Decisions, decisions."

Allia looked at him, then laughed heartily. "I get the message," she winked. "I'll go let this go."

"Just make sure it doesn't wander back this way!" Sarraya called. "That thing was looking at me like *I* was the next item on its menu!"

The next day they moved into flatter land, stopped a few hours to wait out a small, savage little squall of a sandstorm, and then moved on through grazing land of thick, tough desert scrub and the occasional needle-lined cactus. The thicker vegetation meant there were grazers wandering the plains, *sukk* and *chisu*, as well as the insectoid *draka*. Tarrin saw his first live *kusuk* around midafternoon, a trio of them surrounding a youngling, and they also saw their first major predator. A young *kajat* had killed a *chisu* and was feeding on it, oblivious to the passing of the two figures and the tiny winged one that rode on the top of the taller one's head. Close to sunset, as Allia began to tire, they passed within a longspan of a small pack of *inu*. The sharp-eyed predators would usually have given them a great deal of notice as they passed, the leader of the pack debating if expending the energy to try to run down a swift Selani was worth the effort, but they were already engaged in a hunt, stalking a small flock of *sukk* that had wandered away from the large numbers of them to the west.

As those days passed, Tarrin watched his sister. She grew more and more expressive, seemed happier and happier, even if she was so tired by the time that they set camp that she had trouble moving. She complained

about that lightly when she got up the next morning, teasing him that it was his fault that she was so woefully out of shape. But Selani were amazingly resilient beings, and over those few days, Allia's endurance and stamina had grown by half, and every night when they stopped to camp, she was significantly less tired. The harshness of the desert environment had bred them to be able to build strength quickly. That was why their children could go from riding to running with the tribe and not falling behind in just a matter of weeks.

Sarraya noticed that on the fourth day, as Allia moved off to relieve herself. "Is it me, or is she almost doubling her endurance every day?"

"That's not unusual, Sarraya," Tarrin said absently as he swatted a large venomous wasp with his tail, which was trying to land on his shoulder. The stunned little insect buzzed off irregularly, staggering through the air as it tried to recover its senses after the strong tail smacked it halfway across the campsite. "Selani are *very* resilient."

"That's not natural."

"I think Fara'Nae tampers with them a little bit," Tarrin chuckled. "That, or five thousand years in the desert has bred some very handy abilities into them."

When they were camped or resting or waiting out the midday heat, they would talk. Allia would tell him stories of the desert and her tribe, what it was like being the daughter of a clan-chief, and she would often describe animals and plants to them. Allia was alot more experienced than Denai had been, and she knew things about the desert that Denai hadn't. It made hearing about animals they already knew just as interesting, because Allia could tell them much more about them. Sarraya also had a turn, but she concentrated on expanding the very hasty lessons that she and Triana had given him. Every day during the noon break and after they made camp, she and him would practice Druidic spells, or he would sit and listen to her as she explained things to him in greater detail. Sarraya was actually a pretty good teacher when it came to Druidic magic, at least if one overlooked her endless badgering and the childish delight she took in berating him when he made a mistake, and Tarrin learned a great deal from her.

Tarrin noticed that Allia seemed to be missing Allyn, but she also wouldn't let that show. He knew her well enough to know that it was bothering her, but he wouldn't say anything about it. She was very happy to be home, even if it wasn't with her intended, and he was going to let her enjoy that happiness rather than try to console her for the missing company of a loved one.

The fifth day on their journey to the Cloud Spire turned out to be quite a bit more exciting than the others. Not long after setting out that morning, they came over a blind ridge and stumbled directly into a rearing *kajat*. It was a huge one, nearly twenty five spans high, and with a massive, gaping mouth filled with browned and pitted teeth. The wily predator had carefully and wisely selected that spot, knowing that the ridge hid it from anything coming over, and the winds would keep its scent away from its prey until it was too late. Tarrin wasn't really that surprised, since he kept his eyes open and expected trouble at all times, so he reacted smoothly and calmly to its attack. It lunged at them, jaws snapping, and Selani and Were-cat split to either side of it, not even breaking stride as those jaws cracked shut in the air that separated them. The *kajat* seemed momentarily confused by this, unsure of which direction to turn, then decided on turning towards Tarrin. He picked up into a sprint and angled in along the side of its body; he'd had some experience at this, and he knew that *kajats* didn't turn very quickly. By staying close to it, he would stay out reach of its teeth and its tail, both formidable weapons.

But the creature roared in pain and turned in the other direction quickly. Tarrin saw Allia right beside its other leg, and she'd stuck it with her sword to get its attention. Then, to his surprise, she ran right under it and between those huge, pumping legs, legs that shook the ground when they set onto the sandy soil, darting aside quickly as one of those tree-trunk sized legs shifted towards her as the monstrous beast made its turn. She angled up and came right by him, motioning with her hand for him to follow, and he did so quickly. The turning animal's tail passed harmlessly over them, and it bellowed in frustration when it made its turn and saw its meal already running away. Tarrin felt the earth shake as the massive predator gave chase, actually catching up with them for a moment or two but it could not keep up with them. It trailed further and further behind, then finally gave up and slowed to a walk.

Allia was laughing in delight as they slowed to a walk, seeing the *kajat* well behind them and already turning to return to its ambush site. "That was exhilarating," she said in a bubbly manner, sheathing her shortsword after cleaning it.

"That was a pretty dangerous stunt, Allia," Sarraya accused.

"It's an old trick for getting away from them," she told the Faerie lightly. "*Kajat* are fast runners, but their size makes them ungainly when trying to maneuver. The closer you stay to its flanks, the safer you are. You get away from one by making it commit to turning in one direction, then running away in the other by going underneath it. By the time it turns around again and starts chasing you, you have enough of a lead to escape."

"I've used similar tactics on them, Sarraya," Tarrin reminded her. "Remember?"

"I remember," the Faerie laughed. "I'm sure the *kajat* does too."

"That one certainly picked a good spot," Tarrin said in appreciation. "I never smelled a whiff of it until it was trying to bite my head off."

"He is mature and wise, *deshida*. That's why he's so big. That one has a lot of experience, so he knows where the best ambush sites lay." She looked around. "I'm a bit hungry. We should stop for a meal."

"There's a fairly big one back there a ways," Sarraya grinned, pointing back at the *kajat*.

"That would be wasteful," Allia said condescendingly. "Besides, we don't kill *kajats*. They prey on the *inu*, and that keeps their numbers in check. *Inu* are more dangerous to us than the *kajats* are."

"The *inu* are the second most dangerous thing out here," Tarrin agreed calmly.

"What's the most dangerous?" Sarraya asked.

"Them," Tarrin said, pointing at Allia.

Sarraya laughed, and Allia gave Tarrin a bright smile.

That turned out to be the only adventure that was in store for them that day. They camped before sunset and built a large fire, as they were moving

into regions of the desert where Sandmen prowled, and Sarraya Conjured for them quite a feast. All four moons would rise early that night, and the White Moon and Red Moon both were all but full, which cast bright light down over the desert. The white and red light mingled with the sand and rock and scrub, casting strange shadows over the plain and giving the scrub an eerie blackish color.

"Strange night," Sarraya mused, looking out past the firelight. "Not often that Domammon and Vala are full and in the sky at the same time."

"Things are probably going to be a bit strange up there until Gods' Day," he told her, then explained what was going to happen.

"A conjunction, eh?" Sarraya said, looking up. "Now that you mention it, the moons *have* been tightening up in their tracks, and the Twin Moons have been hiding behind each other more than usual.

"Well, there are the missing ones," Allia noted, pointing to the northeast, where the Twin Moons were just starting to rise. They were in their waning phase, and Duva was partially hidden behind Kava.

"Domammon and Vala are going to wane and wax one more time before the conjunction," Tarrin noted. "The Twin moons are going to wax, wane, then wax again."

They both nodded in agreement. They both were familiar with the lunar cycles. Domammon and Vala had lunar cycles that were fairly close to one another; Vala's lunar cycle renewed itself every twenty days, two days shorter than Domammon's twenty-two. They matched phases about every fifteen months, as their cycles converged to give them the exact same phase on that one night. The Twin Moons' lunar cycle was only fourteen days long, for not only were they always very close to one another, their phases were also always exactly the same. Right now they were about half full and in the waxing phase of their cycle. They would come full, go new, then come full again in about two months. And their full phase would correspond with the full phases of Domammon and Vala. That did happen about every two years, called the Lantern Night for the amount of light the four full moons and the Skybands cast onto the land, but only once in about every thousand did the four moons line up in a conjunction.

There were other unusual nights. When Vala was full and alone in the sky, the red light over the land it cast gave that kind of night the name Blood Night, and it was basically seen as an unlucky night by most. The Twin Moons often partially concealed one another, but sometimes one moon would be hidden completely behind the other. That was called Child's Night, named so because the hidden moon was said to be playing a child's game of hide and seek. And on some very rare occasions, one moon would pass behind another, and that gave them the order that most people associated with them. Domammon, the largest, was always behind the other three. Vala was in front of Domammon, but behind the Twin Moons. And the Twin Moons were always in front of the two larger ones, but traded often in which moon was in front of the other between themselves. The moons would eclipse one another, and certain eclipses were said to have certain meanings. When Vala eclipsed Domammon, it was supposedly a night for finding a husband or wife, and that was why it was called the Lovers' Clip, so named because a vast majority of the time, Vala only partially eclipsed Domammon, clipping its edge for a few hours. When Vala was eclipsed by the Twin Moons when they were both fully visible, it was said to be a night for embarking on new ideas. This was why it was called Denthar's Brood, named after the Younger god of knowledge. When only one of the Twin Moons eclipsed the edge of Domammon, it was called the Dagger Night, was it was rumored that such an eclipse incited men to acts of violence. In Aldreth, it was a custom for everyone to meet on the Green and tie all the men's hands behind their backs on Dagger Night, a social ceremony that the women always enjoyed, for it had evolved into a kind of festival of food, drink, music, and dancing. On that night the women supplanted all the normal tasks of the men, and after their hands were rebound in front of them, the men served all the food and did all the cleaning afterwards, and had to do it all with their hands bound together. Needless to say, the men of Aldreth were never too happy to see a Dagger Night come around.

In two months, those four moons were going to line up behind one another, and on that night, Tarrin would know that his task was over, and it was safe for him to finally go home. He couldn't wait.

"Do the Selani have any special names or customs when the moons eclipse one another?" Tarrin asked Allia curiously.

She smiled. "Not really," she replied. "But when all four moons are full, the Selani stay up all night and feast, and sing songs to the Holy Mother. We call it the Night of Passage. Our legends say that it was Fara'Nae's voice that led us to the desert, but she guided us home by causing the four moons to be full and form a line in the sky, lighting the way home, as the wind blew at our backs to push us in the right direction."

"Maybe it was a conjunction," Sarraya mused.

"The moons line up all the time," Tarrin shrugged. "At least in a straight line. I think if it was a conjunction, the legends would be pretty specific about how it looked. I think seeing all four moons lined up behind each other would be rather memorable."

"That must be why a Selani always walks with his back to the wind," Sarraya said.

"That, and it keeps the face from getting scoured by flying sand," Allia smiled. "We always turn our backs to the wind when we first feel it to honor the Holy Mother, a custom done in memory of how the Holy Mother guided us to her. After that, we can turn and face it as we please, but that's usually not very pleasant. Even with a veil and visor, the sand finds ways to scour off the skin, and it gathers under the veil and hood."

"Did I ever mention how glad I am that I don't live here?" Sarraya asked.

"Frequently," Tarrin drawled.

"Remind me to do it a few thousand more times," she grinned. "Fervently."

"You're about to annoy me, Sarraya," Allia told her. "I don't complain about your home."

"That's because my home is perfect," she said airily. "You can't complain about it, because everything is perfect."

"Everything here is perfect to me," she retorted.

"Well, I can't help it if you're all mixed up," Sarraya said flippantly.

"I can't help it if a small body houses a small brain," Allia said in an off-handed manner, only glancing at the Faerie. "It must be hard to go through

life with such a limited ability to appreciate things."

"I am *not* dumb!" she snapped hotly. "And stop making fun of my height!"

"It's a pity, brother," Allia said to him casually. "She doesn't even have the awareness to know she sits in paradise. I guess it's true what they say about the size of a person's head. The larger the head, the smarter the mind."

"*Well!*" Sarraya huffed, flitting up into the air. "I'm going to bed. *Good night!*" she added in a vociferous manner, then buzzed angrily into one of the three tents arrayed around the large fire.

They watched her fly off, and Sarraya got an earful of their laughter to follow her into her tent.

"That was well played, sister," Tarrin said with an appreciative smile. "Var and Denai used to drive her crazy like that too."

"I really want to meet your Var and Denai," she told him, looking out into the plain after a very faint noise ghosted to them, too faint to be made out.

"They were quite a pair," Tarrin chuckled warmly. "Var was serious and sober, but Denai was very young and very impulsive, and not a little reckless. They turned everything into a competition, and when they weren't competing, they were usually fighting. I miss them sometimes. They never made a campsite dull, that's for sure."

"They're lovers now, aren't they?"

"They're married, actually," he corrected. "And Denai's pregnant with their first child. I'm not sure which tribe they're with now. Denai is training to be *obe*, and that probably means Var ended up in her tribe."

"*Obe* don't change tribes without exchanging with another *obe* from that tribe," Allia affirmed with a nod.

"Well, she's only an apprentice, so she might have gone to Var's tribe. You know, just apprenticed under the *obe* in Var's tribe. Either way, the territory of their clan is way southwest of here, so I doubt we'll run into them," he sighed.

"Which clan are they?"

"Clan Dellinar," he answered.

"An honorable clan," Allia nodded. "Our clan has never had blood issue with them. They're a very respected clan."

Tarrin chuckled. "Denai couldn't identify my clan brand when we first met," he told her. "There are only thirteen clans. How could she not know?"

"You said she was young, brother. She must have just forgotten. That *does* happen, you know," she smiled lightly. "Sometimes that memory of yours makes me sick, *deshida*. You never seem to forget *anything*!" She laughed. "I struggle and work and tear out my hair to remember something you pick up in a matter of seconds, and never forget! It's one of the rare times I ever feel anything negative towards you!"

"Well, I'm sorry," he told her. "I can't help it. I've always had a good memory, and I just seem to have a knack for learning spells and languages. Believe me, sister, I have a hard enough time remembering just about anything else."

"Don't bury yourself in the sand, brother," she said with a quirky half-smile, using a Selani term that meant *don't sell yourself short*. "That mind of yours seems to soak up everything. You can always remember the little details that the rest of us forget. That must be why you're so good at learning spells and languages. You have amazing attention to detail, and both things are nothing but a stack of details piled one on top of the other."

"I'll take your word for it, sister," he shrugged, his ears picking up when that faint sound reached them again. He stared off into the eerily lit plain, his tail slashing a few times in irritation. "What *is* that sound?" he asked shortly.

"I think it's a Sandman," she answered. "It'll need to get closer for me to be sure."

"I don't *want* it to get any closer," he grunted. "That moaning always makes my teeth grind."

"I don't want it approaching either, but if we can hear it, at least we can keep track of it. It won't sneak up on us."

"We don't need any more of those kinds of surprises," he chuckled as his ears continued to scan the ghostly lit scrub beyond the light of the fire.

The sound trailed off, and the night passed without incident. They saw no Selani for two days as they moved south of east, but there were signs of the passing of a tribe. The vegetation was eaten down in one area, and though the wind had scoured away all traces of them, their scent was still lingering on some of the exposed stones on the desert floor. The scents were fresh, not even a day, and he realized that they had stopped here to let their animals forage.

"They're going north," Tarrin announced.

"That's not unusual," Allia replied. "There are blooms in the northern marches in the fall." A bloom was a rapid growth of vegetation, usually proceeding a rare rain shower or shifts in the ground water that brought it closer to the surface."

"How can you tell it's fall?" Sarraya complained. "There are no seasons out here. Just hot desert, hot desert, and more hot desert."

"The days are getting shorter," she told her.

"Well, that's *obvious*," Sarraya huffed, flitting off his head. "But it's not like this place suffers from the climate changes that everywhere else does."

That much was true. Because both spring and autumn were notoriously short, the transition from season to season was pretty swift. The late summer of just a few days ago was probably full-fledged autumn in Suld now, with frost in the mornings and less rain than normal. Winter would be marching in but a few rides behind that, and there would be snow on the ground before the last month of the year began. It wasn't because spring and autumn were actually shorter than summer and winter--all four seasons were two and a half months long by the solar calendar--it was that what people tended to call "late summer" or "early spring" was actually another season. Tarrin had been calling it "late summer" for a while now, when actually it was well into the *calendar* season of autumn. But Tarrin was a farmboy, and in Aldreth, they went more by weather than they did by a calendar. Tarrin didn't think his parents even bothered with them. He never had. He often had no idea what month it was. The seasons ruled them, and it was by those seasons that they reckoned all time.

Tarrin stopped and added it up. If Gods' Day, the day after New Year's Day, was a little under two months away, then by a calendar, they were in

the middle of autumn. By a *calendar*. In Suld and Aldreth--both had similar climates, though Suld saw alot more rain--they would be having warm days and cold nights, with sudden and often wild temperature shifts. It could be hot one day, and biting cold the next, only to have it hot again the day after that. A day that started with frost on the ground could end too hot to wear wool without sweating to death. And when the rain came, it came *hard* in Aldreth. Such wild temperature changes made rain during both the summer and the fall tend to be thunderstorms, and those storms could be very, very fierce. In spring more so than fall, but the fall storms could occasionally match the savagery of their springtime cousins.

"Maybe the rest of the world should take lessons from our desert," Allia teased the Faerie.

Sarraya flew off, muttering curses.

"Is she always so obnoxious?" Allia asked him honestly after Sarraya was well out of earshot.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "But she's been especially bad here lately. Usually she's nice about as often as she's contrary, but for the last few days it's been nothing but snide comments and snippiness. Something must be bothering her. I think I need to ask about it."

"She's the kind to take her discomfort out on others," Allia surmised.

"She lets you know she's not happy, that's for sure," he agreed.

"Well, she'd best come out of it soon. She's starting to annoy me."

"Sarraya loves to fight, sister," Tarrin chuckled. "Get used to it, because she likes you, and she picks on people she likes alot more than she does on strangers. That, or just do what you've been doing."

"What is that?"

"Get the best of her. Whenever she's losing, she runs away."

Allia laughed. "I think that won't be too hard," she winked.

He was about to agree, but he felt a familiar pulse flow through the Weave. Another came, and then a third, and that third seemed to lock in on him. Tarrin could feel them clearly, and the familiar hand of Keritanima was behind those sweeps. She was searching for him, and her probes had finally

found him, probably using his star as a means to find him as he used their stars to find the other Sorcerers. "Kerri's looking for us," he remarked to Allia. "I think she's going to project over here."

Before he was finished speaking the air in front of them shimmered, and then an Illusion was built out of flows that were manipulated from thousands of longspans to the west. It was an Illusion of Keritanima, exact down to the smallest detail, and a faithful representation of her at that moment. And at that moment, the image of her was dressed in a frilly little nightgown made of silk, untied at the neckline and hanging off her left shoulder in a manner that would be very appealing to a Wikuni male. The Illusion's eyes seemed to shimmer, and then it went from being a mere magical vision to seeming *alive*. That, Tarrin knew, meant that Keritanima had joined to her Illusion, and now it was as if a spectral version of herself was with them.

"Kerri," Tarrin smiled. "You look sleepy."

"It's dawn over here," she yawned.

"You look tired, *deshaida*," Allia noted.

"I've had a long day and a very short night," she complained grumpily.

"Are you in Dusgaard?" he asked.

She nodded. "A bloody cold place. I thought Wikuna was cold," she said with a shiver. "Did you know that they have to have a foot--er, span--of snow on the ground?"

"Winter comes early in Ungardt, sister. *Very* early," Tarrin chuckled.

"That grandfather of yours is impressive, brother," she said with a toothy grin. "He's as big as a bear."

"He's pretty mellow for an Ungardt, Kerri," he told her.

"I noticed."

"What were you doing last night, if you're in Dusgaard?" Allia asked.

"Staying up with Anrak," she frowned. "It's something of a custom for visitors to sit up and drink with their host. Thank the Goddess I'm a

Weavespinner. I was neutralizing the alcohol before it could get me drunk. At least I don't have a hangover, thank the Goddess."

"I'll bet that *really* annoyed the Ungardt in the hall," Tarrin laughed. "To see a little slip of a Wikuni girl stone sober."

"I made quite a bit of money," she said smugly. "They decided to wager just who was going to be under the table first."

"You cheated, Kerri," Tarrin accused with a grin.

"So?"

Both Allia and Tarrin laughed loudly. "Did everything go alright?"

"Smooth as silk," she said confidently. "My clippers had to chase off about six ships that followed us out of the harbor. They lurked on the horizon until we crossed into Ungardt waters. We had a tense moment with a squadron of longships, but I managed to talk our way around them. They didn't like seeing a squadron of Wikuni clippers sailing into their waters. Not that I can't blame them," she added as an afterthought. "They escorted us to Dusgaard, and now they and my clippers are patrolling the waters off Ungardt to discourage anyone trying to sneak in."

"Sounds like our ruse worked," Allia noted.

"I think it did. Jenna said that there was a mass exodus out of Suld when we left. Everybody and his brother was in the city. Oh, that reminds me," she said. "There's been a bit of bad news out of Suld, Tarrin."

"What?"

"The Regent and the boy-king both are dead, as well as about half the Royal council and the heads of the four major noble houses," she told him. "It was an accident, before your paranoia starts getting the best of you."

"What happened?"

"A fire at the palace," she replied. "It gutted the wing that held the Royal apartments. It was started by a kitchen cookfire, and got out of control. It's very bad timing that alot of the heads of the higher noble houses happened to be at the palace at the same time. It's left a serious vacuum in the city and kingdom both."

"Who's in charge?"

"Right now? Jenna," she answered. "It's part of the treaty between the Tower and the Crown. If the throne vacates due to accident or treachery and there's no heir, the Keeper acts as Regent until a new king is chosen by the nobility. Jenna's fairly ticked off about it," Keritanima laughed. "She had enough work just being Keeper. Now the courtiers of the Lion Throne are banging down Duncan's door to get audiences with her. She's been howling at me for two days now, asking me how I do it."

"Do what?" Allia asked.

"Run a kingdom," she answered. "It's really not that hard. If Jenna can run the Tower, she can run Sulasia. It's just a little more paperwork, that's all."

"Poor Jenna," Tarrin chuckled.

"Why would a treaty be set up that way?" Allia asked.

"Simple, sister. The Keeper's neutrality is *never* in question," Keritanima answered. "If a king dies because of treachery, then *someone* had to kill him, and you never know who that may have been. They added accidents because you never know if an accident is as accidental as it seems. Either way, it puts someone with absolute neutrality in power who can punish the killer or determine that it truly was an accident. It also frees the nobility to get down to the business of getting a new king immediately, without all that messy disorder that tends to follow the death of a monarch. You know, some noble deciding that he's going to run things himself, and all that."

"That's rather practical," Allia said appreciatively.

"You know Sulasians, sister. Practical, pragmatic, and as much fun as a box of wet sand," she said with a teasing look at Tarrin.

"Joke all you want, but it works," Tarrin shrugged absently.

"Where's Sarraya?" Keritanima asked curiously, looking around.

"Off in a tizzy," Allia answered.

"I was not!" Sarraya's voice called as she flew back to them. "Hullo, Kerri. You're looking a bit frumpled."

"I feel frumpled," the Wikuni chuckled.

"Well, that explains why Jenna hasn't talked to me," Tarrin mused. "She must be up to her ears in paperwork."

"Alot more than that," Keritanima told him. "The citizenry is very nervous because rumors are flying that the fire was set on purpose, and Jenna's had to go out several times and calm things down because the nobles are too busy jockeying for a shot at the Lion Throne. They all adore her, and she's about the only one in the city right now that can keep that powder keg from exploding. The nobles think it was arson too, no matter what Jenna tells them, and they're all blaming each other."

"How would Jenna know?" Sarraya asked.

"There are any number of spells she could use to find out," Tarrin answered, cutting Keritanima off.

"So, Sulasia's about to fly apart at the seams," Keritanima said off-handedly, "and it's going to get worse."

"How can it get any worse?" Tarrin asked.

"When they try to choose a new king," she answered. "The heads of all four major houses died in the fire. There's going to be little internal wars within those houses to choose the successors, and while they're doing that, the minor houses are going to be maneuvering to get the throne before any of the major houses can get organized. It's so perfect for the minor houses that it really makes me think that someone *did* set that fire. All the minor nobles houses are chomping at the bit, because they think it's their chance for their smaller, minor houses to get on the throne."

"Isn't there a good candidate among the minor nobles?" Tarrin asked.

"Several, but nobody *knows* them, brother," she answered. "When it comes to winning the throne, reputation is almost as important as ability. They're not going to put someone on the throne if they're not sure he'll do a good job, because anyone that backs the new king may end up on the wrong side of the sword if it comes out that he's really incompetent, and the rest of the gentry defies him. It's a very unique situation, and I've already warned Jenna that the nobles may start fighting one another. Without one good qualified and *well-known* candidate, it's going to spread the support out

among a number of lesser ones, and you know what that kind of scenario can degenerate into."

"Civil war," Tarrin growled.

"Not quite. More like an internal period of turmoil," she said succinctly. "If I were a betting woman, and I am, I'd put my money on Duke Arren of Torrian. He's a minor noble, but he has one of the best reputations in Sulasia as a fair, just, and kind lord, even if his desmense was what the Suldans would call a backwater town."

"Suldan?" Sarraya asked.

"A citizen of Suld. You can't very well call them Sulasians, can you?" she asked with a toothy grin.

"Arren would never seek the throne," Tarrin scoffed.

"I know, and that's more the pity," Keritanima sighed. "It may be a kingdom-wide affair, but if the citizens of Suld don't accept a new monarch, they don't get the throne. That's why all the heads of the noble houses stay in Suld, no matter where their fief is. It's more than an old saying in other parts of the world that as Suld goes, so goes Sulasia." She grinned. "In Wikuna, we say 'Sennadar marches to Suld's drum.' It's a fairly accurate description of the international politics of the West."

"So you say that more than Sulasia could be affected by this?" Allia asked.

"Sister, the entire *world* can be affected by this. I don't think either of you understand just how critically important Suld is on the world stage. The person who sits on the Lion Throne wields *vast* amounts of power, power that extends far beyond Sulasia's borders. Sulasia's the most important kingdom In the West."

"Why?" Tarrin asked.

"Because of the Tower, for one," she answered. "And it's also the most stable kingdom on Sennadar. All the other kingdoms have histories of turmoil and unrest, but Sulasia's been plodding along in domestic harmony for about five thousand years now. Even when there's a change of dynasty, things have always been settled quickly and without much fuss, because the Keeper's always been there to step in and keep things running smoothly

while a new king was chosen. All the other kingdoms look up to Sulasia like a big brother. That's why whoever sits on the Lion Throne has a great deal of influence. But this time it's different, though," she mused, tapping her muzzle with a finger as she thought. "Things have never been this unstable in Sulasia before, at least not to Wikuni memory. If the nobles don't find a competent successor and ram him through the selection process, they may very well start fighting among themselves."

"What's the selection process?" Allia asked.

"The same as it is for any other kingdom, sister," she replied. "Someone with a tracable royal or noble bloodline steps up and says 'I'm the King.' Noble houses either support or denounce him. If he has enough support among the noble houses, he's the king. If too many powerful houses denounce him, he's usually exiled. That's why the candidates are always *very* sure to have their support lined up before they make a claim on the throne."

"That's a fairly simplified explanation, but it's pretty accurate given how much you left out," Sarraya agreed. "There's a great deal of maneuvering and jockeying among the nobles to line up that support, and sometimes it can take a while. There are also a bunch of formal ceremonies and such involved with making the claim. And the High Priest of Karas has to at least not openly denounce the candidate."

"I forgot about that part," Keritanima admitted. "But it's not an official rule. In just about any kingdom, if the church rejects a monarch, the people are likely to reject him too. Churches hold a lot of power over the citizenry, and the king rules at their suffrage. Especially in monotheseistic nations like Sulasia."

"Mono-what?" Sarraya asked.

"Only worshipping one god," she answered. "We have nine here in Wikuna, so as long as I don't offend a majority of the churches, and the church of Kikkalli in particular, I'm on solid ground."

"I didn't know you have nine," Tarrin mused.

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "Kikkalli is the only name you've ever heard. She's the goddess of trade, ships, good weather, and the seas, and every Wikuni alive worships her. But we also have a god of money and prosperity

that's fairly popular, a god of luck, a goddess of bad luck, a goddess of joy, and a god of protection. Denthar, the god of knowledge, and Dragor, the god of creativity, are human gods, but they found roots in our pantheon because they appeal to us, and we also worship Saltemis, the Elder god of the waters and oceans. We *are* an ocean-going people, after all," she chuckled.

"You have two gods of the ocean?" Allia asked in confusion.

"That way we cover both sides of our butt," Keritanima said with a wolfish smile. "Saltemis is the Elder God, and that means he's the god of *all* the oceans. But Kikkalli is a patron of the seas too, among other things, and she's much more likely to answer our prayers, because she's the ruler of the Wikuni pantheon. When your entire culture depends on the sea, you don't take *any* chances that you may offend one of the gods who has sway over it."

"Ah. Why worship a god of bad luck?"

"To keep her from visiting you," Keritanima grinned. "Shaar isn't worshipped out of love, sister. She's honored to keep her from singling you out. A devout Wikuni in search of a little luck first asks for luck from Sheel, then appeases Shaal to keep her from taking that good luck away."

"Sheel and Shaar?" Tarrin noted.

"According to Wikuni myth, Shaar was originally the goddess of beauty. She was in love with Sheel, but he spurned her, so out of spite she became the goddess of bad luck, in order to undo everything Sheel represents. When she became the goddess of bad luck, she became ugly, and a very old legend says that when she turned ugly and we lost a god of beauty, all the Wikuni turned ugly too," she said in a scoffing manner. "According to that old story, that's why the gods turned us into what we are now, to hide our looks behind the faces and fur of animals. I think it's a crock, myself. In fact, I know it is. I remember the story you told about our origins, Tarrin. Our gods changed how we looked to sever us completely from our Sha'Kar origins. To make us our own people."

"I'd say they succeeded there," Sarraya agreed.

"That's an interesting story," Allia mused. "I'd like to hear more about the legends of your gods someday, sister."

"Someday when we both have lots of time, I can have every priest and bard in Wikuna tell you everything you want to hear," she smiled. "But that'll have to be later. Right now, there are more important matters, and I've drifted way off the topic here."

"We didn't mind, Kerri. Actually, it was interesting to hear about that," Tarrin assured her.

"Whatever," she said with a toss of her hair. "Jenna's going to project over here sometime today, so try not to go so fast," she teased. "I thought about it yesterday, but you and Allia must have been racing or something. It's too hard to keep up with you."

"Just get ahead of us," Allia told her.

"We can't do that," she answered. "You forget how this works. The Weavescape doesn't match the landscape, so I can't just jump ahead. Ahead in the Weave is different than ahead in reality. If I tried that, I may build my projection inside solid rock. It wouldn't hurt, but I'd be wondering why it was so bloody dark."

Sarraya laughed richly as she landed on Tarrin's shoulder.

"I can feel it when you're looking for me, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "I didn't feel anything yesterday."

"I didn't really get that close," she answered. "I can feel you moving around from the Heart, brother. That's how much of an effect you have on the Weave now. Anyone in the Heart can feel you moving around."

Tarrin frowned. He didn't know that, and more to the point, he didn't *like* it. He'd never sensed Spyder like that; perhaps the Urzani had learned to mask herself in some way. If so, that was a trick he fully intended to learn. The idea that any Weavespinner could find him any time they wanted did not sit well with his cautious Were-cat nature.

"Tell Jenna to seek us in the afternoon," Allia told her. "We'll have stopped for the night by then, and she should be able to find us."

"That'll work," she said, pulling up the shoulder of her nightgown absently, only to have it immediately slip down her arm. "Any trouble?"

"Nothing major," Tarrin answered. "We had a close call with a *kajat*, but it wasn't anything serious."

"How far are you along?"

"We're about seven days from the Cloud Spire," Allia answered. "That's our destination. Tarrin wants to show me the city at its top."

"I'd like to see that too," Keritanima grinned.

"Come over when we get there, and you will," he told her.

"Any instructions or anything you need to pass on?"

"Not really. How are Auli and that human doing?"

"Auli's having a blast," Keritanima chuckled. "Don't worry, *deshaida*," she's not acting wild. She's just having alot of fun. She has you absolutely pegged, by the way," she winked. "Sometimes even *I* forget it's not you. The human's doing alot better now than he was before. He has your personality down well enough, but the Illusion wasn't working out as well as we'd hoped."

"Why not?"

"The tail never moved," she said with a slight frown. "It wasn't Dar's fault, though. He put the tail on, but unless he was there to make it move, it didn't do anything. One of us had to be with him all the time to make it convincing, or at least that was before."

"How did you fix it?"

"Jenna fixed it," she answered. "She used a spell I've *never* seen before, a spell I didn't even think was *possible*. She Transmuted him!"

"She what?" Allia asked.

"She *changed* him, sister," she said in wonder. "Right now, he looks, moves, and even *smells* like a Were-cat. She even put a lingering weave in him to mimic Tarrin's strength. I don't know what Jenna did, but *I* can't even tell the difference now. It took the boy a little time to figure out how to move the tail and control the claws, but he's more than a mirror image of you now, brother. I just want to know where she learned how to do that!"

Tarrin knew exactly which spells she used to do that. Actually, it was a rather clever idea. "I taught it to her," he answered. "I taught her all the spells I learned when I was turned. I see she's already putting them to good use."

"And you didn't teach me?" she protested a bit indignantly.

"We'll have all the time in the world for that later, sister," he told her.

"I'm going to hold you to that. It's the least you can do for running out without saying goodbye."

"We were on a tight schedule," he said contritely.

"I know, I'm just teasing," she winked. "How is the desert?"

"Hot," Sarraya said in a grumble. "Hot and sandy."

"I'd say that about describes a desert," Keritanima laughed.

"Me and the Faerie have been having a running disagreement about whose home is more perfect," Allia said with a sly smile. "So far, I'm winning."

"So *you* say," Sarraya retorted.

Keritanima looked behind her. "Well, I'd better go. Miranda's tugging on my tail for some reason. Kinda stupid for me to look, isn't it?" she added with a wry smile. "I can't see anything but scrub and strone."

"It's a reflex," Tarrin assured her. "Make sure you pass on the message to Jenna."

"Will do. Come visit us in the Heart, brother. It would be nice to see you."

"If I think it's safe enough," he replied.

"I can't ask for more than that. I have to go. You three be careful."

"We will," Allia assured her.

"Bye *deshaida, deshida*. I love you both. Oh, bye Sarraya."

"I love you too, and be careful, sister," Allia warned.

"I love you too, sister. Keep an eye on our imposters," Tarrin added.

"Well thank you *so* much for remembering me," Sarraya huffed acidly.

"Being the second helm isn't very fun, is it?" Keritanima said with a wolfish, toothy grin, and then her image vanished.

Sarraya threw her hands up in the air and flitted off, muttering to herself.

"She's having a bad day, isn't she?" Allia asked with a laugh.

Although she pouted for a while after Keritanima disappeared, Sarraya's temper improved during the rest of the day. She became less and less combative, and by sunset she was actually starting to make jokes. She hadn't been doing that before--at least not what was usual for her--and it was something of a good sign.

Tarrin had a feeling that he knew what had been bothering Sarraya. He knew his little friend rather well, and he had the feeling that she'd been just a little intimidated by Allia. That, and she was a little intimidated also by how close he and she were. He realized that she was starting to feel like she was both not needed and not wanted, and for Sarraya, that was somewhat intolerable. It was why she'd been so snippy lately. The first time they'd gone through the desert, he had absolutely depended on her. They traded barbs alot, but they were very close. Sarraya had had that relationship disturbed by Allia, who, she had found out, was not just another Denai. It wasn't that Var and Denai hadn't been competent, but Tarrin's relationship with them had been very distant at the beginning. Even though they were with them, Tarrin still only talked with Sarraya. She'd gotten used to that. And now here was Allia, who had quite literally taken over their group, and in Sarraya's eyes, had stolen Tarrin away from her. Tarrin talked with Allia, and joked with Allia, and all of Sarraya's attempts to interject herself had met with miserable failure. The Selani woman had proved to have a sharp wit that quickly turned the Faerie's barbs and comments, her normal method of starting a conversation, back on her.

They decided to stop early that afternoon, just in case Jenna was looking for him, and Tarrin decided to deal with this little situation. They found a good spot nestled on the leeward side of a rock spire, a rather short and stubby one. After Allia left them to go hunting, Tarrin sat down with his

back to a large wind-roundedstone and motioned for Sarraya to land on his knee. "I think you're being just a little silly," he told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked in her high-pitched voice.

"We don't think you're a fifth wheel, you silly woman," he told her with a light smile. "I know that's bothering you."

She flushed slightly.

"And Allia being here doesn't change the fact that we're friends, does it?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

Tarrin fixed her with a hard look.

She blushed, and laughed ruefully. "Alright, I'm jealous," she admitted, patting his knee. "You're always talking to her, and I can't seem to get a word in edgewise. And I don't know how to talk to her."

"Just *talk* to her," he said pointedly. "If you try to fence with her, you're going to lose, friend. I think you've discovered that."

Sarraya gave him an indignant look, then flushed and laughed. "She's quite different from what I expected," she admitted. "I thought she was always that quiet and reserved."

"She acts like that around strangers because it's what her honor demands," he told her. "Think about Var. He acted much the same way until he got to know us, if you don't recall. Selani consider it unseemly to laugh or show humor in front of strangers. That can lead to misunderstandings, and that's the last thing two Selani clans or tribes want to have happen. And Allia's a clan princess, Sarraya. She doesn't take her title seriously, but it *does* require her to act with a measure of dignity. The honor of her entire clan is on her, and she has to live up to it."

"Denai was nothing like that," she mused. "She was so open and bubbly."

"She was also very young and rash," he told her. "Denai is an exception. Var is the rule."

"I understand," she said thoughtfully.

"Now that you've seen the Allia I know, you understand why I like her so much," he smiled. "She's nothing like what she seems to be in company."

"That's no lie," Sarraya laughed. "I never dreamed she had such a sharp tongue."

"You've never seen her in action," Tarrin grinned. "She can cut you in half with it. To my memory, I've never won an argument with Allia."

"Never?"

"Not once," he answered honestly. "She submits when she knows I'm being very serious and when it suits her, but when it's a point of contention that didn't go into those areas, she won every single one of them." He chuckled ruefully. "She's not afraid of me, so my usual techniques for winning arguments don't work on her."

"I think I just may see just how good she is," Sarraya said in an oddly professional manner, flexing her fingers in a predatory manner.

"It's your skin," Tarrin told her.

Their little talk seemed to have had the effect he intended. Sarraya was quiet and thoughtful for a while after Allia returned, dragging a dead juvenile *sukk* by the leg, and she seemed to be organizing herself as Tarrin and Allia dressed, quartered, and then started roasting the bird over the fire Tarrin had built while she was hunting.

"I don't see any bows," Sarraya noticed, as Tarrin realized she was starting her run. "How did you catch it?"

"The same way we catch anything," she shrugged. "You sneak up on it using the brush as cover, then jump up and run it down." She pulled out her short sword. "This is the only hunting weapon a Selani really needs, Sarraya. The only thing in the desert that can outrun us are *inu* and *kajat*, and even they can only do it for short distances."

"I remember seeing some Selani use javelins," she noted. "Remember, Tarrin?"

"Javelins are safer when you're going after *chisa* or a large flock of *sukk*," she answered. "*Chisa* are big, and they'll gather into defensive circles when we attack them. If there are enough *sukk*, they turn and attack

predators in a large group rather than run. Even *inu* and *kajat* won't attack a large flock of *sukk*. Remember the *inu* we saw a few days ago?" she asked, and Sarraya nodded. "They were stalking that small flock because they knew that a flock that size would run rather than fight." She reached down and picked up one of the severed feet of the big bird, showing Sarraya its very long and wicked talons. "Believe me, Faerie, you do *not* want to be on the wrong side of these," she said with a slight smile.

"It looks like it would be something of an educational experience," Sarraya noted, which made Allia laugh. "How did the Selani come to tame them?"

"Actually, it's not very hard," she answered. "If you can get a *sukk* egg, even a wild one, you can tame the *sukk* when it hatches. It imprints itself to the first thing it sees, thinking that that is its mother. It will follow you around, and you can train it to prepare it for life in the tribe's flock. When it matures and separates from its mother, it remains in the flock. Even if that flock happens to with be a Selani tribe," she said with a smile.

"What about the eggs the *sukk* lay in your flocks? Do you have to get those too?"

"No, the mother will teach the baby everything she was taught herself," Allia answered. "Once you train one, it will train all its babies. *Sukk* are actually rather intelligent. That's why they'll turn and attack predators when they have sufficient numbers. They've learned that numbers give them strength." She laughed. "I've seen a flock of *sukk* attack *kajats* before," she said. "They confuse and fluster the *kajat* while they shred its legs with their talons. The *kajat* never fails to kill one or two of them, but in the end, it's the *kajat* that comes out on the worse side of the bargain. Once they're incited like that, *sukk* will actively defend the bodies of dead flock members for days, ensuring that any predator that kills one of their number won't have a chance to enjoy the spoils of its labor. Every *kajat* learns the hard way that ambushing a large flock is a very bad idea. Look closely at the next *kajat* we see's legs. You'll see the scars."

"I'm sure it's quite a surprise for it," Sarraya grinned. "Things that big aren't used to being pushed around." She said that while giving Tarrin a sidelong glance.

Allia gave her a knowing smile. "Even the mightiest *kajat* can be felled if enough rock mice stand together," she said in a cadence that said it was one of the Selani's sayings. But she too gave Tarrin a sly look, which made him snort shortly.

"If *sukk* defend the dead, how do javelins make it safe to hunt them?"

"They only defend if they're excited into fighting," she said pointedly. "When you hunt a large flock, you kill a *sukk* from cover. If the flock doesn't know it's being attacked, they won't defend the carcass. *Sukk* do occasionally die from natural causes, so when you spear one, the rest of the flock thinks it succumbed to some disease or something like that and leaves the body behind."

"Clever," Sarraya said appreciatively.

"After so long in the desert, we've learned how things work," Allia replied with a light smile.

Like that was opening the gates of a city, Sarraya and Allia began to open up to each other a little. Now that she wasn't trying to lace her conversation with barbs and comments, Sarraya was managing to hold a conversation with the Selani. Tarrin quietly withdrew himself from them to let them get to know each other all over again, and to avoid becoming a common target. As was his habit, he climbed the rock spire and sat down at its top, a surprisingly wide top that was worn generally flat by the scouring wind, and looked off to the horizon. It was too far away to see the Cloud Spire quite yet, but at least it would be a relatively easy journey. The land between them was more or less flat, with many rock spires, and there was a lot of scrublands. He did remember one expanse of boulder-strewn barrens, but it wouldn't take them more than half a day or so to cross it.

He wondered how Jesmind and the others were doing. By now, Mist had to be going stir crazy, and was probably becoming something of a threat to the Sorcerers in the Tower. Jasana was probably still being punished, and Jesmind and Triana both had to watch the girl like a hawk to make sure she wasn't trying to weasel out of it. He still regretted not seeing his children and saying goodbye, but things had been rushed, and Jesmind had taken up what little free time he'd had, and Jasana was still being punished. He doubted that Eron would particularly care if he said goodbye

or not; Eron was a typical Were-cat child. His mother was the only thing that truly mattered to him, the absolute center of his very young life. Tarrin wasn't angry or sad about that, because he understood it. Besides, Eron liked him and had shown some affection, and in a Were-cat child, that was the most for which he could ask. And the unusual circumstances of the situation probably made it very hard for Eron to rationalize showing love to a human. Eron had never seen his father as a Were-cat, and Tarrin had a feeling that that would make a significant difference in how the child behaved towards him.

He felt a familiar surging in the Weave that immediately centered on him; it was Jenna, and Jenna could find him much faster and more efficiently than Keritanima. She locked in on him almost instantly. He looked to where he felt Jenna's will exerting itself against the Weave, where flows pulled free of the strands and quickly wove themselves into a perfect image of her young, attractive appearance. The eyes of that projection opened, and she smiled down at where he was sitting. "Brother," she said grandly, walking over to him. "That's quite a view," she said. "I didn't know the desert was this pretty."

"Some parts of it are breathtaking," he said calmly as she sat down beside him. "Kerri told me what happened. How has it been?"

"Don't *even* start about that," she groaned as she had her projection sit beside him. "It's a nightmare, Tarrin. A nightmare! They dumped a mountain of problems on me from before, and the nobles are all starting to get combative and sneaky, and if that wasn't bad enough, the people in the city keep wanting to riot," she said, blowing out her breath. "Some fanatic out there is whipping them into a frenzy in the main square every day, and I have to go out there and break things up to stop it. I actually had to break them up with Sorcery today," she growled. "They can't catch the inciter, and Goddess I wish they would. I intend to peel off his skin in little tiny strips."

"I've had a bad influence on you," he teased with a smile.

"I guess you have," she grinned in reply.

"How are Jesmind and Mist?"

"Mist is getting cranky," Jenna frowned. "Triana's been splitting her time between us and Julia, and she spends most of the time with us keeping

Mist from killing people. Jesmind's been a little short-tempered, at least a little more than usual. I think that's because of Jasana," she mused.

"What's she doing?"

"Moping and crying alot," she answered. "Whatever Jesmind and Triana did to her had a big impact. I think Jesmind's upset at what they did to her, and it's making her waspish."

"Typical mother sympathy," he sighed. "She sees Jasana suffering and wants to stop it, but she can't because she's the one causing it. So it makes her short-tempered."

"I think that's about right," she nodded.

"I guess I'm part of that too," he grunted. "She knows I'm angry with her. She hasn't even tried to talk to me through the amulets yet. I think that's just piling things onto what's going on with Jasana."

"Probably."

"How is Kimmie?"

"She's doing fine," she answered, then she laughed. "She's getting bigger every time I see her. Jesmind said that's normal, but it's almost eerie. She's eating enough for four people, and she's been an absolute sweetheart. Triana told me that pregnancy significantly mellows out a Were-cat, and it's really showing on her. Kimmie's always been friendly, but now she's like a grandmother."

"Maybe Jesmind should get pregnant, then," Tarrin mused.

"That's your department, not mine," Jenna winked.

Tarrin let that pass. "Are things calm, other than that?"

"More or less," she nodded. "There was a mass exodus after Kerri left with the fake you. Every inn and boarding house was overflowing before, but now the merchants actually have somewhere to stay. It's just as well. With what happened with the king and Regent, it's best right now to get all the extra bodies out of Suld."

"Good point," he agreed. "How did Grandfather take it?"

Jenna laughed. "Actually, he didn't have any complaints at all. He was happy to help out, and he really liked the idea of the possibility of a little warfare. I had to convince him *not* to allow them to invade Ungardt."

"You shouldn't have bothered," Tarrin chuckled. "I feel sorry for any ship off Ungardt's coast. You know they'll be attacking anything afloat that's not Wikuni."

"I didn't think of that. This may be a bad time to be a merchantman," she giggled.

"Eh, it'll keep them on their toes. A little exercise now and then is good for you. Kerri's mad at you, you know. Well, at me actually."

"About what I did to Fox?" she asked, and he nodded. "I told her I'd teach her that."

"Have you talked to mother and father lately?"

"Yesterday," she nodded. "I told them that it may be a good idea to disappear for a while, so they agreed to pack up and go visit a few old army friends in Torrian."

"Torrian? They rebuilt it?"

"They're in the process," she said delicately.

"I guess they would. It's been, what, three months? Four?"

"About four," she affirmed.

"How far along are they?"

"They're doing rather well," she answered. "The army's been sent there to help out, and between them and the citizens, things are going up pretty quickly. They're taking this chance to rearrange things a little bit. You know, give the city a little better layout. And Arren wants to put up a stone wall this time."

"Oh, that reminds me. How much can you influence the nobles about a king?"

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Arren."

"Ooh, that's a good choice," she said with an enthusiastic nod. "They're not going to like it, but I might be able to ram him down their throats. They're all thinking *they* have the best chance. That's what's making this all so messy," she growled. "No house wants to support a potential from any other house. And without that, there's no way any one man can get enough support to get the throne."

"You may have to take steps," Tarrin warned.

"I think you're right," she said thoughtfully. "If I don't step in and do something, I'm going get stuck with it, and I *hate* it. I'll be regent over a kingdom torn apart while the nobles all fight with one another."

"You may have to step on a few people."

"Then I'll wear some iron-shod boots," she grinned. "I've learned how to step on people, brother. The first thing I learned was that they're going to hate me no matter what I do, so I may as well do things my way."

"Kerri taught you that, didn't she?"

"She didn't have to," she told him. "I learned that the first time I butted heads with the Council, and they hinted that my power extended as far as they'd allow it to go. I wasn't about to let that happen, so I let them have it. I think that shocked them, to see this little girl come in there and bite their heads off. I think that was when they realized that I didn't think that the appointment was for show. It took me a while, but I finally got them under my heel. I can do the same thing to the nobles. After I make a few ugly threats, then threaten to keep the crown for myself, they'll probably be amenable to my choice for the throne."

"Think you can get away with that?"

"Probably. I'm pretty popular in the city right now, so they'll all probably think I have a chance of winning the people over. If you can win the people of Suld, you have a good chance of keeping the throne, no matter what the nobles think. They know that any monarch that sits on that throne does it because the people of Suld are content with him."

"Kerri said much the same thing," he nodded.

"I'll need to get a good running start at it," she mused. "Have some people drop a few stories and rumors here and there."

"What for?"

"To get the people of Suld thinking about Arren," she answered. "It won't matter how much I want him on the throne if the people won't accept him. I have to make sure they've heard about how kind he is and how devoted and caring he is for his people, and how good a job he's doing overseeing the rebuilding of the city. Did Kerri suggest Arren?"

"She did mention him, and I happen to agree," Tarrin affirmed. "You know, you picked up on this pretty fast, Jenna. Making all these clever plans and being political and all. You sound like Kerri."

"I should. She had to teach me alot about politics," she laughed. "Her and Alexis. I still make way too many mistakes, but at least I can keep things from becoming a total disaster."

"That's all we can really ask for, Jenna," he said thoughtfully, looking out over the plain, which was now colored red from the setting sun behind them. The stones out in the scrub caught the light better than the plants, making the plain look like there were small pools of blood around the plants, like the plants were bleeding. "It's all so different now, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm not sad things turned out this way," she said sincerely. "I may not like some of my duties as Keeper, but in a strange way, it feels like I *belong* here."

"I do too, about being a Were-cat. Almost like I was born into the wrong family."

"Well, then, I'm very glad someone messed things up then," Jenna grinned. Then she sighed. "It's almost over, isn't it?"

He knew exactly what she meant. "Not quite yet, so don't let your guard down. I'm not going to relax until afterwards. I think I'll sleep a few months--at least as soon as the Goddess tells me what to do with the Firestaff--and then do absolutely nothing for at least ten years. Well, the doing nothing will come after I get my house built."

"Where?"

"Out in the Frontier, in a nice meadow with a little stream running through it," he answered. "I used to go there alot when I wandered the

forest. That's going to be my new home, and I have no intention of leaving it for about ten years."

"Then all the excitement will be gone," she sighed. "I'll have my boring duties, and you'll be lounging around out there in the Frontier avoiding all this work."

"I think I've done my part. Now it's your turn," he said shamelessly.

She laughed. "I guess so. Well, I'd better get back. Goddess only knows what kind of mischief they're getting into without me there to babysit them. You have anything you need passed along?"

"Not really. Just tell Jesmind, Kimmie, and Mist that I'm alright, and I'm thinking about them. Tell my children I love them, and try to keep them out of trouble."

"That's not easy," she giggled. "But I'll do my best. I'll talk to you tomorrow, alright?"

"Alright. Good luck."

"I think I'm going to need it," she fretted. "Bye Tarrin. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Have fun."

She gave him a slightly hostile look, and then her image vanished as he felt her consciousness retreat back into the Weave at the unimaginably fast speed of thought itself. She was returning to her body, where it sat, physically connected to a strand of the Weave, and probably under guard.

Things sounded a bit dicey in Suld, but if there was one thing he'd learned about Jenna during his amnesia, it was that she was a *very* capable young lady. She may think she made a lot of mistakes, but the truth was, Keritanima and Alexis had trained up a young but gifted Keeper. He had no doubt that she would handle things, and she would do it smoothly and efficiently. Between what she had learned from Keritanima and Alexis, and the maturing information that Spyder had put in her head, Jenna was a remarkably detail-oriented and organized ruler, with a maturity and intelligence to handle these kinds of problems, and the cool, level-headed training she received from her parents only helped those things along. She would make good decisions, because she wouldn't rush into them, she

would look at a problem from several sides before deciding on the most practical and efficient solution, and she knew when to ask for help from advisors. She had the perfect balance of confidence and a willingness to accept aid that made her an excellent ruler.

He felt confident that before Gods' Day, Arren was going to be sitting on the Lion Throne of Sulasia. And he didn't once doubt that they couldn't have chosen a better man.

They had no trouble at all as they continued to move, shifting to a more southeasterly direction the day after he talked to Jenna. The plain made it easy to see the more dangerous predators well before they got close enough to be a threat, and they moved through a strange void of Selani. They saw a few Scouts from a distance, but that was all. The Scouts were ranging out to find the best grazing for the animals, and their presence meant that tribes would be moving in to take advantage of the scrub bloom around them within a matter of days, if that. They saw several signal fires built atop rock spires during the nights, beacons to guide the tribes to good grazing.

Tarrin relaxed more and more as they moved towards the Cloud Spire, as any signs of a possible pursuit didn't materialize. Jenna had everything under control in Suld, Keritanima had everything under control in Dusgaard, and they had everything under control here. Things seemed to be going even better than he hoped they would, and he couldn't find any reason within himself not to relax just a little and enjoy the advantage of it while he could.

His little talk with Sarraya seemed to have had a major impact. She reverted to the Sarraya he remembered very quickly after that, full of witty remarks and sly comments, and she seemed to completely relax around Allia. Allia, to his surprise, warmed to the Faerie alot faster than he thought she would, and they began trading stories of the desert and Sarraya's colony. Allia, he knew, was trying to understand the Faerie, and she'd do that best by learning about her past. Sarraya was a very complicated little female, as Allia was finding out, alot more complicated than her shallow demeanor presented to the world. Her Faerie flightiness and impulsiveness waged a constant war against the intense discipline instilled in her by her Druidic training, and those two diametrically opposed traits gave her an unusual

personality. She seemed flighty and scattered, but she was as sharp as a tack, possessed of a great intelligence and also having had a very thorough education. Sarraya knew things that people would never expect a Faerie to know, like the intricacies of human politics and a great deal of human history. Tarrin was very fond of her, for she was also a good, solid companion and she never made things boring. She was always full of surprises, be it a new dig on him or a new way to entertain herself in the monotony of travel across the scrub plain.

Such an example happened three days after he talked to Jenna. She had moved ahead of them as they stopped so Allia could get the sand out of her boots, and when they caught up with her, they were rather shocked to see her aggravating a lone juvenile *inu*. The reptilian raptor, only coming up to Tarrin's waist, snapped in frustration at the darting Faerie, trying to catch her as she weaved and buzzed around its head. Tarrin noticed that the animal had a rather long, half-healed gash on its flank, and it looked thin and a little bony. It was a rather handsome specimen, with sand-colored scales and a darker stripe on each flank and along its spine, starting at the end of its snout and ending at the tip of its tail. It also had small irregular stripes on its powerful back legs, running from hip to ankle. The coloration would break up its profile out in the scrub, making it harder to see.

"What are you doing?" Tarrin demanded in surprise as they stopped and looked around. That *inu*'s pack couldn't be far away, and the last thing they needed right now to was to be ambushed.

"Hold on," Sarraya said breathlessly, slipping aside as the *inu* again snapped shut its jaws, just barely missing her. "Would you hold still?" she demanded sharply at the animal, "you're ticking me off!" And to everyone's surprise, probably even the *inu*'s, it did just that. It recoiled from her in surprise, then stopped trying to eat her, standing there in its hunched posture, wickedly clawed forepaws tucked in under its chest.

"How did you do that?" Allia asked in surprise.

"I'm a *Druid*, you silly girl!" she told her with a grin. "Druids can command animals when it's needful. Hasn't Tarrin ever showed you that?"

Allia looked at Tarrin speculatively. "Don't look at me," he shrugged. "Nobody ever taught me that."

"You are *so* dense," she said scornfully. "It's not a spell, you dope! Animals can sense who we are. If you speak in a commanding voice, they'll obey you!"

Tarrin gave her a very hard, flat look. "You mean to tell me that all this time, you could have just ordered anything that may attack us to leave us alone?"

She grinned wickedly. "I didn't want to interrupt your fun," she teased.

"Even after that *kajat* bit off my leg?" he demanded hotly.

"It was too intent on eating us," she answered. "When they're like that, it's alot harder to get through to them. That's why this one didn't just stop the *first* time I told it to. Besides, I'm so tiny and it was so big, I think it had trouble hearing me. They *have* to hear us."

"What about the pack of *inu*?"

"They were trying to eat Denai, remember?" she said pointedly. "And I think she really ticked them off by killing a few members of their pack. I just said that when they're like that, it's hard to get through to them. Their predatory instincts have taken over." She looked at him. "And yes, we *did* tell you that, Tarrin. When we were in Shoran's Fork, remember?"

Tarrin looked back through his expanded memory, and found what she was talking about. When they were telling him about Druids, they remarked that no animal would attack a Druid. Now he understood *why*.

"Why didn't you teach me that?" he demanded.

"Because I'm really not sure if it will work for you," she answered honestly. "You're a *Were-cat*, Tarrin. You're a predator, and some animals won't trust a predator no matter how sweet you talk to them. That may have been a little dangerous, especially if you'd have tried to talk down a hungry *kajat*. Knowing you, that's the *first* thing you'd do," she snorted.

"Does it work for Triana?"

"Triana never does it," she answered. "She said she never tries to talk to a potential meal. It's bad manners, and it's not very sportsmanlike. That's also why she won't Conjure anything that isn't already dead."

Allia laughed, looking at Tarrin. "I guess that makes sense. I wouldn't like having a chat with a *kajat*, knowing it may decide to turn around and eat me."

Tarrin, however, was a little intrigued by the idea of it. He looked at the *inu* and drew himself up. She said all one had to do was speak in a commanding manner. Well, if it was one thing Tarrin had learned as his time as a Were-cat, it was how to be commanding. He looked the *inu* right in its sinister, amber reptilian eyes, his own implacable and steely. "Come here," he told it, pointing to the ground before him with a furred finger.

The animal seemed a bit torn. Tarrin could tell that his command had reached it, but just as Sarraya said, it seemed wary about obeying something that was obviously a predator.

"I'm not hunting you, you foolish cub," he chided it. "Come here."

Bolstered by that, the *inu* warily stepped towards him, its sleek head snapping back and forth between Allia and the Were-cat. It stepped up in front of Tarrin, craning its head almost straight up to look at him, its long, meaty tail out to give it balance.

"I've never seen a living one from so close before, at least in a relaxed state," Allia said in appreciation. "We respect the *inu* for its power and cunning, but they also have a certain grace and beauty about them."

"Only a Selani would think a big lizard was cute," Sarraya huffed.

Tarrin knelt by the *inu* and pushed it til it turned, presenting its wounded flank to him. It was a very nasty laceration, wide and deep, and it was starting to show signs of infection. From the size of the wound, Tarrin knew that it was caused by the claws of a *kajat*.

"A *kajat* did this," he noted.

"It probably killed the rest of its pack," Sarraya added. "Allia said that they do that."

"*Kajat* eat *inu* because it gives them a meal and also cuts down on competition," she nodded. "That, and *inu* are sometimes foolish. They'll continue to attack, even when they have no chance of winning. Only after the majority of the pack is killed will the survivors finally turn and run."

"I'd say that's exactly what happened here," Tarrin said. The *inu* probably wouldn't react too well to Sorcerer's healing, so he reached within, through the Cat, and touched the vast power of the All. His intent and image were simple and clear, something he had done many times before, and the All read his intent, saw his image, and responded as he desired. The wound on the animal's side began to heal unnaturally fast, before their very eyes, as Tarrin's prodding caused the animal's own healing ability to accelerate at an incredible rate, even as the All supplied the animal with the life energy it needed to undertake the task.

"Why heal it?" Allia asked. "A lone *inu* rarely survives long, and I don't think we want something like this as a pet."

"So it at least has a fighting chance," he replied as the wound completely closed, and the last traces of Tarrin's magic killed off the now internalized infection.

"You're getting too sentimental in your old age, brother," Allia teased. "Why were you playing with it, Sarraya?"

"I guess I just wanted to get a close look at a live one," she said. "The ones I've seen up close weren't very whole. Tarrin isn't very neat when he kills things. There were body parts laying everywhere," she said with a little shudder.

"Dead is dead," Tarrin said flatly as he patted the animal's flank, feeling the powerful muscle underneath those scales. Tarrin felt its warmth, and, curious, he sent probing weaves into the animal, weaves usually meant to find sickness or injury. These weaves instead inspected the internal workings of the animal, puzzling out its biology.

Tarrin whistled. "It's not a reptile," he said in appreciation.

"What do you mean?" Allia asked.

"It's not cold-blooded," he explained as he slid his paw along its flank. "It's warm-blooded. It's not a reptile. It's a close cousin of reptiles, but it's not one."

"Maybe it's in the same family as dragons," Sarraya said. "They're warm-blooded too, and it's very apparent that they're related to reptiles. You know, scales, big teeth, claws, bad attitudes, that kind of thing."

"We know that there are relatives of dragons," Allia mused. "Drakes are their relatives, and Dolanna told me that Wyverns are also related to them. I've never seen a Wyvern before, so I don't know about that."

"They're not something you want to see," he snorted, the memory of the fight he'd had with the Wyvern on the riverboat coming up to the front of his mind. "Strange." He stood up. "Alright, I'm done," he told it. "Go on."

It looked at him quizzically.

"You're on your own now, cub," he told it. "Just be careful out there, and don't try to take anything bigger than you are. You should be alright."

With a curious chain of short growls in its throat, the *inu* turned and started off towards the south.

"Now there's something you should have tried to tame, Allia," Sarraya said with a grin.

"It wouldn't be prudent," she shrugged. "You can't have tame *inu* and tame *sukkand chisa* around each other. They're natural enemies."

They continued on southwest at an easy pace, as Tarrin mused over what he'd learned. After looking back on things, he realized that the first time they'd come through the desert, Sarraya had never really had the chance to use that Druidic trick to help him. The fights he'd had with the local wildlife had been fast and furious, where Sarraya's presence would have only complicated an already complex situation. And the times when she *would* have been very useful, like when the *kajat* attacked them down in the Great Canyon, she hadn't been there. That probably would have been the best time for her to calm an attacking predator, but she'd been off scouting.

It showed one of Sarraya's problems when she taught. She was a good teacher most of the time, but that was with things she thought he could use or learn. If she felt it wouldn't work for him or he couldn't use it, she not only wouldn't teach it to him, she also wouldn't even mention it. Tarrin understood the reasoning for it, because with Druidic magic, there was absolutely no room for error. By not even telling him about something, she was making sure that he wouldn't get curious about it and try to use something that either wouldn't work or was beyond his ability. But it still irked him a little bit.

Tarrin mused a little about that, realizing that he was his own warden in that regard. He was a curious one, always trying anything someone did that he saw. That curiosity was coupled to an admittedly strong power and a clever mind, and when Druidic magic was concerned, that could get him into a great deal of trouble. He was a lot like Keritania that way; when he saw someone do something he couldn't do, he just *had* to figure out how it was done. He couldn't help himself. At first, when he was just learning Druidic magic, he accepted Sarraya's warnings and commands without question, not trying some of the things she did. But he was more experienced now, more confident, and now she had to be careful. From the way they talked, Tarrin was probably as strong as Sarraya now, and that put anything she did in the realm of his possibility. He'd see her do something and try it, and that could get a little tricky, given he may not be capable of it. But, on the other hand, she'd also be willing to teach him, since he *was* more confident and more experienced.

They made camp early, as a small sandstorm roared over them an hour or so before sunset, taking refuge in a very narrow fissure of rock at the base of a broken rock spire. Tarrin had often wondered about the rock spires. They were everywhere in the desert, from the most barren sandswept sandfields to the most rugged badlands. Some were large, some were small, some tall, some short. But most of them were made of a dark stone that seemed oddly out of place with the sand colored rock most common in the desert. There were some sand-colored rock spires, but those had seemed most prevalent in the southeastern stretches of desert, and they'd shown a lot more effects from the scouring wind than the darker ones had.

Curiosity driving him, he reached out and put a paw on the stone, sending flows of Earth and Divine into it. What he discovered made his tail twitch. The stone was *igneous*, hardened lava, and as Tarrin followed its root down into the ground, he realized that it had come pouring out when someone or something punched a hole in the ground, a hole that went all the way down to the vast sea of magma upon which the land floated.

All these dark rock spires were probably the same, the result of a breach into the magma.

They are the scars left behind by the Blood War, kitten, the Goddess told him, her choral voice echoing in his mind. *The rock spires are what's left of*

magic that the Demons used to pull lava from the ground and kill the defenders. Five thousand years ago, this was a lush grassland. But then the Demons came, punching holes into the mantle and causing the lava to erupt. That covered large areas of this verdant belt with pools of lava. The heat and the fumes killed the grass, changed the weather itself, turning this place into a desert. At one time, this was a hellish wasteland covered with thousands of small hill-sized volcanic cones. But the winds this area is famous for wore them down, eroded them into a sand that still rests in the northeast sections of the desert, where the sand and dunes are black instead of white. The normal rock beneath too was worn away, which made the light sand and dust you find everywhere else here. The rock spires were the cores of those volcanic cones. If there is a testament to the destruction of the Blood War, my kitten, this is it. The Desert of Swirling Sands is the last great scar left behind by a war that raged five thousand years ago.

That sobered him, left him with a grim resolve. The Blood War had been so long ago, but even now ripples of it flowed through the present, showed themselves here in the wound left behind by its raging, echoed in the songs and tales of the valiant Dwarves, who sacrificed everything to save the rest of the world. So much destruction and pain, and all of it had been caused by the Firestaff. Val had used the Firestaff to become a god, then raised an army of Demons to conquer the world. They turned on him, and Val was forced to help the very ones who had been his enemies, as the entire world was forced to unite to fight off the Demonic invasion. It was the Blood War that caused the gods to take the position they had now, where the next who used it would be destroyed. They couldn't allow a god that was not bound by the laws of the pantheon to exist. Even if it meant another catastrophe on level with the Blood War or the Breaking, they couldn't allow it, because Val had proved that such a one could destroy the delicate Balance which the gods strove mightily to maintain.

After all, a world destroyed by their own hands could be rebuilt. The price in the lives of those who lived on that world would be staggering, maybe even insurmountable, but the world would survive. And that was all that mattered to them. The Elder Gods cared only for the world as a whole. The civilizations that lived on it and their accomplishments did not matter in the grand plan of things which was the Balance. The Elder Gods would

grieve for their act, but they would still go through with it, because it was what had to be done.

You must be able to do what must be done. He had heard that so many times, and for the first time, he realized that he wasn't the only one in this mad game that had to live with that heavy rule.

