

A cityscape at sunset. On the right, a tall, ornate tower with a circular top section is visible. In the center, a tall, spire-like building reaches towards the sky. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting the time is either dawn or dusk. The overall scene is a mix of modern and classical architecture.

THE TOWER OF SORCERY

**THE FIRESTAFF
CHRONICLES 1**
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Chapter 1

It was going to be a good day.

Tarrin stumbled slightly under the weight of the deer as he tried to step over a fallen log, working to prevent the end of his bow from snagging on the underbrush. The morning sun was piercing the thick canopy of the ancient woods at a low angle, splashing golden yellow light over tree trunks and occasionally hitting the back of a leaf, lighting it up from behind and giving it a golden glow. The air was warm and dry, and the forest was filled with the sounds of life; chirping birds, the cry of a squirrel, the rustle of the brush as a rabbit or chipmunk scurried about. The sounds were slightly alarmed, for Tarrin couldn't carry the deer carcass and manage any decent stealth, but he wasn't so noisy that they went totally silent.

He would make it back in plenty of time. The deer was already slated to be roasted at Summer's Dawn, a festival that the village held every year at the beginning of summer. It was a day for everyone in the village and on the surrounding farms to take a break from the grueling work, to bring something that represented the bounty of the land to a grand feast that would take place on the village green. Most people brought something from the wild, representing the richness of the forest, and in another way, giving thanks for it. When the crops failed, a family could survive with a bow or sling. Right at that moment, wives were skinning something freshly snared or shot, accepting bowls of mulchberries from the children who had picked them, or waiting for the husband to get back with his catch. Most men went after deer, but more often than not they had to settle for rabbit, or maybe even boar.

Tarrin downed a big one. It was so heavy that he almost couldn't carry it. Tarrin was a very good hunter. His father had been a Ranger, one of the specially trained soldiers that learned to fight and survive in the forest, and that training made him the best hunter in Aldreth. Or it would have, if he could hunt. Tarrin had learned from the best hunter in the region, and he was very accomplished himself. There were things that his father, Eron, saw

that he barely noticed, and to him, the slightest turned leaf was like an open book. Eron couldn't hunt, but he could still track, and he was not only known as the best tracker in the region, but renowned all the way to Torrian. He had been a mighty soldier in his day, and had risen high in the ranks before accepting his pension and retiring to the farm on Aldreth. He'd matured into a quiet, reserved man with graying hair, gray beard, and a twinkle in his blue eyes.

Tarrin's mother had everything to do with that. To the villagers, Elke Kael was...unusual. She wasn't Sulasian, she was an Ungardt, one of the hardy folk that lived to the far north in the frozen lands. She was tall, taller than every man in the village, and had the pattern Ungardt features. Blond hair, wide hips, buxom chest, pretty face. But Elke Kael was steel under her pale skin. She had a figure that made the village women grumble in envy, but there was nothing but corded muscle inside the loose shirts and breeches she commonly wore. She was a warrior, the daughter of a clan king, and she had every bit of the pride and haughtiness.

The villagers didn't quite know what to make of Elke Kael. She was the wife of Eron Kael, one of the most respected men in the area, but she was nothing like him. She was a hot-tempered, blunt, erratic woman that could use a sword or axe better than any man in the village, even her own husband, and the fact that she was a better fighter than the men left them a bit envious and scornful of her, and left the women confused and not a little bit afraid of her. She had a tongue sharper than a razor, and was infamous for her temper-induced explosions. She was nothing like anything the village had ever seen before, with a personality and attitude that was as misplaced in the Aldreth crowd as her appearance was. The years she'd been in the village had done little to change this view of her. She was known as "the blond witch" when her ears were beyond the words. But Tarrin found her reputation to be a bit misplaced, because at home, Elke was a gentle, compassionate woman. She was quick to criticize, but she was just as quick to complement. Forty years of life had done nothing to her body; she looked like Tarrin's sister instead of his mother. Her blond hair was untouched by gray, and her body was just as hard and taut as it had been when she arrived. The only mar on her were the very faint and small wrinkles that had begun to creep up around her eyes.

But what was unusual to the villagers was what Tarrin accepted as normal. Tarrin had grown up watching his mother and father, and he'd learned that they weren't the usual parents from talking to the village children. When most mothers were baking bread, his mother was practicing with her axe. When most fathers were working in the fields, his father was teaching him how to shoot the bow, and how to hunt, and what to look for when he was tracking a deer. For a seventeen year old, Tarrin was a nasty fighter. He'd grown up with a sword in one hand and a bow in the other. His father was a grizzled pensioner of one of the most elite divisions of the Sulasian army, and his mother was the daughter of a clan king, and as such was trained in the formidable style that made the Ungardt some of the best fighters in the world. Tarrin had spent more time in his life outside than inside, and more time holding a weapon than a farming tool. He'd been trained by his parents in most common weapons, and Elke had taught him the devastating hand-fighting styles that made the Ungardt so dangerous.

He stopped for a moment, wiping sweat off his brow that had slid down out of his blond hair. Tarrin favored his mother in looks. He had the Ungardt height and broad shoulders, and had also inherited blond hair and blue eyes from his mother. His ears were flat against his head and narrow, like his father's, who jokingly commented that they were the proof he was blood related to his son. Tarrin's face was the male version of his mother, with the same high cheekbones and strong jaw, the same straight nose and the same penetrating stare. He was handsome in the male way where his mother was handsome in the female way. He was taller than his mother by at least half a hand, the tallest man in the village, and at only seventeen it was guaranteed he would grow a few more fingers before he was finished. He was even stronger than he looked, thanks to the weapons training through most of his life, and had the iron constitution of a man that swung heavy weapons half the day and pushed a plow the rest of it.

He started moving again, finding the game trail that would quickly get him home. They built their farm on what the villagers called the Frontier, the wild expanses west of the village that led into the thousand longspan expanse of unexplored forest of the same name. There was nothing between Tarrin and Arkis, a kingdom a thousand longspans west, but trees and forest creatures, and the occasional river or hill. No human life existed out there, because the Frontier was the stronghold and bastion of the Forest Folk,

intelligent beings of various types that preferred to live far away from the humans. There were none this close to the village, but it was the reason that nobody ventured west of the village. Eron fell in love with it as soon as he arrived, Tarrin had been told, and had promptly found a meadow so that he wouldn't have to cut down trees and built the farm that they lived on today. Eron still had the Ranger blood in him, and liked to live in the forest, away from the village and its noise and distractions. The Kael farm was the only human settlement west of Two Step creek, about a longspan towards the village from the farm. The farm itself was about three longspans out from the village, just far enough to make visiting an endeavor but not so far out that it took half the day to get there.

Unusual people, living in an unusual place, so the villagers whispered.

Tarrin didn't really miss it. He liked the wild forest, the same as his father, and he learned early in life that his feared mother made the women shoo their children away from him when he was in the village. Especially the mothers of the girls. But Tarrin was strikingly handsome now that he was grown, and the mothers had a hard time convincing their daughters that the blond child of the wild Elke Kael wasn't worth their time. He'd grown up out among the ancient oaks and maples, birch and blueleaf trees, and when his sister Jenna was old enough, he started taking her. But she didn't like it too well; while Tarrin was his mother's son, Ungardt to the core, Jenna had inherited the gentle, mild ways of her father's Sulasian heritage. She was every bit the lady, even at thirteen. Granted, she was a lady that could put an arrow through a squirrel's eye at two hundred paces, but she was still feminine. Jenna had done some of the Ungardt training, enough to be able to defend herself from an attacker, but she hadn't studied the fighting arts the same way Tarrin had. She was wicked with a short-staff, and was probably the best shot from Aldreth to Torrian with a bow.

He'd spent most of the last few years out here in these woods. He knew them very well, and he ranged out further than even his father and mother would approve, if they knew what he did on his junkets. They allowed him to take his bedroll and camp out—his father always said it was good for a boy to have some time out in the wild, to get closer to the beating of nature's heart—and those permitted overnight stays allowed him to venture deeply out into the Frontier, further than he was allowed to go, where he liked to explore.

Tarrin had lived here all his life, but it wasn't his dream to stay here. His parents knew this, and accepted it. Tarrin wanted to be like his father, to go out and see the world, experience what was out there. He wanted to visit the capital of Sulasia, Suld, one of the grandest cities in the Twelve Kingdoms of the west. He wanted to sail on an Ungardt longship like his mother had, he wanted to visit the island city of Dayisè, the grand capital of Shacè. He wanted to see the Fountain of Swans in Tor, he wanted to see the Dragon statue in Draconia. There was a whole lot of life out there beyond the boundaries of the village, and it was waiting for him.

Today's festival was a part of that dream. Two days ago, two strangers had entered the village. One of them, a petite, dark-haired woman, was a *katzh-dashi*, one of the Sorcerers of Suld. A wielder of magic, and a person that the entire village avoided. Magic was an accepted part of life, especially in Sulasia, but a practitioner of it was a strange being with awesome power, and that made the common village folk a bit nervous. Tarrin had seen *katzh-dashi* before. Every five years, they scoured the entire kingdom of Sulasia, looking for people who had the spark, the natural talent, to use the power of Sorcery. When they found them, they were taken back to the Tower of Six Spires in Suld and trained in the ability, so they could control it. If they wanted to, they could remain for extensive training to become *katzh-dashi* themselves. But if they didn't, they were taught enough to be no danger to others, and then released to do as they would.

It was the man that had arrived with her that interested Tarrin. He was a man of average height, wearing ornate plate armor and a small helmet that was fringed by his curly black hair, and he moved like a wolf. That was a Knight, one of the special warriors that were trained specifically to act as the physical complement to a Sorcerer's magical power. The Knights were attached to the Church of Karas, the patron god of all Sulasia, and served the Church when not needed by the *katzh-dashi*. The training school for the Knights was on the Tower grounds itself, and it produced some of the best warriors in the world. A Knight gave an Ungardt nightmares; they could even hold their own against the legendary Selani, the Desert Folk, a race of non-humans that dwelled in the Desert of Swirling Sands, far east of Aldreth. A Selani warrior was rumored to be able to take ten armed men with nothing but his hands and feet. A single Knight was usually enough of a deterrent to stop a good sized raider band.

While the Sorceress looked for youngers with the spark of Sorcery, the Knight would be scouting for potential applicants to the Knights Academy. Most Knights were nobles, or the sons of men who could afford to bribe their children in. But the Knights always looked for people with natural talent. If Tarrin could talk to him, or impress him, he may be allowed to go with them to Suld and petition for formal admittance. His father had taken that step, and had applied, and took their test. But he failed it. Eron was good, but he didn't have the special spark that was needed for a Knight. He went on to have an illustrious career in the army. Tarrin was fully aware that he barely had half a chance to get in. But he'd been taught to go after his dreams. Especially when they weren't impossible ones.

Tarrin stopped for a moment, looking down. There was a track in the soft loam of moss under a tree. It was large, obviously made by someone wearing a boot. But it was huge; the man who made it had to be at least a head taller than him, and weigh almost twice as much. He saw several more, tracking back towards the open forest. He grunted a bit as the heavy deer shifted on his back, so he decided to look into it when he got back. The deer was too heavy to go investigating, and he wasn't about to set it down and leave it.

It was a rare sight to find something so...obvious. There were creatures living out in the Frontier, and though none lived so close to the humans, Tarrin knew they were around. There were some times that he would feel their eyes on him, when he was deep out in the Frontier, out where he wasn't allowed to go, and those sensations never failed to make him turn around and hurry back to territory closer to home. He'd never seen any of these mysterious Forest Folk, but he knew they were there, and he tried to avoid any contact with them. His father had drilled that into his head when he was younger, that if the Forest Folk wanted contact with humans, they'd be the ones to initiate it. He was taught never to follow unknown tracks, never to investigate sounds, and never to hunt deeper in the Frontier than Eron himself had taken him. These tracks were way too obvious to be Forest Folk, they were human tracks, which was why he was curious about them. The only ones who came out in this area were his family, and he knew all the tracks of his family. These were made by no one he knew. Still, he was in too much of a hurry to worry about such things right now. There

was plenty of time to find out who from the village had been skulking around the farm after the festival.

A bit later, Tarrin emerged from the tree line not too far from the house. It was a large affair, made of carefully shaped logs and chinked together, with a stone gray slate roof. The house was huge for only four people, with an excavated basement and an attic, and it had six rooms on the first floor. Tarrin occupied the loft-like second floor, which served as his room. His parents occupied the largest room, in the back, and Jenna's room wasn't small either. The other three rooms served as the living room, kitchen, and a storage room. The cellar had a deeper room that held a magical object--it was a piece of metal that radiated intense cold all the time, one of the rare prizes brought back from Eron's many travels. It served to keep their food frozen and preserved, allowing them to stockpile large amounts of food against the often brutal Sulasian winters that howled down out of the Skydancer Mountains, only two days' travel to the north. They often sold the surplus food in the winter to the needy, but were known to share with those who lacked the ability to pay. Paying the worth of something was the honest thing to do--Aldreth villagers were almost legendary for their practical good sense and honesty--but charity was only right and proper.

There were three other buildings in the huge meadow that served as the Kael farm. The barn was on the far side of the house, not large as barns went, but more than large enough to store most of their farming utensils and hay. They had a shearing shed for the twenty sheep that were kept in a pen beside the barn, the source of the wool that Elke would spin into cloth and sew into clothing. His mother may be a warrior, but she was just as good at all the things that wives were supposed to do, and many that most wives were not supposed to know. She could tan leather, weave cloth and fend it, even dye it. And she was an outstanding seamstress and an even better cook. Elke made functional, rugged clothing that would last for years. And with the right kind of leather, she could make leather shoes and boots. Tarrin never ceased to be amazed at the scope and breadth of his mother's ability. He wondered how she found time to learn it all. The third building was the stillery, which sat just downstream of the small brook that passed right by the house. That was his father's passion and favorite hobby. He would spend all day out in that building, brewing homemade beer and brandy, and occasionally apple wine. He was quite expert at it, and his

home brewed ale was always in demand down at the Road's End Inn, the village's only inn. Sometimes merchants bought it from him to sell in Torrian.

Much of their farming went for this hobby. They grew hops and barley in addition to wheat, corn, turnips, tomatoes, melons, and their groves of apple and pear trees. The sheep were part of the small motley crew of animals living in the farmyard. The sheep shared space with the chickens and geese, and the three pigs in the wallow on the opposite side of the barn. They had three cows, one for milk, that were pastured on the far side of the barn, inside a small fenced area, and they had two horses that split time between being mounts and pulling a plow. Theirs was a prosperous little farmstead, full of plenty and bright in its love of family. He was truly happy here, but the call of the road was something that he couldn't deny. He'd come back here when he was content to settle, find a wife, and live here with his aging parents. By then, Jenna would be married, and she'd have convinced her husband to live here rather than with his own family. It was an unusual circumstance, but he knew his sister. She wouldn't live anywhere else; she shared Tarrin's passion for this little farm, and she would not let herself live anywhere else. She'd *make* her husband live here.

Jenna came around the side of the house, her dark hair obviously wet. Her simple brown dress was damp around the collar, and she had it partially unbuttoned at the neck. Jenna was just starting to develop into the attributes of a woman. Twice already their mother had had to let out the bust of her dresses, and she'd thickened around the hips substantially in the last two months alone. Though she had their father's dark hair and features, she was going to have a body like her mother. Tall, buxom, and hippy. Not quite as tall as her mother, but she would be at least a hand taller than any other woman in the village. She would be taller than her father, that much was for certain. Eron Kael was half a head shorter than his wife, and it wasn't because he was short. Eron was one of the taller men in the village. She looked up at him intently.

"It's about time!" she said. "Mother sent me out to get you. We're waiting for you."

"Well, I'm here," he told his younger sister with a grin.

“You got a big one,” she said gruffly. The relationship between them was complex. It was cordial, and they truly loved each other, but as siblings do, they tended to fight from time to time. They’d had a rather rousing squabble about whose turn it was to feed the animals earlier. In her present mood, that was the closest thing to a complement he would get.

“Let’s get it on the cart and get going,” he said without preamble.

“Mother! He’s back!” Jenna shouted as she turned around. The cart was out front, with the roan Treader hooked up to it. It was laden with his sword and staff, some of the clothes his mother would sell today, a few kegs and casks of his father’s ale and wines, and one of the many bushel of arrows that his father had made during the winter. Eron Kael was even better at fletching than he was at brewing. Twenty years as a Ranger had taught him the art of arrow making unlike anything a standard fletcher could match. Tarrin had watched and learned, and he could make good arrows himself, but they were nothing like his father’s. It was the major source of income in the house. The farming, the brewing, these were just supplements or hobbies. Eron Kael’s arrows were the major part of the family’s income. Men came from as far as Ultern to buy them. He also made bows, but not as often. He stated more than once that he didn’t have the patience to make bows much anymore, but one of his bows could be sold for a hundred gold lions to a true archery adherent. It took him a month to make a bow, where he could craft ten arrows a day. Occasionally he got the itch to craft a truly exceptional bow. He would spend up to four months on it, but it was well worth the effort, because those special bows were always incredibly accurate, and most of them had tremendous power. Those he could sell for hundreds of lions.

Archery wasn’t just a means of feeding families in Sulasia, it was the national pastime. The Sulasian Rangers and the special archer divisions of the normal army were world famous for their incredible accuracy with longbows, but nearly every man and over half the women in Sulasia, even townsfolk, were competent archers. Tarrin’s first toy when he was a baby had been a toy bow, and he could draw the first bow his father made for him when he was four. And Tarrin was not unusual. In Aldreth, there was not a single man or woman who was not at least proficient with a longbow, and most villagers, who practiced archery as more than a hobby, could outshoot Sulasian army regulars. Children in Sulasia practiced with their longbows

the way children in other kingdoms might play with hoops or wooden blocks.

Tarrin dumped the deer carcass on the cart as his father limped down the porch steps, wearing a simple unbleached wool shirt and leather breeches. He'd injured his leg some twenty years ago, but still managed to carry out his duties as a Ranger by doing it from horseback. He managed it for five years before they pensioned him. Tarrin was born after it happened, so he'd never known his father any other way, but the limp didn't slow him down. He could still fight, was still one of the best shots in the region with a bow, and did more than his share around the farm. The only thing he really couldn't do was run fast. Tarrin mused that he didn't look like he was on the verge of his fiftieth year. He had the graying hair, but he was just as spry and alert as ever, and his hands still had the supple magic in them to craft such excellent bows and arrows. His mother came out behind him, dressed in a ragged blue wool shirt with a hole in one sleeve and leather leggings (which was ever a source of shock and gossip among the women, no matter that they saw her wearing pants for the last twenty years). It wasn't like her to have holes in her clothing. It must have just happened. Then again, by the dark look on her face, she wasn't too happy about something. It could very well be that. The fact that she was carrying her axe was more than enough reason not to ask about it. In fact, it was a good reason not to say *anything*.

"Nice buck," his father complemented as Tarrin climbed into the back of the cart with Jenna, and he climbed into the driving seat.

"He almost got away," Tarrin admitted.

"Let's get going," Elke Kael said grumpily as she got up into the cart beside her husband and stowed her axe under the seat.

Tarrin knew better than to ask, so he filled the quiet silence with mental images of greeting the Knight, what he would say, how he would convince him that he was worthy of a test in Suld. He also went over the forms and moves of the sword in his head, just the way his father and mother had both taught him. Tarrin much preferred the staff in a fight. It was a long weapon with good reach and good speed, you could use it for multiple tricks and feints, and it only killed when you consciously decided to do so. But Knights didn't use staves too often. The sword or the axe was the common weapon of the Knights, so he had to know how to use them to earn a spot in

the Academy. And he did, probably better than anyone in the village except his mother. His father had already admitted that his son was a better swordsman than him.

The hour long cart ride was passed in almost total silence. The silence wasn't unusual for the family, for none of them were particularly gabby to begin with, and time spent in silence was common for them. Tarrin was too busy with his mental preparations at meeting the Knight to even notice any conversation around him. The excitement he'd suppressed to hunt effectively had welled up in him since the finality of the trip to the festivities had taken hold of him. He wondered how often the Knight had to endure boys like him coming up and professing a heart-felt desire to be in the Academy and become a Knight. It was a common boyhood dream across all of Sulasia. Tarrin secretly hoped that he could convince him that he was more than the other boys. He was older, that was true, almost too old to start the training, but he already knew so much. He doubted that, if they knew he'd already had instruction, they would hold his age against him. He had all the physical qualities of a Knight. Strength, size, speed, and endurance. But, unknown to him, he had many of the mental qualities of a Knight as well. He was clever, intelligent, insightful, honest, forthright, and modest.

They came around the familiar bend in the road about an hour later, and the small village of Aldreth slid into view. It was a modest community, the village proper holding about thirty homes and shops, arranged in a loose circular formation around the Village Green, a huge grassy meadow that acted as the hub of a wheel, and was the vital communal area of the villagers and the farmers that surrounded it. Every festival or meeting was held on the Green, since the inn was too small to hold everyone. Festivals were held on the Green, and children made it their playground when it wasn't being officially used. The village was bordered on the far side, the east side, by a wide stream, called Cold Water Creek, and right at the foot of the sturdy bridge over it stood Road's End Inn. Aptly named, for it was the end of the road that led to Torrian. The Green was a bustle of activity as tents and tables were being erected or adjusted, and the smoke of many fires filled the air, as did the smell of roasting meat or simmering stews or open-baked bread. Many merchants from Watch Hill and Torrian, the two towns along the South Road, had arrived and set up stalls to hawk their wares

during the summer festival, and even from their distance, Tarrin could hear them shouting.

They parked the wagon at the edge of the Green, and while his father unhitched and pastured the horse in the inn's stables, Tarrin, Jenna, and their mother picked up the food and things they would need and carried them onto the meadow. Elke spoke to her children tersely, in a voice that warned them both not to do *anything* that would attract her attention. They found a likely spot near the place where the archery games would take place, then Tarrin was sent back for the table boards as the family's women began setting up. Tarrin met up with his father as he reached the wagon.

"What's wrong with mother?" he asked quickly as he pulled out one of the long, broad planks that would be used as their table.

"She's a bit nervous," he replied.

"Nervous?" Tarrin scoffed. "Why would she be nervous?"

"Because of you," he replied.

"Me?"

"Tarrin, she knows you're going to talk to the Knight," he replied. "Sure, she wants to you be on your own and find something in the world, but no mother likes the idea of letting go of a child." Tarrin hadn't considered that. "And, your mother being your mother, she's taking it out on everyone around her," he added with a grin.

"Let me guess," he said, "you didn't sleep well last night."

"I don't think I slept at all," he replied honestly. "I don't think she did either."

"I never thought she'd be like that," he said. "She's all but tried to throw me out of the house."

"That was her trying to motivate you," he confided. "Now that the end is in sight, she's reversing tactics. After she gets over her tiff, and she *sees* that knight, expect her become all light and sunshine," he predicted with a wink. "She'll try to honey-talk you into giving up on the idea."

If anything, Tarrin knew that his father knew his mother. He could predict almost the exact words she would use when she talked sometimes.

That familiarity was an extension of the deep love he had for his Ungardt princess, a love that had caused both of them to learn and know absolutely everything about the other. His mother could perform the same predictions on his father, but Eron was much better at it than Elke.

“I didn’t mean to upset her.”

“Tarrin, nothing you could do could change that,” he said. “It has to do with you striking out on your own, and that’s just a natural thing. It comes eventually.”

“How do you feel about it?” he asked.

“I feel a lot like your mother,” he said. “I don’t like the idea of you leaving, but I understand that you were never meant to spend your life on a secluded farm. Parents just don’t like to let go of their children, Tarrin. When you have your own children, you’ll understand.”

Tarrin considered that as he and his father carried the long table planks out to their site. He helped erect the table as Elke and Jenna started a fire, and Tarrin winced a bit as Elke rather brutally and efficiently cleaned, skinned, and dressed the deer for roasting. She was taking her aggression out on the poor thing. Tarrin was glad it was already dead. “Tarrin, go fetch that barrel of arrows,” Eron commanded.

“Yes, father,” he replied, and scurried off to the wagon.

At the wagon, he hefted up the heavy barrel, filled to the brim with the wooden shafts of arrows in a carefully arranged double-stacked system of packing them that allowed maximum space with minimal risk of damage to the arrows or fletching. As he hefted the barrel onto his shoulder, he saw the knight and the Sorceress stepping out of the inn.

The woman was a slim woman, very diminutive and delicate looking, with thick dark hair that fell down her back in tumbled waves. Her face was delicate and fragile-looking, with graceful features that made her quite lovely. Her brown eyes were rather large and penetrating, and Tarrin could feel her gaze sweep over him like a hundred phantom hands. She wore the plainest of dresses, a simple blue dress with no frill or ornament, but the dress was made of silk, and it shimmered and whispered in the morning light as she moved. She was a very regal-seeming woman, and moved with

a commanding aire that all but announced to everyone that he was high born.

The knight was just slightly above average height, about half a head shorter than Tarrin, wearing rather ornate plate armor that showed the nicks and scars of use in battle. He was solidly built, with an impressive barrel chest and thick arms, and his curly black hair curled around the edges of his conical steel helmet. It was an open faced helmet, and that face seemed out of place on a man of war. His face was cheeky and broad, with a slightly wide nose and narrow eyes that made him look impish and jovial. Despite that disarming face, he wore a heavy broadsword at his belt, and it hung there as if it was a part of him. He was well trained in fighting, his stance and very demeanor screamed of it.

Tarrin wanted to talk to him right then, but he had the barrel of arrows. With a sigh, he turned his back to them and trotted back towards the picnic area his family had claimed.

After setting everything up, Jenna went to talk to her friends, and Eron drifted off to talk to Glendon Nye, one of the Village Speakers. Tarrin watching his mother for a few moments, moving in an aggressive manner, slamming pots down, yanking things about, and muttering under her breath. He put his hand on her shoulder gently, and she whirled about on him. “What?” she demanded.

“You’re being silly,” he said with a smile. “Even if I do go away, I’m still your son, and I still love you.”

She looked at him for a moment, then laughed in spite of herself. “I don’t want you to go,” she admitted, putting her arms around him and giving him a gentle hug. “I know you need to, but I don’t want to lose my baby.”

“I’m not a baby anymore, mother.”

“To a mother, her children are always her babies,” she replied.

“You won’t be losing me,” he said. “I’ll just be somewhere else.”

“It’s more than that, Tarrin,” she said, letting go. He handed her the carving knife she was reaching for absently. “I guess parents don’t like seeing their kids grow up. It makes us feel old.”

“Old? You?” he scoffed.

“I feel it from time to time,” she admitted. “It just doesn’t show on me as much as it does your father.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “This place isn’t for you, son,” she said. “Considering the way the rest of the village considers me a witch, you’d do better finding a wife elsewhere. Even the girls who gawk at you cringe when they see me. They would not be good daughters-in-law.”

“Mother, you’ll outlive the mountains themselves,” he said with a chuckle.

She smiled at him, but said nothing.

While the women were preparing the food, the men readied for the competitions. Tarrin picked up his staff and bow and rushed into the fray. First was the archery competition. It was simple enough contest, where stands of ten archers fired at hay-stuffed targets with cloth targets pinned to them. They were painted with red circles, and the two archers to have the best score went on to the next round. There were three circles on the target. An arrow inside the outermost ring was worth one point, inside the middle ring was worth two points, and inside the third was three points. A red circle was in the center, the bull’s-eye, and that was worth four points. Each archer had ten arrows, and the targets were started at one hundred paces. With every round, they were moved back twenty five paces. Tarrin’s family more or less dominated this event. Tarrin and Eron Kael were outstanding shots, but this year Jenna was old enough to compete. They’d never seen Jenna shoot before, but both her brother and father knew how deadly she was with a bow.

Jenna wasn’t the only woman in the contest. Many of the village women knew how to use a bow, and some of the better shots, mostly young women, had decided to compete. There were nearly fifty people competing, almost half the village’s population.

Tarrin, Jenna, and Eron all were drawn into the first round. As Tarrin and Jenna checked their bowstrings, they heard Eron scoffing at Lamon Dannis, the village cooper. “That young girl of yours don’t have enough arm to send an arrow a hunnerd’ paces,” he drawled.

“I’ll wager you twenty silver talents that she can put eight arrows into the bull’s-eye,” Eron said immediately.

“‘Ere now, friend,” Lamon said in his outlander’s drawl, “I think that’s fatherly pride talkin’, not good sense.”

“Then accept the wager,” he goaded.

“Done then,” he said loudly. “Easy money.”

“Yes,” Eron agreed. “For me.”

There was raucous laughter from several of the men around Lamon as the Kaels marched onto the line. They all counted out ten arrows, then put the rest on the ground well behind them, like the other seven men and women on the line. There was no organized firing. Each archer fired at his or her own pace, but they all had to wait for the go signal from Garyth Longshank, the village mayor. Garyth was a tall man, thin and whip-like with a friendly face and warm expression. He was the village cobbler, and just about everyone except the Kaels wore his leather shoes and boots. He was also a sharp trader, who made quite a bit of money duping the traveling merchants who thought the small village had no trading man among them. Garyth, wearing a simple white wool shirt with his leather apron and wool breeches, stood to the near side of the firing range, holding a large piece of white cloth in his hand. “Are the archers ready?” he called.

There was no reply. That meant that everyone was ready.

“Alright then, commence shooting!” he shouted.

Tarrin exhaled, centering himself. He drew back his powerful longbow in a smooth motion; the bow was one of Eron’s best, and it was so powerful that only Tarrin, Eron, Elke, and the village smith could even draw it. He brought the bowstring to his cheek, carefully lining the arrow up with the target, after testing the air with his senses to discern wind speed and direction. He held the bow rock-solid, tuning out the sound of loosed arrows and chatter around him, becoming one with his bow, one with the target, just as he was taught. Then he loosed in a smooth, fluent motion.

He knew it was a bull’s-eye the instant it left the bow. He didn’t bother to watch it, reaching in for another arrow, pulling it out just as his arrow thudded home in the exact center of the target. His was not the only one;

many men and women in Aldreth were not shabby with the bow themselves, since just about everyone in the whole village had at least one. The villagers of Aldreth as a whole were exceptionally proficient with the bow. Of the ten archers at the line, only two failed to hit the bull's-eye on the first shot. And theirs were not far off.

Tarrin blanked out his mind again, drew, carefully aimed, and then fired. Then again. And again. His arrows were tightly grouped right around the bull's-eye as he fired his arrows. Tarrin lost track of where he was, he was so caught up in the machination of nocking, drawing, aiming, and firing the bow. He reached for another arrow, and found the quiver empty. He'd fired all his arrows. He looked down the range, seeing his ten arrows almost perfectly arranged inside the red of the bull's-eye. That was good, even for him. He usually had one or two outside the bull's-eye. He looked to his left, to his sister's target. It looked exactly like his. A look to the right showed his father's target exactly the same. His father looked at him and grinned boyishly.

"They'll have to advance all three of us," he said with a smirk. "We tied. And I just won twenty talents."

Jenna laughed delightedly and lowered her bow. "Let's see the others beat those," she said with family pride.

As surely as the sun rose in the east, Eron was right. Garyth consulted with the official tallyman, then made an announcement. "There is a tie," he called. "Three people put all ten arrows in the bull's-eye. The rule is, all people who tie are given advancement except in the final round, so Eron Kael, Tarrin Kael, and Jenna Kael advance."

Smiling, the three made their way back to their table, where Elke handed each of them an earthenware mug of chilled apple-flavored ale from Eron's keg. "Did you see that?" Jenna laughed to her mother.

"You shot very well," Elke smiled to her daughter.

"And Lamon Dannis thought I couldn't get an arrow to the target. Ha!"

Tarrin noticed that all the boys were looking strangely at Jenna. Surprisingly, her shooting ability had attracted their eyes. He couldn't see why not, her dark hair and pretty face would attract any boy's attention. Then again, she was the daughter of Elke Kael. But Jenna didn't have the

same problems as Tarrin, since she looked Sulasian to her fingernails. She had lots of friends in the village, and the mothers of the children weren't quite as worried over her. Although Tarrin was a nice, considerate boy, he looked too much and acted too much like Elke Kael to suit them.

"Don't drink too much," Tarrin warned her. "We have to shoot again."

"I won't," she promised.

Because ten people were supposed to go on to the next round, the rules changed slightly for the last group. There were only six of them, so the mayor decided that only one of them would advance, to balance out the advancing group to ten to take the tie into account. After the last group fired, the targets were moved back and the advancing ten were called back up to the line. In this phase of the competition, the goal was to score at least a predetermined amount. Everyone that did stayed in, while those who failed were out. Every time a round was over, the target was moved back twenty five paces. In case nobody scored the quota on a particular round, the person with the highest score was declared the winner. What made it more difficult was that each archer was only to fire three arrows.

"This is a group of good archers," the mayor said in a booming voice, "so we'll make it tough right at the start. The quota is nine points." Everyone was expected to pass the first round, but a few of them grumbled at the high quota set. The reason they grumbled was because the wind had picked up some. Distance firing in a shifting crosswind was tricky. "Archers ready!" the mayor called, and ten bows raised. "Loose!" he shouted.

Tarrin raised his bow slightly, calculating in his mind the trajectory angle needed to give the arrow the right height to hit the bull's-eye. Then he watched the wind carefully, adjusted his aim to let the wind push his arrow into the target, and then loosed. He watched the arrow go high and seemingly off center, then get pushed down and back on course by the wind. It hit just at the edge of the bull's-eye, but it still counted as one. He noted with concern that Jenna nailed the center with her first shot, but Tarrin knew that Jenna had to eliminate everyone else fast. If the target went back too far, her young thirteen-year-old arm wouldn't be able to send an arrow to reach it. Tarrin figured she'd be in for only three rounds before distance began working against her. But Tarrin had other things to do than worry about his sister. He nocked another arrow, aimed, checked, adjusted,

and then fired again, hitting more solidly in the bull's-eye that time. Then he did it once more. His last arrow missed the bull's-eye, but was solidly in the innermost ring. That was eleven points, enough to advance. Tarrin saw that Jenna and his father both had three bull's-eyes. Looking down the line, Tarrin saw that everyone looked to be advancing.

Almost. After the tallyman checked the targets and the archers walked to the target to pull their arrows, two people were eliminated, the thatcher and the smith's apprentice. The targets were moved back, and Tarrin glimpsed a slightly worried expression on his sister's face. He thought that she had to know that she was going to run into this problem; Tarrin did well his first time, but didn't win. Because the same thing happened to him. The target was pushed back out of his range. He stepped over to her as she checked the fletching on her arrows, and said "don't worry, the same thing happened to me when I competed the first time. Just do the best you can."

"But I want to win," she huffed.

"So did I," he told her.

The wind died down some as the mayor raised the quota to ten points. The whole line took several minutes to shoot three arrows, as each archer carefully took aim, and there was no time limit. After that round, three more were out. Five stood to watch the target go back. The quota went up to eleven points, and Tarrin guessed that this would be the last round.

It took Tarrin almost a whole minute to aim and fire the first arrow. He saw that it was either right on or close, but the target was too far away and too peppered with holes to make a solid guess. He didn't worry about it, just aiming his next arrow and shooting, then again. He was one of the last archers to finish, so he only had to wait a few seconds until the mayor called for bows down, and the mayor joined the tallyman to check the scores. They checked the five targets, all of which looked close, then walked back to his standing area. "Only one person advances, so we have a winner!" he called. "The scores are: Kanly Mills, eight points. Aaron Noth, nine points. Tarrin Kael, ten points. Jenna Kael, ten points. Joran Wanderer, ten points. And the winner, Eron Kael, with twelve points!"

Eron accepted a few handshakes, and then patted his daughter on the shoulder. "You did very well, my girl," he said with a smile. "You'll do

even better next time.”

“Second place your first time out is pretty good,” Tarrin added. “It’s better than I did.”

“I still wanted to win,” she huffed.

“That’s your mother talking,” Eron laughed as they went out to collect their arrows.

Tarrin ran to the table, set aside his bow, and picked up his staff. Next was his favorite competition, the staves. Much to his mother’s dismay, Tarrin preferred the staff to any other weapon. His own staff was rather special, much like his bow, but he’d made the staff himself. He’d found an Ironwood sapling some three years ago. Ironwood was much as its name described, a rare wood that was so strong that it was like steel. It took Tarrin three days to cut the sapling down, and it ruined five saws. It took him over three months to strip and shape the wood, and he couldn’t even count how many knives he ruined in that endeavor. It cost Tarrin every copper bit he had, plus some of his parents’ money which he still owed them, but it was worth it. Ironwood was almost unbreakable and resilient, and would bend if enough force was put on it but always return to its original shape, important qualities in a good staff. The wood itself was just a tad heavier than oak, and it looked almost exactly like oak, but it floated so powerfully that he could stand on the staff in a still pond. That ironwood stump had regrown, and it was quickly going to return to the size that it was when Tarrin cut it down. That was the way ironwood was. Tarrin had wisely made his staff using his mother’s height as his guide, projecting the size he would be full grown by sizing the staff for someone slightly taller than his mother, and besides, he could always cut the staff down to size if it was too large, where he couldn’t put wood back if he made it too small. And the gamble had paid off. The staff was about half a head taller than him, as a good staff should be sized for its user, and he hadn’t had to cut it down. It fit almost perfectly into his hand, but he remembered how cumbersome it was when he first made it. It hadn’t mattered much, for he’d had enough wood for two, and had made another one for himself at that height. Jenna owned that one now, it was almost perfect for her. A bit too tall maybe, but she’d grow into it.

Rushing to the referee’s table, he hurriedly put his name into the draw for staff contestants, then he looked at the ring. The staff competition was

rather simple. Two contestants stood inside a circular ring that was fifteen paces across. A contestant could win in three ways. He could knock his opponent out of the ring, he could knock the opponent off his feet, or he could knock the opponent's staff out of his hands. Dropping your own staff or stepping out of the ring put yourself out. Contestants were allowed to voluntarily go down to one knee, but not both. It was a full contact competition, but hitting between the legs, in the back, or in the face was automatic disqualification. Shots to any part of the head with hair, or above the forehead for the balding contestants, were perfectly acceptable. Hits with hands or feet were also acceptable, as were hits with any part of the body against an opponent, except for those areas that were off limits. Jen Bluebird had a habit of headbutting his opponents, and that disqualified him last year.

Tarrin stood next to his father, who had his own staff, watching the roughly thirty men willing to compete this year put in their names. "Karn Rocksplitter's competing this year," Eron noticed. Karn was from Daltochan, the mountain kingdom in the Cloud Dancer Mountains to the north, and like all Dals, he was wide and powerfully built. Being a blacksmith made him even more powerful than his Dal heritage. Karn had been the village champion for three straight years, but he'd broken his ribs a week before the festival last year and couldn't compete, and Tarrin had won. Many in the village were looking forward to seeing the young Tarrin Kael up against a grizzled veteran like Karn Rocksplitter.

"Good," Tarrin said. "I didn't feel right not getting my head thumped by him last time." Tarrin had been knocked out by Karn two years earlier, but it had been a good contest. Karn relied on his raw power, and his smithy's endurance allowed him to just wear down opponents. Tarrin was ready for him this year. Karn wasn't offensively gifted, but he could stand in the middle of the ring and defend to the Last Day. Tarrin already had a plan, because he fully expected to cross staves with him.

"First contestant," the mayor called, reaching into a hat with names written on pieces of parchment, "Tarrin Kael! Second contestant," he called, pulling out another strip. He laughed. "Second contestant, Eron Kael!"

There were some shouts and laughter at that, and father and son gave each other a slight smile. Eron may have a lamed leg, but he was still a

formidable opponent with the staff. “Looks like you’re not going to repeat this year, son,” Eron said mildly.

“I just hope mother brought some cold cloths,” Tarrin shot back. “You’re going to need them.”

They took their places in the ring. If anyone could defend against Tarrin, it was Eron, and Tarrin knew it. It had to do with the daily sparring practices they had. Tarrin didn’t fight the staff the same way the villagers did. He’d been trained in the Ungardt way, and the Ungardt fought the staff with a completely different style. The Ungardt had forms for holding the staff in the center and also on one end. Tarrin knew Eron had more trouble dealing with a end-hold style, so that was the way he set himself in the ring, holding his staff almost like a spear. Eron grimaced a bit, and then gave his son a wolfish grin.

“Eron, are you ready?” the mayor called. Eron nodded. “Tarrin, are you ready?” Tarrin nodded. “Alright, just remember that we’re here for fun, not to knock out teeth. Ready? Go!”

Tarrin evaded a fast thrust to the belly, spun around and ducked to evade the swipe at his head, then whipped the staff across the back of Eron’s knees. He felt the staff connect solidly, but he’d missed the knees and hit only one knee. He didn’t have a low enough angle to get both. Eron dipped as his lamed knee unlocked, but he didn’t go down. There was some laughter at the youngster’s quick coup against his father, but they’d seen Tarrin fight staves before. He was one of the ones favored to win. Tarrin blocked a fast series of swipes from his father, using the end-hold grip like a sword to parry blows, then stepped into a high swing, blocked with the far end, and tried to smash the held end of the staff into Eron’s belly. Eron blocked it with the center of his staff, but Tarrin’s power scooted Eron’s feet across the dirt ring, towards the rope that marked the ring boundary. Eron leaned into his staff, stopping his skid, but Tarrin had leverage enough to lift a foot. He stomped on his father’s foot hard, making Eron wince, then hooked his heel behind the foot he’d just stomped and pulled with his foot as he pushed with the staff. Eron was pinioned between them, and tottered back as his foot caught against Tarrin’s heel. Eron gave up a hand on his staff and grabbed Tarrin by the belt, threatening to pull both of them down and cause a double-elimination.

But Tarrin wasn't put off. He gave his father a heavy push, then quickly grounded one end of the staff and leaned into it. Eron kiltered backwards, staff going wide, and then he started falling. Tarrin leaned into his staff as Eron's hand on his belt tried to yank him forward, using the staff as a buttress against falling. Eron fell backwards, reached the end of his arm, and then was yanked to the side. He came to rest on his backside, his staff under his leg, holding on to his son's leather belt.

"Winner, Tarrin Kael!" the mayor called, as many of the spectators clapped and shouted and laughed. Tarrin helped his father up, who still had that wolfish grin.

"Sneak," his father accused.

"Cheater," Tarrin bit back, with a smile on his face.

"Thought you'd give that up if I threatened to double us out," Eron admitted with a wink.

"I figured you did," Tarrin grinned back.

Tarrin's next match wasn't so quick. It was against Jen Bluebird, who was deceptively powerful and very fast. Tarrin matched Jen's speed with speed, and the two of them danced around each other as their staves moved in blurred symmetry. Tarrin's moves were more precise, more crisp, than Jen's as he moved from one move to the next, flowing like water around and with his opponent. He blocked a flurry of high-low strikes from the staff, leaned back out of reach of a high swing, then just moved his leg out of the way of a strike at his ankle. Just his leg. Jen hadn't expected him to not move back, and was too close. Tarrin drove the end of his staff between Jen's feet like a spear and then twisted, putting one end behind his left foot and the side in front of his right. Then he lifted a hand off the staff and punched Jen in the stomach. Not hard, just hard enough to knock him backwards, allow the staff to tangle his feet, and topple him.

Tarrin defeated his next opponent almost immediately. It was Darl Millen, the wheelwright. Tarrin bulled into the heavier man, supposedly playing right into his hands, then hooked his arm around his hip. Tarrin stepped into his opponent, twisted so his back was to Darl, and dragged him over his body in the Ungardt hook-throw. Darl landed on his back with a thud in front of Tarrin.

Tarrin's final match was against Karn, and it was the final match. Tarrin stepped up and shook the powerful, bald smith's hand, giving him a warm smile. Karn was one of his few friends in the village, a gruff man who was as much an outsider as he, who had the talent to be much more than a village smith. Tarrin had spent some time helping in Karn's smithy when his apprentice was hurt and couldn't work, and he'd learned quite a bit there, both about smithing and about Karn. Karn had even taught Tarrin the Arakite language, a language so heavily used east of Arkis that it was a common language, a vital skill for anyone who wanted to travel as Tarrin did. Though he could be a master smith in a big city or even work for a noble, this was the life that Karn loved, so this was what he did. "I get ta' thump yer head, boy," Karn said in his gravelly voice.

Tarrin laughed and looked down at the shorter man. "We'll see who thumps who," he returned.

"Contestants ready!" the mayor shouted. "Go!"

Tarrin instantly jumped back to the edge of the ring as Karn settled his feet in his classic "like the mountain stone" stance. Tarrin knew that fighting Karn on his own terms was suicide. He had to make the big man move, make him do the attacking. Because Karn would be perfectly content to stand in that one place and let Tarrin swing until his arms couldn't lift his staff over his head. That was Karn's way. Patient and methodical, the same way he hammered hot steel. Tarrin took up his staff in the end grip and weaved the point near Karn's face, flicking the tip lightly towards Karn's nose. Karn easily blocked the attempts, but Tarrin wouldn't stop. The answering parries became harder and harder, as Karn became annoyed that Tarrin wouldn't do what he was supposed to do and try to take the big man down from the start so that the match didn't go on and go into his favor. Karn's face turned black as Tarrin almost got him, the tip swishing a finger from Karn's nose, and he gave a shout and stepped up to engage the younger, taller opponent.

Tarrin ducked under a swing and blocked the reverse, reset into a center grip, and engaged Karn toe to toe. He kept attacking just enough to keep Karn on the offensive, goading him so that he wouldn't settle back into his classic defensive posture. While they exchanged blows, Tarrin analyzed

Karn's attacking technique, looking for any exploits or holes. Not surprisingly, Karn didn't have any worth exploiting.

They battled back and forth for several minutes, Tarrin working to keep from getting bulled out of the ring while Karn defended his knees and ankles, two of Tarrin's favorite targets. Bets and suggestions were being shouted by the spectators around the ring, but Tarrin tuned it out as he saw the hole he needed. Karn set his lead foot down heavy when he tried to thrust. That was what he was looking for. Tarrin put a pace between them, then worked Karn into a position where he would try to poke the end of his staff into Tarrin's belly. Karn bit, stepping in and lunging the point of his staff at Tarrin's ribs. Tarrin spun aside even as the thrust was delivered, the wooden shaft missing his side by a finger. Tarrin dipped and bent going down on one haunch as his hand flew out wide to counter balance the spin. His other leg came straight out, and the momentum of his spin added to his strong kick carried his foot around at high speed. His foot flew around and cracked solidly into Karn's lead ankle. Tarrin felt his whole foot go numb, but he had so much behind it that it pushed Karn's planted foot out from under him. Karn windmilled his arms wildly, losing hold of his staff, then went down in a tumbled heap.

Tarrin rose, still spinning, and came to a stop facing the fallen Karn, staff in hand, tip grounded on the dirt.

"Och, boy, what in the name of the Gods was that?" Karn groaned, pushing up onto his backside.

"That would be a spinning foot sweep," a voice called as Tarrin put his hand out to help Karn up. Tarrin heard it clearly over the cheers and calls from the crowd, and the mayor's cry of the winner's name. Tarrin looked over, and saw the curly-haired knight step into the ring with several other spectators. "That's an Ungardt move," he noted aloud. "The Ungardt, she's your mother, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir," he said demurely, pulling Karn to his feet. "You alright, Karn?"

"Fine, lad, fine," he said with a rueful grin. "I thrust at ye, but ye just disappeared. Then I found my foot trying to fly south."

“I think I broke my toe,” Tarrin groaned, settling his foot in his boot. “It was like kicking a rock. Is there any soft part on your body?”

“I don’t think so,” Karn chuckled. “Mae says my belly’s getting a bit soft, but I don’t see it.”

“A good move, son,” the knight continued. “Your mother, did she train you completely?”

“She taught me a lot of what she knows,” Tarrin replied, trying not to blurt out everything at once. It wouldn’t impress him acting like a fool. “I still can’t beat her with her own weapons, though.”

Karn reached down and picked up his staff as the mayor and Eron clapped Tarrin on the back. “Good match, my boy, good match!” the mayor cried with a wide smile.

The knight was lost in the press, much to Tarrin’s disappointment, but he found himself swept up into the good mood and festive atmosphere. He won the prize for staves, a new belt knife crafted by Karn just for the occasion. It was a beautiful piece of work, with a hilt shaped like a falcon, the wings acting as the quillions and the body the hilt. The tail flared out to be a miniature pommel, and there was a hawk’s head embossed into the steel of the blade on both sides, where the shape had been carved out of the steel and filled in with silver. Karn outdid himself with that bit of artistic work. The blade was longer than Tarrin’s hand, and it was razor sharp on both sides.

Tarrin was sitting at the table, watching Eron and Elke dancing on the Green while Jenna checked the arrows she’d used in the archery contest for damage, when the knight’s voice called out. “What brought an Ungardt to such a secluded place?” he asked curiously, walking up to them. Tarrin saw that the Sorceress was with him, looking at the siblings with her penetrating gaze.

“She married father,” Jenna piped in simply. “Father wanted to live here, and mother came with him. She says it’s warmer than home.”

“I would think that it is,” the Sorceress said in a mild, calm voice, touched with amusement. “You are brother and sister?”

“Yes ma’am,” Tarrin replied respectfully.

“I can see the resemblance,” she said.

“Not many people can,” Jenna said impishly.

“On the contrary, I cannot see how someone could not see that you share common blood,” the woman countered. She reached into the bodice of her blue dress, and withdrew an amulet made of ivory. It was rather unusual, Tarrin noticed, a circle holding a six-pointed star inside it created by two triangles resting over each other in opposite directions. And inside the six-pointed star was a four-pointed star, its points going in the four compass directions, with concavely curved sides. At the center of that inner star was a small diamond. “Do either of you know what this is?” she asked.

“It’s an amulet,” Jenna replied.

“Not what it is, child, what the symbol means,” the woman elaborated.

“No,” they both said, almost in unison.

“It is the symbol of my order,” she told them, pulling the chain over her head and holding the ivory object in her hand. “We call it the *shaeram*. It represent the seven spheres of Sorcery. Earth, air, fire, water, the power of the mind, the power of the Goddess, and the seventh sphere, which is the power of confluence.”

“Con-flewence?” Jenna repeated. “I’ve never heard that word.”

“It means the power of joining, of unity,” she said with a smile. She held out the amulet to them. “Here, take it. Hold it in your hands, and tell me what you feel.”

Jenna took the ivory amulet and silver chain, holding it in her hands and looking at it. “Ouch!” she cried, almost dropping it before grabbing it by the chain. She quickly pawned it off to Tarrin.

“What’s the matter?” Tarrin asked quickly.

“It’s hot!” she said loudly.

“Hot?” Tarrin said. He put his hand near the amulet. “I don’t feel any heat,” he said, then he put his hand on it. The instant he did so, it felt like he’d grabbed a piece of stock out of Master Karn’s forge. “Ahh!” he hissed, yanking his hand back and shaking it violently to cool it. “How do you wear

this thing without getting branded?” he asked the Sorceress crossly. Jenna was blowing on her fingers, giving the woman a baleful look.

“Here, let me see,” she said calmly. Jenna presented her hands. Her fingers were red and blistered. “By the Goddess!” the woman said under her breath. “Here, you too, Tarrin Kael,” she said, in a commanding voice. Tarrin held out his hand.

His skin was severely blistered wherever it touched the ivory.

“It *burned* you,” she breathed in surprise. She put her hand over Tarrin’s seared fingers, and Tarrin suppressed the desire to yank it away when he felt *something* flow into his hand. The throbbing pain eased, and then was gone, washed away by some sort of sensation that was warm and icy at the same time, and not entirely pleasant. She let his hand go, and he gawked at it. His fingers were smooth, pink skin, and showed no signs that anything had happened to them.

“How did you do that?” he asked in shock as she took Jenna’s hands in her own. Jenna yelped and tried to pull away, but the woman’s hands were like steel, holding them in an iron grip.

“My name is Dolanna Casbane, a *katzh-dashi*,” she said formally. “What I just did is called healing, and with practice, it is something that both of you will be able to do someday.”

They both just stared at her.

“The young one is a bit *too* young,” the knight said.

“No matter,” she replied. “I am amazed that neither of them have done anything. She needs instruction before she has an accident.” She put the ivory amulet back around her neck, tucking the device back under her bodice.

“What are you talking about?” Tarrin asked.

“Both of you, you have tremendous potential,” she said, pursing her lips. Then she noticed the slightly confused looks she was getting. “Both of you have the natural talent to be Sorcerers, to be *katzh-dashi*,” she explained. “*Tremendous* potential. The *shaeram* *burned* you. I have never seen that happen before.”

Jenna looked at her a bit fearfully. “What does that mean?”

“That means that both of you must come to the Tower of Six Spires, in Suld, and undergo formal training,” she replied. “Soon. Now.”

“*Now?*” Jenna said. “I can’t just leave! My parents wouldn’t let me, and I don’t want to go!”

“Jenna,” Tarrin soothed, “calm down.” Then he looked at the small woman expectantly.

“There is no need to look so surprised,” she said gently. “Nor is there reason to be frightened. I will speak to your parents, and let them know what has happened. Then we will all sit down somewhere quiet and discuss what must be done.”

Tarrin put his arm around Jenna, who had begun to cry, then he pulled her into his arms and comforted her, his own mind tumbling around a numb sensation. “It was wrong to just blurt it out like that, Dolanna,” the knight berated as the pair left.

“I was surprised,” she said a bit ruefully, and then their voices were lost in the din. He didn’t notice the knight stop and look back at them.

“But I wanted to be a knight,” he said numbly, putting his chin on the top of his sister’s head.

They had been missing quite a while. Tarrin was still sitting with Jenna at their table, but the sun was creeping very lowly down along the western sky. His parents and the woman had been missing for hours. Tarrin still held Jenna very close, for though she had stopped weeping, she wasn’t yet ready to give up on the feeling of comfort and security she was receiving from his embrace. Tarrin wished that someone would do the same for him.

Sorcery. Although his father had many times told tales of the Sorcerers of Suld, Tarrin had never really paid much attention to them. His father had worked with them in the past, and his stories and impression of them was very good. Tarrin had been raised to believe that Sorcerers and Sorcery were good things, and that the *katzh-dashi* deserved to be treated with honor. But never, even in his wildest fantasies, had he ever considered the possibility that he would be capable of using Sorcery. That was a power for

special people, the people in the stories. Although it existed, he never dreamed that it would affect him so personally.

Poor Jenna. All her life, since she'd started to grow into a woman, all she wanted was to find a good man, marry, and settle into a life of blissful domesticity. She had no desire to leave the village, much less travel all the way across Sulasia and go to the Tower in Suld. And she was only thirteen. They had no right to take such a young girl from her parents. And though Tarrin had always wanted to leave, being a Sorcerer was not the life that he'd imagined for himself. He wanted to be a knight. Sorcery was a totally alien concept to him.

The others seemed to sense that something was wrong with the Kael, but they did not intrude. Tarrin thought somewhere in the back of his mind that they knew that this would happen to some family. Every time a Sorcerer arrived, parents began to worry about ever seeing their children again. Last year, Timon Darby was taken to learn Sorcery in the Tower, and Leni Darby, his mother, had moped around, not speaking a single word, for over three months. Timon had visited last month, and he looked well from the glimpse that Tarrin got of him. What made it seem so bad was that the Sorcerers wanted both of them, that his mother's sense of loss would be that much worse with having to let go of both her grown child and her adolescent child.

“Tarrin?”

Tarrin turned. Elke Kael was standing there with his father and the Sorceress, the knight standing a bit behind them. It was obvious that his mother had been crying. Eron looked somber and serious.

“Mother!” Jenna cried, flying from Tarrin and burying herself into her mother's arms. She started crying again, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed into Elke's wool shirt. Elke stroked her hair and held her close, crooning soft words to her daughter.

“Child, there is nothing to be afraid of,” Dolanna said calmly.

Jenna pushed away from her mother, her eyes burning with something that Tarrin guessed was pretty close to hatred. “Get away from me!” she shouted. “I don't want to go! I don't have to!”

“Child,” Dolanna said, but Jenna cut her off. Jenna raised both her hands, and Tarrin felt the most unusual sensation, a sensation of *drawing in*. Except it was Jenna who was drawing whatever it was. He could feel something, *it*, flow into his sister like a flood.

“Leave me *alone!*” she screamed. Suddenly, pure fire erupted from Jenna’s hands, and it roared at the Sorceress like a wall of blowing dust before a tornado. The fire simply *stopped* when it reached the woman, coalescing into a fiery ball in front of her. Then it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Jenna stared at her hands in shock.

“*That* is why you must learn, child,” Dolanna said firmly. “With your power, you could quite possibly destroy the entire village. But you are right. We cannot make you go.”

“Dear, you don’t have to go,” Elke said softly, putting her hand on her shoulder. “Dolanna agreed to send someone here to teach you. You’re too young yet to leave, but they can’t just let you go around like this. You could hurt yourself.”

“I don’t have to leave?” she asked in a small voice.

“No,” Elke said with a gentle smile. “When you’re older, you will have to go to their tower, but not until you’re older.”

“Mother!” she said with a sob, crushing into Elke’s arms again.

“She will learn much better in a place more comfortable for her,” Dolanna said to Elke calmly. “We have not had one as young as she with the kind of power that she possesses. In such a special case, certain exceptions must be made.”

“What about me?” Tarrin asked.

“You, my young one, you will be going with us,” she told him. “We are leaving tomorrow. And you will not be alone. Two other young ones will be going with us. Tiella Ren, and Walten Longbranch. I believe you may know them.”

“Tiella? And *Walten?*” he said in surprise. Tiella was the herbalist’s apprentice, learning the uses of herbs for healing. Walten was the son of the

village carpenter, a tall, rather shiftless young man more fond of sleeping than working.

“When we return to Suld, I will send one of my brothers or sisters here, Mistress Kael,” the woman continued. “As per our agreement, the instructor will reside in your home, so that he or she can be close to Jenna.” She turned and looked at Tarrin. “Do not feel that going to the Tower is the end of all,” she told him. “It is not required for you to become *katzh-dashi*. If you decide that the life of the order is not for you, then we will teach you what you need to do to control your power, and then you may be on your way to pursue your own life. But if you do wish to remain among us, I am certain that someone with your raw power and potential would find a position of respect and importance among us.”

Tarrin nodded quietly, thinking back to what Jenna had done, and what he had felt. It had frightened him, but at the same time, it felt....wonderful. Like life flowing into him for the first time. Was that how Sorcery felt when it was used? Tarrin was a curious person, and his appetite had been whetted by that strange sensation. He suddenly found that he wanted to know more about what it was about.

“There is little time to chat,” she prompted. “Tarrin, you must go home and pack for the journey, but you may only bring what I tell you. You may bring enough clothing for the journey. You may bring a knife for utility, you may bring any books that you own, and you may bring some of your personal belongings, such as a razor. Anything that you use in your day to day life. You may bring weapons, but not weapons of war. Your staff and your bow are acceptable, but a sword or axe is not.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because novices come to the Tower carrying only what they need, and you will not need weapons,” she told him simply. “You will need these items during the journey, so they will not be taken from you when you arrive. But you will be expected to put them away, and not touch them while there. If you were to bring a sword, it would be taken from you and held, and then returned to you when you leave.”

“Alright,” he said. Despite it not being what he wanted, that short touch on something larger was like a seed growing inside him. Even though he

still didn't want to be a *katsh-dashi*, he found the idea of learning more about the sensation he experienced to look better and better to him.

"You will return to the village after packing," she told him. "You will spend the night in the inn, so we may get an early start on the day."

"Wylan said you can borrow one of the inn's horses," Elke told him. "Go ahead and go get your things. Make sure you get enough clothing for a month-long journey. We'll be staying here tonight too, so bring back a change of clothing for all of us."

"Alright, mother," he said.

"Well scoot!" she said, shooing him away.

"Be back soon," he promised.

He went to the inn first, and after talking to the wiry, nervous-looking Wylan Ren, Tiella's father, he was on a horse trotting back down the large trail that led to the secluded Kael farm. It didn't take very long to get there, and he tied the horse to the porch rail and ran inside. He had a leather pack for when he went hunting, made by his mother, and he used that to pack up enough clothing for one month on the road. He also added in his shaving razor and soap, then got his small cooking pot he used when hunting and filled it with various odds and ends that he felt he may need. He got his pouch that had his sling and a variety of sling stones and metal sling bullets, metal cast-offs of Master Karn's forge that he formed into little balls for a sling. That way he profited off the leftover metal. The knife he'd won in the staff competition went on his belt, and two slender throwing daggers were tucked into his boots, one on each side. Eron had taught him how to throw daggers, and these were balanced for throwing. A third also went on his belt, on the other side. He rolled up his outdoor bedroll, a thick mat filled with down and scraps of wool to form a pallet-like mat, with two heavy wool blankets and a small pillow rolled up inside it. When traveling on the road, it was almost guaranteed that they'd spend some nights outside.

He came down out of the loft and went to the storage room, and got his tent. It was a small tent, made only for one or two people, but it was perfect for camping outside. He then picked up three extra quivers of arrows for his bow, and took it all outside and started lashing what he couldn't wear or carry on the saddle.

He stopped, and looked at the house, and he realized that it would be the last time in a while that he would see it. He went back in and went back up to his room, looking around just once more. He'd lived in this room for the last ten years. His eyes came to rest on a section of wall that was slightly different than the others, where he'd accidentally ran his staff into the wood and made a big hole. It had happened in the winter, and his father had made him sleep in the room with the hole to the cold outside for two days until he could get it patched. He stood on the bed, and reached up into the rafters running along the top of the attic, feeling around. He found the small wooden box, then grabbed it and pulled it down. When he was younger, he always used a chair on the bed to get up there, and hide this box. His secret box, full of all the things that a young boy thought were important. Many things had been into and out of this box, some of them even alive. He opened it after sitting on the bed.

Inside were four things. A large tooth of some animal, the sharp fang nearly as long as Tarrin's hand, a brilliantly glittering piece of quartz crystal he'd once found out along the streambed of Two Step Creek, a twisted nugget of pure gold, also found along the creekbed, and the wing. It was a large gossamer wing, looking like the wing of a dragonfly. But this dragonfly would have been nearly a span long. The wing was a bit longer than Tarrin's hand, thin and delicate looking, but Tarrin knew it was very hard and rather tough. It would also bend before it broke. It was translucent, and when one looked through it, it scintillated and reflected in all the colors of the rainbow. Tarrin had often spent hours gazing at the wing, mesmerized by the colors, and dreaming about what animal or creature had once owned it. Tarrin had found it out in the woods when he was eight years old. It was the first thing that had went into the box, and it was the only thing that had been in the box the entire time he'd kept the box. The wing was the reason he had the box; he wanted to hide something that incredible, put it where nobody could find it. He had owned it longer than anything else, and it was very special to him.

He didn't want to leave the box here. It was as much a representation of his life here as it was a possession. It had been filled with his most secret secrets through the years, and the child in him didn't want anyone else to come along and find it. He remembered Dolanna saying he could bring personal effects. Well, this was the most personal effect he had.

He packed everything back into the box carefully, and then used scraps of wool from his mother's work room to pad the contents. They'd never been jostled around, and he didn't want to run the risk that age would make the wing brittle. After making sure that everything was well protected, he closed the box and set the tiny latch on the front. The box had been a gift to him from his mother, and she'd always wondered what had happened to it. Tarrin had let her believe that he'd lost it. He went back out to the horse, noticing that it was starting to get dark, then packed the box deep into his pack, where it wouldn't have to be removed to get at anything else. Then he locked the front door, got on the horse, and hurried back to the village before it got too dark to ride.

It had been a quiet, emotional night. Tarrin had spent most of the night with his family, just sharing their company this one last time before he left to go to Suld. It wasn't an unhappy time. As the hours went by, the excitement of doing what he had always wanted to do began to take hold of him, and Tarrin's leaving was something that the family was already prepared to face. He was up well past a reasonable hour, listening to Jak Longbranch, Walten's brother, playing his lute and talking. Tarrin's departure had quickly circulated around the village, and everyone in the inn stopped by to wish him good luck at one time or another.

He'd spent some of that time talking to Dolanna, and to Faalken, the knight. He'd asked them about Suld, and they'd spent quite a while describing the city, one of the largest and grandest cities in the Twelve Kingdoms. Dolanna described the Tower, with its six smaller towers surrounding the huge central tower, which rose over the city like a tree in a meadow, how the grounds were surrounded by a magical fence, and enclosed enough land to put ten Aldreths inside comfortably. The Tower was home to more than the Sorcerers. The knights had their academy on the grounds as well, and the Tower ran a school for educating those willing to pay for it. Everyone in the school was considered a Novice, although only a handful out of each major class had the spark to be Sorcerers. Tower-educated people had quite an edge on others, so many rich nobles and merchants sent their children there to be educated and gain that edge.

Faalken described the city in a bit more detail, like the massive, grand, breathtaking Cathedral to Karas that was in the center of the city, and the Eight Fountains, one at each compass point, beautiful sculptures set in fountains, many of them rigged to spray water. The most famous was the Fountain of Swans. There were many other landmarks in the city, like the Black Tower, a tower that was once home to a wizard, and now was a cursed place. Many came to look at it, enjoying the perverse thrill of catching glimpses of the hideous things that roamed the tower's halls, and occasionally appeared on the balconies. Faalken had told him that they couldn't leave the tower, but that anyone that went into the tower was putting his life in his own hands. Dolanna had called the things trapped in the tower Demons, and she said that it was the hands of the Gods themselves that trapped them inside.

Dawn came early, but Tarrin was already awake to greet it. He was dressed and packed when Dolanna knocked on his door. She gave him a cursory glance when she saw him fully dressed. "Do you often sleep so little?" she asked.

"I don't sleep too much, no," he replied.

"That will work to your advantage at the Tower," she told him with a smile. "Get your pack and come downstairs. We will eat, and then be off."

Tarrin picked up his two packs, a personal one and one for a pack horse, and then went downstairs. His father was already up, sitting at a table with the knight as Wylan Ren set down plates of fried eggs and bread and bacon. "Morning, Tarrin," Wylan said with a smile as he passed. "I'll bring you some breakfast."

"Thanks, Master Wylan," he said, then he set down his packs and sat beside his father.

"Morning, son," he said. "Sleep well?"

"Well enough," he replied. "You?"

"Your mother kept me awake pretty much all night," he said ruefully. "You warmed up to the idea of going much faster than she did." He took a bite of bread. "Now that you've had a night to think about it, what do you think?"

“I, I think I’d like to know more,” he said. “I don’t know if it’s what I want to do with my life, but looking into the possibilities won’t hurt me.”

“That’s a good attitude,” the knight, Faalken, told him. “A man set in stone will break before he can bend.” He leaned back in his chair some. “You know, maybe I can convince the Tower to let us borrow you for a while,” he thought aloud.

“Borrow?”

“You’re Ungardt trained,” he said. “There’s a lot we could learn from our northern neighbors. They fight better than most I’ve seen. They’re not the wild savages people make them out to be.”

“Definitely,” Tarrin said. “They work very hard to be that good.”

Faalken nodded. “I think all the screaming and craziness is more show than anything else. They have a reputation for it, so they have to maintain it.” He grinned suddenly.

“A predictable opponent is a defeatable one,” Tarrin quoted from his mother’s many sayings.

“I see you learned your lessons well,” Faalken said shrewdly.

Wylan Ren brought him a platter, and also weak ale for everyone to drink. “Uh, Faalken, I need to ask you about the horse,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Dolanna bought one of the inn’s horses for you.”

“Well, that’s nice and all, but I don’t ride very often,” he said. “I’m bound to get saddle sore.”

“I’m sure Dolanna will take care of it if you start getting raw,” he assured him.

“That’s a relief,” he said, cutting into the eggs.

Dolanna came down with his mother, and they ate breakfast quietly and quickly. Just about the time that Tarrin finished his breakfast, Tiella Ren staggered down the stairs. Tiella was a pretty girl, fifteen years old and with blond hair and blue eyes. She was very petite, even shorter than Dolanna, but had a very generous figure. She was one of the most sought after girls in

the village. Every boy in Aldreth sighed and staggered a bit when Tiella Ren walked past. Tarrin had probably talked to Tiella more than any girl in the village, because she was very smart, and she knew that Tarrin didn't have a real interest in her in the way the other boys did. Although she was very pretty, Tarrin thought of her as a friend, not like *that*. She was wearing a plain wool traveling dress, one of her older ones so that the brown dye had faded, divided at the skirt for riding. She too had a pack with her.

"Tiella," Tarrin greeted. Tiella was not a morning person. Tarrin had seen her in the morning before.

"Umm," she said blearily, sitting down. Tiella had taken the apprenticeship with the herbalist as much for the fact that he didn't get up until noon as anything else. "There should be a law against getting up this early," she groaned, putting her elbows on the table and putting her head in her hands.

Faalken grinned at Tarrin, then he smacked his palms on the table. Hard. Tiella squeaked and sat bolt upright, then glared at the cheeky knight with murder in her eyes. "I love dawn," he said with an innocent grin. "I love them so much, I'm going to go outside right now and check on the horses."

"You do that," Tiella said in an ominously low voice.

The burly man got up and left without a word.

Dolanna came down with Walten moments later, as Wylan came out, saw the two newcomers, and then went back into the kitchen. He returned with three platters of breakfast, "Wylan, get two more," his father said. "I'm going to go wake up my wife and daughter."

"Certainly, Eron," he said.

Walten was a tall, lanky lad, sixteen years old, with sandy brown hair and a narrow face. His eyes were small and set close together, and his hands were scarred from working as the carpenter's apprentice. He was wearing a simple brown tunic and leather breeches, the knees of the breeches a bit thin from his need to constantly kneel. "Tarrin," he said simply as he sat down. Tarrin and Walten didn't talk very often when Tarrin was in the village, but they got along well enough. They weren't exactly friends, but they didn't actively dislike each other, either.

“Walten,” he returned. Walten was notorious for being a bit lazy, but Tarrin thought he understood why. On one rare occasion when they talked, Walten admitted he hated carpentry with a passion that bordered on holy. Tarrin could understand how difficult it would be to motivate yourself into doing something you couldn’t stand. He hated carpentry, but he loved to whittle and carve wood. It was that hobby that convinced his parents to apprentice him to the carpenter, but Walten had told Tarrin that there was a big difference between shaving a piece of wood into a shape, and nailing two boards together. Walten would have been a good woodcarver, but not a carpenter. It was the shapes and designs that Walten could design in wood that kept the carpenter, a wiry, crotchety old man named Dumas Tren, from throwing Walten out on his ear.

Tarrin didn’t quite understand the difference, but he kept his opinions to himself. Tarrin crafted arrows in his spare time, trying to master the *touch* that his father had when making arrows, but what he did wasn’t quite the same as what Walten did. Tarrin shaped the ends of arrow shafts to accept the head and the fletching, but Walten could carve remarkably human-like faces and figures into wood. Tarrin could see a difference between the woodworking he did and the work that a carpenter did, but not the difference between what Walten did and the nailing part.

His mother and sister came down moments later, with his father. Elke immediately sat beside him and brushed his hair away from his ear impulsively. Jenna sat across from him, staring at the plate that Wylan set in front of her woodenly.

“We must be off with the dawn,” Dolanna said as she sat down. “Eat quickly, young ones. We do not have much time. Tarrin, take the packs and go help Faalken pack the pack horses.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tarrin said as Elke glared darkly at the Sorceress.

Tarrin shouldered six packs, grunting under the weight, and carried them out to the large stables to the side of the inn. Faalken was there, saddling a small white palfrey, and a large roan stallion pawed the ground behind him. It was a huge horse, and Tarrin didn’t doubt that it was war-trained. “Dolanna send you out?” Faalken asked.

He nodded. “Which is the pack horse?” he asked. “I’ll start loading it.”

“Those two down there,” he pointed to the far stalls. “Those packs in the corner go on them too. Put all the food and the tents on the gelding, and use the mare for the personal gear. I have to reshoe Dolanna’s horse, and that takes a bit of time.”

“Alright,” Tarrin said, and he went to work. He pulled out one horse at a time, then saddled it with the pack saddle. After that, he put on the bridle, then began tying packs and tents to the fittings and loops on the pack saddle. After he’d loaded the gelding, he tied it to a post at the feeding trough and went for the mare and repeated the procedure. Tarrin worked with a quiet efficiency that got the job done quickly, and he finished in time to help Faalken saddle the last two riding horses and picket them at the feeding trough.

“Where did you learn how to handle horses?” Faalken asked as they left the stable. “That was professional work.”

“My father was in the army,” he replied. “He taught me how to take care of horses a long time ago.”

“I’ve heard of your father,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yes, his arrows fetch a high price in Suld.”

“His arrows go to Suld?” Tarrin asked in a bit of surprise. “A merchant from Torrian comes here and buys them from time to time, but we always thought he sold them in Torrian.”

“I guess he sends them on to Suld. Some of them, anyway,” he said as they returned to the inn. “Can you make arrows like that?”

Tarrin laughed. “I can make decent arrows, but nothing like my father’s,” he admitted. “Father has a magic touch when it comes to making them. It’s something I could never quite manage to duplicate.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, son,” Eron said. “More than half of the arrows I sell are yours.”

Tarrin stared at his father.

“Seriously,” he grinned. “You just think my arrows are better. The truth is, you can’t tell one of yours from one of mine.”

Elke laughed at Tarrin's baffled expression. "I feel, cheated," Tarrin said.

They both burst out laughing at that.

"Tarrin, what do you think happens to all those arrows you make?" Eron asked.

"I thought we used them around the house," he said.

"Son, if I did that, we'd have arrows coming out the chimney. You make more than double what I do. But now that you're going to school, I'm going to have to cut down the orders I accept," he noted to himself. "My hands aren't as fast as they used to be."

"Speaking of school, it is time for us to go," Dolanna said, standing up. "Young ones, pick up your packs and go outside. We will choose mounts for you."

Elke stood and embraced her son fiercely. "You mind your elders now, and do well in your training," she said in a controlled voice. "And remember, your room is always there for you when you come home."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Tarrin promised.

Tarrin embraced his father warmly. "Do us proud, boy," he said.

"I will," he replied.

Jenna crushed him with a fierce hug. "You write me and tell me what it's like there," she said in a breaking voice. "Maybe we'll be there together when I get there."

"I hope so, shortness," he said. "I wouldn't mind having my little sister around. It wouldn't feel like I was alone then."

His family stood by the table. It was obvious that they weren't going to see him off outside, and that was well enough for him. He wouldn't be tempted to turn the horse around and ride back if he knew they were there watching him leave. Tiella was saying her farewells to her mother and father and three siblings off to one side, and Walten was being admonished by his mother on the far side of the room about his manners and being a good boy. Tarrin hadn't seen his mother come in, but he'd been out in the stables.

Tarrin shouldered his pack and, waving to his parents and sister, he walked out the front door.

Outside, Faalken had the horses lined up and ready. Tarrin selected the largest of them, a gray mare that looked to have a steady disposition, and tied his pack to the saddle quietly. "They're staying inside?" Faalken asked. Tarrin nodded, and Faalken nodded himself. "I can understand that," he said. "I chickened out my first attempt to leave home. I turned around and rode back."

"I was thinking about it," Tarrin admitted.

"Setting out on your own for the first time is both exciting and scary," Faalken said, mirroring what Tarrin was feeling inside. "You're excited about the idea, but part of you doesn't want to abandon what it's come to know and accept as life."

"You're a very wise man," Tarrin said with a smile.

"I've seen Dolanna play this out many times," Faalken admitted. "Be glad you got her. Many *katzh-dashi* aren't quite so gentle or considerate as she is."

"Is this all she does?" Tarrin asked.

"No, they take turns," he replied as the others filed out of the inn. Tarrin noted that Tiella was looking back a lot, but Walten marched right up to a horse and started tying his pack on, humming a tune and with a big smile on his face. Walten was certainly looking forward to getting away from the carpenter. Tiella tied on her own pack, adjusting the cloak her mother had given her a bit, and climbed up into the saddle. Tarrin had his own cloak rolled up behind the saddle, a very tightly woven one that was virtually waterproof. The air was a bit cool on this cloudless dawn, but not so cold that he needed a cloak. And it was promising to be a warm day, like most days were this time of the early summer.

Tarrin mounted the gray mare quietly, checking his staff and bow, the bow set in the saddleskirt and his staff tucked into the skirt on the opposite side. He had everything, hadn't forgotten anything, and he was ready to go.

"How long is it going to take us to get there?" Tiella asked curiously.

“It’s four days to Torrian,” Faalken replied. “From there, we’ll go to Marta’s Ford, which takes six days, and then get on a riverboat and take it to Ultern. That takes about nine days. From Ultern to Jerinhold, and then to Suld, takes five days. Twenty-four days, barring bad weather.”

Dolanna gracefully mounted as Faalken climbed up onto his roan. “Alright, young ones,” Dolanna said in her calm voice. “Let us be off. Tarrin, you lead the pack horses for now.”

Turning their horses, Tarrin took the reins of the pack animals from one of the stable hands that had come out to help. Then they started down the Torrian road, beginning their month-long journey to Suld, and ultimately to the Tower of Sorcery.

Chapter 2

It was a good day to travel. Tarrin led the pack horses behind the others along the Torrian Road, as birds chirped in the early summer morning and the sun peeked through the trees to warm the earth. This stretch of road wasn't unfamiliar to Tarrin, who had accompanied his father to Watch Hill numerous times, so he settled into a comfortable muse as he let the horse plod along behind the others. Now that they were actually moving, he couldn't deny that he was tremendously excited about this trip. He was still a bit nervous over going to the Tower and learning magic, but even that was starting to interest him as he thought back to the roar of fire that Jenna had created, or the healing that the Sorceress had done. He began to think about what she had said, about earth, air, fire, water, the mind, and the power of a Goddess, and he began to speculate what Sorcerers could do.

There was a reason why he was put in the back, he noted not long after they started out. It put a fighter at each end of the caravan. Faalken took the lead, occasionally scouting ahead, leaving Tarrin to defend the rear in case something snuck on them from behind. This was wild territory, and just about anything could happen. There could be a new band of brigands that had just settled in, or a pack of Bruga or tribes of Dargu, Waern, or even a gaggle of Trolls could have come down out of the mountains to the north for a bit of plunder. Those races, called the Goblinoids, were universally malicious, cruel, and extremely hostile to human life. Bruga and Trolls were very dim-witted, but Dargu were very cunning, and Waern were downright intelligent. There were Ogres and Giants as well, but both of those races were rather gentle and more amiable than their cousins. Ogres weren't very bright, but they weren't evil like the others, and Giants were intelligent and rather friendly when not encountered in their home range. Giants were welcome in most cities, provided they were careful not to break anything. Four times that Tarrin could remember, Giants had visited Aldreth to buy some things that they couldn't make on their own. Master Karn had been commissioned to make giant-sized versions of an axe and some belt knives, which looked more like swords except for their massive hilts. It was a

testament to Karn's ability that he made them so well. The villagers of Aldreth had a good relationship with that Giant Clan, which lived two days walk to the north, in the foothills of the Skydancer Mountains.

They weren't the only forest beings that Tarrin remembered seeing in Aldreth. Being right on the Frontier, Aldreth saw more of the exotic beings than just about any other village or city in Sulasia. Tarrin had seen Centaurs three times, and had once seen a Druid, a human that was devoted to the power of nature. On a regular basis, people that looked like humans came out of the forest and visited the village on market days, bought assorted supplies and merchandise, and simply walked back into the forest. The village had a long standing practice of not asking these people any questions. They always behaved with exquisite courtesy, they paid with good money or bartered with good pelts or other valuable forest goods, and it was promoting good relations with their unknown sylvan neighbors in the forest to cater to the needs of those that chose to live there. Those visits were one of the things that kept Aldreth villagers out of the wild western forest. It had been a long standing rule that no hunting or expeditions would go beyond the farthest settlement, which was the Kael farm. Tarrin broke that rule with daily regularity, but Tarrin felt that if he was willing to take the risk, then so be it. Tarrin traveled deeply into the Frontier with regularity, much further than his parents realized, and though he had never seen any Forest Folk out there, he knew they were there.

These woods here between Aldreth and Watch Hill were wild for the most part, but there were many farmsteads and freeholdings that had been carved out of the heavy woods on both sides of the road. Most of them were out of sight of the road, down cart tracks that disappeared into the trees, but they were there. Not long after setting out, they'd encountered Arem Darn, one of those freeholders, on his way to Aldreth with a load of hay to sell. He had his wife with him, and their three children played in the hay in the back of the cart. It was unusual to see a living soul on this road until one almost got to Watch Hill.

"Tarrin!" Tiella called, shaking him out of his musing consideration of the trees.

"What?" he asked. He noticed that Walten had drifted back with Tiella, and Dolanna and Faalken were a bit up the road from them.

“I said, what do you think of all this?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I for one am a bit nervous,” she said.

“I was planning on leaving anyway,” Tarrin shrugged. “I’m just going to a different place, that’s all.”

“Where were you going to go?” Walten asked.

“I was going to try to get into the Knights Academy,” he sighed. “I knew it wasn’t a sure thing, but this kinda blew that out of the water. By the time I finish at the Tower, I’ll be too old.” He brushed his hair out of his eyes. “Maybe I’ll go into the army, like my father. If I decide not to stay at the Tower, that is.”

“I can’t wait,” Walten said simply. “I’ve hated carpenting since they day my parents stuck me there. At least this is more interesting, and I get to *do* something.” He looked up the road. “I didn’t want to spend all my life in the village anyway.”

“I’ve had daydreams of leaving Aldreth and going to Suld, maybe seeing Tykarthia, but I didn’t really take it seriously,” Tiella admitted. “And here I am.”

“Step it up, young ones,” Dolanna called to them. “We must stay together.”

Tarrin and the others urged the horses to a faster walk, and they were up with the knight and the Sorceress again.

They stopped several times over the day to rest, so that the Aldreth villagers could get themselves out of the saddle and stretch out muscles cramped by sitting down. They stopped for a meal of bread, cheese, and dried meat by a large stream, in a small meadow near the bridge that spanned it. Despite the slow pace and frequent stops, by the time the village of Watch Hill came into view at dusk, sitting atop the small, rounded, flat-topped rise, Tarrin’s legs were painfully cramped and his back felt like he had an axe in it. He almost fell down when they stopped outside the Hilltop Inn and dismounted. The sky was changing into the colors of night when the stable hands came out to get the horses. Three of the four moons were up, all three of them full, and the Skybands, the bands of light that existed

in the sky both day and night, were going from their daytime dull white and into the brilliant rainbow cascade of scillinting color that they wore at night. They weren't too wide, about the same width as Domammon, the largest moon, which rode just over the brilliant bands of color. Sometimes Domammon hid behind the Skybands. Duva and Kava, the twin moons, had just risen. Vala, the Red Moon, would rise around midnight, as it did at this phase of the month. The three moons and the Skybands filled the darkening land with curious light, just enough to see but not so much that details could be easily made out.

Watch Hill sat upon a single hill that rose out of the surrounding forest, where there was a large flat valley. During the day, a person could see quite a distance over the green-carpeted valley in which the village stood, thus the village's name. The architecture was so much like Aldreth that it was easy to see the similarities, but the layout of the village was much different. The village followed the contours of their hill, arrayed in rows on the flatter parts of the ridges along the sides, and with the inn and the smithy sitting at the top. The hill had a gentle enough rise so that the road went right up one side and down the other, with several spur streets along the flat ridges leading to the homes and shops. Watch Hill was about twice the size of Aldreth, with fifty homes and shops, and a population of around four hundred both in the village and on the farms surrounding the base of the hill. The Hilltop Inn was larger than the inn in Aldreth, a large four story structure with a huge stable behind it, painted a bright red that was quite visible for miles around.

Before Tarrin could move, he felt Dolanna put her hand on the back of his neck. He gasped slightly as he felt an icy rush go through him, but where the icy sensation flowed, the pain was washed away.

"Warn me next time!" he said in a breathless hiss, holding onto the saddlehorn for support.

"Very well," Dolanna said in a light voice. He had the suspicion that she did that on purpose.

The interior of the inn was spacious and rather crowded. The people filling the inn were both the functionally dressed farmers and villagers, as well as a few men in armor and wearing swords here and there. These were caravan guards, hired by merchants to guard their wares as they moved

them from Watch Hill to Torrian. The merchants were here as well, well dressed men, and a couple of women, sitting apart from the common folk of the village like little kings and queens, with their noses in the air. Tarrin didn't particularly like travelling merchants. Most of them were snotty and arrogant, and they always tried to cheat their customers. At least the ones that had come to Aldreth had. They'd thought that just because the people there lived in an isolated community that they were stupid or too back-country to know better. Tarrin knew that not all merchants were like that, but he'd not had any good role models thus far with which to compare them.

A rotund, tall man with a bald pate and wearing a dirty apron scurried up to them. "Mistress Casbane, it is good to see you again," he said. "I have only two rooms left, but they are yours for the taking, with my complements."

"Such a generous offer," she smiled, "but we would not deny you the coin you would make on your rooms this night. We will take your rooms, for the usual fee. I would ask, though, that some supper be brought to us in our rooms. We will not dine in the hall this night."

"It will be as you wish, milady," he said with a warm smile. "Please, follow me. I'll have the hands bring up your packs as soon as I come back down, and I'll send Emmy and Kamy up with dinner for you. We have roasted beef and stewed potatoes this night."

"I can hardly wait to taste your wife's excellent cooking," Dolanna said with a genuine smile.

The rooms they were led to were on the second floor, and were side by side. Both were the same size, and both were rather spartan but clean. Each of them had three beds in it, a single stand with washbasin and water, and pegs along the only free wall for cloaks and clothes. A lamp was set into the wall near the door, and the innkeeper lit this lamp with his candle in each room after opening the door. The room key was sitting on the basin table, duplicate of the one the innkeeper had used to unlock the doors from the outside. Tarrin had slept in this inn before, but not in this particular room. He knew that the window would have a good view of the village and the forest below, but right now there was only darkness. "Bring the packs to

this room,” Faalken told the innkeeper as he moved into the room. “Alright, boys, pick a bed. The one by the window is mine.”

“I don’t care,” Walten grunted, flopping down on the one against the far wall, by the washbasin. That left Tarrin the one beside the door.

Tarrin sat down on the bed, surprised at how soft it was, and took off his boots. Dolanna’s healing touch had taken away the pain of a day in the saddle, but not the aching weariness of a day’s full activity. Two men brought up all their packs and Tarrin’s staff and bow, along with Faalken’s shield he’d hung from the saddlebow of his horse. Tarrin and Walten took Tiella and Dolanna their personal packs, and by the time they returned, two young, pretty women in simple dresses came into the room with large trays. “Master Luhan bade us bring you dinner,” she said with a coy look at Faalken.

“Just set it anywhere, and mind you bring up the Lady’s dinner quickly,” he told her.

“Yes, my Lord,” she said with a little bob, and the two women set their trays of food and drink down carefully on Tarrin’s bed so as not to spill them, and hurried back out.

“Dinner!” Walten said happily, snatching up a plate and a mug of ale. He sat down on his bed, put his plate on his lap and flagon on the floor, and tore into it like a starving wolf. Tarrin handed Faalken a tray and flagon, then started on his own. He had to admit, their cook was very good. The meat was seasoned while it was roasted, and seasoned well, and the potatoes had spices in them that Tarrin had never experienced. It was amazingly good.

“Luhan’s wife is Shacèan,” Faalken said, reading the surprise in the faces of his charges. “She cooks in their classic style, which involves using spices. Luhan grumbles at the price of those spices, but he more than makes up for the cost with the food he sells.”

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever had,” Walten said. “My mother uses spices, but only what grows around the village.”

“These don’t grow anywhere but Shacè,” Faalken told him.

“No wonder they’re expensive,” Tarrin mused as he took a sip of the ale. He was surprised. It was his father’s. Tarrin could tell his father’s ale as clearly as a smith could see the difference between a forge and an anvil. He laughed ruefully. “This is my father’s ale,” he said.

Walten took another drink of his. “It is, isn’t it?” he agreed with a grin.

“Then your father’s a good brewer,” Faalken said.

“It’s a hobby of his,” Tarrin said. “I’ll have to tell him that people who buy it are selling it instead of drinking it,” he said mainly to himself.

“Well, eat fast, cause we’ll be up very early,” Faalken cautioned. “I suggest you go to bed right after you eat.”

“I intend to,” Walten groaned, putting his hand to his back. “Mistress Dolanna took away the pain, but not the soreness.”

“With good reason,” he replied. “What you’re feeling is exhaustion, not just saddlesores. If she’d taken that away, you wouldn’t want to sleep. And you need it. Healing isn’t just a touch and you’re well. It drains away some of your own strength, as well as some of hers, before the magic of it puts some of it back. That’s why it’s not an entirely pleasant feeling.”

“You can say that again,” Tarrin agreed. “It felt like she put ice down my shirt.”

“That’s as good a description as any,” Faalken chuckled. “It’s worse the more she has to heal.” He took a drink from his flagon. “If you’re hurt too badly, it’ll kill you before it can heal you, if the healer isn’t *very* careful.”

“What can Dolanna do with magic?” Tarrin asked impulsively.

“I’m not going to answer that,” he said bluntly. “I’ll leave the explanations of it up to her. I’d be a bad teacher anyway.” He looked at both of them, seeing that they were done. “Finish your ale and let’s go to bed.”

“What about the dishes?” Tarrin asked.

“Oh, we put them on the trays and set them out in the hall. Luhan or someone else will pick them up later. Now let’s get to bed.”

They put their dishes out, undressed for bed, and Tarrin put out the lamp after they locked the door.

Wake up, something seemed to whisper to him. *You have to wake up*.

Tarrin awoke in the middle of the night. He had no idea why; usually he was a very light sleeper, but he didn't wake up unless there was a reason. He looked around. Walten and Faalken were still asleep. The window was open, and a cool breeze blew in from the rather warm summer night outside, the top of his windowsill illuminated in a very faint ruddy light. Could that be what woke him up? That light was probably a torch, held by a watchman or a latecomer down below.

He decided he was just jumpy, being the first night out, and laid back down, ready to go back to sleep.

Then he heard it again.

It was the faintest of noises, like the sound of a man stepping on a twig, but not quite. It came from under the floor, where the kitchen was. He swung his legs out of bed, wanting to get a candle.

The floor was hot.

Tarrin pulled his feet back up quickly and reached down and put a hand on the floor. It was hot. Very hot. That could only mean one thing.

The kitchen was on fire.

"Faalken!" Tarrin called quickly, reaching over and grabbing his boots. His boots were noticeably warm where they were sitting on the floor. "Faalken!"

"What is it?" he asked in a calm voice.

"The floor is very hot. I think the kitchen is on fire."

Faalken reached out and put his hand on the floor, then snatched it back. "I think you're right. Walten!"

"I'm up," he said grimly.

"Get on your boots and get Dolanna," he ordered. "Tarrin, go downstairs and make sure. If there is a fire, get everyone up and out of the inn."

“Yes sir,” Tarrin said, yanking on his boots quickly and jumping out of the bed. He went to put his hand on the door, then yelped and drew it back. “Aaii!” he hissed, shaking his hand. “Faalken, the hall must be on fire! I can’t even put my hand on the door!”

They could hear it now, the rushing, roaring, and crackling that came with a fire. Smoke began to pour in from under the door.

Faalken jumped out of bed and grabbed his metal gauntlet, put it on, and smashed his hand *through* the wall between their room and the room holding Dolanna and Tiella. “Dolanna!” Faalken shouted. “Dolanna, there’s a fire! Get up!”

“Faalken!” she called in reply. “It is too large for me to try to affect! We have to go out the windows! Throw our packs down and jump out the windows!”

“Tarrin, Walten start throwing out packs!” Faalken ordered, getting on his boots. “I’ll go out first and catch the ladies as they jump!”

“Come on!” Walten called urgently to Tarrin as they ran to the packs stacked neatly in the corner. They quickly formed a unit. Tarrin would toss packs to Walten, who was standing by the window, who would then throw them to the ground one story below. Tarrin picked up the last pack and threw it to Walten, then he started collecting up Faalken’s armor and his sword belt. “Go on, I’ll get these!” Tarrin ordered.

“Alright, I’ll catch them on the ground,” Walten said, climbing into the window and then dropping out of view. Tarrin waddled across the room under the heavy burden of the weapons and armor, then carefully dropped them out of the open window. Tarrin saw many people in nightclothes milling about on the grass below as many of them threw buckets of water on a raging fire on the first floor and a bit to Tarrin’s right. That was the light that had illuminated the top of the windowsill. “Tarrin, come on!” Walten called, waving his hand.

“I have to get my things!” he said. “I have time!”

Tarrin rushed back in and grabbed his bow and staff, made a fast sweep to make sure they hadn’t left anything, and then ran back to the windowsill. Just as he reached it, there was a loud bang behind him, and he suddenly

found himself smashed against the wall. On his knees, he turned and looked as he felt sudden, searing heat against his back and side.

The door had exploded inward under the heat, and the raging inferno was sweeping into the room like water. Tarrin saw *something* for a fleeting instant, and then saw it again. It almost looked like a man, except its outline was one of flames, and it was almost invisible in the conflagration around it. But he could see its eyes, green slits or pure light that stared out from the flames like twin beacons of doom. It seemed to point at him, and the fire erupted at him like water rushing from a cracked dam.

Blinking away his surprise, he quickly got to his feet as the fire swept in after him. He didn't have time to do this gracefully. Just as the fire was about to engulf him, he turned and dove headfirst out the window.

There was a feeling of weightlessness, as the ruddy-illuminated ground changed places with the starry sky in a whimsical manner, and then there was a numbing pain all along his right side and the back of his head. He felt his mind swirl around like the sky and ground had done, so much so that just trying to remember how to move was quite a chore. He managed to roll over and get onto his hands and knees, but his head refused to respond to his commands to lift it, hanging limply from his shoulder as he groggily tried to get up.

He got some semblance of response from his neck. His head lifted partially up, but his brain instantly swam in a haze of distorted pain and disorientation. It proved to be too much for him. Without a sound, Tarrin slumped down to the ground as his mind descended into darkness.

Tarrin was first aware of the light. He opened his eyes as they registered a dancing, wavering light against the inside of his eyelids. He was laying on the ground on his back, staring up at the stars, partially hidden by smoke. Dolanna, in a nightshirt, was kneeling beside him, and his body registered an icy after-feeling and an exhaustion that he wasn't used to feeling. The wavering light was the fire. It had totally consumed the entire structure, regardless of the attempts to put it out, and now men and women worked feverishly to keep it from spreading to other buildings. They were well away from the blaze. Walten and Tiella stood nearby with Faalken, the three

of them holding onto the reins of their horses. Their packs were both on the ground nearby and on the horses; obviously they'd been tying them on to make it easier to move. Tiella was in a nightshirt, and Walten in nothing but breeches and boots. Faalken had found the time to put on both his clothes and his armor.

"The next time you decide to dive out of a window," Dolanna said with a crisp voice but a smile in her eyes, "try to land on your feet."

"I'll remember that," he grunted as he sat up. "What happened?"

"The fire spread faster than I have ever seen a fire spread without the use of oil or magic," Dolanna said sourly. "By the Goddess's grace, nobody was killed. You were the last one out, young one."

"Did we get everything?" he asked.

"I believe so," she replied. "We need to get dressed and decide what to do next. Tiella, come with me."

"Yes ma'am," Tiella said, picking up her pack and following the diminutive woman.

"That was impressive, the way you dove out of that window," Walten said with a grin as he tossed Tarrin a pair of breeches. "You landed on your head."

"I didn't have time to do it any other way," he shrugged. "Better a bump on the head than barbecued Tarrin."

Faalken chuckled, picking up another pack and starting to tie it onto a packsaddle.

"Where's my staff and bow?"

"They're over here," Faalken assured him. "You landed right on the bow. You'd best make sure it didn't crack."

They dressed quickly, and Tarrin checked his bow and staff for damage as Walten helped Faalken add the rest of the packs to the saddles. Tarrin was bone-weary for some reason. No doubt an effect of the healing. Faalken had said that it took some of the strength of the person being healed. Well, he certainly felt drained. He leaned heavily on his staff for a few moments,

then sucked in his breath and set his weapons into the skirt on the saddle. “I see the stable was spared,” Tarrin said.

Faalken grunted as Walten said “we had time to get everything. Sir Faalken, what are we going to do now?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, tying down the last pack, “but it would be best if we just rode on. It’s a couple hours til dawn right now, and it serves us no purpose staying when we have nowhere to stay. They’ll want us travelers out from underfoot while they deal with this anyway. That, and the longer we stay, the more that they’ll think the fire was set by someone.”

“Why is that?” Walten asked.

“Because we’d be visible, we’re strangers, and something bad happened. It’s natural for them to want to blame somebody.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Walten said quietly as Dolanna and Tiella returned. They were wearing curiously similar brown dresses, but Tiella’s was of wool while Dolanna’s was of silk.

“Tarrin, do you feel well enough to ride?” she asked immediately.

“I can ride, ma’am,” he said confidently.

“Excellent. We will start out. There is no place for us to stay, and it is close to dawn. It will just give us more time to travel this day.”

Quietly, the small group mounted their horses and, with Faalken leading, they left the village of Watch Hill with the reddish light of the fire illuminating the road. That large fire was like a beacon that was visible for miles on end, a grim monument to the passing of a fifty year old building.

It was not a good start to this trip, Tarrin thought grimly as he looked back.

It was cloudy all day, and there was a fierce wind that tore from the north. Tarrin had his cloak on, pulled around him and with the hood drawn up to protect himself against the dust and leaves that blew on the wind, the dust picked up off the road behind them and the leaves from the forest. The air had also noticeably cooled; at this time of year, with the conditions the

way they were, Tarrin knew it meant that there was a thunderstorm moving in.

The day had passed in almost total silence. They'd left Watch hill moving at a very fast pace, as if to put distance between them and the accident behind them. They stopped not long after daybreak for a short rest, eating a cold breakfast of cheese and dried meat, then had set out again at a pace only slightly slower. The fire last night had subdued Walten and Tiella somewhat the same way it worried Tarrin. They all thought that it was a bad omen of some kind, a warning that there was worse to come. Dolanna and Faalken were quiet as well, but theirs was a wary quiet; this stretch of road was wild, with the next populated area being Torrian itself, some two and more days down the road. The reason the caravans hired guards was to defend against raiders and brigands that were known to ambush along the road from time to time. Tarrin's strength seemed to rush back into him after breakfast, and he felt his old self by noon. Faalken had scouted ahead from time to time, leaving the defense of the rear to Tarrin.

He rode up past his friends to Dolanna, who was riding her small white palfrey at the lead while Faalken ranged ahead to sniff out any potential hazards. "Mistress Dolanna," he called.

"Just Dolanna will suffice until we reach the Tower, Tarrin," she said in her gentle, relaxed voice.

"Dolanna, we need to find shelter, soon," he said. "There's a storm chasing out of the north."

"Yes, I know," she assured him. "Faalken is looking for a place of relative shelter as we speak."

"I hope he's looking for something solid," Tarrin said. "The thunderstorms we get this time of year can be really nasty."

"He will find us something," she assured him.

Faalken rode towards them even as she spoke, coming around a bend farther up the road as Tarrin glanced behind them. The clouds were getting black back there. The storm wasn't too long in coming.

"Dolanna, there's a cave about a quarter longspan up a game trail, about a half longspan up the road," he told her. as he reined in beside her. "It's

been used. It's a bandit hideout of some sort, or was at one time."

"It will have to do," Dolanna said, glancing over her shoulder, back at the clouds. "Is there room for the horses?"

"Yes, plenty," he told her.

"Then I think we had best get there soon," she said. "There is not much time before the storm reaches us." She turned to Tiella and Walten, who had begun to watch the black clouds behind them and talk to each other. "Faalken found a cave for us to shelter in," she told them. "I think it best we hurry. Let us pick up the pace."

They urged the horses into a canter, and quickly reached the game trail as the first rumblings of thunder reached them. The black clouds were moving faster now, but their progress was hidden by the trees as the small party moved as fast as the horses could along the narrow, twisting trail. The forest turned gloomy, and then dark; it seemed to Tarrin that it was more like darkness than the gloom of a storm. "It's going to be a bad one!" Faalken warned. "The cave is right past that bend, so let's get moving!"

The cave was set into the face of a steep incline that marked the base of a hill. The opening was rather large, but it quickly bottlenecked into a tight passage not far inside. They dismounted outside the cave mouth. "Take the reins and follow me," he said, holding out an unlit torch to Dolanna. Tarrin felt that curious sensation again, and then the torch lit by itself. "There's a large chamber just inside the chokepoint we can put the horses."

Tarrin had to yank on the reins of all three horses as a loud crash of thunder almost instantly followed up a blindingly brilliant flash of lightning. "I'm going to need help with the pack horses!" Tarrin shouted over a sudden howling gale that tried to drown out his voice, but Faalken's nod and wave told him that he'd been heard. Tarrin waited just inside the entrance as the others led their horses into the narrow passage one by one, forcing the unwilling animals to enter the confining space as Tarrin sawed and yanked on all three sets of reins to calm the horses down. Faalken and Walten reappeared quickly, and the three of them led the remaining horses into the narrow passage with Faalken leading and Tarrin in the middle.

The chamber at the end of the chokepoint was indeed large. It was almost the size of the stableyard of the Road's End Inn, nearly a hundred

spans long. There was an obvious place set up on the north end, the end holding the entrance, for horses. There was even a water trough and fodder laid in neat stacks. The walls of the cavern were very rough and irregular, meandering this way and that, but the chamber was still rather wide at its widest point. The ceiling was also irregular, but at its lowest Tarrin could just barely scrape his fingertips across the stone when he raised his arm. The south end of the chamber had a sand-covered floor, with a firepit neatly laid out directly under a very small hole in the ceiling. The hole didn't open directly to the outside. Tarrin looked up there and saw that it was pretty badly slanted, but that didn't let the rain just fall in. Instead, there was a pretty steady stream of water that fell from one side of the hole and dropped into an area where the sand had washed away, creating a loud splashing. There was another white flash from the hole, and the whole cavern shook with the ear-splitting crash of thunder that followed it up. They all took down the packs, and pretty quickly a well organized campsite had been set up. Tarrin laid out the bedrolls as Walten set up wood for the fire, moving the stones forming the firepit a bit to get the fire away from the waterfall pouring from the chimney hole. Tiella and Dolanna were taking out food for dinner and cooking utensils. Faalken had taken a large piece of tarp, probably one of the tents, and was securing the entrance to the chamber with it to form a door of sorts. He then ducked through it to do something outside. Tarrin doubted he would be long, for it was raining like the furies out there.

Tarrin was sitting to one side of the fire, back to the wall, checking his arrows one by one in a methodical fashion, as Walten sat beside him. Faalken was stirring a stew that had been set over the fire, and Tiella was talking with Dolanna in hushed tones across the cave. "Not such a great start to an adventure, is it?" he asked.

"Adventure?"

"That's how I see this," he said. "Getting out of stinking Aldreth, getting a chance to travel with a knight and a Sorceress, going to see Suld. This beats making cabinets any day of the week."

"I'd be eating dinner at home about now," he said.

Walten gave him a strange look. "You know, there's a lot of rumors that fly around about your family," he said. "Tel Darlik used to say that all you

did over there was train to kill people.”

“Not quite,” he chuckled. “I did learn how to use weapons, and hunt and all, but how do you think we got our food?”

Walten laughed. “We never thought about things like that,” he admitted. “I’ve never even been out to your farm before.”

“It’s a farm,” he shrugged. “We have a house and a barn and a toolshed and such. Father has a brewhouse where he makes his ale, and we have fields out behind the house.”

“Sounds like you miss it,” he said.

“I do,” he replied. “I’ve been preparing to leave Aldreth for two years now, but now that I’m really gone, most of me wants to turn around and go home.”

“Preparing to leave?”

“Since I was a boy, I’ve wanted to be a knight,” he said. “Well, mother and father trained me with that in mind. Two years ago, I decided that that’s what I was going to do. I’d earn a chance to test for it, and go to Suld. If I got in, great. But if I didn’t, well, there was always the army, or fletching, or something that I could do to earn my way.”

“Everybody always used to say that you didn’t do anything,” Walten said. “You weren’t apprenticed to anyone. All you seemed to do was hunt. My mother used to say that you were a shiftless, lazy freeloader. But that’s her,” he said quickly.

“Words are words, I guess,” he said. “Besides, the rest of the village really didn’t understand. Most of them couldn’t see past my mother.”

“She is a bit strange,” Walten said defensively.

“Only to you,” he replied.

Walten laughed. “I guess you’re right.”

“She’s Ungardt. Of course she’d do things differently than everyone else,” Tarrin told him. “Ungardt ways aren’t much like Sulasian ways.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, women aren’t just wives and mothers,” he said. “Most women are as big as men there, so they can learn to fight if they want. They crew the sailing ships like men, they fight in the clan armies, they do about anything that men do. And men don’t mind all that much, cause they’re used to it.”

“That is different,” Walten said, taking out his knife and a chunk of wood and starting to work on it. “What’s your Ungardt grandfather’s name? I remember the last time he came to the village to see your mother, but nobody would even talk to him.”

“His name is Alrak. He’s very nice. He gave me a sword last time he was here, and gave mother anew axe.

“Odd presents.”

“Not for Ungardt, they’re not,” Tarrin chuckled. He put away his last arrow and secured the quiver cap. The rain sounded like it was beginning to taper off outside. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand that,” he said.

“What?”

“That you hate carpentry, but you like woodcarving.”

“Nailing boards together is boring,” he said defensively. “This is alot more fun.”

“Whatever you say,” Tarrin said with a grin.

The storm passed quickly after that, so they ate with general silence, then went to sleep.

The next day dawned clear and warm, and they set out again. The forest showed signs of the ferocity of the storm, for there were limbs and even a few trees littering the forest floor, and Tarrin spotted one tree that was split in half with its insides blackened and charred. It had been struck by lightning. The road was damp but not muddy, having mostly dried over the night, but Tarrin found that he rather liked it, for it eliminated the dust that had been swirling in the wind the previous day. Dolanna pulled them up for a moment as she considered the area. “If we move a a good pace, we can reach Torrian some time after nightfall,” she said to Faalken.

“Aye,” he agreed. “We made good time yesterday, even with the storm.”

“It was the extra time we had, from when we left after the fire,” Walten surmised.

Dolanna nodded. “We get no closer standing here,” she said. “Let us move on.”

They rode rather hard most of the day, stopping only for very brief rests and eating lunch in the saddle. The pain of the saddle had begun to creep into Tarrin’s legs and backside again, and about midafternoon he saw that he wasn’t the only one. Dolanna had stopped them when Walten began to slow down, then did her healing work on them all again. After that, they returned to the brisk canter that had propelled them so far. They encountered five or six other travelers on the road, all but one of them groups of merchants riding to Watch Hill. The last was a party of King’s Men patrolling the Torrian road to discourage bandits. They rode past the armed party without a word.

It was well past sunset, riding by the light of three full moons and the brilliant Skybands, when they topped a hill and looked down into the shallow valley that held Torrian.

From what he could see of it, Torrian was a large city, surrounded by a stout wall of huge logs sharpened at the tops. The hazy sight of buildings could be seen inside the walls, as well as occasional points of light that marked a torch or other light source along the streets. It was about ten times the size of Aldreth. Tarrin wasn’t the only one to gawk at the size of the place; he’d never seen something quite so large before.

As they started down the hill towards the city gate, Tiella looked fretfully at the wall. “Won’t they have the gates closed?” she asked.

“Yes, but there will be a guard at the gatehouse, over the gate,” Dolanna replied. “That guard will order the gates open.”

“Good,” she said. “I’d like to sleep inside tonight.”

“What is the matter?” Dolanna asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking around, “but I have the feeling that something is going to happen.”

The gate was a large pair of wooden slabs bound with iron, with a large room of some sort built onto the wall above it. A single light outlined a

small window, and at that window a silhouette appeared. “The gates stay closed til sunrise,” the man called down.

“I am Dolanna Casbane,” she called back.

“I don’t care if you’re Sheba the Pirate,” the man said back.

Dolanna reached into her bodice. “I am not she,” she said in a level voice. “But I am a *katzh-dashi*. By law and the agreements between the Tower and the King, you must obey my request to open the gates.” She held the amulet up, and Tarrin saw that it started to glow with a milky white light.

There was a span of silence after the silhouette disappeared, and then it was back. But it was a different voice. “He’s a new man, Mistress,” an older voice called. “They’re readying to open the gates now. Please step back a bit.”

“My thanks, sir guard,” she said as they moved back. “It has been a long day, and we require food and rest.”

“Most of the inns are full, Mistress, but the Duke is at home,” the guard called down as the gates began to creak and groan. The left gate pulled away slightly, moving at a slow, loud pace. “I’m sure you can get hospitality from him.”

“I know Duke Arren,” Dolanna said. “He is a most kind and generous man, and one of the best stones players I have seen in many years. Yes, I would like to pay him a visit.”

“I take it you know the way to his keep?”

“Yes, I am familiar with the way,” she told him as the gate came to a groaning stop, more than wide of an opening for them to enter.

“The Gods be with you, Mistress,” the man above called down.

“May the light of the Goddess illumine you,” she returned.

They followed Dolanna as the three younger ones gawked and stared at the streets of Torrian. The streets were narrow and a bit crooked, with large houses built so close together that they all seemed to be the same structure in the darkness. There was an acrid pall that hung in the air, what his father had always called the “city smell”, the smell of garbage, unwashed people,

waste, and stone and wood. The streets were not deserted, as people moved to and fro in small groups, or parties of city watchmen patrolled the city in search of thieves.

It was obvious where Duke Arren lived. It was a huge keep set on a small hill overlooking the river that flowed through the city. It was a brooding structure, with impressive stone walls and a deep, steep ditch dug around the walls that were filled with sharpened stakes, the towers of the keep itself visible over the walls. There was a drawbridge out over the staked ditch, down, with a gatehouse on the other side. A portcullis hung threateningly at the top of the gatehouse roof, ready to drop down to protect the castle from invasion on a second's notice. Four men stood at the other end of the drawbridge, and Tarrin could see about ten more sitting around a table set up in the courtyard beyond the gatehouse. Dolanna stopped them at the edge of the drawbridge as two of the four advanced. Tarrin could see that they were all wearing chain mail armor, and all four held pikes.

One of the two, the taller, one, called out in a friendly voice. "Mistress Casbane?" he asked.

"You have a good memory," Dolanna smiled. "I have not been here in many years."

"I remember you," he said. "You healed my broken arm. Duke Arren is here. Would you mind waiting in the courtyard while I send a man to let him know you're here?"

"That would be very good," she said.

The two men led them over the drawbridge and into a large courtyard, where they dismounted. Like the castles that his father had described, this one had several buildings inside the impressive walls. He couldn't identify all seven of them, but one was obviously a smithy and another a stable, and another looked like either a kitchen or a storehouse. The ten men sitting at the table set up in the middle of the courtyard were the only men to be seen, and despite the many torches set in holders along the walls, the courtyard was dark and foreboding. The main keep was on the far side of the courtyard, a massive construction of huge stone blocks that clawed its way well past the height of the city walls. It had a tower on either side of the main structure, which was easily four stories tall. There were a multitude of

window, both arrow slits and larger, more conventional windows, but those larger windows were on the upper floors. There was a balcony on the highest level that he could see; that, most likely, was the Duke's private bedroom. Eron Kael had remarked to Tarrin once that Torrian Keep was over a thousand years old, and in all that time, it had never fallen to an enemy army. He also said that if he ever had the chance to visit it, to go to the main hall and look for a small hole just to the right of the center on the wall where the raised dais was, where the old Duke of Torrian had been killed by a man who had used a bow so powerful that it had driven the arrow through him and so deeply into the wall behind him it had left a hole half the length of an arrow. That had happened three hundred years ago, so his father said, and it had started the civil strife that had brought the present family into power in Sulasia, the kings of the Markas line.

The front doors were massive, at the top of a steep staircase that made the entry level the second floor, and the ground floor a basement. They were made of wood, but they had hammered bronze sheathing the wood, creating a burnished look that was more than visible in the light of the two torches to each side of them. It was obvious that several servants polished those bronze covered doors fairly often. The doors opened a bit, and a rather well proportioned man wearing a red doublet and hose exited. As he approached, it was obvious he was a middle aged man, but still burly in the shoulders and spry of step. Once he was near, Tarrin saw that he was a very handsome man, with a few wrinkles around his eyes and some gray peppering his black hair and beard. Dolanna curtsied to the man gracefully as Faalken bowed, and Tarrin, Walten, and Tiella followed suit. Just a lot more clumsily.

"It's good to see you again, Dolanna," the man said with a smile. "Still roaming the countryside?"

"When I have the chance, your Grace," she replied with a smile. "Faalken you may remember, but these young ones you have not met. May I present Tiella Ren, Walten Longbranch, and Tarrin Kael, pupils journeying to the Tower."

"Pleased to meet you," the Duke said with a smile.

"I know it is late, old friend, but do you have room for five more?"

“Dolanna, I’ll make room,” he said with a grin. “I need to throw some of these lackeys and sycophants out anyway.”

“If it pleases you, your Grace, may we dispense with the visiting until tomorrow? We have been on the road since before dawn, and we are all tired.”

“Of course, of course,” he said. “I’ll have baths arranged for you, and some dinner, and some rooms with soft beds. We can catch up on old times in the morning, over breakfast. Tiv, have the hands stable the horses, and have their packs sent to their rooms.”

“Aye, my Duke, I’ll see to it,” one of the men behind them replied, as he trotted towards the stables, shouting some names.

“Come along then, we’ll go give my seneschal some work to do,” he said.

The entrance hall of the keep was massive, with vaulted ceilings and several suits of armor arrayed on posts to each side of the hall. There was also a huge, well made tapestry hanging at the far end of the hall, where it opened into the main hall of the keep. “Your Grace,” Tarrin blurted, “my father told me a bit about this castle. Is the hole still there?”

Duke Arren chuckled. “Yes, it’s still there,” he replied. “You can look at it in the morning, if you like.”

“Maybe,” he said, blushing at having said anything in the first place.

“Your father’s a historian?” he queried.

“No sir, he’s a soldier,” Tarrin replied. “He’s retired now.”

“That’s the best kind of soldier to be,” Arren said. “Kael? Eron Kael’s boy?” he asked quickly.

“Yes, my lord,” Tarrin said, a bit surprised.

“I remember him. Tall fellow with wide shoulders. The deadliest bowman I ever saw in my life. I hear he makes a living selling arrows now.”

“He brews ale on the side for something to do, my lord,” Tarrin said, a bit startled at this bit of information. “Pardon my asking, but how did you know my father?”

“He was garrisoned here for a while,” he replied. “He had this wife, the tallest woman I ever saw, an Ungardt--” he looked at Tarrin a bit closer. “Yes, that would be her I see in you,” he mused to himself. “Are they still married?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Amazing. I was sure she would have killed him by now.”

Tiella giggled.

“You have quite a family reputation in front of you, my boy,” Duke Arren told him as they went up some stairs at the far end of the entrance hall. “Eron Kael was a good man, the kind of man we like to have around. His wife, well, she was quite a work. She was the best fighter with an axe I ever saw. If not for the law against women fighting in the army, she’d probably had been a good officer. Karas knows, even I jumped when she barked commands at me.”

“I’m just surprised you knew my father, my lord,” Tarrin admitted as they turned into a wide, well lit corridor that had a thick rug that went all the way to both ends.

“He was the kind of man that’s hard to forget,” Arren told him.

They went up another flight of stairs, and were in a large corridor much like the one below, again with a rug on the floor. “Each of you pick a room,” he offered, pointing down the corridor. “People will arrive very soon and draw baths for you and bring up your belongings, and I’ll have some roast venison and some soup brought up for you.”

“I’ll take this one,” Tarrin said, pointing at the nearest door.

They all said their goodnights, and entered their respective rooms.

Tarrin was shocked at the room. It was very large, with a poster bed in the middle of the wall to his left. There was a washstand with a basin and pitcher against the wall with the door, and a writing desk on the wall facing the bed. A large footchest was at the end of the bed, and a nightstand flanked the bed on each side. A large window was on the far wall, with a tapestry depicting a charging knight on the wall beside it. All of the furniture was old, possibly antique, and it was all ornately carved with flowing leaf and vine designs. He sat on the bed tentatively, feeling the soft

feather mattress, as a woman in a plain brown dress entered. “My lord, we’re bringing in your bath,” she announced.

“Thank you,” Tarrin said. Two large men carried in a copper tub, and a procession of servants emptied buckets of steaming water into it. Two more carried up his pack and his staff and bow, and then in a whirlwind of hasty activity, they finished filling the tub, handed him soap and a couple of large towels, and set a large platter of piping hot venison and a large bowl of soup on the desk, then put a mug beside it. Then they were gone.

Tarrin sank into the bath gratefully, scrubbing three days of dirt and sweat off of himself, then cleaning his hair. Then he just soaked in the water languorously as he ate the dinner that was brought him--he didn’t want it to get cold. After his skin began to wrinkle, he climbed out and towelled off, and then dressed in a clean nightshirt and underdrawers. Almost as soon as he pulled the shirt over his head, there was a discreet knock at the door. “What is it?” Tarrin asked.

“Are you finished with your bath, my lord?” came the woman’s voice.

“Yes ma’am,” he replied.

The door opened, and she stepped in. “Would you like the tub removed?” she asked.

“Yes, please,” he said. “I don’t want to get up in the night and trip over it.”

Five men came in, and as three of them filled huge buckets with lukewarm water to lighten it, the other two picked up the tub and carried it from the room. “Will there be anything else?” the woman asked as she picked up the empty dishes and damp towels.

“No, thank you very much,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she said with a smile, and left the room.

Tarrin climbed into the bed almost excitedly, ready to get into some serious sleeping in such a nice bed. He reached over and turned the lamp all the way down, and then pulled the hood so the tiny bit of light emanating from it wouldn’t bother him. Then he snuggled in and fell asleep.

Wake up, something seemed to whisper to him. *You have to wake up*.

Again he woke up, for no apparent reason. It was still dark outside; very dark, with only the light of the Skybands filtering into the window with the warm night breeze. He looked towards the lamp.

And saw the indistinct silhouette above him.

Without thought, almost instinctively, Tarrin rolled out of the way even as the figure's arm smashed down against the pillow with so much force that the bed shook. Tarrin felt hot lines of pain along the side of his neck as he twisted aside, rolling up into the blankets and he spun aside, falling off the bed. He then immediately rolled in the opposite direction, under the bed, unspooling himself from the constricting covers. He got free of them just as the bed sagged from the weight of his attacker. Tarrin shimmied out from under the bed between the bed and the washstand and quickly got to his feet. He saw the indistinct shadow across the bed, between him and his staff. It hunkered down a bit, and then suddenly was flying towards him with shocking speed.

With speed born of thoughtless reflex, Tarrin bent his knees and twisted, just like he'd been taught to avoid the pounce of a rock lion. The shadowy assailant had aimed for his high chest, but Tarrin was now under that angle of attack. He reached up and out even as something snagged his shirt at the shoulder. It didn't register to him that the palm of his hand came into contact with a woman's naked breast. His other hand came up under a flat, tight belly, and he helped the attacker along on its flight across the room, using its momentum to hurl it headfirst into the washstand. There was a horrifically loud crack as the washbasin and pitcher shattered, spraying water all over the wall, him, and the bed. The stand itself was crushed with a loud smashing crunch, splinters and shards bouncing across the carpeted floor as Tarrin quickly reached out and unhooded and turned up the lamp, then without even looking, jumped over the bed and ran to the far corner to fetch his staff. He turned around armed, confident that that noise would alarm someone, but he was brought up short by what he saw.

It was a woman. Almost. She was totally nude, but it wasn't her unclad condition that caused him to stare in shock.

She wasn't human.

Her arms and legs were covered with white fur, to just above the elbow and just above the knee. Her hands and feet were oversized for her body, noticeably so, and were an odd cross between a human's hands and an animal's paws, with wide, thick fingers and toes and feet sufficiently large and long so that she stood up on her toes. Each limb ended with large, long, wickedly sharp claws on the fingers and toes. One of those white-furred hands was stained with his blood. She was standing with her back to him, shaking her head to clear the cobwebs of the impact, and he could clearly see that she had a long, cat-like tail growing from between the muscles at the very top of the cleft of her backside, covered in white fur. She had red hair, this creature, so thick that it all but stood straight up at the top of her head, but not so tall that the back of triangular, cat-like ears weren't visible. She turned around quickly, and Tarrin stared at what was probably the loveliest face he'd ever seen, but a face twisted into a snarl of animalistic rage. She had high cheekbones, a small, pert nose, and a sharp chin, but it was her eyes that captivated him. They were nothing more than two slits of pure green, literally glowing from within with an unholy radiance that made his blood run cold. Her body was tight and well defined; it was obvious that she was very strong the way her muscles rippled and shifted as she moved. Tarrin did see that she was wearing a collar of some strange black metal around her neck.

She *growled* at him, hunching down in an obvious preparation to lunge at him in the same manner she'd done so before. Tarrin saw with dismay that she had *fangs*. She may look human, he decided, but this was not a foe to take lightly. A single swipe from those wickedly clawed hands could kill. Tarrin held his staff at one end in the end grip, getting ready to bat her out of the air if she tried it again. She jumped up on the bed and hunkered down, almost on all fours, her growl lowering to an ominous rumbling in her throat, and then she lunged. Tarrin brought his staff up and around with every bit of power he had. The cat-creature put her feet on the floor and reached out with her hand, and *caught* his staff. Tarrin's hands felt the shock of the impact; it felt like hitting a rock. She grabbed hold of his staff and yanked, ripping it out of his hands, and threw it aside contemptuously.

Tarrin hopped back, almost stunned. This thing was *strong*. It would have taken two grown men to rip the staff out of his hands the way she just did. She stepped forward so fast he almost missed it, and missed getting his

head ripped off by the span of a child's hand as he ducked under her open-handed swipe. He stepped through her overswing, getting behind her, looped his hand around her neck, and then bodily hauled her over his shoulder in the classic Ungardt neck-throw. Done right, it broke the opponent's neck before any part of him touched the ground. It was a killing move, but Tarrin had quickly realized that only one of them would walk out of this room alive. Not only did it not kill her, but she twisted in his hold and put her feet on the floor as she came over. Before she could set herself, Tarrin lunged forward, letting his weight bull his lighter opponent. But it was like trying to push a mountain. She'd dug her claws into the stone, and he was not about to move her.

He cried out in shock when she picked him up around the waist with one hand, and then bodily threw him *all the way across the room*. He impacted the wall with a bone-numbing impact, landed on the writing desk, and then fell with the writing desk as it collapsed under his sudden weight. She was on him almost instantly, but he had presence of mind to kick out with his leg. His shin impacted her foot solidly, and despite her strength, she wasn't able to defend against it. Her legs were swept out from under her, spilling her to the ground on her side and back as she grunted in surprise and pain with the hard landing. Tarrin grabbed a splintered leg of the desk and sprung up, holding the wood like a dagger, and tried to plunge it into the woman's face. She quickly caught his wrist in her hand, stopping it as quickly as if he'd struck the floor, and her hand closed around his wrist. Tarrin heard the bones snap audibly as her inhuman strength crushed his left forearm. In a haze of pain, Tarrin gritted his teeth and fixed her with a baleful gaze full of hate as he let go of the wood with his right hand, falling from his limp hand and to the floor beside them, and punched her dead in the face. Her head snapped to the side, and the grip on his broken arm eased, but he was motivated to keep it up. He punched her again, and again, and once again, bloodying her nose and breaking one of her teeth. She seemed disoriented, so he quickly got his feet under him and stomped deliberately on her belly. Her breath whooshed from her lungs with a sound that was quite satisfactory to him. He did it again, higher up, hearing her ribs break under the force of his bare foot smashing down on her. But one of her feet suddenly was up and between his legs, and the heel of her foot smashed into his lower belly so hard he was catapulted into the footchest by

the bed, crushing it underneath him, as his back slammed into the footboard of the bed.

Tarrin wheezed for breath as the creature got to one knee, hugging a set of broken ribs with one arm as her other helped support her. He felt like he'd fallen fifty spans out of a tree. Tarrin got to his feet first, scampering around the bed and to the nighstand, where his dagger was sitting. He drew it and advanced quickly as the creature gained its feet, still a bit wobbly. He lunged at her as if to stab her, but she twisted to the side. He was waiting for just such a move. He quickly went to one knee even as her clawed hand swiped at the air where his face had been, then sprang up with every bit of power he could put behind his shoulder. His shoulder slammed into her broken ribs with enough power to lift her up off the floor. His broken arm reached around her and held her side as he ran as hard as he could, ignoring the hot lines of pain that he felt against his back and thighs, smashing her punishingly against the wall. She again lost her breath as Tarrin rebounded off of her. Tarrin slammed the elbow of his broken arm against her head, pinning her head to the wall, and drove the dagger into her heart.

Tarrin felt hot blood wash down his hand. She made no sound, only fixed him with a look so evil it chilled his blood. But instead of limply losing her strength, she grabbed his broken arm in one hand as her other grabbed the forearm of his right. Tarrin quickly twisted the dagger in her, making her shudder, but it did not stop her.

She twisted her head around, pushed his arm slightly away, and then sank her fangs into his forearm.

Tarrin screamed as white-hot pain instantly erupted in his arm, followed by a fatally ominous numbness. Tarrin twisted the dagger again, which only made her saw her teeth back and forth, making him all but howl in pain as her long, sharp teeth worked deep into his flesh, gnashing and shredding the flesh of his forearm. It was a gruesome battle of wills, to see who would stop inflicting pain first, to see who could withstand more. But Tarrin was only human, where she obviously was not. Unable to withstand the pain blasting into his arm, Tarrin let go of the dagger and put his hand on her neck, then literally ripped his wounded arm out of her mouth, tearing a sizable hole in his own arm to do it.

Tarrin staggered back, cradling his numb arm as the creature simply pulled the dagger out of her own chest. There was a great deal of blood smeared on her breasts and flowing down her belly, but the wound, that would have killed about anything Tarrin could think of, hadn't seemed to phase her much at all. She fixed him with a gaze full of hate, but oddly enough, a sort of grim respect.

Tarrin knew he had no chance against her. He never really did. And if nobody had come by now, then nobody would. But he'd given her a fight that would make her earn her kill, and he wasn't about to stop now. He was Ungardt. He would die with honor.

"Come on," Tarrin growled, letting his numb arm hang limply at his side and balling up his fist. "Let's get on with it."

She snarled at him, baring her fangs stained with his blood. She then took his dagger and threw it at him. He saw the throw coming, so he easily evaded the missile as it streaked by as if shot from a bow. The dagger struck the door, and there was a loud snapping sound as it went *through* the door and cracked into the wall outside. She then advanced on him slowly, as if she knew that he was too wounded to make any sudden or fast moves, as Tarrin tried to back up. She took her time, letting him take a step back for every step she took forward, and it wasn't until it was too late he realized what she was doing. His foot snagged on a piece of what was left of the desk, and he stumbled slightly. She lunged at him in that exact instant. She hit him fully in the chest, driving him backwards to land heavily on the floor. The back of his head cracked into the floor, making his vision dance and weave as stars filled his eyes. He managed to focus his eyes just in time to see her rear back one hand-paw, claws extended, as the other came to rest on his upper chest to hold him down.