He was shaken out of his sober reverie by a series of low growls coming over the howling wind outside, their pitch and timbre causing him to pick them out from the shrill whistle of the wind. Tarrin's instincts warned him immediately when he realized that it was an *inu*, and he rose up to block the fissure to protect Allia and Sarraya, who were chatting behind him. The owner of those growls stepped around a bend in the narrow, constricting cave, and Tarrin saw with some surprise that it was the *inu* he had healed. It had followed them! If that wasn't impressive enough, the fact that it could keep up with them was itself quite astonishing.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded irritably of the animal.

"What is it?" Allia asked, then she rose up and looked under his shoulder. "It followed us?" she asked in confusion.

"I guess it likes you, Tarrin," Sarraya laughed.

"What is it with you and these big animals, brother?" Allia asked lightly. "First Sapphire, and now an *inu*. What is about you that attracts them?"

"I think we'll have to leave him behind when he brings a *kajat* into camp, trailing along behind him like an energetic puppy," Sarraya sniggered.

The *inu* looked slightly embarrassed, but didn't look away, its reptilian, amber eyes unwavering as they looked up at Tarrin.

"It lost its pack. I guess it thinks we're its new one," Allia mused.

"She," Tarrin corrected absently. "This one is female."

"Ah, now I see what it is," Sarraya said in a wicked manner. "First Sapphire, now this one. I never knew Were-cats were sexy to these warm-blooded reptiles."

"Don't ever let Sapphire hear you say that, bug," Tarrin warned in a flat tone. It wouldn't do to send her back out into the sandstorm. Tarrin blew out

his breath. "Alright, but keep out of trouble," he told her imperiously.

Having a little trouble turning around in the very tight space, the *inu* turned and laid down in the fissure with her head facing outside, keeping watch on the entrance to their refuge.

"What are we going to do with her now?" Allia asked, looking at the *inu*.

"Nothing," he shrugged. "If she wants to follow, let her follow. We can't do anything about that."

The *inu* remained even after the sandstorm was over, and that irritated Tarrin just a little bit. He didn't want to be nasty to her, but he didn't like the idea of her following along behind him either. Not that it bothered him or he feared her, but if she followed them, she wouldn't hunt, and she was going to get weak. If she followed too long, she was going to get too weak to hunt once she did break off. Tarrin felt kind of responsible for her, but he knew the instant he fed her, he'd never get rid of her. And taking an adult *inu* home with him would cause Jesmind to absolutely explode. He went to sleep worrying over that, understanding that he'd have to run her off in the morning, for both the good of both of them.

It turned out that Allia totally destroyed any chance that they would ever get rid of the *inu*. When Tarrin woke up the next morning, he came out of the fissure to see his Selani sister feeding the *inu* a rather large *umuni*. She had a strange, bright look in her eyes, and she was stroking the animal's sand-colored flank gently, almost affectionately. The *inu* seemed to enjoy the attention, even sidled up against the Selani and growled in a playful manner, nuzzling at her side with her wickedly toothed snout.

Tarrin groaned. "Allia!" he admonished in expasperation. "Now she's going to follow us around all the time!"

"Let her," she said with a strange kind of enthusiasm. "Sarraya may have joked about it, but now the idea of taming *inu* intrigues me. They would be excellent hunting partners. *Inu* are swift and intelligent, and we respect their ability."

"What about the domestic flocks?"

"Some of those sheep-herding men use dogs to control their flocks," she shrugged. "Dogs are predators. It would just take some training on both sides to keep them from fighting."

"It's a bad idea," he warned.

"I'll find out in time, won't I?" she asked pointedly.

Tarrin blew out his breath. "Alright, have it your way," he said shortly.

"Naturally."

"Before you get too attached to idea, you should consider what we're going to do with her when we go up to the Cloud Spire."

"Take her with us, of course."

"Are you out of your mind?" he said hotly. "If I take an *inu* up there, they may throw us off!"

"They would throw you off if you took a *kajat*," she said calmly. "But not an *inu*. She's too small to be a danger, and you and Sarraya can explain things to her so she doesn't cause any problems." She patted the *inu*'s flank fondly as the big predator bent down and ripped the *umuni* carcass apart with her long, dangerous teeth, swallowing it in huge, bloody chunks as she held the remaining carcass down with her wickedly clawed foot.

This was an argument he knew he was destined to lose. He knew when to cut his losses and at least bow out with some measure of dignity. "All right, but I'm not going to help you in any way. She's your burden."

"Yes you will," she said absently. "You'll argue, and you may even try to put your foot down, but we both know in the end, I'm going to win." She flashed him a bright, affectionate smile. "Because you love me."

"Sometimes love really stinks," he said with a snort, turning and stalking away.

They didn't have to slow down much for their new pet. The *inu* that Allia named Talon could keep up with them rather well, a testament to her stamina and her will to keep up. *Inu* were born runners, but Tarrin hadn't realized how much like the Selani they were until he saw Talon and Allia together. They had the same basic survival instincts. Both *inu* and Selani were nomadic, going to where the food was, and that meant that both

groups were used to travelling great distances. *Inu* were fast sprinters, but they were also effective distance runners, able to eat up the longspans with an easy stride that they could hold for hours on end. He realized that the Selani had probably learned from the *inu* when they first came to the desert, for the *inu*'s hunting tactics were similar to the Selani's. They used ambushing tactics, running down a meal in a furious sprint, and a pack cooperated during hunts meant to bring down more than one prey animal, with one group chasing meals to where the rest lay in wait. The Selani did the same thing, able to either run down lone prey or chase them into an ambush set up by the rest of the hunting party. The Selani had found the desert a harsh, forbidding place when they first arrived, so they probably turned to those who thrived here and learned the secrets of survival from them. Selani were alot like *inu*, and it was no surprise that someone had finally noticed that.

Talon herself surprised Tarrin a great deal. She was *very* intelligent, playful, and seemed quite happy to stay in their rather unusual pack. She seemed a formidable, intimidating predator to him, but at the same time she was affectionate and very social, and surprisingly gentle. It amused him that he realized that he'd done the same thing so many others do, only see the bad side in a thing. He'd judged the *inu* from a bad experience with a pack and their fearsome reputation, but hadn't once thought about how they *lived*. A pack of wolves seemed dangerous and forbidding, but wolves themselves were very social and intelligent animals, capable of great expressions of devotion and love to members of the pack. *Inu* were like wolves that way. They were ferocious, and they were dangerous, but they were also mothers and cub, mates and pack members. To members of the pack, they were cordial, even compassionate, dutiful and loyal, and protective. That, he realized, what was caused them to attack in what some thought was a suicidal manner. They weren't attacking mindlessly, it was a powerful instinct to defend the pack against a dangerous enemy. That instinct to defend caused them to be wildly aggressive, attacking even things like *kajats*, because the concept of pack lived on even if the entire pack was killed in the fight. Even the last surviving *inu* thought in terms of *pack*, as *we* instead of *I*, and would continue to fight on for the pack. It took the realization that the entire pack would die unless someone retreated to make them break off from an attack.

Talon had adopted Tarrin and Allia as her own pack, and she had assumed a place in it. *Inu* were exactly like wolves; they had a hierarchy of command that ran from the leader all the way down to the lowest member. She assumed that lowest place willingly, not willing to challenge the mighty Tarrin over his role as leader, and sensing that Allia was just as deadly. She wouldn't challenge Sarraya because she was a Druid, and that left her in the most submissive position. Besides, she was a very young *inu*, and the youngest occupied the lowest ranks. After all, they still had much to learn.

Allia seemed entranced by the *inu*, and Talon seemed just as taken with Allia. She had gained the animal's trust, and after Tarrin used Druidic magic to speak directly to it--something he'd done with Sapphire before she could speak--some ground rules were laid down and some Selani was taught so she could obey Allia's verbal and hand-signed commands. After that, the two of them would go off and hunt together, and they would often drag back animals too big for either of them to catch alone. Or at least seemingly. Allia's intelligence and understanding of her environment and the animal she was stalking allowed her to take on virtually any animal in the desert. It would be a bit dangerous, but she could do it. But with Talon's help, they could easily bring down any size prey animal, from the largest *sukk* to the most heavily armored *kusuk*. It seemed odd that Allia would choose an *inu* as a pet, but on the other hand, a sleek and deadly raptor fit in with his sister's personality. The fact that Talon was just as big as Allia only made it seem even stranger.

There was no doubt as to who Talon's favorite was. She was friendly with Sarraya and Tarrin, but she behaved like a puppy around Allia, prancing about and almost trembling with delight every time the Selani stroked her scaled flank. She was right by Allia's side almost all the time, and Allia was so trusting of her that she'd even let the *inu* groom her. She had no fear of the animal, but it seemed to him that fear of Talon was woefully misplaced. She *was* a deadly predator, but she was also an animal with a pack mentality. Since she'd adopted them as pack, it made her as safe and secure a travelling companion as they could have.

Sarraya found the whole thing quite amusing. "Next thing you know, Kerri's going to bring home a *kajat*," she teased, giving Tarrin a wolfish grin one fine desert evening, as the two of them sat on a short rock spire,

staring out into the desert to make sure no little surprises were close enough to cause any problems.

"As long as she feeds it, it's *her* problem," Tarrin snorted, which made the Faerie burst into laughter.

Several days of light travel as they adjusted to the *inu* seemed to fly by, but not without news of the outside world. Keritanima and Jenna projected out to him about every other day with news. Keritanima's news was redundant, for they were safely entrenched in his grandfather's house in Dusgaard, and were surrounded by an army of watchful Ungardt. They would probably be just as safe in the arms of the Goddess herself. The only real news there was that Auli seemed to be playing games with the human that had been altered to take his place. Fox, he was told, was an overly clever young man with a penchant for causing trouble, and someone like that would immediately catch Auli's attention. Tarrin wondered if the young human knew just how much trouble he was getting himself into. It wouldn't seem *too* strange for outsiders to see that, for Tarrin and Allia were quite close, and were known to tease and play with each other from time to time. Triana would be there to step on it if it got out of hand, though. She was visiting about every other day or so to keep an eye on Julia and make sure things were going alright for them.

The news from Suld wasn't as light-hearted. The strange inciter still hadn't been caught, and the crowds he was whipping into a frenzy in whichever square or marketplace he appeared in that day were getting bigger and bigger. Jenna had a real problem on her hands with him, and no matter how hard they tried, he always seemed to slip away during the chaos of the riots he would incite. On the king front, she reported that she had made significant progress. She had dropped Arren's name in the right places around Suld, and now there was open verbal speculation about the worthiness of the respected duke of a far-flung desmense. That was the first step to getting him on the throne, and Jenna told him she intended to go see him in a couple of days and order him to accept if the throne was offered to him. And she would make *sure* that it was offered to him. Jenna had a great deal of power, and her power inside the boundaries of Sulasia rivalled the monarch's. Picking a king was well within her abilities.

Jesmind had still yet to talk to him, and that was bothering him a little bit. She knew he was angry, but he figured she would have put that aside to make sure he was alright. That wasn't normal for her, and he realized that maybe he was going to have to put his anger aside for a little while and check on her himself. He was depending on her to let him keep tabs on his daughter, Mist, and Kimmie as well. Then again, that may be one of the reasons she wasn't talking to him. Jesmind had shown a great deal of jealousy over him, and he had the feeling it was because Mist and Kimmie, her two rivals, were *right there*. If they weren't around, she'd probably be a lot less jealous, but with them there, she felt she had to compete for his attention.

Probably not. As a reason, anyway. Jesmind could do something that Mist and Kimmie couldn't do, and that was talk to him any time she wished. That she wasn't using her advantage meant that something else had to be bothering her.

He knew that it had to be Jasana. Having to punish her that severely had strained her, but she knew it had to be done. That was another reason to talk to her, if only to cheer her up a little bit.

The next morning, the four of them ran with a sandstorm threatening from behind, and they came over a rise and looked over the very gentle hills that crowned the distant cloud on the horizon, not yet hidden by the wavering air caused by daytime heating. They pulled up and looked at it a long moment. "Here we are," Allia said. "We'll be there by the midday heat."

"I wonder why we haven't seen any Aeradalla," he growled, looking around in the sky. "The last time we came, we saw a bunch of them before getting this close."

"I was wondering the same thing myself," Sarraya agreed. "I didn't think we were this close, seeing as how we slowed down so Allia's pet could keep up with us."

"They don't normally go in this direction," Allia said. "They seem to hunt to the south of the Cloud Spire. You don't see them very often when you approach from other directions."

"As often as they fly just for fun, you'd think that we would have seen some of them by now," Tarrin fretted. "It's strange."

"Well, by this afternoon, we'll know," she told him sedately. "Let's move, brother. We're wasting valuable travel time."

"We'll find out now," he said bluntly, setting his feet. "I'm not about to wandering around up there unless I'm sure of things."

"How do you propose we do that?" Allia asked.

"Easy." He put a paw to his amulet. "Ariana."

"I forgot about that," Allia chuckled.

There was an interminably long pause. "Ariana," he called again.

"*Tarrin?*" came the startled reply. *"Is that you?"*

"Would it be anyone else?" he asked archly. "Where are you?"

"*At home,*" she replied.

"Good. I'm about twenty longspans northeast of you right now. Why aren't there any Aeradalla in the sky?"

There was a long pause, then her laughter reached him. "*What are you doing in the desert?*" she asked brightly.

"That's not important right now," he told her. "What's going on?"

"*It's the imbralla,*" she told him. *"A religious observance. For one ride we don't fly unless we're hunting or moving from tier to tier. We do it memory of our distant past, when we had no wings and couldn't fly. After the imbralla, we have a grand holiday to honor Shaervan and the gift he gave us. You're just in time for it, my friend,"* she laughed. *"The imbralla ends the day after tomorrow."*

"Do you think we'd cause much of row if me and a friend or two come up?" he asked.

"*Not at all,*" she replied. *"I think you'd be the only outsider we'd allow in. Andos hasn't forgotten what you did for him, you know. Neither have I. Do you know I'm the richest merchant in Amyr Dimeon now?"* she asked with a laugh. *"I also just happen to be the Queen,"* she added with a smug

little smirk in her voice. *"I'll tell Andos you're coming, and if he doesn't allow you to come up, I'll do the allowing for him."*

Allia smiled, and Sarraya laughed. "She hasn't changed," she snickered. "That's the same girl we saw flatten the nose of a fresh patron in that bar."

"From barmaid to queen. What an interesting turn of events," Tarrin chuckled.

"I'll tell you all about it when you get here. Do you need me to come and get you?"

"I can get up on my own."

"I rather thought you could. I've seen you fly before in Suld. Remember where the palace is?"

"One of those four buildings on the top tier surrounding the obelisk, right?"

"Just so. It's the one facing north. I'll tell the guards to expect you."

He was about to reply, but a power of staggering greatness suddenly broke in between them. *"Tarrin, come back immediately!"* it was Ianelle's voice, and she sounded frantic. Almost panicked. *"Tarrin, you have to come back right now!"*

"Ianelle?" he asked in confusion.

"There are Demons on the grounds, honored one! We need you!"

Tarrin was shocked, and Allia and Sarraya both gasped. Demons on the grounds! No wonder things had been so quiet! They were going to lure him back by attacking the Tower, because that's where his mates and children were!

Well, it was going to work. "I'm coming right now!" he said quickly, letting go of the amulet.

Demons on the grounds! The horror of the battle of Suld rose in him again, but this was a different kind of horror. The guards and Knights would have no way to fight against Demons, and only someone with an extensive knowledge of Sorcery could fight against them. Tarrin and Jenna had that knowledge, and she would need him to help her.

Everything was out the window now. They were attacking the Tower, and it held many things that were precious to him. The Goddess, his sister, his mates, his children. So much of his life tied up there, and he could not turn away, no matter how dangerous it may be to go back.

Without a thought, without even a warning, Tarrin enveloped the four of them in the weaves of Teleportation, and they vanished from the desert, within sight of the goal they had decided upon when they arrived, within sight of a goal they did not reach.

So close, yet a world away.

Chapter 11

Because he had no idea what was happening or where things were taking place, Tarrin Teleported them back outside the towers, in the sand-filled area where the Knights trained their cadets. It was the one place that he knew would be empty at that moment; if there truly were Demons on the grounds, then every body that could swing a sword would be fighting against them.

He felt it the instant he arrived. The Weave was literally thrashing around the Tower as he felt several powerful Circles scattered through the grounds, all of them wielding High Sorcery. Even from that distance, he could feel what they were doing, and he was a bit startled at their ingenuity. Sorcery could not harm a Demon, since it was a part of the world. Only things not of the world could harm one. Since they couldn't use Sorcery, what they *were* doing was sucking all the Wizard and Priest magic they could get their hands on out of the Weave. Because both forms of magic were other-worldly in origin, and therefore could do injury to a Demon. At that moment, Tarrin seriously doubted that any Wizard or Priest anywhere on the entire planet could cast any spells. If he tried, the power of the Sha'Kar and the *katzh-dashi* were intercepting the power before it could reach them, pulling it back to the Tower grounds, and then unleashing it as raw, magical force. They couldn't shape the Wizard magic because they weren't Wizards, and the same applied to the Priests. They had to use both types of intercepted magic in their primal states, but that primal state was more than enough to do significant damage to anything it struck. Raw magic was a destructive force, not a benign force. The power they could unleash in the real world wasn't even a fraction of what was in the Weave; Tarrin realized that doing what they were doing was horribly inefficient, and only a small portion of the magical energy they drew actually managed to manifest in the real world. They had to draw vast amounts of energy to form an attack with enough power to kill. That was why they hadn't already wiped out all the Demons.

Tarrin had never thought to try that before, but it was more than possible. The power of both forms of magic travelled through the Weave, and while it was in the Weave, it was subject to the power of a Sorcerer. Since it was not a spell, it was more of a trick, it was not one of the things he'd picked up when he was turned.

Tarrin swept a weave of Mind through the entire grounds, searching. They were *everywhere*. Demons literally surrounded his position, nearly two hundred of them. He couldn't tell what type they were, only that they were Demons.

He moved swiftly, drawing his huge black-bladed sword out of the *elsewhere*. "Allia, show me your swords," he told her quickly. Without a word, she drew them from under her loose shirt and presented them to him. He worked with what he was feeling from the Weave, reaching into it and suddenly *pulling*, pulling at any Wizard or Priest magic he could find. There was always that kind of magic in the Weave, either active or faint traces left behind when the spells finished their journey. Like a vast broom, Tarrin raked his power through the Weave, collecting up every tiny bit of that dormant energy he could find within his reach. And he had a *much* greater reach than the Circles formed around the grounds. A vast reservoir of Wizard and Priest magic was drawn in by his power, and he summoned the power of High Sorcery. His paws exploded into Magelight, and he touched each sword with a glowing finger, building an intricate semi-weave that mimicked a strand into both of her swords, then poured that energy into them. It acted like a temporary vessel for the magical power, lasting as long as the matrix of the tightly as he'd woven the seven strands around the metal of the blades kept its integrity. But the weaves, anchored to the metal, extended just out of it, making the swords glow with a brilliant light. The edges of that nimbus of trapped energy was razor-thin, giving the swords a lethal cutting bite.

"They can hurt Demons now," he said, releasing his grip on the reservoir of energy, and immediately sensing every Circle on the grounds tap into it. The Weave shuddered as the Circles fed off his accumulated power, and the sounds of sudden explosions and sharp detonations echoed and re-echoed across the grounds. "Come on, let's go deal with this," he said grimly.

Not like that! the Goddess commanded. *They need your power right now, kitten, not your sword!*

Before he could reply, a Whisper reached him. *Tarrin, you've got to give us more!* Ianelle demanded in a hurried, desperate manner. *We can't draw out much more on our own!*

Where is Jenna? he demanded quickly.

Fighting her own battle in the city! she replied urgently. *Quickly! We've nearly depleted what you gave us!*

He knew immediately and instinctively what he had to do. "Sarraya, stay with Allia," he ordered. "Keep an eye on each other, and remember that only Allia can do any real damage."

"I can be of use, even if I can't fight directly," Sarraya said quickly.

"Then do it," he said, putting a weave of Air underneath him. "Be careful," he told them as he quickly lifted off the ground, standing on a platform of his own power, rising up with shocking speed, rising up over the battlefield. He could see it now. Pockets of fighting surrounded the seven towers, heavy, intense fighting as groups of Knights, Wikuni Marines, and Arakite Legions surrounded lone or small groups of many kinds of horrid Demons. From human-like armored half-breed *Cambisi* to those huge vulture-like ones, even two of the four-armed, pincer-handed dogheaded Demons like the one he'd fought in Dala Yar Arak. Big ones, little ones, all of them ugly, and all of them killing humans with almost wild abandon, swinging black-bladed weapons or rending with teeth and claws or killing with crushing blows of raw power. Circles of Sorcerers, each led by a Sha'Kar, struck at the Demons almost recklessly, driving blasting, incandescent bolts of pure, unrefined magical power into them. The bolts exploded when they hit Demons, annihilating the creature, and occasionally accidentally catching up the warriors trying to pin them down in the magical firestorms, killing and injuring their own. The Sha'Kar were trying to minimize the friendly casualties, but what they were working with was raw and volatile, and they didn't have an exacting control over the power they trying to wield.

Worries of his family was pushed aside as he rose to the very top of the Tower, over it, looking down on the combatants like they were tiny

figurines. He backed up until he was nearly in the center of the Tower, and he distinctively felt it when he made contact with the major Conduit that rose up from the crystal dome at the very center of the Tower's top. The endless power of the Weave reached out and grabbed him with that contact, literally dragging him into the Conduit, and he felt its power race over him, around him, through him, making every bit of his body tingle and buzz like pins and needles as the power reached through him. As the *Goddess* reached through him, directly through him, using him as an instrument to do her bidding, just as she had done during the battle against the *ki'zadun*. He felt himself being shunted to the side as the power of the Goddess joined with his, and he felt her unfathomable energy touch him. Shrinking back from the immensity of her, seeking shelter from her might in the feeble shell of his mortal form, he tried to look away from her terrible beauty, tried not to experience the thrilling, terrifying, awe-inspiring sensation of being directly linked to the power of a god.

An amount of power so vast it would have destroyed him had he tried to wield it himself rose up out of the Conduit, causing the huge pillar of magical power to suddenly blaze with light brighter than the sun. As it had done when he was being turned, the entire Weave around the whole city of Suld suddenly became visible, glittering, glowing strings and strands of energy that crisscrossed the streets, the buildings, the ground, the sky, covering the cityscape with a multitude of glittering lines of magical power. Tarrin could only snap his head back and gasp as that power touched him, infused him, then flowed through him, reaching out into the *entire Weave* as the Goddess' invisible hand cupped the totality of her precious creation and twisted it, wringing all the otherworldly magical energy within it like a maid wringing a washcloth and funnelling it to the Tower of Six Spires.

She wasn't done. He could sense it, though he tried not to look into and through the connection that now existed between his mind and her godly intelligence. With a speed that made him look like an untrained Novice, flows of power, *hundreds* of individual spells, lanced out him like arrows shot from a bow, visible lances of magical power that erupted from the blazing pillar of light that was the Conduit and rained down all over the Tower grounds. Their targets were not the Demons, they were the grim, courageous humans fighting against invincible foes to give the Sorcerers a chance to destroy them. In that blink of an eye, in that one instant, several

hundred spells were woven through him, snapped down with blazing speed, and then released. Every spell activated unerringly, performing a trick similar to what Tarrin had done for Allia, as every human defender's weapon suddenly began to glow with a bright white light, a light that would allow the weapon to deal true harm to the Demons they were fighting.

In that touch passed information, and he understood the reason for her actions. The strictures in place would not allow her to interfere *directly*. She could not destroy the Demons unless they directly threatened her icon. But she *could* act indirectly, and that was exactly what she did, by giving those defending the Tower grounds a fighting chance against their invulnerable opponents. The only way in which she could directly interfere was when it concerned the Weave, her domain, and she had done that as well by gathering up all the alien magic that her children would possibly need in order to repel the Demonic invasion.

Her touch retreated from him, the door between his mind and her power closed, and he understood why they had needed him. Only a *sui'kun* could do what she just did. He and Jenna were the only ones she could have used to take direct action the way she had.

The draining effect it had on him was stunning. Swimming in a haze of bone-numbing weariness, Tarrin felt his own power slip, until the only thing holding him up was the power of the Conduit itself. She had used him as her vessel, her hand in the real world, but much of the power that had been unleashed in the material world had come from *him*. It would have killed anyone not a *sui'kun* instantly. His heart racing, his breathing shallow and as rapid as the drumming of a running rabbit's feet, Tarrin somehow managed to get himself out of the Conduit, where he crashed limply to the roof of the Tower. He had no idea how long he lay there, concentrating only on sucking in as much air as he possibly could, wondering if he was going to die laying there on that rooftop of utter exhaustion. He felt like the Goddess had ripped out a piece of his soul, and he could barely find the energy to breathe, let alone move. His heart began to falter slightly in its rapid beating, and the power of his regeneration began to falter as well as it too was drained, trying to draw up power from the All to enact recovery, but lacking the strength to do even that.

Then tiny hands were on him, and from their touch came an angry, invigorating strength. Tarrin gasped as a blast of warmth flowed through him, delivered by the tiny hands of Sarraya, flinched, then scrambled up to his paws and knees, fumbling with the sword that was still in his paw, miraculously retained through it all. Though it was a welcome sensation, it came in a vast wave, as if Sarraya were trying to make him explode with the excess energy she was sending into him.

"Enough!" he gasped, feeling his heartbeat start to slow, felt heat and vigor spread out into his arms and legs, felt strength return to muscles that had been completely depleted of energy. "I'm alright!"

"That was quite a show," Sarraya said without humor. "Can you move?"

"I can move, but I'm tapped," he grunted. "I couldn't weave a candle lit right now."

"Come on, let's get down there and do what we can," she said. "Whatever you did turned the tide, but they still need help."

Sarraya picked him up with a Druidic spell and carried him over the ledge. Tiny points of bright light littered the grounds below, glowing weapons that had suddenly turned the Demons from wild attackers to desperate defenders. Knights, Legionaires, and Marines pressed them from every side with those killing weapons, striking back blows that had been rained upon them, and any Demon that tried to disengage from the press was vaporized by an incandescent, ragged bolt of raw energy unleashed from a nearby Circle, Circles that were tapping into the vast energy that the Goddess had gathered for their use. Sarraya literally let him free-fall for several seconds, as the ground raced towards him, the fighting figures grew bigger and bigger, but he had no fear. He trusted his tiny companion utterly, and he knew she would slow him down before he hit the ground. A black-skinned *cambisi*, a male with blackened, bloody armor, was backing up from a Knight and two big cat Wikuni Marines, his armor actually affording him a protection that many Demons did not enjoy against the newly dangerous weapons wielded by their enemies. The half-breed Demon was backing up directly under where Tarrin was falling, putting his back to the white stone wall of the Tower for protection, completely oblivious to the doom that was descending on him from above. Tarrin gripped his sword in both paws and coiled it back over his head, arching his back and tucking in

his feet in a position that Sarraya would instantly recognize and understand. He wanted her to slow him down, but not *too* much.

Luck probably was with the three pressing the Demon, for a black-furred panther Wikuni looked up and saw Tarrin dropping like a missile of death, sword readied to strike, and he jumped back quickly. The other two saw his act and did the same, not wanting to give the Demon a hole to exploit, and that got them out of the way. He felt Sarraya's power pull on him mere longspans above the ground, and the sudden deceleration worked with him as his entire body uncoiled like a released spring, whipping the sword over his head with such force that it literally cut the air, making a ripping sound as it went. The sudden deceleration gave the sword even more power as momentum pulled it down as the rest of him suddenly went slower than the sword, and only his inhuman strength kept the sword from ripping out of his paws.

The sword's edge hit the Demon right in the center of its burgonet helmet, and the alien metal split like paper. The power of the blow sent the black-bladed weapon right down the centerline of the Demon's body, and the sword, with the awesome power of the falling strike behind it, literally cleaved the Demon into two perfect halves. The sword, with so much force that the metal armor offered no resistance, went on to bury itself to the hilt into the ground under the Demon, as tendons and bones in Tarrin's paws snapped from the strain of trying to *stop* the weapon after it had done its job. Black blood exploded from that perfect line sliced right down its middle, between its eyes, right down the middle of its nose, and then two halves slid against one another with the slick blood helping them along, and then crumpled to the ground limply.

Pausing a second to let his regeneration repair the damage to his paws, he pulled his sword out of the ground, cleaned of the acidic Demon blood by the earth it had cleaved along with the Demon, and stood up with glowing green eyes and a flat, implacable expression. The only recognition he gave the Demon he had just bisected was to wipe some of the burning, smoking black blood off of his face. He felt it burning at him like acid, but then Sarraya was there, using a Druidic spell to strip the black blood off of him and the three defenders before it could eat into their flesh.

Raising the undamaged sword blade--*nothing* seemed capable of harming his prized black-bladed sword!--he gave the two Wikuni and the Knight a calm look, a look of utter, complete, and icy resolve. This was not a time to rage. This was a time to let his cold human fury do its work, focusing him on what had to be done and not worrying about things that would distract him. They gaped at him for a moment, then the Knight laughed ruefully. "That's one way to do it," he remarked.

"We're not done yet," he said. "Come with me."

"As you command," the panther Wikuni said instantly.

Ianelle, report, he Whispered. That didn't require any real energy to use.

Whatever you did, it's working, she answered as Tarrin and the three behind him ran towards the North Tower, where a pocket of Knights and Legionaires were surrounding a trio of strange stocky Demons with slimy, shiny skin, webbed feet, and frog-like heads filled with huge teeth. *We're starting to kill them off as fast as they're appearing.*

Are they Teleporting in?

They can't do that. Their powers don't work on the grounds. They're appearing around the fence and running in.

Take the power the Goddess gave us and build a Circle big enough to surround the grounds with a barrier; he ordered. If we can stop them from pouring in, we can kill the ones already here. The humans and Wikuni are getting the upper hand now, they won't need your help except with the cambisi.

And they were. As they ran towards them, the Knights and Legionaires managed to spear one of the trio of Demons, which staggered and fell out of sight, as the remaining two turned their backs to one another and flailed wildly with their webbed, clawed hands. Without their invulnerability, the Demons were suddenly unarmed and soft targets, with only teeth, claws, and occasionally strength or size to use to fight back. Only the armed, armored *cambisi* would present a real threat, for they were all expert swordsmen and enjoyed the benefits of their armor.

As you command, honored one, she replied immediately.

Get Darvon to form up at the entrances to the towers, he added. We can't let them get into the towers.

He's already done that, she replied, and then she retreated from him.

The quartet stopped advancing on the group when a Knight ran his sword through one of the Demons, and the exposed back of the other suddenly bloomed a spear shaft between its shoulder blades as a Legionaire skewered it from behind. They weren't alone long as one of the big ones, a *glabrezu*, howled in fury and advanced on them, its bloodstained pincers on its outer arms clacking in horrid anticipation. Behind it advanced a pair of *cambisi*, the night-skinned, scaly looking humanoid half-breed Demons brandishing bloody swords, using the much larger fullblood Demon as a shield.

Tarrin had them spread out with sharp movements of his paws, then raised his sword in both hands and squared off, challenging the *glabrezu*. He'd fought such a beast before, and he was aware that they were very fast, very strong, and were very dangerous. But then again, so was he. It bellowed when it reached them, and Tarrin barely registered the sound of steel on steel as the Marines and the Knight engaged the two *cambisi* as he slid aside of a plunging thrust with the sharp ends of its pincers on one huge arm, like a spear aimed at his chest, then ducked under the wide, sweeping blow of the other. The Demon recovered from its lunge fast enough to knock wide Tarrin's attempt to stab it in the lower belly; it was odd to fight an opponent taller than him. He only came up to the Demon's chest. Unfazed by its defense, Tarrin reared back and swung his sword in a massive sideways blow, turning it back in the same direction from which it had been deflected. The Demon tried to block it with the bony pincer, which usually would be an effective shield, but it had never faced a weapon like Tarrin's. The weapon didn't seem to be magical, but its edge was incredibly keen, and the inhuman power he could put behind it gave it awesome cutting ability. The majority of both bony pincers spun away from the arm in a wide arc as the Were-cat's sword neatly severed them, then Tarrin lunged in with the sword low to get inside the inevitable retaliatory strike from the other outside arm. He ducked under the two smaller taloned hands that ended the arms that stuck out of the front of its chest as they reached out for him, seeking his eyes, spinning slightly as he reversed his grip on his sword with one paw and let go with the other, so the blade extended

from the outside of his gripping fist rather than the inside, which was the standard holding grip. Ducking down as much as he could, one paw on the ground to give him stability and lower his profile even more, Tarrin continued to move forward, slithering between the giant Demon's spread legs. It hunched over, its good pincer-arm aiming down to stab him with the sharp ends, but then it howled in a high-pitched, agonized keening as Tarrin's shifted sword sliced across the side of its leg, severing the tendons and muscles in the knee. Tarrin cleared out from under it as its lamed leg crumpled under its weight, and then, with a savage snarl, he flipped the sword back around into a proper grip and lashed out with it at the Demon's unprotected lower back, shearing through its spine and sending a good longspan of blade through its body. The Demon collapsed to the ground, its upper body swaying grotesquely without any bone to hold it to the lower part of the body, but Tarrin was on it before it could even roll over. With a vast overhanded chop, he separated its doglike head from its body with one precise, well-aimed blow.

He recovered just in time to parry a strong slash from one of the *cambisi*, backing up a step to give his larger weapon enough room to bring it to bear. One Wikuni was down and still, the other was kneeling on the ground with a hand to his chest, bleeding from a wide gash in his chest, and the Knight was defending his fallen companions from the other *cambisi* as it pressed him with light, precise thrusts and flicks of his serrated-edged longsword. The *cambisi* before him wielded his weapon lightly and surely, like a fencer, so Tarrin decided on using raw, elemental brutality. Quickly and without much finesse, he brought his sword down on the *cambisi* with vast power, staggering it back as it blocked a blow that would have split its head in half had it connected. The red-glowing eyes of the halfbreed flickered with shock and surprise as Tarrin swung again, then again, hitting it with such power that it could not recover in time to strike back before Tarrin was screaming that black blade right back at the Demon's face. With great, sweeping blows, Tarrin backed the Demon back almost into its companion, then quickly and deftly pinioned his weapon and slapped wide a desperate attempt to stab the length of its sword into his belly before he could rain down another punishing blow. Caught off guard by a quick and convincing display of finesse and fencing ability, the Demon did not recover in time to avoid Tarrin's club-like fist when it smashed into the Demon's helmet. He had learned long ago that he may not be able to do

Demons any harm with such attacks, but the raw power behind the blow was something not even against which a Demon's invulnerability could protect. Tarrin had learned, the hard way, the magic went only so far when it defended one against the immense power of *physics*.

Stunned by the devastating blow, the side of its helmet caving in and skewing aside so it covered the Demon's eyes, and spinning in a full circle, the *cambisi* staggered back from the massive power behind that attack, staggering right into its companion, knocking its sword inward at a critically bad moment. The Knight pounced on his foe's momentary incapacity, crunching his glowing broadsword into the Demon's breastplate with a powerful thrust. Tarrin raised his weapon and drove it into the Demon's head, before it could right its helmet, and both foes dropped nervelessly to the ground.

"Sarraya, see to the wounded," he ordered of the invisible, lingering Faerie as the Knight gave him a wolfish grin. He raised his visor, and Tarrin realized that it was Ulger.

"You're as good as they say you are," he complemented. "Come on, boy, let's go get some more of them!"

"I'll do what I can for these two," Sarraya called from somewhere beside him. "I'll catch up in a bit."

"Be careful," he ordered.

"Always," she replied before he heard her wings buzzing, lowering her to the Wikuni laying on the ground.

The Were-cat and the Knight sallied forth from that battleground and became a mobile terror for the Demons, attacking those already scrambling in frenzied desperation to protect themselves from a pack of incensed Knights, Marines, and Legionaires that had revenge burning in their expressions and fury seething in their eyes. They gathered up more and more stragglers as they finished off Demons already engaged by other defenders, stragglers that were quickly forming up with other Demons to seek safety in numbers. The defenders had trouble attacking these large groups of Demons, so they too began to gather, and the most dangerous of these groups was Tarrin's. The stray Knights, Marines, and Legionaires that he and Ulger had picked up had formed something of a loose mobile wedge

formation with Tarrin at its point and the Legionnaires and their large shields and spears directly behind him to engage Demons not totally focused on the lethal Were-cat. The heavily armored Knights protected the flanks of the Legionnaires, also protecting the Wikuni Marines that prowled the edges of the formation seeking to flank and envelop enemies struck by the wedge by giving them a secure base within the wedge to which they could retreat when necessary. They moved about the battlefield to engage any Demon that had been trapped by pockets of defenders from joining the main host. Tarrin would slam into the Demons with the Legionnaires' spears jabbing at them from behind him, their shields interlocked to keep the Demons off the rest of the wedge as the Knights anchored the Legionnaires' flanks and the Wikuni Marines flowed out quickly to surround the engaged foe. Though nobody had called out that they use that tactic, it proved to be devastating. All of them were seasoned, veteran fighters, and they had instinctively gathered into the most efficient and effective formation they could have used. The wedge grew wider and wider as more men joined it, each man going immediately to where his comrades were stationed within the formation, and the large moving formation quickly became a rallying point for all the other groups of defenders that had been doing their best to prevent the Demons from regrouping.

Tarrin felt the individual Circles suddenly break up, and then reform into a huge one, one that had to number at least a hundred Sorcerers, a circle of immense power. It touched High Sorcery, and then he felt it get to work. He felt them reach into the power the Goddess had gathered for them, and then the entire Tower grounds seemed to shimmer visibly. Light bloomed at its edges as Tarrin felt them build the barrier of stolen magic, building a sectioned shell of Sorcery some twenty spans high and then filling its hollow center with the alien magic the Goddess had pooled for their use. The result of their work was not a solid barrier, but a highly volatile, explosive field divided into thousands of small cell structures that, the first Demons to touch it learned, quite literally exploded outward in a fiery blast whenever it was disturbed. Whoever had been leading that Circle had been clever in anchoring it into that pool of alien magic, so that every time a section of it was drained off by destroying a Demon, the individual shell weaving that had exploded mended itself using flows from its partner cells, and energy to replace what was expended in the explosion filled the hole. And since only one cell of the aggregate would explode when it was

disturbed, not exploding those to either side, it kept the Demons from making the whole barrier detonate and then rush in before the Circle could rebuild it without needing thousands of Demons to all attack the barrier at the same time. And Tarrin rather doubted that they had that many to waste. The barrier was a self-replenishing defensive ring of highly reactive, unstable energy that destroyed any Demon that touched it, and it stopped the invasion of new Demons onto the grounds instantly.

Sorcery that clever had to be Ianelle's handiwork.

In moments, the steady stream of Demons rushing onto the grounds stopped. Dramatically. Those trapped on the grounds were very quick to gather into one large mass, and then they turned and started moving quickly towards the defenders, seeking to swarm them over in a single hideous charge. The defenders too had quickly regrouped, forming a single body a thousand men strong that stood right in the path of the Demons, and the Lord General of the Knights himself arrived quickly to take command of it. He arrived on a black charger, heavily armored with barding, the warhorse's protective armor showing signs that Demons had tried to claw through it. Darvon's sword was pitted and burned from Demon blood, and he had some blood seeping from the shoulder of his armor, staining his side, but he moved in the saddle with sureness and his booming voice was sharp and decisive. "Alright, men, form up in the wedge our clever Tarrin has been leading around the grounds!" he called in a commanding tone. "Legionaries in the center, Knights on the flanks, and Marines behind and ready to envelop when we hit!" Darvon himself moved quickly to the center of the hastily forming formation, fully intending to serve as its spearpoint alongside Tarrin. The Legionaries gathered behind them into three rows, and two rows of Knights extended out to each side of them as the Marines set themselves in the center of the wedge, ready to sweep out when it broke through.

Tarrin flashed the Lord General a quick smile, one that was returned enthusiastically. Darvon was old, almost elderly, but he was still one of the toughest fighters the Knights had. His aged arm had swung a sword longer than most of the Knights under his command had been alive, and he was regarded with a towering respect by professional soldiers all over the world. That respect gave the men behind him tremendous confidence facing the

unworldly enemy, confident in the fact that the legendary Darvon would lead them to victory.

Darvon clapped down his visor and raised his sword. "Stand ready!" he boomed, and the humans and Wikuni behind him suddenly roared in reply, as swords, spears, and shields were raised and readied.

"We won't stand in defense!" he shouted defiantly as his night-coated warhorse pranced a little under him. "We won't huddle here like cowering babes and wait for them to come to us! We'll ram into those stinking Demons while they're still confused and send them back to the Hells they crawled out of!"

The echoing cry of furious assent from the defenders was almost deafening, swords and spears bouncing in the air over their owners' heads as they screamed their enthusiastic acceptance of Darvon's commands. Tarrin could clearly hear the shrieks in reply coming from the Demons; despite being at a disadvantage, they still wanted to fight, still wanted to kill.

"Alright then, men! They're waiting for us! Let's not disappoint them!" He turned his horse and pointed forward with his sword. "At a walk, forward!"

They started out at a slow walk, as the Demons some distance ahead quickly tried to line up even as they moved towards the defenders.

"At a trot, forward!" Darvon boomed, picking up the pace. Tarrin didn't have to run, he simply stretched out his pace to keep up with the Lord General beside him as the armor of the men behind started jangling as it bounced with their trotting steps. The Demons began to scream and brandish their claws or weapons, and they too picked up their pace.

"At a run, forward!" Darvon commanded as he spurred his horse to a canter, and the entire host suddenly broke into a sharp, fast, yet still tightly organized run. They kept their lines, kept from spreading out, keeping a pace that Darvon set that any professional soldier could hold for a short amount of time. It wasn't a dead sprint, which would let the men behind set the wedge, but it was fast enough that their crashing into the Demons was going to split their enemies into two groups. The Demons, not nearly as disciplined as the soldiers they faced, charged at the host, breaking up as the faster ones outpaced the slower ones. Every eye was locked on that

unworldly horde of nearly two hundred Demons, big ones, small ones, thin ones and heavy ones, but all universally ugly. But not a single man faltered in his charge, despite charging into battle against the spawn of the Hells themselves. As one, they were confident in Darvon, and they would not break under his command.

"Set--shields!" Darvon barked, raising his own shield to his side, tucking it in. In a singular rattling sound, the Legionaires all raised their curved, rectangular shields to form the shield wall that would split the Demons' line apart. The Demons only screamed in fury and ran at them even faster, some of them frothing at the mouth with a horrible grayish foam.

"Spears--ready!" the Lord General boomed, and the forest of raised spearpoints suddenly lowered in a single motion, putting glowing steel spearpoints to either side of Darvon's charger and the loping Were-cat. The Demons did not falter in their mad charge, closing the distance in a shocking amount of time. But still the men behind did not waver. Tarrin raised his black-bladed sword grimly, ready to do his job and punch through the lines, break a hole in them the host would use to separate them, surround them, then grind them to dogmeat within a ring of unyielding steel teeth.

"No mercy!" Darvon boomed furiously as he raised his sword to ready to do battle with a vulture Demon not ten spans away. The defenders screamed in an intimidating war cry and followed as Darvon deflected aside the cruel point of the vulture-Demon's wicked hooked polearm with his shield, then sent its head flying with a powerful stroke from the saddle of his warhorse. Tarrin didn't bother with fancy fencing, he simply chopped his sword over his head at a heavily armored *cambisi*, shearing through the sword raised in defense and cleaving a horrid wound in its face and shoulder. The power of the blow sent it flying to the side, only to be trampled into the ground by the warhorse's grinding steel-shod hooves.

The impact of the defenders and the Demons was loud, ringing across the grounds and well into the city. The larger Demons stopped the forward movement of the wedge, but only momentarily, for their lines were very loose and disorganized. The Demons did not fight as a group, they fought as a collection of individuals, and that prevented them from reacting to the

tactics the defenders used against them. Instead of regrouping in the hole that Darvon and Tarrin opened in their middle, they instead each fought its own private battle. But the spears of the Legionaires kept them from closing in and using their size to break up the defenders' lines, and those trying to get at the Knights found that their heavy armor and powerful broadswords made them impossible to split up. The wedge began moving forward as the first Demons to reach them were cut down, and those Demons reaching them after the initial rush came with a wider and wider gap in the center as Tarrin and Darvon, still side by side and moving ahead of the formation, split the charging Demons into two groups, leaving the rapidly dissolving bodies of their victims behind them as they advanced. When they ran out of Demons in front of them, they split up, Tarrin going one way and Darvon the other to engage those on the flanks, and the Legionaires, now with Ulger serving as the head of the wedge, advanced into the hole they created behind them. Amid the din of shouts, ringing steel, and the shouts and cries of the wounded, and the howling and screaming of the Demons, the wedge passed between the lines of the Demons and began to widen as the Marines rushed out from the core to either side and enveloped their foes, surrounding them.

The formation worked perfectly. The two pockets of Demons, realizing to their chagrin how they had been trapped, fought with zealous ferocity, assaulting the Legionaires and Knights that now stood between them, but the spears of the Legionaires on the front rank had been discarded and now they wielded glowing shortswords. They let the Demons crash into their shields, and then expertly shifted the large shields and stabbed out from behind them with their short-bladed weapons. Demons screamed in pain and fury, clawing at the shields, the stronger ones ripping them away, but the Legionaires simply closed ranks around any man who fell, men who lost their shields stepping back into the formation against the shields of the second rank and letting the men on each side in the first rank close the hole with their shields, denying the Demons a chance to get between them. The Legionaires in the second and third ranks still wielded their spears, jabbing and thrusting them at the Demons, pushing them back and preventing them from getting inside the front rank, aiming for the face and chest and shoulders, trying to maim or incapacitate if they couldn't kill. Marines that had swiftly gotten behind them and began assaulting them from behind now proved to be a deadly distraction to those trying to get past the Legionaires

and Knights, allowing those in front to get in a killing blow as the Marines behind harried and harassed them.

Without their magic, without their invulnerability, and without any kind of coherent battle strategy, the Demons fell quickly to their highly organized and cooperating adversaries. Darvon and Tarrin continued to cut wide swaths through the Demons, breaking them up into smaller and smaller pockets, and the wedge finally broke up as the Legionaires and Knights helped the Marines surround those dwindling pockets of resistance and chop them down. In mere moments of furious, intense fighting, a force of two hundred Demons had been destroyed by a thousand mere mortals, and there was an eerie silence after the squeals of the last Demon faded away.

Then one man, an Arakite Legionaire with blood flowing from a nasty claw gash over his left eye, raised his spear and shouted in triumph. Another man joined him, then another, and then more, until the survivors cried out, flushed with victory over their unnatural enemies.

Tarrin didn't feel like joining them, and neither did Darvon, it seemed. He raised his sword quickly and got their attention. "It's not over yet, men!" he shouted. "Fan out in groups of fifteen and make sure there aren't any loners out there! Five of each, and watch each other's backs!"

Tarrin paused while the men quickly scrambled to obey the Lord General. The attack had no real sense to it. Did the Demons come here just to make him return, just to cause trouble? Where was Jenna? Was she alright? He cast out his senses into the Weave, and even that seemed to tire him. But he could feel her somewhere in the city, relatively stationary. The Weave around her showed no signs that she was doing anything, but it was shifting a little with her emotions. He could feel it clearly; Jenna was *very* angry. Something had happened out there, something to draw her out of the Tower, and then the Demons swarmed in while she was gone.

Wait. That was *not* right. The Demons showed no sign of using any kind of coherent battle strategy, but luring Jenna out of the Tower meant that there *was* a design behind things. What could be gained by getting Jenna out of the Tower? Tarrin mulled that over quickly, lowering his sword as he thought. Getting her power out was the first thing he saw. If Jenna had been here, the Demons would have been stopped almost before they could have

gotten started. The Goddess would have used Jenna instead of him, and what was more, Jenna could have Circled with virtually everyone in the entire Tower, creating an awesome magical force that even a Demon would fear, a force that would have stopped the attack in its tracks.

Something a Demon would fear.

Jenna had been lured out of the Tower to prevent her from stopping the invasion. That much was plain. But *why*? The Demons out here didn't do anything but run around and try to kill people on the grounds. None of them he'd seen had tried to force their way into any of the buildings, and they'd had the chance to do it several times. Why come out here and attack men on the grounds when they went to all the trouble to pull Jenna off the grounds? They didn't do any lasting damage. The only thing they'd managed to do was bring him back to the Tower.

They were a *diversion*!

With an awful cold feeling in his stomach, Tarrin turned and bolted for the main Tower, but before he took more than a dozen steps, the Weave suddenly wrenched, wrenched with such a power that Tarrin felt it like a knife twisting inside him. There was a drastic, dreadful surge in its power, as if the entire Weave was trying to flow into one place.

And that place was *in the Tower*.

Jasana! Jasana was crossing over!

Only one thing could make her cross that line, to make her desperate enough to have to resort to Sorcery. She was in danger!

The Demons on the grounds had been a diversion! Their real target was *Jasana*!

Unable to Teleport or project, almost too tired to run, Tarrin still managed to dig as deep inside him as he could and summon up reserves from some unknown source, reserves tapped out of abject fear and concern for his daughter. It propelled him faster than any horse had ever run, and his mind raced even as a cold hand gripped his heart and squeezed it mercilessly. They'd distracted him and everyone else while someone or something else had snuck into the Tower and attacked his daughter! That was why none of the Demons tried to force their way into the Towers...they

didn't want to interfere with what was happening *inside*! Tarrin endured the pain as he felt the Weave writhe and contract under his daughter's personal struggle, felt it rush into her like an avalanche unbidden, felt it seek to infuse her until her body literally exploded from the energy contained within. If she lost control and was Consumed, the explosion would kill everyone on the Grounds and bring the Towers down!

He didn't even bother with the door. He ran right through it, sending shards of wood flying in every direction as he plowed through the obstacle. He trampled some faceless person without even realizing, running the robed figure down without losing a single step. He felt the Weave reaching its crescendo as he reached the stairs, flying up them six and seven at a time, frantic to reach his daughter before she reached the moment of truth, to tell her what to do, to keep her from destroying herself. He abandoned running in circles and bounded up them in huge leaps, using the walls as springboards, taking entire floors in two vaults off the circular walls.

He reached their floor! He barrelled down the hallway madly, seeing the dead bodies of human servants lining the sides of the passage, trails of blood. Someone had attacked his family! He turned a corner and saw, to his horror, the door of Jesmind's apartment smashed in, with debris laying on the floor beyond the open doorway from what he could see. Where were Jesmind and Mist?

Jasana was infused as far as she could possibly be infused with the power of the Weave, far beyond the power he himself could hold. Even in his frenzy, in his terror at what was happening, he was *awed* by the absolute power contained within his daughter's tiny body. Such and incredible *power*! Almost there, almost there! If he thought it would do any good, he would have shouted, but he knew she wouldn't hear him. He was too late! Just a second too late! Jasana was already at the climax. If she didn't Transmute herself and do it *now*, she wasn't going to make it!

Think! he cast his thought frantically towards her. *You've touched me, cub! Make yourself like what you've felt in me!*

And she did. The power raging into her simply *stopped*, and then the power she contained turned inwards on her, sweeping through her as she Transmuted herself, altered her body so that it could withstand the destructive forces the magic brought to bear against her tiny body. Just like

that, in the span of a second, it was over. She had used up all the power within her, and now she was isolated from the Weave until she learned once more how to come into touch with her powers.

For her, it was over. The Weave shuddered at Jasana's Transmutation, and then the entire thing seemed to *thicken*. It was the only explanation he could rationalize. The strands around them became thicker, stronger, if only by a negligible amount, every strand becoming a tiny bit more conducive to holding and transmitting magical power. The Goddess said that the Weave benefitted every time a Sorcerer crossed over; that had to be the effect.

But there was no relief in his daughter's survival. He reached the doorway and slid to a stop inside, certain that something dreadful had happened.

What graced his eyes was something that he would never, *ever* forget, ranking as the most horrid memory he would ever confront. The room had been destroyed in a savage fight, debris and pieces of furniture laying everywhere, and sprawled on the floor with the debris, laying in pools of their own blood, were Jesmind and Mist. Both had been slashed by some kind of edged weapon, and both were unnaturally pale, their breathing shallow and faltering. Across the room, holding both of his children in its arms, was a creature he had seen before. It was a Demon, a Demon with the upper body of a woman, the lower body of a snake, and six arms. He recognized this one; he knew her personally. This was the same Demon he had banished during the Battle of Suld. In her left arms, she held a limp, pallid Jasana, knocked out by her ordeal. In her right arms she held Eron, who was thrashing, hissing, spitting, gouging in vain at her ensnaring arms with his tiny claws, even biting at her. And in the left hand not holding Jasana, she held Jegojah's magical wounding sword.

In horror, he realized that she had broken in and used it on Jesmind and Mist. They would have ignored a weapon, and she used that against them to deal them incapacitating blows immediately. Tarrin had felt the pain-amplifying bite of that deadly weapon. And even now, the magic of the sword was keeping his mate and friend from regenerating, spilling their lifeblood out onto the floor.

I told you I'd repay you, her thought reached him. It was ecstatic, triumphant. She held up his two children and raised the sword when he took

a step towards her, his ears laying back and his eyes igniting from within with the unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger. Internally, he had to crush the Cat in a vice-like grip to keep his powerful protective instincts from making him fling himself at the Demon. As long as she held that deadly blade to his children, he could not attack her. And she knew it, smiling viciously at him as her dead eyes burned with evil delight.

My Master wants the Firestaff, and you will deliver it to him, her thought touched him. You will do it to recover one of your children. This one, I think, she said, hefting Jasana. The other you can have now, as insurance you don't try to follow me.

Then, with deliberate slowness, her eyes boring into him with evil pleasure, she deliberately raised the sword and drew it across Eron's exposed neck, cutting his throat. The blood boiled from the ghastly wound, and Eron gurgled feebly as the Demon brutally tossed his body aside, where it crumpled to the floor with a quickly and horrifically expanding pool of blood forming around his head.

The enraged bellow that tore from him could not define the fury, the rage, the incredible pain and injury she had dealt to him with that one act. His claws came out and he coiled up to fall on her and tear her to tiny pieces, but the sword raised again and touched Jasana's neck. That made him freeze instantly, fear for his daughter preventing his rage from taking control of him.

You can chase me or try to save them, her thought echoed in his mind triumphantly. If you're fast enough, you may even save the boy-child's life, but I rather doubt it. Choose, Were-cat. Save one life or three. I leave it to you.

Then, her coils doubling over on themselves, she slithered backwards towards the balcony door. For an awful moment, Tarrin's rage nearly made him launch himself at her unprotected back as she turned around, but an image of Faalken's tomb stayed him instantly. He would *not* let his mate and son and Mist die over his need to kill that Demonic bitch for what she'd done! They had to keep Jasana alive, or they couldn't get the Firestaff from him! Save what he could, and leave recovering Jasana for after the others were saved!

Though it killed him, he made no move towards the *marilith* as she slithered out onto the balcony and then somehow went over the side. His lunge was instead to Eron, rolling him over and putting desperate hands on his neck, trying to stem the horrific flow of blood pouring out of the grisly wound. He was spent, utterly spent, and even as he desperately reached out to try to command his power of Sorcery, he knew that it was going to fail. Even as his son's skin turned chalky and the flow of blood pouring from the dreadful wound began to wane. Never before had he felt so powerless, not known what to do, not had someone to help him. He gave a strangling cry as he redoubled his efforts, terror and panic starting to overwhelm his rational attempts to exert his spent will against the Weave.

Calm down! the voice of the Goddess touched him, though her own voice was frantic. *I can't do anything unless you calm down, kitten! Open yourself to me, quickly! There's no time!*

Trying to calm down, trying to reign in the firestorm of emotion roaring through his mind, he put his paws on Eron's shoulders and tried to center himself. He knew he had to reach out to the Goddess as she reached out to him, and in their meeting he would become her instrument, but his eyes could only look at the deadly wound in his son's neck and the blood that was saturating the knees of his trousers.

It seemed an eternity, but then he finally felt her searching for him, reaching out for him. He rushed out to meet her, and in their touch he was again shunted off the the side as the awesome power of the Goddess reached directly into him, through him sweeping him up with it and joining his mind to hers. He could feel her near-panic, her fear and fury at what had happened, but she did not let it her affect her judgement. With her swift and sure manner, she wove the spell that Tarrin had improvised to defeat the killing magic of Jegojah's sword, wove it through him and into Eron, Mist, and Jesmind simultaneously, something he would not have been able to do. That was all she needed to do, all that needed to be done, and all that Tarrin's weary body could withstand as the regenerative powers of the Were-cats would kick in now that the magic defeating them had been neutralized.

As his eyesight failed and the Goddess quickly separated herself from him, he saw the terrible gash in his son's neck begin to close, and pink flush

his chalky skin as his body's regeneration restored the blood spilled by Jegajah's sword. All he could feel was relief as he spiralled down into unthinking blackness, knowing that his son and the mothers of his children were going to live.

Chapter 12

The first thing he smelled was Jenna.

Her scent was saturating his nose, and he dimly realized as his mind clawed its way back out of the blackness that it was all over the bedding on which he was laying. The old smell came from the bedding, but there was also a fresh scent of her, mixing in his nose with the scents of Jesmind, Mist, Allia, Sarraya, and his son, Eron.

Comprehending that one scent made him snap immediately awake. Eron! The last thing he remembered was seeing his son's wound slowly began to close, and color start to bloom in his pale skin. Happening so fast that it made him a little dizzy, Tarrin's mind became completely alert and his eyes snapped open even as he sat up in the bed, fear clamping around his heart. Was Eron alright? Had he healed completely? Had the terrible wound had any lingering effects?

He was in Jenna's bedchamber. He knew that because her scent was everywhere, and the place fit his sister's personality. It was a fairly large room, filled with furniture that was both handsome to the eye and sturdy. Jenna was a farmgirl, and to her, durability was just as important as the way it looked. On a farm, getting the most out of something was very important. Before he could get more than the most cursory look around, he was buried by hugging arms. Jesmind and Mist had rushed forth to embrace him, and their scents in his nose was like the sweetest perfume. He held each of them tightly for a moment, then made them give over when Eron climbed into the bed. Tarrin hugged his son to him desperately, with trembling arms, unable to feel nothing except the relief that came with a parent's assurance that his child was well. He clasped Allia's hand as she greeted him, then sat sedately on the bed beside him as Mist and Jesmind continued to cling to him.

Still holding Eron tightly, who hugged him back just as intensely, he looked at Jesmind. His mate had tears standing in her eyes, and he could see the desperate, terrible feeling of loss that was raging inside her. It was

inside him, too. He could see that she was trying to tell him what happened, but he remembered it all with an awful clarity.

"I'll get her back," he promised immediately, reaching out to her. She clutched his paw with both of hers, then burst into tears and buried her face against his shoulder.

"How long?" he asked, looking to Mist.

"You've been asleep for nearly a day," she answered. "Jenna wouldn't let anyone try to wake you," she said in an accusing manner.

"Jenna did the right thing," he admonished in a grim tone. "What happened after I went out?"

Jenna stepped forward with Dolanna and Allia. Sarraya, who was sitting on Jenna's shoulder, had to buzz her wings a little to keep from sliding off the young woman's narrow shoulder. "The Demon got off the grounds," she answered. "I'm sorry, Tarrin, but she had a sword to Jasana's throat. Nobody dared challenge her, so they had to let her go. They had no choice. She disappeared into thin air the instant she got on the other side of the fence."

"She's a Demon, Jenna," he said woodenly. "She can Teleport. She had to get off the grounds before she could do it. Now tell me how that Demon got inside the Tower. Didn't anyone notice something like *that* moving around?"

"We found how she did it," she said, holding up a strange hat. "This is magical. It changes the appearance of anyone who wears it. She got in hiding under an Illusion."

"How did it work on the grounds?" he asked quickly. "Wizard magic won't work here."

"This isn't *Wizard* magic, brother," she said. "It's a relic left behind from the Age of Power, like the cold metal in our cellar back home, and this one has weaves in it. It's an object of *Sorcery*."

Tarrin snorted, kicking himself. Of course it was Sorcery. Only Sorcerers could create Illusions. He fixed his eyes on the hat, and he could feel the weaves inside it.

"They found it in Jesmind's apartment," Jenna said. "It must have come off when she attacked."

"What's happened while I was asleep? And where were you, Jenna?" he demanded.

"I was up to my eyeballs in Demons," she snapped in reply. "I had to go out and stop another riot, but when I got there, I was suddenly swarmed over by a horde of Demons. It was all I could do to protect myself and as many as the rioters as I could. And we found that instigator," she said with a growl. "It was a *cambisi*!"

Almost immediately, the depth of the plan locked in his mind. "And I'll bet a Demon set the fire in the palace," he concluded emotionlessly.

"If they did, I couldn't find any evidence of it," Jenna answered. "They may have just taken advantage of the situation."

Still holding Eron, he patted Jesmind's shoulder comfortingly. "I need your strength right now, my mate," he told her in a calm, icy tone. "We can both fall apart *after* we get Jasana back."

Jesmind sniffled a few times, then pulled off his shoulder, her eyes haunted, but her expression stony. "I'm sorry," she apologized in an emotionless manner, much like his own. "You're right. We'll have plenty of time for getting emotional after we get our daughter back."

He took her paw in his own and gave it a gentle squeeze. She gave him a wan smile, and he looked to Mist. "Where is Triana?"

"On the way here," Sarraya answered, flexing her wings a little and shifting in her seat on Jenna's shoulder. "She'll be here within the hour, I think. We weren't the only ones attacked, Tarrin," she reported, a little hesitantly. "Keritanima and the rest had to put down their own Demonic incursion."

Tarrin sensed her reluctance. "What happened? Was someone hurt?"

Sarraya lowered her eyes, her expression pensive. "I don't think you're ready to hear this, Tarrin," she warned.

"If you don't tell me now, while I'm too numb to react, you may not like what happens when you do," he warned her bluntly.

"Your grandfather is dead, Tarrin," she blurted. "They killed him when he tried to stop them from getting Julia. They all came after Julia like she was the only thing that mattered."

That was like a knife twisting in him, but it was lost in the weariness and emotional turmoil of knowing his daughter was in the clutches of a Demon. It was just one more on a growing list of reasons to avenge himself against that six-armed Demoness. More fuel for her funeral pyre.

"If Triana hadn't have been there, they would have gotten her," Sarraya said. "Triana *found* a way to hurt Demons with Druidic magic. I never thought that possible," she added thoughtfully. "It took her a while to recover from using it, and as soon as she did, she started back to the Tower."

"Where are Kerri and the others?"

"Still in Ungardt," she answered. "Kerri's Teleported back here a few times already to check on you, but the rest are holding firm there."

"Bring them back," he said emotionlessly. "There's no reason for them to continue with the charade, especially since it didn't do any bloody good." He snorted shortly. "Let's get everyone in one place, and this is the safest place for them to be right now." He looked at Sarraya. "Why didn't Triana have Kerri Teleport her here?"

"Kerri was out," she answered. "She, Dolanna, and Julia did something to repel the Demons, but it wiped all three of them out. By the time Kerri woke up, Triana was already gone. And nobody can contact Triana while she's travelling, Tarrin. Not even me. When she's doing what she does, it's like she's outside the boundaries of this universe. Nothing can reach her."

Tarrin thought a moment, still holding his son close to him with one paw. It was all very carefully planned and executed. Had it not been executed against him, he would have been impressed by it. Whoever had planned it had identified all their strengths and weaknesses, carefully prepared their plan, then executed it with flawless precision. They had done everything they needed to do to get Jasana. They had lured Jenna off the grounds and then pinned her in one place long enough to keep her from interfering. They had eliminated the danger he posed when they forced the Sorcerers to recall him and burn off all his power defending the grounds

against the horde of Demons who were nothing more than a means to deplete him and occupy his attention. They had trapped Keritania and Dolanna in Ungardt to keep them from stopping what was happening here, and they had cleverly also targeted Jula, his other daughter, in case the attempt to kidnap Jasana failed. That way, they'd have at least one of his daughters to use as leverage to make him hand over the Firestaff. This was a broad, intricate plan, and somehow he just *knew* that it was the brainchild of that six-armed Demoness. The *marilith* were supposedly the brains of the Demons, their planners and generals. This was a plan that reeked of her supernatural touch.

"Where is Kimmie?"

"She and Phandebrass are setting down a Wizard barrier around the Tower grounds, just outside the fence," Jenna said stonily. "I have about fifty Wizards and Priests working on it."

"Where did you find them?"

"Some are the Priests of Karas. The rest are Wizards who happened to be in Suld at the moment. After the Demon attack, they agreed to give us some help. Phandebrass is in command down there, believe it or not. I'm not sure how Wizards rank themselves, but Phandebrass seems to be at the top of the pecking order."

"When it's Demons, it concerns *everyone*," Sarraya said grimly. "There are no groups. It's *them* and *us*."

"Well said," Jenna said with a nod.

"It's not a surprise to me," Tarrin said shortly. "He may be a little scattered, but you won't find a better Wizard than Phandebrass."

"What now?" Allia asked him in a calm yet steely voice.

"Now? Now I find out where they have Jasana. Then I go there and destroy everything standing between me and her," he said in an ugly tone, sweeping Mist and Jesmind out of the way as he swung his legs out of the bed. They'd undressed him, but his unclad condition meant absolutely nothing to him as he got out of bed, still holding Eron in his arms. His son was picking absently at the black fur on Tarrin's arm, seemingly content to be held by his father.

"I've tried searching for her, but I can't find a trace of her," Jenna frowned. "She crossed over, Tarrin. As strong as she is, I should be able to sense her anywhere on the *planet*, but there's nothing. It's like she dropped off the face of the world."

"Or they have killed her," Allia said grimly. "I am sorry to say it, but it must be considered," she said quickly when Jesmind laid her ears back and hissed at the Selani threateningly.

"They won't kill her," Tarrin said shortly. "As long as I have the Firesetaff, they won't dare. If they do, they know they will *never* get it. Even if I have to live for all eternity, they'll never so much as see it." Without even thinking, Tarrin Conjured new clothes for himself. With as much Demon blood he got on himself during the battle, he was surprised the old ones didn't melt off of him. "And I know exactly where to start to find her."

"Where?" Jenna asked.

He was reluctant to set Eron down, but he needed both paws to dress. Eron immediately ran over to his mother, clinging to her leg. The assault had to have been very traumatic for him. Another reason to pay that Demoness back for everything she did. He jerked on his new trousers, barely registering that his claw ripped them from the lower thigh down. He pulled on the vest without a shirt and flexed his paw briefly. "The place where I found Faalken's Soultrap," he finally answered. "I can find my way back there again." He turned a powerful stare on Jenna. "Is Amelyn still in the dungeon?"

"Yes, but she's told us everything she knows."

"I doubt that. Take a Circle down there and drag everything out of her."

"That may destroy her, Tarrin."

Without batting an eye, without even so much as a shiver of warning, Tarrin's paw lunged out with blinding speed and grabbed a pawful of Jenna's dress. He hauled her off the ground and brought her up to look him eye to eye, to stare into two green glowing pools of utterly ruthless determination. "*I did not say that you had a choice*," he said in a seething hiss so cold, so brutal that it made Jenna pale. He put her back on the ground so hard it made her teeth click, and his paw tore away part of the

bodice of her dress as he recoiled it from her, threatening to expose her breasts. What was revealed of them showed that each had a pair of bloody lines running down them, from the claws on his fingers. He had not been gentle with her.

At that moment, everyone in the room realized that in his present state, he would kill anyone who stood in his way. Even a sister.

With a brief snort, he smoothly seated himself right in the middle of the room, legs crossed. He reached out a paw and set himself against the Weave, spinning out a strand that led back to the main Conduit that looped directly through him, then he crossed his arms, hunched his shoulders and bowed his head, then wrapped his tail around his legs and closed his eyes. "You can tell me what you found out when I get back," he told her in a tone that grew more and more distant as he spoke.

"What is he doing?" Jesmind asked, a voice that grew further and further away as he pushed himself into the Weave.

"Going out into the Weave," Jenna's voice replied, as if from half the world away.

He hovered in his strand a moment, feeling the Heart tugging at him. If he let himself go, that's where he would end up, but he held his position just aside from his body. He could see into the real world from the strand, but everything was oddly discolored and wavering, like looking through the heat shimmer of the desert at a distant object. Just as his eyes could see the Weave in a kind of background sense, so could he see into the real world from the Weave, though it was just as insubstantial as the Weave was from the real world. He could feel every tiny bit of magic flowing around him, through him, the tiny eddies and currents within the strand, currents that had altered the currents in nearly every other strand around the Tower because of its creation.

He had never done what he was trying to do, but he knew that he could do it. His anger was not rage, it was that cold, focused anger of the Human, an anger that actually made him concentrate harder on the task at hand to complete it. The anger swept out all the panic and worry of a parent, left behind nothing but a burning need to accomplish the task at hand, a task that his daughter's life depended on him succeeding.

In a blur, Tarrin moved himself back to the desert, back to the ruins of Mala Myrr, back to the exact place where he'd started when he released Jegojah and Faalken from the Soultraps. He sent his senses into the strands, seeking out the path he had taken so many months ago, hoping that there would be some trace of it remaining in the Weave. Then, rather foolishly, he realized that all he had to do was send himself back to that dark, emotionless room where the Soultraps had been the same way he sent himself to Mala Myrr. He didn't *have* to know how to get there; he just needed to know where he was going. That was all.

And he was. Just wanting to go there was all it took. He found himself looking out through the strand into that room, but it was a room that, even through the distortion, looked much different than it had before. Tarrin wove a spell that opened a clear window between the Weave and the real world, an undistorted image of what was beyond the strand, and he was quite surprised to find that the room had been emptied of the furniture and the vials and the bottles and the books and strange objects that had been there before. The room was empty. Completely empty.

A little puzzled, Tarrin cast out his senses, looking for another strand that intersected with the building. He found one, which wasn't very easy, given that the Weave was much thinner where he was than it was in the Tower. He moved himself into that one, which required him to double all the way back to a major Conduit and then come all the way back, a journey that would have been a hundred leagues up and back had he had to travel it in the real world. He changed his position instantly, moved into a strand that moved vertically through the building where the room was located, a strand that would let him see the inside of the place a little better. He moved up and down floors, looking out into the real world using his window, but found the place empty. Most of the furniture was still there, but all the small things were gone, and he found the place was devoid of occupants. In some rooms, snow had piled up in corners, blown through open windows. Rising up out of the building, he looked down on it from the strand from overhead and found himself looking down on a huge castle, more like a citadel, sitting on top of a huge grey mountain while snow and howling winds swirled around it. In the distance, he could see a large body of water surrounded by rugged grayish peaks, but he couldn't see much beyond that because of the wind-driven snow.

A little annoyed, Tarrin wove a projection of himself and pushed himself into it, which would allow him to move about in the real world. He used it to explore the castle, every room of it. He combed it level by level, chamber by chamber, even using Sorcery to ferret out every hidden room and secret passage and checking them as well. There was no one there. Not only was there no one there, they had left absolutely nothing behind to give him any clues or information. They had abandoned this place, he realized, and in that evacuation they had been extremely thorough in removing any trace that they had been there. Tarrin returned to the Weave in disappointment, and because the effort of projecting was going to tire him if he kept it up too long. He may need to project again when he did find where Jasana was, and he didn't want to tire himself prematurely.

There's nobody here, he said to himself, which became a Whisper in the Weave, since he had no body to make sound. *Now what?*

That is because you look in the wrong place.

Tarrin was startled; that voice was a voice that he had not heard in many months.

It was Spyder.

Follow my thought, her voice commanded. *I will guide you to what you seek.*

He did so, following the sense of direction from which her voice emanated. It led him back into the major Conduit, back into a Core Conduit, one of the seven of the greatest Conduits that depended on the *sui'kun* for their existence, and then out through a steadily shrinking series of strands, becoming smaller and weaker and thinner with each intersection or split, until he reached a place where all the strands seemed to have been *turned*, pushed back away from something that felt like it was as solid barrier.

Come out.

Without much thought about it, Tarrin pushed flows out of the strands at that strange location and wove them into a projection of himself. Once the weave was formed, he pushed his consciousness into it, and then opened his spectral eyes.

He was on a snow-choked plain. There was nothing but snow as far as he could see in any direction, but there were mountains on the southern horizon, and directly ahead of him, about a league, the snow suddenly stopped to reveal a strange swath of grassland.

Tarrin's ears laid back slightly when he saw a vast army of Goblinoids and humans camped in that grass, and they weren't bundled up against the bitter cold that he could sense plagued this area. There was a sea of them, specks of dark breaking up the green of the grass, sitting around fires, training with weapons, sleeping or sitting in row upon row upon row of small tents that were erected in that grassy plain. Standing directly beside him was Spyder, and he realized that she too was a projection. She wasn't actually there.

"Gora Umadar," she said in a distant voice, pulling that black cloak around her a little more. "You are Ungardt. You know the name."

He did. It was supposedly a cursed place far to the east and north of Ungardt, in the tundra north of the Petal Lakes. Ungardt legend said that an ancient beast of evil was imprisoned within it, and it was bad luck to venture out of the Ice Mountains that separated the lands of Ungardt from the tundra holding the fell place on the other side.

"That is where they hold Jasana," she told him in that same dead, sing-song voice.

Tarrin tried to push out into that grassy plain, to try to sense Jasana, but it was like there was a wall holding him out. "Why can't I sense anything over there?" he asked.

"Val's icon is there, Tarrin," she answered. "He exerts a force that the Goddess cannot counter. The restoration of the Weave has restored most of his power, and now he can wield it directly. That is something that no god can counter without bringing his own icon here, and no god will risk that. If Val and another god did battle through their icons, the results would be disastrous."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because they would be fighting directly," she answered, her eyes sweeping out over the snowless plain and the army it held. "Should one god triumph over the other, his icon would be destroyed, and all his godly

power contained within it would sweep out like a firestorm. It would destroy the entire region. For any other god, it would mean millenia of banishment from the world. For Val, it would mean death."

"Because he's trapped in his icon?"

"Because he is a child of the Firestaff," she corrected. "He has never existed anywhere else but *here*, Tarrin. That is the difference between him and the other gods. That is why they cannot allow any more children of the Firestaff. When I sealed him into his icon, I didn't draw the very essence of him out of where the gods are and imprison him in it. That would be impossible for me to do. I *am* only a mortal." She looked at him. "His essence was already here. I sealed him into his icon to restrict his power, to force him to be physically present in order to use his godly powers, which restricts the range of his reach. Nothing more. And that I could do *only* because all ten Elder Gods united and gave me that power. For the gods, an icon is a presence in this world. For Val, it *is* him, just as your physical body is *you*. Destroy it, and you destroy him, whether he is sealed in it or not."

That filled Tarrin with a kind of grim excitement. "Then I could destroy him," he said in a dreadful voice, his need to avenge himself against those who had abducted his daughter running hot in his mind.

"You are a *mortal*, Tarrin," she told him pointedly. "Had I had the power, I would have destroyed Val myself rather than seal him into his icon. We, not even all the *sui'kun* together, have the power to destroy Val's icon, my brother. We may seem godlike to mundanes, but we are as mundanes compared to the gods, and we are as nothing compared to Val, because of the circumstances of his existence."

Tarrin wanted to growl in frustration at that. Val had been the directing force behind everything that had happened to him over these years. The idea that he couldn't avenge himself against him was like bitter medicine in his mouth. Had he been rational and calm, he would have balked at the idea. But in his current mental state, the need to punish was overriding his common sense.

Calming down a little bit, he looked over at the army. That army was going to make things difficult. If Jasana really was being held inside it, then

any attempt to get her out meant that he'd have to go through an army of Goblinoids, fight a god, somehow beat him, then fight his way back *out* through the army of Goblinoids he'd battled to get in. And do it all inside a void that would rob him of his most powerful asset, his Sorcery.

"Hold on. The *ki'zadun* attacked the Tower to destroy the Goddess' icon. You just said it's impossible."

"It is impossible against *Val*, Tarrin. You continue to forget that since *Val* exists in our world both spritually and physically, it allows him to bring more power to bear here than any other god, even *Ayise* herself." She paused, clicking her tongue absently. "A mortal would have a much better chance of destroying the icon of any god other than *Val*. Only *Val* can exert his full and true power in our world, where all other gods are restricted. Someone such as you or I could *possibly* destroy the icon of a god. It would be exceedingly difficult, but it *would* be possible. All the *sui'kun* acting together would have a respectable chance of success," she admitted. "The *ki'zadun* used Demons in their assault on the Tower, and Demons would have a *good* chance of destroying an icon, because of their power. But not *Val's*. The power he can wield in our world makes him invulnerable to the attacks of a mortal, even invulnerable against the very Demons he summons. It is part of the reason why he has no fear of them."

Tarrin growled in his throat, a little angry with her that she could bring up a valid argument against everything he wanted to do, arguments he couldn't refute. "Where exactly is *Jasana*?" he asked.

"There is a structure at the center of the grass," she answered, raising her hand. An Illusion appeared, that of a grim black stone pyramid sitting out in the middle of the grassy tundra. "This. This is where *Val* is holding *Jasana*, and where *Val* is himself. He's also assembled the strongest of his servants among the *ki'zadun*, amassed this army, and has started summoning Demons to do his bidding." She lowered her hand, sliding it back under her cloak, but the image remained. "That is why I am involved," she told him grimly. "He has broken the strictures and brought Demons into our world."

"I thought they couldn't get in because you guard the gate."

"They cannot, *unless* a Wizard Conjures them. I cannot control that, because when a Wizard Conjures a Demon, they bring them here using the

power of their magic, much the same way you have learned to Conjure using Druidic magic. They do not have to use the gate to gain entry into the world. I also cannot stop a god from doing the same thing. Where a Wizard can only Conjure and keep control of one Demon at a time, Val can raise an army of them. And that is what he is doing."

Tarrin paled. An army of *Demons*? It was going to be another Blood War!

"Exactly my fear," she nodded, somehow knowing what he was thinking. "Val tried this once, and nearly destroyed the world. Now he tries it again, either believing he can control his Demons this time, or not caring about what happens to the world he conquers. He may be content to rule over a wasteland of blasted ash, so long as he *does* rule. These are here for the same reason," she said, nodding towards the Goblinoids. "Val raised his army believing that when the Firestaff releases him from his icon, he could use them to sweep out of the tundra and begin his conquest."

"Why can't the gods stop him?" he asked. "And why can't they just destroy him?"

"Because he is a *god*, Tarrin," she said patiently. "If they face him directly, they could destroy him, but in that battle would come the end of the world as we know it. It is why the Goddess had you claim the Firestaff in the first place, my brother. Think."

She was right. The Goddess told him that if someone used the Firestaff, the gods would have to rise up and destroy him, and the entire world may be destroyed in that confrontation. Confronting Val would be no different.

"Because Val is a child of the Firestaff, it means that all his power is *here*," she told him. "That gives him a great deal of power dealing with the other gods, whose power is in another dimension. Where they have to work through an icon, he does not. Where they can only devote a portion of their power to the battle, he does not. It makes him as powerful as any Elder God on this world. Perhaps even more so. That is why even the Elder Gods would be wary of confronting him. Even they run the risk of losing their icons. And if that happens, then the world would be in chaos," she said grimly. "The power guiding the forces of nature would be cut off, and the

entire world's workings would run amok until the gods could form new icons and regain control. Very little would survive that."

Tarrin frowned. She was being very careful to spell out for him what would happen if the gods started fighting. But why? And that caused him to ask a question that, though he had never even considered before, made him wonder why he had never asked it before. "If Val's *already* a god, why does he want the Firestaff?"

"Because if a god used it, it would cause the god to have his full power manifest in this world," she told him. "A Younger God that used the Firestaff would have all of his power in that other dimension where his spirit resides, as well as an equal measure of power residing right here in this world, and it is a power that does not depend on the faith of the mortals who worship him. It would make a Younger God something even greater than an Elder God, truly immortal and wielding a power that even the Elder Gods would fear. For Val, who is already a child of the Firestaff, it would *double* the power he already possesses, and that power would make him unstoppable." She looked at him. "Do you know the story of Val, my brother?"

"Some of it," he answered.

"Then you know that he is a god without rules, without constraints. Do you know why?"

Tarrin mulled over that for a moment. "Because he's a child of the Firestaff."

"Yes. He is not a child of Ayise. His power was not granted by her, and it means that he did not have to accept the responsibilities and restrictions that came with that power. He is truly a god without rules, a god that does not care about the Balance. In fact, in his own way, he is a god seeking to destroy that Balance. We call him Val, god of darkness and conquest. The gods have another name for him."

He looked at her.

"They call him Entropy, the embodiment of the force that seeks to unmake all," she said, looking at him. "They fear him more than they fear any other thing." She looked at the army again. "I brought you here to show you what stands between you and your daughter, Tarrin," she told him in a

quiet voice. "Now that you see what you have seen and heard what I have told you, do you understand why?"

"To show me what I'm up against."

"To show you that what you intend is impossible," she told him bluntly. "There is no way you can get Jasana back without surrendering the Firestaff to Val. He is a *god*, Tarrin, and he holds your daughter in the very center of his seat of power. You cannot sneak in, you cannot trick him, and you cannot beat him with either magic or brute force. He will sense you coming from a thousand longspans away, and he will hear every thought that passes through your mind. Any bargain you try to make with him, he will not honor, seeking to kill you as quickly as he can to regain the Firestaff before the appointed day. And if you do face him, he will crush you as if you are nothing and take the Firestaff from you, and there is nothing you can do to prevent it. You intend to rescue Jasana, without thinking about the consequences. And now you know what will happen if you do."

You must be able to make the choices that must be made.

No! Not Jasana! He had chosen his duty, and it had cost Faalken his life! He had chosen his duty, and it had nearly killed Kimmie! He would *not* make a choice that would kill his daughter. He *would not*! The entire world did not matter more than his precious child, because the world would not be worth continuing if Jasana was not there to share in it.

In a flash, an instant, a plan formed in his mind. It was a simple plan, an elegant plan, yet a plan carrying flavors of nuance and subtlety that would make Keritanima proud. It was a plan that addressed all the problems of rescuing Jasana without getting her killed, and after going through it in that instant, he realized that it was a plan that would *work*, no matter if it was a god that would be the one trying to defeat it or not. The simplicity of it made it almost infallible.

He had to be able to make the choices that must be made. In that instant, he made his choice, and that choice was Jasana.

Quickly, he buried the plan in the deepest parts of his mind, submerging it into the Cat, the one place where no one, not even the Goddess, could dig it out. He knew that if she knew what he intended, she would not allow it. She would stop him, and he would not be denied.

If Val wanted the Firestaff, Tarrin would *give* it to him. It was not worth the life of his daughter.

"If there's one thing that you should have learned about me by now, Spyder," he said in a voice that held absolutely no emotion, "is that the world *does not matter* to me." He looked at her. "Val has my daughter, and I'm going to get her out of there alive. That's all that matters to me. The world can go to the Nine Hells for all I care."

"Then your daughter will grow up in a blasted wasteland."

"As long as she grows up, I don't give a *damn* about where it happens to be," he said, looking over the army one more time.

"You are foolish to say that to me," she said, drawing herself up. "I will not permit you to decide the fate of us all, Tarrin."

He felt her power build up, felt the terrible might of it even though both of them were working through projections. But he ignored her, keeping his back to her. "I'm not going to go out and intentionally destroy the world, fool woman," he said with a snort. "But I won't abandon my daughter. If it would have been anything else, anyone else, I would have let it go. But not Jasana. Not one of my children. I'll *find* a way to get her back. I'll do my best to keep the Firestaff away from Val. But if it comes down to it, I'll hand it over to him without hesitation."

"Then you doom us all."

"Then we all die," he said grimly. "That doesn't matter to me in the slightest."

"Then you leave me little choice, my brother," she said with terrible finality. He felt her power immediately build up to its peak, felt her half a world away, probably doing the same thing he was doing, sitting somewhere in a small room in a nice comfortable chair, projecting herself out across the vast distance between them.

"Go ahead," he told her without emotion. "Let's just get it all out of the way now, woman. It doesn't matter to me anymore. *Nothing* matters to me anymore except my daughter," he said in a dead tone. "Strike at me, Spyder, and I'll tear the Weave. I know how it's done. Try to stop me, and I'll cause another Breaking. You won't have to worry about Val destroying the world."

He turned on her, and there was awful burning fanaticism in his eyes that took her aback. "If you deny me the chance to save my daughter, I'll destroy the world *myself*!"

There was a shocked silence from Spyder, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. "Mother!" she gasped in consternation. "This cannot be!"

I cannot interfere, the voice of the Goddess touched them both, a very subdued, serious voice, nothing like the voice he was so accustomed to hearing. *You understand the rules, daughter. I cannot directly interfere. I cannot demand. I can only ask. If Tarrin decides to defy me, I can do nothing but deny him his powers. And he does not need Sorcery to tear the Weave, daughter. He's a strong enough Druid to do it. It will kill him, but he can do it.*

"What must I do, Mother?" she asked in confusion. That was something he *never* thought he'd see. Spyder was at a loss as to what to do.

I suggest you withdraw your threat and release your power, she replied dryly. *If my kitten is this determined, then I say give him his chance. He has proven again and again that he can find ways to accomplish his goals. We must all have faith that this time will be no different.*

"I do not like it, Mother. It takes an awful risk."

I don't like it either, she said with a rueful chuckle. *But if there's one thing I've learned about my kitten, Spyder, it's that once he truly sets his mind to accomplishing a goal, he finds a way to succeed. Just as he has faith in me, now I must show faith in him. I won't interfere, kitten*, she told him directly. *I disagree with what you're doing, you must know that. I love Jasana too, but I can think of no way to safely get her out. But I'm going to trust you on this, Tarrin. If you believe with all your heart that you can get her back without giving the Firestaff to Val, then I'll support you, and I'll do everything in my power to make it happen.*

"I can do it, Mother," he said confidently. "I swear it."

Then that is good enough for me, she said simply. *All you need to do is ask, Tarrin, and I will help you as much as I'm allowed. Because of what Val is doing, he is forcing us to directly interfere anyway, so I'll be able to help you a lot more than usual.*

"What is he doing?"

"The Demons, Tarrin," Spyder said. "He is Conjuring Demons by the *dozens* every day. He already has a force of nearly a thousand, and they grow by the hour. The gods themselves must take steps now to prevent another Blood War. It is why I am here. It's why I've shown you what's before us. I am the Guardian, and now I am summoned to execute my duties. To defend our world against incursion from hostile extra-dimensional invaders. That is my purpose."

The weight of that was not lost on him, no matter how adamant he was about rescuing his daughter. The possibility of Val getting the Firestaff was only one of the dangers presented in this very delicate situation. If Val raised enough Demons, he could threaten the entire world whether he was freed or not. And now that the Weave was restored, he would *bet* that the same lack of magic that kept the dragons trapped in the form of drakes was keeping Val's icon rooted to his spot. The Goddess was animating her icon now, moving it around. Val couldn't move it around the way she did, but he *could* move. He'd be at least as mobile now as any other living thing with arms and legs.

Even if they kept the Firestaff away from Val, they were going to have to deal with him and the army he had amassed.

"You already have a force at hand to deal with Val," Tarrin told them both absently. "I think the battle at Suld showed how effective it is to bring the Wikuni, Ungardt, Knights, Selani, and Arakites together. Assemble them again in greater numbers, and you'll have an army that even Val is going to fear."

I already realized that, kitten. I'm already starting to make some arrangements with their gods. The Younger Gods have a stake in this too, and they'll help. They rule as patrons of the mortals, so it is through them that we must act. Karas, Dallstad, Kikkalli, and Fara'Nae have already pledged their children to the cause. I'm even asking Neme for her Amazons and for the outworlder god that commands the Wizards to release them to my charge. Every Elder and Younger God both are going to be devoting a block of their priesthood to the cause to serve as magical assistance along with my Children and the Wizards. We may even get assistance from the Druids and Fae-da'Nar, this is so serious. I've yet to approach Shiika over

her Legions, though. Because the Arakites really have no one god that could force such a large empire to mobilize, it forces me to deal with their Demon Empress. Tarrin could sense the intense distaste present in her voice.

"Shiika's actually not bad for a Demon," he said in defense of her.

"Truth be told, I have an odd fondness for her," Spyder admitted. "At least she is old enough to understand me."

I hate Demons, the Goddess said with a shudder in her choral voice. *I still say it was a mistake for us to allow her to remain on Sennadar.*

"You know, I remember Allia and Camara Tal saying the same thing about Jula," Tarrin said pointedly.

There was a startled silence, then the Goddess laughed, a symphony of silvery bells. *Point taken, kitten,* she said. *We should break this up. Were I not shielding us, Val would be hearing every word we say with us so close to him. I think it's time for us to withdraw and start making plans for what's to come, outside of his earshot. As it is, he knows we're here, and you can bet that he knows that we didn't come just for the view.*

"As you say, mother. I will come visit you in Suld presently, my brother," she told him. "What comes requires my direct intervention. When the army marches, I will march at its head."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you," he said in a grim tone. "And Mother, thank you for your confidence in me."

Ayise and the other Elder Gods are going to thrash me over it, but it was long ago decided that in this particular area, my word is absolute. I accepted responsibility for this, and it also allows me to act with absolute authority. Not even my parents can gainsay my decisions. So don't worry about Ayise or Shellar coming along behind me and unmaking my decision for me, kitten.

"Thank you," he said again. He felt much calmer now. He needed to think about what had to be done, and the need to destroy that army would change his plan around a little bit, but everything was still more than workable.

He was glad they were going to help, but he didn't *need* it. He had been deadly serious when he threatened to destroy the world. He *would do it* to

get Jasana back. He would sacrifice anything to recover his daughter, his precious child, and nothing was going to stop him from his goal of her safe return.

She was all that mattered.

It took him a while for him to open his eyes.

The room was silent, empty, and he could tell that Mist, Jesmind, Allia, and Eron remained in the room. Talon's scent was also present, and he heard his son giggling slightly, along with the *inu*'s throaty growls. He did open his eyes and turn his head towards that sound, seeing the *inu* playing with the Were-cat child, nuzzling him on the belly with a foot holding him down while the boy laughed. The *inu* was *tickling* him!

"Tarrin!" Jesmind said quickly, standing up from the couch in which she'd been fidgeting.

Tarrin pushed himself to his feet without ceremony, looking down at them. He knew what was coming, and he knew it wasn't going to be easy on any of them.

What was coming was a war, a war of a magnitude not seen since the Blood War. Val's endless hordes of Goblinoids and his force of Demons had to be stopped, no matter what happened with the Firestaff. But their presence was going to interfere with his own plan, and it meant that he was going to have to make certain arrangements with those who made the plans.

Maybe it was good that Val and the armies were at Gora Umadar. That way, the battle wasn't going to threaten any cities or centers of population. That barren tundra was uninhabited by men, not even by the small tribes of barbarians that were common in the empty lands north of Ungardt.

He took Jesmind's paw, then allowed her to embrace him. He put a paw on her shoulder and took in her scent, but inside there was too much turmoil for his love for her to establish itself.

"Did, did you find anything?" she asked, looking pleadingly up into his eyes, a look that said to him that even if it was a lie, she wanted to hear good news.

"I know where she is," he told his mate. "It's going to be...difficult to get her out. But it *is* possible. I'm going to need help to do it."

"Then you will get it," Allia said quickly and sincerely, clicking her tongue a few times. Talon disengaged from the Were-cat child and stalked over to her, lowering her head.

"You're going to help me a different way, Allia," he said. "The only one I'll need to help me recover her directly is Jesmind."

She looked up at him with shimmering eyes. "What can I do to help?"

"Go with me," he told her. "When the time comes to get Jasana and get away, I'm going to need you. Nobody else can do it but you."

"I'll do anything to get my daughter back," she told him sincerely.

Tarrin was silently glad to hear that. When the time came, her declaration was going to be sorely put to the test.

He put his arms around her and then explained what he'd seen, and revealed some certain exchanges he'd made with Spyder. "Val is summoning up an army of Demons," he concluded. "We're going to have to put a stop to that. The Goddess has already started assembling an army to face them, and she'll need help from the rest of us, and she'll need all of us when the time comes to start fighting."

"What will I do with Eron?" Mist asked in worry.

"I don't expect you to fight, Mist," he told her. "Your cub is still too young, and I want you to stay with Kimmie. She's going to push herself too far with her magic if someone doesn't stay with her and reign her in, and that may harm the baby. So you have two children again."

"I don't find that idea to be totally repugnant," she said with a slight smile. "I know Kimmie, and she won't disobey me. I'll keep her on a short leash for you."

"Is Triana here yet? How long was I out?"

"Nearly an hour," Allia answered.

Tarrin brooded about that. It certainly didn't *seem* like an hour. Then again, time seemed to work a little differently within the Weave. It was not

as absolute there it was in reality, moving at the same pace everywhere. In some places it moved swiftly, in some places ponderously. He guessed he must have crossed a boundary into an area where time marched quickly, making a substantial chunk of time in reality seem like only a moment to him there.

"If I've been out that long, then Kerri and the others have to be back by now," he said. "And Spyder and Shiika may be here too."

"Shiika? Why would that Demon be coming here?" Jesmind asked.

"Because we're going to need her," Tarrin replied.

"Is it wise to ally with a Demon against its own kind?" Mist asked.

"Shiika is a dependable ally," Allia told her calmly.

"If there's one thing you can absolutely depend on about Shiika," Tarrin elaborated, "it's that she'll do whatever it takes to keep her position of power and luxury, and do anything it takes from being banished from Sennadar and sent back to the Abyss. Val's army threatens her luxurious lifestyle, and his Demons are a direct threat to her status. She'll fight on our side because we represent a better lifestyle for her if we win." Tarrin snorted. "Shiika probably hates the other Demons even more than we do," he added absently. "Because she's so different from them."

"How so?"

"Shiika doesn't have the same mentality as other Demons," he answered. "If there was ever such a thing as a *nice* Demon, Shiika is the closest thing you'll ever find to it. She's rather nasty, and she *is* a Demon, but she lacks that fundamental sense of *evil* that infects the rest of her kind. She's not a good or kind woman, but she's not like the others either, actually unlike just about any other Demon. If they ever noticed it, they'd probably destroy her."

"So between the two extremes, she falls somewhere in the middle," Mist surmised.

"That's a pretty good way to look at it," he agreed. "She's a dangerous woman and I don't entirely trust her, but I *do* trust her when her interests happen to coincide with mine. As long as we're working towards the same goal, she can be a loyal and very powerful ally. It's when those goals start

drifting apart that you have to start watching her, because she'll step on your head to advance her own cause."

"Tarrin, you know some of the most unusual people," Mist laughed. "A Demon, a dragon, and everything in between."

"Normal people are boring," he replied with no humor.

"I think I'd like to meet this Demon," Mist said.

"You'll get your chance," he answered, pushing Jesmind out from him a little. "I'll warn you now, though, they smell worse than anything you could ever imagine. I've built up something of a resistance to it." He looked to his mate. "I want you to stay here," he told her. "And when Jula gets here and as soon as I track down Kimmie, I'm sending them up here too. I want all of you together, so you can protect each other in case they try this again."

"I'll do it for now," she said. "But don't make me stay here too long."

"We won't be here very long, Jesmind," he told her. "As soon as I tell Jenna what I'm going to need from them, we'll be on our way."

"Where are we going?"

"North," he said. "And we'll be travelling a long time. We have to go quite a distance."

"Why not just fly us there, like you did when we came to Suld?"

He shook his head. "This time, I *want* to go slow," he told her. "I have to arrive at our destination on a very specific day. If I'm too early or too late, the plan will fail. It's important, Jesmind. So if I slow us down or speed us up on the road, I don't want you to argue. Alright?"

"If we have to be there on this specific day, why not wait here and just magic ourselves there?"

"I don't want to be where people can find me," he told her. "I need to be travelling, on the road. I need to be *looking* like I'm on the way, not lounging around here looking like I'm planning something sneaky. Do you understand?"

"I, no, but I'll trust you," she said uncertainly, then she gave him a wan smile.

"I trust you, but I would like to know why it's so important," Mist said.

He looked at her. "Val wants the Firestaff, that much you should know," he told her. "But the Firestaff can only be used at a particular time on a particular day every five thousand years. We absolutely have to be there *on that day*, not a day sooner or a day later, because the immediacy of the situation will make Val desperate enough to give me the chance to get Jasana and get her out of there alive. You know that he'll have no intention of letting any of us leave him alive. I have to have a powerful bargaining chip when I do come for her, or else he won't do what we need him to do to get Jasana back alive. That chip is going to be the fact that if he doesn't do as I demand, he'll have to wait another five thousand years before he'll be freed. He knows that not even *he* can take the Firestaff away from me, Mist. It's locked in the *elsewhere* in my amulet, and any attempt to take it by force will cause it to be sealed up there forever, out of reach of everyone and everything. I have to *give* it to him, and that will give us the opportunity we need to get Jasana back."

Mist turned it over in her mind, and then nodded. "That's clever," she complemented.

"It's just luck that circumstances fell as they did," he snorted. "If Mother had never given me this amulet, and the amulet's magic wouldn't actively defend itself from attempts to defeat it or get the amulet away from me, I'd have no way to get Jasana back."

"Perhaps what you call luck someone else calls a *plan*," Mist told him, which made him start. She had a point, but to hear Mist talking like that was very odd. He'd never thought that she had much of a mind. Then again, he made the same mistake about her that so many others made about him. They saw nothing but his outwardly violent personality, thinking that someone who acted so brutish could not possibly also be rather intelligent.

"Maybe," he admitted.

"Did I ever tell you about when your Goddess visited us?" she asked, reaching under her shirt and pulling out a black *shaeram*. "She gave me and Eron these amulets."

Tarrin was a bit surprised. "No, she never told me, and neither did anyone else," he said honestly. He suddenly felt a little foolish. He'd seen

the one Eron wore many times, but it had never crossed his mind as to where and how he got it. He'd been human then and had no memory, and it didn't seem odd to him at the time that Eron had one. Everyone seemed to have one, even him. But he had no excuse for not sensing the amulets after he regained his memory and his Were stature. In all the confusion and worry about what happened to him and his need to get out of the Tower quickly, he guessed he had never had the mind to realize what he was feeling from Eron's amulet. Then again, with all the background magic in the Tower, sometimes it was hard to sense things unless he was actively concentrating on it, or it was very, very close to him.

Accepting it as merely one of the many things that went on without his knowledge, Tarrin recalled his pack from the *elsewhere*, taking it off and setting it on the ground, then kneeling before it and rooting through it absently. He'd almost forgotten about what was inside it, and he had the feeling that it would be vitally useful. If Val was going to summon Demons, magical juggernauts and powerhouses of destruction, then it was only fair that their side call up similarly dreadful assets to challenge them.

Val had his Demons. Tarrin had *dragons*.

He pulled a small crystal bell, plain and unadorned, but the crystalline object almost pulsed with magic under his fingers. It was an object that Sapphire had made to allow him to contact her if he had an emergency. Well, *this* was an emergency.

Holding it by its top, he used a claw to sound the bell. It made a sweet, clear ring, a ring that reverberated in the air and seemed to increase in both its volume and the choral harmonics it emanated steadily. Then it suddenly stopped.

"What is that, Papa?" Eron asked, slinking forward to look at the small object.

"A means to call a friend," he answered, feeling the Wizard magic in the bell flare into life, feel it reaching across a vast distance, searching for something...searching...and then it found it.

"What is it, my little one?" Sapphire's voice called through the bell, replacing its crystal chime.

"Sapphire, I need your help," he said immediately. "In fact, we may need the help of every dragon you can find."

"What is so serious as to need that?" she asked.

"Val has raised an army of Goblinoids and Demons, my friend," he told her. "An army large enough to conquer everything on this side of the Desert of Swirling Sands." He blew out his breath. "And they've kidnapped Jasana."

"*WHAT?*" she demanded hotly.

"Demons working for Val attacked the Tower and took Jasana," he told her. "They've done it to force me to give them the Firestaff."

"We will *see* about that!" her voice was hot, almost infuriated. There was a long pause. "It is an attack on clan, Cyrus! Clan comes first! Tarrin, where are you now?"

"We're in the Tower. Our Goddess is organizing a massing of forces to face Val's army, but I'll be leaving soon to recover my daughter before the fighting makes it impossible for me to get to her."

"Where in the Tower?"

That question took him a little aback. "We're in a guest apartment," he replied. "Jesmind's was destroyed in the attack."

"What level? Which side?"

A little confused, he looked at the others. He honestly didn't know the answers to those questions. "Where *are* we?" he asked them.

"Ninth level, north side," Allia answered.

He repeated that to Sapphire dutifully. "Alright. Put the bell down, my little one, and back away from it. I'm coming right now."

Not sure what was going to happen, Tarrin put the bell on the floor and backed away from it. Mist grabbed Eron by the tail and dragged the curious cub away as they did the same, giving the little crystal bell a very wide berth. Jesmind looked at him in confusion, but he could only shrug and look at the bell. He had no idea what was going to happen either.

There was no sense of magical buildup, no hint or sign that it was coming. One second, she wasn't there, the next she was, standing over the little bell in her human form in a lovely violet brocade gown, a look of tightly controlled fury burning on her face. She looked around, then her eyes locked on the Were-cats. Eron scrambled behind Mist, seeking protection behind her legs, looking up at the angry dragon in fear and curiosity both.

"I thought you said you never felt a need to go faster than your wings could carry you," Tarrin noted.

"This is not the time for play!" she said in a brusque manner. "Where are Jenna and Triana? They swore to me that this place was safe! I will take them to task about their failure in a very severe manner!"

"This isn't the time to be throwing accusations, Sapphire," he said grimly. "They used Demons, and they had a very good plan. Even if Jenna knew that they were coming, I doubt she could have stopped them."

"Demons do not plan," she said in a frosty tone.

"*Marilith* do," he countered. "A *marilith* led the attack."

That brought Sapphire up short. "Perhaps," she admitted.

"Me and this particular *marlith* have something of a history," Tarrin said grimly, flexing his claws, the image of that six-armed Demoness cutting Eron's throat forever burned into his mind. "A history I mean to end at my earliest convenience."

"Where is Triana?"

"She was in Ungardt," he told her. "She's making her way back here as we speak. She was checking on Kerri and the others to make sure they were safe. The Demons made sure to attack when Triana was gone, but that turned out to be a good thing. Another group of Demons attacked them in Ungardt, trying to kidnap Julia. But Triana was there to help drive them off before they could get her."

Sapphire frowned, and then she looked at Mist and Eron. "I see you are safe," she told them. "Is Kimmie safe?"

"She's safe," Mist replied calmly. "She was with Phandebrass when the attack happened, and they had went out to do battle with the Demons on the grounds. They joined up with Allia out there, so I was told. Her and this strange new pet of hers," she said, looking at the *inu* standing beside Allia, seemingly unconcerned about this strange new visitor.

"Those Demons were but a diversion," Allia growled. "The six-armed one had snuck into the Tower using magic to disguise herself and assaulted Jasana in their apartment."

"She had Jegojah's sword," he told Allia in an emotionless tone. "I thought they buried it with him.":

"They did, but everyone knew where he was put to rest," Allia answered. "I do not think the Priests of Karas could have stopped the Demon from taking it from his crypt, even if they knew she was there."

"Where was he buried?" Sapphire asked.

"In the Cathedral of Karas," Allia answered. "They did not know who his patron god was, so the Priests decided to bury him on the hallowed ground of Karas. It was the least they could do for him. Jegojah has already become something of a legend in Suld, because of what he did during the battle. Someone told someone that leaked it out to the world that Jegojah was a Revenant, and quite a story has developed around him. He has become a hero."

Sapphire blew out her breath. "We waste time here," she said. "Take me to Jenna, little one. I mean to scold her, then we will see about destroying this army and getting your daughter back."

For some reason, hearing her say that made him feel immensely better. Sapphire was a dragon, and she had immense, awesome power. Dragons were the most powerful beings on Sennadar. Just one of them was enough to give an army of humans nightmares. If Sapphire brought her clan and they fought against Val, then Val's army was going to have a *very* formidable enemy to face. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that you're going to help us, my friend," he told her sincerely.

"You may have more than me and my brood. I have called for *Kriss'thass*," she said.

That made Tarrin rock back on his heels. Sapphire had taught him some of the dragon language, and that was a word he understood. That was a term that meant *Council of Wisdom*, and it meant that Sapphire had summoned the dragons that represented the ruling body of their race to come and debate an issue of dire importance.

"If Val is raising an army of Demons, then it is an issue that concerns us all," she said simply, seeing Tarrin's horrified expression. "I was not alive for it, but I was told that during the Blood War, the dragons held themselves aloof from the troubles of the little races, wrapped in an air of their own superiority. The devastation the Demons wrought before they finally came to their senses and fought with the little races caused famine among our kind and taught us a harsh lesson," she told him bluntly. "When we ignore the plight of the weaker races, when we believe our own power makes us as gods ourselves, inviolate and omnipotent, we doom ourselves to a fool's end. The Blood War taught us that the happenings and problems of the little races *can* affect us. This time, the dragons will *not* sit on their haunches and believe that the fate of the little races is not our concern. If Val is fielding an army of Demons, he will find *dragons* facing him across the line."

Mist laughed nervously. "I'm pretty sure that'd be a sight enough to make even a Demon wet his pants," she said, looking at Sapphire.

"We can harm Demons," Sapphire said with a terrible kind of eagerness. "Our power may be of the land, but not even a Demon's invulnerability can withstand it. We know how to get around that."

"Triana must have figured it out as well," Tarrin said. "Jenna told me that Triana's magic was what drove the Demons away when they attacked Julia in Ungardt."

"It can be done," she nodded confidently. "It speaks much of Triana's power if she is capable of it. To do it, one must take native Druidic magic and make it *unnatural*, and you know that the demands on the Druid rise exponentially when he reaches outside of the bounds of the natural order." Tarrin nodded emphatically, remembering the many lessons Sarraya and Triana had taught him about that. Druidic magic could do *anything*, but as soon as one tried to use it in a way that wasn't natural or existed beyond the bounds of nature's workings, the toll it took on the Druid raised drastically. If Triana could twist it into an unnatural form of magic, then she had to

possess *awesome* power. "When this is over, she and I *must* meet and teach one another," she said. "I have the feeling she can teach me things even I do not know, and I have much to teach to her. I think she is capable of much of what dragons can do with Druidic magic."

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, looking up at him. "Now, time is wasting, little friend. Take me to Jenna. Let us get her scolding out of the way, so we can move on to the important matter. Getting my little one's daughter back."

He gave her a sincere, honest, and emotionally charged look of utter relief and hope. If Sapphire was going to help, then his chances to recover Jasana alive just went up significantly.

"Wait here," Tarrin told the females. "When Triana gets here, send her to Jenna's office."

"We'll be here," Jesmind nodded.

Tarrin led Sapphire through the halls of the Tower, and the dark looks on the two of them caused every other person that happened across them to get very far out of the way. Tarrin had no patience for anyone who got in his way, and Sapphire's expression was as dark and ominous as a thundercloud. Everyone in the Tower, from the lowest servant to the Keeper herself, knew that the dark-haired woman with the chilling eyes was actually a dragon, and they all gave her a *very* wide berth. That cushion of safe area increased greatly when they saw how angry she was.

But not everyone respected that cushion. When they turned a corner, he saw Kimmie and Phandebrass moving in their direction. Kimmie gave out a low cry and ran towards him, then literally jumped up into his arms and hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry!" she said in a weepy voice. "If I'd have known, if I'd just had more patience and stayed inside, maybe--"

"No, Kimmie," he told her gently. "It's best you did what you did, and you probably saved lives out there on the grounds. I don't blame you."

"But Jasana--"

"She won't be there long," he said in a dangerous voice, looking down into her eyes.

She sniffled, her luminous blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "Anything you need, my love," she said with all her heart. "Anything you need, and it's yours. If we don't have it, we'll take it from whoever does."

Tarrin actually laughed. "Don't get savage on me now, Kimmie," he told her. "It doesn't suit you."

"I can't help it. With my own child under my heart, I know exactly how you feel. I'd take the world apart stone by stone if someone threatened our baby."

"I say, that's no lie there," Phandebrass said as he reached them. "You should have seen her out on the grounds, Tarrin, you should. I say, I've never seen her so, *aggressive* with her magic before. I didn't know she knew half of those spells, I didn't!"

"She's a mother defending her children, biped," Sapphire said bluntly. "You males fail to appreciate how dangerous that can make a female."

"I fully understand it, madam," he said with a bow, "but to see it in my gentle, sweet little apprentice, it was a surprise, it was." He scratched his face, now starting to show signs he was growing a white beard. "I say, if you're off to help plan a rescue mission, count me in, lad. We can't let something like this go, we can't. It's time we put our foot down. Hard."

Hearing the usually easy-going and addled Phandebrass say something like that was a shock. He rarely showed any signs of actual aggression, and he didn't show signs of such focus very often. He was usually quite happy with talking his enemies to death. He rarely fought, but when he did, Tarrin realized as he thought back to the several battles they'd fought together, he used his magic wisely, efficiently, and to devastating effect. He showed signs of irreverence during minor skirmishes, but when it was a serious fight, he rose to the challenge, showing an almost inhuman coolness in the face of anything that faced him. Phandebrass seemed scattered, but when he focused his mind, he was a dangerous adversary. And he seemed focused right now.

"I knew there was a reason I liked you, Phandebrass," Sapphire told him.

"As you say, madam dragon, clan is all," the Wizard replied soberly. "I say, I may be no relation, but I'm rather fond of the lad, and I'm truly fond

of his daughter, I am. They've been very good to me, and I say, I've not had such good company and such opportunities to learn in all my life, I've not. I take personal offense at them lowering themselves to such a dastardly trick, I do. I say, it's fair time we took the *ki'zadun* over our knee and spanked them with a spiked bat."

"I couldn't agree more," Sapphire nodded.

"Kimmie, I want you to go wait with Jesmind and Mist," he told her.

"Keeping us all together, hmm?" she said with a smile.

"Exactly that," he answered. "Sapphire wants to talk to Jenna, and there are some things I have to do before I can leave."

"Where are you going?"

"After Jasana," he answered.

"I say, let me pack up then," Phandebrass said.

"No, I'm going alone," he told the Wizard. "But you'll need to pack up anyway. They'll explain it all as soon as Spyder gets here."

"Spyder? She's going to help you?"

"No, she's going to help you," he told her. "You'll find out what's going on later, Kimmie. We don't have time to explain it right now."

"Alright," she said trustingly, letting go of him. "I take it I'll have to follow your scent trail back?"

He nodded.

"Alright then. I'll see you later, and we'll talk," she told him, pulling his head down and giving him a kiss.

"I say, I think I'll tag along with Kimmie," Phandebrass said. "I'll be a fifth wheel in a room full of Were-cats, but with me there, nothing's going to sneak up on them, it won't."

"I appreciate that, Phandebrass," Tarrin said sincerely, nodding to the human. "But before you go, I need a favor."

"Just ask."

"How good are you at astronomy?"

"Astronomy? I say, I'm no expert, but I do know a bit about it. What do you need?"

"On Gods' Day, the four moons are going to form a conjunction," he told him in dreadful intensity. "I need you to find out *exactly* when that's going to happen. Use a clock and find out to right down to the second. Down to the *second*, Phandebrass."

He gave him an unblinking stare, then nodded. "I'll draw you up a chart," he promised. "It will be ready by supper, it will. You have my word on it."

"Thank you."

"All you need do is ask, lad. All you need do is ask. Now if you'll excuse me, your pretty girlfriend is going to leave me behind, she is."

They left them behind, then quickly made their way towards Jenna's office. Tarrin paused to turn and look back, watching Kimmie hurry back the way he had come. Kimmie was looking well, and he was glad of that. He hated the idea of leaving her behind, but there was no help for it. He wasn't about to endanger another of his children. If he hadn't been so angry and so driven by his need to rescue Jasana, he would have paid her the attention she deserved. Ever since he'd come back to the Tower, she'd been pushed more and more to the fringes by Jesmind, and Tarrin felt sorry for her because of that. Jesmind seemed perfectly capable of being friends with Kimmie and dealing with her amiably about Tarrin as long as he wasn't around. But as soon as he did come around, she got defensive and possessive, and he knew her behavior was an attempt to push Kimmie out of competition for his affection. He remembered Jesmind's heated declaration when he'd argued with her back when he was a human, and it opened his eyes a great deal about her behavior. As long as she was the only one he loved, she had no qualms about allowing him to stray. But now that she knew that he loved Kimmie, she was worried that he may find more happiness with Kimmie than with her. And Jesmind, being who she was, was responding by trying to drive away her competitor.

Jesmind was jealous, and he probably couldn't blame her. He loved Jesmind with all his heart, but he also loved Kimmie. There were no depths or levels of love to him; love was love. What Jesmind didn't seem to

understand was that both he and Kimmie knew that right now, he belonged with Jesmind. He had promised he would come back to her, and he would keep that promise. They were still mates, in his mind as well as hers, and only time and the process of their instincts driving them apart was going to change that. She had probably been a little hurt by what happened as well, feeling that she wasn't woman enough to be everything he needed, or feeling betrayed that he would fall in love with Kimmie when he was already in love with her, or probably both. And now with Jasana gone--he sighed. He needed to pay her some very special attention. With everything happening, she needed some reassurance.

Tarrin watched Kimmie walk away with hooded eyes, taking in the sight of her. Even from behind, her expanding waistline was starting to become apparent, but she was still one fine figure of a Were-cat female. If she only knew, but there was no way he could tell her. Then he turned and followed Sapphire.

Jenna's scolding was brief, but it was also intense and thorough.

Sapphire blasted into her, venting her anger and her displeasure in a very effective manner, blistering Jenna's ears with heated tirades of her lack of responsibility and her inattentiveness, then drifting into outbursts of obscenity so vile that it even made Tarrin's ears cringe to hear them, things *he* wouldn't even say. Not satisfied with the colorful expressions available in Sulasian, her black vituperations extended into several languages. From Arakite to Sharadi, Torian drawl to a flowery language he'd never heard before, she ranged through all the worst available foul language present in those languages, sizzling the pale Jenna's ears. Then, as if to crown it off, she started raging at the girl in the language of dragons. She had never taught him any of the obscenities, and that was probably why he barely understood a quarter of the words that came off of her lips. Jenna stood stock still and pale as the dragon bored into her with her remonstrances for allowing Jasana to be taken off the grounds. The Keeper stood there like a meek little girl who had just been caught with her hand in the pasty dish, taking the dragon's hot lecturing with a bowed head and a pale face.

There was silence for several moments after Sapphire seemed to play herself out, looking at Jenna with those ominous eyes and panting from the

exertion of such an outburst, as Jenna simply stood there with her hands folded in front of her, looking as contrite and vulnerable as she could possibly look. It was a trick Jenna used to devastating effect against her father, and it had allowed her to weasel out of a great deal of punishment when she was a little girl.

A devious nature was something of a family trait on the female side of Tarrin's family line.

But Sapphire had the same mettle as their mother, and Elke Kael had been immune to her daughter's suffering and simpering posturings. She glowered at Jenna for a moment as she recovered from her tirade, then she sighed and looked to Tarrin. "I feel much better now," she admitted.

"I don't think Jenna agrees with you," he said absently.

"You're right," she said in a weak voice.

"I would not have been able to focus on the matter at hand if I hadn't gotten that out of my system," she said conversationally.

"Has Spyder contacted you, Jenna?" he asked.

"She did. She said she's coming, and we have something serious to talk about. You have any idea what she means?"

"Yes. We're about to stop a second Blood War, Jenna," he said grimly. "Before it has a chance to get out of control."

"What?" she asked woodenly.

"The same people who attacked the Tower aren't done yet, sister. They've rebuilt their army, they have Val raising an army of Demons to aid them, and Spyder herself is going to put a hand in to stop it. So are all the gods, both Elder and Younger. This is going to be a *direct* confrontation, Jenna," he said with unwavering eyes. "If we don't stop this here and now, it's going to be the Blood War all over again."

"I can understand why she's so upset," Jenna said, putting a hand to her stomach. "But what does this have to do with Jasana?"

"She's being held in the middle of that army," he said emotionlessly. "That's going to make getting her out a bit tricky."

"I can tell you have a plan, little one. What is it?" Sapphire asked.

Tarrin sat down in the chair in front of Jenna's desk. Jenna sat in her own, and Sapphire in the one beside his. He Conjured up a small map of the area of Gora Umadar, which consisted of little more than a square surrounded by a large circle. But it geographically correct and to scale, since it was a Conjured creation. "This is Gora Umadar," he told them.

Jenna whistled. "They're holding Jasana *there*?"

He nodded. "It's a big pyramid built on the tundra," he told Sapphire. "Spyder told me about it. Val's icon is in the pyramid, and that's where the Demon took Jasana. I can get her out, but it won't be easy." He traced a finger around the circle. "This line is where all the snow is melted," he told them. "They must be using some kind of magic to keep the area warm, because they've got a few hundred thousand Goblinoid and human soldiers surrounding the pyramid."

Jenna frowned. "That must be where all the survivors from the battle here went."

"As well as their armies from probably every stronghold they have here in the West," he added. "I went to the place where they had Jegojah's Soultrap, and the place is completely empty."

"Where is that?" Sapphire asked.

"A castle overlooking the Petal Lakes," he answered.

"Castle Keening," Jenna told them. "Sitting on the road leading out of the Iron Pass."

"Well, it's empty now, and I'll bet Val's recalled all his troops that were within marching distance to Gora Umadar. Val's also been raising Demons by the hundreds to add to his army, and that's what Spyder and the gods are getting involved to stop. You know that all of this is about the Firestaff," he told her.

She nodded. "They took Jasana to make you give it to them," she said.

"I'm going to use that to get her back," he said. "The Firestaff only works on day every five thousand years, and I'm going to make sure I get to Gora Umadar *on that day*. The immediacy of the situation is going to give

me a bargaining chip. It's the only time I think I could get that close to Val and face him directly."

"Why is that so important?"

"Because I want his attention on *me*," he told her. "I'm taking Jesmind with me. While I'm holding Val's attention, Jesmind is going to get out of there with Jasana. Only after they're clear will I pretend to be willing to give him the Firestaff, and that's where you're going to come in."

"Us? How?"

"At that moment, I'm going to need a *huge* distraction," he said dryly. "I think something along the lines of a powerful army arriving to do battle with Val's forces will qualify. With a little luck, I can escape in the chaos. Val has turned Gora Umadar into a void, but I know I can do other kinds of magic. I'm going to have Triana teach me some way to escape from Gora Umadar with a Druidic spell. That way, after Jesmind gets Jasana out of there, I can get out myself."

"Why not just go alone and use the same trick to kidnap Jasana back?"

"Because me being in the pyramid is going to distract *them*," he told her plainly. "You're going to *need* that kind of a distraction, sister. Val is a *god*. Don't forget that. If he catches you before you can get a chance to set up, he'll slaughter your army. But if all his attention is on *me*, you have a chance to get there and set up before he can respond."

"Besides, little one, I doubt that they would let Tarrin get that close to his daughter," Sapphire added. "They *know* he is a powerful magician. They will take no chances that he has a little surprise. And Val would be a fool to allow Jasana to leave without Tarrin remaining behind, so he *must* have someone with him to help him. But why Jesmind? Kimmie or Triana would be better."

"Jesmind is Jasana's mother," he said. "She will obey Jesmind without question. She won't even do that for Triana. And at that point, Jasana doing exactly what she's told could mean the difference between life and death."

"You have a point," Sapphire acceded.

"The only sticking point I have right now is how to get them out once they get out of the pyramid," he admitted. "There's going to be a hostile

army between them and freedom, and they'll attack as soon as Jesmind comes out."

"I can take care of that, little one," Sapphire said. "Sandwing is very young, and his youth gives him both speed and brashness. And he a very small dragon yet, so he won't be so large as to cause any undue trouble."

"One of yours?"

"My youngest," she nodded. "The one that took so long to get word to me. He is as small to me as a baby is to you." Tarrin considered that, realizing that Sandwing was probably only about a hundred spans long, where Sapphire was five hundred. A much smaller, sleeker, and probably faster and more agile dragon, but still a dragon. Something not even the most fanatical Troll would dare to cross.

"That will work," he nodded to her. "The timing is going to have to be perfect, and your child may have to think on his feet, but it can work."

"Sandwing is a very clever dragon," she told him confidently. "He will do fine."

"Well, that takes care of the only real hole I had," he said.

"What's the rest of the plan?" Jenna asked.

He got up and started to pace. "Timing is going to be everything in this," he told them. "I asked Phandebrass to draw me up a chart so I'll know exactly when the conjunction happens. I have to get there before that happens, but not so late that it *does* happen while I'm there. I want Val watching the clock every second, desperate to get the Firestaff from me before the conjunction occurs. That's going to be the *only* window where I'll be able to extort demands out of him. With me right there and the Firestaff within his grasp, I'm confident he'll let Jesmind and Jasana leave as long as I stay behind. That's what matters. After they're out of danger, then I'll get out of there. Val and the others know I can do other forms of magic, but they *don't* know how strong I am with Druidic magic. With the void, I'm fairly certain they'll assume that they're preventing me from escaping using magic. I want that to be a nasty shock for them," he said with a grim smile.

"It is a plan with possibilities, little one, but it has a fatal flaw."

"The tundra," he nodded. "I know. There's nowhere to hide out there, and no way an army can approach without being spotted days before they arrive. That is where I'm hoping that Mother can help. She said the gods themselves were going to directly involve themselves in this. I think the *best* thing that they could do is use their power to transport the army right onto the battlefield. Their sudden appearance should create a nasty shock in our enemies, and if they're set up for attack before they leave, they can literally throw themselves at the enemy army before they so much as get out of their tents." He gave a dry, hollow chuckle. "If the Sha'Kar can Teleport several hundred people, I think the Elder Gods can Teleport an army."

"*You are correct,*" the voice of the Goddess sounded from thin air, and then her animated icon appeared behind Jenna's chair. With her was the black-cloaked Spyder, and the two of them looked the unusual pair. Jenna immediately got up and offered the Goddess her chair, the chair of the ruler of the Tower, and she accepted it with a warm smile and a pat on Jenna's cheek, seating herself with Jenna

standing to the left of her chair and Spyder to her right.

"Divine One," Sapphire said, standing up and giving her a surprisingly graceful curtsy.

"I'm not much one for ceremony, Sapphire," she smiled. "And call me Mother. It pleases me."

"As you wish, Mother," she said with an eloquent nod.

"That's a fairly cunning idea you have, kitten," she continued with a light smile. "It certainly would have a good effect for our side. The sudden appearance of the army *and* the sense of presence the Elder Gods would have over them will *definitely* get Val's attention, and that will give you the chance you need to escape. Let's not forget the element of surprise that will give us an immediate advantage. And I find that the rest of your plan has merit, kitten. It relies a little too much on luck, but for *you*, it's a remarkably well thought-out plan."

Tarrin flushed slightly.

"I know, it's a very tricky problem, and sometimes problems like that require a little unconventional thinking. The idea to transport an army right

onto the battlefield is *clever*, my kitten. You've just revolutionized warfare. It's the ultimate surprise attack!"

"And it lets us amass our army wherever we wish," Sapphire added. "Suld may not be the right place for it. There are too many eyes here."

"There's no need to *mass* the army anywhere," the Goddess told the dragon. "If we do what Tarrin suggests, we can assemble elements of it wherever they may be, then bring them all together right before we move them to the battlefield. That way the disappearances of entire armies don't raise any suspicions, we don't strip any friendly kingdoms of all its protection while we're borrowing their armies, and we can get them all assembled and set up before we transport them to Gora Umadar. All we need to do is assemble the command staff in one place and let them work out the battle strategy. The common soldier rarely knows the full plan anyway. He merely goes in the direction his officers lead him."

"The best place for that would be Abrodar," Spyder finally said. "It is the one place where Val's eyes cannot reach. As Sapphire said, there are too many unfriendly eyes in Suld."

"Agreed," the Goddess said with a nod. Then she looked to Sapphire. "I heard you've called council," she said. "How many dragons do you think will help?"

"You will have all nine of my clan and every blue in my territory," she said immediately. "When I call them to war, they must obey, as is custom. That is some seventy blue dragons. The golds, silvers, diamonds, and sapphires will heed such a call to arms against Demons, and I'm fairly sure we can get a good number of the bronzes, greens, emeralds, topazes, and blacks, but I'm not sure how many of the others will agree. The reds will probably be the hardest to sway. Them and the coppers. Both are very selfish breeds. And you know how much we will have to argue with the steels to get them to agree. Sometimes they fight just for the sake of fighting."

Seventy blue dragons. Just the image of seeing seventy of those massive creatures in the sky would be enough to strike utter terror in the heart of any mere mortal that happened to witness such an event.

Standing up, Tarrin gave the Jenna a steady look. "None of this really concerns me, and I have other things to do," he announced. "Jenna, I'm going to be asking you to Teleport me to Ungardt as soon as I get everything done."

"Why Ungardt? And why leave?"

"It's the easiest route to Gora Umadar, and right now I don't *want* to be found," he answered. "If they can't find me, they can't deliver any ransom demands that put me in a hopeless situation. So long as I'm out of their reach, they have to keep Jasana alive. And that's what matters."

"Good point," she agreed after a moment of thought.

The Goddess looked at him, and he felt her reach into his mind. It was a gentle touch, almost comforting, but he wasn't sure what she found. He couldn't sense what she was doing, only that she did it. Whatever she found, though, caused her to smile.

He left them without another word and sought sanctuary in the one place where he could find peace, and that was the courtyard. The statue of the Goddess was missing from the merrily bubbling fountain, but the sense of peace, of *welcome*, that had always been a part of the courtyard remained. It was that sense of peace that made him seek this place out, to calm the turmoil of his mind. He sat on the lush grass near the fountain and closed his eyes, drawing up into a cross-legged meditative posture, closing his eyes and trying to calm his mind and his emotions. He needed to do it, because he could feel the All starting to take an interest in him. It seemed almost alive, the All, attracted by the noise that an upset Druid could cause, almost as if it were curious to find out what had upset the Druid so. It only seemed to be attracted to the stronger Druids, those with a more intimate connection to it, the ones that could make the most noise. Regardless of why it was attracted, he could feel it creeping towards him, the first of the signs Triana had trained him to detect. That feeling of *swelling* in the All, as if it were building up around him. That was what it felt like when the All was starting to build itself up to reaching out and making a connection with a Druid of its own volition, and his meditative attempts to calm himself caused it to lose interest in him, made that swelling in the All subside.

There was plenty to cause him turmoil. His daughter was the core of it, that much was given. Jasana's abduction was like a knife twisting inside him, an intense pain that he never thought was possible. His mind was consumed with fear and worry over the safety and well being of his daughter, the kind of reaction that only a parent could have for a child. It was all he could do to try to think through that worry, that fear, to maintain his focus and keep his mind on the task of retrieving her safely. It was not going to be easy, and that meant that he had to push that to the side. Like he told Jesmind, they could fall to pieces *after* she was safe. After he rescued her, he'd let all his pent-up emotions go, finally give them release. But until then, they were only a liability, and as dangerous as this was going to be, he couldn't afford any distractions.

That was only one of the problems facing him. He was very concerned for his sisters and friends, because what was coming would be much worse than what happened at Suld. This time it would be a pitched battle on open terrain, where there would be no fortifications, no defensive fallbacks. Only army against army, where the one with superior numbers, magical firepower, and leadership was going to prevail. the Sorcerers, Wizards, Priests, and dragons and other magical creatures were going to be countered by the *ki'zadun's* black Wizards and Priests, the *Fae-da'kii* that had survived the battle at Suld, and the Demons. The humans, Selani, and Wikuni would be faced by humans and Goblinoids. Unless the Goddess did some serious recruiting, they were going to be severely outnumbered, and that really worried him. In a battle like that, the safety of his friends and sisters was very much in doubt. Even Allia would tire, and after battling for hours, even she would make a mistake that may get her killed. He was very worried that he was going to lose a sister or dear friend in this coming war, because more than ever before, the chances of that not happening had never been so against them.

And even if they prevailed, even if they destroyed Val's army, Val would still be there. He was a god, invincible, unstoppable, and he would only retreat to Zakkar, the ancient base of his power, and assemble another army. He would keep coming back, and coming back, and coming back, because nobody could stop him. Not even the gods themselves were willing to confront Val, to eliminate him and the danger he posed to the world once and for all, and it was all because they were *afraid*. That seemed

unbelievable to him, but it was true. Despite all their vast power, despite the absolute *need* to get rid of Val, they were afraid to face him. Afraid of what damage it may do, and what he understood with sudden clarity, afraid of the losses they may suffer to *themselves*. They were afraid to be diminished, even if it meant that Val would rampage across the land with absolute impunity as they did nothing but wring their hands and fret over it. Spyder said that the gods called him Entropy, but he realized that he only posed a danger because the gods were unwilling to do what had to be done to end the threat he caused. They were afraid of destroying the world, but they seemed perfectly content to allow Val to destroy it piece by tiny piece rather than risk destroying it all at once. Fear was a good thing, but not when it prevented one from doing what had to be done. That was something his mother and father had taught him, and he realized that it may be time for some gods to start thinking about that.

Again it came back to Val. Val had been behind Kravon, and he had been responsible for much of the misfortune in Tarrin's life. He was the root of it, and it was upon him that all of Tarrin's anger had been affixed. His abduction by Jula, the death of Faalken, the countless innocents he slaughtered after turning feral, the near-destruction of the Goddess' icon and the death in the battle of Suld, it was all directly attributable to him. And now he threatened his daughter, an unforgivable offense, one that made Tarrin want to tear out his eyes. Only the desperate danger his daughter was in kept his mind from wonderfully graphic and gory fantasies of somehow tearing Val limb from limb then defiling his shattered remains in a final act of defiance and hate.

But Val was a god, while he was but a mortal. Val held supreme power here, beyond that of even the Elder Gods, because he existed solely and completely in the material world. He was little more than a gnat flying in Val's face, annoying him and in danger of being crushed like nothing as soon as he annoyed Val enough.

But some gnats were more resilient than others.

Tarrin remained in his calm state for an hour and more, trying to compose himself and ready himself for the trials ahead. A trek across Ungardt in the winter would not be pleasant, and the end of that journey led to its own significant problems. The trip was nothing more than an exercise

in wasting time, anyway. Everyone was waiting for Gods' Day, even him. Everything up to that point really meant nothing. At least to him. But at least it would be time with Jesmind, a chance to spend some time with her before everything was said and done, when he knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

But he had no regrets. He would do what must be done, just as the Goddess had commanded him. Jasana would survive, Jesmind would survive, and that was all that mattered to him.

The waiting was all. He was waiting for Phandebrass to finish his chart. He was waiting for Triana to arrive. He was waiting to leave. There would be no goodbyes, just as there were none last time. The time before, it was to maintain a veil of secrecy. This time, it was to maintain a veneer of believability. He was absolutely depending on something Spyder said, that Val would be out there listening, picking the thoughts out of everyone's minds. He went to a great deal of trouble laying down a believable convincing plan, a plan that he was absolutely certain that Val was going to learn. A plan Tarrin had absolutely no intention of following. It would be the same plan up to a certain point, but when those paths split, Val was going to be in for a nasty surprise. So much of one that it was going to allow them to get Jasana out of Gora Umadar alive, and with Sapphire's child dragon there to pick them up, get them to safety.

And that was all that mattered.

It was forty-one days until Gods' Day. Forty-one days to wait, forty-one days for snags to rise up in the plan.

Forty-one days until the very real possibility that it would be the beginning of the end of the world. Or, depending on how one saw things, forty-one days until the opportunity of wiping out Val's army and forcing him to start again from scratch and rebuild. That would give everyone all the time they needed to recover and be ready for the next round of this extended, unending contest between Val and the rest of the world.

Forty-one days.

He became aware of Triana's scent. He heard her come into the courtyard, pad over to him silently, then seat herself facing him. He made

no indication he knew she was there, and she was silent a long moment, as if content to wait for him to acknowledge her.

"They said you wanted to see me," she finally said.

"I did," he said serenely, without opening his eyes. "I want you to take the other Were-cats into the Frontier. Take them as far from Suld as you can get them, and don't leave them. I don't want them anywhere near what's coming."

"I guess we can all go to Mist's place," she mused. "It's going to be a bit cramped with me and Julia there, but we can manage."

"And I want you to warn *Fae-da'Nar* of what we're going to do."

"I've already done that. That's why I'm so late getting here. They've agreed to help again. They know what Demons mean, cub. Everyone has to put a hand in to stop this before it gets out of control."

"Good. Me and Jesmind are going after Jasana."

"I know, they told me," she said. He felt her put her paw on his shoulder. "I don't know what you have up your sleeve, cub, but I hope it's a damned miracle. Do you have any idea what you're about to walk into?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and she actually flinched her hand away when she saw the look of almost burning obsession in his eyes, and the cold emptiness behind them. The eyes of a man willing to go to any lengths to recover his child. "I'll manage, mother," he told her.

Because they had seen into each other's minds, they were much closer now, and her intimate understanding of him made her pale when she realized the truth. "Don't think like that, cub," she told him, almost pleadingly. "It's not a given that you're not going to get out alive. Don't give up hope."

"I'm not. But I'm also not going to ignore reality," he told her. "After I get Jesmind and Jasana out of there, and the moment passes when Val can use the Firestaff, I'll have nothing left to use as a bargaining chip. If Jenna and the others can't distract Val long enough for me to find a way to escape, I won't."

"They said you wanted me to teach you how I travel."

"I only said that to reassure the others," he said dismissively. "I doubt I could learn something that complicated in one day."

"You're right."

"When the time comes, I have an idea of how I'm going to get out," he told her. "It's going to depend a little on luck, but no plan doesn't rely on little on luck at some point."

"You're going to give me gray hair, cub," she told him with a weak smile.

He reached out and put his paw on her leg, patting it. "Don't tell the others," he said. "Part of this depends on the other side hearing and seeing things that reinforces the ideas I've laid down. If things don't happen the way I've set them up, I'm not going to get Jasana back."

"I'll keep quiet."

"I only told you because you're a Druid, mother. Spyder told me that Val can pick the thoughts right out of your head from great distances, but I'll bet that not even he can do that easily to someone with a mind as disciplined as a Druid's. That's why nobody else can know. Val is going to find out about the plan from others, and he'll prepare to deal with that plan."

"While you have something else up your sleeve," Triana nodded. "Clever."

"I do. Forgive me if I don't tell you, but this is something I can't risk for any reason."

"I don't blame you, cub. When are you leaving?"

"Phandebrass is doing something for me. I'll leave when he's done."

"That book?" Triana asked. "I saw him when I tracked down Camara Tal. He had a book with him, and he said it was for you."

"That's what I've been waiting for," he said, quickly standing up. "There's some information in that book I need. Now that he's found it, I can go."

"Want me to gather everyone?"

He shook his head. "I don't want anyone to know I'm going. As soon as I get that book, I'm getting Jesmind, and we're leaving. I don't want any explanations. Kerri and Miranda will dog me until they get what they want out of me, and it's critical they know only what I want them to know."