But she never delivered the blow. She stayed like that for several seconds as her eyes registered surprise, then shock, then rage. He felt the muscles of her legs, up against his sides, flex and bunch, as if she was trying to move something or push something, but she wouldn't move. He even felt the claws of the hand on his chest shimmy and flex, as if something was holding her hand down, and she was pushing against it.

"By Karas' Hammer, what *is* that thing?" he heard Faalken's voice. Faalken came into view quickly over his view, from behind.

“Do *not* touch her!” Dolanna’s voice cracked like a whip. The creature glared at Faalken with that unholy gaze, and Tarrin saw the knight take a step back.

Tarrin put his head on the stone in relief. Talk about arriving in the nick of time. His heart was still racing from the fight, and that racing was what made him realize what was happening to him.

The numbness had spread, and now there was an angry itching and burning in the arm where she had bitten him.

She lifted off of him as if an invisible hand had picked her up, and she was pushed back and off of him. She came to rest on her knees, still locked in that position of delivering the fatal blow. Tarrin sat up unsteadily, putting a hand over his racing heart. He could *feel* it inside him, like a venom. Could she have a poisonous bite? Whatever it was, it had already spread all through him. He was almost totally numb inside and out, from head to foot, except for the itching and burning in his ripped arm. “Dolanna,” he said in a slurred voice, as he tried to roll over and get to his feet. His actions were jerky and erratic as unfeeling muscles tried to respond to his mental commands. He felt Faalken’s hands on his sides, and he was helped to his feet.

“Tarrin, lad, what in the Abyss happened in here?” Faalken asked, looking at him with a professional eye, assessing injury. Tarrin was a mess of blood and shredded clothing, with angry red welts that would develop into spectacular bruises later. His left arm was badly mangled, and he had exceptionally deep lacerations on his neck, back, and on both thighs from the creature’s claws. The room was completely smashed; Tarrin had given back as good as he got.

“It, she, tried to kill me,” he returned in a wooden, listless voice.

“Tarrin!” Dolanna said quickly. “Tarrin, did she bite you?”

He tried to find the words to reply. It took a moment as he worked through the haze in his mind. “Yes,” he finally replied. “She almost ripped my arm off.”

“Faalken,” she said in a suddenly strangled voice, tightly controlled, “Faalken, do exactly as I say. Do not argue. Let go of him, Faalken, let go of him and step away from him *very* slowly.”

“Dolanna--”

“Do it!” she snapped.

Tarrin felt a sudden sharp stab of pain in his wounded arm. He winced and grabbed it, but then he felt it again, then another pain in his shoulder. “Dolanna, something’s happening,” Tarrin said in sudden palpable fear. He could feel *something* inside him, something that suddenly felt like a knife in his belly. “Augh!” he cried, doubling over and putting both hands on his belly. His left arm was on fire, and that fire was sweeping through him like an avalanche.

In an instant, there was nothing but pain. Blinding, white hot pain that filled him like a cistern, flowing over and washing through him like fire in his veins. His small cry instantly became a howl of such agony that Faalken backed away from him like he was Death Herself come to claim him. The pain scoured away all conscious thought. But some part of his mind knew full well what had happened, and what was happening. Wherever the fire touched, his body began to *change*.

His hands cracked and split, cracked again as bones were broken and reformed, expanded, changed, and then reset. Fingers lengthened and thickened, and claws formed from the nails of his fingers. His feet lengthened and expanded, the toes becoming larger and more defined, with even larger claws forming from the nails. His back was hunched, but it was obvious that the bones in his spine had reformed themselves, adding to his height as his torso elongated slightly even as his legs and arms grew longer by a proportional amount. Tarrin’s ears simply fell off as two black cat’s ears sprouted up through his hair, just over and behind his eyes and just behind the hairline of his forehead and bangs. There was a ripping sound, and his tail emerged from behind him, pink with new skin as it grew as fast as a snake could slither, then it thickened and fleshed out. Then black fur quickly grew over it, over his arms to above the elbow, and his legs to above the knee. His teeth all simply flowed into slightly different shapes, slightly more pointed and sharper, except for the wicked fang-like insicors that grew out from the gums on both his upper and lower teeth.

Then his long scream ended. He slumped to his hands and knees, his tail hanging limply behind him and his claws retracting back into their resting positions inside his fingers and toes, as he panted in deep breaths of air. He

tottered to one side, then the other, and then fell onto his side, oblivious to the world.

“By all that’s holy,” Faalken said in a mute, awed voice, staring at Tarrin like he was a live snake.

Dolanna’s gaze was on the creature. She looked unusually subdued, her body still wrapped up in the solid air she’d woven around her. Her face carried a strangely remorseful expression, but it was her eyes that caught the attention of the Sorceress. They looked on Tarrin’s altered form with pity. The collar, Dolanna could sense, was magical. Foul magic, the type used to control other beings. She could sense the weaves of magic inside it as she probed the black metal collar. It was specifically made to force the owner to do what the collar’s owners commanded.

She has been forced into this, the Sorceress thought grimly. *Something has sent her to kill him.*

Several of the Duke’s men arrived at last, and they tried to bull into the chamber. But Dolanna halted them with a single forceful command to stop. She wove certain flows of magic into the collar, disrupting its controlling effects, and then found the clasp to unlock it from her neck. She took it off of her smoothly, and could literally see the hazy, unfocused look in the creature’s crystalline green eyes. It looked up at her in confusion. She turned to the guards. “You will take this creature to a holding cell,” she instructed in a voice that would brook no opposition. “You and you,” she pointed to two men wearing leather gloves, “you will carry her, and you will do exactly as I say. You will carry her to the cell, making sure you get as little blood on you as possible. Once you are there, you are to lock her in the cell and leave her be. Both of you are to remove your uniforms and gauntlets as carefully as you can to make sure the creature’s blood does not touch your skin. Then you will burn the uniforms. Is that understood?”

“Is it poisonous?” one of them asked.

“Not a poison, but the creature’s blood is deadly to humans in its own way,” she said. “So long as you do not touch her blood with your skin, you are perfectly safe. Sergeant, *nobody* is to enter that cell without my explicit permission. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Mistress,” the guard sergeant said in a steady voice.

“Do it,” she said. Two guards hurriedly rushed in and grabbed the paralyzed creature by her sides, then carried her statue-like form from the room, keeping her as far from their bodies as they possibly could.

“Madam, what about that one?” the sergeant asked, pointing at the unconscious Tarrin, laying on the floor.

“Leave him to me,” she said in a quiet voice. “Now leave us. I will not be disturbed. Faalken, get the cover and use it to pick up Tarrin, and place him on the bed. Do not touch any blood on him. It may be the creature’s. Then stand outside the door so that I am not disturbed.”

Faalken grimly collected up Tarrin’s limp body in the quilt that was laying on the floor and gently placed him on the bed, which happened to be the only piece of furniture in the room that was still whole. “What happened to him?” Faalken asked quietly.

“I cannot tell you that yet,” she replied, sitting on the edge of the bed with a look of dreadful concentration on her face. “Now leave me. I cannot afford any distractions.”

Chapter 3

It took a long time for Tarrin to awaken.

It had almost been like he was drifting in a deep blackness, floating in a void where he could not see, but garbled sounds and impressions somehow drifted into his awareness. He registered several voices, but could not make them out. He would drift into and out of these impressions, hearing the voices murmur up from nothing, and then fade away after a time, never understanding the meaning of the words. There was more than sound in the void, there was also smell. Unusual smells and odors touched his awareness, from simple things like the smell of candles and wine and wood and stone, to complex scents that he could not even begin to describe nor understand. Unlike the sounds, the smells were there always, flooding his shrouded mind with its bizarre information.

Tarrin also realized that he wasn't alone in the void. There was something in there with him. It was a presence, a compilation of instincts and motivations that defied rational thought. It was always there, just behind him, as firmly attached to him as was his right arm. But at the same time it was not part of him. It was something that he couldn't describe, and he pondered on it for a long time before the brilliance of light penetrated the blackness, and he realized that he was waking up.

He opened his eyes, the sensations and impressions of his sleeping mind forgotten. The light was...bright. Very bright. He was in a rather small chamber that held nothing but the bed, a small table of some sort with two chairs, the chair Dolanna was sitting in, and a single stand beside the bed holding a lamp. Tarrin didn't feel quite up to moving yet, so he spent the few moments trying to remember what happened. There was...a fight. That cat-creature woman had attacked him. Had almost killed him. She would have, if Dolanna hadn't stopped her literally at the last instant. She'd torn him up too, broke his arm, nearly ripped it off. But the whole thing was a hazy blur in his mind. Only the part where she bit him was clear in his mind.

It was about that time that he realized what he was smelling. He could smell *everything* around him. The bed, the wool of the blanket, the leather of the chair. The spicy-musky-warm smell that was strong in the room was coming from Dolanna. And there was a myriad of other smells assaulting him, smells that he couldn't identify easily, faint ones and strong ones, sour ones and sweet ones, light ones and heavy ones. He could hear quite clearly his own breathing, Dolanna's breathing, and he could just barely make out the sound of the beating of her heart. Never in his life has his senses been so lucid, so sharp, so incredibly sensitive. The light of the single lamp, the fire turned down very low, was as bright as the daylight to his eyes.

The numbness. When that creature had bitten him, there was a numbness that had spread through him, almost like a poison. Then there was pain, pain so severe that his mind didn't want to remember it. Then nothing. Had the creature's bite caused this change in his senses? Was it a side effect of the venom she injected into him?

There was more, he realized. He was feeling odd new sensations along his body. His sense of touch was more acute, but there was a sensation of things being touched that he didn't have. There was no way for him to describe the sensation, even to himself, but he was feeling things where he didn't have things to feel. He decided to try to move. He shifted his legs, putting his feet down on the mattress, getting ready to push himself into a sitting position.

Then his claws snagged on the sheet.

His heart seizing in his chest, he realized that that was exactly what he was feeling. He pulled an arm out from under the covers, and stared at it in numb shock. His arm was fully healed, and it was covered in black fur to just above the elbow. His hand was almost twice the size it had been, with thick, long fingers that had pads on the insides and on the palm. He could see the tip of claws recessed up inside his fingers, retracted out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Tarrin," Dolanna said in a weary voice, looking at him. "There was nothing more I could do for you."

"How?" he managed to ask.

"It was her bite," she told him quietly. "Her condition can be passed to others through contact with her body fluids. When her spittle got into your

blood, it began the change.”

Tarrin stared at her, his mind whirling. Then a little voice in his head carrying his mother’s imperious demeanor snapped at him to get over it. “What’s done is done,” his mother would always say. “Worry too much over what’s behind you and you don’t see the root in front of you,” his father would remark. It was done. He had been, been *changed*. Crying and panicking over it would do no good, and breaking down wasn’t going to help him now. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself up to a sitting position. While doing so, he sat on something that had a feeling of pressure. Reaching under him with his other hand, he grabbed something that felt the sensation of being grabbed. Almost absently, he realized that it was a tail. Whirling images of the nude creature came back to him then, and he realized that he looked just like her now. The fur, the hands and feet, the claws, and the tail. Probably the ears and teeth too. A run of his tongue through his mouth confirmed that aspect of his suspicion. A tentative hand to his head proved the other, as the pad of his palm crushed down on his cat-ear. It was an eerie sensation.

“What now?” he asked calmly.

She gave him a curious look. “A strange question to ask,” she said. “I thought you would have started demanding to know what was going on. Or perhaps start rearranging the furniture.”

“My mother always says that’s what’s done is done,” he said grimly. “Going into conniptions at the moment isn’t going to help me.”

“A wise woman, your mother,” Dolanna said, sitting up. “And it seems that the training you have received from your parents is going to help you. That is very good. You have a strong mind and an even stronger will, young one, and those will be you allies.

“The worst of the news, Tarrin, is that I cannot change you back,” she told him bluntly. “Your body is not what it was, and I cannot separate what was once you from what you are now without killing you.”

“I sorta expected that,” he sighed.

“The change is not just physical. You have taken in the instincts, the essence, of the animal of which you now are part. In her case and yours, it is the common housecat.” She pushed her rather disheveled hair back from

her eyes. “Now this, this is where I have helped you. Do you feel the presence of that side of you? It should be there, inside with you, but it will not be easy to recognize.”

He remembered the sensation of not being alone before he woke up. It was still there, but not very strongly. But now that he knew what he was looking for, he could find that other side of himself, the Cat, sitting in a corner of his mind. “I can feel it, but it seems far away,” he told her.

“That was my doing,” she told him. “The sudden introduction of that animalistic set of impulses into you would have all but driven you mad,” she told him. “I have contained that part of you so that you can adjust to its presence. As the days pass, the spell I have woven will weaken, and you will feel it more and more in your mind, until the spell is gone and you must deal with it on your own. But this will give you time, time to adjust to it, time to learn how to control it. Soon, in days, you will begin to hear the song of its instincts trying to guide your actions,” she warned. “That song will get stronger and stronger as my spell wanes, but it will give you the chance to learn how to deal with it without any negative consequences.”

“Consequences?”

“Tarrin, it is not human,” she said. “When you are in danger, or angry, or afraid, that part of you will lash out, just as an animal would. It does not see right or wrong, or laws, or what is proper or improper. It is an animal, and it will react like one. It is up to you to control that, because if the animal takes control of you for too long, what makes you human could be lost to it, and you will spend the rest of your days as the animal you will have become.”

Tarrin paled at that, but he nodded. Just as his conscious mind was in control, it seemed logical to him that if he had another mind, then it too could take control. Although the instincts he could feel in his mind wasn't precisely another mind, it was a different aspect of his own. The Cat was part of him, but it was not. More to the point, it was a new part of him, and that unfamiliarity was part of the danger.

“There are, advantages to what has happened,” Dolanna said quietly. “You are now a Were-kin, a Were-cat. The Were-kin share several distinct advantages over humans. Most have great strength,” she told him, and he

nodded. That woman had thrown him across the room with one arm. If that wasn't "great strength" he had no idea what was. "Were-kin can be hurt by weapons, but they cannot cause permanent injury unless they are weapons of magic or weapons of silver. I saw that you stabbed her with your knife. That probably did nothing but make her angrier."

"It did," he said. "That's when she bit me."

"You may have sharper senses now, but that I cannot tell you. I have never read nor talked to anyone that had a knowledge of the Were-cats. They are a very rare and seclusive breed." She leaned back a bit. "You are now linked to the cat, physically and mentally, so I would surmise that you share its traits. Strength, speed, and agility. The senses of a hunter."

"I can smell you right now," Tarrin told her quietly. "And there are, other smells, smells I can't identify."

"You will, with practice," she said. "And that is what matters right now. If you can gain a familiarity with your physical form, it will help you understand and deal with the instincts that are part of you."

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"Look at your hand," she said. He did so. "There are claws recessed into your fingers. Make them come out."

Tarrin gave her a look, then looked at his hand. He tried to flex his hands to get them to come out, but all they did was shift inside their sheaths. Clawing his hands did make them come out a little, but they didn't actually extend. There was a muscle in there, he realized, muscles that he had to learn how to move. Kind of like people who could wiggle their ears, they always said it was a matter of knowing which muscles to flex. It was the same with this, but the problem was, these were muscles he didn't even have when he'd went to sleep. He furrowed his brow in concentration, relying on his enhanced sense of touch, and a strange, new feeling of just knowing his body. He could feel the claws in there. He seemed to sense that they were worked by certain muscles attached to the bases. He clenched his oversized hand into a fist, and then opened it and tried again, flexing *inside* rather than outside.

Silently, five claws, each one as long as Dolanna's little finger, slid out from the tips of his fingers. They were vicious, formidable looking

weapons. He looked at them and wondered how that creature had managed *not* to kill him. They were hooked, like a cat's claws, sharp along the inside edges and at the tip. "Very good," she complemented, as he relaxed his hands, and the claws slid back up inside his fingers.

Tarrin's belly growled. "Think I could get something to eat?" he asked.

"Yes, I will have something sent up to you," she said, scrubbing her eyes with her hands. "Now that you are awake and seem to be well, I can get some sleep," she said.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Three days," she replied wearily. "The wounds you took in the fight were dreadful, and on top of that, this happened to you. Your body exhausted almost all of its energy in the transformation, which healed you as a side effect. You may not have survived had I not been here. And I wanted to be here when you awoke, to help calm the shock and fear of finding *this* waiting for you when you awoke."

"Three days," he said in wonder. It didn't feel like he'd been asleep for three days. "Do, do the others know?"

"Faalken does," she said. "I told Duke Arren what happened as well. Walten and Tiella only know that you were severely injured, but they do not know you have been changed. I will tell them now, so that they can adjust to it."

He couldn't help but ask. "What happened to *her*?" he asked.

"She escaped," she said grimly. "She killed twelve men while doing it. My spell wore off much faster than it should have, and she ripped the cell door off the hinges. She killed the cell guards, two other guards, a servant, and a stablehand. Arren tried to trap her inside the castle by raising the drawbridge, but she simply climbed up the wall and jumped off the top. If she would have simply waited, none of that would have been necessary."

"What do you mean?"

"She was wearing a collar," Dolanna said.

"I remember it," he interrupted, an image of her coming to his mind.

“It was controlling her,” she continued. “She was being compelled by magic into doing what she was doing. It was not really her fault. She was being used. I think she was fighting the collar the entire time.”

“She should have been able to kill me easily,” Tarrin mused to himself, remembering more images of the fight between them. There was any number of places where she could have just put her hand across his neck and slit his throat. She had the speed to do it. If she’d been fighting the collar, it explained much. Why he was able to outmove her, and do the things he was doing. She was distracted. His mother had said many times, “in a fight, the man with his mind on two things usually ends up with his mind in two places.” Mother’s sayings were usually graphic, but they were very true.

Mother. How were his parents going to react to, to *this*? He was fairly certain that, after the initial shock, that they would adjust to it, even as he would. But it would be painful. His parents were intelligent, open-minded people. But if they rejected him, he didn’t know if he could live through that.

He pushed it out of his mind for the moment. He wasn’t even ready to start dwelling on things like that yet. His mind was tickled by something Dolanna has said, about the collar. About the Were-cat woman being controlled. Then someone had to be controlling her, and they ordered her to come up here and kill him.

“Who would go through all that trouble?” he mused.

“Excuse me?” Dolanna asked.

“Why would they send that woman to kill *me*?” he asked. “I’m not worth that much attention.”

“It may not have been you,” she said. “Her target may have been someone else, and she simply came into your room by mistake.”

Tarrin looked at her, her smell filling his nose. “I don’t know,” he said simply, leaning back against the headboard. “If she can smell the same way I can, then if she knew my scent, she’d know who to come after. But maybe not. I guess we’ll never know.”

She stood and stretched, then leaned over the bed and put her hand on his cheek gently. "I must get used to those eyes," she said gently, "but in a way, looking like this, you are very handsome, Tarrin," she told him. "Almost as if this was what you were always meant to be."

"My eyes?"

"They are green," she said. "The same color as the woman's. They are a cat's eyes, with the vertically slitted pupils. They are very striking."

"Huh," he said in wonder.

"Well, you are hungry, and I need to sleep," she said. "I will bring you a meal and some books to read. For your own safety, I do not advise you to leave this room. After the deaths of their comrades, the castle's guards may not take kindly to you. You should take this time to get familiar with yourself. Learn how to move your tail, for example. I will have Faalken come sit with you in about an hour, so that if you need something, there will be someone to see that you get it."

"Alright," he said.

After she left, Tarrin tentatively threw back the covers, and looked down at himself. He was nude, and his tail was coming out from under him. His tail wasn't very thick, more for ornament than use, but it was very long, and covered with black fur. His legs looked mostly like they did, except they looked more muscled, and of course they had the fur on them that started at a ragged line just above his knees. He reached down and put his hand on the fur, feeling that it was both soft and rather thick, but not very long. He reckoned that from a distance it would almost look like black breeches. His feet were similarly oversized, wider through the ball of his foot, almost like a paw, with long, thick toes that were tipped with those nasty claws, claws that wouldn't entirely retract into his toes. They were much larger than the claws on his fingers. There wasn't a pair of shoes out there that would fit those feet. He sat up and pulled a leg up, then grabbed the oversized foot in his hands and turned it so he could look at the bottom. He was surprised at how easily his foot rotated like that, and he saw that the bottom of his feet were covered with two thick pads, much like his hands were. One was at the ball of his foot, and the other at the heel, with smaller pads on the bottom of each toe.

Swinging his legs over the bed, he shakily stood up on his new legs. He was very weak still from what had happened, but he could actually *feel* the muscles shift and play under his skin as they worked to put him on his feet. Despite the weakness, he realized at that moment that he had every bit of the inhuman strength and power that the woman had. Despite his weakness, he felt light as a feather, and it required almost no effort to move his own weight. On standing, his tail seemed to come to life of its own volition, and that was when he realized that it wasn't just for show. He nearly overbalanced forwards, but his tail swished deeply behind him and recentered himself on a stable balance. It began to move on its own, swishing back and forth in a rhythmic motion, and it had to be the oddest sensation he'd ever felt in his life. He almost instinctively stood only on the balls of his feet, heels off the floor, understanding why they were so wide. Stability. There was one other thing that got his attention, and that was the hair. His hair was extremely long, falling well down his back, and very, very thick. It was the same blond color it had been before. He wasn't used to the weight of it, nor the way it swayed and swished whenever he moved. It was an extremely disconcerting sensation.

He saw his clothes neatly folded at the foot of the bed, and he sat down again and picked up his trousers. He saw that they'd been modified, with a small hole in the back and a slit leading to it, with a pair of buttons. Dolanna had already made clothing for him to take his tail into account. He sat down and carefully put his leg inside, then curled his toes to keep the claws from snagging. He repeated it with the other leg, then stood up and buttoned them in the front. It wasn't easy, because his fingers were so large now, but he somehow managed. The back buttons, however, were another story. Tarrin managed to twist himself in such a way that he could actually see behind himself; Tarrin had never been able to twist like that before, and he realized that his entire back and spine were built differently than his human one had been. He worked for a very long time to get the small buttons through the holes, but the small things eluded even his best attempts. Growling a bit in frustration, he popped out the claws on his hand and pinched the little button between them, then managed to jam it through the slit. He repeated the process with the other button, managing it on the fifth try.

She'd left him a white wool shirt, with laces at the front, and long, wide sleeves. It was much easier to get into that, but the laces were quite beyond him. These large hands had obvious drawbacks. They were very dexterous, but their size made manipulating very small things extremely difficult. He figured that he'd be able to do it with practice, but he didn't much feel like fooling with it.

Dolanna opened the door, holding a tray so filled with food that she had trouble holding it up. She gave him a cursory glance as she entered the room, closing the door with a foot, and set the tray down. Tarrin looked at her. Something was....wrong. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, either. She looked the same as she always had, but somehow, she didn't. As she got closer, he had to look down at her more and more, and then he understood. She was shorter.

That meant that he had to be taller.

He looked up at the ceiling. If this ceiling was the same height as the one in the other room, then he *was* taller. It was noticeably lower than it had been.

"Is it just me, or are you shorter?" he asked her.

"You grew by half a span," she told him simply. "As if you were not tall enough. You are taller than most Ungardt now." She opened the door again and picked something up off the floor, and then came back in. They were books. "How does it feel?"

"Strange," he said, looking down at himself. "But in a way, it doesn't. It's like it's always been like this."

"Those are your instincts," she told him. "Do not ignore them, Tarrin. They may try to guide your actions, but they also will give you important information. You must learn to listen to them without letting them control you. It is a balance you must strike within yourself, a balance between man and animal, with the man guiding."

He nodded. There was no way he could ignore something that just came to him unbidden. But, as she said, he couldn't let it control what he did.

"Faalken will be along in a while," she told him. "He told me that he thought you would not mind a distraction, so he is bringing a stones board."

“I think he’s right,” he said. “I won’t mind someone to talk to at all.”

“Go ahead and eat, and Faalken should be along,” she said. “He is going to the city market to buy something, and will come visit you when he returns. That should give you time to eat in peace.”

“Alright.” He reached out and took Dolanna’s hand gently, feeling how warm her skin was, and how fragile that she seemed to be. “Dolanna, I want to thank you,” he said. “I know you couldn’t have stopped it, but at least you’ve given me a chance. Thank you.”

“Oh, dear one,” she sighed, giving him a smile, “it is I who should thank you. I cannot help feeling responsible for this. And I want you to know, that if you never need anything, anything at all, I will always be about to help you. It is the least I can do for you after bringing you here, where this could happen.”

“Would, would you send a letter to my parents?” he asked. “They need to know about this.”

“I already have,” she told him. “They should have it by now. I made sure to tell them not to come, Tarrin. I felt that you would need time to grow accustomed to it before you could face them.”

“Thank you,” he said, because she was right. If he saw his mother right now, looking like he did, and she rejected him, it would destroy him. Better to face it himself than run the risk of that.

“I will return after I have rested, bathed, and eaten,” she told him. “Then we will talk of what is to come.”

“Eating is a good idea,” Tarrin said, the wonderfully sharp smells of the tray drawing his attention to it.

“Enjoy,” she told him, leaving.

Tarrin never knew food could taste that way. Everything seemed fifty times what it had been before, and he found that the tastes of some foods had changed somewhat. Mutton had always been bland to him, but now it had a texture and a subtle flavor that he enjoyed immensely. The tray was filled with dishes of meat, and nothing else, with a mug of plain water. There was mutton, pork, beef, venison, rabbit, and even goose and chicken. He found that they all had tastes related to their scents, so much so that the

taste of it was the base of the scent it gave off. He figured that if he didn't like the smell of something, odds were that he wouldn't like the taste of it either. He sampled each of them, testing the new taste of it and comparing it to what he remembered, then he attacked the entire tray and devoured it. When he was done, he marveled that he was capable of eating so much. But he was wonderfully full, and the contentment of that simple condition amazed him. No doubt that it stemmed from the instincts that were inside his mind now.

It was all so strange. By all rights, he should be having a complete panic attack. But he was not. It was as if the instincts in his mind had forced him to accept the change that had been wrought on him. Yes, he was upset, and very frightened about what had happened to him, but even now it felt...right. Just as Dolanna said, he felt as if this was the way that he was supposed to be, that he had been incomplete before this. It was probably the instincts doing it to him...and in a way, he was glad of that. At least this feeling of normalcy was somewhat comforting.

He stood at the window, looking down into the courtyard, wondering if he'd have the courage to walk across it. It was painfully obvious that he didn't belong in the human world anymore. In a place like Aldreth, things were different. The proximity to the Frontier made the villagers receptive to non-humans. But this wasn't Aldreth. This was Torrian, where non-humans walking down the street were quite an event. They would either ignore him, stare at him, or run from him. There were non-humans in port cities, the sea-faring animal people, the Wikuni, but Torrian was far from the sea. Maybe in Suld, where there were many Wikuni, he would be able to walk down the street. But here, he wasn't so sure.

The door opened. Tarrin looked over his shoulder, and saw Faalken coming into the room. Faalken's rough, outdoor-like scent touched Tarrin's nose, and he filed it away in his mind for future reference. Faalken had a stonewood board in his hands, as well as a couple of mugs and a leather pouch.

"You look, impressive," Faalken told him.

Tarrin looked down at his hand, flexing out the claws and watching in mused wonder. "Something like that," he replied quietly. "I'm getting used to it, though."

“How does it feel?”

“I can’t describe it, Faalken. There are sounds and smells and sights I see and hear and smell, that I just can’t describe. You have milk and ale in those mugs,” he told him. “I think you were either in a rush or working out. You’ve been sweating, and your heart’s still a bit fast. And you were eating a meat pie.”

Faalken blinked, then chuckled ruefully. “Right on all counts,” he admitted. “I think I understand what you mean then. Feel better?” he asked as he put the stones board on the small table.

“Much,” he replied. “Just eating did wonders.”

“Did Dolanna tell you what’s happened? With the other one and all?”

Tarrin nodded.

“Well, as soon as she’s sure you’re alright, we’ll be moving out,” he said. “Dolanna wants to get you to the Tower immediately. If there are any side effects or complications over what happened to you, there isn’t a better place to be.”

“She didn’t tell me that,” he said.

“She probably didn’t want to worry you,” he said, sitting down and pushing the mug of milk towards him. Then he opened the pouch and poured the stones out onto the board. “She probably want you to only think of one thing at a time. I can’t argue with it, but I prefer a more direct method of doing things. You want white or black?”

“I’ll take black,” he said as he moved away from the window. He looked at the chair a moment, then managed to figure out how to sit down in it without pinching his tail behind him. He did it by turning the chair around and straddling it, crossing his arms over the back, which was now in front of him.

“Kind of hard, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Sorta,” he said. “So far, all the tail’s done is move by itself. I can’t figure it out.”

“Practice,” Faalken shrugged. “It’ll give you something to do while you’re waiting for me to lose.”

“I’ll do that,” he promised.

Faalken was a good stones player, so there was a considerable amount of time between moves. Tarrin took that time looking back at his tail when he wasn’t studying the board, sensing what he felt when it moved, what he felt when he touched it, and how it felt as it moved through the air. He took all these sensations and started picking through them, until he thought he had a good idea of where the muscles were, which ones were which, and what he had to do to get some reaction out of it. Reaction that wasn’t reflexive, anyway. He sucked in his breath and tried to make it stop moving.

And got nothing for his trouble.

Furrowing his brow, he tried again, but still there was nothing.

He decided that he was going at this the wrong way. Instead of making it stop, he decided to make it move the way he wanted it to. He watched it sway back and forth of its own volition, studying what he was feeling in combination with what he was seeing. “Your move, Tarrin,” Faalken prompted. Tarrin turned around and studied the board for a few minutes, and placed a stone on the board, then went back to watching his tail. After a few more minutes, he thought he had it. Instead of making it stop, Tarrin tried to make it stick straight out.

And it did.

He was a bit amazed. Straight, his tail was longer than his leg, over half again as long as his leg, it looked. A good piece of it would drag the ground if it went limp. When it was moving, and looped and curled, it didn’t look that long. Tarrin tried something else, bringing his tail around his body. It didn’t move smoothly, but it did manage to curl around his side. It was very flexible, he noticed. It kept wanting to go back to what it was doing, and that made it hard to keep control of it.

“Having fun?” Faalken asked.

“This isn’t easy,” Tarrin told him. “It has a mind of its own.” Tarrin let it slide up his side, feeling the fur slide by even as the tail felt his shirt ghost by, then slipped it over his shoulder and wrapped his tail around the back of his neck. The tip drooped down nearly to his waist. He wondered how strong it was. If it had the same inhuman strength he did, then it would actually be a rather formidable surprise. It may even support his weight.

“Not bad,” the knight said. “Your move.”

Tarrin put a stone down on the board. “I was wondering how that creature got up to your room,” Faalken said.

“With these,” Tarrin replied, showing Faalken his claws. “As strong as she was, she could have driven the tips into the stone and climbed up that way. I think *I* could do it.”

“Probably,” he said, “but are you sure she was that strong?”

“Faalken, she threw me across the room with one arm,” Tarrin told him. “She was strong enough.”

“Are you sure that happened?”

“Would you like a demonstration?” Tarrin asked him testily.

“As a matter of fact, I would,” he said, standing up. “I’m curious about this, and it’ll give you the chance to come to understand yourself a little better.”

Tarrin stood up, got in front of the shorter, stocky man, grabbed him by the upper edge of his breastplate, and hauled him into the air. Tarrin held him at arm’s length up and out, letting Faalken’s feet dangle well off the floor. Tarrin looked up at him calmly as Faalken’s eyes bulged a bit, and he grabbed Tarrin’s wrist with both hands reflexively. “And this isn’t even much of a strain,” Tarrin told him. “I can throw you, if you’d like.”

“I get the idea,” Faalken said, a bit weakly.

Tarrin set him down on his feet gently, then Faalken grinned at him.

Tarrin gave him a look. “You did that on purpose,” he accused.

“Yes,” he said. “Dolanna told me about you, about what the change did to you. I wanted to see if you were aware of it yourself. Now then, it’s my move.”

They played five more games in relative silence, with occasional idle chatter, and Tarrin practicing with his tail, and then with voluntarily moving his ears. The ears were easier and harder at the same time; it didn’t take him long to figure out how to move them, but they instantly moved towards any sound on their own. They’d often take off on him in the middle of an

attempt to move them, when Faalken made a sound. Tarrin couldn't have had anything better. It was a sense of normalcy to him, and the burly knight did everything he could to make Tarrin feel at ease. He never stared, never blinked, never flinched, even when Tarrin accidentally touched him. What Faalken couldn't understand was that the instincts in Tarrin's mind had forced the acceptance of the change onto him, that, despite it only being hours since he'd awoke to discover himself altered, he had already come to accept it as a new part of his life. Not to be pined over and fretted about, but to be learned and overcome. He was still determined to go to the Tower, to go on with his life. This just changed things. He doubted that he could get into the army like this, but he was sure that he could find something to do, something where *this* would make very little difference. There was so much of his life that was now thrown up in the air. And this afternoon of playing stones made everything seem like it would work itself out.

There was a knock at the door. "Who is it?" Faalken called. Tarrin didn't know who it was either; the faint scent coming under the door wasn't Dolanna, and hers was the only other man-scent he knew.

"It's Arren," came the reply.

"My Duke, come in," Faalken said, a bit nervously.

The door opened, and the middle-aged Duke Arren entered the room. He was dressed in a black doublet and hose, the doublet with silver thread embroidered into the shape of a hawk on the front. His eyes were a bit tired, and he just waved them off when both of them moved to rise in his presence. "There's no need for any of that," he said. "Tarrin, I'd like to apologize--"

"My Lord, there's nothing you could have done," he cut him off. "Nothing you could have done would have stopped her, even if you knew she was coming. There's no blame to be taken. I'm not dead, you know. I'll learn to deal with this."

"I'd have to agree with you," he said, pulling the third chair over to the table and sitting down. "She killed twelve men escaping from the cells. Twelve men, and two of them were the best fighters I had."

"They had no idea what they were dealing with, my Lord," Tarrin said. "The only reason I survived was pure, sheer luck. And Dolanna." He looked

at his hands. “I rather prefer living like this to being dead, so if this is price I pay to keep living, then so be it.”

“You’re rather calm about this,” Arren said.

“I don’t have time to run around screaming in apoplexy,” Tarrin said dryly. “I have better things to do.”

“He’s part Ungardt, Duke Arren,” Faalken reminded him.

“Ah, yes, that famous Ungardt no-nonsense stoicism,” he mused. “If it were me, I *would* be running around screaming,” he admitted.

“No,” Tarrin said quietly, “you wouldn’t. It’s hard to explain, but part of it *makes* you accept it. I’ve only been like this for a few days, and only one of those awake, but it’s like I’ve been like this all my life,” he said quietly. “I do have trouble making these new parts move, but they feel like they’ve always been there. This feels....right to me. If I were turned back to a human, I’d feel like, like I lost a part of myself.”

Arren looked at him soberly. “An intriguing side effect,” he mused.

Dolanna’s scent touched him just as he heard her voice. “The Tower will want to study him,” she said from the doorway. She’d bathed, and was wearing a clean dress. The dark circles under her eyes were gone, and she moved with that familiar crisp precision that he knew her to have. “But on the other hand, he will have a chance there to better learn how control his animal half. It is a controlled environment, where the stimulus that could make him lose control can be contained and separated from him.”

“Dolanna,” Arren and Tarrin said together. “How do you feel?” Tarrin added.

“I feel rested,” she replied. “How do you feel, young one?”

“Refreshed,” he replied. “Strong. The meal did wonders for me.”

“I rather thought that it would,” she told him, taking his hand as he stood. Her small hand was swallowed up in his huge hand-paw. She turned his hand over and touched the back of it with her other hand, feeling the short, silky black fur that covered it. “How does it feel?” she asked.

“It feels...like this is the way I’m supposed to be,” he told her soberly.

“That is very good,” she told him confidently. “The harder you fight against it, the harder it is to control it. Part of the key to controlling it is to allow it to try to guide you, but not to control you. There is a delicate balance in that, and that is what you will have to learn.”

“If I ignore it, it starts to scream at me?” he asked.

“Precisely,” she said with a smile. “You do not want it to do that.” She looked at them all. “We will be leaving tomorrow at dawn,” she said. “Tarrin, I have had all of your clothes altered so that you can wear them.”

“Uh, Dolanna, what am I going to do?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, am I riding a horse?”

“I would imagine so,” she replied. “You must face the public at some point, Tarrin. You cannot live your life in this room. It is best to get it over and done with at the outset, so that it is not a fear that nags at you.”

“I guess,” he sighed, staring at his hand.

“Let’s take it a step further,” Arren said. “Tarrin, you will dine with us tonight,” he ordered. “I’ve told my people what happened to you. Let’s put you out where you can see that people aren’t going to scream in panic. They may stare, but that’s about all.”

“A good idea,” Dolanna agreed.

“What time is it now?” Tarrin asked.

“Nearly sunset,” Faalken replied.

“We’ll be dining in about an hour,” Arren told him.

“I guess, my Lord,” Tarrin said dubiously.

“Well, we have time for one more game of stones,” Faalken urged.

“Then we’ll leave you to that,” Arren said. “Come, Dolanna, you and I have some catching up to do.”

“Indeed. I will send a handservant to fetch you at dinnertime,” Dolanna told them, and the pair exited as Tarrin and Faalken bowed.

They sat back down and started a new game, but Tarrin's mind wasn't much in it. The idea of going into a public place was admittedly frightening, but on the other hand, it was necessary. Like Dolanna had said, he wouldn't be living in this room his entire life. He'd thought to himself that he was going to have to learn how to live with this startling new change...well, going to eat in the main hall would certainly qualify as learning. He wondered if he and Dolanna were rushing things a bit, but on the other hand, considering what had happened, maybe they weren't going fast enough. The only way for Tarrin to learn, learn how people would react, learn about himself, was to do. And sitting in the room didn't teach him much. Still, the concept of it was frightening. He couldn't shake the vision of a gang of men suddenly turning on him with swords, calling him a monster. He knew that it wouldn't happen, couldn't happen, but the thought was there nonetheless, and nagging fears were rarely rational or logical.

It was both with anxiety and anticipation that he stood when there was a knock at the door. A slim, pretty young girl with dark hair opened the door. She gave a slight start when she saw him, but her expression remained open and cordial. "My Lords, Duke Arren is calling all to dine," she announced.

"I was losing anyway," Faalken said sourly, standing up. "We'll be along in a moment," he told her.

"I will inform his Grace," she said with a little bob of a curtsy, then she departed.

"Dolanna doesn't take no for an answer, does she?" Tarrin asked sagely, noting her comment to report their status to the Duke.

"I've yet to see her do it," Faalken grunted, putting his sword belt back on. "Let's go eat."

Tarrin stepped out into the hall with trepidation. The smells outside were all man, criss-crossing each other maddeningly along the corridors to such an extent that the individual scents blurred into a musky, slightly unpleasant miasma. The smells of food were in the air as well, faint but present. The candles in sconces on the walls seemed bright to his eyes, and he could hear the faint steps of people all around. Faalken stepped out into the hall behind him and closed the door. "That way," he pointed, and they started out.

About halfway down the hall, a scent unlike anything Tarrin ever smelled touched his nose. It was so striking in its utter perverse nature. Where most people gave off the smell of life, this smell was the smell of death. Of *evil*. Tarrin had no idea how he knew that, but he did. He felt his ears lay back on his head, and he instantly assumed a wide-footed stance. In that instant, he got his first taste of the animal within him. At the smell of that *evil*, it reared up in his mind and flooded his consciousness with impressions and urges to seek out the source of it and destroy it. It was unnatural, the scent, otherworldly, the antithesis of everything that was gentle and good, against life itself. As a creature of nature, tied to it with mystical bonds that transcended human comprehension, the existence of the *evil* was an abomination, and it had to be destroyed.

Tarrin put a hand to his head, trying to clear away the homicidal impulses, but it was far from easy. He did what Dolanna said, listening to them but not letting them control him, and not ignoring them.

“What’s wrong?” Faalken asked. “Are you alright?”

“There’s something here,” he said in a low, growling voice, still fighting to keep from charging off and killing whatever it was. “Something evil.”

“Evil? How--”

“I can smell it,” he said in a low voice. He looked down the hallway, into the shadows near the stairs, and he noticed that the shadows were a bit *too* dark. Had he not had eyes so sensitive to light, he would never have noticed the discrepancy. At that instant, the instincts howled in his mind, and he barely suppressed the notion to charge. “It’s up ahead, in the shadows past the stairwell.”

“I don’t see anything,” Faalken said back.

Tarrin grabbed a candle off the wall in an innocuous move, then suddenly hurled it ahead with terrific force. The candle passed directly through those shadows, and they seemed to swirl around the speeding candle as it passed through, like smoke, rippling and reverberating in a blatantly visible pattern.

“Shadows don’t do that,” Faalken said flatly, drawing his sword.

But the swirling shadow simply vanished without a sound, and the death-stench evaporated like mist. Tarrin looked around in confusion, hardly believing what his nose was telling him. “It’s gone,” he said in surprise.

“Can you still smell it?”

“No, when it disappeared, the smell just disappeared too,” he told him.

“Let’s go tell Dolanna about this,” he said, ramming his sword home in its scabbard.

Tarrin’s nervousness about going into public was banished by this new feeling of anxious fear. If it could appear as quickly as it disappeared, it could be on them before either could blink if it appeared close enough. Tarrin kept every sense open and scanning, looking for any trace, smelling for the faintest whiff, anything, that would give them a split-second’s warning. He was so wrapped up in it that he stopped in surprise when they entered the main hall.

The hall was a grand affair, over one hundred paces long and about seventy-five paces wide. The floor was filled with tables, and those tables were occupied. The smell of it almost bowled him over as a tidal wave of scents stacked one on another assaulted his nose. The murmuring roar of the more than hundred people in the hall confused his ears, and the torches and candles burning in the room gave off myriad shadows that tried to draw away his eyes. Numerous dogs prowled around the tables and among the rushes, sometimes fighting among themselves for the largest scraps thrown from the tables. The general din quieted significantly as the people became aware of him, staring at him and whispering among themselves.

Much to his surprise, he stood up tall and straight and stared back at them until they all looked away.

He had no idea where that came from. Perhaps that too was the instincts, the Cat, at work.

He pondered at it while Faalken led him across the room, the eyes of the hall following him as discreetly as they could manage. He was vaguely aware of the song in his mind, the murmuring sounds that represented the Cat, aware that it was growing stronger inside him. He hadn’t realized that it could be so strong so fast; Dolanna had said that she had contained it,

dulled its power so that Tarrin would have a chance to get used to it gradually. If it was this strong now, he shuddered to think of how strong it would be when it was contained no longer. But there was no failure in this struggle. Dolanna had already warned him that if he failed to control the Cat, it would drive him mad. And some part of himself knew it too.

They reached the Duke's table, on the raised dais at the end of the hall where his ruling seat usually stood. There were seven people seated at the table. Arren, Dolanna, Walten, Tiella, and three other people that Tarrin didn't know. Two of them were middle aged men much the same age as Arren, one wiry and thin and the other with the same wide-shouldered stockiness that said he was used to wearing armor. The other person was a woman. She was rather young, with sharp, strong features, more handsome than she was pretty. Her hair was a chestnut brown, and she was wearing a rather elegant gown. Arren stood and welcomed them in a loud, calm voice, then offered them seats at his table. Tarrin watched Tiella and Walten carefully for a moment, watching them gape at the change in him. But, to their credit, neither of them flinched or looked away. Tiella even smiled slightly.

Tarrin leaned in close to Dolanna as he passed her seat. "We have to talk. Now," he told her in a hushed voice.

She gave him a calm, curious look, then looked at Faalken, who nodded quickly and slightly. Dolanna stood and gave Arren a warm smile. "I have need to speak with the young one a moment, my Duke," she told him. "If you will excuse us?"

"Certainly," he said with curiosity tingeing his voice.

Tarrin led Dolanna over to the corner of the grand hall, then turned to face her with his back to the wall. Faalken joined them quickly. "Dolanna, I saw something up in the hallway. It was something like a living shadow. If it didn't smell the way it did, I may not have seen it."

"Smelled? How did it smell?"

"Evil," he told her. "Death, decay, hatred, but it was evil," he said with a shudder.

"A shadow, you say?"

“Aye,” Faalken told her. “Tarrin threw a candle at it, and its body looked like it was made of liquid shadow.”

“A Wraith!” she gasped. “What would a Wraith be doing here?”

“What is a Wraith?” Tarrin asked.

“It is a creature summoned from the Lower World,” she told him. “It is the spirit of a man who had done great evil in his life. They are not free, they must obey the orders and commands of the Wizard who summoned them. It was not here by chance.”

“Then why was it here?” Faalken wondered.

“That I cannot tell you, but the fact that it was here does not bode well. It may have been sent to kill someone, or merely to spy. Their shadow-like bodies make them excellent spies. Arren must know of this immediately. That creature may be eyes for a hostile force.”

“Dolanna, if it was eyes for a hostile force, it wouldn’t have been sitting at the end of a closed hallway,” Faalken told her. “If it was there to spy, it was looking for a specific person that walked along that hallway.”

They both looked at Tarrin.

“Possibly,” she answered the unspoken question. “If the Were-cat was sent to kill him, it may have been checking to see if she was successful.”

“And now it knows that she failed.”

“Why would that matter?” Tarrin asked. “I’m a nobody. Why would they be watching me?”

“I do not know,” she said. “And that is not a good thing. Somebody outside is acting on information I do not have. If that is it at all. It may have had an entirely different mission in mind.” She pursed her lips. “But it is best to assume the worst, so that is what we will do. We cannot leave now. Night is the time of the Wraith. They cannot exist in open sunlight, so we will leave in the morning, when their eyes cannot follow and the summoner must rely on another means of spying us. In the meantime, everyone will move into an apartment with only one entrance and as few windows as possible.”

“But what about the dinner?” Faalken asked.

“As of right now, it is of no moment.” She stepped slightly away from Tarrin. All three of them looked towards the raised table, and it was only seconds before Arren looked in their direction. Dolanna made a discreet gesture for him to join them, and he immediately stood up.

“Something’s wrong,” he said soberly as he joined them.

“Tarrin and Faalken found a Wraith in the passageway outside his door,” she told him bluntly.

“A Wraith, eh?” Arren said grimly. “That’s not a good sign.”

“We do not know why it was here, but we are going to assume that it is part of what happened to Tarrin. We will leave at dawn tomorrow.”

“Good,” he interrupted. “If there’s a Wraith after you, you sure as light don’t go outside in the dark.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Until then, I am putting our group out of eyesight. I need from you an apartment, with two or three goodly sized rooms, with only one door opening out to the keep. And with as few windows as you can manage.”

“I have something like that,” he said. “It’s a guest apartment, with a bedroom, a room for a maid, and a sitting room. It only has two windows, one in each bedroom, and a single door to the hallway.”

“That will do,” she told him. “Tarrin, go to Walten and Tiella and have them come here.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said immediately, then he left the trio and walked over to the table.

“Tarrin, you look....different,” Tiella said. “Not bad, just different.”

Tarrin’s change was the last thing on his mind. “Dolanna wants to talk to us, now,” he told them. “Come on.”

Walten looked at the food on his plate and sighed, then he stood up.

“Tiella, Walten,” Dolanna said immediately when they joined her, “I want you to go to your rooms with Tarrin and gather up your belongings. Do not leave each other. Visit each room in turn. When you have

everything, go to the landing of the stairwell on the fourth level and await us. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am," Walten said, and Tiella nodded.

"Arren, please have servants take up enough food for seven people," Dolanna went on as Tarrin left with his companions. "Include plenty of meat."

"Tarrin, what's going on?" Tiella asked after they left the hall. Tarrin noted that both of them stayed rather close to him, but not *too* close. They were trying to be as casual about his change as they could, but Tarrin could smell the tension in both of them. They were afraid of him. Probably with good reason, he concluded with a slight sigh. He was afraid of himself.

"We saw something upstairs, called a Wraith," he told them. "Dolanna thinks it may be watching us, so we're going to all stay in the same place tonight, so she can keep watch over us, I think."

"Wraith?" Walten said. "Jak told me a story about those. They're supposed to be living shadows, and their touch is like the cold of the grave."

"We didn't get close enough to touch it," Tarrin said as they started up the stairs. "Dolanna thinks it may have something to do with--with the one that attacked me," he said after a second of inability to say it. He still couldn't.

They went to Tiella's room first, and with the help of the two young men, they were on their way to Walten's room in minutes. Walten's room was even faster. They went up to the same corridor where Tarrin had seen the Wraith, and he couldn't help but make sure it was gone as they rushed into his room and he collected up everything of his that he could find. But most of his belongings were missing, especially his staff and his bow. He didn't recall seeing them earlier, either. They left his room quickly and went to the stair landing that Dolanna had said to go to, and there they waited for many tense moments.

Tiella looked at Tarrin covertly after they stopped, then she blushed when he looked at her. "I'm sorry, Tarrin, I can't help it," she said shyly.

"I guess I can't blame you," he said gruffly. "I'd stare too."

“What does it feel like?” Walten asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” he replied. “More like I’d had on blinders and my ears covered and my nose pinched shut all my life. The tail is still pretty weird to me, but I’m getting used to it.” He looked back at the member, which was swishing to and fro with a slow rhythm. Did you go into the city?” he asked.

“No,” Tiella replied. “After you were hurt, Dolanna wanted us to stay close. Torrian isn’t that big, anyway. She said that we’re going through Marta’s Ford, Ultern, and Jerinhold. Then we get to Suld itself,” she said eagerly.

“I thought you were still nervous about leaving Aldreth,” Walten said accusingly.

“I want to see the cities,” she told him.

“I just want to get out of Aldreth,” Walten grunted.

Dolanna and Faalken came up the stairs seconds later, with several servants behind them. To his relief, Tarrin saw his packs and his weapons in the hands of three of them, and he could smell roasted meat under the domes of the platters that the serving women carried. “Do you have everything?” Dolanna asked. “If not, then it will be left behind.”

“We got everything, Dolanna,” Tiella replied.

“Good. Follow us.”

They were led to a small apartment, with three rooms. There was a smallish sitting room into which the door opened, and there were two bedrooms attached to it. They put down their packs as the serving staff carried the other things into the room, and Arren appeared at the door. “Dolanna,” he called.

“Arren,” she said, “if you would, post guards at the door, but warn them that they will not, under any circumstances, open the door. It could mean their lives.”

“I’ll warn them,” he said grimly.

“Young ones, listen carefully,” Dolanna said as she closed the door after the last servant. “I want you to stand in the middle of this room with

Faalken. Do not say a word, and do not move until I tell you that it is alright.”

Faalken ushered them into the middle of the sitting room, standing beside a plush upholstered chair that was flanking a sofa. When they were there, Dolanna turned around and bowed her head. Tarrin could feel what was happening. There was again that sensation of *drawing in*, into Dolanna, and for a second he could almost see something around him move. She stayed still for several moments, until the outside walls, ceiling, and floor suddenly seemed to shimmer. But just for a moment. Dolanna sighed audibly and slumped a bit, then turned around and faced them. “Do not open the door, for any reason, unless I tell you that it is alright,” she warned. “Do not get too close to the windows. Do not even get close enough to touch the window sill.” She put a hand to her brow. “Now then, I am going to rest a while. There is food over there, and I have some books in the smaller pack if you would like to read.”

Tarrin and Faalken sat down at the small table in the corner and began eating dinner as Walten and Tiella used the stones board that was on it to play a game. “What did she do?” Tarrin asked Faalken.

“She laid a Ward on these rooms,” he replied. “It’s very exhausting.”

“What is a Ward?”

“It’s like a barrier,” he told him. “I don’t know how she made this one, but I’ve seen ones that stop magic, ones that keep people from crossing them, even ones that stopped stone from passing over a boundary. They can be made lots of different ways. You’ll have to ask her for specifics, though.”

He nodded, resolving to do just that.

After eating, Faalken stood up and looked at the three. “We’ll be getting an early start, so I suggest we go to bed now. Tiella, go sleep in Dolanna’s chamber. Walten, you and Tarrin sleep in the other room. I’ll sleep in here.”

They separated quickly, wordlessly. The next room was a small bedchamber, with the bed, a small armoire, and three small tables. There was only one bed.

“You sleep on the bed,” Tarrin told him. He knew that Walten would not want to sleep in the same bed with him. To be honest, he didn’t want to either. Not until he trusted himself. “I’ll sleep over there. Let me go get my bedroll.”

Tarrin recovered his bedroll, and Walten was already in bed by the time he got back. “Go ahead and put out the light,” Tarrin told him. “I think I can manage.”

“Alright. Night, Tarrin.”

“Night.”

As soon as the lamp was out, Tarrin got the most blatant sign of his change, for after a moment of grayed vision, the entire room bloomed into light as his eyes adapted to the darkness. Just the light of the Skybands through the window, patchy from clouds, was enough to paint the room to his eyes in bright shades of black, white, and gray. He realized that he couldn’t see color with such little light, but the fact that he could make out every detail of the room made up for that. He put out the bedroll in the corner, near the window, and sat down upon it, feeling his tail come to rest against the floor, and stared out at the room, wondering at how sharp and clear his vision was, musing at seeing only in black and white. Just like a cat, he could see in just about any light except total darkness.

In the room, alone, in the dark, Tarrin felt the Cat inside his mind, and for the first time all day, for the first time since waking up, he felt fear. They had kept him busy most of the day, keeping his mind off of it. But there was nothing but time now, time waiting for the dawn, time for nothing but cold reality to come down on him. It was in there, staring back at him, and he could feel its power. The power of a caged animal. The song in his mind grew more powerful now that he was listening to it, and it took active concentration not to succumb to it, to do as it urged him to do. He had no one to talk to, nothing to do in order to distract himself from it, and that made it prominent in his mind. And that proximity to something that seemed so strange to him began to make him afraid.

It was as if the whole room changed. The bright black-and-white room seemed to become ominous, and he found the colorless, shaded vista before him to be suddenly frightening. It was *alien* to him, and the wonder he’d

felt when first beholding it drained away, replaced by trepidation and anxiety. For some unknown reason, he backed up on the mat, backing up until his back was to the wall. But there was no getting away from that which made him afraid. It was inside him, part of him, staring back at him, trying to take control of him. There was nowhere he could go to hide from it, no way to make it leave him alone. It was there and would always be there, and that simple fact terrified Tarrin. Because it was already so strong in his mind, and he was told, and knew in his heart, that it would only grow stronger.

He pushed back into the corner, feeling his tail kink a bit from the pressure. He brought it around him and wrapped it across his ankles, drew his knees up to his chest, hugged his waist with his arms, and put his head back against the corner. With the song of the Cat disrupting his thoughts, he stayed curled up in the corner, huddled from something that could not be hidden from, trying in vain to push it out of his mind, to find enough peace to sleep.

Chapter 4

It had been the longest night Tarrin had ever had.

It was an eternity there, alone, in the dark, with nothing between him and the Cat but his willpower. Time had seemed to stop, and he had felt every second go by. He spent the night jumping at every little noise, huddled in that corner like a trapped mouse, so desperately wanting to talk to someone that he very nearly went to wake them up. But that would be giving in, and he knew that he had to learn how to fight it now, quickly, before it had the chance to overwhelm him. There wouldn't always be someone to talk to.

He'd finally managed to fall asleep sometime during the night, but it was no relief. As soon as he fell into slumber, he would have dreams. Terrifying dreams, vivid dreams, conveying a message and a set of sensations so base, so raw, so animalistic that even the surrealistic touch of the dream was enough to make him sit bolt upright and start a cold sweat. And the instant he awoke, the song of the Cat would be there, trying to lull him into complacency. He was glad of such an uncomfortable position, since it made it so easy for him to be awakened out of the dreams. The song of the Cat was much preferable to facing the dreams. He could fight the song, but the dreams, he had no defense against them. They touched him on a level that the song could not, and he could do nothing but wake up once they started. He was amazed that Walten had slept through it.

He'd been having one of those dreams, then was shocked awake by a combination of the dream and a sound in the next room. He'd never been so glad to hear a sound in his life. When he joined Faalken in the other room, neither of them said much of anything. Faalken could see just by looking at Tarrin's haggard face that it had been an easy night. The burly knight simply offered him a cup of water and let him sit quietly at the table. Faalken gently rapped at Dolanna's door, then sat down at the table with him.

Dolanna opened the door a few minutes later, stepping out wearing a simple brown silk dress. With one look, she seemed to take in the entire situation. She sat down in the chair to his right and put a cool hand to his forehead. “I can understand what it was like,” she told him. “But it was necessary.”

“What do you mean?”

“You had to be alone,” she told him with compassion in her voice. “It may seem cruel to you, but you will end up alone at some point in your life. It was best for it to be now, while my spell holds the animal inside you in check.”

He could understand her reasoning. Although it did seem a bit cold-blooded. She’d left him to face his fear alone, and while the logical part of his mind understood her reasoning, part of him was rather slighted by the callous treatment. He’d respected her before, but in a strange way, he realized that he absolutely depended on Dolanna now. Her calm demeanor and seemingly intuitive understanding of what he was going through gave him a source of strength from which to draw support.

“How do you know so much about what happened to me?” he asked impulsively.

“I, have studied this condition before. There are other Were-kin out there,” she told him. “Were-wolves, Were-boars, Were-lions, Were-foxes, Were-bears, and many others that are more rare. Like Were-wolverines, Were-dogs, Were-rats, and your own kin, the Were-cats. I happen to personally know a Were-wolf, and I also once studied the progression of the condition, which is called Lycanthropy, in an infected man who had been bitten by a Were-wolf—but not the same Were-wolf,” she added quickly. “It was much different in his case. The infected man gave me his permission to study him, and he integrated quite well with his Lycanthropy and went on to join a Were-wolf pack and vanish into the Heartwood. But I have seen enough parallels between him and you to understand in a general way what is happening to you.”

“What causes it?” Tarrin asked. “Is it a disease?”

“No, young one, it is not,” she told him gently. “The Were-kin are creatures of magic, Tarrin. There is a natural magic inside of you now that

is linked to the cat. While it may not seem like much, it is this magical nature that gives you many of your powers, and it is also what makes you immune to the wounds of non-magical weapons, or ones not made of silver. The only non-magical things that can harm you are falls from heights, fire, and acid.”

“Powers?” Tarrin asked.

“Were-kin can change their shape,” she told him. “They can assume the form of the animal to which they are bonded. But I do recall hearing or reading that the Were-cats are different than the other Were-kin in that respect. There is something limited to you or makes you different than other Were-kin, so I will not even attempt to try to teach you to shapeshift until I am certain of what that difference is. The fact that your base, natural form, the one into which you transformed at the onset of the bite, was not a fully human form lends me to believe that it is a limitation more than a difference.”

Tarrin swallowed that. Shapeshifting?

“There are other powers,” she told him. “Inhuman strength like yours is a gift of your magical nature. And if I remember, you can regenerate wounds received from magic, falls, acid, and fire at an accelerated rate, and that you can even regenerate lost limbs. Only the injuries made from silver counter the magic that gives you power.

“But I digress. It is this inherent magic that causes the condition, Tarrin. The only thing missing from a human is that magical touch, that essence of magical energy and animal instincts. That is what is passed on through contact with body fluids. Once it is introduced into a human, he becomes a Were-creature of the same type that passed it to him. He gains all of the powers and vulnerabilities of the Were-kin, and he is Were in every aspect. He is as much Were as the one who bit him; there is no difference between a Were-kin who was born into it and one who was bitten.”

“What would happen if that magic was taken away?” he asked.

“Nothing could take it away,” she told him. “It is infused into every fiber of your being, and it is now as integral and necessary as your blood, or heart, or bones. If it truly was removed from you, you would die.”

“I’ve heard stories about Were-wolves,” Tarrin said thoughtfully. “They all say that they change into beasts at the full moon, but father always scoffed at them. He said he’d met one or two in his life, and they were nothing like that.”

“He is correct. Were-wolves are urbane, polite fellows with a highly defined sense of propriety. Being part animal, Tarrin, Were-creatures tend to act much as their animal counterparts act, just in a human way. Were-rats are rapacious, greedy, and unreliable. Were-bears are methodical and careful, and Were-wolves are very organized and structured.”

“What about, the Were-cats?” he forced himself to say the word.

“There is very little written or known about them,” she said, pursing her lips. “They are the rarest of all the Were-kin, and I have never heard of a Sorcerer or scholar finding one to learn about them. The other Were-kin hold a rather low opinion of them, for some reason,” she said, giving him a curious look. “I believe that this limitation that caused you to assume this near-human form might have a hand in it, but I am not sure.”

“It seems like the hand of Karas was at work when you were chosen for this assignment,” Faalken noted to Dolanna. “Blind luck put the boy in the hands of someone that could help him.”

“Yes, it does seem fortunate that I was sent,” she mused. “To think that I nearly rejected the request. I am glad that I did not.”

“I am too,” Tarrin said sincerely and fervently.

Dolanna smiled and put a hand on the back of his. “With luck and hope, tonight will not be as bad,” she told him. “You must still spend it alone, but as we travel, I will teach you ways to center your thinking so that you can put the instincts aside in your mind enough to rest. They are the same techniques we teach our novices in order to wield the power of Sorcery,” she told him. “As you become accustomed to the cat inside your mind and as you become skilled with the centering and concentration skills I will teach you, let us hope that it solves your problem. And it will give you a head start in your studies at the Tower.”

“Dolanna, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Faalken said, “what are we going to do about traveling? Tarrin kind of stands out now.”

“I have already taken that into account,” she said. “I cannot create an illusion that will last all day, so I instructed Arren to have a robe made for Tarrin that will cover him. It will have a hood on it and oversized sleeves, so that he may hide his most striking features. I also had him alter Tarrin’s saddle so that his feet will fit in the stirrups.”

“I’ll get the young pups out of bed,” Faalken said. “We have a long way to go today.”

Tarrin looked at his hand, more like a hand-paw than a hand, wondering at Dolanna’s words. He could only really be hurt by fire, acid, magic, silver, or falling from a height. But that didn’t make much sense. “Why can I be hurt from falling?” he asked.

“There is a simple concept behind it, Tarrin, one that I should explain. Now that I think of it, it is something of which you should definitely be aware. To put it more specifically, you can only be harmed by magic, silver, or weapons of nature.”

“Weapons of nature?”

“Is fire not a part of nature?” she asked.

“Yes, but--”

“Does it not injure?”

“Yes.”

“Acid may be made by man, but it is still a natural compound, existing in nature. Does it not also burn when touched?”

He started to understand. “So falling off a cliff results in a very natural impact with the ground,” he concluded.

“Exactly. You should also be wary of true weapons of nature. A falling tree will hurt you just as quickly as it would me, and if someone hit you with a rock picked up off the ground, then it would result in a real injury. But of these lesser forms, none can kill you. You regenerate too quickly for that to happen. The only weapons of nature that can kill you are fire, acid, falling...or maybe getting impaled on a tree branch., or getting caught in an avalanche or rockslide.”

“I’ll remember that,” he told her. “You said that I have magic inside me,” he said, his mind starting to explore the possibilities.

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t that make *me* a magical weapon?” he asked, holding up his hand-paw and extending his claws. “I do have these, you know, and they are weapons.”

She smiled broadly at him. “You are most clever, Tarrin. Yes, it does. Being a magical creature, you have the power to injure those creatures like yourself that can only be harmed by magic. But, there is a drawback to that,” she warned. “You are a magical creature, and that lends itself to certain...vulnerabilities concerning magic. The largest is that a ward set up to repel magic will not allow you to cross it,” she told him. “You cannot very well just leave your magic on the other side.”

“That makes sense,” he reasoned.

“Well, we must be getting ready to leave,” she told him. “We can continue our discussion on the road. Let me lower the Ward protecting the room. You should go get your things together, and make sure that nothing was left behind.”

“Alright,” Tarrin said.

Walten was getting dressed when Tarrin came back into the room. He was sandy-eyed and bleary; Walten was not a morning person. Tarrin checked his packs, and realized that all of his trousers had been altered already, and also that his boots were not here. Just as well, he reasoned. He couldn’t wear them now anyway. He took that opportunity to put on clean clothes and wash up a bit, fighting a bit with the trousers to get his fingers on that little button in the back that sealed his tail into that little hole made for it. This was the second time he’d done it, and it took less than half the time the second time around. He pulled a clean shirt over his head and laced it up, then packed all his things away as he made sure that he had it all. His bow and staff were in the corner. He picked up the bow, then looked at his hands. There was no way he could shoot it like this. The tips of his claws were right there, and they could hit and cut the bowstring. “Walten, I...I can’t use this anymore,” he said, holding up the bow. “Would you like to have it?”

“I, guess,” he said slowly. “I’m not sure I can draw it though. I’ll just keep it for you, in case you want it back, alright?”

“Alright,” Tarrin said.

Tiella was sitting at the table when they left the room, and the door outside was open. Tarrin could see one guard standing at the door, but he could smell three others. Faalken’s scent was still strong in the room, but it was obvious that he’d left. Dolanna was in the other room; he could hear her moving around. Not long after Walten came out of the room, three servants brought in large platters with breakfast, and that lured Dolanna and Tiella out of the bedroom. Tarrin had learned from yesterday how careful he had to be, else he would bite his tongue while he ate. And with teeth like his, that was not a pleasant experience. He managed to work through breakfast, then was handed a plain brown robe by Dolanna when he pushed his plate away. Although if fit, it was not comfortable. The hood pressed down on his ears in an irritating manner, and he had to keep his tail tucked in to keep it from bulging out the back of the robe.

“It won’t look half as bad when you’re on the horse,” Faalken assured him.

“I hope not. I look deformed like this.”

“Tuck your hands in,” Dolanna told him, and he pushed his hands into the sleeves. They totally concealed them. “The only problem is your feet, but they will be partially in the stirrups. With the black fur on them, they will appear as boots. It will do.” She sat back down at the desk, writing something on a piece of parchment. “I doubt that Duke Arren is awake, so I will write him a letter of gratitude, and when I am done, we will depart. I wish to reach Skeleton Rock by sunset, so we have a day of hard travel ahead of us.”

Outside for the first time since the change, Tarrin was assaulted on all sides by sounds and smells that almost overwhelmed him. What was merely unpleasant before was a powerful stench now, the smell of man, his waste, and his sweat assaulting Tarrin’s nose like a hammer. He realized that it was the background from inside the castle magnified a thousand fold. He choked briefly after stepping out the door of the keep, then went into a fit of coughing and sneezing.

“What’s the matter?” Walten asked in sincere concern.

“Do all cities smell like this?” he demanded indignantly. “I think I’m going to vomit!”

“It should lessen after a while,” Dolanna told him.

“I hope so,” he said, putting the back of his hand over his nose and letting the smell of his fur cover the stink of the city.

Hands brought the horses around, and Tarrin realized that they may have a problem. Horses could smell too, and he wasn’t sure if they’d take him as a predator or not. His scent was not the same as a human.

He approached his horse slowly and gently, letting it get his scent a little at a time. The horse began to whinny slightly and started to fidget. Reaching out one hand, Tarrin placed it on the bridge of the horse’s nose, stroking it reassuringly. The horse looked at him curiously, realizing that he was the one that had the strange smell, but Tarrin’s careful gentle touch had eased the horse’s primary fear. “Yes, it’s me,” he told the horse with a smile as it suddenly nuzzled him.

“I see that that will not be a problem,” Dolanna said.

“Not with this horse,” he corrected. “They don’t know my smell, so how they see me depends on how I act when I come up to them.” Tarrin packed his saddle with his gear, sliding his staff into the saddleskirt, then carefully mounted the horse. The horse was still a bit nervous, and the other horses were beginning to get skittish, but a gentle pat on the neck and a few soothing words calmed the horse down again.

“Put up your hood, Tarrin,” Dolanna ordered as she climbed into the saddle. Walten was ordered to take the pack horses, and Tiella pulled herself up with Faalken’s assistance.

“Have a safe journey, milady,” one of the hands said, letting go of her horse’s bridle.

“May the Goddess make it so,” she said quietly.

Torrian didn’t seem any different when they had arrived, when Tarrin was human, but it smelled differently. The powerful smell of the city was indeed starting to dull, and Tarrin could begin to make out other scents,

those of horses and wood and metal, out on the streets. The streets were sparsely populated, mainly merchants and shopkeepers and their servants beginning the ritual of opening their businesses for the day's custom. He could also catch faint odors drifting out of open doors, those of leather, spices, and the smell of baking bread or roasting meat. He looked around actively, trying to put a name or sight to a particular smell, for there were many that he couldn't readily identify. The ones that he knew were simply the smells he'd known when he was human, only sharper, but there were a myriad of other smells out there that he'd never smelled before.

They crossed the White River at the Old Bridge, and then left Torrian through the eastern gate, on what was known as Skeleton Road, because of the natural formation called Skeleton Rock that was visible from the road. Once they were outside the walls, the powerful smell of the city ebbed with every step, until there was nothing left but the smells of the forest.

It was just as powerful, but for different reasons. The Cat seemed to roar up in his mind at the smells and sounds and sights of the wilderness, reacting to the scents of the forest. His ears began to search and seek out every little sound, his nose testing the air for every possible scent. The smells of man and horses were still strong along the road, but the smell of trees and earth and animals washed away that unnatural intrusion. Tarrin pulled down his hood and breathed deeply as the smells of the forest, letting them clear his nose of the city-smell and clear his mind of his worries.

There was one other smell, faint, but he could just barely make it out. A familiar smell, though he'd never smelled it before. Familiar because it was close to his own. "The other one was here," he told Dolanna. "The one that bit me. I can still smell her."

"How long ago?"

"Probably yesterday," he told her. "I'm not sure, though. I'm still getting used to this." He pointed to the woods. "Her smell goes that way. I think she went for the trees almost right after she cleared the hill that hid her from the city wall."

"Just let her go, Tarrin," Dolanna warned. "You will not find her."

"I don't want to," he grunted. "I know that this wasn't her fault, but she's still the one that did it to me."

“I understand,” she said. “Let us pick up the pace. Skeleton Rock is quite a distance from here.”

They rode hard throughout the entire morning, stopping only to rest the horses. The morning was warm and sunny, and the weather pleasant enough to make the ride almost enjoyable, as Tarrin experienced such a sensation of freedom and pleasure that it made him wonder at himself. He knew it was coming from the Cat, but that didn't change how he felt. The Cat considered the trackless wilderness to be home, but he could also sense that it didn't mind the cities, either. It was a creature of adaptability, capable of making it almost anywhere its paws were touching the ground.

They did not stop for lunch, they ate in the saddle during a walking period to rest the horses, a meal consisting of dried fruit, cheese, and bread, then they were off again at a brisk canter. The shape of the land was slowly changing, becoming less hilly but just as forested, and there were more and more small streams and brooks to traverse as they continued in the south-of-east direction in which they were moving. There were no villages or settlements in the region, which Tarrin considered to be curious. “Why aren't there any villages?” he called to Dolanna as they rode.

“Because this region is considered to be bad luck,” she replied. “Skeleton Rock breeds such tales. You will understand when you see it.”

Tarrin considered that, then decided to wait until he saw this Skeleton Rock before he made any judgements.

About an hour after eating, they slowed to a walk to rest the horses. The wind shifted into Tarrin's face, and that brought to him the smell of man. Several of them, just up ahead. Faalken was at the rear, riding up from a scout of their trail and possibly moving on up ahead to scout the front. “Dolanna, there are men and horses in front of us,” he warned her.

“How many?”

He sniffed at the air. “I can make out at least six different men,” he told her, “but it seems like there are more than that.” Up ahead, the road turned sharply to the left to avoid a deep streambed.

Dolanna called for them to stop by raising her hand and reining in. “This road is known for bandits, because of the lack of population along it,”

she told Tarrin. “Let us make sure it is a trade caravan before rounding the corner. Put up your hood, young one. Walten, Tiella, come closer.”

He lifted the hood in place as Faalken reached them. “What is it?” he asked.

“Tarrin smells men up ahead,” Dolanna told him. “We will wait to see if they show themselves.”

“That’s not all of it,” he said. “There are several men riding up from behind, hard,” he told her. “I could just make out their dust. They’ll be up to here in just a little while.”

Tarrin scented a change in the attitude of the scents, getting stronger. They were moving, and it wasn’t up the road. “Dolanna, the men are moving, but they’re not coming up the road.”

“Which direction?” Faalken asked.

“Towards us,” he replied.

“That tears it,” Faalken said grimly, clapping down the visor of his helmet. “Caravans don’t sneak through the woods.”

Walten drew out Tarrin’s bow and nocked an arrow. Surprisingly, Tiella drew out a sling from her belt pouch and slipped a stone into the cup. “No, take the pack horses,” Walten told her. “I need both my hands. You can still get off one shot holding the horse’s reins.”

“Tiella, take the pack horses off the road,” Faalken told her.

Tarrin could hear them now, rustling the brush ahead of them, near the curve. He could make out a startled oath of disappointment, then there was the sound of swords sliding out of scabbards. Tarrin laid back his ears and snarled wordlessly as the Cat in him prepared to beat back the attackers. “They’re coming,” Tarrin said, pulling his staff out from the saddleskirt. Now that they were closer, more and more scents were becoming clear to him. “Dolanna, I can smell at least fifteen now, maybe more.”

“Listen!” Dolanna said sharply. “Stay together, and do not advance past me,” she warned. “I will have to use sorcery, and I do not want to hurt one of you by accident. Faalken, with me. Tarrin, stay with Walten and Tiella and defend our pack animals.”

In a rush, at least ten men erupted from the brush ahead, shouting and brandishing weapons. Five men on horses rounded the corner ahead and charged, and a single man stood back by the brush. Tarrin could hear him shouting in oddly discordant, unintelligible words that made Dolanna's eyes widen like saucers. He could feel her do her magic, then he felt a sensation of enclosure. The shouting man pointed his hands at them, and Tarrin almost jumped when a ball of fire erupted from his hands and streaked right at them. It struck something in front of them, something invisible, and exploded. Tiella screamed and Tarrin had to suppress the sudden urge to run away when an inferno of angry fire surrounded them, licking at the invisible something that prevented it from reaching them. Dolanna's magic had created some sort of shield that was defending them from the enemy's magical attack. "Walten, take out that mage!" Faalken demanded instantly. Walten raised the longbow instinctively, pulled back, aimed, and fired. Tarrin could see from the instant it left the bow that it would hit the mark. It arced over the small field separating them, homing in on the chanting man, then simply bounced away harmlessly.

He had something protecting him too.

"Back away from the shield, Walten!" Dolanna said in a strained voice as the men reached her shield and started beating on it with their swords. "I am about to deal with these men!"

Tarrin pulled off the robe and dropped off the horse, understanding instinctively that if the mage wasn't killed, he would bring down Dolanna's shield, and they would be hopelessly outnumbered by the attacking bandits. He dropped his staff and waited for the right instant, right when the middle-most man was rearing back his arm. Then he exploded forward like an arrow from a bow. His shoulder caught the man squarely in the chest, picking him up and carrying him into the man behind him, exploding him off his feet and carrying *him* for several spans before Tarrin threw both of them aside almost negligently. Then he put his ears back and ran flat out right at the mage. Tarrin's inhuman strength gave him inhuman speed in that sprint, faster than a horse, and the chanting man's eyes bulged and he nearly mis-spoke himself as he saw the Were-cat bearing down on him, his face full of mindless fury. The mage simply redirected his spell, pointing at Tarrin instead of Dolanna. A bolt of brilliant white lightning lashed out from the man's hands, arcing across the meadow.

But Tarrin wasn't there.

The man blinked a second, then a shadow on the ground made him look up.

It was the last thing he would ever see.

Tarrin had sprung into the air at the last instant, jumping clear of the magical attack, jumping impossibly high, nearly twenty spans into the air. He could have jumped onto the roof of a two story building with his vaulting leap. It wasn't that hard for him to adjust his trajectory so that he would land right on the unfortunate man. His hand-paws leading, Tarrin slammed directly into the man's chest, and he was already slashing and tearing before his opponent hit the ground. They both rolled several times backwards as Tarrin's momentum blew them both back towards the trees, as Tarrin got a grip on the man's shoulder with one hand, his claws sinking deep into flesh, and he brought up a foot and put it against the man's ribcage. He drove his claws into the man's belly as they rolled, then kicked out and down even as his hand pulled the man into it. It was an instinctive move, the same as a cat raking with its back claws, and it was devastating. Tarrin ripped the man open from the base of his ribcage to his hips, and all his internal organs flew out of him in a stinking, bloody spray, their rolling making them fly all about. The man managed to make a gurgling croak before he came down hard on his back, Tarrin on top of him. His eyes registered shock as Tarrin lifted a paw while hunched over the man, his other paw holding him down by the chest and his face twisted into an animalistic snarl of pure hatred, and then struck with it. The blow was aimed at the throat, but the sheer force of it, and Tarrin's inhuman strength, ripped the man's head right off his body. That head was swiped aside by the raw power of the blow, bouncing in the bloody grass like a ball before coming to rest at the base of a tree.

Tarrin was almost overwhelmed by the smell of the blood, and for a horrifying moment, he had to stop himself from ripping the man apart. He put a blood-saturated hand-paw to his head, trying to shake off the loud song of the Cat trying to get him to do as it willed, urging him not just to kill, but to savage the victim. But his human reason prevailed; his friends needed him. Tarrin got up and turned around, looking at the men beating against the shield Dolanna created with their weapons. Dolanna made a

pushing motion, and the shield suddenly exploded outward, sending the men flying in all directions. Faalken charged into the fray with his sword drawn, having his warhorse stomp and grind enemies into the ground under his hooves. Tarrin sprinted back towards them, chagrined at throwing away his staff like he did. Walten put an arrow into a man's belly as Dolanna seemingly grabbed small balls of fire from the air, hurling them with deadly accuracy into the chests and backs of the attackers. Tarrin hit the back of the regrouping men like an avalanche, grabbing one by the back of his mail armor, picking him up, and hurling him into three others with enough force to tumble them three paces down the road. He raised a bloodstained paw, the claws with small bits of ripped flesh stuck to them, and ripped the face off one attacker with it, then backhanded another with enough power to rip through his chain mail. One man desperately tried to spear him from the side, but Tarrin twisted, grabbed the spear with a free paw, and swung the man around, throwing him to the ground. Tarrin used the spear shaft to block a sword, then an axe, then stepped into an overswing and delivered a short kick to the knee. It snapped the man's leg like a twig. Tarrin almost instinctively fell into the Ungardt forms of fighting, and found a center, a focus that kept the Cat in check and let him concentrate on the matter at hand. Killing enough of them to make the survivors break and flee.

Tarrin went to rake a man across the chest, but an arrow appeared in his side, and Faalken cut him down from behind an instant later. Tarrin darted to the horse's side and grabbed the haft of an axe that was aimed at the horse's leg, then yanked it out of the man's hand and buried it up to the handle in the back of the man's head as he was turned by the strength of Tarrin's yank. Tarrin saw out of the corner of his eye a man trying to stab him in the side with a sword, then grabbed the brained man and dragged him into the sword's path. The man lost his sword as the dead man fell, then he fell himself with an arrow right in the temple. Tarrin had to admit, Walten was a very good shot with his bow.

The remaining five men, two wounded by Faalken's sword and Walten's arrows, turned and fled, screaming in panic. "Let them go!" Dolanna said wearily as Tarrin moved to chase them down.

"Are you alright?" Faalken asked. "You're covered with blood."

“It’s not mine,” Tarrin said through clenched teeth. He’d killed. Not just one, but several men; he couldn’t even remember how many. Although it was a case of kill or die, he’d never taken a human life before, and he found the taste of it to be very bitter.

“Tarrin,” Dolanna said in a tightly controlled voice. “The next time you decide to do something like that, let me know. I could have easily handled this, but your racing off stayed my hand.”

“I didn’t know I was doing it myself,” he muttered quietly, looking away from the carnage and trying not to smell the blood, or listen to the Cat sing to him in his mind.

“This was no group of bandits,” Faalken said with a grunt. “Not with equipment like this.”

“And not with a Wizard leading them,” Dolanna agreed.

“This is too much, too fast,” Faalken continued in a sober voice. “There was the fire at Watch Hill, and then the attack on Tarrin, and now this. Somebody doesn’t want us to get back to Suld *real* bad.”

Tarrin could hear the pounding of horses’ hooves, and feel the vibration of it in the pads of his feet, coming from the road under him. “Dolanna, those horses are coming up fast,” Tarrin said urgently.

By the time Dolanna had turned to look up the road, the first of them appeared. The man behind the leader was carrying the banner of Torrian and Duke Arren. They were dressed in the blue surcoats that were the uniform of the armored, mounted warriors under Arren’s control. They slowed to a stop at the battlefield, and the lead man advanced. “Lady Dolanna, Duke Arren sends these twenty men to be your escorts and guards on your journey,” he announced. “I am Captain Daran.” He looked around. “I see we didn’t ride hard enough,” he said in a grating voice. “Are there any wounded?”

“Not among us, captain,” Dolanna said warily.

The captain reached under his surcoat and produced a letter. “The Duke asked me to give you this, to prove our identity,” he said. “Jarax, take two men and see if the survivors of this are still lurking around. Kardon, take

three men and pull these bodies off the road. Let's not litter the King's Highway."

The two men, one slim and wiry and the other massively built, saluted and took men to carry out their orders. Dolanna accepted the letter from the captain, broke the seal, and read it quickly. "These are the Duke's men," she affirmed. "Noboby but Arren would know what is written here. Considering what just happened, captain, we will be very glad to have you along."

Daran looked around professionally. "Quite a rumble," he noted. "Looks like the Were-cat did some serious damage. Good work, Master Kael," he said, bowing in his saddle. "It looks like you saved one of my Duke's favorite people."

"It was nothing," Tarrin said weakly. The smell of the blood was getting to him, and it was getting very hard to control the instincts.

Dolanna looked at him sharply. "Tarrin, there is a stream just at the bend up ahead," she told him. "Take a clean change of clothing and go wash up."

"I think I will," he said gratefully.

After scrubbing the blood and bits of flesh off his paws and getting himself clean and into clean clothes, he rejoined them. The bodies had been pulled off the road and placed in a line in the meadow. The bodies had been carefully searched, nearly stripped, much of their equipment now on the pack horses serving the Duke's men. Dolanna was with Walten and Tiella, talking to them as Faalken helped the captain throw the last body into line with the others. The three men sent to look for the survivors had returned. Tarrin joined Dolanna with the others as she finished telling them about something. Tiella, Tarrin noticed, was a bit pale, but had a determined look on her face. "You alright, Tiella?" he asked.

"I'm alright," she told him. "I almost got pulled off my horse by one of the bandits, but Sir Faalken saved me."

"Not before you put that sling stone in his eye, then kicked him in the face," Faalken chuckled as he rejoined them. "That had to hurt."

"It was supposed to," she said primly.

"I imagine it would," Faalken grinned. "For a trio of farm children, you three are rather nasty fighters."

“It’s from working all day, Sir Faalken, and having nothing else to do but shoot things,” Walten replied dryly. “Tarrin, I don’t like this bow of yours. My arms feel like I’ve been chopping wood all day.”

“Just Faalken, please,” he corrected. “And I think I’d rather have you three farm villagers in a fight over a pack of knights. Are we ready to leave, Dolanna?”

“Yes, we are ready now,” she said. “Tarrin, pick up your staff and put the robe back on, and we will be off.”

Tarrin rode with Dolanna and Tiella as they got under way, encircled protectively by the Duke’s alert men, wrapped in a layer of steel and trained warriors against another attack. Faalken and Jarax were scouting ahead, and the captain had a man riding behind as rear guard. Tarrin had a grim expression on his face as he broached a subject he wanted to continue talking about. “Back there, Dolanna, you said that you didn’t think that they were bandits,” he said.

“They were not,” she said gruffly. “A pack of bandits would not have a Wizard leading them.”

“And then Faalken brought up the fire, and, and what happened to me.”

“Yes, and I do not think that they were mere coincidence. Not now. Tarrin, someone *sent* the female Were-cat after you on purpose. The collar that she was wearing was a device that was controlling her. And now the attack on us, after you and Faalken had noticed the Wraith. And before that, the fire that started so mysteriously, and raged out of control faster than even my magic could control it. No, someone is trying to stop us from reaching Suld. Someone with considerable resources at his disposal.”

“But why?” he asked. “It makes no sense. We’re three villagers being brought to the Tower by a Sorceress and a knight. What possible reason could someone have to try to stop us? We’re not worth the effort.”

“I know, that is a part of the puzzle,” she said thoughtfully, a finger tapping her chin as she thought. “Obviously, these people know something that we do not. Or believe that they do.”

“I think--” Tiella said, then she quickly hushed herself.

“Go ahead, child,” Dolanna prompted. “Do not think that you cannot speak your mind to me.”

“I think that maybe it’s not just one person,” she said.

Dolanna raised an eyebrow. “An intriguing concept,” she said with sincere interest. “Why do you believe so?”

“Well, there was the fire, then what happened to Tarrin, and now this,” she said. “And the Wraith, but it didn’t attack us. Well, aren’t they just a bit *too* different?” she asked. “Why not try another fire? That almost worked, and they had to know that. Why send that woman after Tarrin, when she could have attacked *you*? If they got you, Dolanna, the rest of us would probably just turn around and run home. Then there was this, where they tried to kill *all* of us, but they used brute force and not magic or a slave, like before. They just don’t add up.”

“I think that you have a point,” Dolanna said. “They may be from the same group, but I think you are right in believing that this was not the work of an individual. This was either a group or several individuals working independently.”

“The question is still why,” Tarrin maintained.

“That, I cannot answer,” Dolanna said, rubbing her delicate jaw.

“So we’d best plan our moves carefully,” Tarrin said.

“I have already mapped out our plan of action,” she said. “At Marta’s Ford, we will take a riverboat to Ultern. That, I hope, will leave behind any spies that are watching us. From Ultern, it is but a bit over three days to Suld. Two days to Jerinhold and one day from there to Suld itself. Plus, the Ultern Road is packed at most all times with caravans and travelers,” she added. “The congestion on the road will help to conceal us from sight, and dissuade another such direct attack.”

“So the worst of it will be getting to Marta’s Ford,” Tiella said.

Dolanna nodded. “It is still three days to Marta’s Ford, even if we travel hard,” she told them. “This is a wide expanse of unsettled territory, where most anything can hide and wait in ambush. I must admit, I am relieved beyond measure that Arren had the foresight to send a guard detachment after us. Daran and his men are highly skilled, and are extremely familiar

with this terrain. They will get us to Marta's Ford. That is our main objective at the moment."

"And from there, a boat ride," Tiella said.

Dolanna nodded. "Renneè should still be at Marta's Ford," she said. "He is an old friend of mine. He told me that he would not be leaving for a while, so that his crew can conduct minor repairs to his ship. Perhaps, if he is there and seaworthy, he will agree to take us downriver. His ship is fast, and his crew skilled. They will put us far ahead of any pursuers."

"I like the sound of that," Tarrin said sincerely.

"As do I," she said. "Now then, let us pick up the pace a bit. We still must make Skeleton Rock before we may stop."

Skeleton Rock was literally self-explanatory. They reached the formation right at nightfall, and all four moons rose early and full, washing the land with enough light to see by for a human. The others couldn't see that far into the distance, but Tarrin's eyes could easily see to the cliff face that towered over the road some distance away. In the side of it, there was the head and partial skeleton of a monstrous animal so huge that Tarrin doubted it was ever alive. The skull was long and vaguely reptilian, and it looked like the teeth were as long as Tarrin's foot, all of them coming to sharp points.

Tarrin peered at the formation for several moments, then stopped Dolanna as she walked by. "What kind of beast is that?" he asked.

"Nobody knows," she replied. "The bones are actually stone, but I have been told that bones turning to stone is a natural process. It means that the bones are beyond ancient. They are so old that all the Tower's attempts to study them through magic have failed. It is just too far back for our magic to reach. There are reports of much smaller creatures resembling that one that live in the Desert of Swirling Sands, to the west."

"Much smaller? How small?"

"About the size of a house," she replied calmly. "I believe that the Selani call them *kajats*."

"Yeek," he said under his breath. "I wouldn't want to see one of those up close. It looks like it's nothing but an eating machine."

“That is a fairly accurate description,” she said with a light chuckle.

Tarrin was given his own tent, and it was another night of dreams. The fear wasn't as bad this second night, but the dreams were even worse, because more than once he simply could not wake from it. They were also mixed with human-like dreams of the men that he had killed, rising up from their resting places and following him around, demanding to know what gave him the right to take their lives. That scared him more than the Cat dreams. Tarrin had suppressed the shock, fear, and horror at what he had done, but when he was asleep, they all rushed back at him in a flood.

Hours before dawn, he found the idea of going back to sleep to be too frightening to contemplate, so he dressed and left the tent. Three men were standing guard around the camp, and the fire was low. He spent the hours before dawn reading one of the books Dolanna gave him, a book about the sources, uses, and practitioners of magic. The book was confusing, obviously written for someone that already had a basic understanding of magic and the people who use it, but he did learn several things that he thought were important.

There were four distinct types of magic-users, and each one drew magic from a different source. The Sorcerers, who were born the ability inside them. Where anyone with sufficient intelligence could learn another type of magic, only people born with the ability inside them could be Sorcerers. They manipulated the existing pattern-web of magic that laid over the world, twisting and changing it into the magical effect they wanted. This magical matrix was called the Weave, and it was from this web of magical energy that Sorcerers drew their power. Sorcerers were the only magic-users that could generate Illusions, it said, and a Sorcerer could interfere with the flow of magic through the Weave that would disrupt and block the powers of a Wizard or a Priest. There were also Wizards, or Arcane Mages as they were also called, who drew on their magical power from an *elsewhere*, a place that nobody really understood. They did this with their arcane chants of special words of power and precise gestures, and the presence of certain materials that were vital for the magic to operate. Wizards were the only ones that could summon creatures up from other the Lower World and command them to do their bidding. Much like the Wraith that he had seen. Priests, or Clerics, were the worshippers of Gods, and it was the Gods that supplied these faithful with the magical power. Tarrin

was already familiar with Priests, for one from the temple to Karas in Torrian visited Aldreth every two months to check in on them and see if they were doing alright. Abram preached alot about the goodness and power of his God when he was there, and though the villagers politely ignored his ranting, they were always happy to see him, because he could perform healing on the sick or injured. The main powers of a Priest were healing, supportive, and defensive, the book said, meaning more to aid than to hurt, but Priests did have formidable offensive magic at their command. Mending broken bones, breaking fevers, that sort of thing was what Abram did for the village. Sorcerers could heal too, but a Sorcerer's healing worked differently. Sorcerers could heal injuries, but not illnesses. The last type of magic-user was also a type that was born with the ability. They were called Druids, and little was known about them or their magical power. What was known was that their power seemed to come directly from nature itself, almost like the magical energy of life that was theirs to command. Druids were rare and exceptionally powerful, because a Druid could disrupt and block the magical attempts of any other type of magic-user. But Druids were as rare as they were powerful, living far from human settlements and doing their obscure work in the wildest of the wilderness.

Tarrin digested that during the dark hours, wondering at the why of it. Why could Sorcerers block a Wizard's attempt to cast a spell? And why didn't Dolanna do that to the Wizard when they were fighting? Stupid question, he told himself. She said that Tarrin got in the way, so he must have interfered or got in her line of fire or something...and she was also dealing with those men attacking the others too. How did Priests call on the Gods for their magic? Could anyone? The book didn't say. What other place did Wizards get their magic, and how did they learn of the creatures from beyond that they could summon up into the world? And just what did the Druids do? Why could only Sorcerers create Illusions? Why could Wizards only summon creatures from beyond? Just what magic did the Druids draw on for their power?

Many questions, questions that he doubted the book was going to answer.

The wiry man, Jarax, came out of a tent and sat near him by the fire. He was a thin man, seemingly too thin to wear the heavy armor, with wiry muscles and a long, narrow face. His black hair was short and slicked back

off his face, and he had a scraggly beard and moustache. “I see I’m not the only one that can’t sleep,” he said.

Tarrin had not talked to any of these men, and he was a bit afraid to do so. They knew what he was, and it was their companions, their friends, that the female killed in her escape. He was almost certain that most of them probably blamed him in some way for what had happened. Besides, he was a bit nervous about talking to strangers. He couldn’t see past his own transformation in order to communicate with people he didn’t know, so self-conscious was he about what had happened to himself. Tarrin just nodded vaguely, hoping the man would just sit down and be quiet. He wasn’t sure if the man was talking out of simple courtesy, or friendliness, or out of fear of him. All in all, he rather preferred it if there was no talk at all.

“What are you reading?” he asked politely.

“A book on magic,” Tarrin replied quietly.

“Don’t think I ever read that,” he mused, leaning back against a log. “I prefer stories and poetry myself.” Tarrin went back to his book, and after a few moments, the man spoke again. “Is that what you always read?” he asked curiously.

“Do you mind?” he asked. “I’m trying to understand this.”

“Sorry,” he said a bit tartly, leaning back against the log again. Tarrin looked at the book, not really reading it, turning a page every few minutes. It was worth it to avoid talking. “Could I interest you in a game of stones?” the man asked.

Tarrin snarled at him, his ears laying back slightly. The man gave him a startled look, then hastily stood up. “I think you’d rather be alone,” he said, stating the obvious. Then he turned and walked away.

Tarrin put the book down, putting his palm to his forehead. Where did that come from? It wasn’t like him to react like that, but the man had irritated him. What scared him was that it came without thought, and he reacted on it just as mindlessly. Were the instincts changing him so much? Like what had happened earlier, with the mage. He’d torn the man apart, literally, and he had *reveled* in it for one horrifying moment. It wasn’t a perverse joy, it more like a deep satisfaction that came with killing an enemy. But it frightened him just the same. He was changing, he knew it, he

could *feel* it. And there was nothing he could do about it. He could only hope that he could temper it. So that there would be some part of Tarrin left once the mental alterations were complete.

“Would you like to talk about it?” asked a voice. It was Tiella. She sat down beside him on the log, fearlessly taking his hand-paw into her hand and stroking it reassuringly. That simple act was devastating in its simplicity, and he was about to surrender completely to her and let her scratch him behind the ears. Tiella turned his hand up and looked at his palm, with its large, tough pad and the smaller pads on his fingertips, marvelling at the paw-like qualities of his hand, which truly made it a hybrid of the two, and not one or the other.

“I’m...doing things, Tiella,” he said uncertainly. “I’m not thinking about them...it’s like I can’t think about them. They just happen, and I’m afraid of it.”

“Why?” she asked.

Tarrin blinked and looked at her. “Why? Because it’s not what I would do,” he told her.

“That’s to be expected, Tarrin. This,” she said, holding up his hand-paw, “this is not what you were a few days ago. It’s different now. You have to let yourself get used to it, but that doesn’t have to mean that you have to be afraid of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when something like that happens, ask yourself *why* it happened,” she told him. “What happened?”

“That man kept talking to me, and I wanted to be left alone,” he said, shuddering a bit. “So I snarled at him.”

“Alright, now why did it happen?” she asked.

“I don’t know, because he was irritating me, I guess,” he said.

“No,” she said. “That’s what *you* think happened,” she said. “What about the other mind in there? Why did it do it?”

“To make him leave me alone,” he floundered.

“No,” she said again. “Because *you* wouldn’t do anything about it,” she told him. “It let you try first. When you either gave up or failed, *it* decided to do something about it. And it worked.”

Tarrin stared at her for quite a while. It was a bit crazy, but in its own way, it was perfectly logical. The Cat in him had its own way of doing things, that was true...but it was also true that that didn’t happen until after then man repeatedly bothered him. Had the Cat sensed his human desires, and acted upon them? If that were so, then didn’t that put the Cat under his control as much as it put him under *its* control?

“You’re going to have to start asking yourself *why* you do the things you do,” she told him. “There has to be reasons for every single thing. And if you can understand those reasons, well, then maybe it won’t be so scary. So the next time it happens, don’t be afraid of it. Explore it, try to understand it. *Experience* it. If you try to just ignore it, then you’ll never be able to stop it.”

He chuckled ruefully. “Tiella, I don’t think you know how much better I feel now,” he said sincerely. “I think you may be right. Dolanna told me not to ignore what I was feeling and the instincts in my head, but if she’d have said it the same way you just did, I don’t think I’d have been afraid. Well, I’m still going to be afraid, but I’ll try to understand the why of what I do as well as the what. There has to be reasons the Cat does the things it does. It’s not a creature of whim.”

“That’s where you’re messing up, Tarrin,” she told him. “Don’t keep thinking about it as *it* and *you*. There is no *it* and *you*. It’s just you. What you have in here,” she said, tapping his forehead, “it’s a part of you. If you treat it like something that’s not, then it’s going to *seem* like it’s not, and that’s not good for you. You may call it the Cat, or the instincts, or the other mind, but it’s not. It’s just a different part of you, of your own mind. It’s not what the Cat does, it’s what *you* do.”

He gave her a steady look, and he could see her blush slightly. Tiella was usually a quiet girl, headstrong, but talking wasn’t her way. He knew she was smart, but she’d just laid out what he was feeling, and solutions to those problems, like it was something that even a child would have realized. He looked at her with a budding new respect. He reached up and put his paw on her cheek, his huge paw swallowing up half her face, and she

smiled at him and put her hand against his paw. “That tickles,” she giggled. “That pad is soft and rough at the same time, and the fur on your fingers is smooth. Now, it’s my turn,” she said, holding out a hand imperiously. Tarrin seemed to understand what she wanted. Without much thought, he brought his tail around and placed it into her waiting hand. She grabbed hold of it, feeling the thickness of it, then probed the fur with her fingers meticulously. He felt her fingertip touch the skin under the fur, then she grabbed it both hands and bent it. She bent it until it was touching itself, and kept doing it until he sucked in his breath. “Sorry,” she apologized. “Is the fur hot?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “It just seems normal.”

“What’s it like, having the tail?”

“Different. Interesting,” he replied. “It does its own thing most of the time, but it does help with balance, and it helps me run faster. It’s longer than my legs, so I have to keep it off the ground, but that’s not too hard. The muscles that move it are pretty strong.”

“How does it help you run?”

“It’s like a counterbalance,” he told her. “I can lean farther down, and that lets me run faster. I don’t fall over because of the weight pushing out behind me. It seems to just know when and where to move to keep me balanced too. It’s almost eerie.”

She yawned. “I think I’ll go back to bed,” she told him. “Think about what I said, Tarrin. And try to get some sleep. You’re starting to get circles under your eyes.”

She slipped back into the tent she shared with Dolanna, leaving Tarrin to his own thoughts. She had come very, very close to the mark, he realized. He did tend to think of the Cat as an invader, an alien, something that was *not him* taking up residence in his mind. That wasn’t true. Though it hadn’t been there before, it was there now, and it was as much a part of him as his right arm. Perhaps the Cat considered him to be much the same, an usurper out to overthrow *it*. It did things, things that happened without his rational thought, but that was only logical. They were instinctive reactions, response to stimulus, reflexes. They happened first because he didn’t *have* to think about them. Analyzing his actions also was very sensible. If he could identify what was making him do things, and why they were happening, he

would come into a greater understanding about himself, and that would make it easier when it was necessary for him to prevent that particular thing from happening again, or to minimize its effect if it was something either unavoidable or uncontrollable.

It wouldn't be easy. He knew that. It may be instincts and impulses, but it carried with it a greater intelligence that made what he called the Cat a very complex creature. But it was a start. And that was something that he hadn't had when they left Torrian yesterday. It did make him afraid, but at least now he felt that there was something that he could do in order to make peace inside himself.

After a suitable gawk at Skeleton Rock and a hot breakfast, the group was off again, riding hard in the cloudy morning. Captain Daran kept two men in the lead at all times, scouting out the conditions ahead as two men drifted behind them to ensure there were no followers. They passed one caravan train in the morning, and a brief stop to talk to them told them that the way ahead was all but deserted, and that they were making better time than they thought. At the pace they were going, they would reach Marta's Ford before noon tomorrow.

Tarrin spent the riding thinking about what Tiella had said to him, and thinking about Dolanna's instruction that morning, in concentration exercises. They were a bit like the aiming exercise that his father taught him, about emptying the mind of all thought and concentrating all of your attention onto a single thing, ignoring everything else. In archery, that one thing was the target. Dolanna was teaching him to center himself on *himself*. She told him that that was the first step to using Sorcery, to look within, and then without, then draw what was out within, then use what was within to change what was without. It sounded a bit confusing, but he was certain that it would make sense eventually. He couldn't do it riding the horse as hard as he was, but he could think about how what Dolanna had told him would fit in with the insights that Tiella had revealed to him early that morning.

They stopped for lunch near a small river which they had just forded. Lunch was going to be a simple affair of bread and cheese and some dried fruit, but Tarrin was more thankful for the time out of the saddle. His back

didn't agree with all the bouncing around. He put his paws on his back and stretched it, bending backwards so deeply that his head nearly brushed the ground. His backbone was different now, he knew, with more bones in it that were a bit smaller, which let him bend like that. Playing around, he put one paw on the ground and walked over himself, bringing his legs up and over until he was balanced on that one paw perfectly. He'd never considered that he would inherit the cat's agility as well as the fur. Such a move was no strain on him at all to maintain. He bent his elbow and brought his nose down to tickle the grass, then pushed himself back out, then swung down into a hunched, all-fours position much akin to a cat sitting. "Having fun?" Walten asked him as he walked by.

"Just testing something," he replied. He sprang straight up, high into the air, then tucked in and began to roll backwards. The sky and ground traded places wildly, but Tarrin just *knew* exactly where the ground was, and he also just *knew* precisely how he was oriented to the ground at all times. He snapped out his arms, and his paws made perfect contact with the grass. He arched back and pushed off with his arms, coming to a perfect stop, bent like a bow, at a very shallow angle to the ground, using raw strength to keep from toppling over. It was incredible, and he wondered at it for long moments as he generally just jumped around, performing acrobatic feats that would had made the most grizzled veteran performer gawk.

"Impressive," Dolanna remarked. "Now, if you are done playing, we need to eat and move on."

"Sorry," he said, sitting down beside the Sorceress as Faalken grinned at him. "What?"

"You should tour," he said with a laugh. "Tarrin Kael, acrobat extraordinaire. I can see you pack them in."

"Oh, please," Tarrin scoffed.

"We can get you one of those tight-fitting costumes," he went on.

Jarax laughed, and Tarrin scowled at the knight.

"Dolanna can open for you, doing a magic act with things stuffed up her sleeves and ribbons hidden in her hair."

"That will do," Dolanna said frostily.

Faalken gave Dolanna an impudent grin, then took a drink of water innocently.

“You can be the strongman,” Tarrin told him with a calm voice. “Faalken, the half-brained strongman, so muscular because his body didn’t want to waste the effort on his mind, so dumb we don’t even pay him. I figure that should attract the baser audience.”

Faalken gave him a look, then laughed jovially. “I guess I deserved that,” he chuckled.

“You deserved worse,” Dolanna said in an icy voice.

“Your dinner is getting warm,” Faalken told her with a wink.

They camped that night in a clearing well off the road, and it was another sleepless night for Tarrin as the dreams invaded his mind. He awoke the next morning sandy-eyed and feeling like his head was stuffed in wool. Dolanna put them out on a pace even harder than the day before, and it wasn’t long until the first farms surrounding Marta’s Ford were laid out to the sides of the Skeleton Road. Dolanna slowed them to a walk, and as Walten and Tiella listened to the wiry Jarax tell some old tale, Tarrin rode up to Dolanna and listened as she talked with the captain of Arren’s men and Faalken.

“We intend to take ship here, Daran, and there are too many of your men to make it feasible,” she told the captain.

“I intend to see you to Suld, Mistress Dolanna,” he said adamantly. “Arren ordered me to escort you through the front door of the Tower, and I mean to do just that. I’ll bring five men with you.”

“That is still too many. We have to board the horses.”

“Four.”

“Three,” Faalken said. “That’s about all the room that we’ll have.”

“Three then,” he said. “Jarax and Orgal.”

“Good choices,” Faalken agreed.

“Jarax?” Tarrin asked. “Why?”

“There’s more to worth than a man’s arm, Tarrin,” Daran told him. “Jarax is a good fighter, but he’s also a talkative man that keeps the villagers entertained, and keeps their mind off what’s going on. That makes him more than worth it.”

Tarrin hadn’t considered that. And it made sense.

“Orgal is the monster of a man that usually rides rear guard,” Daran told Dolanna. “He’s quiet and seems slower than he is, and he’s got a good eye. Not much gets past him.”

“Then arrange your packs so that your gear is with us,” she said. “But I do not want any more than one extra pack animal in our train. Space is becoming a problem.”

“I’ll see to it, Mistress Dolanna,” Daran said.

“Tarrin, go back to Tiella and Walten for a time,” Dolanna told him. “And pull up your hood.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, pulling back and letting the knight and Sorceress speak privately. He didn’t even try to eavesdrop on them, which would have been easy because of his keen hearing. He settled the hood over his ears carefully, patting on it to feel if they were bulging, then joined the trio in the middle of the column.

Jarax was spinning a tale about history, about the civil war that had raged between Draconia and Tykarthia for the last seven hundred years. They were the two kingdoms north of Sulasia, which had once been one kingdom, and had fought a war so bloody for so long that victory wasn’t even a goal any more. They lived only to completely eradicate the other off the face of Sennadar. “So,” Jarax was saying, “the western nobles of Draconia were getting more and more displeased with King Dawon. They considered the weighted tithe system the king used to be unfair, seeing as how the western nobles were paying nearly four times as much as the eastern ones. The nobles of the east, led by the crafty Earl Winold, kept flattering the king with gifts and very carefully arranged plots to continue to discredit the western nobles and keep them out of the king’s favor. Winold, you see, hated Duke Tykan with a passion, and he considered the more moderate practices going on in the western parts of the kingdom to be

almost sacreligious. Winold was a man that would have banned the use of fire if the thought he could get away with it. Some men are like that.

“Winold was a crafty one, but he made one fatal error. He arranged a border atrocity, sending a large complement of soldiers to attack an isolated, small village in southern Ungardt, then arranged it to look like the leader of the western nobles, Duke Tykan, was the one that ordered the attack. The attackers carried out their mission, and did manage to convince the Ungardt that it was Tykan who was responsible, but they didn’t count on the Ungardt response. Instead of punishing just Tykan, the Ungardt invaded the entire kingdom of Draconia. That was the War of Seven Roses, and it lasted only six months. It ended with the Ungardt invaders taking King Dawon back to Dusgaard in chains, dragged by a horse the entire way. The stories say that he even managed to live long enough to get to Dusgaard, where he was stoned to death in a public square by children. Dawon’s heir was Elon.”

“Elon the Sunderer?” Tarrin asked.

“That’s how he’s known, yes,” Jarax said with a smile. “Elon wasn’t a very smart man. He relied on Winold’s counsel, not realizing that Winold only cared about putting Tykan in his place. Tykan and the western nobles had fought well in the war, but the western lands had been relatively untouched. The Ungardt had invaded from the north and east, ravaging the eastern duchies on their way to Draconis. Winold convinced Elon to raise the taxes and tithes even more on the western nobles, to equalize the suffering, so Elon had been told.

“Needless to say, Tykan and the western nobles went up in flames. Tykan demanded an audience with the king, which was denied. Tykan knew that it was Winold behind all the scheming, so he decided that he had to talk to the King without Winold’s oily voice there to cloud the issues. When he tried to get into the king’s bedroom to talk to him personally, Winold had him thrown in the dungeon. The western nobles, loyal to Tykan, attacked Dracon Keep in a surprise attack and freed Duke Tykan. They were careful not to hurt anyone, but their goal of just freeing the Duke wasn’t really noticed. Tykan fled back to his duchy with Winold’s private army on his tail, then they barred themselves in Tykan’s Hold and endured a month-long siege. The armies of the west rose up and chased out the invaders.

“That was when Elon made a fateful mistake. He declared Tykan an outlaw, and levied fines on all the nobles of the west that had participated in the routing of Winold’s army, so steep that they would never be able to pay them. The western nobles, in an absolute rage over the continual injustice, simply seceded from Draconia as a block. They decided that wise Tykan would be their king, and named their new kingdom after him. The nobles of the central duchies were suddenly caught between two nations, and they declared their allegiances in a random order that left pockets of one kingdom inside another.

“By then, Elon had died under mysterious circumstances, and with no heir, Winold assumed the throne. His hatred of Tykan had totally consumed him, so he raised an army to march into the rebelling western lands and kill anything that moved. The western lords, already mobilized, marched east and met the hastily assembled army at Long Staff River, and totally crushed them. Winold pulled back and regrouped as Tykan rallied for support from Ungardt and Sulasia, his bordering neighbors. The Ungardt were still in a tiff over the war, and the Sulasians recognized their independence but wouldn’t form any sort of military alliance.

“And that was how the war started. Tykan controlled the commerce coming in from the western harbors and ports, but Winold controlled the iron mines in the mountains around the Petal Lakes. The two kingdoms started a war that still hasn’t ended, to this day. The lands between Draconia and Tykarthia, once fertile farmland, are nothing but a barren wasteland now, the grass trampled into mud by hundreds of battles and all the towns and keeps crushed by one side or the other. The border changed by the day at the beginning of the war, but as time went by and more and more was destroyed by the boots of soldiers, the wheels of siege engines, and by fire. They’re more or less separated now, and there are few if any major battles, but not a day goes by when one baron or earl rides across that wasteland to raid on the border of the other. They say that there are enough bones littering Elon’s Waste to make a mountain.”

“Wouldn’t it have grown back by now?” Tiella asked.

“Yes, it has, but it’s still called a wasteland because nobody can live there,” Jarax replied. “Even the rudest hut is burned and all its inhabitants killed, because there are raiders from both sides prowling the no-man’s land

constantly. That brutal practice has actually helped to keep the two kingdoms separate.”

“I’m glad I don’t live there,” Walten said, shuddering.

“It’s an unhappy place, all right,” he said. “I’ve been there a few times. Children are taught that the people on the other side of the border are murderous animals and have to be completely exterminated. They live in cities behind walls, and the people out on the farms jump at every shadow. The funny thing is, they both worship the same God. They’re the same people, but they’re too busy hating each other to notice it.”

“Eww,” Tiella sounded. “I’m glad I don’t live there too.”

“Why does it go on?” Tarrin asked.

“Who knows?” Jarax shrugged. “I guess because by now, there’s nothing left but hate. The minds of fanatics are hard to fathom. You’d be better off trying to walk to the sun.” He scratched at his beard absently. “Now that we got the unpleasant story out of the way, how would you like to hear about the Islands of Amazar?”

“Where?” Tiella asked.

There was a gleam in Jarax’s eye. “A wondrous place that I myself have visited. A place of women, where women rule, women fight, and women do all the things that men do here, and men are the property of the women.”

“There’s no such place,” Walten scoffed. “My father told me that the tales about Amazar are a bunch of baloo. There’s no Amazar, no Sha’Kari, and there’s no such things as dragons.”

“Sha’Kari, I don’t know about,” Jarax admitted, “but Amazar is a real enough place, thousands of leagues to the south of Shacè. Amazar is actually a series of islands off the coast of the continent of Sharadar, home of that wondrous and ancient land of magic. The Wikuni visit it often, because the furs and silk the Amazons make are in high demand, and they are the only ones that go to the islands. I was there myself, so I know.”

“If they don’t let humans go there, how did you get there?” Tiella asked, a bit accusingly.

“Ah, that’s a long tale,” he said. “Let’s just say that I was a young man with a wanderlust. It’s not that humans aren’t allowed. Women are free to come and go as they will, but any man that sets foot on the lands of Amazar becomes a woman’s property, and he’s not allowed to leave. I happened to Amazar quite by accident, and spent nearly a year there, owned by a tall, regal lady named Sulina Dar. She was quite a woman. She was the Queen, you know, and it was considered an honor for a man to be owned by her,” he said, his eyes distant. Then he cleared his throat and continued. “I decided that being a woman’s property wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, and snuck onto a Wikuni galleon and returned to Sennadar, working as a deckhand in return for passage. I even have something to remember it by,” he said. He rolled up the sleeve of his tunic, displaying a strange tattoo on his upper arm, a squiggly symbol that looked like a bird...almost. “This was the mark of my mistress,” he told them. “The sigil of the house of Dar. The royal house, you know,” he said with a bit of pride. “This little mark up here says which woman in the house owns me. That’s how they know who owns which man.”

“What happens when he’s sold?” Tarrin asked.

“He’s tattooed again underneath the first one. Some men have tattoos all the way down one arm and halfway down the other, but they’re usually older men. Being sold too often hurts a man’s reputation.”

“Reputation?” Walten asked. “How can a slave have a reputation?”

“It’s slavery, yes, but it’s not *slavery*,” he said. “Full-blooded Amazon men may be owned, but they’re not exactly slaves either. They have to do what the woman tells them to do, but there’s a certain amount of leeway in the matter. It’s very difficult to explain.”

“Kind of like marriage,” Tiella injected.

“Something like that, yes, but not quite,” Jarax agreed.

They could see the edge of the town of Marta’s Ford, and Tarrin pulled up the hood a bit more to make sure of it, especially since there were children playing in the field off to one side of the road. Dolanna called the column to a stop, then turned her horse to face them. “Faalken and I are going ahead to secure passage on a ship. Daran, keep everyone together and

off the road, and perhaps this would be a good time to check the horses. We should be back soon.”

The two of them trotted into the town as Daran and his men walked the horses to a small field by the road across from the playing children, then they all dismounted. Daran’s men started checking over their horses, and Tarrin did the same, urging his horse to give him a hoof at a time, as he checked them to make sure the shoes were in good shape and there were no stones or bruises. All of the horses had more or less grown used to Tarrin’s unusual smell, and he could pass among them like anyone else. They actually paid him no mind; although his smell was obviously one of a predator, they either understood or came to realize that he didn’t eat horses, and that they were safe with him among them.

A wooden ball came to a stop near Tarrin, and he froze at the sight of the two small children running across the road to fetch the toy. It was two little boys, both of them about eight years old, gangly but well fed, with the taller of the two having reddish hair and the shorter brown hair. Their features were similar; they were either brothers or cousins. Tarrin let the rear hoof of the horse down slowly as the two boys looked at him curiously. “Why do you have such big hands?” one of them asked boldly.

“And why are they all black?” the other one continued.

Tarrin put his hands inside his sleeves slowly as if it was something he was used to doing, not drawing any undue attention to them.

“They’re just my hands,” he said calmly. “Just like any other hands.”

“My hands aren’t black,” one boy said, holding them out to show him.

“No, but you’re not me either,” Tarrin replied with a smile.

“You have funny eyes, mister,” the other boy noticed.

“They’re not funny to me,” Tarrin told him. “I could say that your eyes are funny.”

“You’re one of those wi-koos, aren’t you?” the taller boy asked. “Those animal-people that sail on the ships.”

“No,” Tarrin said, “but you can think of me as one of their cousins.”

One of the boys across the road shouted for them to bring back the ball. “Well, we have to go. Goodbye, wi-koo cousin,” the taller boy said.

“Bye,” the other said, and they ran back across the road to rejoin their friends.

They hadn’t shown any fear of him, even when it was obvious to them that he wasn’t human. But then again, children were like that sometimes. He went around the horse and picked up the other rear hoof, checking it carefully for signs of injury or damage, noting that it would have to be trimmed down soon.

The horses all started fidgeting. Tarrin looked up and sniffed deeply at the air, then his hackles rose. He had no idea what that smell was, but it was not human, and it didn’t smell very friendly either. Judging from the way the horses reacted to it, it could be said that it was definitely a bad smell. The wind was blowing from the north, from the trees and across the field on the other side of the road, and then to them. Whatever it was was up there in those trees past the field. Tarrin listened to his instincts for the first time, actively seeking them out and seeing how they reacted to that smell. The Cat didn’t like that smell. And that was what he wanted to know.

“Jarax,” Tarrin said calmly, peering over the children at the trees on the far side.

“What is it?” he asked.

“How quietly do you think you could get the attention of those kids and get them to move?” he asked in a quiet, intent voice. “There’s a smell in the air that’s upsetting the horses, and it doesn’t smell friendly. Whatever it is, its in those trees on the far side of that field.”

Jarax gave him a sober look. “I think I can get their attention,” he said. “I’ll get Orgal and Nyllin and we’ll let them look at our swords. That always fascinates young boys.”

“I’ll drift up to the road over there,” he said, pointing towards the town with a clawed finger. “If whatever it is sees that the kids are being watched, maybe it will give up and go away.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but it has the smell of blood on it,” Tarrin replied. “That means its a predator.”

Jarax nodded, and he walked over to where Daran was talking to Orgal and a few other of his men. Daran looked at Tarrin curiously, who nodded and started to move, so he quietly issued a few orders to his men, and they all started to drift apart in seemingly random directions. Jarax, Orgal, and Nyllin, the second in command of the men, approached the boys with light voices and offers to let them hold their swords. That made the young boys instantly forget their game and rush over to where the men were standing, which was on Tarrin’s side of the road. That drew the boys out from between Arren’s men and whatever it was on the other side of the field.

Tarrin reached the road a few paces from the leading horse, ignoring the curious looks from Tiella and Walten. He looked back at Walten quickly, and made a drawing motion with his hands, then nudged at the far woods with a jerk of his head. Walten understood his action, then quickly pulled Tarrin’s longbow out of his saddleskirt and started stringing it. Tiella pulled her leather sling out of her belt pouch and kept it wadded up in her hand, a bullet stone fitted into the sleeve, as she pulled out Walten’s quiver of arrows for him. Tarrin untied the robe belt in front of him; the robe was too full, and he couldn’t run very fast or very well while wearing it. He stood on the side of the road, seemingly with his head bowed, watching the edge of the woods from the edge of the hood.

There was a movement at the edge of the woods. It was just too high up. Tarrin looked up and saw a face, nearly fifteen spans off the ground, impossibly wide. Tarrin gave a gape at the face that materialized in the greenish cast of the woods, probably invisible to any eyes but his, then he saw the yellowed tusks at the edges of its mouth. It was a Troll! He’d never seen one, but he’d heard enough about them from his father. Trolls were the largest of the Goblin races, twice as big as a man and ten times meaner. They ate humans whenever they got the chance. The Cat in him welled up loudly when he recognized that face; obviously the Cat had no love for Trolls either. It wanted to kill it, and Tarrin found himself in agreement. Trolls this close to human lands were only there for one reason, and that was to catch someone to eat. But he wouldn’t go running after it. The smell of it was too strange to him to discern if there was more than one, and he wasn’t about to run into a snake pit. Too strange, and too horrid. Now that

the smell was clearer, he decided that he'd never smelled anything so vile in his life. Not even the city-smell that hung about Torrian was that bad. It smelled like rotting flesh floating in a month-old cesspool. Tarrin made a motion to Daran, who approached him casually. "It's a Troll," Tarrin told him.

"You're sure?"

Tarrin nodded. "I saw it. The face was about fifteen spans off the ground, and it had tusks."

"That was a Troll, alright," he said grimly. "How many?"

"I'm not sure," Tarrin said quietly. "I don't know their scent well enough to figure out if there's more than one. Besides, the smell is so awful I doubt I could if I tried," he said, wrinkling his nose.

"We can't let a Troll run around loose," Daran said. "It will kill someone."

"Walten may be able to put an arrow into it," Tarrin said. "It's right at the edge of bow range."

"No, then it'll just get mad," Daran said, thinking. "We have to lure it out, so we can kill it."

"Trolls may not be smart, but they aren't stupid," Tarrin said, falling back on what his father had taught him about them. "It's not going to come out here when it can see twenty armed men."

"We can have some of the men trot off," Daran said to himself.

Tarrin looked up, seeing more disturbances in the foliage. "I don't think that it's going to matter," Tarrin said quickly. Tarrin could see another Troll, and then another, and one more, gathering at the edge of the trees. "I see four of them now."

"They'll attack with that many," Daran told him, turning around and putting a hand on his sword. "I can see them," he said.

The Trolls hovered at the edge of the clearing, then they simply turned and walked away. Tarrin could smell their scents getting fainter; a smell that pungent was easy to keep track of. "They're leaving," Tarrin said. The taste of disappointment was hot in his mouth, and he had to quell the Cat's desire

to go chase them down. Now he was glad that he hadn't chased off after that thing in the first place. He'd have had a nasty shock by the time he got there.

"That's not like them," Daran said curiously. "Twenty to four are odds that Trolls would have accepted, and it's not like a Troll to give up on a fight. They like killing as much as they like eating."

"All in all, with those children here, I'm glad we didn't have to fight," Tarrin said, tying his robe belt again and trying to calm down from the adrenaline-rushed high he'd worked himself up to in preparation for the fight.

"It may not be over yet," Daran said. "They may have decided to turn around, or maybe even try to come at us from another direction. We're moving into town, and we're bringing the children in with us," he announced. "I don't want to be left out in the open like this with four Trolls prowling the woods."

"Good idea," he agreed.

They all got into a loose formation around the children, who were lured into coming with them by Jarax's easy manner and promise that they could sit on the horses, then walked into town. Marta's Ford was a large village, with no outer wall, and it was surprisingly clean by the standards of Tarrin's nose. The buildings were vaguely similar to the ones of Aldreth, except for the thatched roofs where Aldreth used slate tiles, but they were laid out in rectangular patterns following the streets instead of facing the village green. This town didn't have a green. The masts of three or four ships were visible over the rooftops, near the large warehouse buildings. It was that commerce that made Marta's Ford larger than Aldreth, for much of the city seemed to revolve around its modest docks and the goods that were loaded onto and off of the ships. Daran sent Nyllin to find the mayor and warn him of the Trolls lurking in the surrounding woods, and the rest of them stood in a vacant lot between two houses near the road leading towards Torrian.

Dolanna and Faalken returned not too long after the kids had run out of things to see and drifted away. Dolanna was smiling slightly as she approached, and Tiella, Walten, Daran, and Tarrin met the pair. "Renneè is still here," she told them. "He awaits us at the dock."

“Lady Dolanna, there were Trolls in the woods while we were waiting,” Daran said quietly.

“Trolls?” she asked.

The captain nodded. “I sent Nyllin to quietly warn the mayor. I’ve ordered my men to stay in the town for a couple of days to dissuade them from attacking anyone.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Daran and Tarrin quickly recanted the events that had happened not long ago. When it was over, Dolanna pursed her lips worriedly. “That’s not normal behavior for Trolls,” Faalken grunted. “They should have attacked.”

“I know,” Daran agreed.

“At this point, I am not going to take any chances,” Dolanna said. “Let us get to the ship now. I will convince Renneè that leaving immediately would be a good idea.”

They walked the horses through town, reaching the docks. The river was deep towards the southern end of town, but shallowed dramatically towards the north, until it resembled little more than a stream, forming the ford from which the town took its name. It was a natural headwater that made it a logical place for a town to be. The town sported three wooden docks stretching out into the narrow river, and all three were occupied by three different types of ship. The farthest one away was a two-masted vessel with a narrow beam and a graceful look. The middle ship was an oared scow with a single, small mast, little more than a barge. The third ship was a single-masted fishing vessel of some kind, heavy with nets and rigging and smelling like fish even from this distance. Dolanna led them to the farthest ship, which was painted a dull brown. Men and women both moved along the decks, performing the repetitive chores that made up sailing, and one man, wearing a white silk shirt and with a wide, flat hat with an outrageously long feather in it, was standing at the rail. He was a thin man with a narrow face and long, wavy black hair spilling out from under his cap, and he wore a thin, long moustache and a goatee. It was obvious that he was Shacèan, if not from his graceful features, then from his frilly shirt and black trousers with its red sash, or maybe the light rapier he wore in his

sash. Shacèans were about the only people who used the light fencing weapons.

“Ah, Madam Dolanna, you return already,” he called in a thickly accented voice. “*Andevouz.*”

“*Andevouz,*” Dolanna repeated in a calm voice. “We must leave immediately. As soon as our gear is brought aboard.”

“*Ai,* madam, you hurry me, no?,” he said, “but I am done with my loading, yes. Come, come, I will have your horses loaded, yes, and we will talk as my Lady begins her journey.” He barked out a series of commands in a flowing, musical language, and a heavy plank was quickly lowered for the horses. They carefully led the horses up the narrow walkway, holding tightly to the reins, allowing canvas-shirted sailors to take the reins from them once they got the horses on board. The tall captain gave them all a cursory look, then he retreated to the raised sterncastle and grabbed hold of the wheel that moved the rudder. He barked out a few more commands, and another man started shouting a series of instructions. Dolanna and the others went up to the captain’s sterncastle deck as the sailors hurriedly started untying ropes, slipping hawsers, and climbing up into the impressive rigging to lower the sails. Shacèans built very good ships, almost as good as Wikuni vessels.

“A dangerous group, yes,” Renneè noted as he watched his sailors free the ship from the dock. The vessel started drifting with the current, sliding away from shore. “But not without its flowers and jewels,” he added, giving Tiella a look that made her blush suddenly. “*Mon am,* what manner of creature do you bring to Renneè?” he asked soberly, looking at Tarrin.

“This is Tarrin,” she said calmly. “He is my guest.”

“Ah, then he is my guest as well. *Andevouz,* Tarrin.”

“Tarrin, take off your robe,” Dolanna instructed.

Tarrin hesitated a bit, but did as she commanded. He never felt so self-conscious in his life. It was almost as if he was stripping in front of them. Renneè’s eyes widened slightly at Tarrin’s appearance, but he said nothing untowards. “*Ai,* I thought for a moment, you bring a Wikuni aboard my Lady,” he said with a snort. “I have three cabins open for you, madam Dolanna. I have two other passengers as well, so it will be crowded at the

dinner table, no?” He spun the rudder wheel a bit as they entered a shallow bend in the river. “It will be crowded, yes, but I know you will make do.”

“I appreciate your aid, Renneè, and that you do not ask too many questions,” Dolanna told him.

The Shacèan smiled at her roguishly. “No, madam, it is I who must thank you. Renneè would be sleeping at the bottom of the river, yes, if had not been for you. If this little thing pleases you, then it is with an open hand that I give it to you, yes.” He sniffed a bit. “And only a fool demands to know the mind of a *katzh-dashi*, yes. And I am no fool.”

Faalken stifled a laugh, and Dolanna pinned him with an icy stare. “Who are your passengers?” she asked.

“A merchant, yes, whose cargo we carry, and who is most likely very happy I left early. The other is a traveler, yes, who paid Renneè enough to sail for a month, and asked only for a cabin, meals, and not to be bothered.”

“I see,” she said. “I thank you again for your help, Renneè.”

“*De ’cèst*,” he said with a smile.