"I think that's a mistake, but I won't gainsay you, cub," she told him, standing up. "Let's go see Phandebrass, and you can get on your way."

Without another word, the pair of them left the courtyard, devoid of the statue that defined it, yet with the presence it represented still present within it.

A presence that heard every word.

Kimmie was tired.

She'd been getting strangely tired here lately, usually when working with her magic, and sometimes just after a long day. Despite her pregnancy, she still tutored under Phandebrass, though now he told her that it was more of her refining the skills he taught her than any real additional instruction. Under his watchful eye, she practiced her art at a grueling pace each day, wearing herself out and coming back stronger the day afterward. But now that her pregnancy was entering its final phases, her due date only a month and a half away, the child inside her was putting more and more demands on her body and her energy. What had started out as help at the fenceline turned into more of an active supervision, for she had grown too tired to continue after a shocking short time. Were-cat females were only vulnerable in their pregnancy during the last few days, when the baby was ready to drop, but they weren't totally unaffected by their condition until that time. Were-cat babies were infants, but they were Were, and that put more stresses on the mother, more demands on her energy, than a human baby. Until they made their own connection to the All and their powers became independent, the mother was carrying the burden for both mother and child, and Were-cats were a strongly magical Were race. Their regeneration, and to a lesser degree their strength, were aspects of Druidic magic, not physical conditions. Until the baby was born, became an entity completely separate from the mother, the mother was supplying the unborn infant the magical energy it needed for its Were nature to remain strong and healthy.

That was getting to Kimmie, but there was an emotional toll as well. What happened to Jasana had hit her hard, made her rather fearful for her own baby, and it had hurt her to see the damage it had done to Tarrin. She knew exactly how he felt, and to a degree felt the same way herself. Jasana wasn't her daughter, but she did love the little girl, considered her a part of her immediate family. The grief of her abduction was only matched by her anger over it, and the need she felt to help Tarrin and Jesmind get their daughter back. She knew that they'd need to stay together now, in case the enemy decided that having *two* of Tarrin's children or mates was better than just one. They would gather together and probably have Triana with them to protect them, and they would not permit them to take another Were-cat.

She was exhausted. All of them had gathered together, including the ones from Ungardt, and Jenna told them what was happening. Keritanima immediately had something of a power struggle with Jenna, a confrontation that Jenna won; Keritanima was so used to giving orders that she probably didn't even realize she was infringing on Jenna's authority. But things did look hopeful. They needed to get a look at the army they were facing, but the simple idea that dragons may be fighting with them made any enemy numbers seem even to their own. The idea of gathering the army in small elements then having the gods themselves collect the pieces and then transport the entire mass to a surprise attack on the battlefield was a clever idea, one with a great deal of potential.

That had been the hardest thing about the meeting. The Goddess of the Sorcerers was there *in person*, sitting on a luxurious chair and letting the mortals make their plans, either answering questions or making suggestions from time to time. Kimmie had found herself staring at the figure more than once. It seemed too bizarre to be in the presence of a *god*! And she was such a beautiful one! Her very presence was overwhelming, as if her body couldn't contain all her mighty power, and her voice too seemed to echo and resonate in choral tones, as if no one voice could hold the power it contained. But her aura of power was a gentle one, and her smiles reassuring. Kimmie almost immediately understood why the Sorcerers informally referred to their Goddess as *Mother*. There was a nurturing quality about her, a feminine aire of protectiveness and kindness, that made her seem like the mother of them all, and she had felt quite safe sitting there in the Goddess' presence. And had been reluctant to leave it. Their Goddess

was a gentle and loving goddess, and Kimmie felt a little jealous over it. The patron god of Wizards, the god of the original Wizard who had brought Arcane magic to Sennadar from his other dimension, was called Azur, and he had never once answered one of Kimmie's prayers. It seemed unfair that the Sorcerers would have a patron so intimately involved with her followers, while their own god was so terribly aloof and uncaring.

And when she'd thought that, the Goddess looked right into her eyes and gave her a loving smile. There was something in that smile, that look, almost like a look of *invitation*. Was the Goddess inviting her to cast off the worship of an uncaring god and accept her as her patron? She had to admit, being there in her presence, she was *sorely* tempted. Azur had never answered a prayer, had never seemed like a part of her life, and her worship of him was simply because he was the patron of her order. Because it was expected of her to be a subject of Azur. She even had his holy symbol, that of a human hand surrounded by an aura of flames, but she kept it in the bottom of her pack, where it rarely saw the light of day. But was it a real invitation? She'd never so much as seen any hint that Azur knew she was alive, but the thought of being rejected by the Goddess if she did try told her that Azur would *definitely* notice that. As long as she was a good little subject, he'd not care, but if she sought acceptance with another god, he'd probably be rather offended, and she would suffer his wrath.

Still, it was a rather intriguing idea. The Goddess of the Sorcerers was never known to have any worshippers outside the members of the order of which she was patroness. Would she accept Kimmie, even though she wasn't a Sorcerer? It was an idea to ponder.

But all those thoughts left her when she returned to her room, and found something waiting for her on a small table beside her bed. She noticed it immediately because Tarrin's scent was strong in the room, and it came from those objects. One was a black metal statuette, a sleek cat sitting on its haunches with its tail curled around its legs, an expression of truly feline indifference on its face. It was a lovely sculpture, very detailed and remarkably lifelike, with emeralds for eyes that seemed to glow in the light of the glowglobe hovering over the bed.

The second object was what looked like a piece of rope laid carefully around the statue, but as she got closer, she realized that it was Tarrin's

braid. He had cut it off and left it in her room, carefully weaving the cut end with the braid's tip to form an unbroken circle.

Seeing that braid, knowing from experience what something like that meant, Kimmie immediately burst into tears and ran over to the table, kneeling before it and clutching the severed braid between trembling paws. She knew that he would never have left something like that, a piece of himself a magic-user could use against him, without a very good reason. And giving it to her, the mother of one of his children, told her his reason, even if she wasn't entirely sure how she knew what it meant.

Weeping into the braid, she cradled it and the cat statue to her breast, knowing that it was Tarrin's way of telling her goodbye.

And that he wasn't sure if he was coming back.

And so, without fanfare, without farewells, and without even any notice, Tarrin and Jesmind disappeared from the Tower of Six Spires after Tarrin retrieved a small book of lunar charts and astronomical observances from Phandebrass, made a few other arrangements, picked up Jesmind, and then he had Jenna Teleport them silently out of the Tower. The only ones who knew they'd left were Triana and Jenna, and neither mentioned anything to anyone until well into the next day

And a quiet, mourning Kimmie, who jealously guarded the precious gifts he had left to her, gifts that she did not reveal to any other living soul.

Chapter 13

It was cold.

Cold wasn't a very descriptive term, however. Freezing would have been better, or arctic, or brutal, but they all described the biting, knife-like cold of the coastal plains of Ungardt.

Tarrin and Jesmind loped to the east, leaving the city of Dusgaard behind during the dead of night, with only the light of the Skybands and the Red Moon to light their way, the colors casting strange shadows on the crusted snow that was piled a span or more on the ground. The snow did little to slow them down, for Tarrin's height made a span of snow a pittance, and Jesmind followed in the trail he broke in the frozen snow. His feet, submerged in the snow most of the time, felt comparatively warm compared to what he felt against his skin. Winters were cold in Ungardt, and coming out at night, the temperature was as far below the freezing point of water as it was above the freezing point in the midday desert. Biting cold sank its teeth into both of them, but it found that it could not gain purchase. Neither was properly dressed for the intense cold, but their Were-cat natures defended them from frostbite. Their regenerative abilities prevented their flesh from freezing by expending energy to keep them warm, and that would protect them for a short while. For Tarrin, it was a bit more. His strong connection to the Weave allowed its energy to flow through him just as if he were a strand, something that required no effort or energy on his part, and that energy produced heat. The same heat he had Transmuted his body to protect against now ward off the arctic chill, keeping him at a comfortable temperature.

It would have to protect them, because they couldn't stop. Ungardt weren't paranoid, but if they knew Tarrin was there, they would slow them down. Not over challenging them, but over hospitality. Hospitality was serious business to the Ungardt, and if any of the clan caught him out on his own, they'd invite him into their lodges, and Tarrin would be forced to accept. If he snubbed them, it could cause an incident between his family

and the offended family...and in Ungardt, such spats often led to bloodshed. The Ungardt did not have the same strictures about fighting among themselves as the Selani had, and Ungardt fought with each other with greater enthusiasm than they did with outsiders. Ungardt considered a fight with another Ungardt as a fight worthy of their talents. Tarrin had to get them out of the populated areas before dawn, then the sun's return brought the temperate up to that which the Ungardt would find more acceptable to outside activity. The other reason was because he didn't want *anyone* to know where he was. If an Ungardt saw him, they'd spread the word, and it wouldn't take that long to get back to his enemies. He didn't want to give anyone any help in tracking him down. So Tarrin led Jesmind on a murderous pace, knowing that they had to get off the coastal plain and up into the foothills as quickly as they could.

It took them quite a while to get off the coastal plain. Ungardt was the largest kingdom in the West, but it was also the least populated, and the vast majority of that population was hugged up against the sea. There were occasional villages scattered along the rolling hills off the coastal plain, but one could go for days travelling between them. The other concentration of Ungardt was to the far east of the kingdom, in the Frozen Mountains and the rugged foothills abutting them on the west edge, where Ungardt miners and craftsmen were concentrated to mine the vast deposits of iron and coal out of the glacier-covered mountains and rugged foothills, and craft it into tools, weapons, or large ingots of pure iron for sale to other kingdoms. There were huge complexes up in the mountains where the Ungardt used their precious blast furnaces to melt the iron down into stock and ingots, using the coal they mined from the foothills to fuel their furnaces. The technology of the blast furnace was relatively new, the Ungardt only having it for a about fifty years or so, and it was the cause of the infamous Iron War between Wikuna and Ungardt. The Wikuni had refused to sell the plans for a blast furnace to the Ungardt, trying to maintain a stranglehold on their trade in cast-iron goods, so one enterprising Ungardt noble emptied out his entire strongroom to buy a Wikuni agent and have the man steal the plans for the device. The crazy idea actually worked, and a year later the Ungardt noble had in his greedy little hands the plans for constructing a blast furnace. The Wikuni took great offense to this, and made the eternal mistake of blaming the king of Ungardt and the entire kingdom rather than just the offending noble. Malor Eram, king at that time, declared war on

Ungardt. The Ungardt were actually happy over it, ready to put the arrogant Wikuni in their place, and began a two year war. The Ungardt were not fools. They knew that the clippers and frigates of the Wikuni gave them superiority at sea, so they took their longship up into the pack ice of the arctic reaches of the northern area of the kingdom and left them there, beyond the reach of the Wikuni, whose ships were not designed to deal with ice-laden seas. Then they pulled back from the coastal plain and allowed the Wikuni to occupy Ungardt soil, because they *wanted* them where they could get their hands on them. But Jorg Skullsplitter, king of the clans at that time, didn't attack them immediately. He let them build up as much as they desired that first year, and then winter set in. The Wikuni learned quickly and to their eternal regret that *no one* invades Ungardt in the winter, and *no one* can defeat the Ungardt who fight in the winter. The Ungardt fully understood and expected, and were both used to and prepared for, the fury of the northern winter. The Wikuni knew what to expect in the Ungardt winter, but even they underestimated the depths of the cold of the winter, a cold so intense that the Wikuni, even in their fur, didn't want to venture more than two steps from their fires. Jorg let them freeze to death for a couple of months, then his warriors boiled out of the foothills like a wave crashing on the beach and easily overwhelmed the Wikuni defenders. They even captured their clippers and frigates, which were stripped of their gunpowder, cannons, and then set at the heads of the fjords to fire on Wikuni vessels from atop unreachable fjordheads as they passed. Malor Eram sent an even larger force in the spring, but they were shocked when the Ungardt, sailing Wikuni vessels, began ambushing them on the open seas and captureing or sinking their troop transports at an alarming rate. The Wikuni were forced to use convoys to protect their vulnerable transports, but that only minimized the destruction. The Ungardt would sweep down on those convoys, sink as many troop transports as they could, which weren't heavily armed to give more space to carrying soldiers, then they would run away. The Wikuni learned that the Ungardt were their equals on the seas when they had Wikuni vessels under them. These slashing tactics had a devastating effect, and the numbers of troops that landed on Ungardt soil were overrun by hordes of berzerk Ungardt warriors, unafraid of their muskets and cannons. They held the Wikuni off the whole spring and summer, then again pulled back into the foothills as winter approached,

daring the Wikuni into trying to occupy their land in the teeth of winter again.

After two years, Malor Eram realized that there was no way he could win a war against the Ungardt when they were on Ungardt soil and in Ungardt waters. They had land trade routes back into Draconia and Daltochan, which were landlocked nations that were immune to Wikuni threats to prevent them from trading with them. That, and the sudden drastic decrease in the amount of iron they received in export made them realize that the Ungardt were more important to them as a trading partner than they were as an enemy. The Ungardt were the door through which Dal and Ungardt iron flowed into Wikuna, and the war closed that door. Malor offered peace, which Jorg accepted with the condition that the stolen technology that had started the war was now official Ungardt property, and they'd do their own smelting and refining. That nearly set Malor back on the warpath, for the Wikuni made a fortune buying raw ore at cheap prices, smelting and refining it, then selling the refined iron at a hefty profit, but he could not refuse. And so, there was peace again, the Ungardt suddenly began making money smelting and refining both their ore and the Dal ore, and sold it to Wikuna at a much higher price. It was a war that the Wikuni had lost, the only one they had ever lost, and it bit deeply into the purses of the noble houses of Wikuna. So deeply that Malor Eram mysteriously died that winter, and was succeeded by Ethram Eram, who was Damon Eram's grandfather.

The Iron War was probably what made Wikuna what it was today. They were almost paranoid over their technology falling into the hands of other nations, unwilling to share it with the rest of the world because of the financial gains that having it brought to them. But the problem was that technologies that would make them much more money by releasing them were also withheld, such as their ingenious water and sewage systems. They could make a *fortune* if they sent out their plumbers and pipe-making artisans out into the world and offered to build their water systems in the larger cities of the West, and the entire world for that matter, but they would not, jealously holding onto what they perceived as their technological edge.

That would change, though. Keritanima showed that she was much more progressive than the kings who had held the throne before her. She

would introduce Wikuni advances to the West, and everyone would benefit from it.

They ran on through the night, along a road that led eastwards through a series of smaller and smaller villages, villages that showed the peculiarities of Ungardt architecture. They used slate-roofed houses whose roofs were steeply sloped, the crown of the roof often three stories off the ground for a one story house, and they were built like that to make the heavy snow that fell during the winter slide off the rooftops. If that much snow settled on top of a house, its weight would collapse the roof. So Ungardt roofs were high, sharp, and heavily reinforced, to bear the additional weight they were forced to accept during the winter months. Some buildings in the cities and some of the larger buildings in the villages had flat roofs that were made of stone, but there was also a door leading onto it so people could get easily onto the roof and sweep the snow off of it before it got too heavy for the roof to take. But those roofs were usually literally armored, heavily buttressed to withstand great amounts of heavy snow, so the chore of going up and sweeping them off wasn't something that had to be done after every snowstorm. And in the summer, such buildings provided something of an extra private space where the owners of the building could go and enjoy the brief warmth of the summer sun. The flat roofs turned into temporary gardens and courtyards during the summer.

By morning, they were at the edge of the foothills, passing through a village just beginning to stir in the darkness. Morning came *very* late that far north, so far north that the Skybands dominated the entire southern sky, so far north that the sun only came up for a few hours on Midwinter Day. The Ungardt would rise well before sunrise and stay up well past sunset, using the light of the Skybands and the moons to navigate the night. And that far north, the Skybands cast a great deal of light down on the land, more than enough for Tarrin to see as clearly as if it were day, and more than enough for a human to easily be able to move around. It was never truly dark on Sennadar unless the clouds blocked the night sky, and the larger the Skybands were in the sky, the more light they shed down upon the land. As far north as they were, they were a constant lantern in the night, turning darkness into a dim pre-dawn kind of light that by which anyone could easily see.

They moved well past the village, and finally stopped in a stand of thick fir trees that helped break the biting wind. Jesmind swept snow off a log and flopped down, panting and breaking some frozen sweat out of the hair of her red eyebrows, but Tarrin showed no signs that he was winded from the long, heavy run. He simply wove a dome of warmth around their small clearing in the middle of the fir grove, then swept all the snow out of it before it melted and turned everything soggy. Jesmind gasped when all the snow suddenly picked up and flew out of the clearing, then she laughed as Tarrin seated himself cross-legged on the ground, wrapping his long tail around his legs to keep it out of the way. "Nice," she said, looking around, then shaking her head while her paws scrubbed through the unruly mane of her hair. "What do we do now?"

"Rest," he answered in a distant tone, taking the metal bracers off his wrists and putting them in his lap, then summoning his black-bladed sword out of the *elsewhere* and setting it in his lap with them.. "Go find us something to eat. I have something to do."

"What?"

"Make you a weapon," he told her, then he closed his eyes and put his paws over the bracers.

"No, what do you want to eat?"

"It doesn't matter, and you won't find any problems finding something," he answered. "Caribou are migrating through this area right now."

"Is that what I'm smelling?"

He nodded.

"Then it shouldn't be too hard to run one down," she agreed, standing up. "They're all over the place."

"Just don't let yourself be seen. Ungardt hunters are out doing the same thing right now."

"You're insulting me, my mate," she teased. "Before I go out there, do you think you could make me something a little warmer?" she asked, picking at her thin shirt. "This doesn't do much about the wind."

He opened his eyes and absently Conjured her a heavy fur-lined jacket of sorts with sleeves that ended at her elbows and a deep hood to hide her colorful hair, with white fur at the collar and cuffs and hanging down to her thighs. The fur on her arms and legs would keep them warm, and the pads on her feet were thick enough to defend her against the cold of the ground. The only parts of her she needed to protect against the cold were the parts with no fur.

Jesmind pulled it on over her head, then waved her paw in front of her face. "This thing may be *too* hot," she complained.

"You're hot from the run," he told her.

"Don't you need something?"

"Cold doesn't bother me, Jesmind," he told her distantly, eyes closed again. "The Weave is keeping me warm. Now go on. When I'm done, I'm going to be starving."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see when you get back."

"You're getting too secretive," she complained as she pulled up her hood to hide her flame-colored hair, a color that would attract every eye to her within a league out in the white snow, then she bounded off into the snow and quickly disappeared, her white coat blending with the snow perfectly.

What he was doing stretched his powers of Sorcery to their limit. The Cat's Claws were powerful magical devices, and they would be perfect for his mate. He had no real need for them, because he had a weapon against which the Demons could not defend, and his magic made him their equal. But Jesmind had no protection from them, and what was worse, no weapon to harm them. He intended to change that. He focused all of his power on the Cat's Claws, and then reached deeply into High Sorcery, causing his entire body to limn over into Magelight, then have it condense down and form the concave four-pointed star that marked a *sui'kun* using his maximum power. He turned his full, true power against the bracers in his lap, his magic and his awareness sinking down into the black steel of their substance, deeper and deeper, until he was at a point where the tiniest bits of their substance were made aware to him. It was at this level that he unleashed his power, weaving flows of such microscopic smallness that it

would have boggled the mind of nearly any other Sorcerer, manipulating the very core of the substance of which the bracers were made. He had to go very slowly and very carefully, for the substance of the bracers also housed the weaves that gave the Cat's Claws their power, and he could not disrupt that magic. Magic of that kind was strong, but it was also very delicate and very carefully designed. If he interfered with the way the weaves worked with one another, they would break down and destroy themselves, and render the items powerless. So he moved with painstaking care, Transmuting the metal of the Cat's Claws piece by tiny piece, moving methodically through them a section at a time, changing the metal very carefully around the weaves without disturbing them. It was exhausting work, and the effort of it was very quickly and very steadily draining him of his energy.

It took nearly two hours, but when he was done, almost in a swoon from the effort it had cost him, he was very pleased with the results. The metal of the Cat's Claws had been Transmuted into the exact same kind of metal of which his sword was made, that same strangely light, almost indestructible alloy that was not natural to his world, because all of the metals of which its alloy had been made did not exist on Sennadar. Though it was a creation of native magic, he could sense that the metal of the Cat's Claws were now harmful to a Demon, able to breach their invulnerability and strike them true injury. Though created by native magic, the result was a substance that still had no native existence in his world, and as such still constituted a weapon not of his world where it concerned a Demonic opponent. Just as the Ironwood of his staff had been raised in Sennadar and still had the power to harm a Demon, so this metal, created in his world, still had the power to do a Demon injury. He had used his own sword as a guide in how that metal was arrayed at its basest level, an organization of the tiniest of all pieces of solid matter, all of which did not exist in the natural order of his world. He saw that it was this alloy's properties that gave the sword its incredible edge and hardness, a toughness inconceivable to modern metallurgists, a metal so strong that it would take *magic* to make it bend or even break. The sword had been *created* by some strange alien magic, shaped into the form of a sword and given an edge that narrowed down to a single line of those tiniest bits of matter that made up its substance, quite literally because that was the only way it was going to be done. No smith's hammer could shape this metal, because it required a heat so intense that no

smith could survive the temperatures required to melt the metal. The metal would not even melt in a *volcano*, it was that strong. He remembered when it had gotten red-hot in the desert after his battle with Spyder, how he'd been afraid to pick it up because he feared the blade would bend. Now he knew that it had never been in such danger. Though the metal did become red-hot, it would have been just as strong as it was now. The sword itself was curiously non-magical, but the properties of the metal and the need to shape it with magic, a magic that allowed the maker to give it as sharp an edge as could possibly be given to the weapon, made it as good as one.

Quite by accident, he realized that since he did have such an understanding of that metal now, he could conceivably Create it. But it was an unnatural substance, and as such it meant that the attempt would be exceptionally demanding, if he could do it all. But that was something to explore at a later date. One did *not* experiment with Druidic magic.

Completely drained, almost shaking with exhaustion, and suddenly absolutely ravenous, Tarrin leaned over his legs and gave himself a few minutes to recover. Jesmind wasn't back yet, and that was odd. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he knew it had been some good amount. Jesmind was too good a hunter not to have caught something by now. Tarrin put on the Cat's Claws and made sure they still functioned properly by extending the blades. With no sound, the metal reshaped itself, flowing down over the backs of his paws and extending out over his fingers, the edges of the blades lighter in shade than the black of the metal, an indication that they had reshaped themselves to form an edge just as lethal as the one on his sword. Nodding in satisfaction, he returned the blades and took off the two metal bracers.

Jesmind's scent blew in on a faint breeze that penetrated the fir grove, as well as the smell of blood and a large hooved animal. A moment later, she came into view, carrying an animal that had to weigh three times more than she did, but having very little trouble handling its bulk. She carried it into the clearing and threw it to the ground, wiping at a large bloodstain that interrupted the white of both her coat and the fur on her right arm. "Here you go," she said. "It doesn't smell all that appealing, though."

"It's something to eat," he said. "I don't feel like eating it raw, though. Let's get a fire going."

They did so quickly, putting a good fire down in a stone-ringed pit. Tarrin was too tired to use Sorcery for anything but lighting the fire, and in a very short time, they had large chunks of the caribou roasting on sticks over the fire. Jesmind leaned up against him, and he put an arm around her, taking in her scent and enjoying her closeness, but her scent was agitated, and her weary sigh told him she was still worried. It was only natural for her to be so, just as he was almost sick with worry for Jasana. But they were doing something about it, and that was the only reason he could bear it.

"It, would be nice if Jasana were here," she said in a small voice. "We've never once had a picnic together, do you know that? We never seemed to have had much time at all to be together."

She put her head against his shoulder and stared woodenly into the fire as he held her a little closer. "You can't give in to it, Jesmind," he told her. "We're doing something about it. Every time you feel this way, tell yourself that. We're on our way to get her back, and we *will* get her back. I need you to be strong, love. When the time comes, it's your strength that's going to get Jasana out."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be making sure nobody tries to stop you," he told her. Then he remembered what he'd been doing. "Here, I want you to take these," he said, picking the Cat's Claws up from the ground, where they were laying by his sword.

"Aren't these those magic bracers Jenna made for you?"

He nodded. "I changed them a little so they can harm Demons. They *will* come after us, Jesmind. Val probably has them searching for us now, and when they find us, they're going to attack us in waves. My sword and staff can harm them, but now you have a weapon to use too."

"How can we fight so many?"

"We don't have to," he said. "There is a Ward that can stop them. We just have to survive long enough for me to raise that Ward, then I can kill them whenever I please."

"I guess that works," she said, holding up the two metal guards. "How do these work?"

"Put them on," he said, and she did so. She jumped a little when the black metal contracted around her lower forearm, then she laughed as she put the other one on. The black metal really stood out against her snowy fur. "All you have to do is want the blades to come out."

"That's all?"

"That's all. It does take a little effort, so you have to think hard about it. Go ahead and try."

Jesmind's brow furrowed in concentration as she held her paws out before her, and it took only a second for the bracers to react to her mental command. The metal flowed down over the backs of her paws with dazzling speed, then flowed out and set into the five span-long talons that extended past her fingertips. "That's all there is to it," he said with a smile. "With a little practice, you can make the blades longer or shorter, or only make one or two of them extend. You have complete control over them. They're sharper than razors, they won't break, and you don't have to worry about hurting yourself. They're enchanted so that they'll never cut their owner. If you tried to stab yourself with them, the metal would just retract when it touched your skin. They won't hurt you, even if you try to make them hurt you. I almost forgot, you can make them unbind themselves from your paws if you want to pick something up. They'll stick out over your knuckles when you do it, like four little swordblades."

"What about the one on my thumb?"

"It retracts when you unbind them by itself. It would be at an odd angle if it stayed out."

"I guess that makes sense," she said, turning her paws over and looking at her palms, seeing the ten magical claws extending over her fingers. "They really look intimidating," she mused.

"They should be. You can cut steel with them."

"They're that sharp?"

He nodded. "Given how strong you are, you could tear them through a solid block of steel. The edge lets them do it, but it's your strength that makes it happen. The metal's unbreakable and it covers the backs of your paws, so they double as pretty effective shields. If you ever find yourself

needing to defend yourself, use the bracers, or curl up your fingers and use the claws."

She nodded. "Well, I hope I never have to use them," she said as she retracted the blades, then she reached down and picked up his sword. She handed it to him, and he absently sheathed it and put it back in the *elsewhere*.

"I hope so too, but let's be realistic," he said as he touched the roasting meat with a finger. It was almost ready, which was a good thing, because his stomach was demanding food. He almost couldn't wait any longer.

"I intend to stick these in that Demon woman's eyes," she told him hotly, holding up her paws, though it was the bracer blades she obviously meant. "I guess I should be glad you gave them to me. Now I can pay her back for hurting me and stealing our daughter."

"That's the spirit," he told her with a heavy smile. "Now then, these are done. Let's eat."

The meal was hot and filling, and Tarrin managed to denude a good amount of the carcass with repeated trips to it to reload the roasting stick before his appetite was satisfied. Between him and Jesmind, they managed to clean off all the good parts of the caribou and left little behind to serve as a later meal. Both had been running hard and used up a lot of energy, and their Were natures didn't entirely depend on the All for its energy. It wasn't the first time he'd eaten like that, eaten five times more than his stomach could possibly hold, for his stomach was emptying itself out even as he filled it. They fought briefly over the liver, always a choice part for a carnivore, and ended up splitting it.

Tarrin felt re-energized after the meal, was up and moving around spryly as Jesmind lounged a bit by the warm fire. "What now, my mate?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said, Conjuring a very detailed and fully accurate map of Ungardt and the tundra to the east of the Frozen Mountains. "We have forty-one days to get there, and we have to make sure we arrive in *exactly* forty-one days," he reminded her, sitting by her and putting the map on the ground. "We're right here," he said, pointing just to the right of a dot that represented Dusgaard. "There's only small villages of my clan and Clan

Vjolgir east of us, but then it gets populated again when you get to the Frozen Mountains," he added, sliding his finger towards the right on the map, to where several symbols rested that represented mines and mine camps.

"What's out there?" she asked.

"Iron mines," he replied. "The Frozen Mountains are stained red from all the iron in them. It's the same in Daltochan, but they have other metals, like silver, tin, gold, lead, Mithril, and copper down there. There only seems to be iron in the Frozen Mountains. Ungardt makes half its money off the mines and the smelting camps. The other half comes from trade."

"I didn't know the Ungardt were so heavily into mining," she mused.

"We didn't used to be, but the Dals showed us how much iron we have," he shrugged. "In fact, we have alot of Dals at our mines. They're better at mining than we are, and they'll go where the mining pays the most."

"If you want to find a Dal, dig a hole," Jesmind chuckled, quoting an old saying.

"Mining's one of the very few things they can do up in their mountains," Tarrin told her. "So it only stands to reason that they'd be very good at it. Ungardt are too big and unruly to be good miners," he admitted. "There are alot of Ungardt there, but the Dals do alot of the mining with the more patient Ungardt, and the Ungardt usually work on refining the ore they bring out."

"What did you call it? Smelting?"

He nodded. "They mine coal from the hills just west of the mountains and use it in the smelting foundries up there," he told her. "That means we can do it cheap, so we can sell our refined iron cheaper than anyone but the Dals. And when the Dal iron gets imported out of Daltochan, it makes the price for Dal iron at ports about the same as ours."

"Ah, so there's no competetion with Daltochan," she noted.

"Not really. They mine alot more than we do, and there's never a shortage of people wanting to buy iron."

She looked at the map. "How long is it going to take us to get to the mountains?"

"About six or seven days," he said. "It's the crossing the mountains that's going to be tricky. There's bound to be heavy snow up there, and I may have to use magic to get us through the passes. And it won't be a direct route. We have to follow the passes," he said, snaking his finger up and down the map in the mountains, following a narrow, treacherous path, "and we'll be spending as much time travelling north, south and west as we will east. I have no idea how long that's going to take, but I'm guessing that it's going to take us at least twenty days. But it's after we come out on the other side that's up in the air. We can't go slow when we get out on the tundra, so we might be forced to wait in the mountains until it's time to move down onto the tundra."

"It's too open, isn't it?"

"It's flat as a board and there's not a tree between the mountains and the polar ice," he nodded. "It defines *open*. They'll see us coming from days away, and we'll be in the most danger when we come out onto the tundra plain. We very well may have to fight our way to Gora Umadar."

"How long will it take?"

"If nothing gets in our way, we could reach Gora Umadar in three days from the pass leading down out of the mountain," he said, pointing to the pass that was almost directly southwest of the black triangle representing the place where they were holding Jasana. "But I expect *plenty* of things to get in our way, so I'm giving us five days to get there. That means we have to be at the mouth of the pass here in thirty-six days," he said, pointing to the pass again. "If we're early, we hunker down and wait. If we're late, then we rush right out onto the plain and get a bit more direct in clearing a path to Gora Umadar," he said with an aggressive snort.

"What kind of weather will we face?"

"Not much but snow out here," he answered. "There's going to be some fierce storms up in the mountains, and there's nothing to stop the wind out on the tundra, so I'll bet that it's pretty strong out there."

"That doesn't sound *too* bad," she said with a neutral expression, examining the map. "As long as we don't mess around, we should reach the

pass opening with time to spare," she surmised.

"I'd rather not," he said with a slight frown. "I'll go stir crazy if I have to sit in one place and wait. As long as we're moving, I feel like we're getting somewhere. But as soon as we stop, I'll get impatient, and I can't let that distract me. We absolutely *have* to get there on Gods' Day. Not a day sooner or a day later, and we have to arrange it so we reach the pyramid itself as close to the first hour after noon as we can possibly arrange it."

"Why then?"

"According to Phandebrass' charts, the conjunction is going to happen a little after noon on Gods' Day," he said. "Phandebrass got a book of charts from the library that had all the information in it that I needed, but he wisely wrote all sorts of helpful notes in the margins for me. He figured out what time it would be in *Gora Umadar* when it happened, and added that for me in his notes. I'm glad he did. It's different times in different parts of the world at one time, because the sun isn't in the same place in the sky for the whole planet."

"Mother explained that to me once. It sounds weird."

"The planet is round," he said, drawing a circle in the dirt by the fire. "The sun doesn't move, we move around it, but since the planet is round, only one side of it faces the sun at any one time." He drew a smaller circle representing the sun. "Dawn and dusk are nothing but us sitting on the border between day and night, and noon is when we're directly facing the sun." He drew lines from his representation of the sun to the planet, lines to its edges and its center. "We reckon time by sunrise and sunset, so that makes the time different for different parts of the world. As far as I can tell, the conjunction will line up over Suld at exactly noon. Since we're going to be so far east of Suld, it's going to make it later in the day for us when that happens. Phandebrass figured that out. Hold on," he said, taking out the book and leafing to the page with the diagram of the conjunction on it, a page he'd marked by folding its corner. "Here it is. It'll be one hour and seven minutes after noon, time local to Gora Umadar," he told her. "The entire key for us is to get inside the pyramid and confront Val as close to that time as we can possibly make it," he told her. "With the conjunction so close, it's going to make him desperate enough to bow to my demand to release you and Jasana before I give him the staff. After you two start out,

I'll stall, telling him I won't give it to him until after you've cleared the enemy army. A dragon is going to land outside the pyramid and pick you up after you get out. When he clears the army with you, I'm hoping that the conjunction will be about to start, and that should be about when the Elder Gods are going to transport in the army to attack Val's forces. That's the signal they'll be waiting on to do it. That's when I'm going to try to make my escape, when Val is distracted by the appearance of the Elder Gods and the army."

"It seems awfully dicey, love," she frowned.

"We're dealing with a god here, Jesmind," he sighed. "It's the only way it's going to happen. We can't fight him and we can't trick him. The only thing we can do is make him beat *himself*. Val may be a god, but he was once mortal, and somehow I get the feeling that alot of his human personality is still in him, like impatience. We have to use that against him, or it won't work."

"Isn't what you're trying to do tricking him?"

"No. I'm trying to hold his attention, first off of you and Jasana, then off of the fact that the Elder Gods just Teleported in an army to attack his forces. There's a big difference."

"If you say so," she said uncertainly. "That's all you need me to do? Take Jasana out of the place where they're holding her?"

He nodded.

"Why me? Wouldn't Allia have been better? I've seen her run, my mate. She's faster than me." "Jasana will obey you without question," he told her. "That's going to be very important, Jesmind. If she resists or disobeys because I don't go with you, she may cause a fatal delay in getting her out. I can't risk that. When *you* tell her to shut up and go, she'll do it without argument." He looked at her. "Besides, she's *our* daughter, Jesmind. It's our duty to get her back, and it's only right that we're the first people she sees."

She gave him a warm yet fierce smile. "You're right. I wouldn't have felt right sending someone else to get back our daughter for me."

"I know. And I feel more comfortable with you being with me. At least you understand me, my mate. You can sense what I'm thinking, and that's

going to help us when the time comes to get our daughter back. You'll pick up on things nobody else would notice, not even Val himself."

"I hope so," she nodded, then she yawned and stretched. "I'm getting sleepy," she admitted. "Let's make a tent or something and get some sleep. I get the feeling that we're going to be on the move quite a bit tonight."

"You'll have to put it aside for now, my mate," he told her. "You can take a short nap, but we'll be starting out again in just a while. It's dangerous to travel at night because of the cold, even for us. We have to use all the daylight we possibly can. The only reason we stopped now was because we spent most of the night running, and we both needed some rest."

"If we need to use the daylight, then let's go," she said, standing up. "The food refreshed me, and I won't get sleepy if we're running. I can save that for tonight."

Tarrin folded up the map and put it in the book, then sent the book into the *elsewhere*. "You're right," he agreed, rising to his feet gracefully. "We're wasting daylight."

"Then let's go."

"Yes. Let's go."

They travelled through the gentle rolling foothills of western and central Ungardt without incident, and without being spotted by the locals. Two experienced Were-cats were not about to be spotted by anyone that they didn't want to see them. Tarrin didn't doubt that they found their tracks and puzzled over them, since they were so unique, but not one Ungardt spotted Tarrin and Jesmind as they ran at a steady pace towards the mountains. They would run well into the night, until it got so cold that it forced them to stop, usually indicated by when sweat began freezing to their skin. The cold wouldn't hurt Jesmind for short periods of time, but if she exhausted her regenerative abilities, she would become vulnerable, so Tarrin always made sure they stopped well before that became a possibility.

Again Tarrin paused to wonder why he still sweated whenever he physically exerted himself, even though the heat could no longer affect him.

Perhaps it was a ingrained biological function that would occur whether he truly needed to do it or not.

By day, they moved swiftly yet carefully, not letting the Ungardt see them. When they did stop for the night, they chose secluded places easily concealed, built small fires and relying on Tarrin's Sorcery for their warmth. They hunted caribou mostly, felling the beasts often as they crossed paths with migrating herds, eating at the site of the kill and moving on to leave the remains to the wolves, foxes, and other scavengers prowling the snow-choked hills.

Every night, Tarrin would go out to where he could see the stars and study them and the moons for hours on end, often at the cost of sleep, carefully studying their movements and checking them against the book that Phandebrass had given him. He spent whole nights watching the moons rise and fall, becoming intimately familiar with how fast each one moved, trying to learn how to gauge how much time would elapse between where a moon was and where he wanted it to be. He knew that his ability to gauge that time without using any kind of timing device was going to be critical to the timing of his plan, so he needed to become quite adept at it very quickly.

But as each day passed, there were changes in them. Jesmind began to get more and more impatient, wanting to go longer and longer each day and waking up earlier and earlier. She'd started out very accommodating to him, but as the time passed and the days restored a sense of familiarity between them she began to get more and more hostile. It wasn't because she was doubting him, it was because she was anxious and worried, and Tarrin was the only means available for her to vent her building frustration and impatience, feelings that only grew stronger as more days passed without her daughter with her, and the days leading up to getting her back dwindled steadily in number. Tarrin ignored or endured those spats of anger from her, concentrating almost inhumanly on his study of the skies, his attempt to master judging time by the distance the moons travelled.

Tarrin's focus on the skies only seemed to aggravate her more, but he also grew more and more distant from her. The time was getting closer and closer for him to get back his daughter, and his every thought began to center obsessively on that, on the moment when he saw his daughter and Jesmind spirited her out of the pyramid and to safety. But he didn't go over

it in his mind, knowing that Val may pick up on what he was trying to do. Without the ability to think through it, it only left thoughts of getting it done, and thoughts of getting there.

He allowed them to move faster and faster, realizing that unless he took some serious precautions, they were never going to *make* it to the pyramid. Val would catch them on the open tundra, and they'd be killed there. So he let Jesmind push him faster and faster, trying to reach the edge of the mountains, where they could hide easily, so he could stop and attend to the problem of getting them there without Val sending his entire army after him to stop him from reaching the pyramid, to kill him and take his amulet.

Because they were pushing, they reached the eastern edge of the Frozen Mountains in five days. The mountains appeared on the horizon after a steady snow one brisk morning, jagged points of reddish rock capped with white snowy peaks thrusting out of the foothills ahead, high, steep, and very daunting. The mountains were extremely rugged and incredibly high, some of the highest mountains on all of Sennadar, towering upwards of twenty thousand spans up into the sky.

Jesmind looked at them with trepidation when they stopped for a brief rest. "We have to cross *those*?" she demanded.

"There are passes," he said. "They're on the map."

"How can you be sure about that map?"

"It's a map Conjured by Druidic magic, woman," he told her. "That makes it absolutely correct. The land doesn't lie." He retrieved the book and took out the map, checking it. "That's this peak right here," he said, pointing to the highest of the peaks they could see, then pointing to it as she came over and looked at the map with him. "That means that the pass we need to find is about twelve longspans south. We'll have to take it at night."

"Why? Miners?"

He nodded. "They use that pass quite a bit. See, look at all these mining sites on the map. It has a road through it. That'll make the going a little easier, but it's going to make it harder to sneak by the Ungardt."

"They won't notice two cats, my mate," she told him calmly. "We can shapeshift and hide until they pass."

"Good point. I forgot your amulet won't let you lose your clothes."

"It's about to come in handy," she said. "Though I wouldn't mind showing you a little something," she teased, swishing her tail at him sensually.

"As cold as it is, I may only see goosebumps," he drawled in reply, which made her laugh.

The humor was a good sign, he realized as they started south. She'd not been very friendly the last few days, combative and hostile, but maybe seeing the mountains reminded her that they were in fact making progress. It was hard to make jokes or laugh when both of them knew that Jasana was being held prisoner, with that crushing weight over them, but Jesmind was at least trying. Maybe five days of waspish comments and flat looks at him had run its course.

It didn't take them long to go twenty longspans, but the clouds above began to thicken and darken as they moved. He could smell snow in the air, and that concerned him. He'd be hard pressed to keep them moving if a blizzard slammed into the mountains while they were in them, where snow piled up by the span and could bury a house in a matter of days. All the time they'd gained could be lost if they got snowed down, forcing him to resort to using powerful magic, like an Elemental, to get them over. That kind of display left a mark in the Weave, and he didn't doubt that Val would sense it instantly. Despite being in a void, he was still a god, and he wasn't going to take any chances. Spyder said he would get more and more powerful the closer they got to him, and at this distance he didn't want to take any risks at all.

They needed to hurry before. Now they needed to race the weather to avoid getting trapped.

Tarrin picked up the pace, a pace that Jesmind could easily maintain as they ran up into a division between two of the reddish, mighty mountains, quickly coming across a rutted road just before reaching a large stand of fir trees. The trail was steep, and the road was forced to follow slight ridges in the side of the foothill, zig-zagging its way up through the small wood towards the pass. The two Were-cats simply went straight up the hill, moving with speed and grace, ghosting through the trees and easily

avoiding a large caravan of wagons trundling its way down the hill, towards a small village visible from breaks in the trees at the foothill's base. They paused as the tail end of it went by, skulking down behind a rather large fir tree, as armed men on horseback escorted the wagons both ahead, behind, and with pairs flanking every wagon.

"Why the armed escort?" Jesmind asked in the silent manner of the Cat.

"Goblinoids," he answered. "There aren't many of them left up here, but they do wander up from Daltochan and the Petal Lakes sometimes, trying to catch the mining camps off guard."

"I don't smell any. Why the concern?"

"Humans think there's an enemy behind every tree," he shrugged. "Then again, that's a healthy attitude," he added absently.

"Don't backslide on me now, my mate. I'm starting to like you again."

"Well, you're always the first enemy I keep my eye on, love," he teased lightly. "You're more dangerous than most of the others."

She elbowed him in the ribs, then she set off as the last pair of mercenaries disappeared around a bend in the road.

They moved up into the pass itself quickly after leaving the caravan behind, rising up a thousand spans into the mountains very quickly, leaving the stand of trees and becoming exposed to a howling wind that funnelled up through the pass, screaming into them from behind. The wind was raw and very cold, and it carried on it the definite smell of snow. The two Werecats had to shift into cat form and hide from parties of Ungardt several times as they climbed higher up into the pass, which was a narrow gorge cleaved between two towering peaks, but at least the floor of the gorge was relatively flat and easy to travel, and its edges held many large rocks and boulders which gave their small cat forms plenty of places to hide when it was needful.

The pass crested and looked down on a small plateau of sorts surrounded by rising snow-capped peaks, a bowl in the mountains which held a rather large mining town in its center. Black smoke rose up from the short, stout chimneys of several connected buildings in the center of town, with smaller high-roofed buildings surrounding them.

"What are those buildings in the middle?" Jesmind asked, shouting over the whistling wind, which made hearing difficult.

"I'd think they were a foundry, but it's too deep in the mountains," he shouted in reply. "They'd have to cart the coal up here. It's probably just a really big smithy. They probably go through a lot of picks and shovels and things like that, and it'd be easier for them to make them here than try to cart them up the road from the village."

"Probably. Which way do we go?"

Tarrin looked around the bowl, and pointed to the northwest. "The map says there's a narrow pass there that leads into a series of interconnecting valleys," he answered. "We'll follow those valleys all the way across."

"I certainly wouldn't want to have to go up and down!" she shouted over a particularly loud howl of wind. "It wouldn't be very fun!"

"It would take forever!" he called in reply. "Well, let's not just stand around up here where anyone can--"

He cut himself short when something peculiar in the howling of the wind caught his attention. It was higher pitched than the wind, and it only lasted a moment. He turned just in time to see a large winged form diving at them from behind, using the tailwind to build up immense speed. It was a huge creature, some twelve spans tall and with feathered wings and a vulture's head, but it also had a vaguely humanoid body, like a twisted Wikuni, a bipedal frame with heavy elements of a vulture, including a vulture's feet and tail. It was carrying a huge polearm, like a glaive but with a wicked triple hook on the backside of the single-edged blade, and that polearm was levelled at them like a lance wielded by a charging Knight.

Immediately, Tarrin knew what it was. He'd fought them before. They were called *vrock*, and they were Demons.

The first had found them. Tarrin laid back his ears and realized that he had to kill this one before it could report their position back to the others.

Pushing Jesmind aside, Tarrin squared himself and set to deal with the flying charge. The *vrock*, seeing that it was discovered, shrieked in fury, the sound Tarrin had heard, and levelled that polearm right at Tarrin's heart. Tarrin knew Demons, and he knew that the first thing the Demon was going

to try was Teleporting right before it reached him and appearing behind him, where the full force of its flying charge would impale him on its deadly polearm. Teleporting behind someone seemed to be their favorite trick. Reaching out and putting his will against the Weave, Tarrin pulled it away from the *vrock*, isolating it from the magic of the Weave, and thereby cutting it off from the source of its Demonic powers. Tarrin couldn't directly affect a Demon, but he *could* strip them of their powers.

The Demon sensed it immediately, and its dark eyes turned flat with hate as it pulled in its wings and descended. Tarrin could see that it would pull out just before reaching the ground and attack head-on. It swooped down and its wings opened, pulling it up level and bringing it right at the pair of Were-cats faster than any horse could possibly run. With a scream of triumph, the *vrock* adjusted its aim to impale the Were-cat through the middle, and the Were-cat did not try to get out of the way.

Timing was everything in a situation like this, and the endless hours of training with someone with Allia's inhuman speed finally paid off. In an absolute blur, Tarrin twisted aside at the last instant, the tip of its polearm just barely grazing the edge of his vest as he spun out of the way, and a viper-like paw lashed out like a whip and struck the top of the polearm as it passed, even as the Were-cat ducked under a wing moving with enough speed to decapitate him if it had struck.

He didn't strike it very hard, but he struck it hard enough. The downward strike on the polearm changed the *vrock's* trajectory in the air, dipping it down in a course that would plow it into the ground. The Demon opened its wings when it realized that it was now flying towards the ground, but it did not react fast enough. With a frightened squeal, the Demon slammed into the ground, digging a two span deep trench in the rocky ground with its beak, then it struck a rock it could not move and was catapulted over it. It rolled and tumbled on the rocky ground for about fifty longspans, as Tarrin and Jesmind raced behind it with weapons readied. Not even a crash like that would do more than temporarily stun the Demon, since it could not be harmed by the ground, but the impact and the physics at work in such an impact would still serve a vital purpose. Such an impact would stun the creature, possibly give it a concussion, as its brain rattled around in its skull like a clapper in a ringing bell.

There were ways to get around a Demon's invulnerability.

The thing rolled to a stop on its belly some three hundred spans away from where it had initially struck, and it never got a chance to so much as rise up on all fours and shake its head. Both the Were-cats were on it instantly. Jesmind jumped on its back and drove all ten metal talons of the Cat's Claws into its back, pinning it down. It squealed in sudden pain as the wounds registered to it, but that squeal died abruptly when Tarrin's black metal sword took off its head. The head bounced a little off the ground, then rolled to a stop a bit away upside-down, its eyes still glowering in abject hatred.

"Get off of it!" Tarrin barked in command, but Jesmind was already jumping free. She knew what was going to happen. The body immediately began decomposing, melting it a horridly smelling, sizzling, acidic black ichor that started burning its way into the rocky ground.

"How do I clean these?" she asked, holding up the smoking talons of the Cat's Claws, smeared with Demon blood.

"Just wipe them off on the ground," he told her as he did the same with his sword. "The blood doesn't seem to harm the metal, but I don't like taking any chances."

She drove them into the ground a few times to clean them, then retracted the blades and came over. Tarrin had just finished cleaning his sword, but he wasn't expecting what she did next. Jesmind hauled off and punched him in the jaw, felling him to the ground. Tarrin glared up at her as soon as the stars cleared--she didn't pull that punch, which would have taken the jaw clean off a human--but she glared down at him just as hotly, shaking her fist at him. "Don't you *ever* do that again!" she shouted at him. "It nearly skewered you!"

"When you fight Demons, you have to take chances," he told her bluntly as he regained his feet, rubbing his jaw. "We can fight about this later. Right now, we have to get as far away from this thing as we can. There may be others up there looking for us, and this one might have told them where we are before attacked."

She glared even more at him, promising him with her eyes that this was far from over, but she didn't argue. Tarrin picked up his sword and started

off towards the north, to skirt the camp and reach the pass on the far side, and Jesmind followed silently.

They moved very quickly, but both of them kept scanning the skies like rabbits in an open field watching for a hungry hawk. *Vrock* weren't the most dangerous of the Demons, but they could fly, and they could tell the other Demons where they were. The Demon's ability to Teleport anywhere they wanted to go meant that the *entirety* of Val's Demonic host could fall on them at any moment, so keeping hidden from the searchers was an absolute priority. They moved up into the pass, which opened into a narrow, uneven valley that had a frozen stream flowing down the middle of it and stands of scrubby pine and fir trees to each side of the stream. They moved into the trees and stopped for a while, keeping watch on the clouding skies above, looking for any more large winged figures.

After about a half an hour, when no others appeared, he realized that the Demon had attacked them without reporting in first, or at least he hoped so. But he wasn't about to take any chances. He realized that this close to Val's armies, moving around during the daytime was going to be dangerous, and moving at night may be the better option. Despite the intense cold that would face them, they would be harder to spot from the air if they did their travelling at night, when the darkness would make it easier for them to hide.

Tarrin knelt down and took out the map, studying it as Jesmind continued to watch the sky from the edge of the trees. The series of interconnecting valleys was the easiest way through the mountains, and would put them closest to their destination, but it wasn't the *only* way. Not far from here, according to the map, there was a cave that went under a mountain and opened in a treacherous ravine on the far side. It would take days to where the cave let out by foot, and it may throw off any *vrock* that were looking for them. Actually, it was a faster way to go, but the map showed that the cave opened to a thousand span cliff with a hundred spans separating it from the other side. That ravine was in the base of a valley that connected to one that was along his chosen route. He pondered that for a moment. He'd have to use magic to get them across the ravine, a calculated risk, but the day or so of being underground and the sudden change of position would make it hard for the Demons to find him if indeed that one did manage to send word of their positions back to the others.

And it would cut two days off their trip through the mountains.

Tarrin checked the book. They had thirty-thirty-six days left before Gods' Day. He estimated that it would take them ten to twelve days to cross the mountains, and the seven to nine days he'd given to get to the mountains actually only took five. He'd have to stop to find a way to keep the Demons from finding them, which may take a few days...perhaps doing that up in that cave would kill two problems with one arrow. They'd be out of sight, away from the Demons, and if he did find a way to hide them from the Demons, it would keep them out of their hair the rest of the way across. He did *not* want to have to duck behind a rock every time he thought he saw a shadow in the sky. If he had to do that, they'd be slowed to a crawl in a place where being in the wrong place at the right time could strand them until spring.

As if to reinforce that, snow began to fall on them, dropping flakes on his book of charts, causing him to quickly sweep them off with a muttered curse and put the book safely away.

That cave seemed to be the best option. It would be a grueling path--he'd explored a few caves back home, and they involved a great deal of climbing up and down--but the gain they'd make by taking that route and the safety that it would offer to them would more than make up for the arduous nature of the journey through it.

Tarrin crept up to the edge of the wood carefully and knelt in the snow beside Jesmind, who was looking up into the sky carefully. "Anything?" he whispered.

"Nothing yet," she answered. "What was that thing?"

"They're called *vrocks*," he answered. "We're lucky we killed it so fast. They're usually very nasty."

"Just about any Demon is very nasty, love," she grinned. "At least we know these magical claws you gave me work on them. They went into its back easier than a pole through water."

"Sorry if I scared you, but I have experience fighting these things," he told her. "They've got powerful magic, but they're also very smart and most of them are seasoned fighters. You have to attack them unconventionally, because they'll expect just about everything else."

"Just warn me next time!" she huffed. "I nearly had a heart attack when it went by you! I thought it cut you in half!"

"I did what I had to do to kill it and kill it quickly," he told her. "You don't get easy kills against Demons most of the time. Even without their magic, they're very formidable."

"They didn't seem so formidable on the grounds," she scoffed. "From what I heard, the humans and Wikuni had their way with them."

"They were dealing with some of the best fighters in the world, Jesmind, and they were heavily outnumbered," he said bluntly. "Once their magic and their invulnerability was taken away from them, they found themselves in a serious bind because they were facing humans and Wikuni that were just as formidable as they were, and facing a *lot* of them. The humans and Wikuni there were crack veterans, and the only Demons that could really fight back were the *cambisi*. And they killed nearly three times their number before they went down," he reminded her. "And if it hadn't have been for the Legions, they would have lost alot more," he added. "They're experts in large formation fighting, and they served as an anchor for everyone else."

"I'll take your word for it," she said in a low tone. "How long do we wait?"

"We'll be here until dark," he told her. "The map shows that there's a cave not far from here that leads under one of the mountains and lets out on the other side. It'll save us some time if we take it, and we'll be alot harder to find if we use it. We're going to pause there a while so I can figure out some way to keep the Demons from finding us, then we'll be on our way again."

"I don't think I'm going to argue about that," she nodded. "If we have to crawl through the snow the whole way, we'll get to the other side sometime next year."

"A little time invested now is going to save us a whole lot later," he affirmed.

They retreated into the grove, and spent the rest of the day fearfully scanning the skies as the snow piled up around them. The dark clouds dumped nearly two spans of snow on the ground as they waited for dark,

and the storm seemed to intensify as the day went on, the winds becoming stronger, the air colder, and the snow heavier as sunset approached. By the time the dark clouds above did start dimming with the setting sun, they were in the teeth of a full-blown blizzard, with howling winds that bent the trees and driving snow that reduced the visibility to almost nothing.

"How are we going to find our way in this?" Jesmind demanded as they ventured out to the edge of the grove as the light around them became very murky.

Tarrin took hold of his amulet and chanted one of the spells that Camara Tal had taught him, a priest spell that would lock in on a certain location and guide him to it unerringly. He felt that strange surge of power rush through the Weave and into him, then release through him into the real world. Immediately, he knew that the cave entrance was seven longspans away, a thousand spans higher than his current position, and it was almost due east of them. The spell also showed him the easiest way to get there, telling him that he would have to go northeast around a peak and approach the cave entrance from the north.

"I can find it now," he told her. "Come on, let's get there before we're buried."

The going was very difficult. The snow was deep, and the wind caused deep drifts to form. He could barely see five spans in front of him, and he often had to plow through the snow to give his shorter mate a path to follow. The fierce wind was like a knife cutting into them, so cold that even *he* could feel it, and he paused to Conjure heavy fur coats for them to wear, tying them tightly at the waist to keep the wind from tearing them off of their backs. The coats got the wind off of them, but its force made them exert their inhuman strength to keep from being blown off course by it as Tarrin led them around the peak and towards the mouth of the cave. The wind was an ally to him, however, and he knew it. The stiff wind would even keep a Demon from flying, keeping the skies clear of them while they made their dash to the safety of the cave.

That seven direct longspans of distance turned out to be nearly fifteen longspans of travel, and it was such slow going that it took them most of the night. The cold was getting to Jesmind, and she staggered along behind him, her teeth chattering as her effort was exhausting her regenerative

ability. They stopped frequently to rest behind anything that served as shelter from the wind, but things improved greatly when they finally got around the peak, and the peaks mass served as a partial break to the wind. It still swirled and howled around them, but it was a wind that had been forced to turn up the small box-end valley in which the cave mouth was located, so it didn't have half of the raging force that it had had in the main valley. Once they reached the box canyon, they moved with more speed and confidence, and though the snow was even deeper, coming up to Tarrin's waist in some places, he had little trouble bulling a path through it in which his mate could follow.

Just before sunrise, as the main force of the savage snowstorm seemed to be abating, they finally reached the cave mouth...at least horizontally. The cave mouth was set thirty spans up a sheer rock face, a hole in the red rock wall of the mountainside, and it was a *small* hole. In a way, it reminded him of the hole that Sarraya had made for him in the side of the Cloud Spire, the hole that let him get into the lava tube that led up to the top and into the city. This one was considerably larger than that one, but it was still going to be quite an acrobatic display of flexibility to climb up there and squeeze in while hanging thirty spans off the ground.

"That's *it*?" Jesmind demanded as she pulled down the hood of the fur coat he'd Conjured. "I'm going to lose all my clothes and half my fur trying to get in that!"

"It's bigger than it looks," he told her as he pulled off his coat and handed it to her. "We'll have to take off the coats and throw them in in front of us, but we should make it." He put his claws in the stone and started up. "I'll go first. Let me get in, then come up. Make sure you take your coat off first and throw them in to me when you get there."

"Why not leave them here?" she asked. "We won't need them in the caves."

"Because I don't want to leave anything behind they can use to find us," he said calmly as he scrabbled up the icy stone.

The opening truly was bigger than it looked, and to his delight, it immediately opened into a rather large irregular chamber whose ceiling was populated by quite a few hibernating bats. The interior was murky, even to

his eyes, as the minimal light that got through the clouds above only had one small hole to filter into the chamber. Tarrin wriggled in quite easily and dropped down to the floor of the chamber, layered rather unpleasantly with bat droppings that felt were disgustingly squishy under his feet. He waited under the opening until the two coats flew into the chamber, him catching them before they fell into that unpleasant mess on the floor, and Jesmind slithered in effortlessly head first and dropped down to the floor.

"Ewww!" she complained, picking up a foot and putting it back down. "Tell me that I'm not standing in what I think I'm standing in!"

Tarrin pointed up, and Jesmind followed his eyes. Then she glowered at the eerie carpet of brown furry bats coating the ceiling. "I don't think I'm ever going to groom my feet again!" she said with a queasy look.

"Then they'll be crusty and smelly," he said absently, reaching within, through the Cat, and touching his Druidic power. A small ball of faint glowing light appeared over his outstretched paw, and he held it up and surveyed the room. "There's the opening that leads down into the mountain," he said, pointing at a small, roughly triangular opening on the far side of the chamber, which was only about two spans high.

"It's pretty narrow in there," she frowned, bending down and looking across the chamber. "I hope we don't have to crawl the whole way."

"Have you ever explored a cave?"

"Not really, why?"

"Because we just *might* have to crawl the whole way," he said. "Cave tunnels can be any size or shape."

"You're making this trip better and better," she said acidly as she padded over towards the opening. "First you freeze my tail off, now you want me to be an earthworm."

"Hold on, we have to deal with the light situation," he called.

"Why not use that?"

"Because I have to work to keep it going," he said. "I have a better idea."

His idea was two little balls of light that were created by Sorcery, not Druidic magic. He wove the very simple spells, some of the very first spells that Initiates learned, and set them in a way so that they couldn't unravel when he stopped concentrating on them. The flows would pull against each other in a delicate knot of sorts, and that would keep the spells going for quite a while after he stopped maintaining them. Since they were such simple spells, he figured that they would last for six or seven hours before the flows of Fire and Air finally worked themselves free of one another and disrupted the spell. It was the trick that the Sha'Kar had taught him, a trick that he'd been very hard on himself for not figuring out on his own. Tarrin cleverly set one over each of their heads, hovering just over and between the tips of their ears, so its light didn't shine right in their eyes, and they would also serve a vital purpose in warning them when their heads were getting too close to the ceiling. The lights would go up into the ceiling and wink out when they were very close to it, and the sudden darkness was a warning they were about to bang their heads.

"Cute," Jesmind said, trying to look up to see the ball of light, which only dipped back with her head as she moved it. It would stay firmly where it was set in relation to her body, just over and between her two white-furred ears, illuminating everything around her without a part of her body getting in its way. It did create two dim spots to each side of her head, shadows from her ears, but the ball of light was so close to them that it diffused light into those shadows well before it reached the walls. The white fur of her ears served to reflect the light as well, much better than his black ones, which made the area of light surrounding Jesmind much brighter than the one surrounding him.

"Now that we have that fixed," he said, rolling the fur coat into a bundle and tying it onto his back, a possible cushion should he rise up and into a ceiling, "let's go find a clean place to rest a while, then we'll set out."

They moved just beyond the constricting tunnel and found something suitable. It was a slightly wider section of tunnel that was straight and with a rather flat floor, but still with a ceiling only about four spans off the floor. They spread the fur coats on the hard stone and rested for a short time, then started out.

The passage through the caves was much warmer than travelling the mountains above, but that lack of cold was countered by the sheer effort of travelling like that. True to his observation about caves, the tunnel they followed was almost whimsical in its dimensions. Sometimes it would be dozens of spans wide and high, almost like chambers, sometimes it was so narrow and small they would have had to literally wriggle through bending zig-zags on their bellies had they not had the advantage of being able to shapeshift into a much smaller form. In fact, in no less than four places they encountered that first morning, they were forced to shift into cat form to wriggle through tiny holes, which would have stopped any other spelunker that hadn't brought a pick and a shovel with him. The floor was rarely even, with shelves or fissures in it, higher on one side of the passage than the other, making footing a serious business for both of them. They occasionally had to climb up or down sheer rock faces, cliffs underground, vertical shafts that sometimes twisted and turned like the deranged machinations of some insane Wikuni plumber's most feverish fantasies. Tarrin could swear that one particular strange loop in the tunnel was almost like a thread inside the stone of the mountain tying itself into a knot. It went up, then down, then up, then down, and slid from side to side as it did so, giving it the illusion that it turned back on itself, like the floor of the passage actually rested right on the other side of the ceiling over their heads. Though the tunnel rose and fell in turns, the down parts were longer than the up, and Tarrin realized that they were descending deeper and deeper into the mountain's core. Stalagmites and stalagmites were everywhere, posing a very real hazard to their heads, and the caves were surprisingly wet, with water dripping from the ceilings or oozing from the walls. There were patches of actual mud in some places, and there was part of the tunnel where they were forced to swim along a narrow channel, a flooded part of the passage. It was a swim through water as cold as ice, and left both of them soggy and with chattering teeth when they got to the dry tunnel on the other side of the fifty spans of submerged passage.

"T-This was a b-b-bloody b-b-bad id-d-d-dea," Jesmind said, her teeth clicking as she hugged her arms to her sides.

"That wasn't very pleasant," he agreed with a shiver, then he used Sorcery to strip the water off of them, then warmed them with a gentle

weave of Fire and Air, warming the air around them. "But at least we didn't have to go totally under the water."

"Oh, that's a relief," she snapped shortly, then she sighed as the warmth of his spell started seeping into her cold skin. "You're a handy fellow to have around," she smiled as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth.

"Thank you. Someday I aspire to be more than your slave."

"Don't count on it," she winked.

Though the effort was exhausting, neither of them wanted to stop. They both seemed not willing to stop until they got so deeply into the mountain that neither the Demons nor the blizzard could find any way to reach them. They continued on, steadily descending deeper and deeper, and Tarrin noticed that the properties of the tunnel were changing. The narrow areas were becoming further and further apart, and the tunnel grew noticeably wider and the grade of the passage less severe as they got deeper inside the mountain. Almost like the caves in the heart of the mountain were older, and had more time for the water to dissolve away the rock and make them bigger. That made the going much easier and faster, almost like they were walking through a carved passage than a natural tunnel.

It was about then that he noticed the peculiarities of a deep underground passage. It was pitch black, which was normal for such a place, but the air and the rock almost seemed to swallow the light. The little dim lights he made only illuminated a very small area around them, but their night-sighted eyes let them penetrate deeply into the gloom beyond that light, but even that wasn't a tremendous distance. Tarrin found the idea of having the range of his vision impaired extremely irritating, and not a little unsettling. He was a creature heavily grounded in his senses, and a limitation on one of those senses made him jumpy and nervous. The air, though fresh, still had a strange *stagnant* quality to it. It did move and it was fresh, but it moved in and out of caves that all had the same musty smell, making the air heavy with dull scents that were hard to make out, since the same scents had been drifting around down here for years. Smells of rock and dust and dirt, and also strange plant-like smells like mold, lichen, and fungus. Rare, strange plants that could survive in a world without light. And sound was very curious. They moved quietly, as was only their habit, but ever whisper of sound they made echoed and re-echoed up and down the passage, and the

sound of dripping water carried down the passages for *longspans*. A loud noise would carry for a long way and echo for a long time, and if there was anything down there with them, it wouldn't take it long to find them if they made a lot of noise. The sound was trapped, bouncing endlessly off the walls, and he realized that a sound could linger down here in these tunnels for days after the maker of the sound was long gone. Since there was no light, he figured that anything that lived down here that was carnivorous hunted by *sound*. That was another good reason to be as quiet as possible, though the simple fact that every sound they made lingered around them so long it made both of them unsettled was reason enough.

They travelled for quite a while, and Tarrin realized that being under the ground was going to make it hard for him to track time. He was never very good at keeping time, because of the nature of the Cat, and being robbed of the stars and moons and sun to serve as reference points, he would quickly lose count of the days. And knowing how many days he had to go was *very* important. When he thought that it was pretty close to sunset, he pulled up when they entered a huge chamber that had the sound of running water in it, like a bubbling brook, though wherever the water was, it was beyond the illuminating range of the little balls of light. "We should camp a while," he told her lowly, looking at the cave that he could see. It was a large chamber, with an irregular dome-like roof that was about thirty spans off the floor, the chamber roughly circular in shape. The water turned out to be a small underground river that flowed from north to south through the chamber, with their passage extending on towards the northeast, a decline hiding the passage and letting them see nothing but its ceiling almost as soon as it left the chamber.

"This is as good a place as any," she said in a quiet tone, almost a whisper. "At least we have water."

He had no idea how long they stayed there, because he couldn't easily tell time down in the cave. He conjured wood for a fire and a roasted goose off some hapless inn's serving table, and then both of them immediately went to sleep. They were both very tired, and though he'd been a bit worried about not posting a guard, he realized that there really wasn't anything down there that could hurt them. He *did* raise a Ward that kept out everything but air before he went to sleep. He was confident that there was nothing down here, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

He had no idea how long they slept, but when both of them were awake, they ate breakfast without conversation and then set out again. The going was easier and easier as the passage continued to enlarge and become easier to travel as it descended, almost like a grand gallery with a ceiling higher than they could see and a flat floor that almost seemed like a road. It rose and fell, but he could tell that it still predominately went down.

They travelled some time before a strange sound reached both of them. It was extremely faint, barely audible, but the nature of the tunnels carried the sound to them. After pausing to filter out the echoes in his mind, he realized that it was a faint hissing sound, like what he remembered the volcano on Sha'Kari sounded like in the cauldern. But it was a slightly different sound, and he could distinctly hear moving water as well. And bubbling, like a kettle of boiling water, or maybe an area of very gentle rapids in a small stream.

"Sounds like water," Jesmind whispered, peering into the gloom ahead. She could only see about a hundred spans ahead, just as he could, but the reflex to try was automatic.

"I think it is," he answered in the manner of the Cat, a means of communication that was completely silent, and would not interfere with his ability to hear. "Let's go see where it is."

"Let's be careful," she said. "I think I've caught whiffs of some kind of animal in the air. This air is too damn thick and laden with other smells for me to be too sure, though."

He nodded, bringing his staff out of the *elsewhere*. The passage was more than large enough for him to wield it.