Their cabins were cramped, but on a ship, everything was cramped. There were three beds packed into a room a bit larger than a closet, with cabinets and a small stand for a washbasin and lamp. A single small porthole served as a window to the outside. Dolanna stepped into the door and regarded Walten and Tarrin calmly as Faalken stowed his armor into a tiny locker bolted to the floor at the base of his bed. “Feel free to move about as you wish,” Dolanna told them. “Just be careful of the crew. Many of them do not speak our language, and Shacèans are known for their quick tempers. And do not, under any circumstance, allow one of their women to lead you off alone,” she warned.

“Dolanna, you’re ruining the trip for them,” Faalken jibed, grinning at her.

Dolanna cowed the jovial knight with an unholy stare, and then continued. “The women will be friendly enough, but the men aboard will look upon it with jealousy. Shacèan women adore playing one man against another, so, for my own sanity, please refrain from getting involved.”

“Women sailors,” Walten said with a bit of a laugh, after Dolanna had left. Walten wasn’t crazy enough to say something like that in front of her. “What’s next?”

“The Ungardt do it,” Tarrin told him, a bit waspishly. “I don’t understand this Sulasian hang-up about gender. Women aren’t little china dolls, Walten. My mother should have shown you that by now.”

“Yes, but your mother is, well, your mother.”

“She’s just your average Ungardt woman, Walten,” Tarrin told him bluntly. “Ungardt ships have as many women on them as they do men, and it seems like the Shacèans are much the same.”

“They are,” Faalken said. “And you do what Dolanna said, Walten. The women here will try to get you alone, just to make their current beau jealous, and he’ll carve his mark into your cheek if he finds out. And the woman will make sure he finds out.”

“That’s a bit silly,” Walten grunted.

“Of course it is, but we’re talking about women here,” Faalken said, giving Tarrin an impudent grin.

“I just said they’re not helpless,” Tarrin said. “I never said they weren’t strange.”

All three of them laughed, and Tarrin went back to putting his clothes in the tiny chest at the foot of the bed he’d chosen for himself. “Never try to understand a woman,” Faalken said with a chuckle. “It’s like trying to make water flow uphill.”

Tarrin lingered in the cabin for a bit, then went out on deck for a while to enjoy the warm summer afternoon. The ship was sliding through the river waters like a knife, making excellent time with both the current and the wind helping them along. The ship bobbed slightly in the water, creating a rocking motion that he rather liked. He looked up at the complicated rigging guiding the billowed sails, making sense out the seeming chaotic criss-cross of ropes and lines that held the two large sails at a precise position relative to the wind. Sailors crawled around up in the ropes constantly, because every turn of the river changed the ship’s orientation to the wind, and that demanded a change in the position of the sails. Tarrin decided that

running rigging for a riverboat had to be much harder than rigging a ship on open water, where it moved more or less in a straight line.

It was going to rain tonight, he predicted, staring back at the clouds gather in the west through a break in the trees. It would be the first real rain since they left, and that was unusual. This was usually a rainy part of the summer. It had been much warmer than usual too. Maybe the two were related. Maybe the heat was making the rain dwindle down. But, on the other hand, it had been a very wet spring, so maybe the lack of rain in the early summer was just things evening out. He was no weather-watcher, like some in the village.

“The fur, it is handsome on you,” a woman’s voice called. Tarrin looked up, and he found himself staring back into a rather pretty face. Her cheekbones were high, her chin sharp, and her nose thin and straight. She had deep green eyes, like emeralds, and she had red hair spilling out from under a kerchief tied around her head. She was partially laying across a spar in the rigging above. Her face conjured up a remembrance, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He felt like he was supposed to know her, even though he’d never seen her before. “I like the ears too,” she remarked with a grin. Her voice was deep, strong, not delicate like a face like hers would suggest, but the Shacèan accent was strong in it. He saw that she was wearing a simple white cloth shirt with trousers made of sailcloth canvas. Her feet were bare, like most of the sailors, and he noticed that unlike the other sailors, she wore no jewelry at all, not even earrings. Her ears weren’t even pierced. “How are you called, furry one?”

“Tarrin,” he replied shortly.

“Tarrin,” she said, trying the word out for size. “I like your name. Do you play *angepen*?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” he said, starting to get a bit edgy.

“That is a shame, yes,” she said, smiling at him. “Perhaps I will teach you, later. But for now, I have work to attend. We will see each other again, no?”

“Probably,” he said non-committally.

“We will, Tarrin,” she promised, and Tarrin’s ears picked up. Her voice had no trace of the Shacèan accent.

He watched her gracefully climb higher into the rigging, helping to shift the sail to match the new angle of the wind. It was odd, but he dismissed it. His mother had gotten rid of her Ungardt accent, but she could easily pick it back up whenever she wanted. That woman had probably done the same.

They ate dinner with the captain and his merchant passenger in the small officer's mess. Dinner consisted of a very savory fish stew that all but melted in Tarrin's mouth, and he liked it so much he nearly emptied the pot by himself. The merchant kept giving Tarrin wild looks, and barely spoke two words together throughout the entire meal. And as soon as he was done, he got up and left quickly. Tarrin sighed as he left, but there was nothing that he could do about it.

"Dolanna, what is *angepcen*?" he asked curiously.

Renneè laughed richly. "*Angecen*?" he repeated, then laughed again. "*Angecen* means Maiden's Kiss. It is a game that women play to tease men."

Tarrin blushed furiously. "I didn't know," he muttered.

"What woman said this to you?" the captain asked.

"The redhead," he replied.

"Ah, her," he said. "She is new to the Lady. I hired her this morning. Stubborn as a rock, but she is a good sailor, yes, very good." He gave Tarrin a look. "I am surprised she said this to you, yes. She has not been on the Lady long enough to find a beau. And, I am sorry to say, you are not what most ladies would look for in a man."

"That's true enough," Tarrin agreed, looking at the palm of his paw soberly. Not indeed.

Dolanna put her hand on his shoulder. "Tomorrow morning, I will start teaching you," she said. "Tiella, Walten, it would behoove you to sit with us, for what I will teach Tarrin will do both of you good as well. It is seven days to Ultern, so we will have plenty of spare time."

And we're leaving behind those that were following us, Tarrin added silently.

After dinner, Tarrin stood on the deck of the ship as it coasted to a stop and anchored in the river on the gentle side of a bend, anchoring for the night. The ship was well enough away from shore in the wide section of river to ensure that getting aboard would be very difficult, but there were sentries posted regardless. Tarrin looked up at the sky, up at the silvery darkness where the clouds concealed the moons and the Skybands, and felt the cool wind on his face. Wind carrying the green smells of the forest, smells that always seemed to soothe him, even back when he was human. He opened his eyes and looked down at his paws, studying the backs of them, marvelling at them.

It was as if he'd never been anything else.

It was a calm revelation, he admitted, but he couldn't even remember what it was like not to have a tail. What he felt, and smelled, and heard, it was as if they were things that had always been there, and the didn't seem so unusual or new to him now. He knew that that was just him getting adjusted to his new condition, but he never expected to forget what it was like to be human. The Cat had taken up its now-familiar place in his mind, singing to him the song of the instincts, supplying him with information that transcended human comprehension and thought, that which truly made him neither human nor animal, but both. He felt the cool wind blow, felt the first drop of rain touch his cheek, marvelling once again at himself.

How *alive* he felt.

He knew there was no going back. But he couldn't help but feel that this was how he was always meant to be. Over the last few days, such a short time, he had fallen into more than a mere acceptance of what he was, he had found true joy in it. There was just something incredibly pleasing about how the way the grass smelled in the morning dew, or the smell of a thousand kinds of flowers blowing in the wind, or the *scritch scritch* sound a squirrel's claws made on the bark as it moved. He began to find pleasure in his body as well, at its strength and agility, at his tail, and ears, and fur, and claws. It was no longer an alien thing to him, but his body, the body that was more of a home to him now than his human one had ever been.

He also knew that in a time of anxiety he would feel much differently than he did now, when the dark part of his condition reared its head and made him afraid, but that would be then, and this was now. It would happen

very soon, when he closed his eyes and went to sleep, and the dreams returned to him, the nameless dreams that he could never remember, yet never failed to startle him stone cold awake and in a cold sweat.

He stood at the rail a moment longer before going below decks, smelling the rain, listening to the sharp staccato pattering of drops hitting the wooden deck, the ropes, the water, even the leaves and branches of the trees along the riverbank. Feeling it against his skin, feeling it in his fur.

Feeling *alive*.

Chapter 5

Tarrin had suffered through another sleepless night. He was desperately tired, but every time he settled into slumber, the dreams would rise up again and shock him awake. And he could never remember what they were about. In its own way, that was even more frustrating and frightening, because the things that scared him so remained nameless, shapeless phantasms, things that he could not identify. He ended up on the deck of the ship well before dawn, standing at the rail and simply waiting for the sun to come up. He was completely exhausted, but he was so terrified of sleeping that even the thought of it made his blood go cold.

He had no idea how long he stayed at the rail, wilted over it like a dying flower, until the first rays of the sun touched his face. With the rising light came voices, and sounds, and the smells of the humans as they rose from their sleep and went about the work of a new day. He watched them all with a detached curiosity, as Renneè came from his cabin and the officers and the crew started readying the ship for departure. His exhaustion made it seem like he was watching everything through a filmy gauze over his eyes, and it took him moments to think even the simplest things through.

The ship lurched, and Tarrin sank his claws into the deck and railing. The ship's bow anchor had raised, and the ship was starting to get pushed by the current. The ship had been stopped for the night with the bow facing the current to minimize the effect of it on the ship, and now the vessel was swinging around to put her stern to the current, to face downriver, using the stern anchor as a pivot to keep the vessel stable. The stern anchor was raised, and the ship pushed ahead with the current. The wind was very faint, the air calm and the sky clear, so the sails were very slack as the ship pushed downriver. Dolanna's clean scent touched his nose, but it took him a moment to recognize it. "It is time for breakfast," she said.

"I'm not hungry," he replied."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and he flinched away from it. The grip hardened, and she made him turn and face her. She gave him a look of concern. "How long has it been since you slept?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I sleep a little at night, but not for long."

"Dreams?" she asked, and he nodded. "There are some medicines I can give you that will let you sleep without dreams, but I do not want you to have to rely upon them. Tonight I will give you a dose of it, and we will see how it helps you." She put a hand to his cheek, feeling his temperature. "Why did you not tell me of this?" she demanded. "Tarrin, if I am to help you, you cannot hide things from me."

"I didn't think that you could do anything," he told her quietly.

She gave him another look. "Would you prefer to try to sleep now?" she asked.

"No, I can wait," he assured her.

"Tell me about these dreams," she said.

Tarrin closed his eyes. "I don't remember them when I wake up," he told her, "but whatever they are, they scare me so bad that I'm stone cold sober and awake when I do wake up. It's strange...the dreams just vanish like mist the instant I wake up, as if they'd never been. All it leaves me is the memory of being afraid."

"Interesting," she said. "You remember nothing at all? Not even a flash, an impression?"

"No," he replied. "I think I remembered them on that first night, but since then, nothing."

"We cannot let you go on like this," she said. "Lack of sleep has different effects on people, but a common one is increased aggression. That is something that you can definitely do without. If the medicines do not work, I will have to resort to magic."

"Why not use magic in the first place?"

"Tarrin, it is very complicated," she told him. "To put it very briefly, I have an exceptionally difficult time using magic on you that affects the mind. You are not human, Tarrin, and the alien nature of your mind does not

allow me to use mind-affecting weaves as I could use them on humans. You do not think the same way that I do, and I must have an idea of how a target thinks in order to weave together a spell that can affect those thoughts. When I wove the spell that holds the instinctual side of your mind in check, it nearly killed me. I had to rely on raw power to overcome my unfamiliarity with your mind. And look at the results. I think the spell totally unraveled at least two days ago. Such a short respite for so much effort.”

“It did?”

She nodded. “I am surprised that you did not notice.”

“Maybe I did,” he said. “They've been...loud lately. I've started doing things without thinking, things I think that the Cat is making me do.”

“What things?”

“Little things,” he admitted. “Like smelling before I open a door, or checking my room before I rest. I think the Cat can hear my own thoughts, because sometimes it acts on what I'm thinking or feeling. Like what happened with Jarax.”

“He told me about that,” she said.

“I wanted him to be quiet, but he wouldn't shut up...so I growled at him.”

“Are you sure that you are not hungry?” she asked.

“I'm sure,” he said.

“I will have the cook keep something for you, just in case.”

Tarrin heard a faint sound, almost like the fluttering of a sheet in the wind. He looked up, but the sails were rather slack in the still air; the sailors were not even tending them, they were standing around on the deck waiting for a wind to come along. “What is it, Tarrin?” Dolanna asked. He put a paw up to quell any further questions.

But after a few moments, he gave up on it. He had no idea where it had come from...it could have been a branch slapping into another. “I don't know, maybe I'm hearing things,” he told her. “You should--”

He heard it again, closer this time, and from another direction. He looked up towards the bow of the ship--

--then he was diving to the side, carrying Dolanna with him, as a loud crash shook the ship, and large pieces of the rigging and mast slammed into the deck. Tarrin was up in an instant, as a huge reptilian-like bird writhed in the rigging, shrieking a loud, high-pitched scream and thrashing at the sails and ropes. "It's a Wyvern!" Dolanna shouted in sudden fear and anger as the creature systematically destroyed the sails, and broke off another piece of the mast. It gave another keening cry as chaos erupted on the deck, sailors scrambling every which way to avoid whipping ropes and falling spars. The creature was nearly twenty spans long, not counting its tail, and its large wings beat heavily at the air with every stroke as it used its huge, wickedly clawed feet to rip at the rigging. Its tail had a noticeable barbed tip, and its black scales gleamed in the morning light. Its red eyes glared balefully as it screeched, thrashing apart the intricate rigging and working its way to the deck. Sailors started to scramble towards the gangways, getting away from the huge monstrosity. Tarrin watched helplessly as that barbed tail shot down like a javelin and impaled one hapless man in the back. He stiffened instantly, then fell limply to the deck when the sharp point was pulled away, his skin already beginning to turn black from the venom.

He had to do *something*. It was too large for the sailors to fight, and with it up there and them down here, there was nothing that they could do except for get stung by that tail. Unthinkingly, Tarrin popped out his claws, laid back his ears, and growled at the creature menacingly, his eyes flaring up from within with an unholy greenish aura. Those two slits of evil glared right into the creature's reddish eyes without fear, challenging it without words. More sailors scrambled safely away as Tarrin held its attention, and Dolanna groggily got back to her feet.

The monster crashed to the deck with enough force to make the entire ship tremble, smashing planking under its feet as it dropped from its perch in the ruined rigging. It towered over Tarrin, barely able to fit on the deck, but Tarrin just growled at it menacingly, hunching down and putting his paws out wide in an instinctive, reflexive battle stance. "Tarrin, have you lost your mind!?" Dolanna shouted at him angrily, even as she raised her hands at the creature and started weaving a spell.

The creature lunged its head at him, faster than a striking snake, but Tarrin was even faster. He slipped just aside of those wicked jaws and raked it right across the snout, almost getting its eye. He got in another good rake on the end of its nose as it snapped back, howling in pain, shaking its head as blood flew in all directions. Tarrin hunkered down and grabbed a barrel, then lifted it as the expected tail-stinger lanced in at him with blazing speed. He put the barrel in its path, and was pushed back as the stinger slammed into the full barrel. Digging his claws into the deck, he stopped the momentum of the stinger, amazingly with the barrel intact, then threw the barrel and tail aside. The barrel was stuck on the end of the Wyvern's tail, regardless of the creature's whipping attempts to free its venomous stinger of the obstructing object.

A sheet of pure fire flashed out and up, right into the monster's face, as Dolanna's spell was fully formed and unleashed. The Wyvern howled in agony as the curtain of fire continued to sear at its scales and crisp the flesh of the open wounds Tarrin had put in its face. It desperately lunged forward, making Dolanna break the spell to literally dive over the edge of the rail to escape the creature's snapping maw. Tarrin tried to slash it, but the creature's great weight, put on only one side of the narrow-beamed vessel, was making the whole ship list dangerously to that side. The rail was almost in the water as the Wyvern started skidding forward, and that low level allowed Tarrin to reach into the river and pluck Dolanna out of the current by the back of her dress. Sinking his claws into the deck, he carried the wet woman up the steeply angled decking, out of the thrashing Wyvern's reach. The Wyvern had too much weight on one side, and as it tried to turn around to get back into the middle of the ship, the railing broke against its leg and it tumbled into the water.

The ship rocked wildly, catapulting Tarrin all the way across the ship as many sailors, and Walten, were hurled over the sides, as well as the horses and what wasn't nailed down that was on the deck. Tarrin had to wildly throw out one paw and snag his claws into the rail to keep from going over the other side. He managed to keep hold of Dolanna, but that grip tightened as the Wyvern hooked its wing over the railing and pulled, dragging the ship's starboard rail under the water's surface as it tried to clamber back onto the ship. Many of the people below, who were eating breakfast, were just now getting to the doors, among them Faalken, who were armed to the

teeth to repel the monstrous invader. But at that moment, they were all grasping onto anything that would not slide across the deck. The ship listed higher and higher, until the deck was almost vertical to the water, as the Wyvern tried to drag itself back onto the ship. The horses were swimming frantically towards the far bank, just putting distance between them and the Wyvern.

“Goddess, it is going to capsize the ship!” Dolanna screamed in fright.

“Everyone over the rail!” Tarrin heard Renneè's terrified voice scream over the din, then he shouted it again in the language of his own people. He looked down, right into the Wyvern's face, seeing that one of its eyes had been burned away, and smoke was wafting from the charred flesh of the wounds he had given it. It was mad from pain, and it did not realize that capsizing the ship would most likely kill it as the ship's weight rolled over it and pinned it underneath. Sailors were diving off the ship in every direction, even right past the Wyvern, but the creature's eyes were fixed balefully on Tarrin and Tarrin alone.

Grabbing Dolanna by the waist, he set his feet into the deck with his claws and grabbed her with both paws. “What are you doing?” she demanded as he hefted her over his head.

“I'm saving your life!” he answered. Then he threw her, with every ounce of strength in him. She sailed far downstream, a good thirty spans, and crashed noisily into the water well clear of the Wyvern.

Tarrin grabbed onto the rail and pulled himself over it as the Wyvern's wing hooked around the mast, and it hefted to drag its weight back out of the water. The ship lurched violently, rolling up even higher as it was pulled down by the monster's weight. Tarrin saw Faalken and Tiella jump over the side, as Renneè tried to keep hold of the railing, then lost his grip and dropped out of view. Tarrin glanced away for a moment, back towards shore. He *thought* that he may be able to jump to one of the branches overhanging the river. He turned his back to the Wyvern, set himself in a sitting crouch, and then sprang.

He extended fully in the air, his paws reaching for anything to which they could grab hold. He just barely reached the foliage with his spring, but he got paws full of twigs and leaves, the branches to which they were

attached supporting the sudden increase in weight. The tip of Tarrin's tail brushed the water as he bobbed down, then he hauled himself up and onto a sturdy branch, then he turned and looked.

The Wyvern had pulled the ship about as far as it could go without rolling. Tarrin could see half of the ship's keel and the rudder. Then the ship shimmied to one side, and it rolled over on the Wyvern with a thunderous crash that sent white spray high into the air. The Wyvern screeched once before the ship rolled over onto it, then the ship rocked upside down several times. Then it began to move.

The Wyvern was pushing the ship from underneath.

Tarrin looked at Dolanna, who had managed to swim upstream somewhat. The sailors were all swimming for the opposite bank, the bank farther from the Wyvern, the bank where Renneè was standing and calling to his crew. Tarrin was about to say something, but the hideous stench of Trolls struck his nose like a hammer.

He looked down, and saw three of them, approaching the tree where he was. All of them were armed with spears, and he could hear more of them over the shouts of sailors and the rocking swish of the ship.

He couldn't jump into the water, not with that Wyvern between him and the other shore. And he couldn't fight so many Trolls alone. That left only one recourse. Flight. But if he fled, he doubted that he could rejoin Dolanna and the others. With the ship capsized, they would most likely flee in every direction, and they were all soaked, which would make it impossible for him to track by scent.

Dolanna had seen the Trolls, he was certain, for it explained what she shouted to him. "The Tower!" she called. "Go to the Tower! Go west to the coast, and then south to Suld! I will see you there!"

Tarrin nodded, even as the first spear arced in. Tarrin ducked under it frantically. It had been an elaborate trap, and an effective one. If it didn't kill him, it did separate him from the others, leaving him to survive on his own. He vaulted higher into the tree, scrambling into the high branches with the grace of a squirrel, using his claws and strength and agility to get out of sight of those spears. They chased him up the tree, several missing him only by a whisker. Then he felt the whole tree shudder. He looked down, and saw

five Trolls working the tree back and forth, trying to uproot it. He'd have scoffed at such a notion, for the tree was old and it was huge, but the tree was already swaying alarmingly. He had no doubt that they could do it. He looked around frantically, and noticed that the branches of another tree were rather close by.

High over the ground, Tarrin vaulted from one tree to the next with surprising ease, landing on all fours on a sturdy branch. The Trolls below all shouted and pointed at him, and it occurred to Tarrin that, as old as this forest was and how thick and large the trees were, he could go quite a distance before having to touch the ground. And if he could get a few minutes out of sight of the Trolls, he could lose them. But traveling in the trees wasn't as fast as moving on the ground, he discovered quickly, and Trolls had outstanding eyesight.

For two long hours, Tarrin scrambled through the branches, trying to get far enough ahead of the Trolls to hide, or come down onto the ground and run at a faster speed without getting a spear in his back. But there were a *lot* of Trolls; the air was literally befouled by the stench of so many. There had to be a hundred of them, and most of them were following him with their surprisingly fast lumbering gait, and they tried to knock down any tree he stopped in for any amount of time. They couldn't get him down, and he couldn't get away from them. He moved in totally random directions, often going in circles. Once he stopped to rest, but a spear had blasted in and came about two fingers' width from his nose. It had almost startled him out of the tree.

Tarrin was almost exhausted, feeling the effects of lack of sleep, running on pure adrenalin and depending on the Cat's skills of the forest. It helped him know which branches weren't safe to jump to, it kept him from going in a predictable direction and letting them get ahead of him. He saw daylight in front of him, too low to be anything but a break in the woods. He kept moving towards it, planning to cut in one direction or another when he reached the edge, but he stopped once he got there.

It was either the same river or another one. He had no idea. It didn't look quite like the other river, though, for the water was not as muddy on this river. What made him stop was that the river was deep, very deep, and it was at least fifty spans across. Just like the other river, the branches of the

trees overhung the river a goodly ways, a good ten spans over the bank, on both sides. That left thirty spans of open air...and if he went high, he could come down and grab a lower branch, which would give him at least five more spans of distance....

It was insane, but he was getting tired, and if he stopped, they would kill him. He was hopelessly lost, and there was nobody to help him this time. If he didn't separate himself from them enough to where he could really get away from them, he was going to die.

Tarrin climbed higher and higher into the tree. He'd already chosen his branch, a long, heavy one that would take his weight almost to the very end, one that had several prime candidates for grabbing almost directly across from it. He could hear the Trolls rumbling towards him, a few of them almost under him; as soon as they had enough, they'd try to topple the tree. He reached the branch and squatted for a moment, preparing himself. If he missed, and fell into the river, he'd be speared before he could reach the other bank. He had to wait for the Trolls to get involved with knocking down the tree, so that he'd have enough time to recover from the jump and get out of sight before they could throw spears at him, or figure out a way to get across the river and chase him. They would get across the river. If they were smart, they'd find a long enough tree and knock it over the water. But that would take time, and all he needed was enough time to get onto the ground and away without taking a spear in his spine. He was much too fast for them to chase him down once he got a lead on them. At least he fervently hoped so.

The tree shuddered violently. That was Tarrin's cue. Taking a deep breath, Tarrin swallowed his panic and sprinted over the uneven branch, running along it as surely as if it were solid ground. He spaced his strides carefully so that he'd hit the very end and be able to jump. He felt his heart go into his throat as his foot hit the jump mark he'd mentally made, and he pushed off from the branch with every bit of power and desperation that his tired body could muster, giving out a cry of effort as he hurled himself into the air.

Stretching out in the arc of his jump, his paws led the way as he sailed over the bubbling waters of the river, some fifty spans underneath him. Even from there, he could tell that it was going to be close. Had he been

fresher, he could have put his feet on his target branch with such a run at it. But his exhaustion had removed that advantage. Even his inhuman strength had its limitations. He started descending, and for an instant he panicked, thinking that he wasn't going to make it. He missed his target branch by nearly two spans, but his forward momentum lined him up to grab one of the ones underneath it. He stretched out as much as he could, even his claws reaching out, reaching out for that branch.

He snagged it in his claws, and instantly his hand closed around it. He came flying down, then was snapped back by his hold on the branch. The limb cracked and splintered under his sudden impact on it, bowing it down deeply, but it had served its purpose. It had kept him from going into the river. He swung wildly on the branch for several moments, grabbing it in both paws. He caught a glimpse of something as he started slowing down, and just barely managed to identify it as a spear. He twisted his entire body around that arcing weapon, shocked and impressed that a Troll could throw such a huge spear so far. Natural invulnerability or no, if he was hit by something like *that*, the shock alone would probably kill him, if it didn't slow him down with him trying to pull it out. He pulled his body up and out of the trajectory of another spear, then physically curled his body up and around the limb above him. He hooked his waist around it, swung over, then hauled himself up, then jumped straight up reflexively an instant before yet another spear tore him in half at the belly. The spear slammed into the trunk with a loud *thok*, and Tarrin's feet came down to land on the haft of it. It was embedded so deeply into the tree that it supported his weight.

Tarrin used it as a springboard to get him to the branch higher up, the branch he'd targeted, then scampered around and behind the tree trunk, safely out of the Trolls' line of sight. He peeked back around the other side, lower down, seeing them standing at the bank of the river, howling curses and screaming, stamping their bare feet in frustration. They were too busy being mad to think of finding a way across the river, but that wouldn't last for long. He had to move, and he had to move *now*.

He hesitated an instant, weighing his options. He could try to find Dolanna again, but he had no idea where he was, and he certainly didn't want to lead a hundred Trolls right to her. He thought about following the river down to the original one--he was certain that the two joined

somewhere--but he had no idea if Dolanna would be there once he evaded the Trolls with his roundabout route and tried to find her. She told him to go to the Tower. She expected him to go to the Tower. He seriously doubted that he would be able to find her, for she would obviously take another ship downriver, and he couldn't keep up with it. She would meet him at the Tower.

So that was where he decided he had to go.

Looking up, he got his bearings using the Skybands. Since they crossed the sky from east to west, and he could see from the morning sun which of those two directions was which, he knew which way to go. Go west to the coast, and then south to Suld.

Turning away from the morning sun, Tarrin left the howling Trolls behind, dropped to the ground, and ran south, with every intention of doubling back on a good bit of his trail and then going into the trees to give the Trolls fits when they got across the river. They knew that he could go in any direction...and he'd have too much of a lead on them for them to seriously give chase to him.

He did just that, doubling back on almost two miles of trail, then going into the trees and moving west. He did that all morning and well into the afternoon, past the point where his muscles burned and his breath came in hard, short pants. Every moment he kept moving was more time he could safely rest. That one thought, that goal, dominated his mind, kept him moving. Get out of danger, and then rest. Resting too soon will leave them too close. His whole thought process centered around the next branch. Find the next branch, jump to the next branch, walk across the next branch, climb up the next branch. He was afraid to stop, even a moment, fearing that that moment would become longer, and they'd be surrounding the tree he was sleeping in when he woke up, shaking him out of it.

It was a hazy, totally exhausted Tarrin who looked up a moment and realized that it was sunset. He moved the entire day, on a course that was as due west as he could manage in the trees. He was famished, thirsty, and totally drained, but hunger and thirst couldn't hold a candle to the bone-weariness that threatened to topple him out of the tree. Tarrin dropped to his knees on the wide branch, a branch even wider than he was, connected to a

tree that had to be a thousand years old, laid out on its length right where he was, and fell into an instant deep slumber.

There had been no dreams. None that he could remember, anyway, and if there were, they were incapable of rousing him from his comatose sleep. Tarrin's eyes fluttered open, aware of the rosy light that was painting the green foliage in front of him, hearing and smelling the life of the forest that he had all but ignored in his mad flight the day before. It was quiet, peaceful, and there was no sound of Troll feet and no stench of Troll bodies.

He'd not moved an inch from where he had fallen to the branch, and he was sore in more places than he could count. His belly growled dangerously at him, and his throat felt like someone had stuffed wool against it. But he was alive, and he'd evaded the Trolls, and that made it tolerable. Even being lost and alone in the wilderness was more than preferable to his head hanging around some Troll's neck, as it jokingly exaggerated the difficulty of the spear cast that had killed him. Getting up onto his paws and knees, he yawned loudly and stretched, feeling his back crackle and pop from the long hours in an uncomfortable position, his claws digging furrows out of the bark.

His head snapped up. There was another smell, almost right on top of him, but it had been there so long he'd dismissed it, even in sleep. It was a smell very much like his own.

“Good morning,” came an amused voice.

Tarrin looked behind him, and *she* was standing there. She was wearing clothes now, a white shirt and a pair of canvas breeches, but she was just as beautiful and terrifying as he remembered. The nightmarish memories of that chaotic battle washed over him, and his arm throbbed and burned in memory of her bite, the bite that had changed him. Her shirt was stained in many places, and the breeches were tattered about the ankles, but her skin and fiery red hair and white fur were clean, and her crystalline green eyes looked down at him with a guarded expression. He could tell that she was tense, as if expecting him to attack.

The thought did occur to him, but he was in no position nor condition to start a fight. He was still very weak from the long flight and lack of food or

water, and he knew it. An indignant “*you!*” escaped his lips, carrying with it all the hatred and enmity he felt for her, a hatred that had flared up inside him like a bonfire. *She* had done this to him, had changed him. That it was not her conscious choice did not matter.

“I see you remember me,” she said, a bit ruefully.

“What did you expect?” he demanded hotly, managing to get to his feet. He couldn't hide how much of an effort it was just to stand. “You have a lot of nerve, woman. If I wasn't so tired, I'd kill you.”

“You would try,” she said flatly. “You don't bring enough to the table to kill *me*, cub, especially not right now. Be thankful I like you. I've killed others for less than what you just said to me.” She crossed her arms beneath her ample breasts and leaned back against the tree trunk. “I'm not here to fight, anyway,” she told him. “I'm here to meet you.”

“We've met,” he growled at her.

“Mind your manners,” she snapped at him. “I'm not going to be able to do anything with you if you can't be civil.” She pointed at him. “You are Tarrin,” she said. “My name is Jesmind. “

“How did you find me?”

“Oh, come now, cub,” she said in a flat voice. “Give me some credit. I've been watching you since the day you left Torrian.”

“I didn't see you, or smell you.”

“That's because I didn't want to be found,” she told him simply. “You did very well getting away from the Trolls. I was about to put a paw in, but you got away on your own. I'm impressed.”

“What do you want?” he asked bluntly.

“I want to teach you,” she said. “Well, there's no 'want' involved in that. It's a matter of 'must'. For the time being, consider me to be your mother.”

“*Mother?*” he said in a strangled voice.

“There are things that you have to know,” she told him with a challenging, cool look. “It's my responsibility to teach them to you. Until you're old enough, or experienced enough, to be out on your own, you are

my responsibility. What you do will come back to me, because I'm the one that is responsible for you being what you are." She gave him a moment to let that sink in. "There's no choice in the matter, Tarrin. You must know these things. But as soon as I'm confident that you understand them, and I'm sure you won't go mad, then you'll be free to do as you will. You'll never have to see me again. Unless you want to, that is."

Tarrin steadied himself, considering her words. He hated her, but there were things that he wanted to know. "I don't mind, not all that much," he said in a quiet voice, "but I'm traveling west. If you're going that way too, then we can travel together."

"Is that so?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "My home lies to the east, cub. That's where we need to go."

"I can't," he said. "I have to go to the Tower. The reason I left home was because I can do Sorcery. They were taking me to the Tower. If I don't go there, I'll do magic and hurt someone without knowing what I'm doing. Besides, someone out there doesn't want me to get to the Tower," he told her wearily. "Those Trolls were after *me*, and it's not the first attack. *You* should know that," he said. "The only place I'll be safe is in the Tower."

"I'll worry about keeping you safe," she told him. "Once we get out of human lands, nobody will ever find you."

"Didn't you listen at all?" he demanded. "I don't have a choice. I *have* to go to the Tower. That's more set in stone than *anything* that has anything to do with you. Now if you're willing to travel in that direction, then we can travel together, and I'll learn what you have to teach me. If you're not, then we'll just part ways here and now and hopefully never see each other again."

"Don't dictate terms to me, boy," she said in a dangerous tone. "You'll go where and when I say you'll go."

"Then you'd best either let me go or try to kill me now," he shot back, standing straight and tall before her. He realized how tall she was as he faced off against her. Her eyes were on the same level as his, and she was only on very slightly higher ground. He hadn't noticed that before; his memories of her didn't include any where she was standing up straight, or very many that included her by herself or without pain involved. In his

memory, she was twice as big as he was. It was reassuring that she was his own size.

She gave him a dark look, then she laughed ruefully. “Oh, my, this is going to be interesting,” she said. “Mother always wished for me to have a child as stubborn as I was. Well, I think she got her wish. Both of us have to travel south,” she said. “Let's travel south for now. When the time comes when we'd have to part, let's take this up when we get there.”

“I don't object to that,” he said, after a moment of weighing her offer carefully. “Just answer me one question. Who sent you after me?”

“I don't really know,” she sighed. “I was careless, and someone managed to use magic against me to hold me still while someone put the collar on me from behind. It was on a deserted street in Goram.”

“That's in Tor,” Tarrin objected. Tor was a small kingdom on the southern coast, not far from Arkis. It was also almost a thousand leagues to the south and east.

“I know,” she said. “I don't have any memory of much after that. Just little images. I remembered you, though, because the Sorceress took off that thrice-damned collar with you in the room. If she'd have left it on, I probably would never have known you existed.”

“A pity,” he grunted.

“No, lucky for you,” she snapped back. “You seem to be dealing with the dual nature of our kind, but there are things about us that you need to know. There are rules that we live by, rules imposed on us by the *Fae-da'Nar*. If I wasn't here to teach you, then you wouldn't know these things, and that would hurt you later on.”

“Fae-what?”

“*Fae-da'Nar*,” she repeated. “Think of it as an association of intelligent beings of the forest,” she told him. “Centaur, the other Were-kin, Faeries, Pixies, Dryads, Sylphs, and many others. We all live with a very loose communal government, so there's very little friction and we can all live in peace, and we don't irritate the humans and cause trouble that way. Look, there's a great deal I have to teach you, and it's not going to happen right here, right now. You're about to fall over, and I'm tired from tracking you

down over the last night and day. Let's get something to eat, get some water, and we'll start south.”

“Alright,” he said.

They climbed down out of the trees, and Jesmind led him towards the smell of water. It was a large stream with large rocks littering the shores. “Ah, water, and it looks like we have breakfast too,” she said.

“Where?”

“Don't you know how to fish?”

“Of course, but I don't have a hook.”

“Humans,” she sighed. “You have to make tools for everything. Come on, I'll teach you how to *really* fish.”

Tarrin watched as Jesmind laid down on a rock by a large, deep pool, then slithered up to the edge. He stood just behind her, watching as she watched the water. Tarrin could see several silvery shapes moving about under the water. Jesmind lifted up one paw, watched intently for a second, then her hand shot into the water so fast it sounded like the surface of the water was ripped. She snatched her paw back just as quickly, and a rather large fish sailed over his head, then hit the bank and started to flop around.

“That's all there is to it,” she said. “Just make sure that you aim below where you see the fish. The surface of the water bends what you see, making the fish look like it's somewhere else. Here, you try.”

Tarrin traded places with her, watching the darting shapes, a bit nervous now, with tail-twitching interest. His first few attempts were badly off the mark, but he swallowed his frustration and concentrated on the task at hand, analyzing how much he had missed with the different attack angles he'd used. He got a pretty good idea how much he was off from his past attempts, so he adjusted his trajectory, waited for the right moment, then struck like a viper. His paw slammed into the water, his claws hooked into something that gave, then he yanked it out. Tarrin looked back to where it was falling, and saw a rather large silver-backed fish flopping around next to the one that Jesmind had caught, which was already starting to go still.

“Not bad,” she praised. “Catch us a few more, and then we'll eat.”

“Alright,” he said, turning his attention back to the pool.

After about ten minutes, Tarrin had six trout laying on the bank. Jesmind used her claws to gut and clean each fish as it bounced onto the bank, her claws like knives as she cut off the heads and tails and fileted the remainder with precise skill. Tarrin stopped to drink deeply from the pool after fishing, then returned to her where she was sitting on a rock at closer to the trees. “I usually don't eat it raw,” she admitted, “but it's well enough in a pinch.”

“Raw?” he said with a shudder.

“Don't knock it til you try it,” she said, holding out a fileted strip of fish.

Tarrin was surprised. He expected to gag the instant it his mouth, but it actually wasn't that bad. He wolfed down his meal quickly as Jesmind watched him, his ravenous hunger coming back in a rush. “It's not like we live in the woods and act like animals,” she told him as they ate. “I live in a nice cottage in about the center of the Heartwood. What you Sulasians call the Frontier. I hunt, and fish, and just live, and when the urge hits me, I wander around the Twelve Kingdoms and see what's going on with the humans. I built the cottage myself,” she added with a bit of pride.

“Why doesn't anyone know about you--us?” he asked.

“Because there aren't very many of us,” she said. “We're the rarest of all the Were-kin. And because of this,” she said, holding out her arms, “we're often mistaken as exotic Wikuni.”

He looked at her face, closely. Take away the ears, and she was the twin of the sailor that was on the ship. She was even wearing the same clothes. “You were the sailor on the ship,” he accused.

“Yes, I was wondering when you would figure that out,” she said with a smirk.

“How did you--”

“It's not easy,” she cut him off. “So don't even think about trying. The human shape, it's not natural to us anymore. At one time it was, but that was long ago. We've changed since then. We can take the human shape, but it's very painful, and it's also very exhausting. I seem to have a knack for it,” she shrugged. “I can hold the human shape for over four days, but it leaves

me sore and aching for a week. My mother can't hold the human shape for more than six hours, and she's been practicing for over six hundred years."

"Six *hundred* years?" he said in consternation.

"Oh, that," she said. "We don't age like humans do, Tarrin. How old do you think I am?"

He looked at her. She had a youthful glow about her, even though her features were obviously mature. It made it hard to put an age on her. "I don't know," he said. "About twenty-five, I think."

She laughed. "You're trying to be sweet on me," she accused. "I honestly don't know how old I am. I think I'm somewhere around five hundred. Maybe more."

He gaped at her.

"I lost track," she shrugged. "The next time I see the Red Comet, I'll know. I was born two years before it passed, and it passes every fifty-nine years. I've seen it eight times, and it's going to be coming around again fairly soon."

"In two years," he said absently, doing the math. "That makes you five hundred and thirty-one years old," he said soberly.

"Something like that," she shrugged. "My mother is over a thousand. She's the oldest of us."

"How?" he asked.

"It's just our nature," she replied simply. "Once we reach a certain age, we just stop aging. We live until something kills us."

He continued to eat, wondering over that information. That meant that *he* was the same. He would live until he was killed. But the way things had gone lately, that could be at any time.

"Any other questions come to mind?" she asked calmly.

"No, not at the moment," he said, chewing on another strip of fish. He was still in a bit of shock over the concept that Were-cats didn't grow old, or die of age.

“I think you understand the basics,” she said absently. “I have the feeling that that Sorceress managed to give you a little instruction. You certainly understand your physical gifts,” she noted. “We'll start with shape-shifting. It's not that hard, and you should be old enough. You look it.”

“You don't know?”

“I've never worked with a Changeling before,” she said with a small frown. “Kimmie was a Changeling, but Mist was the one that acted as her mother. Mist is like that sometimes,” she mused. “There are things we can and can't do that depend on our age,” she told him. “We can't shapeshift until puberty, and taking the human shape isn't possible for a couple of hundred years afterward. I don't know about you, because you weren't born into it. And I can't remember just when Kimmie had managed the human shape.” She finished off her strip of fish, and leaned back against a rock. “We'll try this evening,” she decided. “You need to understand what all goes into it, and it's easier to do it when we're stopped.”

“Why?”

“So you don't lose your clothes,” she replied.

He gave her a blank look.

“The clothes don't change with us, Tarrin,” she warned him. “You have to take them off.”

He blushed furiously.

She laughed richly. “You're one of them,” she said with a grin. “I've never understood the human hang-up about clothes. Really, they don't have anything I haven't seen a thousand times over, and besides, I'm not going to go into heat at the sight of a man's bare backside.”

He didn't dignify that with a response.

Tarrin had discovered one thing about Jesmind over the course of the day, as they walked south at a very leisurely pace. She was *blunt*. She tended to say exactly what she thought or felt, and had no reservations of making observations that wouldn't go over well with him. She also had the unnerving habit of speaking almost graphically about things Tarrin wouldn't even think about. And it never occurred to her that she was making him

uncomfortable. He felt he would die when she started inquiring, very bluntly and thoroughly, about his past love life.

“Why do you want to know *that*?” he finally demanded.

“Because I need to know,” she shrugged. “If you've never slept with a woman, I need to know. But, judging by your reaction, I'd bet that you haven't,” she grunted.

She missed his murderous glare. “That's not what I'm talking about,” he said flintily.

“You're so touchy,” she snorted. “Didn't you do *anything* when you were a human? It must have been unbelievably boring.”

“I guess humans have different customs and standards than you do,” he said frostily, leaving out the implication that she had *no* morals or standards.

“Yes, I've noticed that myself from time to time. You know, once I was ran out of a town because I took my shirt off to wash at a stream? Humans are the strangest creatures.”

“Didn't it occur to you that maybe the town had standards of modesty?”

“You mean it's wrong to take off your shirt?”

“In public, in some places, yes, it is,” he told her.

She snorted. “I'm amazed humans manage to breed,” she said. “I wouldn't be surprised if women had to keep their legs closed in bed, or men have to keep their pants on.”

He blushed furiously, right up to the base of his ears. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“I will be, as soon as you shut up,” he grated.

She gave him a look, and laughed delightedly. “Tarrin, in that respect, you were right. My people, my kind, what we consider 'right' and 'wrong', it's much different than what the humans believe. Because we are shapeshifters, we spend some amount of time without clothes...so I guess we're used to it. I could look at you naked and not even get a stir. Because I don't associate being naked with sex the way humans do. To me, clothes are

for utility, not for concealment. It wouldn't make me bat an eyelash to walk down the busiest street in the world nude." She chuckled. "I'll admit, I was teasing you a bit there. I've been around long enough to understand the human customs. It's just fun to make you blush," she said with a wink and a grin. "But you should start getting used to the idea of being nude in company," she said. "You'll have to be nude when you shapeshift, and I'll be nude as well. So you'd best resign yourself to the idea of being in close proximity to me without clothes on either of us." She wrinkled her nose slightly. "And you are *definitely* taking them off at night," she said. "They need to be washed, and I'm not sleeping with that smell under my nose."

"What do you mean?" he asked warily.

"If you think I'm sleeping alone, you've got another thing coming," she told him flatly. "It's cozier with another." She gave him a strange look, as he gaped at her. "Oh, come on now," she said accusingly. "If I wanted to bed you, I certainly wouldn't be playing at it like a love-sick human. When I want you, I'll let you know in no uncertain terms. It's not the custom of my kind to play games about it, and we don't assign the same significance to it that the humans do. It's simply something that is very enjoyable, and if you keep making me talk about it, I may change my mind."

That effectively cowed him. "I'm sorry, but you're moving a bit too fast for me," he said carefully.

"Obviously. Don't assume something just because you *think* you know what I'm thinking, cub," she told him gruffly. "What I consider important is much different than what you do. The faster you understand that, the quicker you'll learn." She gave him a look. "Actually, just shapeshifting a while will show you that. The cat in us, it's stronger when we're in the cat shape," she told him. "A lot of things I'm talking about will make more sense when you see them through eyes closer to my own."

"I have a question," he said.

"What is it?"

"Are you always this cross?"

She gave him a look, then laughed. "Not usually," she said. "To be honest, I'm a bit nervous about you, and a bit worried for you."

That broke a small chip off the big block of animosity he felt for her.

“Worried?”

“Tarrin, I didn't wish this on you, but we can't change the past,” she told him with a sigh. “What matters to me now is helping you learn how to live with it. I didn't do it by choice, but I was still the one that changed you. I have to take responsibility for that. And that means that I have to help make it as painless for you as I can.”

Now he was mad at her. He'd built up a perfectly acceptable reason to hate her, and she'd managed to destroy it with that one eloquent sentence.

They traveled for the rest of the day moving in a southerly direction, through virgin forest that had probably never known the footsteps of man. Tarrin listened to Jesmind during those times that she spoke, describing the trick of willing the change into cat-shape, and warning him in advance about how the change would affect his body and mind. When he wasn't listening to her, he was watching her. He had to admit that he was fascinated by her. He was used to dealing with strong women, but his mother was nothing like *this*. Every move she made was like a demonstration of her power, and she carried herself as if she owned the world. Every little move she made was a clear symbol of her dominion. She was strong, wise, authoritative, and she knew it. But on the other hand, her movements and some of the looks she gave him were not overbearing, but interested, curious, compassionate. She was a woman of strength, but she didn't beat him over the head with it. She was content with herself and her life, and that fact was obvious in her demeanor.

“I'm starting to think I have a hole in my shirt,” she said bluntly after a time.

“What?”

“You're staring at me,” she told him. “If you didn't notice, that makes our kind a bit uncomfortable.”

“Sorry, just seeing what it looks like from the outside,” he told her.

“The same as it does on me,” she said. “Except for certain differences,” she added as an afterthought, motioning at her breasts.

Tarrin looked away from her, wondering at the wild changes of attitude he'd felt towards this woman just since the morning. From hate, to distrust, to suspicion...and now to the first inklings of respect, and even a bit of trust. He *trusted* this woman, he discovered. In very many ways, he *was* a child, and almost instinctively, he was reaching out to someone that he thought could make everything better, someone to quiet the fears, someone to put an arm around him and guide him. Jesmind represented that person, he realized. She *was* that person, the only person, that could help him make sense out of the chaos that had become his life. Her sincere regret and resolve to help him had helped break down the anger he'd felt for her just that morning, allowing him to look on her with new eyes.

And look *at* her with new eyes. She was beautiful. There was no doubt about that. And he was starting to dread having to disrobe in front of her.

“The cat is strong when we carry its form,” she told him later that day, after his long contemplation of her and his situation. “The longer we stay a cat, the stronger it gets. Expect to have to take a lesser role concerning some of the instincts when in that shape. But for you, I think it will help, because those things that try to affect your mind now will be much clearer to you when you allow them to express themselves, instead of bottling them in.”

“I hope so,” he said sincerely.

“Have you been having dreams?”

“Yes, but I can't remember them,” he replied.

“They do go away, in time,” she assured him. “They're your mind getting used to the instincts. As you settle in with them, the dreams will get weaker and weaker, until they go away.” They stopped for a moment next to a huge oak tree, that was on the edge of a small clearing that was dominated by a fallen log and a large carpet of moss. The light was starting to dwindle. They had walked all day. “This looks like a good place to stop,” she said. Then she pulled the strings of the laces on her white shirt.

“What are you doing?” Tarrin asked.

“I'm taking off my clothes,” she told him with a steady look. “You do the same. Chop-chop, I want to get you through this at least once before sunset.” And with that, she pulled the shirt over her head.

Tarrin made himself look. In just a moment, there wasn't going to be anywhere on her that would be safe to put his eyes, and he wasn't about to fuel her amusement. She stared right at him as she pulled her long, thick red hair out of the neck of the shirt, and he returned her gaze with the same calm. He did well, right up until she unbuttoned her trousers. He looked away right as she pushed them over her hips, working on the laces of his own shirt.

“Look at me,” she commanded. “It won't do you any good not to look. You're going to see me, no matter how hard you try not to.”

He met her gaze shyly, and she smiled at him. It wasn't an amused or malicious smile, it was one of compassion. “I know it makes you uncomfortable, but the quickest way to get over that is to meet it head on,” she told him. “Don't look at my face. Look at me, *all* of me. I'm not embarrassed, so you don't have to be either.”

She stood there calmly as he did as she said. He looked at her. From toes to the top of her hair, he looked at the muscular form of her body. He noticed that her muscles were very defined, but not overly developed. She did have a washboard stomach, but it gave her a very slender waist compared to her full hips, and the muscles in her back heightened the seeming smallness of her middle. She even turned around slowly for him, allowing him the full view. He noticed how shapely her backside was, even with the white-furred tail sticking out of the top of it. Just like his own tail, the fur on her tail stopped right at the base of it, with no fur anywhere else. “Just one thing, Tarrin,” she said. “Looking is one thing. Touching is altogether different.”

“I didn't even think of it,” he said sincerely.

“I didn't say it was bad,” she said huffily. “I just said it was different.”

“It sounded like you meant it was bad,” he grumbled.

“Then I'm sorry,” she said. “But touching is the same for us as what looking at a naked woman does for a human male,” she warned him. “It goes for you as much as it does for me. Believe it or not, I think you'll find that standing there with no clothes on isn't half as bad as you think. Even with me standing here. But the instant I touched you in a place you

considered to be intimate, well, let's just say that it would give you a different reason to blush.”

He blushed anyway, pulling off his shirt.

“The same goes for me,” she said. “I don't recommend you putting your paws on my more sensitive parts, unless you want to fend me off with a stick.”

“I find it hard to believe that,” he said with a sniff, unbuttoning his trousers and steeling himself for the act of disrobing in front of her.

“It's been a long time since I've had a man,” she warned bluntly. “Believe it or not, human women get the same urges as human men. Well, among my kind, females get that urge even more often than human men, and we're not afraid to go after what we want.” She crossed her arms, waiting deliberately. “I'm being nice to you because you're still unfamiliar with what's happened to you, but if you'd have been any other male, we'd be--”

“I thought you didn't want to talk about it,” he said through gritted teeth. In one fast, jerky move, he whisked off his trousers, and stood there, self-consciously, under Jesmind's appraising eye. “And why is that?”

“Is what?”

“Why do the women, um--”

“Oh, that,” she said. “Because there are seven women for every man.”

“What?”

“There are seven females for every male,” she repeated. “So we have to share.” She put a finger to her chin, staring at him in a way that made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. “Turn around,” she ordered. he did so, gritting his teeth. “My,” she said. “My, my, my.”

“What?”

“You've got a very handsome body, Tarrin,” she complemented.

“Can we get on with this?” he asked plaintively.

“You're ruining my fun, do you know that?” she said with an evil little smile.

“I'm glad one of us is enjoying this,” he growled.

“Just give it time,” she told him. “The best way to get used to it is to just do it. And it gives me something nice to look at.”

“*Do you mind?*” he demanded.

“Not at all,” she said, looking him up and down in such a way that he blushed to the roots of his hair. She laughed then, and then motioned at him with her paw. “Alright, I guess I am being mean,” she admitted. “Watch what happens. After you see it, I think you'll be able to do it easily enough.”

He watched as she hunkered down in a squat, her arms lowering to the ground in front of her, and then she simply *shrunk*, so fast it happened in the blink of an eye. A rather large white cat was sitting on the ground where she'd been standing. There was another flash, this one of expansion, and she was again standing before him. “That's all there is to it,” she told him. “To make it happen, you have to want it to happen, and you have to *will* it to happen. You already know how to do it. It's in your blood. You just have to make it do it.”

“Alright,” he said. He thought about what she did, how she changed. He wanted to do the same thing, so he kept telling himself to change in his mind, over and over again. But nothing was happening.

“Don't just think it,” she said. “*Want* it. *Will* it.”

Clenching his paws into fists, he closed his eyes and *willed* it to happen, using all the concentration skills taught to him by his parents. He felt the oddest sensation, a cool sensation, as if his body had been changed into a liquid. He felt it actually flow into that other shape, the liquid filling the new vessel. There was no pain, just that flowing sensation. And then it was over.

He opened his eyes, and he was given a new point of view of the world. One much closer to the ground. Everything was in vibrant color, and the world opened up to his senses as his instincts seem to advance from the corner of his mind where they usually sat. He was closer to them that way, and he could *feel* them in a way that he'd never felt them before. And after a few seconds of that intimate contact with them, he didn't feel quite so afraid of them. He looked down at his paws, seeing a pair of cat's legs underneath him. He looked at himself, this way and that, getting an idea of how it felt

to have four legs instead of two, getting used to having fur all over his body. “You're a handsome cat, Tarrin,” Jesmind said appreciatively, then she hunkered down and shifted into her cat form. She was slightly smaller than he was, he noticed, and her smell was the smell of a cat, not the smell of a Were-cat.

“How does it feel?”

Tarrin was a bit surprised. She had not used sounds or words or movements, but he just seemed to understand perfectly what she was saying to him. And he found it instinctively easy to reply to her in the exact same manner. “Strange,” he told her in that unspoken manner. “How are we talking?”

“I've never understood the specifics of it,” she said. “We just know what other cats have to say. It works with normal cats too, from housecats to lions.”

“Odd,” he remarked, sitting down sedately. He felt the urge to start cleaning his fur. Though the idea of licking himself seemed a bit unusual, nonetheless he felt perfectly at ease with the concept. That was definitely the instincts of the cat impressing themselves on his consciousness, as she said they would.

“What do you think?” she asked, walking up to him and sitting down in front of him.

“It feels...right,” he said after a moment.

“Then you won't have any trouble,” she told him. “To change back, you just will yourself back. It's that easy.”

“It'll be more comfortable to sleep like this,” he remarked.

“Now you understand why I talked about getting rid of the clothes,” she said with a light manner, grinning at him in the manner that cats smiled. “Change back, Tarrin. Make sure that you can do it easily.”

Tarrin nodded to her, and this time he kept his eyes open. He *willed* himself back into his bipedal form, and he changed. His vision blurred and grayed over at the same instant that he felt his body go liquid again, and it cleared with him looking down at Jesmind's cat form. “Very good,” she told

him in the manner of the cat. “Now change back, and let's go hunting. I'm hungry.”

“Hunt, as a cat?” he asked.

“Cats are excellent hunters,” she said proudly. “And I have a taste for squirrel. So let's go get one.”

“Eat a squirrel, raw?”

“You'll understand once you change back,” she told him huffily.

Tarrin again willed the change, and he was surprised at how easy it was that time. It just took wanting it, and thinking about making it happen, and it happened. He sat down again in his cat form in front of her.

“It's easy, isn't it?” she said simply.

“Yes, it is,” he agreed.

“Now, let me teach you how to hunt, cub,” she told him, assuming a matronly role. “The meat is worth the effort.”

Jesmind was right. Raw squirrel did taste good.

Tarrin lay half-awake in the darkness, with Jesmind curled up beside him, against him, sound asleep. They'd found a large hollow log to nest in for the night, where it was dark and warm and snugly cramped, just the way that cats liked dens. He drowsily mused over how complete the domination of the cat was on him while in its form, how things that would have turned his stomach or made him flinch just seemed to be second nature to him now. The hunting was actually rather easy, for he already had a solid understanding of the basics. All Jesmind had to do was teach him the tactics and nuances of doing with stealth, speed, claws, and teeth, rather than a bow or sling. Once he'd caught the squirrel, he killed it with a bite to the neck to asphyxiate it. Then they ate it. And Tarrin had felt like it was the most natural thing in the world. All those little things that cats did made perfect sense to him now. It was like he was blind for not realizing it sooner.

That was the Cat, and he knew it, but in a way, he welcomed it. He hoped that this closer communion with what was inside him would let them co-exist peacefully together. Introducing each other, as it were. And maybe

stop the dreams that haunted and terrorized him, the dreams that were the reason he didn't want to fall asleep, no matter how desperately his body and mind cried out for it.

Jesmind yawned and stirred against him. He was a bit surprised when she raised her head and licked his cheek, then kept at it. He closed his eyes and put his head down, letting her groom him, accepting her attention completely.

She groomed his cheek and neck, then put her head back down against his shoulder. "Now go to sleep," she ordered in a gentle tone. "I'm here to watch over you."

Tarrin closed his eyes, and soon he was fast asleep.

Sunrise poured a stream of rosy light right into the log, and into Tarrin's eyes. He opened them blearily, letting them adjust to the light, and he wondered at it.

He'd slept through the night, without a single dream.

Jesmind was sleeping beside him, with her head resting against his shoulder. And there was a strange smell in the air. It was a musky smell, an unwashed one, and from the smell of it there were several of them. Whatever they were. Leaving Jesmind asleep, Tarrin inched out of the hollow log, testing the air with his nose. They were very close, whatever they were, almost within earshot. When he heard the first rustling, he backed well into the log, back beside Jesmind, who was still asleep.

After a few moments, he could hear voices, and they weren't human. They were canoid sounds, full of yips and barks, and Tarrin had been taught by his father about them. That meant that the smell was of Dargu, the dog-faced, goat-horned Goblinoids. He saw one padded, dog-like foot come down right outside the log's opening. He didn't know their language, only knew how to identify it.

"Jesmind," he called in the unspoken manner of the cat.

"I know," she replied calmly. "Just leave them be, Tarrin. They're not looking for us, and I hate killing anything before breakfast. That isn't breakfast, that is," she added absently.

“But--”

“Just lay back down, Tarrin,” she told him.

There was a cry from outside, and Tarrin saw the edge of his trousers as they were picked up. “They know we're nearby,” he said sourly, “and they know I'm not alone.”

She seemed to consider that. “Maybe we should do something about it,” she decided. “If they're with those Trolls, I don't think that we want them knowing where we are. Besides, I'm not giving up my clothes. But if we do this, they all have to die, Tarrin,” she told him. “All of them. Even the wounded. Are you capable of it?”

He was quiet a moment. “I am,” he said grimly.

“Alright then. Let's crawl out of here. You go one way, I'll go the other. We'll get them between us, change, and attack. Remember, no mercy. We can't let them know we have alternate forms.”

“Alright,” he said.

The black and white cats slithered unnoticed from the hollow log and split up. Tarrin hunkered down and darted from bush to tree, working himself out to the edge of the Dargu pack as he took stock of them. There were about eight, armed with spears, clubs, and one with a rusty sword. They were snuffling and checking out their clothes, putting their dirty hands all over them. He'd have to wash them after that. The sword was no danger to him; it was the clubs that were the real threat. Weapons of nature, the rough treestumps could deal real damage to him. Besides, the raw impact of a club could knock him out just as easily as a human, and then he would be helpless.

Once he was in position, Tarrin waited a few seconds for Jesmind to get into position, then changed form. It was so easy to him, he didn't even think about it. He struck from behind, without warning, and his clawed paw reached around the Dargu and cut its throat with a single claw just as quickly as any assassin's knife. The Dargu died without a sound, slumping to the ground, and the others had yet to notice. Tarrin picked up the already dead Dargu and hefted him over his head, feeling hot blood pour on his shoulder, then he threw the dead creature into the backs of his companions.

They fell to the ground in a bloody pile, grunting in surprise and the shock of the impact.

Total chaos erupted at that instant, as Jesmind struck from her position of concealment. Jesmind fought with an elemental style that Tarrin could see was self-learned, but it was no less deadly. She ripped the throat from her initial victim, then darted in and did the same to the nearest enemy before it could react. Tarrin drove right into the heart of the Dargu concentration, wreaking havoc with his clawed paws and feet, fighting in the forms of the Ungardt hand style, modifying them as he went to take advantage of his claws. Fighting in the familiar forms seemed to calm him, help him control the bloodlust that raged through his soul, dying to be released, and it allowed him to maintain himself. He caught the wrist of a club, yanked the creature forward, and then broke the arm. Then he whipped it around by that broken arm, and it spun over onto its back as it howled in agony. Tarrin finished it with a stomp right to the neck, crushing the windpipe. The Dargu at first fell back, then pressed in, and then fell back as their weapons were batted aside or evaded, and Dargu fell by the second to the clawed Were-cats' devastating attack. The last few turned to flee, but Tarrin knew that there could be no mercy in this battle. His life depended on it. He grabbed one by the ponytail on its head and yanked back hard enough to snap its neck as Jesmind rushed forward and tackled another, her claws flaying it alive before they hit the ground. That left one, and it had a few steps on Tarrin. Tarrin simply picked up a fallen club, sized up his target, and hurled it at its back with his unnatural strength driving it. It hit the Dargu squarely in the back of the head, and it hit with sufficient force to spray the surrounding trees with red gore. The dead creature tumbled to the ground, and was very still.

Jesmind blew out her breath, carefully sizing up the bloody mess. “Good,” she told him. “You know how to fight. That's something I won't have to teach you.”

“I know how to fight,” he said tightly, looking away from the bloody carnage they had wrought in a surprisingly short time.

They washed themselves of the blood in the nearby stream, and Tarrin dunked his clothes and beat most of the dirt out of them, and wrung them out as best he could. They were still wet when he put them on, but there

was little else he could do. Wet leather chafed and itched, but he wasn't about to go nude.

“Much better,” Jesmind approved as she donned her own wet shirt. She'd taken his idea and done the same thing.

“You think there are any more of them out there?”

“Thousands,” she replied, “but they usually live farther north. They'd only come down here for a reason, and with those Trolls that were chasing you, I'd say that you were that reason.”

“I don't see why,” he complained. “I'm just a farmboy from a secluded village.”

“I don't know either, and I don't really care,” she said. “We'll have to make for a city. We need humans around us, with their steel to scare off the Goblinoids.” He saw nothing wrong with that idea. Until he could continue on in safety, heading for the Tower was out of the question. It was too far away, and these creatures had obviously been placed previously...as if the placer had known which way he would go.

Of course he did, Tarrin realized. There was only way to get to Suld from Marta's Ford.

One way for a human.

“Darsa is on the coast,” Jesmind thought aloud. “It's actually pretty close. About four days' travel. And they're expecting us to go south, towards Ultern, not west.”

“So we should go west,” Tarrin said.

“But my home range is east,” she fretted. “I hate going the wrong way.”

“If you want to walk through them, then go right ahead,” Tarrin told her.

“Hush,” she said absently, billowing out her wet hair to help dry it. Tarrin was struck again quickly by Jesmind's raw beauty and physical perfection at that moment, as she scrubbed her hair to and fro to get air through it, the move accenting those breasts that Tarrin couldn't help but stare at when he thought she wasn't looking. He didn't understand why or how he could look at her as a guardian in one way, and as a partner with the same eyes. She was almost like his mother, and he wouldn't even *dare* to

think of his mother the same way he caught himself thinking about Jesmind. He thought that maybe it was because she was a female of his own kind that made him think that way, the only one that he knew. But it could be anything, and he knew that. He still wasn't familiar enough with this new life to understand the nuances.

She gave him an intent look, then put her arms down casually. "I guess that we will go west for a time, then turn south again," she acceded. "We may not have to go all the way to Darsa. It'll depend on whether or not we're followed."

"I guess that'll work," Tarrin acquiesced.

They turned west and started at a very brisk pace that was almost a run. Jesmind urged him into a loping, jog-like pace that ate up the ground, and he was shocked at how easily he could maintain it. They ran for most of the morning, farther and faster than a horse could manage it. The trees flew by as they ran along game trails, and the whole world seemed to center down to the sharp watch for tree limbs and turns in the trail, or picking out a path when they had to travel through virgin forest. Their clothes dried relatively quickly with their speed blowing air over it. About midmorning, Tarrin started to get tired. "Can we stop for a while?" he asked her.

"I guess," she said sourly. They both slowed to a walk. "We'll find a stream and fish out some lunch. We'll rest while we eat."

They found one, a pretty little stream with a waterfall that was twice Tarrin's height feeding a large pool. Silvery shapes darted to and fro in the water, which was decidedly icy to the touch. Tarrin guessed that the stream was fed right from the Skydancer Mountains, with their ice and glaciers in the higher elevations. Jesmind had him fish out some lunch as she drank farther down, and when she returned, he had three large trout sitting on the leaf-strewn bank. "Only one more," she told him, cleaning and paring them as Tarrin took five minutes to snag the last one. She handed him a flank of fish as he sat down.

He gave her a curious look, a question coming to mind that he'd been meaning to ask her for a while. "What do you do?"

"Do? What do you mean, what do I do?"

“Well, what do you do? When you're not here with me, anyway.” He took another bite. “You know, do you make things? Or sew, or what?”

“Ah,” she said. “I don't work for a living, Tarrin. Unless you want to call hunting and gathering work. I do have a little garden behind my house, but I admit I'm not there too often. I like to roam around a lot. I guess as we get older, just sitting at home isn't quite as sedate as it used to be.” She pulled a bone from her mouth and tossed it aside. “It's bloody boring, truth be told. I've never had a child, so I've never really had the urge to stay in one place too long. Mother really gets after me over that,” she grunted.

“Over not being married?”

“Tarrin, we don't marry,” she told him tersely. “My three sisters all have their own children, and I think my brother Laren has sired about four, but I'm not sure. He doesn't talk to us much anymore. I'm the oldest, but I don't have any children to present to my mother. Well, except for you, but you're not the kind of child she wants. Mother's a busybody, and she probably won't let off of it until I hand her a baby. She tracks me down about every twenty years or so just to see if I'm pregnant or already have a baby, and if I don't, why I'm not trying to track down a male.” She made a face. “Last time, I just went home around the time she started looking for me, just to save myself the trouble. That's where she always starts to look.”

“Well, how do you earn money?” he asked curiously.

“Money? I've been around a while, Tarrin,” she told him with a grin. “I have money. I keep most of it at home, buried in a safe place. But I don't really use it too often. I can provide my own needs. About the only things I ever buy are clothes, and the occasional steel tool.” She finished her last bit of fish, and leaned back. “Why all these questions about me, anyway?” she demanded.

“I don't know,” he said. “You're a Were-cat, so maybe if I learn about what you do, then I'll know what I'm supposed to do.”

She laughed. “Cub, do whatever you want. If staying in your den all your life is what you want, do it. If you want to spend your life traveling, do it. The only things you can't do are what's proscribed by *Fae-da'Nar*.”

“What are those?”

“It gets involved, but the core of it is not to give the humans reason to hate us,” she told him. “Butchering villages, preying on humans, killing people for no reason. That kind of thing. What would give us a bad reputation.”

“Oh.”

“The real mess is when you have to learn about the other *Fae-da'Nar*,” she grunted. “You have to learn the basic customs of the others, and things like that. It's so we don't have misunderstandings and start fighting among ourselves.” The wind had blown a strand of hair up inside her ear, and it was flicking reflexively to clear it. Tarrin reached up and pulled it free for her. “Thank you,” she said absently. “I see your hair is still growing,” she remarked.

Tarrin made a face as he swung his head back and forth, feeling it sway behind him. “I hate it,” he complained.

“I'll braid it for you,” she offered. “That keeps it more or less under control” She got up and knelt behind him, taking his hair into her hands. Hands, he realized. There was no way she could put her Were-cat paws into his hair like that without him noticing the difference. But a look down showed him that her tail was still there. “You can change only your hands?” he asked.

“I can,” she said. “But I can't get rid of my tail or put on human ears without going full human. Some of us can, some of us can't. It depends.” She pulled his hair back and started separating it. “It's a lot easier just changing your hands, I think. It's not as much of a strain.” Tarrin looked down at his paws. “Don't even think of trying,” she warned. “When you're as young as you are, you could only do it for a few minutes, and even then it would be excruciatingly painful. Save it for when the gain is worth the pain.”

“Alright,” he said, bowing his head and letting her braid his hair.

“Tarrin,” she said.

“What?”

“If you don't get your tail out from between my legs, we're going to have a disagreement.”

“Sorry,” he said sincerely, blushing somewhat. “It does what it wants most of the time.” He took control of his rebellious limb, snaking out from under Jesmind and curling it around himself.

After she finished, they started off again on that same ground-eating pace. They held it as the land began to get flat, and the trees slowly began to get larger and larger, with less underbrush, which allowed them to go faster. Tarrin began to see faint signs of human activity, but it was very sparse. It also let him think and he had reached a very simple conclusion.

He had to leave Jesmind.

Not because she was cruel, or mean, or he was afraid of her...it was because he liked her *too* much. He was getting more and more intrigued by her, and more than once he'd entertained the idea of going with her to her den. He'd already made a promise to go to the Tower, and he meant to uphold it. And the memory of Jenna almost burning Dolanna with fire instilled enough fear into him to make him want to go there. He *never* wanted that to happen with him. The thought of accidentally burning Jesmind made him even more horrified. He knew that there was nothing he could say to her to make her stop doing what she was doing...because he knew that for one, Jesmind wouldn't change, and the other, that it was *who* she was that was quickly charming him, not what. Jesmind had a unique, direct approach to life, and a vibrant liveliness and manner about her that was quickly putting him under its spell. She was much like his own mother, and Tarrin wasn't the only boy alive that found the ideal woman to be something like his own mother. She was intelligent, wise, strong, willful, and honest, and those were qualities that he found to be very attractive.

The only question that remained to him was how he was going to do it. He was fairly certain that she could easily track him down, and she seemed to be in much better condition than him, so he was fairly sure that a lead wouldn't matter all that much. He had to fix it so that they were physically separated, or do it in a manner that would make her not want to follow him. But he had no idea how he was going to manage that.

He thought about it the rest of the day, until Jesmind called him to a stop. She looked up worriedly. “We have to find shelter,” she told him. Tarrin felt the cold wind, and he knew what she meant. There was a summer

storm blowing in. "You go that way, I'll go this way. Look for anything dry."

He followed a small ridgeline for a few moments, but Jesmind called out to him over a rumble of thunder. He followed her scent-trail back to her. There was a fairly large hole in the side of the small rise, leading up rather than down, and from the smell of it she'd already crawled in. "Jesmind!" he called into the small cave as the first drops of rain started to fall.

"It's large enough," she called back. "Come on in."

It was an abandoned den of some kind, but the smells were too faint to identify. It was rather cramped with two people in it, but it was more than long enough for both of them to stretch out. It just didn't have any headroom. "No, go on the other side," she ordered as he tried to crawl in beside her. The den entrance was set so that it would be to the side of them when they laid out, and she obviously wanted to be closer to it. He obligingly crawled over her, trying not to put too much weight down on her, and laid down in the space between her and the den's curled wall.

"Good," she said calmly. "I didn't want to sleep in fur tonight. This is soft enough, dry, warm, and large enough for us to sleep like this."

There was a brilliant flash and then a blasting crash of thunder that shook the whole den. "That was close," Jesmind remarked as she rolled over on her back and put her paws behind her head.

"Sounds like it's going to go on for a while," Tarrin said as the hammer of the rain became suddenly loud.

"Probably," she agreed, her eyes almost glowing in the darkness of the den. They were gathering in the light, like a dog's eyes in the dark, only the color that reflected back was the same green as they were in the light. It was an eerie look, with her eyes glowing in that manner, and Tarrin fully understood how his gaze could instill fear. If his did what hers do, then they would be frightening to look at. "I'm going to sleep. Unless you had other ideas?"

"No," he said with a faint blush. Tarrin put his head on his paws, closed his eyes, and immediately fell asleep.

It was morning. Jesmind was asleep beside him, and he'd again slept through the night without dreams. The air coming into the den smelled of wet leaves, and he could hear dripping water. After the thunderstorm, the rain had continued on as normal rain for most of the rest of the night, breaking the rather long dry snap that had been going on. He leaned over her and looked out the opening, seeing water droplets sparkling in the sun, and he could hear a wind blowing the tops of the trees. He wanted to go out and see. Putting his back against the top of the den, Tarrin tried to inch over Jesmind without disturbing her, but there was almost no room. His tail swished across her side and leg, and her eyes opened immediately and focused on him. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I wanted to go outside and see, but you were in the way." He was about to say more, but her eyes seemed to go softer for a moment, and the texture of her scent changed in a way that he couldn't explain. He stared down into those lovely eyes of hers and seemed to be captivated by them. He could smell her, feel the nearness of her in the cozy den, and it seemed to be clouding his judgment. He hadn't even realized that he'd leaned down close to her until he was already there. She just seemed to lay there and see what he would do, and for some reason that bolstered the young man's courage. Closing his eyes, he lowered his head and kissed her.

It was an awkward kiss, tentative, and Tarrin didn't even know what he was doing until he felt Jesmind's paws slide up and around his back. But Jesmind seemed to urge him, and when she kissed him back, the sensation of it totally blew all coherent thought to the four winds. He realized in some corner of his mind that she made sure to get a hold on him before returning his kiss, because the sudden sensation and raw sensuality of it actually frightened him. He tensed up and tried to pull away. Jesmind let him go only so far before her claws dug into his back, and the pain caused him to instantly stop. "Whatever is the matter?" she asked, her voice breathless, her eyes a bit confused and a tad annoyed.

"You...I...I can't do this," he said in a panting tone. He wanted to, but he felt that if he did, he wouldn't *want* to leave her. But he had to. Her own safety depended on it.

"And what is stopping you?" she asked in a calm, quiet voice. "I know I'm not. I've been working you up to this since the moment we met, and I'm

not about to let you back out now.” She used a leg to throw both of them over, until he was on his back and she was on top of him, her smoldering eyes staring down into his and her paws holding him down. “I thought I was going to have to hit you over the head to get your attention. I've never been so blunt about getting a man's eye.”

“But we can't, I can't--”

“Stop talking nonsense,” she said in a cooing voice. She leaned down and kissed him again, and all resistance, as well as all thought, fled his mind.

Chapter 6

Tarrin had no idea what to do now.

It was midday, and they were still inside the den. Tarrin was gathered up into Jesmind's arms, and as she slept contentedly, he brooded.

This was not what he wanted to happen.

It was, but it wasn't, and in that respect, it had been more than he ever dreamed. Jesmind had been an infinitely tender lover, and that expression of her warmth and feeling for him had touched him to his soul. He knew that he'd never think of her in the same way again. He felt a feeling of trust in her that defied explanation, grounded in the incredible intimacy that they had shared, and he would tell her anything she wanted to know, and he would trust that it would go no farther. He'd come to know her every line, her every curve, and her scent was imprinted forever into his mind. He didn't know if it was love, but there was certainly something between them now, some sort of bond that could not be broken.

What he had feared would happen had happened, though...he didn't want to leave her. He wanted to stay with her and learn what she had to teach, but more than that, he just wanted to be with her. And he knew that, unless she agreed to go with him to the Tower, that it wouldn't come to pass. The problem was, he couldn't just come out and ask her to go to the Tower with him. If she knew that it was his intent, then she'd watch him so closely that he'd have no chance to get away from her. He knew that he'd have to approach the subject very delicately, try to urge her into it, convince her that teaching him at the Tower was just as good as back at her home. And he also had to impress upon her how important it was that he learn how to control the untouched talent of Sorcery that was deep inside him, control it before he hurt someone, or hurt her.

It was very heavy thoughts, and he worried at them fretfully, almost as much as he worried at who was trying to kill him. He had no doubt about that now. They had been trying since he'd left home, and they weren't about

to stop. They were probably even behind the fire in Watch Hill's inn. And they had caused this to him, the change that had forever altered his life. He didn't really blame Jesmind. She was a pawn, and whatever he'd thought at first, she had no direct responsibility for what had happened. She was just a tool used by another. There is an old saying in the army; don't kill the messenger when he brings bad tidings. Jesmind had been the messenger. Whoever they were, they had access to some very exotic creatures, like Jesmind, they had mages like the one he'd killed, and they could make the Goblinoids do what they wanted them to do. That was considerable power, because Trolls didn't like to talk to their dinners before eating them. Those Trolls had to be afraid of the ones that told them to chase him to do what they wanted. Trolls were like that. And it was very disturbing, because from what his father had said often, the Goblinoids weren't much of a threat because of their infighting. Tribes fought tribes with just as much enthusiasm as race fought race. Well, he more or less had concluded that those Dargu had been working for the same people. If these people could command all the different Goblinoids and prevent them from killing each other, then they had an extremely powerful army at their disposal.

It was a puzzle, and it was like trying to put one together with a blindfold on, and he wasn't allowed to touch the pieces either. But until he knew who and what was behind it, there was nothing that he could do but keep one step ahead of them. They seemed fanatically intent on keeping him from reaching to Tower of Sorcery. He was just as determined to do it just to spite them. Tarrin thought about that as he absently played with Jesmind's hair, studying the white-backed cat ear that was poking up out of that brilliant red mass, noticing how it was large, but not *too* large, and how it moved even in her sleep towards any sound. He ran the back of his finger along her cheek, then over the smooth skin where a human ear would have been. It looked odd to him, even now, not to see an ear there.

"Mmmmm," Jesmind sounded, stretching under him. Her arms wrapped back around him almost immediately, and she gazed up into his eyes with a bemused, content expression on her face. "Good morning," she sounded, bringing a paw around and tapping him on the tip of his nose. "Such a serious face," she chided. "Don't I get a smile?"

"Not right now," he told her.

“Well,” she said, ignoring him, “I’d say that that was definitely worth stopping for.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he said dryly.

“Cub, I don’t think you want to hear how much I enjoyed it,” she said with a grin. “Unless you’d like a rather detailed account of the parts I found most pleasurable?”

“Ah, no,” he replied urbanely.

“Good,” she said. “Talking about it with you right here will just give me ideas, and as much fun as this is, we have to move. Where are our clothes?”

“I have no idea,” he replied.

She laughed richly. “Then we really must have enjoyed it,” she observed. “I hope I didn’t tear them.”

She waited a moment. “Tarrin.”

“What?”

“To get up, you have to get up,” she told him. “I can’t move with you on top of me.”

After finding their clothes, Tarrin crawled out of the den. He had dirt caked to him in many places, and there were streaks of brown on him. “That’s what happens when you sweat in a dirt-floored den,” she told him with a wink. She looked much the same as he did. “There’s a stream somewhere nearby. We can wash off there.”

The smell of water led them to a very small little brook, and they found an area of relative depth to wash off the dirt, then let the sun and wind dry them before they dressed. As they sat by the stream, basking in the warmth of the sun, Tarrin decided to start trying to convince her to come with him. “Where will we go from here?” he asked.

“We’ll have to turn northwest for a while,” she told him, smoothing out the fur on her arms, then using her claws as a comb to brush her thick hair. “I think going on to Darsa is the best thing to do, whether they follow us or not. After we lose ourselves in the people there, we can get back to my range easily.”

“Why turn northwest?”

“Because of the Scar,” she told him. “It’s a big ravine that runs almost to the coast. Once we get to it, we’ll run beside it. Darsa is at the end of it.”

“If you’re worried about that, then we can just go to Suld,” he said. “It’s a large place, full of people, and we’ll be allowed to stay in the Tower. I think that we’d be safer there than running around out here.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m not going anywhere near those spellweavers. It was one of them that collared me.”

“Really?” he gasped.

“I know Sorcery when I smell it,” she said in a deadly voice. “I don’t know much about Druidic magic, but I’ve got enough of it to sense a Sorcerer’s weaving, and I felt that right before I lost my memory.”

“Not all people who can use Sorcery are Sorcerers,” he told her. “Many of them don’t want to be in the order. Maybe it was one of those freelancers.”

“I don’t care,” she grated. “I’m still not going anywhere near them. And neither are you.”

“I have to,” he said. “Jesmind, I *am* one of those people. Before I left home, I saw my sister nearly kill someone with Sorcery. It was an accident, but it was no less deadly. If I don’t go somewhere and find someone to teach me how to control it, that may happen to me. And I may kill somebody. I don’t want to hurt anyone, Jesmind, least of all you.”

She gave him a hot look, but he pressed on regardless. “I don’t see why you can’t teach me what I need to know there,” he said in a reasonable tone. “That way I learn what I need to know about being what I am, and I’m in a place where I won’t accidentally kill someone with Sorcery.”

“I’m not going there,” she told him in a steely tone. “And since I’m not, you’re not. And that’s the end of it.”

“Gods, woman, do I have to burn your hair off to make you understand?” he said hotly. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, and if I hurt you, I think I’d kill myself. There’s only one place that I can go to keep that from happening. Why are you being so stubborn about this?”

“Cub, I’m about one step from shutting you up,” she growled, balling one oversized hand-paw into a fist. “I said no. In case you don’t understand what that means, it means *no*. I’m not going to Suld, and you go where I go. That means *you* are not going to Suld.”

He was getting angry with her, but he knew better than to press it too far, else she’d start getting suspicious. When the time came, he needed as much a head start on her as he could get.

After dressing, they started off again at that ground-eating pace that they’d used the day before. It was amazing that he could run so fast for so long. At that pace, he knew he could outrun a horse, for while a horse could run faster, it couldn’t do it as long as he could at the speed he was running. The forest became populated by more and more evergreens as the terrain quickly became hilly. There was less undergrowth as well, which allowed them to run faster when there was no trail to follow.

The Scar was almost self-descriptive. It was a huge ravine that simply opened with no warning. It was about a hundred paces across where they’d encountered it, and it went straight as an arrow due east and west. Jesmind stood confidently at the very edge of the deep crevice, which had a considerable amount of standing water at the bottom which was at least two hundred spans down, shading her eyes with her paws from the bright sun as she studied the horizon to the east, and then to the west.

Tarrin stood at the edge, looking down at the narrow lake at the bottom. “What now?” he asked.

“There are some bridges across here and there,” she said. “There are enough woodsmen around for them to need them. We’ll cross one and get on the other side, then cut the bridge so the Dargu can’t follow.” She grunted. “Damn, I don’t see any,” she informed him. “Let’s skirt this thing to the east and see if we can’t find one.”

They turned east and followed along the edge of the ravine. Tarrin noticed that it stayed at almost the exact same width, and the walls of the ravine’s sides were smooth, with striated, multi-colored bands of rock that went all the way down to the water’s edge some distance below. “I wonder if there are any fish in there,” he mused.

“There are,” she told him. “I fell in once. It took me almost an hour to climb out. That water is *cold*.”

“How did that happen?”

“The bridge fell out from under me,” she shrugged, “and I was too far away to jump to the edge.”

“I wonder what made it,” he said.

“From what I hear, it was some God,” she remarked. “I guess he was having a hissy fit or something.”

They found a bridge about an hour later. It was a rotted rope bridge with wooden planks, and it looked like it would collapse if a fly landed on it. Jesmind frowned a bit after looking at it, but a few tugs on the supporting ropes showed that they were firm. “We may as well try this one,” she said. “The worst that can happen is that we both get wet.”

“I *hate* getting wet,” Tarrin growled.

“I do too,” she said. “It’s a race thing.”

Jesmind went first, since she weighed less than Tarrin. But not much. The planks groaned considerably as she put her weight on them, but they held. The ropes creaked just as loudly, but they too held. “Come on,” she said after she was about a quarter of the way across.

“Is that wise?” he asked.

“The support ropes are strong enough,” she said. “So long as we’re far enough apart, it’ll be just fine.”

Tarrin put one padded foot on the first plank, and he winced when it creaked ominously as he put weight on it. He kept both paws on the handrails as he gingerly stepped out onto the bridge, moving with the sure-footed caution for whom that cats were famous. Tarrin realized that he had absolutely no fear of the height. It was the fear of the bridge breaking out from under him that made him go so slow.

After he was about halfway across, Tarrin suddenly stopped. He realized one simple thing. That this was the *perfect* opportunity to separate himself from Jesmind. With the Scar between them, she would have to find another

bridge to get back across, and that would give him enough of a lead on her to get away.

Tarrin agonized over it for several seconds. He didn't want to leave her. He was afraid that she would be angry with him for his treachery. No, he was sure of that. But the single thought of Jesmind's skin charred and her hair on fire strengthened his resolve. It was for her own good as much as his.

With her back to him, Jesmind didn't see Tarrin flex out his claws, grab the rail rope securely with his other paw, and then shear through the rail with his claws.

The rail snapped like a broken bowstring, popping back towards the walls of the ravine and breaking guideropes that secured the support ropes to the rope lattice holding the footplanks. The floor fell out from under both of them, and Jesmind wildly managed to get her paw on the unbroken support rope, which sagged and suddenly groaned loudly from the sudden extra weight. Tarrin flexed out the claws on his foot, and, holding the support rope with both paws, he set his claws of his foot against it and pushed. They ripped through the sturdy hemp easily, and then the rope bridge separated into two pieces.

Tarrin fell with one section, and Jesmind fell with the other, on opposite sides.

The impact with the wall was bone-numbing. Tarrin almost lost his grip on the rope as he rebounded away from the wall and his hands stung fiercely. He scabbled on the wooden planks with his claws, then found purchase as they sank into the old wood. Breathing a few deep gasps of air, he put his forehead on the rotting wood and thanks whatever Gods were watching that he didn't take a swim. "Tarrin!" Jesmind called urgently. He looked back and up. She was higher up on her section, hanging on with her paws and footclaws in the same manner as him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm alright," he replied soberly, then he started climbing up. The rotted condition of the planks made climbing up them dangerous, so he opted to just hand-walk up the support rope, which was still in good condition.

"Don't!" she called.

"What?" he asked, still climbing.

“You’re on the wrong side,” she shouted to him. “You’ll have to drop into the water and climb up my side.”

“I’m not getting in that water,” he said adamantly, neatly evading giving away his intention for a few precious moments. He had a good rhythm at that point, and he was climbing up the side of the ravine with surprising speed. She beat him to the top, but not by very much. He clambered over the edge of the wall and turned around to face her.

“Well, we can follow along on either side until we find another bridge,” she called.

“You’re safe now, Jesmind,” he called calmly.

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

She was quiet a moment, then her ears laid back. Even from a hundred paces away, he saw her eyes literally flare up from within with an unholy greenish glow. “*You* did that!” she accused. “You little--”

Tarrin winced at the barrage of sudden graphic curses she threw in his direction. She was incensed, and he was suddenly glad they were separated by an uncrossable barrier. “You’re going to Suld!” she shrieked. “You *lied* to me!” she said with a sudden vehemence that frightened him.

“I never did any such thing!” he called back.

“You said you’d stay with me, and now you’re running away!” she accused. “You lied to me, Tarrin!”

“I said I would learn what you had to teach,” he called back. “I never said *when*. You don’t understand that I *need* to go to Suld, Jesmind. I don’t have a choice. I wanted you to come with me, but you refused. This is more your fault than mine. When I’m done at Suld, then I’ll be happy to go with you. But not until then.”

She was totally enraged, and despite the distance between them, he was suddenly very afraid of her. “You had better run far and fast, *rogue*,” she spat at him. “Because when I catch up to you, I’m going to kill you!” Tarrin rocked back on his heels. She *meant* it. “And I know where you’re going, so you had best hope to every God you can remember that you get there before

I do!” She snatched a small rock off the ground, and hurled it at him. Despite the distance between them, Tarrin had to duck to avoid getting his nose flattened by the rock. “I’m going to kill you, Tarrin!” she shouted at the top of her lungs, then she threw a few more tongue-shriveling curses at him, even as she threw more rocks. He *hoped* she didn’t know what some of those words meant, as he evaded the amazingly accurately thrown rocks.

He gave her a sober, calm look, and she stopped shouting at him. Her face was screwed up into a mask of utter outrage, and she was panting hard from her anger and exertion at throwing curses and rocks. “I’m sorry,” he told her. Then he turned and started running south.

Her howling promise to gut him when she got her claws on him followed him into the trees.

It had not gone as well as he had hoped, but it had been necessary. Tarrin sighed at what could have been, then quickened his pace. Jesmind was now his enemy, and he knew that she would kill him without hesitation when she caught up to him. So he had to make sure that she didn’t.

It had been a very hard two days.

Tarrin was huddling in a small hollow bole created by a massive fallen tree, avoiding a heavy rain that was soaking the surrounding forest. The only reason he stopped was that he needed rest and that it was so heavy it had reduced visibility to almost nothing. Tarrin had had almost no sleep since leaving Jesmind, pushing himself at a murderous pace that was surely so far ahead of her that his trail would be washed out by the rain. That had been his intent, for rain was a common occurrence in Sulasia at that time of year. With enough of a lead and the rain washing out his scent, he could now change direction without fear of her following him.

Then again, he didn’t even know if she was. He’d seen no sign of her since he’d left her fuming at the Scar. Since she knew where he was going, he saw her making one of three choices. She would try to track him down, she would get ahead of him on one of the more obvious routes to Suld and head him off, or she would go all the way to Suld and try to catch him there. Tarrin was guessing that, as mad as she was, she was chasing him. And now

that the rain was so heavy, it would wash away any trace of his passage, and he could make his planned turn with no fear of her following.

Well, not *too* much fear.

He waited for a few moments, then climbed out into the rain, getting onto the fallen tree. Now it was important not to get on the ground, where his tracks or scent could sink into the mud. He pulled himself into the trees with a low-laying branch, then turned southeast, away from Suld.

That was his plan. Go southeast for a while, turn due south, then cross the High Road to Suld at some point. Run parallel to that road on the south side, veer away close to the city, and then enter from the south, the opposite direction of what she would think he would come in.

Two days with very little food and no sleep had taken their toll, however. Tarrin had already factored in a day of little movement into his plan. Once he was sure he'd lost her, he'd stop and get a very good sleep, then fish or hunt up a good meal, and then return to his established pattern of eating whatever he could find during a stop of only a short time. Over the last two days, his father's training in woodlore had kept him alive, letting him find roots and plants that were edible, things that he wouldn't have to hunt down or catch. He did have one meat meal, stumbling over a rabbit den, then reaching in and grabbing the animal before it could get too far away. It hadn't expected that. But raw rabbit left much to be desired, and he wouldn't do that again unless he was hungry enough not to care.

Tarrin moved in the trees for the rest of the day. It wasn't as fast as moving on the ground, but with the heavy rain, it was almost undetectable. Especially since he was being extraordinarily careful about not leaving clawmarks on the trees. Twice he'd passed over or allowed to pass a band of Goblinoids, one a tribe of small Bruga, the other a small pack of Trolls, which were trudging about in the rain in an obvious attempt to find something.

Or someone.

They were still looking for him. He'd already known that they would. It was what made his plan risky. If he had too many fights with them, he'd be leaving bodies and obvious signs of his passage, and that was something that he was certain would doom him to be meeting Jesmind face to face in

the immediate future. He had to get to Suld without getting into a single fight, if he could help it. And with the number of Goblinoids that were infesting this stretch of forest, that would not be easy. But, to his advantage, they would slow Jesmind down as well, if she did manage to follow him.

He kept moving after the sun went down, moving in the pounding rain. The darkness was much more his ally than the Goblinoids, for his sensitive eyes gathered in the murky light and allowed him to see, while they resorted to torches, ruddy beacons that told him exactly where they were. He moved on through the night, after the rain tapered off, stopping in utter silence as a sooty torch came in his direction, then moving on after it had gone by.

He moved on after daybreak, and throughout the entire day, glad of a warm, windy day with heavy overcast that would keep his shadow off the ground, while the sound of the wind through the trees would cover any sound he may accidentally make. The concentration of Goblinoids was going down, as they concentrated their search in other areas, for he only saw five bands of them as he meandered on a generally southern course.

By the end of the day, his head felt as if it were stuffed with sand, and he found his mind drifting at the most inconvenient times. He'd already been awake somewhere around two days, and he'd all but exhausted his reserves. The rain that had begun to fall was about the only thing keeping him awake, as it pattered on his head and body and dropped into his ears, which was uncomfortable. He knew that he had to stop, danger or no danger. He decided to stay in the safety of the trees, though, and he searched around for a suitable sleeping place. It took him about half an hour to find one, just as the sun was setting in the west, an old hollowed out squirrel's nest that had yet to gain a new tenant. It was just large enough for him to squeeze in through the opening, and inside it was certainly warm and dry. Tarrin removed his clothes and pushed them into the opening, then changed form and wriggled in through the entrance. The inside was indeed dry, and warm. The past tenant had littered the floor of the hollow with pine needles and shredded leaves, creating a very soft bed on which to sleep.

He laid down on the soft mat of needles and leaves, considering things in that drowsy half-conscious frame of mind before sleep. He'd yet to feel real fear at what he was doing...and he hadn't had a single dream since

meeting Jesmind. In the short time that they had been together, the feisty Were-cat female had changed Tarrin, changed him very much. Because of her, he could strike out on his own, surrounded by enemies, with very little fear, and a great deal of confidence. He would have been lost out here alone, if it hadn't been for Jesmind.

He closed his eyes and slept, dropping off literally between one thought and the next.

It took him nearly fifteen days to reach the High Road. He'd spent almost all that time moving through the trees, not leaving the Goblinoid patrols even a footprint to follow, coming down only to forage for food and to drink water, and to cross a couple of streams and small rivers. His ribs were starting to stick out some, but he'd gotten used to the constant hunger that came with meals that couldn't fill his belly.

The time out in the forest, in a way, had been good for him. His body was as tough as an old gnarled root now, already strong muscles hardened visibly by some serious physical activity. The pads on his hand-paws and feet had had been worn down, then grew back several times, until the pads that were now on his feet were about as tough as old leather. He thought he'd had endurance before, but now he could move all day and half the night at a constant speed that would have put a Goblinoid on the ground panting and heaving. It had also brought his two elemental sides into a closer symbiotic harmony, as both the human and the Cat cooperated to get him to safety. The human guiding his path and allowing him to execute his plans, the Cat by keeping him safe and telling him what moves were wise and what moves were stupid. He drew heavily on the instinctive knowledge of his animal half in those fifteen days, and that along with the woodlore instruction he'd received from his father had been what had fed him over the course of time. He noticed a change in his basic attitudes as well, for the time in the forest had all but converted him into a creature of the forest.

But now a sign of the human world stood on the ground underneath the tree in which he was perched. His tail snaked back and forth reflexively as he stared at it, the single goal that had driven him for half a month, watching a trade caravan wend its way to the west. He needed information, and here was the perfect opportunity to get it. It was a large caravan, with

some ten or fifteen wagons and nearly forty men on horseback, wearing armor and carrying assorted weaponry, guarding the goods which were stowed on the large wooden conveyances.

Tarrin dropped down to a lower branch, waiting to see if he could get one man somewhat by himself. He didn't want to hurt the man, just talk to him, but he didn't want to attract the attention of the entire caravan. He got his chance, as one of the caravan's rear guard stopped not too far from him and dismounted, then hurried off into the bushes to relieve himself. The others didn't wait for him. Tarrin moved into a position relatively close to the horse, approaching it with the horse's scent full in his face so that the horse wouldn't smell him. The man came out of the bushes and climbed back up onto his horse quickly.

"Excuse me," Tarrin called from the concealment of the lower branches.

The man gave a startled oath and drew his sword.

"Oh, please," Tarrin called. "Put that away. I just need to ask you a couple of questions."

"Who are you?" he called. "Where are you?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Where are we? I'm a bit lost."

"This is the High Road," he said, a bit confused.

"I know that," Tarrin retorted. "*Where* on the High Road? Near what city?"

"How can you not know that?"

"Are you going to answer me or not?"

"I may not," he said.

"Human, if I was a bandit, I would have attacked you when you went into the bushes," Tarrin said in disgust. "I just want to know where I am so I can get to where I'm going."

The fact that Tarrin called him "human" was not lost on the man. "Are you a Faerie?" he asked curiously. "Is that why I can't see you?"

"Don't worry about what I am, just answer the question," Tarrin grated.

“This place is about a day’s ride to the west of Ultern,” he answered. “Jerinhold is about a day’s ride east of here.”

Tarrin considered that. “I came too far east,” he growled aloud. “Thank you, human. That helps me a great deal.”

In an intentional rustle of leaves, Tarrin left the man standing there.

Tarrin was quickly faced with another problem, one he hadn’t considered. The forest came right down to the road in that stretch that he’d found, but that was not normal. Farmlands cut into the forest on both sides of the road not even a quarter of a mile from where he’d encountered the guard, and they stretched out too far for him to keep the road in sight and still stay in the woods. Tarrin couldn’t follow the road quickly if he had to detour every quarter of a mile to go around a farm, and time was a definite factor. It left him with a hard decision to make, but in the end, it wasn’t much of a decision.

Tarrin holed up in a tree top for the rest of the day. When sunset drained all the light from the sky, leaving only the faint, multihued light of the Skybands as illumination, Tarrin dropped down from the trees and stepped out onto the road. There was no helping it, but at least on the road he could travel with great speed. Tarrin set out in that ground-eating lope, and spent the night traveling down the road. He passed the caravan he’d encountered that day around midnight, and left them far behind.

What he didn’t expect was reaching the city of Jerinhold before dawn. It was a walled city, surrounded on all sides by farmland, and not a few small villages. Tarrin wasn’t about to set foot inside the city, so he ran along a road that went along the base of the wall, watching the faint light on the eastern horizon warily. He also didn’t want to be caught out in the open at daybreak. He wasn’t sure why he was so concerned with not being seen, but some part of him didn’t want the humans to see him, or for them not to see him like that. In a way, he was afraid of how they would react to seeing a half-human creature, and the thought of being violently rejected was more than he was willing to risk.

It was almost dawn by the time he’d managed to circumnavigate the walls of Jerinhold, and the High Road stretched out before him with almost no cover available. He decided to find cover for the day, but he’d get as far

as he could before he had to take shelter. He ran at a very brisk pace right up until the dawning of the sun, then he veered off the road and crossed several farms, and got himself into a small strip of woods that lay between two large farms, serving as a boundary between them. He hid his clothes in a small bole of a tree, changed form, and crawled into the bole with his clothes. As the first rays of the sun washed over the floor of the woods, Tarrin fell asleep.

Tarrin was almost starving when he woke up, some time before sunset. He dressed with a hollow hole forming in his stomach, and the thought of food was the only motivating factor. Aside from a few field mice, there really wasn't much in the small strip of woods, and besides, field mouse wasn't the tastiest of meals. There *were* farms around, several of them, and he was absolutely positive that he could find something to eat among the buildings of one of them. Tarrin didn't really like the idea of stealing from honest folk, but there was almost nothing else to eat, and he was afraid to show himself. He was filthy and bedraggled, and a farmer or innkeeper would probably go for his pitchfork before greeting the Were-cat in a civilized manner. Aside from that, Tarrin had no money with which to buy a meal, even if he had the courage to walk into an inn.

Tarrin considered this as he slinked out of the woods furtively, keeping himself relatively well hidden among the rows of knee-high wheat growing out in the fields. The closest farm was the most logical target, and it was a very large one. Obviously losing a chicken or two wouldn't *really* hurt this farming family. They were evidently very prosperous. He crept among the wheat as human smells touched his nose, and he crept up on the scents with the stealth of a ghost. He lay in the field and watched as four men worked with iron rods and wooden dowels to uproot a huge treestump. The tree which had owned the stump lay on the ground beside the stump, and the stump itself had not been cut. Rather, the ancient tree which had once rested upon it had simply come down from old age. There was an older man with a brown beard and a grizzled visage that was obviously in charge, coordinating the heaving attempts of the three young men with him to rock the stump out of the ground. By their scents, Tarrin could determine that they were all related. A father and his three sons. And they all had smells of other humans all over them. Wives and children, most likely. This was a

family farmstead, where whole generations lived and worked in harmony to manage the large holding and make it productive.

Tarrin just couldn't steal from them. He'd been a farmer himself, and he knew how it felt to lose livestock and crops to raiding animals. But, watching them heave and groan and sweat trying to uproot the stump, he realized that he didn't have to steal from them.

Steeling himself, Tarrin stood up. It took them a few moments to notice him, and when they did, the father gave out a startled shout and brandished his iron rod like a staff as his sons hastily yanked out their own tools to defend themselves against the intruder.

"Please, don't do that," Tarrin said from his heart, raising his paws in supplication. Tarrin's simple plea must have struck a chord with the brown-bearded patriarch, for he lowered his iron rod a bit and regarded Tarrin curiously.

"What manner of creature are ye?" he asked. "And what do ye want?"

"I'll help you uproot the stump in return for food," Tarrin offered, ignoring the questions he didn't feel like answering.

"Really now?" the patriarch asked. "And what makes ye think that we'd be wanting yer help? Or that we can trust ye?"

Tarrin hadn't considered that. Back in Aldreth, trust was a simple matter, and it was abundant through the village and outlying farms. Nobody locked their doors in Aldreth. He knew things were a bit different in the rest of the world, but watching the farmers made him look on them as he would have looked on farmers back home. And it was obvious that they were nothing like his friends back home. Tarrin caught a glimpse of his hand-paws, and an even greater reality crashed in on him. They'd trust him even less because of what he was. "I, I'm sorry I bothered you," he said quietly, turning around and starting to walk away.

"Hold," the man called. Tarrin stopped and turned around. "Yer more dirt than skin, and that shirt's hangin' off ye like there's nothin' under it. Ye offered work in exchange for food, and I have the feelin' ye could have easily stole what ye wanted. If ye could get this close to us, then getting that close to the chicken coop woulda' been just as easy. Come, stranger. Help us pull this cursed stump, and ye can eat with my family this night."

The look of grateful appreciation on Tarrin's face made the fatherly man blush a little bit. The three young men gave their father a wild look, but said nothing. "Come on then, stranger," the man said, putting his iron rod back under one huge root. "Well, come on, boys, I'd like to get this done today," he prompted.

Tarrin put a foot down in a hole dug around the base of the stump, sunk his claws into the side of the stump, and braced his other foot against the ground. The young men all returned to their places, and the older man put his shoulder under his iron rod. "Alright now, all together," he said. "One, two, three!"

Tarrin felt his blood rush through his body and he put his inhuman strength against the side of the stump. It creaked, and groaned, and the rods and dowels used by the humans suddenly began to move, helping the main force of the movement, which was Tarrin, drive the stump out of the ground with raw physical force. The stump moved half a span with that first push. "Alright, again!" the farmer said, resetting his iron rod as Tarrin got a new hold on the stump. It groaned, and several smaller roots underground snapped from the strain. They stopped and reset the levering prybars, and Tarrin got a hand-paw up and under the edge of the stump. He set his shoulder against the stump and waited for the farmer to give the word. "This time may do it," the man said in his earthy voice. "Ready now. One, two, three!" Tarrin growled from the strain, and his vision blurred over as the blood pounded through his body. The stump shuddered, then there was a loud, deep snap as the main taproot broke. After that, the stump rolled out of the hole easily.

Tarrin sat down heavily on the edge of the hole left by the vacated stump, elbows on his knees and breathing heavily. That had been all he had in him. The farmer and the three young sons gave Tarrin sidelong glances, then the aged patriarch offered a hand out to Tarrin. Tarrin took it hesitantly, but the aged farmer just smiled and helped Tarrin to his feet. "The name's Kellen," he introduced. "My boys, Delon, Brint, and Ian."

"I'm--uh, call me Rin," Tarrin said. He didn't think it was wise to tell him his name, even though his physical description more than gave him away. "Why don't you have your horses pulling the stumps?"

The man's eyes hardened slightly. "Both my horses died last month," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tarrin replied. "Sickness?"

"Yah," he replied with a grunt. "Come on then, let's go see if Mother has dinner on the table."

The farmhouse was an impressively large affair, some three stories high, and it was teeming with activity. There were at least four generations of this family living in the house, two generations below Kellen the farmer and one generation above. The children playing in the farmyard all stopped and looked at Tarrin with undisguised curiosity, and the elderly woman sitting on the house's porch, with her knitting in her lap, eyed Tarrin suspiciously as Kellen brought him up to the front porch. Tarrin was filthy and matted, and he felt his indisposition keenly as the old woman stared at him with her hard eyes. "Mother Wynn, this is Rin," Kellen told the aged woman in a calm voice. "He helped us pull that big stump from the west field."

"That's nice," she said in a calm voice, continuing with her knitting. She was a very small woman, Tarrin noted, with silver hair tied back in a loose bun. Her hands were gnarled from age, but her fingers were still surprisingly nimble as they worked the knitting needles. She was wearing a plain brown wool country dress, and had slippers on her feet. Her face was very old, and wise, thin from the sunken cheeks of her advanced age, and she probably only had three teeth left in her mouth. But her eyes were clear and lucid, a chestnut brown that seemed to see absolutely everything with the most cursory of glances. "Your wife won't let him through the front door looking like that," she warned. "You need to clean yourself up, Rin," she told him.

"I know, ma'am, but I haven't had the time," he said shyly.

She gave him a calm look. "Ian, take him out back and show him where the wellpump is. Brint, he's about your size. You have a decent shirt and pants he can wear?"

"I think I have something, Mother Wynn," Brint replied respectfully.

"I'd appreciate the chance to bathe, but I can't stay long, ma'am," Tarrin told her, "so there's no need for me to get clothes. Master Kellen

offered me a meal for my help. Once I get the meal, I'll be moving on. And I can eat on the porch just as easily as inside."

She gave him a simple look, and grunted in assent. "Have your mother fix Rin a plate," she told Brint.

Ian took Tarrin around to the back of the house. Tarrin was surprised that none of the children followed. There was a wellpump and a trough of water right behind the house, close to the door opening to the kitchen. "The water's not that warm, but it should be alright," Ian told him gruffly.

"Thank you," Tarrin said sincerely, taking off his shirt.

"Yer ribs are sticking out like branches," Ian noted.

"I haven't been getting much food lately," Tarrin replied.

Tarrin washed up as best he could in the trough, dunking his shirt and twisting out most of the smell and dirt, then scrubbing out the mats in his fur. His hair still had the same braid in it that Jesmind put in it, but he still tried to wash out his hair the best he could with the braid in it. He couldn't put it back, and it was much too convenient for it to stay in the braid. After he was done, he walked back around the house. Everyone else was gone, inside, except for the elderly woman Mother Wynn. She had a plate with roasted chicken and carrots in her lap. There was another such plate sitting on the porch by the steps. She motioned at it. "Have a seat, boy," she said.

"Thank you," he said politely. "You don't have to sit out here with me, ma'am," he said.

"Maybe not, but I always sit on the porch when I eat," she said. "An old lady has the right to eat wherever she wants." Tarrin sat down and attacked the large mound of roasted chicken pieces. It had been a very long time since he'd had a cooked meal, and even longer since he'd had that much food at one time. "Try not to swallow the bones," she remarked with a crooked grin.

"It's been a while," he said between bites.

"I gathered," she said pointedly. "Who are you running from?"

"I offended a large tribe of Dargu that decided that my home range belonged to them," Tarrin lied. "They decided to press the argument, even

after I killed some of them. I decided to take a little trip into the human lands, since they won't come into the human lands, but I've not had much of a welcome from you humans either," he elaborated. "I have no money for food, and there's no game worth hunting so deep into the human lands, so I've had nothing to eat. Master Kellen is the first that's been nice to me."

"Kellen likes to feed strays," the old woman said with a shrug.

"I feel like a stray," Tarrin sighed. "I can't go back to my den til the Dargu aren't expecting me. Then I'll discuss the living arrangements with them one at a time," he said grimly.

"Sounds like fun," she remarked.

"Not for them, it won't be," he growled.

She cackled evilly. "I don't mind seeing a few less Dargu in the world," she told him.

"Try about fifty," Tarrin said.

"No wonder you decided to leave," she said.

Tarrin nodded. "I can handle three or four, but not fifty. I'm going to let them go back to my range and get comfortable, and then I'm going to start killing them one at a time," he told her. "Once I have them down to a manageable number, then I'll start getting unpleasant. A few very messy and graphic object lessons should let them know that I'm back."

She cackled again. "I like you, strange one," she said. "You have a flair for the dramatic."

"Fear is a good motivator with Dargu," Tarrin told her, falling back on his many lessons from his father. "If I can scare them enough, they'll leave my home range without so much as a fare thee well. But they're brave in numbers, so I have to get rid of some of those numbers before I can start my little terror rampage."

"You know the dog-faces pretty well," she said clinically.

He nodded. "It's best to understand some of your more unpleasant neighbors," he told her.

"Smart boy," she complemented.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said politely, tearing off another chunk of chicken with his sharp teeth.

“Sounds like you have a good plan there,” she told him.

“I hope so,” he replied. “We’ll find out soon.”

“I reckon you will at that.”

They ate in silence for a while. “How long have you been here?” Tarrin asked. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I’ve been here all my life,” she said with a dreamy smile. “I was born on this farm, in this house, eighty years ago. And I’ll die here.”

“Home is the best place to be,” Tarrin agreed calmly.

“It is indeed.”

Tarrin looked down at the plate, and was surprised that it was clean. The bones were all stripped totally bare, and he’d even found the time to eat the carrots, although he honestly couldn’t remember doing it. “Well, that’s about that,” he said, looking at his plate. “I’d best be moving on. I don’t want to upset your house any more than I already have.”

“Not quite yet,” she said. “Since I’m an old woman and it won’t make any difference, why don’t you tell me why you’re *really* running?” she said with a mischievous smile.

Tarrin grimaced ruefully. “I thought I was a better liar than that,” he said.

“You’re a good liar, boy,” she admitted with a grin. “The problem is, I’m better at seeing the truth than you are at lying. You wouldn’t lie to a decrepit old woman, would you?”

“I thought I already did,” he said.

She cackled loudly, slapping her hand on her knee several times. “I like you, boy,” she repeated. “Now then, out with it. Who are you, and what’s got you running so hard you don’t have time to take a bath?”

“My name is Tarrin,” he told her honestly. “I *am* running from Dargu. And Trolls, and Waern, and Bruga, and whoever else has decided to chase me today. I have no idea why they’re chasing me, though. I came down into

the human lands because they won't follow me. There are too many humans for them to hide." He put the plate down. "I'm supposed to be a student at the Tower of Sorcery. If I can ever get there, that is," he sighed.

She pursed her lips. "A lot of bother for one boy, Sorcerer or no," she said.

"I know," he said. "That's why I don't understand it. What do they want *me* for, anyway?"

"That I can't answer, my boy," she said in her gravelly voice. "But you were right. It is time for you to move on. If you have that many people chasing you, Suld is the only place you'll be safe. Run for the Tower, boy. They'll protect you well enough."

"I'm already working on it, ma'am," he assured her with a smile. "How far am I from Suld, anyway?"

"It's two days from when you reach the High road," she told him. "You should steal a horse and just run for it."

"*Steal?*" he gasped.

"What, you've never heard of it? Well, you find someone with a horse, hit him over the head, and take his horse," she told him with a blunt grin. "You may as well take his money and his clothes, while you're at it."

"I know what it is, but I don't like to steal," Tarrin said. "If I did, I'd have stolen food off this farm."

"Boy, beggars can't be choosers," she said bluntly. "If it comes down to you living or dying, better someone loses his horse than you losing your life."

Tarrin nodded. That was just pure wisdom, and it would be foolish to ignore it. Mother Wynn may be old, but Tarrin saw that her mind was sharp, and she had the wisdom of experience. "I'll think about it," he promised, "but I don't like horses all that much. It's too hard to hide when you have a horse." Tarrin stood up and approached Mother Wynn, then knelt beside her and took her hand in his paw. "I appreciate your talk, Mother Wynn," he told her honestly. "You're a wise woman, and you made me feel much better."

“Glad someone around here appreciates an old woman’s chatter,” she said with a totally fake look of suffering. Tarrin had no doubt that everyone in the house hinged on her every word.

“Some of us can see past how someone looks,” he said pointedly.

She harrumphed, then shook her hand free of his gentle grip. “You’d best get on with yourself, boy,” she ordered. “You’re not getting any closer to Suld standing here, you know. Now scoot.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said with a smile. “Thank you, Mother Wynn.”

“No need, boy,” she told him. “Now scat.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said. Then he left the old woman sitting on the porch, rocking gently in the darkening evening with a plate of chicken on her lap and a faraway look in her clear brown eyes.

It was the feeling that he was too close for anything to go wrong that lulled him into a false sense of security, and he paid for it. It came in the form of something hitting him in the back of the head as he loped down the High Road towards Suld, well into the middle of the night. Tarrin saw nothing but stars and dropped to the ground like a felled ox, rolling several times before coming to a stop against a tree by the side of the road. Tarrin swam in a gray haze, as he hovered right on the edge of consciousness, not yet able to move but vaguely aware of what his ears were telling him. He could literally feel his skull start to mend the fracture created by whatever it was that hit him.

“Don’t get too close,” Tarrin heard one voice through the haze. “I wonder what it is.”

“I don’t ask questions,” the other one said. “That man in the inn said anything that even remotely looks Wikuni, and this one is close enough for me. I just don’t want to carry the body back. It looks heavy.”

“Is it dead?”

“It will be in a minute,” came the ominous response.

The haze parted like a curtain, but Tarrin didn’t immediately move. He reached out with his keen senses, feeling the air, smelling it, noticing the

shifts in air against his skin and fur. There were two of them, and they were right over him. Tarrin felt the air brush along the side of his long tail, and he used that as a guide to slowly slither his tail between the feet of one of them. Once it was in position, he slashed with it as hard as he could.

Tarrin's tail wasn't anywhere near as strong as the rest of his body. It was more for balance than for work, but the muscles in his tail had the same proportionate strength as the rest of his body, and that gave the slender limb formidable strength. That strength swiped the feet out from under one of the two men, who crashed to the ground in a heavy grunt. Tarrin rolled up on himself and slipped away from the other, springing up to face a smallish, dark-haired man with a narrow jaw and rotting teeth, who was holding a long dagger in his hand and a sling in the other. The other man was a shade smaller than this man, but maybe a bit heavier. Both of them wore common peasant clothing. The standing man gaped at him, and barely had time to gasp before Tarrin was on him. Tarrin's huge paw closed around his neck in a crushing grip, and Tarrin picked the smallish man off the ground by his neck and held him out at arm's length.

"The next time you hit a man in the head with a sling," Tarrin growled at him evilly, his eyes glowing from within with an unholy greenish radiance, "make sure he's dead before you get this close." Then he closed his grip around the man's neck, crushing it. The man gurgled once, then his head flopped limply to the side as the bones in his neck shattered.

The other man screamed in terror and scrambled to his feet as Tarrin threw the dead body aside. That sound snapped Tarrin out of his sudden desire for blood, and he hesitated as the other attacker turned tail and ran, blubbering and whimpering in abject terror. Tarrin let him go; it had been this man that had tried to kill him, and the fear would be punishment enough for the other. Tarrin was worried more at how easily he had killed the man, how he had done it without a second thought. Granted, he argued to himself, the man *did* try to kill him. But Tarrin had killed him out of retribution, not out of defense of his own life. And what scared him was that he had absolutely no remorse.

Tarrin put it out of his mind as he considered the situation. Someone somewhere was spreading some kind of story that got men out on the road hunting down anything that looked Wikuni. Wikuni were also known as the

Animal People, so the resemblance to Tarrin was not even remotely a coincidence. Whoever was after him was trying another tactic to get rid of him, a tactic that had come very close to working. It made the road unsafe for him. He rifled through the pockets of the dead man as he considered his original plan to skirt the road from the safety of the forest. That plan was still workable, but it meant that he would have to go quite a bit out of his way, at least an hour's travel south.

The man had a few coppers and a silver coin in his purse. Tarrin took it, and his dagger, and took his leather belt as well. Tarrin's pants weren't quite so snug on him now that he'd lost weight, and he needed something to help hold them up. The money would get him a meal in the morning, and the dagger, like any knife, had a multitude of uses, and would save his claws. As an afterthought, he picked up the body and slung it over his shoulder. It would be better to leave it somewhere other than on the road.

He slunk across several farms until he reached the treeline, being careful not to alarm the dogs on many of them, then went back well and far enough so that the body would be eaten by scavengers long before it started smelling bad enough to attract attention, back where the signs of human passage were so old that it didn't matter. Then he looked up to the Skybands and aligned himself so that he'd be traveling west. Then he left the body, naked, the clothes neatly folded on a nearby log, and continued on towards Suld.

Tarrin's encounter with another farming family did not go quite so well the second time. It took three tries before he would find a farmer or farm member that would even talk to him without running away screaming. The screams and fear stung Tarrin terribly, but he had to admit that as dirty and bedraggled, and as non-human, as we was, it wasn't much of a surprise. He finally found a farmer willing to listen to him, a tall, burly man holding a pitchfork who was standing outside his barn. Tarrin offered to buy his breakfast, and the burly man simply gave him a gruff nod. He was given a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a few apples in return for the copper coins he'd taken from the assassin. Tarrin left the farm and the farmer behind, eating his meal in the quiet safety of the forest, then he moved on. It was

important to get as far as he could before stopping, maybe even to within sight of Suld.

He did manage that, around midday, but it wasn't quite what he had in mind. The forest simply stopped almost half a day's walk from the city walls, which were clearly visible well in the distance. The land sloped down gently towards the city walls, and it was covered with nothing but farmland and hedges separating them. He could see the fabled Tower of Sorcery even from here, its white stone soaring out over the distant walls of the city, and he could just barely make out a few of the six smaller towers that surrounded the main spire. He was within sight of his goal, and that simple realization swept a wave of relief and reassurance through him. The only problem was to get to it. He would have to do it at night. He had too much owned, organized land to cross to do it at any other time. Getting over the walls wouldn't be much of a problem. There wasn't a wall made that his claws couldn't help him climb. Once he was inside the city, it just became the simple task of reaching the Tower without Jesmind or any other interested party getting in his way.

Tarrin crept back from the treeline and found a nice crutch between a large limb and a trunk, then hunkered down to sleep out the rest of the day.

Orisen the guard stood on the high battlements of the impressive walls of the city of Suld. They were high walls, strong walls, and they had never fallen to an invading force. The job of guarding those walls fell to men like Orisen, but unlike most wall watchmen of Suld, Orisen took his duties very seriously. Every night, he prowled the city walls of the south sector like an impatient general, his eyes scanning the dark landscape for the slightest movement. His ears strained to hear any sound not normal for that sector of the city at that time of the night, since Suld was such a large city that it never truly went completely to sleep. In his illustrious ten year career on the South wall, he'd witnessed three robberies on the streets below, all of which had been solved and the perpetrator caught and convicted on his testimony. He'd also been privy to one murder, which was also solved. He'd even caught personally sixteen men that had tried to sneak either into or out of the city at different times of the night. Orisen was a good man, and he took his job as seriously as a surgeon did when he cut open a man. He stood at

his favorite battlement, staring out over the farmland and small village outside the south wall, thinking how nice it was that the winter's chill was gone, and the early summer night was much preferable to prowling the walls wearing five cloaks and three pairs of breeches.

He never saw nor heard the ghostly shape that rose up from the wall not ten paces to his right, darted across the twenty spans that made up the top of the wall, and disappeared quickly over the other side.

He did perk up and rush to the city side of the wall when the sound of a roof tile hitting the street reached him. Many thieves liked to run the rooftops, and that sound was one of the most obvious that gave them away. He looked over the side of the wall. He could see the tile in the torchlight at the base of the wall, but there was nothing, and nobody, else to be seen. Longspan Street was deserted.

Reassured, Orisen the guard went back to his serious duty of defending the city of Suld from any and all threat, be it from inside or outside.

Tarrin stood in the shadow of a large manor house, near its fence, staring at the massive compound that was the Tower of Sorcery. He was a bit discouraged at what he saw. The obvious gates to the compound were guarded by men that frightened Tarrin not a little bit.

By the time he'd gotten to the huge towers, it dawned on him that the men guarding it would have no idea who he was. He didn't want to get into a fight with them, and he certainly didn't want them to go crazy at the sight of him, and more than once the thought that one of them would be happier turning him to the people looking for him crossed his mind. But he absolutely *had* to get inside. Jesmind could be behind any building, and the men that were obviously looking for him could be readying to slide a dagger in his back at any moment. The miasma smell of the large city, which was surprisingly clean for its size, effectively robbed him of his most powerful sense, his sense of smell, and the background noises prevalent in the city made it hard for him to lock in on the faint sounds of someone sneaking up on him. He had to get in, but he didn't want to risk trying to get in through the front gate. He wasn't going to feel safe until he was inside

that tower, and in the presence of people that he felt he could trust. And that meant Dolanna, or Faalken, or Walten or Tiella.

That left doing it the other way. There was a fence surrounding the tower compound, an elegant structure of iron that rose up and ended in a tapered curl at the top. It was only about fifteen spans high, and it was much too elegant and showy to be very effective. It also had not one speck of rust anywhere on it. A one-eyed man with no legs could get over that fence in a very short amount of time, much faster than the regular patrols Tarrin saw roaming the fence perimeter to get there in time.

But it couldn't be that easy, and he knew it. That left only one solution. That fence had to be magic. This *was* the Tower of Sorcery. There were lots of people inside that could do magic. So if they were so lax about defending such a flimsy fence, then it only stood to reason that the fence was capable of defending itself.

A plan formed in his mind. He would get over that fence and get to those buildings across the open area, then use them as cover to sneak up to the overpowering presence of the central tower. Once he was there, he would find a way to sneak in. And after he was inside, he'd just surrender himself to the first person that walked by. They could find Dolanna, and Dolanna could set everything straight. And then he'd be safe.

Tarrin watched the movements of the patrolling guards closely. The men, dressed in white surcoats over a chain jack, moved in groups of four, with one man leading, two in the middle, and one man bringing up the rear. One man held a torch, the man in the back. That made sense, because it kept the glaring light out of the eyes of the men that were trying to see, while still illuminating their path. A group passed by about every ten minutes, but they didn't move at the same pace, so that amount of time changed randomly. Again, a good idea, because predictability was the first step down the road to defeat, when it came to anything military. He was just going to have to take his chances.

He waited almost another half hour, until one torch disappeared around a distant building, and he did not see another appear around the other corner. With a sudden lurch, he sprinted down the street that led up to the fence. He carefully gauged its height; he couldn't even so much as let an errant hair on his tail touch that iron. He glimpsed a spot of ruddy torch

light just as he reached the point where he had to jump, because he was going too fast to turn aside. He sprang for all he was worth, clearing the fence clearly by nearly the length of his own tail, and he hit the ground at a dead run. He was across the two hundred space field in the same amount of time it took the average man to light a torch. He disappeared from sight just as the next patrol came around one of the buildings farther down the way.

With the stealth of the cat of which he was part, he slunk across the massive compound, around large buildings and small ones, across a sand-filled area that was obviously some sort of training area for military men, then between buildings where the sounds of sleeping men could be clearly heard. He ducked into a narrow gap between two small buildings to avoid another patrol, then he darted across an open area to another building that was right beside one of the six towers that surrounded the main spire. Even the surrounding towers were huge, hundreds of spans tall, and his neck craned as he looked up its dizzying height. The central tower was more than twice the height of the six surrounding ones, a massive cylinder that towered over the city the same way a lone tree towered over a meadow. The top of it had to be at least a thousand spans in the air, and the effort and engineering required to build it absolutely boggled his mind.

He stopped gawking like a tourist and studied the surface of that huge central spire, easily visible even from that distance to his light-sensitive eyes. He saw what he wanted, a balcony some hundred spans off the ground. That was his way in.

He sprinted silently across the open ground to the smaller tower, then circumnavigated it with an eye out for torches. Once he was on a line with that balcony, he ran across the open area between the two towers. He stopped at the base of it, and it loomed over him. For an irrational moment, he thought it was about to fall over on him, as he looked up to see where the balcony was. he squelched the squeak of surprise at that idea, then, after a few quick looks for wandering patrols, he put his claws into the stone. He didn't want to be discovered hanging off the wall. That would be very inconvenient.

The tower's stones were made of some kind of white marble or granite, and they didn't even have so much as a scratch on them. They fit together so tightly that Tarrin had trouble finding creases to stick his claws, and

Tarrin realized that there was no mortar between the blocks. It had to be magic holding the unimaginably huge construction together. It was slow going up the side of the wall, because of the tight fitting stones and no wear which would have given him places to put his claws. It took him nearly an hour to clamber up the one hundred or so spans, and he nearly fell twice. Sweating, exhausted, and with his belly trying to gnaw a hole through his skin, Tarrin got his fingers around the base of the guardrail around the balcony. He hauled himself up onto the balcony with main force, then stopped and got his breath back while looking down over the large open yard at the base of the tower.

He'd made it.

Now he had to get inside. Turning to the door to the balcony, Tarrin turned the latch in his oversized paw and felt the door open. It made no sound, but the glass paned door was pushing up against the drapes that had been drawn over it. He pushed it out as quietly as he could and slithered in through the opening. He found himself in a rather large, lushly appointed bedchamber, complete with a slumbering occupant. It was a woman, by her scent, but there wasn't enough light in the room for him to get the best of looks at her. She stirred slightly as Tarrin closed the door to her balcony. Tarrin wanted to be caught, but he decided that being caught in a woman's bedchamber was not the best way to go about it.

He padded across her carpeted floor as silent as death, then snuck through the door on the opposite wall after opening it to make sure that it wasn't a closet. He found himself in a large hallway that curved very gently to one side, which was illuminated by curious globes that hung from the ceiling, globes that gave off a milky white light, but no obvious heat.

There was nobody to be seen. He couldn't even hear anyone.

He yawned. He wanted to be captured, but there was nobody about to go to the trouble. He was exhausted, and hungry, and filthy, but the only one of those he could remedy was the exhaustion. He'd find some quiet, dark place to lay down for a while, then he'd let himself get caught in the morning, when there were people awake.

It took him only a few minutes to find an empty bedchamber. From the smell of it, this chamber wasn't used by anyone, so he was rather sure that

nobody would bother him until he was awake and good and ready to be captured. He took no notice of the room other than its empty smell, then flopped down heavily on a soft feather bed. He didn't care if his filthy clothes were dirtying the covers. He'd made it. He was in the Tower of Sorcery.

Now he felt safe.

Tarrin fell immediately into a deep, dreamless slumber, a look of calm contentment on his face.

Chapter 7

Tarrin awoke slowly, and for a moment, he forgot where he was. He was warm and content, and the early summer sun washed through a partially curtained window. As he awoke he wondered why mother hadn't woken him up before now. But the tingling sensation in his tail from where he'd been laying on it brought him back to the present, as did the gnawing hollowness in his belly. He was still filthy and half starved, but at least he was warm and safe. That almost made up for it.

It was an effort to get out of the soft feather bed. Tarrin saw that he was in a very lushly appointed bedchamber, very much like the one that he'd come in through the night before. It had the soft bed, two nightstands to either side of it, a chest for clothes at the foot, a stand for a washbasin, a writing desk in the corner, and an armoire to hang clothes that were too delicate to be folded. There was a small tea table in the corner by the glass-pane door that led to another balcony. The walls were adorned with tapestries, one a simple geometric design that was pleasing to the eye and the other a scene depicting a solitary knight riding his charger across a grassy meadow. He stood by the bed for a moment, feeling a bit dizzy from having to exert himself. Now that he'd made it, he was allowing himself to feel every little ache and feel the weakness of several days with almost no food.

Now to the business of getting himself captured. It was going to be an easy affair, he was certain. All he had to do was go out into the hall and just wander around until he crossed paths with someone. That someone could almost certainly tell him where to go, or maybe that person could direct him to Dolanna. Either way, he would be more than satisfied. He had no idea if Dolanna even knew he was still alive, and he wondered if she was worrying about him. He'd been too busy with Jesmind, and then with getting away from Jesmind, to even consider what had happened to his friends after he'd left them on the other side of the river. He hoped that they'd not had the

same trouble he'd had with Goblinoids, and that their trip to Suld was a quiet one.