They padded along carefully for a surprisingly long distance, as he realized that the tunnel was funnelling the sound to them from a great distance away. The air began to move, to blow very gently in their faces, and it carried the smell of water with it, along with the tang of minerals, and the air seemed both humid and strangely warm. Curious now, both of them picked up their pace just a little bit, confident that the air blowing in their faces would bring the scent of an enemy to them before the enemy knew they were there. The air kept getting warmer and warmer, until it was almost unpleasantly so, and it grew veritably sticky with humidity, so much

so that Jesmind took off the fur-lined shirt he'd Conjured for her. The passage descended again, but now there was a very faint, ruddy light at its end.

Tarrin stopped, remembering the last time he'd seen a ruddy red light at the base of a descending passage. "What's the matter?" Jesmind asked in the manner of the Cat.

"That might be an underground volcano," he told her. "Something has to be making that light. It might be lava."

"Well, let's keep going," she said. "If it gets too hot for me, I'll stop, alright?"

"Alright," he nodded, and they started down again, more cautiously this time.

They padded down to the end of the descent, as the air got hot, but not dangerously so. Tarrin did smell some sulfur and other minerals that he remembered smelling in the volcano, but it wasn't nearly strong enough to be dangerous. They reached a bend in the passage and peeked around it, and Jesmind laughed audibly when they saw what was on the other side.

It was an absolutely massive opening, a great chamber of empty space at the very heart of the mountain itself. The light wasn't from lava, it was from some kind of strange luminescent fungus or growth that was literally covering all the ceiling and walls, but not the floor. It was a huge circular chamber with an arching domed roof, the top of it more than two hundred longspans from the floor, cast in the strange red light of the luminescent material covering its walls and ceiling. The floor of the chamber was surprisingly flat, but there were multiple rimmed pits in it that were filled with water or dark, thick mud, and both water and mud laid in thin pools in depressions on the wide floor, all of which had tendrils of thin steam rising up from them. The air was hot, sticky, and he realized that the mineral smells were coming from the water itself. The hissing and moving sounds they'd heard were coming from the water, from the hissing of the water and mud that boiled to the sounds of the bubbling water churning in its stone pools, like large kettles on a stove.

It was a hot spring! A hot spring in the middle of the mountain's heart!

"Incredible!" Jesmind said in wonder, looking around. "It's a hot spring!"

"Let's be careful," he said. "Sometimes hot springs erupt into geysers. It won't hurt me, but I think you may not like having boiling water sprayed all over you."

They waited where they were for a while, then carefully circumnavigated the chamber around the walls, wary of any trembling in the floor or rushing sound that would herald an eruption. But none happened. They reached the far side of the chamber, where a wide tunnel led *up*, and somehow Tarrin sensed that this hot spring was at the bottom of the cave system, that it would be up now instead of down.

"I kind of like it here," Jesmind said. "I've never seen a place so exotic."

"It may be dangerous."

"Well, do your magic thing and find out if it is or not," she said. "I'm tired and I'd like to rest a while, and this place looks pretty good."

Glancing at her irritably, Tarrin knelt and put a paw on the floor, then sent flows of Earth down into the stone. He didn't like using magic as they got close to Val, but what he was doing was very gentle, very passive, and required very little energy. He sent his weave deep into the ground, seeking out the source of the hot spring, and once he found it, he inspected what he found there. The stream that they'd seen before dropped down close to a pocket of magma, which heated it and caused it to rise up here. It was very steady and consistent, and he sensed no erratic motion of water or steam that would cause a geyser. The springs here were very stable.

He told her so, which made her almost squeal in delight. "Let's find one that won't boil the meat off me!" she announced, rushing back into the chamber like a little girl with a new doll.

"What?"

"I want to take a bath!" she called after him.

Take a bath? Then he realized what she meant. A hot bath always was relaxing but a bath where the water would never cool off was a rather attractive concept.

Tarrin looked around. The place was a bit warm and a little muggy, but it had its own light, plenty of water, and it was in the absolute center of the mountain. He couldn't get any safer than this. This would be a perfect place to stop so he could figure out how to keep the Demons off of them...and he had to admit, the idea of bathing in one of those hot springs *was* rather attractive.

By the time he'd made that choice, Jesmind had already shrugged out of her shirt, and was in the process of shedding her trousers. He was about to warn her not to do that, but she got them off, tossed them aside negligently, then stepped down into one of the pools of water. Tarrin rushed over to where she was in concern, afraid that she'd just stepped into a boiling cauldron that would boil the meat off her bones, and saw with some relief that she had chosen a wide pool of water that was so clear that it did not in any way hinder his view under its surface. It didn't bubble, meaning it wasn't boiling, and the water seeped up from several small cracks in the bottom of the pool. It was also rather shallow, and when Jesmind seated herself in it with a look of dreamy contentment on her face, her head just crested the salt-crusted rim of the pool. The steam that wafted up from the pool shifted when she blew out her breath, then she opened her eyes and gave him a warm, inviting smile.

"Now this is my idea of resting after getting down here," she said languidly, stretching in the water. "*Please* tell me that this is a good place for us to stop so you can do whatever it is you wanted to do to hide us from the Demons."

"It crossed my mind," he said, squatting down beside her, wrapping his tail around his ankles.

"I could spend half of forever in here," she sighed in utter contentment, then she reached up and grabbed the end of his tail. She tugged on it lightly, grinning at him. "You need a bath, my mate," she told him, tugging a little more firmly.

"Let me put up Wards at the entrances, and I'll be happy to join you, Jesmind," he told her. "Let's make sure we're safe before we drop our guard, alright?"

"Well, alright," she acceded thoughtfully. "Just don't take too long."

"I'll do my best," he said, standing up. "Jesmind."

"Sorry," she said, letting go of his tail.

Tarrin moved off to raise the Wards, silently thankful that Jesmind had found something with which to distract herself. She wasn't as hostile as she'd been before, but he was thankful for anything that distracted his mate from Jasana's abduction, even if it was for a little while. After all the heavy travelling they'd done, taking a few days off here to give him time to devise a means for them to return to the surface without the Demons finding them, time Jesmind would spend languishing around in a place that would keep her from getting restless, was a good thing. It was good for her, and he would enjoy spending the time with her, a last respite from harsh reality before they had to rejoin it, a chance to be together in peace and quiet for a day or two. Though both of them thought of nothing but Jasana and the fact that she was taken from them, they both could use a day or two to recover, to deal with those feelings as a mated pair instead of as individuals, a chance for them to talk, and prepare themselves for the harsh ordeal to come. He knew that when they came out of the cave and were again out in the mountains, there would be little time for rest, little chance to be as comfortable and content as they would be here. It would be a very hard journey, and this place would let them get ready to face the bitter cold and the snow and the treacherous trek across the mountains and over the tundra, until they finally stood before the black pyramid of Gora Umadar and got their daughter back.

It was their last chance to rest before the end of their journey.

Chapter 14

He had never faced such a puzzling problem before.

Sitting in the middle of the large chamber full of hot springs with his legs crossed, arms folded and head bowed in thought, stripped down to a pair of ragged trousers, Tarrin continued to mull over the problem. It was the same problem he'd been thinking about for four solid days. Any time he was not eating, sleeping, or spending time with Jesmind, he was considering this most bedevilling of obstacles.

How to get around the Demons.

The problem was a tricky one. The amulets he and Jesmind wore protected them from any attempt to locate them using magic, but they didn't hide Tarrin's effect on the Weave. That was an indirect indication of where he was, and he didn't doubt that the Demons or the Sorcerers that may be working with the *ki'zadun* weren't going to overlook that for long. They also didn't protect them from purely visual searching, such as what the *vrock* were doing from the air. The solution he needed had to hide his effect on the Weave, but it also couldn't require such an expenditure of Sorcery that it would be like a beacon to attract Val's attention. They also needed something that would hide them from the airborne searchers, who would only have to find the tracks they left in the snow and follow them back to them. That was where he was running into the problem. Every solution he came up with required too much power to be exercised outside of himself, and that power would be like a beacon to attract Val's attention. Personal magic, contained within, like the magic of his amulet, wouldn't be noticed because the amulet's power of non-detection hid things like that from others. So long as it wasn't *too* powerful, anyway. Having to both conceal his physical and magical presence would mean using too much magic to escape Val's notice, especially as they got closer and closer to the pyramid.

He knew Val was there. He'd felt...brushings. That was the best way to explain it. Sweeps of detection from a mind and power so vast that Tarrin's

consciousness shied away from them when they passed over him. Val was searching for him, but for some reason, the imprisoned god had yet to find him. Tarrin had no explanation for that, aside from the possibility that him being so deeply in the mountain was somehow interfering with Val's ability to detect him.

Every time one of those brushings swept over him, it chilled his soul and scattered his thoughts. There was an utter, unmitigated hatred behind that power that terrified him. For some reason, Val hated him with a passion that was almost a religion unto itself, a hatred that was a paragon of example for any who hated another. Feeling that hatred worried him even more. Not for himself, but for the very real worry that Val would kill Jasana just to spite him. But that hadn't happened yet. For some reason, he was sure of it. Jasana was still alive, he *knew* it.

Those tentative brushings told him that things were getting very serious, and he had redoubled his efforts to find a solution. His distance from her had annoyed Jesmind, who had quickly grown restless and impatient in their restrictive wonderland. She could only take so many hot baths before the luxury of them got old, and the heat and humidity in the place had caused her to go around with progressively fewer and fewer clothes, until she finally decided to forego clothing altogether. Her nudity didn't bother either of them in the slightest, since Were-cats had no sense of modesty, but her nakedness had an effect on Tarrin that was quite human. She was his mate, and he was very attracted to her. Seeing her nude was like dangling a waterskin just over the head of a man dying from thirst, and sometimes he had trouble concentrating on what he was doing when she was close by.

The four days hadn't been spent completely in work, though. Tarrin and Jesmind had taken the time to talk to each other, to get some things out in the open, and the time had reconciled them. His anger for her disappeared when he understood how hurt she'd been when she found out that he'd fallen in love with Kimmie, but she understood after he talked to her that his love for Kimmie did not in any way change how he felt about *her*. There was no competition in his eyes. When Jesmind and Kimmie were together, Jesmind had precedence. Not because he loved her more, but because she was *first*. She had been his mate first, he had been with her longer, and because he had an obligation to her that superseded his duties to Kimmie. Kimmie understood that, probably much better than Jesmind did, and it was

a testament to her mild nature and her understanding that she was willing to accept the situation. He loved them both, but when his duties and feelings for them came into conflict with one another, he would choose Jesmind over Kimmie nearly every time. Jesmind finally understood that, and it had smoothed over the most glaring wound of their relationship. Her hurt and her fear of losing him forever was why she had acted so poorly towards him when he was a human, and though he had hated it, he *did* understand her motives. When he wasn't working on his problem, he was spending time with Jesmind, renewing the powerful bonds that existed between them, restoring the intimacy and openness that had been missing from their relationship since he'd come back from Sha'Kari. When he wasn't deep in contemplation about their problem, he was lounging in hot baths with Jesmind, or talking with her, or making passionate love with her, or just enjoying her company.

But the marching of time had reminded him that they were on a tight schedule. Finally growing tired of not having a way to keep track of the passing of time, Tarrin broke down and did something that he rather regretted doing. He remembered the gold pocketwatch that the rabbit Wikuni Jervis owned, a marvel of Tellurian design that made it keep accurate time despite its tiny size. Tarrin Summoned that watch, and then used Druidic magic to send back to the place where he'd stolen it a note explaining to Jervis how sorry he was for taking it, and a large, uncut, Created ruby that was worth about five times what he'd paid for the watch. Tarrin didn't mind Conjuring away from people things that they could easily replace, but taking something as treasured and priceless as Jervis' beloved watch was quite another matter. Unfortunately, since the watch was a manufactured thing, Tarrin couldn't Create one of his own; such a technological contraption was beyond the bounds of nature, and as such he wasn't about to experiment to see if he could indeed Create something like that. Stealing someone else's was much safer and easier, and at least Jervis would understand his desperate need for it.

Jervis' watch turned out to be the one thing he needed, because it not only told time, it also had a little dial on it that showed the White Moon, Domammon, travelling through its phases. It had little marks on the dial to denote days, and with that he could count how many days until Domammon was again full, which was when the conjunction would occur. By looking at

the watch, he could see how many days he had left, and that was critical down in the tunnel, where he had no way to mark the passing of the days.

Now that he had a way to tell time, Tarrin fretted and grew more unsettled as the days passed. He was still no closer to solving his problem, and there were only twenty-eight days left. It would still take them about eighteen days to get out of the mountains, and he estimated five days to cross the tundra, so he only had five days of working time to come up with a solution. And he did not *want* to use up all that time. If they had an emergency, they may need an extra day or two to get everything settled and back on track. He did not relish the idea of burning up all his time here and now and end up being behind after something happened to delay them.

Being late was *not* an option.

Jesmind shared his impatience. The time alone had allowed them to become close again, but they both shared the desperation of needing to recover their daughter. He was just as impatient as she was, but he understood that this was *not* the time to rush off without being prepared and without a plan. They had spent several hours talking about Jasana, and though the speaking of her hurt both of them and made them both want to fly over to the pyramid on the back of an Elemental and tear the place apart until they found her, he constantly reminded her just who had their daughter. But it was still hard. Every time he was with her, all either of them could think about was the fact that their daughter was not there with them. Even in the intense throes of passion, the emptiness that their daughter had once filled was like a hole in each of them, taking much of the joy and pleasure out of it. It was hard to find joy or happiness without Jasana, but they both tried, intentionally tried to distract themselves from the fact that their daughter had been stolen from them. They knew that they couldn't succumb to depression, or what was worse, couldn't surrender to their anger. So they went through the motions of being mates, even engaged in lovemaking, trying to keep their grief and fury from overwhelming them, and in that overwhelming commit a grievous error that would lose their daughter to them forever.

It was hard for Were-cats to keep such control of themselves, but both of them somehow found a way. Tarrin was utterly focused on their little problem, and spent every waking moment not engaged with his mate

searching for a solution. Jesmind had little to do in the hot spring, but she tried to keep busy. Tarrin had Conjured her a great deal of material, and she passed her time fashioning large white cloaks for both of them to wear, cloaks that would blend in with the color of the snow and make them very hard to spot. Jesmind had a surprising number of hidden talents and skills, and her ability to sew was probably one of the most surprising. She had to take on human hands to do it, but Jesmind's knack for holding the human shape--or parts of it--for extended periods of time was still a matter of pride for her. Not even Tarrin and Triana could match Jesmind in her endurance for withstanding the discomfort for taking on the human form. She had learned it because she wanted to learn how to play the lute, but it served her well in many hobbies and skills that she had learned from the humans that necessitated the smaller, more agile human hands. Because she could tolerate it so well, her fingers remained supple and agile long after the pain stiffened the fingers of other Were-cats, so she could enjoy her hobbies for much longer than any other Were-cat could practice them. Because of that, Jesmind was much better at such things than any other Were-cat, and she had often been asked to sew garments or make things for others.

"Tarrin," she called, nudging his shoulder.

He opened his eyes, and found himself looking at her thighs, right where her white fur ended and her skin began. She didn't have any pants on, and that fact caused his eyes to immediately drift up to certain parts of her that most human women struggled mightily to conceal.

"Ogle me later, love," she said seriously. "It's back, and it wants in."

It was proof that the caves were not devoid of animal life. It was a strange, curious thing, looking like some kind of gigantic lobster. It was about ten spans long, its armored shell grayish brown, and had wicked, powerful claws like a lobster, as well as ten armored legs and long, whip-like antennae. The animal had no eyes, or at least none that Tarrin and Jesmind could find. It had shown up the day after Tarrin raised the Ward blocking the entrance, but Tarrin had lowered the Ward for the animal after talking to it and finding out that it came here to both get water and feed on the moss-like plants that grew on the walls and cast the reddish light in the chamber. Tarrin would not deny the animal its right to graze, and it promised not to bother the Were-cats or disturb their things in exchange for

right of passage in the hot spring. It told Tarrin that there *were* carnivores in the cave system, so Tarrin didn't lower his Wards. He would let the lobster animal in, let it graze and water, then let it out again once it was ready to go.

"Alright," he said, looking towards the opening that led to the passage beyond. It was there, alright, a huge armored monstrosity waiting patiently for Tarrin to permit it entry. Though it was ugly, Tarrin rather liked the big brute. It was surprisingly intelligent, and had exquisite manners. Jesmind kept wanting to throw it in one of the boiling springs and cook it--she adored seafood--but he had to remind her again and again that a Druid just didn't *do* such a thing. As Triana had said about talking to animals, it was very bad form to talk to an animal, then turn around and eat it. As soon as he opened communications with the animal, it was his word and bond that he would do it no harm. The fact that the big lobster-creature was an armored juggernaut and had no fear of predators was why it was so polite and willing to engage the obvious carnivore in conversation. This beast was on the top of the food chain, too large for any normal cave predator to kill without seriously risking its own life. Those huge pincers could tear through solid rock; in fact, it used them to burrow into the rock to make dens and widen constricting chokepoints to gain entry to the tunnels beyond them. It too engaged in the occasional hunt, being omnivorous, but tended to prefer the blind cave fish found in some of the larger underground lakes over hunting down other landwalkers.

It took only a thought to lower the Ward. "It's clear," he called in a strong voice, and the huge beast scabbled in, its legs making a *tik-tik-tik* sound on the rock as it passed. Tarrin raised the Ward again after it cleared its boudary. It ambled along the edge of the wall, its antennae flicking out to touch the bare stone it had stripped of the luminescent moss two days before. It moved along until the antennae struck the glowing plant, and then stopped and immediately began to feed. Jesmind turned to watch it, her eyes intent. Her tail twitched peculiarly as she regarded the animal, and he could tell that she was thinking of trying to cook it again.

"Leave it alone," he warned her. "Even if it didn't have passage, I wouldn't want to try to catch it."

"I'll bet it tastes like lobster," she said musingly, her tail slashing back and forth, slapping him in the side of the head a couple of times.

"Get your tail out of my face, woman," he told her irritably, slapping at the offending appendage, then finally grabbing it and pulling it to the side. Jesmind was forced to back up to keep the tail attached to her backside. She glared at him for a moment, then slid down to sit on her feet beside him.

"Any luck?" she asked.

He snorted shortly, giving her all the answer she needed. "No matter what I think of, it uses too much magic," he told her. "Hiding us from the air won't be easy, because I can't think of anything easy to do that will hide our tracks. Using Illusion to hide will be easy enough, they don't use much magical energy, but the tracks we leave behind have me stumped. Trying to hide a trail like that or wipe it out by any means other than magic will take too much magic for us to avoid being noticed."

"It'd be nice if we didn't leave tracks," she grunted. "Like those white-furred foxes I saw before we got here. They walked on top of the snow."

It was like a light appeared in his mind. "Jesmind!" he said suddenly. "That's *brilliant*!"

"What is?" she asked.

"That solves the big problem!" he said enthusiastically, "and I think it won't leave too much of a mark!"

"What?" she demanded irritably.

"Walking on *top* of the snow!" he told her excitedly. "And it'll make travelling up there alot easier to boot!" He considered it. It *was* possible, a weave of Air, Earth, and Water, that would make the snow like solid ground, like firm soil to them. There was a weave for walking on water like it was a solid surface, and it would be easy to alter that weave to suit his purposes. It couldn't just be a weave, though; he'd have to, for the first time, create a permanent magical object. Two of them, actually.

He rifled through his store of magical knowlege, granted in his turning, and found what he was looking for. He'd need items of exceptional craftsmanship, but the *creation* of those objects was not a demanding issue. He only needed items of exceptional quality. If he *Created* suitable items

with Druidic magic, they would serve his purposes, so long as they were items of exceptional quality. He had to prepare the items, infuse them with magic of the Weave that would then turn and cause any subsequent spells cast into them to become permanent. That required High Sorcery. That worried him a bit, since that would be serious magic, but it was worth the risk. He'd also have to figure out and program in the *triggers*, the variables that would give them the ability to control the magical operation of the items. That was going to be the tricky part, he saw as he studied the problem. That meant he'd have to adjust the weaves he placed in the objects by the feel of them. If he got it wrong, the spells would fizzle, the fizzling would destroy his preparing weave, and they would stain the objects with an magical residue that would make them unusable until he purged them of it and prepared them again.

The more complicated he made things, the harder it was going to be to make it work. He pondered what he needed the items to do, and then pondered how he would want to control that operation. The items would need to do two things. Firstly, it would need to hide them in some fashion. An Illusion would work best, a very special kind of Illusion that picked up the background and projected it forward, that curious trick that Dar had thought up that was as good as being invisible. The Illusion would have to be form-fitting, with only their eyes not covered by the Illusion so they could see. The non-detection aspect of their amulets would subsequently cover over the magic of the Illusion, providing even more protection by hiding the magic of the spell itself. The only control he'd need over that Illusion would be the ability to activate it and deactivate it.

The second thing he needed was Jesmind's clever idea to walk on top of the snow. That wouldn't be a completely internal weave, but the field of its effect would be limited only to whatever it was that had contact with their feet, or whatever parts of them were in active contact with the surface. To make the weave simpler to use, and subsequently simpler to alter, he'd have to restrict its operation to only working against water or water-based substances, like water, thin ice, snow, and mud. The weave would function in such a way that their weight did not change, but their weight over the watery substance would barely register to the substance upon which they stood. It was very easy to do, and the magical imprint it left would be greatly subdued by the amulets. What little that would be left over would

probably be hidden by the background power of the Weave. The only control he'd need over that was the same as the Illusion, the ability to activate it or deactivate it as necessary.

No, he'd need it to do *three* things. The non-detection aspect of his amulet was a *spell*, and he could cast *that* into the items he created, interlacing it with the other weaves. He could tailor it specifically to masking the magical imprint that the Illusion and the water-walking power would make when they were being used. Restricting it like that, making it function in a very specific manner, would make it much easier to weave into the device without it causing the device's magical matrix to collapse or malfunction. The more targeted a spell was, the easier it was to implant into a permanent device. That spell needed no triggers or alteration, but it too would be rather tricky because it had to interlace very tightly with the other magic, covering it over and hiding it behind a mask of nondescript background energy, much the same as the weaves in the amulets that Grand Syllis made, weaves that cleverly hid what they protected by making them appear to be something else. That was how the non-detection worked. Syllis had used the weaves in the amulets. Tarrin could make them appear to be nothing more than just strands in the Weave.

It was possible. It would take two days of constant activity, and he wouldn't be able to sleep. He couldn't leave his device, couldn't so much as let them out of contact with him. The preparation weave would hold his work for brief amounts of time without him having to actively maintain it, but it wouldn't last long enough for him to get any sleep. He'd have to weave carefully and delicately, a flow at a time, carefully interlacing it into the material of the object itself and into the binding weave that he would place on it first, the High Sorcery that would envelop his work and make it permanent once it was complete.

Yes, it would work. He saw that clearly as he considered, as he worked out what had to be done. It would take him about two days to make each one, and that would cut his margin for error down to one day. But on the other hand, the ability to walk *on top* of the snow would make the journey drastically easier, and would allow them to go much faster. So he could gain that time back during the trip over the mountains. There'd be no plowing through snowbanks if they had those devices. They could move effortlessly over them like they were solid ground, and it would make the movement

through the tundra even easier. That would be flat terrain, and the snow would be like the ground to them, allowing them to outrun anything that didn't have wings or wasn't fifteen spans tall. The Illusions would hide them from prying eyes, and the non-detection of their amulets *and* the new devices would hide them from magical probes. The only thing he'd have to worry about was his impact on the Weave. But then again, Spyder didn't seem to have that effect, so there had to be a trick to not having such an impact that he could be sensed from great distances.

And the worry that his work on the objects would be strong enough for Val to find him.

"Hello!" Jesmind said impatiently, waving her paw in his face. He blinked and looked at her. "What's the matter with you?"

"I was thinking," he told her. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you were serious," she repeated.

"Very serious," he replied. "I can make something that will let us walk on top of the snow, and I can also fix it so it casts an Illusion over us that will make virtually impossible to find."

"Virtually?"

"It won't hide our eyes," he told her. "So unless they look directly at us and they have *very* good eyesight, they won't see anything."

"That will make the going alot faster," she said after a moment. "No more slogging through snow."

"That's what I was thinking. The only bad part is that I'll have to create permanent magical objects. That takes alot of time and alot of effort. A *lot* of effort. I won't even be able to sleep while I'm doing it."

"How long?"

"I'll have to make two objects, one for each of us, and each will take two days. If I don't stop to rest between them, it will take four days."

"You'll need to rest," she admonished. "At least a day, so you can catch up on your sleep."

"Probably," he grunted. "So let's call it five days. The problem is that that's all our available free time. So if I do do this, we'll have to move quickly to make up time."

"We'll do that easy if we can run on top of the snow," she told him. "We could clear the mountains in fifteen days instead of twenty, and still have plenty of time to get across the tundra."

"That's what I was thinking," he agreed. "If I do this, Jesmind, I'll have to lower the Wards. Their magic will interfere with what I'm doing. That means that you'll have to defend the chamber by yourself. I won't be able to help you. I may never *notice* that anything happened. I'll be completely out of it."

"Just leave me enough food, my mate," she told him. "I won't let anything hurt you. That's a guarantee."

"So, you like the idea?"

"I don't relish the idea of being a living snowball, my mate," she grinned. "I *really* like the idea of being able to walk on top of the snow without us having to plow through it."

"Alright then," he said, standing up. "Let's get this started."

"Now?" she asked, standing up with him.

"Why not?"

"Shouldn't you get a little rest before you start?"

"Maybe, but I also need to ask the Goddess a few things. I'm going to be vulnerable while I'm doing this, and I'm worried that the magic I'm expending will let our enemies find us. I need to make sure that won't happen."

"How can she do that?"

"She said she'd help me in any way she could," he told her. "Maybe she can hide me while I'm making the objects."

You've already been hidden, my kitten, her whimsical chuckle came to him. *Why do you think Val's mind has yet to find you?*

"Mother!" he said in surprise. "Is that why he can't find me? Are you doing it?"

No. You're deep in the heart of the earth, and that is Darian's domain. Darian was the name of the Elder God of earth, and it was one of the peculiarities that both Darian and Ahiriya were also the names of two of the humans on the Council. Ahiriya had been named for the goddess of fire since the day she was born, to honor the goddess of fire to give her name to a child with flame-red hair, but Darian may not have been the name of the Earth seat. Men sometimes changed their names, and it was possible that the Earth seat may have changed his to honor the Elder god whose element he represented on the Council. The Sorcerers worshipped Niami, the Goddess of Magic, as their patron, but they also acknowledged and revered the other Elder gods as representatives of the natural forces that Sorcery represented. Darian agreed to hide you from Val while you were within his realm. Remember this, my kitten; any time you need to hide, just put earth over your head. Darian will protect you from being found so long as you are surrounded by earth and rock.

"I'll remember, Mother. Could you find Spyder for me? I need to ask her how she hides herself in the Weave."

You've already stumbled across that trick, kitten, she answered. Remember when you let the Weave flow through you to keep you warm? That is how she does it. When you let the Weave flow through you, the effect you have on it is significantly reduced. Jenna was almost in a panic when you first started doing it, because she couldn't keep track of you anymore. I had to calm her down.

"How are things going on that side?"

Busy. I've finished making the arrangements, so now everyone is scrambling to have their forces in place before Gods' Day. Shiika is in Suld along with General Kang. He and Darvon are going to be the tacticians responsible for the plan of attack.

"Good choices."

I certainly agree. Kang is a thorough professional, and Darvon's credentials are already well known and respected. She chuckled. Kang got quite a nasty shock when he met Sapphire.

"Have the dragons met and discussed it?"

They have. There will be some three hundred dragons participating in the attack. The rest won't fight in the battle, but they will participate in the defense of Sennadar if we fail to stop them at Gora Umadar. I think that's a wise choice.

"Why not commit them all?"

Because if we fail, there won't be any more dragons left to fight, she answered. The dragons are the reason we won the Blood War, kitten. When they committed to the cause, we started winning the war. Their power is tremendous, more than even you can imagine. Three hundred dragons may be all we need to help battle a force the size of the army that Val has collected.

"Even more reason to commit all of them to this battle," he said stubbornly. "Put an overwhelming force on the field."

Yes, and put them all within Val's striking distance, she said pointedly.

"Oh. I forgot about that," he said sheepishly.

I rather thought you did, she answered. I must go now, kitten. Remember what I told you. Whenever you must hide from Val, simply surround yourself with earth and rock. Darian will protect you.

"What was that about?" Jesmind asked as the Goddess withdrew from him.

He told her quickly. "As long as we stay underground, the Elder god of the earth will hide us from Val," he concluded. "So we'll be safe until we leave the caves."

"Too bad we can't take caves all the way there," she fretted.

"I know, but since when are things ever that easy for us?"

She laughed. "No doubt there." Then she frowned deeply, glancing at him. "If the Goddess is worried about this Val frying the dragons in the army, what's going to stop him from frying the *army*?" she asked. "Are the other gods going to protect them?"

"They won't interfere directly," he said grimly. "They're too afraid."

"Then who's going to stop Val from killing our army?"

"The gods won't interfere *directly*," he told her. "They won't *attack*. But as long as Val doesn't directly attack *them*, they *will* defend the army against his power. They can do that much without inciting a direct confrontation. You know, one of those things that may destroy the world."

Jesmind glanced at him, her eyes suspicious, then she seemed to understand. She snorted, putting her paws on her hips. "A silly way to have a war," she said. "Where half the people on our side are too afraid to do what they have to do."

"Well said," he nodded. "Now, if I'm going to do this, I'd better rest a while."

"Why don't you take a bath with me?" she invited, grabbing the end of his tail and tugging lightly. "That will relax you."

"And we'll end up doing something more strenuous than what I'll be doing when I'm making the objects," he said dryly.

"Well, at least you'll sleep soundly afterward," she said with a naughty smirk, pulling on his tail more insistently. "Come on, my mate. Let me pamper you a little before you have to wear yourself out with your magic."

"How can I refuse a naked woman?" he asked with a smile.

"Why do you think I took off my clothes?"

He laughed and let her lead him to her favorite bathing pool by his tail.

It was, by far, one of the hardest things he had ever had to do.

It had cost him two days of sleepless, continuous effort, but now, two days and a lot of energy later, he held the final result of his toil in his paws. It was an unassuming-looking leather belt with a gold buckle shaped in the fashion of a cat's head. The leather was as supple as silk but as strong as steel, leather of the highest quality, and the gold pure, alloyed with other metals just enough to allow it to retain its shape--in its purest state, gold was a very soft, malleable metal.

It had certainly been worth the effort. After Jesmind had indeed pampered him a little bit, massaging him, paying him very gentle and loving attention, he slept a while and got to work. He decided on using a belt because it was a rather mundane item, not the kind of thing that one would identify as a rare magical object. And besides, the physical characteristics of his race made a belt more practical than other things. He already wore a necklace, earrings and rings were impractical for a Were-cat, and they couldn't wear boots. Their claws made any kind of magical garment a dangerous proposition, since an errant claw may tear the garment and disrupt its magical properties, and some kind of token or object that wasn't worn could conceivably be lost or dropped by accident. A belt wouldn't come off unless it was taken off, it served a useful purpose other than that of its magic, and it was the last thing someone would suspect was a magical device. It was safely out of the way of a Were-cat's claws, and its sturdy leather would resist any incidental claw that may brush across it.

After he decided on using a belt, he bent to the task of Creating one. He tried several times until he got one that he felt was good enough to accept a magical enchantment. After that was done, he then proceeded with the *very* difficult task of infusing it with magical power. He had never done it before, but the knowledge of how it was done was solidly in his mind, part of what he'd learned when he was turned. He went very carefully nonetheless, not wanting to waste precious time by messing it up and having to start all over again from scratch.

It was alot harder than he thought it would be. He had to use High Sorcery to start the process, preparing the object to receive a magical enchantment, and that was alot more critical to the process than he first realized. The better he did with the preparation, the more magic the object could accept, and therefore the greater its potential. Preparing an object was purely a function of *art*, not spellweaving, for he had to pattern his preparing weaves carefully to take the material and *feel* of the object into account. The preparing weave had to fuse with the belt's leather and gold seamlessly, flawlessly, becoming so united with it that it was as if it had always been there. Since every object was different, that made every attempt to prepare an object a unique exercise in being able to bring out the utmost potential of the object in question. *This* was why the object had to be of the utmost quality, he realized after he had begun. If the object was

shabbily made, its impure nature would taint the process of preparing it to receive a permanent magical enchantment. An object of quality would be much more receptive to the preparing spell, more attuned to the purity of the magic it was being prepared to contain.

This was where Tarrin ran into his first problem. The belt he had Created *was* an object of quality, but it had a certain sterility to it that the magic had trouble overcoming. A normal object made by the hands of a master craftsman showed in its very nature the effort the craftsman had expended to make it, but Tarrin's Created belt had no such sense in it. It made it unusual, and magical spells as delicate as the one he was using did *not* like unusual. But the mutable nature of the spell allowed him to work around this little problem, and as such it served more as an educational tool that would better prepare him when he made the second belt.

After he solved that problem, he finished with the preparation of the belt, infusing it with a weave that would bind to the magic that was put into it afterwards, and render them permanent. Once that was done, he began on the work of placing the magic itself. He had to do it flow by flow, carefully, painstakingly, interlacing his work with the binding weave, carefully placing it, then checking it, then double-checking it. He had to maintain the flows he was setting the entire time, *every flow*, and the effort of keeping a steadily growing and more complicated weave organized was part of the exhausting effort of doing what he was doing. The flows did *not* set, the flows did *not* hold themselves. He had to place each one and hold it right where it was as he started with the next.

The binding weave that would make the whole thing permanent did help in that regard. By altering it in a very slight way, he caused a portion of its binding effect to become active, which held the flows he already set down where they were and give him a chance to rest. But the binding was very temporary, rarely lasting more than an hour, and the flows tended to drift a little bit while they were being artificially maintained by the binding weave. Every time he paused to eat or rest, he had to go back over all the work he'd already done and correct minor shifts in the flows that, had he not fixed them, would have caused the whole thing to be ruined if he tried to activate the object. After he finished that, a process that could take anywhere up to two hours by itself, he could continue the slow, painstaking process of weaving the spell flow by careful flow.

It took him nearly a day and a half of constant effort to complete the three weaves. They would have been very easy to weave on their own, but the demands and requirements of putting them into the belt were very, very different from usual Sorcery. He had to interlace the weaves so they could work together, yet be separate. He also had to *very* carefully overlay the weave of non-detection so the magic of the belt wouldn't be apparent to anyone but someone with as much power and skill as he, who was the creator of the item, had. It would take a *sui'kun* to get around the powerful weave of non-detection in the belt and recognize it for what it really was. He also had to carefully program in the triggers that would give the wearer the power to command the magic the belt made available. Tarrin had already decided that the only triggers needed were the ability to activate or deactivate both the Illusion and the ability to walk over water-like surfaces like they were solid ground. The non-detection would never deactivate, forever defending the belt and its wearer from magical detection of the magic the belt contained, but *only* the magic that was contained within the belt. He had to very carefully find where in the structure of the weaves to place those two triggers, which would cause the magic to activate and deactivate without disturbing the function of the belt or the operation of its other two functions. That was *not* easy. If he put it in the wrong place, a trigger to deactivate one function could cause *all* the belt's magic to stop working. If he really messed up, he could set the trigger in a place that would permanently disrupt the magic he'd placed in it, rendering it nonmagical. The setting of triggers was a very delicate operation, which was why magical devices like the Cat's Claws, which had many functions and also had the ability to change its operation depending on a great many possibilities, were so incredibly rare. His respect for his sister reached new heights when he realized how *staggering* the effort to make those bracers had to have been. The many layers of triggers concerning the operation of the blades was eclipsed only by the raw power of the magic she'd placed into them to make them serve as magical armor. It had to have taken her *rides* to make those things, rides of constant effort and no sleep.

But he finished that, and after he was done, he meticulously went over every single flow to make sure it was all where it was supposed to be. Once he was utterly convinced he had it all right, all he had to do was fully activate the binding weave he had placed in it before he started. The binding weave clamped down on the weaving he'd done, searched through

it, then it snapped down his weaving *on its own* and released all the magic of the belt in one simultaneous act, causing the magic of the belt to flare into life.

It had been a lot of work, but it was *done*.

He held the belt up as Jesmind lounged nearby, reading a book he had Conjured for her before starting his work, sighing in relief. He was *tired*. He could stay up for days if he had to, but this was two straight days of no sleep *and* exhausting work. For a moment he wondered how Jenna *survived* when she made the Cat's Claws. It looked rather normal, and what was more important, he could feel the weave of non-detection hard at work, hiding the magic of the belt by making it have the same feel and sense as a tiny capillary strand, the smallest and weakest of all the strand structures. If anyone ever felt anything at all. Only a strong Sorcerer or magic-user would even notice anything unusual about the belt, and those who did would mistake it as nothing more than background magic, nothing they'd think was coming from the belt itself.

Standing up, stretching, he decided to test his new creation. He put it on and stepped up to the nearest pit of water, one that was bubbling rather angrily, and willed the water-walking aspect of the belt to activate. He felt a strange surge, and a weird tingling in his feet that quickly stopped, and that was a good sign.

"Tarrin! You're done?" Jesmind called from where she was laying on her side, still unclothed.

With a short hop, Tarrin jumped out over the pool of bubbling water. His feet struck its surface, and they did not sink. It was something like trying to stand during an earthquake, for his weight did not in any way impact or change the surface of the water, a surface that was boiling and shifting beneath his feet. Jesmind laughed as he threw his arms out and quickly stepped to the edge, forced to use his arms to keep himself from falling over. He made it to the edge, turned and knelt down, then pushed his hand against the water. It too struck the surface and then stopped, and what was curious to him, no amount of strength he tried to exert against the water would change its surface in any way. It was like the water was impenetrable stone. The surface was boiling, and that meant it was hot enough to burn an

unprotected paw, but Tarrin's immunity to heat protected him from the dangerous temperatures.

"It works," he told her with a slow smile. He willed the power of the belt to cease, then he pushed at the water with his finger once again.

His finger easily sank into the boiling water.

"It definitely works," he said confidently, then he willed the Illusion to activate. It was hard to feel anything with the non-detection actively trying to hide it from him, but he made it, so he knew what to look for. He felt a surge of magic that quickly surrounded him, then seemed to solidify into an Illusory image. "Did I disappear?"

Jesmind gaped at him, then she laughed. "There's a little distortion around your silhouette, and it gets a little worse whenever you move, or I change my vantage point," she told him, moving around him to check from different angles. "Is that invisibility?"

"In a sense," he answered. "The Illusion picks up what's behind you and projects that image forward."

"So it's like camouflage. I guess that's why there's that small distortion on the edge. It's the border between the magic and reality." She walked completely around him, then stopped before him. "I can definitely see the green of your eyes, and they certainly stand out. But from a distance and from behind, I'd never notice you."

"That's what matters," he nodded, willing the Illusion to stop. "Am I here again?"

"In all your wondrous glory," she told him. "That's amazing, my mate! Is that mine or yours?"

"If you want it, it's yours," he shrugged. "But you're going to look a bit silly running around with nothing but a belt."

"Who's here to notice?" she asked.

"Did you have any trouble while I was working?"

"Nah," she sounded. "That lobster thing hasn't come back yet, but it's about due. I was kinda hoping that it would show up while you were working."

"Don't bother it, Jesmind," he told her.

"What you didn't know wouldn't hurt me," she grinned.

"It would have been a little hard to to hide *that* much," he chided.

"I'm curious."

"If you're that desperate for lobster, I'll *Conjure* you some," he told her.
"Just don't try to eat the one that comes in here."

"Spoilsport," she teased. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been dragged behind a horse for a few months," he answered honestly. "I'm hoping the second one won't take me as long. Since I made the first one, and it seems to work, I'll know what I'm doing a little better the next time."

"Well here, let's get you into one of the springs," she said, taking his paw. "I'll fix you something to eat, and you can soak before you get some sleep."

"That sounds wonderful," he sighed sincerely, letting her lead him away.

After a long, relaxing soak in a hot spring and a filling meal, Tarrin got some much-needed sleep. he slept longer than he intended to sleep, and because of that he started on the second belt almost immediately once he got up, almost forgetting to Conjure Jesmind the food and some things to help her pass the time before he committed himself to his work.

The second belt took him only a day and a half to make, but just because he had experience now, that didn't make it any easier. It did make the process of laying down the weaves a little faster, and he had to rest less often. But when he finished with that one, he was even more worn out than with the first, as the concerted effort of making both belts without proper rest between the two projects had taken its toll on him. He finished when Jesmind was taking a light nap, dozing in cat form just outside the circle he'd drawn on the stone that told her not to come any closer to him than that. Tarrin didn't disturb her, moving to a stable pool of water to test the belt. He put it on and activated it, then stepped out onto the surface of the water as if it were solid ground. Nodding to himself, he returned to solid ground and deactivated it, then went over to the food pack he'd Conjured and pulled out a meal of bread, cheese, and salted ham. He fell on the meal

ravenously, finishing it and continuing to deplete the pack, until he realized that he'd eaten everything he'd left for his mate while he was working. He solved the problem by Conjuring a large side of beef out of some inn's kitchen somewhere, one that hadn't been cooked yet, but the meat's raw state in no way discouraged him from starting to devour it.

"Mmm," Jesmind hummed in her humanoid form, coming up behind him and sitting down beside him. She was still nude, but to his relief, she wasn't wearing the belt. That *would* look a little silly. She had probably played with its magic for a while, then got bored with it and put it away. "Done already?"

He nodded, taking another piece of meat off the flank with his claws. "When are you going to put on some clothes?"

"As soon as we leave here," she told him. "You may not notice it, but it's rather hot in here. I'd rather sweat into the open air rather than my clothes." She ran her paw up his back sensually. "Besides, I think you enjoy the view."

"I can't argue with that," he admitted with a slight smile. "As soon as I get some sleep, we'll be on our way again, my mate. and we'll have to pick up the pace."

"That's fine with me. I'm starting to get restless in here. It's hard to sit and do nothing while--" her voice broke a little, and she looked away.

He put his paw around her shoulders. "It was necessary," he told her gently. "But now we have the tools we need to move swiftly and without worrying about being seen, and that's going to give us a much better chance to get there and get her back."

"I know," she said, putting her head against his shoulder. "Someday we'll have to bring Jasana here," she said. "I kind of like it here. It'll be quite a journey, though, just to take a bath in a hot spring."

"I've been here long enough to get a good lock on this place, Jesmind. I can Teleport back here whenever I please."

"You can?" He nodded. She smiled up at him, then kissed him lingeringly on the lips. "I knew there had to be some good use for all that magic of yours, my mate."

"Yes, it can do alot more than amuse you, can't it?" he asked dryly.

She laughed and slapped him on the back with a paw. "Move over," she commanded. "I haven't had any meat that wasn't crusted with salt for two days."

After a heavily filling meal, Tarrin caught up on his sleep, lounging in the heat in his cat form, laying on one of the heavy fur coats he'd made. It was quite relaxing, and the coat had Jesmind's scent all over it, which pleased him. He always seemed to sleep better when surrounded by the scent of a mate.

When he woke up, with Jesmind sleeping up against him in her cat form, he realized that their time in the hot spring was at an end. That saddened him a little. He had spent good time here with Jesmind, had healed their relationship here, and though the circumstances of their visit were dire, he would leave the place with fond memories. He had taken his break from reality, though, and it was time to get back to things. He had to rescue his daughter. Though he had enjoyed his time here, that thought had never been far from his mind.

The vacation was over.

Rising up, he licked affectionately at his mate's cheek and ear, grooming her. It woke her up, but she submitted to his attention, lifting her head to give him more access to her fur. For the first time in quite a while, he heard her purring. Though the loss of their daughter had deeply pained them both, at least for the moment, she had found enough contentment to purr. He groomed her for quite a while, prolonging her pleasure as much as he could, but the inexorable ticking of the clock that so ruled them intruded on his intimate moment.

Sighing inwardly, he stopped, then rose up and padded away from her, giving himself enough room to shapeshift. He did so without thought, rising up to his full height and looking around the chamber, knowing that it was time to go. "Pack up," he told her in a sober voice that was all business once again.

Jesmind shapeshifted laying on the coat, then rolled over on her back and sighed. "We have to come back here," she told him, putting a paw on her stomach as he found his vest and slipped it on. She had piled the clothes

they weren't wearing by the food pack, so he reached down and grabbed her breeches, then lobbed them at her. They landed on her shins, and she sat up and looked at them. "Ah well, back to silly human customs," she mused. "I forgot how free it feels to go without clothes."

"You just like me staring at you."

"Of course, but there's still something nice about being naked."

"Be glad you're Were. After five hundred years, could you imagine how you'd look if you didn't regenerate?"

Jesmind laughed. "Gravity would have done a number on me, that's for sure," she said as she started pulling on her pants. "My breasts would be hanging down around my hips."

"So, there's at least one thing clothes are good for," he told her calmly as he picked up the food pack. He made sure it was empty, then tossed it aside. He had no more use for it. He tossed Jesmind her shirt, which she pulled on, then made sure to hand her the magical belt he'd made, which she'd placed at the bottom of the stack of folded clothing. She took it and put it on immediately, touching the cathead design of the buckle gently.

"You have the hang of how it works?"

She nodded. "I practiced with it while you were working on the other one. You should have warned me," she accused.

"About what?"

"That if I stepped out onto boiling water, it would burn my feet!"

"I thought you'd have the sense to realize that, Jesmind," he told her.

"You did it!"

"I can't be hurt by heat either," he said mildly. "Forgot about that, didn't you?"

Jesmind glowered at him, then made sure the Cat's Claws were settled on her wrists.

They were ready to go in a matter of minutes, and Tarrin stopped to look back. It had been a good stop. He and Jesmind had repaired their damaged relationship, and he had made items that would help them greatly

in the journey to come. They had lost eight days, but with the ability to move on top of the snow, they could quickly regain some of that lost time. He checked his book, then his watch, and realized that they had actually lost *ten* days. His pause before making the objects, the pause in between, and the pause afterwards added up to two days. There was only eighteen days left. They were *far* behind schedule!

"Come on, we have to go!" he said with sudden urgency. "We're *behind*!"

"We are?" she asked in surprise.

"By two days!" he said with a growl. "I *knew* I shouldn't have rested so much!"

"You *had* to rest, Tarrin!" she protested. "It wouldn't have done you any good to start out if you couldn't walk without your knees buckling!"

"I should have let you carry me," he said, sick with himself. They had to make that time back up! "I should have given you the map and let you carry me while I rested!"

"Calm down, my mate," she told him. "These belts you made will let us go very fast. We can make the time back up. Don't get stressed."

He was about to give her a nasty retort, but he blew out his breath and collected himself. She was right. They would move *much* faster with the belts, and the combination of the Illusion and the fact that they would leave no trail would protect them from aerial hunters. "You're right," he growled. "But we can't lollygag around anymore. We have to go, and go *now*."

"Well, let's go then," she said, touching the belt around her waist, then bending down and picking up the two heavy coats he'd made and the white cloaks she'd made. She handed him his, and he tied them in a roll behind his shoulders again, a cushion in case he accidentally rose up into the roof of a cave. Jesmind did the same, pulling a bit in discomfort at the fur-lined heavy shirt he'd Conjured for her. "Let's go before I melt," she complained.

The passages on the other side of the hot spring were much easier to traverse than the ones down which they'd originally came, and that, he realized, was why the ones on that side had animals in them. They moved

with great speed, almost haste, rushing along the passages and galleries, pausing only when a fork in the tunnels made him pause to use magic to determine the path they needed to take. The caves turned into a labyrinth of interconnecting passages, and they were inhabited. They saw several smaller lobster-like creatures, some huge flying bats, slugs and a centipede that had to be twenty spans long. Some of them fed off of mushrooms and fungi that grew on the walls, and the rest fed off the ones that ate the fungi. There were some pretty big animals, but none of them actually attacked the swiftly moving Were-cats. Tarrin guessed that since they'd never seen anything like them before--or sensed, since some didn't have eyes--they decided to leave the strange creatures alone, uncertain as to how dangerous they were.

Since they weren't harassed, the two Were-cats managed to get to the cave opening on his map in less than a day. The fact that they'd not once had to creep or crawl or climb cliffs or swim across lakes helped significantly. The light that flooded the tunnel made both of them move a little faster, knowing that they had come to the end of their journey, but Tarrin was a bit wary of leaving the safety and protection of the caves. But it was necessary; they could move much faster overland, and the route to the pass on his map was much shorter going through the passes than trying to find a way to get there through the caves. They reached the cave opening, which was a small ledge looking down into a deep chasm. The sky was cloudless and a deep blue, the air thin--they had come up a great deal since entering the caves--and it looked to be about noon or so. Jesmind stopped at the edge of the ledge and looked down into the chasm as icy stiff wind whipped at them.

"How do we get across?"

"Magic," he answered, putting his arm around her waist. "Don't wriggle."

"I'm all yours, love," she said lightly, putting her arms around his neck.

After scanning the skies to make sure nothing could see them, Tarrin set about the task of getting across. It was a simple matter to weave a bridge of Air across, but it angled down, and the bridge had no friction to give the Were-cat traction. He ended up having to slide down his ramp carefully, and activated his belt just before jumping over onto the snow. The snow took

his weight completely, and he didn't leave so much as a clawmark in the snow. But unlike the water, the rough surface of the snow gave the pads on his feet good traction. Jesmind's foot sank into the snow, and she quickly pulled it out. "Oops, I forgot to turn it on," she admitted, then set her foot down again, this time having it tread solidly on the surface of the snow. Jesmind took off the roll of her coat and cloak, put on the coat, then pulled the cloak on over her shoulders over it. The wind whipped it around her body, but she made no real notice of it. "Put on your cloak," she ordered. "When we're not hiding behind the Illusion, they'll still make us hard to spot against the snow."

Tarrin nodded, pulling out the cloak and putting it on. Jesmind winced as she looked around. "It's really bright," she said, shielding her eyes from the sun. The sunlight was reflecting off the unbroken surface of the snow, creating a blinding glare.

Tarrin Conjured two of the crystalline visors the Selani wore and handed Jesmind one of them. "These will cut down on the glare," he told her, fixing his over his eyes, causing the world to be stained with shades of dark violet. It did help reduce the blinding light reaching his eyes.

"Handy," Jesmind said, putting hers on and looking around as Tarrin knelt down and took out the map.

"We go that way," he said, pointing south after studying it a moment.

"How long to get to the tundra?"

"I'm really not sure," he frowned. "Maybe fifteen days. But we have to do it in twelve."

"Why twelve?"

"So we can stop to rest before hitting the tundra, and I can figure out how long it's going to take us to make it to Gora Umadar."

"Oh. Are you ready?"

"Hold on. I don't want to have to stop every half hour to check the map. Let me get a good sense of it."

"Take your time, my mate," she assured him, settling the visor on her face a little better. "This thing isn't going to sit very well without ears," she

grunted.

"I must have sized it wrong," he said, standing up and pressing his paws to the sides of it. He set his will against the Weave and sent flows of Earth into it, causing the crystal from which it was made to retract. He fitted it to her face, so the bridge of her nose and the ridges of bone just over where human ears would have been would support the visor on her face, then extended the tips so they just slightly wrapped around. That was how he'd fit his, and he'd found that it was both comfortable and made it very hard for the visor to come off. It would even stay on in a fight. "Just remember to pull it up before you try to pull it away from your eyes," he warned.

"That's much better," she said with a thankful smile.

Tarrin finished studying his map, then put it and the book away. "Let's get moving," he announced, activating the Illusion that would hide him on the open snow.

"That is *so* weird," Jesmind laughed as she activated her own, and the two figures of the Were-cats disappeared behind projections of white snow.

They moved surprisingly fast in their new mode of travel. Being able to run on top of the snow both allowed them to treat it like unobstructed ground and prevented any trail from being left behind. A lot of the time Tarrin expected to take in the mountains was plowing through deep snow, and that too had been removed as a hindrance. Tarrin led with Jesmind following, and since she was so close, she followed the slight distortion the edges of the Illusion created, giving her a visible reference point that would be *much* harder to see if one was further away. The Illusion wasn't perfect, but it was still enough to hide them from scanning eyes.

That first day, no less than six *vrock* soared over their heads. Every time they saw one of them, they immediately stopped and knelt, spreading out their cloaks to widen out the distortion effect and make it less noticeable, and waited for the Demon to pass over them. They didn't see them--or at least he didn't think they did--and they were poignant reminders that they were being hunted.

Their presence was proof to him that it had been as he expected. Val knew what he was doing, knew the plan he'd given to the others, and had set out his Demons in the mountains to catch him before he got the pyramid on

his own terms. If Tarrin could reach Gora Umadar, Val would be forced to bargain. If Val could catch him before he got there, his bargaining position would be severely hamstrung. Without the immediacy of the Conjunction to give Tarrin weight, he wouldn't be able to demand Jasana's release.

That gave Tarrin a rather grim satisfaction. Tarrin's plan *seemed* logical, if a bit dicey in some parts, but that was only consistent with his rather unique approach to plans. Find something that seemed good and go with it before it was entirely thought out, which often forced him to go by the seat of his pants once he ran out of plan and still found problem in front of him. It seemed that Val had bought it, had swallowed it hook, line, and sinker...or it *seemed* that way. Whether it seemed that way or not, all Tarrin needed was for Val to believe that long enough for Tarrin to get to him on Gods' Day. If he could do that, then it didn't matter *what* Val thought or believed or planned. Tarrin would have the advantage, and it was an advantage that, if played right, he would not lose.

Not even Val would, in his wildest dreams, expect Tarrin to do what he was intending to do. It was crazy, and it was just *slightly* dangerous, but it would get Jasana and Jesmind out alive, because he could *guarantee* that Val's attention would not be fixated on them. And after all, that was all that mattered.

Sometimes crazy works.

Though the *vrock* were looking for them, Tarrin's magical belts seemed to conceal the two Were-cats from their notice, and so they were able to move very quickly. They went on very late into the night, found small caves to rest in, then set out again well before sunrise. It was bitterly cold during those nighttime hours, so cold that Tarrin had to put on his heavy coat, but the cold did not slow them down. The exertion of running kept them warm when that heat was trapped in by the heavy coats they wore. Tarrin paused less and less frequently to check the map, as its contours slowly set themselves into his memory to the point where he had the whole thing memorized, but those stops were for more than just checking the map. They were also chances to take a short break and get a little food or water, so they continued even after the need for the main excuse for them was taken away.

The first serious attempt to find them came on that second day. A penetrating wave of power swept over them, another searching sweep by

Val, which caused Tarrin to instantly stop and kneel down to hide his movement. But this time it stopped when it touched Tarrin, stopped for a heart-seizing amount of time, as if it could sense something beneath the powerful non-detection his amulet provided. But it could not breach the amulet's protection, so it moved on after a moment

"What's the matter?"

"Val just tried to find me," he answered. "He almost did."

"Can we do anything about that?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. So we just go on."

Jesmind looked decidedly nervous. "Alright," she said uncertainly.

That established a pattern of activity that lasted for ten days. Tarrin and Jesmind would move swiftly over the snow, stopping only when a *vrock* appeared in the skies over them, Val's searching magic swept over them, or they needed a short break. The probes against the power of his amulet became stronger and stronger, as if Val *knew* there was something there, but just couldn't find any evidence to prove it. They also saw a party of Trolls, trudging along the far side of one of the interconnecting valleys, their large frames plowing a path through the snow. They didn't slow down when they saw them, for they were too far away, and the light snow that was falling would make it even that much harder for the distant monsters to make out the very subtle visual evidence that they weren't alone in the pass. The weather didn't entirely cooperate during those ten days, going from sunshine to light snow mostly, but there were two rather strong snowstorms that rolled through and buried the land in another six spans of snow. The first happened when they were asleep, but the second struck late in the afternoon of the seventh day, and it was when it hit when one of the strange peculiarities of the water-walking power of the belts became evident. They could move in the snowstorm, but if they stopped in any one place long enough for snow to fall around their feet and cover them, it was as if they'd been set down into stone. They made that mistake, stopping as Tarrin checked the map, and when he went to move again, he found his left foot stuck under the snow. It had taken shapeshifting to get clear of it, but when he shapeshifted, the belt was put into the *elsewhere*, and its magic was removed from him and he sank deeply into the newly fallen snow. Jesmind

had to pick him up and literally toss him into the air, so he could shapeshift freely, then reactivate the belt before his feet hit the snow.

As they travelled, both of them became much more intense. All banter and playful chatter ceased as they got closer and closer to their goal, and they got even more grim every time a *vrock* appeared in the sky. They were getting deeper and deeper into the heart of their enemy's power, and both of them were completely focused on the tasks at hand and very serious. They both knew that this was not the time for fun and games. Their hunter's instincts had taken over, and they knew that in this situation, they were not the hunters, but the prey. So they had to be eternally vigilant against attack, else they would be captured and the life of their daughter would be forfeit.

After ten days of travel, with only seven days left until Gods' Day, they came over a high pass and could finally see a break in the jagged peaks, and were looking down over a great distance to the flat tundra. They still had about a day of travel through a series of narrow valleys like the ones through which they had been travelling, steep, often treacherous gorges between high peaks whose floors were nearly as steep as the walls that surrounded them. They had descended several thousand spans, steadily coming down, and now they could see the rest of the way down to the tundra below.

"Is that it?" Jesmind asked as they stopped to look down between the two peaks, look down to a featureless white plain.

"That's it," he told her in a weary voice.

"There don't seem to be any foothills."

"We're too far away to tell. We'll be another one or two days in the mountains. Maybe even three."

"Why three?"

"We might slow down," he said, pausing to kneel and pull out the book of charts. He checked the date, then looked up in the afternoon sky to the eastern horizon, where the faint outling of Vala, the Red Moon, was rising behind the whitish Skybands. It was in an early rising cycle, just a tad past half full, a cycle of rising during the day that would get pronouncedly earlier and earlier for the next six afternoons. All four moons were going to do that, so they could be out in the middle of the day to form the eclipsing

conjunction. "And we need to find a cave where we can rest until we come down onto the tundra."

"I don't see anything out there."

"The pyamid is about two hundred longspans northeast," he told her. "We'll find patrols out, but the main army is there."

"Two hundred longspans on flat ground? Tarrin, it won't take us two days to do that."

"I figured on that back when we'd have to go through the snow," he told her. "Since this is alot faster and easier, we may have to meander around up here in the mountains for longer than I anticipated."

"How long will it take us to cross the tundra?"

"Four days," he said. "That's what I'm planning on, anyway."

"Why so long?"

"Because there are going to be patrols out," he told her. "We'll have to avoid them, and that's going to slow us down."

She snorted. "It would be easier to go through them."

"And leave a trail a child could follow," he said shortly, looking up at her.

"Fighting them would make me feel better."

"Yes, well, think about this. If we fight, we can't use the belts."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"What is blood, Jesmind?" he asked bluntly.

"Ohhhh," she said. "Well, we'll have to use weapons. Our claws may not be able to get past the skin, but I don't think it'll stop weapons."

"I hope not," he said.

"Then we'd better make sure," she said, extending the talons on the Cat's Claws. "Make your belt stop for a minute."

He understood what she wanted to do. Nodding, he put his book away and then deactivated the belt. He immediately sank four spans into the

snow, his feet hitting enough solid matter to stop him when the snow was up to his waist. It was a little surprising to him, and he nearly lost his balance trying to shift his weight in the snow. Jesmind began to laugh uncontrollably, literally dropping onto her backside, unable to stop.

Tarrin glared at her a moment, then blew out his breath. "While you're laughing, I'm standing here for any flying Demon to see," he told her bluntly. "Now let's test this and move on."

"Sorry," she said, turning suddenly serious. "But it *is* funny, my mate."

"Fine. We can both laugh when we're somewhere safe." He held out his bet arm, offering his elbow. "Be careful. Those are *magical* weapons, love. Anything you do to me, I can't heal."

"Then how are we going to test it?" she asked. "I'm sure they'd cut your skin no matter what."

"No they wouldn't," he answered. "There's water in you skin, Jesmind. If you can draw blood, you can sink them all the way into my arm."

She nodded in understanding, retracting all the blades but the one over her index finger.

"You've got the hang of that, I see."

"It's really not that hard. Now hold still," she ordered, reaching the point of the blade towards his bare upper arm, above the fur line. Tarrin felt the icy cold touch of it, and it left blood behind when she drew it away from the gentle touch. Even such a light touch cut him with absolute ease, a testament to the lethal edge on those metal claws. "They work," she said, retracting the blade, then hooking him under his arm and hauling him out of the snow. She heaved him up quite easily, since his weight didn't even come close to challenging her inhuman strength, and Tarrin reactivated the belt before his feet touched the snow. They struck the snow like it was a solid surface, and he settled them down easily as a tiny thread of blood trickled down into his fur. He Conjured a small leather bandage and wrapped it around the cut, not wanting even a single drop of blood to fall into the snow and reveal that he had been there.

"Let's get moving," he announced. "Let's get as close to the tundra as we can, then find a cave to hole up and rest a while."

"I could use some," she grunted. "But it won't be as nice as the hot spring was."

"Welcome to reality," he told her as he reactivated the Illusion, and turned to start back down the valley.

They managed to get quite a distance before they found a cave to rest in for the night, and while Jesmind collapsed in it, Tarrin went up onto a small rock and stared up at the sky. All four moons had set long ago, leaving nothing but the brilliant stars and the Skybands. They had six days now, now that midnight had passed. In six days, he would have his daughter back. His family and Val's forces would be at war, a war in which even the gods were going to participate. They would be there to defend the army against Val's power, as much as they could without forcing a direct confrontation. Tarrin still felt a little angry about their cowardice, but on the other hand, he understood how chaotic things could get if one of the Elder Gods lost an icon. The natural force that god controlled would go wild, and would remain so until the god managed to create a new icon. The only god who could conceivably lose an icon and not have it cause major damage to the world was his own Goddess', Niami. She controlled only magic, but the destruction of her icon would kill any Sorcerer with even a modicum of power or training. That would literally strip the entire world of its magic, killing every creature that depended on magic, like dragons, Faeries, and Were-cats. Niami's banishment would make the whole world mundane, and he doubted that any magic would *survive* until she recreated her icon. She would return to a world that had been totally stripped of it magic, and that would make her a goddess with nothing to control. Or a goddess supplying a power to the world that nobody there would remember how to use, and as such it would be wasted.

He hated the idea of his sisters and friends fighting in that war. It would be so big, so charged with magic, that their lives were in very real jeopardy. But no matter what happened with Tarrin, that army had to be destroyed. They couldn't let it out of the tundra, where it could wreak havoc in Ungardt, Draconia, and Daltochan, then spread out to threaten all of the West. It was too big for any one kingdom to face alone. At least the gods would be there. If Val could attack the army of his allies, then the Elder Gods could turn around and attack *Val's* army. That was the deadlock, he saw. If the gods had to defend their own armies, their power cancelled one

another out, and it would be up to the armies themselves to decide things. Neither god could strike at the other's army without letting down the defense of his own. They either let the armies decide it or both armies were annihilated, leaving a very tense standoff where Val may very well decide to throw caution to the wind and attack the Elder Gods directly.

That was the very thing that the Goddess intended for him to stop when she sent him after the Firestaff. Tarrin couldn't really do anything about Val, because he had used the Firestaff before Tarrin had even been alive, but he still had to keep it out of enemy hands. If Val used it, his power would increase that much more, and he would quite possibly have the power to banish *all* the Elder Gods and take control of the world himself, capable of carrying out the duties that the Elder Gods had been tending. A world remade in Val's image, where he ruled all with absolute power. That was a world that couldn't be allowed to be. There would be no room in it for everyone he held dear.

Timing. Timing was everything. The battle with the dragon to gain the Firestaff showed him that. An hour earlier, and he would have been killed by the dragon in battle. An hour later, and he would have claimed the Firestaff without a fight. There was an issue of timing in this as well, getting to Val at that perfect moment where the nearness of the conjunction gave Tarrin a powerful bargaining position, a position he would use to get his daughter back. The other issue of timing would be how well the gods timed the appearance of the army with the beginning of the conjunction. They were supposed to transport the army to the tundra and begin the battle the *second* the conjunction began. That, the conjunction itself, and Tarrin would all be distractions to Val, and Tarrin was going to *need* for him to be distracted at that moment. That was his one and only chance to make sure Jesmind and Jasana got safely away from the pyramid. After that, it all came down to luck. He freely admitted that, but many of his plans depended on luck for success. Luck seemed to be his ally more often than not, so why not plan for its eventualities?

That was what Jesmind was getting suspicious about. He could tell. His plan to get there and to get Jasana were quite detailed, but his plan to get *out* seemed to her to be uneasily vague. That was probably the stickiest part of the plan, the one in which luck would play the greatest role. His continued existence after Jesmind and Jasana got safely away depended a

great deal on how lucky he was going to be at that particular moment in his life. He'd planned all he could for it, but the fickle finger of luck was going to be the deciding factor.

And that seemed strangely fitting to him. Tarrin was more than willing to gamble absolutely everything on his luck. He *prayed* Val wasn't quite as reckless as he.

Sometimes crazy works.

Distantly, he became aware of Jesmind. She seated herself beside him on the rock, and spent long moments in silence, staring up into the sky with him. The Skybands were particularly brilliant that crisp, clear night, dominating the entire southern sky, their full color and beauty shining freely without the lights of the moons to shade, stain, or interfere with them. To the north, the lights of Maiden's Ghost flickered in the sky, curtains of bluish light that wavered and shimmered in the night sky. Ungardt legend said that they were caused by an ancient maiden who was lighting the way home for her lover, who sailed away in a ship and never returned. Shining in the northern sky, a beacon to him to bring him home. Between them were the stars, a sea of little flickering lights glittering down like tiny diamonds within heaven's treasure chest, opened to those below so they could stare up and wonder at the riches above them.

Jesmind slid her paw into his, and he clenched it tightly. They didn't have much more time. He was worried for her, and for Jasana. Their escape from the clutches of Val would be very dangerous. He could only hope that his crafty mate could get their daughter out of there alive. But then again, there was nobody else he would or could trust with something as precious as his daughter other than his daughter's mother, the only other living soul that could possibly understand what that little girl meant to him. Because she meant just as much to her. He would destroy the world to save her, he would willingly die to protect her. He would do whatever it took to get her back. Jesmind would do the same.

They didn't speak. They only stared up into the night sky, dreading what was coming, but knowing that the end of the ordeal would return their daughter to them.

Because they had made such good time, Tarrin slowed them to a walk the next day, as they easily began the descent towards the tundra. The easier pace left them with more energy, but that only gave them more time to stew. They were both already wound very tightly, and the delay only seemed to aggravate Jesmind, who wanted to run down there, who wanted to get there and retrieve their daughter *now*. For Jesmind, everything was *now*. That lack of foresight cost them dearly way back when they had first met, when her need to take him to her den *now* rather than after he'd learned what he needed to learn had been what caused the feud between them. The result was that Jesmind became very hostile on the walk down the connecting valleys that would eventually lead to a pass that would bring them out of the mountains. She fought with him constantly over his slow pace, and it was only his repeated reminders that they had to be there at a certain time that kept her from racing off on her own.

Tarrin felt the same way. It was killing him to slow to a walk when his daughter was in the clutches of someone that wanted to hurt her, but he had no choice. She would have to stay where she was until Gods' Day, there was absolutely no way he could change that. No amount of running or racing was going to let him get there a single hour earlier than he needed to be, else his arrival would spell the end for them all. He didn't know how she was, whether or not they were caring for her, if they were hurting her. They had to keep her alive, but that was all. Torturing a child was not something he would put past his enemies. She was defenseless without her magic, and wouldn't be able to fight back--

He stopped thinking about it. Thinking about it was working him up, and he had unconsciously picked up his pace. He had to believe, have *faith* that the Goddess would protect their daughter from harm while she was in the clutches of Val.