Taking a deep breath, Tarrin went up to the door and opened it. Not even approaching the farmers had been quite so difficult. Mainly because he was starving when he approached the farmers, and hunger dulled much of the fear of encountering people. Despite his newfound comfort with what he had become, he was still very much insecure about how others would react to him, and he found himself to be desperately afraid that people would want to have nothing to do with him now that he was no longer human. Tarrin was used to being alone much of the time, but before he always had his family. Now he had nobody, and that frightened him more than a little. Being alone in a crowd was the worst way to be alone, because one had a whole group of people around to remind one of just how alone one was.

The hall was quiet and deserted. Tarrin could smell traces of human scent, which were rather fresh. Though the hall was empty now, people did come down it with fair regularity. He had a choice of left or right. Since it really didn't matter to him which way to go, Tarrin went in the direction that seemed to have the stronger human smell, which was to the left. The hallway curved ever-so-gently to the right, so he couldn't see very far down it to look for people.

Tarrin's first encounter in the Tower was almost by surprise. It was with a rather small woman wearing a simple gray dress with a white apron over it. She was obviously a maid or servant. She came up the hall in the direction that he was walking, and stopped dead when she saw him. He was about to greet her, but she gave out a shrill scream that hurt Tarrin's ears, turned the other way, and ran for all she was worth.

Tarrin sighed audibly, and then he couldn't help but laugh. All the trouble he'd gone through to get here, and now nobody wanted to talk to him. He couldn't get himself caught.

He didn't smell the two humans until they were nearly up the stairs that descended to his right. They were both young, not even twenty, and it seemed obvious to Tarrin that they had come in response to the woman's scream. There was a young man and a young woman. The young man was wearing a pair of simple brown wool trousers and a blue shirt, and the

young woman was wearing a plain red dress, devoid of any adornment. They were both attractive young humans, the man with brown hair and dark eyes, and the woman with black hair and grayish eyes that stood out. They both gaped at him in shock, then they too turned to run back down the stairs.

“Stop!” Tarrin barked in a voice that cracked like a whip. They did so, instantly. They didn’t even turn around to look at him. “Go find a Sorcerer, any Sorcerer, and bring them back here. Tell them that there’s a Were-cat in the Tower, and to come see what it wants right away. I’m going to wait right where I’m standing.” They hesitated. “Well? Move!”

They bolted down the stairs.

Tarrin leaned he back against the wall, idly checking the claws on his fingers for splits or other damage. He was starting to get surly about the whole affair. Getting himself caught wasn’t supposed to be this much work.

Another man rushed up from the direction the maid had run, and the sound of metal jingling told Tarrin it was a guard long before he rounded the curve. He was a young man, burly, with a blue surcoat over a chain jack. He was carrying a drawn sword. He had dark hair and dark eyes, which were a bit wild at the sight of the emaciated Were-cat. “Oh, put the sword away,” Tarrin snapped at him churlishly.

The man came to a stop and stared at him, obviously at a loss as to what to do. Tarrin marveled at the base intelligence of the occupants of this tower. “Put the sword away,” he said in a slow tone, as if addressing a child. “Turn around and go find someone in charge. Tell that someone that there is a Were-cat in the tower that wants to talk to someone with a mind. Bring them right back to this spot.”

He too just stood there.

“Go!” Tarrin snapped.

He hastily turned and trotted away, still carrying his sword.

Tarrin leaned his head back against the wall. For their defense, he realized that his appearance here was probably a bit shocking. As formidable as the defenses and security were around the compound, it was probably quite unusual to see someone that looked like him prowling the

halls. But that was three people off to bring back someone that he could talk to. He was sure that it wouldn't be very long.

The young man and woman indeed returned, not a moment later, with someone with them. He was a mature man, probably around forty, with specks of gray disturbing the continuity of his dark hair. He was thin and studious looking, with a long face and smallish ears, and his eyes were decorated by a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles sitting on the end of his nose. His brown eyes seemed to take in the entirety of Tarrin with only a single glance. He was wearing a severely plain brown robe, with a leather belt around his waist from which two leather pouches and a small dagger hung.

“Are you a Sorcerer?” Tarrin asked abruptly.

“Yes,” he replied. “My name is Sevren Dallinson. Who might you be, stranger, and what business do you have with us?”

“My name is Tarrin Kael,” he replied. “I was supposed to be coming with a Sorceress named Dolanna...I can't remember her last name, but we were separated on the way here. If you could send someone to go get her, she can explain everything.”

“I'm afraid I don't know all my sisters by name,” he said dubiously. “Initiate, what is your name?” he asked the young woman.

“Tryla, Master,” she replied obediently.

“Tryla, go to the Council and tell them of this development,” he ordered. “Report that this visitor is looking for Dolanna. When you are done there, come back to, that room,” he said, pointing to a door a bit down the hall. “We will be waiting there.”

She curtsied to him, then turned and hurried down the stairs.

“Wendall, go to the kitchens and fix a very large tray of food. And bring some wine. Bring it back to us. Make sure it has plenty of meat,” he ordered.

“Yes, Master Sevren,” he said with a bow, then he too rushed off.

“You look about half starved,” the Sorcerer noted with an appraising eye at Tarrin. “We can eat while we wait.”

“If you can stand the way I smell, I’d be happy to have you at the table,” Tarrin said with a rueful look.

“You must have had a rough time,” he said. “Come, let’s go sit. You can tell me more while we eat and wait. It looks to me like you’re having enough trouble standing.”

“To be honest, Master Sevren, this wall is about the only thing holding me up,” he admitted with a chuckle.

Sevren offered out his arm to the Were-cat, who took it after only a moment’s hesitation. He led Tarrin into the room, which was an almost exact copy of the bedchamber in which Tarrin had slept. These had to be guest quarters of some kind. They sat down at the table, and Tarrin yawned and stretched in his seat. “So, what was bringing you to our Tower?” Sevren asked curiously. “We don’t get many of the Woodland folk here.”

“You know what I am?” he asked in some surprise.

“I’m familiar with your kind, but I’ve never met a Were-kin before,” he admitted.

“Well, it’s not that I was coming here for any serious reason,” he said, then he recanted some of the story of their trip from Aldreth. He didn’t really talk about Jesmind. What he felt for her, and what had happened still seemed too private to discuss with a total stranger. But despite being a stranger, Tarrin rather liked Sevren. He was a calm, thoughtful man that had quickly eased most of Tarrin’s fears with a few simple words and one act of kindness. Offering to help Tarrin into the room had told him much of what made up the sober looking man, and Tarrin could honor and respect that about him. That was why Tarrin told him anything at all.

He absorbed what Tarrin had to say. “If you don’t mind, I may study some of the outward effects of your transformation,” he said. “I know it sounds like I want to study you like a bug, but you have to admit that this is a good chance to learn. And what we discover may help someone else that has this happen.”

“No, I really don’t mind all that much,” Tarrin told him. “I know what it was like for me, and I’d rather not have anyone have to go through it,” he said with a shudder. Being used to it still didn’t mean that he *liked* it. One

could get used to a missing arm, but that was no reason to lop one off. “If I can help make it easier on them, then I don’t mind at all.”

“That’s a good lad,” he said with a smile.

The door opened, and three women entered, flanked by two armed guards, with the Initiate behind them. Two of them were unknown to him, but the third, dressed in a dark blue silk dress, was Dolanna. Tarrin smiled broadly and stood, ignoring the other two women to accept Dolanna’s hand as she reached him. He stared into her eyes for a moment, then pulled her close and embraced her. She coughed and wheezed, then said “Tarrin, I need my ribs in one piece” in a gasping voice.

“I’m sorry, I’m just glad to see that you’re alright,” he said. “Are Faalken and--”

“They are all well,” she assured him. “Tiella and Walten have already entered the Novitiate. Faalken has returned to the Academy, where he instructs pupils when not accompanying me.” She pushed him away slightly. “Tarrin, may I present the Keeper,” she said, motioning.

The woman to which she motioned was a very small woman, even smaller than Dolanna herself. She had dark hair, nearly black, that was streaked in a few places with silver, and was as petite as she was short. She was more handsome than she was pretty, just coming into her middle years, but in her dark eyes Tarrin saw a hardness that came with being a ruler. He could almost smell the aura of power around the small woman, an aura that made her seem to be much larger than she actually was. She wore no badge of her rank, only a simple silk dress in a modest brown, but it was obvious just looking at her that she was a woman of great power and importance. Those hard eyes took Tarrin in in a single glance, and he felt distinctly uncomfortable standing there in his filthy clothes.

“You’re as thin as a stick,” she noted in a clear, strong voice.

“Running for your life can do that, ma’am,” he replied calmly. Tarrin didn’t like this woman. He wasn’t sure why, but he did not. It was a gut feeling, an instinctive reaction, but he did not like her.

“So I’ve been told. Well, you’ve made it, young one, and we can all be happy of that.” She sat down at the table, and the other woman followed her. She was a rather tall woman with black hair and very pale skin,

wearing a yellow silk dress that was cut rather low in the front. Silk seemed to be the fabric of choice in the Tower among the ladies. The woman had a very pretty face, and was obviously very young, but her dark eyes were expressionless. It gave Tarrin the chills to look into them. It was like looking into the eyes of a corpse. "Because you look about ready to fall over, we'll put off formally admitting you into the Novitiate for two days, so you can rest a bit and get back some of your strength," she told him. "Until then, feel free to look around, but you're not to leave the Tower grounds. Although you're not officially a Novice yet, you should start abiding by the rules that all Novices follow. I've sent for Elsa Gaarnhold, the Mistress of Novices. Where you sleep and what you'll need will be her responsibility. She'll also provide you with some new clothes and show you where things are."

The young man Sevren had sent for food returned with a tray heavily laden with roasted chicken and goose. Tarrin's mouth started watering the instant the smell of it touched his nose. "A good idea," she remarked, standing up. "I'll leave you to your meal, young one. I'm sure you'd like to stay, Dolanna, so please do so."

"Thank you, Keeper," Dolanna said quietly.

"Elsa should be along in a while. Just wait here for her." They all stood, and then the Keeper and the dead-eyed woman with the yellow dress left without so much as a word.

"Strange," Sevren said calmly.

Tarrin didn't waste any time. He sat down at the table where the young man had set the tray and attacked the food with a vengeance. The young man left, and Sevren and Dolanna sat down at the table with Tarrin. Sevren and Dolanna exchanged polite introductions, and Tarrin offered each of them something off the tray.

"Thank you," Dolanna said, pouring glasses of wine for each of them. Tarrin wondered how the man knew to bring more than two glasses. "Tarrin, what happened after we separated? I have been worrying for you."

"It's a very long story, Dolanna," he said between bites. "To make it short, I ran into Jesmind."

"Jesmind?"

“*Her*,” he said calmly.

“Ah. She came to find you?”

“She’d been following us the whole time,” he replied. He gave Sevren a cautionary glance. “Sevren, I just met you, but I think I can trust you. Promise me that what you’re about to hear goes no farther than this room.”

“You have my word, my boy,” he said immediately.

“She didn’t know who collared her,” he told Dolanna. “She can’t remember anything that happened while it was on her neck. The only reason she knew about me was because you took off the collar with her in sight of me.”

“I hope that it was not a bad occurrence,” she sighed.

“It is now,” he grimaced. “She was taking me back into the Frontier. I kept trying to convince her to come to Suld with me, but she wouldn’t hear of it. So I ran away from her. And she was *not* happy about it.”

“I feared as much,” she said in a heavy voice.

“She’s going to try to kill me, Dolanna. There’s no doubt in my mind. She’s decided I’m a Rogue because I refused to learn what she has to teach me, and that means that I’m marked. The people here should know that Jesmind *will* come here, and when she does, she’ll try to kill me.”

“I will let the Keeper know. She will be the one that will have to take steps.”

“That’s why I’m in such sorry condition,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if she was right behind me, but I wasn’t about to take the chance. I’ve been running almost constantly for the last fifteen days or so. Dinner was whatever I could find during a ten minute stop to rest.”

“Well, you have made it, my dear one,” she said with a gentle smile, putting her hand over his paw.

“Only just,” he sighed. “The entire forest north and west of Suld is literally crawling with Goblinoids. Maybe someone should be told about that. There may be enough out there to come down and attack a fair sized town.”

“That should be passed along,” Sevren noted.

“There were also humans around trying to kill me,” he told her. “I was almost done in by a little rat of a man with a sling. I found out that someone was paying a reward for dead bodies of anyone even remotely resembling a Wikuni traveling on the High Road. I just hope no innocent Wikuni were killed.”

“Dear one, Wikuni almost never leave sight of the sea,” she told him. “They are almost married to the ocean. That is why Wikuni are so rare outside of harbor towns.”

“What else did the man tell you?” Sevren asked.

“Not much. I killed him pretty soon after I shook off getting hit in the head with the rock,” Tarrin shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly thinking straight, else I would have grilled him for more before I killed him.”

Tarrin missed the slightly worried look Sevren passed to Dolanna, and her very slight gesture to leave it be.

“Have you been having the dreams?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “Jesmind did teach me a little bit before we split. She taught me how to make them stop. That’s at least one good thing that came of it.” He put down a stripped goose leg bone. “She also taught me how to shapeshift. It’s actually pretty easy.”

“Did she teach you anything else?”

“Not really,” he replied. “We were only together a few days, and we spent a lot of that trying to sneak around the Goblinoids that were all over the place.” He decided not to tell her about the night they’d spent together. That was too private, even to discuss it with Dolanna. “What happened after the Wyvern sunk the ship?” he asked.

“There were several casualties among the crew,” she replied. “We helped them as best we could, and then we took another ship south. It was a very uneventful trip after you left us. That leads me to believe that you were the reason for it.”

“I was,” he said. “Whoever it was that’s after me certainly didn’t stop after the Wyvern. I spent most of my time running from Jesmind and

dodging Goblinoids at the same time.”

“Are you sure that they were after you?” Sevren asked. “I’m assuming here that by Goblinoid you mean more than one race. They don’t usually cooperate.”

“These were,” he replied. “I saw a Dargu tribe meet with a Waern tribe, and the chieftains spoke without drawing weapons. That’s not right, because Waern consider Dargu a delicacy. They’re working together. And that means that there’s someone that’s telling them what to do that they fear more than they hate the others.”

“A very grim suggestion,” he said, stroking his chin in thought. “I think that the King should know about this. A coordinated horde of Goblinoids could storm any city in Sulasia, except for Suld.” He picked up a slice of beef. “They may decide to pick a few cities in their leisure time.”

The door opened, and a huge woman entered. She was wearing a pair of black trousers and a brown shirt, and her long, thick blond hair was done up in a simple braid that was as thick around as Tarrin’s wrist, and reached almost to her backside. Her face was strong but very handsome, and she had a sword belted at her waist. There was no doubt that she was Ungardt. Tarrin stood and eyed her calmly as she closed the door and approached them. “*Vasra guhn*,” Tarrin greeted. Tarrin had been taught the language of the Ungardt by his mother, during their daily training sessions. They used it almost all the time when speaking to each other, especially since Eron had never gotten around to learning it.

“*Vasra dughus*,” she noted with surprise. “What clan?” she asked in the Ungardt tongue.

“Vashtalla,” he replied. “You?”

“Emden,” she replied.

“We are cousins,” Tarrin noted, holding out his paw to her. “Greeting, cousin. Honor to Dallstad.”

“Honor and glory,” she replied, clasping his wrist in a strong grip. “It’s nice to meet someone with manners,” she said in the common tongue, grinning. “You’re Ungardt under that fur, and dirt.”

“Half,” he admitted. “My mother is of the blood.” “Of the blood” was the way the Ungardt referred to themselves.

“You look Ungardt,” she noted clinically. “You take after your mother. You are also of the blood, no matter who your father was. A good thing for you.”

“I’m happy with it,” he said. Ungardt were a very arrogant people, and just agreeing with her was the easiest way to keep the peace.

“But you’re also a Novice, and I’m the Mistress of Novices. Don’t expect any preferential treatment just because we’re cousins,” she said in a steely voice.

“I don’t expect any,” he replied.

“Good. I’m going to take you to the Novice quarters,” she told him. “We’ll get you some clean clothes, give you a room, and I’ll show you where you can bathe.”

“Yes!” he said fervently.

“You are a bit fragrant,” Dolanna noted.

“Dolanna, if I smell that bad to you, just imagine how I smell to me,” he told her.

She laughed. “Yes, that nose is very much a liability, is it not?” she asked with a smile.

“At the moment, yes,” he said with a grunt.

“As of this moment, she’s Mistress Dolanna,” Elsa said bluntly. “And you’re a Novice, just like any other Novice. Come along, Tarrin, and we’ll get you washed and dressed.”

“Yes, Mistress Elsa,” he said calmly. He’d kiss a dragon for the chance to take a bath.

“Dolanna, you can see him later,” Elsa instructed her.

“I’ll talk to you about arranging time with Tarrin,” Sevren told her. “He’s agreed to let me do some studies.”

“As long as it doesn’t cut into his class time, we’ll talk about it,” she told him. “Let’s get moving, Tarrin.”

The halls of the Tower were wide, and they were all lit by those softly glowing globes. From as far as he could tell, they simply hovered in midair near the ceiling. Another thing that he noticed was that the floors were carpeted out in the halls. That was unusual, and it had to be frightfully expensive if every hall was like this, considering the awesome size of the building. They went down stairs quite a ways, all the way to the ground floor, and he saw that the carpeting did indeed stop. The hallways in the sector of the Tower to which she took him were just as wide, but there were many, many more doors set into the walls. The floors and walls were absolutely spotless, and not a cobweb could be found anywhere. There were also many people. They were universally young, in their mid teens, from pale, tall Ungardt to stocky Dals to swarthy Arkisians. Even one or two olive-skinned people from the Free Duchies between Shacè and Arkis. They were wearing either plain white wool dresses or white wool shirts and brown wool trousers. They all wore exactly the same kind of leather shoes. They all stared at Tarrin in shock, and more than one shrank away from him as Elsa led him deep into the domain of the Novices.

“These are the halls of the Novices,” she told him as they walked along. “There are three levels above this one also. My office door is at the end of this hall. Pray that you’re not called in there.” She pointed down a side hall. “At the end of that hall is the Novice Hall,” she said. “It is where you will eat, and it is also where you will gather for any assemblies called for the Novices. The classrooms where you will receive your instruction are on the third and fourth levels. I’ll have someone else show you all the little things. For right now, we’re going to worry about the main things.”

They stopped in front of a door. “This will be your room,” she said. He noticed that it was within sight of the plain wooden door with her name on a wooden plaque which was nailed to the door. She was keeping him well within her sight. “You will have a roommate, Tarrin. We are not treating you any differently than any other Novice. Right now, he’s probably in class.” She opened the door. Inside the surprisingly large room were two narrow beds, both neatly made, with a strong, sturdy chest at the foot of each bed. Each bed also had a stand to the side of it, and there was a small writing table, with one chair, between them against the far wall. There were two pegs on the wall on each side of the room, and on the right side, one peg was occupied with a plain wool robe, and the other had a brown cloak

hanging from it. Tarrin saw that hanging on the wall on the right side were pieces of paper with very elaborate sketches. Many of them were the towers and buildings of the compound, but there were also several sketches of people. One of them, he saw, was Elsa. And it was remarkably well done. Whoever had done them had a natural talent for art. “See how clean this room is?” she asked. “It had best stay this way. Now then, let’s go see the Quartermaster and get you clothing.”

The Quartermaster was on the second level, in a large room that was filled with shelves, those shelves holding assorted items and articles. The Quartermaster himself was a small wiry man, approaching his golden years, with a bald pate fringed with gray hair. His face was drawn, as thin as he was, but Tarrin saw that he moved with a spry step that belied his advanced years. He wore a simple brown coat over a white shirt, with brown trousers, and he had several stick pins stuck to the sleeves of his coat. He had several Novices and similarly young people with colored shirts or dresses rather than white. Those, he’d managed to deduce, were Initiates, in the step above the Novices. “Madam Elsa,” he greeted in a scratchy voice, eyeing Tarrin warily. “What can I do for you?”

“This boy needs Novice’s clothing,” she said, jerking her thumb at Tarrin.

“Ah, this could be a challenge,” he said, studying Tarrin. “Is he always so thin?”

“He should fill out a bit,” Elsa said.

“Turn around,” the man told Tarrin, and he did so. “That tail is going to cause a problem,” he said. “I’ll have to put a button in the back for it. I’ll just have to cut holes in the underclothing.”

“Do you have anything just for now?” she asked.

“We could put him in a robe until I get his pants sewn,” he offered.

“That’s a good idea,” she agreed.

“Do you commonly wear shoes, Novice?” he asked.

“No sir,” he said, holding up a leg and letting him see the rough pads on the bottom of his feet. “My feet do well enough for me.”

“Good, I don’t have any shoes big enough for those feet,” he said, “and those claws would cut them up pretty quickly anyway.

“Let me measure you, and then I’ll get to work on some pants,” he said, taking a knotted cord out of his pocket, the knots tied at regular intervals along its length. “Go behind that screen and take off the shirt and pants.” The affair took about ten minutes, for the wiry Quartermaster was quite adept at what he was doing. He would wrap that knotted cord around some part of Tarrin’s body, and then write down the resulting measurement on a slate board he’d taken off a table. Tarrin was a bit antsy when the man casually wrapped that cord around the base of his tail to measure its width. He was unaware of how sensitive that particular place was, but Tarrin didn’t do anything. He just stayed still and let him get it over with. In a very short time, he had Tarrin thoroughly measured, and had taken reference measurements from Tarrin’s current pants. The man gave him an old, worn out robe to wear, for he adamantly refused to give back the filthy, ripped clothing Tarrin had been wearing. “I’ll be sure to leave room for him to fill them out,” he told Elsa. “From his current clothes, I have a good idea of how much that’s going to be. He can wear that old frayed robe to the bathing pool, and he can wear this one until he gets these clothes.” He pointed at a folded garment that had been placed on a table by a Novice.

“When will they be ready?” Elsa asked.

“I can have them for you tomorrow morning,” he replied.

“Very good. Come along, Tarrin, we’ll get you clean.”

They went down into a basement, and he was quite surprised. In the basement was a huge pool of water, one end of it steaming, and it was occupied by a surprising number of people who were bathing. Both men and women. There were many chairs set around the bathing pool which were filled with clothing and towels, and there were several Novices scurrying about tending the baths. The water smelled heavy to his nose, and he realized that it was minerals in the water, the minerals of a natural hot spring. A most ingenious way to build a communal bath and keep the water hot.

“Surprised?” she asked.

“A bit, ma’am,” he responded.

“There’s just the one pool, and since we all don’t have the same hours, it would be impossible to divide the time. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. It takes some people longer than others, but you will. Everyone uses this pool. You, me, the Novices, Initiates, Sorcerers, guards, servants, and visitors. Even the Keeper herself bathes here.”

Tarrin felt absolutely no reservations about undressing, he realized. The time with Jesmind had indeed changed him, in more ways than one. Or maybe the time with her had allowed him to come more into contact with the Cat within him. Either way, he realized soberly in that instant that he was changing, he was adapting to his Cat instincts. And, in some ways, they were starting to have a serious influence on his views and mannerisms.

He unbelted the robe immediately, and pulled it off his shoulders, then draped it over the back of a chair. She laughed richly. “That didn’t take very long,” she said as he stood beside her nude.

“I’m not human, Mistress Elsa,” he reminded her gently. “My idea of modesty isn’t the same as yours.”

“Point taken,” she acceded. “Is there anything else I should know? Anything special you’ll need?”

“No,” he replied. “I don’t need anything special, ma’am. My blood is dangerous to humans, but let me be the one to worry about that problem.”

“Yes, you would be the best to deal with it,” she agreed. “And telling everyone that you’re contagious may not endear them to you.”

“I can do without that added stress, ma’am,” he told her, giving the hot water a longing look.

“I’ll leave you to your bath now,” she told him. “I’ll send someone to take you back to your room.”

“I can make it back on my own, ma’am,” he replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, ma’am,” he said. “I can find it. I’d like to walk around and see things after the bath, anyway.”

“Alright then,” she said. “Just don’t get lost.”

“No chance of that, ma’am,” he told her. “I can follow my own scent trail back if I don’t know where I am.”

“Your nose is that sensitive?”

He nodded.

“Interesting. Have a good bath. Don’t get waterlogged.”

She left him as he lowered himself immediately into the water. It was tepid, and he discovered that it got hotter as one moved towards the far end of the pool. He waded in the waist deep water until he reached a delightfully hot temperature, then picked up a cake of soap that was sitting on a tray between the outer and the inner lip of the pool. He saw that there were two edges to the pool, the upper one and a lower one near the water level, that was just below the surface of the water. The water poured over that edge in a very thin stream, then was channeled away to a drain that removed the excess. He noted that that skimmed the soap foam and dirt out of the water and carried it away, keeping the water clean for other bathers. A very clever design.

He scrubbed at himself for a very long time, washing over twenty days of dirt and sweat and leaves and bark and all other manner of things off his skin and out of his fur. It was a bit hard to get at his tail, but he managed to scrub the formidable dirt out of it and comb out the mats with his claws. He unbound his hair and washed it thoroughly, watching as dirt and bits of bark and leaves, and a couple of dead flies and mosquitoes, washed out of his hair and were carried away by the gentle flow towards the edge. He climbed up onto the edge of the pool to thoroughly soap down and lather the dirt out of the fur on his legs, then he combed the mats out after dropping back into the water to rinse.

During the bath, he’d come to realize how thin he’d gotten. His ribs stuck out like bare branches, and every muscle he had was visible to the eye as he moved. The heavy meal had done wonders for him, though, and he could literally feel how much weight he’d gained since then. He suspected that it was the semi-magical power of regeneration that Jesmind said they possessed at work there, using the food he’d eaten to quickly put meat back on his bones. He was already hungry again. He was going to have to find out if he could get more to eat. He had the idea that if he ate heavily for a

day or so, his regenerative ability would flesh him back out in almost no time.

He felt like an entirely new person when he climbed out of the water and shook much of the water out of his fur. He was clean, warm, safe, secure, and he would soon be full. The trials of the journey to Suld were quickly fading into his memories. He felt the eyes on him, but unlike the sensation he'd felt when he was on the run, he didn't mind these eyes. Some of them were in fear, but the look on one blond woman who was in the bathing pool was one of appreciation, not fear. Jesmind's prediction that he would come to not mind being nude in the presence of others had come to pass, he knew. The Cat had taken that much of a hold on his mind. And he found that he welcomed it.

He took a towel from an edgy Novice girl and dried himself off, then sat down on a chair, nude, and tried futilely to try to braid his hair back up. His huge paws made the task extremely difficult, and he came close to using his claws to shear it off more than once. He knew how futile that would be. It would grow back in a matter of hours, and may end up growing back longer than it was now. He didn't want to risk that. Having it three quarters of the way down his back was more than long enough.

"You look like you could use some help," a voice called.

He looked up. It was the blond woman who'd been in the pool, with a towel wrapped around herself. Her face was young and very pretty, with deep blue eyes that sparkled in the light and the classic high-cheekboned, delicate face that made Draconian women famous for their beauty. Her common mode of speech marked her as a Tykini, from the breakaway kingdom of Tykarthia. "I do have trouble with it," he admitted.

"Here, let me," she said. She went around behind the chair, and he felt her take up his damp hair in her hands. "Why do you grow it so long?" she asked.

"Because it just grows back," he replied.

"Hair this long must have taken you years," she noted, starting to pull his hair into sections for braiding.

"No, hours," he told her.

“Really?”

“It’s racial,” he said delicately.

“Ah,” she sounded. He could feel her hands swiftly begin to intertwine his hair into a single thick braid.

“You’re good at this,” he noted.

“I have five sisters, and braids are a very common hairstyle in Tykarthia,” she said. “Not as popular as they are in Tor, but popular enough. Have you ever seen a Torian woman?”

“No.”

“They put their hair into as many tiny little braids as they can,” she told him. “Sometimes they weave beads into the ends. I shudder to think of how long that takes.”

“They must have a lot of time on their hands,” he noted.

“Truly,” she agreed. “My name is Jula,” she introduced.

“I’m Tarrin,” he responded.

“You’re visiting?”

“Actually, I’m supposed to enter the Novitiate,” he told her.

She laughed. “Then I’d best not let too many people see this,” she told him. “I’m *katzh-dashi*. If they see me braiding the hair of Novices, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know who you were.”

“I didn’t know who you were either,” she said. “Down here in the baths, it’s not easy to tell. It’s not like I have the *shaeram* tattooed on my bosom.”

“I think that would be a bit ostentatious,” he said sagely.

“Not to mention painful,” she agreed. “Do you have a bit of twine or thong?” she asked. “I need to tie this in, or it’ll unravel itself.”

“I think I have the old one somewhere,” he said. “No, wait, I undid it in the pool. I forgot about it.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “I’ll cinch it so it’ll hold itself for a while, but you need to--” She stopped as Tarrin, who had his old, frayed robe in hand, ripped a bit of cloth off the hem, then handed it to her. “I hope you’re not quite that hard on your clothes,” she said with a bit of a laugh, taking it from him and tying it to the end of his braid. “Want me to make a pretty little bow in it?”

“No thank you,” he said dryly.

“We don’t have too many non-humans in the Tower,” she told him as she knotted the torn fabric and then came back around him. “I think there are a couple of Wikuni that act as emissaries of a sort, but that’s about all. If I may ask, what race are you?”

“I’m not Wikuni,” he told her. “I’m a Were-cat.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes brightening. “We’ll definitely have to talk. I have an interest in the non-human races, and most Were-kin are very tight-lipped. Well, it will have to wait, I guess,” she sighed. “I need to get dressed and get to the class I’m teaching before they think I’m not showing up.” She went over to the next chair and dropped her towel without so much as batting an eyelash. Tarrin noted that she had an exquisitely shaped body. She was very lovely. Her figure almost compared to Jesmind’s.

Tarrin pulled the new robe on and belted it at his waist, then gathered up the old one. He realized that they didn’t tell him what to do with it. He decided to take it back to his room and drop it off. He’d ask about it later.

“What do I do with the towel?” he asked Jula as she pulled her shift over her head and settled it into place.

“Just leave it,” she told him. “A Novice will pick it up in a while.”

“Thank you, Mistress Jula, for the braid,” he said.

“Any time, Tarrin,” she told him, shrugging herself into a robe. Obviously, she would wear that back to her chambers, where she would dress. And the sight and thought of that told him that this robe he was wearing was his. He was supposed to hang it on that peg on the wall.

He couldn’t follow his scent-trail all the way back, since they’d come from the Quartermaster’s so he went up to the first level and wandered until he saw something that looked familiar. From there, he quickly found the

central hall, and followed it down to the door to his room. He noticed that there were no locks on the doors. Opening it, he saw the room much as it was before, except for a neatly folded pair of trousers and a shirt resting on the bed. He also saw, to his own surprise, a single leather pack sitting in front of it, and his staff was sitting in the corner. Dolanna had had his things all this time? He was impressed, and a little relieved when he realized that the Box had been in that pack. Going to it quickly, he noticed a note resting on top of the pack, and another note sitting atop the clothes. The note on the clothes was from the Quartermaster.

Master Tarrin:

I finished this set, and decided to bring it so you had more to wear than a robe. You

can pick up your other four sets of clothes in the morning. They will be ready for you.

The second note was from Dolanna.

Tarrin:

We managed to recover this pack from the wreck of the ship. Thank Faalken for this,

It was his quick thinking that saved our belongings. I dried them out as best I could with

magic, and I do believe that nothing was damaged. It took some doing to recover your staff,

but I knew how much it meant to you, so I decided that it was worth the effort.

By the way, what is in this pack will be held in the strictest confidence. It was obvious

to me that what is within are things that you hold dear for sentimental reasons. It will remain

a private matter.

This evening at sunset, I think you should visit the library. It is easy to find. I am certain

that you will find it to be an interesting place.

Tarrin folded the note carefully, and then opened his pack. It was obvious from the letter that Dolanna wanted to talk to him, and without the Keeper or a stranger around. It would be no problem. Since he wasn't really a Novice yet, even if his excursion broke a rule, it wasn't a rule that applied to him. Then he unpacked his pack to check things.

The Box was alright. The four items inside, the tooth, the piece of quartz, the gold nugget, and his treasured wing, were just fine. They showed not a sign of being dunked in the water. Neither did the box. His small daggers were in the pack, and so was his larger one, which surprised him. He thought he'd lost the item he'd won at staffs in the fair. His shaving razor was there, but not the soap. But then again, he didn't need the razor. With a start, he realized that he'd not shaved once since being bitten. And his face was hairless. That he didn't mind, for he didn't like beards and he hated shaving even more. His sleeping mat, tent, and cooking pot were absent, probably lost, but this pack, with his clothes and his personal items, it was what was important.

He placed the pack in the chest at the foot of his bed. The clothes in the pack were his sturdy leather clothes, and he wanted to keep them. A bit of cutting with a knife or claw would free up a place for his tail in his pants, and that was all that really mattered. He took off the robe and dressed in the Novice's clothes that had been left for him, and hung his robe on the wall on the peg. Then he went to his staff.

The sturdy Ironwood showed not a sign of any duress, but that was usual for it. It took something like a blazing inferno to mark Ironwood. It seemed almost feather-light to him now, but he could feel every indentation on the wood intimately, and it felt just the same as he remembered. He was just stronger, and that made the very heavy wood feel lighter. His hands were now paws, and were much larger. He knew he'd have to practice with the staff to get used to the different grips he'd need to use it, now that his

hands were so different. And learn how to use his natural weaponry in harmony with it.

The door opened. Tarrin stood by the bed calmly, staff in paw, and regarded the young man that entered. He was a bit tall for his age, which looked to be around fifteen, and he had the dark, swarthy skin that marked him as an Arkisian. His hair was black as pitch, long and done up in an attractive side-parted style, and his eyes were a rich almond brown, almost like amber. He too wore the white shirt and brown pants of a Novice, and he had a book in his hand. "They told me that you may be here," he said calmly. "I'm Dar, Dar Ulthan," he introduced. "I'm your roommate."

"I'm Tarrin," he replied calmly.

"They asked me to show you around," he said. "We can do that after lunch, if you want."

"Lunch sounds *very* good at the moment," Tarrin said with a smile.

"Well, if we're going to eat, we'd best get moving," he said. "They don't let stragglers eat."

Tarrin put the staff back in the corner and followed the tall, lanky young man out.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Aldreth."

"Where?"

"A village about as far from Suld as you can get without leaving Sulasia," he replied.

"I'm from Arkhold, in Arkis," he returned.

"What brought you all the way here?"

"My parents are in the spice trade," he explained. "Merchants who are educated in the Tower tend to do better, and my parents want me to keep up what they've built."

"Educated? I thought that the school they have here would have been in some other building."

"The Initiates stay in other towers," he said, "but we Novices are here."

“Why do they all wear different colors?” he asked curiously.

“The Initiates? It’s their rank,” he replied. “Except the ones that wear brown. Initiates who wear brown aren’t Sorcerers, they’re just the advanced people in the school. They’re here in the Tower too, in the levels above the library.”

“Which way will you go?”

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “All I’ve learned so far is history and geography, and they’ve taught me about fifty different ways to add two and two together,” he said ruefully. “But they haven’t given me the Test yet.” He led Tarrin down another passageway. “I’m not entirely sure which way I want to go. Seeing the Sorcerers here, it’s made me interested in what they do. But if I do end up learning Sorcery, it’s bound to make my parents very mad. They’re paying a lot of money to send me here. But, on the other hand, if I do have talent, they don’t have to pay anymore,” he said with a smile.

“Hmm,” he mused. “My parents weren’t quite so lucky. They *made* me come here.”

“The Test?” he asked.

Tarrin nodded.

“I didn’t know they tested Wikuni.”

“I’m not Wikuni, and I wasn’t like this when they tested me,” he told him.

“I wasn’t sure,” he admitted with a short laugh. “I know a lot of Wikuni from when my parents bargain with them, and you don’t look like any Wikuni I’ve ever seen. But you look almost like one. I thought maybe you were a deformed Wikuni.”

“No,” he assured him. “I’m a Were-cat.”

“Truly?” he said in wonder. “Then none of the stories I’ve heard of the Were-people are true, are they?”

“Probably not,” he said. “Well, the part about biting is true,” he added somberly.

“That’s how it happened?”

He nodded. “It was just one of those dumb things,” he said. “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” That much was true, to a certain degree. If he’d chosen another bedchamber, it would have been Walten, or Tiella. Or maybe even Faalken or Dolanna. Or maybe nobody.

“You took it better than I would have,” he said. “I’d still be screaming.”

“I’m over that now,” he said. “It’s actually not that bad, once you get used to it.”

“I’d rather not find out,” he said.

“Smart man,” Tarrin agreed. “The getting used to it is *not* pleasant.”

“I didn’t think it would be.” They went through a door, and entered a huge room, much like a grand hall. There were tables and benches aligned in orderly rows in the center, with a single table on a raised dais on the far end of the room. There were already a great many people in the room, and almost all of them were sitting quietly at the tables, where a myriad of different foods sat and waited. The smells of them made his stomach growl. Sitting at the table on the dais were several men and women wearing assorted dresses, shirts, doublets, and robes, but Elsa was seated firmly in the center of the table facing the assembled Novices. Dar led them to the closest empty seats, and he had them sit down fast. “Anyone standing once the Mistress starts the meal prayer is sent away hungry,” he explained in a very low whisper.

Tarrin nodded calmly, taking in the nervous reactions of the other Novices seated near and around Tarrin. They all couldn’t help stare at him, but they tried to make it inconspicuous. He decided that ignoring them would be the best thing to do. Not an arm’s reach away, a large platter of roasted ham sat, almost taunting him. It was a tremendous act of will not to reach out and take it.

“Everyone stand!” Elsa’s booming voice called across the hall. All the Novices stood respectfully and bowed their heads. Tarrin endured a short little speech from Elsa, where she invoked the blessing of some Goddess on the meal, but Tarrin didn’t listen to her. He was more interested in hearing her voice stop than he was listening to her speak. When the Novices began to take their seats, he realized that Elsa had stopped talking. He sat down

with Dar, and when he saw several people reach for platters of beef, or pork, or a bowl of potatoes, he knew that it was time to eat.

He graciously let everyone else take what they wanted off the platter he was eyeing, then he reached out and took the entire platter. “Anyone else want any of this?” he asked pointedly, holding it out. When nobody answered, he pushed his own plate away and set the platter in its place. He looked at the small-handled fork by the plate with a bit of annoyance, and instead used the large serving fork that was on the platter. It had a handle large enough for him to use. The knife too was too small, but the claw on the index finger of his free hand was more than capable of being a substitute for a knife. The razor-sharp tip of his claw neatly sliced up the meat to his liking, then he used the serving fork to get it to his mouth. Someone poured fresh, chilled milk into a pewter mug that was beside him, and then that person moved down to do the same with Dar’s mug. He was more interested in the food, however, and he managed to finish off the entire platter of roasted ham, which had enough ham on it to feed five. Dar gave him a rather wild look as he pushed the platter away and took a drink of milk. “Do you always eat that much?” he asked.

“Not always, but I’d been moving without eating much before I got here,” he replied. “I’m just catching up on missed meals.”

“I can understand that,” he said, going back to his own meal.

Tarrin could almost feel the energy of the meal surge into him as he sat there drinking his milk and waiting for Dar to finish. Now that his body had more raw material to work with, he was very certain that he’d not look even half so thin by dinnertime. He was looking forward to the studies with Sevren; he was curious just what his body was capable of doing. This ability to restore lost body tissue was most interesting. But then again, he felt that he should have known it would do that. Something in the back of his mind, he thought it was the Cat, told him that he could grow back missing limbs, except for his head, and even regrow lost teeth and claws. It was part of the regenerative capabilities inherent with his kind.

And, he realized, it was the reason they didn’t age. The regeneration *healed* them of the effects of time, repairing any damage brought on by the marching of the seasons. That was only logical, he realized calmly as he sat there. The effects of time were not natural; well, they were natural, but they

were not the natural state of his body, and that was how his regenerative ability maintained him. An older him did not fit into his body's imprint of itself, and so it was corrected by regenerative healing.

Tarrin was only seventeen. He hadn't lived long enough to be able to appreciate the profound concept of living until someone killed him, maybe for thousands of years, but he was wise enough to know that he wasn't old enough. It was something that he would have to think about in the time to come, something to ponder.

After the meal, Dar took Tarrin around the Tower. They went to the Library, the scribing chamber, out on the grounds, to the huge garden behind the Tower, then they walked along the highly polished black tiles of what was known as the Heart of the Goddess, a massive open space in the exact center of the Tower that ran from the base right up to the top. While they walked, they talked. Dar was an earnest young man with high goals and ideals, but they didn't include what his family wanted from him. He was an accomplished artist, and he wanted to pursue that, while his family thought it was frivolous. He also wanted to learn. He was wildly curious about the world, and he almost didn't want to leave the Tower, to leave the vast Library, which was one of the largest and most complete in the world. They strolled along the black tiles around the edge, near the wall, as Dar confided certain things to Tarrin that he knew the young man had not told other people. Dar and Tarrin seemed to just connect, and he realized that he already considered the young Arkisian a close friend. The Cat in him liked Dar just as much as the human did. In the base of the floor, in a huge design, was the *shaeram*, the geometric star-in a star-in a circle design that was the symbol of the order. It was done much differently than the medallions he'd seen, and that pointed some things out to him. The medallions were a four-pointed star with concave sides inside a six-pointed star. This symbol resembled that six pointed star, but instead of a star it was six individual triangles laid out corner to corner, third point out, all contained within the circle. Each triangle was a different color. They were red, blue, a shade of purple like violets, orange, yellow, and a lighter shade of purple that was obviously a different color. The circle encircling them was green, and the concave four-pointed star within was white. The design had to be about fifty paces across, taking up about three quarters of the floor.

Tarrin felt...strange. There was *something* in this vast chamber, but he couldn't quite put his claw on it. It hovered right on the edge of his consciousness, almost like something that rested just at the edge of his vision, a sound that was so faint that he couldn't tell if it was real, the phantom of a scent in his nose. "Do you feel that?" he asked Dar quietly, almost reverently.

"Sometimes I do," he replied. "There's something in this place, but the Sorcerers won't tell me what it is. I think it has something to do with magic. Not many people come in here, so I like to come in here a lot and think."

Tarrin advanced into the huge open area, still trying to understand the extremely vague sensation he was feeling. His pads made no noise on the black tiles as they crossed the boundary and set foot on the green of the surrounding circle of the symbol. Tarrin felt that unusual sensation more strongly as he advanced into the middle of the huge room. He looked up into the soaring void that rose up over them, an enclosed area that went up so high that he could just barely make out the ceiling so far above. Tarrin put a paw out in front of him, because he could almost see a *something* coalescing in front of him. As he moved closer, it seemed to be more distinct.

When his paw crossed the invisible barrier above where the green circle ended and the red triangle began, something strange happened. A faint, ghostly radiance appeared around Tarrin's thick fingers, and it swirled and eddied like water between and over them. At the touch of that visible light, Tarrin's fingers tingled angrily, pins and needles that were almost painful, yet seemed to go *through* his fingers as well as around.

"Amazing!" Dar murmured, standing beside him. "It never did that to me."

Tarrin put his entire paw in, feeling the tingles, watching the light ghost up and around his paw. It was almost like water; whatever it was was definitely flowing, from the floor up towards the ceiling so high above. "Put your hand in," Tarrin told him in a wondrous voice. "Don't just put it in, *feel* what's there."

He did so, closing his eyes. After a moment, while Tarrin put his other paw in and played with the swirling, smoky radiance, Dar's eyes snapped

open. "I feel...tingles," he said. He put his other hand out, and then tendrils of ghostly smoke-light started wisping out from under Dar's hands. "Incredible!" he whispered as it became stronger. "I can *feel* it!"

Tarrin raised a foot, to take a step inside.

"I wouldn't do that," a voice called from behind.

They both whirled around. The woman standing before them was very, very tall, and she was almost achingly beautiful. Her skin was bronze colored, but her hair was a brilliant, fiery red. A most unusual combination. She wore a daring, low-cut red silk dress, and had a figure that most women would kill for. Dar instantly bowed to the woman, and Tarrin clumsily did the same. Her hard green eyes swept over them quickly, then she walked up to them. She stepped between them and put her hand out, over the barrier, and Tarrin watched it as it reached into the same area where he had been. "You have no idea what you're doing," she said in a hard voice, "and that can kill you if you're not careful."

Her hand suddenly erupted into a white fire, which spread over her palm, and licked up from under her cupped hand. She removed her hand from the place, and the white fire was still in her palm, dancing and weaving in the air. Tarrin could feel the heat from it; it was *real* fire. It was pure white, but it was real. "This place, I don't think it's safe for either of you. You'd best not come here again."

Swallowing, Tarrin looked at the fire. Why hadn't it done that for him? Like she said, it was something he had no knowledge of, but he just had to know. "What is it, Mistress?" he asked.

"It is Sorcery," she said simply. "It's something you haven't learned yet. But from what I just saw, it's something that both of you *will* learn," she added with an appraising look at Dar.

Dar positively beamed.

"Just don't get creative," she said. "Before you even *try* to use Sorcery, there are many things you have to learn. It's way too easy to kill yourself if you don't know exactly what you're doing."

"I know," Tarrin said absently thinking back to Jenna and her explosive experience with the power of Sorcery.

“Now get on with both of you,” she said shooing them away with a hand as the fire winked out from the other. “I suggest you not come back here until you’ve learned more about the power of Sorcery.”

They left her with hurried bows, almost running from the vast chamber. Only when they were clear of her did they start whispering fervently. “You *will* be a Sorcerer!” Tarrin whispered to him, as Dar said “that was absolutely incredible!”

Dar looked over his shoulder. “That was Ahiriya,” he told Tarrin in a hushed tone. “She sits on the Council of Seven.”

“Ahiriya?” Tarrin asked. That was also the name of a Goddess, the Elder Goddess of Fire.

“I know, she almost looks the part, doesn’t she?” Dar said with a grin. “She sits in the Fire seat on the council and everything. She has just as much of a temper too. She’s the *last* person in the Tower you want to have mad at you.”

“The Fire seat?”

“The council, it has six members,” he explained. “Each one is the seat of one of the six spheres of Sorcery. Air, earth, fire, water, the mind, and the power of the Goddess. The Keeper is the seventh. They rule the Tower.”

“I remember that much,” he said. “I just didn’t know they called themselves that, that’s all.”

“You’ll learn most of that in the first week or so of the Novitiate. That’s about all they talk about. Rules, rules, rules, and just how deep you bow to which person. I think it’s a bit silly, myself,” he grunted. “Back home, you bow to the king, but that’s about all. We’re kinda informal about that kind of thing.”

“You sound like a noble,” Tarrin said.

“Well, my father is a Margrave,” he admitted. “That’s a rank something like a Baron here in the west, but there are no lands that go with the title. It’s like a landless noble.”

“A landless noble?” Tarrin asked.

Dar nodded. "He earned it about fifteen years ago. The king needed something done badly, and my father managed to do it for him. He gave my father the title in thanks."

"Hmm," Tarrin sounded.

"We don't take it seriously, anyway," he said. "My family earns money through the spice trade, so we don't really need land."

"My father said that Novices work when not in class," he said.

"We do," he said with a wince. "I got *very* lucky. They wanted you to know your way around, so I have the afternoon off to show you the Tower."

"What do you usually do?"

"Scrub floors, scrub walls, scrub pots and pans, scrub scrub scrub," he said with a face. "I swear, when I get out of here, I'll never so much as look at another scrub brush as long as I live."

Tarrin laughed. "You should work on a farm," he said. "You do the same things every day, over and over. As soon as you finish it, it has to be done again. It's very monotonous."

"Sounds like torture," he said.

"You get used to it," Tarrin said. "I didn't mind most of the chores. It was something to do." He looked down at his paw idly. "Besides, we had a small farm, and there were four of us, so there wasn't a huge amount of work. We had a lot of free time."

"What did you do with it?"

"Hunted, roamed around in the forest, that kind of thing," he said. "My father was a Ranger, so he taught me all about the woods. My mother's Ungardt, so I learned all about fighting from her. That's more or less what I did with my free time."

"I sat and learned numbers, then learned how to cheat spice dealers," Dar said with a grin.

"Must have been boring."

"You have absolutely no idea." He looked around. "Let's go back outside. It's a nice day, and if any Sorcerer decides they need something,

they can make us do it. We're the mules in the Tower, and idle mules irritate many of the Sorcerers for some reason."

Tarrin laughed. "Outside sounds like a good idea."

The sky was clear, with the Skybands cutting across the blue in their dull white colors. They went to the massive garden behind the Tower proper, where numerous Novices toiled in the meticulously arranged gardens with gardeners and Initiates supervising them. The garden was in its early summer bloom, and it was a sea of colorful flowers divided by red brick walkways. There were several fountains among the large sections of roses and tulips and numerous other flowers, and they stopped at each one and gazed on the beautiful sculpture that often spouted streams of water. There was also a huge hedge maze behind the flower gardens, and the two of them wandered the pathways of that huge maze for almost the entire afternoon, going well past the point where the pathways were neatly tended.

"Things are getting ragged," Dar noticed.

"I don't think they come in this far," Tarrin replied.

Dar laughed. "Maybe we'll come across the skeleton of the last person who did," he joked.

"It's certainly large enough to get lost in," he said.

"Do we even know where we are?" Dar asked a bit uncertainly.

"I know where I've been," he assured him. "I can smell our trail, so we can just follow that to get out."

After a while, though, Tarrin was getting aggravated. They'd followed every single possible path, and yet they still hadn't found the center. "There has to be a way in," he growled.

"As rough as these hedges are," Dar said, pushing away a branch that quite nearly grew across the entire path, "The way to it may have grown over."

"I think you're right," he agreed. "Let's start looking for holes in the hedge."

After about half an hour, they found it. It was indeed overgrown, and so badly that it literally looked like a wall. They pushed through it, walked

down a short path that was similarly choked, and then they found themselves standing in the center.

The hours were worth the effort. There was a fountain in the middle of the large grassy clearing, a fountain that was bright and clean despite the obvious years of neglect. There was a statue in the center of the pristine marble fountain, a statue of a woman of indescribable beauty. The stone was unweathered, and it seemed to literally capture the sparkle in the eye of the long-haired, nude figure. The sculpture was so incredibly detailed that Tarrin could see the individual strands of hair flowing down the back of the statue's shoulders. It stood on a pedestal in the center of the fountain, where small spouts of water filled the small center area with the sound of happily splashing, bubbling water. The figure was in a delicate feminine pose, and its arms were outstretched, as if welcoming them into the clearing. The clearing itself was neat and clean, despite the obvious fact that nobody came into it anymore, with several rose bushes growing to each side of a single solitary bench that sat in front of the fountain. There was a red brick path around the fountain, widened around the bench, running under their feet towards it.

"It's beautiful," Dar whispered.

Tarrin couldn't answer. He approached the rim of the fountain and boldly stepped up onto the lip, then waded through the ankle-deep water. He went right up to the life-sized statue and stared at its intricately detailed face, a beautiful face with elegant cheekbones and almond shaped eyes under very delicate brows. Tarrin reached out and put his paw on the cheek of the statue, just to make sure that it was really stone. Never had he seen such unbelievably detailed sculpture. For an irrational moment, the statue's exquisite figure reminded him of Jesmind, and he wondered if she somehow had something to do with it.

"What are you doing?" Dar asked.

"It's really stone," he told him. "You can see the hairs in her eyebrows."

"It's almost embarrassing," Dar said.

"What?"

"That's not all the hair the sculptor made," he said delicately.

Tarrin looked down. "You can see each hair in that too," he said.

Dar blushed.

"What?" he asked. "It's just stone, Dar. I don't think it cares if you look." Tarrin stopped himself. Where did that come from? That sounded just like Jesmind. Had those short days changed him so much?

"Well, it's still improper."

"Don't be such a prude, Dar," he said. "With all the art I saw in the room, I would think that you could appreciate the art of this, even if she is nude."

"I'm not a prude at all. Baths in Arkisia are communal, just like here, so I'm quite used to seeing naked women and being seen naked. But they're all strangers, and not half as pretty as that statue," he said, "but it's almost *too* life-like. If you touched that statue in the wrong place, I think it might slap you."

Tarrin rather bluntly placed the palm of his paw against the area of contention. Dar choked a bit, and then he laughed. "No slap," Tarrin said.

"You're fearless," Dar told him.

"No, I'm just not afraid of a piece of marble," he replied.

"Well, you couldn't have touched it in a more sensitive place," Dar said.

"Yes I could have, but the statue was carved with her legs too close together," he said.

"*Tarrin!*" Dar hissed. "That's rude!"

"And you've never thought of doing it yourself?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, well," he said, clearing his throat and turning a bright shade of red. "I never thought to do it to a piece of stone."

"Now you're thinking the right way," Tarrin said, leaving the statue and wading back across the fountain.

"You don't think the same way we do," Dar deduced shrewdly.

"No, I don't," he said calmly. "What I consider modest and improper isn't the same as what you do, Dar. It has to do with what I am." Again, he

marveled at how much like Jesmind he sounded, and got a little window into Dar's way of thinking. He wasn't shy at all around strangers, but if he was attracted to someone, it made him much more modest. "This is a very nice place," he said. "That's the most beautiful fountain I've ever seen, and the whole thing is pretty. I could live in here."

"I wonder who keeps it like this, since the opening is so overgrown that it's hidden," Dar wondered aloud.

"*Somebody* has to," Tarrin agreed. "This place would be a jungle if it wasn't tended. But there are no human smells in here. Not even a trace of one," he told him. "Nobody has been in here in weeks, maybe months. And that's too long for it to look like this."

"Maybe the place is magic," Dar said.

Tarrin considered that, and then he thought about the way he felt in the huge chamber Dar called the Heart of the Goddess. But that same feeling wasn't here. But there was a different feeling here...a feeling of *peace*. That was the only way to describe it. Standing there, staring at that beautiful statue, Tarrin couldn't deny that there was something very special about this place, something that made him feel very much at peace.

"I don't know about magic, but this place is very special," he said in a quiet voice. "Maybe it's a good thing that nobody really comes here."

"Yeah," he agreed. "They'd just mess it up."

They sat down on the bench and stared at the exquisite statue for a long time. They didn't speak. Talking was unnecessary. They both simply contemplated the statue, her arms held out in a gesture of welcome, the look of gentle caring on her face.

"It's getting late," Dar said, looking at the dimming sky. "We probably missed dinner."

"It was worth it," he said calmly.

"It was," he agreed.

"We should go. They may be looking for us, and they won't find us here."

“Yes. We should remember that. This might be a nice place to get away from it all.”

Tarrin glanced around at the clearing. “Yes, it would be,” he said. Looking up, he could see that the hedges didn’t conceal the center from the vast height of the main Tower. But from that height, one would need a spyglass to see who was down here.

They went back to the Novice quarters, and Tarrin considered the fountain. It was a beautiful place, and it was indeed very well hidden. It was the perfect place to go when he didn’t want to be bothered.

“Let’s see if we’re not too late for dinner,” Dar said.

“You go ahead,” he said. “I need to do something.”

“Alright. See you in the room. I’ll try to sneak something back for you.”

“Thanks,” he said.

He immediately went to the Library. He wasn’t too late to keep his appointment with Dolanna. The library was a vast place, a chamber that took up almost every span of available room on one side of the Tower. It went from the inner wall to the outer wall, took up two levels, and probably took up enough room to house about three hundred people. The floor was lined with bookshelves, and each one was piled heavily with books. There was a set of steps on each side of a large statue of some robed man with long hair and no beard, leading to a half-upper level with even more bookshelves. In the exact center of the lower floor, up against the wall that separated the central core of the tower, was a circular desk behind which sat the Master Librarian and two or three of his scholar attendants, who were responsible for keeping the Tower’s vast wealth of books in a neat and orderly fashion. Tarrin hesitated to let one of those librarians pass, pushing a wooden cart stacked with books that were to be replaced on the shelves.

Ignoring the several curious looks, Tarrin squatted down and put his nose close to the floor. There were a multitude of scents all jumbled together on the floor, but he knew precisely which one he was looking for. He had to check two other likely places it would be until he found Dolanna’s scent, sharp and strong and fresh. After that, he simply followed it. It went up the stairs and into a dark corner of the huge library. She was

sitting at a solitary table behind a large, dusty bookshelf, where a single one of those glowing globes hovered over the table to provide light.

He sat down across from her at the small table quietly. She looked up from the book she was reading, then carefully looked in either direction for eavesdroppers. “Thank you for coming, Tarrin,” she said.

“What did you want to see me about, Dolanna?” he asked.

“Nothing earth-shaking, my dear one,” she said with a smile. “I simply wanted to talk to you about your journey to the Tower. I felt that there some things that you did not wish to talk about in front of Sevren.”

“Not a whole lot,” he told her. “Me and Jesmind, we, uh, got very, you know, uh--”

“I understand,” she said quickly. “I had assumed as much.”

“Why?”

“Because, my dear one, *that* is a very effective way for a woman to control a man,” she said.

“That’s not why it happened,” he said.

“Then what did occur?”

Tarrin explained to her the social peculiarities of the Were-cats, as it was described to him by Jesmind. Dolanna simply nodded. “Yes, that is logical,” she said. “I should have expected as much. I keep falling into the trap of thinking of you and the other Were-cats as thinking in a human manner.”

“No, we don’t,” he said soberly. “Here lately, I’ve really noticed it. I’ve changed, Dolanna.”

“How so?”

“I’m starting to think almost the same way Jesmind does,” he told her. “I used to be nervous about undressing in public. Right now, Dolanna, I could strip and walk across the library without batting an eyelash. It just doesn’t seem the same as it once did.” He shuddered slightly. “I find it very easy to kill,” he added.

“What else?”

“Just little things, Dolanna, mostly along those lines,” he said. “I think the time with Jesmind opened my eyes to that other side of me, and now they’re starting to communicate. Jesmind told me that I was ignoring it. Well, I’m not doing that anymore. And it’s doing it without me knowing about it. When I was in the baths, I realized that my ideas about being nude changed. It wasn’t until then.”

“It is your instincts,” she told him. “They are starting to merge with your conscious mind. Tarrin, it is what is supposed to happen, and it is a very good sign. You do not seem to be having any problems integrating them together, which is also very good.”

“It’s just scary,” he told her. “I’m starting to wonder at what I’m going to do next. It’s like I’m starting to lose control.”

“No, dear one,” she assured him. “The fact that you can recognize these changes in attitude tells me that you are still very much in control of yourself.”

“It’s still weird,” he said. “At first, when I met Jesmind, I was amazed at how *different* she was. She was blunt and almost totally fearless, and she thought about some things in ways I never thought any woman would ever think about them. And now I find myself acting more and more like her with every passing moment. I know I’m not becoming her, because she’s female and I’m not, but I’m starting to think almost the same way. I’m getting just as blunt, and I find myself capable of doing things that would have made me almost faint just last month.”

“You are starting to think like a Were-cat,” she told him gently.

“I didn’t realize that it would be so different,” he admitted.

“But you do realize it, Tarrin, and that is your best weapon in learning how to deal with it,” she told him.

“I hope so,” he sighed.

“Just believe in yourself, dear one,” she told him.

He nodded. “Did you tell them about Jesmind?”

“Yes,” she replied. “The Keeper has started putting eyes out to watch for her. So far as I know, she has yet to arrive. Nobody has seen her.”

“They’re not going to,” he grunted. “If she doesn’t want to be seen, she won’t.”

“We must have faith,” she said.

“What about the Goblinoids?”

“Now that we have passed on to the King,” she told him. “I have not heard what will be done about it, but at least the King now knows what is happening. I am certain he will mobilize units in the army to deter them from getting any ideas.”

“Good,” he said. “Dolanna, that place in the center of the Tower, what is it?” he asked.

She gave him a curious look. “It is called the Heart of the Goddess,” she told him.

“I know. Me and my roommate were in there. There’s something in there, something magic. But before we could find out, someone came in and threw us out.”

“That was a good thing,” she told him with a look of concern on her face. “Tarrin, you have awesome potential, and you will have tremendous power when you learn to use it. That place, it is very central to our power as Sorcerers. It is something that you will not understand until you learn about the Weave. But for now, consider it to be a place with a great deal of magical energy. With your inherent aptitude, I am surprised that nothing bad happened.”

“I think it almost did,” he said with a shudder. “Me and Dar were playing with the area inside the symbol, because it was creating light when we put our hands in it. The woman came in and stopped us before we did anything else.”

“Then your roommate has the talent,” she told him calmly. “He will be a Sorcerer.”

“Yes, the woman told him that,” he replied. “He’s very happy about it.”

“Have you, done anything with Sorcery?” she asked.

“No,” he told her. “After what happened with Jenna, I don’t even want to try until I know what I’m doing. I’ve seen what can happen if I mess it

up.”

“That is a *very* good attitude,” she told him fiercely. “Sorcery is not bad, Tarrin, but you *must* understand what you are doing when you do it, or there is a tremendous potential for disaster. Training people as powerful as you is very, very dangerous because of that. I have asked for the honor of doing that myself. I feel that I am best qualified to do it, since I know you so well, and you are so comfortable with me.”

“I wouldn’t mind it.”

“But they may not allow it,” she told him. “I am very strong, Tarrin, but there are others much stronger than I. They may decide to pair you with a Sorcerer with enough raw power to stop you from hurting yourself. And there are only a handful with that much raw talent in the Tower.”

“Not if I refuse to learn from them,” he said.

“Tarrin, you cannot do that.”

“Really? What’s stopping me?” She gave him a blank look. “I didn’t think so.”

“Tarrin, that is rebellion you are talking about,” she said. “That is not tolerated in a Novice.”

“I’m not a normal Novice,” he told her.

“You will get in a great deal of trouble,” she warned.

“And? Dolanna, I’m already in trouble. Do you think that a little bit more is going to make a difference? Between Jesmind and the Goblinoids and the person that was trying to kill me, I’m really not going to worry about someone getting into a twist because I want a specific teacher.”

She gave him a strange look, and then laughed delightedly. “Tarrin, my dear one, you are going to drive this Tower to distraction,” she told him fondly. She looked down the passage between the bookcases. “It is getting late, dear one. We should be leaving.”

“It is getting there,” he agreed. “I don’t have anything to do tomorrow either...maybe I’ll spend the day reading. And maybe see you in here. Around sunset maybe.”

“Perhaps,” she said with a smile.

Tarrin left her sitting at the table. It had been a productive meeting. Dolanna had calmed some fears that had broiled up in the past day, and he had learned a thing or two besides. And he got to talk with Dolanna. Tarrin had a very special rapport with the Sorceress, and they both knew it. It had been she that had kept a terrified Tarrin from going into histrionics after he’d been bitten. It was her gentle guidance that had literally kept him from going mad. And they had a very close personal friendship as well. She was in many ways one of the crutches on which he leaned, and he would have no one else teach him about Sorcery. Unlike many others in the Tower, he already knew Dolanna, already knew what to expect from her. Despite them being Sorcerers, and despite the warm welcome he had received from many in the Tower, Tarrin was still a bit reluctant about getting close to strangers. He wouldn’t be as forthcoming with a stranger as he would with Dolanna, and that made her the best teacher for him.

Tarrin was used to being what he was. Now he had to get used to how that would affect relationships with others.

Tarrin was up before dawn, and so was Dar. Someone walked up the hallway just as Tarrin awoke, ringing a bell. That was obviously the signal for all Novices to get up and start preparing for the day. Tarrin had had a very good sleep, and much to his surprise, so had Dar. Dar had not shown the slightest reservation about sharing his room with such an exotic, unknown creature as Tarrin, and that surprised the young Were-cat considerably. Dar was perfectly at ease with Tarrin, and that simple fact had endeared the Arkisian to him even more than the previous day. Being able to sleep soundly in the same room as someone was a definite measure of trust.

Tarrin wondered if it hadn’t been for that specific reason that Dar was chosen to be his roommate. Because he *was* so tolerant.

Dar groaned, sat up, and yawned deeply. “Dawn gets here earlier every day,” he grumbled in complaint as he rubbed his eyes.

“Of course it does,” Tarrin told him. “It’s coming into summer. Each night is a bit shorter than the last. If you’d go to bed at a decent hour, then

you wouldn't be so sleepy."

"You're the one who kept *me* up," he shot back. "Do you always like to play cards?"

"It helps me think," he shrugged.

"Next time, read a book," he complained, sliding out of bed.

"I may. You're a lousy hand in King's Sword."

"Give me a break, I just learned it last night," he said indignantly.

"Do you play stones?"

"Religiously," he replied.

"I'll get a stones board."

"Not in this room you won't. Neither of us will sleep if you do."

"You may be right there," he admitted. "I don't like stopping in the middle of a game."

"I don't either." Dar was wearing his small clothes, and he pulled his robe off the peg and belted it on.

"What's the routine in the morning?" Tarrin asked.

"We all have to bathe first," he said. "After that, we eat. Then we either go to class or to our work."

"All the Novices at once?"

"No, they do it a floor at a time. We have to go bathe first."

"What do the others do while they wait?"

"They wait," he said. "They have to get up at the same time we do. But we have to wait on them to finish before we can go to eat, so it evens out."

"Well, what happens if you want to take a long bath?" he asked.

Dar laughed. "Tarrin, you don't see many Novices take long baths," he said. "At least everyone but Torians and Arkisians."

"Why is that?"

“Because they have to appear naked in front of the others,” he said. “The Torians and us have communal baths, so it doesn’t bother them. Most Novices jump in, jump out, and then wrap a towel around themselves as fast as they can.”

“Humans,” Tarrin sighed. “You’re so quirky. After you see someone naked once, does it matter how many more times you see it?”

“It doesn’t bother me anymore,” Dar told him. “It’s a little different since I’ve only shared a bath with my family, but I got used to it. I admit, even I was a little nervous about it the first time I had to bathe with strangers.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “I feel like taking another bath. That bathing pool is just too handy.”

“I just wish they others would calm down. Sometimes taking a bath is stressful with everyone racing to get done,” Dar grumbled.

Tarrin laughed. Now he understood why Jesmind was so amused at his own discomfort. And now that he seemed to be closer to Jesmind’s way of thinking, it was just as amusing to him as it was to her. It was such a silly custom, almost ridiculous, for humans to be so ashamed of themselves.

Dar and Tarrin left their room and fell into step with the other Novices that lived on their floor. They all seemed sulky. Tarrin also noted that many of them stared at him in wide-eyed amazement, and not a few of them wouldn’t get that close to him. That made him sigh a bit. It wasn’t like he was some unholy monster there to drink the living blood from their veins. He was a person, after all. He even had a name. He understood that to them, he was a very strange creature, but it was silly to be afraid of him. He was a Novice, just like them. It wasn’t like he’d gotten himself into the Tower so he could eat the unwary young Novices.

He ignored them as best he could. He was more interested in a hot bath than anything else. That he attended to with a brisk businesslike manner of which Dar seemed to approve. They disrobed and jumped right into the water, and he waded out into the hot water quickly, before others could get over there and intrude on his space. He had plans for the day, several of them. The first was to take his staff outside and start working out the differences that there would be. He had larger hands now. He was stronger,

faster, and he had natural weaponry. He needed to work with them more than the chaotic, half-instinctual way he'd been using them. He needed to know exactly what he could do, so he would know exactly what he was capable of doing. In a fight, that was dreadfully important. His life would hinge on it. Then he would go to the library and start reading about Sorcery. He'd discovered from talking with Dar last night that they didn't start really teaching Sorcery until the Initiate. Well, he wanted to know now. And he was pretty sure that he could talk Dolanna into giving him lessons, whether or not they were sanctioned by the Tower. Before he started doing that, he wanted to read about it. Besides, he was rather sure that they'd watch him very closely for a while. He'd just arrived, and they had no idea what he was about. They'd watch him carefully until they were certain that he wasn't going to do anything unusual. At least for him. After that, if he had time, he wanted to explore the rest of the grounds more thoroughly. That, he knew, was a purely Cat instinct, to know his territory, but he was more than willing to go along with the idea. He was curious to see what all there was out on the grounds, which were about three times the size of Aldreth. And after that, he would meet with Dolanna in the library at sunset.

He'd been right about his body repairing itself, though. He wasn't half as thin as he'd been this time the day before. His ribs were again sheathed in a layer of muscle, and the little aches and pains had faded quite some time ago. It had only taken a single day with a huge amount of food for his body to restore what had been consumed during his period of near-starvation. He looked healthy, and he felt healthy. He was strong again, strong enough to take his staff out in the field and work with it.

"Man, this is hot," Dar complained as he lathered his hair.

"I like it like this," Tarrin said.

"It's tolerable, but only just," he said.

"For you."

"Hey, I'm the only one that matters," he said with a grin.

"You might think so," Tarrin shot back.

"You mean the world doesn't revolve around me? I'm crushed."

"You look it."

Dar answered that by splashing water at him. Tarrin retaliated by snaking his long tail around the boy's ankle, and then yanking. Tarrin's tail was by no means as strong as the rest of his body, but it was strong enough. Dar disappeared under the water with shocking speed, and then came up spluttering. "Cheater," he accused after spitting out a mouthful of water.

"Oh, did my tail catch on your leg? I'm so sorry," Tarrin said with false sincerity. "Let me help you up."

"That thing is long," Dar remarked, looking behind Tarrin in the water.

"About half again as long as my leg," Tarrin told him calmly. "Long enough to be useful."

"I noticed," Dar said after he stuck his tongue out at the Were-cat.

"It doesn't look it because it moves all the time, and it's always bent," Tarrin said, washing the soap out of the fur on his arms.

Dar laughed. "Your tail reaches farther than your arms."

"I guess it does."

"And you can grab things with it?"

"Yes. It's not as delicate as my fingers, but it's got enough agility to grab things."

"That's the first time I ever heard of the butt grabbing the hand."

Tarrin gave him a face, then laughed. "Wait til it smacks you. Then you can say that it's the first time a butt ever smacked back."

Dar laughed with him as they climbed out of the bathing pool. But it also made Tarrin consider the possibilities. From a combat situation, his tail was a tactical advantage. It gave him a third arm, as it were, one that didn't have an elbow and was as supple as a snake. He made a mental note to ponder that. He was rather sure he'd thought of that once before, but he hadn't pursued it last time. Most likely it had been during his flight from Jesmind, and at that time he was too busy trying to survive.

They went back to their room and dressed, then they stood at the hallway leading to the Hall, waiting for the Mistress of Novices to appear and lead them in. Dar explained that the food was already laid out on the

tables, but those unlucky Novices that had pulled kitchen duty, and only awaited them to come in and sit down. They had the same thing for breakfast every day. Cooked eggs, slices of bacon, ham, porridge, bread, milk, and fresh fruit, when it was in season.

Elsa appeared a short while later, and she stopped in front of Tarrin. “You look a whole world better, boy,” she noted.

“I feel just fine, Mistress,” he assured her.

“Good. You’re entering the Novitiate tomorrow. Oh, and don’t forget to pick up your clothes from the Quartermaster after breakfast. He’s waiting on you.”

“I’ll take care of it, Mistress Elsa,” he promised.

“I saw that staff in your room, boy. You’re not supposed to have that. Unless, of course, it’s of sentimental value.”

“I’ve owned it for five years, Mistress. I made it myself. It’s got a great deal of sentimental value.”

“Good,” she said. “That’s all I wanted to hear. And if anyone asks, you’ll tell them that. Understood?”

“Understood, Mistress,” he told her. Then she led them into the Hall.

“What was that all about?” he asked in a hushed voice. Elsa was only a bit ahead of them.

“We’re not allowed to have weapons, except for a personal knife. I didn’t think it was a weapon,” Dar shrugged.

“It’s very much one, if you know how to use it that way,” he told him in an equally hushed voice. “I could teach you, if you want.”

“I may take you up on that. It’s always handy how to know how to fight with something so ordinary.”

“That’s the idea,” he said. “My mother could whip your tail with nothing but her hands and feet. My father could do it with a leather belt.”

“A belt?”

Tarrin nodded. “I’ve never seen one used quite that way, and I doubt I ever will. He could even block a sword blow with it. He said he learned it

because even if you lose everything else, you'll always have your belt."

Dar chuckled. "That's a very smart idea." They entered the Hall and took the closest available seats, but they didn't touch any food. That came after the blessing. "Your mother knows the Ungardt Ways?" he asked in a whisper.

Tarrin nodded. "She taught them to me, but I'm still not as good as she is."

"I heard that they don't often teach them to women," he said.

"You heard wrong," Tarrin told him. "Even a village grandmother has some training in the Ways. It's a custom."

Many more Novices poured in, many of them still damp from the baths. After the hall was more or less full, Elsa stood up and delivered the blessing in a booming voice. When she was done, the Novices started in on breakfast. Now that he was mended, he didn't have a quarter of the appetite he'd had the day before, so his breakfast plate was much more reasonable. He did like scrambled eggs, so he put more on his plate than was good for him, then added some bacon and fried ham to it. He didn't touch the porridge, but did have an apple after cleaning his plate.

As he'd discovered the day before, he wasn't required to sit and wait for everyone else to finish. Once a Novice was done with the meal, they were permitted to leave and get about their affairs. Tarrin bid good day to Dar and left the Hall, going straight to the Quartermaster's. The wiry man greeted him warmly when he entered. "Ah, I see you got my clothes," he said.

"Thank you, sir. They were very handy. I don't like wearing robes."

"With that tail, I can understand why. I have your clothes ready for you. Come with me and we'll get them."

The wiry man led him to a shelf some ways back into the huge room. "Those are the same size as the ones you have on now," he said. "Hmm, maybe I should have made them looser. They're already snug on you."

"No, sir, this size is perfect," he assured him. "I'm as thick as I'm going to get."

“But you were thin as a stick yesterday.”

“I got better,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“I don’t think I want to know, so spare me the details,” he said dryly. “With all the magical things that go on around here, I should know better than to ask anymore.”

“Oh, what do you want me to do with the old robe?” he asked.

“Keep it,” he said. “It’ll make good rags if anything else. That’s what I was about to do with it.”

“I’ll find something to do with it, sir,” he assured him.

“Well, I won’t keep you. I know they keep you Novices busier than a frog on a griddle. Have a good day, young man.”

“You too, sir,” he mirrored.

Tarrin took his clothes back to his room and put them away neatly in the chest. He took off the ones he was wearing and put on a set of his old leathers out of his pack, then picked up his staff and went outside. He debated where to do his practicing for several moments. It had to be an open area out of the way. But a moment of thought told him that the perfect place was that sand-strewn area he’d crossed the night he arrived. It even had several large posts driven into the ground, and was obviously a training field for someone, most likely the Tower guards. If nobody was using it, it would be perfect for his needs.

But it was indeed being used. A squad of young men wearing leather pseudo-armor labored on the field, swinging lathe-bundled practice swords to the barking command of a burly man wearing the plate armor of a Knight. Farther down the line, young men swung their practice swords at the wooden posts, and in another place they sparred against each other. About seven or eight other Knights prowled the field, correcting stances and giving instruction as they moved, or they supervised the sparring matches with a keen eye. Tarrin also noticed three robed Sorcerers standing to one side. They were obviously there in case of an accidental injury.

As Tarrin approached, he recognized one of the prowling Knights. It was Faalken. Dolanna had said that he trained students when not out with her. Faalken noticed him and trotted out quickly to greet him, his plate

armor jingling as he moved. “Tarrin!” he said joyfully, clapping the Were-cat’s paw in his strong hand. “Dolanna told me you were back. You look very well.”

“I do now,” he said ruefully. “I wasn’t in very good shape when I got here.”

“Yes, she told me. She said it wasn’t easy on you.”

“Not by a measure,” he grunted.

He took notice of his staff. “Here to practice a bit?”

“I remembered seeing the field, but I didn’t know if it would be used,” he said apologetically. “I’ll go find someplace else.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “You’re more than welcome here. It’s not often that we get to see someone other than Elsa use the Ways, anyway.”

“Is she any good?” he asked.

“Let’s just say that I’ve never seen a Sorceress thump so many heads without magic,” he said with a grin.

“I’m not surprised,” he said back. “She’s from the Emden clan, and they’ve always been very good at the Ways. It’s a matter of pride with them.”

“Yes, well, just find yourself an open spot,” he invited. “I hope you won’t mind if some of us watch.”

“Not really,” he said.

Tarrin picked a small corner of the soft sand practice field and turned the staff over in paws several times, getting a feel for the changes. The staff seemed a little smaller to him now, and he’d have to adjust his grip on it. He started going through forms, very slowly, sliding from one to the next with a fluid grace and feeling the changes in leverage, the shifts in the grip he’d have to make, the adjustments to take his new height into account. His wide feet gave him more stability than before, and his Were-cat sense of balance and equilibrium was a definite asset. He worked through the same forms again several times, going faster and faster each time, until he whirled through the routine at blazing full speed. He almost dropped the staff three times, but his inhuman agility and speed allowed him to snatch it back

before it got out of control. His huge paws made walking the staff over the back of his paw harder than it had been before, which meant he'd have to be more careful with grip-shift moves.

Tarrin began to sweat as he started practicing with some of the more difficult forms, slowly working himself into the changes the bite had brought about and adapting to them. He knew it would take more than just one day, but he was pleased at the amount of progress he'd already made after a few short hours of work.

He then started with the mixed move forms, staff moves that were accented with punches or kicks, even headbutts and several throws. He began to experiment, changing a punch into a claw rake or a stab with the pointed ends of his claws, changing a foot sweep into a tail-sweep. All in all, making such minor changes wasn't much of a problem, just very subtle changes to his stances or sets to take a broader swipe into account and such.

"Not bad," Faalken complemented as Tarrin stopped for a moment to gather in his breath. "I forgot how good you are with that thing."

"It's coming along," Tarrin told him. "I need to practice the hand forms. I think it'll be harder for me to use them than the staff now."

"Why is that?"

"Because a lot of what they are depends on your strengths and weaknesses," he said. "All those are different for me now. I'll almost have to re-teach myself the forms. Weapons don't change like that. Well, sure, there are some things that are different now, but it's adjusting to the weapon. In hand forms, I have nothing to adjust to, so that changes it all around." He made a face. "If that makes any sense."

"I understand what you're trying to say, even if you're doing a bad job of it," he said with a grin. "Weapon forms are weapon forms, but your hand forms are more or less suited just for you. You're a different you now, so you need to use new forms."

"Exactly," he said. "What I already know is all I need. I just need to learn the new way to use them. I have these claws now, and the tail. I need to learn how to use them in a fight."

"Wise idea," he said with an outrageous smile.

“You,” Tarrin said, shaking a paw at him. “It’s good to practice again,” he sighed. “I forgot what it was like. And I still want to beat my mother in a fight.”

“I think you could do that now,” Faalken observed slyly.

“I wouldn’t cheat,” he said in an outraged tone.

“How is it cheating?”

“It just is,” he said after a moment’s blank look.

“When are you going to give up that overgrown toothpick and use a *real* weapon?” Faalken asked.

“Like what?”

“Like a sword.”

“I’ve used swords before. I don’t like them,” he said. “They’re too crude.”

“*Crude?*” Faalken gasped in feigned shock.

“Crude,” he said again. “They have no style. Any fool can pick up a sword and use one.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Faalken laughed.

“And they’re crude in using them as well,” he added. “It’s too easy to kill when you don’t want to kill. With my staff, I have to make a conscious choice to deliver a killing blow. It’s not as uncertain as it is with a sword.”

“You just never learned how to control one,” Faalken told him. “If you think it’s that crude, then you have a lot to learn about them.”

“I do know how to use one,” he said. “My father uses one. But then again, my father won’t draw it unless he intends to kill, so there’s no open area about leaving people alive as far as he’s concerned.”

“So...you consider it crude because you don’t like it?” Faalken surmised.

“Just about,” Tarrin said with a grin. “Keep you toy, Faalken. I’ll stay with a real weapon.”

“What happens if you don’t have it with you?” Faalken asked.

“Faalken, my friend, that’s what these are for,” he replied, showing the Knight his claws. “And I can’t leave these behind. They’re with me everywhere I go.”

Faalken laughed. “Point taken,” he acceded. “But all in all, I’d still like to see you practice the sword. And the axe, and any other weapons you know. Best get used to using them as you are, in case you ever come to a situation where you *need* to use them.”

“I can agree to that,” he said after a moment. “Better to be ready for what will never be.”

“Because only a fool says never,” Faalken finished the saying.

Tarrin looked up at the sun. It was nearly noon. The students were filing off the field in neat rows, and that reminded him that it was about time for lunch. “I have to go, Faalken,” he said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have a good day, Tarrin. Come visit again soon.”

“I hope to,” he said.

In the Hall, as he was settling in for lunch, he managed to spot Walten a few tables over. Rushing over there, he saw that Tiella was sitting with him. They both saw him, and Tiella waved to him happily. “Tarrin!” Tiella said with a smile. “It’s so good to see you!”

“They told us you made it,” Walten told him with a grin.

“It wasn’t easy,” Tarrin said. He tapped the shoulder of the Novice that was sitting across the table from his friends. “Excuse me, would you like to trade seats?” he asked. “These are old friends of mine.”

The young girl gaped at him a moment, then hastily vacated the area. The novices to each side of her scooted away from him as he stepped over the bench and sat down, shaking Walten’s hand over the table and holding onto Tiella’s a moment. “What happened after the boat sank?” Walten asked.

Tarrin gave them a very brief account of what had happened after he’d parted ways with them. He told them about Jesmind, but didn’t go into the more personal things that had happened between them. “So after I got away

from her, I made my way here,” he finished. “It wasn’t easy because of all the raiders running around. I was in pretty bad shape when I got here.”

“Wow,” Tiella said. “Nothing happened to us. We just got another boat and kept going.”

“How’s the Novitiate?” Tarrin asked.

“Busy,” Walten grunted. “I’ve never cleaned so much in my life. I think I may see if I can go back to being a carpenter.”

“I’m starting to hate rags,” Tiella added. “They make me clean the Keeper’s office, and she goes into fits if she sees even a speck of dust.”

“That’s all you do?”

“Believe me, that’s enough,” she said with a screwed-up face.

Tarrin laughed. “Just stick with it,” he said. “They can’t make you clean forever. What are you learning?”

“Right now, history,” Walten told him. “We don’t get to start learning Sorcery until we learn some things about history and geography, and even things about adding numbers and a class on logic. After that, they put us in the Initiate, and we start learning magic.”

“Sorcery,” the Novice beside him said absently.

“Yeah,” he said. “They make you scrub the privies if they hear you say that word.”

“We call it the M word,” Tiella told him.

“How long have you been doing this?” he asked.

“Almost two rides,” Tiella told him. A ride was ten days, so it was nearly twenty days.

“They must have put you in fast.”

“The day after we got here,” Walten told him.

Tarrin chuckled. “They didn’t waste any time, did they?”

“None,” Tiella agreed.

Elsa stood, and the Hall stood with her for the blessing of the meal. Tarrin thought about what they'd said while she talked. They'd wanted to do the same with him, but he hadn't been in shape to do it. It must have been standard practice. He was very glad that they'd had no trouble after he'd been separated from them. Faalken and Dolanna were experienced travelers, but Walten and Tiella weren't really suited for fighting. They could, and did, though. Both of them had exhibited dogged courage and determination in the fights that had happened while he was with them. But they hadn't had the fighting background that he did. He was happy that it had been left to him, and not to them. It wasn't that he liked fighting, it was that he was better suited for it than them.

The blessing over, they all sat back down and started to eat. Tarrin listened as Tiella and Walten talked about the routine of classes in the morning, lunch, then maybe one more class, and then off to do all the cleaning, or whatever duty was imposed upon them that day. They talked about several instructors, and Tarrin was a bit surprised to find out that only a few of the Novitiate teachers were actually Sorcerers. But then again, the Novitiate dealt with pure knowledge, and a non-sorcerer was just as capable of teaching history or numbers as a Sorcerer.

Tarrin stared at a Sorcerer who had entered the Hall and started staring at him. It was an old man, with sunken eyes and cheeks and with a white-fringed ring of hair around that bald pate. He wore a simple brown robe that was slightly food-stained. The man moved with an erratic gait, as if one leg didn't always want to work the right way, and he made a zig-zagging, meandering course to Elsa and the Sorcerers seated at the table on the dais at the far end of the Hall.

"Who is that?" Tarrin asked.

"Brel, the Master of Initiates," Tiella informed him. "Nobody I talked to likes him. Mistress Elsa is firm, but fair. I hear that Brel enjoys punishing people."

"He's a little man that thinks it makes him bigger to put other people down," Walten grunted. "Standing on a man's shoulders may let you see higher, but you're still the same size once you get down."

“Well, that’s a problem that will have to wait,” Tarrin told them. “None of us are there yet. I’m not even *here* yet,” he said with a smile.

“Tomorrow,” Tiella told him. “We were all told about you, Tarrin,” she said with a wink.

“Told? Told what?”

“That you’d be in the Novitiate,” she said. “A Sorcerer came into our class and told us about you. That you’d be in the Novitiate, and that since you’re not human, you’re not quite like everyone else. He said a few things about how to act around you, and said as long as we don’t make you mad, that everything will be just fine.”

“Nobody told me they were doing that,” he said.

“I guess they want to make sure that nothing bad happens,” Walten said. “Tykarthians and Draconians don’t like people who aren’t human, and the Dals really hate them, because of all the Goblinoids up in the mountains.”

“I’m not a Goblinoid,” Tarrin grunted.

“Yes, well, even I think that if someone called you a really bad name, you’d do something to them,” Tiella said.

“I would,” he affirmed bluntly. “But you know me, Tiella. I would have done it even before this happened to me.”

“True,” she acceded.

“There’s going to be another one,” Walten said.

“Another what?”

“We heard about it in our class today. A Selani is going to come and enter the Novitiate.”

A Selani. One of the Desert Folk, who lived out in the Desert of Swirling Sands to the east of Arkis. That desert, and the Selani that lived there, were the only things keeping the countless legions of the empire of Arak out of the West. The Selani were a hard people, like their desert, and they were regarded the world over as the most lethal adversaries in hand to hand combat in all the world. The Ungardt were known for their fighting ability, but even the Ungardt paled in comparison to the Selani. Five

hundred years ago, the Emperor of Arak decided to try to invade Arkis. That was when Arkis was a fledgling nation, made up of Arakites that had fled from the brutal oppression of the Emperor, Zanak XVI. An advance force of Arakite Legions had tried to cross the desert, and were obliterated by the Selani. Angered by the loss, the Emperor ordered his legions to sweep the desert and kill anything that moved. The Selani simply allowed the invaders to come in, let them wander around for about a month to let the heat and blowing sand take their toll, then they wiped out the invaders. The Selani had been angered by the attacks, and after a council of all the clans, they decided to attack Arak.

No nation in the world would have been insane enough to make that decision, but the Selani were beings of high honor. Their honor had been stained by the invasion, and they meant to punish the Emperor for his actions. Nine of the fifteen clans left the desert and fell on the western border of Arak like the a tidal wave of destruction. They laid waste to absolutely everything in their path, but, according to their honor, they killed not one civilian. All who did not raise a weapon to the Selani were allowed free passage to safety. Many simply remained behind the Selani lines, for the Selani advanced so quickly that there was no way they could outrun the advance. These were treated as guests of the Selani, and were given tents to live in and food to eat while the Clans eradicated their Empire. Zanak became so enraged and bewildered at the unstoppable Selani that he took command of the army personally and met them on the plains of Dala Ren. The Selani clans met the elite of the Arakite Legions on that grassy plain, and killed them to the last man. The Emperor himself was captured and taken back to the desert, where not a word was heard from him again. Nobody even knew what fate had befell him at the hands of the Selani.

The Emperor captured, the Selani clans simply withdrew, leaving the throne to the Emperor's eldest son, Zanak XVII. The ruined western marches of the Empire blamed the Empire for their loss, and seceded, becoming the kingdom of Saranam. The Emperor was too busy fighting a sudden war on his eastern frontier, caused by the decimation of the Legion reserves, to attend the matter immediately. But once that war was finished, Zanak set his legions to invade what was once his own empire.

The legions advanced to the border, and found three clans of Selani sitting on the other side waiting for them. The people of the new kingdom

had managed to befriend the Selani, and the Selani had had council and decided that a nation between the desert and Arak would be better for all involved. So they simply created one. Zanak, fearful of the lethal ability of the Selani, who were clearly allied with his former subjects, decided to sue for peace instead. Arak recognized the sovereignty of Saranam, formal peace treaties were drawn up and signed, and everyone went home. Arak was the largest single nation on the planet, and yet even they were no match for the fighting prowess of the Selani. It is a world-wide relief that the Selani have no interest in conquest. So long as they are left alone, they are quite happy to dwell in their desert in perfect contentment. And all of the Selani's neighbors were more than willing to let that happen.

"I wonder what the Selani will be like," Tarrin mused.

"I heard it's a she," Walten said. "A Clan Princess or some such thing. Some kind of noble."

"Who knows," Tarrin said. "I'll be curious to meet her, though. Well, I need to go to the library for a while. See you two later."

"Have fun," Walten said.

"Just be careful, Tarrin," Tiella said. "Some of the other Novices don't like you. Don't let them bully you into a fight."

"Tiella, dear, don't worry about it. Once I kill a few of them, I think the rest will leave me alone."

"*Tarrin!*" Tiella gasped.

Tarrin laughed as he stood up. "I'm just teasing you, Tiella," he said with a grin. "See you later."

Tarrin spent several frustrating hours in the library after that. There were lots of books on magic, and magical theory, and many other such things, but most of them were written for people who already had a basic understanding of magic. He did eventually find one that explained the fundamental differences between the four orders of magic, but it wasn't that much of a help. According to the book, there were four distinct orders of magic, each one using a different type of it. There were the Sorcerers, who drew energy from the world around them, it said. From something called the Weave, which the author stated was all around the world. The Wizards,

or Mages, drew magic from *elsewhere*. The book didn't say exactly where that was, but it made it clear that Wizardly magic was not of this world. That concept intrigued him. Priests used Clerical magic, they drew their magical power directly from the Gods themselves, beseeching the God to grant the priest the power to work the magic. Tarrin had seen Clerical magic before, when a priest of Karas came to the village to help stop a strange sickness that had spread through the village. The last order were the Druids. The book was very vague about the Druids, and it stated that they were extremely secluded and reserved. The author stated that they drew their magical power directly from the earth itself, tapping the raw power of nature for the magic to cast their enchantments.

"I did not expect to see you here, dear one," Dolanna's voice called. Tarrin looked up, and saw her standing by the table.

"I've been reading," he said as she seated herself across from him. "Haven't been getting very far, though."

"What about?"

"Sorcery," he said pointedly.

"Worry not over it," she assured him. "They will give you that instruction in due time."

"I know, but I have reasons to start thinking about doing it now," he said.

"You worry that much?"

"Let's just call it being safe," he said. "Jesmind is out there, and me being in here makes no difference to her. If I can get in without attention, so can she. She *will* try, Dolanna. And I'll need every weapon I can get when that happens."

"The Keeper is aware of it, Tarrin," she said. "I do believe that she has already taken steps to find her."

"She won't."

"Give us some credit, young one," she said. "We have more at our disposal than normal spies."

"Be that as it may, I'm not placing my trust in someone I don't know."

She was about to say something, but she held her peace instead. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” he said.

“Faalken told me you were on the field. The others were most impressed with you.”

“I don’t see why. They’ve seen Elsa, so they’ve seen me.”

“Tarrin, you may not understand this, but you are very fun to watch,” she told him with a smile. “You are very graceful, and you move as if you float. When you were out on the field, Faalken said it was like watching a professional dance. He also remarked that you should think of using acrobatics,” she said.

“Acrobatics?”

“Tumbles, flips, and such,” she said. “You are more than capable of it. I have seen you do such things.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said. “Any word on who my teacher is going to be?”

“Tarrin, that day is some ways in the future,” she told him. “There will not be a decision for some time.” She stood again. “It is not good for us to be seen thus very often. If I need to speak with you, I will send you a message.”

“Alright. Have a good night, Dolanna.”

“You too, dear one.”

After dinner, Dar and Tarrin sat in the room. Dar was at the desk, writing a series of numbers exercises on a piece of paper, and Tarrin was reading a book he took from the library, a book studying the condition the author called Lycanthropy, which was another name for the condition of the assorted Were-kin. The book named several different species, such as Werewolves, Were-bears, Were-dogs, Were-boars, Were-rats, and Were-tigers. It also talked about some of the lesser known strains, such as Were-foxes, Were-lions, Were-wolverines, Were-bats, and his own kind, the Were-cats. The book touched on the society of *Fae-da’Nar*, saying that the Were-kin existed in a very loose association so that there was very little infighting

between them. It didn't mention anything about other woodland beings being in it the way Jesmind said they were.

Tarrin hadn't really thought all that much about other Were-creatures, or any other creatures for that matter. He was born human, and though he no longer was, he was more human than anything else. His upbringing made him thus, and while the Cat could alter that, it could not replace it. In the short days since meeting Jesmind, a peace had fallen over him. He had almost no trouble with the Cat, although he could feel it there. It was almost like the Human and the Cat in him had struck a bargain to work together. Tarrin felt that the Human had to give up a few things, which accounted for the Jesmind-like attitudes and mannerisms that had come over him lately. But that was a small price to pay for the peace under his ears. Tarrin did not embrace what he was, but he had accepted it. And he knew that that was an important step.

It was all so strange. When he'd left Aldreth, never in his wildest dreams did he think that he would have ended up the way he did. It was almost like the Favor of the Lady had turned black on him. But in another way, he had to admit that being what he was had saved his life. That Wyvern may have killed him had he not been Were, and capable of the inhuman speed and coordination he'd used to sheathe its poisoned tail. And make the jump to shore, then make the jump that got him out of reach of the Trolls. It was better to live changed than not to live at all.

Rather shamefully, he realized that he hadn't written a letter to his parents. Though they knew of his change, he still thought it was only decent to write to them himself. Best to let them know he was well and whole.

It wasn't easy to write with his huge paws, but he managed to pinch the quill pen between two fingers, and proceeded to write. He wrote simply, honestly, the way he talked to them. He told them about his change, and disclosed much of the journey down in simple, straightforward words. Then he described what it was like as best he could, since it was so very hard to try to explain sensations that a human had never experience.

While he was writing his farewells, the door opened after a single sharp knock. Elsa stood in the doorway, wearing her tunic and breeches, her blond hair damp from the bathing pool. "Tarrin, a word with you," she said in the Ungardt tongue.

“Yes Mistress?” he asked in kind.

“You’ll be presented to the Keeper in the Hall tomorrow before breakfast,” she said. “It’s a simple ceremony that inducts you into the Novitiate. After that, you’ll go to your first class. Someone there will guide you.”

“Alright, Mistress Elsa,” he said.

“Oh, there’s a Selani in the Tower,” she said. “You’ll be in class with her. She doesn’t seem to like humans, so we’d like you to show her around after class.”

“I can do that, Mistress,” he replied.

“Alright. Have a good night.”

“You to, Mistress,” he replied, and she closed the door.

“What language was that?” Dar asked.

“Ungardt,” he replied.

“It’s like a broken lute,” he said sourly.

“I didn’t invent it,” Tarrin shrugged.

“I should teach you a civilized language,” Dar told him. “Arakite.”

“I know Arakite,” Tarrin told him calmly.

“You do?” he said, looking at him strangely.

“My father speaks it. He learned it when he was in the army. So does a blacksmith in the village. He taught it to me while I filled in for his apprentice one summer, and my father finished it up so I could get the finer points down.”

“How many languages do you speak?” Dar asked curiously.

“Three,” he replied. “Sulasian, Ungardt, and Arakite.”

“Where did you find time to learn all these things?” Dar said in consternation.

“We don’t have much else to do once the chores are done,” Tarrin shrugged. “We don’t have a big farm, so it doesn’t take very long. I learned

Sulasian and Ungardt when I was a baby, because that's what my mother speaks. My father and Karn taught me Arakite during the time I was helping him at his forge, after his apprentice broke his arm in an accident. Karn would teach me as he hammered the metal. It gave him something to occupy his mind, because he was such a good smith he didn't have to think about his work."

"This could be handy," Dar said in Arakite.

"Like we'll have to keep secrets," Tarrin said in Arakite with a smile.

"I know Shacèan," Dar told him. "Maybe I'll teach you that instead."

"I don't see much use for it," Tarrin said. "I never thought I'd use this language, ever. Except to talk about mother in front of her with father without her understanding."

Dar laughed. "If she's Ungardt, she probably didn't appreciate it."

"Mother does it to father too," Tarrin said. "I think it's a game with them. Mother doesn't know Arakite, and father doesn't know Ungardt. I'm the one in the middle."

"Must be a dangerous place," Dar said with a grin.

"No, not really. It's just a game with them, so they never ask what the other is talking about."

"Ah well."

Tarrin looked around the room. "Dar, there's something about me you should know," he said in Arakite. "I think it's best to get this out of the way now, so you don't have a heart attack when you see it."

"What?" he asked curiously. He raised an eyebrow as Tarrin started to take off his clothes.

"I don't want this to go out of this room," he said.

"It won't, I promise," he replied as Tarrin shed the last of his clothes.

"This." Tarrin fixed the image of the cat in his mind and willed himself to change. The room went gray, as it did when he was in transition, and his body swiftly melted into the new form. When vision returned to him, he looked up at the now-gigantic Dar and meowed complacently.

“Mikaras!” he gasped, speaking the name of the patron God of Arkis. Then he made a curious scratching gesture with his right hand over his eyes, and made one small bow. It must have been religious in nature, Tarrin guessed. Maybe speaking his God’s name was taboo or something. “Tarrin, is that you?”

Tarrin nodded, sitting down calmly.

“I heard stories about this, but I never thought to think about it. You can’t talk, can you?”

Tarrin shook his head.

“But it’s obvious you can understand me.”

Tarrin nodded.

“May I?” he asked. When Tarrin nodded, Dar reached down and picked him up. “By the storm, you’re heavy,” he grunted as he shifted Tarrin into a comfortable position, then he started to scratch his ears idly. “You’re cute like this,” he said with a grin. He then put him down, and Tarrin resumed his own shape.

“So if you see me like that in the room, don’t have a conniption,” Tarrin told him, bending down and retrieving his trousers. “Sometimes I like to sleep that way. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t give me away if you see me like that out in the Tower. There may come a time when I’ll want to sneak around.” He sat down and started pulling them back on. “Oh, if you see a white cat that looks a lot like me, come find me and let me know immediately.”

“That would be this Jesmind, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I’ll keep an eye out,” he promised, then he yawned. “I think I’ll go to sleep early, after you kept me up last night.”

“Sure, blame it all on me,” he shot back with a smile. “But I think I could go for some sleep myself.”

Tarrin had discovered that the strange balls of light were called Glowglobes, and they were all over the Tower. Not a single candle was used anywhere. The secret to making them were lost over the years, as was so

much that the Sorcerers had managed to achieve before the disastrous Breaking which had occurred two thousand years ago. Tarrin had heard that story from his father, who had heard it from a Sorcerer.

The Breaking was a series of natural disasters that had ravaged the world from one end to the other. Fires, earthquakes, tidal waves, followed by disease and famine. It was a savage time for the world, and in the West, the ever-jealous Priests had managed to convince the people that the Breaking was the fault of the mysterious Sorcerers. In a climax of mindless fury, a mob of thousands and thousands had stormed the one and only center of learning for Sorcerers in the whole world, the Tower. Rather than defend the Tower and kill thousands, thereby destroying the reputation of the Sorcerers, the Keeper at that time, Valas Dansen, ordered the Sorcerers who were not in the Tower to hide themselves and keep the art alive. Then the Sorcerers in the Tower raised a mystical ward which blocked the mob for long enough to weave one more enchantment.

When the ward lowered and the mob stormed the Tower, they found it empty.

Totally empty. Not even the furniture remained. The Sorcerers had decided that rather than kill innocents, or allow themselves and their knowledge to be destroyed, they would simply vanish. And in vanishing, they would take themselves and every scrap of the knowledge that they had accumulated along with them. Eron had told him that to this very day, nobody knew what happened to the Ancients, as they were called, or where they went.

The mob, thinking that it was some great curse laid on the place, fled in panic. And the Tower remained empty for over five hundred years. After the vanishing, Karas, the patron God of Sulasia, was incensed at his priests for their duplicitous destruction of the Sorcerers, whose Goddess, a goddess that had no name anywhere, was an ally. He stripped the priests of Karas of all their magical powers, and decreed that they would remain without magic for a period of one hundred years. And that was how it was. Without their magical powers, the priests of Karas were subjected to the humility of the common man, and so they were punished for their part of the deed.

Things remained thus until Malin Trent, the Crusader, entered the Tower and called out to all his hidden brothers and sisters who practiced the

forbidden art of Sorcery to return and dwell in the Tower in peace. Malin suffered serious challenges to his crusade to restore Sorcery, for the priesthood again took up their old war against the Sorcerers, whom they despised, calling Malin Trent a witch and a consorter with evil. Malin and those Sorcerers that did return to the Tower found themselves to be the objects of ridicule and scorn, and not a few outright attacks. One year after Malin reclaimed the Tower, and had persuaded some three hundred of his secreted brothers and sisters to join him in the open, the priests again carefully staged and incited a near-riot, whipping up the people against the Sorcerers to drive these new ones out just as the old ones were. The old ward that once stopped a mob was restored, for it was an ancient magic that was still in place and had not deteriorated over the centuries.

In desperation, the Tower met in secret and reached an agreement with the King of Sulasia, Ulan the Wise. The Sorcerers would be permitted to return to their ancestral seat and return to their lives of study and contemplation. The Crown would protect the Tower and the order from the priests and the people. But in recompense, the King demanded that the Sorcerers perform certain tasks for the crown which their Goddess did not deem unsuitable, tasks that the order of Karas would not do themselves, for in their arrogance they felt themselves above the Crown. The Sorcerers would also rise up in defense of Suld itself, should the city ever be attacked. The treaty was sealed, and Malin Trent returned in secrecy to the Tower.

After Ulan's army put down the riot and dispersed the people, the Tower quickly proved to the Ulan how incredibly useful they could be. Ulan had inherited a weak nation from his father, for with the punishment of the priests so long ago added to the taboo of housing the Sorcerers, Sulasia did not have the political or military power of its neighbors. Draconia, which was one nation at that time, was at that time preparing to invade Sulasia for its rich farming land and deep harbored city of Suld. The kingdom of Tharan, which had been to the east and on the land that Aldreth now stood upon, also was preparing to attack the weakened nation. In a concerted effort, the two nations invaded Sulasia and found undefended territory, for Ulan had pulled all his troops back to Suld, to defend the ancient and proud city against invasion. The two armies reached the vast plain on which Suld stood, and advanced in total confidence that the city was theirs for the taking.

Bound by their treaties with the King, the Sorcerers of the Tower rose up and smote the armies with their magical power. Eron had shuddered at that point in the story, only saying that the destruction wrought by the Tower was horrific. Neither army managed to get a single man to the walls of the city. The army of Tharan was totally annihilated, and the Draconian forces escaped with only one tenth of their total manpower. And that small fragment itself was destroyed when the Sulasian army flooded out of Suld and caught up with them on the south side of the Scar. The natural boundary proved to be the doom of the fleeing enemy, who, in their mad rush to get over to the safety of Draconia, broke the bridge under their weight and doomed those behind them. After the slaughter, Sulasia quietly marched into Tharan, whose king was killed at Suld, and annexed the entire nation. Ulan also captured and annexed the southern marches of Draconia below the rugged hills that marked the western edge of the Skydancer Mountains.

The priests of Karas were outraged at this new alliance, but there was nothing they could do. They had refused to be of service to the king, and in that rejection they had lost his ear. That place was now held by the Keeper, and so long as the Crown and the Keeper were allied, the priesthood could do nothing. They did, however, continue to try to turn the people against the Tower. But after a yet third attempt, one which the priests orchestrated from a veil of secrecy, Karas himself took notice of the behavior of his priests, and stripped them of their magic for a period of one year as a warning that such behavior would not be tolerated.

That Glowglobe represented what the Sorcerers had lost after the Breaking, for the secrets of the Ancients had disappeared with them when they vanished. All of their accumulated knowledge was gone, and the hatred of the Sorcerers caused the destruction of nearly all of the knowledge they had gathered that had not been housed in the Tower. The eradication of knowledge had been so complete that literally nothing was left of the Ancients, only this ancient Tower which they had built, and the smallest of scraps of lore from old tomes and training that was passed down through the generations, training that deteriorated from the tremendous power of the Ancients, a power that was only now, after a thousand years, just beginning to be researched again. It was the driving force of the Tower now, to rediscover the power of the Ancients and return it to the world.

A lofty goal, Tarrin thought it. But grand, and noble, in its own way. In the thousand years since the return of the Sorcerers, they'd more or less stayed to themselves, opening the school in the Tower and forming a somewhat unfriendly alliance with the priests of Karas, by way of the Knights. The Knights were a militant order of the church of Karas, but were sworn and duty-bound, on command of the Crown, to defend the Tower itself and to protect and guard the Sorcerers whenever they left it. Arman the Just, the king who had made that decree, had done it to try to foment a favorable relationship between the two orders, but it had done little more than anger the priesthood and strengthen the Sorcerers. A Knight's oaths were to Karas, *not* the order of the priesthood, and defending the Tower and the *katzh-dashi* were their primary goals. They did perform service for the priesthood, but when and only when those duties did not come before their defense of the Tower and its inhabitants. They were a free-standing entity, related to the Church but not a true part of it, and that situation made every high priest of Karas chew on the carpet in frustration for the seven hundred years that the Knights had been in existence.

And during all the eight hundred years since the return of the Sorcerers, they had done almost nothing but study and research. Since his father was no Sorcerer, he didn't really know how far along they'd gotten in their quest to reclaim the power of the Ancients. But Tarrin was certain that they'd managed to make some gains, some discoveries. After a thousand years, that was almost a given. And it was what he would learn.

Tarrin closed his eyes and thought about that for a while, half-dreams where he speculated about learning the power of Sorcery. Then he fell asleep.

Chapter 8

Tarrin was quite amazed as he stood in the Hall beside the other entrants into the Novitiate.

This Selani was *gorgeous*.

She was stunningly beautiful, with swarthy, creamy brown skin and exotic white hair that was so thick it was amazing, silky and very fine, and hung down to her backside in loosely curled waves of brilliant white. She had a face that artists would sell their souls to capture on canvas. She was ethereal, delicate, and quite exquisite, with her slender nose and high, arched cheekbones and almond shaped eyes that were so intensely blue that even the pupils had a bluish cast to them. Tarrin could readily admit that he had never seen any woman that could compare to the ethereal beauty of this Selani woman who stood before him. Her body was as perfect as her face. She was amazingly tall, only a bit shorter than Tarrin himself, who stood a head over most men. Her generous figure and shape were perfectly proportioned for her tall stature, and she had a figure that rivaled Jesmind's, the first woman he'd seen that could compare with his fiery bond-mother. And just like Jesmind, Tarrin's sharp eyes could see the definition of the muscles in what brown skin he could see, for she wore a baggy sand-colored, long sleeved shirt and a matching pair of pants. She may look slender and delicate, but this was one flower with steel for a stem. Selani were warriors, and she had a warrior's body. Her scent was metallic, almost coppery, a clear symbol of her non-human heritage, but at the same time it was very spicy and clean, and he found it to be quite appealing. Tarrin noticed idly that she only had four fingers on each hand. Three fingers and a thumb. And her hands were not malformed, nor was she missing fingers; that was how they were meant to be.

She also had a look of aloof distance on her face. Elsa had said that she didn't like humans, but to Tarrin, it was more like a resentment at being in her current position. Tarrin had felt like that a few times, and that was

exactly how he looked when he was in them. She didn't want to be here, and that was plainly visible.

The little ceremony of induction into the Novitiate was dry and dusty, and Tarrin didn't even listen to the Keeper as she droned on about being there to learn, obeying their teachers and the Sorcerers and all that rot. He was considering the Selani. Tarrin had an intense interest in her, for some unknown reason. She looked aloof, but Tarrin saw under that, and to him, she looked alone. He thought that, if he approached her the right way, that they could become good friends. He wondered if that wasn't why he was so interested in her. She looked very lonely to him, and he didn't like to see anyone suffer like that. The days alone with nothing but his fear as he ran from Jesmind and the Goblinoids had put a soft spot in his heart to people in similar fixes. Here was a young woman taken very far from everything she had known and thrust into a sea of confusion, where nothing was comfortable or understood, and surrounded by people to whom she could not relate.

After the little speech, the twenty or so new Novices were allowed to go sit down. Tarrin made a special note to sit next to the beautiful Selani woman, and once blessing was said, he turned to her. "My name is Tarrin," he told her. "I was told to show you the places in the Tower after class."

"I was told of you," she said in a toneless voice, which was quite pretty. Her accent was thick, and it made her voice sound very exotic. It was almost as if she was trying to sing the words of Sulasian, which was more or less the common tongue of the West; it was even called Western Common outside of Sulasia, as much as Arakite was considered Eastern Common. "I do not need to be guided. I can find my own way."

"As you wish," he said in a carefully neutral voice. "Whatever makes you feel most comfortable."

That word had the desired effect. She blinked those luminous eyes once and regarded him carefully. "You are devious," she said in a calm voice. "There is more of a cat about you than fur, strange one."

"I meant no offense," he said. "You just look very unsettled. I meant to offer you friendship."

“Friendship is a thing that is earned, not given,” she told him abruptly. “But your concern for me touches my heart. I would accept your offer. We will go see these places after this class.”

And she spoke not another word. An Initiate gathered up the new Novices and escorted them to a large room with many chairs, all facing a small podium with a huge slate board behind it. A small man with thinning brown hair and wearing a tight-fitting tunic and hose in the Sulasian style stood at the podium. “Good morning,” he said as they were seated. “My name is Sheldin Brewer, and I will be your instructor in the subjects of history and geography,” he introduced. “I know that some of you already know a good deal of history, and some of you know geography, but just be patient so that those who don’t have a chance to catch up a bit.”

And so he began. Tarrin knew a goodly amount of history, thanks to his father, but this Sheldin touched on events and places that Tarrin had never heard of. He also knew just about everywhere, as he roughly sketched in the four continents of the Known World and the kingdoms and nations on which they stood, and described very briefly the continent across the sea which was the domain of the Wikuni. Although it was a dry subject, the man’s light manner and keen knowledge of his material made the class actually enjoyable, and he was surprised when the man broke the class for lunch. “All of you are to sit together at the table directly in front of the Mistress of Novice’s table,” he instructed. “An Initiate will come and escort each of you to where you need to be after lunch. We will meet again in this room tomorrow after breakfast. Good day to you.”

“The man is learned,” the Selani said in her calm voice as they walked back to the Hall.

“Yes, he is,” Tarrin agreed. “I’d expect him to try to pull you aside pretty soon,” he said.

“Why?”

“I don’t think he’ll pass up a chance to learn about your desert,” Tarrin told her. “Nobody but your people go there, so he’ll jump at the chance to ask you about it.”

“It is our home,” she said. “That is all there is to tell him.”

“True, but he’ll still want to know,” he said. “Men like that are driven by the hunger to learn.”

“It is a good quality,” she observed. “There is honor in knowledge.”

She still hadn’t told him her name. Tarrin didn’t want to push her too hard, though. He had the feeling that she could be very touchy, and he thought that if he put the wrong foot forward now, it would ruin any chance to strike up a friendship with her. Making friends with her was as much for him as it was for her, for in her Tarrin felt there was a kindred spirit, someone else here that did not quite fit in. From her he could expect honesty, and she had already put him at ease by not showing any fear of him. After they’d been seated in the Hall and the blessing was made, Tarrin discreetly watched her as she ate. He was curious about what she would and would not eat. She did not disappoint him by showing certain peculiarities. She would not eat pork, he noticed. Nor would she eat any chicken or goose. He didn’t know if those were personal preferences or racial or cultural preferences, though. She ate a great deal of cabbage and stringed beans, he saw, and she especially seemed to enjoy the boiled potatoes.

Initiates began to arrive, pick out a certain Novice or Novices, and then leave with them, taking them to their assigned work duties. Tarrin waited until he was sure the Selani was done with her meal, and then turned to her. “Do you feel like looking around?” he asked politely.

“It would please me to do so,” she answered in a similarly polite voice.

Tarrin had a good memory, and Dar had been a good guide, so he mirrored his friend’s course of the tour, showing her the important areas of the Tower. She seemed more or less unimpressed with most of it, showing interest only in the library. Tarrin gritted his teeth a bit when he showed her the baths. He had no idea how she was going to accept it.

“Ah, yes, this place,” she said when they came down the stairs.

“They explained how it works?”

“Yes,” she said. “I find nothing wrong with it. A similar custom exists among my people, but we use a sweat tent. Such an amount of water would never be used for bathing among me people. It is too precious.” She looked at the water longingly a moment. “If only we had such riches at home.”

“If water was this abundant there, it really wouldn’t be a desert anymore,” Tarrin noted.

She gave him a sidelong look, and then she laughed. It sounded like a cascade of silver bells. “I guess it would not,” she agreed, smiling in spite of herself. “I would like to go outside,” she said. “I came here in the night, so I did not get the chance to see much of the outside. But I saw much grass and other plants on my journey. I would like to compare it with the grounds. I have heard there is a garden here.”

“Yes, most of the compound is grass. I wonder how they keep it so short,” Tarrin mused aloud. “And there’s a really big garden behind the tower proper,” he told her. “That must be the garden you heard about. It’s very lovely.”

She was awed more at the sight of the grass than she was with the massive size of the central Tower and the six smaller towers surrounding it. The sweeping, elegant bridges that connected the upper levels of the towers to the tower proper were nothing to her, for she was staring out at the expanse of the lawn. She even reached down and touched it. “It is so green,” she said in a wondrous voice. “I have seen grass and forests ever since I left my home, but I was so spiteful at being sent here that I did not look at it. It is a beautiful sight.”

“It’s all I’ve ever known,” Tarrin told her. “Maybe someday I’ll see your desert, and then I’ll be able to compare them.”

“The Motherland is not without its own beauty,” she told him. “The Painted Lands have such color that it would take your breath, and the mesas and ravines of the Broken Lands cast shadows across the land that merge with the color of the rock and the sheen of the heat that make the colors dance like rock snakes. We have green, but it is so small compared to the rest of the land that it is easy to miss. Here, everything but what the humans build is green, or brown.”

“Let’s go look at the garden,” he offered. “And there’s something else there that I think you may want to see,” he added.

She was impressed with the gardens, spending a great deal of time going from flower to flower and plant to plant, looking at them, touching them, and smelling them. Tarrin didn’t have to get that close to smell them,

he could do it from where he stood. But it did make him appreciate the beauty of the gardens just a little bit more, watching her take in the sights of the living beauty of the gardens. After they'd worked their way through most of it, he got her attention with a paw. "Come on, there's something else I want to show you," he said. "It's kind of a secret, though, so don't tell anyone about it."

She raised an elegant white eyebrow. "Then lead on," she said.

It took him a while to find it again. The scent trail he'd made before was about two days old. Since he and Dar had crisscrossed the whole hedge maze more than once, that put their scents all over the place, and after that much time it was hard to tell the trail that led true to the ones that went to dead ends. He relied on his memory for most of it, and had led them almost right to the center. It was finding that elusive choked-off passage that was challenging. The Selani was starting to get a bit restless as they reached another dead end. "What are we looking for?" she asked.

"It's a very small passage that's so overgrown it's almost invisible," he told her, frowning. "It's very hard to find."

"I saw such a thing not long ago," she told him.

"You must have sharp eyes," he said.

"Yes," she told him. She led them back to the place unerringly, and it was indeed the opening to the maze's heart. "This is it," he told her. "Thanks."

"You are welcome," she said as she followed him into the living tunnel.

The serenity and beauty of the maze's heart had just as much effect on her as it had had on Tarrin. He still felt the same wonder and peace he'd felt the day before as he looked on the lovely statue in the center of the fountain. They stood at the entryway for several moments, as the Selani stared at the statue in mute awe. "My roommate and I found this place a couple of days ago," he said in a hushed voice. "We don't think anyone else comes here anymore."

"It is a wondrous place," she told him. "The statue looks almost alive."

"I know," he said, motioning her to follow him. They sat down on the stone bench in front of the fountain. "Well, I hope you found the time we

spent together tolerable,” he told her.

“I think you can stop with the subtle games, Tarrin,” she said with a little smile. “If you are trying to connive yourself into my good graces, you may stop.”

He flushed slightly. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. “I just didn’t want to offend you.”

“You have put quite an effort into trying to talk to me, and befriend me. Why?”

He looked at those intense blue eyes, and decided that blunt honesty was the only recourse. “When I saw you, you looked very lonely,” he told her. “I didn’t want you to be here and be unhappy. And aside from Dar, my roommate, and the two Novices that traveled here with me, none of the other Novices will so much as talk to me. I thought that since you’re not human either, we could talk to each other on the same ground. If you understand me, that is.”

She gave him a long, penetrating look, and then put a hand up against his cheek. “You are very perceptive, Tarrin,” she told him honestly. “I do not want to be here, and I do feel a bit lonely and homesick. I am touched that you would put yourself out so much for my benefit when you do not know me. You have much honor, Tarrin. I would be honored to call you friend.”

“I would accept it gladly,” he replied.

She smiled. “My name is Allia. Allia Do’Shi’Faeden, of the clan Faedellin.”

“That’s a pretty name,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“How did you come to be here?” he asked.

She sighed. “It was not by choice,” she said. “My father, the clan chief, decided that a better understanding of the humans would be a wise thing. The lands of our clan rest by the mountains that separate the desert from the place you call Arkis, and over the recent years more and more of them have appeared in our lands. Some seek trade, but most come seeking to take from

the land that which is for the Holy Mother Goddess. Our lands are rich in the metal gold, and many come to steal it from our lands. Gold is sacred to our Holy Mother Goddess, and we do not take it from the ground, but the Arkisians take without regard to the wishes of us or our Goddess. My father decided to send one clansman here, to this place, to undergo the learning that is offered so that we may better understand the humans, and to find ways to stop this thieving without having to wipe Arkis from the world. My father chose someone else for this task, not I. Not long before he was to make the journey, a *katzh-dashi* appeared at our camp. He took my father aside for some time and spoke with him. After they were finished the *katzh-dashi* left, and my father told me that I would go in the stead of he who was chosen. I was not happy about the choice,” she said sourly. “I do not like humans. I think that the thieving swine Arkisians should be driven from our lands and made to come no more. After I made my feelings known, my father demanded twice over that I be made to do it. He told me that a wise chief always considers all options before making such decisions. He even made me swear a Blood Oath on it,” she said with a sour grunt. “That was not nice. I am honor bound to treat those I hold in contempt with a respect I do not believe they have earned.”

“Not all humans are the same,” he told her. “I used to be human, before this happened to me.”

“No, not all humans are,” she agreed. “I understand that, but I still do not like them. I feel that any other breed of human would do the same as the Arkisians, should our desert be by their lands.”

“I really can’t say,” he said. “Probably. Humans are driven creatures, and greed is a powerful motivator. Besides, they probably don’t even realize they’re taking something your people hold sacred.”

“They do so once,” she said with a note of finality. “It has long been the custom of our people to kill all who seek to invade our lands, save only merchants, who are given safe passage. For a long time, that was enough to keep all but the honest away. But lately we have had to kill more and more gold hunters who ignore the laws and the dangers.”

“Well, things will work out,” he told her. “Much as I like it here, we’d best not tarry. Odds are they either have people watching us, and they’ll

notice we're missing. And I don't want them coming in here looking for us."

"Truly," she said. "I have noticed such watchers throughout the day."

"We'll have to come back when we can slip away," he said. "I like it here, but the idea of others tramping around in here offends me."

"An interesting notion. Why?"

"Because this place almost seems holy," he told her. "I get the feeling we're welcome here, but I'd rather not insult whoever watches this place by leading others in here too."

Allia looked around. "Maybe you are right," she said slowly. "I have been honored to feel the touch of the Holy Mother Goddess upon my soul, and the feeling of this place is something like that. I think that some God or spirit does keep watch over this courtyard."

Tarrin was pleased to know that he'd not been far from the mark. Not long after they'd left the hedge maze, the Keeper herself approached them. She was alone, which said much about how safe she felt in the confines of the Tower grounds. Her face was pleasant, even serene, and when she spoke, it was with a calm, light manner. "Ah, Tarrin, Allia," she said. "I've been looking for you."

"Yes, Keeper?" Tarrin asked after he bowed to her. Allia also bowed, but it was a very stiff one.

"I've been thinking about you two, and I thought to approach you with an offer."

"Speak on then," Allia said in her calm voice.

"Neither of you are suited for the chores of a Novice," she said. "Both of you are warriors. If it does not offend you, Lady Allia, would you two like to spend your afternoons with the Knights? Both of you can continue to study the warrior ways, and perhaps our Knights can learn from you. And maybe you can learn from each other. Tarrin, you are an adept in the Ways, and Allia, you are an adept in your people's style of combat."

Allia looked at Tarrin. "I did not know this," she said. "You know the Northmen's hand-fighting?"

“I *am* one of them, Allia,” he told her. “Well, I was, and only on my mother’s side, but yes, I learned it.”

“Long have I wanted to see if the Northmen were worth their mettle.”

“So the idea pleases you, Allia?” the Keeper asked.

Allia gave Tarrin a speculative look. “The idea does please me,” she said.

“Good. Oh, just one word of warning. As you can see, Tarrin isn’t human. He’s a Were-cat, and if you’re not familiar with his kind, they have magical capabilities. One of them is that their blood and spittle can change other humans into Were-kin too. We honestly have no idea what effect it would have on you, Allia, since you are Selani. So you should exercise a bit of caution. Don’t put yourself into a position where his blood gets into your mouth, and Tarrin, please don’t bite her.”

“I’d never dream of it, Keeper,” Tarrin said in shock.

“Nothing is without risk,” Allia said philosophically.

“Good,” she said. “You may go back to your exploration now. Have a good day.” And then she turned and walked away.

“You did not tell me you followed the path of honor,” she said, a bit accusingly.

“I don’t make much of an issue of it, Allia,” he told her. “People are afraid enough of me as it is. I don’t need for them to find more reasons to not like me. Oh, and the fact that I can change people is kind of a secret. Please don’t repeat it.”

“It will not pass my lips except when we are alone,” she promised. Then she wiped at an arm. “I am in need of a sweat tent,” she sighed. “I have not cleaned myself in some time.”

“You don’t smell it,” he said. She gave him a cool look. “Allia, I’m not human either. My senses are very acute. Trust me, you do not smell.”

“Well, if I must use that bathing pool, then that is what must be.”

Tarrin sensed that she was very uncomfortable with that notion. “If it doesn’t sound too forward, do you want some company?” he asked.

“Yes, that would please me,” she said in a gratified voice.

He found out why once they reached the baths. Allia had never in her life been immersed in water that went past her knees. She was sincerely afraid of the idea of going into the waist-deep water, though she would die before she admitted it. He also found that, like him, she had absolutely no fear of appearing in front of others nude. Tarrin found that quality to be refreshing. She undressed herself boldly before him as he did so himself, then he lowered himself into the pool and waited for her. She stood at the lip of the pool hesitantly, looking out over all that water with a bit of a wild look in her eyes. He stood by the lip right under her and reached up a paw. “Come on,” he said gently. “If you want, I’ll teach you how to swim. The water’s not quite deep enough for it, but I can give you an idea.”

She took his paw, and lowered herself into the water.

She still had that wild-eyed look, and she would not let go of his paw. He winced a bit under her grip. This woman was *strong*. He thought that the relaxing heat of the water may loosen her fear somewhat, so he led her towards the far end, into the hotter water. He was very careful to stay as close to the lip as possible, to give her something solid to reassure her. “Let me know if it gets too hot,” he told her as they advanced into the hotter water.

The hot water had its desired effect. The grip on his paw relaxed, but she still would not let go. He decided not to make an issue of it. She was doing something that she’d never done before, something that was new and a bit frightening. “I know it’s a strange sensation,” he told her. “Come on, let’s go out into the middle. Once you see that you’re not going to go in over your head, I think you’ll be alright.”

She looked at him intently. Her eyes blazed for just a moment when she realized he knew she was afraid, but then, curiously, they softened, then took on an appreciative look. “You are very subtle,” she said, then she laughed. “Very subtle indeed. Am I so obvious to you?”

“No, but I could tell that you didn’t like the idea,” he told her. “And the grip you had on my paw told me a lot once you got into the water.”

She smiled then, a glorious smile that would make any man’s knees weak. “You are quite a man, Tarrin,” she said in her accented voice. “You

will bring me much honor in our friendship.”

“Well, thank you,” he said.

“Now, you may wash my hair,” she said in an imperious voice.

“Yes ma’am,” he chuckled, reaching for a cake of soap, right after she let go of his paw.

Allia, Tarrin found, was a very serious, sober woman, dignified and very much bound to her precepts of honor and propriety. That wasn't a bad thing, not at all. But, on the other hand, he discovered that, once you got past that towering barrier of iciness that she put to the human world, she was a warm, vibrant person with a very rich sense of humor and a very perceptive view of the world. Tarrin saw a lot of Jesmind in her, for they had the same practical, no-nonsense view of the world, and both had the same tendency to speak whatever was on their minds. That told Tarrin that Allia trusted him, and that pleased him greatly. They talked of unimportant things during the course of the bath, as he washed her hair, then she unbound his braid and returned the favor. All in all, he liked Allia very much, even after only a short time to get to know each other. Much like he and Dar had done, Tarrin and Allia simply clicked, quickly finding a common ground and using it to build a friendship.

By the time he helped her from the water, they were both laughing and carrying on as if they'd known each other all their lives.

There were a couple of frictions, however. The main one was Dar. Because he was Arkisian, Allia took an immediate dislike to him, and Dar was instantly afraid of her. That was a wise thing, Tarrin guessed, and from then on the young man avoided Tarrin like the plague any time he was with Allia. Tarrin didn't ignore Dar, he just divided his time between his two friends so that he could spend time with both without leaving out the other.

The next day, Tarrin and Allia walked out onto the training grounds wearing their practice clothing. For Tarrin, it was his old leathers. For Allia, it was the same sand-colored baggy clothes which she had worn the day before. She'd worn Novice clothes that morning, and looked distinctly uncomfortable in them. She was wearing the trousers rather than a dress, and when he asked her why, she laughed in his face. “Selani do *not* wear

such ridiculous things,” she told him. “It would tangle my legs when I fight.”

After a quick consultation with each other over the rules of the sparring match, they faced off to quite a crowd of Knights and apprentices looking on. They had never seen a Selani face off against an Ungardt before. The rules they’d chosen were what Allia called “child’s rules”. Tarrin didn’t want to hurt her, since he was so much stronger than she was, so he’d insisted.

What he didn’t gamble on was that he had to *hit* her in order to hurt her. She was wildly, impossibly fast. He’d never seen *anyone* who could move with the blinding speed with which she evaded his attacks. Tarrin himself was fast, inhumanly fast because of his Were-cat nature, but she was even faster than him. Tarrin was quickly put on the defensive, using every block and evade tactic he knew to keep her blurring hands and feet away from his sensitive parts. The unfamiliarity of his own body worked against him, as he struggled to work the forms that he knew around his new body, but facing an opponent like her was no time to experiment, so he simply tried as best he could to defend himself against her using what he knew and his natural speed and agility. They helped, but her own speed and agility neutralized that advantage, and his promise to pull punches eliminated his strength advantage. With no advantages over her, he was facing someone more adept in her style of fighting than he was in his, and the pummeling he endured proved it. But, after a while, he had to concede that he had *never* been as good as she was, even when he was human. Allia could give his mother a good fight. He would have paid money to see them face off against one another.

After about an hour of getting beaten like a dog, Tarrin started to come to understand her moves, and started anticipating her attacks. She used set, specific forms, and once he identified them, he could predict which move she would flow into next. It still didn’t help much, for her speed allowed her to change moves in mid-attack. She beat him almost at will, punching and kicking him almost anywhere she pleased for that first hour, until he managed to mount enough of a defense that her attacks could no longer find him. That look of light amusement dissolved into a set look of concentration as she had to start working to get past his defenses. She could still do it, but it wasn’t nearly as easy as it had been before.

Tarrin came to understand why the Selani were so deadly at that point. Had this been a real fight, and had he not been a Were-cat, she probably would have killed him by now.

“Enough of this play,” she said. “Now we spar for real.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that we do not pull punches,” she said.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“You will not, trust me,” she said with a challenging smile.

“Alright, they’re your bones,” he shrugged.

One hit was all it took. Tarrin knew that. He had not used his full strength in their earlier spars. He blocked a side kick with a forearm with enough power to knock her off balance, and then he put a foot right in her belly. He did not pull the punch. Allia folded around his foot and was knocked backwards a few spans, then she sat down heavily on the ground, wheezing and gasping for breath with both hands to her belly. Tarrin knelt by her and put a gentle hand to her belly. He didn’t feel anything wrong there; he’d just knocked the wind out of her.

“Goddess!” she said in a choked, breathless voice. “What did you hit me with?”

“My foot,” he said calmly. “I’m a lot stronger than I look, Allia. I tried to warn you.”

“So you did,” she wheezed. “I will listen to you next time.”

Two instructors and a Sorceress came over. “Are you alright?” one of them asked.

“I will be in a moment,” she said in a breathless voice. “You pack quite a punch, friend Tarrin.”

“Maybe too much of one,” the instructor said. “It will be very hard to train you when you have such a strength advantage.”

“I can be careful,” Tarrin said.

“It isn’t the same,” the man said. “You have to learn by doing, and doing your best. If you pull punches in training, you’ll not learn as well as

you could.”

“I think that the Tower has something that could even things,” the Sorceress said. “I’ll make a few inquiries. I believe that we have a magical object that will augment the user’s strength. Would that make it right to train him?”

“Would that give the wearer the same resilience as Tarrin?” the instructor asked. “Great strength does more than let you hit hard. It also gives you the ability to absorb blows. It has to be the same.”

“I had never considered that,” Allia confessed, speaking in a more normal voice. “We are a strong people, but we teach that speed can overwhelm power. Speed is more important than power.”

“I’ve always believed that you need a balance of the two,” the man told her. “Speed alone and power alone aren’t enough. You need both. You’ll find that most of the toughest men are also among the strongest. You can use that power to defend as easily as to attack.”

“That’s what the Ways teach,” Tarrin told him, helping Allia to her feet. She put a hand delicately to her belly, but said nothing. The Sorceress stepped forward and put her own hand on Allia’s stomach. The Selani looked about ready to kill the woman, but said nothing. “You’ve got a very nasty bruise forming here, and that blow injured the muscles in your abdomen. You’re going to be very tender unless you let me heal this,” she said.

“Then do so,” Allia said in a calm voice, a voice that Tarrin could tell was tightly controlled. The Sorceress put her hand under Allia’s baggy shirt, and Tarrin felt that sensation of *drawing in* again. Allia sucked in her breath at the icy touch of Sorcerer’s Healing.

After that, Tarrin looked up. “It’s getting late, and this is a good place to stop.”

“Yes,” she said. “I learned much today. I became overconfident, and I paid the price,” she told him, putting her hand on her stomach. “I underestimated you. Tomorrow I will not do so again.”

Tarrin winced. She’d beaten him almost at will all day. He’d gotten in that one shot because she didn’t know the nature of her opponent. He had

no doubt that she wouldn't approach him the same way again.

"But I am impressed. Your Ungardt Ways are effective, but I can tell that you feel uncomfortable with them."

"I wasn't this way when I learned," he told her. "I'm still getting used to it."

"Yes, that would change things, would it not?" she observed. "I will train you in the Dance," she said. "They are more suited for you than your Ways, anyway. And I will teach you a civilized tongue," she added. "If we are to be friends, then we should be able to speak in a way that pleases us both."

"I won't mind," he told her.

"My language is not easy to learn," she warned.

"If we have anything, Allia, it's time," he said.

"Very well. Then let us begin now. Greetings. *Azra shan.*"

Tarrin's life settled into a daily routine at that point, as he became settled into life in the Tower. The trials of the road faded from his worries, but the ever-present threat of Jesmind never went far from his mind. In the morning before breakfast, his time was spent with Dar, as they talked, and dreamed, and did the things that friends did. Tarrin liked the dark-skinned young man a great deal, for he was witty, friendly, and was very intelligent and mature for his age. Tarrin had no doubt that Dar would succeed at whatever he decided to do with his life, because he was so smart. After breakfast, and for the majority of the day, he belonged to Allia. Dar didn't seem to mind the Selani monopolizing Tarrin's time, for he'd listened and understood when Tarrin explained to him that Allia had nobody else. Dar himself had many other friends among the Novices, but Allia had only Tarrin. Just like him, the others were afraid of her. They feared her because she broke one boy's arm for patting her on the backside during dinner. Allia did not like to be touched by strangers, and much like Tarrin, she was not afraid to make it well known in any manner she chose.

After lunch, Tarrin and Allia went to the field, to train. That was, Allia trained Tarrin. She was quite a master of her fighting art, which she called

ji'shen, which meant “the Dance” in the Selani tongue. They did indeed have an artifact to even things between them, a pair of gloves made from a Troll’s hide, which granted the wearer the proportionate strength of a Troll. The gloves smelled absolutely hideous, and the time he was on the field taught him how to ignore his nose as much as he learned the flowing, viper-like forms of Allia’s fighting style. While they fought, Allia continued to teach him the words of the Selani tongue. Tarrin was a very bright young man, but he had a special talent for languages. He picked up on her native tongue quickly, and she was amazed at how precise his memory was. She only had to explain something to him once, or tell him the meaning of a word once, and he remembered it.

After they trained, they both found a way to slip away before dinner, and they met again in the hidden courtyard in the middle of the hedge maze. There, she continued teaching him not only her language, but a very complicated hand-gesture language that her people had created, so that they could communicate without speaking. It was technically a violation of her sacred vows to teach him that, she admitted, but she had no doubt that it would never go past him. She had placed her trust in him, and he in her.

They would then go to dinner, and afterward, they would retire to the baths. At that time of the evening, they were literally deserted. It was not even staffed by Novices. Here, his training yet continued, or they simply talked.

They were there on that rainy summer evening, listening to the rumbles of thunder that filtered through the thick walls of the Tower. Tarrin was laying on the stone on his belly, arms folded up under his chin, eyes closed as he enjoyed a backrub from his companion. The fact that both of them were nude, and that she was sitting on his backside, never occurred to either of them.

It was strange, how they had come together, he mused silently as her delicate yet strong four-fingered hands worked a knot out of his muscle. They shared a friendship that had become shockingly deep in an amazing amount of time. Much as he’d started to feel about Jesmind, Tarrin knew in his heart that he could trust his white-haired friend with absolutely any secret, and that it would go no further. He had told her secrets, things that he’d never told another person, not even Dolanna. She was the only living

being aside from himself and Jesmind that knew what had happened between them. The whole story. He confided his deep-most private self to her, and she helped him talk out many of the strange impulses and feelings he had from time to time, which were extensions of the Cat which was inside him.

“Keep your tail still,” she chided.

“What?”

“I said keep your tail still,” she repeated. “I’m sitting on it, and every time you move it, it presses up against—”

“Alright,” he cut her off, and she laughed her silvery little laugh. In that respect, she was even worse than Jesmind ever was. She would talk about things that would make him die of mortification without so much as batting an eyelash. Where Jesmind would not do it in public, Allia would. He didn’t *want* to know what his tail was doing, because she’d give him an explicitly graphic description of the whole thing. The fact that he was not ashamed of his body, yet he could still be embarrassed by talk, amused her greatly for some reason. “I swear, sometimes you’re worse than a wife,” he said.

“We should be married, with what I’ve let you touch,” she told him in the Selani tongue. Unlike her stiff, formal way of speaking when she used the human language, her mode of speech in her native tongue was much more relaxed. Although he didn’t have the accent quite down, and he didn’t know all the words, he did speak enough of it to understand her when she used it.

“You asked for it,” he shrugged.

“So I did,” she acceded. “But you really should be careful of your claws. I had trouble sitting down for three days after that.”

“I said I was sorry,” he snorted.

“And you think I’ll forgive you so quickly? I may need a favor someday,” she teased.

“You could have asked to be healed.”

“And how would I explain claw scratches *there*?” she asked. “You know they’d start asking questions, Tarrin. What we do in private is our own

affair, and they have no right prying.”

“But we don’t do anything.”

“Precisely,” she said.

“Sometimes I don’t understand you at all,” he said sourly, putting his head back down.

“Let’s just say that I think that if they thought we were lovers, they would separate us. And I don’t think either of us would permit that.” He knew she wouldn’t. He was all Allia had here. She almost clung to him and his friendship, surrounded by people who were either afraid of her or treated her like a laboratory experiment. Tarrin and Allia both had to endure endless interruptions from assorted Sorcerers, asking endless questions. One even asked to take a sample of their blood. The *katzh-dashi*’s endless quest for knowledge was an admirable trait, but when that *endless* part was directed right at him, he found the whole matter to be very annoying. Tarrin was her only friend, the only person she felt comfortable enough to talk to. She was acquainted with the Knights on the field, but didn’t really consider them to be friends. Faalken once confided that everyone thought that she considered herself better than everyone else.

Well, in a way, she did. She had an aire of superiority about her, that was true, but it was not arrogance, it was more like a knowledge that she could kick anyone’s backside in the Tower without working up a sweat. Her own people were a very proud race, and they did consider themselves above the humans. But that was a natural trait; every race considered itself better than all the others. It was only basic nature. Tarrin caught himself sighing a lot and saying “humans” in that same condescending tone that Jesmind had used. But she never acted that way to Tarrin. To her, he was an equal, a comrade, a good friend.

“I’ve been meaning to ask something,” he said.

“What?”

“Why are there so many different ways to say ‘friend’ in Selani?” he asked.

“Well,” she said, “that is because there are different levels of honor associated with each,” she told him. “A visitor of another clan who is

received with honor is a *shih* or *shai*, depending on if it is male or female.” Selani had different forms of words when addressing women or men. It was the only language Tarrin had heard of that did that, and that made it very complicated. “A passing acquaintance in the clan is a *shina* or *shaina*. A friend is a *shida* or *shaida*. A very close, dear friend who is not of your own family is a *bashida* or *bashaida*. The closest form of the word is the Brother in all but Blood, or Sister, depending. That is *deshida* or *deshaida*. It is a serious taboo to use the wrong form.”

“Is that so?” he mused. “Well, if we have to use the term we feel in our hearts, then I must call you *deshaida*,” he said.

She was quiet a moment, then he heard her sniffle a bit. “Tarrin, I am honored,” she said in a quiet, emotional voice. “But if you would be my brother, then you must accept the rites of my people,” she warned in the human tongue, so there would be no mistake of translation.

He urged her to get off of him, and they sat down by the water’s edge, their feet dangling in the hot water. Tarrin looked at her, and his eyes never really failed to go her shoulders. On each shoulder, she carried a single brand. On her uppermost left arm, it was a circle with a line through it and a crescent just inside the circle and over the line. She said that the circle and crescent were the symbol of her clan, and the line through it was the mark that denoted her status as the blood of a clan chief. On her uppermost right, she carried a sword-on-spear symbol that she said was the holy symbol of her Goddess.

“Would you be willing to truly become my brother, a brother in all but blood?” she asked.

He didn’t even have to think about it. “Of course I would,” he told her. “You’re very important to me, Allia. You and Dar are the only things that keep me from going crazy here.”

“There is more to it than that,” she warned. “You would be bound under the Oaths. For you, that would mean very little, for you have no true clan chief. But it would put you somewhat under the dominion of my Holy Mother Goddess, for you would have to swear an oath to obey her will.”

“What would she want of me?” he asked curiously.

“I would have to ask her,” she said.

Tarrin gaped at her a bit. “You’ve never told me you talk to your Goddess,” he said.

“Don’t you?” she asked, lapsing back into Selani.

“Not really,” he said. “Karas is the God of the Sulasians, but he’s never spoken to me.”

“The Holy Mother has a more intimate relationship with her people than most Gods, *deshida*,” she told him. “If I pray, she will answer. I must pray and ask her guidance on this. She may not accept someone not of the Blood.”

What startled him was that she clasped her hands together at her breast and closed her eyes. Obviously, she meant to do it that moment.

Tarrin wondered at her request while she was silent. Even though it hadn’t even been a month, Tarrin already felt that he was that close to her. She was the older sister he didn’t have; to his surprise, he found out that she was thirty-seven years old. Selani aged at a slower rate than humans. Among her people, thirty-seven was barely of marrying age. As long as it didn’t mean consigning his soul to an unknown God, he was more than willing to make her happy by accepting the oaths of her people. Tarrin wasn’t an overly religious person, since neither of his parents were very serious about it themselves, but he started getting edgy when his soul was in the balance of things.

After a while, she opened her eyes. “The Holy Mother will accept you,” she said with a smile. “She likes you, actually,” she said with a gentle smile. “She is very thankful to you for being so good to me. She also said that since I am violating my oaths in teaching you what you should not know, that you had best be made a brother of the Blood. She was quite put out with me over that,” she said with a depressed look in her eyes.

“What would she demand of me?”

“Tarrin, the Holy Mother demands nothing of us,” she said gently. “What we do with our lives is our own choice. That you acknowledge her is enough. The Holy Mother Goddess has no dominion outside the boundaries of our deserts, so there would be no demands set upon you. But also that means that she cannot help you.”

“I’ve never had a God help me before,” he shrugged.

From seemingly nowhere, Tarrin almost thought he heard the impetuous stamp of a foot.

“What was that?” Allia asked curiously.

“Maybe it was thunder,” Tarrin said. “The storm’s still going on outside.”

“Ah. It is your decision, Tarrin.”

“Allia, I’ve already made up my mind,” he said. “You’re already like a sister to me, and I love you as much as my own family. I would be honored to formalize the relationship.”

She smiled broadly at him. “Maybe it was the Holy Mother’s hand that guided me here,” she said. “I am now glad beyond reason that I forced to come into the human lands, else I would never have met you.”

Tarrin reached up and put the palm of his paw against her cheek, swallowing up the delicate side of her face in his huge paw.

And so Tarrin stumbled into his room late that night, with his shoulders throbbing, but feeling very good about the whole thing. Allia never told him that it would be her Holy Mother Goddess herself that would put the brands on him. She had reached out from wherever it was she was at and touched him with her power, and that had burned the symbols into his shoulders just the same way they appeared on Allia. The pain was part of the rite, an acceptance of the pains and trials that came with adulthood, and he’d been warned that to scream was unseemly, and that he had to remain still and not squirm, for the branding was not instantaneous. If one moved or flinched, it was an evasion of the duties of adulthood, and that person took a bad brand, and was ridiculed and scorned. Tarrin had a bit of an advantage there, for his Were-cat nature allowed him to endure quite a bit more pain than a standard human. He still nearly blacked out though, which, he’d discovered, was an honorable thing. Blacking out was not in his control, and it proved that the person being branded was strong enough to hold still even under such intense pain. People who blacked out, curiously, did not take a bad

brand, even though they did move. Tarrin suspected that the Holy Mother Goddess had a great deal to do with that.

Tarrin just worried that his regeneration would heal over the charred burn marks.

“You’re in late,” Dar noted as he turned to look at Tarrin from the writing desk.

Tarrin hunched over a bit, his tail drooping. Even putting himself in the water of the bathing pool hadn’t eased the residual pain after the branding.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Allia branded me,” he said shortly.

“*What?*”

“She asked me to become her brother, and I said yes. The brands were so that could happen. I couldn’t be her brother until I was seen as an adult in the eyes of her people, and that meant I had to be branded. It meant a lot to her, and to me.”

“You take friendship seriously,” Dar said, getting up. “I’ll go steal some ice from the cold room,” he offered. “That should take most of the bite out of it.”

“I appreciate it,” he said gratefully.

He returned a bit later with a small bowl of ice, which was wrapped into a kerchief and applied to one shoulder at a time. The ice blissfully numbed his throbbing skin, and he leaned back on his bed, back against the wall, sighing in almost ecstatic relief.

“That must have really hurt,” Dar said.

“It was worth it,” Tarrin said. “I can’t even begin to explain the relationship I have with Allia, Dar. It goes way beyond simple friendship. I’ve never had so deep a connection with anyone. We love each other about as much as two people can who aren’t married.”

“Well, so long as it makes you happy, then I say congratulations,” he said with a smile.

“It’s not like we’re betrothed, Dar,” Tarrin chuckled.

“I know,” he said. “But in its own way, it’s just as profound, I think.”

“More or less, yes,” he agreed. “I did more than profess love for her. I promised to be like her own brother in every way. And family can be just as close as married couples.”

“And in such a short time,” he said. “What will your mother say?”

Tarrin gave him a look, then laughed. “We said the same thing,” he admitted. “We don’t understand why we took to each other so quickly either. Maybe it was fate.”

“I don’t believe in fate,” Dar said with a smile. “It may have been the Gods.”

“I doubt that,” Tarrin chuckled. “Like me being friends with Allia was so important that it was demanded by the Gods. Get real.”

Again there was that same sound, like the stamping of a foot. Tarrin sat up and looked around, and so did Dar. “See?” he said after a moment. “One of them is talking to us now.”

Tarrin gave Dar a look, then he laughed again. “Give one knock for no, two knocks for yes,” Tarrin said in a spooky, melodramatic voice. He shifted the ice against his shoulder, wincing. “These should be healed by tomorrow,” he said. “I *really* hope that the brands don’t heal over. I don’t like the idea of being charbroiled every time Allia wants to prove to someone I’m an adult.”

“At least you’d get used to it,” Dar grinned.

“Not that, I won’t,” he grunted. “I’ve never felt pain like that before in my life. Not even my transformation into this shape was half as painful, and that was so painful I blocked most of the memory of it from my mind.”

“That may be why the brands seem to be more painful,” Dar said with surprising insight.

“Perhaps,” he said, putting the melting ice in the wet kerchief back in the little bowl. “In any case, I’m tired, and I think I’ll go to sleep.”

“I’ll turn down the lights.”

“Don’t bother. I want to sleep the other way tonight, and the light won’t bother me at all.”

Tarrin had an ulterior motive, of course. He didn’t know if he’d have the same pain in the cat shape, and he was willing to try it and see. He undressed and changed form quickly, and, to his dismay, he discovered that the pain was just as present. He hobbled a bit, for he now had to support his weight on the branded limbs, but managed to curl up in a dark place under his bed and go to sleep.

Wake up, something seemed to whisper to him. *You have to wake up*.

Tarrin opened his eyes. It was dark in the room, and the sounds of Dar’s breathing told him that his friend was sleeping. That was the only sound he heard. From outside the door, he could hear faint scraping noises, and then the sounds of a man breathing. Breathing that was a bit fast, Tarrin noted as he got up and padded out from under the bed, the pain in his forelimbs more or less shunted aside. He sat beside the door and hunkered down, smelling at the air drifting in from the other side. There were two human smells, both human men that smelled slightly of ale and prostitutes. And Tarrin could smell clearly the presence of steel, and of one other metal that took him a moment to identify.

Silver. The only non-magical substance other than fire or acid that could do him real injury.

His ears laying back, Tarrin listened intently as the two began to whisper.

“Is this the right room?” one asked.

“I’z be certain o’ that,” the other whispered back in a bizarre accent Tarrin had never heard before. “This’n be the right room, rightly so. Remember now, we’z can’t kill the critter with nothing but this here sword,” he instructed his companion. “It don’t like silver, none at all. Now you’z be getting that magic trinket out and ready, so’s the critter don’t be a’ hearin’ us open the door. The boss done say that if we wake it up, it’ll right fast send parts of us’n all over the room.”

Tarrin changed form silently, his eyes flat and his ears laid back. They were here to kill him. But they didn't know that he was already awake. The thought that they were there to try to kill him filled Tarrin with a sudden rage, a rage that he fought desperately to control. For the first time in a very long time, the Cat in him rose up and tried to take control. He knew it was futile to try to outright resist it, for when it was his life in jeopardy the Cat called in a voice too powerful to deny. He had to try to channel the rage, focus it, to keep from totally snapping and going into a berzerking rage that would put innocents in danger.

“Are you's ready with the trinket?” the man whispered. Tarrin's sensitive ears pinpointed exactly where that voice had come from. And that was the man with the silver weapon, the weapon that represent the threat to his life.

Tarrin took stock in the door, measuring it carefully. Then he balled up a fist, reared back, and punched his paw *through* the door.

His paw opened the instant it was through, and his aim had been true, for the palm of his paw came into contact with a nose. His fingers closed around that head, wrapping more than well enough around it to get an unbreakable grip, and then he yanked the man back through the door. Tarrin noted that where his hand going through the door curiously made no noise at all, there was a sudden, loud tearing snap as the door was shattered from the force of Tarrin's pull, a sound accentuated by the shriek of the man in Tarrin's clutches. It was a small man, thin and wiry, wearing dirty townsman's clothing and with a silvered sword in his hand. The sight and smell of that weapon made Tarrin's eyes go totally flat.

Grabbing hold of his wrist with his other paw, Tarrin closed his fist.

The man's scream was cut off with horrifying abruptness, for he had no mouth with which to use, and no brain with which to direct the mouth that was not there. Tarrin's fingers drove into the skull and the brain, his inhuman strength digging down and under and then crushing everything that had been below the man's forehead, shattering bone and liquefying flesh. Blood and worse spurted out from between Tarrin's fingers as his fingers closed inside the man's head, literally tearing off the man's face. The other man looked into the door in shock as the dead man fell away from Tarrin, a hideous gaping hole where the front of his head had been,

and blood and bits of flesh dripped and oozed from between Tarrin' fingers as he watched the body fall to the floor.

The man shrieked in abject horror and turned to flee, but Tarrin was on him before he could take a single step. He tackled the man and sent him sprawling to the floor, quickly getting on top of him and putting a paw on his chest to hold him down, and then opening his other paw, allowing what was left of the other man's face to drop from his grip. The man stared in desperate terror at the bloody paw raised over his head, claws out, with bits of flesh, bone, and brain dangling from the fur and from the claws. Tarrin's eyes glowed from within with an unholy greenish radiance that made the man squeak once he beheld them, and his face was twisted into a snarl of fury that almost made him like a raging beast. Tarrin very nearly killed him out of rage, but he managed to maintain at least some semblance of sanity. This man had been hired to kill him. Tarrin wanted to know who had done it. "Who sent you?" Tarrin asked in a hissing voice that made the man go very still. "Who sent you?"

"I-I can't say!" he wailed. "They'll kill me!"

"If you don't, I'll make you beg to die," Tarrin told him in a voice so evil that the man tried to sink through the floor to get away from him. "I'll gut you like a pig and drag you around by your entrails until you feel like talking." Tarrin lowered his paw, driving the tips of his claws into the skin of the man's belly. He squealed and writhed, then screamed in pain as Tarrin sank a bit more of his claws into the man's flesh.

The man bellowed as Tarrin slowly twisted his paw, digging the claws in deeper. "It was a Wizard!" he said in a high-pitched voice. "I don't know his name! Belleth knew it!" Tarrin twisted his claws. "Kravon!" he shrieked. "I work for Kravon!"

Then Tarrin felt a coldness at his back. He turned around, ignoring the many Novices that had opened their doors to see what the commotion was about. The shadows behind him seemed to coalesce, and then two slits of pure green radiance appeared. The unearthly cold told him all he needed to know.

It was a Wraith.

The man looked over Tarrin's hip at the apparition, and then he screamed a scream of such terror that it chilled Tarrin's blood. He did himself grievous injury as he suddenly thrashed against the Were-cat, whose claws were still sunk in his belly, but in his wild panic he felt not a whit of pain. The Wraith advanced with shocking speed on them and reached out. Tarrin knew that the touch of a Wraith was the cold of the grave, and it meant death. Even in his rage, he was still lucid enough to know when to bolt. He sprang away from the conjured creature, trampling the man under him in his flight. The man, bleeding freely from his ripped stomach, stared at the Wraith in terror, his body paralyzed by fear, watching that insubstantial hand.

Even as it sank into his chest.

The man made a single gurgling sound and arched his back, and then he moved no more. He remained in that hideously twisted position even after the Wraith withdrew its hand from his chest. The Wraith took one look at Tarrin, and then it simply vanished.

Control returning to him, Tarrin and a few other Novices warily approached the dead man as others screamed hysterically, and more than one Novice cried out or was noisily sick. The man's skin was blue, and the eyes were open and glazed.

The man's body was frozen solid.

Tarrin shivered when he felt the cold radiating from the frozen corpse, then he heard Dar moan and start retching. Tarrin had not left the other one in very presentable condition. Elsa charged out of her door wearing only a nightshirt and brandishing her axe, then stopped when she saw the nude Were-cat standing over the frozen corpse. "What happened?" she demanded hotly.

"This one and the one in my room tried to kill me," Tarrin said in a cold fury, panting to keep control of himself. The Cat was howling for blood, and it wanted to punish the ones who had dared try to take his life. It just wanted to destroy things at the moment, to vent its rage on whatever was handy, but Tarrin's rational mind wouldn't allow that. Such a mindless display of violence would solve nothing. But it still wasn't easy.

Elsa glanced into his room, which now had no door. She shivered a bit. “What did you do to him?” she asked, then she glanced at the blood and flesh still hanging from Tarrin’s right paw. “Nevermind, I think I know,” she said in a bit of a weak voice. “Tarrin, go down to the baths and wash off all that blood. Take Dar with you.”

“Alright,” he said tightly. Dar still coughed a great deal as they left for the baths, Tarrin stalking the halls unclad in a fury as Dar followed behind carrying Tarrin’s robe. Down in the bathing chamber, Tarrin dropped into the pool and started cleaning off his arms and paws. He was a bit surprised at the amount of blood he had on him; it was even splattered on his face and chest, and smeared over his torso. He’d stepped through a pool of it, and bloody footprints. Dar sat on a chair with his head in his hands, leaned over and still coughing a bit here and there.

“Are you alright?” Tarrin asked as he climbed out of the pool.

“Yeah,” he said weakly. “Just imagine waking up to see something like *that*,” he said with a weak chuckle. “I don’t think I’ll ever eat meat again.”

“Sorry, but he tried to kill me,” Tarrin said. “And I doubt they would have left you alive either.”

“I know,” he said. “But why did you have to--do that?”

“It seemed appropriate at the time,” he said. “I didn’t even think about it.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Dar,” he said. “I thought I was dead when I saw that Wraith. I’m just lucky it wasn’t after me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Wraiths are conjured up for a specific purpose,” Tarrin told him, repeating what Dolanna had told him so long ago. “That’s all they’ll do, what they were conjured to do. That one was conjured to kill that man before I could get him to talk,” he said with a growl. “All I got was--”

Tarrin’s heart seized in his chest when a faint trace of an old scent touched his nose. He bowed down and sniffed delicately at the stone, trying to block out the strong smells of the mineral-rich water. The scent of her

passage was still on the stones. Jesmind had been in the bathing chamber. A whirlwind of conflicting emotion welled up in him at that scent, and most primary of them all was fear. He feared Jesmind more than anything else in the world, because he knew, beyond any doubt, that she was there to kill him. And unlike most in the Tower, she was very capable of doing it. It was almost an ironic twist that she would show up so soon after he'd nearly been killed. It was like an omen.

“Dar,” he said in a hushed voice.

“What?”

“Get up. We have to get out of here.”

Dar looked around. “What’s wrong?”

“Jesmind is here,” he said in a quiet, foreboding voice. “We have to get back to where there’s people.”

Dar scrambled to his feet, his eyes darting in all directions, handing Tarrin the robe and rushing after him as Tarrin made quickly for the stairs. They mounted the base of the staircase, but Tarrin stopped dead when a silhouette came around a corner and stood at the top. A silhouette with a tail. His heart froze in his chest, and then it was replaced with a calm, almost unemotional void. He had nowhere to run, and that meant that he would have to fight.

She came down step by step, slowly coming into the light. She was wearing the same white tunic and canvas breeches, which were a bit frayed and torn, but they were clean, just like her. Her eyes were glowing from within with that greenish aura, two slits of pure evil in the shadows, which were a clear indication of her fury. “It’s been a very long time, Tarrin,” she said in a deceptively mild voice.

“Not long enough,” Tarrin growled, his ears laying back and his own eyes igniting from within.

“I hope you enjoyed your time here,” she said, her claws coming out, “because you’re out of it!”

And with that, she dove off the steps and slammed shoulder first into the startled Tarrin’s chest, driving them both back down the stairs.

Both of them were Were-cats, and they both had the same abilities. Tarrin and Jesmind both knew exactly where they were in relation to the ground, and the stairs, so while they tumbled down they both fought to put the other under when they hit the bottom. Tarrin lost that fight, coming down right on the back of his head, but he almost instinctively kicked up and out as hard as he could. With his back on the floor, it gave him a brace, and Jesmind was hurled up and over his head. He rolled to his feet as she tucked in midair, tumbling end over end several times before lightly landing on her feet some distance away. Tarrin had time to rip the rope holding the robe closed and yank it off before she got set again, shedding the constricting garment and not giving her anything to grab onto except his hair. He flung that robe in her face as she lunged at him, covering her head and upper torso, then he ducked down and let her sail past him. Her tail hooked his ankle as she passed, and it almost yanked his leg out from under him. He managed to keep his feet, but it instantly stopped her forward momentum, putting her in claw's reach of him. Even without seeing, she raked her wicked claws right across his chest, digging extremely deep furrows into him, furrows that went all the way to the bone. Had she hit him lower, he realized instantaneously, she'd have disemboweled him.

The pain was serious, but not more than he could withstand. He grabbed hold of her wrist before it could get out of reach, then reared back and slammed the sole of his foot into her cloak-clad head, yanking on her arm in the same instant to increase the force of it. She grunted in pain, and that turned to a yowl when Tarrin kept his foot up and pushed against her head as his grip on her arm pulled her into it, trying to break her neck. Her tail lashed around and up, right between the legs, sending a white-hot flash of excruciating pain through him. He instantly let go of her, stumbling backwards against a chair as she stumbled back a few paces herself, tearing the robe from her face. Tarrin saw her eyes go completely wild, and she shrieked at him incoherently as she rushed forward. She'd lost control of herself, entering the rage that Tarrin had felt on the edges of his own consciousness many times, a rage that had suddenly boiled up in him in response to her own. Tarrin lost himself to the rage, and met the beast in her face to face.

Beast to beast.

Dar knew he should go for help, but for a moment, he was so horrified by what he saw that he couldn't move. Tarrin and that woman were, quite simply, ripping each other to pieces. There was a look of the most terrifying mindless fury on both of them, and they dealt each other the most grievous wounds with absolutely no regard for their own lives. He'd never seen such a display of sheer animalistic mindlessness in his entire life. They were on the floor, clawing, gouging, and even biting each other in an elemental display of abject fury, rolling to and fro and smashing chairs. The floor was quickly smeared and spattered with blood and bits of flesh and torn clothing, and huge patches of bare muscle and bone began to show on each of them. What was even worse, Dar could see that those hideous wounds were slowly closing themselves. They were both regenerating their wounds, and Dar almost got sick when he realized that the winner would be the one that could withstand more raw punishment than the other, which could keep up the healing even as the other sought to rip the flesh from the bones. It was a war of attrition, and Dar shuddered to think of the pain that either of them were feeling.

They rolled over the edge of the pool and fell in, and Dar's paralysis vanished as they did. Blinking, he rushed up the stairs, hoping beyond hope that Tarrin was still alive when he returned.

Tarrin managed to regain some part of himself at the shocking touch of the water. He kicked Jesmind away, put his feet under him, and kicked off the bottom, sending him out of the water like a sling bullet from a sling, catapulting him back up to the pool's edge. He was torn and beaten, and many of his muscles had been severed. His right arm hung limply at his side, the muscles used to move it ripped apart by Jesmind's claws. The pain was there, but it was a dull thing, something that festered at the back of his mind rather than dominating his every thought. She wasn't half as hurt as he was. She was much deadlier in a mindless rage than he, falling back on instincts that had kept her alive for five hundred years. He could not match her sheer brutality or mindless resistance to pain.

Jesmind climbed out of the pool slowly. Her tail was missing more than half its length, which floated in the pool, and most of her left calf had been raked away by Tarrin's feet. She'd lost every bit of clothing, shredded in

their brief savagery, but the look of mindless rage was still stamped onto her face. He knew that if he lost control again, she would kill him. She was more suited to it than he. He focused his rage, focused it into what he'd learned, what he knew. He'd met her on her own battlefield, and he had paid the price. Now he had to make her fight on his. She lunged at him, but he spun away, sliding just out of reach of her claws, bending like a blade of grass in the wind. He then elbowed her in the back with his good arm, a move that was part of *ji'shen*, then kneed her in the side, which was a move in the Ways. They fell apart for a second, as Jesmind gasped for breath, then she turned around and rushed him again, straight ahead, uncaring about any defense he may erect.

It was almost too easy. Tarrin turned partially aside, as if to flee, then he pivoted and brought his right leg up, folded it around his knee as his back came to her, and kicked absolutely straight up, performing a standing split. The ball of his foot struck Jesmind right under the chin, the claws of his feet punching three holes in the base of her jaw. Her head snapped back audibly, and the raw force of the blow knocked her into the air. She made no attempt to right herself and land on her feet, coming down right on the base of her neck instead. She crumpled in on herself like a rag doll, and when she settled to the floor, she did not move.

Tarrin wilted, almost falling down, as the blinding pain of too many wounds to count suddenly screamed at him all at once. He'd survived by the skin of his teeth, and he looked it. The skin of his teeth was about all he had left. He limped over to her and rolled her over with a foot. She was unconscious, bleeding from her many wounds, wounds that were closing even as he watched. He mused at that; he thought that, since they were both magical creatures, that they would deal real damage to one another. It was a good thing they did not, for he'd have been dead in the first few seconds had that been true. Her face, wet from the pool, was untouched, aside from the three puncture wounds under her jaw, and the blood had been washed from it by their bath. Just looking at her reminded him how beautiful she was, and he knew that he just couldn't kill her. Not now, not ever. Regardless of how she felt about him, he didn't hate her. And he wouldn't kill her.

He knelt by her, checking her pulse to make sure it was strong, then he smoothed the wet red hair back from her face. "Why do you have to be so

damned stubborn?” he asked her weakly. Then he bent down and kissed her lightly on the lips. “If you’d just wait a while, you stubborn witch, I’d go with you.” He stood up. “But it’s too late for that now, I guess. I hope you’re happy with your decision. If you’d have waited, or came here with me, I wouldn’t have ran away.”

He turned around. “Goodbye, Jesmind. Have a nice life.” Then he hobbled away from her.

As soon as he’d gone far enough up the steps, Jesmind opened her eyes. They were lucid, calm, even mischievous, and she smiled a victorious little smile. But then that light look hardened over into one of firm resolve, and she shook her head as if to clear her mind of unwanted thoughts. She waited until the sound of his passage were too faint to detect, then she scrambled to her feet and darted up the steps, making less sound than a ghost.

Tarrin was met in the hallways by three Sorcerers as he hobbled back towards the Novice’s quarters, two men he did not know, and the red-haired Ahiriya, who were rushing towards the baths. She was in the forefront, and she took only one look at him with those penetrating eyes. “Did you kill her?” she asked.

“Hardly,” Tarrin said a bit weakly. He hadn’t completely healed from the grievous injuries he’d suffered at Jesmind’s hands. “It was all I could do to get away.”

Ahiriya put her hands on his shoulders, and the icy sensation of Sorcerer’s Healing rushed through him, putting him up on his toes as his blood seemed to turn to ice. The other two Sorcerers obeyed Ahiriya’s short command to search the baths, rushing away quickly. When that icy rush faded, it took the pain along with it. Tarrin staggered back and away from her, his strength, taxed by her healing, flowing back into him. Unlike a Priest’s healing, a Sorcerer’s healing took some energy away from the person being healed, using it to heal the recipient, and that always left Tarrin feeling slightly drained.

“Your things have been moved to another room,” she said. “That boy who rooms with you demanded to be put in the same room with you,” she

chuckled. “He’s got guts, I’ll give him that. Let’s get you a robe or something to wear, and we’ll take you to your new room.”

That touched Tarrin. Despite the obvious danger, Dar was going to stay roommates with him.

The room Tarrin was led to was on the second level, not far from the room that Allia held alone, and it was at the very end of a hallway. The fact that there were two mailed guards standing at the entrance to that hall, quite a distance down, was not lost on him. Even though there were a goodly distance away, they defended the only way in or out, and thus stopped anyone from getting so close to him again.

The room was absolutely identical to the room he’d had below. Dar was there, busily putting up his art back on the walls, and the young man gave Tarrin a look of profound relief as he entered. Tarrin put his paws on the Novice’s shoulders wordlessly. “Are you alright? Did you kill her? What happened?”

“I’m fine, no, she’s not dead, and we fought for a while before I got in a lucky kick,” he said with a gentle smile. “I also have a name, Dar. That man gave me a name before the Wraith killed him. That may be *why* the Wraith killed him.”

“What name?”

“Kravon.”

Dar gasped slightly. “*The* Kravon?” he said in shock.

“Who is he?”

“He’s a renegade,” he said as Tarrin let go of him and took of the too-small robe that had been found for him. His belongings were in the chest--they’d done nothing but move the whole chest. “I heard about him from my parents. He’s a Wizard, and he supposedly leads a group of other Wizards who go around stealing magical artifacts. My father said there’s more to it than that, though. He said that they’re trying to do something.”

“Why would he want to kill me?” Tarrin asked himself. “I’m nobody.”

“Maybe it’s not who you are,” Dar said. “Maybe it’s *what* you are.”

“No, why kill me because I’m a Were-cat when he sent the Were-cat that changed me?” he countered. “He was at it before that happened anyway.” He pulled on a new pair of trousers and pulled out a shirt. The door opened abruptly, and Tarrin and Dar were staring the Keeper right in the face. They both stood and bowed awkwardly, Tarrin hastily throwing his shirt on afterward.

“I see you’re alright,” she said.

“Well enough, Keeper,” he said.

“What happened?”

“Two men tried to kill me in my sleep, then Jesmind took advantage of the confusion and attacked me when I went to the baths to clean up,” he told her plainly. “One of the men gave me a name before he died,” he told her triumphantly. “He said he works for Kravon.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she said nothing about it. Tarrin seemed to understand in that instant that there was an awful lot that the Keeper knew, things that would answer all of the questions that he had, and that she simply was not going to tell him. She knew why they were trying to kill him. She knew *who* was trying to kill him too, he was certain of it. He also came to understand in that instant that she wanted something from him. He didn’t know how he knew, but he did. He was here specifically because they wanted something. And that made him nervous.

“I’ll have someone look into it,” she said shortly. “We can’t find Jesmind, but that won’t be like that for long.”

“You’ll never catch her, Keeper,” he told her.

Her eyes seem to flash momentarily. “You have a low opinion of us, boy,” she said in a steely tone.

“No ma’am, I just know Jesmind. She could hide in plain sight so well you’d step on her. She hid from all of us from the day after she bit me to the day we met in the forest, and that was no mean feat. Trust me, Keeper, you won’t find her. Don’t even bother.”

“I’ll have it done anyway,” she said. “It amuses me.”

“As you will, Keeper.”

“Well, things will get back to normal around here now,” she said. “I’ve put men at the entrance to this hallway to prevent any more midnight guests, so it shouldn’t happen again.”

“Thank you, Keeper,” he said politely.

“You two try to get some sleep,” she said, then she turned and walked out without another word.

“That was strange,” Dar said.

Tarrin looked at the door with his eyes narrowed. The first stirrings of mistrust were coming to life inside him. Things were not as they appeared here in the Tower. And he meant to find out what was going on.

The next attempt on his life came the very next day, and his wariness from the previous night had been what saved his life. Tarrin and Allia were out on the field, practicing, when the fur on the back of his ears stood up. In that absolute instant, he knew something was wrong. He lunged forward and drove Allia to the ground, even as something buzzed spitefully over his head. There was a cry of pain seconds after than, and the sound of someone falling. Then it was chaos. Tarrin looked up, and saw that one of the students, laying on the ground near them, had a crossbow quarrel through his neck. His eyes were already vacant and glazed. Had that bolt hit him, it would have hit him right between the shoulder blades.

“Spread out and capture anyone with a crossbow!” Valden, one of the Knight instructors, bellowed instantly. One of the attending Sorcerers rushed forward, but he could see that he was too late. So he closed the boy’s eyes, then pulled out the quarrel.

It was tipped with silver.

“That was meant for you,” Allia said grimly.

“I know,” Tarrin replied quietly. This young man was totally innocent, a victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was one more thing he was going to flay from the hide of whoever ordered the attack. His eyes went flat, and his ears laid back. “And I’m going to find who shot it.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said, and they got up and darted away.

It took a bit of doing to get them to let Tarrin have the crossbow. It was found between two buildings, in a narrow alley, and Tarrin more or less threatened to maim anyone that wouldn't let him hold it. Tarrin put the stock near his nose, ignoring the scents all around him as he locked in on the scent of the man that had held it, and had shot it at him. Once he had it, he checked in the alley and found the scent trail. Five Knights, including Valden and Faalken, hurried along after Tarrin and Allia as Tarrin followed the man's trail. It played out, though, when it got onto the road that led to the main gate of the compound, and then outside.

"You there!" Faalken boomed at the gate guards. "Who's gone through here in the last hour?"

"Two wagons, five troops of guards, and ten visitors, sir," the gate sentry replied immediately.

"Anyone looking like they were nervous about something?"

"No sir," he replied.

"It had to be someone walking," Tarrin said. "I can still smell his scent. He walked through the gate."

"Who's walked out of here?"

"Just two troops of guards and one visitor," the man said. "It was a woman and her two bodyguards."

They looked at Tarrin, who shrugged. "Don't look at me," he said. "I just know it was a human man."

"It could have been any of them," Allia said. "Even one of the guards, or perhaps a man in a guard's uniform."

"Maybe," Faalken grunted.

"This isn't the place to discuss it," Valden said. "This place is in crossbow range of any of those buildings across the street."

Tarrin swept his eyes across the area beyond the fence. "Good point," Faalken agreed. "Let's get Tarrin back to the barracks."

Valden was one of the older knights, a gruff, no-nonsense kind of man that seemed to have absolutely no sense of humor whatsoever. He was held

in very high regard among the Knights, though, because he was extraordinarily good at the small details that made a successful campaign, and he was a fearsome fighter. He was the most practical, sober man Tarrin had ever seen. Valden led them as the five Knights formed a defensive perimeter around Tarrin, putting their steel armor in the way of another quarrel. Tarrin watched with an alert wariness, taking in and analyzing every sight and sound and smell for possible threat. They reached the barracks that served as the cadets' quarters. "We've got to tell the Keeper about this," Faalken said. "Someone is going to an awful lot of trouble to kill you, Tarrin. They've been trying since the day we left Aldreth, and they're not afraid to come into the Tower to do it, either."

"What can she do?" one of the other Knights, a hulking man named Umber, asked.

"We'll seal the compound if that's what it takes," Valden said in his non-sense voice. "These people have to be coming in from the outside. If they can't get in, they can't try to kill anyone."

"You can't *get* in here without--" Umber said, then he blanched a bit.

"That's possible," Valden said grimly.

"What?" Allia asked.

"That someone from the inside is bringing them in," Valden explained. "Nobody can come onto the Tower grounds without an invitation or a summons. For them to get in, someone has to be inviting them in."

"Maybe they just snuck in," Tarrin said. "I've done it. This place isn't as secure as you may think."

"You have certain racial advantages, Tarrin," Valden. "It'd take a man pole-vaulting to get over the fence without touching it. Not many people know how to do that. And you can't touch the fence, else you're stuck fast to it until a Sorcerer weaves a spell to release you."

"They must get tired of going out there to release the birds," Tarrin noted.

"It doesn't trap animals," Valden said absently. "It only--" He swore. "Garen, go find out if the fence works on Wikuni."

Faalken's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"But it was a human scent I smelled," Tarrin told them.

"Yes, but let's close that door before they find it open," Valden said. "I don't know how the fence works exactly. Since it doesn't trap animals, it may only trap humans. And that means that anyone else can climb it as they please." He pursed his lips. "There's really not much we can do at this point but alert the Keeper and have her take steps," he said. "There's no way to find out who brought the assassin onto the grounds."

"Well, until we talk to the Keeper, not much else can be done," Valden said. "Tarrin, go back to the Tower, and stay indoors. I suggest you stay in a public area as well. Try to keep people around you."

"Alright," he said. Tarrin was starting to get annoyed. That he had a name seemed to be something a step in the right direction, but he had nowhere to take it, and so long as he was in the Tower, he had no means to search it out. Tarrin didn't like being the target of someone's homicidal tendencies; at least someone he didn't know. Jesmind, he could understand, and he had hopes that the two of them could settle their differences peacefully. But this mystery man Kravon was an unknown, a stranger, and he had no idea how to make him stop other than to kill him. But he didn't know who he was. That was the problem.

If he only knew *why* they were after him, at least then he'd have some idea of what to do, how to make them stop. He was floundering around in a sea of possibilities, and it was a long way to shore. He couldn't think of anything he'd done to offend someone to the point where they would have him killed. It was maddening.

He sat in his room for quite a while pondering it, then finally gave up in disgust. Allia was meditating in her room, a private time that she needed to herself, so he decided to read a book until she came for him.

The door opened, and the Keeper entered his room. Tarrin stood hastily and bowed to her.

"I was told what happened," she said. "It won't happen again, I can assure you of that," she said in a flinty voice. "I'm having the compound searched at this very moment, and no visitor may enter armed from this day forward."

“That’s all well and good, but that doesn’t tell me anything,” he said pointedly. “Why are they trying to kill me, Keeper? They’ve been trying for a very long time now. They must have a reason.”

She looked him in the eye, but said nothing. “Don’t concern yourself with it, Tarrin. You’re under our protection, and we’re going to protect you. Oh, I’ve received word that your parents and your sister are on the way here,” she said.

That managed to sidetrack his anger. “They’re coming here?” he said, his heart both leaping in his chest and sinking into his gut at the same time. He so desperately wanted to see them, but an irrational fear of how they would react to his new shape almost gave him the panics. If they rejected him, it may be more than he could bear. He knew his parents; he doubted they would do such a thing, but a part of his mind simply wouldn’t stop thinking about it.

She nodded. “I got word yesterday that they were at Marta’s Ford. By now, they are halfway to Ultern. They should be here by the Midsummer Festival.”

“I can’t wait to see them,” he blurted.

“You’ll have to wait until they arrive,” she said with a smile and a wink. “The teachers tell me that you’re doing well,” she said, changing the subject. “Keep up the good work, Tarrin. Now, I must be off. Take care of yourself.”

And then she left, leaving him somewhat giddy at the thought of his family coming to see him.

The door opened again. “Was that the Keeper I just saw?” Allia asked.

“It was,” he replied. “My family is coming to the Tower to visit me,” he told her.

“That is good news,” she smiled.

“I hope so,” he said. “If they see me like this and scream and run away, I think I’ll kill myself.”

“Do not get worked up over it,” she said, patting him on the shoulder. “You are their son, and they love you for who you are, not how you look.”

“I hope so,” he sighed.

“Come, let us go someplace quiet, so that you may practice.”

“Not the garden,” he said. “There are people watching me right now, I think. If I disappear in there, they may send people in to find us.”

“Then we will not practice the hand-language today,” she said. “Let us simply talk. You need to work the edge off of your accent.”

“I can speak the language almost as well as you can,” he said tartly, in Selani.

“Maybe, but if you’re going to do something, do it right,” she shrugged, speaking in Selani as well. “You don’t *sound* Selani, and that’s what matters.”

“Whatever,” he said. “We need to talk anyway. Let’s go out and walk around the outer garden a while. I have some things to tell you.”

“Alright.”

Outside, they walked the paved paths along the gardens, and Tarrin noticed that they were a bit busier than usual. More than one Sorcerer, and more than one guard, walked along the paths. At least two kept him in sight at all times. He was definitely right about that. “Allia, they want something from me,” he told her in Selani.

“What?”

“I don’t know, yet,” he said. “I looked into the Keeper’s eyes today, and I could see things there. She knows who’s trying to kill me, and why. But she won’t tell me who it is or why they’re doing it. And they want something.”

“Well, since you’re not dead, they obviously don’t want your body,” she said. “They’re going to teach you magic, and they’ve been having me train you to fight. That means that it’s not you they want. Perhaps they want something that you can do for them.”

“You said a Sorcerer came and asked for you, right?” She nodded. “Well, it seems I’m not the only one they want.”

“Maybe they asked for me because of what I could teach you,” she said.

“They had to do that *long* before they ever knew of me,” he protested. “You know how long it takes to get to the desert from Suld?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she said primly. “And you’re right. They had to send that Sorcerer months before I left my people, and we’ve been here only about three months.”

“And I was still human at that time,” he added. “Maybe they wanted *you*,” he said, “and since I’m here, they decided I’d do a better job of it. Whatever it is.”

“It’s all just sand blowing in the wind,” she sighed, bending down to look at a particularly lovely rose. “We can’t prove anything.”

“Maybe not, but I can start looking for answers,” he said.

“How so?”

“I’m a Were-cat, dear one,” he said with a smile. “I can go places that humans wouldn’t even dream about.”

Her look sobered instantly. “What you’re thinking about is one step from suicide,” she warned. “The Keeper is a Sorcerer. I’ll guarantee that she and her office have magical protection.”

“Hmm,” he said, rubbing his chin with the side of a finger. “You’re right. But Tiella cleans the Keeper’s office. I think I’ll ask her to start remembering any scrap notes she happens to see. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Just be careful, *deshida*,” she warned.

“I will,” he promised.

It was a large problem, but the thought of his family coming quickly drowned out such heavy thoughts, and replaced them with a mixture of joy and terror that put him on edge for several days, and put him so out of sorts he did not one thing to start unraveling the veil of mystery surrounding his place in the Tower. He wanted desperately to see his parents, his sister, to put himself in the arms of his mother and father and know that they would accept him as he was. But the very thought that they would reject him made his heart lurch. He’d had a nightmare that made him sleepless for three days, a nightmare that his mother looked on him for the first time, and a look of horror overwhelmed her. Mere words or actions could hold nothing

on that one dream, that one image, that had shaken him to the very core. It seemed the embodiment of all the gnawing fears, the self doubts. He'd thought he'd achieved an equilibrium with his animal instincts, but the fight with Jesmind showed him how pitifully wrong he was. They only seemed abated because he was in a very controlled, safe environment. He knew, then, that every time his life was in danger, or he was angry, that he would fight that same fight, a fight for control. And he knew that he could lose.

Of Jesmind, there was no sign. She had simply vanished again, most likely waiting for another chance. Tarrin still had mixed feelings about the fight, and about her. She wanted to kill him, but he knew he could not kill her. It just seemed *wrong*. When they were apart, the Jesmind he remembered was the incisive, light-hearted woman whom he'd met in that treetop, who had a quirky sense of humor and those glorious green eyes. But it was like she was another person now. He saw it in her eyes right before that fight. She absolutely despised him, hated him with every fiber of her being. In a way, that hurt him, because he didn't feel the same way. She had cared about him in some way before he left her, that he knew. Be it compassion, or responsibility, or even the beginnings of friendship, he wasn't sure. But not anymore. He could see the lust for revenge in her eyes.

It was a hot summer day, and Tarrin sat panting on the sand-pit practice field, nursing a broken tail. Allia stood calmly in front of him, hand on her hip, with a distant expression he knew only too well. Allia was nearly sadistic when she was training. She'd told him that a respect for pain was one of the lessons learned. It was the way she had been taught. She had the scars to prove it. "Don't lead with your foot like that again," she told him absently, checking her fingernails for any sign of damage as Tarrin took his broken tail in his paws. There was a visible kink in it, and he winced as he pulled the bones apart and gently let them come back together in the right way, so they could heal. Despite a month of training, he'd yet to even lay a paw on her. He was starting to get frustrated. No matter how well he thought he was doing, she would simply seem to grow an extra arm or leg, and that phantom limb would hit him in some very sensitive area. The Troll-skin gloves she wore gave her strength proportional to his, and without that strength advantage, it was clear who the better fighter was.

"I'll try not to," Tarrin grunted as he got to his feet. He spread his legs wide, in a ready stance, and waited for her. She didn't disappoint him,

wading back into the fray confidently. What amazed him about her was her fluid suppleness. She seemed to be capable of moving in ways even a rope wouldn't dream of. She was like a candle flame, contorting in the wind, bending herself in almost impossible angles to avoid blows, and then springing back to the attack. That agility coupled with her speed made her almost impossible to hit. Tarrin was no novice, but even his own training couldn't find a hole in her defenses. He gritted his teeth as she flowed around several more darting attacks, then she kicked him right in the backside with the inside of her foot. He stumbled forward as she laughed lightly, and that just seemed to set off something inside him. He was going to get her, no matter what it took. He'd give her a reason to laugh.

He set his feet wide again, putting his clawed paws out over his feet, spreading his weight. She'd warned him against doing just that, because it would slow him down. And when she saw him do it again, she rushed in to chastise him. She feinted a jab, then spun around, bringing her foot up, performing one of her circle-kicks. Her foot whistled through the air as it sped towards its target, his cheek.

And passed through empty air.

She almost spun to the ground, and had to wildly catch herself before falling down. She'd been counting on hitting him to stop her momentum, and he'd simply disappeared. All she saw were his pants laying on the ground. She gasped as the significance of that hit her.

Just as the pad of his paw struck her right on the back of the head. She catapulted forward, head first, and her face dug a furrow in the sand as she hit the ground.

Tarrin pulled his hand back, enormously pleased with himself. She'd preached and preached about the advantage of surprise in combat. She never even dreamed that he would change form on her. That put him right out of harm's way, and after slipping out of his clothes, he changed back right behind her and literally slapped her on the back of the head.

Allia turned over and sat down, spitting sand out of her mouth. Her sweat had made the sand stick to her face, and it looked like she painted her face. Tarrin took one look at her and started laughing. "I believe you made your point," she said icily, as the instructors and cadets stopped to look at

them. The fact that Tarrin had no clothes on didn't catch everyone's eye nearly as much as the sight of the nigh-invincible Allia with her backside on the ground and her face caked with sand.

Faalken and Valden walked over from where they and their six cadets had been watching the two spar. They always watched them, because there was much to learn from watching two such as them. From time to time, Allia and Tarrin sparred with the cadets, to give them some exposure to fighting against Non-humans. Tarrin and Allia both used tactics that relied on their natural abilities; Allia's speed, and Tarrin's strength and natural weaponry. In that way, Tarrin and Allia were more cadets than Novitiates. They were even more involved with the Knights than most cadets were, since they too sparred with the Knights. To give the Knights some basics of unarmed combat, and too to fight against unconventional foes to broaden their experience. Allia had approached the idea with trepidation at first, but the tremendous respect the Knights had for her had worn away that reluctance. She often called to them by their names, which was amazing, considering she would not so much as speak to a Novice, and wasn't quite cordial to Sorcerers that talked to her.

Allia gave him a wry smile, and offered her hand. "Very well done," she complemented. "You changed form on me. I didn't think of that."

"I hope you're not talking about me," Faalken said dryly. Tarrin blinked. She spoke in Selani. Tarrin often forgot that he was the only one who could understand her when she did.

"No, Faalken," she said as Tarrin helped her to her feet. She pulled up the tail of her shirt and started wiping off the sand. "I was telling Tarrin that he did very well."

"That was a pretty clever move," Faalken agreed. "Uh, Tarrin, you can put your pants back on now," he said pointedly.

Tarrin chuckled. "The clothes don't change with me, Faalken," he said, reaching down and collecting his pants, and then putting them back on. "Why do you think I didn't do that before? I'd be losing clothes left and right."

Valden laughed. "True enough," he said. "I'd feel a bit out of place bare as a newborn in the middle of a battle."

“At least people would say you had courage,” Faalken noted slyly.

“They’d say I had *something*,” Valden returned. “I doubt it would be courage.”

“Do not get too much of an opinion of yourself, Valden,” Allia said calmly. “I have seen you in the baths. They would say you have something, but it would not be what fills your codpiece.”

Valden gave her a strangled look, and then turned beet red. Faalken almost fell over in a sudden gale of uncontrollable laughter. Allia gave Valden a very calm, sober look, then one of those sea-blue eyes winked slyly, and a corner of her lip quirked up into a near-smile.

“Ye Gods!” Valden gasped mockingly. “Allia has a sense of humor! Great Karas, call me home, for the end is here!”

“It’s a rather base one, at that,” Faalken managed to gasp. He was wheezing audibly, and was bent over.

“You humans are so amusing,” she said with a light smile, then she put her four-fingered hand on Valden’s cheek, bent down and kissed the shorter man’s other cheek like his daughter, and then turned her back to him. “I think that is enough today, Tarrin. A day of practice is always better when the student can walk away with a sense of accomplishment. And you have done very well today. Very well indeed.”

“Well thank you,” he said with a smile.

“Come, let us bathe. I need to get the training field off of my face and out of my hair.”

Tarrin chuckled, picking up his shirt from the post where he’d left it hang. They left Faalken, who was still in a state of near-paralysis, now on his knees, laughing uncontrollably, pounding his hand on the ground.

“All kidding aside, Tarrin, you’re coming along very well,” she told him as they walked back to the Tower. “I know I didn’t do half as well after only a month and some days.”

“I had prior training,” he shrugged, then he wrinkled his nose. “Goodness, Allia, put those gloves somewhere else,” he said.

“I left them with Valden,” she objected.

“What?”

“Valden has them,” she affirmed.

“Then why do I smell Troll?” They both looked around, and there was nothing. Just grass, the Tower, and a few of the surrounding buildings that they could see.

“Maybe Valden is upwind of us,” Allia shrugged.

“Maybe you’re right,” he agreed.

He felt a tiny shudder under his feet, conducted up through the pads on his foot. That was the only warning. But it was enough. A paw on Allia’s shoulder sent her careening to the side as he lunged the other way.

As a club almost as large as Tarrin smashed the air between them and crushed into the ground, sending dirt and grass in all directions. Both Tarrin and Allia rolled to their feet.

And found themselves surrounded by four Trolls. Twelve spans tall, nearly twice as tall as their opponents, their wide-featured, brutish faces were alight with the prospect of the kill. Each one had nothing but a fur loincloth cinched with a leather belt, and all four were carrying clubs as big as Allia. Tarrin understood the nature of that selection immediately. His magical defense did not carry over to the raw physical force that the Trolls would put into those clubs. They would kill him just as fast as any human should they hit him

They wasted no time. Allia gave a ear-splitting undulating cry, the cry of alarm among her people, as her hands flashed to the daggers she kept in her boots. Tarrin was a bit more direct, as the Cat flowed into and through him. Instinct and thought were one, and they caused him to explode into action. He ducked under the massive swing of another Troll, and then kicked it in the side of the knee before it could recover. Tarrin’s strength caved in the side of its knee, and it sagged to the ground with a bass-deep rumble of pain, rolling around on its back holding its knee. Allia simply stepped aside as the Troll behind her gave a vast overhanded swing, spraying dirt in every direction, then she danced lightly around it and sank one of her daggers into the back of its knee. It too sagged to the ground. Tarrin ducked under one swing, then dove forward to evade the other Troll’s swing. He danced around so that one Troll shielded him from the other, a

Troll that had turned to meet Allia. He saw his chance. “High and low!” he shouted to Allia in Selani. “I’ll go low!”

“Go!” she barked, backpedaling out of reach of a huge swing.

Tarrin lunged forward just as the Troll in front of him started after him, which surprised it. The Troll obviously wasn’t used to such small creatures attacking it. It tried to step back a bit, but Tarrin dove right between its legs, rolled, and came up sprinting. The other Troll had set its feet to deliver another overhand blow; Tarrin could see the club come up over its head. Tarrin ducked down a bit and ran between its legs.

With both paws up, and his claws out.

The Troll shrieked in abject agony, bending over as Tarrin’s claws literally ripped out everything that was under its fur clout. Allia dashed forward as Tarrin knelt down, and she put a boot on his shoulder and leapt, then sprang off the head of the doubled Troll, high in the air. The other Troll, which had just turned around to see where Tarrin went, got a perfect view of Allia rear back both hands, and then throw her daggers with precise and deadly accuracy. They drove into each of the Troll’s eyes, the tips and more finding the monster’s brain, putting it forever into darkness.

As the Troll Allia felled hit the ground, Tarrin absently reached up and ripped the throat out of the doubled Troll, ending its hideous wailing.

A small formation of armored Knights and cadets came around one of the storebuildings about that time, quickly surrounding the two lamed Trolls and convincing them that sudden pacifism would lead to a longer life. Tarrin was panting as he wiped the flesh and blood off his claws in the grass, trying not to vomit at the overpowering stench of Trolls and Troll blood, which was the core of their awful smell.

“Four Trolls that fast?” Faalken said appreciatively.

“It was almost *much* shorter,” Allia said grimly as she pulled her daggers free of the Troll corpse. “It was like they appeared from the thin air.”

“They did,” Tarrin said, putting the back of his paw to his face, letting his own scent drown out the stench. “I didn’t see or hear them, not even when they attacked.”

“Magic,” Valden growled. “It had to be. They’d never have gotten onto the grounds any other way.”

Tarrin looked up at him. “Someone went to a lot of trouble to arrange this,” he said tersely, getting his instincts back under control.

A red-robed Sorcerer walked around the building, coming up short at the display. He was a young man, not long a Sorcerer, with sandy colored hair and a rather handsome, full-cheeked face. “My,” he said. “Trolls, here? However did they manage to get onto the grounds?”

“We don’t know yet,” Valden told the man.

“Tarrin, you and Allia go on,” Valden said. “We’ll take care of this.”

“Yes, Master Valden,” they said in unison. “I have *got* to get this Troll-stench off of me,” Tarrin told Allia fervently.

Tarrin almost scrubbed off his fur in the baths, then they went for the afternoon meal. Afterwards, Allia went to her room for her private meditation. Tarrin caught up with Dar, and they went out into the garden to talk.

“Trolls?” Dar said, taking the apple Tarrin offered.

Tarrin nodded. “I felt one of them put his foot down. That was the only warning I got.” He looked out over the gardens, to the hedge maze. He was still feeling a bit unsettled after the attack, and he desperately wanted to go to the central courtyard, but there were too many people watching him. “We got very lucky. If it hadn’t have moved, both of us would probably be dead now.”

“This is getting serious, Tarrin,” Dar said. “Whoever is doing this is starting to bring in harder things to kill. He may pull a Dragon out of his hat next.”

Tarrin scoffed. “No,” he said. “It probably took them a *very* long time to get those Trolls here. I seriously doubt that they could do it again. Not any time soon, anyway. If they stay on their little pattern, I have at least a ten-day before they try again.”

“I don’t see how you can be so calm about it,” he said.

“I’m not,” he said flatly. “But there’s nothing else I can do, so it’s best for me not to get myself worked up about it.”

“Just be careful, Tarrin,” Dar said, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“I intend to, Dar,” he assured him. “I, I want to go out tonight,” he said. “Can you leave the door open for me?”

“I guess,” he said. “Want me to stay up?”

“No, just don’t lock the door if you wake up,” he replied. “I just want to get out a while without so many people watching me. It’s almost creepy.”

“I can understand that,” he sighed. “Oh, they’re giving me the Test next ten-day,” he said.

“We already know how it’s going to turn out,” Tarrin said with a grin.

Dar grinned back. “I know, but it still has to be done,” he said.

“Like it matters.”

“They give it to you gifted ones too,” he said.

“I’ve already taken it.”

“This is a different test,” he replied. “It gauges what spheres of Sorcery you’re strong in. That way they know how and where to teach you.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tarrin said, sweeping a fly off his back with his tail.

“I didn’t until yesterday,” he replied. “I managed to get an Initiate to explain it to me.”

Tarrin shrugged. “It’s still nothing to worry about,” he said.

“I know,” Dar replied.

The Keeper was walking towards them. “Uh oh,” Tarrin said in a low voice. “Trouble off the port bow.”

“Man the catapults,” Dar quipped. Tarrin had to stifle a laugh. They stood respectfully as she approached, and it was quickly obvious that she meant to talk to them. They bowed as she stepped up before them. Tarrin noticed that the Keeper was only slightly taller than the fifteen year old Dar.

“Tarrin,” she said.

“Keeper.”

“I have a gift for you,” she said tersely. “It was something that we didn’t want to give to you until you reached the Initiate, but it seems that you can use it now.” She reached into a pocket of her cream colored dress, and withdrew a *shaeram*, one made of some kind of black metal, but it wasn’t steel. Tarrin knew the scent of steel. This was some other kind of metal, one he’d never smelled before. “It’s been enchanted,” she explained. “It’ll let you change form without losing your clothes or anything in your hands. They’ll go to some other place when you change, and come back when you change back. The *shaeram* itself will turn into a little metal collar when you’re in your cat shape.”

“Uh, thank you, Keeper,” he said uncertainly, accepting the black metal amulet. It was surprisingly light, and the metal seemed both cold and warm at the same time.

“Let me help you put it on,” she said, motioning for him to turn around.

He really couldn’t deny her her request. He turned around and knelt so she could reach his neck easily, and she fastened the black metal chain of the amulet around his neck. He had the most peculiar feeling the instant she fastened it, but it faded so quickly that he doubted he felt anything at all. “Now let’s have a look at it,” she said, patting him on the side. He turned around and let her inspect the amulet, and then she smiled. “It looks nice on you,” she said.

“Uh, thank you, Keeper,” he said.

“Let’s test it, make sure the weave was made right. Change shape, and then change back.”

“Alright.” He stepped away from them and willed himself into his other form. There was the customary blurring of vision, then he had a new point of view at the level of their shins. He sat down as the Keeper knelt beside him and put her hands on the delicate black metal collar now around his neck, a collar so close to the color of his fur that it was almost invisible. “No clothes,” she told him. “The amulet did that part of its job. Alright, change back.” When she moved away, he did so. And he was fully clothed, with the amulet around his neck.

“Excellent,” she said, smiling. “The weave is working just fine.”

Tarrin looked down, smiling. That solved the one problem he constantly had about changing his shape. It opened entire new levels of sneaking around for him. “Thank you, Keeper,” he said sincerely. “This is an excellent gift.” He already had plans. Little did the Keeper know, she’d just given him the opportunity he needed to do a little snooping. There were many, many cats on the Tower grounds, there to chase down the rats, or the cats that were personal pets. One more wouldn’t attract much attention.

“I’m glad you like it,” she said with a smile. “Oh, by the way, don’t worry about what happened today. I’m going to see to it that it doesn’t happen again,” she said with a bit of steel in her voice.

“I won’t,” he replied civilly.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer,” she said. “Enjoy the rest of your day.” She looked up at the late afternoon sun. “What’s left of it, anyway.”

“That was nice of them,” Dar said as the Keeper disappeared from view.

Tarrin held the amulet in his paw, looking down at it. It seemed...warm. “It’s a welcome gift,” he said sincerely. “I don’t change form because I’ll lose my clothes. This solves that problem. I’m going to have to start wandering around as a cat from now on. That way I won’t attract as much attention.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. “There are cats all over the grounds.”

“It’ll also let them get used to not seeing me,” he said with a wink.

“Oh,” he said, winking back. “That could come in handy too.”

“Just a bit.”

Tarrin’s “gift” had an unforeseen side effect, one that very nearly caused him to go into a rage.

It wouldn’t come off.

It was held on by magic, about that much he was positive. Though the chain was long enough to slip over his head, it would not. And there wasn’t a clasp anymore anywhere on the chain; it was a continuous chain all the

way around. He'd ripped off a good amount of his own skin struggling to remove the amulet, and he'd worked himself up into such a frenzy that both Allia and Dar had to work together to calm him down.

Like the rest of his kind, Tarrin had a nearly phobic fear of being trapped or captured. The fastest way to set him off was to put him in a cage, where the Cat was imprisoned, and its desperate need to be free caused it to all but overwhelm the human half. It was that instinctive reaction that had caused Jesmind to go berserk in Torrian and kill so many people during her escape. The amulet necklace was no cage, but it *was* a collar, a symbol of his imprisonment. They may have well put a leash on him. To be subject to the will of another was so against the very nature of the Cat that it seemed alien to Tarrin's human half as well. They were fiercely independent creatures, and the amulet represented a limitation, a stricture on that freedom that he couldn't deny. Just thinking about it got his blood seething, and he felt the almost overpowering need to break things.

He stalked about in a white-faced fury for the entire day, and people avoided him like Death herself. He had an entire bench to himself during breakfast. Even Allia and Dar were afraid to get too close to him. The setting for the day was when he woke up, and the door latch stuck as he was trying to get out. Without hesitating, Tarrin ripped the door off the hinges and threw it into the hall, nearly startling Dar out of his wits and sending two Novices running for cover. Elsa had tried to confront him about the door after breakfast, but one look at his face made her blanch and back away. Nothing was taught in his classes that day, since the instructors were too busy jumping every time Tarrin so much as twitched. A guard tried to stop him from leaving the Tower after lunch, and Tarrin left the man groaning with both arms and legs broken and his pike tied in a knot around his waist. He spent the whole afternoon pacing through the city, heedless of the fact that Novices weren't allowed off the Tower grounds, wandering aimlessly and not paying attention to anything. The gate guards had tried to stop him too, but after Tarrin had nailed one of them to the gatehouse with a dagger through each forearm, and hurled another into the magical fence, the others wisely got out of his way. They seemed to realize that he was keeping himself from killing anyone, but he had absolutely no reservations over hurting them. He walked right over more pedestrians than could be easily counted, and had overturned three carts and killed two horses that

refused to get out of his way. Eventually a contingent of the city guard was dispatched. Not to detain him, but to clear the path in front of him. The fact that he wandered with absolutely no set pattern or goal made it very hard for them.

And Tarrin never noticed them.

After he'd walked himself into exhaustion, he returned to the Tower grounds, mainly because he had nowhere else to go. He was allowed in unchallenged, and when he was halfway there, Allia and Dar approached him together, a bit wary, and started the task of settling him. It took both of them, and it took them nearly two hours just to get him to sit down. And that took Allia pushing him down and literally sitting in his lap, straddling his legs and holding him down with both hands. "Tarrin!" she snapped in a harsh voice. "You dishonor yourself acting this way!"

He gave her a flat, deadly look, and his ears laid back on his head.

"Don't lay your ears back at me, boy," she challenged hotly. "You won't hurt me, and you know it. Now stop acting like a sun-baked *shivat* and talk to me!"

Tarrin stood up, picking her up with him. Then he set her gently on her feet and walked away. She moved to follow, but Dar put a hand out. "No," he told her.

"He will hurt someone like this," she told him.

"No, I don't think so," he replied. "I know where he's going."

She gave him a flat look.

"This is something he needs to work out for himself, Allia," Dar told her. "We calmed him down, but that was just putting the lid on the boiling pot. He needs more than we can do for him."

She looked at where they were on the grounds. "Yes, that is the only place he would go, is it not?" She sighed. "I think you are right. When he is ready to talk, he will seek us out."

It wasn't until he was standing at the base of the fountain in the courtyard, gazing up at the incredibly beautiful face of the marble statue, that some semblance of rationality returned to him. He sank to his knees in

front of it, putting his face in his paws, as he realized just how close to madness he'd went. He'd terrorized people, destroyed things, even killed animals. That rage was replaced with self doubt, loathing, and fear of himself, at what he had almost done. If someone other than Allia had gotten in his face, he wasn't sure if he would have killed him or not. If it had been the Keeper, then he had no doubt what would have happened. She would have died.

It just seemed so complicated, even though it was so simple. He knew how the Cat thought. He even knew what it was going to do most of the time, but it was as if he was a spectator in his own body. Even knowing what it would do, he felt powerless to stop it. The Cat was so much stronger inside him than he ever dreamed, capable of throwing him aside like a forgotten toy whenever the mood suited it. All day it had not been a struggle for control, but a struggle for containment, to keep the Cat from doing something that Tarrin would regret for the rest of his life.

And yet, staring up at that beautiful face, it was as if everything he'd done that day was washed from his soul, and he felt at peace with himself.

And that peace allowed him to think, for the first time in nearly a day. Yes, the amulet would not come off, but it did not control him. He controlled *it*. And it was not a symbol of his slavery. The *shaeram* was the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*, an amulet just like any other. It was up to him to use it to his own advantage. It took him a fairly long time to reach those conclusions, and it was well after dark the next time he bothered to move his eyes off the statue.

He *had* to control it. If he didn't, it would drive him mad. All his training was about control, all his experiences of life were about control. He had to start using them in his fight with the Cat, or the Cat would overwhelm him, and Tarrin Kael would be no more.

Tarrin had thought he'd reached a balance inside himself. He knew at that moment that he could not have been more wrong. The real battle for himself had just begun.

Sniffing a bit, Tarrin stood up again, looking at the soft light of the Skybands casting multihued radiance over the statue on the fountain, and it all but took his breath away. Such loveliness seemed impossible for the

human hand to carve with such perfection. Without quite knowing why, he waded into the fountain and climbed up onto the base, standing in front of the statue. He put his paws on its shoulders, and leaned in and rested his forehead against the shoulder of the statue. "I don't know if I can do it," he admitted out loud, confiding in the statue, voicing the truths he felt in his heart. "I never would have done what I did just a month ago. I'm losing myself, piece by piece, bit by bit. I don't know if I'm strong enough. I never dreamed the Cat could be so strong. I just feel so, so lost. And I'm scared, and I don't know what to do. I'm, changing," he said with a shudder in his voice. "And I can't stop it."

Faith.

The word just seemed to echo through the courtyard, though he knew that he had heard no sound.

You must have faith.

Tarrin looked around, quite mystified at the strange voice he heard. It was sweet, melodic, but it had an odd choral quality to it, as if it carried a power inside it that was more than what a single voice could hold. "Who are you?" he called.

Faith, my kitten, it repeated. Faith.

Tarrin looked around in confusion. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

But there was no reply.

Tarrin started to wonder if he really *was* going mad. He backed away from the statue quickly, almost falling off the ledge of the statue's base. He hesitated only a moment, drinking in the calming beauty of the statue and the fountain, and then he turned and left.

The events of that day were more or less forgotten; that was, Tarrin wasn't punished for it. Not a word was mentioned of it, but it had its own effects. The most obvious was that the Novices now would have absolutely nothing to do with him. They stayed as far away from him as they could. Before, where he got nervous looks, now they refused to even look at him. Novices would turn around and walk in the other direction, or duck into

doors or side passages, when he walked the hallways. At dinner, the only time they were forced to be near him, the people who sat at his table finished in moments and hurried away.

Their rejection of him hurt, and it hurt deeply. He could understand their fear, but that didn't make it any easier. He had lost control of himself, and shown them the monster that lurked underneath. And now they were treating him like that monster. He became moody and out of sorts the next few days. Not even Allia and Dar could get him back to his usual self for any extended amount of time.

It wasn't the only shock he received, however. Three days after his rampage, he and Allia were visiting the baths for their after-practice bathing, and Tarrin saw Jesmind in the baths, soaping her red hair vigorously. The sight of her made him grit his teeth together, and he extended his claws almost out of impulse. Allia put a hand on his shoulder quickly. "She is not here to fight," she warned, soothing him. "Do not dishonor yourself by attacking one who has no desire to fight."

"Alright," he said stiffly. She looked up, catching his scent, and those green eyes locked with his for a few moments. Then she just looked away, dunking herself underwater to rinse her hair.

The Novices that tended the baths took one look at the impending disaster, and then fled, leaving the three of them alone.

Tarrin stood at the edge of the bathing pool and squatted down, his eyes flat. "What are you doing here, Jesmind?" he asked in a stiff voice.

"I'm bathing," she said with infuriating calm, pulling her hair behind her.

"Don't state the obvious," he grated. "It makes you look like a fool."

Her eyes flashed, and her light expression turned steely. "I'm not the fool here," she said, her voice carrying an edge. Then she turned her back on him pointedly. "I made a deal with the Keeper," she told him. "I promised not to fight with you, and in exchange, they allow me to stay on the grounds."

"You, making deals?" he scoffed.

“Why not?” she said. “I’d never get away from here if I killed you. They’d kill me. I’m not stupid,” she told him. “So count your blessings, cub. So long as you’re inside the fence, you’re safe from me. But be warned. The minute you step outside the fence, your life is mine.”

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” he said in a hissing voice. “Any time you want a piece of me, you just ask. I’ll bring everything you can handle.” That even startled *him*.

“My, the cub grows teeth, and he thinks he’s an adult,” she chuckled. “Since we’re going to be stuck here together, there’s no reason to be so nasty. I’m almost ashamed for you.”

“Get over it,” he said in an ominous voice.

She stopped, then turned partially and looked at him. And then she flinched visibly. “I, see,” she said quietly. Her tone surprised him. It was one of regret, not anger. “Goodbye, Tarrin,” she said quietly. “I’ll think fondly of you.”

That confused him. He gave Allia a strange look, then stalked away.

“Allia,” Jesmind called.

“What do you want of me, *kissash*?” she demanded flatly.

Jesmind winced. “Watch him,” she said in a civil tone. “He doesn’t have much more time.”

“Time?” Allia said. “Time until what?”

“Until he is gone.” She wrung her hair out with her paws, looking up at the Selani woman. Her face was sober. “It may come down to you. A knife thrust to the base of the skull will kill, even one of us. Just make sure you sever the spine, and leave the knife in until he’s dead.”

“What talk is this?” she demanded hotly.

“He trusts you,” she sniffed. “When there’s no more hope for him, you’re the only one that will be able to get close enough.”

Tarrin and Allia were in practice the next day when the news reached him. A nervous Novice handed him a message, and then bolted. Tarrin broke the seal on it and unfolded it.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. Then his eyes widened, and the first smile in a ten-day graced his handsome face. “My family is here!” he exclaimed. He laughed, and then picked up Allia and spun her around a few times. Then his face took a stricken look.

“Just go to them, my brother,” she said softly to him. “They are your blood. It is not how you look that will matter to them.”

“I hope so,” he said fervently.

“Go bathe first,” she noted critically. “You have sand all over you.”

“You’re right,” he agreed.

“Well, Faalken,” Allia said, dismissing Tarrin with a slap on the rump. “What can I teach you today?”

Tarrin flew through his bath, all but jumping in and jumping out, then he ran to his room and put on his Novice clothes. The note said to meet them in the room that was the third door on the left coming off the hallway that led from the Grand Stairwell, on the third level, along the outermost ring. That was only one floor up, but was in a different section of the Tower.

He ran up there, but then stood in silent dread by the door for nearly ten minutes. His desire to see his family was balanced by the fear that they would reject him, and it left his mind a confusing chaos of conflicting thoughts and impulses. He stood there, eyes closed, hand on the door handle, until a voice from behind startled him out of his indecision.

“Tarrin,” called the warm voice.

Tarrin turned and looked. It was Jula, the Sorceress who had braided his hair. She smiled at him and approached, putting her hand on his forearm.

“Are you unwell?”

“No, Madam Jula,” he said quietly. He heard sudden commotion in the other room. They knew he was here. “I’m alright.”

“Good,” she said with a smile, patting his arm. “Have a good day.”

Tarrin watched her leave, then he took a deep cleansing breath, and turned the handle.

They were all there, as was the Keeper. Seated around a polished oak table that was the main facet of the room, surrounded by many plush chairs. A single window stood on the far wall. But it was the faces of his family that captured his attention, mainly his mother. He watched that face blink once, and then a look of profound relief and joy swept over her features. “Tarrin!” she called, coming around the table.

Tarrin met her half way and buried her in his arms, lifting her up off the ground, all the relief in the world flooding over him. “Mother,” he said quietly, in a voice that communicated all the fear and anxiety he had felt at meeting her.

“I need my ribs, my son,” she gasped. He let go of her and hugged his father in almost exactly the same way, then he picked up Jenna and whirled her around a few times, as she held onto his neck. He cradled his beloved little sister up in his arms, laughing delightedly. She reached up and touched his cat ear delicately, then started feeling along its ridge-backed length. “It’s soft,” she remarked.

“It’s sensitive,” he warned, though he didn’t stop her.

“I think it’s cute,” she said with a grin.

“Well thank you,” he grinned, setting her down. “You have no idea how frightened I was--”

“I know, Tarrin, I know,” Eron told him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “But no matter how you look, or what happens, you’ll always be our son, and we will always love you.”

Tarrin put his paw over his father’s hand, his eyes grateful and warm.

“Well, I think you need time,” the Keeper said. “Show them around, Tarrin.” And then she took her leave.

“How did it happen, Tarrin?” Elke asked calmly. “They only told us that you’d been changed. They didn’t give us details.”

They sat down, each paw holding a hand of a parent and Jenna in his lap, playing with his tail idly, and he recanted the events that had led him up to that point. “I don’t really blame Jesmind,” he said, looking down a bit. “I just wish she’d give up on this and just wait. She doesn’t understand.”

“She’s only doing what she thinks best,” Elke said.

“Well, it’s not best for me,” he replied calmly. “Jenna, don’t pick at the fur. That hurts.”

“Sorry,” she apologized. He pulled his tail free of her hand, and then rapped the end against her forehead, making her giggle. Then he let her grab it again and continue her inspection.

“You seem to have taken to the tail,” Eron remarked.

“It’s not easy to ignore,” he chuckled. “It has its uses.”

“I’m sure,” Elke said. She turned his paw over and ran her finger along the large pad on the palm, then over the smaller pads on the fingers. Then she pinched his fingertip gently, coaxing a long, sharp, wickedly curved claw to come out. “Formidable,” she noted. “It’s too long. Where does it go?”

“The bones in the end of my fingers are forked,” he told her. “The claw stays between them. When its retracted, you can feel the base of it up by the knuckle. Just at the end of the pad on my fingertip.” He did so, feeling her fingertip put pressure on that very small bump that was the base of his claw.

“Clever.”

“Don’t congratulate me,” he told her. “I didn’t do it.”

She chuckled. “Guess not. What’s it like?”

“It’s not all that bad,” he told her. “But I have the Cat inside my head too. He kinda came with the body. Sometimes, sometimes I have trouble controlling it. When I get mad, or I’m in a fight.” He cut himself off. “Let me show you around,” he said. “The gardens here are very pretty.”

He took them on a tour of the grounds, introducing them to Faalken and the Knights, then showing the huge garden behind the north Tower, where the hedge maze was. Tarrin enjoyed it immensely, feeling the worries of the last month flow away at the touch of his parents’ hands, or the bright

laughter of his sister. They walked around the garden five times, then sat down on one of the marble benches. “We’ve decided to stay here, Tarrin,” Eron told him.

“Stay?” he repeated. “But the farm--”

“Tarrin,” Eron said. “Don’t worry about the farm.”

“But it’s our home, father,” he said.

“It’s not anymore,” Elke said quietly.

“What happened?”

“Not long after the Sorcerer arrived to train Jenna, the village was attacked by Dargu,” she told him. “We were all in the village that day. Emiris, the man sent by the Tower, gave his life to defend the village. He managed to make them turn and run, even with two arrows sticking out of his chest. He died with honor,” she said with respect in her voice. “When we got back to the farm, it was clear they’d been there. The common room was ransacked, but they missed everything else. We’re not sure why...your father thinks that they were ordered out before they could finish, which is really strange. Dargu never give up easy pickings that way. Anyway, instead of risking another Dargu assault, we decided to bring Jenna closer to the tower, and we thought that with us close by, it may make you feel more at home here.” She patted his paw. “So we cleaned up, packed what we wanted to bring, stored the rest, and came here. When you leave the Tower, we’ll go back home. Maybe,” she said. “I rather like it here, and Eron’s starting to get a bit restless out there in the forest. I think a couple of years in the city will be good for him. And the Sorcerers said they’d see if they couldn’t fix his limp,” she added with a smile.

“I’m used to it now,” he said mildly.

“True, but you’d be more fun to chase around the bedroom if you weren’t so easy to catch.”

Tarrin laughed, and Eron flushed a bit. He figured that it was his exposure to his mother that made him relate so well with Allia, and at one time, with Jesmind. They all three were very much alike.

“I’ll miss the old farmhouse,” Tarrin sighed, “but I guess it’s not all that important.”

“No, not really,” Elke replied. “What matters is that we’re still a family, no matter where we are.”

“Amen,” Eron said.

They ate dinner that night in the same private room where he’d met them, and they all sat around the table and talked for quite a while. The Dargu attack had been sudden, but only a very few houses were damaged, and though there were casualties, they had been light. Only three men had been killed, all of them men Tarrin didn’t know very well, who lived to the northeast of the village. The Sain farm and the Ubara farm had been burned down, and a few fires in the village itself from burning arrows were just about it. Tarrin marveled at the change in his home village, how it had always been so peaceful and quiet. Now, two attacks in so many months. It was as if the entire world were starting to get unsettled.

But the villagers would cope. Elke respected them a great deal, though she didn’t show it, because they were strong. It took a special kind of people to live in a frontier village, where danger could show itself at any moment. The fact that Aldreth saw a lot of Dals come down from the mountains, and even the occasional Forest Folk wander in from the Frontier, made them a bit more cosmopolitan than normal backwater villages, and it gave them a tolerance for things that weren’t “home”. They were a rugged people.

“What have you seen so far, Tarrin?” Eron asked.

“Not much,” he chuckled. “I’ve been in the Tower almost all the time I’ve been here. I came in the middle of the night like a thief, and sight-seeing wasn’t on my mind. I--” he stopped abruptly, turning in his seat. Jesmind’s scent was touching him, and it made his ears instantly go back. He had no doubt that she was listening, and in an instant, he realized that if she could use his family to draw him off the Tower grounds. That filled him with a sudden icy rage, so sudden that the Cat roared up from the dark place in his mind and very nearly seized control.

“What’s the matter?” Elke asked.

He put up his paw to hush her, and he reached out with his formidable senses. Her scent was her cat-scent, and it was wafting in from the window.

He stood up, oblivious to the strange looks his family was giving him, padding on silent feet towards the window.

He had no choice now. To protect his family, Jesmind had to die.

“Get out of the room,” he said in a cold, tightly controlled voice.

“What?”

“Get out!” he shouted, as his hand lashed through the window and closed over fur. He drew his hand in, and whipped the white cat across the room. Jesmind yowled in shock and surprise as she sailed through the air, which turned into a screech when she slammed into the far wall with enough impact to chip the stones. Jesmind changed form, blurring into her human-like shape on her hands and knees, her eyes wide, and sudden fear glowing in them.

Utter, total rage boiled through Tarrin’s mind as he charged forward, picking up the table and sending his family tumbling in every direction. Jesmind seemed frozen in place, then she suddenly tried to spring out of the way as Tarrin leveled the table at her, but it was too late. He slammed the table into her, as it shattered from the impact, and for a moment she was pinned between the remains of the table and the wall, crying out in pain, until she got a leg up and put a foot on the table, then pushed it away. “Tarrin!” she gasped hurriedly, “I’m not here to fight! Tarrin!”

But Tarrin was beyond any mere words, and one look into his eyes told her that. There was nothing rational left in his eyes. She ducked under when he swung the table pedestal at her, her claws ripping the muscles in his arm and making him drop it. But instead of pressing, Jesmind backed away, quickly, backing straight towards the window.

She never saw it coming.

Eron stepped up behind her and smashed a table fragment into the back of her head, and she crumpled like a rag doll.

Yet that wasn’t enough. Tarrin was on top of her in the span of a heartbeat, kneeling over her with one paw on her chest to hold her down, the other rising with claws out to finish her off. She put both her paws on his wrist, weakly trying to push him away, but her eyes were unfocused and she had no strength in her arms.

“Tarrin!” Elke gasped in shock. She grabbed his wrist with both hands. “You can’t! She’s defenseless!”

Tarrin yanked suddenly, sending Elke reeling, but she would not let go. “No!” she barked at him. “Tarrin!”

He rose up off of Jesmind and smashed Elke against the wall, her feet dangling half a span off the floor, holding her up by the paw she held in her grip, as the other paw reared back, claws out. Her stunned look of terror did not register to him. At that instant, she was not his mother, she was an enemy, someone trying to stop him.

He didn’t know what would have happened, had Eron not smashed him in the back of the neck with the table leg. The blow made him let go as he gasped in pain, staggering back. The blow knocked some sense back into him. Jenna was crying hysterically. Elke Kael was wheezing for breath, and Eron was just beside him, ready to hit him again should do anything untowards.

Tarrin looked up, and he realized what had almost happened. He had very nearly killed one of the most important people in his life. “What have I done?” he said in a voice filled with self loathing.

He had almost killed his mother.

He stepped back, putting his paws to his face, bending over to hide from the shame and agony of it.

He had almost killed his mother.

Everything he had ever feared had come to pass. He was losing control of himself, becoming the monster that he appeared to be. Not even his own family was safe around him any more. He would have killed Jesmind, and he would have killed Elke, had his father not stopped him.

He had almost killed his mother.

He stood up and wailed, a sound of such loss and despair that it made the hair on the back of Elke Kael’s neck stand up, a wail filled with such self-loathing and guilt that it nearly broke her heart. He looked at her then, and in his eyes she could see his blame, his guilt, his apology, and she could see his horror. It was such a look of pleading, of terror, of guilt...it was the look of a man who had lost all hope for himself. He had almost killed her,

and Elke understood with that look that it was the one thing that he could not bear, the one horror against which he could not stand.

He had almost killed his mother, and it was the one crime for which there was no forgiveness.

Tarrin flinched away from his mother's gaze, turned, and jumped from the open window.

The Cat-woman groaned a bit and pushed herself up on her hands, looking out the open window. Blood was oozing from the corner of her mouth. "Did you have to hit me so hard?" she complained, rubbing the back of her head.

"I don't think I hit you hard enough," Eron said in a cold voice, one that made her flinch.

"That fool," she spat, sitting up. "I warned him about this, but he wouldn't listen to me." She got to her feet, wobbling a bit, as Elke comforted the nearly-hysterical Jenna. "Tell the Keeper that I'll take care of it."

"How, by killing him?"

Jesmind looked at the blocky man, her eyes grim. "No, he'll do that for himself if someone doesn't stop him," she said. "I didn't come here to fight, but he thought that I was. I didn't know that you people were his family. He was fighting to protect you from me. I'm responsible for this," she said, sighing, "and I have to put things right. Tell the Keeper I'll bring him back, alive, no matter how long it takes."

She pushed her red hair out of her face. "Unless I'm too late. Right now, he's looking for somewhere to die. I hope I find him before he finds a good spot."

In the morning, all that was found of him were his clothes, ripped from his body, then folded as neatly as shredded clothes could be folded.

Chapter 9

He had no idea how long he had wandered.

Tarrin was padding slowly beside a pile of reeking garbage in a narrow, crooked back alley, so exhausted that he could only move one leg at a time. He had ran all night, in his cat form, running from the horrors that he had almost carried out, running from himself.

He wanted to die. He wished to the Gods that Jesmind had taken his life back in Torrian, that he would have just laid there and let her rip out his throat. The guilt of his crime had crushed all will and hope from him, and it was as if his life was over. But that had not happened, and the Gods had not answered his prayer and struck him dead, so he was going to have to do it himself. Suld had a nice deep harbor. A walk off the pier would end his agony, would forever silence the animal, the monster, inside him.

The only problem was, he was lost.

Suld did not gently slope down towards the sea as most port cities did. It was a slightly hilly area in a natural harbor, and the land rose and fell in very gentle waves that had no definite direction. The stench of the city blocked out the smell of the sea, and his very small size prevented him from seeing it. And he had no idea at all of where he was.

The irony of it almost made him laugh. He couldn't even kill himself right.

He dragged himself along several streets, wandering aimlessly with his head down and his tail dragging the ground, until he could go no farther. He was on a wide street in a classier part of town, where iron fences separated well kept lawns and gardens from the street and from each other, and where large houses rested on sizable plots of land. It was dawn, and already many carriages, horses, and pedestrians were going about their daily business. He needed to stop, to rest, but he couldn't do it here. He would be disturbed, and the last thing he wanted was to be disturbed.

He wriggled himself between the iron bars of a fence and crawled up under a well manicured shrub. It was dark, and cool, and peaceful there. A fitting place, a quiet place. A place to reflect. He was too numb now to feel the pain, there was only the memory, the sight of his mother staring at him in fear, the knowledge that had he not been stopped, he would have taken the life of one of the people on that world that he would die for. His family had come to find Tarrin, but they had found the beast that lurked within him, the beast that he could not control. He would die before he hurt his family.

And he had to die to make sure that he didn't.

He would sleep. Close his eyes and let the slumber take him, hold him, keep him sedate and calm, keep him from hurting anyone else. He would lay down under that excellent bush, and he would sleep.

And he would remain so until he was dead.

He collapsed under the bush unceremoniously, too tired to even make himself comfortable. Then he closed his eyes, and dreamless oblivion engulfed him.

He was only vaguely aware of the hands on him until he was totally surrounded by them. The scent of a very young human filled his nose, one whose hair smelled of lilac, and his nose and fur were being held against a very soft fabric. Linen, maybe, or silk.

"Aww, what happened to you, little kitty?" a piping girl-child's voice called, as a tiny hand started petting him. "You like you were chased through a garbage pile." Tarrin remained limp in her arms, eyes closed, even though he was awake. He really didn't care. It was as if anything that was done had no meaning for him, and he drifted in his own world of unfeeling numbness. He could hear, and understand, but it had no importance to him. If she petted him, he did not care. If she took him by the head and broke his neck, so much the better.

"Aww, you must be sick," she said, compassion in her voice. "Don't you worry, little kitty, I'll take care of you."

He felt himself being carried, and then a door was opened. "Mother, look what I found in the garden," she said brightly.

"Janette!" came a shocked gasp. "You take that, that *creature* back outside this instant!"

"But she's sick, mother!" the child protested. "And she's lost, and all alone. She must be scared half to death."

"Is it even alive?" she asked suddenly.

"She's breathing," the girl told her mother confidently. "I think she just needs a warm place to sleep and some food, and she'll be alright."

"No!" the woman said adamantly. "I will not have that animal in my house."

There was a brief pause. "Then you take her," the little girl said with surprising firmness in one so young. "If you throw her out, she's going to die. And I won't do that."

It was a devastatingly effective tactic, it seemed, for Tarrin was shortly thereafter bathed and put on a soft pillow, with a small coverlet put over him to keep him warm. The little girl stayed right beside him, filling his nose with her scent, scratching his ears and petting him, crooning soft words to him. Her gentle, sing-song voice disrupted his attempts to return to the oblivion he so badly wanted, but he refused to open his eyes, or so much as move. To do so was to recognize life, abandon his will to end his life, and it was hard enough suppressing the Cat's instincts, the foremost of which was the instinct of self-preservation. He would lay there until he died; the little girl was just dragging out his wishes.

The little girl proved to be a stubborn opponent. Long after most children would have lost interest, the little girl was still there. She refused a call to lunch, and then another call to dinner, staying by him, reading to him, petting him and trying to coax him into activity. She ignored the maids, the butler, and even her own mother's firm command to "leave that creature be and come eat your dinner". She stubbornly stayed by him, even when her father came into her room.

"Your mother said you found a cat, and you won't eat your dinner," he said in a firm voice.

"She needs somebody with her, father," she said maturely.

The coverlet was pulled from him. "But she's asleep, pumpkin," he argued. "You should let her sleep and come down and eat your supper."

"She may be asleep, but she's all alone in a scary place," the little girl told her father. "I don't want her to be sad. You don't get well when you're sad. You told me that yourself."

"Uhm, yes, well," he floundered, unable to counter her argument. "She's wearing a collar," he remarked. Tarrin felt a tug on the black metal collar around his neck, the transformed *shaeram*. "I'll ask around and see if anyone has lost a cat. If we can get her home, maybe she'll get well faster. And you can eat your dinner."

Dinner was brought up to the little girl, who managed to outlast her parents on that score. He could smell roasted beef just in front of his nose, but his desire to be no more was so strong that even the primal force of hunger could lift him from the pillow.

As Tarrin's will ebbed away, even his will to die, he retreated farther and farther into himself, fleeing from the pain, finding the oblivion he so desperately sought inside his own mind. He found an easier way, a simpler way, to find peace. He opened his mind to the Cat, and allowed its awareness to join with his seamlessly, completely. The Cat knew only of now, that moment. The past and the future were irrelevant, meaningless to it. It was the now that mattered, and in that eternal now, Tarrin could find peace, refuge from the pain, from the guilt, from the agonizing, nightmarish memories of what he had done.

Tarrin had feared his instincts, loathed them, tried to control them. He found peace by surrendering to them. And in that surrender, the sentient being that was Tarrin was suspended, pushed by the wayside, taking up that dark place in their mind where the instincts had once lurked. It was dark there, and there was only the impressions of senses, a vague awareness of reality...and there was no pain. Caught up in the eternal now that was the way of the thinking of the cat, there was no past, no pain from the past, no future, no fear of what it would bring. There was only now, and in that now, there was no pain.

In that instant, that eternal now, Tarrin was the observer, the lurker, and the Cat was the one in control.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The room was a large, airy one, full of light and brightness and cheer. He was on a large bed, propped on a pillow. It was warm, and safe, and he felt secure in his surroundings. A plate of meat was sitting just away from his nose, but he was so weak that he could not fight off the coverlet to reach it. The Human in him knew the words that were the things he could see, could understand the sounds that the human made, and he used that knowledge. He was a pragmatic creature; though the Human seemed both alien and a part of him at the same time, he had no fear of it, and was not afraid to allow its greater understanding of things guide it.

The little human made a bevy of delighted sounds when she saw his open eyes, sitting down beside him and hand-feeding him the much needed meat. He felt safe in the presence of the little human, safe and protected, as safe as he would feel curled up against his mother's stomach.

That thought caused a pang of hurt through the Human in him, but he could not understand why.

He accepted the little mother's preening sedately. He was warm, and safe, and there was no hurt or hunger. He was content. He closed his eyes and purred his contentment.

However much he wanted unfeeling sleep, the reality of life would not allow Tarrin to slip away.

Tarrin's attempt to submerge himself into the Cat had worked, but only up to a point. He too shared the Cat's eternal now of existence. In mere hours, he lost his feelings against the memory of what happened, and that was what caused his rational mind to flow back up from the darkness. What was past was past, and it was of no moment.

That first night, as Janette slept contentedly with him laying at the foot of her bed, Tarrin's rational mind rejoined the Cat in the world of the outside. Unlike his attempts to quell or control the Cat, the Cat welcomed

his awareness as a brother, and made room for him in the forefront so that they both may live the life that was theirs. It was a poignant lesson to his rational mind, about how badly he had misjudged the instincts that were inside him. They were not all evil and destructive. He still didn't trust himself, but he had come to the conclusion that, so long as he was not put in a position where he would be challenged, he would be content.

And living out his life as a little girl's pet seemed to him to be an excellent way to go about it.

The Cat didn't mind; all it was worried about was food, shelter, and protection, and those existed in this place.

It was perfect. It fulfilled all his physical needs while providing him a place to create a new life for himself, a life free of the pain and guilt that had nearly destroyed him. Janette's house was a good place to hide, and it was a place where he could find a simpler existence, free of the pressures and failures of his past.

The next morning, the matronly, gray-bunned maid opened the door and called to the girl, waking her up. She yawned and stretched, then looked right at Tarrin. "Good morning, little kitty," she called, reaching down and picking him up. Tarrin decided that he rather liked being held and cuddled, because the girl's touch was surprisingly gentle, and there was a selfless giving love in her touch that was impossible to ignore.

In her nightclothes, she trudged down the stairs to the small room where her parents were taking their breakfast. The mother flashed the daughter a stern look the minute she noticed her. "Do you have to carry that creature around?" she demanded.

"She doesn't know her way around yet," Janette countered artfully. For such a young girl, not even ten, she seemed to know exactly what to say to play her parents like a lute. "And besides, she was sick yesterday. I don't want her getting tired."

"I think the cat can walk on her own, pumpkin," her father said, trying a different tactic. "And it's important for animals to exercise while they're getting well. It makes them get well faster."

"Really?" she said. "Then I'll take her out into the garden after breakfast."

"That may be a good idea," he said.

"Maybe it will run away," the mother murmured under her breath to her husband.

"I think I'll call you Shadow, little kitty," the little girl said with a smile, handing him a piece of breakfast sausage.

"Don't get too attached to her, pumpkin," the father warned. "I'll ask around and find out who owns her today. She may be going home."

"Then I'll go visit her," she said diffidently.

But the trip "home" never materialized that day. It was spent with the little girl coddling him outrageously, walking with him around the gardens, and inside it was a game with a little wooden doll tied to a string. Despite having a human awareness, the Cat in him absolutely could not resist attacking that little wooden doll, and Janette was inexhaustible in her desire to drag it for him. They played like that for hours and hours, until a call to dinner interrupted the game.

The humans ate as Tarrin laid sedately by the fireplace in the main room. He was content. And he was content to stay where he was as long as he could.

"What do you *mean*, you can't find him!" the Keeper, Myriam Lar, raged to her Council. It was the day after Tarrin's flight from the Tower. The Keeper had already made some very grim plans for Jesmind, though from what she'd managed to piece together, it wasn't really anyone's fault. Jesmind happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even Tarrin's parents agreed that she had made no attempt to fight, only to try to reason with Tarrin. "That weave was to hide him from his enemies, not to hide *him* from *us*!"

But Tarrin's disappearance was of the most dreadful concern. They *needed* him. Allia wouldn't be enough, they needed him. And now he was out in the city, either trying to kill himself or trying to kill everyone he could get his paws on. Either way, it was a dangerous and deadly situation.

"The tracking weaves we spun into the amulet aren't working, Keeper," Amelyn Storm, the Mind seat, said bluntly. "We don't know why. We know they're still active, but we can't get a direction out of them. As to the non-detection, that's working, and working too well. It's blocking some of the indirect weaves we've been trying to use to find him. We never expected to have to rely on them to find him," she said quickly to head off the comment. "That's what the tracking weave was for."

"Has anyone tried weaving a spell to find the Adamantite that the amulet is made of?" Koran Dar, the Amazon Air seat, offered in his quiet voice. Koran Dar was the youngest of them, but he was a very wise man, and his voice was heeded when he bade to speak.

"I tried that," Darrian Goldaxe, the Dal Earth seat, growled in his rocky voice. If anyone could find a metal, it was Darrian, who was much like the earth, and the Earth-God for whom he was named. He had a special affinity for metals, which was the main reason he sat on the Earth Seat. "I think the Were-cat's magical nature is masking it."

"That's possible," Ahiriya grunted. She too was named for a Goddess, the Goddess of Fire. It was amazing to the Keeper how some parents just seemed to know what their children would be when they were born...or maybe the children, with such important names, drifted towards the significance of them. "That may also be why our finding weave isn't working."

"Keeper," Amelyn said quietly, "we should leave open the option of finishing him. If he goes on a rampage, he could kill hundreds of people."

"Then let him," she growled. "He's too important, Amelyn. That Death spell was only set in place should he fall into the hands of the *katzh-maedan*. If he leaves the city, then we may have to use it, but not until then."

"As you decide, Keeper, but keep in mind that he may already be mad. And I can't undo his madness."

"I'm aware of the limitations, Amelyn," Myriam said. Because Tarrin wasn't human, it rendered him almost totally immune from Mind weaves woven by those not of his race. It had to do with thought; since he wasn't human, he didn't think in the same way that humans did, and that made his

mind closed to those weaves that the Mind affluents used. But in this case, that was a liability. It removed the Tower's options of simply controlling him through Sorcery, or curing or holding off his incipient madness.

"With all due respect, Keeper," Jinna Brent, the fox-faced Shacèan Water seat said in her accented voice, "but Tarrin, he may not be the one, no? It could still be the Selani, or the Wikuni. Or maybe one we have not found."

"I'm almost positive it's him," she said, tired of this old argument. "What little information we have to go on fits him almost perfectly."

"But he is too much trouble, no? Already he causes us grief. Maybe another would do, yes? The woman Were-cat, she is still here. It would not be hard."

"And are *you* going to volunteer?" Myriam asked icily. It was answered with silence. "Tarrin had a very strong mind, and it seems like it was too much for him. How powerful do you think your will is, Jinna? Amelyn? Koran Dar? Nathander?" She crossed her arms under her breasts. "You all know that the one has to be powerful in Sorcery, and if it's not him, then it might have to be one of us."

"Better him than me," Darrian growled.

Myriam grunted. "Have the city guards tripled," she said. "Have them look for him, and for any stray black cats they find. He has to be hiding somewhere in the city, and we have to find him before he either goes berzerk, kills himself, or tries to flee."

Tarrin was more or less adopted into the house of Tomas the merchant, his wife Janine, and their daughter Janette, because Tomas the merchant couldn't find the missing owner. There was also Nanna the maid, Dernan the butler, and Deris the cook, and the uncountable ladies that made up Janine's social circle.

It was a large house, with three stories and a basement, filled with expensive furniture, silk buntings, and intricate tapestries, and where Arakite rugs laid thickly on the floor. It was the domain of Janine the wife, and she ran it like a little general. Everything had a place, and it was kept in

strict order. Even the dust was strictly arranged by size and consistency before Nanna had a chance to come by and sweep it up. At first, Janine the wife had no idea where Tarrin would fit into that order. He was a cat, after all, and she had real fear for her expensive tapestries and curtains. But Tarrin solved that problem by remaining as inobtrusive to the suspicious woman as possible. He stayed almost exclusively with Janette, and any time he and Janine the wife shared company, he was careful to remain sedate and quiet. He did not claw the furniture or rip up the tapestries. He did not soil the carpets, and he was the picture of gentility when Janine the wife was entertaining her silk-clad lady friends, playing Tarok or stones. Dernan the cook, Nanna the maid, and most of the ladies absolutely adored Tarrin, and that seemed to grind Janine the wife's gears somewhat. The one thing he absolutely would not do was so much as scratch Janette. Even in his semi-aware state, he understood the calamity that would befall the little girl, should he bite her. So in their long, endless games, he was very, very careful not to even scratch her by accident. If she got too close in the game, he would stop. He would not lick her, nor would he let her anywhere near him either during or after his grooming of himself. He took no chance whatsoever that even the most fleeting contact with his spittle would transform her. He wouldn't put anyone else through the torment he'd suffered, the torment that put him in the house in the first place.

The majority of his time was spent with Janette, his little mother. Janette doted on him almost too much, and he was the central aspect of her life since the moment she found him under the bush. He adored his little mother with a passion, and was quite content to follow her around, always being near her. When she was bathing, or eating, or doing her studies with her mother, he was always close to her, usually laying by her feet sleeping. Any time her lilac-scent faded from his awareness, he went to find her. And once he knew where she was, he was content to let her be. Janette's parents had taken notice of Tarrin's unusual behavior, but had passed it off as a strange attachment stemming from her finding him and nursing him back to health. But it was more than that. Janette helped keep the pain away, and in her company he found love and acceptance.

There was very little concept of time in the Cat's eternal now, but Tarrin seemed to sense somehow that a considerable number of days had passed since she found him. He had that sensation because, over time, his human

awareness became more and more dominant, as if it was too strong for the Cat to totally subjugate. The catlike instincts were slowly taking on a human reasoning, and he started to become aware of things that had no meaning for him earlier. Things changed around the house to help him respark the human awareness, such as Janine's change of attitude towards him. At first, she barely tolerated him. But as time went on, and he proved that he was no threat to her decorations or her daughter, the woman fell into a gruff acceptance of him. She paid him no attention, but neither did she pay him any mind.

It was after Janette's bedtime when Tarrin was laying sedately by the fireplace. When he was not with his little mother, the fireplace was his domain. He would go to bed with her and wait for her to go to sleep, then he would lay by the fireplace until it fell to embers, when he would go back up and sleep at the foot of her bed. There was almost always a fire burning, even in the middle of summer, for light if nothing else, and its dry heat was very pleasing to him. Janette had had to practice the flute before bed, just one of many lessons she went through each day, as her mother turned her into a "proper lady". In that respect, the little girl drove her mother wild. Janette would have been much happier on a farm, because she loved to be outside, loved to crawl through the grass and climb trees and catch frogs. That was rather hard on the pretty silk and brocade dresses Janine the wife had her wear, and it was always a point of contention between them. Ladies did *not* do such things. What Janine the wife seemed to fail to understand was that Janette was *not* a Lady. She was a child. And crawling in the grass, climbing trees, and catching frogs were things that children did.

Janine the wife was there, in her favorite chair, reading from a thick book, as Tomas the merchant sat in his favorite chair next to her. Janine the wife was a tall woman, thin and shapely, with a pretty face and her brown hair done up on a bun most of the time, except when she was entertaining, when it was let down in cascading waves. Tomas the merchant wasn't at home very much during the day, off caring for his business. He was a thin, tall man with lanky arms and a gentle face, his brown hair thick and long, and done up in a single tail at the back of his neck. When he was home, he was either working on his papers or spending time with his family. Tarrin rather liked him, because he was a calm, unruffled sort of fellow with a very practical mind.

"You look worried, my love," Janine the wife said to him. The two of them seemed to be deeply in love. They certainly carried on as if they were.

"The *Star of Jerod* still hasn't come in," he said, biting his lip slightly. "It's three days overdue."

"That's only three days," she said.

"I know, but Bascone usually isn't late."

"I thought Bascone was captain of the *Wave Sprite*."

"He was," he said. "He took over the *Star* two months ago."

"I'm sure he's alright. There's been some rough weather south. He may have been delayed."

"I hope so," he said. "He was carrying Arakite silk, and if I lose that cargo, we're going to take a serious loss."

Tarrin looked into the fire, transfixed by the dancing of the flames. Just as he looked away, the fire popped suddenly. The sound startled him badly. Despite his time in the peace of the house, he still reacted with the reflexes of a warrior. He jumped up and faced the fire, hissing defensively, until he realized that it wasn't an attack. Then, feeling a bit foolish, he laid back down. Tomas the merchant's chuckle didn't help his pride much.

"He's a jittery thing," he remarked to his wife.

"I think her last owner wasn't very nice to her," Janine said grudgingly. "She follows Janette around like a puppy. It's like she thinks she's the only good person in the world."

"He," he corrected.

"I thought it was a girl."

"No, it's a boy."

"Janette thinks it's a girl."

"I know. I don't have the heart to tell her any differently." He shuffled a few more papers. "I hope Bascone puts in tomorrow," he sighed. "My buyers for that silk are getting impatient."

"Bascone's a dependable man," she assured him. "If he's late, then he ran into trouble."

"I know, and that's what worries me," he grunted.

"He's a good captain, dear," she said calmly. "It'd take nothing short of the Gods themselves to sink Bascone's ship."

"I can take the loss on the ship. It's that silk I can't afford to lose." There was a shuffle of more papers. "Oh well, I'll worry about it tomorrow," he sighed. "Shadow," he called.

Tarrin turned his head and looked at him. "He's a smart cat," he chuckled as he motioned to him. Tarrin got up and yawned, then padded over to Tomas's chair, and jumped up into his lap. He settled down as Tomas the merchant rubbed the back of his neck pleasingly.

"Not you too," Janine huffed. "Everyone in this house is in love with that creature."

"I think you keep saying that just to be contrary, dear," he accused. "You're just annoyed that our little girl browbeat you into keeping him."

There was a long silence, then Janine the wife laughed ruefully. "Maybe," she said. "Janette can be a terror when she has her mind set on something."

"She's her mother's daughter," he said fondly.

"Any word of who owns it?"

"None," he said. "I've asked all around the neighborhood, but nobody owned him. Not around here, anyway. Looks like we're stuck with him."

"I think that was a bit obvious," she said dryly.

Tomas the merchant chuckled. Tarrin started purring as Tomas's fingers found all the itches. "I don't mind him," Tomas the merchant said.

"He doesn't like me," Janine the wife said gruffly.

"Try being nice to him," Tomas the merchant replied.

"I am," she said indignantly.

"You don't kick him, or beat him, or dunk him in boiling water. Yes, you're so very nice to him," Tomas the merchant said. Janine the wife laughed helplessly.

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" she asked.

"I think I may send the *Sprite* out to look for Bascone," he said soberly. "He's using the standard route, so if he's in trouble, Pichet will be able to find him and help him."

"Is Pichet on the schedule?"

"Not right now," he said. "I can't buy that wool shipment until the silk comes in, so Pichet's in port until Bascone gets here. At least this way, Pichet and his sailors have something to do."

Janine the wife chuckled. "They do get rowdy after a few rides in port."

Tarrin tuned them out, putting his head down. Being a cat gave him a great deal of time to think, and lately, his thoughts were becoming more and more sober. He thought a lot about what had happened, and his current situation. More and more, he was starting to realize that being a cat was all well and good, but his human awareness made going through the motions day after day to get a bit old. And he'd been thinking of his family.

He missed them. Even with what happened, he loved his family very much, and knowing that they were only across town made it even worse. He knew they were worried about him, despite what happened, and that added to his concern. Allia was probably a wreck by now. Without him, she had nobody, and despite her strength, in this foreign land, a friend to talk to was absolutely vital to her. He just hoped that she met his parents, and that his parents and sister would somehow take his place in her life. Give her someone to talk with. Dar was probably in the Initiate by now; he wasn't sure, because time had a surreal quality to him, caught between his human awareness and the Cat's eternal now as he was. Tarrin hoped that Sorcery was everything the young man dreamed it would be. He had several real reasons to leave, to return to his life and take up his responsibilities.

But the knowledge of what he had done, and his fear of himself, kept him firmly in place. It was better for him to stay here, stay in a place where there was no temptation, no danger. His little mother was the sole reason he hadn't gone totally mad, and wasn't dead at that moment. If not for her, he

would be gone. And in her arms, he felt absolutely safe and secure, and knew that nothing bad would befall him. He knew that that little girl was the only thing standing between him and insanity, and he just didn't feel he was ready to go on without her there to soothe his fears and make all the pain melt away. He just wasn't ready to leave.

He wondered what happened to Jesmind. Without him there, she had no reason to stay. And after so much time, if she hadn't found him yet, she wasn't going to find him. He wondered if she was combing the forests and plains around Suld in an attempt to track him down.

The next day taught him that *someone* was looking for him. Nanna the maid answered the door, where a sober looking young man wearing a coat and breeches of soft gray velvet stood. He was wearing a *shaeram*. Tarrin hunkered down in the shadow of the hallstand as the man took off his three-corner cap and greeted Nanna the maid politely. "Good morning to you, madam," he said. "I was wondering if you could help me."

"What do you need, good sir?" she asked.

"The Tower is looking for something, madam," he said. "It's a black cat, just a bit larger than an average cat. He's wearing a black collar. Have you seen such a cat?"

It hung there for several seconds. "Whatever is the Tower doing looking for a cat?" Nanna the maid asked curiously.

"It belongs to the Wikuni Princess," he said ruefully. "If it's not found, there's going to be some very strained words passing over the Sea of Storms."

"Well, I'm sorry, good sir, but I've not seen this cat you seek."

"Ah, well," he sighed. "Should you spot him, there's quite a substantial reward for the one who brings him back. You can bring him to the Tower gate, and the guard there will direct you."

"I'll keep that in mind, good sir," she said. "I'm sorry, but I have work to do. Good day to you."

"A good day to you, madam," the man said, dipping his cap to her again. Then Nanna the maid shut the door. She shook her head, and then noticed Tarrin hunkered down under the hallstand. Nanna the maid didn't

miss much of anything. "The Royal cat, eh?" she chuckled, beckoning to him. Tarrin approached her warily, an irrational thought that she meant to carry him after the Sorcerer crossing his mind. But she just cradled him in an arm, scratching him behind the ear. "Well, get that out of your system, Shadow," she smiled. "I saw how you acted when you got here. That royal brat was very mean to you, and I'll not give you back to be tortured. Besides, Janette would be devastated."

And that was that. Nanna the maid never made mention of the visit to the others, not even to Tomas the merchant, and it was simply dropped.

But it was important to Tarrin, and he brooded over it for several days after the visit. It was obvious that though he was done with the Tower, the Tower was nowhere near done with him. It also told him that they did want something from him, else they wouldn't be looking for him. And it told him that they knew he was still inside the city, else they wouldn't waste people's time by sending Sorcerers door to door looking for him. But, on another note, he realized that they couldn't find him with Sorcery, else they'd have been here the day after he fled. That was a very important bit of information, something that he filed neatly away in his memory. But he was a bit more careful after that, not going out into the areas of the garden that were visible from the street, and not laying in the windowsills looking out as he used to do.

But life inside did not change. He was still with his little mother most of the time, content to just be near her when she was busy with something else. And yet, as days passed, he found that his desire to be with his little mother faded from fanatical, to important, to merely being his wish. He was healing, he knew, coming to terms with the trauma that had put him in Janette's arms in the first place, and he was relying less and less on the little girl's calming love and affection.

It was probably then that he knew that, while he loved this house dearly and everyone in it, that it would not make him content to live out his life here. Eventually, he would leave, would have to leave, and find a life for himself elsewhere. Janette would grow up, and her life would become full with husband and children. And while he knew that, should he stay, he would be a part of that life, it seemed wrong to him to take away something from her just for his own selfish desires.

He knew it would be soon, but "soon" was a very vague concept to one that had trouble marking the passage of time.

He laid and thought about his eventual departure often, while Janette was busy with something else, but he had no idea how many days it had been since he had made that decision. The eternal now of the cat prevented him from simply counting the days, since the memories of the past days seemed to blur into one another in a jumble that made it impossible to discern one day from another. Janette's world was one of strictly regimented activity, for she performed the same lessons almost every day, did the same things every day, and there was nothing different from which Tarrin could refer to try to calculate the amount of time that had passed. All he had to go on was the seasons, and it was still hot outside during the day and warm in the night. It was still summer.

It had been a day, like any other. Janette had spent time with him between her lessons, playing with him, or taking a nap with him, or just petting him, as she always did. After dinner, she was sent to bed, and Tarrin stayed at the foot of her bed, as was his custom, until she was asleep. Once she was asleep, he would go down to the fireplace and lay on the hearthstones, soaking up the fire's warmth and listening to Tomas the merchant and Janine the wife talk. He was on his way there when a sound from the kitchen disturbed him. Thinking it was Deris the cook, Tarrin thought to beg a treat from the portly, jovial man before moving into the living room. Deris was a friendly man, and like the rest of the household, he rather liked Tarrin. He gave Tarrin scraps and treats whenever he was cooking, so Tarrin made a special point to be the man's friend.

But it was not Deris in the kitchen. It was empty, and the sound he heard was someone using a thin probe to unset the latch on the door. Tarrin's ears laid back as he realized it was an intruder, not Deris. The door opened, and a thin man dressed in dark clothes, and carrying a knife in his hand, stepped into the sacred confines of his little mother's house. Tarrin came around the corner ears laid back, back up, and growled at the man threateningly. He wouldn't get in without a fight.

"'Ere now," the man chuckled in an evil voice. "The mouse thinks 'e's a lion, 'e does."

The man took a step towards him, but he did not move. It occurred to Tarrin that if they made a racket, Tomas the merchant would investigate, and he would walk in unarmed against a man with a knife. His life would be in very real danger. And since he had been in the form of the cat for so long, simply changing form to deal with the bandit didn't occur to him; changing form was something he didn't even think of anymore without working himself up to it. Tarrin knew he was no match for a human, not as a cat, but he absolutely could not let the man get by him. The life of his little mother depended on it.

In desperation, Tarrin suddenly felt something *drawing in*, filling him with a seething life that almost set his blood on fire. A fuzzy image of fire came to him, fire roaring from the hands of a pretty brown-haired girl, even as the world around him seemed to be overlaid with impressions of glowing strings crisscrossing the room. The sensation of *drawing in* moved those strings, causing them to draw towards him, until little pieces of them flew out and entered him.

That image of fire seemed to weave itself from his imagination and into reality. A red-hot tongue of flame lashed from him, simply materializing in front of the defensive cat, and it roared at the man. It washed over him, singeing his hair and setting small licks of fire to his clothes before flashing out of existence nearly as quickly as it appeared. The man cried out and dropped the knife, staggering back towards the door. Angry red welts were already forming on his face, and the skin on his hand had an almost liquid consistency from its immersion in Tarrin's fire. "It's a devil-cat!" he cried, then he turned and fled out the door.

Tarrin suddenly felt too weak to move. It was as if all his strength was sucked out of him with that fire. He wilted to the floor as a suddenly concerned Tomas charged around the corner, holding a rapier in his hand. Tarrin was surprised that Tomas held it with a cool familiarity that told him that the man knew how to use it.

"Shadow!" he called in sudden concern, kneeling by the exhausted Tarrin and putting a gentle hand on his back. "Are you hurt, boy?" he asked, his eyes staying on the door.

"What's the matter, Tomas?" Janine the wife called, coming up behind him.

"The kitchen door is open," he said. "I think someone tried to sneak in, but it looks like Shadow here startled them."

Strong hands picked him up, and Janine cradled Tarrin to her breast, her free hand checking him for injuries. Despite his exhaustion, he meowed plaintively to her, and put her head against her shoulder. "There's a knife on the floor," Janine said.

"I think Shadow attacked the man," Tomas the merchant chuckled. "He must have been up on a counter, and leaped at him when he came in. That's a good cat," he said with a laugh, petting him gently.

"He knows who feeds him," Janine said with a laugh.

Tomas looked out the door, then closed it, reset the latch, and then locked it. Then he picked up the knife. "It's still warm," he noticed. "I think I'll have a talk with Deris about leaving the kitchen door unlocked when he's not in the room," Tomas the merchant said.

"Be easy on him, Tomas," Janine the wife said. "I'm certain that it was an accident. He's usually very careful."

They took him back to the living room, where Tarrin spent most of his night on Janine's lap. He was very frightened, frightened of what had just happened, so he clung to the woman like a child clinging to its mother. Janine, a bit startled that Tarrin would show her so much affection, stroked and soothed him the way only a mother could, easing him from the death-grip his claws had on her and coaxing him into simply laying on her lap.

He had used Sorcery. And just like his sister, it had been raw, uncontrolled, an attack made in desperation. That changed everything. It was the reason he had fled from Jesmind in the first place, and he realized that, until he learned how to control it, that he would not be safe, nor would others be safe around him. He could have easily set fire to the house, or killed himself with his ignorance. He knew then that he had to leave, and very soon. He had to go back to the Tower, go back to the only place that could help him control his power, and he had to go before it happened again. Next time, he may not be so lucky, and he knew it. He had to accept his responsibilities, stop hiding from them.

It was time to grow up.

Tarrin had been solitary all the next day. It hurt Janette a little bit, but Tomas the merchant and Janine the wife figured that he was still a bit shook up over his encounter in the kitchen. What he was doing was making a decision, one that didn't come lightly to him, and he needed time by himself in order to reach it.

That night, after everyone was asleep, Tarrin padded up into Janette's room. He looked at the darling little girl, all snug in her covers and with a cute little expression on her face. How he was going to miss her.

After a few moments of concentration, Tarrin changed form.

The realignment of his thinking was quite profound. After so much time in his cat form, with the cat in control, it was unusual to have to think through the cat's distraction in order to form thoughts. The cat accepted the reversal of roles graciously, returning to its place in the corner of his mind. And when it returned, Tarrin bade it farewell as a brother, not in relief that it was gone. The time in his cat form had allowed him to come to a deeper understanding of his cat instincts, and though he still feared what he may do someday when he was in a rage, at least he could face that future with at least some hope that he could prevent anything as horrible as what he nearly did to his mother from happening.

He knelt by her bed, putting a paw on her shoulder. "Janette," he called softly. "Janette, wake up. I need to talk to you."

The little girl opened her dark eyes. Though he was a stranger, Janette did not scream or look up at him in fear. The light of the moons and the Skybands filled her room with enough light for her to see his face, and though he was unknown to her, his gentle way of waking her seemed to allay any fear and replace it with curiosity. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm your cat," he said with a smile.

"You are not," she said indignantly.

"Yes, little mother, I am," he told her, cupping her cheek in his huge paw. "Well, I'm not *really* a cat. Not *just* a cat. Here, let me show you." He stood up and stepped back from her.

"You're not wearing any clothes," she remarked.

"I know," he shrugged. "I don't have any. Now watch." He changed form for her, and saw her eyes widen and heard her gasp. Then he changed back, and returned to his spot beside her bed. "See?"

"You're not a girl," she accused. Tarrin marvelled at her innocent way, at how she could so easily accept what would have been earth-shattering to an adult. Children were very adaptable.

Tarrin laughed. "No, I'm not a girl," he agreed.

"If you're not a cat, why were you a cat? Why stay here? Don't you have a home?"

"Well, it gets complicated, little mother," he smiled, stroking her hair. "You see, I was lost. I was lost, and very frightened, and very sad, and I didn't know what to do. I was so afraid that I didn't want to go on living. And then a little girl fished me out of a bush," he said, tapping the end of her nose with his fingertip. "You saved me, Janette. If you wouldn't have found me, I would have died. Here, with you, I found my way again, little mother." He cupped her cheek again, his paw almost swallowing her face up. "I can't ever thank you enough, Janette. You showed me how to live again."

Her eyes welled up with tears. "You're going to go away, aren't you?"

"Oh, pumpkin, I don't want to leave you," he said, collecting her up into his arms. "I love you very much, Janette. You're my very own little mother. But sometimes, we all have to do things that we don't want to do. Like when you take your lessons with the flute. I know you don't like it, but you have to do it." He looked into her eyes, wiping away a tear. "I have things I have to do out there in the world, little mother," he told her. "Just like your father, when he goes out every day to mind his affairs. As much as I love you, and I love this house, this isn't my place. I can't do what I need to do here. Can you understand that?"