As if thinking about Val brought his attention down on them, Tarrin felt that same oppressive weight appear in the air around him. He immediately stopped and put a knee down on the snow, trying to behave like an immobile magical anomaly in the Weave, to make it harder for the imprisoned god to find him. It hovered around him, probing lightly with light fingers of investigation, then came the familiar press, as Val tested the veracity of this unusual fluctuation in the Weave. Tarrin endured that for a

long moment, feeling like someone putting wet wool on top of him, and then it withdrew, but not move on.

What came next caused Tarrin to suck in his breath. It was like a lance of Val's power, driving into him, seeking to penetrate the non-detection of the amulet. The power was staggering, a tremendous might that was necessary to penetrate a magical spell woven by another god. Whether it succeeded or not, Tarrin knew in that moment that Val had found them!

I have found thee, Were-cat, and now thy life is forfeit! came a triumphant cry floating in the very air itself, a cry charged with glee and hideously twisted longing.

The taunting quality of the voice offended him, and the fear and worry he had over his daughter added fuel to that fire. Rising up on his feet, his eyes burning with outrage and barely contained fury, Tarrin reached out and took hold of the Weave. Paws erupting into Magelight as the Were-cat quickly started pulling power in from the Weave, he shaped that raw power into a powerful barrier, something that was not quite a Ward, but not quite a spell, existing only in the magical of magical energy, the other-world in which the Weave existed. It was more of an active control of the raw force of Sorcery, working with it in its pure state. Val's power struck that barrier, a terrible blow meant to *kill*, but when it made contact with it, it was turned aside. Tarrin sensed the shock on the other side of that attack, felt it gather up and strike again with more power than a mortal could even comprehend, the full power and might of a *god*, but again it was turned aside.

Impossible! came a gasping denial.

You forget the nature of this mortal, came a surprising taunt from the Goddess, slapping Val in the face for his failure. *It is not his power that defeats you, bound one, it is mine. Face it, my worthy adversary. You won't win this easily. My power protects him, and so long as his faith in me is strong, you cannot harm him in such a manner. If you try to strike him down, I will prevent it.*

Seek you to unmake all in a direct confrontation, cursed witch? came his hissing retort.

If that's what you want, then bring it on, she said pugnaciously. *I'm feeling rather energetic today. What about you?*

There was a long silence.

I'm not as cautious as the others, Val, the Goddess taunted. My power isn't vital to the world. The world can survive without me. That's why it's my task to oppose you. So any time you want to gather up your insignificant little power and face me, just let me know. I'll come and strike you down with all the power of a true god.

Tarrin sensed the incalculable levels of insult his Goddess had just unleashed against Val, and he clearly heard the howl of fury coming from his divine adversary. But then the howling stopped, and he could actually sense Val as he regathered himself.

Thy mission will end here, Were-cat, he warned. I will send a servant for what thou carries. Relinquish the Firestaff to me now, or thy daughter suffers for thine stubbornness!

"Listen to me," Tarrin said audibly in one of the most evil voices Jesmind had ever heard come out of him, "if you so much as touch my daughter, I'll make sure you will *never* get the Firestaff," he hissed with all the sincerity he could muster. "I understand the secret of the amulet, you bastard. If I destroy my amulet while the Firestaff is locked within it, it will be *forever* destroyed. If you harm her, you will never--*never!*--get the Firestaff. You'll be cursed to being forever bound inside your icon, with all your mighty power, but no way to bring it to bear against anything you cannot see!"

With some satisfaction, he realized he hit a nerve. The rage that swelled up against him was almost indescribable. Rage and fury and hatred, raw, sheer, utter hatred, a hatred so intense it almost had a life of its own.

"I am coming for my daughter," he said in a cold voice. "If you want a piece of me, you'll get your chance. But if you touch my daughter, if there's so much as a hair out of place on her head, I'll give you a reason to scream!"

That sent the imprisoned god into new throes of furious raging. Val had a temper. Tarrin filed that bit of information away for future use as the god somehow managed to get control of himself. *Thou art quite brave to speak so to a god*, he said in a smug kind of self-inflating way, as if to remind himself that he was one.

"When my daughter is concerned, I don't care *who* you are," he seethed.

Tarrin's disrespect seemed to flare the god's anger, but he kept it under control *If thou art so insistent on death, then come*, he said hotly. *Come. I will allow thee to stand in the might of my presence and understand the folly that grips thy mind and soul.*

"I'll be there, on *my* terms," Tarrin flung that back at Val. "So chew on that. I'll come at a time of my own choosing, and you will face me on *my* terms. What I have is more important to you than what you have is important to me. I know it, you know it. So wait for me, impotent godling, wait for me and know that you march to the drum of a *mortal*."

Val fled from him then, but it was a retreat marked by infuriated screams. Tarrin had managed to pretty thoroughly irritate and anger the god Val, and that was *exactly* what he wanted to do. Tarrin had learned the hard way that anger was more a weapon to one's opponent than it was to one's self. He *wanted* Val angry when they met face to face, because that anger would help *him*.

If you wanted him mad, you certainly did a good job, the Goddess said to him, her voice amused. *Is that a part of your ultra-secret plan, kitten? So secret you won't even let me see it?*

"I have my reasons."

I know you do. That's why I've respected your privacy, came her light response.

"I'm surprised you faced him like that."

I took a risk, she admitted. *This isn't the first time me and Val have thrown rocks across the fence, kitten. You know that. He knows I'll face him if he pushes me, and that keeps him from trying. Val is just as afraid of losing as we are. When you're a god, you have a lot more to lose.*

"Not as much as anyone else."

You misunderstand, kitten. Val won't be banished, he will die. His very soul is caught up in what he is. If he is destroyed, if he dies, that destruction will be utter. Where the soul of a mortal goes on to either reap the rewards or suffer the penalties for the actions they took in life, Val's soul will not do that. It will be destroyed in his death along with him, and he will face total annihilation, kitten. He fears that, as anyone would. That is the price of

using the Firestaff, kitten. You become a god, but you commit your very existence to your new state of being.

He was a bit surprised at that, but it made sense, given Val's pattern of behavior. "I understand," he said. "So what's coming will be nothing more than a battle between armies."

I don't know. Val fears me, but he doesn't fear the other gods as much as he does me. He knows I'll take him on, and I won't have much fear in doing it. The other gods will be just as terrified of the idea as Val, but Val would be the one initiating it, so he'd probably feel more confident about it. After all, he'd have gotten himself ready to do it. This is why I've always been the one to deal with him, kitten. My power is the only one that can oppose him significantly enough to reign him in. I've kept him in check for five thousand years, but with the time of the Firestaff's activation so close, he's started gambling. Just as we have.

He understood that, understood it more deeply than she probably realized. Val's fear of destruction had kept him working behind the scenes for five thousand years, preparing everything for the day he got his hands on the Firestaff and could use it to become more powerful than even the Goddess could withstand. He had committed five thousand years of work, planning, sweat and toil to this, to the item Tarrin carried with him, and he had set plans in motion to move forward with his dreams of conquest. And being surprisingly forward-thinking, he had set things up so he could make his attempt to conquer and rule whether he got the Firestaff or not. Val had grown tired of working behind the scenes. He was willing to gamble on how involved the Elder Gods would get and try to conquer, maybe gain a foothold for himself and establish a kingdom in the West from which to operate as he consolidated his forces and waited another five thousand years for the chance to free himself of his prison.

And if he failed, it wouldn't matter. In a few thousand years, after everything had returned to normal, he could begin again.

It was a win-win situation for Val. Win the world, or lose his army and simply pull back and wait to try again. And again, and again, and again, continuing to try, continuing to test, until he did finally win. Because the gods were afraid to put an end to him, he could thumb his nose at them and simply wait for another opportunity to overthrow their power in the world.

Releasing the power of Sorcery, Tarrin felt an icy resolve grip him. If that was the way it was, then so be it.

"I take it something big just happened?" Jesmind asked.

"Val tried to kill me," he said in a grim voice. "Mother stopped him. He can't kill me because I'm under Mother's protection. Now he's waiting for us, Jesmind. He's waiting for us at Gora Umadar."

"Then let's not disappoint him," she said shortly.

"We won't, but we still have to get there on Gods' Day," he told her. "That hasn't changed. But now we can move and only worry about the Demons and the patrols. Val knows he can't kill us directly, so we only have to worry about the servants he tries to put in our path."

"These belts seem to take care of hiding us from them rather well."

"From a distance. We may have to fight our way across the tundra if the patrols are heavy enough."

"I don't see anything wrong with that at all," she said in a dreadfully eager tone.

"Me either," he agreed with a single nod.

Moving at a slow walk, they continued down the mountain valleys. They camped early that night in a small cave, then set out again well after sunrise. Peaks of the tundra appeared between mountains and hills as they continued a zig-zagging descent down the valleys. About noon that day, they reached the pass that split the mountains in two, and the tundra opened beneath them as they stood at the pinnacle of the pass and looked down. A featureless white plain, unbroken snow, as far as the eye could see. Almost unconsciously, Tarrin looked northeast, to where the pyramid of Gora Umadar stood beyond the horizon, their ultimate destination.

They moved about halfway down the pass, and then Tarrin stopped them when he saw a rather large cave mouth yawning just along the edge of the pass wall, a perfect place to stop and rest and prepare for the trek across the featureless tundra.

"You know, the snow's thinning out," Jesmind noticed as she pointed to a snowbank by the cave entrance. "It can't be more than a span or so deep."

"The mountains block the weather," he said distantly. "All the snow is forced to fall on the other side and in the mountains. That means the snowstorms that make it over here don't have much left. I doubt there's more than a span of snow on the tundra."

"How long will we camp here?"

"A day," he answered. "We have five days to get there, and I'm giving us four to cross the tundra. We can come down onto the tundra tomorrow and run to make up the time to get down, and then from there we'll just have to see how fast we go."

"I hate this," she growled as they stepped into the cave. "I hate having to go slow."

"I do too, but it's necessary," he said. "Let's set things up and get some dinner started. I'm hungry."

It was a tense layover for both of them. Jesmind was nearly in a fever pitch, but Tarrin was too distracted to notice. Things were nearly over and done with. In just a few days, it would all be over. Jasana would be safe in just a few days. She just had to hang on for five more days. He still had no sense of her inside the void, but he still just *knew* that she was alive and well. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. Val had not harmed her, at least not yet, because he knew of the terrible retribution the Were-cat would exact against him if he did so. He wouldn't be free to harm Jasana until *after* he got the Firestaff. Tarrin held in his paws a means to forever deny Val the chance to free himself of his prison, and they both knew it. That gave Tarrin a power over Val that not even the bound god could deny. Val was indeed marching to Tarrin's drum, and the Were-cat knew he had to keep playing as long as he possibly could.

Jesmind stormed around, muttering, cursing, throwing rocks at the walls, and venting on him for her own impatience. Tarrin simply sat there and endured it with a look of disengaged concentration on his face, as he struggled to master his own impatience, tried not to act the same way as his mate. She got worse and worse as the sun set and the moonless night took hold over the land, as the light of their small fire cast warm yellow and red hues across the red-tinged walls of the cave.

"Jesmind," he finally said, opening his eyes after something whizzed by his face so closely that he felt the air it displaced flutter against him. "Sit."

"Don't you dare order me around!" she raged at him. "Doesn't it bother you in the slightest? How can you just sit there!?"

"I sit here to keep from acting like you," he told her, looking up at her with hooded eyes. "If you want a distraction, I'll be happy to give you one."

She looked at him, then her eyebrows rose in surprise when she caught the change in his scent. "How can you think about that at a time like this?" she demanded.

"Because this will be the last chance we have," he answered calmly. "I want one more night with you before we both march off into the face of insanity. And if anything, it will calm you down. I'll get you in bed just to make you stop pacing."

Jesmind snorted loudly, but the invitation was there, and he knew his mate. Even if she knew she was being manipulated, she couldn't pass it up.

"That's low, my mate," she growled, but she had already grabbed the tail of her thick fur-lined shirt.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy the indignity," he said dryly as she shrugged out of her shirt, then sidled onto his lap and started kissing him.

It had been their last night spent together before all was said and done.

Tarrin lay with her in his arms as the light of the morning spilled into the opening of the cave, the fire long died away and the cave cold and unpleasant, but the thick fur under which they lay kept them both comfortably warm. Jesmind was sleeping, and it was times like that, when sleep softened her features, that she was at her loveliest. He could stare down at her for hours, never growing tired of the sight of her. He couldn't see her face now, but he knew exactly how it would look, with her cheek resting against his shoulder, her arms tucked in around him, embracing him even in her slumber, that heart-stealing expression of peaceful contentment that made her so incredibly beautiful. He knew he wouldn't see that expression again until after it was all over, if he ever saw it again, but the memory of it was enough to make him content.

Four days. Four days until they got back their daughter. Four days until the armies of the gods fell on the armies of Val and destroyed his hopes to conquer and rule. He was nearly sick with anxiety over the idea of having to wait another four days, but there was no help for it. And there would be no secure snuggling out on the tundra. Their every waking moment would be spent in wary alertness, ensuring no enemies snuck up on them. They would not sleep together again, as one of them would always be awake from that point onward. So this was truly their last chance to be together, and Tarrin was not going to let it be squandered. It meant too much to him for him to waste it.

But they couldn't lounge around all day. They had a schedule to keep. It was going to take them half a day to get down onto the tundra, and then they would have to run to make up some time. After that, it would be an exercise in careful pacing to try to reach the pyramid at the exact moment he wanted to be there.

But that didn't mean that they had to leave *right now*. He was content to enjoy it as long as he could, the feel and smell and nearness of his beloved mate, revelling in the love he had for her. Any time they lost now they could make up on the flat board of the tundra below, where their speed would become unhindered by having to ascend or descend.

He did just that for quite a while, as the sun's angle changed in the sky, though it barely managed to clear the horizon. They would only have about five hours of what could be called daylight, and alot of that was when the sun was below the horizon. The winter solstice had come come and gone, and every day now would have just a little more light. Though it really made no difference now.

Jesmind finally stirred, making an adorably cute growling sound in her throat as her claws unconsciously hooked lightly into him. "Morning," she said, raising her head to look at him. "What time is it?"

"Daytime," he said absently, then he smiled when he saw the look in her eyes. "Still indignant?"

She giggled almost girlishly. "A little, but I can't for the life of me say I'm unhappy with the reason for it," she told him, leaning up and kissing him intimately. "You play dirty, my mate."

"Always have," he affirmed with a slight nod, which made her laugh. "I don't really want to get up, but we do need to get moving. It's going to be very, very tense from now on."

"I know. We'll have to take turns guarding the camp when we rest."

"Yah. And we're bound to have company on the way."

"Good. I need something to come along and give me a little release. Val's minions will be nice and convenient for me to work out my peevishness."

"Better them than me."

They packed up and started out after that, and Tarrin was strangely lamentful for leaving the little cave behind. Not because of where it was or where they were going, but for what it represented.

They got down onto the tundra by about sunset, finding the pass surprisingly easy to navigate. They moved out from steep decline to flat plain so suddenly that it seemed like some deranged god had dropped the mountains on top of a vast table. There were no foothills, no rugged terrain leading up to the mountains as there was on the west side. The mountains simply *stopped*, and the plain of the tundra began. As he expected, there was little more than a span to a span and a half of snow on the tundra, and in some places its smooth surface was marred by the tracks of wolves, caribou, foxes, and any manner of small rodents that burrowed out of the snow. He could hear them under it, in tunnels dug out under the frozen crust of the snow, and pits in the snow showed him that the foxes and wolves also could hear the little rodents, punching through the snow to try to grab the little bite-sized morsels. They passed large herds of caribou, shuffling the snow aside with their noses to graze on frozen mosses and lichens and even some snow-bound grass that grew from the cold ground.

But there were other tracks. Boot tracks, some of them overly large, as patrols of Goblinoids marched in spiral patterns out from Gora Umadar. They saw none that first day, even after they stopped for the night when a storm brought little snow but howling winds down on the plain. Tarrin was forced to resort to magic to build a shelter made out of ice, a rounded one that could stand up to the wind, but was surprisingly warm inside when they got a fire going. He'd made sure to make small windows in all four

directions so the one staying up could see, windows clogged up with wads of cotton to keep the light of the fire from spilling out of those holes and to also keep the cold from getting inside.

Before setting out well before sunrise the next day, Tarrin consulted the map, looked at the watch, and then checked the stars. "We need to slow down," he announced to Jesmind. "We'll walk for most of the morning, then pick up after we stop for lunch."

"Alright," Jesmind growled, activating the Illusion that concealed them on the featureless plain.

Tarrin's use of magic the night before had ramifications. Not an hour after setting out, they skirted wide of a large force of about a hundred Goblinoids, being led by an armored *cambisi*, and they were marching with great haste towards where Tarrin had erected the shelter for the night. The Illusions worked very well to hide them from a force of Waern, Dargu, and a pack of twenty Trolls, for they saw them coming well before they got close enough to be a danger, went very wide of them, then laid down on the snow and waited patiently for them to pass.

"Well, there's your diversion, my mate," Tarrin had whispered to her as they hurried by. "Still feel like venting?"

"I think that's a little too much exercise," she said primly. "I don't want to wear myself out now, do I?"

Tarrin watched them curiously, his eyes narrowing. "Why didn't it Teleport?" he wondered aloud.

"What?"

"The Demon isn't Teleporting," he noticed. "They could have sent a horde of them after us, but they didn't. That Demon is *marching* to where we stayed last night. Why?"

"I have no idea."

"Neither do I, but I think it's fairly important I found out," he said seriously.

They got their chance to beat up on some of Val's forces later that afternoon, as they picked up the pace after lunch. They caught up to a patrol

of about fifteen Dargu, looking to be returning to Gora Umadar, and this time Tarrin had no say in the matter. Jesmind's distortion went flying by him as he slowed to take in the possible threat, and he was forced to rush after her to at least give her some support. Jesmind had meant it when she said she was looking forward to having someone at hand she could use to release her fury, and she had *not* been joking. She abandoned the Illusion when she caught up to them, letting them look death square in the face, and attacked the lot of Dargu with infuriated savagery. Were-kin hated Goblinoids with a passion, and that only helped spur Jesmind on as she assaulted the tail end of their column with the Cat's Claws. Tarrin barely had reached them by the time she'd cut six of them down, and the remaining nine looked torn between engaging the wild-eyed, cursing Were-cat, screaming hideous obscenities at the top of her lungs as she tore through Dargu flesh with her metal claws, and turning and running away. But the Were-cat was faster than them and they knew it, so they banded together to mount a desperate defense against her. It turned out that they only lined up in a convenient array that let Jesmind attack them all without having to chase any of them down. She fell on them with mindless fury, ignoring their jabbing spears and their rusty swords, sending blood and little pieces of dog-faced Dargu flying with every whip-like rake of the Cat's Claws.

Tarrin slowed to a stop and leaned on his staff, seeing that Jesmind was in no danger from this lot. She needed the exercise, needed the distraction, and it would do her good. So he stood back and let her have her way with the Dargu, tearing into their lines with wild-eyed glee and killing five of them in the process. The four survivors turned with yipping calls of fright and tried to run away, but Jesmind simply chased them down, grabbed them by the backs of their heads, often by their ears, then slashed a metal blade of the Cat's Claws over their throats, not only cutting their throats, but taking the heads off their bodies. She did that with the first three, methodically killing them one by one, then she loped after the last, who was squealing with fright as he ran as fast as his lanky legs would carry him, a mangy tail up between his legs as he ran for his life. She loped along after him easily, then took the severed head of the last Dargu she'd killed and threw it at him. Jesmind's aim was true, and her inhuman strength made the decapitated head strike with the power of a musket ball. It struck the Dargu right in the back of the head, sending a pink cloud into the air as both skulls shattered from the impact, spilling it to the clean white snow. She caught up with it

quickly and drove all ten metal blades of the Cat's Claws into its back in a simultaneous movement. The body did not jerk or flinch, meaning that it had been dead the instant it hit the snow.

"Feel better?" Tarrin asked conversationally.

"No," she huffed fiercely, kicking the Dargu corpse before her. "But it's a start."

Tarrin let her clean herself up, then they started out again.

The problem with the Demons gave him something to occupy his mind as they ran on into the darkness, as the four moons set one after another very early into the darkness, casting the snowy plain in the multicolored hues of the Skybands. Why *hadn't* they Teleported in to attack? He'd been so worried about that for so long that it really annoyed him that they hadn't. Did the Demons have some kind of limitation with how they could Teleport as well?

The void. Of course. That had to be at least part of it. Inside that void, only Druidic magic would function. That, and he realized that Val, whose power was within him, would also have his power function normally. Everyone else, his Wizards, Priests, and Sorcerers, were powerless. And since the magic the Demons used *also* travelled through the Weave, they were rendered powerless. That was definitely a part of the solution, but not all of it. Val could herd them out to the edge of the void and then have them Teleport to attack him, but it hadn't happened. Could they not Teleport to where he was? Did they too have to know where they were going in order to Teleport there? He wasn't sure. Shiika could Teleport to the Tower, but then again, he had the feeling that she'd been there before.

Fear could be a reason. Tarrin had decimated Val's Demons, and he showed that he was still more than capable of handling as many as Val could throw at him. His ability to strip them of their power was the great equalizer, that and his deadly sword. Only the *Cambisi* had any kind of chance against him, and most of them were not up to dealing with an opponent quite like him. The only Demon that Tarrin had never bested was the *marilith*, that six-armed Demoness. He'd had to resort to Priest magic to defeat her, a testament to her fighting prowess. He hated her with a passion that was nearly holy, but he was not fool enough not to respect her ability.

Tarrin realized that Val had not once tried to find him since the Goddess confronted him. That seemed to click in his mind with the Demon problem...perhaps, just perhaps, Val was *letting* him come. Now that he thought of it, he hadn't seen a single *vrock* since then either. Maybe Tarrin had ticked him off to the point that he was moving his forces out of the way to clear a path for the Were-cats to reach him. That was certainly possible, and if that were true, it would explain why Val hadn't sent the Demons after him. He may have sent that column of Goblinoids to *find* Tarrin and Jesmind, find them and shadow them, perhaps not to attack them. That or to make contact with all the other patrols and recall them. The fifteen Dargu had been travelling *towards* Gora Umadar, and they had to have crossed paths with the *Cambisi's* unit earlier in the day. They were travelling in the snowbreak that the Trolls had made when they came out, the same snowbreak that they had been loosely following.

Val did indeed seem to be letting them come. That made Tarrin smile maliciously to himself. He couldn't have *asked* Val to accommodate him more than he was if that was indeed what he was doing. The idea of getting to Gora Umadar more or less unmolested was going to make this a whole lot easier.

They stopped for the night, and since the wind was relatively calm, they took turns sleeping in cat form out on the flat tundra as the other stood watch. Tarrin spent all his time staring up into the sky with his book of charts in his lap and Jervis' watch in his paw, studying the stars and counting time. He would watch the second hand of that little clock with absolute interest, memorizing the span of time that its movements represented, and began practicing counting backwards to zero the minutes and seconds that passed. He would look at the watch and try to estimate exactly when the minute hand would cross a chosen line, checking the watch when he believed that that moment had just occurred. He was wrong more often than not, because his Were-cat mentality made it hard to keep track of time, but he kept at it. There was going to be a moment very soon that his ability to count time was going to be vital, and him constantly looking at the pocketwatch was going to be like screaming at the top of his lungs that he was waiting for something to happen.

When they moved out well before the late sunrise the next day, with only three days left, Tarrin slowed them to a walk. Jesmind growled and

complained and glared at him whenever they weren't hiding behind their Illusions, but he did not step them up at all. They encountered no resistance that day, only tundra wildlife, as if his assumption was correct and Val had recalled his patrols. As if Val was clearing the path for him. He paused often to check his watch, to check his map and track the distance to Gora Umadar, and he saw that he would have to go even slower for a little while. So they stopped for an extended lunch, then set out at a lazy walk, almost strolling along, though Jesmind's cursing and complaining at the slow pace made it seem much less a stroll than an exercise in patience. She just would not get it into her thick head that they had to get there at a certain time on a certain day. Moving slowly didn't please him much either, but he understood that timing was the only thing that was going to get their daughter back.

They camped early, and Tarrin let Jesmind sleep as he stayed up the entire night, studying his watch with single-minded determination, then checked his book of charts and studied the stars. Phandebrass had been right. He'd been calculating the time of the conjunction in the margin of the book, and though his own results took fifty times longer than it had taken Phandebrass, his deciphering of the charts coincided with the Wizard's prediction. He had never doubted Phandebrass, but it had given Tarrin something to do, something to occupy his mind and keep him from dwelling on the plan, a plan that he could not think about. Though Val had stopped trying to find him and attack him, he had no doubt that the bound god was *listening*. Spyder said that he could hear every thought in Tarrin's head. By not thinking about what had to be done, only thinking about the plan he *wanted* Val to see, he protected his true intentions from being discovered. When the time came, the Cat would guide him in what must be done. That was an intelligence that did not require thought, and the plan had become nothing more than programmed instinct, nonexistent until the moment the need for it brought it out of him. And since it did not exist, there was nothing for Val to find.

They moved slowly and without opposition the next day, with only two days until the conjunction. Jesmind cursed and complained even more as they moved at an easy walk, but they were only fifteen leagues from the edge of the pyramid's warmth effect, which was itself twenty longspans from the pyramid. Fifteen leagues was *nothing* to a Were-cat. They could

cover that in a single day, but they had to stretch it into two. They had to get to the edge of Val's army just after sunrise. That would give them two hours to travel that twenty longspans and reach the pyramid, and then he would need to play things by ear, depending on his ability to count back the time until the conjunction occurred.

They camped in the open once more, and again, Tarrin simply let Jesmind sleep as he studied his watch and watched the stars. The moons rose about three hours before dawn, all four of them almost at the same time, and it was then that he knew that the conjunction was nearly upon them. They would not rise simultaneously tomorrow, the critical day, with the moons rising in a manner that would cause them to intersect with each other in the sky an hour after noon. They were supposed to come *close* to conjunction today, with the event was occurring tomorrow, with Domammon and Vala crossing in the sky with the twin moons very close to them. The early rising of the twin moons would prevent the conjunction from happening.

Tarrin watched Jesmind sleep in her cat form, snuggled up on the fur coat laid on the snow, sighing to himself. Tomorrow. It would all be over tomorrow. For good or ill, tomorrow was going to be the day he got back his daughter. After two months without her, two months of agonized torture, he would finally get back Jasana.

And pay back those who took her from him.

They rose late that day, and though he'd not slept for two days, he didn't feel tired at all. They started well before dawn but again moved slowly, a leisurely walk across the tundra, but this time Jesmind did not complain. She knew that tomorrow as the day, and she *finally* seemed to understand that his pacing was necessary. They were only eight leagues from the edge of Val's void, and they would have to stop well before they got there to wait, to wait until tomorrow. Again they encountered no patrols, no opposition. There were no *vrock* in the sky, no scouts searching for them. Tarrin guessed that Val really did pull back his forces to allow Tarrin to reach him unchallenged. If only he knew how big a mistake that was. It was the utter proof that even though Val was a god, he was not as godly as he thought he was. If he was, he would have put absolutely everything he could between himself and Tarrin, to try to kill him and take his amulet long before any of

the Were-cat's wild plans could be unleashed on him. But Val was confident in his superiority, thinking of Tarrin as nothing but a mere mortal, and too angry with the Were-cat to consider the consequences.

That was a *huge* mistake.

Time and time again he had learned that lesson. That anger was a weapon only to one's opponent. And for the first time, he had managed to turn that to his own advantage.

He was going to make Val pay dearly for underestimating him.

The seriousness of the situation made both of them silent and brooding all day, a day passed without incident. Jesmind was finally feeling the impending confrontation, and had become quiet and withdrawn. Tarrin had been feeling it in his bones for days now, feeling it coming. And now he only had a little more to wait.

There was no sense of anticipation, no nervousness, no anxiety when they made camp that night, a mere two leagues from the edge of Val's void. That was two hours of slow walking for them. They would get there precisely at sunrise, as he anticipated. And two hours after that, they would be standing in the presence of a god, playing a very dangerous game to reclaim their abducted daughter. He felt no worry, no fear. He felt nothing, strangely empty, as if this were yet another in a long series of exercises that had slowly numbed him to their importance. Even the worry for his daughter faded away, leaving only the knowledge that he had to get her back inside him, a feeling he knew would change when he finally laid eyes on her again.

Not even the strange things he was sensing worried him. He could *feel* Val's irritation, his worry, his anger that they were not there yet. Val knew that tomorrow was *the* day, and yet he still did not have the Firestaff in his possession. Surprisingly, though, Tarrin realized that Val had not yet panicked. Val probably knew that Tarrin was lurking very close by, and since his plan depended on him arriving before the conjunction, Val was probably content to allow that to come to pass. Though the Illusion hid them effectively from everything else, he had the feeling that Val knew exactly where he was even without having to actively search for him.

All the better for Tarrin.

He sat there, looking up into the sky, fully prepared for what was to come to pass tomorrow. By this time tomorrow, if things all went well, everyone he cared for would be alive and well and safe, and Val's army destroyed. The Firestaff would not be a problem for another five thousand years, the gods would all go home happy--all but one, anyway--and Jasana would be home safe, and nothing would ever threaten her again.

He would make sure of it.

Chapter 15

They were off exactly two hours before sunrise, and they were both absolutely silent. There was nothing more that needed to be said, though he knew that some things would have to be commanded later. He had faith that Jesmind would do exactly as she was told without question, mainly because she understood the danger involved in what they were doing. Their getting their daughter back demanded things to happen in a very specific manner, and also required exceptional timing on their part. Val probably knew the plan by now, and he would understand why it was so important as well. He would do his best to interfere with the timing of that plan, but he also could not interfere with one vital fact. The fact that Tarrin had to be there *with* the Firestaff before the conjunction *ended*. He had considered several possibilities in his mind, but that ultimate deadline meant that Val was more or less forced to accept the timing and pace that Tarrin dictated.

What Val wanted was more important to him than Jasana was to Tarrin. That didn't mean that he wouldn't do anything to recover his daughter, but Val had worked and labored and planned for five thousand years to reach this moment, and his desperation to free himself would override Tarrin's desire to regain his daughter. Tarrin understood this, Val understood this, and that gave Tarrin a powerful advantage. So the game would be played by Tarrin's rules, if only because he held the one piece on the chessboard that Val could not counter.

They walked through the cold, starlit night resolutely, without conversation. It would all be over today. Months of worry and planning were focused down to this one day, a day that the gods themselves would be here to witness. It was the day that Tarrin finally confronted Val and recovered his daughter. It was a day fraught with peril, possibly the day that marked the beginning of the end of the world, but it was a day that totally and completely belonged to Tarrin. He knew the dreadful importance of what was happening. He understood the risk involved in bringing the

Firestaff to Val, but to him, they were acceptable risks. Nearly any risk was acceptable if it helped him recover Jasana unharmed.

The appearance of Domammon, the White Moon, on the southeastern horizon was like a cold rock sitting in his belly. It had begun. Vala would rise but moments after Domammon, and the Twin Moons, Duva and Kava, would rise exactly nine minutes after Vala. Domammon in the southeast, Vala in the northeast, and the Twin Moons dead east. They would rise and approach one another, and then they would join to form the conjunction in exactly four hours and six minutes. Tarrin took out the pocketwatch and studied it for a long moment, seeing that he was right on time so far.

They moved on, step after step on top of the snow, the padded feet making no sound. There was only the sound of the gentle wind and the sound of their own breathing, and the pounding of Tarrin's heart.

Two hours passed like that, with Tarrin's every thought locked onto the perils the day would present, until the sky began to lighten as the sun approached the horizon, and the edges of Val's countless army became visible in the brightening light. The edge of Val's void, which was also the boundary of the warmth that kept the arctic chill at bay, rose up before them, and the movements of the army seemed a shimmering of the darkness at the edge of his vision, as thousands of Goblinoids, humans, and other fell creatures moved around. As they got closer and closer, he saw that they were not camped. They were formed up in lines, formation after formation after formation, readied for any attack in a ring that had formations stationed at regular intervals around the perimeter, with the bulk of the force kept well back and in reserve. Tarrin understood the strategy of it. Those fringe units would serve to slow down the attack of the suddenly appearing enemy, giving the reserve forces time to rush to the site of assault and repel the invasion. Tarrin wondered grimly if the beings in those edge units understood that their lives were being thrown away. If they were the ones who were attacked, they would not make it long enough for the reserves to reach them. They were there to die, and in that dying slow down the press of the attackers to give the reserves enough time to reach them, reserves set at a distance that would allow them to respond to nearly any place in their circle of protection. It was a smart strategy, if one was willing to throw away a few thousand men, and Tarrin could appreciate the mind that had devised it. Faced with a circle that ringed the pyramid some twenty

longspans away from it, unable to defend it all, the commander of the enemy was willing to give a little ground in exchange for being able to defend the internal territory from nearly any direction.

"What do we do?" Jesmind asked as she began to scan the enemy forces ahead.

"Walk right through them," he answered distantly. "If I'm right, they won't even try to stop us."

"And what if you're wrong?"

"Then we walk right through them anyway," he said grimly as he cancelled the Illusion concealing him. He wouldn't need it anymore.

Jesmind gave him a long, hard stare, then she too dropped the Illusion and stalked forward with a deadly expression on her face, the expression of a woman prepared to kill a million men if they decided to stand in her way.

Tarrin gauged distances, and realized he was right where he wanted to be. They'd reach the edge by sunrise, and then they would run to the pyramid. He had no intention of walking while surrounded by enemy forces. There was too much chance for mischief. So he would minimize his exposure to them.

As if moving by the clock he carried inside his vest, they reached the border of snow and grass just as the upper rim of the sun appeared in the southeastern horizon. They found themselves facing a large formation of humans, mercenaries, dressed in mismatched armor and carrying assorted weapons, being commanded by a black-armored *Cambisi*, one of the male half-breeds, which Phandebrass sometimes referred to as Cambions. Tarrin and Jesmind stopped right at the edge of the snow, as many of the humans looked down and realized that their feet did not sink down into it, both Were-cats looking grimly at the host arrayed before them, looks totally devoid of fear. That put the humans back slightly, but the *Cambisi* only sneered at them in an evil way and then barked a single command to his troops. They separated their formation, splitting in two and forming a wide alley down their center, clearing the way for them.

Without a word, Tarrin stepped into the area of Val's protection, and felt both the heat and the animosity in it. He felt the Weave pull away from him as he moved into the void, felt the strange restriction placed over him, a

restriction he knew he could circumvent whenever it was necessary. He levelled a flat look at the half-breed Demon, a look that made the red-eyed, blue-skinned creature flinch and reach reflexively for his sword. The amulet around his neck grew heavy for a moment, and then it seemed to get hot, as Tarrin realized that Val had reached into his own void and adjusted it so Tarrin's amulet would function within the bounds of his anti-magical field. He felt Val's fingers reach out towards him, touch the amulet, and in that touch he knew what the amulet was carrying within its *elsewhere*. Val knew that Tarrin had brought the Firestaff.

That was all the proof he needed. Val was inviting him in.

He was making the biggest mistake of his life.

Nudging Jesmind, Tarrin moved forward, ears back, eyes flat, keeping an eye on the men surrounding them, men who looked at them with honest fear. Jesmind did the same, and they slowly crossed the ground within the formation's area, eyes shifting to keep an eye on all the men and their Demonic commander. Once they were through, they broke into a run, moving towards the distant massed armies, set up to respond to any attack.

Quickly yet carefully, they travelled the twenty longspans. They ran up to each mass of troops, layer after layer after layer of them, then paused as a Demon more hideous and powerful than the last, commanding each layer of defense, caused his armies to part and allowed the pair to pass without hindrance. The stops served to slow them down, and Tarrin watched the sun in the sky carefully to gauge their time. They were on pace to reach the pyramid more or less when he wanted to do so, so he was content to continue on as they were. The idea of being surrounded by enemies did not sit well with him, though, and stirrings of unease and worry finally managed to seep in through the grim determination he had in place, deadening his emotions. Jesmind too seemed upset by the continuous moves through soldiers whose avenues they allowed through their ranks seemed to be getting narrower and narrower. The Goblinoids they passed growled and howled and banged their shields as they passed, taunting them, but those brave taunts stopped and the Goblinoids jumped back in fear when Tarrin or Jesmind hissed threateningly at them, laying back their ears and challenging them. Goblinoids feared Were-kin, feared them more than any other creature, and even the threat that these two highly volatile, very

dangerous Were-kin may strike at them was all the motivation they needed to give them a very wide berth.

With a little creative pacing by Tarrin, slowing them down or speeding them up between encounters with enemy troops, he managed to get them close when they needed to be there. After an hour and a half, the black stone of the ancient pyramid of Gora Umadar appeared on the northeast horizon. It was a huge, titanic monstrosity, as big as a mountain itself, built of ominous black stone that even from that distance seemed foreboding and evil. The sight of it filled Tarrin with momentary dread, but that was consumed by his driving need to rescue his daughter. A *god* was in that pyramid, a god that wanted to kill him, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered other than his need to get Jasana back. He would face all the gods, all at once, if that was what it took for him to rescue his cherished daughter.

The sight of the black pyramid made Jesmind stop, putting a paw to her heart and with a stricken look on her face. The pressure of what they were doing was getting to his mate. He reached out and put a paw on her shoulder, his look both neutral and reassuring at the same time, conveying to her his absolute determination. That bolstered her, and she nodded to him, her nervous expression melting away into a mask of stone much like the one that always rested on the face of their mother.

Gora Umadar loomed larger and larger before them as they moved towards it, still unescorted, but with thousands of eyes locked on their every move, both within the pyramid and without. Tarrin slowed to a stately walk, nearly a swagger that announced to everyone that he was there on his own terms, a pride that his position would not take away. He was coming to bargain for his daughter, but his attitude clearly showed that he felt he would be bargaining from the higher chair. Jesmind matched his pace if not his confidence, her slashing tail betraying her anxiety and worry over what was going on. But Tarrin was calm, almost serene now. He knew what had to be done, and there was no reason to even think about it. Everything was going to work out alright. He believed it in his heart, he was absolutely sure of it, and that belief gave him confidence.

As they approached, Tarrin saw that there was a debris field on the west side of the pyramid. There was a huge, gaping hole near the top of the ancient construction, the black rubble the stone that had been torn free from

the inside. Tarrin looked in that direction, and he realized that the hole was facing the position where the conjunction would occur. Val had blown out a window of sorts to let him see the daytime sky, to let him see it when the four moons aligned.

That would serve *both* of them.

They reached the base of the pyramid, towering over them, right on time, barely more than twenty minutes before the fateful moment of the conjunction. The channel through the army of Goblinoids ended in a wide passage into the bowels of the black stone building, a wide passageway with heavy arch at its entrance, with ancient runes and glyphs carved into the stone face. In that arch, her coils shifting restlessly, was none other than the very six-armed Demoness that had cut Eron's throat, the Demoness who had been responsible for Jasana's abduction. The expression on her face was eager, and the look in her eyes said that she felt that they had already won. Four of her arms were crossed before her bare breasts, and the third set of arms were resting on hips that slid down into the scales of her snake body. Jegojah's deadly sword rested in a scabbard slung jauntily off one of those scaly hips by a narrow sword belt, her only garment, within easy reach of her hand. She wore rings on her fingers and a medallion of a very large oval ruby in a gold vine and ivy setting around her neck, a pair of simple diamond stone earrings dangling from gold studs in her ears, and she also wore a slender silver tiara crusted with small diamonds on her head that held her black hair back from her face, all jewelry of great value and riches, a king's ransom.

My Master awaits you, her voice touched inside his mind. He knows of your intent, Were-cat, she taunted him. He knows of all your elaborate plans, but you know as well as I that they mean nothing. As you saw, we are ready for your army, and your careful preparations were nothing but chaff drifting in the wind. My Master is all-powerful, Were-cat. That is why I serve him faithfully.

"There's no accounting for taste," Tarrin growled.

The Demoness' eyes flashed slightly in anger, but she continued. *Your daughter for the Firestaff. That was the offered deal, and it will be honored. My Master agreed to those terms in good faith, and he will fulfill his side of the bargain.* The look she gave him was absolutely predatory. He had no

illusions that that agreement would be terminated the instant Val felt he had the upper hand.

"I'll make sure I kill you first," Tarrin hissed at her, images of her cutting his son's throat burning in his mind.

I'm sure you will, she agreed mildly, though she had an evil smile on her face. And I'm sure you'll let me tell you that my Master has generously given you to me. Your soul will be mine, Were-cat, as it was always meant to be. Now that we've gotten the reciprocating ugly threats out of the way, you will follow me.

"What did she say?" Jesmind whispered, forgetting that she could communicate with him in an utterly silent manner. But the Demoness was just that, a Demoness, and he knew that she understood all languages. Even unspoken ones. It was an aspect of her telepathic abilities. Shiika had told him about that, so in a way, Jesmind hadn't really blundered. Nothing she would say could be withheld from the Demoness.

"She taunted me, I taunted her, then we threatened each other. Now she's taking us to Val."

"Oh," she said, her eyes baffled, but she let it pass.

Tarrin reigned in his anger as he followed the scaly Demoness, who slithered along ahead of them, totally unafraid of exposing her bare back to them. Tarrin looked at the passage carefully, and to his relief, he saw that Jesmind was studying it with absolute intensity. It was nearly twenty spans wide, and the sides of the grand gallery were lined with thick, smooth, black stone pillars, ten spans thick each, that soared a hundred spans over their head to join to the ceiling. The air was cool and dank, and there were smells of ancient decay drifting in that air that did little to mask the unnatural stench of the Demon's scent as they followed her. Many Demons had travelled that passageway, as well as many humans, Goblinoids, and other foul-smelling things the likes of which Tarrin could not even imagine. The light in the passage seemed to come out of the ceiling, but there was no visible sign of it. The only reason he believed so was because the area behind the pillars was cast into dark shadow, and from that shadow he could sense lurking creatures that defied his imagination, things never before seen in his world. Things he did not *want* to see, things even more horrific than

the Demons. The place exuded an ancient evil, but the sense of Val and the evil of the creatures that served him made it even worse, gave the place a heavily oppressive feel, a feel that they were nothing but prey to those who lurked and looked onto them.

"This place is creepy," Jesmind whispered to him, her tail shivering.

"It fits with what I expected from Val," he told her in a grim voice, a voice empty of emotion.

The Demoness looked at them over her shoulder, her knowing smile annoying the Were-cat to no end.

Tarrin amused himself with fantasies of how he was going to get that Demoness as they moved on, a pleasant distraction that also kept him from thinking about what he intended to do. That had to be a surprise, or Jesmind wasn't going to get away with Jasana.

The passageway penetrated into the deepest heart of the black stone pyramid, and every step they took was another second ticking off the clock that ruled them all. The conjunction was very close now, very very close now, so close that the luring song of the Firestaff was actually starting to reach into the real world, teasing him and tempting him with its promise of eternal life and absolute power. The power of the artifact was growing with each second, keyed to the alignment of the moons on this most important of all days, and as those moons moved closer and closer to that moment, the power of the Firestaff had begun to swell in preparation for its opportunity to find release. Tarrin ignored its temptations and its promises, for there was something before him even more important to him than the allure of power. The passage seemed endless, eternal, and its singular sameness caused Tarrin to lose track of time, to forget where he was in his count. That only worried him a moment, because he knew that Val had that opening to look upon the moons, and that would be all the clock he'd need. He was intimately familiar with how the moons moved and how fast each one went, so a single glance would tell him everything he needed to know. Val knew his plan, but he could not escape the ultimate finality of the conjunction, which was the deadline by which everyone based their plans. Tarrin, Val, the gods, Jenna, *everyone*. That end of all ends played into Tarrin's hands much more than Val's.

After an interminable amount of time, Tarrin saw that the passage finally opened ahead of them. The Demon slithered forward just a little faster when the end of the passage came into view, and after a moment they reached it. It opened into a chamber so vast that all of Aldreth could have fit inside it. The mountain-sized pyramid was hollow at its core, only with a shell of intimidating thickness enclosing this cavernous opening within, so large that Sapphire and her entire brood could easily fit within it. The journey from the edge of that chamber to the middle would still take several moments, so far away it was. Tarrin could see the huge hole in the western wall of the chamber, high above, and it shone light down on a large dais, a pedestal nearly a hundred spans off the floor in the very center of the chamber, but from the distance he was at he could easily see everything atop it except those things on the far edge. Upon that raised dais in the center of this vast chamber rested a strange statue of ink-black stone, as well as several figures that he could see near the edge. One of them was considerably shorter than the others, flanked by a pair of unnaturally tall, misshapen forms that had to be Demons.

Jasana.

Come. The moment draws nigh, the voice of the Demoness touched him. *It is time to face your Master.*

Eyes narrowing, fists clenching, Tarrin drew in all his strength, drew in all his resolve. This was it. Now he would see how well he could play the game against a god.

It was the longest and shortest walk of his life. Tarrin felt every footstep creep by, but they were to the dais before he realized what had happened. He could *feel* Val's presence, an overwhelming, suffocating weight that bore down on him, the might of a god, an aura that was absolutely unmistakable. It had the same sense of power that the Goddess' presence did, and where the presence of the Goddess uplifted him, the presence of Val sought to oppress him. The Goddess accepted him with love, but Val endured his presence with abject hatred, and he could sense it all around him. But he was not afraid. Val could not touch him, could not harm his daughter or mate, so long as he played the game correctly. The Demoness started slithering up the stairs leading to the top of the dais, and Tarrin mounted the stairs with Jesmind following him closely behind, almost brushing against

his back, feeling what he felt but unable to shrug it off as he could. Tarrin's eyes fixed on the rattle-tipped tail of the Demoness' snaky lower body, giving him a visible reference point to organize himself, to push the fear away, to ready himself for what was coming. He took in a deep, cleansing breath, and exhaled out all his doubt and fear, leaving behind nothing but a knowledge that when the time came, he would know what to do without even having to think about it. And that was his greatest advantage. Val could put his hand all the way in Tarrin's mind, and find nothing. He would find nothing in Jesmind's mind either, only reinforcement that the plan that had been made was *the* plan. When in fact, it was nothing but a diversion around which Val could prepare.

The Demoness reached the top, and seconds later Tarrin set foot at the top of the platform. He looked around, but all else was forgotten when his eyes locked on his daughter. Two boar-headed *nalfeshnee* stood on either side of his daughter, who looked unharmed, but was still wearing the same clothes that she had on when she was taken. They were badly torn and absolutely filthy, and her hair and fur were similarly stained, but there was little defeat in his daughter's fierce green eyes. She glowered at the Demons, stared defiantly at them, glared at the others on the dais, but when her eyes met his, there was nothing but boundless joy and relief. She made a move to run to them, but Tarrin put out a quick paw, and she nodded and bowed her head slightly, folding her little paws before her. She would wait. He was there now, and her father would make everything alright.

Tarrin tore his eyes away from his daughter and looked around. There were ten figures on the platform aside from him and Jesmind and Jasana, and seven of them were Demons. The two *nalfeshnee* and the *marilith*, as well as a single *Cambisi*, a four-armed *glabrezu*, and a hideous creature that looked like a gigantic fly with a hideous, vaguely human-like head. The seventh was a creature that towered over all the others, with a vaguely ape-like body and a canine maw, with burning red eyes. It was huge, with membranous, bat-like wings that had many tears and holes in them, and an aura of fire and heat seemed to shimmer around it. Tarrin recognized this creature as the mightiest of the Demons, a vicious, powerful brute known as a *balor*. These were the direct servants of the Demon Lords, the unique beings that held absolute power over their infernal realms in another dimension of reality. Phandebrass said they were quite smart and incredibly

powerful, almost as powerful as a minor godling, but they lacked the refined cunning and cleverness of the *marilith*. The three humans on the dais looked extremely uncomfortable, and it was apparent that one of them was a slave of some kind. She was a quite pretty woman with dark hair and lustrous dark eyes, stripped naked, with a collar around her neck that had a chain attached to it, a chain whose end laid negligently on the floor, unattended, but that did not bolster the woman into jumping up and fleeing. She knew that it would be pointless. She knelt by the statue with her eyes on the floor, a look of utter defeated misery on her face, trembling in fear. The other two humans were gray-haired men wearing simple black robes, standing behind and to each side of the black stone statue with their hands in their sleeves, simply waiting to serve.

Tarrin's eyes fixed on that statue. That was the icon of Val, and within it, all of his power had been imprisoned by Spyder five thousand years ago. It looked remarkably nondescript, much like the icon of the Goddess didn't seem to be what it actually was. It shared her icon's detail in appearance, the individual hairs on the statue's head visible, but this statue wore a robe, where the icon of the Goddess was unclad. Tarrin realized that that had to have been how Val appeared in life before using the Firestaff to become a god.

The *marilith* slithered up to the statue and bowed deeply to it. *My Master, as I promised, so I deliver*, he heard her mental voice address the icon. *The Were-cat. He brings the staff.*

I am pleased with you, Shaz'baket, the voice of Val emanated from that statue, a voice that chilled Tarin's soul. *As is promised, Lyselle is yours.*

The woman kneeling on the floor moaned in pitiful despair, her head dropping to the stone as she curled over herself.

The *marilith* slithered aside and took a place to the immediate left hand of the statue, reaching down and grabbing the chain. She jerked it sharply, literally dragging the woman to her by the neck, and the woman made no attempt to resist. She settled into a submissive kneel at the Demon's scaly side, her head lowering and her hands resting on her knees. The Demoness' green scaled snake body coiled around the human, but did not crush her, as if to establish her ownership of the woman.

As I wanted, so it is, the voice of Val reached out and struck at Tarrin like a thousand hammers, the full power of the god lashing out with that communication. *I wanted to look into your eyes as you die, mortal. And be assured, you will die today. Who dies with you is the only matter subject to negotiation.*

Tarrin looked up towards the hole in the sky, and saw that Vala had already started passing in front of Domammon. The Twin Moons, Duva and Kava, were but moments from touching the edge of Domammon's white disk, Duva completely concealed behind Kava, already lined up with one another. That one glance told him exactly how much time he had, and it wasn't very much. The conjunction would occur in mere moments. As soon as the borders of the four moons mingled, even without them being perfectly lined up, the conjunction would be upon them. The instant Duva and Kava passed their edge in front of Vala's edge, the conjunction would be upon them, and it would remain so until the Twin Moons' edge passed clear of Vala's opposite side. A span of twenty minutes.

Bringing himself up to his full height as Jesmind's eyes stayed locked on their daughter, on the far side of the statue and with two Demons guarding her, Tarrin looked at the icon of Val with cold, dead eyes. "You already know the bargain," he announced aloud. "Release my daughter, and do not interfere with her or her mother as they leave this place. When they are free of here, and *only* when they are free of here, I will give you what you want. Double-cross me, and I'll make sure you spend eternity trapped in your prison, godling." He put a paw around his amulet and reached within, deep within, through the Cat and into the boundless power of the All. He caused the All to reach into the Weave, and the Weave somewhat startlingly responded to that summons, boiling out through the All and filling him with its power. Magelight appeared around his paw, around the paw holding the amulet, a clear indication that he was ready to carry out his threat the instant he felt that he was being betrayed. "It is a simple bargain. Accept or decline as you wish, but know that I'll carry out my threat the instant you backstab me."

Then the lives of you and your mate and daughter are forfeit, and their souls will belong to this one, Val responded, and the *balor* stepped forward.

"I'll go knowing that I forever denied you the one thing you desire more than anything else in the world," Tarrin hissed in response. "That will be *sweet* satisfaction no matter what torture you lay over me."

And you would condemn your mate and daughter to similar torment?

"If we're going to die, we may as well spit in your eyes on the way down," Jesmind hissed at the god vituperously, surprising Tarrin with the raw emotion in her voice.

"Face it, weakened god," Tarrin hissed. "There is *no way* you're going to get all three of us and the Firestaff as well. I offered you a bargain. The Firestaff for the release of my daughter and mate. That choice is yours, but remember that you have a deadline," he said, pointing to the hole in the ceiling meaningfully.

And I think you fail to understand that you deal with a god, mortal, the voice emanating from the icon hissed, and Tarrin felt an explosive release of power.

Jesmind stepped back in shock and fear as darkness surrounded the statue of Val, *living* darkness, enshrouding it like a blanket of inky blackness that boiled like an angry stormcloud. The veil of darkness, the cloud of black swelled and expanded, lifting off the floor, took form a vague shifting shadow of darkness that seemed to suck in all light and heat, leaving the place cold and empty. Jesmind gaped at the shadowed visage before them, just as the *marilith* Shaz'baket stared up at it with something approaching adulation. That dark form, the true form of the god Val, his icon caught up within his form, looked down at Tarrin and Jesmind with hollow, dim white eyes, the features the same as the features of the icon, but now cast in shades and dimensions of solid shadow, of living darkness. The oppressive power of Val became almost unbearable as the god released his power into the room, establishing his godly presence. He felt that power crush down on him like an attack, using his divine power to smite at the will of the Were-cat, seeking to smother his desires and intent under a hooded mask of control, seeking to subdue his will and make him a puppet of the god.

Tarrin's mind reacted instantaneously and savagely to that attempt. He reached as deeply into the All as he could, bringing forth all the magic of

the Weave he could muster. He formed a shield of raw power with it, again working with the the raw, elemental state of energy, beyond Spheres, beyond order, magic at its most primal form. Again, just as before, he felt the Goddess rear up behind that power, the might of her hand reaching between him and the power of Val, and turning it aside. Jesmind clung to his back, seeking his protection, her claws digging into him, whimpering slightly as the effect of Val's attack was swept out of her mind by the protection of the Goddess. He struck again, and then again, but each time he was foiled by the power behind him. He turned his attentions to Jasana, gathering himself up to crush the child, but then he stopped before unleashing that attack, understanding that it would be the one thing he could not do, the one thing that *would* make Tarrin carry out his threat and forever deny to him that which he most desired.

"And I think *you* forget that I am not alone!" Tarrin shouted hotly in the face of that living darkness. "You are *nothing* compared to the might of my Goddess! Face it, Val! You can't have everything, so choose what it is you want! You can have the Firestaff, or you can have us and *never* get the Firestaff!" he raged, putting a paw over his amulet threateningly. "Which do you want more?"

Val howled in fury, a sound that chilled Tarrin's soul, a sound of the purest form of anger and hatred. He felt the god's terrible power gather itself, but Tarrin plunged his awareness down into the weaves of his amulet, setting his will like a knife against them in such a way that if his concentration was disrupted, the loss of his power would destroy the weaves of the amulet and destroy everything held within the *elsewhere* it created. "Now then," Tarrin hissed. "This is what is going to happen. Jesmind is going to go get my daughter, and they are going to leave. Nobody will get in their way. They will march out of here, and when they are safely away from here, I'll give you what you want. But not a *second* before that!" he shouted.

He felt Val's awareness probe into the amulet, and it seemed startled that Tarrin could so completely intertwine his power into the staggeringly complex weave of the amulet in the way that he had. Unless he *very* carefully withdrew his power from the amulet, he would destroy its power. "If you make one more attempt to attack us or stop us, I'll cut the weaves! I swear I will!"

And then your lives and souls are mine to vent my fury upon for all eternity! Val retorted in a grim manner, the living shadow making up his form shifting in anger and anxiety.

"I can live with that," he replied in a voice so cold, so ruthless, so utterly devoid of emotion that even Val was taken aback. "They chose me because I can make the decisions that must be made," he said in a dead voice. "It's not the first time I've had to choose like this, and by the Goddess, it will be the *last*. So test my resolve, you worthless bastard," he spat. "Try me. Push me and see how far I will go, how far I'll go to deny you what you want, no matter what it costs me. You should know, you had a hand in making me what I am today," he hissed spitefully. "So if you don't think I'll do it, you just go right ahead and try attacking one of us again. I *dare* you."

It hung there for a long, utterly silent moment, a moment absolutely charged with energy. Tarrin glared up into the shifting shadows of Val's form, and the god stared down at the Were-cat with utter hatred on his face, but also a very sincere concern. The Demons, Jesmind, and Jasana stared at the two of them in mute shock, but Jasana had a resolute expression on her face, clenching her little paws repeatedly. The three humans, overwhelmed by the power of what was taking place before them, look dumbfounded and totally confused.

And as Val considered, as he debated, as he decided if Tarrin really had the nerve to do it, the seconds kept ticking away, the moons came closer and closer together.

There was a moment of dreadful fury that emanated from that shadowy form, then it pulled back slightly from the ground. *Then so be it*, Val said in a furious manner. *The two females are free to go.*

Tarrin glared viciously up at the shadowy form, showing absolutely no fear. "Jesmind," he said in a careful voice. "Go."

Shaking off her shock, Jesmind patted his back and quickly rushed across the platform, avoiding going directly under the hovering shadow-form of Val, as Jasana suddenly rushed away from the two Demons flanking her. They did nothing to prevent her. Jesmind knelt and held out her arms, and Jasana jumped up into her embrace, hugging her tightly, tears flowing down her cheeks as Jesmind crushed her in a powerful embrace.

Tarrin didn't look at them too long. Seeing them like that could be his undoing. He kept his eyes on the dark form of Val, his eyes narrowed and his ears back, his long tail almost straight out behind him as he kept his paw and his power on the amulet around his neck, threatening to destroy it the instant Val showed signs of betraying the deal.

"On my back, cub," Jesmind said in a tight voice, and Jasana settled herself on Jesmind's back, her little arms wrapped around her mother's neck. Jesmind stood up and gave Tarrin a long searching look, but Tarrin only gave her a barely perceptible nod. Jesmind turned and rushed back across the platform, then passed by Tarrin. She looked deeply into his eyes, but there was nothing in his gaze that gave her hope that he would be right behind her. He looked deeply into her eyes, looked at her beautiful face, taking in the sight of her, memorizing her every line, her every curve, branding her into his memory, giving him something that could never be taken away from him.

Her eyes brimmed over with tears, and then she turned away from him and started towards the stairs.

In that moment, one of the programmed *things* clicked in his mind. He had to tell the Goddess something. *Mother*, he called silently in his mind. *Summon the army.*

It's too soon, kitten! she replied urgently.

It's the perfect time, he answered.

He felt her invade his mind once again, but this time she searched much more deeply than she did the time before. This time, she found what he was hiding, and her touching of it caused her to shrink back from in shock. *Oh, kitten!* she wailed in his mind. *NO!*

Do it, and protect Jesmind and Jasana, he said, then he pulled away from her. He looked up at the moons. The time was but a moment away. As he'd hoped, the bantering and useless posturing and threats and counter-threats had eaten up what little time there was left, time to do nothing but stand around and wait.

Now came the gamble.

Withdrawing his power from the amulet carefully so as not to damage it, he reached out his right paw and summoned forth the Firestaff. The lull of the artifact became a loud roar in his mind as soon as his fingers closed over the strange stone-like material of its length, and Val's shifting form suddenly expanded when he saw the object he had desired for so long within his reach. The black stone of the Firestaff was actually glowing now, radiating a powerful reddish aura that illuminated the boiling black clouds within Val's shifting shadow form. The Demons all seemed to lean forward when Tarrin brought the Firestaff forth, reaching out for the power that they all yearned to possess for themselves.

"Here it is, Val," he said in a grim tone, standing fully erect with the glowing staff held lightly in his paws, reaching within and summoning up the power of Sorcery through his Druidic magic, causing the paws holding that glowing staff to begin to glow with soft blue light. "If you want it...then try to *take* it."

There was nothing Tarrin could have said or done that could have enraged the bound god more than that. With an infuriated howl, Val struck at the Were-cat with enraged fervor, a blasting wave of power that Tarrin had never before conceived possible. The Were-cat stood defiantly in the face of that power, Firestaff held before him as he summoned up every iota of power at *his* command. Sorcery, Druidic magic, the Wizard energy within the Weave, the raw, unaltered energy that was the base of all magic, and his powerful faith in his Goddess. He did nothing with them more than use them as a shield against the might of an enraged god, defending instead of attacking. Val's full might crashed down on the Were-cat as a wave of unfathomable blackness, and Tarrin's knees buckled under the assault. The magic within him, around him, before him, actually withstood that initial crash of collisions. Intense pain roared through him as he fought against a tidal wave of power against which he could not stand for long, felt it blasting into his defenses, seeking any weakness through which it could pour and strike at the vulnerable mortal hiding behind that power.

This was the gamble. This was the moment of truth, when the Goddess was engaged with transporting the army and could not help him. He didn't have to hold out forever, just long enough for the Goddess to complete her task and rejoin her power to his and protect them. He had infuriated the god to such a degree that Tarrin was the only thing he could see, the only thing

that mattered, and all that existed in that terrible moment was destroying the defiant Were-cat and claiming the prize that Tarrin had dangled so tauntingly in his face.

Pain lashed through him as he pushed himself to his limits and beyond, but he would not yield. His heart pounded in his chest, threatening to burst, as the incredible strain of trying to hold back a virtual avalanche with his bare paws crushed down on him, as the raw power of the might of a god was completely focused on him, but he would not yield. With a scream of absolute defiance, Tarrin rose up to his full height in the face of that powerful attack, raised the Firestaff, and held it over his head with both paws, refusing to be destroyed, somehow managing to deflect aside the power of a god. The stone around his feet began to melt, the air shimmered as the darkness poured down on him with enough force to shatter a mountain, but he would not yield. Everything that he was, everything he cared about, everything that mattered to him was behind him, the desperate need to protect his daughter giving him a strength and power that surpassed even his own physical limits, allowing him to draw on reserves of strength and magical power he never dreamed possible. The Weave answered the call of a desperate *sui'kun*, surrendering up to him all the power he desired, as he acted within the blessings of his Goddess, giving him all the power he needed to defend himself against assault. The All, attracted by the Were-cat's need, also gave to him freely, causing the very land itself to give to Tarrin its energy so that he could erect a defense suitable to protect himself from the god of darkness. Even the Firestaff itself, so close to the moment its power would reach its peak, seemed to aid the Were-cat in his defense, joining its power to his own and reinforcing the defensive wall of power around which the Were-cat had surrounded himself, a wall that shuddered and buckled and was distorted by the power of Val's assault, but would not break, would not open, would not lower and leave the one it protected vulnerable. The power of the Weave and the All were not the power of a god, but together, with the power of Tarrin's faith and desperate need and the power of the Firestaff, they combined to give the Were-cat a magical defense so potent that it *could* withstand the furious assault the evil god rained down upon him.

Val redoubled his efforts to crush the mortal and take the prize, but Tarrin responded in equal measure, the Weave and the All responded in

equal measure, even the Firestaff responded in equal measure to grant to Tarrin the power he needed to protect himself. His vision blurring and his heart about to tear itself from his chest as sharp cramping pains of exhaustion quickly blasted through him, as the pain of exerting more magical force than any mortal had ever before expended took its dreadful toll on his body and mind, Tarrin stood against that unimaginable assault, stood as solid as stone, still screaming in defiant fury as he reached into the very core of himself for absolutely any iota of untapped reserve. The Were-cat, commanding the power of the Sorcerer, Druid, Wizard, and Priest, combined all of his power into a single cohesive effort that formed a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As if the four orders had Circled with one another, giving Tarrin a magic the likes of which the world had never seen before, a desperate defense erected out of pure instinct, and all of it for no reason more simple or pure as that of a parent defending his child.

Val stopped. Tarrin nearly fell to one knee, panting heavily, his eyes unfocused and a dazed expression on his face, but *he had not yielded*.

Val seemed just as shocked that Tarrin was still standing as Tarrin was that he had managed to last so long. His mind swam for what seemed an eternity as both the effort of defending himself and the pain of being in the path of the avalanche of Val's power rippled through him, as little flecks of darkness and light swirled around him, as arcs of electricity danced around the invisible shield of force Tarrin had erected in defense against the dark god, as the very air around the platform seemed to become alive in the aftereffects of such a release of magical energy, charged with such magical energy that Val had to struggle to reassert the void he had erected in the area.

You are powerful, mortal, but a mortal is all you are, Val's voice said, no longer angry, no longer furious, and strangely respectful. *My power is endless, and yours has reached its end, but you did stand firm against my might, for however fleeting the moment. For that, I find, I must salute you. But now, it is over. I have won. I have won!*

Tarrin could not deny that. Breathing heavily, his arms sagging, his tail drooping behind him, he knew that he had no more. But he knew with certain grim pride that if only for a moment, he had stood against the might and power of a god himself, and he *did not yield*.

He only dimly heard the screaming of Jasana and Jesmind as the god Val gathered himself to strike at Tarrin with his full, utter, and complete power, a blow Tarrin would not be able to turn aside, a blow that he would not have been able to turn aside even had he not been exhausted, a blow that would finish him and convey to the dark god the prize he had so coveted for thousands of years.

Maybe...maybe this time, luck had failed him. But he had just enough for one more act. He reached within, through the Cat, seeking to touch the All, preparing to cast one final spell, a spell that would kill him, a spell that would keep the Firestaff out of Val's hands until well after the conjunction was over--

The conjunction!

Tarrin looked up, past Val, past his dark form, and to the hole high in the ceiling of the vast chamber. Vala was now completely within the white edges of Domammon, and the Twin Moons were but a hair's breadth from touching the edge of Vala's reddish circumference.

Tarrin smiled evilly, feeling some tiny energy surge through his exhausted frame, feeling some measure of satisfaction. It had worked. He had reached Val, had gotten him angry, had goaded him into an attack, and he had somehow managed to survive through it. And as that all happened, time kept ticking away, the second hand on the little gold watch in his pocket continued to advance. Tarrin had arrived there mere moments before the event, and as he had hoped, Val had lost track of time in his fury, a fury intentionally goaded into him by the Were-cat. For the first time, Tarrin had turned someone else's anger against himself, rather than have his own rage turned against him.

Val was too late to stop what was coming.

"You're wrong," Tarrin wheezed with that same evil smile. "You haven't won yet." He drew himself up to his full height, beyond pain, beyond weariness, beyond worry and beyond care. He had withstood the assault that was the only weakness in his plan, gambling that he would somehow find a way to hold for those last few precious moments before the conjunction began. And he had managed to do it, though how he had managed, he would never fully understand.

Val seemed to follow his eyes, his shadowy form looking out into the sky. When that insubstantial head whirled back around, there was raw terror in his eyes.

You must be able to make the choices that must be made.

For the last time, he did just that. Without fear, without emotion, with only regret at what he was surrendering and fully understanding what would happen to him, Tarrin raised the Firestaff towards the sky as the Twin Moons brushed the edge of Vala's red disc and opened himself completely to the ancient artifact's whim. He saw the look of terror and chagrin on Val's face as the black Wraith-like form blazed towards him even as his power lashed out to prevent it, but he knew even as he did so that he was too late. His rage had taken him, and in losing his temper he had surrendered the only chance he would have had to stop Tarrin from doing the one thing that Val could not have permitted him to do under any circumstance.

To use the Firestaff.

And he who holds the Firestaff at a certain time, on a certain day, shall become a god.

Twenty longspans away and to the east, in a brilliant flash and a demonstration of power the likes of which had not been seen since the Blood War, the featureless tundra east of the pyramid flared, and left behind in its diminishment over a hundred thousand armed troops, ten of the thirteen clans of the Selani, three hundred dragons, nearly ten thousand representatives of *Fae-da'Nar* of varying species, a thousand Aeradalla, nearly three thousand magic-users of all four orders, and nearly two score of Demons summoned forth by the Succubus Shiika to do battle on their side.