"I guess so," she sniffled, "but I don't want you to go away."

"And I don't want to leave you," he said, smoothing her hair. "You're very important to me, little mother."

"Why do you call me that?"

"Because that's how I think of you," he smiled. "You are my very own little mother, there to make all the bad things go away. You made me feel like I had a reason to keep living, pumpkin, and because of you, I think I'm ready to go back to what I'm supposed to do. And every time I feel lost or scared, all I'll have to do is think of you, and it won't seem so bad." He sniffled. "I don't think you'll understand how much you mean to me, Janette. I was so close to giving up. So close that you'll never understand. And you brought me back. I want to thank you for that, Janette."

He held her very close for quite a while. "I'm sorry, pumpkin, but I have to go," he told her. "And for that, I'm going to need your help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"You have to open the door for me, little mother." He let go of her and changed form, then jumped up into her lap. He nuzzled her as she picked him up, and he savored the scent of her, the feel of her, as she carried him downstairs. She opened the door and set him down, tears rolling down her cheeks. He changed form again and knelt by her, holding her close one last time. "I'm going to miss you, little mother," he told her. "I wish there was something I could give you to remember me."

"I don't need something to remember you," she sniffled. "I don't want you to go, but if you have to, you have to."

"I won't be gone forever, pumpkin," he told her. "Someday, I'll come back. I won't be your cat, but I'll come back and see you."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he said, tapping her on the nose.

She was clutching something in her hand, then thrust it at him. "I won't need this with you gone. Maybe you'd like it. Just in case."

He took the object. It was the little wooden doll, tied to a string, the toy that they'd used to play with for hours on end, day after day. His eyes filled with tears as he clutched the tiny doll. "Oh, little mother, you still know just what to do to make me happy," he told her, hugging her. "This little toy means quite a bit to me." He fashioned the string into a loop, and then put the doll around his neck like a necklace. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Until then, think well of me."

"I will," she said. Then she gave him a look. "What is your name? I know it can't be Shadow."

"My name is Tarrin, little mother," he smiled.

"Goodbye, Tarrin," she said, putting her little arms around his neck. He held her close for a moment, and then let her go.

"Goodbye, Janette," he returned. "Don't forget to shut and lock the door," he warned. Then he let her go, and turned away from her. He didn't want to look at her again, else they'd be eating breakfast together. He changed form again, then slunk out of the garden, wriggled through the fence, and then went off in search of the Tower.

It only took him about an hour to find the Tower. The problem was getting in.

The guards were as thick as fleas on a dog. They patrolled the fence in such tightly packed patrols that it would be absolutely impossible to sneak in. He didn't want to just walk up to the front gate, because he wasn't sure how they would react to him. They may have received orders to kill him. He had no idea how long that he'd been gone, so he wasn't sure if they thought he was a raving maniac. Not that he'd been too far from it, but he didn't want to have to fight off a pack of guards just to prove that he wasn't crazy. He'd sat there and watched until well after the sun came up, looking for an opportunity to get in, but one never materialized.

He was laying under a wagon, pondering the situation, then something quite suddenly grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. He yowled and tried to kick free, but that grip suddenly wrapped around his neck. If he struggled too much, he'd break his own neck, so he went very still.

"I am *very* put out with you, cub," Jesmind's flat voice came to him, even as her smell, concealed by the miasma of the city, reached his nose. She turned him around and gazed into his eyes. Tarrin couldn't struggle, and with her paws on him like that, he couldn't even change form. "If you had *any* idea what I've gone through to find you," she grunted, then she sighed. "Ah well, that's water under the bridge now."

He hissed threateningly at her, and her flat eyes narrowed.

"Don't take that tone with me, cub," she said ominously. "Or I may forget my promise to your mother and kill you here and now."

"Promise?" he asked in the manner of the cat.

"I promised her I would bring you back alive, and I'll do just that. Now shut up. I regret it enough as it is, but my word is my word."

That revelation came on two fronts. One, that she had went out to find him not to kill him, but to return him to his mother. The other was that she had *very* strong prejudices against lying. When he split from her, she accused him of breaking his word. Now he understood why it made her so angry. It seemed to be a part of her elemental nature to accept a promise as a sacred bond, and if it was broken, then it violated her to the very core.

The ten men at the gate lined up to block her at first, but a few deadly looks made them part like water before her. Five followed her, at a discrete distance, as she made her way along the paved road that led to the central Tower. She carried Tarrin like a purse, still throttled at the neck, and Tarrin was pretty sure that it was because of him that they let her inside the grounds. "I can walk," he told her.

"No, you can't," she said in a grim tone. "If I let you go, you may take off again."

"I won't," he said. "You found me because I was coming back."

"I'm not taking any chances," she said in a cold tone.

She took him into the Tower, along the curved hallways, up stairs, until she reached the antechamber to the Keeper's office. Duncan, the Sorcerer who acted as the Keeper's personal secretary and attendant, stood as Jesmind barged into his office. In that large room, his desk was right by the door leading to the Keeper's office, and three of the four walls were lined with chairs and couches. He said not a word, just eyed the black cat in her paw keenly, then simply stepped to the side and opened the door for her.

The Keeper was sitting behind her redwood desk, scratching out a letter or some other correspondence, when Jesmind marched into her private domain. The floor was covered with a single massive Arakite carpet, and two ornate, deeply cushioned chairs stood in front of her desk. A portrait of a vibrant brown-haired man in robes hung behind her on the wall, the

room's only wall decoration. The Keeper's gray eyes narrowed as she looked up at the disturbance.

"I didn't think you'd have the nerve to face me, Were-cat," she said in a steely voice, setting down her pen.

Jesmind raised her arm, the one holding Tarrin, and then dropped him on her desk. "I said I'd bring him back alive. Here he is. Now take your thrice-damned curse off of me."

"Tarrin?" the Keeper asked in surprise.

Tarrin changed form right on top of her desk, and then he was kneeling on its wooden surface, staring down at the woman calmly. "Keeper," he said formally. "Can I hit her now?"

The Keeper laughed. "I may let you," she said. "Are you alright?"

"As well as can be expected," he said calmly. "I, just needed time alone for a while. I'm ready to go back."

"Good," she said. "Jesmind, leave."

"Not until you take your spell off!" she shouted. "I upheld my end of the bargain! Take it off *now*!"

"I can't do that," she said in an ominous voice. "You're still a danger to Tarrin, and I won't allow you to hurt him. Keeping you tame is in my best interest at the moment."

"You *lied* to me!" she screamed, her claws extending as her eyes flared from within with that unholy greenish aura.

"Jesmind!" Tarrin barked, jumping off the desk and putting a paw on her chest as the other took hold of her arm. In that instant, Tarrin came to understand why Jesmind hated him so much. It was more than a personal feeling between them. When he left her, she accused him of lying to her, of breaking his word. That was so totally against the basic nature of the Cat that it was her nature to take people at their word, and expect them to live up to it. Lying was a violation of the natural order of things, and that made any Were-cat angry. That, and there was her duty. She had a duty to try to kill him, to stop him from doing what he very nearly did. He could respect that, even more so now that he'd come so close to going mad. He looked

back at the Keeper. "You made a promise," he said grimly. "Take the spell off of her."

"I won't do that," she said.

"You *will*," he growled. "Because if Jesmind doesn't kill you, *I* will."

The Keeper's eyes widened. "But you hate her," she said. "She wants to kill you!"

"A promise is a promise," he said flatly. "I didn't understand that before. I do now."

Jesmind gave him a strange look, and she put a paw on his shoulder.

"You will take that spell off of her, and you will do it *right now*, or else this room will need a *lot* of cleaning. If you think either of us are nasty now, you should see what we can do when we're working together."

The Keeper blanched, standing up. "I'll need the Council. It's Ritual Sorcery. I can't do it alone."

"Then have someone bring them here," he said in a dangerous tone. "Now." Duncan paused at the door. "Now!"

"Duncan, go get the Council," the Keeper commanded.

"Don't think this changes anything between us," Jesmind said in a quiet voice.

"I don't expect it to," he replied. "I have no real quarrel with you, Jesmind. You have one with me. I don't look at you as an enemy, no matter how hard you try."

"Then come with me," she offered. "We can let the past be the past. We can start over."

"I can't do that," he told her. "I came back here for a reason, Jesmind. I can do Sorcery. I nearly killed myself with it while I was away. If I don't learn how to control it, I'll either accidentally kill you or end up killing myself. And the only place I can learn is here."

"Why do you have to be so stubborn!" she snapped, stamping her foot.

"Why do you have to be so contrary?" he retorted. "I only need a couple of years, woman. That can't be much more than a blink of your eyes."

"Then I guess we're back to where we started, aren't we?" she hissed.

"I guess so. Jesmind."

"What?"

"Don't even *think* of stepping on my tail."

She gave him a look, then laughed helplessly. "I see you've gotten over your silly modesty."

"You bring out the worst in me," he replied dryly.

"Yes," she said. "I imagine I do, at that."

"Are you calm now?"

"I guess so."

He let go of her and stepped back. "You look haggard."

"You're a damned hard man to find," she grunted, stretching a bit. "I haven't had a good night's sleep in almost a month. How's the arm?"

"Never better. You didn't rip enough out of it."

"You wouldn't hold still."

"That was the idea."

She gave him a long look. "You've changed, cub. A great deal. Was the time away good for you?"

"I managed to keep from going mad, if that's what you mean," he said.

"That must be where you got the doll."

He fingered the little doll absently. "A keepsake, from someone who helped me get through it," he said. Then he put his paw over the little doll to totally smother Janette's scent. He hadn't smelled any of it before, but he was going to take no chance that Jesmind would track his little mother down and use her to draw him out. "And no, I didn't kill anyone, before you ask."

"Small favors," she mused.

"I find all this rather entertaining," the Keeper injected dryly, "but I have work to do. Could you take your reunion outside?"

"No," they said in unison. "We don't leave your sight until the spell is off Jesmind," Tarrin added.

"I'm afraid I can't trust you anymore, Keeper," Jesmind said with hot eyes. "So we're going to keep an eye on you until you uphold your end of the bargain." She crossed her arms under her breasts, giving the diminutive woman an icy stare. "And I expect you to live up to our previous bargain as well. I promised not to touch Tarrin on the Tower grounds. And I'll uphold that. In return, I can come and go as I please."

"You threaten to kill me, and then you make demands of me, in my own office," the Keeper snorted. "You are either insanely brave or monumentally stupid."

Jesmind was about to say something, but Tarrin put a paw over her mouth. "Just let it drop," he told her.

"But--"

"Let it go," he said. She glared at him, but his powerful gaze made her lower her eyes. Then he saw those eyes harden. She was obviously flaring up at being stared down. "I'm not going to fight with you, no matter how pecky you get," he warned. "So just put it away."

"*Pecky?*" she repeated hotly. "You watch yourself, cub, or I'll tan your backside and shave your tail with a board! You're not too old to spank!"

"You even try, and I'll strip you bare and hang you out the Keeper's window like a flag," he retorted. "The whole city will see you in all your glory."

Jesmind actually blushed. That was *most* satisfying, with what she'd done to him in the past.

"Children!" the Keeper barked. "Can't the two of you stay peaceful even for five minutes?"

"No," they said in unison.

She threw up her hands. "Goddess, deliver me from this nightmare!" she cried out in a plaintive voice, then she sat back down. "Tarrin, for my sanity, *please* take my spare robe down from the peg behind the door and put it on. You're driving me crazy standing there with no clothes on."

He nodded, pulling down the dark silk robe. It was comically small, barely stretching around his chest, and not even reaching his knees. Jesmind laughed when she saw it, and Tarrin sighed forlornly. The Keeper motioned to him. "I'll fix that," she said. He came over to her, and he felt that peculiar sensation of *drawing in*, then she put her hands on the robe.

It quickly and silently grew out, falling to the floor and fitting him loosely and comfortably. Its basic style even changed, going from a feminine garment to a gender-neutral one.

"Neat trick," he noted.

"It makes fitting new clothes easy," she shrugged. "It's one thing that we'll teach you here. Any Sorcerer that can touch Earth can do that."

"Touch?"

"There are seven spheres of Sorcery, Tarrin," she said. "Since Sorcery is the magic of the world, they represent the powers that make up and influence our world. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, which represent the physical world. Mind, Divine, and the sphere of Confluence, or Energy, which represent the mystical aspects of the world. Some Sorcerers have a particular affinity for one Sphere. Some can't touch a particular Sphere at all. It's entirely personal. Most Sorcerers can touch all six spheres, but they're not equally strong in them. Most that can't touch all six can only touch four or five, but they're very powerful in at least one of the spheres they can touch."

"I thought there were seven," he said.

"There are. The sphere of Confluence can't be used by a single person. It's the sphere of Ritual Sorcery. It takes at least two Sorcerers to use it."

"Why?"

"We don't really know," she shrugged. "It just is." Duncan appeared quietly at the door. "Good. They're here?"

"Yes, Keeper."

"Bring them in, and let's get this overwith."

Tarrin stepped back and watched the quiet happenings curiously. There wasn't any senseless chatter. They didn't even stand in any particular

formation. But the sensation of *drawing in* was there, and it was powerful. Tarrin seemed to sense that, as a group, they could wield more raw power than the seven of them acting individually. As if the sum of their parts was a greater whole.

That, Tarrin remembered, was what set Sorcerers apart from all the other orders of magicians. Sorcerers could link together, forming circles, and use their power in a combined effort. The Priests could mimic some of that ability, but only where consecrating ground or curing curses was concerned.

Jesmind's form seemed to waver for a moment, and then she sighed explosively. "About time!" she growled. "Don't ever do that me again!"

"Just leave, Jesmind," the Keeper said stonily.

"Fine." She gave Tarrin a strange look. "Until later."

"I'll be waiting."

"You do that," she said with a wink, then she left the Keeper's office.

"He's very strong, isn't he?" a dark-haired woman said, one of the members of the Council. "I could feel the edges of him when we linked."

"He's used his power," a very tall amber-haired man remarked. "He has the touch on him."

"Yes," the Keeper remarked. Tarrin felt very uncomfortable with the seven of them staring at him. "For obvious reasons, he just can't go back to the Novitiate. We need to give him the Test, and place him in the Initiate."

"Tomorrow," Ahiriya agreed.

"Tarrin, go back to your room," the Keeper commanded. "It's still the same one. Put your Novice uniform back on. I'll send someone for my robe later. Oh, and do let Allia know you're back? She's been about ready to kill since you left."

"I will," he said. "What about my family?"

"I'll send word. They've bought a house out in the city, and are living out there."

"Thank you," he said. He bowed sinuously, then quickly evacuated the room. All those eyes on him was giving him a very uneasy feeling.

It felt strange being back in his room. All of his things were there, untouched, though he had no doubt that the Sorcerers searched through it at least five times. He still had no idea how long he was gone, but the memory of the room was still fresh, as if the suspension of time had preserved all those memories.

He didn't even have time to open his chest and pull out his clothes before the door banged open loudly. Allia, her lovely face contorted in a mask of both rage and joy, stalked into the room. He didn't even get a chance to greet her before she reared back and punched him dead in the jaw. Tarrin staggered back, spitting out a tooth knocked loose by the blow. He tried to get his hands up as she rushed at him, but found her clutching to him tightly in a fierce embrace. "Don't you *ever* do that again!" she commanded in a strangled voice.

"I missed you too," he said dryly, licking a bit of blood off his lip. The tooth was growing back, which made the inside of his mouth itch.

Things were different now. He and Allia talked at length as they walked, keeping moving so the Keeper's eyes couldn't pin them down, speaking in Selani to avoid their words reaching the Keeper's ears. He told her about his time in the city, with Janette and her family, and he was brutally honest about the sensations, the guilt, and then finally the tenuous balance he had managed to achieve. He told her about things he wouldn't even tell his mother, and she listened with that same gentle patience that so drew him to her. He then told her about the episode with Jesmind, the spell, and the look that the Council gave him after they were done.

"They want something from me," he said bluntly. "I don't know what it is, but that's obvious now. They'd never have put this much attention on any other novice, even one as strong in Sorcery as they say I am."

"I know. After you left, they started paying *me* that attention," she grunted. "They gave me the Test. Would you believe that I can do Sorcery?"

"Really?" he asked in interest.

"I'm not that strong in it, but it is there," she affirmed. "They said that I couldn't make my life's work out of it, as if I wanted to do that, but I think

that knowing a few spells here and there wouldn't be a bad idea."

"It could be handy," he agreed.

"They are keeping us together," she said. "When you go into the Initiate, I'll go at the same time." She scratched her cheek. "It's not like they're teaching me anything, or anything. I'm basically just wasting time here."

They ended up in the courtyard in the center of the hedge maze. This place of peace quickly soothed Tarrin's nerves, and he sat on the bench and relaxed as Allia inspected the large wild roses that grew at the back end of the courtyard. She tended them when they visited the courtyard, trying to coax them into growing large, beautiful blossoms. Tarrin spent that time staring at the statue, remembering those simple words that had drifted into his mind the last time he was here.

Faith.

He believed that he had found some. By coming into such close contact with the Cat, he had faith that it wasn't out to kill him. Though they would struggle for dominance in his mind, he knew then that the Cat was not his enemy. He knew that he had to be stronger than it was, to assert his authority. As long as he could do that, then everything would be fine. He had found faith in himself, a confidence that things just might turn out for the best. Things didn't seem so gloomy.

It amazed him that he had always thought that way. To him, before, each day was just one step closer to that ultimate end, either by Jesmind's claws, or this mysterious enemy, the Cat, or even his own hand. But now, now he felt that there was a chance that he just may come out of this alive.

He stood up and walked through the fountain, standing at the base of the tall statue. He could never get tired of staring at that lovely face, or those life-like eyes. "What are you doing, Tarrin?" Allia asked.

"Just looking," he replied. "Me and this statue are good friends. She's a good listener."

"And I'm not?" she asked impishly.

"When you're around, you are," he replied.

"Tarrin, look at this," Allia called.

Tarrin went up on his toes and leaned into the statue, looking over its dainty shoulder. Allia had reached deeply into the wild, tree-like rosebush she was working with, and as he watched, she carefully pulled out a *shaeram*. It was very, very old, Tarrin could tell even from that distance, made of silver, and with a small diamond set into the center of the four-pointed star at the core of the symbol. "Its ancient," Tarrin said, "but it's not rusted."

"Maybe it's magic," Allia said, holding it up. "But it's beautiful. I'd like to keep it."

"Then keep it," Tarrin said. "You found it."

"But I'm not worthy of the honor," she protested. "This symbol represents something I am not, and I won't dishonor the *katzh-dashi* by pretending to be one of them."

"It's not the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*," Tarrin said. "It's the symbol of their Goddess. Since you can do Sorcery, that gives you the right to wear it."

Where did *that* come from?

"Perhaps you're right," she mused, holding it up to the fading afternoon light. She laid it over her head, then settled it around her neck, carefully pulling her hair through the loop. "I hope the Holy Mother Goddess takes no offense," she said as an afterthought.

"Why would she?" Tarrin challenged.

"It's the symbol of another Goddess."

"Are you going to start worshipping her?"

"No!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Tarrin shrugged, his voice dismissive in its practicality.

Allia looked up at the sky. "It's almost dinnertime," she noted. "I'm hungry, too. Let's go."

"You go on ahead," he said. "I want to stay a few more moments."

Allia gave him a deep look. "I'll see you in the dinner hall then," she said. He watched her take her leave, and gave her a few moments to get out of earshot.

He looked up at the statue's face, studying its serene, perfect features, again marvelling at the hand that could, with hammer and chisel, sculpt such incredible detail and beauty. He reached up and cupped that face in his huge paw. "Sorry I was away for so long," he told the statue, "but I wasn't myself for a while. But I'm better now. It must be lonely in here alone all the time, so, to let you know, I'll be visiting you again."

Believe.

Tarrin's ears perked up, responding to the voice that had no sound, a choral voice that echoed soundlessly through the courtyard, through his mind, dancing across his awareness like ripples on the surface of a still pond. There it was again!

For there to be faith, you must believe.

"Believe in what?" he called curiously.

Believe in me.

That completely baffled him. "Believe in you? Who are you?"

Believe in me.

The amulet around Tarrin's neck suddenly was very heavy. It felt hot against his skin, then cold, then hot again.

The amulet, the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*.

The amulet, the symbol of the Goddess whom they served. Just as the brand on his shoulder was the symbol of Fara-Nae

The Goddess.

Goddess!

Tarrin gasped in shock, staggering backwards, and then fell into the pool. He sat up, water streaming off of his face, staring up at the nude statue in utter shock. "Goddess!" he gasped.

There was the most unusual sound. It took him a moment to realize that it was cascading, silvery-bell laughter. *Oh, do get up*, the voice called in

amusement. *You look like a drowned rat.*

"You, you, you," he stammered, totally at a loss for words. He quickly rolled over and knelt in the water in front of the statue, the idol-image of the Goddess of the Sorcerers.

Don't do that! the voice called tartly. *I hate it when people do that!*

"Forgive me," he said in meek supplication.

And don't do that either! she snapped. *You talked to me normally before. You can do that again.*

"I, I didn't know who you were, Goddess," he explained.

It doesn't really matter who I am, the voice called. *I don't demand that people act like fools for my benefit. As long as I know how you feel in your heart, I can do without all the bowing and scraping and carrying on. Are you quite finished swimming in my fountain?*

"Uh, yes, Goddess," he said, standing up and keeping his eyes averted.

What's the matter now? she asked crisply.

"I don't know what to do," he said quietly.

Talk to me, she said winsomely. *I didn't drag you out here just to have you fawn on me. It doesn't become you.*

"Drag me out?" he asked.

You think you wanted to come out here yourself? she chuckled. *I need to talk to you, my kitten. Away from the others. There are some things you should know.*

That got his attention quickly. "Like what?"

That's better. Talk to me as you talk to anyone else. As far as answering questions, nothing that you want to hear, I assure you, she said. *For now, I wanted you to know that I exist. They'll teach you all about me in the Initiate. To enter it, you have to swear an oath of obedience to me. I know how your mind works. You'd reject such a vow outright.* He had to agree. His Cat nature would not allow him to willingly subject himself to the will of another. *What I want you to know is that I don't want your obedience, kitten. I want your love.*

"What?"

I want your love, she repeated. I don't expect it overnight. You've never been what most would call religious, so the concept of loving a deity is new to you. That works both ways, my kitten, she said, her choral, powerful non-voice warm and intimate. I already adore you.

What that means for the immediate future is this; I won't demand you to uphold the vow that you'll speak to me tomorrow. I'm giving you permission to lie. Just mouth the words to satisfy the Council, and don't ever even think about it again. Oh, and don't think that this will be a common occurrence, she said, her voice amused. I do have other things to do.

"You do this with all Sorcerers?"

To one degree or another, yes, she replied. I don't directly speak to most of them, but I do listen, and I try to answer as best I can. Just like Allia's Goddess, Fara-Nae, I'm very devoted to my worshippers, so I can afford a bit of personal attention here and there. I couldn't actively talk to you, like we are now, until you believed that I existed. All I could manage were a few words here and there. Are you done asking questions?

"No, but I think you're done answering them."

She laughed, that same choral cascade of bells. You are such a joy, my kitten, she told him. My life will be so much richer with you in it. Just speak the words tomorrow, Tarrin. You don't have to believe them, and know that, on my word and bond as a Goddess, I will not demand you to uphold the vow you will give. I will ask it of you, but I will not demand it of you.

"Why me?" he asked suddenly. "Why this attention on me?"

Because you are very special, she replied instantly. Very special indeed. In fact, at this very moment, half the world's interest is set directly on your shoulders. Not all of that interest is friendly...as you may have noticed. Don't even bother asking why, because I can't tell you.

Just know this, my kitten, she said, her voice sincere and loving. I am here for you. Believe in me, and I will provide for you. Put your trust in me, and I will watch over you. Give your love to me, and I will return it to you tenfold. Have faith in me, and you will never be alone.

Those words struck him to the core.

I must go now, she called. Be well, my kitten, and think about my words. I know that you know that I would not lie to you. So think of what I have said, and make your decisions. I will welcome you. The road ahead is long and dangerous, but with my love in your heart, you will never be alone.

And then the sensation of her power faded, leaving the courtyard dark and strangely empty. The dazzling sparkle in the eyes of the statue seemed to fade away, leaving nothing but the dull stone behind.

Chapter 10

Tarrin didn't sleep at all that night.

The words of this mysterious goddess of the Sorcerers had struck a chord in him that went deeper than he ever thought. She had been right; Tarrin had never been an overly pious person. The concept of actually believing in the gods was quite new to him. Oh, he believed they existed, and his family paid homage to several gods, but didn't actively worship any of them. Now he suddenly had been exposed to the *real* power and presence of a god, and it had shifted his theological positioning quite profoundly. Not quite believe in her, but have *faith* in her.

And she talked just like a person. A real, non-divine person. She seemed to have quite a sense of humor. He rather liked that.

He'd spent that first night back sitting on his bed, watching Dar sleep, musing over his visitation, thinking of Janette, rubbing the spot where Allia had popped him, and thinking about Jesmind's activities. They had placed a spell on her to guarantee her cooperation. Tarrin could understand that. But the way she looked at him when he'd sided with her against the Keeper made him more than a little nervous. Tarrin's feelings over Jesmind were never quite set in stone no matter what. One second he could miss her, and the next want to wring her neck. She'd spent the entire two months he'd been missing hunting for him. That surprised him. He'd have thought that she would have given up after the first month.

And it was so strange being back in the Tower. Dar had been very happy to see him, and they had spent the time between dinner and lights out catching up. Dar had taken the Test, and showed potential. He was starting the Initiate next month. Several novices they both knew had left the Tower for various reasons, and there was a rumor that there was going to be a Wikuni coming to the Tower and going through the Initiate. Dar himself was ecstatic over passing the test and going on to the next phase of the Tower training, for going back and being a spice merchant was the last

thing on earth he wanted to do. The rules of the Test forbade him from even telling Tarrin so much as how long it took. If an Initiate passed information about the Test to anyone, he was immediately expelled. Dar was set to enter the Initiate at the beginning of the next week, which was only three days away. He had already finished his Noviate studies, and was spending his last three days working in the library with the Lorefinders.

As far as his first day back went, it was a continuation of what had gone on before. The Novices avoided him, the Sorcerers gawked at him and pestered him, and the Tower's servants and guards gave him looks like he was going to sharpen his claws on the furniture. The only real difference was that he really didn't care anymore. His time with his little mother had brought to him a balance, and he realized that there was nothing that he could do about the shortfallings of those around him. If they couldn't trust him, or didn't like him simply because of what he was, that wasn't his problem. He'd found his acceptance, with Allia and Dar, and with his family. There was no more he needed.

His family. He was a little nervous about seeing them, after what had happened, but he really didn't think that they would hold it against him. By now, they obviously learned about his nature as a Were-cat, and that was the only explanation that he could give to them. He felt that they could accept it. But it didn't make the reality of what had happened any easier to bear.

Dar yawned and rolled over. "Good morning," Tarrin told him calmly.

"You're up early," Dar said, rubbing his eyes and sitting up in bed. "What time is it?"

"Sometime around dawn," he replied.

"Did you sleep at all?"

"No," Tarrin replied. "I'm too wound up to sleep."

"You're going to be hurting around noon," he said.

"No," Tarrin said. "I can sleep whenever I want for as long as I want, but I can also stay up as long as I want."

"Oh. I didn't know that," Dar said, putting his feet on the floor.

"I didn't either until about a month ago," he told him, unfolding his legs out from under himself and standing up. He stretched languorously, his paws brushing the ceiling, and he snapped his tail to and fro to get the tingles out of it. "I'm going to have a busy day today," he grunted. "They're giving me the Test, and my family is coming in to see me. Two things to worry about."

"The Test isn't all that bad," Dar assured him. "I'm not so sure about your family. Your mother makes me nervous."

"She does most people," Tarrin said.

"She really likes Allia. And Allia really likes her. They're two of a kind."

Tarrin chuckled. "Maybe now you understand why I got into such a deep friendship with Allia so quickly," he said. "She's so much like my mother, I couldn't help but like her, almost immediately."

Dar nodded. "She's been teaching your mother Selani. Oh, yes, your mother comes and visits her quite a bit. I've heard them talk a few times. Mostly, she's making Allia tell her about you."

Tarrin blinked. But then again, that was actually a good idea. Nobody knew Tarrin better than Allia. She'd been the only one he'd confide in over the months, and she knew how his mind worked. By talking to Allia, his mother was reacquainting herself with her own son. Tarrin rubbed his furred finger against his chin, thinking about it. That was a good sign, that she was so intent on learning about Tarrin's changes. That told him that she still cared, even after what had happened. Of course, he felt in his heart that she would forgive him, but a little backing up with hard evidence didn't hurt a bit.

He had changed quite a bit. And it went much deeper than the fur on his arms and legs.

"Your sister has learned it too," he added. "She can talk Selani just like Allia."

Now that was surprising. Jenna had a talent for languages; she could speak the trade tongue that was the commonly recognized language among the twelve kingdoms of the West, but she also knew High Sulasian, the archaic language spoken by high court and by some villages in the western

areas, and she knew Dalasian, learning it from Karn the smith. That she learned to speak fluent Selani in a bit under two months was amazing. It reminded him how smart his sister was, much smarter than him.

"Allia is subverting my family," Tarrin said with a laugh. "Next we'll all be wearing desert garb and running the dunes."

Dar stood up and started dressing, and that reminded Tarrin to change out of his rumpled Novice clothes and put on some fresh ones. He was supposed to wear his usual novice clothes, but they were expected to be clean and very well groomed. The Test was as much ceremony and ritual as it was an assessment of his sorcery. Tarrin would never really look very well groomed, since his claws tended to shred pant legs and shirt sleeves. He found the best shirt and pants he had, showing very little wear from the passage of time and meeting up with the tips of his claws. The pants were always worse. The claws on his feet didn't retract completely the way his finger claws did, so they tended to snag on pant legs as he put them on, if he wasn't careful about it.

He really wasn't sure what he felt about the Test, even after thinking about it much of the night. He was a little nervous, but that seemed to be normal. Fear of the unknown was a common trait in anybody. He did feel alright with some parts of it, such as this vow he had to speak. The Goddess in the statue had told him that he could speak the vow without meaning it, just to humor the Council of Seven. Knowing that was coming was a tremendous relief. It wouldn't bowl him over, and what was important, it wouldn't present the Council with a bewildered, nervous poppinjay there for them to take advantage of him. He had a bit of confidence in what was to come, confident in the permissions given to him by the Goddess. Confident that he didn't have to challenge his independent nature when he was required to speak an oath that would put him into the service of another.

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened. Sevren was standing there, in his plain brown robe and the wire-rimmed spectacles he wore over his eyes. Sevren's scent was a bit nervous. Tarrin trusted Sevren, at least as much as he trusted any of the *katzh-dashi*. Sevren's interest in him had been a bit irritating at first, with all the strange questions and weird requests, but Sevren was very sincere in his desire to study Tarrin's Were condition, and Tarrin couldn't fault him for wanting to learn. Over the course of these little

interview sessions, Tarrin had grown fond of the man. Sevren was a very easy-going individual, and for him to be nervous, about anything, was very much out of character. "What's the matter, Sevren?" Tarrin asked. Sevren didn't like to be called "master" or "lord" when they were alone.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he waved off. "They're waiting for you."

"Already? I haven't eaten yet."

"Time waits for nobody, young one," he said. "Now hop."

"Yes, Sevren," he said, standing up and stretching a bit, working the kinks out of his tail.

Severen led him to a chamber very high up in the main Tower, a room so high that, if it had a window, one could probably see halfway to Shacè. It took them nearly ten minutes to climb the stairs to get up that high. Tarrin always wondered why so few of the Sorcerers weren't overweight. After climbing up all those stairs, he knew exactly why. The Keeper's office wasn't even that high up. And yet, if he kept his bearings, they weren't even at the very top. The stairs still went up when they reached the proper floor. The chamber itself was featureless, built of gray stone, perfectly circular, and there was not a whit of furniture or carpet or decoration. Just an empty room. The only thing in it other than living things was a glow-globe, high up near the ceiling, a ceiling that had to be fifty spans high. Standing in the room were the seven members of the Council. The only ones that Tarrin could identify were Ahiriyà and the Keeper, but all seven of them wore fine clothing and tried to have a very regal, wise look about them. The way they looked at him made him nervous.

"Very good. Thank you, Sevren," the Keeper said. "You may go."

Sevren bowed and took his leave of them, shutting the heavy, steel-reinforced door behind him.

"Stand in the center of the circle," the Keeper said in a calm voice. Tarrin did as he was told, moving into the middle of the room and standing in the middle of their loose formation. When they all took steps backwards, up against the walls, Tarrin started to get worried. They arranged themselves in a curious pattern where six of them stood at equal distances to one another, as the Keeper stood a bit farther behind their circle and between Ahiriyà and a tall blond woman, as if she had no specific place in

their order. They raised their hands, almost in perfect unison, and Tarrin felt that sensation of *drawing in* all around him. He was surrounded by it. They remained perfectly still for several moments, and Tarrin could sense something around them, around each of them. Each of them took on an aura, a visible halo of light of the colors of the spectrum. Ahiriya was surrounded by red, and the Keeper by green, and the others were surrounded by a distinct color. Orange, yellow, blue, indigo, and violet. The lights were ghostly, almost shimmering, as if his eyes had trouble focusing on them long enough, as they tried to hide from his eyes. Along with the auras, Tarrin could hear musical chords as if they were being played by phantom musicians, musical notes of no specific timbre, as if sung by women with no voices. It was not a sound he was hearing with his ears. Instead, it seemed to reverberate inside of him, conducting against his soul directly.

"What do you see?" the Keeper asked in a almost chanting, sing-song voice.

"Colors," he replied. "Each of you is covered in colored light."

"*Each* of us?" a slender, black-haired woman asked.

"Each of you," he affirmed.

"What color am I?" she asked.

"Light purple," he replied.

"Am I very bright?"

"Not any brighter than the others. Well, the Keeper's standing a little farther back than the rest of you, but she looks about the same," Tarrin replied, studying her and each of them in turn.

The woman's eyes seemed to widen. "What color is the Keeper?" she asked.

Tarrin turned to face her. "Green," he replied. "She's covered in green light."

That made the Keeper rock back on her heels. "Are you certain?" she asked quickly.

"Positive," he replied. "Red. Green. Blue. Yellow. Light purple. Darker purple. Orange," he recited, pointing at each of them in the circle. Then he squinted, studying them. "There's something connecting all of you together," he added as little fuzzy strings started to appear before his eyes. "Little ghost strings."

"And no one of us shines more brightly than the others?" a large, dark-skinned man asked.

"No," he said, putting a finger to his chin and studying each of them. "They all look the same to me."

"Even the Keeper?"

Tarrin looked at her. Now that they said something, she *did* seem a bit more distinct than the others. The color surrounding her wasn't quite as fuzzy, though she was no brighter than them. "She's not any brighter, but she is a bit, umm, well, a bit crisper," he struggled. "All of you are kind of fuzzy. She's not as fuzzy as everyone else. Maybe it's because she's standing farther away, I don't know."

"Goddess," one of them whispered, low enough so that only Tarrin would hear it.

The whispered word that escaped the Keeper's mouth caught his attention much more. She said only one thing, something that made no sense.

"Weavespinner!"

All the colors and the soundless chords suddenly vanished, leaving Tarrin's eyes a little dazzled. He blinked them several times and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. When he opened them again, he found the seven staring at him like he was a live snake. "The Test is concluded," the Keeper said in a voice that she was obviously trying to control. "You will speak not a word of what happened here this day, Tarrin. If you do, you will be punished in the most severe manner imaginable. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Keeper," he said in a calm voice. He already *knew* that speaking about the Test was forbidden.

"This day, you have demonstrated that you are one of the children of the Goddess. You are *katzh-dashi*. As per our laws, you will be taken into the Tower and given training in your gift. But before you are given that instruction, you will swear an oath. On one knee."

"What?" he said in sudden heat, heat that was totally feigned. He realized last night that if he didn't look surprised, they'd wonder if someone had secretly prepared him for this. "I won't bow my knee to anyone! Least of all *you*," he grated, giving the Keeper an unholy, murderous look.

"You have no choice," the Keeper shot back in a cold voice. "It is demanded of all who enter the Initiate. And we make no exceptions, not even for you."

"I'm not subjecting myself to anyone," Tarrin retorted.

"Tarrin," she said in an exasperated voice, "you're not doing anything that isn't demanded of everyone else. The Oath is a way for us to be sure you'll complete your training, because not many will break an oath without really thinking it over first."

"What is this oath?" he asked in a less hostile voice.

"To obey the will of the Goddess so long as you stay on the grounds, follow the commands of your instructors and superiors, and do your very best in your learning. That's all."

Tarrin rose up to his full height, putting a finger to his chin and pretending to consider her words. The nameless goddess was right. They made sure the oath talked about him obeying the Goddess. Not the Tower. That was just as *she* said it would be worded. Of course, what the Keeper *didn't* say was that she would, at some time in the future when he got rebellious, point out that as Keeper she spoke the will of the Goddess. Neat little trap there. But Tarrin knew that if this goddess wanted his obedience, she'd do the commanding *herself*.

"Only so long as I stay in the Initiate?" he pressed.

"Only so long as you stay in the Initiate," she affirmed.

"And if I decide I don't want to be a Sorcerer?"

"Then you go your own way," she shrugged.

Which means that I can un-enroll myself whenever I feel like it, he thought with a calm look at her, trying to hide a grin. "Alright, but if you trick me, I'll hand you your guts one handful at a time," he said in a dangerous voice.

"I would expect no less," she said in a slightly sickened voice. "Kneel."

He did so, reluctantly. "Do you swear that you will obey the will of our Goddess, She Who Goes Unnamed, patroness of the *katzh-dashi* and Goddess of the Weave?"

"I swear," he said after feigning a few seconds of indecision.

"Do you swear to do your utmost to pass the Initiate, to come to the end of the training and say that you gave it your all in good faith?"

"I swear," he said immediately.

"Do you swear to obey the commands of your instructors, and the laws of the Tower, so long you remain bound to the order?"

"For so long as I remain in the Initiate, I so swear," he said flatly, giving the Keeper a deadly look.

"That's not enough."

"That's all you'll get," he said with a steely tone, standing up. Towering over the diminutive Keeper, he looked down at her with a blunt expression of mule-headed stubbornness. "If I decide to stay as a *katzh-dashi*, we'll have to renegotiate. Until then, take what I've given you and be happy with it, because I won't go a step farther. It's more than I'd have given anyone else," he told her adamantly.

"You push it," she said with hot eyes.

"You forget what you're dealing with," he replied in a calm voice. "I'm not a human. My nature is contrary to tying myself down in one place, and giving someone else control over me goes against just about every instinct I have. Be lucky I went as far as I did."

"I think you forget your place," the Keeper said in her commanding tone.

"Then feel free to educate me," Tarrin said, casually popping his claws and giving them a cursory glance, letting the Keeper see just how long and sharp they were.

"Myriam," the dark-haired woman cut in. "Myriam, you forget--"

"I forget nothing," she snorted.

"Tarrin is right," the woman pressed. "If swearing oaths is against his nature, to force him into more than he is willing to give may upset the balance of his mind. You don't want him disappearing for three more months, do you?"

"No," she said.

"Take my word for it, Myriam," she said. "If he didn't want to be here, he would never have returned. I think we can trust him with what he has already given."

"Yes, yes, you are right," she said with a contrite smile. "I forget that he returned on his own."

"I have one more thing," Tarrin said.

"What?"

"I want Dolanna to teach me."

"We've already arranged that," she said. "Tarrin, no one person can teach you, but Dolanna will be involved in your education. She will be *one* of your instructors."

"Why more than one?"

"Because different *katzh-dashi* are better at different things," a tall, slender man wearing a blue robe said calmly. "Each instructor teaches a student what he or she excels at, so that the student is always trained by those who best know the subject at hand."

That made sense, so Tarrin only nodded and took a less hostile stance.

"You will have many teachers. Even some of us will instruct you," the blond woman said.

"Now stop asking silly questions," the Keeper grunted. "Go to your room and pack your things. The Mistress of Novices will arrange your

move to the Initiate rooms. The Master of Initiates will be expecting you before noon."

"Yes, Keeper," Tarrin said quietly. He gave them all a very curt, cursory bow, then padded out of the room.

"Defiant," Koran Dar, the tall, willowy Amazon Seat of Divine Power, what some called the Seat of the Goddess, mused as the door closed.

"As stubborn as a rock," Amelyn, the dark-haired Seat of the Mind, grunted.

"But he *is* the one," Jinna, the blond Water Seat said quietly.

"He is a Weavespinner," the Keeper said almost reverently. "A *Weavespinner!*"

"Maybe there is hope for us after all," Darrian, the burly Earth Seat, said in his gravelly voice. "There's been no record of a Weavespinner since the Ancients left us."

"Remember, that's not a requirement," Nathander, the Seat of Air, said in a calm voice. "The ancient writings state that any of noble blood that is not human can do this task."

"He hardly looks noble," Ahiriya grunted.

"He's the son of a clan princess," the Keeper told her. "A prince. That qualifies. The Selani is the daughter of the chief, and her Royal Highness' pedigree leaves no question in the matter."

"Be that as it may, since we don't absolutely *need* him, we can always get rid of him if he gets out of control," Nathander said in a brutal tone. "One of the other two will suffice."

"But they don't have his power," the Keeper said. "That may be very important when the fur starts to fly."

"The dagger in your hand is better than the spear flying towards your back," Nathander said in his detached tone. "I don't relish the idea of taking a life needlessly, but we must always keep the greater good in mind. If he gets out of control, we may have to put him down. To protect the rest of us,

if for any other reason. A madman with *that* kind of power running around could shatter what it took us two thousand years to build."

"I must agree," Amelyn said. "I can't affect his mind with any of my weaves, Keeper. If he goes mad, there won't be anything I can do to heal him."

"Then we'll have to be careful," she said, looking at the door. "That boy is our best chance. We just have to keep him sane long enough to do what he needs to do. After he's done, then we won't need him anymore," she said in a grim tone of finality.

Tarrin walked with Allia from the main Tower and towards the North Tower, the tower of Initiation. Both of them were packed, wearing Novice white but carrying no Novice uniforms with them. They were being led by a young Initiate wearing a red shirt. The fact that Allia was with him told him something, that they wanted to keep them together. They'd rushed her through two months of Novitiate in two days, then simply said she passed and told her to pack this morning. Probably not moments after he walked out of the Test himself. He wasn't sure what their game was, but he knew it had something to do with him, maybe with Allia. They wanted something, and they wanted Tarrin to give it to them. Or possibly both Tarrin and Allia, judging by the way they were kept together.

But that wasn't something he didn't already know, and it wasn't something that he was in a position to do anything about at the moment. He had no idea *why* they wanted him, *what* they wanted, or *when* they wanted it. He was totally in the dark, and without information, he had no way to plan a way to get him out of or around whatever this thing was that they wanted. The Goddess in the statue had said that, at this moment, half of the world's attention was placed right on his shoulders. No doubt this maneuvering in the Tower had something to do with the Goddess' proclamation. They knew that he was important. That had to be key to the reason that he was here.

The North tower, like all six of the surrounding towers, was much smaller than the main tower. About half the height. Several bridges ran from its red stone walls over to the main tower, some hundred spans or

more in distance, and Tarrin wondered how the plain stone spans, with no support or bracing, managed to stay up. They didn't even have guardrails. The bridges were not for Novices. Tarrin had never set foot on one of them before. From what he knew of the Tower, most of the main tower was filled with the library, rooms for the *katzh-dashi*, and it was where most of the business of the order was conducted. The North Tower was for the Initiates and their training, and the South Tower was mainly for research. It was where the books not kept in the main library were stored, the books full of things that were potentially dangerous to people who had no idea what they were doing. Like nosy Novices. There was a lot of traffic between the South Tower and the main spire, because many of the Sorcerers worked there to try to rediscover the secrets that had disappeared with the Ancients.

From the inside, though, Tarrin couldn't really tell the difference between the towers. They had the same gray stone walls, and were lit with glowglobes hovering near the ceiling. The Initiate led them through the main doors and down a corridor that led towards the center of the tower, then down one of the curving inner ring hallways. He took them up a flight of stairs, back into the intersecting hallway, and out to the outermost ring, the room with windows facing outwards. That was where the office of Brel was. A sign hung on a scrupulously scrubbed door with his name and his title. The young man, a tall Draconian from the look of him, with long dark hair and broad shoulders, knocked exactly three times and waited nervously. His two charges made the young man decidedly nervous. "Enter!" a voice called.

The young man opened the door. "Two new Initiates, Master Brel," the young man said. "The Mistress of Novices bid me bring them to you."

"Very good, Lem," he said in an irascible tone. "I'm coming out."

"Yes, Master Brel," he said, closing the door. "Nobody goes in there unless they're in trouble," he whispered to them.

Tarrin rolled his eyes, and Allia chuckled a bit.

Brel came out with a slamming of the door, ignoring the short bows given to him by the three in the hall. He was a small man, thin and very short, looking about ten years past his grave. He was sallow and emaciated, with thin little wisps of white hair clinging to a scalp pocked with liver

spots. His face was sunken and weathered, but his brown eyes were very lucid and sharp. The man reminded him of Mother Wynn, the old woman he'd encountered on the flight away from Jesmind and to the Tower. His scent was sharp and acrid, and it was obvious from the smell of him that he didn't bathe as often as he should have. He wore a stained gray robe that had a couple of tears in it, belted at the waist. "First rule," he said in a snappish tone. "Nobody goes in my office, unless I let them in. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master Brel," they said in unison.

"Thank you, Lem. You can return to your duties." The young man bowed and scurried away. "You're here because you've proven you can handle the power of Sorcery," he told them. "Things work here much the same as they did in the Novitiate, except you'll be spending alot more time in study and practice than you will doing errands and working chores. Come with me."

They followed him back to the staircase, up two floors, then back out to the outermost hallway that ringed the tower. "I run a very tight tower," he said in a waspish tone. "If you thought Mistress Elsa was bad, she's a kitten compared to me. I'm a firm believer that punishment wears the nonsense out of someone." They stopped in front of a door. "Each of you will have your own room," he said. "Two rooms share a common storage closet. This will be your room, Tarrin," he said, pointing at a door. Tarrin didn't even bother asking how he knew his name. No doubt Master Brel had received a three page report on his two unusual Initiates ten minutes after Tarrin walked out of the Keeper's office two days ago. "Consider yourself lucky. Most new Initiates don't get a room with a window."

"Is the room across from Tarrin's occupied?" Allia asked in her strong, silky voice.

"No, and it's *Master* Brel," he said sourly.

"Then I will take that one, Master Brel," she said.

He gave her a startled look. "By the Goddess, you will *not!*" he gasped. "The very idea is insane!"

"Why is that, Master Brel?" she asked coolly.

"You're a girl!" he shot back.

"And why does that matter?"

"It's improper!" he snapped. "What's to stop him from walking in on you undressed? And what's to stop him from letting a boy into your room, if he doesn't go in himself?"

"How narrow," she said with a sigh. "If I want a male, I will not ask Tarrin to smuggle him in. I will let him in myself," she said bluntly. Brel stared at her with his eyes about to jump out of his face. "I am not human, Master Brel. Do not assign your human moralities to me." She crossed her arms under her breasts. "As to him 'walking in', I assure you that there is nothing under my clothes that he has not already seen. As to him being my lover, please, be sensible. As much as I love him, it is as a sister loves a brother. I am not in the habit of sleeping with my brothers."

Brel made a few strangling noises.

"Perhaps I should let a boy into the room of a female roommate, should you not pair us together," she mused aloud. "Maybe the experience would take the steel out of her back."

"Now see here!" he raged suddenly. "I'll not have that kind of talk in my tower!"

"It's a losing cause, Brel," the Keeper's voice called from the hallway. "Just give them the rooms they want and be done with it. I assure you, nothing improper is going to happen between them." Tarrin and Allia bowed to her as she approached, and Brel nodded to her. "I have another Initiate for you. I need the largest room you have available. One with a window."

"I take it the Wikuni has arrived, Keeper?" he asked, regaining his composure.

She nodded. "Her convoy just arrived in the harbor. She'll probably show up here tomorrow. It should take her that long to decide what to wear," she grunted with a sigh.

"Wikuni?" Tarrin repeated. "A Wikuni here, Keeper?"

"Not just any Wikuni," she said. "One of their Princesses. We made a deal with the King to bring her here for education."

"Pardon my saying so, but you don't sound very enthusiastic."

She laughed ruefully. "I guess I'm not. This Princess has a reputation. I have no doubt she'll be as inconvenient as possible."

"Ah," he said. "One of *those*."

She nodded. "I can feel the gray hairs coming already."

Tarrin chuckled. "Patience, Keeper," he said with a grin.

"I'll keep that in mind. Go ahead and take care of the young ones, Brel. I'll wait in your office."

"No, Keeper, I won't keep you waiting. Go make yourselves at home," he told them. "Feel free to rearrange the furniture if you feel like it, but keep everything clean. The kitchens are in the main tower. I'm sure you already know where they are. Go get some breakfast, and I'll have someone show you around after you get something to eat."

"Thank you, Master Brel," Tarrin said. "I was getting a little hungry."

He gave Allia a short, hostile look, then walked away with the Keeper by his side. "I have a room on the fifth level, Keeper, one of the largest. It has a nice view of the gardens," he was saying as they walked away.

Tarrin looked at Allia, and they both shrugged. "Another?" Tarrin asked.

"I guess so," she replied in Selani. "I'm starting to think that they're collecting Non-humans."

"You may not be far off the mark," he replied as he opened the door.

"If they're putting this Wikuni in the Initiate, then she must be capable of doing Sorcery," she speculated.

"I was thinking the same thing. They're not collecting Non-humans, they're collecting Non-humans that can do Sorcery."

"I think that's about right. Have you seen your parents yet?" Allia asked as the glowglobe inside the room brightened in response to the opening door.

"Not yet," he replied. The room was the same size as the room that he and Dar had shared, but it was only for one person. The room had a larger bed, with a large chest at the foot of it much as his old room had been. The room had more furniture, though. A large writing table was against the left wall with a chair resting in front of it, and a bookcase stood beside a washstand on the right wall. A key, the key to the room, was sitting on the top of the bookcase. There were two tables flanking the bed, two small nightstands, one of which held a lantern, the other a candle and candletray. Tarrin wondered what the lantern and candle was for with the glowglobe hanging in the air. What amazed him most was the carpet on the floor. It was a large carpet, dyed a solid blue with gold threading in geometric patterns along the outside edge. From the feel of it under his toes, it was old, but well maintained. The room had two windows as well, just on the outsides of each nightstand, small windows that a child would have trouble trying to squeeze through.

Compared to the Novice rooms, this was luxurious.

"I wonder if mine is this nice," Allia mused. There was a door between the washstand and bookcase on the right wall, the door leading to the central storeroom which this room and the next one over shared.

Tarrin leaned his staff in the corner and set his two packs down on top of the chest. "I'd hope so. Those windows may be a problem."

"Why?"

"Jesmind."

"Ah. I'm sure that you can figure out a way to defend them. And they let *you* out as easily as they let *her* in."

"Can't argue with that," he agreed as they opened the door to the storeroom.

It was large for a closet, with shelves lining the walls between the two doors. Two large chests sat against each wall, each chest flanked by two smaller ones, the same style and size chests as the one at the foot of his bed. A pole ran under the high shelf on each side of the closet, and several curious metal and wood hangars hung on them. Tarrin had seen hangars before, but only in the inn back at Aldreth. They were a relatively new innovation, from Shacè. They'd been making wardrobes with hanging poles

in them. They were primarily for dresses, to hang them to air them out and keep them from wrinkling.

"They certainly give us plenty of room," Tarrin noticed.

"I guess they think that we'll be living here for years," she replied as they opened the far door.

Allia's room looked so much like Tarrin's that he wondered for a moment if they hadn't gotten switched around in the closet. There was one difference, however. Allia's carpet was a darker shade of blue, and had a solid brown border instead of a geometric pattern border. "I'd say that it is," Tarrin noted calmly.

"Truly," she agreed. "It's quite nice." She put her packs on the floor and sat down on the bed tentatively, pressing down on it with her hands. "This one is almost as soft as the sleeping pillows I have back home," she said. "And I'm rather glad that I'll have you only a call away."

"It's going to be strange sleeping without Dar in the room," he grunted.

"He should be in the Initiate by the end of the month," she said. "You won't be separated long."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I've talked with him a few times since you were gone," she told him. "Nothing long. Just seeing if he'd heard anything about you."

Tarrin chuckled. "And you didn't kill him?"

"No," she said frostily, crossing her arms and taking a very imperial pose. "I'm not quite as bloodthirsty as that, thank you."

Tarrin laughed. "I think Dar appreciates your restraint."

She gave him an unflattering look. "Let's go get something to eat," she said. "I'm hungry."

"Me too," he agreed.

"I wonder when they'll give us the new clothes," she mused as they went out her door.

They already knew how things worked for Initiates in the main tower, from seeing them move around. Unlike Novices, who ate in the hall at

definite times, an Initiate was allowed to take whatever food they wanted from the kitchen at any time, and they had their own special dining room, or they could take their food and eat it anywhere they wanted. That was because an Initiate's classes were not nearly as structured as a Novices, and the Initiate may spend two weeks taking a class at dawn, then move to an afternoon instruction, and so on. An Initiate's training was dependent more on the availability of an instructor than anything else, so the Initiate had to be able to receive instruction whenever it was available. Initiates also had more freedom than Novices. Once they were raised to the Blue, they were allowed off the Tower grounds, but had to remain within the city.

After invading the kitchens and fixing plates of breakfast, they took them out to the dining room and enjoyed a quiet meal. There were four other Initiates there, two wearing green, one red, and another light purple. It looked like the one wearing purple wanted to challenge the two, who were still wearing Novice white, about eating in the dining room reserved for Initiates. But the young woman seemed a bit intimidated by the two Non-humans.

"I wonder if they forgot about us," Tarrin chuckled as they finished. "I mean, with this princess coming in, I think the Keeper kind of messed up Master Brel's taking care of us."

"I don't really care if they remember or not," she replied in Selani. "Just so long as they remember to give us Initiate red."

"I guess so."

"I don't really mind it. It's refreshing not having everyone stare at me and go out of their way."

"No doubt," he agreed. "Maybe this Wikuni will give everyone something else to look at for a while."

"Why are *you* talking?" she challenged with a grin. "You've only been back two days. I'm the one that had to deal with it for two months."

"Who do you think was dealing with it before I left?" he retorted.

"Point taken, *deshida*," she said with a smile.

"I'm so glad, *deshaida*," he said in a neutral tone.

After eating, they walked back over to the North Tower, then they went to their rooms and unpacked. There was more room than Tarrin knew what to do with, but the fact that he wouldn't be keeping his Novice clothing gave him even more room. The room was on the third floor, so Tarrin spent some time looking out the windows, elbows on the windowsill. The room faced out into the gardens, and the riot of color and the smells drifting in from the window reminded him of the outside world, stirring the Cat inside him.

There was a knock at the door. "Yes?" Tarrin called.

A young man in a yellow shirt entered, holding a bundle of red shirts. "I was to drop these off to you," he said. "And pick up your Novice white."

Tarrin gave him a curious look. His eyes were a bit wild, and from the smell of him, he'd received a bit of a shock. "What's the matter?" he asked as he motioned him to come in and grabbed the hem of his shirt.

"That Selani," he said nervously, in a low voice. "I dropped off her shirts, and she took off the one she was wearing right in front of me!"

"She's like that," he chuckled, pulling off his own and folding it quickly and neatly in his paws. "You get used to it." He put on one of the new shirts, seeing that it fit well enough, then handed the young dark-haired Initiate his stack of white shirts.

"Thank you," he said, taking them. "I was supposed to tell you to be at Master Brel's office door at sunrise tomorrow," he instructed. "He said that you have the rest of today to settle in."

"Alright," he said. That was fine with him, for he wanted to see his parents.

That took a while. The only one that knew where they lived was the Keeper, and she was busy with the preparations to receive the Wikuni. By lunchtime, he finally tracked her down in her office. "Keeper, I have a favor to ask," he said as Duncan let him inside.

"Why bring it to me?" she asked. "I'm busy."

"Nobody else knows where my parents live," he said.

"Oh, my," she groaned. "Tarrin, I am *so* sorry. In all this chaos, I totally forgot to send that message. I meant to do it yesterday, but I got word that

the Wikuni was coming in not long after you left my office."

"That's alright, Keeper," he said with sincere compassion. "I knew you were busy, and I don't think they could have seen me yesterday anyway."

"Yes, well, that doesn't excuse me," she said in a stern tone, full of self-incrimination. "I'll send the message right now. I'll have them come to your room."

Tarrin returned to his room to wait, and to dread and think about their arriving. So much had happened over the two months, so much time for them to think about the entire event. He honestly had no idea how they reacted to it, or how the time to think about it may have changed that original perception. His own memories of that fateful night were fuzzy, hazy, indistinct. He only knew the generalities of it. But in a way, that was bad enough. Knowing that he almost killed his own mother still sent a rush of hot shame through him when he pondered it, but the time with Janette had managed to partially heal that festering wound on his soul. All that he had left was to find out what his parents and sister thought about him now. Whether they would embrace him or spurn him. Either way, he felt that he could handle it. Losing his family would destroy him, but he would face up to it like a man. Like a Kael.

They arrived about two hours later, opening the door to his room without knocking as he paced nervously. Elke Kael rushed in with a cry and buried her son in a fierce hug, barely giving him time to turn around. Tarrin struggled to breathe as his father and sister crowded in on him. Elke then pushed him out at arm's length and gave him a dark scowl. "Don't ever do that again!" she shouted at him, then hugged him again.

Tarrin felt relief beyond measure. That one line told him that she wasn't holding a grudge. "I was afraid you'd be mad at me," he said, returning her embrace.

"I *am* mad, but not for that reason," she huffed. "I'm mad at you for staying away so long."

"I needed time," he told her as he took his father's hand, then hugged Jenna warmly.

"You don't look that bad," his father noted with a smile. "Just a bit worried."

"You wait two hours and see how good you feel," he replied.

"And how *do* you feel?" Eron asked.

"I'll never be the same," he said with sober eyes. "Never. But I guess it was something that had to happen."

Tarrin sat on the bed with Jenna in his lap. Elke sat beside him, and Eron sat in the chair by the desk. "Where were you all that time?" Jenna asked. "We looked and looked for you. The Sorcerers even used magic to try to find you, but they couldn't."

"I, don't have much memory of it," he said haltingly. "I lost so much time. In my other shape, time doesn't mean the same thing as it does when I'm like this."

"But where did you go?" she pressed.

"I was picked up by a little girl," he told her. "She adopted me as a pet."

Jenna giggled. "That must have been funny. I don't think you'd make a very good pet."

"On the contrary," Eron said with keen eyes. "I think I understand what he was saying. He probably had her very nicely fooled."

Tarrin nodded. "I couldn't even remember how to change shape," he told him. "I'd all but given up, and when I did that, I let the Cat take control of me. You see, the Cat doesn't have much use for human memories, so it simply buried them. And the Cat doesn't register the passage of time. There's no past, no future, for a cat. There's only now. And without memory of the past, or knowledge of the future, the now would be everything. And in that now, there was only the Cat. If she hadn't found me when she did, I'd probably still be wandering around as a cat, with no memory of who or what I was." He bowed his head for a moment. "By now, I'd *be* a cat."

"Two days would make that much difference?" Elke asked.

"It wasn't the time," he told his mother. "It was her. It was like being a child all over again, mother. She cared for me. She honestly did her best to spoil me," he chuckled. "Since I was more or less being coddled, and she wouldn't let me get depressed, I had time to think about everything. Well, what was left of me had time to think. She was so good to me that it made

the Cat totally content, and the combination let me find some measure of peace inside myself. I had no worries, no cares. It was like a vacation from myself."

"I think I can understand that," Eron said. "And after finding some peace, you started getting your human awareness back."

Tarrin nodded. "It didn't happen very fast, but it did happen," he said. "I still don't entirely trust myself, but the time was good for me. I understand my instincts much better now that I've lived with them controlling me for two months. I think that I'll never be able to totally control them," he sighed, "because Jesmind seems to have the same problem, and she was born with them. But there's hope."

Elke smiled and patted his shoulder. "I'm just glad to see you well, Tarrin," she said to him with a warm look in her eyes.

"I'm glad I wasn't disowned," he chuckled, patting her hand warmly.

"Never that, son," Eron told him. "Never that."

"Have you had any trouble, from Jesmind?" he asked.

"No, we haven't seen her," he replied.

"Does she know where you live?"

"I doubt it," Elke told him. "The only one who knows where we live are the Sorcerers, and I doubt they told her."

"She's sneaky, mother," he said. "She can follow you easily."

"She'd have no reason to with you out in the city," Eron pointed out. "Remember, *you* were the reason she was here. Without you, her need to be here disappeared. Where is she now?"

"I have no idea, but she's probably pretty close," he said. "She knows I'm here. She's the one that found me, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"I was trying to get back into the Tower without being seen," he replied. "She caught me just outside the fence."

"Is she still after you?"

Tarrin nodded. "I doubt I ever will get rid of her," he said. "But that's a problem for another day." He settled Jenna a bit on his lap. Despite the fact that she was nearly fourteen, she fit onto his lap like a young child. "Tell me what's been going on."

And so Tarrin was caught up with the goings on of the Kael family. Jenna had been learning Sorcery from the Tower, as a Sorcerer came out each day to their house to give her instruction. She found it to be incredibly fascinating, and he had the feeling that Jenna had found her calling in life. His father had started making arrows and bows again, doing his work out of his new house in the city and having suitable materials brought in from the forests. He made quite a bit of money. He was already looking to set up his brewing equipment again, and having supplies brought in from Aldreth so he could start brewing ale. His mother had found something close to happiness at Suld, with a new home that was much larger, new friends, and a blossoming business baking pies and pastries and selling them to an inn down the street from her house. Tarrin's grandfather, Anrak Whiteaxe, had visited twice while he was gone. Elke had chanced to see her father's ship in harbor, and managed to track him down. Then he had visited again only last ten-day. He was *very* happy about his little girl living in a port city, especially one that he visited so often. They also told him about their visits to the Tower, trying to get information, and about their taking in of Allia. Allia wasn't just Tarrin's friend anymore, she was an adoptive daughter to the family. All of them adored the dark-skinned Selani, and she seemed to genuinely be fond of her *deshida's* kin. Jenna, who shared Tarrin's knack at learning new languages, had been learning Selani from Allia. And surprisingly, Elke told him that Allia had been picking up some Ungaardt from her.

Tarrin laughed as Eron described Anrak's reaction when he met Allia. Anrak had been a bit intimidated by the Selani. "I'm not surprised," he said. "Allia has that effect on people."

"Whatever happened to that young man you were rooming with?" Elke asked.

"Dar? He's still in the Novitiate," he replied. "He has only a couple of classes left, then he moves to the Initiate." Tarrin had been glancing at Jenna, and saw her flush slightly. By analyzing her scent, he noticed that the

mention of his voice had unsettled her somewhat. Then he chuckled. Her first object of affection. "I'll be glad to have him close again. We're good friends, and I don't think I've met a braver man. After all that happened around me, he stubbornly stayed on as my roommate. Even when he was given the chance to move."

"I'd say that's commendable," Eron said with a slight smile. "We need to meet him."

"We will," Elke said. "Now that Tarrin's back, we can visit."

"Actually, I think they'll make those few and far between," Tarrin said. "I don't think they let the Novices and Initiates spend too much time with their families."

"Probably not," Eron said. "That distracts the student."

"Official visits, anyway," Tarrin grinned. "I can just about come and go as I please, whether they want me to or not. Tell me where the house is."

"Not far," Elke told him. "Just go out the main gate, go down five streets, then turn right where you see the sign for the Happy Harpy Inn. We're the fourth house on the left."

"We wanted a house as close to the Tower as we could," Eron told him. "You wouldn't believe how expensive houses are in this neighborhood."

"I can imagine," he said.

"When do you start learning Sorcery?" Jenna asked him.

"Tomorrow, I'd imagine," he replied. "They don't waste time around here."

"You'll like it, Tarrin," she told him with serious eyes.

"I hope so. If not, I'll be terribly bored."

She slapped his knee, and he retaliated by ghosting his tail over her face, making her sneeze. "I hate to cut things short, Tarrin, but I have some errands to run," Elke told him apologetically. "I don't want you to think I'm just showing up and leaving you."

"No, that's alright, mother," he said. "I didn't expect you to be spending all day with me. But we do need to take a walk through the garden before

you leave."

She caught his serious look, then nodded. "Then let's go take a walk."

Outside, they spent some time chatting idly, working their way deeper and deeper into the garden. They meandered into an area where there weren't any other garden visitors within earshot, and Tarrin looked around quickly. "Jenna, I want you to do me a favor," he told his sister.

"What?"

"Go over there for a while," he said, pointing. "I need to talk to mother and father for a few minutes."

"What, you don't trust me?" she challenged.

"Jenna, as much as I love you, there's nothing that you can do to help me with this," he told her. "Mother and father can tell you when you get home, and we don't have much time, so I don't want to have to explain things. They already know a bit about what we're going to talk about."

"Go on, sweetie," Elke shooed her off. "We won't be long."

"Alright," she sulked, stamping away in a huff.

"What is it, son?" Eron asked.

"They want something from me, father," he said.

"More than just teaching you?"

He nodded. "I can tell by looking at them. It's in their scents. The problem is, I don't know what it is they want. I've thought about it, and for the life of me, I can't figure out what it is."

"Are you so sure?" Elke asked.

"Mother, while I was, away, I found out that they were sending Sorcerers door to door looking for me," he told her.

"I don't see anything wrong with that," she said.

"Of course not. You're my mother," he told her. "Think of it like this. The Tower would send *Sorcerers* to hunt down a runaway Novice?"

"Tarrin, you said yourself that you weren't rational," Eron said. "They could have been trying to find you before you hurt someone."

"Father, my sense of time is very fuzzy, but I know that the Sorcerer that showed up where I was hiding was there a *long* time after I ran away from the Tower," he said. "It was well after the wife--well, nevermind that. It was a long time. They had no business looking for me door to door after *that* much time unless they were desperate to find me."

"Tarrin dear, we *were* desperate to find you," Elke said.

"Mother, you were. The *Tower* has different reasons," he replied. "After that much time, they knew I wasn't rampaging, else they'd have found me long before then. They knew I was still alive too, else they wouldn't bother to look in the first place. And despite me being gone for so long, they still kept looking. They even used magic to *force* Jesmind to find me."

"I think I'm starting to understand," Eron said. "By looking for him so hard, for so long, they tipped their hand," he told his wife. "They had no reason to keep up the search that long unless there was gain in it for them. The only gain that I can see was that they find Tarrin."

"I don't see anything wrong with it," she declared firmly.

Tarrin struggled for a moment. He knew because the Goddess in the statue had told him, more or less right out, that he was a very important person, and that had to be the reason the Tower was so serious about finding him. He didn't want to tell his parents about that--it seemed a bit too personal--so he cast out for a different way to phrase it so that his mother would understand the point he was trying to make. "Think of it like this," Tarrin said. "You know that serving pitcher grandfather gave you?" She nodded. "I know how much you love it. Now, would you hire someone to search for that pitcher for two months? Remember, you're paying for this man to search for it."

"No!" she said.

"That's what the Tower did to try to find me," he told her.

"I--oh. I get it," she agreed. "So you think you weren't worth that much effort."

"From you, yes, I was," he grinned. "From the Tower, no. I'm just one of the masses here, nobody special. The only thing that makes me different is this," he said, holding out his paws. "And there's more going on here than

just this. Did you know they specifically arranged to have Allia come to the Tower?"

"Yes, she told us that story."

"Well, they've brought another Non-human here. A Wikuni princess."

"So?"

"So, I heard long ago that they're the first Non-humans, well, *we*, are the first to be here since the Ancients walked the grounds," he told her. "And now they bring in two of them, and get me by accident."

"What difference does that make?" Eron asked.

"Maybe none, but it's, odd," he replied. "I may be getting paranoid, but it's almost like they're collecting Non-humans that can use Sorcery. I may not have been part of their plans to begin with, but I certainly seem to be so now. After I left, they started giving Allia a *lot* of attention."

"Yes, she told us," Elke said.

"I was getting that attention before I, left," he said. "At first, I thought it was because someone was trying to kill me, and not just Jesmind. Now, maybe I'm not so sure," he said. "You weren't here for it, but I was attacked several times here on the Tower grounds. Once by Jesmind, and a few times by outsiders. Now that I think back on it, every time but one that I was attacked, Allia was there. They may have been attacking both of us, and not just me." He rubbed his chin with a furred forefinger. The Goddess in the statue didn't say anything about Allia, but that didn't mean that she didn't matter. There was a good chance that she was just as important, because of who and what she was. "Hmm. Perhaps they *were* attacking both of us, *because* we're Non-humans that can do Sorcery. It's the only thing that makes us different from every other Novice and Initiate."

"The question is why," Eron said calmly.

"That is the question," Tarrin agreed. "Until I can figure out what's going on, all my thoughts are just dust in the wind. The Tower wants to keep their hands on us, and someone else wants to kill us, and I want to know why. And I mean to find out. I wanted to warn you about this, and warn you that you may hear some bad things about me from the Tower in the next month or so," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to find out what's going on," he said adamantly. "I have no doubt that I'll have to break all sorts of rules to do it. And I may get caught a few times. So long as they don't realize what I'm doing, I don't care if they catch me or not."

They were quiet a few moments. "Anything we can do to help?" Eron asked.

Tarrin smiled at his father. "Not really," he said. "This will be an inside job."

"Just be careful," Elke said. "You don't want to get into too much trouble."

"Why?" he said. "If I'm right, I could kill someone on the front steps, and they'd just slap my wrist and put me back in class. If I don't miss the mark, I'm too *important* to misuse. They don't want me vanishing again."

"Don't push it too far, son," Eron warned.

"I don't intend to, father," he said. "The Cat is a very subtle creature. I have no doubt he'll help me sneak around and find what I need to find without raising too much of a ruckus. He's good at that."

"Just be careful, my son," Elke said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "We just got you back. I don't want to lose you again."

He gave her a short hug. "You won't," he told her. "I'll be careful, I promise."

He didn't really want to say goodbye, but he had to let them go. They were his family, but they didn't need to be any part of what was soon going to happen.

Tarrin was going to find out what was going on, even if he had to peel the Keeper out of her skin strip by strip to get the answer. He didn't like being manipulated, and he wasn't about to play someone else's game without knowing the rules. His advantage was that they really had no idea that he suspected something was going on. Oh, yes, they knew that he knew that someone out there was trying to kill him, some Wizard named Kravon. But they knew he didn't know why. They could give him any explanation

that pleased them, and they felt that he would take it at face value. But it wasn't that easy.

The Cat was subtle, but it was also very *suspicious*. He had his suspicions about the Tower now, and he wouldn't trust them until he could lay those suspicions aside.

Having a goal is one thing.

Figuring out how to reach it is another.

Tarrin returned to his room and slept away some of the afternoon, catching up on sleep lost the night before, and as he slept, and sprawled on his bed in cat form, he thought about what was going on and what he'd have to do. The main problem was that he had no idea where to go to get the information he needed, not without making it obvious that he was up to something. For some reason, he was pretty sure that letting the Keeper know he was nosing around about those things would get him in trouble. Maybe even put him in danger. He knew that, since he was important to the Sorcerers, they'd give him a bit of breathing space, he didn't want to push that advantage.

Everything more or less hinged on the Keeper. He was positive that she knew what was going on. He knew that she knew who was trying to kill him--more to the point, she understood just who this Kravon fellow was. So, the problem was that the Keeper had information that he wanted. He had to get that information, but he had to do it in such a way that she wasn't aware of him getting it.

And that wasn't going to be easy. Tarrin didn't really like the Keeper, but he respected her. She was a capable ruler, and she was by no means stupid or careless. That kind of information was bound to be very sensitive, so it wasn't just going to be laying around. If it existed anywhere but in the Keeper's mind in the first place.

The first step, he guessed, would be the Keeper's office. It was where she was bound to keep her official business. There, and in the possession of Duncan, her secretary. And to a lesser degree, he realized, the official offices of the other members of the Council. From the way they all looked at him, he had little doubt that they knew a great deal about what was going

on. To a lesser extent, their personal quarters were also places of interest to him. There could be information he needed in one of their rooms. So he needed to find out where the Keeper and the Council members lived. And also Duncan. When it came to information in the Tower, nobody probably knew more than Duncan, so that man could never be ruled out.

He realized quickly that he didn't have to ransack the Keeper's office. Tiella's job as a Novice was to clean it. She was already inside. He needed to talk to her. Tiella was a friend, and would probably help him out, so long as the risk to herself was minimal. She was a friend, but she wasn't stupid, and Tarrin wouldn't put her in danger for his own sake to begin with.

Another thing he needed to do was start talking to the other Sorcerers. He knew a few of them, such as Dolanna, Sevren, and Jula, but he needed to get on friendly terms with a few more. Sorcerers were more open with Initiates. He hoped that there were some rumors or gossip about Tarrin floating around between the members of the order, and if was lucky, he could pick some of that up. Dolanna would be his best bet there. If he could get her to start nosing around on her own, using her own sources, talking to her own friends, there was a good chance she could pick up some information that he could use. Dolanna was probably the only Sorcerer in the Tower that he really trusted.

His reverie was disrupted by a sudden high-pitched screeching sound. For a second, Tarrin thought it was some kind of animal caught in a trap. Then he heard it again, and realized that it was a voice screaming the word "no". It was relatively faint, as if it was coming from a goodly distance off.

Curious, Tarrin jumped down off the bed and changed form, then went out into the hall. To his surprise, a few other Initiates were drawn out as well, curious as to the animal making that sound. But their ears weren't quite as sharp as Tarrin's, which could pick out the words.

The screaming continued, changing timbre and cadence, going from long drawn-out bellows to chattering shrieks, and Tarrin followed it up three flights of stairs and down a hallway. It kept getting louder and louder, until the higher ululations made Tarrin's ears ring painfully. He came around a corner and found the Keeper standing face to face with a figure that had her back to Tarrin. She was wearing a dress, and what stood out about her was the long, very bushy tail that sprouted from the back of her dress. It was

long and thick and very bushy, with reddish fur that was crowned with a white band between the red fur and a black tip. It was a fox's tail, a tail that was on a rather slender young woman with long red hair. A young woman with black-tufted fox ears poking out from her red hair.

She was Wikuni, one of the animal-people from across the sea. They all looked different, the Wikuni, two-legged beings that resembled common animals. This one resembled a fox, obviously, from the ears and tail.

She was wearing a cream colored gown that went well with her red fur and hair. Tarrin could only see the back of it, but he could see even from that angle that it was silk, it was slashed with red goring, and it had a brocaded bodice that sewed into the silk at her sides. A belt of beaten gold was around a very slender waist. She was a bit taller than an average human woman, about half a head taller than the diminutive Keeper, but she was slender and had very attractive feminine curves. A foot appeared under the hem of her dress, a dainty furred foot in a cream colored slipper. That foot stamped down, and her hands went to her hips as she shouted at the Keeper. "Unacceptable!" she shouted. "This room isn't fit enough for my pet cockatiel! I want an apartment, with piped water, and a balcony overlooking the gardens! I'll not live in this, this dungeon cell! I *won't!*" she shrieked, and it hurt Tarrin's ears.

For such a little thing, she was certainly *loud*.

"Highness, your father sent you here to receive education," the Keeper said in a cordial tone. "You're in the Initiate now, and this is where Initiates live."

"I am Keritanima-Chan Eram, Jewel of the Western Star, Lady of the 20 Seas, Bearer of the 5 Bands of Nan, Holder of the Ring of Bakul, Crown Princess of Wikuna! I will not be treated like a peasant! *Do you understand me?*" she finished with a ear-splitting scream that about pierced Tarrin's eardrums. Tarrin's paws went up to his ears, and he bowed a bit and winced.

"You think you can lower it to something less loud? Like a thunderstrike?" he asked acidly.

The Keeper's eyes darted up in surprise, and the Wikuni whirled around. Her face was a cross between a human face and a fox's, with human shaped amber colored eyes over a short, boxy muzzle. Her cheekbones merged

with the sides of that muzzle to give her the pattern sharp fox-like face. A button nose was at the end of that muzzle and her maw hung open in astonishment. Tarrin noticed the teeth. Despite being a hybrid of human and animal, her mouth was all fox. She had the jaws and the teeth, and for a moment, he wondered how she spoke. The ability to speak the human language depended a great deal on the shape of the human mouth. He was totally incapable of speaking any man-language while in cat shape, because his cat maw and muzzle were incompatible with those sounds.

"Highness, this is Tarrin Kael," the Keeper said. "One of the other Non-human students I mentioned."

"How *dare* you speak to me so, you, you, whatever you are!" she snapped at him. He watched her mouth closely as she spoke. She had different lips than what would have been on a fox's muzzle, stronger and as prehensile as human lips, which sealed the sides of the mouth and allowed her to direct the sound in the proper manner. Interesting. They were by no means human lips, but they were not animal lips either. "I am *Princess* Keritanima, and you will address me so!"

Tarrin approached them, looking down the considerable distances between their heights. She came up to his chin. She stared up at him coldly, but he could see the very faint amusement in her eyes. This close to her, he got a good sample of her scent. It was not human, nor was it fox. It wasn't even a mixture of the two. It was a scent uniquely individual, not what he would have expected from the looks of her. If he hadn't scented her, he'd never have identified her scent if he encountered it in the hallways.

"Highness, Tarrin is the son of a king's daughter," the Keeper said bluntly. "He is as much a prince as you are a princess. And if you look, you'll see he is wearing the Initiate uniform. I myself am a Duchess. So you see, we're not quite as impressed with your title and rank as you are. Your father sent you here so we could educate you, and we intend to do just that. That means that you will live where we tell you. You will eat with the other Initiates, you will attend classes with the other Initiates, and you will live like the other Initiates. That means that everyone except the one maid we agreed to goes back to your ship. So do the clothes, the jewelry, and the furniture."

"NO!" she shouted. "They are mine, and I'm bringing them!"

"They may be yours, but this is *my* Tower," the Keeper retorted angrily. "Your father gave custody of you to me, and that means that you do as I say. And unlike your father, I'll *make* you do what I tell you to do."

"You will *not*!" she snapped in a loud voice.

Without another word, the Keeper began rolling up her sleeves. "I may be a Duchess, but I was born to a woodcutter and a seamstress," she told the Wikuni in a deadly voice. "And I have never seen in my life a girl in more dire need of being spanked than you."

"You wouldn't *dare*!" the Wikuni screamed, then she turned and ran into the open door beside them. She closed it, and the sound of the bolt being thrown from the inside was loud and clear.

The Keeper drew herself up, and Tarrin could feel her starting to *draw in*. "Keeper, please," he said quickly, cutting her off, "allow me."

"By all means," she said with a courteous bow, motioning to the door with both hands.

"How would you like it?"

"Direct, but please go easy on the local geography," she replied. "We do have to fix what you break."

"I can handle that, ma'am," Tarrin said as he stepped up to the door. It was just like the one to his own room. That meant that he knew exactly where the latch was in respect to the door's wood. Balling up a fist, he reared back and punched the door precisely, driving his paw through the solid wood. The Wikuni screamed in fear when Tarrin's paw exploded through the door, and he heard her stumble back and fall down against what sounded like a chair. Unballing his fist, he reached down deftly and grabbed the latch, then lifted it. Then he removed his hand from the door and pushed it open.

The Wikuni was sitting unceremoniously on the floor, an overturned chair laying beside her, and a look of abject terror was in her eyes as the door swung open. Tarrin made a grand sweep of his paw, motioning to the Keeper that the way for her was clear. "Thank you, Tarrin," she said in a crisp, businesslike voice.

"Any time, Keeper," he replied grandly.

"Now if you'll excuse us, I do believe that her Royal Highness would prefer to have her bare backside blistered without an audience." The Keeper marched into the room like a general about to do war.

"Yes ma'am," Tarrin said, closing the door.

The sound that Keritanima-Chan Eram, Jewel of some star, Lady of some sea somewhere, and so on and so on, made after a few seconds was just as loud and high pitched as they were before, but now they were howls of pain and outrage that proceeded a sharp sound of a hand against a fur-clad backside. Tarrin found that this time he found the loud caterwauling to be somewhat pleasant to his ears.

Now that he could hear himself think again, he returned to his room and changed form, then laid back down on the bed.

Tarrin considered what would happen after he got the information, and decided on a course of action. One thing was plain. The Tower would not let him just walk out. He would have to sneak out or flee, one or the other. The fact that they didn't find him the first time was very comforting to him, but he knew that they knew that they couldn't find him. He needed to plan things so that, if he did flee, he would act as if they *could* track him down. That meant that he needed somewhere to go. He was a Were-cat, and his home was the trackless expanses of forest that humans called the Frontier. He was pretty sure that, if he could make it there, he could simply vanish. The Sorcerers would have to be desperate to send people in after him.

That was if he left. He considered also the possibility that he would stay. He wasn't sure how learning whatever these secrets were would affect his position in the Tower, but if he stayed, he had no doubt that things would be much different for him.

Another thing to consider were the ones he left behind. Allia would *not* be in a good position if he fled the tower. There was every possibility that Allia's position here had nothing to do with him or this information. Then again, considering the increase in attention she received after Tarrin ran away, he wasn't so sure about that. And there was every possibility that this Wikuni would also have a stake in whatever it was that was going on. She was the last of their very unique three, a Non-human that had the ability to

use Sorcery. If that indeed was the reason they were in the Tower, Tarrin's removal from the playing field made them much more important.

He'd have to think about that more, but that was something that he'd have to think about after he got a better idea of what it was he was trying to do. He was trying to walk a maze with a blindfold on as it was, and making only the crudest of plans based on information he had yet to acquire. But it was a start, and it made him feel better knowing that he *was* preparing for the future.

In the interim, there was one thing that he could do that really didn't require anything, something that he needed to do no matter what happened. Learn. He had to learn as much about Sorcery as he could, as fast as he could. If he fled the Tower again, his power in Sorcery would help him get away. If he stayed, that power was leverage to use against the other Sorcerers. No matter what road he travelled, the ability to use Sorcery loomed large on each of them.

Tarrin already knew that he was powerful. From what the Sorcerers said, what he saw in them, the little hints, and Dolanna's discussions, he knew he was very, very strong. Probably stronger than three average Sorcerers put together. That power was his leverage, and that was what he had to concentrate on for the time being. It did him no good if he couldn't use any of it. And, not forgetting any of the points here, he knew that knowing Sorcery would be a big help the next time this mysterious Kravon decided to send someone to try to kill him. True, he was hard to kill. True, his Were-cat nature made it that much harder. But this Kravon *knew* what he was, and he knew how to kill him. And he was sneaky, and he had his own magic at his disposal. The invisible Trolls and the Wraith were more than enough evidence of that. Tarrin had been lucky, very lucky, more than once, and that luck had saved his life. But there was going to be a point where he was going to run out of luck. If that happened, then he would need to fall back on something a bit more dependable than wild luck. And Sorcery seemed quite an effective crutch.

It was quite a bit to think about. Tarrin yawned and stretched, then snuggled down a bit more into the bedspread and brought his tail around to wrap around his body. Maybe too much for a simple farm boy who was just trying to stay sane. All this thinking and planning and plotting wasn't what

he had in mind when he left home. It wasn't in his nature--well, his old human nature. The Cat was a methodical creature, so it didn't mind the planning and plotting all that much.

One of the two doors opened, but Tarrin didn't respond. The scent coming into the room was Allia's coppery scent, and that meant that there was no danger. "Tarrin," she called. He heard the door close, and then felt the bed shift as she sat down upon it. He opened his eyes and looked up. She was wearing Initiate red, and he saw that she was wearing that *shaeram* that she found in the courtyard. "Were we going to train today?"

Tarrin shook his head, then he yawned again.

"We have to get back to it, Tarrin," she told him. "You've gone three months without a single workout. You may be getting soft."

With a flick of his tail, he shoed her off, then closed his eyes and put his head down on his paws.

"You're sure?"

He shoed her away with his tail again.

He felt her get up. "Oh, Tarrin," she called.

Annoyed he opened his eyes and glared at her. "What?" he demanded in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"There's no need to get snippy," she said frostily. "I just wanted to know how your parents are doing."

Although the strangeness of it seemed to be lost on her, it was not lost on him. He did *not* speak. And her response was more than merely understanding what was in his eyes. She had been snippish in response to his own blunt demeanor. Such a reaction could only come if she understood what he'd said. Giving her a strange look, he rose up into a sitting position. How could she have understood? Only other cats, or a Were-cat, could have understood his words.

The *shaeram*. She'd found it in the courtyard, where the statue of that Goddess stood. And both of them had been amazed to find it, considering that it wasn't there the day before. Could it have been some kind of gift

from that Goddess to Allia? Something to let her understand Tarrin when he was a cat?

There was one way to find out. Giving her a direct look, he said "Stand on one foot and sing the drunken courtesan song."

"And what insanity possesses you to think I'd act a fool for your amusement?" she countered with a smile. Then she blinked, and her expression went from mild amusement to one of incredulity.

"Yes," he replied to her unspoken question. "Don't ask me how, I don't know. I think it's that amulet you found in the courtyard. I think it's letting you understand me."

She reached into her shirt and drew out the ivory medallion. "Amazing," she said. "It's as if I hear you speaking in your own voice! But that's impossible, you being the way you are now."

"I *am* speaking in my own voice," he told her. "Well, sort of. It's my unspoken voice. It's just that you can *hear* it."

"I can hear it fine," she said, staring at him.

"Take off the amulet," he said.

She nodded, and removed it. "Alright," she said. "Try now." Tarrin asked her how old her father was, but there was no reply. "If you're talking, I can't hear it," she told him after a moment. Then she put it back on. "Tarrin?"

"It's the amulet," he affirmed.

"My," she breathed, then she stared at it. "There is *no* way that this found its way to me by sheer accident," she said firmly. "I can almost smell someone's hand making things like they are."

"Yes, but who would put it there?" Tarrin said. He secretly had suspicions, of course. That Goddess in the statue was probably the guilty party. She was the *only* one, outside of Allia herself and Jesmind, that knew about Tarrin's ability to communicate in the unspoken manner of the Cat. But Allia's devotion to Fara'Nae would probably make her reject the necklace if Tarrin told her where it really came from. And her having it would open up entire worlds of new possibilities. For one, if he didn't miss

his mark, he could speak to her in the manner of the Cat while in humanoid form, allowing him to talk to her without speaking. The use of it went beyond mere words.

So, to make sure she kept it, a little bit of creative manipulation of the truth was in order. Tarrin couldn't lie while speaking in the manner of the Cat. Lying was alien to the Cat, so it had no place in its language. But that didn't stop him from spinning the truth on its edge.

"I'm sure that the goddess that gave it to you wanted you to have it, Allia," he told her, stressing the word *goddess* while underplaying the possibility that it was some goddess *other* than Fara'Nae. "Else she'd never have put it there for you to find." The key to a good lie--or manipulation of the truth, in this case--was simplicity. The simpler things were, the more easily they could be accepted as honest words. That was why Tarrin didn't elaborate, allowing her to digest his statement and draw her own conclusions.

"It certainly wasn't there the day before," she said in support. And it's so *lovely*," she sighed, looking at the carved ivory symbol. "You're right, my brother," she said after a moment. "It was left there for me on purpose. I'll not question a gift freely given, even though I know it wasn't from the Holy Mother." She gave Tarrin a sly look. "And I suspect that *you* know where it came from," she pressed, sitting down beside him and grabbing him by the tail. "It's from that other one, isn't it? The one they made me swear obedience to this morning?"

Tarrin laughed ruefully. "I'd imagine so," he told her. "This *is* her domain, after all. If anyone put it there, it was her."

"Yes, you're right," she said. "I guess that's not all that hard to figure out, is it? She knows about you and me, and she gave me this to help me talk with you." She patted it, then slid it back under her shirt. "I'll have to talk fast to the Holy Mother, but I think she won't mind. She gave me permission to take that oath, after all. I get the feeling that the Holy Mother has some kind of agreement with this Goddess of the Sorcerers over me. I think they're sharing me somehow."

"Why not?" Tarrin shrugged. "If your Holy Mother is sure that this other goddess will take good care of you, and won't try to steal you, then I don't

think she'd mind all that much. From what you've told me of her, she seems a very practical goddess."

"The Holy Mother is *very* practical," Allia said. "It's what makes her such a sensible goddess, and it's a reflection of the way we Selani live. Practicality is very important out in the desert. Without it, we would quickly die."

"I imagine so," he agreed. "I think you're in a pretty unusual situation, Allia. You've got the Holy Mother looking out for you, but since you can do Sorcery, that *also* puts you under the influence of this goddess of the Sorcerers. I guess it's not all that strange to think that they made a deal. I don't think they want any friction between each other, you and the Sorcerers, or upset your beliefs."

Allia laughed. "Here we sit, daring to speculate on the motives of the gods. I'm surprised we haven't been struck dead."

"Men have been doing it for as long as there have been gods to talk about," Tarrin shrugged, or as best he could in cat form.

"Truly," she agreed.

"I'm going back to sleep," he told her. "I'll see you later?"

"Later," she replied.

Tarrin saw her again about sunset, coming out of the main Tower's entrance that led to the kitchens, and also the entrance that Initiates and Novices were supposed to use. Her hair was damp; she'd been in the baths. "Tarrin," she called, her expression a bit irritated, "you would not believe who I just saw."

"That Wikuni?" he asked.

She nodded. "I can't *believe* that anyone would act like that. If she were Selani, her parents would have killed her!"

"What did she do?"

"She threw a temper tantrum in the middle of the kitchens," she replied. "All because the cook wouldn't bake her a fresh loaf of bread, no less! She was completely out of control. She even threw *knives* at the cook!"

"Wow," he breathed. "Did the Keeper spank her again?"

"What?"

Tarrin quickly related the short tale of his meeting with the Wikuni, which made Allia laugh. "No, the Keeper wasn't there," she replied. "One of the Council did come down and speak very firmly to her, though. I think she listened about as much as a rock would have."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Tarrin grunted.

"Where are you going?"

"To get something to eat," he replied.

"I'll come with you," she said.

The night air was crisp and cold, the ever-present wind of the Keen howling over the battlements of the wind-swept fortress. Built of gray stone over two thousand years ago, the forgotten structure clung perilously to the cliffside of God's Crag, a massive mountain south of the main crux of the three Petal Lakes, the point where the three lakes joined. The six towers of the outer walls and main keep had stood against the stiff, constant wind for more years than most things on the world had lived, and had withstood the merciless pounding in such a way that made the use of magic obvious. Built long ago by a forgotten king to protect the flow of iron from the rich mountains that surrounded the Petal Lakes, Castle Keening served a new master now. The mines to the east of Castle Keening were long ago abandoned and collapsed, and those to the north were supplied by lakebarges and raft instead of the forgotten overland routes that the grim, foreboding castle had once defended from raiding bands of Waern, Dargu, Bruga, and Trolls.

A lone figure stood on a balcony high in the tower that rose over the main keep. Ashen skin took on a ghostly pallor in the light of the two risen moons and the Skybands, almost luminous in its colorlessness. Black hair contrasted the ghostly skin blaringly, long, thick hair that was kept neat, clean, and tied back away from the thin, emotionless face. A face that made most people cringe or step back unconsciously. He was a tall man, tall and almost cadaverously thin, wearing a simple gray robe that was kept

scrupulously clean and neat. The robe did not billow in the stiff wind. The man's hair did not so much as flow, even as the wind howled around him. Behind the man was a tall, burly Dal wearing a mail shirt under a breastplate. The man's iron gray hair was cut short, as was his beard, and a wicked scar ran down his left cheek. Beside him was a slender woman wearing a black robe and cloak, with a hood pulled over her face to conceal it from the light that made her dark clothes a silhouette against the fire burning in the fireplace behind the trio.

"The Sorcerers have recovered the Were-cat, Master Kravon," the large Dal told him in a voice as gravelly as his appearance, a voice like the mountain stone. "More to the point, he went back to them."

"Indeed," the man in the gray robe said in a cold, neutral voice. "I expected as much. That one is full of surprises."

"We can still remove him, Lord Kravon," the woman said in a calm voice.

"As efficiently as before?" Kravon asked in a monotone, glancing over his shoulder. "All your prior attempts have done is to warn the *katzh-dashi* that we are aware of their prize."

"Luck, Lord Kravon," the woman said in a slightly ruffled voice, smoothing her cloak's hem uncounsciously, then settling her hood deeper over her face. "We very nearly had him, more than once, but blind luck favors fools."

"Fool," he chuckled grimly. "Naive, yes. Inexperienced, yes. But not a fool. Never that. You underestimate our opponent, my dear. And his allies. They are guarding him. Even now, they are preparing to raise the ancient ward that surrounds their Tower. With it raised, the magic of the Wizards will not be able to penetrate, and the Were-cat will be safely contained on the grounds."

"My magic will still be quite effective, Lord Kravon," the woman said confidently.

"Yes, but what will you do with it?" he asked, turning around and regarding her with eyes that were as cold as the grave. Eyes that gave children nightmares. "Should you attempt to eliminate the Were-cat, you will most certainly be found out. And my eyes and ears within the *katzh-*

dashi will be removed. Our other agents in the Tower would have no way to get their information to us. At this stage in the game, that is not acceptable.

"The *katzh-dashi* are a force to be reckoned with, my dear. You, of all people, should be aware of that. Their magic is strong, and they know what to do with it. They know what is at stake, and they primp and ready the Were-cat for his role in the game." He chuckled again, a sound like steel sliding across steel. "And the Were-cat is not the only one that can play the role. The Selani, and the Wikuni, they are as much a danger to us as he is. The poor creatures. If they only knew what it was they were being prepared for."

"From the sound of your voice, my Lord, you have a plan," the Dal said. "I stand ready to carry out your orders."

"Yes, Bral, in a moment," he said, turning back around, staring up into the brilliant starry sky. "The Were-cat," he said quietly, "is a Weavespinner. An Ancient. My dear, I believe you understand exactly what that means."

"Aye, my lord," she said grimly. "He holds power over the All."

"We cannot allow that to come to pass," he said. "We must strike at him *now*, before he learns what power he holds, and how to wield it."

"But my Lord," she said, "if they raise the ward, they are putting him out of our reach."

"Ah, yes," he agreed. "But that only protects him from those who are *outside*."

"I understand, my Lord," the woman said with a bow of her head. "I'll gather up the people I'll need."

"The *katzh-dashi* are very much caught up in tradition and custom," Kravon mused to himself. "They'll put the Were-cat through their normal Initiate, and teach him at only a slightly faster rate than usual. Because even they do not know exactly how to go about training him in arts that were lost eons ago. That works in our favor." He turned and looked at the woman. "I want him dead before he weaves his first spell, my dear," he commanded in a clear voice. "Every time he touches the Weave, he presents more of a danger to us. There is no place in our plans for him."

"I will see to it, my Lord," she said confidently. "I already have a most delicious plan in mind, one that presents no danger to our own people."

Kravon nodded. "Just get it done, my dear," he said. "Now go. You must be back at the Tower before daybreak." She curtsied gracefully to him, then turned and walked away. "Bral," Kravon called after the woman left the room.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Bring Semoa to me," he said. "I am confident that our puppet will do her best, but I will not gamble on her success. It is time for Jegojah."

Bral's rocky face blanched. "The Doomwalker?" he gasped. "My Lord, is that entirely wise?"

"Wise or not, it is necessary," he said. "And you would do well not to second guess my decisions, General."

"Never, my Lord," he said in swift and sincere humility. "I only struggle to understand what's obviously over my head."

"To seek wisdom does you credit, Bral," he said. "But remember that all men have limitations."

"Aye, my Lord," Bral said in meek contrition. "I will bring Semoa to you."

Kravon nodded. "Quickly, General, quickly. Time is passing."

After a very good night's sleep, Tarrin arose the next morning curiously expectant, and a bit eager. It was surprising to him to think that he was eager to get into the business of learning Sorcery, but he was. He had only touched that power once, in cat form, and even now the memory of it was veiled by the long rides he had spent in cat form. The only thing he remembered about it was the feeling of the power inside of him, around him, and then feeling it rush out of him in such a flood that he felt drained. He wanted to know more about it, know how he had done it, how it worked.

It was a subject that was kept in the strictest confidence in the Novitiate. Novices were not taught a whit of Sorcery, nor were even the most fundamental aspects of it taught, nor were the books or manuscripts that

went into any detail kept where a Novice could reach. All of that was saved for the Initiate. From what he already knew, the first rides of the Initiate were more classroom instruction and history, but it was the history of the *katzh-dashi* and formal education on the fundamentals of magic. After that was completed, then the Initiates would be paired with Sorcerers, and they would start learning Sorcery first-hand. The Initiate was again unlike the Novitiate in that it had no formal structure after the learning began. An Initiate was deemed graduated when he satisfied the Sorcerers that he was competent. That could take months, it could take years. It depended entirely upon the individual's aptitude and desire to learn. After the Initiate was complete, the full-fledged individual had the option of joining the *katzh-dashi*, or going their own way. Entry into the *katzh-dashi* wasn't a requirement, but the Sorcerers weren't about to let people out there run around with the gift unless they had formal training in how to control it.

And once you were in the Initiate, you didn't get out until the Tower was done with you. No Initiate had ever run away from the Tower that had not been captured or killed.

Because of all that, Sorcery was a complete mystery to him. All that he knew was his own brief touch on that vast power, a touch that was made when he wasn't fully in command of his own wits and made in a panic.

Opening the door to his room, he stepped out wearing Initiate red. It felt strange, somehow. After two months of wearing no clothes at all, anything against his skin that wasn't fur was odd, but seeing the color of it in glances and peripheral vision made it feel alien to him. Before he left, it had always been white. Always. And now the color fringing his eyes was red. More than once, he had an irrational impulse to check to see what was bleeding. After two months, the conceptions he had drawn from wearing Novice white for so long were yet to fade.

Although it was not even dawn, Allia was not in her room. Ever the early riser, she had a habit of waking long before him and spending the time walking the gardens. It wasn't an allowed practice in the Novitiate, but she was never caught out of her room when she was supposed to be within it. The gardens held an almost mystical attraction for the Selani warrior. The flowers and color and vivid life of the plants never ceased to amaze her. It reminded Tarrin how he took the things around him for granted. What was

everyday to him was something to inspire wonder in his desert-born friend. Then again, he had little doubt that the descriptions of her homeland would pale in comparison to the real thing, when he finally did get the chance to see it for himself.

It was dark outside, with a pale mist hugging the ground, a mist thick enough to dim the light from the Skybands high above, light that only illuminated the grayish fog in a ghostly light that obscured everything within. This close to dawn, only the White Moon, Dommammon, was still in the sky, but it was too low to the horizon to add any light. Definitely not enough to pierce the fog. The air was chilled with the beginning of fall, and the scents riding on the still air were damp and subdued. The foggy air quickly drowned out most senses, giving Tarrin a curious sense of isolation within the misty haze. It obscured his vision of the main Tower ahead as he walked out on the path, and the North Tower behind disappeared into the dim murk. Scents were watered down by the humid air, and sound reflected back off the gray misty billows, amplifying the faint scrapes of his paws on the gravel path. His tail shivered as the damp air penetrated the fur sheathing it, putting a strange cold sensation against skin that was not accustomed to such feelings.

It was a new day. A new start. The day was certainly going out of its way to be different. This was the first time that Tarrin had felt the chill of the coming winter, or had seen the fog for which the city was famous. In the spring, it was said that one couldn't see a candle in a window across the street until well after the midday bell. The fog was a normal fixture from the beginning of winter to the middle of spring. It was a poignant reminder of how much time he had lost. Two months, he'd been told.

He encountered a solitary figure as he walked along the path towards the Tower. The fog muffled the figure's scent, but the bushy tail swaying behind a feminine form marked the person as Wikuni. And there were only two Wikuni at the Tower. The Princess, and her maid. Tarrin hadn't seen the Princess' maid, but she doubted that the maid looked *that* much like her Royal Bratness. As they neared each other, he saw that it was indeed the Princess of Wikuna, in all of her royal authority, wearing an Initiate dress of red and without the pretty baubles and jewels which had decorated her fingers and neck the day before. Her boxy muzzle was shivering as she seemed to mutter to herself, but her amber eyes were hard and steely. Not

the look he expected from the vapid scatterbrain. She looked up at him, and that look evaporated like the fog around them exposed to the summer sun, replaced with a hollow emptiness that made it seem that there was nothing behind those eyes except the back of her skull.

He passed her without comment or acknowledgement, and he heard her stop and turn around. "Hey!" she snapped, her words echoing loudly in the muffled silence of the fog.

Tarrin stopped, but did not turn around. "What?" he asked in a calm, quiet voice.

"It is customary for people of *your* station to bow," she said in a grating voice.

"My station," Tarrin said in a calm voice. He didn't like the way that this was going. He could see now that if he didn't take a stand immediately, he would have no peace with her. The Wikuni was going to be in his class today, and that meant that there would be long hours of enforced companionship with her. He decided that it was best for his own sanity to put her down now, and put her down hard. "My station is whatever I decide it to be," he told her in a grim voice, turning around. His irritation lit his eyes from within with their unholy greenish aura, making them look as twin pools of utter evil in the ghostly light of the fog. "And I'm going to tell you something right now, little Wikuni. I have no patience for people like *you*. Stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. But if you get on my nerves, I'll make you regret it."

"I'd like to see you *try*," she snapped. "I'm the Princess of Wikuna! You-
-"

Without hesitation, Tarrin snapped forward like an arrow launched from a bow. Before the Wikuni could even flinch, he had her by the bodice of her Initiate dress. She made a squeak of shock that cut off what she was going to say as his fingers closed on the material, then he yanked her towards him by that precipitous handhold. She grabbed his wrist in both hands and rained curses and demands on him as he dragged her towards the main Tower wordlessly, at a pace so fast that he was half dragging the foxwoman behind him. He entered the Tower with her in tow, dragged her down the main stairs, and entered the baths with her feet dragging along the stones

and her grip on his wrist the only thing keeping him from ripping the front of her dress away. There were three people in the baths, two women and a man, all three of them in the bathing pool at discrete distances from one another. All three stopped cleaning themselves and watched as Tarrin dragged the hapless Wikuni by the bodice of her dress, right up to the edge of the pool. At the end where the water hissed and steamed.

The Wikuni shrieked in terror when she realized what Tarrin was going to do. She let go of his wrist and tried to pull away from his grip, willing to sacrifice her dress, but by then it was too late. Tarrin's other paw closed around the base of her tail, something that would not come off easily. Hoisting her up by her bodice and her tail, he took a little shimmying step, and then heaved her into the middle of the hottest part of the bathing pool.

She landed in the water face first, making a spectacular splash, then she broached the surface like a boulder fired from a catapult. She charged towards the cooler water with whimpering cries streaming from her mouth, her fur clinging to her skin and making her look like a drowned rat. Tarrin watched her with emotionless eyes as she managed to reach a temperature that was bearable more than painful, and that was when he was fixed with the most baleful glare he'd ever seen in his life. Had he still been human, it may have taken him aback, but he had no fear of her, so it had no venom. "You are going to be *so* sorry you did this to me!" she promised in a hissing voice.

"This was your warning," Tarrin replied in a voice so cold that it stole the venom out of her eyes. "I am not a simpering human, Wikuni, and I'm not one of your subjects either. Whoever you are means nothing to me. If you irritate me, I'll kill you. I'll do it without a second thought. Treat me like something not worth your effort one more time, and I'll rip off your tail and hang it on my wall as a trophy. Talk to me like you did again, and I'll hang you off the fence and skin you. And I'll make sure you live long enough to see your own pelt. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

Staring at him in horror, she could only give a slight nod.

"Good. I hate repeating myself."

She suddenly erupted into a bawl of tears, but he tuned out her sobs and stalked away from the pool. Wondering when he'd become so hard. He'd

only meant to make it clear that he would brook no attitude from the girl, and then he was suddenly threatening her life.

He knew that the time away had been good for him, but even then he knew that he was nowhere near in complete control. That little episode was a very impacting reminder of that fact. He still had to be very careful of himself, else he would do something that he would truly regret later.

On the other hand, the Wikuni would have probably taken anything less to be empty words. At least now, she understood *exactly* how he felt about her attitude.

The entire affair managed to spoil the exuberance and anticipation he'd been feeling. Muttering to himself, he stalked up the stairs, in the direction of the kitchen, intent on claiming the breakfast he had left his room to get in the first place. He stopped when a glimpse of red hair shown ahead of him, a thick shock of hair the color of fire disappearing up the staircase. He fully well remembered, with a bit of a shiver, the last time he had seen a redheaded woman on the steps leading from the baths. Memories of that nightmarish encounter were dim, but the emotions behind them, emotions to which he was susceptible considering his months in cat form, made his ears go back and made his heart flutter in his chest. Advancing slowly and carefully, he knelt at the base of the steps and stared up their length, up to where they slowly began to turn to the left, his nose sifting through the myriad scents left on the stone by countless feet. Only those that were freshest had any meaning to him, and none of them were Jesmind. In fact, her scent was nowhere around. Could it have been someone else? Jesmind's hair color was odd, but not unique. He had not seen anyone else in the Tower with quite that shade of fire red hair, but that didn't mean that there wasn't another one.

But his nose didn't lie. Nobody had been on the steps in the last half an hour, except for himself. He puzzled over that for a moment. How could the woman with the red hair have went up the steps, and not left a scent? Even if her feet had never touched the ground, the traces of her scent would still be drifting in the warm, muggy air. Especially since the air circulated *down* the stairs; he could feel it against his face. He was downwind, and yet there was no scent at all.

Tarrin debated what to do. There was another set of stairs leading out of the baths, on the far side of the chamber, so he wasn't pinned into going in this one direction. But he was curious about who, or what, he had seen, something that left behind no trace of its passage. Jesmind was good, but there was no way she could have done that.

The sound of sloshing behind him told him that the Wikuni had dragged herself out of the bathing pool. He could hear her panting, almost as if to keep control. Yet she didn't say a word. She was either too frightened of him--no, it had to be that. He didn't credit her with enough sense to be otherwise.

Not caring to be brained from behind by an indignant wet Wikuni, Tarrin advanced up the steps cautiously, claws out, his every sense straining to know what was around the slight bend in the staircase as it rose up to the ground floor. There still was nothing, only his own scent going down. When the landing came into view, he again saw only the briefest flash of red, a lock of hair disappearing around the corner. He rushed up to that spot and stared down the hallway. It was a hallway that led into the center of the Tower, towards the Heart, and there was not a single doorway between the stairs and the ornate iron gate that marked the Chamber of the Heart. There was *nowhere* for the mysterious figure to go, and yet she, or he, vanished without a trace. Without any trace at all, for there was no scent on the stone that was even a day old. Nobody went into the Chamber of the Heart without a good reason.

Tarrin could think of only two things. Either his eyes were deceiving him, or whatever it was had no scent.

If his eyes were deceiving him, then they were doing it again. Tarrin could see faint movement behind the iron gate marking the end of the hallway, a flash of red and white behind the intricate iron scrollwork, iron wrought into the shape of the *shaeram* on each of the two iron gates. Just like the red and white of Jesmind's hair and shirt. It wasn't like Jesmind to sneak around like this. If Jesmind wanted to talk to him, or to fight, she would have come right out and got him. He seriously doubted that she wanted to fight, but if she did, then maybe she was trying to bait him into ambush. Curiously detached, he realized that he needed to find out exactly who, or what, that was, to see if it was friend, foe, or other.

It only took an instant's thought to form his awareness around the shape of the cat, and then his body flowed into the form as his vision blurred. He heard a startled gasp behind him, down the stairs, but he ignored it as he crept on utterly silent paws up the hallway, which was lit with glowglobes like all hallways within the Tower proper. He reached the iron gates, then slunk down on his belly and looked through a hole in the ironwork by the base, looking into the large room.

The room was empty, except for Jesmind. She was standing with her back to him, her thick mane of wild red hair flowing down her back and around her shoulders, bunching up against the base of her tail. A tail that swished to and fro in a reflexive, rhythmic pattern. Her paws were clasped behind her back in a relaxed manner, and she was staring at the strange place in the middle of the chamber, staring upwards at the ceiling so incredibly high above.

Tarrin saw immediately that all was not what it appeared to be, because Jesmind had no scent.

It was *not* Jesmind, he was certain of that. It could not be her, no matter how much it looked like her. Because she--*it* did not have a scent.

"I know you're there, Tarrin," the figure called. It *sounded* like Jesmind's voice, even down to the undertones of impatience in the timbre. "You don't have to hide from me. You know me better than that. If I wanted to fight, I'd have attacked you while you were busy with the walking throw-rug."

It was very convincing. *Very* convincing. But it was *not* Jesmind. Tarrin changed form absently, taking a step back. He had no idea who or what that was, but since it was somehow pretending to be Jesmind, he didn't want to risk trying to find out more. Yet maybe he could find out more.

"What do you want, Jesmind?" he asked acidly.

"To talk."

"The last time you said that, you tried to rip my head off."

"Times change, Tarrin," she said. Tarrin's eyes narrowed. Jesmind didn't call him by his name. She called him *cut*. "I've been thinking. I make the offer to you one last time, Tarrin, but this time, you don't have to leave. I

talked to the Keeper the other day, and she explained how, dangerous, this Sorcery business can be if you're not trained. I can teach you what you need to know while you're here."

Clever. Just what he would want to hear out of her mouth. Tarrin reached out with his senses, closing his eyes and taking in the air deeply through his nose, straining with his ears. He could hear the Wikuni behind him, advancing curiously, could hear her breathing. No such sound emanated from the chamber before him. The smell, the *feel* of that Conduit thing that Ahiriya had described tingled along his skin, but he could discern no scents of anything alive inside the chamber, nor could he hear anything.

A scent. Yes, there *was* a scent. A smell of....ozone. Like the smell of lightning after it strikes. And there *was* a sound coming from the room, but not of breathing. More like the sound of a distant wind, the sound of air pushing against air. Both were very faint, almost negligible, but they were there.

"Wikuni," he said calmly, quickly, aware that she stood right behind him, "give me your slipper."

"What? I--"

"Don't argue!" he snapped in a sibilant hiss. "Just give it to me!"

Lifting a foot with a mutter, she reached down and removed her slipper, then handed it to him. "I don't see what--"

She cut herself off as Tarrin reared back and then threw it into the room with considerable force, squeezing it through a hole in the gate, and managing to strike the figure square in the back. The throw had enough to stagger the form forward, until its foot crossed the line and into the dark circle that marked the boundary of that Conduit Ahiriya said was there.

It gave a keening cry, like the sound of wind howling through the treetops, a horrid sound that made Tarrin's ears stand straight up, then try to fold in on themselves to block it out. Then the form of Jesmind vanished in a whirlwind of dark clouds. But the whirlwind seemed to falter, as the magical power inside the Conduit charged whatever it was that had been hiding behind Jesmind's appearance. The magical energy rushed into it, making it glow, and showing Tarrin its form. It was some kind of odd creature seemingly made out of the air itself, and its shape altered wildly

as it writhed and convulsed in the magical vortex that was the Conduit. It gave another keen, until a sudden blast of wind lashed out from inside the glowing area as the figure itself disincorporated.

Shielding his eyes from the sudden hot wind, he heard the Wikuni gasp behind him as the hot wind passed them by and blew faint dust down the hall. "What was that!" she demanded in a slightly shocked voice, a voice held under tight control.

"I don't know," Tarrin replied.

"How did you know it wasn't, well, whatever it was?"

"It had no scent," he replied calmly.

She blinked, giving him a curious look. Tarrin noticed that those amber eyes were clear and totally lucid. They were...calculating, and they took in Tarrin from top to bottom, as if by that one glance, the Wikuni could work out the inner motives of his deepest self. As if she was reassessing her opinion of him. Her look made him do the same thing. This Wikuni was more than she appeared.

"What in the Pit was that?" a voice called. Tarrin and the Wikuni both turned to look, to see two of the three from the baths, the man and the blond woman, standing in the hallway with towels wrapped around themselves.

"We don't know," the Wikuni said in her normal imperious tone. "Some kind of glowing ball thing got our attention, so we came down here to look at it. When we got here, it gave off that horrid sound and then just popped."

"Strange," the woman hummed, tapping her lower lip with a delicate finger. "I--nevermind, you're Initiates. I'll be able to find you. I'll be asking you about this later today, when I have a chance to find you. I want to know what that sound was."

"Why not now?" the Wikuni demanded in an impetuous tone.

"Because I'm standing here wearing a towel," she replied. "And that's Mistress to you, Initiate."

"M-Mistress," the Wikuni said gratingly, having to all but wrap her mouth around the word.

"Now go get out of that wet dress, and for the Goddess' sake, comb out your fur," she ordered. "You look like a drowned rat."

The Wikuni stamped her foot with a huffing sound escaping her lips as the two Sorcerers went back down the staircase. "I do *not* look like a drowned rat!" she said hotly.

"Actually, you do," Tarrin said in a calm voice, totally devoid of amusement.

"Well *thank* you, mister messenger!" she snapped at him. "It's *your* fault I'm standing here getting dye in my fur!"

Tarrin glanced at her, a sneaking suspicion dawning in his mind. "You can drop the act," he said. "I saw your eyes. There's no way you can be that smart and that stupid at the same time."

She seemed about to give him what-for, then she scratched the back of her head and laughed ruefully. "You can, if you pay attention to what you're doing," she relayed in a calm, conversational tone. "Most people wouldn't catch a slip that small. And I usually wouldn't make such a slip, but you surprised me."

"Slip?"

"Why, I'm the Brat Princess," she told him with a cheeky grin. A grin that showed her very sharp teeth. "Didn't you know that?"

"It seemed fairly obvious to me," he drawled, "but I don't see the need for it."

"You would, if you understood the situation," she sighed. "It *is* something of a secret, Tarrin. I spent a great deal of time convincing everyone I'm an empty-headed shill. I don't need you to go behind me and ruin that."

Nothing sparked Tarrin's curiosity more than a mystery, and here was a living one. The thought that she had to act like a brat intrigued him to no end, and his mind whirled with possible explanations. "We have time," he said.

"I'm wet and look a drowned rat," she chuckled. "I don't have as much time as you. Sunrise isn't far off, and I have to be ready. We'll talk--oh yes,

we'll talk, but it will have to be later. Just promise me that you won't give me away."

"I won't," he said. "After the dunking I gave you, you have a perfect excuse to avoid me. So there won't be any more slips."

"True. I like the way you think," she agreed with that same toothy grin. "In fact, I'll absolutely *loathe* you for what you did, but since you're so, well...."

"Direct?"

"Yes, direct. That's the word I needed. Since you're so direct, I'll be too afraid of you to push things. The Brat Princess is a whining self-centered poppinjay, and she likes to hurt people that slight her, but she's a coward. She wouldn't risk you hurting her." Even her manner was different. Tarrin could see it in her, how she moved. She moved with a stately confidence that belied the impression that he had of her, although there was a certain tension in her, as if she was afraid to act true to her real nature in front of him. She was obviously able to submerge herself in her role as the Brat Princess so completely that she could literally take on an entirely new set of mannerisms. This was not a spoiled whining little egotistical brat. This was an intelligent, cunning, calculating young woman that seemed a bit haunted and somewhat defensive. No doubt for the reasons that she pretended to be so much less than what she actually was.

"I'll keep your secret, Wikuni," he promised. "Just be careful around me."

"Keritanima," she said. "My name is Keritanima. Keritanima-Chan Eram, Jewel of the Western Star, Lady of the 20 Seas, Bearer of the 5 Bands of Nan, Holder of the Ring of Bakul, Crown Princess of Wikuna. And don't you forget it," she added with a playful banter, a sly smile curling the corner of her maw.

Tarrin chuckled in spite of himself. "Until I hear it about three hundred times, I think I will," he admitted.

"Trust me. You'll know it by heart by the end of the day," she winked.

Tarrin actually laughed. "I take it I'm in for a very long day?"

"Everyone in my class will be," she grinned. "I have a reputation to maintain, after all, so I have to make a very memorable first impression."

"I'd better warn Allia," he chuckled. "And you'd better not annoy her until after I have a chance to explain things to her. She's even more direct than I am."

"I'll remember," she promised. "Just don't tell her about me."

"I'll figure out a way to explain it," he told her.

At sunrise, there were eight young men and women standing outside Master Brel's office. Tarrin had spent the time eating and waiting thinking about the strange encounter, with the whirlwind creature. Not three days after he returned, another attempt was made on him. He had no doubt that it was an attempt. No doubt that going into the chamber and facing what looked like Jesmind would have meant his death. It was yet another strange magical creature, something which he had no idea what it was. He'd have to ask Dolanna, when he next saw her. Dolanna's knowledge of magical beasts was very impressive.

Allia was there, and there were four others, two young men and two young women, all of them highly born, from the looks on their faces. Two in particular, a young man and young woman, looked noble to their fingertips, and the hot looks they passed at each other, an open animosity that bordered on rage, sizzled the air between them. The other young man looked like a Dal, and the swallow-necked young lady with her black-black hair and wide blue eyes was most definitely Shacèan. No doubt that the two glaring at each other were nobles whose houses were at odds with one another. The other young man and lady were staying pretty well back from those two, but keeping them between themselves and Tarrin and Allia. From the looks of them, the two glarers were either Sulasian, Draconian, or Tykarthian. The three nations' peoples looked much alike. Tarrin joined Allia with a smile and an outreached paw, which was taken by his blood sister. She looked striking in his red Initiate uniform, a strange color on her after seeing her wear nothing but white since he knew her. She'd even had her silver hair trimmed and neatened from its long, ragged appearance for the occasion. "How did you sleep last night, sister" Tarrin asked.

"Well, but I felt lost within that large bed," Allia said. "I thought the beds of the Novices were soft. I fear I may grow used to your wetlander comforts."

"Maybe in another lifetime, *deshaida*," Tarrin told her with a smile.

He was about to say something else, but Keritanima came around the corner, looking quite regal and splendid. The signs of her recent dunking had been totally removed. Her fur was soft and silky and properly brushed, her long auburn hair was done up into a coronet atop her head, one made of beaten gold and set with a rainbow of assorted jewels, tumbling down her back and over her shoulders in carefully arranged waves and curls. Her Initiate dress was of the standard cut and form, but it was made of the finest silk, and had lace at the sleeves and at the throat. The look on her face was more imperious than regal, the look of a self-centered brat who knew the power she held. Tarrin had to admit, she played her part perfectly. Had he not known better, he would have been totally convinced. In fact, he had been, until he caught her in her lie. She looked every inch a princess.

"That reminds me," Tarrin whispered to Allia in Selani. "Don't pay any attention to the Wikuni or her antics. Just ignore her. I already warned her to leave you alone. I'll explain later, when we have time to talk."

"I will," she promised with a faint nod, and a calm look at the Wikuni. Tarrin glanced at Keritanima and gave her a faint nod, which she acknowledged with a slight movement of her eyes.

Keritanima did not disappoint. First, she went off on the tall noble boy that had been giving hot looks to the young lady, dressing him up then down, and calling him about fifty types of scoundrel and ruffian. All because he didn't offer to kiss her ring. Then she bored into the young lady for not curtsying quite deep enough after Keritanima had demanded, in an ear-grating voice, to be afforded the respect due to her station. She invented several new terms of disrespect on the spot when the noble boy politely told her she was being too loud, then she actually *slapped* the other young man, whom Tarrin did not know, that had been standing on the other side of the young lady and young man that had been looking daggers at each other. For no reason Tarrin could fathom. When he gave her a hot look, she reminded him that she was the Crown Princess, and that if he so much as *thought* about laying a hand on her, Daddy's Royal Marines, two hundred of whom

were now garrisoned on the Tower grounds as part of the agreement between Wikuna and the Keeper, would find him and use him as a target dummy.

Tarrin had trouble trying not to laugh. Her mind was fluent, and her acting was quite impressive. She flowed from one irritating state to another, cajoling, commanding, making snide comments, throwing barbs and darts at the assembled Initiates that rolled from her maw with ceaseless frequency, or demanding compliments on her great beauty, or her pretty coronet, or commenting on the rarity of value of the silk in her dress. In mere moments, all four of the other Initiates looked ready to kill her. Allia gave her flat, challenging looks, looks that cowed Keritanima every time she seemed to want to approach. Tarrin, remembering that he didn't like the Wikuni in public, affixed her with similar flat stares, and those kept her on the far side of the gathering. When Brel appeared around the far corner, Tarrin thought that the other four would rush forward and kiss the hem of the man's robe in gratitude.

"Hhhrumph," he grumbled, "well now, it looks like all of you are ready. Follow me. And keep quiet." They followed the withered old man out of the North Tower and back to the main Tower. They ended up in a small chamber near the Novice quarters, that had ten chairs arranged to face a point in the front of the room. Brel left them there with commands for them to sit and wait. Tarrin chose a seat near the back, giving the chair a bit of a wary look. It had a solid back and no padding, and chairs like that gave him nowhere to put his tail. He turned the chair around and straddled it, folding his arms on the back of the chair and leaning into them. Keritanima, not wanting to be outdone by a chair, left immediately after Brel, and Tarrin could hear her voice piercing the rock as she demanded a split-back chair with lots of cushions, and refreshment. Tarrin thought she would have demanded someone to fan her, if she thought she could get away with it.

"I may end up killing that, creature," Allia said quietly.

"Just ignore her," Tarrin told her. "She won't bother you directly."

"She's bothering me *indirectly*," she grunted.

"May be, but you'll understand later. Let's meet after we get out of here, by the statue. We need to talk."

Allia nodded, and Keritanima returned, a smug look on her face. A minute later, a split-back chair was brought into the room, but no cushion. She berated the servant over the slight for several moments, then seated herself regally on the chair, her tail threading the space between the slats in the back of the chair. There was low talk, talk of expectations and wondering at what would happen this first day, and Tarrin joined in it mentally. He had no idea what would be done this day, the first day of the Initiate, and his mind went over the possibilities as they waited for whatever it was to happen.

The door opened, and the thin form of Sevren entered the room. He looked just as Tarrin had remembered, tall and thin with those wire-frame spectacles over his eyes, dark hair speckled with gray, cut short, and that same type of brown robe with the leather belt. It seemed no surprise to Tarrin that Sevren was the instructor. He was one of only two Sorcerers Tarrin knew well, and trusted. He had no doubt that the Keeper had put Sevren into the job to keep Tarrin at ease, and in a way, he did not mind at all. Tarrin's suspicions of the Tower made him wary of the people who lived within it. Sevren was one of the two exceptions.

"Good morning, Initiates," he said in his calm, pleasant voice.

"Good morning," they said in unison, except for Allia and Keritanima.

"My name is Master Sevren, and I'll be teaching you your first day's lesson. I have no doubt that all of you are wildly curious about what we will do today, and what you will be doing for the next few years." Keritanima's eyes narrowed at his use of the word *years*. "That is what today's lesson will be about. A tour of the parts of the Tower we use for instructing Initiates in the use of Sorcery, an overview of what will happen in the next month, and a little bit of historical lecture, so you will know where the *katzh-dashi* came from, and where we hope to go in the future. Because it's early yet, we'll take care of that right now."

"The *Katzh-Dashi* are a very ancient group," he began, raising a hand and conjuring forth an Illusion before him. It was a two-dimensional illusion, a simple image like a portrait, but drawn on air rather than canvas. The image conjured by the illusion was the Tower itself, without the six surrounding Towers. "They have occupied this land for nearly seven thousand years. Most of what happened in such distant past is lost to us, but

we do know that even then the *katzh-dashi* performed tasks that gave us our name. If you didn't know, *katzh-dashi* means "servants of man" in the Ancient Tongue."

"Servant?" the young lady who'd been glaring at the man said in a hot tone. "I am nobody's servant!"

"We all serve, Milina," he told her coolly. "You serve your father by being here. I serve the Keeper by teaching you. The Keeper serves the needs of those she commands with her decisions. We all serve. It was always the goal of the *katzh-dashi* to serve mankind by using our magical powers for man's benefit. Anyway," he said adjusting the spectacles over his eyes, "for thousands of years, we did just that. We served. The city of Suld developed around the Tower of Sorcery, and over the years, grew to its current size and position of one of the largest cities in the West. I'll not go into the specifics during this time, a time we call the Age of Power. You'll get the specifics at a later date. What you need to know is that, at that time, the Ancients and the Sha'Kar worked harmoniously towards some unknown goal, and served man when not actively working towards it."

"What goal, Masster Sevren?" the blond young man asked.

"We don't know, Kev," he sighed. "The records of what the Ancients were working on were lost in the Breaking."

"Who were the Sha'Kar?" Keritanima asked idly, examining her short, sharp claws.

"Again, we don't know," he answered. "All we know is that they were a Non-human race who were very powerful in the Gift. The entire race vanished during the Breaking."

"Well, what is this Breaking you keep talking about?" Keritanima asked.

"It is the darkest hour of our history," he replied soberly, and the illusion changed to a large group of people standing outside the Tower gates. "It happened exactly two thousand, one hundred and twelve years ago."

"Ah, that. We call it the Year of Chaos," Keritanima said in a disinterested voice.

"Different cultures would have different names for it, but they are the same," he said calmly. "Anyway, it was the end of what many call the Age

of Power. Back during that time, magic was a commonplace thing. Many practiced it, and many more had created items of magical power to perform tasks. Even the most dullard farmhand had the magical aptitude to cast minor enchantments and cantrips, if he studied the proper magical words. Perhaps it was this commonality that created the Breaking," he speculated with a sigh. "Anyway, to make it short, since most of you probably know many stories about it, the Weave was ripped. We still don't know how or why it happened. Most scholars think that the magical pressures placed on it by the peoples of the world had torn it, and the backlash caused almost all of those magical objects to explode, almost all at the exact same time. Since those magical treasures were owned mostly by the rich and those versed in magic, it killed most of the important people in the world. Kings, Emperors, powerful Wizards, rich merchants, nobles, many of them were killed by the disaster. The sudden power vacuums in each kingdom caused chaos as wars erupted over succession. It was a ghastly time," he sighed. "What was probably worse than this was that it killed almost everyone with knowledge of Magic. There was a void of magical power in mere seconds."

"What about Sorcery?" the dark-haired girl asked.

"Well, that is itself a mystery," he told her. "After the initial explosions, some courtier rushed to the Tower to seek aid for the wounded king, and he found nothing. The Towers, all seven of them, were totally, completely empty. Even the furniture was gone. The Ancients, our forebearers, had vanished like smoke in the Breaking. To this day, we have no idea what happened. Whether they all died, or simply foresaw what was coming, and removed themselves. If so, we don't understand why they didn't come back after the backlash had finished.

"This disappearance caused problems," Sevren sighed, pointing at the illusion. "The people of Suld believed that the Sorcerers were responsible for the cataclysmic accident. We still take blame for it, even though we honestly don't know if the Ancients caused the Breaking or not. There simply is no evidence left behind. Anyway, because of this, the Tower was attacked by a mob of Sulasians seeking vengeance by trying to tear the Tower down. But the magic that had raised the Tower was still strong, and they couldn't so much as scratch the stones. After that, the new King, taking the place of the prior one who had died of his wounds, declared all Sorcerers to be enemies of Sulasia, and they were to be killed on sight. The

Tower was considered to be cursed by most, and it was abandoned to fall to ruin."

He removed his spectacles and cleaned a lens on his robe. "I don't need to describe the next few hundred years to you. I'm sure all of you have heard the stories." Tarrin had indeed. Almost one hundred years of war, famine, and chaos, where kingdoms rose and fell by the year. "But things settled down, as things had to. But the loss of the many Mages and Priests, killed by their own magical objects, left a void in our culture that took almost a thousand years to replace. As to the Sorcerers, well, anyone who displayed talent in Sorcery was branded a witch, and was either killed or driven out. The Priesthoods of many kingdoms actively hunted down Sorcerers, killing them wherever they could find them, and especially the priesthood of Karas, the patron god of Sulasia. In one particularly heinous act, the Crusaders, a militant arm of the Church, sacked and destroyed what is now Jerinhold, but was then a small village called Bluewaters. They slaughtered everyone in the village when they failed to hand over a suspected witch, who wasn't even in the village. The order of Karas was not the only one to commit such atrocities.

"The Gods, who had not noticed these events, suddenly stood up and took notice. Karas especially was very unhappy with the conduct of his priests and their place in the whole business. He stripped them of their magical power for a period of one hundred years. And in that time, Sulasia lost half of its lands to surrounding kingdoms in constant wars. But Sulasia survived, if somewhat smaller."

The illusion changed again, showing the face of a young man. He was handsome, a bit weary in the eyes, with long brown hair and a small scar over a thin-lipped mouth. "For a thousand years, not a single Sorcerer had stood on the Tower grounds. What few of us there were were called witches, and were hunted down and killed. But there were a few who managed to persevere, to find others with the Gift and teach them, and we continued. But it was a dangerous life. That changed when Marek the One was born. He came into his power late, as we measure things, well after he'd started a life as a caravan guard. He managed to teach himself once he understood what he was, using some scraps of books left over from the Age of Power. He came to Suld in his travels, saw the Tower, and stood for hours lost in its beauty. He claims in his writings that he heard a gentle

voice calling to him, a voice he could not deny. It convinced him to come into the Tower, and he did so. Marek claimed the Tower of Sorcery as his own. Of course, nobody really noticed this. Nobody came onto the Tower grounds, because the people of Suld thought that the grounds were cursed. He was only the first, for more began to show up at the Tower gates, young men and women, all drawn here by some strange, mysterious voice. That, of course, was the voice of the Goddess, calling her new children to their home, just as it drew Marek. They were all Gifted to some degree or another, and almost by general consent, they organized themselves into the new *katzh-dashi*. Marek was named the first Keeper of the Key, or the Keeper, and they started on a quest of recovering the knowledge that was lost when the Ancients vanished from the world. A quest that we still pursue to this day."

"How much have you gotten back?" the dark-haired young man asked.

"Not even a fraction of what the Ancients knew," he sighed. "It was written in books from that time that the Ancients could move mountains, turn aside the sea, and even stop the moons in their places if they had a need for it. We think that this is exaggeration, but there has to be some kernel of truth to it. The Ancients *were* very powerful. We've found stories of how the Tower was drawn forth from the very rock beneath us by magic, and shaped into the form we see today. It has stood against the elements for over five thousand years." Tarrin wasn't the only one to blink. The Tower, the main building, anyway, looked like it was built weeks ago. "Yes, it doesn't look like it, does it? Amazing eye for architecture, the Ancients," Sevren chuckled. "The Ancients raised the other six towers not long before the Breaking, to create more room. They were very crowded, it seems. All of the other buildings on the grounds were built since we reclaimed the Tower." He chuckled. "Not long after this, the people of Suld realized what had happened, and they were very afraid. After all, it had been a thousand years since a Sorcerer had stood on this ground, and the people of Suld believed that the Ancients had caused the Breaking, and they still considered Sorcerers to be agents of evil. The stories of that time had evolved over the years into fanciful tales and myths. Anyway, it didn't take long for the priests of Karas, seeing their old enemies arise from the ashes, to try to put a stop to it. So they quickly incited civic unrest over the

Sorcerers, and led a mob to the gates. But the *katzh-dashi* had no intentions of moving. They met them at the gates and demanded to see the King."

The illusion changed, to an illusion of a picture, a portrait of a man with a crown standing before an older Marek outside the very gates that stood before the Tower. "Tabon the Wise didn't earn his name through foolishness," Sevren chuckled. "He did indeed appear at the gates of the Tower to understand the intentions of these living myths. What surprised him was when Marek offered a bargain. In return for royal protection, the Sorcerers would aid the King in matters that didn't involve violence, espionage, or politics. They would also help defend the city of Suld itself against enemies that would attack it. They asked for very little in return. Only for royal recognition and protection from persecution. Tabon saw the gain for the Crown in this, for his current arrangement with the priests of Karas was not very useful for him. The priests considered the King only a minor resistance to their own wants, and they often tried to rule the kingdom through the King, through intimidation or worse. Tabon accepted the bargain. That bargain is still in effect to this day.

"Needless to say, the priests of Karas were outraged at this, mainly because it undercut the power of the church inside the kingdom. They gathered up their militant orders and priests and prepared an assault on the Tower. But Karas suddenly appeared before them as they prayed in their great cathedral, and he was very unhappy. He stripped the priests of their magical powers for a period of one year, and further decreed that one of the militant arms of the church, the Knights of Karas, would forever more be attached to the *katzh-dashi*. They would serve the *katzh-dashi* as bodyguards and protectors whenever they travelled outside the city of Suld, and when not needed by the Sorcerers, they would operate under the power of the Church. That arrangement is also still in effect," he chuckled. "Every *katzh-dashi* has a Knight assigned to protect him or her when they leave the city, and the Knights of Karas are famous world-wide for their skill, courage, and devotion. Both the Tower and the Church of Karas are very proud of them. Anyway, the priests weren't too happy about this, but it was the commandment of their God, so they could not disobey. It was made so, and the priests suffered their one year's punishment."

The illusion changed again, to show a great battle outside the wall of a city. Tarrin recognized it. It was the South Gate of Suld. "Our bargain was

put into effect quickly. An army from Rauthym, a kingdom that was once to our east, invaded when they found out that the priests had been stripped of their magic. They marched unimpeded up to the gates of Suld and demanded the city's surrender. Tabon called on the *katzh-dashi* for assistance, and the Sorcerers answered. What happened next is what most call the Battle of Nine Bells. Grenig the Fool, king of Rauthym, attacked Suld, and was slaughtered. Instead of retreating, he foolishly pressed the attack, and was beaten back badly by the magic of the *katzh-dashi*. When the Church tower rang nine bells the next morning, the attacking army had been decimated, Grenig was dead, and the surviving generals had offered surrender. Rauthym was summarily annexed by Sulasia and became part of the kingdom, and still is today. Some of the people of Rauthym fled south and established the kingdom of New Rauthym, which is now one of the ten Free Cities."

The illusion faded from view. "That is more or less the general history of the Tower," he told them. "Very little has happened since the Battle of Nine Bells in a historical sense that has a bearing on your training. We'll be more specific about times and dates and events, but that will be later, after you're well into your training." He adjusted the spectacles on his nose. "I think we can start with the tour now," he said. "If all of you will follow me."

Sevren led them to several places, and they new Initiates followed in wonder. Tarrin himself was very intrigued by the story he'd been told, about the Ancients and the Breaking. He'd heard stories of those things from his father, old folk tales that did paint the Sorcerers as evil. They were also generally blamed for the Breaking, and that was the reason that, to this very day, a Sorcerer was not safe once he stepped over the border of Sulasia. Sorcerers were still considered witches in most of the kingdoms of the West. That they tolerated Sulasia's alliance to the *katzh-dashi* was something of a mystery to Tarrin. But then again, Tarrin remembered that his father said that the *katzh-dashi* almost never took any interest in affairs that happened outside the city walls of Suld. They were a very secluded order, almost regional, and it was easy to forget about them completely. Besides, Sulasia was one of the most powerful of the twelve Kingdoms, and no army would march against it with much enthusiasm.

It was more than that, he realized. The Tower was considered one of the best places of learning in the West. It was why so many nobles and rich

merchants sent their children here for education. Perhaps the reputation of the Tower and the *katzh-dashi* was not quite so hard and feared as he first thought. Perhaps the world considered the new *katzh-dashi* to be a better version of the old ones. After all, they weren't as powerful as the Ancients. They didn't ignore the world the way the stories say the Ancients did. But why would a Sorcerer not be safe outside of Sulasia, yet the very people outside of Sulasia sent their children here to be educated? It was a strange paradox, and thinking about it made his head hurt.

The first place they visited was the library, and this time, they were allowed up onto the third floor. That was where all the tomes on magic were kept. It was a bit darker on that floor, and cooler, but there were many shelves full of books, and tables and chairs between them. There were also many people there, most of them Initiates but some Sorcerers, reading from ancient manuscripts, scrolls, and books. One small group of older men and women sat at an ornate table in the middle of the library, reading studiously from books so old they looked about ready to fall apart. There were many younger men and women surrounding this core of learning, laboriously writing in new books as they read from older ones. They were scribing, he realized, copying the pages of old books, about ready to fall apart, into new ones, so that their knowledge would not be lost as the books upon which the knowledge rested disintegrated with the marching of the years. Sevren explained to them that they were welcome to come to the library and read anytime they wished, but that they had to follow very strict rules of conduct and procedure. Each section of the library had a rating, and a Initiate of one grade was not permitted access to books that were too advanced for him. That would prevent accidents.

Next they were taken to a large room in the basement, a room that had many blackened scars on the walls, ceiling, and floor. Sevren called it a practice room, one of several, where Initiates could practice combat weaves in a controlled environment. Sevren warned that they would be here *only* with a *katzh-dashi* instructor supervising them.

Next they were taken up to the very top levels of the main Tower, to a huge room on the top level that had a ceiling that was vaulting tens of spans high above, and had a huge symbol laid into the floor. It was the *shaeram*, the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*, and Tarrin stared at it for a moment. It was the same as the one he wore around his neck, but this one had color. The

circle around the perimeter was green, and the four-sided concave star in the center was white, with a black point in the middle. The points of the six-sided star between them were red, orange, yellow, blue, indigo, and violet, laid out in such a way that their corners met perfectly and did not overlap. Tarrin noticed that what he thought of as a six-sided star was actually six triangles carefully laid out tip-to-tip, so that each triangle made contact with the circle and the triangles to each side. Tarrin was quick to make the connection between the colors and the seven grades of Initiation. They were also the seven colors he saw during the Test. Each color represented a sphere of Sorcery.

"This is where you will learn Ritual Sorcery," Sevren said. "Under the careful guidance of teachers, you'll learn how we can link our powers together in a combined effort, where the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. But it's a very delicate and dangerous procedure, so it will be a while before you stand in this room again. You have a great deal to learn beforehand. Come along now, we have one more place to visit here in the main Tower."

Tarrin stepped out onto the symbol curiously, putting his paw down on it. There were no tiles, but it wasn't paint either. No seams, no edges, but the colors began and ended crisply and perfectly. It was as if they'd changed the color of the stone that made up the floor. The stone was curiously warm, and he noticed a faint tingling buzz behind his ears. And how quiet it was.

Too quiet. He couldn't hear the footsteps of the others as they filed out of the large double doors in front of him.

He stood up and rushed off after them--

--then rebounded off something that wasn't there.

Tarrin shook his head and touched his nose delicately, feeling it bend a little bit. He had impacted something solid, and yet there was nothing in front of him. He shook off the impact and put his arms out in front of him, then started forward again.

And his paws struck something solid. Something that simply was not there.

It had no sense of texture at all. As if it were made of the slickest glass, like it was solid air. It went up as high as he could reach, and it went all the

way down to the floor. Keeping his paw on it, he started walking, and found that it went around in a circle, precisely following the outside edge of the green circle laid into the floor. When he came back to where he started, he began to get nervous.

He was trapped inside.

Extending his claws, he tried to rake the surface of this curious barrier, but they simply slid along the surface harmlessly. He felt no pressure against his claws at all, the pressure that told him that they'd hooked into something. It simply *was not there*. Yet it *was*, because he couldn't get through it. Whatever it was. He looked up, and at seeing the ceiling some fifty spans over his head, he wondered just how high up it went. Bunching his legs, he vaulted up almost fifteen spans, but the pressure against his paws told him that it did indeed extend well and far upward. He landed lightly and tried to quell the sudden rise of the Cat in his mind. He was trapped inside this strange symbol, and the feeling of imprisonment was starting to upset his animal half. The Cat had an instinctual fear of imprisonment, and he had to fight against an instinctive compulsion to flee, to try to get free by any means possible. Now was the time for thinking, not for panic, and it took him several moments of wrestling to convince the Cat that this was not a trap that could be broken out of. But thought out of.

Allia appeared in the doorway. She said something--or at least he thought she did, for her mouth moved--and she motioned for him to come with her. Tarrin put both paws on the barrier and pushed, then waved to get Allia's attention, but she was already half turned around. "Allia!" he shouted, then he realized that if he couldn't hear her, then *she* couldn't hear *him*. Quickly changing tactics, he put his paw around the amulet and used the unspoken manner of the Cat. So long as he could see her, she would "hear" it.

"Allia!"

She turned around, and he saw her mouth move, but he couldn't hear her. "Allia, get Sevren!" he told her in the manner of the Cat. She spoke again, then started moving forward. "I can't hear you!" he told her. "I'm stuck in some kind of magical wall!" He banged his paws against the invisible barrier to emphasize his point. "Get Sevren, Allia! Get him *now!*"

Tarrin's fear and anger were rising, quickly, and it was obviously starting to show on his face.

"Calm yourself, my brother," she replied in the manner of the Cat. "Just stay calm. I will get Sevren, and he will get you out of there." She darted to the doorway, and by the movement of her chest and mouth, she was shouting at the top of her lungs. But he couldn't hear so much as a whisper. "He's on his way," she told him as she started towards him.

"No!" Tarrin said quickly. "We don't know what this is. Stay back until Sevren says it's alright."

"You may be right," she agreed, holding her position about ten paces from him.

Sevren and the other Initiates appeared in the doorway. Tarrin saw Sevren's mouth moving, but he couldn't hear the words. He saw Allia turn and start talking to him, pointing at Tarrin, who had his paws on the barrier and was leaning against it, then made a few imperious gestures. Sevren approached him with an intrigued look on his face, then he stopped at the outside edge and said something. Tarrin shook his head and beat his fists against the barrier. Then Sevren stepped over the edge of the circle.

"--know what it is," his voice simply started. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yes, Master Sevren," he said with an explosive sigh. "How did you get in?"

"It's a standard Warding Circle," he said calmly, like a scientist studying an experiment. "It's a device--" his voice stopped as he stepped outside the circle, and then resumed as he came back in "--contain--er, sorry. It's a magical ward the Mages use to contain the creatures they conjure up from other places. It only works against creatures of magic. I guess that classifies you as such a creature," he said clinically. "Interesting. I'll have to research this."

"Can we do that *after* you get me out of here?" Tarrin demanded sharply. "I don't like being caged!"

"Hmm," he said, peering at the floor. "I can't see the weave. Oh, wait, yes, this isn't a spell. It's a Ward. Hold on, I need to puzzle this out. Give me a minute." He was quiet for a moment, and actually knelt on the floor and

studied the green circle. "A Mage's Circle has symbols of power," he said absently. "Those have to be here. If we can destroy one of them, then the Circle will be broken, and you can get out. So they had to hide them with magic," he reasoned.

"Wait, you can get out if you're a human?" Tarrin asked. "What if I change into a cat?"

"Try it and see," he said after a second's thought.

Tarrin nodded, and quickly assumed his cat shape. That made a couple of the Initiates, including Keritanima, gasp in surprise. Tarrin approached the edge cautiously, then felt the ends of his forward whiskers brush up against something solid. He pushed forward just to be sure, and felt his nose come into contact with the barrier. He changed back with a disgusted look on his face. "No, it's still there," he grunted.

"Try going human," Sevren suggested.

"I--" he started to say that he couldn't, then he remembered Jesmind saying that they *could* take on a human shape, but only for a very short time. "I'll try," he said. She said it would hurt, so he closed his eyes and clenched his paws into fists, getting ready for it. Then he formed the image of him as he was in his human form, then willed the change.

It was like being dunked in boiling pitch. Every inch of his skin seemed to catch on fire, and his bones began to throb. His blood was like liquid fire in his veins, and his heart began to pound like he'd run across the world with the four moons on his back. He almost fell to his knees under the sudden blazing pain, but he remembered that he was doing it for a reason. He staggered forward, hands out, desperately trying to get over the boundary of the circle before it killed him.

But his hands struck that same invisible barrier.

With an explosive release of breath, Tarrin resumed his normal shape, and fell to his knees panting. A sheen of sweat was glossing his skin, and he was holding his chest in one paw as his tail thrashed violently, nearly tripping Sevren. "Lad, are you alright?" Sevren asked in sudden concern, putting his hands on Tarrin's back. Tarrin felt the icy sensation of Sorcerer's Healing rush through him, and the icy cold froze away the pain and washed most of it out, but it didn't take away the aftershock or the memory.

"Don't you *ever* ask me to do that again!" he hissed, still panting furiously. "I don't think I'll ever walk right again!" Jesmind had endured that? For *six days*? He had a very powerful new respect for his bond-mother. He looked at his paw, seeing familiar pads and fur and claws. He could still feel the tingling in them.

"Alright, so you can't just change shape to get out. Hmm," he mused, helping Tarrin stand. "I guess what makes you what you are doesn't change, no matter what shape you wear." He went back to looking at the floor. "I can't see the weaves hiding the runes. They must have stranded them somehow. But they couldn't do that," he said. "Only a Sorcerer can hide a weave."

"Stranded?"

"A technique to hide a weave from a Sorcerer's probes," he said absently. "You charge the weave so it can sustain itself, then stretch-- nevermind, it's too hard to explain. I'm going to need some help. Stay calm, I'm going to go outside to tell someone to fetch some *katzh-dashi*. We can erase the runes with Ritual Sorcery, whether we can see them or not." Sevren stood up and stepped outside the barrier, pointing at the blond young man and then motioning him off. Tarrin looked at the floor, trying to fathom what Sevren was talking about. There were symbols on the floor that were making the magical barrier in which he was trapped, symbols that had to be erased. But were they inside or outside? Maybe he could scratch--

The air suddenly became very cold, and a familiar smell saturated the air, the smell of death. A smell Tarrin knew too well, one he would never forget.

The smell of a Wraith.

Chapter 11

It coalesced from the dark shadows that seemed to swirl up from the floor, the immaterial taking form, condensing into the shadowy body and glowing green eyes that Tarrin had seen twice before. The air was biting cold, Tarrin's breath misting before him, as if it too was trapped inside the barrier and was isolated from the warmer air outside. The undead shade grew into its full height, and its glowing eyes blazed with sudden evil eagerness as it started to move. Despite the fact that Tarrin was more than a head taller than the undead creation, he had the sensation of being trapped in a cage with a rampaging bear.

It was all an elaborate trap, designed to trap him inside with the Wraith. But knowing that didn't help him at the moment. Baring his fangs, he growled at the creature, the Cat boiling up in his mind to try to wrest control from him. But the Wraith was unimpressed at his show of threat, advancing on him at a slow, almost leisurely manner, almost as if it knew that Tarrin had nowhere to run. It reached for him lazily, and then was surprised when Tarrin was simply not there. Tarrin was ten spans over the creature's head, having vaulted straight up. He pushed off the barrier behind him and landed on the far side of the symbol, quickly taking in his surroundings. The symbol was about ten paces across, which was very little room to maneuver, but he had an unlimited ceiling with which to work. If he had a chance to use it. The Wraith turned around quickly, its eyes glowing in hatred as it advanced on him again.

Tarrin struggled with the Cat for control as it tried to get him to fight, to fight as any cornered animal would when threatened with death. But the Cat didn't understand that this was not an enemy that could be battled with teeth and claws. Tarrin had seen the creature put its hand through a man's chest. It was a body without substance, which used its deathly cold as its weapon. If he tried to rake it, his paw would pass through it, and he would probably lose his paw. The Wraith seemed to understand this, and it was taking its sweet time to close the distance, almost allowing Tarrin to contemplate his

fate. Then it struck at him again. Tarrin dodged it easily, dancing away, putting his back to the barrier, then rolling to side as it took yet another swing, staying out of its reach. It staggered forward, then it too struck the barrier and rebounded.

It was trapped in here with him.

It rushed on him with sudden, shocking speed, a single arm lashing out from the side. It struck Tarrin high in the side, and Tarrin screamed in pain as the shadowy hand raked its insubstantial fingers against his ribs. Pain blazed along his side as he lurched away from that hand, and he staggered forward as the Wraith seemed to stop in confusion. Tarrin, however was not confused. It made perfect sense to him, as the words of Dolanna came back to him, spoken so long ago. *You are a creature of magic*, she had told him. *You can only be harmed by fire, magic, acid, silver, other creatures of magic, and weapons of nature.*

Other creatures of magic.

The Wraith's hand had not passed through his body, as it had done so with the man before, and it was what the Wraith had obviously expected to happen. It had *struck* him, made actual contact. The cold of the grave was still there, but it struck his *skin*, and while it had frozen the flesh and muscles around his ribs, it did not go deep enough to reach his vital internal organs. And Tarrin realized one other truth in that physical contact.

If it could touch him, then *he* could touch *it*.

His eyes lighting from within with their green fire, Tarrin snarled at the creature once more and spread his paws wide, claws out. He embraced the Cat in that instant, becoming one with his animal half, and he felt it shunt his human awareness off the side to let the Cat deal with the situation. He was going to need every advantage he could muster to kill the Wraith without getting his face frozen off. His united whole squared off against a now tentative Wraith, but the Wraith was compelled into its action by the magic that had created it. It was there to kill Tarrin Kael, and that was what it had to do. It rushed forward with its hands out, but Tarrin slithered to the side and raked his claws against its exposed flank. Icy pain blasted up his paw as the cold conducted through his claws, but he ignored it in his animalistic rage, doubling every second as he fought for his life. His claws

ripped through the shadow that made up the Wraith's side, peeling some of it off to evaporate like mist exposed to the heat of the sun. Tarrin backed away, shaking his paw vigorously as it turned around, a grim smile on his face.

He could hurt it. If he could hurt it, then he could kill it.

And it seemed to understand that as well, for it came at him like a raging beast. It punched and kicked at him, but Tarrin avoided contact with those lethal shadowy limbs as much as possible. He could not avoid forever, and soon he was blocking them with his forearms, feeling pain blast through his arms every time he blocked a fist or foot. His paws became numb, but his claws were frozen in place out of their sheaths, and his muscles were locked in their raking positions. He was struck again on his hip, making Tarrin howl in pain and sending a deadly numb wave down his right leg. Tarrin jumped back from a wide sweep, almost collapsing around his numbed leg. Some semblance of human awareness came back to him. The Cat seemed to realize that brute force wasn't going to win this, so it seemed to draw on Tarrin's knowledge, on his experience and skills, and on his intellect. His human consciousness began guiding the Cat's instincts.

The Wraith attacked with amazing speed, but Tarrin was suddenly a ghost himself. The creature struggled to reach the Were-cat, but Tarrin was always just out of reach. His tall, supple body flowed around the Wraith like water, weaving like a blade of grass in the wind, bending but not breaking, always close to hand but evaporating like mist when it went to touch. Tarrin danced around the undead creation thusly for several frenzied moments, flowing away from its viperlike strikes, and retaliating with rakes of his claws into the monster's shadowy body. But where the Wrath found nothing but empty air, Tarrin's claws found purchase, stripping away puffs of its insubstantial body. The Wraith moved faster and faster, became more and more desperate to find Tarrin with its hands, but the Were-cat was always just out of reach. It scored several minor hits, touches on Tarrin's blocking arms, and it also managed to get a grip on Tarrin's braid. He felt the cold conduct right through his hair, freezing his scalp, but when the Wraith went to jerk the Were-cat's braid, it broke off from his head, then shattered on the floor when the Wraith tossed the frozen braid aside.

Tarrin was in worse shape than he led the creature to believe. Warm blood soothed the agonizing frozen flesh on his side and hip, where his skin and muscle had torn around the unbending frozen places where the Wraith had touched him. Each strike on him, each forced block, stole more and more of this warmth, and he could feel the chill of the grave settling into his bones, slowing him down and causing biting pain to flow through him like blood. Tarrin was growing weary as his energy was literally sucked away with each glancing strike, and he was panting heavily. He had to end it, and end it fast, or the Wraith would kill him. There was no help from outside, but Tarrin didn't blame any of them. Even Allia would be no help to him against this creature. He knew that dancing any more would weaken him too much. It was time to attack the Wraith head-on, injury be damned. It was a choice between risking a swift death and ensuring a slow one.

He turned on the Wraith with no warning, and he attacked it with such savagery that the Wraith was taken aback. Claws ripped considerable wisps of shadow away from its body, taking out its right eye, as Tarrin struck at it again and again and again, driving it backwards. Tarrin felt its hands strike him in the side and chest and shoulder, but he ignored the Wraith's blows and concentrated on ripping it to shreds as quickly as possible. The Wraith actually backed up to get away from him as Tarrin assaulted it furiously, ignoring dreadful wounds to his shoulder and chest and neck, not feeling the side of his chest rupture around a frozen expanse of flesh and send blood pouring from him in such a rush that it fell to the floor in rivulets. Tarrin was beyond pain, beyond feeling, beyond thought. There was only the Wraith, and his mind had focused down to the single goal of destroying it. Tarrin did sidestep when the Wraith reached for his face, slamming his claws down on its right arm with enough force to tear the shadowy limb from its body at the elbow, a limb that fell to the floor and evaporated like mist. The Wraith fell to the ground, and Tarrin jumped on top of it, ignoring the instant freezing of his knee and foot, holding the Wraith down with one paw on its chest as his other paw rose up over his head, then drove down like a striking snake. The claws drove right into the shadowy head, right *through* it, driving the tips of his claws into the stone beneath. The Wraith made a curious keening wail, then its entire body simply evaporated like smoke before the wind.

In his rage, Tarrin started looking around for his enemy, but it was nowhere to be seen. Then the pain hit him. He arched his back and howled in agony, as if a thousand red-hot lances drove into him, and then he mercifully passed out, falling into a half-frozen pool of his own blood.

Outside, Sevren held tightly onto Allia with both hands, ignoring the struggling Selani's desperate cries and savage oaths and promises to kill him. Sevren knew no weaves to affect a Wraith, and they had been moving about inside with such ferocity that no other weaves would have been useful. To allow Allia to rush in there would have killed her, and maybe Tarrin too. Sevren didn't like standing helpless outside, but under the circumstances, there was nothing else he could do. He'd had the presence of mind to send another Initiate out to find a Sorcerer, *any* Sorcerer, with healing ability. Sevren himself could barely ease the pain of a scratch, let alone seal it.

With the Wraith vanished and Tarrin passed out, Sevren released the Selani and followed her as she rushed towards the Were-cat, who was laying in a pool of blood that was expanding at an alarming rate. Then the Selani rebounded off the ward with enough force to knock her down. Sevren paid her little mind, reaching out his hands to test for an invisible barrier, but there was none. He passed into the circle and instantly felt the biting cold against his skin. He almost knelt in that pool of blood, but he remembered at the last instant what a danger Tarrin's blood posed to him. He wove a weave instead, freezing it solid, then used another weave to drag Tarrin's body out of the red circle. Kneeling, he put his hands on Tarrin's chest and wove yet again, thawing the frozen flesh of Tarrin's body and restoring his body's warmth, heat that had been bled out by his blood loss and the touch of the cold of the grave that came with the Wraith's shadowy hands. He worked quickly and carefully, else his warmth actually cook the flesh of his patient rather than thaw and warm. Tarrin's body began to shudder violently, and his teeth chattered with such force that blood started flowing from his mouth. Sevren saw with some horror three of Tarrin's fingers, claws driven into the stone, broken off from the hand that had driven through the Wraith's head. Tarrin's arms were almost frozen solid from the repeated touches of the Wraith. Tarrin's shirt was soaked with

blood, plastered to his chest and sides, and it was starting another pool of crimson around his torso.

Then another was beside him. It was Koran Dar, the Divine Seat, and one of the most powerful healers in the Tower. Koran Dar put his hands on Tarrin's chest, and the Were-cat's shuddering instantly stopped. Sevren stood after Koran Dar nodded to him, his hands covered in Were-cat blood, and then he stepped outside the ward. A strange feeling on his hands made him look down, and he saw that the blood on his hands had been stopped by the ward's power. Two small spots of red were on the floor over where his hands had pass through the ward. The Initiates were gone, even the Selani, and in their stead stood the Keeper and her secretary, Duncan, as well as Ahiriya and Amelyn, two of the Council. "Tell me what happened," the Keeper said in a hissing voice, through clenched teeth. Her features were tightly controlled. She looked about as mad as a bear with a hornet in its mouth.

Conciscely and quickly, Sevren related to her the events. "I was trying to see the runes of the warding circle when the Wraith appeared," he said quickly. "Tarrin pushed me out of the circle, and before I could put together any kind of spell, they were moving around too fast for me to try anything. Then the Selani tried to rush into the circle with a dagger," he sighed. "It was all I could do to keep her outside. If she'd have gone in there, it would have killed both her and Tarrin. Tarrin actually managed to *kill* the Wraith, and when he did, I rushed in to help him as best I could."

The Keeper was silent for an agonizing moment, a moment where Sevren saw his life pass before his eyes. "You did what you could," she said in a grim voice, one that made Sevren take an involuntary breath. "I can't even see the runes."

"I know," he said quietly, not wanting to press his luck. "I've never seen its like. Will Tarrin be alright?"

"We'll know as soon as Koran Dar works with him. For now, link with us and help us break the Ward holding him in."

Sevren nodded, and in seconds, the runes that made up the Ward flared into brilliant light, then winked out of existence as the combined power of the Keeper's circle destroyed it. The ward's walls shimmered, then

vanished, and a wave of cold air that carried the smell of death and blood washed over them. The Keeper broke the circle, her eyes furious, but her voice tightly controlled. "Ahiriya. Amelyn. We raise the Ward immediately. I'll not have one more attempt on Tarrin. Not one." She grunted. "Amelyn, gather the others, and as soon as Koran Dar stabilizes Tarrin, we'll raise the Ward."

"Yes, Keeper," the dark-haired woman replied.

"Ahiriya."

"Yes, Keeper?"

"I want every Mage in Suld driven out of the city. I don't care what it takes. I want the Priests too afraid to leave their churches. I want them to know that when the Tower is displeased, the consequences are not worth the risks."

"It will be done, Keeper," she said quietly. The look on her face made it clear where she thought the blame was.

"I want whoever did this found. Alive," she grated. "I'm going to kill him myself."

"It will be done, Keeper," the fiery-haired woman repeated. Sevren knew that it was one of the jobs of the Fire seat. Hers was the task of running and arranging the things that were not exactly within the bounds of law and propriety. She ran the Tower's spy networks, and it was her responsibility to make those who made too much trouble for the Tower "disappear". It was a job for which she was well suited. Ahiriya was born to a noble family in Draconia, where political intrigue, betrayal, and assassinations were as common as livestock and clouds. She performed her unusual duties with a savage efficiency that made the others in her rather unique profession very nervous and wary. Nobody crossed the Tower, and Ahiriya was one of the reasons for it. No doubt Ahiriya blamed herself for this attack; it was her responsibility to know what was going on, both in the Tower and out in the world. The attacks on Tarrin had probably driven the woman crazy with their subtlety and cunning. This one, by far, had to be the most cunning yet.

Two Tower guards had arrived with a litter, and they were carrying the limp form of the Were-cat away, with the Selani walking beside him,

holding his huge hand in hers. Sevren noticed that the hand again had five fingers, and looked for all the world like no damage had been done to it. Concern for the young man in his eyes, Sevren followed the litter out of the chamber.

He missed seeing the Keeper order the Were-cat's blood put into jars and stored in a safe place.

Tarrin drifted in darkness for quite a while before he finally managed to claw himself back into awareness. All of the pain was gone, pain that he didn't really remember that well, but he still felt cold in his bones. The scents in the room were both familiar and unknown, as Allia's coppery scent mingled with the scents of Sevren and three or four others that he didn't know, and those scents mingled with the very familiar scents of his own room. The bedsheets were freshly laundered, and one of the scents was thick with food, as if the person had just come from the kitchens or from dining. The new pillow's goosefeathers were old enough to give up most of their goose smell, but had not been used, so the pillow had not taken on the combined miasma-scent of the people who had laid their heads on it. And underneath it all was the stony smell of age that the Tower itself exuded, a smell of stone exposed to air for thousands of years, a smell that he didn't even notice anymore unless he was paying close attention to his nose. He felt strangely weak and very tired, and the voices he heard sounded curiously distant. But he was awake, and didn't quite feel like going back to sleep, so he stirred and opened his eyes.

Allia was there immediately, smiling down at him and patting his paw. "Welcome back, *deshida*," she said in a warm voice, cupping his cheek in her other four-fingered hand. "How do you feel?"

"A little cold, but otherwise alright," he replied as he sat up in the bed, then scooted back so his back was against the headboard. His clothes were folded and piled his desk chair, on the far side of the room, sitting in an upholstered chair that wasn't part of the furniture of his room, held some middle-aged woman he did not know--no, she was one of the Council members. He recognized her dark hair and heart-shaped face. Sevren was standing on the other side of the bed, along with a plump older woman wearing a gray dress of coarse wool. Beside Allia's stool stood a very, very

tall dark-haired man that Tarrin recognized as another of the Council.
"What happened?"

"You were attacked by a Wraith," Sevren told him calmly. "I'm sorry that I didn't help, Tarrin, but I don't know any weaves to affect a monster like that, and you were moving around too much to try anything else."

"It's alright, Sevren," he waved him off. It was coming back to him quickly, as the Cat gave up the memories of the nightmarish, whirlwind fight. He reached up and put a paw on the side of his head, and felt short hair. Very short. "What happened to my braid?"

"It broke off," Allia told him. "You look slightly funny like that."

"I imagine I do," he replied with a smile. "It'll grow back by tomorrow," he told her. "That's why I keep it long in the first place."

The dark-haired man sat down on the edge of the bed and took Tarrin's face in both his hands abruptly. Tarrin felt fingers of Sorcery flow into his body, searching, reaching, examining that which could not be seen. This man was a powerful healer, Tarrin realized. Probably one of the Tower's strongest. "There's no permanent damage," he said in a deep voice, a very strong one. Tarrin looked up at him, seeing high-boned features that were very strong and somewhat handsome. He had no beard, and his skin was a strange dark bronze, almost coppery in color. His black hair was done up in a single tail that flowed down his back to peek out from behind his right arm. "I still don't see how you survived."

"I agree," Sevren said ruefully. "No offense, Tarrin, but that Wraith should have killed you with the first blow."

"It can't," Tarrin said absently. "At least, not without hitting me in the right place."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Dolanna explained it to me," he replied. "It's a magical creature. Well, so am I. Because of that, we can hurt each other. That means that I can touch it, and it can't help but touch me."

"Ah," the dark-haired man mused. "So it couldn't put its hand through your body."

"More or less," Tarrin affirmed. "It still hurt like anything, but it saved me from instant death. And I think that's what got me stuck inside the symbol," he added. "Sevren said it was a circle."

"A Warding Circle," Sevren said. "A mystical construction Mages use to protect themselves from their conjured creatures. Magical beings can't cross a Warding Circle's perimeter. I guess it also works on magical creatures that exist in this world to begin with."

"I guess I could get in, but I couldn't get out."

"No, it should have stopped you from entering as well," Sevren said. "There was some kind of spell placed on it that made it dormant until a magical creature went in."

"So, it was a trap," Tarrin said calmly. "I expected as much."

"Well, don't worry about that anymore," the woman sitting on the chair told him. "The Council is taking steps to see that it doesn't happen again."

"No offense, ma'am, but I'll believe that when I see it."

"You missed that part," she told him. "The Ward has already been raised."

"Ward?" Tarrin asked.

"The Ancients placed a tremendous Ward around the Tower, Tarrin," Sevren told him. "It was woven into the fence. When it's raised, it prevents any magic or magical creatures from entering the grounds. It will stop the Wraiths and other magical monsters that have been attacking you. It also totally absorbs any spellcasting on the Grounds that is not Sorcery. If there are any Wizards or Priests here, their magic is useless. Only Sorcery works."

"So you see, young one, you are much safer now," the woman told him. "Without magic, these mysterious enemies will have a much harder time getting to you. And since we've increased the guard on the grounds, it will be that much harder."

The copper-skinned man took his hands away, and Tarrin felt the magic fade from inside him. "You are perfectly healthy," he announced. "You'll be a little weak for a few hours, but that'll pass with a good meal and some

rest. I'll have a proper meal sent to you, but in the meantime, no strenuous activity and stay in your room. Allia, stay with him and make sure he doesn't exert himself."

"Yes, Master Koran Dar," Allia said with a flinty look at her friend.

"Now then, we should leave Tarrin to his rest. Come along, Mathilde."

"Yes, Master Koran Dar," the plump woman piped in a voice too shrill for her size.

Koran Dar and Sevren left the room, Sevren giving Tarrin a reassuring pat on the arm and a promise he'd come back later that afternoon to see him. The dark-haired woman gave Tarrin a calm look, then left without a word. Two men that had been standing outside his door quickly entered and picked up the fancy chair, then spirited it out of the room and closed the door behind them. Allia got up from the stool and sat down on the side of the bed, her white hair falling from behind her shoulders as she leaned over him with a stern look on her face. "You about scared me to death!" she told him in Selani.

"I didn't do it on purpose, believe me," he sighed. "Why didn't you come running in there?"

"Because Sevren wouldn't let me," she grunted sourly. "He's strong for such a thin human. He wouldn't let go, even after I threatened to gut him with a dinner spoon."

"He did the right thing, *deshaida*," he told her. "You wouldn't have been able to help."

"I know, but I can't stand aside idly and watch my brother fight for his life," she said in a voice thick with emotion.

"I love you too, my sister," he smiled, touching her cheek with a furry finger. "How long was I out?"

"Not long," she replied. "Master Koran Dar is a very strong healer."

"I wouldn't notice," he said, "I don't even remember how bad I was hurt."

"It was not pretty, my brother," she told him. "The Wraith hurt you badly. You even lost a couple of fingers."

Tarrin held up both paws and wiggled his fingers with a smile. "You can't keep a good paw down," he said with a chuckle.

"I know, they grew back," she said. "Koran Dar was very surprised."

"Well, at least this way, I didn't lose the whole day," he said thoughtfully.

"How well do you think the Sorcerers can defend you?" Allia asked.

"I'm not really counting on them," Tarrin replied, leaning back some. "I think this magical ward of theirs will slow this Kravon person down, but I doubt it'll stop him."

"Wise," Allia agreed. "Always expect the worst. That prevents nasty surprises."

"There's more we need to talk about," he said.

She nodded in acknowledgement. "You should be able to move about by this afternoon," she said. "As long as you don't push it. We can do it then. For now, how about a nice game of stones?"

Tarrin laughed. "Anxious to put me back out, I see," he said with an impudent grin. "Go ahead and get the board. I can lose a few times before this meal arrives."

They were close to the end of the first game when the meal arrived. It was a large affair that took up four trays, but the smell of the food seemed to break a dam of starvation in his stomach, and he attacked the food with wild abandon. Tarrin seemed to understand that it was the healing that did it, both his own regeneration and the strength-sapping healing that the Sorcerers employed, but that didn't make him any less ravenous. He polished off the entire meal and went back to the game, losing to Allia and then starting a new game. At about noon, Koran Dar entered the room and gave Tarrin an exhaustive examination. Tarrin was starting to get a bit annoyed at the prodding and magical searching inside his body. Koran Dar even opened his mouth and took a look at his teeth. "How often do you bite your tongue?" he asked.

Tarrin blinked in surprise as Koran Dar let go of his lower jaw. "I used to bite it alot," he replied. "Sometimes clear through."

"I noticed," he said. "Those teeth look like they could be painful."

Tarrin unconsciously ran his tongue over his altered teeth. They looked more or less human, except all of them were sharp. They either ended in points, or in sharp ridges along molars. His elongated fang-like incisors were the greatest sign of that part the change had rendered on him. "Not really," he said. "Sure, it hurts, but then it heals over."

"I've been meaning to ask you about something," Koran Dar said. "You grew back fingers that you lost in the battle."

"I know, Master Koran Dar," he said, holding up his hand. "I guess we regenerate lost body parts. I know I can regrow teeth. Allia has knocked some of them out."

The tall, dark-skinned man gave the chocolate-skinned Selani a curious look. She smiled at him and reached under her Initiate shirt, then pulled out a simple leather thong around her neck, that had six teeth hanging upon it. Three of them were obviously Tarrin's fang-like incisors. "Just a reminder to my brother for when he gets stupid," she said with a faint smile.

Koran Dar laughed richly. "You remind me too much of home, Allia," he said with a warm smile.

"If I may ask, where is your home, Master Koran Dar?" she asked. "I have never seen a human that looks quite like you."

"I come from the Southern Continent, Sharadar," he replied. "Actually, from a series of islands off the northeast coast of it."

Tarrin made the connection instantly. "You're an Amazon?"

Koran Dar nodded. "I know, we don't often leave our islands," he said. "I, well, let's just say that I decided to avoid an unpleasant marriage arrangement when I was very young. The ship that granted me passage docked in Den Gauchè. I discovered I had the Gift, so I found my way here."

"My father told me stories of the Amazons," Tarrin said. "He said--well, you shouldn't be here."

Koran Dar nodded. "I know. I think I'm the only male Amazon outside of the isles of Amazar." According to his father's stories, the Amazons were

a race ruled by female warriors. They were fierce and strong, and they ruled almost fifty islands in a large chain of the northeast coast of Arathorn. Amazon law was that all men were property, even men that made their way to their islands by accident. Men were the submissive sex on the Amazon Isles, though they were by no means weak. Koran Dar was a good example of that. He was tall, very tall, lean and graceful, and the way he moved told Tarrin just how strong the man was. "You should stay in bed for two more hours," he ordered. "Just to give your healing a chance to set. Then you may get up and move about, but no strenuous activity for at least a day."

"Will he be able to take to the training field tomorrow, Master Koran Dar?" Allia asked.

"Fighting? Yes, he should be up for it," he replied. "I think he'll be whole by tomorrow morning. Now then, I have other matters to attend. Be well, both of you."

Allia got up and bowed to him in the Selani manner as he left, then she sat back down on the side of the bed. "Now then, we were about to start another game," she prompted, putting the stones board back on the bed in front of her.

Later that afternoon, after Allia had gone to bathe and eat, Tarrin wandered idly around the gardens. He did so for nearly a half an hour, feigning intense interest in the flowers and trees, making the other visitors lose track of him. Because of who he was, many eyes followed him, both the curious and those who were there to keep their eyes on him. He entered a confined area of small shrub trees bordering a large trellis holding thick climbing vines, then he managed to evade the other garden visitors' line of sight and change form. Now small and inobtrusive, Tarrin slinked easily through the gardens and entered the hedge maze. Allia was probably already there, waiting for him, as they'd agreed upon as they played stones. They didn't come out and say it, cause both of them were aware that someone was probably listening to them. He simply asked her if those roses of hers were still pretty, and she told him that he should go take a look at them. That was all both of them needed. Tarrin didn't trust speaking to her in the manner of the Cat, because if she could understand it with magic, then so could others. He had no doubt that some Sorcerer about knew a

spell to make that happen, so it didn't make that method of communication secure.

She was in there. Her scent trail was strong on the ground, and Tarrin used that as his guide to lead him into the center of the maze. It took him only a short time to get into the center courtyard, where Allia was tending the large rose bushes behind the fountain, the fountain which held the statue of the Goddess who had spoken to him. It had been a very long time since he'd been in the courtyard, and the sight of the statue momentarily overwhelmed him with a feeling of warmth and security. Almost as if it emanated from the statue itself. It was as beautiful as he remembered. The statue's marble face was still carrying that utter perfection, that smooth flawlessness. The body was just as perfect and tall and lithe as he remembered, and the statue's hair flowed over her shoulders and down her back in frozen waves, the detail so fine that he could see the individual strands in the tumbling mass. The peacefulness of the courtyard was still there, and it soothed him, welcomed him, made him feel as if, in all the world, this was the one place where he would be safe. The sound of the bubbling of the fountain's water seemed to soothe him, and the faint rustle of the roses and flowers in the courtyard as the wind caressed them made him feel a tug for the wide expanses of the tractless forest.

He changed form absently, adjusting his shirt a bit as Allia turned around at the faint sounds that he made as his large feet slipped across the thick, lush grass at the edge of the courtyard. "You're late," she chided in Selani.

"There were alot of people in the gardens," he shrugged. "It took me a while to find a secluded spot."

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked, coming over and sitting on the marble bench before the bubbling fountain.

"A few things, actually," he replied, sitting down beside her. "I guess the first would be--"

There was a faint noise outside the choked-off opening. The sound of branches being moved, very carefully. He stood up instantly and rolled his paw to Allia as he padded towards the opening. "Oops, sorry," he said in false contrition.

"That's alright," she said in a voice that lacked the sudden wariness showing on her face. "I don't think you tore it."

Though he doubted that the eavesdropper could understand the words, he had to be impressed by Allia's ability to think on her feet. He rolled his paw at her again as he approached the opening with one paw out, claws extended. "Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about?" she continued.

Tarrin was there. His paw lanced into the ragged wall of irregular branches that choked off the opening of the courtyard, striking like a viper. His claws and fingertips hit the border of a heavy material, and they closed around it. It was the bodice of a dress. He yanked back, dragging the wearer of that bodice through the branches quickly. In a explosion of green and brown, the red dress of an Initiate was yanked into the courtyard, and the wearer of that dress had reddish fur and a tail. Tarrin threw the figure to the ground, where it made a squeak of surprise.

Tarrin looked down into the hot eyes of Keritanima, the yellow orbs blazing up at him as her face screwed up into a near-snarl, showing just a little bit of her formidable canine teeth. "What did you do that for!" she demanded.

"You should know better than that," he shot back at her, reaching a paw down and offering it to her. Allia's eyes were flat and hostile as Tarrin helped the Wikuni to her feet, where she brushed off her red dress and then delicately checked the front of her dress for rips. The neckline was askew, from where Tarrin had grabbed it, showing a considerable amount of fur-clad cleavage.

"I should slap you for putting your hand down my dress!" she barked at him in a tiff, straightening her bodice and then adjusting the plain leather belt around her slim waist. "You don't go pawing a lady! It's impolite."

"So is eavesdropping," Tarrin replied.

"I wasn't eavesdropping," she sniffed. "I was trying to figure out how in blazes you got through there. And I certainly didn't want to get yanked through like a--my, what a lovely statue," she said, her tone going from annoyed to sincerely impressed in a heartbeat.

"Allia, I'd like you to meet Keritanima," he said to his Selani friend. "The *real* one."

"The Brat Princess is real enough," Keritanima winked. "Pleased to meet you," she said, holding her hand out to Allia as if she expected the Selani to kiss it.

"She is different," Allia said. Allia did nothing to accept that hand, crossing her arms under her breasts and giving the Wikuni a strong look of distrust.

Tarrin nodded. "She screwed up her act and I figured it out," he said, to which Keritanima sniffed disdainfully. "I promised to keep her little secret. I was going to tell you about it, so you didn't kill her in a pique."

"I doubt she'd have gone that far," Keritanima said calmly.

"I beg to differ," Allia said with steady eyes. "I came close to doing it five times during the morning."

"Well, then I guess I'm doing something right," the Wikuni grinned toothily. "I see they Healed you all up, Tarrin. Are you feeling alright?"

"Good enough," he said.

"What are we going to do with her now?" Allia asked Tarrin in Selani.

"You won't *do* anything with me, *oneshai*," Keritanima replied sternly in flawless Selani, using the Selani term for "near-stranger", which was a term to use with business associates and distant acquaintances.

Allia gaped at her, and Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "Where did you learn that?"

"As a Princess, I'm expected to know all the languages of the peoples that we trade with," she said in an annoyed tone. "You have *no* idea how many people we trade with," she said in exasperation. "I *still* haven't learned them all. It's a frightful bore."

"I didn't know that the Wikuni trade with the Selani," Tarrin said.

"I did not either," Allia admitted.

"We trade with the Bloodwater Clan," she replied. "They're the only ones that come close enough to the ocean for us to see. We saw them about three hundred years ago, worked out a couple of trade pacts, and everyone's happy. There's quite a market for Selani *koufa* fiber." *Koufa* was the plant

fiber that the Selani used to make their incredible clothing. It was very tough, and very light. It kept the wearer warm when it was cold, and cool when it was hot. It wouldn't accept dye, so all of the Selani clothing was the same colors, the colors of different types of *koufa* plants. But those colors were white, brown, and a beige that was almost the exact color of sand, which was perfect camouflage in the desert.

"Ah," Allia said. "We don't have contact with that Clan. They're too far south."

"Then there you go," she said, walking away from them and sitting down sedately on the bench. Her bushy fox tail swept back and forth a few times, then settled to a stop behind her.

"How did you find us?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"You're not the only one with a nose," she told him with a wink. "Unlike most of the Wikuni, I have the senses of the animal as well as the looks. Both of you have very distinct scents, and neither of you did anything to hide your trail."

"Now what?" Allia asked Tarrin quietly.

"Now, we talk," Keritanima replied for him, patting the stone bench beside her impatiently.

"About what?"

"About why it seems so odd that I find a Selani and a Were-cat in the Initiate at the same time as myself, when the Tower hasn't had a Non-human in the Initiate since before the Breaking."

That got Tarrin's attention. Then again, he realized that Keritanima was a High Princess, someone that, being used to political intrigue, would quickly see the oddities. He nodded to Allia, and they sat down on the bench beside Keritanima's after Tarrin moved it so they could face each other. Tarrin gave the amber-eyed Wikuni a calm look. "I've been curious about the same thing," he said. "So I've decided to find out what's going on. Since it seems to involve Allia, and now you, I think we should pool our knowledge and see if we can't work out some ideas."

"Well, you've been here longer than me, so give me some background. I can't work on something if I don't know anything about it."

Tarrin and Allia then took turns telling the Wikuni about what they knew. About the inordinate attention they'd been receiving, about the Keeper's gift to Tarrin of the amulet, and how it wouldn't come off, and about the multiple attacks by the mysterious unseen enemy. Tarrin stressed that, at first, he thought that he was the target, then realized later that Allia had been present during all of them but one. Two, now. Tarrin told her about the conversations he'd had with the Keeper, about his mistrust of her, and her reactions when he gave her Kravon's name and with certain other things. Then he went back to the attacks. Although they wanted Tarrin dead, it was obvious that Allia was also on that list. And because Keritanima was also a Non-human in the Initiate, a non-human that could do Sorcery, that put her at possible risk as well.

"Now that you say that, I have to admit that what happened to us coming here makes sense," she said.

"What?" Tarrin asked.

"We were attacked *six times* by Zakkite ships," she said. "The Zakkites dwell on the southern continent of Valkar. They have a mighty navy, and they try to rule the twenty seas through force. The Wikuni have been at war with them for generations. We were attacked six times by sizable groups of Zakkite ships. Each time, they specifically came after *my* ship. After the first time, my ship was put at the center of the formation, I was transferred to another vessel, and more ships were called from Wikuna. And that didn't help, because they came after my ship the next time, and the next. Almost as if they had a spy in our fleet."

"I don't think that's coincidence, but I don't see how some kingdom across the sea could be connected with what happened to us," Tarrin said dubiously.

"If this Kravon fellow has the magic to send Trolls and Wraiths after you, then I don't see why he couldn't contact the Zakkites and tell them where I was, then pay them to try to sink me."

"A bit far fetched, but possible," Allia agreed.

"Far fetched works in politics," Keritanima shrugged. "The more distance you can put between you and a murder, the less chance it comes back to you. Alright then, I think we can say with some certainty that there

is an attempt to get us--all three of us--out of the way. We know what is going on. We know, at least partially, who is to blame. This Kravon fellow you mention. Now we need to find out the other three questions: how, when, and most importantly, why." She got up from her bench and began to pace, her hands clasped behind her back, her furry brows lowered in thought. "You say that the Keeper wasn't surprised about you finding out this name, and you said that you think that the Keeper may know what's going on. So, we may be able to find out the why of it from her. The Keeper's been around a while, so that's not going to be easy. Any information she has is likely to be very hard to find, and what we can find will probably be defended."

"I came up with the same things," Tarrin sighed.

Keritanima gave him a grin. "I think I could make something of you, Tarrin," she said. "You made the right conclusions. But the Keeper isn't the whole Tower," she said. "The Council may also have some information laying around that we can use. I don't doubt that the Keeper either told them what's going on, or had to talk very fast with them in order to keep them in line. After all, I heard that it's going to take all of them to raise this Ward that's supposed to help protect us from the attacks."

"I don't understand how that gives the Council answers," Allia said.

"It's quite simple, Allia," she replied. "The Council will obviously want a reason for why they have to put out so much effort. When the Keeper says it's for Tarrin's protection, the next logical question is 'who wants to kill him?' Well, for her to answer that, she'll either be giving them information that we need, or lying to them in order to secure their cooperation. Either way, it's information we'll want to know. If she gave them answers, then that's information that we can use. If she lied to them, we can use that too."

"How?" Tarrin asked.

"Any number of ways," she said, turning to them and holding out her hand. "One," she said, ticking a finger. "Leverage. We could use that information against the Keeper as a threat. Two." She ticked another finger. "The very lies she tells may be useful to us, just for what she says. The best lie is a lie that is sweetened with truth. Sometimes those small truths can be added up together to form part of a real answer. Three." She ticked another

finger. "If she's lying then it's something that she doesn't want her council to know, or she doesn't trust them. Either way, we'll know where to look for the information that we need. Knowing *why* she lied may be useful itself. Four." She ticked her last finger, keeping her thumb tucked against her palm. Tarrin noticed that she had a pad on her palm, and her fingers, the same way he did. "If we know what those lies are, we can build on them ourselves in order to further our own interests. All it takes is a little bit of creative thinking."

Tarrin was impressed. This was something at which the politically versed Keritanima excelled. "You certainly don't seem like the Brat Princess right now," he laughed.

She grinned at him. "I have no idea why I told you. I could have easily lied my way out of it. I guess I trust you or something, which is a first."

Or something, an impish voice called in his mind for the briefest of moments, and then it was gone. Tarrin smiled to himself, both relieved and excited. So his memories of that weren't dreams, or nightmares. "I must say, I like this version of Keritanima much better than the old," Allia added. "Your screams hurt my ears."

"I practiced a long time to get them that way," she said with a laugh. "You have no idea how much work it was for me to perfect that."

"Why?" Tarrin asked. "Why all this deception?"

"Protection," she said with a sigh and a defensive tightening around her eyes. "I have three sisters behind me, any of which would gladly plant a dagger in my back at the first available opportunity. And that doesn't take into account the army of greater and lesser nobles, all of which view my untimely demise as an event worthy of a celebration. Because they all think I'm a scatterbrained wastrel with no thoughts for anything but pretty dresses and jewels, they constantly underestimate me. It's what keeps me alive." She sat down again. "To be very honest, I don't want the throne. I'd be much happier anywhere else. But whoever does take the throne after my father dies will track me down and have me killed, because I'll be a direct challenge to her power. I could decide ten years down the road that I wanted the throne, and law would demand that she step aside in my favor. There's no law for abdication in our country. I can't just say 'I don't want the throne'

and expect to be left alone. I learned that when I was about seven years old. And that was when the Brat Princess was born. The only reason I'm still alive is because Jenawalani, Veranika, and Luralalena think that the only reason I'm still alive is blind luck."

Allia gave the Wikuni a compassionate look, and Tarrin took her hand in his paw. "It must have been awful," he said quietly.

"Yes, well, one learns how to stay alive," she said with a snuffle. "I spent my childhood learning how to convince people that my idea of a serious decision was whether to wear a silk gown or a satin one. Sometimes people found out, and then I'd have to have them killed. That happened quite a bit as I was starting out, and still learning." Tarrin shuddered at the calm, matter-of-factness in her voice. But he realized that he was probably no better. He too would kill without mercy to protect himself. "I've made it this far," she said with a wan smile. "I've just got to live long enough, which isn't very easy. Unfortunately, my game against my sisters has convinced most of the nobles that I'll be an absolute disaster as a Queen, so they've decided that Jenawalani, the next oldest, is a much better choice for the Diamond Throne. When I'm not disrupting the scheming of my sisters, I'm dodging the assassins hired by the nobles. After I take the throne, I can have my sisters exiled, so they'd have a great deal of trouble getting me killed. I won't like being Queen much, but it's the throne or the grave. And I'm not too happy about either choice."

"Why not leave?" Allia asked.

She laughed. "I have, several times. It looked like it was just an immature fit over not getting my way, but each of them were serious attempts. You have no idea how far my father's arm can reach. If I want to get away, I have to literally convince him that I'm dead. But that's another matter," she said crisply, getting control of herself again. "We have more important matters to handle here than my sordid past. The problem is, we can't tackle them right at the moment."

"I take it you want time to think about it?" Tarrin asked.

She nodded. "This is pretty complex, and besides, I haven't really had time to settle in yet. I need to identify the agents that both the Tower and my father have watching me, so I'll know who to misdirect when the time

comes to start getting serious. That, and the Brat Princess can be *very* useful in gathering information. You wouldn't believe how talkative some people can get when they think that you have no idea what they're talking about." She chuckled to herself, then cleared her throat. "We'll just have to wait for a while, until we've had time to come up with some ideas about how to go about this, and I've managed to gather up some information. In the meantime, we go on as if this conversation never happened," she told them. "That means that once we leave here, I'll be the Brat Princess again."

"I understand," Allia said. "I'll do my best not to kill you."

Keritanima laughed. "I appreciate that," she drawled. "You can hit, just be gentle."

"I can knock you down without so much as mussing your fur, *shaida*," Allia smiled.

Keritanima all but glowed. "And may I call you *shaida*?" she asked in a strangely formal, tentative voice. As if she was afraid of the answer.

"I would be honored," Allia returned, standing up and putting her hand on Keritanima's cheek. Keritanima gave her a shy smile, then blinked. "Uh, I have to go. They'll be looking for me soon, and I can only say I was lost in the gardens for so long before it becomes illogical."

"Alright," Tarrin said, standing up. "How will we tell you--"

"I'm a fast learner," she said. "Isn't that such a lovely statue?" she asked, staring at it again. "And look, roses. They're so thick and well tended. By the way, I'm pretty sure that they'll be following me, watching me, writing down everything I say, and probably inspecting my dirty shifts. I think you two should expect the same kind of treatment, so be very careful. The only reason I've gone against my every instinct about speaking frankly in an open area is because the place seems to be very well hidden, and it's too soon for them to really set up their eavesdropping network."

"It is," Tarrin agreed.

"This is the only place where we can talk freely," Allia added.

"Good. Now, just for my own sanity, please keep my indignities to a relatively low level," she grinned. "The Brat Princess is afraid of Tarrin, and of you, but that makes her angry, so she'll overcome it eventually and start

in on you. You'll have to chastise me occasionally, but please keep it to a level where they don't have to call in a healer. What Tarrin did to me keeps him off of my list for almost a good month," she grinned.

"What did you do to her?" Allia asked.

"I didn't tell you?" She shook her head. "Huh. I threw her into the bathing pool."

"So? That doesn't seem so frightening."

"He threw me into the hot end," she shuddered. "And threatened to kill me if I bothered him again."

Allia laughed. "Yes, I can see how that would be memorable. That water gets *hot* towards the far end."

"I think it boiled some of the fur off my tail," she said absently, bringing her tail around and stroking the fur meticulously. "Anyway, let's concentrate on ideas about how to solve these problems. And I think we should start making plans for leaving."

"Why?"

"A wise person always plans for the worst," she told them. "If the answers we get upset us that much, or we find out that they just wanted us to sacrifice us on some altar or something, we may decide that we like it better somewhere else. One thing that we should keep in mind is that, when we leave, the Tower will come after us. So we should learn everything we can about Sorcery. It may be useful."

"So, you're saying that for now, we should concentrate on Sorcery."

"More or less," she agreed. "We still have the problems to solve, though, so keep part of your mind on that problem. I have to go," she said quickly. "They'll be looking for me, and probably for you two as well. Give me about ten minutes, then you may want to drift out yourselves. I think we can set up another meeting relatively easily," she smiled.

He nodded. "Be careful, *shaida*," Allia told her.

"I'm always careful," she said quickly, then she flashed Allia and Tarrin that toothy grin. "Can I leave on my own, or do you want to boot me over the top this time?" she asked Tarrin.

Tarrin laughed. "I think you can find the way out," he told her.

"I'm *so* glad," she grinned, then she turned and threaded her way through the choking branches. Tarrin noticed that she did so without so much as shivering the leaves.

"An interesting woman," Allia said after she was gone. "She has a great deal of anger, and pain."

"I can imagine, growing up being afraid of your own sisters," he sighed. "I couldn't imagine Jenna trying to kill me."

"She's strong, though," Allia said, tapping her cheek with a long, delicate finger. "And full of surprises. She had me totally fooled."

"Yes, but I think she fools everyone, *deshida*. She had me fooled, until she slipped up."

"I think we're lucky that she trusts us with her secret, and that she agrees about what you had to say."

"I'm sorry I didn't discuss it with you first, my sister--"

"You didn't have time, my brother," she cut him off, putting her hand on his arm. "I realized that this is what you wanted to talk to me about. Well, you did so, with Keritanima here too."

Tarrin chuckled. "She certainly took us in hand," he said ruefully. "I almost feel used."

Allia laughed. "She was just taking command of a situation she could easily understand," she told him. "That, and no matter what she says, she *is* a Princess. Even the intelligent Keritanima is used to being obeyed. We may have to break her of that."

"Now that, I'll pay to see," Tarrin grinned at Allia.

"You may be doing the breaking," she pointed out.

"Then it won't cost me that much," he said. They waited in silence for a few moments. "Go ahead and drift out, my sister. I'm going to sneak out the other way."

"Alright. Be careful, *deshaida*."

"You too, *deshida*." Tarrin changed form, looked up at his now-gigantic friend, then slinked through the choking wall of branches and then wormed through a small hole in the shrub wall on the far side of the verdant passageway.

The night was a long one, surprisingly cold for so early in autumn, as Tarrin mulled over what Keritanima had to say. It was brief, but it made a lot of sense. So did her request to slow things down. She had just gotten here, after all, and needed some time to settle in and get comfortable, but just knowing that she was going to be there to help was a tremendous relief. He felt much better about what he needed to do, knowing that she was very, very good at this kind of thing. After he woke up, some goodly time before dawn, he realized that nobody had told him what he was supposed to do. His injury the day before had cut him out of the rest of Sevren's lecture and tour, and had probably ended it outright, but he hadn't been told where to be today. He decided that asking Master Brel where he was supposed to go at sunrise.

He and Allia were up well before dawn, and after a long bath, they handled breakfast. Allia didn't know where he was supposed to go either, for she was supposed to meet a Mistress Jandi at a tutoring room in the main Tower, one of the places that Tarrin didn't see. They parted in the Initiate's dining room, and Tarrin returned to the North Tower to ask Master Brel what he was supposed to do.

As he reached the door of the Master of Initiates, a familiar scent touched his nose. It was Dolanna, and it was only minutes old. He quickly followed the trail, turned a corner, and found the diminutive, dark-haired woman standing calmly in front of his door. She wore a simple blue dress of heavy silk, protection against the biting chill of the morning, and a wool cloak of a similar blue. Her hair was done up in a series of curling loops that hung from the back of her head, from a silver coronet-like adornment. Her dark eyes were warm and friendly as she saw him turn the corner, and she raised a hand to him with a smile. "Tarrin," she said warmly as Tarrin smiled and took her small hand. "I heard about your battle yesterday. Are you well?"

"I'm fine, Dolanna," he told her. "Are you here to see me?"

She nodded with a smile. "Yes, today is your first day of instruction," she told him. "For obvious reasons, they decided that I would be the best to begin your education."

"Well, I'm so glad that they worry about my well being," he said dryly. "Would you like to come in?"

"No, we will go to the tutoring rooms," she told him. "Come with me."

They spoke in low tones as they travelled from his room to the main Tower, as Dolanna inquired about his time away from the Tower, and how he felt after his fight the day before. She didn't speak of anything important, but the calm, cool looks she gave him, which were somewhat out of her character, convinced him that she knew that they were being watched. He played along with her, being polite and using the proper terms of respect, even though his warm smile told her that he didn't feel any differently to her than he did before he got to the Tower. In many ways, Dolanna had saved his life, over and over. He had a very special affection for the small dark-haired woman, thinking of her almost as a mother, and he was one of only three people in the Tower he trusted with his life.

The room she led him to was a very small one, that was not illuminated with a glowglobe. Instead, three candles burned in a small candelabra that stood on a small table on the far side of the room. Before it stood a small table and two chairs, each facing the other. The dim confines of the room were a stark contrast to most of the rest of the Tower, which was known for its bright glowglobes and large rooms. There was no carpet on the stone floor, nor were there any decorations covering the slate-gray stone of the walls. "Sit down," she told him as she closed the door. He did so, and she took the seat on the far side of the table. She affixed him with a warm smile. "Now then, I am certain that you are wondering why you will learn in a room like this," she smiled.

"I did notice that this place is a bit different," he said.

"There are reasons. The glowglobes tend to distract Initiates as they practice, and the room has nothing in it other than what needs to be here. That prevents accidents. Remember when I declined to teach you about Sorcery as we travelled?" He nodded. "I did that because it was necessary. We do not allow those with the Gift to come here with any sort of prior

knowledge, because your first impressions of your power are very, very important. You must be allowed to explore your connection to the Weave in a way that lets you form your own opinions, else you will always be shackled by your own preconceptions."

"I don't understand," he said.

"In simple terms, dear one, you must come here with an open mind," she told him. "In reality, at first, I will not be teaching you. I will only show you how to come into touch with your power, and then explain the sensations you feel and the things that you see. It is very much a personal process, and it differs slightly from Sorcerer to Sorcerer."

"Oh," he said. "So, if I read a book about a Sorcerer and how he does his magic, I'd always remember that," he said.

She nodded. "And if his techniques were incompatible with your power, it would seriously hamstring your ability." She patted his paw fondly. "Now then, let us begin."

For almost the entire day, Tarrin did nothing but learn mental exercises. He learned techniques to clear his mind of unnecessary thought, and techniques to create calm when emotion threatened to overwhelm him. That, he was told, was important, for the first real taste of the Gift often terrified the Initiate. The trick to gain center, as he called it, he already knew. His father taught him that for archery, and it was a part of his mother's fighting training. It was also very important in the Selani style. To be one with the opponent. Not to be distracted by unnecessary thoughts, not to let fear rule the mind. Tarrin discovered that Dolanna's techniques were somewhat different, and they were also very effective. By the early afternoon, after a short break for lunch, he had gained proficiency in her techniques, and she moved on to the next stage.

"Very good," she said as he leaned back in his chair. "Now then, to show you exactly what you'll be doing." She made a gesture, and he felt that peculiar sensation of *drawing in*. Then several opaque strands of some sort of wispy material slowly faded into view. Two of them came from the ceiling, one from the floor, and the other three from the walls. They crisscrossed the room in seemingly random patterns, but two of them intersected. Where they touched, a tiny ball rested. The strands were white,

and they varied in size. One of them was as thin as a grass stalk. One was as thick around as his wrist. They weren't straight either. He noticed that one of them had a definite curve, and the two that connected were bowed towards each other where the ball of intersection rested. The other three were arrow-straight. Tarrin turned in his chair to follow one of them out of the room with his eyes, seeing it disappear into the wall leading into the hallway. "This, dear one, is the Weave," she said in a grand voice. "This is the source of our power. It is what we use in order to create our magic."

"Strings and ropes?" Tarrin asked. "What are they?"

"They are magic, dear one," she said. "Pure magic. They are called strands. They are all connected together in a great matrix which covers our world. This is the magical conduit through which all magic travels, even the magic of the other orders. Think of them as strands in a spider's web so vast that it cannot be seen by only one person." Dolanna pointed at one that ran beside them, and Tarrin watched as it seemed to unravel before his eyes. Six smaller strands pulled away from the white core, each smaller strand carrying a color. Red, yellow, orange, blue, violet, and indigo. "Do you recognize those?" she asked.

"Yes, they're the six spheres," he replied in wonder. "Where's the seventh one?"

"I cannot draw that sphere out," she told him. "In fact, no one person can. It requires Ritual Sorcery."

"Why?"

"We will explore the why of it later, dear one," she told him. "You have much to learn before we reach that point. Each strand is made up of the seven spheres. They are jumbled all together, and the presence of all of them are what makes the strands what they are. You can see that the six smaller strands, which we call *flows*, are connected to the strand from which they were drawn." She made a pointing gesture, and the red flow extended across the room and connected to another strand near the wall, then it separated from the original strand from which it had been pulled. "A flow usually cannot exist unless it is anchored to a strand, but, as you can see, you can transfer a flow from one strand to another."

"Did that one lose its red?"

"No, dear one," she said, having the red extend out again. "Not all the Sorcerers alive have enough power to totally deprive a strand of one flow. I only borrowed the tiniest fraction of the flow from the strand, and it will get that back, because this strand is connected to that strand within the great web of the Weave," she pointed to the two strands she had affected in turn. "There are ways to make a flow stand alone, but we will get into that after you learn the basics. Each flow is independent and unique," she continued, as the red flow and the blue one extended. They touched, even wrapped around themselves, but they didn't join. "They are like oil and water. They will not mix with flows from other spheres. But flows from like spheres will merge," she said. Another red string flowed out from a different strand, and the instant it touched the first one, they joined. The extra bits at the ends of each one simply vanished, and the now-single red flow formed a straight line between the two strands.

"As you can see, strands are not all the same size. This strand, which is small," she pointed, "is no less powerful than that strand, which is large." She pointed to the wrist-thick strand. "But they are different in how fast you can pull the flows from them, and the power that those flows can hold. It is much like having a bottle and a bucket, both full of water. You can draw the water out of the bottle, but it pours much more slowly than you can get the water from the bucket."

"Ah, so I can't draw out magic as fast from the little one as I can from the big one?"

She nodded. "Most Sorcerers do not just draw from one strand, even a larger one," she told him. "We draw flows from all of them around us, all at once. To draw from just one strand would make even the tiniest magical task take hours."

"So, how *do* you make these little magic ropes make things catch fire?" he asked.

She smiled. "Ever to the point. I have missed you, dear one." She lifted her hand with her palm up, and Tarrin saw little red flows streak out from the strands in the room, and into her. Then he saw red strands flicker from her hands and form into a reddish ball of *something* in her hand, and then a small lick of flame appeared in her cupped palm. Tarrin saw that the lick of fire was still connected to the strand with tendrils of red, tendrils that

danced like smoke in a gentle breeze. "Doing our magic is not quite as easy as most believe," she said. "It requires two very different steps. First, you draw in the magical energy from the Weave. Then, once you have it, you weave the flows you have drawn into a specific effect. This weave," she held up the small lick of fire, "is very easy to create, for it is only one flow. You can see the flows that tie it to the Weave, which continue to fuel its power. If I cut off that flow of energy--" the tendrils vanished, and then the lick of fire winked out--"the weave is disrupted, and it disappears. Other weaves require many flows used together in order to function, such as Healing. That is a combination of Fire, Water, Earth, and Divine power. They can get very, very complex."

Tarrin leaned back in his chair and thought about it a minute. "So you draw in the magic, then while it's inside you, you put it together in a way that makes something happen, and then you just let it go?"

"Generally speaking, yes, dear one," she replied. "We generalize the process at first, but that is the core of what we do."

"It seems easy."

"It *is* easy," she said, "if you know what you are doing. Some, like you and your sister, have enough raw potential to seem to be able to use your power unconsciously."

"Hold on," he said. "You said the magic is all in this Weave, right?" She nodded. "Then what makes me any different from anyone else? Everyone keeps saying how much potential I have, but how does it make me different? I mean, if the magic is all outside, why are Sorcerers not equally powerful?"

"A very good question," she said with a smile. "There are several answers. A great deal of a Sorcerer's potential depends on three things. How closely he is tied to the Weave, how much power he can hold, and how much he can safely manipulate. Two of those aspects change with experience. One does not. As a Sorcerer learns more about the Weave, and practices, it brings that Sorcerer in a more intimate contact with the Weave. That Sorcerer can draw energy from it faster, from a wider area, can weave flows together quicker, and can even directly affect the Weave without drawing in. The amount of power a Sorcerer can manipulate also increases

over time, as he grows into closer contact with the power that he is controlling. But the amount of power that a Sorcerer can hold, the raw amount of energy that he can safely build up inside, never changes. That is purely an aspect of the person. Some magical weaves require vast amounts of power to be woven correctly and have them work. Those weaves the Sorcerer can learn, but if he was to try to use them, they would kill him. His body would simply burn up trying to contain more power than it can withstand." She shuddered. "That is probably the greatest danger you face as you learn. We call it being Consumed, and it is a ghastly way to die. You are destroyed from the inside out, and nothing, not anything, can stop it once it begins. Those lucky ones that realize what is happening kill themselves before it overwhelms their reason." She patted his hand. "Anyway, what makes you so strong is just that. You have *awesome* potential, Tarrin. You can hold more power than four Sorcerers linked."

"That still doesn't make much sense," he said dubiously. "I mean, if you can never do some things--"

"I did not say *never*," she smiled. "There are some very advanced techniques we can learn to allow us to weave spells beyond our natural ability to create. Channeling is the most common. But we still cannot exceed that very basic limitation that our own bodies place upon us, and many of our techniques only allow us to step just so far above that natural limitation."

"Oh, alright," he said. "That makes sense. No, wait. If you draw the magic inside you, and then you weave it together and release it, then why didn't the strands come out of *you* when you unravelled that strand over there?"

She laughed lightly. "My dear one, you make this so easy. You see immediately what I must work to make others understand. Remember when I said that one part of the Weave is connected to all others?" He nodded. "I become a doorway of sorts, dear one. The power I draw in is a direct proportion to the power of the Weave that I can directly affect. When I draw a flow into me and build up its energy, I can release that energy wherever I choose. Magic is a very simple power, Tarrin. It will follow the path of least resistance. If the place I choose is closer to another strand than it is to me, the magic will travel to that strand and then push out the flows to that

point." She reached up a hand and put it through the strand over her head. "When we draw in our power, when we touch the Weave, we become a living part of it," she told him. "The flows that draw from the Weave and enter me also connect me to the Weave, and magic will flow much easier through flows and strands than it will across empty air. Almost always, you will see weaves extend from strands to the point of effect. That energy must flow through me and to that place, and if it a shorter distance from that place to a nearby strand, then that is the path that the energy will take."

"Why do you have to build up power, when it's already there?" he asked.

"How do you mean?"

"You say that you build up power inside you, then it leaves you and then goes where you tell it to go. Then you weave that power together and form a spell. Why not just try to weave it together over there in the first place? That way, you don't have to draw anything in."

"A thought, but it will not quite work, dear one. When I weave together flows somewhere else, I'm trying to affect the magic over there with the magical power I have inside me. In effect, I'm pushing a line of blocks, trying to get the end block to fall off the edge of a table. By pushing at this end, I can make the block on the far end fall off the table. The Weave measures the power I have inside me against the weave I'm trying to build, and if it is enough, I can push out that energy and weave it together to do what I want it to do. I cannot push any more power into the Weave than what I currently hold, so, to again put it in terms of water, the water I carry in a bucket cannot fill up a barrel. If the weave I am trying to build requires a barrel of water, it will not work. If it only requires a bucket, it will work. If it only requires a glass of water, and I try to fill it with a bucket of water--"

"It overflows."

She shook her head. "It never gets the chance to overflow. Because the weave is triggered once it has enough power and I weave it together, the excess energy has nothing to do, and it is dissipated through the Weave. The proper term is that it is absorbed by the Weave."

"So...to stay on the water, it's like filling a glass over a waterfall," he said. "The water that flows over the glass just drops back into the stream."

"Precisely," she said with an approving nod. "You do suffer a bit of a backlash, because that power partially rebounds back into you. It is not pleasant, so you learn quickly not to try to put more magic into a weave than it can safely hold."

"Safely?"

She chuckled. "Yes. If you charge a weave's flows without weaving them together and allowing them to expend the energy you charge into them, they can release that energy in totally random ways. It is called a wildstrike, and the effects can be spectacular. The power of the Weave itself can blow through a ruptured flow, like a torrent of water blasting from a hole in a dam. That is one of the reasons this room is so bare. And these walls are sufficiently reinforced by magical wards and physical buttressing."

"And that's the danger you warned me about," he surmised.

"One of them, yes," she said. "Toying with Sorcery without experience or guidance can be deadly."

"You seem to understand the generalities of weaving flows, but there are some restrictions of which you must be aware. There are only three true strictures when it comes to weaving flows, Tarrin," she said. "Firstly, you cannot weave where you cannot see. That is our range. While you can weave some flows without seeing what you are doing, and indeed there are many that must be woven inside objects, where you cannot see what you do, but you cannot direct them at anyone or anything unless you can see it. You cannot weave flows trying to paralyze someone on the far side of a closed door, nor can you weave in the dark unless you can see your target's location. You do not necessarily have to see his face or form, but you must be able to see enough of him to know where he is. But no matter what, you cannot create flows at great distances, whether you know someone is there or not. The reason for this is complex, but it comes down to perspective. Since you are 'seeing' the flows woven together, it means that flows that are exceptionally tiny are impossible to create. People at great distances appear

tiny, so to affect them from such a distance means that, in relation, you are trying to weave flows in a tight space."

"In other words, Dolanna, accuracy is dictated by distance. The farther away a target is, the harder it is to hit it. And once something is outside of bowshot, you just can't get anything there. It always falls short."

"More or less, though it is a bit more complex than that," she agreed. "Secondly. Flows exist in a state of partial independence from the Weave, and from other flows from different sphere, but they actively merge with flows of the same sphere. Once they are drawn from a strand, you cannot use other flows to try to affect them without considerable danger. In effect, you cannot mop up water with more water. There are indirect ways to do this, however. You can unravel another Sorcerer's weaving by trying to control his flows directly, or attack the Sorcerer directly with Sorcery to make him stop, or attempt to cut that Sorcerer off from the Weave, but you could not send flows out to untie his flows. If you do, the like flows simply merge, you get a tangled mess, and it often explodes as a wildstrike. Thirdly. Because the flows cannot affect flows, and like flows merge and disrupt themselves, that means that we cannot weave flows upon ourselves. When we are weaving, we are living extensions of the Weave, but we are only filled with certain flows, and the flows of the weave we are creating interfere with the power of the flows we are holding inside. We cannot heal ourselves, or weave any weaves that would affect ourselves. The flows merely enter us, touch the power within of the same sphere, then rush out down the flow and go back to the strand. We lose the power from inside, which takes away our ability to push it against the weave, and then it simply fizzles out. Fortunately, any attempt to weave flows on ourselves simply fizzle, and do not form wildstrikes. That prohibition starts at your skin and goes inward. It also means that you cannot weave any weaves against or for another Sorcerer who is actively in contact with the Weave. But mind you, that means those weaves that affect the Sorcerer's body directly. Sorcerer's Fire can burn a Sorcerer just as quickly as it can burn anyone else, because it is an external effect that comes into contact with that Sorcerer."

"What would happen if you try? Wouldn't it kind of ruin his spell?"

Dolanna smile broadly. "Yes and no," she told him. "The energy you are exerting against him is pushing *towards* him. Once it comes into contact

with him, it comes down to who is stronger. If the attacker is more powerful than the target, he can reverse the energy of the flow and drain off any energy inside him, or he can pump power into the victim, exceed his ability to hold it, and force him to release his touch on the Weave in order to avoid being Consumed. If the target is more powerful, then he can block off that flow, literally drawing in so strongly that the attacker cannot overcome the force. Or he can simply allow the attacker to feed him that power without drawing in. If the target can hold more than the attacker, then the attacker could never force the target to let go of the Weave. Either form weakens the target's ability to weave flows, for he must dedicate a portion of his attention and his power to controlling the attacker's energy, but it cannot stop him."

"Then why can't a Sorcerer do weaves on himself?" he pressed. "All he has to do is resist his own attempt to drain, or feed off of the power he's trying to push into himself."

"Ah, but in both instances, there is a catch," she told him. "If you try to feed off of the power you channel into yourself, then what happens when you stop drawing from the Weave?"

"You--ohh," he said. "You cut off your own power, and then your spell fizzles."

"Precisely. No matter how you try to balance the feeding with the restraining, they will always cancel one another."

"What if you only try to feed off of a little of your energy?"

"What indeed? You should already know the answer, dear one."

He thought about it a long moment. "I guess you can't," he said. "If you try to feed off of only a portion of the energy, you're working harder to feed yourself a little bit of power that you get back. So you have to make it stronger, which makes you have to cut back on drawing power, but you can't do that, because if you do you lose that power to make weaves. You could never put enough power into it to make it work."

"A bit long winded, but essentially correct, Tarrin," she commended. "No matter how you try to balance it, you cannot get back more energy than what you are expending on yourself. To be absolutely technical, you *can* weave spells on yourself using this technique, but the flow of power would

be like a slow drip of water trying to fill up the bathing pool. You would grow a span of hair by the time the weave showed any signs of effect. And since it is a sustained process, you would exhaust yourself and have to stop *long* before you so much as dampened the pool's bottom."

Tarrin laughed. "I guess that make it a bit inefficient."

"The draining aspect is just a little bit more difficult to understand. When you try to drain from yourself, you are reversing the energy flow through the strand, but you are still expending that energy to enact the drain. Remember when you asked me about trying to overcharge a weave? Where does that energy go?"

"Well," he said, thinking about a moment. Then he thought about it some more. "Doesn't it dissipate back into the Weave?"

"Yes, that is what happens. You do not get that energy back. It dissipates into the Weave. Think about it, dear one. You are expending energy to drain energy away from yourself. You lose that energy, and then must replace it with more energy, which is used to try to drain away that same energy. You are pushing and pulling on something at the same time, and when you do that, it does not move. The harder you push, the harder the counter will pull. And all the while, you are drawing more and more energy that is doing nothing but making you draw more energy. It is a feedback cycle that causes you to eventually let go of the Weave to avoid injuring yourself."

"Oh, I see," he said.

"That is not an absolute, Tarrin. There are certain instances when a Sorcerer can weave flows on himself, and that is when he is holding power from all seven Spheres. When he, in effect, becomes a strand rather than a flow. And that can only be done using Ritual Sorcery, because the sphere of Confluence, or green, will only draw out under extreme magical power. To even be able to touch Confluence takes considerable power."

"I take it you don't know why that works that way either?"

"Not yet," she smiled.

"I have a question."

"Go ahead, dear one."

"You said that flows can't affect each other. Well then, how do weaves with more than one flow produce an effect? I mean, they can't affect each other."

She laughed. "You are making me work, dear one," she chided, "but you ask very insightful questions. Each flow cannot affect each other, but they can affect the energies that each one releases. The way a weave is woven together is critical to the working of the weave. The weaving dictates how, when, and at what strengths the energies of individual flows are released, and that very intricate process is what welds those energies together to form a specific effect." She raised her hand again, and he saw two flows, red and yellow, flow out of a strand and merge over her hand. This time, the merging was very slow, unlike the first time, and he saw the specific way that the flows were tied in with each other. Then the flows generated an effect, a small ball of pale white light that hovered over her palm, fed by two separate tendrils that linked it back to the strand. Those two tendrils drifted towards each other, touched, then wrapped around each other to form a twisted cord of sorts, although each tendril was most definitely separate. Just like the strands in a rope were individual cords woven together to form a larger one. "Do you see?"

"Yes," he said, studying it.

"That is a common effect. Separate flows that feed the same weave do that. Again, we do not know exactly why."

"So, you're feeding it energy?"

"Yes. Instead of constantly drawing it in and then releasing it, now I am a gate. The energy flows through me and into the weave. It is feeding itself, but I regulate that power. If I cease concentrating on it, the gate closes--" the little ball vanished--"and the weave dissipates."

"That's what you were talking about when you were saying how a Sorcerer can manipulate energy."

"Yes and no," she said. "The ability to sustain a weave is a learned ability yes, and it is an aspect of that ability to manipulate. Yet it is still dependent on the amount of power you can hold. You cannot sustain a weave that you could not create in the first place. It is easier to sustain a

weave than it is to create it, because it does not involve an active use of power, but you had to create it first."

"Can you sustain one weave and then make another?"

"Yes," she told him. "It takes practice, for you have to concentrate to hold the first together while you weave the second. It is a skill you will learn over time. The most skilled of us can work with many weaves at the same time, and some can even create multiple weaves simultaneously, though this is exceptionally difficult. My mentor could build twenty separate flows and sustain them all. That was quite an accomplishment."

"Huh," he said, looking around. "Why can I see them now, anyway? I could never see them before."

"Because I am making them visible," she told him. "I have been sustaining that weave this whole time." The strands fluttered, then disappeared from view. "When you are touching the Weave, you can see them. You do not necessarily have to see them to weave flows together, but you can always see the strands while you are in contact with the Weave, and you must be able to see your target to direct them."

"And that's all there is to it?"

"That is all there is to it," she smiled. "It is a very simple concept, and I believe that is why so many have trouble. Often, the simplest things are the hardest to understand."

"I'm not so sure about that," he said.

"Alright then," she smiled, "where does the sun rise every morning?"

"In the east," he said.

"Why?"

He gave her a confused look. "It is a simple thing, Tarrin. The sun rises every morning, and it rises in the east. Why?"

"Because, well, because it does."

"Why?"

"It just does."

"Why?"

She was getting on his nerves. "I have no idea. It just does."

"Yes, it just does," she said a delicate little smile. "A simple thing, yet it the why of it is beyond most of us."

"Do *you* know?"

"I have no idea, dear one," she laughed. "I simply accept it." She made the Weave visible again, then drew out the six flows for his eyes. "As you know, these are the six spheres. Do you know which is which?"

"Well, fire is red," he said. "I figured that out already."

"Correct. Fire is red. Water is violet. Earth is indigo. Air is yellow. Blue is mind, or the power of thought and will. Orange is divine power, and green is confluence. Each sphere represents a primal force in our world. Four of them are physical, and the other three are not. Earth, air, fire, and water, the four elements. The power of the mind and that of the Goddess, or divine power, are not physical, but are very much still powerful forces that shape our world. The power of Confluence binds these six powers together and gives them a unified purpose. Do you remember the symbol of the *katzh-dashi* in the upper chamber? How the green circle enclosed the other six?"

Tarrin nodded. "I noticed that they all touched it."

"Yes, that represents the binding power of Confluence. When all seven are joined, they become strands, or white. Which is the white star in the center. When all seven join, they create a whole stronger than the sum of the individual parts. That is a representation of what sets us apart from all other orders of magic, forming circles. Unlike the Wizards, Priests, and Druids, we can directly link our powers together to form a magical force stronger than the sum of the powers of each individual Sorcerer. It takes a circle to manipulate the power of Confluence, of binding, which is the most powerful of the spheres, and as such is the most difficult to control. It is a very resistant sphere, fighting against outside influence at all times."

"I guess that makes sense," he said.

"You will study that in detail once you are raised to the green," she said. "Forming circles is the last stage of your instruction." She glanced at the candles, the ones that replaced the last set at lunchtime, which were very

nearly burned down to nothing. "I think we can stop here for today," she said. "You will practice those centering exercises tonight, dear one," she said. "If I feel you are ready, tomorrow I will guide you into touching the Weave yourself. Perhaps even attempt a weave."

"Alright," he said. "Do you think I'm doing alright, Dolanna?"

She laughed sweetly. "Tarrin, my dear one, I think you understand more than Initiates that have been here for a year," she said. "What I told you today was very short," she admitted. "I did not explain a great, great many things, for I wanted to test your natural understanding of the Weave, yet you made the connections on your own. And you passed with flying colors. You seem to understand things that take months for others to comprehend. Most would never have asked the questions you ask, and many more would not understand the answers. Like I told you once before, you are a natural. I have every confidence that you will amaze the Tower with your progression." She reached up and tapped his ear, which flicked involuntarily under her light touch. "And this is the reason I will allow you to progress so quickly."

"How do you mean?"

"Sorcery requires mental concentration and control, but what it requires most is willpower," she told him. "You must exert your will on the Weave in order to make it do what you want it to do. Because of your change, you possess tremendous will, and despite what you believe, you have a great deal of control over your own mind. Most other Initiates would spend rides, months, sometimes even years, building up the basic mental control and will to use the Weave. You already have that. You earned it while learning how to deal with your dual nature. Because you already have a very forceful mind, I think you would be capable of exercising yourself against the Weave."

"I hope so," he sighed. "I just don't want to feel lost, and I don't want to sit in here for a few months."

She patted his arm, her dark eyes warm and reassuring. "Trust me, dear one," she said. "You will do fine." He didn't tell her the other reason, that the faster he learned Sorcery, the faster he could use it to his own ends. To find out who was after him, find out what the Keeper and the Tower wanted

of him, and another tool to use against those who were trying to kill him. "You are released. Report back to this room tomorrow at dawn."

"Thank you, Dolanna," he said, standing up.

"Mistress Dolanna," she said with a slight smile.

"Whatever," he winked at her. A little bit of insubordination was perfectly acceptable between friends. At least *he* felt so.

Back in his room, he considered Dolanna's words, and privately rejoiced in the fact that she was the one teaching him. Because she already knew him so well, that allowed her to do exactly what she did. And it seemed that would allow him to not spend day after day sitting there doing stupid mental exercises. Thinking of exercises, Tarrin changed into his leathers and picked up his staff, feeling its comfortable weight. Allia had been itching to get back onto the training field, and he was too. At that moment, Sorcery was the last thing on his mind. After two months without a workout, he felt rusty. He knew that Allia would think of that first thing after being released from her class, just as he had. He opened the adjoining door and went into her room, but found it empty, and the fading scent told him he had not been there since the morning. He wrote her a short note telling her where he would be, then he left through his own room and hurried out towards the sand-floored exercise grounds where the cadets of the Knights spent their days in training.

The day was cool and sunny, with a ridge of flat clouds standing to the west. The Skybands were wearing their customary day colors, the faint dull white, and Dommammon, the White Moon, was showing in the blue sky as a thin crescent. Although it was well into fall, coming on winter, the air was still quite comfortable. Back in Aldreth, he had no doubt that they'd already had their first snow. The village, being in the foothills of the Skydancer Mountains, tended to get snow earlier than Torrian, which was only 3 days to the southwest. His father had told him that Suld, being on the coast, had a much milder climate than the inlands of Sulasia. It did get cold, and snow and even having the harbor ice up were not uncommon, but the icebound time was not very long. Snow only piled up for about a month during winter, and then the first stages of early spring would melt it. It was the winter that was unusual, for it took winter more time to settle around Suld

than it did most of the rest of Sulasia, even those areas to the south. Eron Kael suspected that the Tower had something to do about that.

The training area was populated, which was normal for this time in the afternoon, full of young men wearing leather jerkins and holding wooden swords, practicing forms, sparring with each other, or thrusting or chopping at the numerous wooden posts that were staked into the sandy ground. Surrounding and interspersed with these cadets were the Knights in their mail shirts, giving instruction, correcting mistakes, or punishing cadets for bad errors. Some of the faces, Tarrin recognized. Most he did not.

One cadet stood out, literally, among those on the field. He was a young man, that was obvious from his face, but the young man towered over the other cadets and Knights as if they were children, and he was almost a head taller than Tarrin. Tarrin was amazed at that, for few humans could look *him* in the eye. The young man had chocolate brown skin, even darker than Dar's swarthy complexion, was more than an axe handle wide across the shoulder, and had arms that looked like gnarled tree trunks. As Tarrin walked up to the edge of the grounds, the young man just kept getting bigger and bigger. He wasn't just tall. He was awesomely developed, and Tarrin had no doubt that the young man was monstrously strong. He swung his practice sword with a calm, calculated efficiency that came with long hours of practice.

A mop of dark curly hair sprouted from a rank of cadets, and Faalken appeared at the edge of them. Wearing a battered mail shirt and a pair of undyed leather breeches, the burly, jovial Knight recognized him and rushed over, his wide, cheeky face beaming. Tarrin smiled warmly and took Faalken's hand when he reached him. "By Karas, it's good to see you again, Tarrin!" he said in a joyful voice. "We heard you'd come back, but they didn't tell us you'd be returning to the grounds."

"They didn't tell me I could," he replied, "but they didn't say that I couldn't, either."

Faalken laughed. "You may get in trouble. You're supposed to be devoting yourself to your magical training."

"They can get as mad as they want," he shrugged. "Besides, I was told that my time outside of class is my own. They didn't put any kind of

restriction on it." He glanced at the monster of a man. "Who is that?"

"His name is Azakar," Faalken replied. "He came from Arak."

"Arak!" Tarrin gasped.

Faalken nodded. "He's an escaped slave. He was one of their gladiators, and somehow managed to get free while he was being moved from one Arakite city to Dala Yar Arak. From what we know, he managed to get passage on a Wikuni clipper, and wound up here. Someone that speaks Araki helped get him into the service on the docks as a laborer. He learned our language out on the docks. Not long after you left, he showed up at the gates and asked for the chance to become a Knight. He's good, Tarrin. He was still in training when he escaped, but he learns fast. We have trouble training him," Faalken chuckled. "I use the troll-skin gloves when I work with him. I'm not used to my students being stronger than me."

"Cheater," Tarrin teased. The cadets, those who did not know him, were now only half paying attention to their work, for they were staring at him as much as they could get away with. "How have things been for you?"

"Oh, the same," he smiled. "Dolanna hasn't been out, so I've been amusing myself on the training grounds." He chuckled. "More like getting my backside tanned. Allia has been teaching us some of her technique. We've decided to integrate some of it into our training."

"Not a bad idea."

"Our armor keeps us from getting exotic, but it's always good to know some unarmed combat. Just in case you lose your sword. Allia helped us come up with some moves and forms that work with our armor. I've gotten pretty good at parrying with my forearm guards," he said. "That wouldn't help me against someone using a broadsword, but it works pretty well against Allia and her shortswords."

"Why not?"

"Broadsword? It'd break my arm," he replied.

"Oh, yes. I forgot, you humans are fragile things."

"You just keep talking," he warned with a grin. "I've got the gloves right now."

Tarrin grinned back, nudging him with his elbow. "I know. I can smell them."

"You came out to grind off the rust?"

"Yes," he replied. "That fight I had yesterday reminded me how important it is for me to be able to defend myself."

"Dolanna told me about that. She said that the Keeper about had a conniption after it happened. I even heard that the Tower is going to run every other magic-user out of Suld in punishment. I know that they're doing *something*," he said. "The priest didn't show up this morning for morning prayers, so the Lord General had to conduct the service." The Lord General of the Knights, their leader, was a strapping man of advanced years named Darvon. Despite his white hair and wrinkled face, he could still swing a broadsword and run wearing armor, and there wasn't a craftier fighter among the Knights. His many, many years wearing the armor had taught him more tricks than most of the Knights put together knew. Tarrin had fought him only once on the training field, and it had been quite an educational experience for the young Were-cat. Tarrin didn't think of Darvon as old. Tarrin thought of Darvon as experienced. What made Tarrin laugh at Faalken's declaration was that Darvon *despised* conducting service. Tarrin had no doubt that it was very short, very blunt, and very interesting.

"It must have been, fast," he mused.

"I think it sounded something like 'Lord Karas, Amen'."

Tarrin laughed. "That sounds about right," he said. "I think that the Church will start worrying about the moral standing of her Knights if that keeps up."

"We're not paid to pray," Darvon's voice piped up from the side. Tarrin and Faalken turned to look, as the white-haired, broad-shouldered commander of the Knights of Karas walked towards them. Darvon was a man of slightly more than average height, and despite his years, he was still very burly. He moved with the grace of a man half his age. He was wearing a mail shirt and a pair of leather chausses, with his old, battered broadsword on his belt. His face had been handsome once, but his face was about the only thing on Lord General Darvon that showed his age. His skin was permanently browned from exposure to the wind and the sun, and his eyes

and mouth were surrounded by a myriad of deeply etched wrinkles. His face wasn't very full, but lacked the gauntness of an old man, with only a little bit of sinking about his cheeks and eyes. Those eyes were a very light shade of gray, quite striking, and they were as clear and lucid as they had been twenty years before. Tarrin bowed as he approached, and Faalken saluted his commander sharply. "Good to see you back, Tarrin. You ready to give up on the Tower and come over here, where you belong?"

Tarrin laughed. "I'd love to, my Lord General, but I don't think that the Tower is going to give me up just yet."

"Such a waste," he said with mock disappointment. "Where's that pretty little she-demon? You two are usually together."

"I think she's still in class, Lord General," he replied. "I left her a note to come out here when she's done."

"Good. I miss seeing you two try to kill each other. It was very entertaining."

"I think my Lord General is just glad that Allia won't single him out with Tarrin on the field."

Tarrin laughed, and Darvon fixed Faalken with an icy stare. "I do very well for my age. Allia said so herself."

"Still, though, it looks very bad for the Lord General of the Knights to have his face planted in the sand."

"I seem to recall seeing you in that same position," Darvon said stiffly.

"Yes, but I'm not carrying the honor of the Knights on my back either," Faalken said airily, waving a hand negligibly before him.

"Let's see how the honor of the Knights weighs on your shoulders, Sir Knight," Darvon warned in a voice promising death, drawing his sword.

Tarrin scrambled out of the way, then he got a very nice view of watching Darvon systematically beat Faalken into the ground. The curly-haired knight fought well, which was to be expected, but Darvon proved quite succinctly just who the better man was with a broadsword. It ended when Darvon struck Faalken on the arm with the flat of his sword, with enough force to knock the man down. Then Darvon grinned at him evilly as

he slid his sword home. "It looks like the honor of the Knights is intact," he rubbed it in. "You need more practice, Faalken. A one-armed baby could have bested you."

"I was just being nice to my Lord General's advanced age," Faalken retorted with an outrageous grin as he regained his feet.

"Keep talking like that, and you'll never make it to my age," Darvon warned. "Tarrin, I want you to spar with Azakar. The boy gets a bit smug with himself sometimes, and I want him to learn a lesson. Make sure you surprise him early on. I want him to learn how to size up an enemy."

"Yes, Lord General," Tarrin said with a bow.

"What keeps *him* from getting smug?" Faalken demanded.

"Allia," Tarrin and Darvon replied in unison.

Darvon called the massive young man over, and Tarrin was again impressed with his size. He was very tall, true, but he was also exceptionally well developed. Muscle rippled through his arms and along his bare chest and stomach, and he moved with a belying grace that warned Tarrin that he was much faster than he looked. The young man stared at Tarrin for a moment, but to his credit, he was not obvious about it, nor did he seem put off by Tarrin's obvious nonhuman nature. "Azakar, I want you to spar with Tarrin here," the Lord General said. "Full contact."

"Yes, Lord General," the young man boomed in a deep bass voice, bowing gracefully to him. He looked at Tarrin, looked at Tarrin's staff, then he raised his wooden practice sword. "I'll be careful, Sir Tarrin," he said calmly. His voice was not boastful, though his words said much about who he thought was going to win. And for that reason, Tarrin took no offense. Thinking one was going to win was very important when it came to fighting. If you didn't think positively to win, then you'd almost certainly lose. "I will do my best not to hurt you."

Faalken and Darvon broke up laughing, and Tarrin had to suppress a grin. Azakar obviously had no idea what he was about to get into. The young man gave his two superiors a curious look, then he turned his attention on Tarrin and assumed a ready stance.

"You're not going to hurt me," Tarrin promised him in a casual voice, as he assumed a ready stance with the staff held in an end-grip.

"Begin!"

It took only two swipes. The first blasted the wooden sword aside, knocking the big man off balance, and the second took him full in the side. The breath wooshed from Azakar's lungs as he was carried off of his feet, to land heavily on his back in the sand nearly ten spans away. He slid another five spans, rolling over a few times until he came to a full stop. He didn't move for several seconds. Tarrin grounded his staff and calmly waited. He knew that he hadn't hurt the young man seriously, just bruised his ribs. Tarrin had struck rather carefully to ensure no bones were broken. The young man groaned and rolled over, then he sat up clutching his side. He gave Tarrin a wild look of shock. "H--H--How?" he managed to wheeze.

"Azakar, Tarrin's about twice as strong as you," Darvon told him with a grin. "This was a lesson, boy. A lesson about underestimating your enemy."

"A...wise lesson, it seems," he panted as the breath returned to his lungs. "You certainly...don't look...that strong."

"It's handy sometimes," Tarrin shrugged.

Azakar wobbled to his feet, then leaned over with hands on knees until he had his breath back. Then he picked up his wooden sword. "Now that I know what to expect, we can try again," he smiled.

"Don't fall into the same trap, boy," Darvon warned. "Tarrin's a very nasty opponent. When you fight him, you damn well better expect the impossible."

"I think my Lord General is getting a bit far afield," Tarrin told him with a smile.

"I think not. Now shut up and fight."

Tarrin bowed, and then engaged the massive young man. After about ten minutes, Tarrin had to admit that he was impressed. The big man was fast, he was strong, and he was *smart*. He was well trained. He never fell for the same feint twice, and he was excellent at guessing out the actions of his enemy. The problem was, Azakar had never seen many of the moves and forms that Tarrin used, so those guesses just barely managed to save his

backside. He spent almost all of that time on a defensive footing, trying to puzzle out the Were-cat's quick, precise thrusts and strikes that seemed to come from impossible angles, all the while suffering from stinging slaps and jabs from Tarrin's staff, or light rakes of his claws, or impact from Tarrin's feet and paws. To his credit, he managed to protect himself very, very well. From the way he reacted, Tarrin was pretty sure that he'd sparred against Allia a few times. But that was Allia. Tarrin may have been trained by his sister, but his size and power meant that his own use of those forms was somewhat different. And many of his moves had roots in his Ungardt training. He slipped backwards a bit, then baited the young warrior into a classic trap, then a quick strike to the inside of the ankle from the staff knocked his foot out from under him. Azakar tumbled to the ground in a heap, collapsing over his lost foundation. He ended up on his back, with the tip of Tarrin's staff about a finger's width from his nose.

"Consider yourself educated, cadet," Darvon told him in a gruff voice. "No matter how good you are, there's always someone out there who's better. Never forget that you may end up facing a backwater yokel with a little stick, and he is capable of beating you."

"Yokel?" Tarrin demanded.

"I'm not talking about you, Tarrin," Darvon assured him, "I'm talking about anyone Azakar may end up fighting as a Knight. It's also good for him to learn that there are more weapons than just swords and axes."

"He is good with that little toothpick, isn't he?" Faalken remarked with a cherubic grin.

That toothpick whistled through the air like an arrow, until the point of it was about a span from Faalken's grin. To his credit, Faalken didn't flich. Tarrin was holding the Ironwood staff by the very end, straight out, and the sandy wood didn't so much as quiver as it pointed at the curly-haired Knight. "Why don't you draw your sword, Faalken, and show me just what kind of toothpick I'm holding?" Azakar, not being a fool, made an attempt to scramble out of the way, but Tarrin put a foot down on his back as he rolled, pinning him to the ground.

A whiff of scent and a flash at the edge of his vision was all Tarrin received by way of warning, but it was enough. With a swift twist and

lunge, he slipped underneath a foot that was flying towards the back of his head. Allia landed on the far side of the prone giant young man, her short swords in her hands and an expectant smile on her face. "If I would have struck you, you would have deserved it," she teased, wagging the tip of a sword at him. "I thought at first that you were hopelessly out of form, letting me get so close to you."

It was a very important return for Tarrin, and for Allia. A return to the field, to the familiar surroundings and routines of sparring and training with his blood-sister, gave Tarrin a sensation of normalcy. He had two months of rust to shake off, but he was surprised at how well he did against her. They danced in the sand-filled pit of the training area for the entire afternoon, getting a new feel for one another. Tarrin's staff fended off Allia's two short swords for hours, as they shuffled and wove and slipped around, by, and through one another. Selani fighting was as much unarmed combat with a weapon as it was weapons fighting with an occasional kick. Allia could kick a man about fifty different ways, and her legs were as much weapons as her swords. But Tarrin had learned well from his sister, and his own feet struck out at her about as often as they touched the ground.

Allia's best trick of the day was to jump up and above a stright thrust from his staff, then land lightly along its length. Her weight didn't make the staff's tip dip very much, as Tarrin adjusted. He didn't want to spill her to the ground. She was showing off for Darvon's benefit, no more, and he knew it. But when she gave him that look, he simply let go of the staff and let her drop. He sidestepped around a sword thrust aimed at his ear, and his tail swished out and hooked her foot as she landed. His tail wasn't that strong, but it was strong enough. It yanked her foot out and dropped her on her backside onto the ground.

"I still cannot get used to that," she grumbled as he helped her up. "I do not have a tail, so I keep forgetting how you use it."

"It's the longest limb I have," Tarrin told her with a grin. "Are we done for today? I'm hungry."

"Yes, I think so," she said. "You have not forgotten what I taught you. I am content with that."

"Good. Let's go eat, and then I need to wash all this sand out of my hair."

"Stop putting your head on the ground, and you won't have that problem," she said impishly in Selani.

"Stop knocking me down, and I won't have to worry about it," he replied pugnaciously, winking at her.

"Picky picky," she grinned. "Let's eat. You worked me to starvation."

Later that evening, as Tarrin and Allia sat in his room playing stones, there was a knock at the door. Before he could even ask who it was, the door opened. It was Keritanima. She didn't say a word, she simply pointed towards the outside, then closed the door and walked away.

It took about an hour for Allia and Tarrin to drift into the courtyard at the center of the maze. Keritanima arrived a few moments after Allia entered. She looked somewhat unsettled. "What's wrong?" Tarrin asked.

"I need to talk to you two," she said brusquely, walking into the courtyard, pausing to stare at the statue, then sitting down on a bench. "We need to arrange things."

"What do you mean?" Allia asked.

"I was thinking," she started. "If we're going to work together, it's going to be bloody hard for us to communicate outside of this place unless we come to an arrangement."

"Sounds like you already have a plan," Tarrin said.

She nodded. "I'm a brat, but I *do* have acquaintances. Do either of you think you could be fond of the brat? If she was nice to you?"

Tarrin thought about it a minute. "As long as you didn't try to pull any stunts with me, probably," he answered honestly. "I put up with Allia, after all."

He got a smack in the back of the head in payment for his remark. Keritanima laughed richly as he gave Allia a cold look, and she stuck her tongue out at him. As he thought many times before, Allia was a completely different person when they were alone.

"As long as you are cordial to me, I would not have that much trouble being nice to the brat," Allia answered.

Keritanima clasped her furry hands together and sighed. "Thank Misha," she exclaimed in relief. "I've already worked out how I'll cunningly work myself into your good graces. I won't tell you, so it'll be a surprise," she said winsomely, giving them a toothy grin.

"Whether we can talk to each other, we still can't really say anything," Tarrin reasoned. "They could be listening with magic."

"True, but Jervis won't think it unusual if he sees me talking with you," she said.

"Who's Jervis?" Tarrin asked.

"The man my father sent to watch me," she replied. "He looks like a completely ridiculous fop, but Jervis is one of my father's best spies and diplomats. When I found out it was Jervis, I couldn't help but start coming up with new plans. And looking forward to it," she said eagerly. "Jervis is the best. And to be the best, you have to beat the best."

"The best what?" Allia asked.

"The best liar," she replied with a grin. "If I can lead Jervis around by the nose, *everyone* back home will realize that I was never the spoiled princess they thought me to be. That's my own measure of revenge in all this."

"I thought the idea was to keep yourself secret," Tarrin said.

"When I leave here, I'm not going back," she said bluntly. "And I want them to *know* just who I am."

"Fair enough," Tarrin shrugged.

"And, of course, I'll appreciate the company," Keritanima admitted. "My maid and bodyguards know about who I am, but she's only one girl and they always kept my rooms under surveillance, and it gets tiring being nobody but the brat for months on end. Back home, I had two or three people that knew who I was. They worked for me, so I could always talk to them. But here, I'm alone."

"Worked for you? As in, did your sneaky work?" Tarrin asked.

She nodded. "Kalina looks just like me, so she worked as my double. Ulfan is a high-level member of the thieves' guild, so he could always arrange to have people disappear. He's the one who taught me all my tricks."

"You do tricks?" Allia said with a smile. "Like rolling over and begging?"

Keritanima snorted, stepping up to her. She patted her on the shoulder, then stepped away. Then she turned back around and held up Allia's ivory symbol necklace, dangling from its gold chain from between two of Keritanima's fingers. "Tricks," she said with a impish grin. "Ulfan thought I was Kalina one day when I'd snuck out of the palace, and dragged me off to the guild. That happened when I was about twelve. That's how we met. After he realized I was the princess, he let me go. But I went back the next week and started harassing him into teaching me all about thieving things. Like picking pockets and other dirty tricks. I figured that they'd be very handy later on." She handed the necklace back to Allia, then sat back down on the bench.

"What else can you do?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Oh, pick about any lock made," she said grandly, polishing her claws on the front of her dress. "Take anything from anyone without them knowing about it. I'm also very good at signing my father's name. I learned that right after I stole one of the royal seals."

Tarrin laughed. "What more could a girl ask for?" he chuckled. "The royal seal and being able to forge the king's name? That's like being able to make your own decrees."

"It has been *unbelievably* useful," she said modestly. "I pestered my father for such important lessons such as juggling and tumbling when I was younger. They were good fronts for learning how to control my hands, and sneaking about without making alot of noise. And I can still juggle," she winked.

"Have you been taught to defend yourself?" Allia asked curiously.

Keritanima laughed. "I'm a princess, Allia," she said. "I'm not expected to be able to protect myself."

"Which means that you can," Tarrin reasoned with a sly look.

Keritanima reached under the hem of her dress modestly, then produced an eight finger long poinard, a thin bladed, needle-pointed dagger. Then she dipped a pair of fingers into the bodice of her dress and showed them a small, thin-bladed throwing dagger. "I keep another one as a hair barette," she told them with a smile. "Ulfan showed me how to use these. They're small and easy to hide in my royal dresses, and he didn't fancy me being alone and unable to fend for myself."

"Well, you need more than that," Allia said bluntly. "No friend of mine goes without being able to fight. I will teach you how to protect yourself the *right* way."

Keritanima gave her a curious look. "Truly?" she said. "I'm not much of a warrior, Allia."

"Tarrin?" Allia prompted.

Tarrin speculated a moment. He'd seen Keritanima move. She was graceful and well coordinated. She wasn't very strong, but that was beside the point. There were many ways one could fight without muscle. "We could do it," he said. "She has good hands, she's fast, and from the way she moves, she's pretty agile."

"Not all fighting is strength, *shaida*," Allia told her. "I fear that you will never be Selani, but you could easily learn some basic techniques for close-quarters fighting. I can teach you how to use an opponent's strength against him."

"Now that sounds fun," she laughed. "I hate to say it, but I can't stay any longer," she said, getting up. "I'll talk to you later."

As she slipped out of the opening, Tarrin leaned back. In a way, he understood what all that was about. It was nothing more than a social call. Here, so far away from what was comfortable for her, she felt more vulnerable, and that made her very insecure. She just needed someone to talk with. *Really* talk with. Even if it was for only a few moments.

"I see that she's starting to feel closed in," Allia remarked.

"You can't really blame her, sister," Tarrin replied. "All alone with nobody to talk to, when everyone hates you? I'd be looking for

companionship myself."

"We'd best wander back, before they start looking," she said.

Tarrin nodded. "I'll see you back in the rooms," he said, standing up. Then he changed shape and slunk out a small hole in the hedge.

Chapter 12

Sweating with effort, Tarrin sat straight up in the chair, his tail lashing behind him. His eyes were closed, and he struggled to reach out and grab nothing.

That was about the best explanation he could come up with. He could *feel* it out there, just begging to be touched, but it slipped out of his grasp like smoke. It was maddening, but Dolanna did very little by way of suggestion or instruction. She told him that each Sorcerer touched the weave in a different way, and he had to learn it on his own. She also told him that all it took was one successful attempt. *Conscious* attempt, that is, for he'd already used Sorcery before. Now, his conscious mind was struggling to learn the trick that his subconscious one had already picked up. She would give him very basic help, but there was nothing more she could do.

"Relax, Tarrin," her voice soothed. "You cannot yank at it. You must reach, but you must also bring it to you at the same time. You are trying to reach out and grab it."

"That's what you told me to do," he protested.

"I said to reach out for what is there," she elaborated. "Part of the trick is drawing it in, the other part is reaching out to meet it. Once you make the connection, you will be able to charge."

Blowing out his breath, he tried again. He reached out with himself, something that he was used to doing with his senses. Now he was doing it with that *something*, that thing inside him that made him a Sorcerer. He could feel it within him, reaching out to complete the circuit that would make him a part of the Weave. But it couldn't find anything to connect *with*.

"Gently," Dolanna urged. "Gently. Do not force it. It is not something to seize, it is something to greet."

Closing his eyes again, he tried to visualize the strands in the room, from what he remembered of the day before. Then he reached out to them, the way flowers reach out to the rising sun, trying to draw in its warmth. He could feel them around him, but they would not respond to his call. He physically reached out with a paw, claws extending, as if to hook the elusive magical energy, but there was nothing upon which for his claws to gain a purchase.

He had been doing this for three straight days. Despite doing nothing physical, he left the training room drained, and could think of nothing but sleep. Allia and Keritanima had been much the same. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd actually managed to accomplish something. But for three days, he'd done nothing but flounder around aimlessly, reaching out in vain for something that simply was not there.

Blowing out his breath in frustration, he opened his eyes and stood up. His tail hooked on the back of the chair, picking it up. "Tarrin," Dolanna said calmly, putting her hands on his arms. "Relax."

"It's frustrating!" he growled in exasperation.

"It took me almost a month," she told him. "You have plenty of time. Now sit back down."

Growling in his throat, Tarrin righted the chair and sat back down. He closed his eyes and started all over again, reaching out. And he failed, over and over, as minutes stretched into an hour. Dolanna put her hands over his paws gently as his claws dug deeply into the table, and he relaxed. "I must seem silly," he said, but the frustration was evident in his voice.

"I would go back to my room and throw chairs," she confided with a smile. "I went through ten desk chairs over that month. It is not easy, Tarrin. Even after you succeed, you will struggle, both to touch the Weave, and then to let it go. But as most things, it requires practice. Even though you fail, you are learning. Eventually, your trial will not result in error, and you will succeed. Do not dwell on your failures, look towards your success."

"You're so optimistic it makes me sick," he said with a smile.

"That is my job," she said with a gentle smile, patting the backs of his paws. "Now, let us start again, from the beginning. Breathe deeply and calm yourself."

Tarrin left that day drained, tired, out of sorts, and aggravated. He had failed again. Tarrin was not used to failing. Not like that. His parents had always taught him that failure was not bad so long as one tried one's hardest. Tarrin *was* trying his hardest, but when he did do his best, he almost never failed so utterly has he had done so for the past four days. It seemed unnatural to him to fail so miserably, even after he'd put so much effort and dedication into his task. He stalked back to the main Tower to get something to eat and fret over his failure to produce results, and he could feel the weight of the sand pouring from the hourglass, and right over his head. He *had* to learn how to touch the Weave. He *had* to learn how to use Sorcery. He didn't have a choice. He needed to protect himself against whoever was trying to kill him. And, if his hunches were right, he'd need it to protect him from the *katzh-dashi*.

That was one good reason. Allia and Keritanima couldn't see it, but he could. The faint glow of the Ward that blocked magic from passing through it, and also worked to seal him inside the Tower grounds. It was as good as the bars on his cage. Tarrin had a hatred and irrational fear of being imprisoned--it was integral in his nature as a Were-cat--and just looking at the Ward caused the Cat to rise up in him and try to take control. The other good reason was slinking around the Tower grounds like a rat. Jesmind was *inside* the Tower grounds. She was trapped inside with him, and he knew that she had more plans for trying to take off his head. She would play all light and sunshine as long as the Keeper or Sorcerers were around, but he knew that she was just biding her time. She was still trying to kill him, and she wasn't about to stop now.

After a quick meal, he went out and sat in the garden for a while. The smell of flowers and growing things always soothed him, and the relative isolation let him forget for a while that he was trapped on the grounds. Tarrin was a creature of the forest. He couldn't deny that. He was born and raised in one, and his transformation into a Were-cat had only intensified his attachment to the woods. The gardens were no forest, but the green and the lighter human scents made it possible for him to imagine it. If only for a little while.

"You're getting soft."

Tarrin was up and whirled around in a flash, claws out and his eyes locked on the green eyes of Jesmind. She was standing not a paw's reach from him, paws behind her back, her stance and demeanor obviously nonthreatening. She had approached from downwind, which was why he hadn't scented her, and she was light enough on her feet to walk the crushed gravel path without making any noise.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded.

"To talk," she said mildly. He continued to glare at her, and she blew out her breath in exasperation. "By the moons, cub, if I wanted to fight, do you think I would have given myself away?"

"Don't call me that," he said, sheathing his claws.

"It's what you are," she said. "Sit down."

"I don't have--"

"I said sit!" she commanded in an imperious tone. Tarrin found himself obeying it before he even thought about what he was doing. "That's better," she said in a calm tone, sitting down on the stone bench beside him. Her scent was carefully neutral. She was keeping herself tightly under control, he could tell. She wasn't about to give anything away. "Now then, we have to talk."

"About what?" he asked gruffly.

"Put away the attitude, cub," she said frostily. "I see no reason why you can't be civil."

"Maybe because you're trying to kill me?"

"Let's not quibble over details," she said quickly. "I'm, leaving, Tarrin," she said quietly. "So consider yourself free. At least for now."

"What's wrong?"

"Do you really care?" she asked sharply. "I have to return to my den. I don't have any choice. But the offer stands still, my cub. Come with me, and we won't have any trouble."

"You know I can't do that," he said bluntly. "I'm even more dangerous to you now than I was a month ago. If the Sorcerers don't teach me how to

control my power, I'll end up killing both of us by accident. I won't put you in that kind of risk." He glanced at her. "It's not that I don't want to," he added. "But this is something that I have to do."

"Why?" she demanded suddenly. "My mother is a Druid, Tarrin. She can teach you about magic."

"She could teach me about Druidic magic, but not Sorcery," he replied calmly. "It's oil and water, Jesmind. It won't do me any good."

"You!" she flared. "You you you! What about me? Do you have any idea how much I hate having to do what I do? I *like* you, Tarrin. A lot. But you make me--"

"Make you what?" he countered. "Where did you ever say that things had to be *now*? I told you once before that if you would just wait, I'd be happy to go with you. This isn't about me, woman! This is about making sure I don't accidentally barbecue the both of us one day!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" she snapped. "My mother can control your power until you learn how to control it yourself! I *know* you need training, but my mother can help you! You don't have to be here!"

"There, you see?" he said, standing up. "You never told me that before."

"That's because you never gave me a chance!" she challenged, standing to face him. "If you were such a pig-faced stubborn mule-headed lump of dirt, you'd have given me a chance!"

"You never listened! You didn't care about what I needed, just what you wanted!"

"What *I* wanted? I did what I had to do! If you would have gone mad, it would have destroyed the reputation of our kind! We have *laws*, Tarrin! I was doing what I had to do!"

"You *knew* I was a Sorcerer, woman! You should have laid it out at the beginning! But no, you had to play your little game--"

"And you *lied* to me!" she said in sudden fury. "I still want to wring your little neck for that!"

"You can try any time you feel like it," he hissed, his eyes narrowing.

"Don't tempt me, boy," she snapped. "You may be bigger than me, but you know I can kick your tail all over this garden."

With an animal growl in his throat, he hunkered down into his slouch-like stalking stance, claws out and paws wide. "Bring it on," he said in a low hiss.

Jesmind's eyes flared from within with that unholy greenish radiance, and her claws slid out of their sheaths. "Don't push me, cub," she growled. "I'll kill you right here and now."

"Children," Keritanima's calm voice called from right beside them. The little fox Wikuni stepped slowly and ever-so-calmly between them, and she put one hand on Tarrin's chest and the other hand on Jesmind's shoulder. "This is no place to play. If you want to kill each other, go out onto the training field. I don't want your blood sprayed all over the flowers." She gave Tarrin a look, a look of such calm confidence, her amber eyes so clear and penetrating, that it made him blink. She turned that level gaze on Jesmind, and the Were-cat female gave the small, slight, slender little Wikuni a startled look. Keritanima wasn't that large, but she was a princess, and she knew how to exert her authority. She used that authority like a club, beating both Were-cats over the head with it until they obeyed her. "Now then, can the two of you ever talk to each other without using death threats?" she continued in that same calm, level voice that all but vibrated with power.

"She started it," Tarrin said lamely.

Keritanima grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and jerked him down to her level. "If you get yourself killed because you don't know how to keep your claws in their sheaths, I'll never forgive you," she hissed at him. "Now you will stop acting like a *barkat* with its tail cut off." Jesmind laughed, but the little Wikuni grabbed her shirt and yanked her down too. "And *you* will learn that not everyone obeys your every wish and whim," she told her in a low voice. "If you want to talk to him, you will do it politely, and you will respect Tarrin's decisions. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

"Who *are* you, little doormouse?" Jesmind asked in obvious shock. "Do you have any idea how close you are to dying?"

"Death is feared by the weak," Keritanima said in a voice that made Jesmind gape. "Do you fear death, Were-cat?"

Jesmind had no answer to that.

"That's what I thought," she said, letting the Were-cats go. "Now, if you're going to talk, talk. But you're not going to fight. The first one that starts provoking the other will answer to *me*."

And then she walked away, leaving both Were-cats to stare at her in total shock. They stared at where she walked around a hedge for several moments, then Jesmind laughed ruefully. "I think we were just spanked," she said. "Who is that little mouse? She acts like my mother."

"That is a friend of mine," Tarrin said dubiously. He'd never been, *manhandled* like that before. He didn't quite know how to take it. A little slip of a girl that he could put over his knee and spank had just done the very same thing to him. Figuratively speaking, of course. Part of Tarrin objected violently to that thought, but the Cat had instantly recognized the raw power which the Wikuni princess was bringing to bear against them, and had instantly submitted to her.

"I guess we could try again. Just without bloodshed this time. The trees only know, I'd rather not find out what she'll do to us if we misbehave." She reached out and put a paw on Tarrin's shoulder. He recoiled from that touch immediately, which surprised her. "What's the matter?" she asked in confusion.

"Just don't touch me," he said defensively.

She gave him a curious look, then reached out again. He flinched away before she could reach him, but then she struck like a viper, grabbing him by the shoulder. She grabbed his other shoulder and made him look into her eyes, and when he met her gaze, her eyes widened in surprise. "Look at me," she ordered when he looked away. He met her gaze unwillingly, his eyes betraying his fear.

"I'm not going to hurt you, my cub," she said soothingly. "But I can see, you've been hurt. Hurt too much for someone so young. You're almost feral. No wonder you seem so violent. I thought it was the Cat doing it to you, but it's not, is it?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You trust the Selani, don't you? And the little mouse?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm deciding what to do about you," she said seriously. "Now answer the question. You trust the Selani and the mouse, don't you?"

"Y-yes," he admitted.

"Good. You need someone that you can trust. Talk to them, cub. Always tell them how you're feeling. It will help you cope with what you are. Now, tell me why you're walking on a razor's edge."

He looked around. "Not here," he said. "Let's walk for a while."

She nodded, and they started walking down the path. Tarrin switched to the unspoken manner of the Cat, a language that any eavesdroppers would have trouble understanding. "Something is going on here," he told her. "I'm not sure exactly what yet, but I think the Sorcerers want something from us."

"This is why I didn't want you coming here," she said with a sigh. "I don't trust these people. Not one bit. I was more than willing to beat you into submission, and take you home where mother could help train you."

"Me and my other two nonhuman friends are working together," he told her. "We're trying to find out exactly why the Tower wants us so badly."

"Do you have any idea yet?"

"No, but we've just started. The little mouse, Keritanima, she's a princess. She knows all about playing politics and intrigue, so we're waiting for her to get herself situated, and she's going to get us going. Me and Allia really don't know all that much about that kind of thing."

"She's too honorable, and you were born in a place where there is no intrigue," she mused to herself. "When I leave here, Tarrin, you're going to be alone."

"I've always been alone."

"No, cub," she smiled. "I've always been here. And I think that a part of you knew. Even when we were enemies, part of you felt secure about the fact that I was always close to you. The Cat in you knew that mother was never far away. I don't like doing it," she said with a grunt. "You're far too young, and you're not entirely stable. This place has brought out all the

worst in you, and it's going to cause you to snap again. Just do me a favor, and when that happens, don't kick yourself in the head over it. It happens, even to those of us born Were, cub. We can snap just as easily as you. Maybe even more easily. You will snap again, cub. Eventually, you'll learn how to not hurt your friends and loved ones in your frenzy. But if you're careful, I think you're going to be alright, Tarrin. You've adapted better than I expected, and you did it without my help. You're still a little reactive, but you'll mellow out over time. But you're my cub, and I don't want to leave you. Especially in *this* place."

"I'll be alright."

"I think you will," she smiled. "But it doesn't really change things, cub. You're still Rogue, even if you have good reasons to be. Like I told you, we have laws. I'm going to try to have someone else come and take my place as your bond-mother, but I'll warn you right now. The next Were-cat you see may be here to kill you. You should treat her like an enemy until she proves she is your friend."

"Alright."

"But I'm not your enemy, my cub," she said, putting her paw on his shoulder. "Not anymore. You may still hate me, but I wanted you to know that. I'll never lift a paw against you again."

Tarrin put his paw over hers. "Thank you," he said simply. "That's one less thing to worry about."

"It's just temporary, cub," she warned. "I'll have to tell the others what happened. Like I said, I'll try to arrange for another bond-mother, but I may not succeed. So watch your back. Now, I have something to ask of you."

"What?"

"I want to deepen your bond," she said.

"My what?"

"When I bit you, you became a Were-cat," she said matter-of-factly. "That formed a bond between us. But among our kind, we can develop bonds with each other through blood. The bond I have with you now is very shallow, because you were human when it was made. It was enough for me

to find you and know you were alright, until they put that damned collar on you. It's interfering with the bond."