The closest element to this suddenly appearing force was a group of Waern under the command of a *Camibisi*. The Waern took one look at that host, and then turned and fled squealing back towards the reserves stationed some distance behind them. The Waern, it seemed, were not fools. Their half-breed commander screamed and cursed at them, even cut a few of the slower Waern down from behind as he chased after them with his sword waving in the air, but he too retreated quickly as a grand, earth-shaking

shout arose from that mighty army, and huge gusts of wind swept across the warm grass as three hundred dragons, the mightiest creatures on Sennadar, took to the air from the fringes of the huge army and turned in loose groups to unleash their furious might on the land-bound enemy.

Then came the charge of the bipeds below, led by the legendary Knights of Karas. Leading a huge formation of armored cavalry of Knights, mounted elements of the Legions and the Arkisian armies, and with the Selani loping easily in pace with the horses, the combined armies of the civilized world began their assault as Goblinoid elements of the army arrayed against them rushed forth from their positions to meet the fleeing Waern and the armies of humanity in a mighty clash on the unnaturally warmed grasslands of the land surrounding Gora Umadar.

The dragons were the first to strike. Led by a huge blue, larger than every other dragon in the host, the dragon Sapphire struck the first blow, an intertwined blast of lightning bolts that lanced forth from her open maw, driving into the center of a large formation of Trolls, killing most of them and causing the ground where the lightning struck to literally explode from the power of the magical attack. Other dragons followed suit, pounding the armies below with infernos of fire, blasts of lightning, clouds of poisonous gasses, streams of lethally powerful acid, and withering cones of intense cold. They absolutely destroyed those enemies closest to their charging allies, and then broke up to attack any large concentration of enemies that were close to them, making sure that no large element of the enemy army was going to meet the attack of the humans and their allies in one piece. They did not try to destroy every little thing, they simply made sure that their enemies were forced to scatter for their very lives, making sure that no organized defense would meet the Knights as they thundered onto the battlefield.

It was a tactic elegant in its simplicity, and absolutely devastating. When the Knights caught up to the Waern and the Goblinoid reserves that had been rushing to meet them, their foes had had no chance to form up and meet the assault in an organized manner. The Knights and heavy cavalry simply rode them down, splitting them into two groups, and into that hole charged the Selani. They widened the hole, and the Legions of Arak with Sulasian Rangers mixed into their lines marched in behind them in the classic Arakite wedge formation, the Rangers withering the enemy with

storms of arrows as the highly disciplined Legions solidified the split of the enemy into two groups. Wikuni Marines, Ungardt, Amazons, Arkisian Legions, and the armies of Sulasia spread out to envelop those isolated pockets and cut them down as quickly as possible.

But that was but the initial blow, and Val's armies outnumbered the forces of the humans and their allies by ten to one. The dragons, the great equalizer that made their forces evenly matched, fanned out with Aeradalla escorting them to protect them from the winged elements of Val's forces, *vrock* and Harpies, fanned out in their mission not to lay waste to everything, but to cause as much chaos and disorder in their enemies as possible, keep them off balance until friendly forces could arrive to strike them before they had a chance to organize themselves. Even dragons had limits on their magic, so they had to use their breath weapons and their spells wisely, to maximum effect, before being forced to land and fight with their opponents in close combat, a method that actually posed risk to them should they come up against a strong Demon.

The battle outside had only just begun. The battle within had not yet truly started.

Val's power struck the Were-cat, but in that same instant, the Twin Moons broke the smooth perimeter of Vala's edge, and the conjunction was at hand. And in that split second, the long-sealed pathways of power which the Firestaff called upon to convey its might were opened. The Firestaff suddenly erupted into blinding white fire, a white fire that melted away Val's attack, that cast every nook and cranny of the platform and those who had watched the struggle between mortal and god with a light ten times more brilliant than the sun.

That light, that power, that brilliance, that energy erupted from the staff, a power so vast that even a god seemed as nothing when compared to it. It was the power of everything, of the entire universe, an echo of the vast energy generated in the instant of its creation. The Firestaff reached back through unfathomable means and touched on that power, the overwhelming power of *life*, of awareness, of being, a force that was vaguely related to the All, but the All was the most pitiful shadow of what this power truly was. The light surrounded Tarrin, enclosed him, and then he felt its power surge

into him through the paws that were holding onto the staff, conducted into him from the nether regions where that power still echoed and through the staff, the instrument of its conveyance.

It was absolutely indescribable. The power of the gods themselves flowed effortlessly into him at a rapid pace, scouring away all that was mortal with their fiery touch. There was no pain, only a kind of utter ecstasy as his mind and soul were torn loose of their mortal constraints and bonded to the power of the universe itself, a power without bounds, without limitations. It infused him, caused his body to shine forth with the same blinding radiance as the staff itself as flesh and blood and bone were saturated with absolutely power, scoured away, replaced by the god-stone that replaced his mortal coil and formed the icon that represented him within the mortal world. It was but a metaphor, a symbol of his true self, but was necessary all the same as a point of reference which the mortal mind could fathom and understand. The power filled his mind, expanded his consciousness, revived memories taken from him by Niami during his turning, again allowing him to look down into the workings of the universe, but this time with an awareness that could comprehend the nature of its workings. Tarrin could see everything that was, everything that had been, could see the intent and reason for all, and *he understood its meaning*. The power joined to him swelled within him, freeing his mind of all mortal restriction, expressing the ultimate potential that he possessed, a potential that transcended the boundaries of mortal comprehension. Tarrin was joined to the universe itself, understanding all, seeing all, feeling truly as if nothing were beyond his capability.

He understood what needed to be done. There was no choice in it, and no choice in what would happen, but he had to make an active attempt to begin it. He reached out with his soul, with all his godly power, and sent it through the power of the universe itself, until those energies most harmonious with his power and his personality responded to him. Those energies, those states became his chosen forms, and those forms represented the base of his power. The energies of fire were most compatible with him, as were the both mortal and immortal concepts of duty, honor, and protection, traits that had been his strongest aspects as a mortal, and transferred into his godly sentience to form the basis of what he represented to the universe and to the mortals and other gods. They were what he was,

his being, and their energies were his to command to a higher degree than the rest.

The formless stone of his icon flared anew, this time with intense red light. Fire exploded around the blank statue that had once been his mortal form, became as flesh again, but a flesh that did not exist within the bounds of mortal comprehension. It was the physical extension of self, the material focus through which the energy of his boundless self would channel, it was the instrument through which he would exert his will upon the mortal world. The blond hair of the statue burst into flame, as did the eyebrows and the fur, but the body retained its Were-cat features and shape. Two wings made of pure fire fanned into being within the fire of his braid, and then anchored themselves to his back, becoming an integral part of self that were as real as an arm or a leg, despite being made of living flame. This terrifying new creation opened its eyes, eyes that glowed with an intense green light, much like the green of the eyes that the mortal had once possessed, glowing in his anger and shining in his resolute intent to defend.

In that moment of blinding brilliance, Tarrin Kael ceased to be. In his place was born a new god, a new power within the universe. He was Tarrin, god of fire, god of duty, god of protection, defender of Sennadar itself, and his was the burning light of retribution which would strike down the god of darkness and forever spare the world of Sennadar from his scourged presence.

Pushing his complete awareness into his icon, feeling much as he had when he was mortal when he pushed himself into a projection, Tarrin became again aware of the material world around him, restricted himself to an awareness grounded almost completely within the material world. A mind expanded by his transformation took all in at once, understood, planned, realized. Jesmind and Jasana had not left, and he saw in their minds, minds that seemed as open books to him, that Jasana had tore free of Jesmind and ran back to protect her father when Val had attacked him. The Demons were all aghast with shock and furious with chagrin, understanding that they had just allowed the opportunity of an eon to slip through their fingers. And across from him, his mind a whirling chaos of disbelief and fury, floated the entity whose existence the new god had been created to destroy. He existed solely for the need to eradicate an ancient mistake, and he would not be denied.

Curious, he noted, that the amulet about the neck of his material form was still bound to Niami, and it still functioned. It had survived the transformation of self. He used it quickly and wisely, sending the Firestaff into the bounds of its *elsewhere* and recalling the black-bladed sword, bending his power to it, transforming it in an instant into an instrument of godly might, whose power existed on so many levels of existence that the mortal mind could not comprehend its depths. It was the instrument of justice, the executioner's sword, and it would fulfill the task for which it had been created.

He was ready. There was only one thing left to do. He reached out--such a *simple* thing to do!--and touched Jesmind's mind directly. *Run!* he told her as Val managed to recover himself, drew in his power and prepared to do direct battle with another god. *Run as fast as you can, and don't look back no matter what happens!*

Val struck, and in that attack Tarrin understood the nature of the danger. Val attacked not in one manner, but attacked Tarrin on uncountable levels, in so many myriad ways, on mental, physical, magical, and metaphysical levels, that only a god could have countered it. Only a god could attack another god in that manner, for they were not bound by the laws and restrictions of the material world, as Val had been so restricted when he struck at the mortal Tarrin, forced to limit his power to the restraints of mortal capability. Tarrin countered on every level, and the strain it put on the very fabric of the universe spilled over into the physical world. A shattering concussion emanated around Tarrin, containing more energy than every magic-user alive on Sennadar could have generated in a combined effort, knocking down all the mortals, sending Jesmind and Jasana tumbling down the stairs, as the stone of the pyramid shuddered and rocked from the blow. Dust billowed out from the ceiling, but a shrug of fiery wings showed Val that his divine opponent was not impressed by the attack. Carried into the air by his divine power, the blazing light of the god Tarrin met the swallowing darkness of the god Val, who had conjured forth a rod of absolute blackness to serve as his physical weapon, and they locked into mortal combat, a duel that could very well destroy the world.

The Elder Gods, present only in spirit and unseen on the battlefield, had no interest in what was happening with the armies. They could sense what was transpiring in the pyramid, and in what was but a flicker of time to the mortals, a long and heated debate arose among them to decide what must be done. But it was the voice of Niami, the goddess of magic, that quelled all objection and unified them to a common goal.

It is as he wishes it, she said with undisguised pain trembling her spirit. We cannot interfere.

Then what shall we do? Step back and watch them destroy what we labored to create? came a hot demand from Ahiriya, the goddess of fire.

We will do as has been decided by our champion, the voice of Ayise, the mother of all gods, stated firmly. We can be of use without interfering in what must be done. Join to me, my children, and let us summon forth the aid of the Youngers. Combined, our power can limit the sphere of destruction about to be wrought upon the land. We must confine the damage as much as possible, so as to save the lives of the mortals currently embroiled in war around us and protect the Balance from being disturbed by what is to come.

And when one defeats the other, then what shall we do? Leia, the goddess of nature, demanded.

What must be done, my daughter, Ayise said grimly. Destroy the victor before he regains his power and can defend against us.

Such a rude end seems a grave disservice to one who served us so faithfully, stately Darian, god of earth, noted.

It was an end the champion fully understood would be awaiting him, Ayise sighed. He has made his choice. Dishonor not the nobility of his sacrifice, my children. What he does, he does in service to us all.

And so, the Elder Gods called forth into service the power and presence of the Younger Gods. Forty-five of them, representing every aspect of the forces that served to shape the world of Sennadar. From grim K'Tar, god of war, to capricious Elia, goddess of song, dance and revelry, from baleful Niskar, god of enmity and hate, to insatiable Lenani, goddess of vice and lust, from dutiful Aldoran, god of law, to raging Vykarr, god of chaos and destruction, all answered the summons of the Elder Gods. Elder and Younger gods raised forth the hands and joined in unified intent, creating a

boundary of defense through which the destruction about to be wrought within could not pass. It was not a physical boundary; indeed, the mortal Goblinoids below them passed freely across its boundary, but it would serve as a powerful defense to limit the destruction surely about to be unleashed upon the land as two gods lashed at one another using power and might the physical world was never meant to contain.

They would ensure that the world would not suffer with what was about to come to pass.

Never in her entire life has Jesmind been so terrified.

She cowered on the floor, clutching her desperately crying child as all reality seemed to go wild around them.

The immense chamber seemed to waver and distort as two indescribably powerful figures seemed to duel with one another in the air over the platform. One of them was the god Val, but the other, somehow, was Tarrin. Jesmind didn't understand what had happened, but somehow, Tarrin could somehow fight against Val. And the change in him! Was how he looked now some kind of great magic? Triana had told her long ago that she sensed something *special* about her mate, something unusual, as if there was a potential within him that transcended the bounds of normal magic. Could this be the final realization of that hidden potential? A power so great that it gave him the power to fight a *god*?

Whatever it was, they were tearing the world apart! They struggled against one another, Tarrin's brilliant blade crashing into some kind of rod of utter darkness in Val's shadowy hands, and every collision between those two weapons sent out a shockwave of power that was shaking the very earth itself. She could feel the power exchanged between those blows, and she could also somehow sense that what she could see was only a *fraction* of the true struggle going on between them. The shaking of the earth was only a part of what was happening, though. Images and shapes floated transparently in the air around them, like some delusions of reality, and magical streamers of light and energy cascaded down from the air to hit the ground. When they struck, sometimes they exploded, sometimes they just disappeared, but sometimes they did bizarre things. One streamer hit a stone

in the floor and changed it into a puddle of water, another hit and transformed a small piece of rock fallen from the ceiling into a sparrow, which then frantically rose into the air and flew towards the large passage that led outside. Jesmind rolled wildly aside each time one of those dangerous motes of light drifted towards her, then managed to regain her feet as the shaking of the earth subsided by a small amount, enough for her to stand.

Clutching Jasana to her, she was momentarily stunned and confused by what was going on. She woodenly saw that six-armed Demoness come down the platform with the naked human female secured firmly in the grasp of her six arms, keeping her prize, and the human woman actually clutched to the Demoness like a child, willing to accept even her aid if it got her to safety. The other Demons were right behind her. They were fleeing from the battle, and the looks of terror on their faces were sincere and obvious. One of the pig-headed ones squealed in sudden fright and tried to dive aside, but it was too late to avoid a massive blast of fire that billowed forth from the combatants high above that crashed into it. She clearly saw the silhouette of its body evaporate, outlined by the furious fire, wavering away to nothing and leaving not even ash behind when the fire splashed into the floor and winked out of existence quickly. Jesmind looked up to see Tarrin raking Val with a column of fire that emanated from his outstretched paw, his braid and tail and those wings all covered in angry red fire stretched out behind him, as if bracing him for the attack. Val had blocked the fire with his black rod, and the remnants of the fiery attack were raining down on those below.

Tarrin had told her to run. Now she understood how good an idea that was! They were going to get killed if they stayed in there!

Gathering up Jasana, Jesmind turned and raced towards that archway, her terror and desperate concern to get her daughter out alive consuming her, giving her great strength and speed. She sprinted past the six-armed Demoness, and the creature made no move to attack her or hinder her. In this, they were all united by their powerful instinct of self-preservation, and there were no enemies anymore. She flinched away and nearly fell down when a shadow of absolute blackness raced over her head, leaving her chilled to the bone in its wake. That wave of utter blackness struck the wall over the archway, and instantly covered every part of the stone that it touched in a thick layer of crystal clear ice. Tarrin and the god Val were

completely consumed in their battle with each other, and the power that was flying around them was indiscriminate and deadly. They had to get away!

Almost flying through the archway, Jesmind entered the long tunnel that would lead them back outside. The columns lining the wide gallery were shuddering and swaying alarmingly, and stones and dust were dropping down out of the ceiling like rain, concealing the passage and reducing her vision. But she ran on wildly, recklessly, consumed with the need to get her daughter out alive. She jumped over a boulder-sized stone that had fallen out of the ceiling, and raced underneath one of those huge pillars as it broke free of its anchors and toppled out into the gallery, racing under it literally as it fell, and the deafening sound of its impact behind them shivering her fur, a palpable force against her skin.

Insane. This was insane! What had happened? How had Tarrin managed to face off against Val? He was fighting a god, and he seemed to be holding his own? Why was he doing it? *Why?* All he had to do was get away! If he had that much power, he could just run away, and take the Firestaff with him! He didn't have to fight! He couldn't win! Val was a *god*!

Jesmind screamed when a huge fissure opened up in the stone beneath her feet, making her leap aside to avoid falling into it. Hot light poured up from the base of that longspan-deep chasm in the earth, and Jesmind realized that the power those two were giving off was tearing the very earth apart as they battled! More fissures crisscrossed the floor, and the land began to shift crazily as some blocks of stone-capped earth rose up and others fell, an insane obstacle course of shifting sections of floor that ground and crushed against one another. Those fissures went up under the columns and snaked up the walls, and she saw with some serious terror that some were being shattered by the forces being exerted against them, and others were beginning to tear free as the ground dropped out from beneath them, tear free where they would begin to fall. The walls were crumbling, as massive stones began toppling out from them to strike the pillars, and larger and larger stones began to rain down from the ceiling.

Sprinting forward because she had no other choice, Jesmind relied on her inhuman agility to navigate the wildly shifting floor, loping from platform to platform as fast as she could possibly go. She glanced back when she heard a deafening tearing sound, an awful tearing of rock, and she

glanced back just in time to see that six-armed Demoness get crushed under thousands of tons of rock as the walls and ceiling collapsed on top of her. She and that human she was carrying were certainly dead, and the Demons behind her, if they weren't dead, were trapped. But she felt little satisfaction in seeing that hated bitch die. At that moment, their own survival was in serious doubt.

Moving with renewed terror-induced motivation at seeing the walls collapse behind her, Jesmind surged forward, taking greater and greater risks, keeping her eyes peeled for any large stones that appeared out of the dust ahead and above them, dust so thick that she could barely see more than ten spans ahead of her. She clutched Jasana to her with one arm, the little girl clinging frantically to her mother as the Were-cat danced along uneven patches of rubble-strewn ground, evaded flying rocks that rained down from the ceiling, and jumped high to clear the massive pillars that had already fallen to the floor ahead of them. The noise was deafening, tearing and exploding rock all around her, and the dust coated her nose and throat and made breathing more and more difficult. But to her eternal relief, the strange light that lit the gallery had not failed, lighting their way and providing Jesmind with just enough light with which to avoid the lethal stones that rained from above and see enough of the floor and debris on it to set her feet without having them slide out from under her.

A thunderous detonation shook the entire world, it seemed to her, shaking everything so badly that Jesmind and Jasana were spilled to the ground. She barely heard the snapping of stone and saw the shadow appear out of the dust, and wildly rolled to the side as one of the huge pillars toppled down on top of her. She rolled up against a huge stone that had already fallen to the floor, and the massive black shadow of the falling pillar suddenly consumed all the light. She flinched, covering Jasana with her own body as the pillar crashed to the ground, and then she screamed in agony when something crushed her left leg. She looked back to see that the stone by them had stopped the pillar's fall and kept it from killing them, but the pillar had broken, and the very edge of its end had landed on her left foot. She realized she could cut off the foot with the Cat's Claws, but they would leave a permanent injury, and she would have no chance of getting Jasana out alive with only one foot. And she would only slow Jasana down

as she tried to get out alive herself. Grimly, she realized that there was only one choice to make.

"Mama!" Jasana said in wild terror, struggling under her. "Mama, are you hurt?"

"Cub!" she said in a gasping voice. "I'm pinned! You have to keep going! Go!"

"No!" Jasana shrieked, wriggling out from under her. "I won't leave you, Mama!"

"You stupid cub!" Jesmind shouted at her. "You have to get out of here!"

"I won't leave you!" she screamed, grabbing Jesmind by the arm and pulling with all the might her little body could muster.

Jesmind yanked her paw free, fixing Jasana with a penetrating stare, summoning up all her motherly authority. "I told you to go!" she said in a voice that would brook no disobedience. "You're all that matters, cub! You have to get out!"

"I will *not* leave you!" she declared adamantly. "Tell me how to get you out!"

She saw that this was argument she was not going to win. She couldn't *force* Jasana to go, so she realized that the only thing she could do was let her daughter help her in any way she could. "If only we had something to cut my leg off that wouldn't leave a true wound!" she said. She could tear her leg off with raw power, or use her claws to rend the flesh to the point where she could snap her leg off, but both would take time, and time was the one thing that they did not have.

Jasana took on a look of dreadful concentration, and to Jesmind's surprise, the woodcutting axe that they had used in Aldreth appeared in her little paws. "Will this work?"

"How did you do that?" Jesmind asked, forgetting the terrible danger they were in.

"It's Conjuring, Mama," she told her. "I realized I could do Conjuring a few days ago. I was going to use it to get away from the evil man."

Jesmind gave her daughter a fiercely proud look. A *Druid*! Her little Jasana was a *Druid*! Just like her father! She took the axe from her daughter, twisted around, and did the deed with one swift blow. She severed her own leg just below the knee, feeling that wild sting of pain, then the angry burning that heralded the rapid growth of a new foot.

As soon as that foot was fleshed out, she scooped up Jasana and raced into the dust once again. The whole pyramid was coming down around their ears, and they absolutely had to get clear as quickly as possible.

She had no idea how long she ran along that passage, wildly dodging falling stones collapsing pillars, and holes that suddenly appeared in the floor. It all blurred together in Jesmind's frenzied mind, a mind consumed by the absolute need to get her daughter out of the pyramid and to safety. But time caught up to her when she saw light ahead of her, piercing the dust-induced gloom of the treacherous passageway, and it caused her to redouble her efforts. Now that she could see the exit--the way out!!!--her utter desperation to reach it caused her to speed up, to move like an arrow shot from a bow, to get her daughter out of the deadly tunnel and get nothing but empty air over them. Her eyes fixed to that light, growing stronger and stronger with each racing step, narrowly avoiding a house-sized block of stone that dropped from the ceiling to crash into the floor behind them, shaking the ground with the might of its impact. Her only sight, her only goal, the very focus of her entire life was that light, and it was with almost religious joy that she suddenly burst from the darkness, burst from the dust, leaping out of the collapsing tunnel just ahead of a shower of stones from the archway that marked its entrance, leaping free of the pyramid and setting foot on lush grass.

She didn't look back. She raced forward with all the speed she could muster, rushing towards a column of smoke where huge winged figures circled over something. They were dragons, and she realized quite unhappily that the dragon that was supposed to be there to pick them up was *not* there. What had happened? Was it late? Had it already come and not found them? The area around her was empty, all the Goblinoids moving forward to engage the armies that the gods had brought here to deal with them. With Tarrin fighting Val, why weren't the gods doing something about the army? Couldn't they just destroy it? She raced on as the ground shook and rumbled beneath her feet, and she realized to her horror that the

fissures that had collapsed the tunnel were also snaking out into the earth itself around them, tearing the very earth apart. Far to her left, a geyser of molten rock erupted from the ground in a deadly spray, flying hundreds of spans into the air to spatter back to the ground, killing anything that it landed upon and setting fire to the lush green grass. She angled away from that horrid display almost unconsciously, and was forced to leap over a ten span wide gash in the earth that stood in her way, a gash that had a terrifying reddish light and powerful heat rising up from it as she sailed over it, so hot it singed the fur on her feet and lower legs.

Gods above! If someone didn't come to get them soon, they may not live to reach safety!

Ahead and to the right, to her terror, she saw a chunk of land that had been a half a longspan in area suddenly sink down into the earth itself. A gout of fire and magma flew into the air a few seconds later, and an ominous black column of smoke rose over the pit.

Goddess! The land was sinking into the liquid fire that was beneath it!

Not seconds later, a hideously sharp shudder in the ground under her feet told her that the same thing was happening right under her! She saw the earth start to rise before her some twenty spans ahead, felt the lightness in her stomach as she started to fall down under the earth with the land on which she was running, and she leaned forward and sprinted with all her might as the land got higher and higher, leaping hugely when she got close to that rising land. She soared over that edge with plenty of room to spare, and the instant her feet touched solid ground, she fled away from the growing pit behind her blind panic, knowing that a plume of flying lava was going to erupt out of that pit as soon as the earth fell into the lake of liquid fire that was consuming it. If any of it splashed on her, it would mean her instant death!

"Mama!" Jasana screamed in terror, burying her face in her mother's chest.

"I know, cub, I know!" she said in a strangled tone. "Where are you, you damned dragon?" she huffed in a terrified voice. "Goddess, if you're out there, I need your help!" she pleaded as she ran. "If someone doesn't come and get us, we're not going to make it!"

As if in answer to her prayer, a shadow appeared over them and then vanished. She looked up to see a dragon circling over them, one with deep blue scales, but was an order of magnitude smaller than Sapphire. This one couldn't be more than fifty spans long from nose to tail, a truly tiny dragon compared to the immense matriarch who was Tarrin's friend. Jesmind's relief at seeing that scaly beast defied rational explanation. It was as if it were a personal gift from Tarrin's Goddess, a magnificent chariot to whisk them away to safety.

"I'm here!" it called in a breathless voice. "Sorry, a couple of Demons slowed me down!"

It landed quickly and heavily fifty spans before them, hunkering down as they rushed towards it so they could climb on as soon as they reached it. "Quickly, the earth is shifting under me!" the dragon called in concern. "We don't have much time!"

"What's going on?" she demanded as she reached it, jumped up onto its back and in front of its wings, settling between two spines at the base of its neck. She stuck Jasana in front of her, putting her arms around her daughter protectively as the dragon turned quickly on the ground and unfurled its wings.

"The army's pulling out as quickly as it attacked, and the Goblinoids are running right behind them!" the dragon said. "The entire tundra is shaking, and fissures are opening up everywhere! This war is *over*, biped! Nobody's going to fight on a battlefield like *this*!"

"What's making it happen?" Jesmind asked as the dragon's wings flared, and they vaulted into the sky.

"That is!" he said, nudging nose towards the collapsing pyramid. "Can't you feel it, biped? Whoever's in that thing is tearing the world apart with magic!"

Jesmind looked down as the dragon turned its tail to the pyramid and beat its wings frantically. Huge masses of Goblinoids were doing just what the dragon said, running for their lives, but many of them were dying as the land tore itself apart, sending them plunging into those pools of molten rock and to certain and painful death. She looked ahead to see the army the gods had brought doing the exact same thing, fleeing wildly, trying to outdistance

the fissures that were opening in the earth and causing massive chunks of it to sink into a fiery demise. Whatever combat had taken place before this happened was completely forgotten, as human and Goblinoid fled side by side in common interest, as every living thing on the tundra below desperately tried to get away from the hellish chaos that had gripped the land.

Jesmind looked behind them, to the pyramid. Tarrin was in there, and he was fighting with Val. Their battle was so intense, so powerful, that it was tearing the earth apart. She could only look back in desperate fear and worry for her mate, trying to understand what was happening, why he was continuing to fight even though there was no chance he could win. Goddess, what was happening in there?

It was a battle between two evenly matched foes.

Tarrin sensed that early on as they continued to trade unimaginable assaults on one another, grappling in the air over the platform, but those physical actions were nothing but a metaphor to symbolize the titanic battle that was being waged between the two of them. Val was confined to his icon, but it in no way restricted his ability to battle Tarrin on every conceivable and inconceivable level of existence, fantasy, imagination, and even anti-existence. The two gods hurled such power between them that the mortals surrounding them would go mad trying to understand it, scrabbling into every possible realm for any foothold or advantage that would turn the tide of the battle in his favor. Though Tarrin was new to this kind of battle his divine status gave him all the understanding and awareness he needed, and that caused him to be able to fight Val on even terms.

And they were *even*. Their power, though separated by five thousand years, was equal. Totally equal. They were both creations of the Firestaff, both borne of its energies, and it had not changed its method of bestowing its gifts after five thousand years. They were mirror images of one another, with only time and experience separating them. But while Val had the advantage of experience, Tarrin had the advantage of sheer determination, possessing an absolute determination to win at any cost, no matter what. Val did not have that same maniacal zeal. He was fighting to save his own life, nothing more, and that fear of death caused him to be much more cautious.

As it had served him so many times in the past, so it served him again. Tarrin's wild nature and dangerous, reckless method of fighting allowed him to throw absolutely everything at the dark god, unafraid of consequence or even continued survival, seeking to overwhelm his adversary with sheer determination and his utter need to win at any cost.

And he could throw absolutely *everything* at Val. He could sense the presence of all the other gods, something that certainly seemed to distract Val, and knew that they were containing the pair of them, allowing them to fight and minimizing the damage they did to the universe. That was a good thing. Had it not been contained, muted, the raw power unleashed by them would have devastated everything within a hundred leagues, and as the battle raged on, the area of destruction would have grown wider and wider.

Knowing that their battle would not destroy the world only urged Tarrin on even more fervently, allowing him to commit himself utterly and completely to the fight, unleashing such furious assault on Val that he had been forced to literally consolidate his power and defend against his infuriated opponent. The pyramid shook and crumbled around them, shaken to its core by the power of the struggle taking place within it.

The battle taking place in the mortal realm was only a small part of what was going on, but it was a metaphor for the battle raging between the two gods. Every movement and act was merely a representation of the shifting of vast amounts of power along infinite realms of possibility, and every attack or defense was a representation of countless thrusts and assaults, parries and ripostes, taking place in those realms of possibility in a simultaneous action. It was a battle on every possible level, but a battle waged by two gods whose minds were still grounded in mortal concepts. That was why Tarrin had managed to unsettle Val with anger. Despite being a god and having such a vast mind, able to concentrate on thousands of individual things at once, he still possessed *emotion*, and that emotion could blind a thousand facets of the same mind as easily as they blinded just one. Emotion was the key to this battle, one facet of Tarrin's vastly expanded mind realized as he deflected an attack from Val from those countless aspects, but in the mortal realm was symbolized by a blast of utter darkness that erupted from the rod in Val's shadowy hand. Tarrin's sword slashed the darkness in half, sending it to either side of him, a mere representation of the true defensive counter that the former Were-cat had employed. The

deflected attack's power was largely lost in the ether of existence, but a fragment of it, the fragments grounded in the physical world, slammed into the side of the pyramid and nearly collapsed its entire south side, but through some miracle the wall managed to hold, a testament to the skill of the lost race of people who had built it. It caused the entire pyramid to shake violently, but somehow the grand old building managed to stay up.

Emotion was the key, and also the weakness. No matter that they were gods, it was emotion that ruled their actions now. Val fought desperately out of hatred, anger and fear. His hatred for Tarrin was a tangible thing, a cancer within him, and it was facing his most hated foe that brought out his anger. And there was fear as well, fear of losing, fear of destruction, even fear of what would happen when he beat Tarrin and had to face all the gods surrounding them, worried that he would be too weak to repel an attack from them *all*.

Tarrin's emotions were no less powerful, but were much differently focused. His hatred for Val was intense, but it did not consume him. His greatest emotion was fear, but it was fear for *others*, not for himself. He had used the Firestaff to become a god to save his mate and daughter, and also to once and for all put an end to Val and the danger he represented to his family and friends. That fear for the safety of others had instilled within him a powerful determination to win, to destroy Val no matter what it took, and no matter what the cost. He fought wildly, recklessly, unafraid of loss so long as his defeat so weakened his opponent that the gods beyond could strike him down, just as Val feared, before he could mount a defense against them. For Tarrin, Val's defeat was much more important to him than his own victory, and his opponent had a very hard time protecting himself from someone that was quite willing to lose so long as he softened up his foe enough for the next assailant to win.

Besides, he knew that his victory would be his own defeat. By taking up the Firestaff and becoming a god, he was now just as much a threat and danger to the gods as Val. If he struck Val down, they would attack *him* just as quickly as they would have attacked Val. He knew the instant he held the Firestaff to the sky that it was a one way trip, and that his deification would be brief. He had become a god for the sole reason to destroy Val. Once Val was destroyed, there would be no more need for him, and he would not endanger the world by trying to live on.

If only to protect those he so greatly loved that he was willing to resort to this kind of desperate gamble.

Tarrin shifted his awareness more into the physical world, studying the shifting, shadowy form of his opponent, allowing his expanded mind to consider as he prepared to repel an attack his opponent was about to initiate. Val's physical form suddenly rushed forward with the black rod leading, and Tarrin responded sufficiently, which caused his physical form to bring up his sword and parry the blow wide. The key was the physical world and emotion, he understood that now. By continuing to brawl across the entire spectrum of existence, he was doing nothing but wandering away from the key of it. Val was imprisoned within his icon. Destroy that icon, and he would destroy Val. That was why Val was attacking in such a vast and broad manner, to distract Tarrin from the simple truth of that one observation. Val's weakness, his greatest weakness, was his imprisonment. And emotion was the path that would lead him to the promised land.

Shifting himself almost entirely into the physical world, Tarrin freed his physical form of its mere status as a metaphor of battle and attacked Val's physical form in earnest. This shocked and surprised his foe, who was forced to return to the physical realm himself, hastily raising up his black rod of utter darkness to desperately parry the assault. Tarrin attacked again, and again, and again with his blazing sword, causing his adversary to back up quickly, moving to protect his vulnerable icon from attack.

What's the matter, Val? he taunted, speaking directly into his foe's mind. *Do I frighten you now? I know how to defeat you. You couldn't beat me when I was a mere mortal, and you know you have no chance against me now. So why don't you just give up? I'll make it swift and clean.*

I am invincible! Val shrieked feverishly in Tarrin's expanded mind, his hatred and anger boiling out of his words like froth from the mouth of a mad dog. *I am a god! I am eternal! You are nothing, Were-cat, do you hear? Nothing! You take from me my rightful place and my destiny, and now you have the nerve to consider yourself my better? I will show you how wrong you are!*

It's almost unfair, Tarrin continued to taunt. *After all, you're bound into your icon, limited in your power. I have no such restriction. I could withdraw my icon to somewhere safe and deal with you from a position of*

security, but I won't do that. I'll give you the chance to kill me, fair and square, hand to hand. Just you and me, though it will hardly be a fair fight. You are but a mere godling, Val. In a way, I pity you for your disability.

That got him. The term *godling* seemed to send Val into a fever pitch, and he abandoned dragging Tarrin into fighting across the entire spectrum of existence and resorted to good old fashioned brute force in the physical world. He advanced with his glowing eyes blazing with indignation and fury, as if Tarrin's insults had been more than he could stand, wailing at Tarrin's winged form with his rod of utter darkness. This was a form of combat much more suited to the martially trained Were-cat, and he smoothly and gladly fell into a defensive position, concentrating all his power in the physical world yet watchful for a sudden attack in the realms beyond that of mortal comprehension. Motes of charged magical chaos drifted away from the impact of Val's rod and Tarrin's sword, physical embodiments of raw magic, whose effects on reality were wild and unpredictable when they struck solid matter, as the two gods battled across the dusty air over the high dais below, a dais littered with massive boulder-sized building stones that had fallen from the roof above. Val proved he knew how to fight in a physical sense, but his technique was forced, and his edge was taken away by his rage. His movements were jerky and predictable, and he was so taken with his anger that he didn't realize that the god who opposed him was simply letting him attack to get a feel for his opponent, coming to an understanding of his preferences and his strengths and weaknesses when fighting with a weapon.

Tarrin continued to defend, searching Val's technique and the magic that made up his physical form for a chink in his armor, a weakness he could exploit to his full advantage. His chosen form was one that was not completely solid, shifting in its nature and actually rather cleverly adaptable, which also made it deceptive and hard to pin down. But the shadows and darkness only concealed what was really in there, and that was his icon. It was a *physical* object, not an amalgamation of shadows and darkness. Those were just shells, smoke and mirrors that Val had erected around his vulnerable icon to protect it from detection and attack. Somewhere in that mass of living darkness was a plain black stone statue, and that was what he needed to attack.

It could be anywhere in there, he realized as he deflected a furious series of savage blows, as the dark god's temper had truly run away with him. He'd have to be very exact, and he couldn't miss. If Val realized what he was doing, if he missed with the first try, Val would regain his composure and again spread the battle out into the infinite aspects of existence, where Val had a better chance to defeat his less experienced opponent and protect his vulnerable icon. Tarrin had gotten him mad, and he had to defeat him before he regained his senses and strove not to lose his temper again.

The icon was the key. But how to reach it within the shapeless nature of the defenses Val had erected around it, that was the question.

Tarrin considered the problem for long moments as he systematically backed up and out of the dark god's wild swings, trying to find a clue that would answer that simple question. He stopped backing up and suddenly turned on Val to attack, catching the angry god off balance, raining massive blows down at his shadowed head that the god just barely managed to deflect. That attack seemed to clear the fog in Val's mind, and Tarrin realized that he was starting to come out of his tizzy. He doubted he could incite him into another outburst again, so he knew he had to work fast. He again scanned Val's shadowy body for a clue as to where he was hiding the icon within it, but the dark god had done well in concealing his vulnerability from his opponent. He felt Val's mind again expand out into the countless realms of existence, preparing to return the battle to a raging melee conducted through all aspects of being, to return to the form of combat that gave him the most advantage.

The answer was deceptively simple, striking him suddenly, and it was an experience of his *mortal* life. It was so simple that he almost laughed. It was so simple that he had overlooked it!

Magical creatures can directly affect one another.

Icons and their physical forms would be no different. Just as the young mortal Tarrin, so long ago, could strike an insubstantial Wraith and do it harm, so now could the god Tarrin reach out with his physical form and grab hold of the vaporish darkness that made up Val's physical form.

That was the answer. And it presented him the opportunity to finish it once and for all, to bring a final end to the threat Val posed to his friends, his family, and to his *children*.

With deliberant intent and eyes lost in the moment, Tarrin let go of his sword. The blazing weapon dimmed and contracted when he let it go, until it was again nothing but a mortal weapon that clattered to the ground far below, the ringing of its impact sounding in his ears, like the chiming of the sweetest bell. That act took Val off guard for a critical instant, in that instant Tarrin struck. He surged forward with only a speed that a god could muster, and a speed that only a god could react to and counter. But Tarrin's release of his weapon had distracted the dark god for a fatal instant, and when Tarrin's flaming paw closed around the wrist of the shadowed hand holding the black rod, Val's eyes widened in shock and terror. He returned to the physical world and tried to wrest free of the god's fiery grip, but could not. He struggled and writhed as Tarrin's other paw reached out and grabbed him by the back of the head when he turned away, then dragged him into a deadly embrace. Val writhed and struggled wildly to break free, trying to gather himself up for a final assault on the former Were-cat, an attack of wild desperation, but it was too late. Tarrin's power focused inward, built to its maximum, even as his fiery wings folded over, covering over both himself and his insubstantial adversary, enclosing him within the fiery expanse of their inner curves.

Tarrin bowed his head as he folded in his wings over Val, completely unafraid of what he was about to do. Val, sensing his power, realizing what was about to happen, screamed and howled in terror, trying to break free, but his darkness was totally surrounded by Tarrin's light, and he could not escape. He was trapped, imprisoned once again by his most hated foe, and he could only scream in a voice that could not contain his outrage, his terror, even as he did attempt to strike at Tarrin with all the power he could bring to bear.

But it was too late.

Mother, Tarrin's voice called out, totally at peace. *Take care of them for me. I love you.*

And then, in a cataclysmic explosion of all of Tarrin's focused power, he destroyed Val. And in so doing, he destroyed himself.

The death of a god was a release of energies too vast to be contained by the material world. The destruction of *two* in a simultaneous event was more than the planet could have withstood, had the combined might of every god of Sennadar not been there to contain that release. The black pyramid, that man-made mountain rising up from the flat tundra, shuddered in the instant of that destruction, and then it was vaporized by a light brighter than a thousand suns, a light that erupted into a massive cataclysm of fire and energy that formed at the point of destruction, and then expanded away from it faster than any horse could ever run and any bird could ever fly. It manifested as a hellish sphere of fire that expanded in every direction, including *down*, utterly destroying everything it touched. It raced away like a shockwave, travelling impossibly fast, but not so fast that those mortals who glanced back did not see it racing towards them.

Jesmind, Jasana, and the dragon that carried them were three such mortals. Jesmind screamed in terror when she saw the flash, then looked behind to see a wall of fire raging towards them so fast it would overtake them in a matter of seconds.

"Mama!" Jasana wailed, turning and clutching at her mother desperately, so desperately that she nearly fell off the dragon. Jesmind held onto her tightly, sure that the dragon would never get away from *that*.

All of that effort to get away, and it was for nothing! *Nothing!*

She saw strange lights ahead of them. They were incandescent balls of light floating in the sky, and with some surprise, she realized somehow that they had to be the gods. So, they had finally shown up! Well it was a little too bloody late for them now!

Move, dragon! the voice of the Goddess touched both Jesmind and the dragon. *You must get past us before the fires reach you!*

That seemed to spur the dragon on. It beat its wings in a frenzied manner, frantically trying to outrun certain death as it raced up towards them from behind. Jesmind clutched at Jasana as the little girl wailed and cried uncontrollably, wanting to cry herself, but so much had happened that she was almost numb with shock. She could only look behind her and watch the broiling fireball roar towards them, watch with some distant

interest as it consumed Goblinoids on the ground behind them, Goblinoids that had been closest to the pyramid when the earthquakes began, and hadn't had the time to get away. She looked ahead and saw the blazing lights of the gods before them, and now she could make out bodies within those blinding lights, lights of every imaginable color, lights that encircled the fireball. The ones she could see before her had their hands raised, as if to repel the fireball that was rushing towards them.

She looked back once more, and saw that it was so close that she could almost feel its heat. And from that distance, in a strange kind of way, it was a beautiful sight to behold. Then the terror of certain death gripped her, tore her back into reality, and she screamed out her fear as she squeezed the little girl in her arms desperately, as if she could protect her from the fire with the power of sheer will and holding onto her as tightly as she could.

But certain death would not claim Jesmind that day. The dragon sizzled between two of the gods with the fireball hot on its tail, and then the gods set themselves in a unifying movement as the fireball reached them. It struck something solid before the gods, a something that suddenly bulged from the strain of containing all that unbridled power, but did not break, containing the full fury of the fire safely inside it. The shock of the impact transferred through the protective shield of godly might, sending a concussive shockwave away from them that knocked everyone down it struck, everyone but the largest of the dragons, who dug in their claws and relied on their raw size to let them withstand the blow. That shockwave struck the dragon and its riders, and only Jesmind's inhuman strength locking her legs around the dragon's scaly neck managed to let her keep from getting dislodged from her mount. The dragon shrieked in pain and fear as it was catapulted forwards by the impact, turning over in the air, and for a terrifying moment Jesmind looked up and saw the *ground*. But the dragon somehow managed to twist in the air, righting itself, though it had lost a great deal of altitude. It tried to pull up, and partially did so, but it still hit the ground fast enough to send Jesmind and Jasana flying over its head. Jesmind tucked in her body and relied on her innate sense of presence in the air, knowing exactly where the ground was at all times in relation to her position, and it let her hit feet first. She rolled to absorb the forward momentum, keeping Jasana safely tucked away and out of harm, then skidded to a stop. She dropped to her knees immediately, hugging her

sobbing child to her with trembling arms, unable to believe that they had actually managed to get away from that alive.

Jasana couldn't stop crying, clutching onto her mother with her little claws digging into Jesmind's sides and her face buried in Jesmind's breast. She tried to comfort her terrified child as best she could, but the terror of that ordeal was so strong in her that *she* wanted to be comforted.

Jesmind looked up woodenly, to where the gods had been floating. One by one, they disappeared, winked out of sight, as if stopping the fireball had been all that was required of them. That angered Jesmind quite a bit, but she bit back that anger when she looked around and realized that the dragon had crashed among the armies that had been summoned to battle Val and his Goblinoids and Demons. They extended on for a great distance, and she realized that their army must have gotten safely away from the explosion.

The explosion! That had happened at the pyramid, and that's where Tarrin had been! Her mate couldn't be hurt by fire, so she was pretty sure that he was still alive, but, Goddess, what *power*! Did that mean that Tarrin *won*? Had he truly done the impossible and somehow managed to defeat a *god*?

A bright light over her head made her look up, and she saw that not all the gods had departed. There were ten left, and she realized dully that they were the Elder Gods. Those ten deities looked down at them, but they were too far away for Jesmind to see their expressions. But she did hear the voice of the Goddess touch her mind.

It seems that your services are no longer required, she said in a heavy, exhausted manner. Could gods really get tired? It certainly sounded like it. Don't worry, we're about to send you all back to where you came from. When you arrive, we'll make sure that people are told what happened, so you can know. You deserve that much for what you have done here today. Go with our blessing, and know that we are both pleased and grateful for what you have done here today.

Jesmind saw the light surrounding them flare suddenly--

--and then she was kneeling on the cool grass of the Tower grounds, not far from the Knights' training field, along with all of Tarrin's sisters and

friends, all the Knights and *katzh-dashi*, and quite a few Wikuni Marines and Arakite Legionaires.

Now she was confused. She looked around, and saw that everyone seemed as stunned as she was. They stood where they were for long moments, utterly silent, but Keritania and Jenna had haunted looks in their eyes. It had all happened so fast, and she didn't understand even a portion of what was going on. What had that fire been? Had Tarrin won? If so, then where was he? He hadn't appeared with the others.

She stood up on wobbly feet, totally drained and exhausted. Not a moment ago, she was fleeing for her very life, now she was back at the Tower, safe and sound, and everything seemed to be over. But what had happened? And where was Tarrin? She looked around, but she neither saw him or caught his scent anywhere. She took a feeble step forward, but nearly toppled over. Jasana continued to cling to her desperately, and her crying was the only sound that was coming from any of the shocked, stunned survivors of that most bizarre of experiences.

A touch came on her shoulder. She turned and saw her mother, Triana, who looked down at her daughter with a grim, resolute look on her face. "Mother," she said in confusion and exhaustion. "I have Jasana. See?" She tried to hold up her daughter, but Jasana's claws embedded in her sides made pulling her little girl away a potentially painful experience. "Where is Tarrin? He needs to see her. I have to show him."

Her innocent question sent a severe jag of intense pain through Triana's stony mask of expression, and Jasana wailed loudly. "Papa's dead!" she screamed hysterically, then erupted into an even more intense outburst of tears.

Jesmind stared up at her mother in utter disbelief, but the empty pain within her mother's eyes told her that it had to be true. "No," she said in a bare whisper as the horrible truth crashed down on her. "No, it can't be," she said more forcefully, clutching her daughter tightly to her breast. But it was true, and that truth was more than she could bear. She would have dropped to her knees had Triana's strong paws not caught her, and she closed her eyes in anguish as tears rolled down her cheeks. She gave out a cry of such pain, such loss that it broke the heart of every person who heard it, a cry of one who had just lost everything that had meaning to her.

"NNNNNNNNOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Chapter 16

It was a very grim time.

Tarrin's death had terribly affected the entire Tower, from the Keeper down to the lowliest maid or servant. Though not everyone knew him, and fewer liked him, he had been such an integral part of the Tower, such a part of its workings and its power structure, that his loss had affected everyone within it. And as things affected the Tower, so they also affected Suld. The new king of Sulasia, Arren Strongheart, had gone into deepest mourning when he heard the news, and had ordered a day of mourning for the city and the kingdom. Everyone in the Tower was very quiet and somber, all the *katzh-dashi* wearing mourning black, and very little real business was being done.

It had been three days since the strange and terrible end of the war. They had won. Not many Goblinoids survived the horrific earthquakes, and Val had been utterly destroyed, which had forever removed the threat he had posed, but the cost it had exacted had been more than they had all been willing to pay. All of them except Tarrin, it seemed. All of his friends gathered together and tried to make sense of what happened, but nobody had been close to him when it happened except Jesmind and Jasana, and they were not very helpful. Jesmind had entered a deep black reverie that had struck her not long after she found out what happened. She would not speak unless spoken to, and her responses were often disjointed and made little sense. Jasana was virtually inconsolable, and even speaking her father's name was enough to send her into a crying storm so severe that only Jesmind or Triana could calm her down. But Jesmind was so lost in her grief that the burden of caring for the fragile child fell to her grandmother, and she accepted the burden with haunted eyes. Tarrin had meant a great deal to the Were-cat matriarch, and his loss had struck her just as keenly as it had her family, but she seemed capable of holding herself together. Mist had taken the news better than everyone expected. The destruction she wrought was confined to only two floors, and luckily they managed to clear

the warzone of all innocents before Mist got outside of their area of control. They did not try to stop her, they only confined her to areas of the Tower where they could afford to lose what was there, and Jenna wanly joked with Mist after she played out her rage that those were areas that needed remodelling anyway. Kimmie had fainted when they told her, and the shock of it had sent her into labor. She had not been conscious for the birth of her own child, or much to the surprise of everyone, her *children*. She had twins, a pair of blue-eyed baby girls who looked exactly alike, with Kimmie's blue eyes and their father's black fur. They had dark hair like their mother, but everyone who looked at them said they could see Tarrin in those tiny infants' faces. In honor of their father, Kimmie named her babies Tara and Rina.

The joy of her children did not make up for the loss of their father. It was a bittersweet thing for Kimmie, Mist, and Triana, as her bond-mother and the Were-cat matriarch helped the grieving mother to care for her wondrous burden.

The Keeper had her own troubles with the loss of her brother, so much so that the running of the Tower and the paperwork it required began to fall behind. Duncan and Ianelle did their best to help in that regard, and they kept things running while the young girl dealt with her grief.

The death of Tarrin had had a powerful effect in Suld, but the death of a *sui'kun* could have a disastrous effect on the Weave. But as the Goddess had told them so long ago, the gods had permitted extra *sui'kun* to be born to protect the world against another Breaking. The *eighth sui'kun* had silently been born some month before Tarrin's death, his birth unnoticed until after Tarrin died, and his loss did not damage the Weave. The burden he had represented had passed on to the infant child, and so the Weave had been protected.

Even the gods seemed to mourn. For all three days since the war and Tarrin's death, the skies had been covered by thick clouds, and those clouds reached out to cover the entire world. It cast the world into dark, gloomy shadow, and everything seemed unnaturally quiet and subdued. The seas did not lap against the land in breaking waves. The wind did not blow. The animals were not themselves. Everything seemed nearly surreal in those gloomy days, as if the gods intended to show their grief upon the land, and

their mourning could not help but affect the mortals who depended upon them. Jenna had tried repeatedly to talk to the Goddess, but she would not answer, and even the sense of her that seemed a permanent fixture within the Heart was gone.

Jenna had tried to find out what happened. She tried to coax the story out of Jesmind, but her responses were chaotic and made very little sense. Nobody could speak of such a thing to Jasana, who was so fragile and highly upset; nobody would even want to try. Any hint or mention of her father sent her into a storm of weeping. Jenna was grieving just as much as they, but the need to understand how he had died consumed her, the need to know what had happened, the need to understand how he had somehow managed to destroy a *god*, but there was nobody to give her any answers. The only reason she knew that he was dead was because Triana *said* so, and she had no doubt that Triana knew. She wouldn't say such a thing unless it was true.

Jenna handled her grief by trying to piece together the story. His other sisters and friends dealt with it in other ways. Allia spent nearly every waking hour in the Goddess' courtyard, and nobody knew what she was doing in there, but they all understood that she was observing Selani customs and rites that dealt with the loss of a brother. Keritania had little time to mourn with the demands of governing Wikuna, but she would return to the Tower every evening and spend quiet time with Allia, the two drawing strength from one another. Dolanna spent those days with Jenna, sharing her need to discover what had happened. Dar had sought comfort from friends, and then, to everyone's surprise, he found solace in the arms of Tiella, who had long harbored a crush on the Arkisian Sorcerer. Camara Tal had put off her departure for Amazar to counsel their tight group, showing the tenderness and compassion that made her a Priestess, a surprising side of her that the others rarely experienced. Sarraya spent all her time with Kimmie, hovering around her twin daughters trying to help her, but more often than not just getting in the way. Azakar remained at Dolanna's side, not wanting to leave her, as if he feared the moment he left she would be attacked. Miranda stayed by Keritania's side as well, offering gentle comfort and a shoulder for her to cry on when the emotion of it overwhelmed her, and whenever anyone saw her when she wasn't consoling her friend, her hands were feverishly busy with embroidery pulled from the shoulder satchel that was never very far away from her.

Even Phandebrass had been affected by Tarrin's death, putting aside his studies and beginning to write down all his memories and observations about the enigmatic Were-cat, chronicling his tale, a tale of a reluctant hero who more often than not was worse than the evil he battled, but in the end had somehow carried the day. Phandebrass became quite enthusiastic about the idea of writing it all down, but he too did not know how it ended, and as was his nature, when confronted with a mystery, the addled Wizard found a new focus in his life to solve it. So he joined Jenna and Dolanna in the quest for discovering the truth.

But it was a mystery without answers. The only ones who were there were Jesmind and Jasana, and they had already exhausted any attempt to get any information from them. Not even Phandebrass would press the grieving pair, understanding the terrible loss they had experienced, and not wanting to aggravate their pain. For them, the loss was most keen. Tarrin had died retrieving his daughter from Val, and Jesmind and Jasana would never be able to forget that he had died for them, and that would invariably cause them to feel guilt for his loss.

Three days, though it had seemed like an eternity. Three days of steady cold rain, as the skies wept along with them, three days when Jesmind did not eat, did not sleep, only sat in that chair facing the fireplace, her unblinking eyes lost in the licking flames. Those three days had already shown on her, as her face seemed slightly gaunt and dark circles had appeared under her striking eyes. Jasana sat on her mother's lap, thumb claw in her mouth, with a hollow expression on her face, clinging to her mother out of reflex more than anything else. Jesmind did not hold her daughter, did not even register her presence, her empty eyes lost in the dancing of the fire before her. Keritania and Allia were with her, as were Dolanna and Dar, and wherever Keritania and Dolanna went, Miranda, Binter, Sisska, and Azakar were never more than a few paces away. They were helping Triana keep an eye on the non-responsive Were-cat. Triana had warned them that this kind of response was very unpredictable, and at any moment she could snap out of it and fly into a rage. So they had to keep a very close watch on her, to get Jasana away from her if such a thing happened. Keritania was reading from a book, though her heart was not in it. Allia was sitting on the floor, her eyes closed, trying to find peace within herself through meditation and introspection, though it had been an elusive

thing. Binter and Sisska stood silent watch, ready to face the Were-cat female and hold her down if necessary to give their charges time to escape, and Azakar stood behind Dolanna's chair as she watched Jesmind carefully, though her own eyes also had dark circles beneath them.

The door opened, and they all looked to see Dar enter. Tiella was with him, holding his hand. She had been friends with Tarrin, and the three days since his death had caused her to become interested in his life and those he had left behind, wanting to help in any way she could. None of them knew her, and that made her very quiet and a little intimidated when in their company. Dar sometimes forgot the very odd mix their tight circle really was, and some of them were not entirely friendly. Allia could be especially intimidating, though Keritanima, Camara Tal, and the Vendari were no less so. Dar brought her in, keeping a tight hold on her hand. "Any change?" he asked.

Keritanima shook her head. "Believe me, if Triana's right, you'll *know* it when there is one," she told him.

"How is she?"

"There's no way to tell," Miranda answered. "She's starting to get thin. I hope she comes out of it soon."

Jasana climbed down from Jesmind's lap and silently shuffled over to Allia. The Selani opened her eyes, then opened her arms to the Were-cat child. Jasana climbed into her arms and laid her head against her shoulder, and Allia wrapped her arms around the little Were-cat female protectively. Dar leaned over and looked at her, giving her a gentle smile. "Hey, cub, how are you feeling?" he asked in a sweet, gentle manner.

"I'm okay," she answered in a dull, weary voice. "I just miss Papa, that's all."

Keritanima and Allia looked at Dar in surprise. That was the first time Jasana had offered any kind of voluntary information without breaking into a storm of weeping.

Dar sat down on the couch behind Allia and put his hand on Jasana's head, ruffling her strawberry blond hair, and Jasana actually gave him a weak, sad little smile. "Don't worry, cub. Your mom's going to be alright soon."

She looked about ready to say something but her ears picked up, and she looked towards the door. "The shining lady is back," she said with detached interest.

Dar and Dolanna looked towards the door with Keritanima. "The Goddess?" Keritanima said. "She's been missing since--" she cut off quickly, not wanting to upset Jasana. "Where is she, cub?"

"With Aunt Jenna," she answered.

"Well, it's about time," Keritanima growled. "Maybe now she can tell us just what in the bloody hells happened."

"I am sure that is exactly what Jenna is asking at this very moment," Dolanna said calmly.

The door opened, surprising almost everyone, and Kimmie and Mist came in. Each one of them was holding one of Kimmie's infant daughters, and Eron tagged along behind his mother, batting lightly at the tiny little black-furred tail dangling from under his mother's arm. "Kimmie," Keritanima greeted. "How are you?"

"Tired," she said in a weary voice, and it showed on her face. Her usually light and gentle expression was drawn, and she too had dark circles under her eyes. "These too don't seem to want to sleep at the same time."

"One's bad enough, but you got two," Keritanima teased.

"It's a burden I'm happy to accept," she replied with a sad smile, sitting down beside Dar. Mist handed her her other daughter, and Eron tried to climb into Allia's lap with his half-sister. Allia gave him some room, but Eron didn't want to sit still, and Jasana made no reaction to his attempts to get her attention. He quickly gave up on the idea of getting Jasana to play with him, and instead ran across the room and jumped up on the back of Jesmind's chair.

"Eron! Down!" Mist snapped at him, and he immediately gave up.

"Sowwy," he said, putting his paws behind his back.

"This is not play time!" she admonished him. "Now come over here and sit down!"

"Yes Mama," he answered sullenly, shuffling over to her. She picked him up and put him in her lap, then put her arms around him protectively.

"Can I hold one of them, Kimmie?" Dar asked, looking at her infants.

"Certainly, Dar," she smiled. He got up and crossed over to her, picking up one of her babies.

"They look exactly alike," Dar chuckled as he looked down at the tiny bundle of pink skin and black fur in his arms. Tiella came over and looked down at the baby in wonder. "I can't tell them apart."

"That's Rina," Kimmie told him. "And this is Tara. They have slightly different scents, even if they do look the same."

"Well, I don't have that advantage," he said with a gentle smile, looking down at the baby. "Well hello there, little one," he cooed. "I'm your uncle Dar. Boy, do we have plans to spoil you."

Rina opened her eyes, and those dazzling blue eyes looked up at Dar curiously. She yawned, her tiny little paws clenching, and then she closed them and promptly went back to sleep.

"I think you'd better give her back. They tend to sneeze when they're around humans. I don't think you want to have that happen in your face, Dar."

"Ah, no, I think not," he said mildly, then he handed the infant back to Kimmie.

"Human smell is something they'll have to get used to," Mist said calmly.

"I hope we don't stink to you, Mistress Mist," Tiella said with just a little anxiety. She had accepted Tarrin as a Were-cat, but she was still a little intimidated by Mist and the others.

"Not necessarily stink, but you do take some getting used to," she answered.

Rina sneezed, and they all looked at her for a minute. Then Dar laughed. "Perfect timing, Kimmie," he grinned.

Jasana's ears picked up again, and she took her cheek off of Allia's shoulder. "The shining lady is coming towards us," she said.

Keritanima and Dolanna looked towards the door, Keritanima's fox ears swivelling a little. "She is right," Dolanna said.

"Perhaps she comes to see Kimmie's children," Allia offered. "She has not seen them yet."

"Maybe," Keritanima said. "She's coming right this way. I think she's coming *here*."

"Maybe they have news," Mist said. "Jenna's been going crazy trying to find out what happened."

"I dare say that Mother would know the answers to all her questions," Dolanna said.

They watched the door with some curiosity for a moment, until it opened and their questions were answered. The Goddess entered in the same physical form she always appeared in when she came among them, that of an extraordinarily beautiful woman with hair of all seven colors of the rainbow, glowing white eyes, and a gown that looked to be made of shimmering, solid starlight. Jenna and Camara Tal were right behind her, and both of them looked wildly excited.

"There you are!" the Goddess said impatiently. "I've been looking for you, Kimmie!"

"Me, my Lady?" Kimmie asked in surprise, sitting up with a baby cradled in each arm.

"Of course you, you silly girl!" she said. "Where is he?"

"Where is he what?"

"Tarrin, you dink!" she replied quickly. "It took me *three days* to talk my parents into this, and I have to get it done before they change their minds!"

"T-Tarrin?" she asked in confusion.

"Oh, that's right. I haven't told you yet, have I?" she asked, then she laughed. "Silly me. Forgive me, Kimmie."

"What do you mean, my Lady?" she asked in confusion.

"Call me Mother, child," she said absently. "When he left, Tarrin left you some things, didn't he?"

"Y-Yes," she answered. "A little statue and his braid," she said, her eyes shining over at the bitter memory of it.

"My clever little kitten!" the Goddess laughed. "Well, Kimmie, it turns out that he gave you something that just might let us get him back."

Before Kimmie could say anything, Jesmind was suddenly out of her chair. She got across the room so fast that nobody even saw her, and she was kneeling before the Goddess, clutching the starlight fabric of her simple gown between trembling fingers, looking up at her with tears streaming down her face. "But he's *dead*!" she wailed. "How can you torture me like this? I *believed* in you, and you let him die!"

"My kitten made his own choices, Jesmind," she said sternly, then she smiled. "But he's a clever one, my kitten is. Oh, he's a *very* clever one. He had all this planned from the beginning, did you know that? He left this Tower knowing that he was going to die. So he took steps."

"Wh-What happened out there, Mother?" Keritanima asked. "What did he do?"

"Tarrin used the Firestaff," she said simply to her. "You know how he gets when someone hurts his family, and he realized that it was the *only* way he was going to be able to keep it out of Val's hands. It only works *once*, you know. Tarrin knew that, so he made sure to be the one that used it. He used the Firestaff on himself, then he destroyed both himself and Val."

Keritanima's eyes widened, and Dolanna gasped. "That's what that explosion was," the Goddess continued mildly. "He destroyed himself, and he did it in a way that it took Val with him. Both of them are dead. And if my clever kitten hadn't taken precautions, they would have both been absolutely *gone*."

"What do you mean?" Dolanna asked.

"Part of becoming a god of the Firestaff is that it binds your soul to the power," she told her. "That's the price you pay for it. If you die, your soul

dies with your body, and you are totally destroyed. Val no longer exists, daughter. He is totally and forever destroyed, and there is nothing that can bring him back, not even the power of the gods."

"B-But Tarrin--"

The Goddess laughed, cutting her off. "Yes, my overly clever kitten took steps," she said with a wicked little smile. "Do you remember Jegojah?"

"Of course we do," Keritanima said in confusion.

"What was Jegojah?"

"He was a Doomwalker," Dolanna answered.

"What made him so dangerous?"

"He could not be destroyed," she answered. "He could simply come back."

"How did Tarrin beat him?" she asked with a narrow-eyed, highly amused smile.

"He--" Dolanna gasped, staring at the Goddess in shock. "He destroyed Jegojah's *Soultrap*!"

That's right," she smirked. "My kitten is alot smarter than people think he is, Dolanna."

"What do you mean?" Jesmind asked in a strangled voice, looking up at her.

"You're going to tear my dress, Jesmind!" the Goddess rebuked her mildly. "Stand up."

She did so quickly, wringing her paws together as Jasana clamored for her mother to pick her up. She did so, stroking her daughter's hair nervously as she awaited an explanation. Keritanima had already figured it out, laughing in delight, and Dolanna had a broad smile on her face.

"Did Tarrin ever tell you about Jegojah, child?" the Goddess asked Jesmind, who only mutely nodded. "Well, he beat him by freeing his soul from a device called a Soultrap. It's a magical creation that imprisons a soul. Tarrin *knew* that he was going to die, Jesmind, so he took precautions. I

don't think he knew if it was going to work, but he tried. He had a little statue that he was very fond of--"

"The little cat!" Jesmind interrupted, remembering his fondness for it.

"That's right. He wove a spell into it that was a very shaky copy of the magic of Jegojah's Soultrap, and he set it so it would last for exactly three months. That was a clever move on his part. If he'd made it permanent, and it worked, his soul would have been trapped inside it for all eternity. He set it so it would snare his soul in the instant he died and trap it inside the statue."

"Did it work?" Jesmind asked in a strangled tone, wanting to reach out for the Goddess again.

"Oh, yes, it worked, Jesmind," the Goddess said with a smile. "When Tarrin destroyed himself, the Soultrap activated, and it captured his soul before the power of the destruction of the rest of him could destroy his soul. It's a little complicated to explain, but let's just say that part of the reason Val's soul was destroyed was because it had nowhere to go after the body was destroyed. Tarrin's soul *did* have somewhere to go, and that's what saved him from the same fate as Val. Tarrin's soul is inside that little cat. And he left Kimmie his braid, a piece of himself, and we can use that to recreate the body that was destroyed when he died. He'll have no memory of anything that happened after he cut off his braid, but it *will* be Tarrin, my daughter," she told her gently and warmly. "But don't worry. His memory still exists in the Weave, and I can give everything back to him right up to where he used the Firestaff on himself. Those memories he *does not* need," she said emphatically.

"He, he planned this from the start?" Jesmind asked in disbelief.

"And they say that my kitten couldn't make a plan to save his life. He proved them all wrong!" the Goddess laughed in delight. "He made a plan that did just that!"

Jesmind looked at her with tears in her eyes. "Y-Y-You mean--"

"I mean just that, my child," she said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder. "As soon as Kimmie gives me the Soultrap and the braid, I can start work on the magic to restore him. In just a few hours, Tarrin is going

to be back. And he's going to get every reward I ever promised him and more. I have *never* been so proud of any of my children as I am of him."

Jesmind began crying uncontrollably right along with Jesmind, and both Kimmie and Mist were weeping up a storm, Mist trying to hug her bond-child around her son and Kimmie's infant daughters. Tiella hugged Dar with excited delight, and Keritanima and Allia were sharing a crushing hug of joy with Jenna. Dolanna had her hands to her face, with a teary-eyed smile on her face, and Miranda was jumping up and down in joy, holding onto Azakar's hands as the Knight grinned foolishly at her. Mist suddenly pushed her son off her lap and reached for the babies. "Kimmie, go!" she said quickly. "Show the Goddess where you have those things!"

"Right now!" Kimmie laughed in happy excitement. "I'll show you where I have them, my Lady!"

"Call me Mother, child," she corrected absently.

Kimmie led an excited procession that got every black-garbed *katzhdashi* and servant whispering in confusion and excitement as they passed. Kimmie had to restrain herself to keep from running, and all of Tarrin's friends and family anxiously followed behind the stately Goddess as she followed the Were-cat female. She took them to her room, and she ran across the room and knelt in front of the chest where she kept her spellbooks and other mystical supplies. "I wrapped them in silk and put them in here," she announced excitedly, fumbling with the lock. She got it open and reached under a bag of spell components. "I don't know why I did," she announced. "Something just told me to keep them hidden, so I did."

"Probably a spell that Tarrin put on the Soultrap, to keep a Sorcerer from noticing it," the Goddess mused.

She pulled out a bundle wrapped in white silk, and carefully unwrapped it. The braid came out first, which she handed to the Goddess, and then she stood and unwrapped the cat. The black metal statue was just as it had been before, but now its two emerald eyes were glowing with a steady greenish radiance. The Goddess smiled broadly when she saw that statue, reaching out for it with steady hands as Kimmie's trembling paws offered it up to her.

"It's working, alright," the Goddess said, cradling the statuette gently. "The eyes are glowing because Tarrin's soul is inside it. A visible sign to Kimmie that something about the statue is unusual. There are instructions in the weaving of his spell, too. Clever, my kitten," she said in appreciation. "He even left behind clues, in case I couldn't tell you what to do."

She cradled the statue to her breast lovingly, then turned and swept towards the door. "I want all of you to go find something to do and don't bother me," she announced. "I have to do this in the Chamber of the Heart. I don't want any distractions. This will *not* be easy, not even for me, and I'm sure you'd find the process to be quite gruesome if I allowed you to watch."

"Let me post guards, Mother," Jenna called, rushing after her. "I'll make sure nobody bothers you."

"Then come with me, daughter. The rest of you, just go find a book or something and read it. It's going to take me a few hours to do this."

The Goddess and Jenna scurried out, leaving all of them standing in Kimmie's room. Then Dar laughed. "She tells us she can revive Tarrin, and *now* she tells us to wait?" he asked. "That was cruel!"

"I'll take the punishment," Kimmie said emphatically. "It'll be the longest few hours of my life, but it'll be worth waiting a million years if it means she can bring Tarrin back!"

Jesmind hugged her daughter tightly, then she began to cry once more, a wracking sob that released all the pent-up emotions inside her. Kimmie hugged her gently, and the taller Were-cat female buried her face in Kimmie's shoulder. Kimmie looked at them all with gentle eyes, stroking Jesmind's hair. "Why don't you go get Jesmind something to eat?" she offered in a compassionate voice. "She'll need some food when she's ready to eat."

"Bring her to her apartment when you're ready," Camara Tal told her with a warm smile. "I'll have everything you need there. We'll make sure she spends these hours in complete comfort and security."

For some reason, he was getting very tired of waking up like this.

But it had been strangely distant this time. There was no climbing out of a black pit of nothingness as it had usually been. This time, it had been like coming down from a great height, as if he'd been floating in a warm, welcoming sea of gentle water or heavy air, a featureless place. It was like he'd been able to defy gravity, like he was sinking back into a reality from which he had found a temporary escape. He felt strangely heavy, but not necessarily tired. He felt oddly disjointed, but he was sure that he hadn't been injured. He felt no pain, no discomfort, only a strange tingling all over, as if his entire body had fallen asleep. He felt decidedly odd, but they were familiar sensations that just seemed slightly out of place, and were even now scurrying to where they should be, which helped lift the fog that was fuzzing his mind.

There was...no memory. He couldn't quite remember where he was or how he'd gotten there. As he felt the tingling begin to subside, he tried to recall where he was and what had happened. There was...a fight. He remembered that. A dark form was there, and it struck at him with a power that seemed to defy rational explanation, but he had somehow managed to stand against it. Then there was an image of the four moons...and then nothing. Nothing until just now.

He became aware of his senses. He was in a large room that had a strange feeling in it. It was perfectly warm, but there were very few scents in the room. He could smell stone, familiar stone, the stone of the Tower. He could smell down and soft linen, and with a mental start, he realized that he could smell the distinct scent that belonged to the icon of the Goddess. He couldn't smell anything else, but he could feel linen against his bare skin, a very slight weight atop him, probably from a sheet. He was laying on a soft mattress of some kind, with a silk pillow filled with down under his head. He could feel the Weave around him, and he realized with some surprise that he was laying directly within the greatest of all the Conduits, the one that ran through the very center of the Tower. That was the fuzzy feeling, the feel of all that power flowing around him, through him, nibbling at his awareness as it passed, feeling both invigoratingly unusual and wonderfully familiar at the same time.

He realized through a mind that only just seemed to be coming back into focus that he was within the Chamber of the Heart, half a world away from where he was *supposed* to be.

Dimly, more and more of the memory of that came back to him. He had travelled to Gora Umadar to recover his daughter. He remembered that, remembered the crossing of Ungardt, the journey through the cave where he had made the magic belts, then across the mountains running on the top of the snow. He remembered the quick and nervous crossing of the tundra, and then they were there. He went through it in his mind, remembering the journey to the pyramid, the six-armed Demoness--her name was Shaz'baket--and facing Val. He remembered how calm he'd been, how strangely calm. He was facing a *god*, and he was calm.

He was calm because he had a plan.

The plan. Of course. Now he could think about it freely, since he obviously wasn't there anymore. He had to get Val mad, distract him, then somehow survive that moment when the Goddess' had to withdraw from him to bring the army. Then he had to hold off Val long enough to--

--of course. That must have happened. He had no memory of it, but one moment he had the Firestaff in his paws, and the next, here he was, laying in yet another bed waking up from an unconscious state. That could only mean that he *did* do it, and if he was still here, then--

"Yes, kitten," the choral voice of the Goddess announced, in quite an amused tone. "The Soultrap worked."

He opened his eyes, and saw her looking down at him with an expression of great love and fierce pride. She was sitting on the bed beside him, her gentle hands stroking the hair back from his face. "You used the Firestaff and became a god, my son," she said gently. "And then you destroyed both Val and yourself. The Soultrap worked, and it claimed your soul before it was destroyed."

"But you said that my soul would die with me," he whispered in a voice that seemed strangely raspy, and was still just a little weak. "I remember that."

"And still you went through with it, despite knowing that," she said with a loving smile. "It shows how very brave you are, my sweet kitten. Even facing total destruction, you were willing to do what you thought you had to do. I'm very proud of you."

"I, I didn't do it for you, Mother," he admitted. "Are Jesmind and Jasana alright?"

"They will be when they see you," she told him. "It's been three days, kitten. Jesmind took your death very hard, and Jasana's been absolutely inconsolable. She blames herself for everything that happened, and she thought that it was her fault you died."

"It wasn't her fault."

"She won't believe that until you say it to her," she told him. "How do you feel?"

"Strange," he admitted.

"That's to be expected," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "This isn't you."

"Excuse me?"

She laughed. "Well, it is, but it isn't," she elaborated. "Remember how it feels to lose a limb and grow a new one? How it tingles for a bit?"

He nodded.

"Isn't that how your whole body feels right now?"

He nodded again, then he started and gaped at her.

She grinned. "There wasn't enough left of either you or Val to thread through a needle, kitten. I had to work with what I had, and the only thing that was left of you was the hair you gave Kimmie. That hair grew the rest of your body. With a little help," she winked.

"You mean I'm in a different body?"

"No, it's *you*, kitten," she told him. "It may not be the same body you had before you died, but it was made from the body you *did* have. That makes it *your* body."

"I have no idea what that means," he said seriously.

She laughed in delight, patting his cheek. "Just trust me, kitten," she told him. "In just a few minutes, the tingling will be gone, and you'll be just as you were when you cut off your braid. And everything works. Fixing you

didn't damage your magical powers. They're the same as they were when you cut off the braid. In fact, they're probably even stronger now."

"I don't feel any different."

"It has nothing to do with your body, kitten, it has to do with your mind. You showed us all why you're the *Mi'Shara*, my kitten. I told you long ago that they never truly understood what it means. Do you know what it means, Tarrin? What it truly means?"

"No."

"The loosest version is the said as the Man Who Once Was. Most thought it meant that it was the man who was once a man, a creature not human but who had once been. The translation in its true state is *The man who was once a man, but becomes more than a man.*"

"That's too many words."

"Yes, it has to do with the delicate subtleties of the Urzani language," she told him. "That term is from ancient Urzani, a short expression with a greater meaning. Did you know that? That it's ancient Urzani?"

He shook his head.

"I'll have Spyder teach it to you," she said absently. "It's a very subtle thing, kitten, but its meaning is quite different from how it sounds. It's a peculiarity of the language, and deals a great deal in metaphor. Ancient Urzani always was a poetic language," she said distantly. "What it *means* is *the man who reaches past the boundaries of man*. The Urzani felt that whenever one crossed a significant boundary in his life, like achieving a major goal, or learning a great skill, he ceased being what he was and became something different than what he was before. That's true, when you think about it, but the Urzani had a surprisingly firm grip on things like that. So, you had to understand the subtle intricacies of the ancient Urzani mind to truly understand that term."

She reached out and lightly tapped in on the nose, much like he did with Jasana. "It means that of all the mortals in this world, you have the rarest of all gifts, kitten. You can reach beyond the restrictions of mortal kind and touch on powers never meant for ones such as you."

"I don't understand."

"It's not that hard to understand, kitten. There are some mortals, just a handful that have ever lived in the entire history of this world, that have had the ability to transcend mortal restrictions. You have within you the potential to do almost anything, to achieve magical feats that no other mortal could ever hope to duplicate. Spyder is one of them. You are another."

"I, I think I see," he said. "That's why I can use all four orders of magic, and every time I've needed to be able to do something, I just seem to be able to do it."

"Not quite," she told him. "Your ability to use the orders of magic is because you're a Were-cat, not because you are a *Mi'Shara*. When the need is greatest, kitten, you have always been able to reach deep inside yourself and touch on magical powers that no other mortal can bring to bear. That is how you survived against Val, kitten. He threw his power at you, but you found within yourself the power to withstand his attack."

"But I wouldn't have lasted long."

"No, you wouldn't have," she agreed. "You *are* a mortal, kitten, where Val was a god. Even though the power you brought to bear was more than any mortal could ever bring, it was still restricted by the endurance of your frail mortal body. But it lasted you long enough, and for a moment, you proved to be the match of a god. Val underestimated you, kitten. He couldn't look past the base fact that you are a *mortal*, and that turned out to be his fatal mistake. What he overlooked was that you are the *Mi'Shara*. He was beaten by his own arrogance. Then again, I think he had a little help in that," she winked.

"I learned that lesson the hard way," he said bluntly. "I thought for once, it would be nice if that cannonball was dropped on someone else's foot."

The Goddess laughed, patting his cheek fondly. "And he definitely underestimated that mind of yours, my kitten. You saw what nobody else could see. You saw that though we are gods, we are still creatures of emotion. And not even our godly might can change that. You played your hand well, my son, and I am so proud of you I want to shout it from every rooftop in the world. You went face to face with a god, and you *won*."

"I, I thought of that because of all the times I've talked to you," he told her, a bit sheepishly. "I saw that even though you are a god, you did seem to act very human-like, and you did have emotions. I remember each and every time I made you mad, and when I made you happy, and even a few times when I scared you. I realized that Val had to have those same emotions, and that was the only way I could get at him."

"I act in a human manner so you can understand me, kitten," she told him with a smile. "But in a way, you were right. Behind this icon and inside my true self, I'm still a creature of emotion. I love, and hate, and fear, and laugh, and mourn, just like you. It's our emotions that connect us with the mortals, kitten. It's the tying bond that links mortal and god, the one way we can look upon mortals and understand them, even though you are to us what a mouse would be to you. A simplistic creature barely worthy of notice. But you understand the mouse, because you understand how the mouse would feel if you pulled its tail, or gave it cheese and pampered it, or set a cat on it. And when you study the mouse, you discover that it really wasn't as primitive as you first believed."

"That's not very good for my ego, Mother," he told her.

She laughed. "I'm just making an example, kitten," she winked. "Val saw you as a mouse, but he made the fatal mistake of thinking that the lowly mouse didn't have the ability to *think*. So when the mouse bit him on the ankle, he lost his composure, furious that the lowly creature would dare defy him. Little did he realize that the mouse was biting him on the ankle to keep him from noticing the tiger pouncing on him from behind."

As always, the Goddess phrased things that were very simple to visualize, and conveyed tremendous meaning at the same time. Tarrin nodded in understanding and looked up at her with serious eyes. "What is it, my kitten?" she asked.

"I hope they're not angry with me," he divulged. "Jesmind and them, I mean. About what I did."

She looked at him, then laughed in utter delight. "My son, right now they couldn't possibly be angry with you, no matter what," she told him. "Now, I can't say that's going to hold true after Jesmind calms down and thinks things through, but for right now, just enjoy the moment," she

winked. Then she looked towards the gated entrance. "Well, Triana just arrived, so I guess we can trot you out and let them fall all over you," she announced.

"Triana? Where did she go?"

"The Council of Hierarchs, something of the ruling body of the Druids, summoned her, and she couldn't disobey," she answered. "They wanted to see Julia, and get some answers, so she took Julia with her. I sent word to her about what I did here, and she basically cursed out the Hierarchs for making her come and immediately started back. She was in such a hurry that she forgot Julia."

"She *didn't*!" Tarrin gasped.

"She did," the Goddess laughed. "Julia's patient, kitten. I told her just to hang tough, and I'd come and get her when I had the chance."

"I can't believe that she did that!"

"Triana's not perfect, kitten. She'll be the first one to tell you that. I'm going to go collect up Julia as soon as I rest up a bit from restoring you. She'll be back by tomorrow."

"That's good."

"Well, kitten, I must admit, I'm very impressed with you. I never thought you'd think of using a Soultrap."

"I'm just surprised it worked," he chuckled ruefully as he felt the tingling completely subside. He sat up in the soft bed the Goddess had made for him, feeling weirdly weak and strong at the same time. "I never thought that weave I put in the cat statue was going to hold for three months. I figured it would have unravelled long before now."

"Don't sell yourself short, kitten. You're not just a power spellweaver," she smiled. "You've got some very formidable skill in the subtle art of delicate spellcraft. You're a very well-rounded Sorcerer. And as soon as you adjust to your new body, you will be again."

"You said I was the same as I was before."

"You are, but it's going to be like breaking in a new pair of boots, kitten," she said with a wink. "As soon as you get used to it, as you break

yourself in, you'll be back to your old self in no time. In fact, you may be better than you were before. I wasn't about to let a chance like this go."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with an insincere look of innocence, putting her hands behind her back.

Tarrin laughed.

She giggled and gave him a wolfish smile. "Honestly, I didn't really do anything, but think about it, kitten," she said seriously. "You were a *god*. It may be lost to you now, but your soul remembers, and it has *changed* you. In time, as your soul grounds itself into this new body and feels as comfortable in it as a soldier in an old pair of well-worn boots, you may start to exhibit certain, abilities, that you didn't have before. You were once a god, Tarrin, and though your divinity was destroyed, there may very well be some faint traces of it left in you that gives you powers beyond what you already possess. They would barely be more than a pittance in the reckoning of a god, nothing that would make even the weakest Younger God worry about you trying to usurp his position, but in the mortal world, they might be significant. But only time will tell if that comes to pass. We had to invent a new term for you, kitten. Darian is calling you a *demigod*, a mortal with traits that are decidedly godly. I rather like the term. You're something like an Avatar now, kitten, but an Avatar of your *own* creation."

Tarrin had never considered that, but in all the other information swirling in his mind, he gave it very little weight or importance. That would be something to worry about when, or if, it became a tangible issue. "If I don't like it, can you take it away?"

She nodded. "But I may not want to, and you may not either," she answered. "Having someone like you around may be handy, kitten. There may come a time when Spyder needs some assistance in her role as Guardian, and I *know* she'd like to take a vacation. You could fill in for her when she needs to take a little break. Besides, you've proved that you're a formidable guardian in your own right, and we have something that we need you to protect."

"What?" he asked uncertainly.

With a smile, she held out her hand, and a black metal *shaeram* appeared in her hand. Instantly, he recognized it. It was *his*.

"H-How--" he gasped, but she cut him off.

"It turns out that this metal is quite a bit more indestructible than we believed," she smiled. "Both your amulet and your sword survived. Don't ask me how, because even *we* don't understand exactly how, but they did. The Firestaff is still inside the amulet. Ahirya thinks the Firestaff protected itself from destruction, and I'm rather inclined to agree. We've tried to destroy it before, but it just won't die. I think the Firestaff took steps to defend itself from your suicide attack, and it must have caught up the sword with it when it moved to protect the amulet. The conjunction was still taking place, and though it had already used its power on you, it *did* still have access to some pretty *powerful* energy. The Firestaff does seem to have a kind of sentience about it, and it must have realized what was about to happen, and took steps. So, we seem to have an opening for a Guardian of the Firestaff, my kitten. Think you're up to the job? You only have to do real work about once every five thousand years or so. The pay's lousy, but at least you have good hours."

Tarrin laughed, laughed long and hard. All that work, thinking he'd destroyed Val and he was also taking the Firestaff with him, and the damned thing managed to survive! How ironic!

Still laughing, he reached out with his paw, and the Goddess reached down and placed the *shaeram* on his smooth pad. She put her other hand underneath it, and he closed his paw around the *shaeram* and her hand both. He looked deeply into her eyes, those glowing eyes, and he just knew that he saw the love for him there, and could feel nothing but love for her in return. She was his Goddess, his Mother, and he would do anything she asked. Not because he had to, but because he loved her.

"I am your mother now, kitten," she said richly. "I made this body, and I held your soul inside me when I took it from your Soultrap and placed it and your memories inside you. In a way, I bore you into this new life, and that makes you as much my son as you are Elke Kael's son. So when you call me Mother, I want you to know that that's how I will always feel when you say it. You are *my son*, and I love you. And I will always be here for you."

"I love you, Mother," he said simply smiling up at her, still holding onto her hand, swallowing it up in his huge paw. "And I can't think of any honor greater than you thinking of me as your son."

"You and me, we share a special bond, now, my kitten," she smiled. "You were once a god. For a moment, you were my equal. How does that make you feel?"

"It makes me glad that I can't remember it," he said honestly. "I don't think I have any business remembering what that was like, or you wouldn't have sealed away some of the memories I gained when I was turned."

"Such a wise kitten," she smiled. "Now then, let's get you dressed and let you get out there and keep everyone from going crazy with anticipation," she announced. "There are quite a few people who are *very* anxious to see you, my son. Let's not keep them waiting."

She pulled her hand free, still holding the *shaeram*, and then gently and meaningfully took hold of the chain. He bowed his head, and she slid it over his head, settled it around his neck, putting it back where it *belonged*. It felt immediately right for it to be there, and he reached up and touched it fondly with a single finger. She reached out, and his black-bladed sword appeared in her hands. She offered it to him, and he took it from her carefully, so as not to cut her by accident. In the instant of that touch he felt something...*different* about the blade. It seemed no different, but there was something lurking within it, something powerful, something that defied his ability to make sense of it. He looked to the Goddess sharply, and she only smiled.

"As it changed you, so it changed your sword," she told him. "You poured your power and awareness into it. When a god does that, the object is forever afterward different. It gains powers of its own, sometimes takes on its own mentality. That, my kitten, is how a god makes an *artifact*. Even though you're a mortal again, this sword is *yours*, and it won't let anyone else use it. It will always be there to help you when you need it, but remember, kitten, that it's as much an asset to you as it is your responsibility to keep it from doing harm."

Tarrin touched the blade of his prized sword reverently. An artifact. A unique weapon of great power, created by a god to perform a function or

service. This sword had been created by him, probably to help him fight Val. And now it was his again, his prize, and also his responsibility.

Tarrin wondered absently why in the world he chose the *sword*. He was much more comfortable with a staff. Then again, like any smart warrior, he knew that there was a time to use a specific weapon. Maybe at that time, facing that enemy, he felt that the sword was the better choice.

He was wasting time. He wanted to see his mate and daughter, and make sure everyone knew he was alright. "Has Kimmie had her baby yet?" he asked as he got out of the bed. The Goddess made clothes appear in her hands, and he took a pair of leather trousers from her that were so soft they were like silk.

"She did," she answered as Tarrin put them on. "But I want that to be her surprise, not mine. So you'll just have to wait and see."

"Spoilsport," he teased as he took a supple vest from her and pulled it on. He pulled his braid out from under the vest, and realized quite suddenly that the braid was the *only* thing about him that was from the original him. Everything else was new, though it felt more and more after every passing second like it was the *old* him. Breaking in, the Goddess had called it. Well, he was doing that already.

"I would be for Kimmie if I told you," she responded. "Now come on, kitten. They're waiting for us."

Tarrin tamped his feet a few times, getting the very last of the tingling out of him, and then started towards the ornate iron gate. He remembered that gate well, for it had been the obstacle that allowed Tarrin to strike the first blow against Jegojah. Much of that fight had happened right here in this chamber. A lot of history here, he realized as the Goddess opened the gate, and he stepped through it, stepping into the long passage that led out into the Tower proper.

They got out into the circular passage surrounding the Heart, and Jenna jumped off of a chair and rushed towards him, tears flying from her eyes. She cried out his name, and he leaned down and let her jump into his arms. He held her close as she gripped him tightly, desperately, and he took in her scent with eyes closed and let himself revel in embracing his sister.

"I can't believe it!" Jenna said as she pushed away enough to put her hands on his face, relying on his hold on her to keep her from tumbling to the floor. Her feet were dangling more than two spans off the polished stone of the floor. "Mother said you were dead, but that she could--that you--oh, Tarrin! You're *home*!" she cried in joy, then hugged him again.

"Not quite home, but it's good to be back with you, Jenna," he told her gently, patting her on the back. "What happened after I left?"

"What do you remember?"

"Not much," he answered. "What happened at the battle?"

"Well, there really *wasn't* a battle," she laughed ruefully. "Right about when we really committed to it, you and Val started tearing the earth apart, and everyone had to run for their lives. Months of planning wasted. Kang and Darvon were very, very mad."

Tarrin laughed. "I guess they would be," he agreed. "What happened to the Goblinoids?"

"What few survived are probably still up there," she answered. "After you--well, after Val was destroyed, the gods brought us back here. We didn't have time to hunt down the survivors and finish them off. We wouldn't have even if we had time. Everyone was pretty much well stunned by what we saw."

"What did you see?"

"Let's just say that when you kill someone, brother, you really don't fool around," she told him with a slight smile. "Now then, I think Mother is about to scold me for holding us up here, so let's go see the others. They're all waiting in Jesmind's apartment."

Tarrin set Jenna down, and after the Goddess waved them onward impatiently. They walked behind her, and Tarrin reflected on what the Goddess had told him in the Chamber of the Heart. He guessed she was right. An event like the one he had come through couldn't help but change him. But he didn't feel any different, and from the way she talked, the change in him would be one that would matter only to someone like Phandebrass, someone nitpickingly precise. He may have been a god, but that had only been for a couple of moments, and thankfully it was over. The

god Tarrin had destroyed himself, and the *mortal* Tarrin had managed to scrape out his own survival with yet another wild, half-formed plan that somehow seemed to work. They were two different people as far as he was concerned, and hopefully, none of that other stuff that the Goddess mentioned would happen. After all, it was now *over*. Val was dead, the day of the Firestaff's activation had come and gone, and he no longer had any need of power or position. He had braved the rapids for two years, and now it was time to float on the gentle currents in the wide pool at the bottom of those rapids. There may be rapid further down the river that was his life's course, but for now, he would enjoy the peace and quiet of being *done*.

The suffering was over. Now, the *living* began.

Sorcerers stopped in their tracks and gaped at the tall, tall Were-cat as he passed, looking like they'd seen a ghost. Servants and guards melted out of the way of the Goddess, looking pale and nervous. They probably knew that a *god* was going by, and nobody could look at her and not be utterly awed. Tarrin ignored them, keeping a gentle hold on Jenna's hand, just happy that he'd been given a second chance. He couldn't remember being dead, and for some reason he was glad of that. It was best if he never knew what that was like, better to only know of what was before him. That was why he was glad he had no memory of being a god. That way there was no grounds for comparison, no knowledge of anything except what he had, what he was, and all the joys and hardships that went along with it. It was the bliss of ignorance, and it was an ignorance that he embraced willingly. He wanted nothing detracting from the experiences of this life, his life. He wanted no veil of regret distorting things as he watched his daughter grow up, as he spent all the time with Jesmind that he could before time and their Were natures pushed them apart. He wanted to enjoy it for all it was worth, never knowing if other states of being he had experienced were actually better than what he had. Being happy with the simple pleasures and trials of being a *mortal*. To him, grounded in the Were instincts of celebrating life, there could be nothing better. The same qualities that had made him the best mortal suited for defending the Firestaff were the qualities that made him reject the memory of what he had once been, made him blissfully content to return to a simple life of uncomplicated happiness.

All he had ever wanted out of life was a cozy house in a meadow surrounded by the beauty and wonder of the forest. A place where he could

simply *live*. And he meant to have just that. There was nothing stopping him now, nothing holding him back, no vows or missions or duty standing in his way. He was free now, free to do anything he wanted, free to pursue the life for which he had yearned.

He was *free*.

Never before had he found such joy in such a simple thing. Service to the Goddess was a sweet bondage, but she understood his nature, and she knew that he would be happiest when he was in service to no one but himself. He loved his Goddess, and he had served her needs over his own willingly, but now she no longer needed her Champion. There was nobody left for him to fight. He would always be there when she needed him, and she knew it, but for now, he was certain that she'd be perfectly happy to leave him alone, to enjoy the simple life of a Were-cat who had had enough of the human world and its irritatingly chaotic bustling. It was time to go back to where he felt he belonged, to the place where everything was simple and pure and wonderfully slow and boring.

It was time to go *home*.

Before he realized it, he was standing at the door to Jesmind's apartment. The Goddess and Jenna had stepped aside, and both of them were smiling at him encouragingly. They wanted him to go in first. Well, that was just fine with him. He was just a little intimidated by what he was going to face in that room, but he knew that it would be wonderful. He put his paw on the doorhandle confidently, and then swung the door open.

For a brief instant, nobody noticed the opening of the door, and Tarrin took in the scene before him. Jesmind had Jasana in her arms, her back currently to him as she paced to and fro in front of the fireplace. Eron was trailing along behind her easily, his eyes fixated on the twitching tip of Jesmind's tail. Keritanima and Allia sat with Miranda around a small table playing cards with Dolanna, as Azakar, Binter, and Sisska stood close to them. Phandebrass had a book in his lap, scribbling in it furiously as Camara Tal, Koran Tal, Dar and Tiella were gathered around Mist and Kimmie. Each of them was holding something very small in their arms, something over which Sarraya was hovering. Triana stood silently at the door-sized window that led out onto the balcony, her tail motionless as she gazed out to the city beyond. Auli was there as well, along with Allyn, and

they were looking at a piece of paper in the hands of Rallix, the badger Wikuni that was Keritanima's husband. Ianelle was with them, pointing to something on it and looking at the thin Wikuni male with steady eyes. Darvon and Kang were standing near the large tea table by the fire, leaning over it with the Demoness Shiika, arguing over some kind of military tactic or something similar as the Demoness watched and learned from the two towering military minds with narrow-eyed interest. For a brief moment, Tarrin felt the emptiness of the two who were supposed to be there. Jula was missing, left behind by a forgetful Triana, but at least he could get her back. But Faalken was gone, and there seemed to be a faint quality about the room that spoke of him, as if he watched from his eternal reward and celebrated with them. In a way, Tarrin realized, the cherubic Knight would have found some reason to think that all this was rather funny.

So many people in such a small room, but it was the two that were missing that struck mostly in his mind and soul.

The first one to notice him was Jasana. She had her chin on her mother's shoulder, and she raised her eyes and saw him standing in the doorway. She squealed suddenly and thrashed against her mother, startling her badly enough to make her let go. Every eye locked on Jasana, which kept all of them from noticing him. Jasana hit the ground running, and her overjoyed exclamation rung like the sweetest music in his ears.

"Papa!!!!!!"

Tarrin knelt down, and he collected up his precious child in arms trembling in joy and relief. He held onto her tightly, taking in her scent, holding her close, and in tears in his joy at seeing her. He had sacrificed *everything* for this priceless child, this wondrous gift in his arms, and he would do it all again without hesitation. All the pain and anxiety over having her stolen from him, of not knowing if she was well, of knowing she was in the hands of his enemies, it all poured out of him, poured out of him and was forgotten as it found release, as he held his daughter in his arms and knew that she was safe. He put his paw on her head with exquisite tenderness and just held her for that moment, one of the happiest moments of his life.

Jesmind crashed into them, her claws digging into him as she crushed their daughter between them. Tarrin put an arm around her and embraced

her, kissed her, heard her loud cries and sobs of joy. Other scents, other hands, crowded in on him, all over him, sisters and friends and dear travelling companions crowding around him, touching him, voices calling out in happiness and relief. His daughter in his arms, his mate by his side, and surrounded by friends and family, Tarrin knew that he would never find happiness and contentment any better than this, that this was better than anything, even being a god. Nothing compared to the power of the love held between him and these special people, and in their reunion he knew that everything was well, and everything was good, and there could be nothing better in all the universe than *this*.

He pried Jesmind off of him enough to embrace in turn both his sisters, and then all of his friends, as their excited voices whirled around and around in his ears. Keritanima was crying with joy, but stately Allia allowed no more than a single tear to well up in one eye. There were strangers present, and she had the honor of the clan to maintain, after all. She'd save her very emotional outburst for when they were in proper company. That almost made Tarrin laugh, but that was his sister, and he wouldn't change her for anything. Camara Tal gave him a warm hug, and he could sense the life growing inside her. Dar clapped him on the back, having to reach up quite a bit to do so, and tiny Sarraya settled for hugging his neck while he was nuzzling Miranda. He put down Jasana and picked up Eron, but his daughter clung to his leg as his son kissed him on the cheek and flung his tiny arms around his neck. He gave Mist a fierce hug, and then folded Dolanna in a gentle embrace that was full of warmth. He got crushed by Triana's powerful arms, making him wheeze and nearly breaking his ribs, then wrapped Kimmie in his arms and made a point of putting a paw on her now flat belly with loving eyes. He embraced Auli and Tiella in turns, then shook the hands of Rallix and Allyn and Koran Tal. Kang saluted him sharply, but Darvon gave the Were-cat a rough hug full of pride. Ianelle kissed him on each cheek, and he even found it in himself to reach out and put his arm around Shiika, in her wingless, human form, braving her unnatural scent.

"Hold on, hold on!" the Goddess said happily. "I think our kitten has some new people to meet!" She stepped forward with two tiny bundles in her arms, held protectively, and Shiika moved aside enough to let him see those two precious infants in her arms. Tarrin's heart melted when he saw

two exceptionally tiny little faces, pink and soft, tiny little Were-cat infants with dazzling, deep blue eyes. Just like their mother. His paws trembled when he reached out and took one of them, touching the tiny baby's forehead with the tip of his huge finger. His paw was bigger than this exquisitely tiny little child, branding her scent into his memory just as he had for Jasana and Eron.

"S-She's so small!" he said in wonder.

"They were born a bit early, kitten, and there were *two* of them sharing space in Kimmie's belly. That didn't give them much room to grow. But don't worry, they'll both be strapping tall. In no time, they'll be normal sized babies. They just need a little nourishment and some loving attention, that's all."

Kimmie took the other infant and held it up so he could see her. "This is Tara," she told him with a rich voice. "And the one in your arms is Rina. They're your daughters, Tarrin."

"They're beautiful," he whispered in joy, looking down at them.

"And they're going to be just as spoiled rotten as Jasana and Eron!" Keritanima announced in glee, sweeping Jasana up into her arms and twirling her in the air. "You have a queen as an aunt, cub! I can shower you with all sorts of wonderful gifts, and I mean to do just that! I'm going to spoil you so bad your father is going to be furious with me!"

"Spoil my son and answer to *me*, Kerri," Mist warned, but she was *smiling*.

"Fine then. Just as soon as I finish spoiling him, you can send me the bill. I'm a rich woman, Mist. I can pay it."

That actually made Mist laugh.

"It's so good to see you, my mate," Jesmind said with her heart in her eyes, looking up at him. "When I thought I'd lost you, I--"she broke off, looking away from him.

"Well, you didn't," he told her gently. "I knew this might happen, so I took some precautions. Now I'm glad I did."

"You didn't *think* it was going to happen, you *knew* it was going to happen!" she suddenly shouted at him. "How could you do that and not tell us, Tarrin? You worried me to death!" she shouted, accenting her outrage by punching him in the shoulder.

So much for teary demureness.

"He couldn't tell anyone because Val would have seen it in your minds," the Goddess told her. "He didn't even tell *me*. Does that tell you how secret he had to keep it?"

"But it's not fair!" she shouted indignantly.

"Sometimes *fair* and *necessary* don't mix, daughter," the Goddess told her. "Tarrin has come back to you. Are you going to stain that with accusations and anger, or are you going to accept it and enjoy it?"

Jesmind bit her lip, then she burst into tears again and wrapped her arms around him. He took care not to disturb his infant daughter, but put an arm around his mate. "It's alright, Jesmind," he told her. "I know it upset you, and I'm sorry it had to happen. But that was the way things had to be."

"Well, no matter what happened, we're just glad you're back, Tarrin," Dar said simply.

"Amen," Camara Tal agreed.

It was much later. Tarrin sat on the couch in his mate's apartment, with Jasana and Eron sharing space, sleeping in his lap and Tara sleeping in his arms. Jesmind sat beside him, with half of her daughter's body splayed over her lap, stroking her hair gently. Mist and Kimmie were on the other side, Kimmie holding their other daughter. Triana stood behind them, and Jenna, Keritanima, and Allia sat on the chair on the far side, with Sarraya hovering in the air over them. This was the core of his family, his sisters and the women in his life, and it seemed appropriate to him that they would share this special time together after the wonderful reunion.

They had spent hours cramped into this small room, trading stories and catching up with one another. Tarrin heard all about the mobilization from five different viewpoints, and the initial attack that had turned into a terrified rout when they reached the battlefield. They heard about his and

Jesmind's trek across Ungardt, and their trip through the mountains. Jesmind still had the belt he'd made her, and she showed it off to them, demonstrating the camouflaging Illusion that Tarrin had set into them. But when the story reached their confrontation with Val, things got fuzzy and indistinct. Tarrin still had trouble remembering that, and both Jesmind and Jasana as well were very unsure of exactly what happened. The only thing they did remember was that Tarrin had goaded and annoyed Val into losing his temper, and that had been the one thing that had let Tarrin get the best of him.

Tarrin had enjoyed that time, time spent in wonderful conversation and companionship with his dearest friends, but the march of time had caught up to them. After several hours in that room together, appetites grew, children got restless, and there were some official affairs to attend. Keritanima had to return to Wikuna for a while, taking Rallix, Miranda, and the Vendari home, but coming back alone some time later. Camara Tal and Koran Tal bid their goodbyes so they could make arrangements with Ianelle, who had business to complete, about her Teleporting them to Abrodar, which but a ride and a half's journey to the isles of Amazar. Tiella had urged Dar away, and Dolanna told him with a smile that Dar had decided to throw caution to the wind and propose marriage to her. They had had crushes on one another for a while, and they'd been kissing in corners ever since Tarrin left with Jesmind. Tarrin liked Tiella, and she was one of the few women strong enough to handle the young Arkisian. They were a good match, and he knew that their union would be a happy one.

It seemed that *everyone* was getting married or having children around him. He held his baby in his arms, smiling down at her, and feeling his older children sleeping against him. He had never been so happy, both for him and for all his friends. Very few things could bring more joy into one's life than a new love, or a new child. He was happy that his friends and sisters were discovering that for themselves. Jenna had no beau, and he doubted that Dolanna would ever settle down, but there was always hope, and it would be the end of the world when Miranda got married. But thanks to the Goddess, there was *time* to wait for it to happen. He was patient. It would happen, and he would be there to celebrate with them.

But it may not be easy to relax around here much longer. Everyone was told Tarrin was dead, and now he was alive. Sevren was just one of a large

group of *katzh-dashi* that had tried to get in to see him, and Phandebrass had already started making a nuisance of himself asking Tarrin a million questions about what had happened to him and what he remembered and such. Tarrin was fond of the addled Wizard, but he was quickly getting on Tarrin's nerves, and he didn't want to be upset right now. Besides, he thought it best if he simply withdrew quickly and quietly from the Tower, to avoid making a scene and causing Jenna problems.

He'd take care of that tomorrow. Jenna was going to Teleport them to Aldreth. He was going to see his parents, and then he was going to do what he'd been dreaming of doing for nearly two years now.

Make a home for himself.

Tara looked up at him with serious little eyes, her expression intent, and then she reached out for him with those tiny little paws, needle-like claws extending out from the tips of her fingers.

"I think she likes you, cub," Triana said in a thick tone, her paw on his shoulder.

"I think she'll like anyone who can feed her," Tarrin chuckled with a smile, looking down at her. "You feel up to a trip tomorrow, mother?"

"Where are we going?"

"Aldreth," he said. "It's the middle of winter, and that's going to make building a house rather unpleasant, but I need to get started. My parents' house is too small to hold all four of us." He looked sharply at Triana. "I can't believe you left Jula behind, mother!" he accused.

She actually flushed. "I think I have enough of an excuse, cub. It's not everyday you're told that the cub you thought was dead is really alive. I'll make it up to her, I promise."

"I swear, what do you all have against that poor girl? Isn't it bad enough that she's always just an afterthought to everyone? Now you have to go and start leaving her behind?"

"I said I was sorry, cub!" Triana snapped waspishly.

Tarrin grinned at her. "Mother said she'd go get her, so I guess everything'll be alright. Besides, as long as she's here before we leave, that's

all that matters."

"You're leaving already?" Keritanima asked.

He nodded. "There's no reason for me to hang around here, mother," he told her. "Everyone I care about, I can see whenever I want. I don't have to be around them. That, and I'd like to get away from here for a while. I don't like how much attention I'm getting."

"That's no reason to run away."

"I'm not. It's just that I've been waiting to go home for a long time now, mother. I don't want to hang around here when I could be *home*."

"I can understand that," she said, patting his shoulder. "I'll help you with your house, cub. I'm a very good carpenter when I have need to be."

"You're good at *everything* when you need to be," he told her.

"True," she admitted shamelessly, which made Tarrin chuckle.

"When I feel comfortable enough to use my magic, I can help you with that."

"No, cub. Let me take care of it."

"I guess I'll let you," he told her with a smile.

"It's going to be hard fixing up my place," Kimmie sighed.

"You're coming home with me," Mist told her. "My house is only a couple of days from Aldreth. We're more than close enough."

"I guess I can't really say no," she said mildly. "I may need some help with the twins."

"You'll have to tell the others," Keritanima told him.

"I think they'll understand," he said, looking at his daughter again. "I do want to say goodbye. I think they'll get mad if I sneak out without seeing them *again*."

Keritanima laughed. "If you'd have done that to me one more time, I'd have cut off your tail."

"Are you sure that leaving tomorrow is wise?" Allia asked. "You are only just restored. Should it not be wise to remain near Jenna so they can

ensure you have no complications?"

"I'll be fine, sister," he told her. "I'm not sick, and I'm not wounded. It'll be a little while before I feel comfortable using magic again, but that's the only side effect of all this." He reached back and touched his braid absently. It was hard to forget it was there now, knowing that it was the instrument by which his body was regenerated. "And if I *do* have a problem, I'm just a call away from help. Distance doesn't really mean anything anymore."

Allia chuckled ruefully. "You must teach me how to do that."

"You'll be a while before you reach that level, sister. But you will. And when you do, you'll have three eager teachers to teach you everything you want to know." He looked at her. "Are you going back to the desert, or are you going to stay here?"

"I guess I will return to the desert," she said after a moment. "But it will be a long journey."

"Not as long as you think," he smiled. "Ianelle knows a Sha'Kar who studied the ruins of Mala Myrr. She said that he can Teleport you there. I'm sure you can get home from there."

"Easily. My clan lands are just south of it," she nodded. "But it will be hard to part from you, my brother. Especially after the last three days."

"I'm just a call away, sister," he said, touching his amulet meaningfully. "And since I'll be stationary, I can project out to see you any time you want."

"It will not be the same."

"No, it won't, but we can meet face to face any time you're in Mala Myrr."

"Then I will have to make sure I am there once every month," she smiled. "I can bring my father and my tribe to meet you."

"I'd be happy to meet them, *deshaida*."

"Jenna's going to have to Teleport me out to Aldreth," Keritanima noted absently. "I can root myself in the place and then come see you whenever I want."

"That won't be a problem," Jenna told him. "And I'll do something to help you fix your problem, Allia. I think I can create an object that will let you Teleport to a fixed position whenever you use it. I can set it so it Teleports you between Tarrin's house and the desert."

"I would be very grateful if you could," Allia told her with a smile.

"We'll see what we can do, but it'll have to wait. I have a mountain of paperwork, and the falling out's already started.

"What falling out?"

"Shiika sent me a *bill*," Jenna said harshly, clenching her fist. "She's charging me for the mobilization of her troops!"

That made Tarrin laugh ruefully. "Clever Shiika," he mused. "Tell her you'll pay a copper bit a year until the debt is paid in full."

Jenna laughed. "I'll send a copper bit in the reply and tell her that that's all she's going to get!"

"She can't seriously think that you'll pay that," Keritanima said.

"Of course not. I have no idea why she sent it, but she had to have a reason. I need to figure it out, so I'll know what she's really after."

"She really ruffles you, doesn't she?" Tarrin asked.

"We never should have let her on that throne," Keritanima fumed. "Why didn't you kill her when you had the chance? She's a nightmare!"

"Finally found a monarch you can't bully, eh?" Tarrin grinned.

"Oh, shut up!"

"I think she doesn't like Shiika," Triana mused to Tarrin.

"I think she doesn't like the fact that Shiika is a worthy adversary," Tarrin told her. "Kerri doesn't like challenges. She likes everyone to just fall down as soon as she comes onto the floor."

"Ooohh!!!" Keritanima growled at him. "Why don't you mind your own business!"

Jasana stirred on his lap, and then settled back down. "Keep it down!" Jesmind admonished her. "You're going to wake up the children!"

"Sorry," she said contritely. "I need one of those."

"You can't have mine," Kimmie said immediately.

"I mean a baby of my own," she said. "I'd like to have an heir, though he'll never really sit on the throne."

"I think he will," Jenna said. "Wikuna would go to pieces unless there was an Eram sitting on that throne to keep order."

"For now. In a few decades, after everyone's used to the system, they won't need me anymore."

"You'll get tired of babysitting Wikuna sooner than you think, Kerri," Jenna told her. "Face it. You're going to end up with a constitutional monarchy."

"When did she learn those big words?" Tarrin asked.

"Hush, brother," she said snippily.

"Well, I think it's time to put Eron to bed," Mist said, standing up. "And if we're going to Aldreth tomorrow, we may want to leave before the Sorcerers wake up." She collected up her son, and Tarrin put a gentle paw on his chest before Mist carried him out of his reach.

"She's right," Jenna said. "If we want things to stay quiet, then we'll have to get up pretty early."

They broke up after that, and the children were put to bed. Tarrin stayed up a while with Triana, Jesmind, Mist, and Kimmie, sharing time with his Were mate, girlfriends, and bond-mother. They spoke of nothing important, only enjoying time together before things changed in the morning. Then Kimmie went off to feed her babies, Mist went with her, and Jesmind, who had had such an emotionally exhausting day added on to three days without sleep, literally fell asleep on the couch, leaning up against Tarrin. Tarrin put her to bed, but was not tired himself. He'd been sleeping--in a sense--for three days, and he wasn't tired.

He wandered the hallways alone, going to all the old places he knew so well. The dining hall where he'd eaten as a Novice. The kitchens where he, Allia, and Keritanima had met so many times to pass information. He went to the baths, another of their talking spots, spending much time down here

getting waterlogged as they talked about what was happening and what they were doing. He returned to the Chamber of the Heart one more time, recalling the battle with Jegojah, then wandered out to the training field where Allia trained him in the Dance, and he had forged a strong bond with the Knights. He had spent so much time here. He had hated it when he was here, but now he felt strangely sad to be leaving. Though it had never seemed very welcoming or comfortable, the Tower of Six Spires had served as his temporary home, and now it was the domain of his sister, Jenna. She was the Keeper, one of the *sui'kun*, a symbol of the new golden age of magic that was dawning, an age when the Weave was whole, and magic was again at its full power in the world.

But that was Jenna's world, and Jasana's world. It would not be his world. He was going to be taking a vacation from it for a while, and he had no intention of setting foot off his land for the next hundred years. He would go home and establish his territory, build his house, and then just *live*. No running around saving the world, no long missions to far-flung locations. The biggest worry he would have would be catching dinner or weeding his garden. No more fighting with progressively more and more dangerous enemies. He may have to chase off some Goblinoids, but he could live with that. They'd be little more than some light exercise. No, he was done with all that. He'd go home and raise his daughter, watch his son and twin girls grow up with her, and he would be *happy*.

And that was all that mattered.

He wandered aimlessly along the halls, halls he and Auli and Dar had skulked when he was human, their minds bent on mischief. He wandered down to the storeroom where they'd discovered that Jasana had turned him, then he wandered up to the door of Jenna's office, an office where he had had more than one confrontation with Myriam Lar, the old Keeper. As he wandered, he remembered old friends, old places. Abraham Kern, captain of the *Star of Jerod*, probably wandering the seas with absolute impugntiy with that black cat sitting on his steering deck. Haley was probably still tending his inn in Dayisè, and Renoit was still herding his troupe about the coastal cities on that horrific bright pink ship, *Dancer*. Ariana was being a queen in Amyr Dimeon, and Var and Denai had to have their hands full by now raising their child. Given their mother's personality, that child was going to be an absolute monster. Arren was the king of Sulasia now, and he

had already established his authority and won over the hearts of the people with his kind and conscientious rule. His grandfather had died, and that made him sigh. Anrak Whiteaxe was at best only an occasional part of Tarrin's life--he'd only seen the man twice in his whole life--but he was still family, and his presence was sorely missed.

And then there was Faalken. He said a silent prayer when he thought about him, dead now well over a year, and still such a strong force in his life. He would live that life the way Faalken would have wanted him to live, a life filled with little care, filled with laughter, and filled with love. He would honor his friend, honor him every day for the rest of his life, and the next boy child he had would carry his dear friend's name. There could be no better way to honor Faalken's memory than to name his child after him.

Now he understood what possessed Ahiriya's parents to name their redheaded daughter after the goddess of fire. He wondered absently if Ahiriya had been pleased by that.

He walked along, and Camara Tal silently fell into step beside him. They walked along in silence for a long moment, then she chuckled ruefully. "We've come a long way, haven't we?" she asked.

"I think we did, Camara," he answered. "I'm going to miss you."

"I think we'll see each other again," she told him with a smile. "We want you to be there when I give birth. We want you to be the child's godfather."

"I'd be honored."

"I'm glad to hear that. I talked to Triana a while ago."

"Oh? What did she tell you?"

"That you and the other Were-cats are leaving in the morning."

"We are. I want to get away from here. I get the feeling if I hang around here too long, they're going to find something else for me to do."

Camara Tal laughed. "Well, you'll just have to run while you have the chance, then."

"That's the general idea. Make sure they give you a *shaeram* before you leave."

"I already have one."

"Where are you going, anyway?"

"The kitchens. One of the rather annoying effects of being pregnant. Cravings."

"Kimmie went through that," he chuckled.

"I'm going to miss those kitchens when we go, but I want to get back home as fast as I can. If only to show my family I'm bringing Koran back. And that I'm pregnant, of course."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow," she answered. "I went to Ianelle as soon as Triana left us. I came to protect and help you, Tarrin. You don't need me anymore, so it's time for me to go home."

"That's such a wonderful word," he said dreamily. "*Home*."

"By this time tomorrow, my friend, you'll be there," she told him with a smile. "And this will all be over."

"It wasn't all bad," he said after a moment. "I've made friends to last a lifetime."

"Then no matter how bad it seemed, it was actually a good thing," she said calmly. "Things come and go, Tarrin. Homes change, people change, and time itself will invariably change. But friendship and love, those last as long as we want them to. With a little work and devotion, they can last forever."

"You know, you're quite the poet sometimes, Camara," he said as they turned down a side hall, heading for the kitchens.

"You can't help but wax philosophical sometimes when you're a Priestess, Tarrin," she chuckled as they went. "It's part of the training."

"I guess it would be."

It was harder than he thought it would be.

They were all there to see them off. Keritanima and Allia. Dolanna and Dar. Camara and Koran Tal. Miranda and Azakar. Sarraya and Ianelle. Binter and Sisska. Auli and Allyn. Phandebrass and his drakes, whom Tarrin had not seen for quite a while. And of course, in spirit, as he always would be, Faalken was there as well.

They had gathered in the gardens, where it was warm and pleasant despite the cold chill of the winter, and it was time to say goodbye. Tarrin and the Were-cats were leaving, and those left behind would also soon be returning to where they also belonged. Camara Tal was taking her husband and returning to Amazar. Sarraya would be returning to her colony. Dar was going to go visit his parents in Arkis, and he was taking Tiella with him. Keritanima had a kingdom to run, and Allia would be leaving with Allyn for the desert later that very morning. Phandebrass was going to take up a temporary position in the Tower library, to help them straighten out their texts of Wizard magic and give him a steady place to do his writing. Auli too was about to take a journey. She was going to the tower in Abrodar with a contingent of other Sha'Kar so the *katzh-dashi* there could begin learning what the Sha'Kar had to teach them, and Dolanna was one of them. Dolanna was from Sharadar, and she wanted to return home for a while. Tarrin couldn't blame her. They were all splitting up, going their separate ways now that there was no longer a need for them to stay together, but they would always be together in spirit. They were joined by the bonds of a powerful love and friendship, and as Camara Tal had said, it would last as long as they wished it to. He could visit any of them any time he wished, and that made it seem less a goodbye and more an "until tomorrow."

But even that "until tomorrow" seemed harder than he expected it to be. He traded fierce hugs with those he was leaving behind, and he was already missing them. He wouldn't be only a touch away from his sisters, he wouldn't be there to hear Camara Tal and Phandebrass argue, or Keritanima tease Dar and vice versa, or Sarraya fight with absolutely everyone. They were going home, but those homes were not all in the same place.

The Goddess had not arrived with Julia yet, but Tarrin knew that even if they left, it would be alright. Mother would bring Julia to him, no matter where he was, and that couldn't be an excuse to hold him here. If he found an excuse, he'd find another, then another, then another, and he'd never leave.

Funny. He spent all that time wishing to go home, and now that the moment was upon him, he was reluctant to do so.

It wasn't easy, but it was necessary, and they all knew that it was going to happen eventually. They would not be together for the rest of their lives, and now that everything was at peace again, it was time to return to those lives dropped before all this insanity began. But they could visit. Tarrin, Keritanima, Dolanna, and Jenna could Teleport, and between them and with the help of the Sha'Kar, they could bring the group back together within a matter of days. Such a reunion had already been planned, and it would take place on the island of Amazar. They would gather to celebrate the birth of Camara Tal's child, to keep strong the bonds of love and friendship that bound them together.

They would not forget one another.

It was hardest to say goodbye to Keritanima and Allia. He held each of them a very long time, telling them over and over again that they had to come visit him, and to talk to him using the amulets every day. He told Keritanima he'd personally come to Wikuna and kick her tail if she didn't project out to see him at least once a ride, and he promised each of them that as soon as he was capable of it, he would be doing the same.

"You'd better," Keritanima told him tearfully as he and both his sisters shared a common embrace. "I hate letting you go, brother."

"We all have our own things to do, Kerri," he told her. "And we'll never be truly apart. I'm always just a touch away."

"That is the only reason I can let you go, my brother," Allia told him thickly.

"And you were going to sneak away without saying goodbye to me? I'm crushed," the Goddess said. They all turned to look at her, and then she stepped aside. Behind her, wearing a new pair of leather trousers and a simple linen shirt, was Julia.

Tarrin opened his arms to his bond-daughter, and she flew into them with tearful eyes, hugging him tightly. "I can't believe it!" she sobbed. "I'm so glad you're alright, father!"

"I'm fine, cub," he said to her gently. "And you got here just in time. A few more minutes, and Mother would have had to bring you to Aldreth. I hope Triana leaving you behind didn't upset you too much."

"I was until Mother spoke to me," she said. "She told me to be patient and wait, and she'd come for me. She came for *me*," she said in wonder.

"I'm sorry about that, cub," Triana said with sincere regret. "When your Goddess spoke to me and told me about Tarrin, I completely forgot myself. I think I said some pretty nasty things to the Hierarchs before I left."

"You did," she giggled. "They were very mad at you."

"Why did you go there?" Tarrin asked them.

"They wanted to test me," Julia said. "I'm an adult now, father. I don't *have* to stay with you. But if you don't mind, I'd like to. I'll help you settle in and help Jesmind with Jasana. If you don't mind."

"We don't mind at all, cub," Jesmind told her with a gentle smile. "But you may be usurped by Kimmie and Mist. They're going to need a little help."

Julia looked over to them, then saw the tiny bundles in their arms. She squealed in delight and rushed over to them, looking into the tiny bundles with unbridled joy. "Twins!" she said in wonder. "Kimmie, you had twins!"

"Yes, two are more or less considered twins," Kimmie said with a sly smile. "This is Tara, and Mist is holding Rina. And we very well may ask you to stay with us a while, Julia. You know how precocious Were-cat children are. We just might need your help."

"I'd be happy to babysit for you," Julia said.

"I say, congratulations on your adulthood, Julia," Phandebrass said with a smile. "It was well earned, it was."

"Thank you," she said with a slight blush.

They gathered around Julia, welcoming her and congratulating her, but the Goddess had come up to Tarrin. She looked up at him with boundless love in her eyes, and she held out her hands to him. He took them in her paws gently, lost in the love he felt from her, totally adoring her. "Just as I

promised you, kitten," she said, looking up at him with a glorious smile. "You have your reward."

Jula laughed brightly, but the Goddess fixed her with an icy stare. "Not a *word*!" she snapped at the female.

"Yes, Mother," she said meekly, but she was grinning broadly.

"What did you do, Mother?" he asked suspiciously.

She pulled her hands from him and put her hands behind her back, striking up a pose of thoroughly insincere innocence. "Ohhhhhh, nothing," she said, giving him an outrageous smile.

Tarrin laughed helplessly. "Alright, if you want to surprise me, I promise I'll be surprised," he told her. "Just for you."

"Oh, good!" she said brightly, then she literally leaped forward and grabbed him by the neck. She pulled him down, and then gave him a loving kiss on the cheek, a kiss that burned with throbbing power that reminded him that she was very much a god. "Remember, you promised to be surprised," she told him. "Now go on, kitten. You need to get on your way."

Tarrin sighed, then he nodded. "Alright, gather around me," Jenna called, and the two groups quickly separated. Tarrin looked at those he was leaving behind, saw the wonderfully poignant smiles, remembered just how each one of them looked at that moment. Allia and Keritanima, his dear sisters. Camara Tal and Miranda, two of his closest friends. Little Sarraya, another dear friend. Binter and Sisska, so solid and dependable. Azakar, so loyal and brave. Phandebrass, so intelligent. And Dolanna, wonderful Dolanna, who had been with him since the very beginning, the woman to whom he owed so much. She smiled at him, such a glorious smile, and then she waved. "May I come visit you?" she asked.

"Any time you want, Dolanna," he told her. "My home is always yours."

He felt Jenna's spell reach out and surround them, and he knew that would be the last he'd see of them all at once until Camara had her baby. But that was only seven months from now. To a Were-cat, that was just a blink of the eyes. He'd wake up tomorrow and realize it was time to go to Amazar.

It was not a goodbye. It truly was only *until tomorrow*.

And then they were gone. And a chapter of Tarrin's life had come to an end.

Aldreth was *freezing*.

They arrived just at dawn. Jenna had aimed them at the fallow farmland just outside the house, and she had been true to the mark. The sky was completely clear, and the scents in the air were of snow and frozen forest, with very little animal scent reaching them. There was half a span of snow in a ring around the zone of Jenna's Teleportation--the snow that had been where they were was now laying on the grass in the garden at the Tower, traded for Tarrin's party--and he looked around to see that things on the Kael homestead had returned more or less to normal. Their father had rebuilt the small barn and the brewhouse, and they had done some work to the old house. There was smoke wafting up from a brand new stone chimney, and the old roof had been replaced with one made of sturdy gray slate. The pens were rebuilt, and there were about a dozen fat sheep grazing on dried hay dumped into a trough near the barn. There was even a new chicken coop on the far side of the barnyard, and five plump chickens scratched in the churned snow for seeds scattered about into it earlier that morning. Either mother or father had gotten up to do the chores, and feeding the animals was first on that list.

"Well, let's go crash breakfast," Jenna said impishly, then she pulled her cloak around her. "And get out of this cold!"

They trudged up to the farmhouse, and an entire lifetime of memories swirled up around him. He had been born in that house, and all of this had ultimately started right here. On the Kael farm, that isolated farmstead that held the distinction of being the furthest east of any human settlement in Sulasia. Home to a pensioned Ranger and his Ungardt princess bride, and had been for the last twenty years. This was where he grew up, this was where he learned how to fight and how to hunt. This was where he began, and in a way, this was what he *was*. The fact that he was one of the most powerful magic-users on Sennadar meant little to him. The fact that he was a Were-cat was only a change in what he had once been, and that was a simple farmboy who happened to live in the best family there was. He had been very happy here, even when he was planning to leave. And it only

seemed right that he would come full circle, and he would return here once more after it was over. He wouldn't live in this house, he had his eyes on a small meadow about four hours of human walk into the Frontier, a nice little meadow on top of a small hill that had a stream running along its southern border, at the base of that little rise. That would be his house. But this place, this region, from Aldreth to a day's walk into the Frontier, it would always be his *home*.

Jenna pushed the door open brashly and stepped inside in front of Tarrin. "We're home!" she shouted, startling her father, who was sitting by the fire with his hands out to it. He had just come in from doing the chores. Eron Kael looked wildly towards the door, and as he ducked under the door to come in behind his sister, he saw his mother, Elke Kael, standing over the stove he'd given Jesmind, cooking eggs and ham steaks in new iron skillet. She took one look at him and dropped her fork, her hands going to her mouth. "Dallstad's axe!" she gasped. "Jenna! Tarrin!"

Tarrin hugged Elke first, if only because she got to her children before their father. She hugged him, then hugged Jenna as Eron hugged Tarrin, then hugged Tarrin again. They caught them up at the door, and the females behind were stopped momentarily. Elke looked under his shoulder during her second hug and saw Jesmind and Jasana, then she laughed in delight. "You brought Jesmind!" she said with a bright smile.

"He brought everyone," Kimmie called lightly. "Can we come in too? It's a bit chilly out here, you know!"

Laughing, Elke Kael made room, and they moved aside so the others could enter. Jasana trotted up and jumped into her grandmother's arms, and Elke hugged her warmly before passing her off to Eron. "Jasana!" he said happily. "How's my little kitten?"

"I'm alright, Granpapa," she said with a bright smile. "We're home!"

Elke hugged Julia, whom she knew was Tarrin's bond-daughter, gave Kimmie a light hug, then offered her hand to Mist. She hadn't met Mist, only knew of her from what Jenna and Tarrin had told her. Triana came in behind them, and she nodded knowingly to her. "Well, who have we here?" Elke asked as she knelt down and looked at the suddenly shy Eron.

"This is your grandson, Eron," Mist told her bluntly. "Say hello, Eron."

"Hello, Gramma," he said bashfully.

"And these are your newest grandchildren, Elke," Kimmie said proudly, holding up her bundle. "This is Tara, and Mist is holding Rina. They're your granddaughters."

Elke turned down the blanket and looked at Tara's tiny little face, and her eyes simply melted when she saw the infant. "Oh," she said breathlessly. "She's *beautiful*, Kimmie!"

"They're identical, so when you see one, you've seen them both," Kimmie winked.

"Rubbish!" Elke said. "Let me see my other granddaughter, Mist!"

Mist laughed and presented the baby to her as Eron, with Jasana in his arms, came over and looked at Tara. Tarrin picked up Eron, Triana and Julia gathered in with Jesmind and Jenna, and they all spent a moment marvelling at Kimmie's babies.

"We're home, Grandpa!" Jasana said again happily.

"How long are you going to visit?" Elke asked Jenna.

"No, mother. We are *home*," he told her. "Everything's been settled, mother. I've come home."

Elke put her hands to her mouth again, then gave him a fierce hug. "I don't know where I'm going to put you all, but we'll find room," she said. "Are your friends staying long?"

"We'll be here for breakfast, mother," he told her. "There's a meadow out in the Frontier that I'm going to claim. About two hours in or so by horse. I'm going to build my house there. Mist and Kimmie have to go back to their own homes. We just wanted stop in and see you before we go."

"And have breakfast!" Jenna said brightly.

"And have breakfast," Tarrin chuckled.

And they did just that. Triana had to Conjure the extra food, but Elke cooked it, with Jenna and Kimmie helping, and they sat down in the common room and had a good, hot, filling meal cooked by his mother's familiar hands. It seemed wonderful to Tarrin to sit down and have a meal

with his parents, and know that once he left their home, there was nothing but the trip out to the meadow, and the process of building. Triana would be a big help there, Conjuring the materials they'd need, but they'd be living out of tents for a couple of rides. He thought about leaving Jasana in the house with her grandparents, but she needed to be with them right now. She was a hardy girl, she could handle the cold.

"So, you're building a house," Eron said. "Why not stay here a while? We can round up a house-raising party, son. We can have it up in a few days."

"Thanks, father, but this is something I think we should do ourselves," he said. "I'm not building anything big or fancy. We just need a nice cabin with enough room for me and Jesmind and my daughters."

"And I won't be there too long," Jula told them. "I've been given my adulthood by *Fae-da'Nar*. I'm going to stay with father a while, and when I'm sure they're settled in, I'll be moving on."

"Well, that's nice to hear, girl," Elke told her. "Does this mean that everything's said and done, son?"

He nodded. "It's all over, mother. The day for the Firestaff came and went, and we're all still here. That's all that was needed. It won't be a problem for five thousand years. I think it's going to take me that long to recover from this," he admitted ruefully.

"Papa died," Jasana blurted. "But the shining lady brought him back again."

"Jasana!" Jesmind snapped.

"You didn't say I couldn't tell them," she said flippantly.

"You *what*?" Elke gasped.

"Well, it's technically true," he admitted sheepishly. "It's a long story."

"And you're not leaving this house until you tell it!" Elke said flatly, slamming down her tankard of water on the table.

More or less obliged to do so, Tarrin sat down and did just that. He told them about Jasana's abduction, and his wild plan to get her back. The others added in what they knew, and it took them most of the morning to tell it. "It

was the only way I could pull it off," he said ruefully as he finished telling them about his confrontation with Val, and his using the Firestaff. "I took a huge chance, but it paid off in the end."

"You're as bad as your father!" Elke accused. Then she laughed. "But you're here now, and that's all that matters," she told him with a loving smile.

"I'm glad you're not mad," he smiled.

"I should be, but I'll forgive you this time," she told him.

They helped Elke clean up the dishes, and spent a little while just visiting. Eron and Elke took turns holding the twins and Eron, getting to know their energetic grandson, and Eron only broke two chairs and a pair of dishes as he zoomed around the room frenetically. Jenna told them all about Arren becoming king and her hand in that, then told them about those they left behind. "Kerri went back home to Wikuna, and Allia should be in the desert by now. Dar should be in Arkis, and those that didn't stay at the Tower should be in Abrodar by now. Everyone's going home," he sighed. "I'm going to miss them."

"My mate, if we want to get home, we should think of heading out," Jesmind warned.

"It is getting late," he agreed, standing up. "So, what do you say, mother, father? Want to come see the future home of your son?"

"I'd love to!" Elke said happily.

"I think I know which meadow you're talking about, son," Eron smiled. "Let me get my winter cloak and my boots."

They let Tarrin's parents get ready, and then they stepped outside. It was midafternoon now, still briskly cold, and still brightly sunny. Julia stepped down into the snow and looked around, then she laughed and started around the house.

"Julia? Where are you going?" Tarrin called.

"I think it's around the back. I don't know, I didn't come through it," she called.

"What are you talking about?"

"Just follow me!" she called.

They started out after her, and when they came around the house, he started sensing something magical. And it was *strong*. Jenna looked a little surprised, looking at Tarrin speculatively. "That wasn't here the last time I visited."

"I think we just found out what Mother *didn't* do," Tarrin chuckled.

What the Goddess *didn't* do was create a strange stone arch behind the house, just inside the treeline. It was surrounded by a simple split rail fence that had a gate in it facing the house. The arch *screamed* of great power. The rather plain stone arch was one solid piece of white granite, some twenty spans high and eight spans wide at its base.

"Here it is," Julia said.

"What is this, Julia?" Triana asked.

"Mother knew you'd want an easy way to get back and forth from your parents' farm. So she made you one. Step through this, and it takes you to the meadow."

"Well, that was nice of her," Elke said, a little uncomfortably. "It's going to be a little hard to explain for anyone who comes to visit."

"They can't see it," she said mildly. "Only we can."

"Oh. I'll take your word for it."

Julia smiled broadly. "Come on, father. There's something on the other side you need to see. It's mother's gift to you."

"Now I'm worried," Tarrin said with a nervous laugh. He picked up Jasana and took Jesmind's hand as Julia opened the gate, and then he stepped up to it. He had no real fear of the magical device or using it, but he was sincerely worried about what he might find on the other side of that arch. There was no telling what could be there.

But the only way to find out was to see.

With a sigh, he stepped forward, and then walked into the arch.

There was a strange tingling inside him, and then the view of the woods that he saw through the arch blurred, and then he was standing at the edge

of a small meadow surrounded by dormant trees. There was a little stream on the south side of that meadow, but the meadow was covered in lush, green grass. Tarrin stepped forward, mindful that people were going to come after him, but his steps slowed to a stop as he got a good look at the little present that Jula had talked about.

It was a house.

Not just a house. It was the *perfect* house.

It was two stories high, and just large enough. It was made of simple gray stone, with large windows in its face. The front door, made of mahogany, was built up from the ground, that door framed by a large deck that spanned the whole front of the house, complete with redwood chairs and a table sitting under a slate roof that extended over the deck. The rails of the deck were painted white, rails that ringed the deck and flanked a short staircase that led up to the deck and the front door. The house looked to be a good ten or twelve rooms large, and it was obviously built on top of a cellar.

The house wasn't the only thing amazing about the meadow. It was *warm* there, just like in the garden back in Suld, a gentle warmth that was magical in nature, a dome of comfort that spread over the entire meadow. It made the meadow grass green and lush, and it ensured that no matter how hot or cold it got in the forest beyond, this little meadow and the house it contained would always be comfortable.

One by one, his friends, children, sister, and parents stopped around him, staring at the house in surprise. They were all absolutely quiet, shocked that they would find it there. And then, Eron laughed.

"I guess you don't have to build it after all!" he proclaimed.

"Now *this* is a gift!" Jesmind said happily, taking Jasana from him and rushing towards the house. "Come on, let's go see it!"

They all rushed off to the house, to look inside and see what wonders were within. All except Tarrin. He stood there for a long moment, marvelling at the house, and then he laughed ruefully. Jula came up beside him and looked up at it with him, then she patted him on the shoulder and smiled. "You didn't think she was going to let you sleep on the ground, did you?" she asked lightly.

Tarrin laughed.

"Tarrin! You have to see this!" Jesmind shouted from the door. Everyone else was inside. "There's *running water*, Tarrin! Just like what you described to me they have in Wikuna! It comes right out of a faucet in the kitchen!"

"Well, father?" Jula asked seriously, patting his shoulder again.

Tarrin could only look at the beautiful house in wonder, and then he silently thanked the Goddess. She had given everything he had ever wanted. All he had wanted when all this was said and done was peace. To live in a house out in the forest where nobody would bother him and raise his children, spend time with his mate, and just *live*. His Goddess had demanded so much of him, but now, he saw, she was willing, even happy, to give back to him in return. She had given him everything he had ever wanted everything he had ever needed. She had brought him back, so he could be with Jesmind and Kimmie and Mist and watch his children grow up. She had brought him here, so he could start his new life. And she had made him this, a beautiful house, where he could live in complete comfort and want for nothing. Where he could watch his children grow up healthy and happy, where he could teach them all he knew and send them out into the world to make their own marks. Where he could spend endless night after night in domestic bliss with Jesmind, or Kimmie, or Mist, always with a loving paw and a good companion with him to share his days and enrich his life. A place he could bring his sisters and friends, a place they would always feel was theirs as well as his own.

A place where he could *live*. A place where he would be *happy*.

A tear coming to his eye, he patted Jula's paw, and then started forward. Yes, he wanted to see this wonderful house, this beautiful and perfect gift from his beloved Goddess. He wanted to see it and thank her for every room he saw, every piece of furniture, every little nail in every board. He wanted to see it.

First at a step, then at a jog, and then at a run, Tarrin ran across the meadow, up the stairs, and through the door of this, his house, his land, his place, his territory. His *home*.

At long last, he had come full circle, and the long journey was finally at an end.

He was *home*.

And so, my children, the tale of Tarrin Kael and the Firestaff has ended, but this is not the end of Tarrin's adventures.

But as in all things, one end is naught but the beginning of another story.

And there will be other stories to tell.