"What is a bond?"

"It's very complicated, cub. I've been alive for five hundred years, and I still don't understand the specifics of it. The short of it is that it will let me know where you are, and if you're alright," she replied. "Because I'll have a small part of you inside me, I'll know where and how the rest of you are. But that collar is inhibiting it. I want to deepen it, so that I can find you after I've finished with what I have to do. I swear to you right now, cub, that I won't tell anyone where you are unless they're being sent to help you. I won't help them track you down and kill you. This way, if I can get you help, I can send that help right to you, no matter where you are."

When speaking in the manner of the Cat, it was impossible to lie. That was why Tarrin believed her. Tarrin had hated and feared his bond-mother, but she was right. A part of him had always trusted her, taken comfort in the fact that she was always close by. Though his logical mind screamed out against it, the instinctive part of him believed her, believed *in* her, trusted her.

"What do I have to do?"

"Just let me bite you," she replied with a smile. "That's all."

"Well, I guess that I can do that," he replied.

They stopped, and she put a paw on the side of his neck. "Now just hold still," she said aloud, "and trust me. It may hurt. I have to bite deep."

"Alright."

She leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips, then lowered down and bit him on the side of the neck. Her long, sharp fangs sank deep into the side of his neck, hitting an artery. It did sting like fury, but there was no icy numbness like there had been the first time. But as quickly as the fangs drove into him, they pulled away. He could feel his blood flow through the two puncture wounds, but only for a second, for they closed quickly.

He didn't feel any different when she rose up and looked at him. She had a thin line of blood running from the corner of her mouth, which she

licked away. But her eyes were soft and reassuring. "There," she told him. "It's that simple."

"Now what?"

"Now, we talk," she said. "I don't know you well, my cub. Not as well as I should."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Ours," she said calmly. "I only have today, and most of it is gone."

"How are you going to get out of here? I know you know that we're trapped in here."

"Give me more credit than that," she smile. "I've been coming and going for the last three days."

"How?"

"There's a trick to it," she said. "Don't even ask how, I couldn't explain it to you. I can't even show you. Just trust me. But you're wasting what little time I have, cub. Tell me about Aldreth, and your parents."

"Why do you have to go?"

"Don't ask silly questions," she berated him.

"It's not silly from where I'm standing."

"Maybe not, but I don't have time to explain it," she replied. "I'm not here to talk about me. I'm here to get to know my cub better, before I have to leave him to fend for himself."

It was late, well past midnight. Jesmind stood in Tarrin's room, putting her shirt back on, more than aware of the scent of the Selani, fresh and on the far side of the door.

Seducing him hadn't been in the plan, but she wasn't sorry that it happened.

Tarrin was, was nothing like she thought. She had thought him out of control, walking the edge of insanity. He was. But it wasn't for the reasons that she thought. She had believed it was the Cat driving him mad, but the

Cat was only the instrument and not the hand pushing it. If he were removed from the Tower, from the situation that was slowly and inexorably driving him mad, he would be well. His very demeanor was so much different from that young, scared, trusting cub that she had met so long ago. He had become hard, grim, almost fatalistic. She couldn't blame him for the changes, but she understood what those changes meant. He was slowly losing his humanity, and if it did not stop, he would go mad. What could not destroy him quickly would destroy him bit by bit, slowly eroding away that which made him what he was, destroying the young innocent boy and replacing him with a savage, ruthless monster.

The Cat had nearly driven him mad, and now the Tower itself was trying to finish the job.

Oh, it wasn't the Tower itself, it was the situation. Tarrin was living in fear, and if he were human, it may be something that he could deal with. But he had the Cat with him now, and the Cat was changing Tarrin's usual reactions to such things. What was the danger now was Tarrin's conscious mind, because he would make the decisions that would turn him into a ruthless monster.

Blinking, she settled the shirt over her lean stomach, then marched deliberately for the door that adjoined Tarrin's room with the Selani's. She knew the Selani was awake, and was fully aware of what was going on. And the Selani didn't disappoint. She stood near her own door in the small room, wearing nothing but a nightshirt, and holding two slender swords in her hands. Her look was one of grim determination, and it seemed to Jesmind that she had been torn between charging in there and saving Tarrin from her, or trusting in Tarrin's judgement and not interfering.

Jesmind would need that trust.

It was something that, unfortunately, she could do little to help him with aside from taking him out of the Tower. But she couldn't do that now. Things had changed, and taking him back was no longer an option. She couldn't force him, and she was in no condition to fight. She had only one thing to say to the Selani, which she did as the woman stared defiantly at her. "I'm leaving," she told her bluntly. "Watching him is now *your* responsibility. Keep him alive, Selani. If you let him get killed, I'm going to hunt you down and take your hair for a bellpull."

And then she left the Selani before she could respond.

Creeping through the north tower in the dead of night, the female Were-cat avoided guards and Sorcerers with an ease that would make the greatest master thief envious. She crept across the Tower grounds and entered the main Tower itself, her delicate nose following a faint scent trail set down some hours before. It was faint and deeply covered by a multitude of other scents, but her exceptionally sensitive sense of smell followed that smell of human and lavender and silk and ivory quite easily. She moved in utter silence, her large padded feet making not even a whisper of sound on the stone of the floor, her white fur seeming to absorb the darkness and merge with the shadows created by the glowglobes. She flitted from shadow to shadow, hallway to hallway, moving through the Tower like a ghost, raising not a whisper of sound or flicker of motion to alert those that moved around her, totally oblivious to her passing.

In all the Tower, there was but one human that Jesmind would even come close to trusting. She reached that person's door not long after entering the Tower, using a single claw to throw the latch and entering the small, elegantly appointed room of the human woman that had taken in her cub in her absence and protected him as best she could.

Dolanna's eyes opened when Jesmind's shadow fell over her, blocking the light from the small window that let the cool air of the waning summer into the room. Those large, dark eyes betrayed no fear, and the Sorceress made no overt moves. She simply stared up at Jesmind with calm eyes, assessing the Were-cat's motives. Not much could rattle the Sorceress, Jesmind had come to discover over the months of watching her cub from the shadows.

"And what brings you past my door at this hour?" Dolanna asked in a calm voice.

"Don't push it," Jesmind told her. "I still can't believe that I'm doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Trusting one of *you*," she spat. "But my cub trusts you, so I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"And what, may I ask, would you need my trust for?" she asked calmly and to the point.

"Something is going on," she said bluntly in reply. Dolanna sat up as she looked down at her, those large, dark eyes calm and attentive. "The Tower wants something out of him, Sorceress. It's so obvious, even *he* has noticed it."

"You give little credit to him," she said.

"Oh, I give him alot more credit than you think," she retorted, "but Tarrin's a backwater country boy thrown into a viper pit. He's not used to seeing intrigue and backbiting, and it *is* credit to say he's noticed something that he's really never seen before."

"I stand corrected," Dolanna replied mildly. "And why does this bring you to my door?"

"Because there's alot more going on here than just some errand that Tarrin can run for the Tower," she said. "Tarrin made mention of the fact that they brought Allia and the little Wikuni in as well, and all three of them seem to have alot of attention from the Keeper and the Council of Seven."

"I have noticed that, yes," Dolanna agreed. "I think it is because the difference in culture demands that all three of them be given close scrutiny."

"No," Jesmind snorted. "They're collecting them for a reason, and they don't seem to be too picky about how they get them."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when you caught me?" she asked. "Remember that collar that was around my neck?"

Dolanna nodded, and her eyes were beginning to look troubled. "It was magical in nature," she said. "You were being controlled."

"That's right," she spat. "And it was a *Sorcerer* that put that damned thing around my neck."

"How do you know this?"

"All of my kind have a touch of Druidic magic in us," she replied. "Some more than others. My own Druidic power rates about at the level of

pond scum, but I can tell the difference between a Priest's chant, a Mage's spellcasting, and a Sorcerer's weaving. I tell you right now, woman, that one of *you* put that collar on me. One of *you* set me loose in Tarrin's bedchamber. I don't know if they wanted him dead or just wanted him to be Were, but there was no accident about it. I remember specifically being sent after *him*. I rather think that they wanted him dead, myself. That he survived was a stroke of the wildest luck. When he turned Were, they just added him to the other two. An added bonus."

Dolanna was quiet for a moment. "Why do you bring this to me?"

"Because only a fool wouldn't know that something's going on," she said. "Since I think that whoever caught me sent me to kill him, it makes me wonder why half of you Sorcerers want to train him, and the other half want him dead." She crossed her arms and looked down at Dolanna grimly. "I know you, Sorceress. My cub is alive because of you. I know that you are very attached to him. Well, I have to leave, so I won't be here to protect him anymore. So you have to find out what's going on, and protect him from whoever's trying to get rid of him."

"You are aware of much more than I expected," she said with a sigh. "I happen to know that Tarrin is indeed being trained for a very special task. I do not know what this task is, but I have been given instruction from the Keeper herself that he is to be trained as quickly as humanly possible. As to the attacks on him, that I do not know. I do know that the Keeper somehow knows who is behind it, but she would never share such knowledge with me. I am not, as they say, in the inner circle. My involvement in this begins and ends with Tarrin."

"So, the Tower wants him alive, and someone else inside the Tower wants him dead," Jesmind surmised. "Now, the big question is *why*. What makes my cub so important?"

"His power, probably," Dolanna said. "I tell you this, Jesmind. That boy is the most powerful Sorcerer I have ever seen. When he is trained, his raw power will be unrivalled on this world. It would take a full Circle to stop him. My guess is that he is being trained to undertake a mission that only someone with his power could complete."

"And some other group is trying to stop it?" Jesmind asked.

"I would assume so," Dolanna replied.

"It almost washes, but not quite," the Were-cat snorted. "If that were so, then what about the others? Are the Selani and the little mouse as strong as he is?"

"No," Dolanna replied. "The Selani is not strong at all in the gift. The Wikuni shows considerable potential, but she is not even close to Tarrin's raw power."

"Then what do they have to do with it?"

"They are non-human," Dolanna replied. "That is the only thing that links them together."

"So, we have a big hole," she said. "And it's going to be up to you to fill it, woman. I won't be here."

"You have given up on Tarrin?"

"No," she replied. "He's still my cub, and he always will be. But I can't stay here anymore. I'm going to go home and try to arrange to have someone else come and teach him what he needs to know, but I may not be able to. The others may decide that he's too old to be taught, and simply decide to have him killed."

"Others? Which others?"

"We don't all run naked through the forest and howl at the moon," she snorted. "Well, not all of us, anyway. The woodland folk all live by a set of laws, and we Were-cats are part of it. Those laws are why I tried to kill my cub. I didn't want to do it, but I had no choice. It's still against our law, but I hope I can convince them that he's not too far gone. There are few enough males as it is, killing one just because he had to come here first would be a crime."

"The *Fae-da'Nar*," Dolanna said with a smile. "I have heard many stories of that most secret society. I even managed to learn some of your laws, from a Were-wolf."

"Yes, I know that Were-wolf," she said dismissively. "Doesn't it seem awfully convenient that the *one* Sorcerer that just *happens* to have

experience in dealing with Were-kin just *happens* to be the one that finds a fledgling Were-cat on her doorstep?"

"I asked the very same question myself, when it occurred," she replied smoothly. "I considered it coincidence before. Now, I do not think I am so certain."

"Good. Someone in this Tower is trying to kill my cub, Dolanna. I can't be here to protect him, so I want you to help do that for me, until I can get someone over here to take my place."

"So," Dolanna said with a smile, "this means that he is no longer your enemy?"

"He never was," she grunted. "He made me angry, but among our kind, angry doesn't really count. I've tried to kill my own mother. And I meant it at the time. It's the way we are." She turned around a moment. "It's *him*," she grated. "When I was watching him from a distance, I saw the young cub I saw when I first found him, and I'd give up on taking him down as a Rogue. But when I tried to talk sense into him, he would get me so mad all I wanted to do was wring his neck. That cub has got a *very* sharp tongue."

"That is, interesting," Dolanna said with a light laugh. "He swears that it is *you*." Jesmind turned around again, giving the Sorceress a curious look. "I have heard very much the same thing, but from him. He once told me that he called you his 'far friend', meaning that the further away you were, the more he liked you. It was when you talked to him that he became angry with you. And I think he still has trouble forgiving you for turning on him."

"I never turned on him," she said heatedly. "He knew what he was getting into--"

"You gave him no choice, Jesmind," Dolanna interrupted, climbing out of bed. "He was desperately afraid that he was going to accidentally hurt you with his Sorcery. Did he tell you what happened before he left Aldreth, before he met you?" Jesmind shook her head. "His sister, who is also tremendously gifted and is only thirteen years old, had an accident. She would have killed me with her Sorcery, had I not been ready for just such an accident. The accident has left a very deep impression in Tarrin's mind. I think it is why he is having so much trouble using his power. He is so frightened of hurting someone with his power that he is afraid to touch it."

When you flatly refused to bring him here, he decided to leave. Not because of you, but to protect you from his power."

"He never told me that," Jesmind said in quiet reflection.

"Tarrin's heart is deep. He would go to great lengths to bring comfort to total strangers. To hurt people is totally against his nature."

"Yes, that's the problem," she grunted. "That's the other thing I came to talk to you about."

"What?"

"You have to get him out of here," she said. "This place is killing him bit by bit. The Tarrin I see now isn't the same cub that walked through those gates. He's turning hard, and if something isn't done, he'll become feral. He's already half feral now. It won't take much to make him feral permanently."

"Feral?"

"It's a term we use," she replied. "To us, it means savage, or vicious. More than a few of us are like that. We may be intelligent, but we're still part animal. If you beat an animal long enough, it turns mean, and it will never trust anyone again. That can happen to us too. If he's put through too much in this pit, he'll never trust another soul when he finally walks out those gates. He'll be feral. He'll only trust those people that he trusted before he turned feral, and when they're gone, that's it. He'll run into the forest, and nobody will ever see him again."

"I cannot take him from the Tower, Jesmind," she said in a troubled voice.

"No, but you can take the Tower out of *him*," she replied. "You have to make sure that he spends time with the Selani and the little mouse. He trusts them. But it can't be just walks in the garden. It has to be quality time with nobody watching or eavesdropping, where he can express himself to them. If he keeps himself bottled up all the time, all his fears and suspicions are going to grow in him like a cancer. You also have to make sure that he stays in constant contact with people that he loves. Bring his parents here at least every other day. He has to have a lot of positive human contact to counteract the suspicion that's starting to fester in him. And for the gods' sake, make

them stop making him feel like a prisoner!" she snapped. "You better tell the Keeper and those others to just back off. They're killing him with attention."

"I did not realize that his position was so tenuous," Dolanna said in surprise. "He does not seem--"

"He's a damn good actor, Dolanna," Jesmind said grimly. "I can see it all over him. The simple fact that he *flinches* when people touch him is all the indication I need. He's keeping up faces because he knows that something's going on, and he doesn't want to tip his hand that he knows. And that's just adding to his trouble."

Dolanna pulled on her robe and tied it about her slim waist. "I will do what I can, Jesmind, but I can offer no guarantees. I am not in a position of authority here."

"No, but you're the only Sorcerer that Tarrin explicitly trusts," she replied. "That gives you a *lot* of say in his well being. If *you* tell them that what they're doing is killing him, they'll have to listen. Because none of the others can get close enough to him to find out for themselves."

"True," she agreed. "I will do what I can for him. I can make no guarantees, but I will try."

"You'd better," she said, closing her fist. "If he goes feral on me, I'm going to come back here and take his pain out of a few backsides. Tarrin's not vengeful. I am. Make sure the Keeper knows that her own skin hangs on how well they treat my cub."

"I am sure that she will swoon over hearing such news," Dolanna said dryly.

"She can swoon all she wants," Jesmind snorted. "I have to go. I have to penetrate the Ward before too many people are around to notice it. Just do what you can for him, Sorceress. Keep my cub sane."

"I will try," she replied gravely.

With a simple nod, Jesmind turned and left the woman standing by her bed.

It wasn't much, but it was all that she had. All that Tarrin had.

It surprised him.

Tarrin sat in the garden, watching the sun come up, unsure of what he was feeling, and what it meant.

Jesmind was a woman that never ceased to confuse him to no end. The emotional whirlwind she had always been able to create in him had only intensified with her leaving, leaving him unsure of what he felt for her. The bizarre mixture of hatred, anger, and trust and even desire he felt for his enigmatic bond-mother had been scrambled like an egg with her gone, and there was an emptiness inside him that he didn't expect every time that he thought about her.

What concerned him was how serious she seemed to be not only about him, but about his mental condition. He felt rather in control of himself, but Jesmind's concern about him made him second-guess his own confidence. He felt more than in control, since his time in cat form had ended, he'd existed in a very content peaceful state with his cat half. He'd had very little problem at all, because he understood his animal instincts much better. Now he wondered if he was in control as much as he thought. He did have to admit that her closeness had made him feel more secure, even when he wanted to tear out her throat. That was a primitive instinctual reaction and he knew it, but he was powerless to overcome it. With her gone, he felt much more vulnerable, and it was a feeling that he didn't like. Not one bit. One thing he had learned about himself was that any time he felt uncertain or uncomfortable, it fomented discord between his rational mind and his instincts. In order to maintain his balance, he was going to have to be very careful and try to remain calm and in control. Even if he wasn't in control, it was important for him to feel like he had control of his life, and that was why he had dropped a note off at Keritanima's door before coming outside. The sooner he started regaining control of his life, the better it would be for him.

One could only think for so long about things that couldn't be answered, and Tarrin was never one to dwell on negatives. He had to look forward, to the future, and come to terms with it. But one thing was for certain. With the way he felt now, he didn't want to live in the stress of the Tower's shadow for any longer than absolutely necessary. They had brought him to

Suld, and at first he had been happy to come. But the reality of what was going on around him had jaded his initial optimism. He didn't like not knowing what they wanted from him, and the fact that they wouldn't come out and tell him made him feel that it wasn't something that he'd like doing very much. Tarrin's initial impression of the Keeper had been dislike. It had degenerated into distrust when she put the collar on him, and now it was bordering on rebellion because he knew that something was going on. No, not bordering. It *was* rebellion. Tarrin wanted no part of what the Tower was planning for him. He was brought to the Tower to learn, and from the beginning he was told that continuing to study Sorcery would be his own decision. That after he learned the basics and was no threat to the world, he was free to go. But they weren't going to let him do that, and that made him feel trapped. Tarrin didn't respond well to that feeling.

The sharp scent of Keritanima touched his nose, and he looked up from the gravel pathway. She was advancing towards him slowly, dressed a bit hastily in an Initiate dress but sleep still creeping across her features. She wasn't her usual perfect self, but then again, her Royal Highness wasn't accustomed to waking up before the sun. Tarrin had slid a note under her door, a note that her maid or one of her two bodyguards had no doubt given to her. Keritanima shared her apartment with her mink-wikuni maid, and during the night a pair of absolutely massive lizard-Wikuni guarded her door. The Keeper made Keritanima adhere to the Initiate codes, but she had been forced to make several exceptions, due to her royal lineage.

"I'm going to kill you, Tarrin," she said grumpily. "Do you have any idea how much I hate getting up in the morning?"

"You'll live," he told her. "I figured that this would be the best time to talk."

"The only reason I came out was because Jervis hasn't gotten here yet," she told him.

"Then it's best that we talk now," he told her.

"Where's Allia?"

"Still asleep," he replied. "I don't think that she's going to be a big help in what we need to talk about."

Her amber eyes gave him a penetrating look. "I take it something happened?"

He nodded. "Jesmind is gone," he told her.

"You--"

"No, nothing like that," he cut her off. "She had to go back home. But she said a few things to me that made me think, and it's something that concerns both of us."

"This master plan?" she asked, and he nodded. "Well, I guess I feel secure enough to get started," she announced. "Miranda has already made many friends among the Tower's servants."

"Miranda?"

"My maid," she replied. "Miranda knows about me, Tarrin. She's one of the reasons I'm still alive."

"You didn't mention her before."

"That's because she likes to keep it as quiet as I do," she told him. "If my father ever found out, he'd realize that Miranda would *have* to know the truth, and he'd probably have her executed for treason."

"I doubt that."

"You don't know my father," she said. "You said something about a Tiella?"

He nodded. "Tiella is a novice that came to the Tower with me," he said. "She can help because her daily task is to clean the Keeper's office."

Keritanima chuckled. "I think that that's definitely a help," she agreed. "But she can't rifle the Keeper's desk."

"I know," he said. "But she *can* pass along anything she sees in passing. Tiella has a good memory."

"I hope so," Keritanima said, tapping herself on the end of her snout with a clawed finger. "Allia told me the other day that she can understand you when you're a cat. Does that mean that you can talk to other cats?"

Tarrin blinked, and gaped at her. "How did you know that?"

"It's elementary, if you think about it," she said. "If she can communicate with you as a cat, then you must speak in some sort of language. And if you do that, then obviously cats can communicate with each other."

"I'm glad you think it's obvious," he told her.

"Then it's true."

"Without going into a long explanation, yes."

"Then why don't you ask some of the Tower's cats to give you a hand?"

"Because they're still animals, Keritanima," he told her. "Cats aren't stupid, but their intelligence isn't the same type as ours. I wouldn't know where to begin asking a cat to dig for information without guiding it step by step."

"Well, it was a thought. But it definitely means that I need a cat."

"What for?"

"Who better to send with information?" she asked with a smile. "All it takes is a hollow collar and instructions to find you. Assuming, of course, that I could make it understand to come find you."

"Now that, I could help you with," he said. "I can ask it to come find me when you say something specific to it. They don't understand the common speech, but they can learn a few words."

"Good enough," she told him, leaning back and looking at the sunrise. "Just keep it low, Tarrin. Let me handle it."

"I was planning to," he assured her. "But I'm still going to see what I can learn."

"How so?"

He extended his claws and showed them to her. "These let me get into a lot of open windows," he replied calmly.

"Just be careful," she replied.

"I'm always careful, Keritanima," he replied soberly, looking at the rising sun.

"Good, because I may need your help."

"How so?"

"The fastest way to find out what someone knows about someone is to make them talk about that someone," she explained. "If you want me to find out why they're so interested in you, you have to make them talk about you. And nothing can make that happen faster than when you make them angry."

Tarrin smiled slightly. "I think you have a plan."

"Oh, I have a very good plan," she replied with a roguish smile. "It involves all three of us. It's certain to drive the *katzh-dashicrazy*. That's just an added bonus, because what it's going to do is make certain that a lot of people talk about us. That's information that'll be easy to gather up." She put her feet on the bench and drew up her knees to her chest. "The Princess Brat has been doing that for quite a while, so she can easily incite the Sorcerers into conniptions, but can you and Allia do it?"

"What would we have to do?"

She licked her chops absently, thoughts obviously forming behind her eyes. "The quickest way for the two of you to make them angry would probably be to become defiant," she reasoned. "That should be easy for you. But the problem is going to be coming up with a reason for you to rebel that makes sense. Plus it will make them show us just exactly how valuable they think we are."

He could understand the logic of that. By seeing how much they would take before they finally took action, he would understand how valuable he was.

"Since I've established the fact that the Brat Princess likes you two, she would probably join in the rebellion," she continued. "I'd rather not, but unfortunately, it's the way things are."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you," she said with bright eyes. "I touched the Weave yesterday!"

"Congratulations," he said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "What's it like?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you that, but I *loved* it!" she said in wonder. "Now I understand why I've always detested the idea of being Queen. Sorcery is what I was born to do."

"I'm happy for you, Keritanima," he said, then he chuckled. "Why did your father give you such a long name?"

"It's something of a custom among female aristocrats," she sniffed. "My sisters have names just as long as mine."

"Well, I'm in danger of biting my tongue off every time I say it, so I'm going to call you Kerri," he told her. "Not because it sounds nice, but because I don't want to go around sounding like an idiot."

She laughed. "Kerri, is it? Well, I guess I can live with that. We'll discuss my fee for being so gracious some other time. Anyway, since I've just managed to make a touch on the Weave, rebelling would mean refusing lessons. I'd rather not do that, but I may not have a choice."

Tarrin's eyes narrowed. "Maybe not," he said. "It's not in stone yet, but let me see if I can't organize a bit of covert instruction."

"That short one? Dolanna?"

He nodded. "She's a very good friend. I may convince her to teach us secretly."

"We'll spend our time in rebellion in the library," she continued. "If we want a real chance at getting away, if it comes to that, we'll need every advantage we can get our hands on."

"How?"

"Tarrin, the Ancients wielded power that would make the *katzh-dashi* look like Novices," she said. "If we could somehow learn just one or two *little* secrets, we could maybe use them to make good on any escape. Don't you forget that if we run, they'll just use magic to find us. We have to find a way to stop that before we try anything."

"You sound convinced that we will."

"I am," she said. "I know a sinking ship when I see it, Tarrin. They want something from us, and they're more than willing to do whatever it takes to get it."

"How do you know that?"

"Just call it women's intuition," she told him. "I have a lot of little reasons that all add up to the same conclusion."

"Well, we can try, but they've had whole platoons of Sorcerers trying to do the same thing that we're going to do, Kerri. I don't know if we'll have any more luck than them." He leaned forward. "The Lorefinders do nothing *but* try to find the lost secrets."

"True, but they're looking at it from a smashmouth perspective," she snorted. "They're looking for the secrets to be written down in the books, waiting for them to find it. The secrets *are* there, but they're not obvious."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tarrin, you'd be surprised at how much you can learn about a people just by figuring out what a day in the life of that person was like," she explained. "If we can figure out what they did from day to day, nothing serious or titanic or earth-shaking, just how Ancient Sorcerer Bobbi went about her daily routines, we may find something that they missed."

"How does that help us learn new Sorcery?"

"By understanding an *effect*, one can often make it come to pass," she pointed out. "After we learn more about Sorcery, we may be able to reverse-engineer some of those effects." She picked at her dress absently. "I'm pretty sure that the Lorefinders are looking for the wrath of the gods type things. They're not looking for how, perhaps, our Ancient Sorceress, Bobbi, cleaned her robes at the beginning of each day."

"And that information was probably left behind," Tarrin said in a glimmer of insight.

She smiled. "Of course. The Ancients took almost everything with them, and they probably didn't write about themselves, but I'll bet that others did. From what I understand, the Church of Karas hated them, and I'll bet that they were exhaustive in their study of the Ancients."

"Why?"

"How better to defeat an enemy than to *understand* that enemy?"

"'A predictable enemy is a defeatable one'," Fox quoted from one of his mother's many sayings.

"Just so," she agreed. "So we may be paying the Cathedral a visit. That's the main repository of almost all the lore of the church of Karas. I think we'll find some very interesting things there."

"They wouldn't let that kind of information out. And they'd boil their own gizzards before handing it over to the Tower," he reasoned. "So it's probably still there."

"Very good," she smiled. "I'll make a politician out of you yet."

"I hope not," he grunted. "So, what's our first move?"

"Our first move is to learn," she replied calmly. "I won't be ready to move forward for a few more days. Maybe a ride. But when I am ready, you have to get unfriendly. Find something that you really hate about your situation, but make sure it's something that they won't change. And when I give the signal, make it very clear that you're unhappy. Cause all sorts of trouble, until the Keeper herself has to deal with it. When she refuses to change it, then you go on strike."

Tarrin laughed. "That's a clever way to say it."

"Allia will stand by you, and after a bit of wishy-washiness, the Brat Princess will too. That will conveniently give us some time to kill, and we'll do it in the library. Miranda will be gathering information, as will Tiella and you. And hopefully, your friend Dolanna will give us some help. After that, we'll have to see where we stand with what we've got before we make our next move. We can't learn secrets unless we have at least a basic understanding of Sorcery, and for that, we'll need Dolanna."

"Dolanna is a *katzh-dashi*, Kerri," he said. "I trust her, but we can't let her know what we're planning. That will put her loyalty in conflict with our friendship, and I'm not sure which side of the fence she'll stand on."

"Hmm, that will make it a bit harder," she hummed. "But I'm sure we can work with it. No matter what, a visit to our local cathedral is very high on our list of priorities. My soul is feeling very unclean. I feel the need to absolve it."

"And I think that tells me exactly what I should feel so angry about," Tarrin said with a slight smile. "Just as soon as I figure out a way to get around it."

"What?"

"The Ward," he replied. "Jesmind said she could penetrate it. Well, I'm going to find out how she did it."

"That could be handy. They'd never dream that you could get around their cage."

Just the sound of that word made him visibly bristle. "*Nobody* holds me," he hissed.

"Fine. Tell that to someone that can do something about it," she said with deceptive mildness.

"Sorry," he said after a moment.

"Not a problem," she said with a toothy grin. "I think I can look past your faults. You *are* a friend, after all."

"You're so kind," he drawled.

It didn't take Tarrin long to explain the plan to Allia, just as it didn't take long for her to understand and accept it. She was a bit put out with him for meeting with Keritanima alone, but he knew that she had been up almost all night, standing at the door while Jesmind was in the room. That he did as soon as getting back to the room, bathing, and dressing for another day of being frustrated. He explained things to her as she braided his damp hair, back in his room.

"I should have been there, *deshida*," she admonished him as she yanked on his hair, pulling it against his ears.

Tarrin winced and bent his head back to take the pain out of it. "I'm sorry, but you needed to sleep," he replied. "I may have been busy with Jesmind, but I could hear you at the door."

She didn't blush in the slightest. Things between him and Allia were always completely open. "I am Selani, my brother. I can go with a night's lost sleep easily. You don't have to protect my well being."

"Well, I will anyway," he said bluntly. "You're one of the few people I have here, my sister. I have to keep my eyes out for you."

"It's so nice to be appreciated," she said with a warm smile, beginning the braid. It had grown back even longer than before, much to his irritation. He was almost afraid of how much it would grow if he lost his braid again.

"The way Kerri talked, she expects to run," Tarrin told her.

"That's not a problem, my brother," she said easily. "My tribe will protect us, and not even the Keeper herself would dare refute the commandments of my chief. If she did, the Selani would call council." Calling Council was a Selani term for declaring war. And not even the Keeper was insane enough to provoke the Selani, who were, by no doubt, the most devastating fighting force in the entire world. The Selani could possibly conquer the entire west, but conquest and spoils weren't important to the desert-dwelling nonhumans, just as leaving their precious desert was something no Selani would do without serious motivation. Allia was the first of her people to willingly leave the desert since the war with Arak.

"I hope so, Allia," he sighed. "If we run, it's a good bet that we'll have a sizable army on our tails. We'll need somewhere to go that's safe, because we certainly can't hide."

"Hide? A Were-cat, a Selani, and a Wikuni, hide?" Allia laughed. "I would think not."

"Exactly," he said with a wry chuckle. "Maybe your father's camp is about the only place in the world we can go that puts us beyond the Tower's reach. They're probably one of the few peoples that the Tower would have reason to fear."

"It's not of any worry to us, my brother," she assured him. "Let's speak of your idea to invade the cathedral of Karas."

"Later," he told her. "We're almost late for class."

Allia snorted. "You mean for imposed torture."

"That's about the way I feel about it," he agreed with a grunt. "Maybe we'll get lucky and do it today, because they're supposed to reform a class once all the Initiates can touch the Weave. I won't have to stare at walls again."

"Maybe so," Allia hummed. "But let's worry about today more than next ride."

Alert, tense, wary, Tarrin jumped onto his very cramped window sill and prepared for the tricky negotiation through the open space and down the wall. Much as he realized when first looking around the room, the window gave him the perfect way to get in and out without being seen. It was on the third floor and was too narrow to squeeze through, so nobody would associate it with being an exit. But Tarrin's small cat form easily fit through the small opening, and Tarrin had a need for using it.

After another exhaustive day of aggravation, Tarrin went to bed early that night to put off anyone keeping tabs on him. For this, he didn't want an audience, because if he was successful, he'd not want others to know what he was doing. He was going to figure out how Jesmind got off of the grounds. He wasn't quite sure how to do it, but he had to start somewhere. He figured that the best place to start would be at the Ward itself, and to do that, he'd have to go take a look at it. He knew it was too much ground to cover to look at every span of the ward, but Jesmind's scent was still fresh on the ground, and he could easily track her movements to find where she had crossed through the ward. But first thing was to get out of his room.

Backing out of the window, he lowered himself over the sill and carefully backed his forepaws off the window. It was much too precarious a position to attempt to shapeshift, so he simply let go and began to fall. Shapeshifting in midair, he drove his claws into the stone of the tower wall, expertly hitting a seam between the blocks, and stopped his downward momentum. He quickly climbed down to the ground, changed form, and then faded into the shadows like a ghost.

Finding Jesmind's scent was easy. Trying to figure out why it went into the main Tower was not. He puzzled at what she would need from there, and instead picked up her scent from the door from where she both entered and exited, then began tracking her across the grounds. Jesmind's scent was faint, but its striking uniqueness when compared to the multitude of humans, dogs, cats, mice, and horses made it easy to follow. There had been no rain to wash it out, and it was too warm still for dew to form. He followed it through the shadows and between buildings, noticing that she

kept herself out of the open whenever possible. From the smell of it, she stayed in her humanoid form instead of relying on her cat form to cross the open areas. That spoke a lot about her ability to hide. Or perhaps she simply didn't care about who saw her.

Stalking across the grounds, Tarrin skulked along, keeping his nose to the grass and his ears alert for any roving patrols. He doubted they'd pay attention to him, for he looked just like any of the large numbers of other cats that roamed around the Tower's grounds. More than once, the scent of a mouse attempted to distract him into a little hunting, but he kept his mind and his nose on the job and promised to attend to the hunting after he was satisfied that the work was done for the night.

It took him almost an hour to track across the expansive area enclosed by the fence, following a fading trail laid down by his bond mother the night before. It took him to a section of the fence deep in the dark shadows between the torches and lamps of the city beyond, a place very well suited for a lone figure to slip over the fence. The street past the fence was large, an avenue of some kind, but it was also deserted. The smells of the city, the foul miasma of human waste, decay, and sweat, were strong in his nose as the evening breeze wafted them in from the cobblestones beyond. The slender iron fence was directly before him, and Tarrin paced back and forth with an eye out for patrols and a mystery forming in his mind.

Jesmind's scent went right up to the ward. From the smell of it, she didn't backtrack to give herself enough of a running start to jump over the fence. She somehow walked *through* the fence without touching it. He hadn't been born with his nose, so he could be wrong, but he didn't detect the faint layering of scent that would have hinted at her laying scent over the same ground again.

Quickly changing form, Tarrin used his height advantage to study the fence, and do it quickly. Nightly patrols of the fence perimeter were frequent enough to make him move quickly. The fence itself showed no sign of tampering, and that close to the ward, he could actually feel it. A slight electric tingle that intensified when he reached toward the fenceline. He wasn't sure what would happen if he actually came into contact with the ward, so he was careful to keep his distance from it as he scrutinized the fence again. But another look gave him the same result. The fence showed

no sign of tampering, and Jesmind's scent wasn't on it. He sat down, tail lashing in irritation, studying the fence and the ground. There was no physical sign of her passage, but then again, there wouldn't be after a full day. The scent trail simply stopped at the edge of the ward. Like she had simply vanished.

Annoyed, he paced back and forth along the fenceline, looking for a possible second scent trail, but there was none to be found. How in the furies did she *do* it? She walked right up to the fence, and then it was like she turned into a bird and flew off. He was stronger than she was, and he couldn't clear the fence without a running start, so he knew that she couldn't have jumped it. But she got out somehow, and he had absolutely no clue as to how. She left no clues behind.

A roving patrol sent him into the shadows, and he returned after the squad of men marched further down the line. The glint of the light from their breastplates played in weaving lines as they moved off, and Tarrin had a fleeting memory of the way that same color played in Jesmind's hair when the sunlight shined on it. Then he sat down again and went through his memories of the ward that had trapped him within the scribed symbol, when he fought the Wraith. The ward had trapped him, but it had not trapped Sevren, because Tarrin was a magical creature. Where Sevren wasn't. Tarrin had come into physical contact with the ward, like it was a solid wall that was preventing him from crossing.

Yet Sevren had passed through it harmlessly.

Tarrin's eyes lit up, then he silently shapeshifted back into his humanoid form and chuckled ruefully. "Oh, Jesmind, if that's how you did it, I'm going to kiss you on the cheek and thank you for being so clever," he said to himself. He reached out very carefully with his paw, taking painstaking care to see exactly where the ward began. He still wasn't sure what it would do if he contacted the ward, but this was something that made the risk worthwhile. He felt his fingers impact an invisible barrier a few fingers in front of the bars on the fence, and to his relief, it caused no flash of light, or pain, or anything that would give him away. Taking off his shirt, he wrapped his right paw and forearm up in the shirt tightly, making sure that it totally and completely covered his entire arm and paw. Then he

approached the ward cautiously, stopped within arm's reach of it, and slowly extended his wrapped paw.

His paw extended well past the bars of the fence.

Grinning, careful not to extend his arm past the protection of the wrapped shirt, Tarrin pulled back his paw and then extended his bare paw slowly. He carefully reached out, slowly, and then felt his fingertips strike a solid invisible barrier.

"Jesmind, you clever girl," he said with a smile. By insulating himself from physical contact with the Ward, he allowed himself to pass through it. By surrounding her magical body in a non-magical material, Jesmind had literally walked right through the ward. And she did it as a cat. The reason her scent seemed to stop just before the Ward was simple. Tarrin would bet that she took off her clothes there, threw her pants over, then carefully laid her shirt across the Ward's boundary. Then she shapeshifted and used the shirt like a tunnel, going in one side and then wriggling out the other. All it would take would be a careful slip through the bars and then reaching back in for her shirt, and a fully dressed Jesmind could leave from the other side. And when she picked up her shirt, which had held her scent-trail, it picked up her scent along with it. Putting his shirt back on and shifting back into his cat form, he tested the grass just before the Ward, and picked up the telltale scent of cotton from which her shirt had been made. He remembered the scent of that shirt. That shirt had been laid upon the ground, and it made him confident that he knew exactly how she managed to do it.

His respect for his bond-mother grew more and more. To think up such an unbelievably clever way to circumvent a barrier did her tremendous credit. The only reason he figured it out was because he'd seen a Ward once before, and he remembered the explanation that a Ward like that would only prevent a magical creature from crossing it. But when he surrounded his magic with nonmagical material, it acted to insulate him from the power of the ward.

The simple fact that Tarrin knew that he could leave the Tower grounds whenever he wished lifted a tremendous weight off of his shoulders. The gnawing fear that had been sitting in his belly since they raised the Ward disappeared, and he actually felt himself relax a great deal. The Cat now felt secure in the fact that it was not caged. This cage could be opened

whenever he wished, and until he wished to do so, it served to keep his enemies out. So both he and the Cat were more than content to allow it to remain, because it no longer affected him personally.

Purring for the first time since returning to the Tower, the large black cat turned and bounded back towards the Tower proper, a spring in his step and his mind high with thoughts of the future.

He missed seeing a large skeletal figure with glowing red eyes step from the shadows on the far side of the boulevard across the fence, cackling in a raspy, dusty voice. It was a tall, gaunt figure, wearing ancient, battered armor of an archaic design, and with an old broadsword belted to its hip and a shield strapped onto its back. A large burgonet helmet concealed a grayish skull-like visage, but did nothing to conceal the lipless gray flesh that ended abruptly in yellowed teeth. It was obvious that the form was not a living one.

"Clever you are, Were-cat, yes," it said in a voice like the grave, cackling again. "Clever indeed to show Jegojah the way in. Time comes, it comes, when sword and claw will cross, yes. We will test your blood, we will, and see if it is as sweet as it is hot. Yes."

Jegojah, Doomwalker, the most powerful creature the mages could summon short of a Demon itself, stepped back into the shadows, and its iron-shod boots rang in harmony with its inhuman cackle as it stalked away. It had things to do, places to be.

And people to kill.

Chapter 13

Tail swishing back and forth, eyes closed, Tarrin kept his paws on the table and tried to remain in a meditative state. It wasn't easy, because he was still internally celebrating what he felt to be his independence from the Tower. He kept wanting to jump up and down, but he knew that it was imperative that he keep his elation to himself. Keritanima's plan depended on him looking unhappy, and it would ruin it. It was a good plan, and he wasn't about to destroy it. Dolanna's breathing kept anchoring him to reality, and her scent of ivory and lavender and silk soothed his jittery consciousness. Her scent had slowly begun to have that effect on him; her very presence was usually enough to take the raw edge off his nerves. Tarrin noticed it after Jesmind left, and he had the growing suspicion that his subconscious, his immature Cat mind--he *was* only a cub, after all--was seeking a replacement for a mother figure. With his own mother out in the city, temporarily distanced from him, Dolanna came the closest to that role. So he was starting to react to her differently than before.

He was much calmer now. A night spent in sleepless joy had mellowed into a simple feeling of contentment, though if he thought about it too long he would get worked up again. That helped him focus on what he was doing a bit more, and the Weave was out there. He could *feel* it. He raised his chin and reached out with all his senses, reaching to make contact with the Weave. Thoughts and memories were centered on the Weave. Memories of the feeling of *drawing in*, and the fragmented memory of the only time he had ever managed to use Sorcery, were working with his active attempts, trying to shape his reaching out to seem to fit in with the memories of Sorcery he held inside. There had to be a middle ground there, and that was where he thought he'd finally manage to make a touch on the Weave. He had to push out and draw in at the same time, he reasoned. That seemed illogical, but he had noticed that logic rarely had a leg to stand on where magic was concerned.

Realigning his thinking, he bowed his head and emptied out his mind, then took a crack at it. At first, it made him seem further away from the Weave, but then he began to feel it on the edges of his awareness. He tried to reach out and draw in at the same time, directing his attempts at the feeling of warmth and pulsating, heart-beat like throbbing that surrounded him. It tantalized him, staying right where he could sense it but just out of reach, and his serenity slowly began to erode into aggravation. He began to rise up out of his chair, eyes opening and lit from within with that almost glowing radiance that meant he was angry.

"Calmly," Dolanna said in a soothing voice. "Do not work yourself up, Tarrin."

Blowing out his breath, Tarrin sat back down. Waiting for something to happen was getting to him, and his good mood quickly disintegrated into something more unfriendly.

"I could feel you more active with the Weave before you lost yourself," Dolanna told him in a calming voice. "Whatever you were doing, continue. Maybe it will be what you need to succeed."

Nodding, panting a bit, Tarrin bowed his head and closed his eyes--

--closing his eyes. No wonder. Smacking himself on the head with a paw, he groaned in dismay.

"What is it, dear one?" Dolanna asked curiously.

Opening his eyes, Tarrin reached out while trying to draw in, focusing his eyes where he could sense the energy of the Weave. The strand slowly wavered into a phantasmic form before his eyes, and he felt himself make contact with it. The sudden influx of power into him felt like the glory of a god. It was warm, tingling, and it filled him like a vessel, saturating his body with a feeling that came close to rapture.

"Tarrin!" Dolanna gasped. "You did it!"

"I did it," he said, trying to both ignore and revel in the sensation at the same time. The strands in the room became visible to him as wavering, ghostly tendrils, and he could feel the pulsating power of the Weave, almost like a heartbeat, roaring through him. And it was building up. He wasn't

drawing it in anymore, but it was still flooding into him, and that pleasure was starting to turn into pain. "Now how do I let go of it?"

"Cut yourself off, dear one!" she said quickly. "You are building up too much power!"

"I'm not *doing* anything!" he objected, feeling the pulsating like a hammer to the back of his skull.

Dolanna's body seemed to shimmer, and then he realized that she had touched the Weave. He felt something sever his connection to the Weave like a knife, and then the power inside simply bled away, leaving him feeling cold and strangely empty. It also left a sharp headache, but the pain in his head began to fade almost as quickly as the power had.

"Tarrin, when you make contact with the Weave, you must resist it," she told him. "It will try to fill you, for it will see you as a part of the Weave, and as I said, the magical energy always follows the path of least resistance."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Because most students are not so in tune with the Weave," she said, pursing her lips. "Your raw power must make me change my methods, I see. You are so strong, the Weave tried to fill you in a flood. For most Initiates, it takes hours to build up so much magic. It will trickle into them, usually without them noticing it. But your power gives you the ability to instantly gather up enough energy to work. That is something that we usually have to teach to our students."

"Why did it start to hurt?"

"Our bodies are fragile, young one," she said. "They were never made to withstand so much power. That pain you felt is what happens when a Sorcerer attempts to do something beyond his ability. If I had not cut you off, the energy would have built up, and the pain become worse, until it would have destroyed you."

Tarrin blinked. "Consumed?"

She nodded. "Let us calm down, then try again. This time, when you feel the Weave connect to you, hold it at bay. You must allow it in and push it away at the same time. The balance of them is what will determine how

much energy you allow to fill you." He nodded, remembering that he used the trick of reaching out and pulling in at the same time to make the connection. It was only logical, in the illogical sense of Sorcery, to have to draw in and push out at the same time to resist the flood of the magic. "Why were you so angry before?"

"I've been sitting here for four days fighting to touch the Weave, and I was doing it with my eyes *closed*," he said in disgust.

Dolanna considered it for a moment, then she laughed wryly. "You are too grounded in your senses," she realized. "Unless you could *see* what you were reaching for, you would fail. Your Were nature makes it difficult for you to work with anything that you can't experience with your natural senses, and the Sorcerer's unnatural sense dealing with the Weave is unfamiliar to it."

He nodded sourly. "Four days of aggravation for nothing," he growled. "I should have realized that closing my eyes was stopping me."

"You are still growing into your Were nature, my dear one," she said gently. "You still have much to learn. Do not kick yourself for things that you cannot know easily. But you should feel happy that you have done it," she told him, patting him on the shoulder. "Four days is very quick for an Initiate's first touching."

"I'd be happier if I didn't feel like an idiot," he grunted.

She chuckled. "As they say, the man who looks behind can see all, where the man who looks ahead only sees the bend in the road."

He blew out his breath, then finally managed to give a rueful chuckle. "Yes, well, it doesn't help," he told her.

"We still have a few hours, my dear one," she said, sitting back down. "Let us practice on touching the Weave. As you know, just one time is not enough to make it automatic. It is a learned skill, like any other. Once you make a touch, we will work on keeping your touch without losing control of it. We will also work on letting go. Your raw power will make that a vital lesson."

Tarrin looked over at her with a resolute expression. "Alright, let's get on with it."

He was expecting it to still be difficult, but much to his shock, the Weave was right there the next time he tried to touch it. He made contact immediately, and he felt the power rush into him. He tried to resist it, but it was like trying to dam a river with a blueberry bush. "Let go, Tarrin!" Dolanna barked. "Push it away!"

It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He stood in the face of that torrent of power, then he somehow did *something* between him and it, almost like cutting a cord with a knife. The power rush stopped, and he felt it drain harmlessly away from him. But it did cause him to have a momentary headache. "Good, Tarrin, good," she said. "You must still learn to resist, but you have managed to cut yourself off. You must still learn to let go of it on your own."

"Isn't that what I did?"

She shook her head. "You used your power to cut yourself off from the Weave," she explained. "You did to yourself what I did to you. You should simply let go of it, push it away from you. It would be much less unpleasant."

"Alright, let's try again," he said, blowing out his breath. He was starting to feel worn out. He reached out again, and once again, the Weave responded instantly to his call. He felt the power flood into him, and he gritted his teeth and stood fast against the torrent, then found purchase against it. He physically pushed out with his arms, and that helped his mind push the power away, faster than it was coming into him. He felt it slow, waver, and then it simply stopped. He blinked in confusion and looked to Dolanna, who was smiling slightly. "You let go of it, dear one," she explained. "Was that your intention?"

"No," he said in confusion. "I was just trying to stand against it."

"You are strong, my dear one," she said. "You tried to choke off the power, and instead choked it off completely. And I must say, I am impressed that you have managed to touch the Weave every time so far."

"It seems, easy," he said after thinking about it a moment. "It's just right there. It's like I was just trying to find it before, and now that I know where it is, it's very easy to touch."

"We shall see," she said with a smile. "Now, touch it again. This time, try to simply maintain your touch."

He nodded, reaching out for the Weave. And it was there for him. Again being flooded with magical power, this time he had an understanding of how it felt to control that power. Pushing against it with his will, he made it stop flowing into him, choking it down to the barest trickle. He already understood that if he totally choked it off, he would lose his connection to the Weave. It took effort. A lot of effort. Sweat formed on his brow as he worked to keep control of his power, fought against the raging torrent that was battering at his wall of willpower. "It's fighting me," he said shortly to his instructor.

"And it always will," she replied calmly. "You will learn how to keep control of it for long periods of time as you gain experience with it, dear one. It too is a learned skill. But for now, let it go."

With an explosive release of breath, Tarrin choked off the power, and let go of the Weave. He wiped his forehead with the furred back of a paw, feeling a bit winded. "I didn't realize that it was so much work," he told her.

"That is why you do not see very many portly Sorcerers," she said with a smile. "It is physical work to control the power."

"I noticed," he said. "Will it always feel this hard?"

"No, over time, you will strengthen your ability to control the power," she replied. "It will always be work, but it will seem less and less strenuous as time progresses. It is here where your strength works against you, dear one," she warned. "You have much more power to control than most others, and that means that it will tire you much more quickly until you learn how to manage it."

He considered her words for a moment. If other Sorcerers didn't feel that raging flood the way he did, he'd have to agree with her. It was like trying to hold back the tide, and what amazed him was that he could manage to do it. But he wasn't sure how long he could keep it up.

"Now, let us continue," she said. "Touch the Weave, and then let it go. And keep doing so until I tell you to stop."

When he left the training chamber a few hours later, he could barely walk. He felt so utterly exhausted that he could probably fall down and go right to sleep on the floor. He was too tired to even be happy over his successes for the day. Dolanna had been almost merciless in her instruction, making him touch the Weave, hold it for a moment, and then let it go, over and over and over. Tarrin never failed to touch the Weave, but as he began to tire, his control over it and his ability to let go of it began to get unstable. More than once, Dolanna had to step in and cut him off from the Weave. After she had to do it three times in a row, she finally relented and called it a day.

Numb with fatigue, Tarrin stumbled back to the north tower and to his room, taking almost half an hour to manage the three flights of stairs, and he crawled up onto his bed. He was too exhausted to take off his clothes, and it would be much faster, easier, and more comfortable to simply shapeshift and sleep in his cat form. It had never seemed like an effort to shapeshift before, but that time had nearly put him out. Once comfortably settled into his cat form, he flopped down on the pillow of his bed and fell immediately into a deep slumber.

Wake up, a voice seemed to call to him. *You have to wake up.*

Tarrin's eyes opened. It was night. Deep into night, by the light coming into the window. Tarrin was still laying on his pillow, but he had curled up into a less slapdash position during his slumber. His ears and nose detected no present threats, but Allia's scent lingered in the room from when she had come in a few hours before.

Uncertain of what woke him up, he looked around one more time, and then put his head back down.

Tarrin, you have to wake up now, the voice said sharply.

Ears picking up, Tarrin lifted his head again and looked around. *Tarrin, you must get up!* the voice said again.

Tarrin finally managed to place that voice, and when he realized who it was, he instantly stood up. "Goddess!" he gasped in the unspoken manner of the cat.

There isn't time, she replied urgently. You must get up and go to the main Tower. Do it now, kitten!

"What's the matter?" he asked as he dropped down from the bed.

Take your staff! she ordered. There is a Doomwalker on the grounds!

"What is that?"

An undead creature, she replied. It has enormous power, my kitten. It has come to kill you, and you must face it on ground of your own choosing.

"To kill me? Another attack?" he asked as he returned to his humanoid form, and then picked his staff up from the corner.

This goes far beyond anything you've yet seen, kitten, she warned. A Doomwalker is nothing to take lightly. The Wraith you fought is like a little baby holding a stick compared to it. You can't run away from it, you can't bargain with it, and unless you fight it on your own terms, you're not going to be able to beat it.

"Why there?" she asked. "I'd rather face an enemy outside, on open ground."

You never fight a Doomwalker when its feet stand on natural earth, she warned him. It can directly draw power from the earth when it is. It has to have metal or stone under its feet to cut it off from that power. You want to be deep in the Tower when it comes for you, so it can't possibly draw you outside. It will definitely want to do that.

Nervous, Tarrin darted from his room and quickly ran down the stairs, then dashed down the corridor and out of the north tower. He passed several guards at the door and on the grounds, then raced into the main Tower through a small entrance that led to the kitchens. If he had to be deep in the Tower proper, he had a good idea of where to go. To the main core chamber that most called the Heart of the Goddess. It was in the exact center of the Tower, and it had both a lot of space and a lot of vertical openness. If worse came to worst, he could climb or jump up to one of the many balconies that peppered the walls all the way up the Tower. He worried quickly at exactly what this Doomwalker creature was, and he shuddered at how the Goddess had described it. The Wraith had nearly killed him, and if this creature was more dangerous, then he had a good reason to be afraid. But he was

Ungardt, and he would face the challenge like any proper warrior would. It was alright to be afraid, so long as he didn't allow his fear to rule him.

He reached the long corridor with its metal gate when he first smelled it. Its scent was that of corruption and decay, like an open grave, but it had a sharp ozone smell that he couldn't identify. It was coming directly towards him, and that smell, that unnatural scent, triggered the Cat into activity. Ears laying back, Tarrin growled in his throat as the Cat registered its hatred of that scent. It reacted much like that whenever he had faced unnatural beings, such as the Wraith. Opening the gate to the chamber, he slipped through it and closed it again, then looked up. The ceiling in the passage was higher than the threshold holding the gate, creating a solid overhang that was nearly three spans long. What a perfect place to lay in ambush.

A short vault up to the ceiling and some claws driven into the stone was all it took. He tucked himself up into the corner and pulled in his tail, holding his staff against the ceiling and going statue-still, using his inhuman strength to hold himself absolutely motionless.

After only a moment, he could hear the sharp metallic sound of armored boots on stone. It was a methodical pace, from the sound of it, coming towards him. As they got louder, the smell of it became stronger and stronger, until it threatened to make him gag. He closed his eyes and reined in his nose, using all his will to deaden and ignore what his nose was telling him, even as he struggled to keep the Cat from charging from its place in the back of his mind and take control, so it could hunt down and destroy the unnatural being it could smell. After a few seconds, he found that he could tolerate that smell, and he had overpowered the instinct to drop down and attack his opponent head-on.

There was a high-pitched, raspy cackle, sound made by vocal cords long dried and in disuse. It was a hollow sound, and it froze Tarrin's spine. "I can smell ye, Were-cat," it said. "You know, you do, that Jegojah has come for you, yes. Clever clever Were-cat, you are."

The gate opened under him. The top of a helmet became visible, as a skeletal being in archaic plate armor stepped through the gate, holding a sword stained heavily with blood. It had obviously killed its way to the Tower, and that no alarm had been raised told Tarrin how good it was. It held a shield in its other hand, and it was advancing into the passage slowly

and carefully, head scanning back and forth. But, like most creatures, it never bothered to look up. "Close, ye are, Were-cat, close indeed," it cackled. "Come taste the steel of Jegojah's blade. Come out, and quick and clean I will be, yes. I hold no ill will to ye, but kill ye I must, yes."

Tarrin dealt the first blow. Dropping down from his hiding place, he coiled up and then exploded into motion like a bow, curling his entire body as his arms brought his staff over his head. The end of that staff struck the undead being directly on the top of the helmet, with enough force to cleave a human being in half. But the creature merely staggered forward from the force of it, and Tarrin's staff recoiled from the helmet with enough force to spin him back around and miss putting his feet down. He landed unceremoniously on his rump as the skeletal thing went down to its knees, and both of them returned to a vertical base almost instantly.

Tarrin had to swallow the urge to flee in terror when it turned around. Its face was gray, dead flesh pulled so tautly over the skull that its face was but a mask over the bone beneath. Its eyes were pools of unholy red light, unblinking and steady, and bare yellowed teeth, without lips to cover them, sat below a grisly hole where a nose had once been. It was tall, but still half a head shorter than him. It cackled gleefully as it approached, making Tarrin go into a ready stance. "Foolish boy," it said in that raspy voice, "your stick, it can't dent my armor, no." It raised its sword into a ready position. "Come then, foolish Were-cat, come face Jegojah in honorable combat!"

Hissing, baring his fangs, Tarrin put his ears back and answered the challenge in a primal threat display. Embracing the Cat to keep it from taking control of him, his two halves met to pursue a unified goal, and then rushed in for the attack.

There was little grace to the first blows exchanged, but clear skill showed on both sides. Tarrin was taken aback with the first couple of blocks, when he realized that the creature before him was every bit as strong as he was, if not stronger. It looked ungainly, but it moved with viperlike speed, and what was most important, Tarrin felt he almost recognized the forms the creature was using. It may be an undead creature, but it was fighting with very real skills of sword and shield. And those skills were impeccable. The creature moved sword and shield in perfect harmony, blocking a rapid and savage series of broad strokes of his staff designed to

take advantage of his inhuman strength and smash an opponent to the ground. After nearly losing his head in a stunningly fast swipe at his neck in response to that, Tarrin backed up and reassessed his opinion of this opponent. The advantages Tarrin usually enjoyed over an enemy, speed, strength, and skill, were nonexistent here. They were actually in the creature's favor.

Tarrin waded back in, much more hesitant this time. He began testing the creature, using forms and routines that baited, stressed, pushed, as he tried to feel out the extent of the creature's skill and speed. His staff blurred as his power moved it about like a stick, blocking sword slashes and swiping and stabbing at his enemy in return. He knew that it was also feeling him out, but there was little to be done for that. He parried a thrust at his chest, tried to come around and strike it on the opposite side, only to find its shield slamming up against his side. Tarrin was pushed back by the heavy blow, and he screamed as a furiously hot line of pain ran up his side. Blood flowed from the wound as the creature tried to reset its blood-trailing sword for a fast stab in the belly, but Tarrin planted his foot directly in the thing's hideous face, knocking out three of its teeth and driving it a few steps backwards.

Hunching over the wound, Tarrin felt it burn and throb savagely. There was something about it that kept it open, long after his regenerative power would have stopped the bleeding. The creature had injured him, injured him for real, for the wound wasn't closing up the way it was supposed to. Pushing the pain out of his mind, he saw it spit out another tooth. He saw that his claws had punched five holes into its forehead and cheek, one of them deep enough to gouge a piece off its cheekbone. It advanced quickly after shaking its head, and he twisted around another attempt to skewer him, then put his shoulder into another attempt to slam him with the shield. It was the creature pushed back this time, and Tarrin bulled it out of the reach of its sword. He whipped his staff around with only one hand, holding it by the end as he spun in a complete circle. The move gave the staff horrific speed and force as it came around his body, and it cracked into its helmeted head with a sharp metallic *clang*, snapping the head to the side forcefully.

But it merely righted its head and gave him an evil grin. "Ye be good, Were-cat, good indeed," it complemented. "Jegojah's head would have

bounced on the floor if Jegojah were human." Much to his dismay, Tarrin realized that its helmet wasn't even bent.

Tarrin couldn't hurt it with his staff. It was somehow invulnerable to it. But why did the Goddess tell him to bring it?

Because it was the only weapon he had, and though it couldn't hurt it, it was still useful. And though it couldn't be hurt by his staff, his claws had quite visibly damaged it. Just like the Wraith, Tarrin could injure this opponent if he attacked it with his natural weaponry. Attacking it one magical creature to another.

He had to get that sword away from it. He understood that clearly. If he didn't, it would chop him into fishbait. It moved in quickly to re-engage, and Tarrin worked feverishly against the sword, keeping it away from him at all costs, fighting from a purely defensive posture. Blood began slicking the floor from the wound in his side, and his foot slipped in it just enough to make the undead creature charge in for the attack. But Tarrin simply let the foot slip out all the way, sinking underneath the blow meant to take off his head, and then he used a Selani form to rise up with his free paw leading, a deceptively slow move that carried tremendous power in it. It hit the creature in the breastplate, and Tarrin's momentum carried it into the air, then sent it flying backwards. It landed on its back a few spans away, and Tarrin capitalized on that by vaulting into the air after it, the butt of his staff leading as he tried to impale its face on the end of his weapon.

But it wasn't there anymore. Tarrin heard it behind him as he landed, so he rolled forward and came up facing it. Its breastplate was caved in at the abdomen from the force of Tarrin's blow. It pointed its sword at him, and before Tarrin even knew what was going on, he was on his back, pain blasting along his chest and arms. He could feel the shirt against his chest burn from the impact with whatever magic the creature had thrown at him. The smell of ozone was strong in the air, and the passage echoed loudly with a thunderclap. Magic! The Goddess *warned* him that it was a powerful creature, and it was only logical that that meant that it also had some magical capability. It was on him instantly, and the only thing that saved him from having his head split in half was a raised foot. He caught its wrist on the pad of his foot, bending his back impossibly tight and bracing his body with his arms as his leg absorbed the force of the attack, stopping the

edge of the blade mere fingers away from Tarrin's forehead. Tarrin's leg was much stonger than his arm, and his body uncoiled like a spring, hurling the creature away from him as his leg and body pushed against it. But it didn't fall down, and Tarrin's backwards roll didn't get him far enough away. He ducked under another blow meant to chop his head in half, but he didn't get down far enough.

Tarrin screamed in pain as his right ear fell to the floor beside him, and that pain triggered the Cat in a way that he could not suppress. The animal in him took over, and his eyes blazed from within with a greenish aura that consumed them. Jegojah actually backed up as Tarrin exploded from his crouch and threw his staff aside, assaulting the undead creature with a blind, mindless fury that took the creature by surprise. He was quickly bleeding from several shallow cuts and slashes in his arms and upper body, but he completely ignored the pain as the Cat in him sought nothing less than ripping off the creature's head. The creature contained Tarrin's mindless fury, understanding that he had lost control, and it made him pay for it every time Tarrin's claws sought out its face by cutting another bleeding line in its hide. Grabbing the edge of the creature's shield, Tarrin ripped it off of its arm, but it cost him a deep stab to his left shoulder in reply. And just as the pain had triggered his loss of control, that deep injury, to the bone, somehow shocked him back into rational thought. He grabbed the sword with his other paw, ignoring the blade's edges digging into his fingers, then pulled it out of his shoulder, then twisted it to the side. He spun away from that motion and planted his clawed paw right in the creature's face as it tried to recover its position, staggering it back and giving Tarrin a chance to see what he had done to it while he was in his rage.

At least he had given back as good as he got. The creature had several very deep rends in its armor from his claws, and its face bore no less than four quartets of deep slashes that dug into the bone. And now that it didn't have a shield, Tarrin felt that it evened things a bit. His left arm was still movable, but it caused a shockwave of pain in him every time his shoulder shifted. His head was pounding, and he could feel blood pour into his ear canal like water, dulling his hearing on the right side.

It cackled again, giving him what Tarrin felt was a leery grin. "Oh, clever, clever Were-cat," it rasped. "Ye be better than Jegojah expected.

Professional trained, ye be, by a master who knows his fighting."

"Let's get on with it," Tarrin snarled.

The creature moved as if to advance, but then it called out a single unintelligible word, then slammed its booted foot into the floor. It created a seismic shockwave that sizzled up the hallway like a tidal wave, and when it hit Tarrin, it picked him up and hurled him twenty spans down the passage. His back slammed into the ornate gates to the inner chamber, and the shockwave drove them open and spilled him onto the floor beyond.

Dazed, Tarrin lay on the floor, knowing that the creature was coming but unable to figure out how to make his body move. Each bootstep seemed to be an eternity apart, and time seemed to slow to a crawl. His eyes came into focus just in time to see it swinging its sword in a broad overhanded chop, meaning to put him down for good. He managed to find out how to move his arms, and a blast of pain heralded his success as his paws arced up and over his body, then slapped together on either side of the broadsword's blade. The blade cut into the pads on his palms, but the pressure he exerted on the sides halted its forward motion just above his chest. Shock registered on the undead creature's face as Tarrin's foot smashed into its knee, buckling it and making the creature roll to the side as its supporting leg crumpled under its weight. Tarrin pushed the sword along with it as he rolled in the other direction, coming to his feet as the creature also regained its footing. Its left leg was bent at an unnatural angle at the knee, but it didn't seem to be in any pain or discomfort.

With a grim look on its face, the thing advanced and engaged, but it limped on its damaged leg. That gave Tarrin an advantage, and the Were-cat suddenly became like smoke, always just within the reach of the creature's sword, but never quite where the sword was trying to go. Tarrin evaded and dodged the still-fast sword, moving like a reed in the wind, folding and slipping around the blade as it sought his blood. He was trying to work the creature into a position where he could give it a finishing blow, but the cagey undead creature seemed to sense each of his attempts to work it into a bad position. They traded futile blows for a long moment, until the creature managed to slash Tarrin across the thigh with its sword when he again slipped on a small pool of his own blood. Sucking his breath in from the pain, Tarrin staggered back with a paw over his leg. Something suddenly

seemed to seize his tail in a hellish sensation of fire, but something that seemed to burn and freeze at the same time. His tail flinched away from that feeling, and he didn't dare look back to see what it was. The undead creature was coming at him in a rush that startled the Were-cat, too fast for its damaged leg, until he realized, too late, that it had lunged with every intention of falling onto the Were-cat after it its sword spitted him, using him to break its momentum. Tarrin managed to slither around the point of the sword, but the creature slammed into his side, right against his injured shoulder, and Tarrin screamed and was staggered back from that painful force.

Then all the world became pain.

Jegojah stumbled forward after ramming its shoulder into the wounded shoulder of its opponent, forcing it back. The Were-cat seemed to cross some sort of invisible boundary, and then its entire body was surrounded with some kind of blazing white light! It was almost like smoke, surrounding the Were-cat, floating up and away from him in wisps and tendrils as if caught in some kind of wind or current. Jegojah recognized it as Magelight, and he had only seen it once before.

When his living body was killed on the battlefield, destroyed in the fires of High Sorcery, what the current Sorcerers called Ritual Sorcery.

Jegojah staggered back, in awe, and it was then it realized that it was too late to run.

Never had Tarrin experienced such pain. It infused his very being, blazing into every tiny part of his body, seeking to fill him until he exploded. The transformation into a Were-cat, long buried in his mind, was a candle held up to the bonfire compared to what sought to erode his very sanity now. Only dimly did he understand that it was the power filling him, seeking to charge him to the bursting point, flooding into him in such a rush that he could not hold it all.

Tarrin had stepped into the massive Conduit that ran up the center of the Tower, and the tremendous magical energy within it had touched *him*.

His mind floating in a tidal wave of agony, Tarrin desperately realized that if he didn't *do* something with the energy filling him, it would destroy him. His eyes focused through the wispy white light surrounding him at the awestruck Doomwalker, and he let out a primal scream of pain and rage, focusing it on his opponent. His frenzied mind attempted to embrace the power, channeling the power, trying to harness it, to control it ever-so-slightly before it could incinerate him from within. Raw power blazed from his incandescent body, striking the Doomwalker in the chest, and then filling it with the same energy that was filling him. But the Doomwalker was not a Sorcerer, could not even begin to hold the power that Tarrin was forcing into it.

In a brilliant pillar of fire, the Doomwalker's body was reduced to ash in mere instants.

Incapable of focusing his awareness on anything else, still screaming, Tarrin raised his arms and did the only thing he could, release the energy back into the Conduit, allowing it to flow through him without building it up. The entire Conduit suddenly flared with blazing white light, pulsing up along the current of magical energy, then shattering the crystal dome that stood at the very top of the tower, sending the column of incandescent light through the Ward surrounding the grounds. It saturated the magical matrix of the Ward, forcing it to glow with the same brilliance, but did not disrupt its integrity. The column of blazing light shot high into the sky, to illuminate the entire city of Suld with the light of the daytime sun. The desperate act gave him a fleeting instant of rational thought, reducing the incredible pain to a level, however brief, where his mind had the chance to react.

Out. He had to get out of the Conduit. Even allowing the power to flow through him was searing him from the inside out, trying to burn his body to ash. Finding his legs through the whirlpool of pain that sought to suck him into oblivion, Tarrin managed to command his legs to push off and forward, a desperate leap to get him clear of the Conduit before the power burned him to a cinder. Unable to feel anything other than the pain coursing through him, he had no idea if he had left the ground, had even moved, before the pain overwhelmed him, and he knew no more.

The brilliant pillar of white light remained for several seconds, catching the attention of every man, woman, and child in the city of Suld. It was beautiful and silent, a column of white light, so bright it stung the eyes if one looked directly upon it, standing over the city like some fantastic finger of a god. And then it flickered and vanished. The light of the Ward, forming a dome over the Tower grounds, remained for a moment more, pulsing and flickering, and then it too faded from view, leaving the entire city to wonder what magic the mysterious Sorcerers were conjuring.

To most, it was simply an interesting event, something to talk about the next morning. To others, it was a sign. An omen, a warning of things to come.

To them, it was the beginning. And also perhaps the end.

With a ragged gasp, the Keeper was shocked awake by what was happening around her.

The entire Weave was shuddering! The delicate magical matrix of energy to which all Sorcerers were linked suddenly pulsated and writhed, and for a fleeting instant the Keeper thought the entire Weave would tear itself asunder, generating another magical cataclysm similar to the Breaking. Intense force caused the strands near her to shudder and shake, like an earthquake in the Weave, and she could almost sense the unnatural energy coursing through the strands.

And outside her large window, the night suddenly became as daytime, as brilliant white light flooded into her chamber and illuminated the city beyond.

It had to be caused by an outside force. There were natural shifts in the Weave, even the occasional violent realignment of the strands, and sometimes even the breaking of a strand. But none of those things came close to what she was feeling around her, feeling the power of it tingle against her skin, almost as if the power were seeking to touch *her*. She dared not try to touch the Weave and assense what was happening to it. To open herself to it while it was unstable could destroy her.

It lasted for several seconds, and then the Weave settled back into normalcy. She sat in her bed, staring at the light outside the window, then

jumped up and rushed to it in time to see the magical light within the Ward begin to wane, flickering and dimming until the night was as it was supposed to be.

So it was true. The task for which they were training their nonhumans was truly at hand, and those who had objected to the precaution would have to hold their tongues. Just as predicted, the turning of night to daytime in the city of the Goddess' children had come to pass.

It was time.

The first guard to arrive in the Heart of the Goddess found only Tarrin, clothes, fur, and hair burned away, with savage burns all over his body, laying prone on the floor. He also found a bloodstained sword, a broken, dented shield, and a large pile of black ash. The tip of the Were-cat's hairless, charred tail had wispy white tendrils of magic floating and dancing around it, which broke away from it like smoke to flow up towards the heavens.

At first, there was only a sensation of nothing. But that eventually faded, and Tarrin realized slowly that he wasn't dead. Scents began to touch his nose, and muffled sounds began to creep into his awareness.

He was laying on a soft sheet, in a soft bed. He was on his back, and a warm, soft blanket covered him. The coppery smell of Allia was near to him, as was the human scent and lavender and ivory that always identified Dolanna. He also could smell the sharp scent of his mother, and the leathery smell that always tinged his father's scent. He wanted to open his eyes, but he found himself to be so tired that even that simple act would have been a monumental achievement. The very act of breathing, of beating his heart, were efforts that forced his body to focus all of its attention on those tasks. His awakening also brought pain, dull ache in his shoulder and head, along his side, and over about every square finger of skin he had. He felt like he had the itching sickness, and was covering his entire body. It wasn't severe, just enough to be annoying, but even that sensation was welcome compared to the oblivion from which he had climbed.

But Tarrin's magical nature was strong, and soon he felt himself strengthen, even as the voices around him sharpened to the point where he could understand the words. He took stock in himself, and found that he could move, if only just, flexing his paw around the hand that was placed within it. A hand that he hadn't felt until the pressure of it squeezing back overwhelmed the burning itch dominating his sense of touch.

"Tarrin?" his mother's voice called. "Tarrin, open your eyes. You can do it."

His eyelids were hard to open. Something was crusted over them, and they didn't want to fold properly. The best he could manage was a half-open right eye, but the left refused to cooperate. But there was nothing but grayness past his eye. With detached interest, he realized that the eye was blinded. "Tarrin, what happened? What did this to you?"

It was hard to make his voice work, and it required a supreme effort on his part. His voice came out in the barest of whispers, and his eye fluttered close even as he spoke, as if he could not support speaking and keeping his eye open at the same time. "D--Doom...walker," he managed to gasp, and it was enough to send him spiralling back into the blackness.

It was a long time before he clawed his way back to consciousness. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but if the condition of his body was any indication, it had been quite a while. The burning itch was gone, and the play of light against his eyelids bled through them and registered to his eyes. His shoulder and ear still ached a bit, but on the whole he felt much stronger than before. He was still weak, but the simple act of opening his eyes wouldn't exhaust him this time. The scents in the room were the same, but also different. His parents and Allia were still there, as was Jenna. There were two or three other humans in the room also, scents he didn't know. No, he did know one of them. The blond Sorceress, Jula, whom he had met in the baths some time ago. There was very little talking, and Tarrin was keenly aware of a hand holding his paw.

His eyes fluttering open, he squinted against the bright light in the room, then they focused on his mother's haggard face. She had dark circles under her eyes, and strangely, her braid had been cut off. She smiled

warmly at him as his eyes focused on her, and she patted his cheek lovingly. "Good morning, my son," she said with a smile. "How do you feel?"

"Like an army marched over me," he replied in a weak voice. "What happened to your hair?"

She put a hand to her short locks, an annoyed look on her face. "I'll explain later," she told him. "The important thing is that you're alright."

"My brother, you must stop scaring me," Allia said in a stern voice, squeezing his other paw.

"I'm sorry, it's not like I planned that."

"Anything feel broken? Do you want Jula to heal something for you?" his mother asked.

"No, I feel alright," he said after a pause, sensing his own body. It was all there, including his severed ear, though the ear was still a bit tender. He was weak as a newborn kitten, but he could tell that his body had healed what the Sorcerers had not reattached or closed. Now all it had to do was recover its strength.

The pretty face of Jula crowded into his vision, and she put her hands on his face. He felt her touch the Weave, and then a slow, warm influx of energy flowed into him, seeking to invigorate his depleted body. Most of the energy was lost, but enough of it took hold in his muscles that he felt well enough to move. He still wasn't sure if his legs could hold his own weight, though.

"I'm getting tired of waking up with people hovering over me," he grunted, which made his mother smile.

"Better to wake in a sickbed than not to wake at all," she told him. "Now, tell me what happened."

"It called itself a Doomwalker," he began, seeking to edit the story so that the Goddess' warning was removed. It required a bit of creative rearrangement of the facts, though. "I saw it from my room while it was coming across the grounds, and I knew it was there for me. I came to the central Tower to try to find some Sorcerers, but I got lost. It caught up with me in a passageway. We had a fight, and then I--" he shuddered at the memory of the pain, and his body seemed to twinge in response. "I was

knocked into the Conduit in the Heart, and after that, I don't really remember very much. Just pain."

"Well, that explains the fireworks," Jula said with a warm smile. "It seems that your little visit to the Heart made the Conduit light up like the sun. I heard that they could see it miles offshore. It also explains the burns. You came this close--" she held up her thumb and forefinger the barest of distances apart-- "to being Consumed."

"Huh," Tarrin grunted. He didn't remember anything like that. Then again, the only thing he could remember about the experience was that he *never* wanted to go through it again. There was pain, and more pain, and different kinds of pain, and the sensation of being boiled in his own skin. There was a fleeting image of the Doomwalker in a furious column of fire, its silhouette disintegrating in a span of two heartbeats. But not much else. "Is it dead?"

"Dead? The Doomwalker? There wasn't enough left of it to put into a bottle," Jula told him. "Whatever you did to it, it was a pretty thorough job."

"Thank goodness," he sighed. "It was using magic against me, and I couldn't beat it in a fight. It almost killed me."

"Almost doesn't count, my son," Elke said gently, putting her hand on her forehead.

"What happened to your hair?"

She was quiet a moment. "That, thing, didn't come right for you. It attacked *us* first. It tried to kill Jenna."

Tarrin's heart froze in his chest, but she gave him a look that quickly soothed his fears. "She's alright. The Sorcerer that was tutoring her managed to beat that thing back long enough for me to plant an axe in its face. There were several people there, so it became a nasty fight. The thing was throwing bolts of lightning everywhere, and a couple of times it simply disappeared from one place and appeared in another. And it was *fast*. It gave us all a serious fight. It gave your father a nasty slash on the belly and killed two of the people the Tower have at the house as guards, and injured several others."

"How is father?"

"He'll be alright," she said gently. "The wound was pretty deep, and it came close to spilling his guts on the floor, but after he dropped his sword, the thing stopped coming after him. It was almost bizarre."

Tarrin remembered it saying something about an honorable battle between them. "Father wasn't armed," he realized. "It wouldn't attack someone that didn't try to fight back."

"Well, it certainly didn't think that way about Jenna," she said, her temper rising. "Jenna used her magic after the other Sorcerer was hit by some strange bolt of lightning the thing threw at him, and that sent it running with its tail between its legs. I've never seen such a display. She really gave it what-for."

"What happened?"

"She picked it up in her magic and almost beat it to pieces against the floor," she replied with a wicked chuckle. "Then she crushed it between the ceiling and a shaft of stone she pulled out of our floor, and then she set it on fire. It ran from our parlor trailing flames, and the last we saw of it, it was running to jump into the river."

Tarrin smiled weakly. "Jenna always did have a temper," he said. Little Jenna, his sweet little sister. It was strange to think of her as an avenging Sorceress, wielding her powerful magic with skill and precision. But that seemed to be exactly what she did. Tarrin was too unfamiliar with his own power to even think of trying to use it against the Doomwalker, and he much preferred to fight opponents hand to paw. But for Jenna, it was the only weapon she had. She was, after all, only a young girl. But it seemed to be a weapon she could wield with power and skill when she needed it.

But it was important. The Doomwalker wasn't just after him. It was also after his sister. But why? Why did they want him, Allia and Keritanima, and now Jenna, dead? It didn't make any sense. He *had* to figure out what was going on. Everyone around him knew something, and it was something that they wouldn't tell him. And without that information, he had no idea what was going on, or why he seemed to be so important.

The attention of half the world is set on your shoulders, he remembered the Goddess telling him. But why? *Why?*

"Well, she's a bit shaken up, but other than that she's fine," she told him. "She's in the Tower now, resting. She'll come see you later, when you feel better."

"I'd like that," he said, laying back into the pillow, his mind whirling. It was too much, too quickly.

"You just lay back and rest, my son," Elke said to him in a crooning voice. "I'm here now, and I'll watch over you."

He closed his eyes, letting his weariness sweep over him, taking comfort in the fact that his mother was there, watching, and that made him feel oddly safe and secure. He fell back asleep quickly.

A Sorcerer had repaired the damage to his body, and a night's rest had replenished his strength. By morning, Tarrin was up and about, feeling a bit tired, but otherwise whole. The trauma of the day before had faded in his concern for his father and family, so he was up and out of the room well before anyone from the Tower could stop in and check up on him. Although the memory of the pain had faded, other thoughts and worries had taken its place. And Tarrin was worried.

For some reason, he had the feeling that something very bad was going to happen soon. What had happened with the Conduit--Tarrin shuddered at that thought. But he *knew* that he had done something, or had something done to him. He could feel it inside him. The sense of everything had changed, ever-so-slightly, and the sense of the Weave was with him all the time now. Without even reaching out for it, he could sense the Weave all around him, and its power beckoned him, called out to him, sang to him, begging him to complete the circuit and become one with it. Almost like he had awakened a part of himself in the fiery gauntlet of the Conduit. But with that newfound sensation was a gnawing fear that it was not normal, that it was what set him apart from the others, that it was what made them so interested in him.

It wasn't a sensation of power, it was more like a clearer understanding of what was around him. The Weave was a part of the world, though it was invisible and intangible to the majority of the world's population. Tarrin felt more in tune with it, and though he couldn't see the strands, he could *sense*

them around him, could almost feel the energy flowing through them. It was strange, unusual, and yet at the same time, he realized that he had always felt those things. They had just never been so clear to him before.

And again, as always, the fear of what was going on around him had resurfaced. Now more than ever, he had to find out what was going on, and why he was of such great interest to the Tower, and most likely many others. Things had changed, he knew. He could *feel* it. Things had changed, and he had the feeling that unless he found out what was going on, he was going to pay dearly for his failure.

Following the scent of his mother wasn't that difficult, and he managed to get to their door by dawn. As he expected, they were not alone. Two Sorcerers, one of them Jula, sat in the sitting room of the apartment, and Tarrin could hear his family moving around in the room beyond.

"Tarrin," Jula said in surprise. "How do you feel?"

"I'm well enough," he replied, crossing the room quickly and opening the door beyond. Inside was a well-appointed bedchamber, with a large bed, chest, armoire, and a writing desk. Bedtables held an oil lamp and a pitcher of water with washbasin, but Tarrin's attention was focused on the three figures on the bed. Eron Kael was laying in the bed with Elke sitting on one side and Jenna on the other. They turned to look when he came in through the door, and Tarrin found his sister buried in his arms only seconds later. She began to cry, clutching onto him tightly. He picked her up easily and carried her to the bed, then he sat down with Jenna clinging to him, putting his paw on his father's shoulder gently. "Good morning," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"I'm getting too old for this," Eron said with a chuckle. "I see you're well, boy."

"You can't keep a good Were-cat down," Tarrin said with a shrug. "How is it?"

"The Sorcerers fixed it well enough, but you know how that healing takes it out of you." Tarrin nodded. His experience with being healed was intimate. "I'm starting to feel well enough to move around, but this taskmaster here won't let me out of bed."

"They said he wasn't to exert himself until noon, and that means that he doesn't get out of bed," Elke said fiercely.

"I don't think getting up and sitting in a chair counts as exertion," Eron said testily.

"Deal with it," she said in a flinty tone.

"What choice do I have?"

"None."

"Then why say it?" he asked in a sharp voice.

"I never said anything. You're the one that keeps trying to put words in my mouth."

Eron blew out his breath, and Tarrin had to suppress a grin. Jenna had gotten over her outburst, and she was giggling a bit. Tarrin squeezed her gently. "I heard that you had a scare yesterday, brat," Tarrin told her.

"Scary isn't the word," she said with a shiver. "That thing--"

"Don't dwell on it, dear," Elke cautioned in a gentle voice.

"Well don't worry about it," he told her. "From what they told me, I didn't leave enough of it to put into a jar. It won't be bothering you for a long while. If ever."

"That's my big brother," Jenna said in a quivering voice. "Always there to kill the boogey man."

Tarrin chuckled. "Well, I don't think I'll go that far," he said. "I see they gave you a nice room."

"I'd rather be home," Eron growled. "What's left of it, anyway?"

"That bad?"

"The roof caved just as we got out," Elke told him. "The fight wasn't very good for the house. It will take some time to repair it."

Tarrin glanced at the door. "Have you made any other plans?"

"We were thinking of staying here," she said.

Tarrin shook his head. "This isn't a good place to be, mother," he warned. "You should find other arrangements."

"There are any number of inns--" Eron began, but Tarrin shook his head again. He reached over to the writing desk and picked up a piece of paper and a quill pen, inked the pen, then set it on the bed by his reclining father.

"You know the city pretty well?" Tarrin asked.

"Fairly," Elke replied.

Tarrin wrote a set of directions on the paper, using the Ungardt language. He slipped it to Elke, who read it quickly, reached it over to the lamp, and then burned it. "When you get there, tell the owner of the house that you're friends of Shadow," he told her in Ungardt. "He'll know what that means, and he won't turn you away." He closed his eyes, memories of Janette and the orderly house of Janine the wife flooding through him.

"I take it that they're friends of yours?"

"More than friends. If they remember me, anyway."

"Oh, you mean that they're *them*?"

He nodded. "Be nice to them, mother."

"Of course," she snorted. "Why shouldn't we stay here?"

"If you two don't stop that, I'm going to get surly," Eron said waspishly. Eron couldn't speak Ungardt.

"Hush," Elke commanded her husband absently.

He glared at her, but said nothing. "Something's going on here, you know that," Tarrin told her. "I don't know, but I get the feeling that what happened yesterday is going to make things tense here for a while. It would probably be a good idea for you to be somewhere where nobody knows your name, if you understand my meaning."

She gave him a penetrating look, and finally nodded. "Maybe you're right," she said. "But Jenna--"

"I think Jenna has enough control of herself not to have an accident, at least for a ride or two," Tarrin said. "She can continue after things have a chance to settle down."

"I think you have a good point," Elke said after a moment.

"Well, I'd better get moving before they send a posse after me," Tarrin said, reaching down and patting his father's shoulder. "I'll come visit in a couple of days. You'd better get better, father."

"If I don't, your mother will kill me," he said with a smile.

"Nothing like motivation," he teased, then he squeezed his sister gently again. "Time for me to go, Jenna."

"Be careful, Tarrin," she said, letting go of him and going around the bed to sit beside her mother.

Without thinking, Tarrin reached out to his mother and put his paw under her chin, cupping it. After thinking about what he wanted for a moment, he touched the Weave and quickly wove together the proper flows of fire, water, earth, and divine energy, then released them into her. Elke's hair suddenly grew at a shocking rate, quickly extending well past her waist. She scrubbed furiously at her scalp for a second, then felt the weight of it.

Tarrin felt something different about it this time, something strange, and something that scared him. That tremendous power that he remembered from the day before seemed to be *right there*, and it all came at him in a sudden flood that took him quite by surprise. He almost didn't remember how to sever himself from his own power, because it came at him in a flood that he couldn't hope to choke off or control, and it happened to him so fast that he didn't even have time to think about what to do to stop it. Just as the day before, severing himself had been a reflex action, a defense against what he was feeling. He wouldn't be able to let go of the Weave, he sensed that, so he had to cut himself off before he lost control. He blinked, trying to understand what had happened.

He had touched the Weave, but when the Weave noticed it, the *Weave* had tried to touch *him*.

She stared at Tarrin in surprise, but he only smiled at her, covering his sudden shock at what had nearly happened to him. Losing it in front of Julia was not a good idea. "You don't look natural without your braid," he told her, standing up. "Be well, mother. I'll see you soon."

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"I've been healed so many times, I should know how it's done by now," he said in a rueful tone, shrugging. "But I really have to go. I'll see you soon."

"Be well, my son," she replied.

After taking her hand, he was quickly out and away. Out in the hall, he allowed himself to slump against the wall, paw to his head. He felt drained, as if the sudden influx of power had taken his own strength with it. What happened? By the end of that first day when he first could touch the Weave, he could easily manage to flow of power. But that had been...more, different. It wasn't the same as it had been before his fight with the Doomwalker.

"Let's talk about it, Tarrin," Jula's voice called from the door. The slender, pretty blond came up to him and touched him on the cheek, and he felt gentle warmth flow into him. "I felt a sudden, radical inflow of power, and then it cut off. You didn't mean to do that, did you?"

"I, no, I didn't," he said. He didn't know Jula well, but the few times that he had spoken with her, she had always left him with a good impression. The only *katzhi-dashi* he even came close to trusting was Dolanna, but Jula was right here, and she already seemed to suspect. He had no reason not to talk to her. Besides, he did like her a little bit. She was like Dolanna and Sevren, not too stuffy or full of herself. "I had touching the Weave down, but," he closed his eyes. "I think getting caught in that Conduit changed something inside me. I felt the power of the Weave, and then it tried to fill me. It came out of nowhere, and I almost couldn't cut myself off."

"I certainly wouldn't have been able to," she said in a grim tone. "It's a good thing you did. What else felt different?"

"Nothing," he replied after a moment's consideration. "Everything felt the same. Touching the Weave, building up the power to weave, and then the initial weaving. But after I let the weave go, the power just roared at me like a charging lion. I have no idea where it came from."

She stared at him for a long moment. "I really don't have an explanation for you, Tarrin," she said. "But this is something that you'd better tell your

instructor, and maybe even the Council of Seven. Perhaps the Conduit injured your ability to control the power, but not anything else."

"No, I can still control it," he said. "Whatever it was, it came from *outside*, from the Weave. It," he began, closing his eyes and remembering the feeling, "it was as if the Weave reached out and grabbed me. It, *reacted* to me touching it."

"I've never heard of that before," Jula said, "but then again, I've never heard of alot of things that are possibly true. You need to go rest, Tarrin. That may be the best thing for you right now. Rest, and don't try to use Sorcery again until you feel completely whole. And for the Goddess' sake, don't do *anything* without a Sorcerer there to help you in case it gets away from you."

"I will, I promise," he replied sincerely.

"Now scoot, Initiate," she said with a teasing voice, patting him on the hip. "That's an order."

"Yes ma'am," he chuckled, standing up from the wall and then padding down the passageway. Something about what happened frightened him, frightened him considerably. Something was different, inside. He could feel it. He only had an active awareness of his own power for half of a day, but the natural way that it felt allowed him to understand how things had felt before. Though the Weave still felt natural, the fact that he could sense it, almost *see* it, told him that things were not as they were before.

Too many things.

Tarrin sat in the courtyard at the center of the maze, cross-legged on the ground in front of the stone bench, picking at the fur on his ankle and thinking quite deeply. It was midafternoon, and though nobody had tried to come and get him and talk to him, nobody quite knew where he was. He figured that Jula ran to the Council the instant Tarrin was out of her sight, and he didn't feel like being examined like a lab rat. So instead of going back to his room, he shapeshifted and slinked off into the garden. He had learned quite a while ago that he attracted alot of attention when he moved around--most Novices and Initiates hugged the walls when he passed by--but a black cat was almost completely ignored. There were veritable legions

of cats on the grounds, some were pets, and the rest were strays that were fed and used as a deterrent against mice. And Tarrin fit in with them quite easily, giving him the ability to move around without everyone staring and pointing at him. Sometimes it got on his nerves, sometimes it reminded him of how out of place he was among the younger, more normal Initiates, but mostly it made sure that everyone knew where he was almost at all times.

Too many things were happening, and they were coming too fast. He laid back and stretched out on the grass, looking up at the cloudy sky. The wind was raw and cool, a signal that summer was over, though the gardens were still green and lovely. The clouds obscured the sky, heavy, laden gray clouds that cast a murky pall over the land. The type that always threatened rain, but never carried out on the promise. They fit his mood at the moment, for he had no idea what to do now.

The first was what had happened to him in that Conduit. It had *changed* him, somehow. He'd only had half a day to be happy that he finally figured out how to make contact with the Weave, and now the Weave was hostile to him. He'd tried many, many times to touch with Weave without it backlashing on him, but it happened every single time. It was as if the Weave were trying to trap him within it, and it was filling him with more power than he could safely contain. And every time he did it, trying to cut himself off from it became more and more difficult. He knew that doing it along was crazy, almost suicidal, but he had to know, and he didn't want the *katzh-dashi* to interfere. The last time he tried, the time that made him stop, the Weave nearly fried him from the inside out before he finally managed to sever himself from it. He wasn't going to try that again. He had just discovered his power, and then it was put out of his reach. And what made it deadly was it was *right there*, the sword he could pick up at any time and use to chop off his own head. Maybe Jula was right, maybe the accident had somehow damaged or injured his capability to use Sorcery. Perhaps it would come back, perhaps it wouldn't but it didn't change things right now. And the short term was starting to look like it was going to be absolutely critical to his very survival.

The second was the Doomwalker. He had been expecting another attack, but he hadn't considered that it would also go after his sister. She was a strong Sorcerer, but he had absolutely no idea of why it would go after her. Other than simply to punish him, to taunt him with that

information should it start to lose the fight. But that hadn't been an issue. He was warrior enough to know when he had his kiester kicked. Jegojah, it called itself, had cleaned up the floor with him. Tarrin got in some licks, but the Doomwalker had never been put in a very bad position. It had used Tarrin's momentary rage against him, and had displayed an outstanding fighting ability. If that weren't bad enough, it could also use magic, and knew *how* to use it. If he hadn't have been knocked into the Conduit, Tarrin would have lost. He could admit it without feeling bad, because no matter how good one was, there was always someone better.

It still didn't make much sense. Jegojah had brought more than enough to the table to deal with him, and Tarrin had the feeling that it *knew* it. So why attack Jenna? Why risk destruction by attacking a little girl, who happened to be protected by two of the nastiest fighters in Aldreth, maybe even all of Sulasia, and no less than two Sorcerers? It didn't make much sense. But then again, nothing made sense to him because he didn't know what was going on.

And that was the third problem. The fight, and what had happened to him, may interfere with Keritanima's plan. He hoped not, because it was getting to the point where absolutely *had* to find out what was going on. Everyone around him was acting on information that was being kept from him. He was certain that the string of seemingly illogical events were all connected by a common thread. For him to know what to do, he had to find out as much as he could about what was going on around him. Why he was so important, what made him so important, and what part his sister, Allia, and Keritanima played in it.

The fight with the Doomwalker had disrupted everything, and he realized that there had been several of those. They were trying to kill him, but they were succeeding in disrupting his plans with the attempts. Jesmind, who could not have changed his life any more without killing him. The attack by the Wyvern that separated him from Dolanna and the others. The Wraith, who very nearly killed him, and caused them to raise the Ward that trapped him in the Tower. And now the Doomwalker, who had caused him to somehow injure his ability to use Sorcery. He wasn't sure if that was a good observation, but that was the way it seemed to be working out.

He had no idea what to do now. He was becoming *afraid* of trying to touch the Weave, and if he couldn't use his power, he had the strange feeling that he may become expendable to the Council. He had no idea what they wanted him for in the first place. He was starting to expect a washtable to attack him. They'd thrown just about everything else at him, and mostly through sheer luck, he'd managed to survive. They had to be running out of ideas.

He missed Jesmind. She had such a simple way of looking at things. For her, everything was black or white, and she didn't lie, and she also took everything everyone told her for the truth. Until she realized it was a lie, anyway, and then she got violent. If only the world could be like that for him. Everything good or bad, right or wrong, friend or foe. Not enemies that turned out to be friends, and potential enemies pretending to be friends, and everything in between. He felt quite overwhelmed at the scope of the machinations going on around him, and he suspected that there were many more beyond his ability to see. He was a simple village boy, raised for a life in the regimented order of the army. Not *this*. Adjusting to being Were had been almost more than he could handle, and what was going on around him just seemed out of his reach. He didn't feel in control, like he was a pawn on a lanceboard, waiting for the next player to pick him up and move him.

He rolled over and started picking at the grass, experiencing the power of its scent, feeling it between his pads. Such a small thing, yet it could live almost anywhere, and it was very tough. If you cut it, it grew back. If you killed it, more grass just took its place. It softened the ground, kept it from washing away in the rain, and it made things beautiful. And all it wanted in return was a little sunshine, a little water, and some fresh air. He could definitely relate to the grass. He wanted out of the Tower. He wanted a little sunshine, a little water, and some fresh air himself. Preferably in some dark, untouched forest, well away from the human lands, where he could live free and unfettered by how others saw him.

But was he willing to let people cut him, try to kill him, to get it?

Grass had it easy, he decided. But then again, what choice did it have?

Nothing for nothing, his mother always said. If you put in nothing, you got nothing in return. There would be a dark forest and simple living, but he would have to work for it. And that meant enduring what was happening to

him now, getting it overwith so he could find his little den somewhere nice. Closing his eyes, he put his chin on the back of his paw, listening to the sound of the wind rustling the hedges, rose bushes, and the grass, feeling it in his fur, on his skin, smelling the scents of the Tower, of people, and of the city beyond that was carried upon it. Grounded in his senses, Dolanna had said. He had to agree. What the Cat couldn't sense, couldn't see, it wasn't important to it. There was no now but now, no place but here, no time but that in which it lived. A serenity of selective amnesia, where the past was forgotten, the future didn't exist, and the whole world existed only in its own territory.

Sometimes cats had it easy too.

There would be no losing himself in the Cat again. Not now. Things were too important, and they were happening way too fast.

He needed to find Allia. Not for anything serious though, he just felt the sudden need for company. He felt very small and very alone, surrounded by things so much larger than himself that he no longer had any meaning, and it was a humbling and frightening sensation. Allia was his sister, in every sense of the word except blood, and she could always make him feel like he mattered, if only to her.

Allia was laying on her side on her bed, a worried look on her face, a book laying before her. He had no doubt that she was worried about *him*, and that made him feel just a little guilty. Tarrin had disappeared after leaving his sickbed, and had told no one where he was going. He was burdening everyone he cared about, and giving nothing but grief back in return.

She looked up at him, and her greeting died on her lips when she saw his expression. She simply moved her book and patted the bed in front of her.

Tarrin flowed into his cat form and jumped up on the bed, then laid down against his sister. She put her hand over him, stroking his fur, soothing his fear and worries. And he clung to that sensation, using it to try to calm his fears, letting it melt away everything that was disturbing him. The ever-threatening clouds finally carried out their threat of rain, and the

sound of the drops striking the glass pane of the window melded with Allia's sweet voice, as she sang an old ballad in her native tongue, and the pleasant merging of the song of the Selani with the music of nature caused Tarrin to give way to his primal instincts. He slipped into a more Cat-like mindset, allowing the instincts to join with his conscious mind, finding solace in the forgetfulness of his animal soul.

He lost himself in the Cat, if only for a little while. There would be plenty of time for worrying tomorrow.

Keritanima's new cat was a long-haired gray, a large, nasty brute with quite an attitude. But Tarrin had learned some time before that normal cats would treat him with respect, so its greeting was full of bluster, yet strangely honorable. Tarrin had only talked to two normal cats before, preferring to generally let the others be and not tip his hand that he had that ability. Though nobody could hear it, cats did tend to act out of their instincts when engaged in rational conversation with a Were-cat, as if the magical creature could exert influence on their normal cousins and make them more capable of conversation. That would make it somewhat obvious that he was doing *something* to the animal.

The cat's scratching at his door had awakened him, quite a feat considering that he was still in Allia's room. She was asleep, and Tarrin had been curled up by her pillow. But he jumped down and padded back into his room, then scented the cat on the other side of the door. He changed form and opened the door, curious as to why a cat would be trying to get his attention, and the big gray strutted into his room casually. He was a very big cat, young and strong, wearing an elaborate leather collar studded with jewels. "The she who feeds me put me down here," the cat told him in its unspoken manner. "Your scent made me curious."

It did have Keritanima's scent on it. Tarrin squatted down and crooked his finger at the cat, and it approached and sat down in front of him. "How did you know to scratch at the door?" he asked as his large fingers started to probe the collar. "Did the she put something in your collar?"

"I scratch at her door," the cat replied calmly. "Humans, and the she, are so easy to tell what to do."

There was a note in the collar, cleverly inserted into a flap between the outer layer of leather that supported the gems and an inner layer that protected the cat's neck from the studs and settings holding the gems in place. "From time to time, she is going to put something in your collar, and tell you to find me. I would be very honored if you would do as she asks. What she is doing is very important, and I need you to bring me what she gives you quickly."

"For a brother, I will do this thing," the cat replied.

"It would make me very happy."

"How do I know she wants me to find you?"

"She will put little things in your collar and then speak my name to you. It sounds like this in the voice of the humans." He spoke his name, then repeated it three more times, so the cat could fully memorize the sound of it.

"I can do that," the cat told him. "When she puts things in my collar or speaks the sound of that to me, I will come to you."

"I will appreciate it. I will let you back out, so you can find your she."

"She is a strange creature. She smells of predator, but acts like humans."

"She is cousin to the predator you smell, but is not predator herself," he told the cat. "Cats are not food to her."

"This is good to know."

Tarrin stood up and opened the door. "I thank you for bringing me this. Go find your she, and expect rewards."

"I will," it said, then it sauntered out the door.

When he closed the door, he worked to unfold the very tiny note. Keritanima had folded it down to the point where even his clawtips had trouble finding the seams and parting them. Tarrin had to endure the pain of human hands in order to get the note unfolded. His paws were sometimes too large to perform tasks on very small objects.

The note was very short and to the point. *Tarrin, I think you and Allia need to bathe.*

That was easy enough. The baths were deserted before dawn, and that was when Tarrin and Allia preferred to use them. Both of them had trouble in attracting attention when in the baths. Tarrin, for obvious reasons, but Allia found bathing uncomfortable when surrounded by Novices, because the hot stares of the adolescent boys made her feel aggressive. Allia wasn't ashamed of her body in the slightest, but she took offense to men and boys who were total strangers staring at her in that manner. Even Tarrin had to admit that it was hard not to look, and he had absolutely no romantic feelings for his sister whatsoever. Allia wasn't human, but that only enhanced the fact that she had a body any human woman would kill to have for herself. If she were human, she wouldn't be half as lovely or perfectly formed.

Allia was very easy to wake up. All he had to do was walk into her room. Her Selani senses were sharp; where Tarrin's nose and ears were inhumanly sensitive, for Allia it was her ears and eyes. She could hear a fly walking on the wall, and read an open book from halfway across the Knights' training field. Her luminous eyes opened when he came into the room, and she sat up. "Keritanima wants to talk to us," he told her. "Down in the bathing room."

"Then let's see what she wants," Allia said immediately, sliding out of bed.

Keritanima's lizard Wikuni guards were standing at the top of the stairs that led to the baths, and it was obvious that they were keeping everyone else out. But when Tarrin and Allia appeared, the two nine-span tall monsters simply stepped aside, motioning with their huge clawed hands. The expansive chamber below was empty, except for Keritanima. She was unclothed, a towel on her lap, and she was brushing out her fur with a silver horsehair brush. Keritanima was fully furred, and with her dress off, her fox-fur markings were quite distinctive. The white swath that started under her chin widened to dominate her front, giving way to the rusty red that colored her arms, legs, and back. Her feet and hands were brown, as were the tips of her ears and tail. Though he had seen that before, it gave her an entirely different sense with the humanizing dress removed. She looked much more an animal when not wearing her dress. He knew she was lithe, but she cut quite a figure out of her clothes, sleek and slender.

"It's about time," she said in a calm, if slightly testy, voice. She spoke Selani, and that incited her companions to reciprocate.

"Your cat must have waited a while before trying to get my attention," Tarrin replied.

"So it did figure out to come find you," she said. "Good. I just got it today, and I wasn't sure what it would do. I was about to send Binter to get you."

"Binter?"

"One of my guards," she replied.

"What did you want to see us for, *shaida*?" Allia asked bluntly.

"Have a seat. Or, for appearance's sake, have a bath," she said. "I just got my fur dry. In this humid air, it takes forever."

"You seem very comfortable sharing your bath with a male," Tarrin observed.

"We're different races, Tarrin," she said primly. "Besides, what I have, you can't see. This fur coat is very good for that."

"Point taken," he said, shrugging out of his shirt. Allia and him quickly undressed, and they slid into the bathing pool just at Keritanima's feet. Keeping up appearances, just in case someone did manage to spy on them. "I assume that you wanted more than just our company, or am I here to marvel at the perfection of the Royal form?"

She laughed. "Much as I enjoy letting my guard down around you two, no, I'm afraid this is business," she told him. "After what happened to you, the Tower is absolutely abuzz with rumor and hearsay. I've already picked up quite a few little tidbits. Miranda didn't know where to begin trying to repeat it."

"Miranda?" Allia asked.

"The maid," Tarrin answered. "Didn't I tell you her name?"

"No, *deshida*," she replied.

"Sorry."

"Well, I sat down and picked through most of it, and I've come to a few conclusions," Keritanima continued. "What happened with you and that, creature, had a larger effect than just putting pretty lights in the sky. I don't know why, but it's made several Sorcerers *very* nervous. I found out that the Keeper's in a rage because it got onto the grounds."

"I can penetrate the Ward, so I figure that it figured out a way to do it to," Tarrin shrugged.

"You managed it?"

"With all that happened, I guess we haven't had a good talk," Tarrin said ruefully. "Yes, I figured out how to penetrate the Ward. It's very easy, truth be told. That Ward isn't half as powerful as the *katzh-dashi* seem to think it is."

"Good, we'll talk about that in a bit," she said. "That light show you created seems to have set something in motion. I heard a couple of Sorcerers talking about it myself. They tend to speak around the Brat Princess, because everyone believes that she's a complete ditz."

"She *is* a ditz, Kerri."

Keritanima gave him a wolfish grin. "That's the idea," she said.

"I don't see how you keep yourself separate from that," Allia told her. "It seems unnatural."

"It's acting, *shaida*," Keritanima told her with a smile. "The Brat Princess is just an image, a front. She has her own personality, but fortunately it's not sufficiently complex that it makes it hard to keep her in character. She's not me, just a face that I show to the world. That's why I always refer to her as *she* rather than *I*. It's just a role I play, nothing more."

"Then I bow to your acting skill," Allia smiled.

"I'll take that as a complement," Keritanima said graciously. "Anyway, whatever this event was that got started by the lighting up of the Ward, I have no idea yet. They seemed almost afraid to talk about it. Miranda brought in a little extra. She tells me that alot of Sorcerers expect the King himself to try to do something, and more than one are expecting wars to start all over the continent."

"Wars?" Tarrin asked in surprise. "What on earth for?"

"That's something that we're going to have to find out," Keritanima said. "We Wikuni trade with the humans, but we don't interact a great deal with them. This probably has something to do with human history, or some obscure prophecy or foretelling that we've never bothered to look into." She looked down at them, her eyes blank as she thought, clawed finger tapping the side of her muzzle. "I have the strong suspicion that it involves us, somehow," she said finally. "Perhaps this task that they're obviously trying to prepare us for is somehow involved with the potential political upheaval."

"I don't see how," Allia said. "We hardly have the ability to stop armies."

"No, but you always have to remember that an army marches at the command of one man," Keritanima said thoughtfully. "It's not the army we're trying to stop, but perhaps the king commanding it. If that's it at all."

"What do you mean?" Tarrin asked.

"It's not the potential war that concerns me, it's the reason for starting it," she answered. "Things have been calm in the Western Kingdoms for centuries. The last major war was the Draconian civil war. The kingdoms in the West are all on good terms with one another. Why disrupt profitable trade agreements? It would have to be something of great value, more than enough to make a war profitable. Remember, war is *very* expensive, and not just in the cost of lives. No kingdom goes to war unless they have a good reason, and there's a potential for profit."

"So, you think all the wars would have the same objective?" Allia asked.

"Probably," she replied. "If every kingdom in the west is suddenly going to attack their neighbors, then there has to be a unifying goal behind it." She blinked, then pulled her hair back away from her face. "But that's a worry for another day," she said. "We have more pressing problems right now. Miranda heard that they're going to step up our training. I'm sure that fits in with everything else going on around here, and it proves that we do indeed have something to do for the Tower. I think that the fireworks two days ago was a wake-up call for them. We should expect things to move fast."

Tarrin looked down at the water, then leaned up against the side of the bathing pool and stared at Keritanima's feet. "I, think we're going to have a problem," he said softly.

"What? What's the matter?" Keritanima asked.

"The fight with that Doomwalker, I never told you how I beat it."

"I heard that you burned it to ashes," Keritanima replied. "They found you half char-broiled. The Sorcerers think you lost control of yourself, because one said you were nearly Consumed."

"That did happen," he said, "but it happened because the Doomwalker bulled me into the Conduit that runs through the core of the Tower."

Keritanima stared at him. Allia came up and put her hand on his back.

"The reason the Conduit lit up was because I made it happen," he told her. "I *had* to, or they would have found two piles of ash. It was the only thing I could do to avoid getting incinerated. But the Conduit, damaged me. I can't use Sorcery now, not without it getting away from me. I can't control it."

"Are you sure?" Keritanima asked.

He nodded. "I almost killed myself more than once trying to figure out a way around it, but I can't," he replied. "If I touch the Weave, it's like the Weave tries to grab me, and it's like it tries to fill me with all its magic all at once. I can't stop that flood, and it happens too quickly for me to even try to let go."

"How long were you active? Half a day?" He nodded. "Maybe you just need more practice, and it will come to you," she offered.

"No, this is, different," he said after a moment. "I can *feel* it. Whatever is happening, it's not coming from me. It's coming from outside, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"We'll have to wait and see. They've already started teaching me how to weave spells," she said. "I've managed to get single-flow weaves down without having them blow up in my face. They're going to start teaching me multiple-weave flows in a couple of more days, after my instructor feels I refine my control a bit."

"Is it easy, *shaida*?"

"As easy as trying to tie a triple-hoist knot with your tongue," she said sourly. "I've learned that doing Sorcery takes *practice*. I've been practicing on my own after class."

"I thought that was forbidden," Allia noted.

"It is, but I've never been one to follow rules that don't suit me," she said with a faint grin. "How have you been doing?"

"It is still, difficult," she sighed. "I can feel it out there, but I can't quite manage to find it."

"Open your eyes," Tarrin told her.

"What?"

"Open your eyes," he repeated. "Try to *look* for it. That's what did it for me. Given your eyesight, it may help you focus yourself better."

"I'll have to try that," she said after a second. "I've been keeping my eyes closed."

"I'd like to have all three of us able to touch the Weave before we start with the plan," Keritanima said. "Because if we can arrange some private tutoring from Dolanna, I want her to be able to teach us as fast as humanly possible. That means that she won't have to go over the basics."

"When did you want to start?"

"In a couple of ten-days," she replied. "There's enough buzz going around to where we don't have to incite it, so let's capitalize on that while we can. Oh, Tarrin, I think you know my new next-door neighbor."

"How do you mean?"

"They moved a new Initiate into the room by mine."

"I thought your maid had that room."

"The *other* side," she elaborated. "He's a young Arkisian named Dar."

"Dar!" Tarrin said, memories of his Novice friend flooding through him. Then he laughed. "He made good time."

"How do you know him?"

"We were roommates in the Novitiate," he told her. "He's a very nice young man. I like him a great deal."

"He's tolerant, I'll give him that," she said with a wolfish smile. "I unleashed the Brat Princess on him, and he was exquisitely courteous."

"He's the child of a merchant family," Tarrin told her. "They taught him a great deal."

"Yes, they did," she agreed. "Anyway, we need to get in touch with Tiella," she said. "Since Novices and Initiates aren't really allowed to mingle, we'll have to do it in here, when she's bathing. Do you think you can arrange to be in here tomorrow? I'll find out when her floor bathes for you."

"I can manage it," he replied. "Dolanna's a bit lenient as far as punctuality goes."

"This will also have to be how we exchange information with her," she added. "It's the only place where a Novice and an Initiate talking won't arouse suspicion. Mainly because there's no uniform to distinguish them when they're both naked."

"I'm a rather striking person, Kerri."

"Yes, but Dar *isn't*," she said bluntly. "If we're going to do this, we need at least one person that doesn't stick out like a cannonball on a banquet table. That means that we have to find someone we can trust. Do you trust Dar?"

Tarrin answered immediately. "Of course," he replied. "He's a very good friend, and he's already keeping quite a few secrets for me already."

"Then you should have a talk with him," she said. "Explain things to him, but leave me and Allia out of it. Just tell him you want to relay information between Tiella and you, and that the information may be sensitive. Make sure he understands it could get him in trouble. There's no need to send him off without understanding the danger."

"He'll do it for me," Tarrin said confidently.

"Good. After we leave here, I'm going to have to be careful. Jervis is here, and he's already setting up his spy network. Our meetings like this are

going to have to be only for important matters. I've already set up mine, so we're going to be sneaking around each other for a while."

"How do you manage spies without letting them know who you are?" Tarrin asked.

"Miranda," she replied with a wink. "From the way everything looks to someone outside the loop, it's Miranda that protects me, not me protecting her. There have been any number of attempts on her life, so that tells me that our ruse is very effective. Miranda is a very clever young lady who does a remarkable job being my puppet."

"You dishonor her to use her so, *shaida*," Allia said disapprovingly.

"I don't *use* her, sister," Keritanima replied. "We have what you may call a friendship within a business relationship. I pay her quite handsomely for her service, and she and I are very good friends. She helps me keep my identity secret, and I repay her by making sure that she'll never want for anything when I pension her. She's very good. I almost don't have to instruct her anymore. She'll make a killing as a spy or head of intelligence when I release her. If she doesn't simply retire, anyway."

"Well, that's different then," Allia said. "You do honor her in her task, and you respect her for the danger she faces in your stead."

"That I do," she agreed sincerely. "Anyway, since you can penetrate the Ward, I want you to leave your calendar open ten days from tomorrow night," she continued. "Both of you. We're going on a field trip."

"The Cathedral?" Tarrin asked.

She nodded. "No doubt the priests have a cache of very useful information over there, and I find myself curious to see what they've managed to find out."

"Why so long to wait?" Allia asked.

"Because it'll take me that long to arrange a way for me to disappear for that long without being noticed," she replied. "Jervis is good, so I can't just walk away any time I feel like it anymore. I'll have to carefully set up my free time."

"You give this Jervis much honor," Allia said.

"He's the best," Keritanima said bluntly. "If I can beat him, then it'll prove to him, and my father, just who the best really is," she said with sudden fierceness. Then she blinked and looked down at them. "Well, I think you two will want to expand your minds. That means you need to start visiting the library."

"What are we looking for?" Tarrin asked.

"Anything that may hint at some specific weaves that the Ancients used to use," she told him. "Anything that may give us an edge."

"I don't read the human words very well, *shaida*," Allia admitted. "It's an ugly writing. It looks like two rock lizards fighting in a sandcrawler's web."

"I'll appreciate what you can do, Allia," Keritanima replied. "I can't ask for more than what you can give."

"We'll time our revolt with the excursion," the Wikuni mused. "We can start revolting after we're back from the Cathedral. That will give us some extra time to look over what we find."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin agreed.

"It also means that I'll have to flaunt my friendship with you over the next few days. Jervis hasn't been here long, and you've been mainly out of sight, Tarrin. Best to club him over the head with it now, before he starts looking for information. That way, he won't give us speaking too much attention. We could probably slip in all sorts of things that way." She looked at Allia. "You too," she smiled. "You'll just have to come up with a reason to like the Brat, Allia." She thought about it so quickly that Allia didn't have a chance to reply before she spoke again. "Actually, let me handle that. You're exotic, and the Brat is attracted to exotic things. She'd tone her attitude down if it meant being friends with someone unusual and exotic. The only thing even close to academics that the Brat pursues is geography, so she'll use that to break the ice with you. The Brat Princess is strangely fixated by it. It gives her a bit of depth."

"I would say so," Tarrin said. "It also hints to others that she's not a total airhead."

"Yes, but it was a defense I designed a while ago, just in case someone started thinking I was more than I showed to others," she replied. "It also gave me a very good excuse to be in the library."

"Alright, so tomorrow, I talk to Tiella, talk to Dar," Tarrin said.

Keritanima nodded. "I'll be busy getting into Allia's good graces, and resuming our friendship."

"Then I guess we have a plan."

"For now. Did you talk to my cat?"

He nodded. "He'll come find me if you tell him to."

"Good." She brought her bushy tail around her body and began combing it out. "Now then, there's just one more thing."

"What?"

"I need my back brushed," she said with a toothy grin. "Be a dear and smooth my fur."

Chapter 14

There were a great many things to do, and it was starting to feel to Tarrin that they were running out of time.

He was sitting in the small training chamber, nervous and uncertain, waiting for Dolanna to arrive. He had no idea how it was going to go. Perhaps a day of staying away from the Weave had corrected the problem he was having, but he wasn't so sure about that. He had tried to find Tiella before coming to the chamber, but she hadn't appeared in the baths, nor did he see her in the hallways as he wandered about. Novices had set schedules, so it was certain that she was somewhere specific, and that she would be there again tomorrow. Keritanima said she would find out where she was, and that made Tarrin a bit uncertain. How would an Initiate with no direct contact with Tiella be able to find her? True, she was a Princess, and she was good at finding things out, but he wasn't so sure that she could find Tiella in a day, and not leave tracks that she was asking.

He'd been so intent on finding Tiella that he didn't get a chance to talk to Dar. That would be handled after class, because Dar would be easy to track down. Initiates were given much more freedom than Novices but still only had so many places that they were allowed to go, and since Tarrin was Dar's friend, it wouldn't arouse suspicion if he asked around to find him.

Tarrin was still a bit unsure about Keritanima's ideas. He'd never seen spying and intrigue, so he had no idea how she was going to manage all the things she said she would do. He did like her plan, however, so that told him that she must know what she was doing. But he had trouble conceiving of something that he couldn't see or touch. That was an aspect of the Cat growing to hold a position in his mind, and he knew it, but he didn't have much choice in the matter. It was either give the Cat some room, or have it drive him mad. It wasn't altering his imagination, but it did have the effect of, as Dolanna put it, grounding him in his senses. Anything he couldn't see, couldn't smell, couldn't experience, they seemed misty and intangible, and it was a struggle to overcome the Cat and ponder them.

But fortunately, pondering Keritanima's plans wasn't necessary. Not with Keritanima there to carry them out.

The door opened, scattering Tarrin's thoughts, and Dolanna entered. To his surprise, she wasn't the only one. Ahiriya, the Fire Seat, filed in behind the diminutive Sorceress, dressed in a red robe that set off her pale skin and fiery hair. That set Tarrin's mind whirling, and one of his paws began to tremble. To have to perform for Ahiriya was one thing, but it would become very clear very quickly to her and the Council that he was hampered. If he was still injured inside, or whatever it was.

"Good morning, Tarrin," Dolanna said pleasantly. "This is Ahiriya, a member of the Council. Often, they prefer to sit in with an Initiate and his instructor to ensure you are receiving proper instruction."

"Dolanna, this is *not* a good idea," he said quickly, almost desperately. "I didn't--"

"That's *Mistress* Dolanna," Ahiriya said in an icy tone, glaring at him.

"Don't push me, woman," Tarrin said to her in a cold voice that promised violence.

"Tarrin, mind your manners!" Dolanna said in shock.

"Save it," Tarrin told her bluntly. "I'm not going to do tricks for the Council, even if I could."

"You go too far, Initiate," Ahiriya said in a tightly controlled voice. "I think a few days of penance is in order."

"I'd like to see you try," Tarrin said in an ominous tone, his eyes lighting from within with their greenish aura.

Dolanna, who knew him so well, understood immediately what that meant. "Mistress Ahiriya, perhaps it would be wise for you to leave for now," she said in a calm voice.

"I'm not letting this impertinent whelp get away with such outrageous disrespect," Ahiriya said in a hot tone.

"Yes, but if you keep going, he will most definitely cause me to Heal one of you," Dolanna told her in a blunt voice.

"You wouldn't *dare* attack a member of the Council!" Ahiriya said in shock, staring at him.

Tarrin laid back his ears, extended his claws, and *growled* at her.

"Oh my," Dolanna breathed, backing away from him.

If anything convinced Ahiriya that he was serious, that could. She backed up to the door, keeping her eyes on him, then opened it behind her. "We'll talk about this later, Initiate," she promised in an ugly tone. Then she backed through the door and closed it.

The instant the door was closed, Tarrin's ears rose up to their normal position, and he stood up straight from the crouching stance he assumed. He looked at Dolanna, his face sober, then he gave her a slight smile and winked.

"You *staged* that?" she asked in a gasping voice. "Tarrin, what on earth are you doing?"

"I don't need an audience today, Dolanna," he told her. "I have, I have a problem. I need your help."

"What is it?"

"The fight with the Doomwalker, it...injured something inside me. I can't control Sorcery. Every time I touch the Weave, the power just floods into me, and I can't stop it."

Dolanna looked at him for a moment. "Floods into you? I taught you how to control it, dear one. It is no different."

"Yes, it is," he replied, sitting down. "The touching still feels the same, but the instant I do, it's like the Weave tries to reach out and grab me. When it does grab me, it tries to flood me with power. I can't resist it, Dolanna. It's way too much for me."

"I was told you caused your mother's hair to grow out," she said. "That is something that even I cannot do, Tarrin. I would not know where to begin. So you *can* still use your power."

He nodded. "But if I hold onto it for more than two heartbeats, the Weave realizes I'm in contact with it, and then it tries to burn me alive. And there's more."

"What?"

"I can almost *see* the Weave now, Dolanna," he told her. "Even without touching it, I can sense it around me. And if I concentrate, I can almost see the strands. Ahiriya touched the Weave when I threatened her. I could feel it."

Dolanna nodded. "I knew, because I was in touch with the Weave myself," she told him with a rueful smile. "I really thought you meant to attack her."

"I wanted her out of here," he said bluntly. "The Council will find out in time, but I don't want the pressure of having to explain all of this with her looking over my shoulder. I...I can't talk about things with strangers around. You're the only one in this Tower wearing a *shaeram* that I trust."

"I appreciate your trust, dear one, but there are many here worthy of it," she told him gently. "I understand that you and Sevren have a friendship. Could you not trust him?"

He chuckled ruefully. "Well, he did save my life, so I guess I could. But I don't know him that well."

"And what of Jula? She stood vigil for you when you were injured, and she has befriended your parents."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I was there also," she said. "Jula likes you, dear one. She told me that she met you before you entered the Novitiate, in the baths, and you impressed her."

Tarrin remembered indeed, how she braided his hair, and how she joked about it. She didn't seem like a Sorceress. "Well, maybe," he said. "But we're getting off the point, Dolanna. Can you help me work around this, this problem? Or at least tell me what's wrong?"

"I will have to understand what the problem is before I can see about finding a solution for it," she told him. "Touch the Weave, dear one, and allow it to respond. I will be here to cut you off if it threatens you."

He nodded, reaching out. Just as he told her before, touching the Weave was simple for him, where most Initiates spent months mastering the

techniques of achieving contact with the Weave. As simple as breathing, he touched the Weave, allowed it to charge him with a small amount of the six flows in even measures. He held it thusly for but a second or two, and then the raging torrent of power found him, and assaulted him. In instants he was being saturated with more power than he could control, and almost more than his body could withstand, and then it was severed away from him. That power dissipated quickly and harmlessly back into the Weave.

"The Weave *reacted* to you!" Dolanna said in an awed voice. "I have never seen it act so before!"

"What do you mean?"

"When we touch the Weave, it tries to fill us with the same energy it holds itself," she told him. "It is not a great amount, for the Weave is vast, and most of its energy is stored in strands. The energy in a strand is not that great, or we would not have to draw from multiple strands at once to build up the magic necessary to weave spells. But the Weave tried to fill you with *more* than that. It actively tried to build up the power in you over the level of magical energy that the strands themselves carry. To put in other terms, the Weave tries to fill us with the power of a strand, but when you touched it, you somehow opened a pathway directly to a Conduit, and it tried to fill you with its power."

A Conduit. "But that's what happened to me," he said in a quiet voice. "The Doomwalker pushed me into the Conduit running through the Heart. That's what caused all the light, because it was all I could do to keep from getting incinerated."

"Oh, Tarrin," she said in awe. "Tell me what happened. Leave nothing out."

Step by step, Tarrin recanted his memory of the fight, and being knocked into the Conduit. "I don't remember very much after that," he said helplessly. "The power tried to fry me to ash, and I just had to *do* something with it to keep from exploding. They tell me I burned the Doomwalker to ash, and it lit up the Conduit and the Ward."

"No one could survive direct exposure to the Heart," she said in a quiet voice. "But you did, somehow."

"Why is it called that?"

"Because that is what it is," she replied. "The Conduit running through the Heart is the largest, most concentrated Conduit known to man. The Tower was built around it so the *katsh-dashi* could be very close to it. The closer we are to the Heart, the stronger our Sorcery becomes. You have never known anything else, but when you leave the city, leave Sulasia, you will understand. Far away, it takes us longer to build up the energy to weave spells, because those areas are not as rich in magical energy as the Tower. The Heart charges the strands around it with much more magical energy than you will find, say, back in Aldreth. The Heart is literally the heart of our power, and when we are close to it, it makes us stronger."

"I didn't know that," he said. "So that's what's happening to me? Do you think I somehow was affected by the Conduit?"

"How could you not?" she said. "I have never heard of anything surviving direct immersion in the Heart. Even mundane objects thrown into the Heart charge with magical power, then explode. But you survived it, and it has affected you. It has opened a link with you, my dear one, a link that fills you with power you cannot hope to control. But there is hope."

"What? How do we fix it?"

"I do not think we can," she said, "but I--they--*may* be able to teach you how to control the link. You cannot control the power, so you must learn how to control the pathway that feeds it to you. If you can learn to choke off that link, it will give you the time you need to use Sorcery without fear of being Consumed."

"You don't sound to convinced."

"Because that may be impossible," she sighed. "But it is all I can think of. I will have to take this to the Council. They are more skilled and learned than I, perhaps they can find a better solution."

"The Council? Dolanna, I--"

"Hush, dear one," she told him. "This is quite beyond me, and I need guidance. Even if you do not trust the Council, remember that you are a Sorcerer, and that entitles you to their assistance. They will help. They must, it is their duty. Perhaps one of them can help you find a way to control this ability, for I do not think that I can."

Tarrin blew out his breath, but had to concede that she was right. He *needed* help, and if Dolanna couldn't supply it, he had to find it where he could. The way things were now, a single slip could fry him to ash, and that was just too dangerous, considering how easy it was for him to call on the power of the Weave. What he had done for his mother had been totally without thought. He didn't even remember how he did it. But it was the most shining example of exactly why he had to get this under control, and do it very fast. Another thoughtless touch on the Weave could quite possibly lead to his demise, and that was something that he absolutely could not afford.

"Alright," he sighed. "I've been wondering something for a while, Dolanna."

"What is it, dear one?"

"Why do you speak so formally?"

She laughed. "Because the northern common tongue is not my native one, Tarrin," she said. "I am from Sharadar."

He stared at her. Sharadar? The almost mythical kingdom on the southern continent that took its name from that nation, a nation of magic, learning, and wonders. "You're from Sharadar? Why are you up here?"

"Because I am a Sorcerer, dear one," she replied calmly. "Sharadar has its own order of *katzh-dashi*, in their own Tower. The Heart comes up from the earth here, but it descends *into* the earth there. There is a Tower and an order of Sorcerers at both ends of it. There are Sharadite Sorcerers here, just as there are northern Sorcerers in Sharadar. Each order is separate, but both answer to the Council and Keeper. Because of that, there are always communications passing between each order."

Tarrin had never conceived of that. He knew that the world was round, but to imagine something piercing the earth and running all the way through it boggled his mind. "What do the southern Sorcerers do?"

"The same as the northern ones," she replied. "Study, learn, and find others with our gifts."

"I never knew about them."

"There is a bit of, competition, between the two orders, dear one," she said with a smile. "The teachings of the other order of *katzh-dashi* come later in your Initiate."

"What happened to them during the Breaking?" he asked suddenly. "Sevren's class didn't cover that."

"The same as what happened up here, but the southern *katzh-dashi* were never driven from their Tower. And yet they too simply vanished."

"But why keep the other order secret?" Tarrin asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"It is not a secret," she told him, "it is merely something not often discussed. The workings of an order half the world away have little bearing or impact on life here."

"But they should say something in the Novitiate," he accused.

"Tarrin, they said *nothing* about the southern continents, other than references to geography," she reminded him. "And the Tower does like to keep its profile low. Telling Novices there is another Tower spreads information that the *katzh-dashi* may prefer to keep private. That is why only Initiates learn of the tower in Sharadar."

"It still seems strange," he said after a moment.

"Politics usually are, dear one," she chuckled. "But since I dare not try to instruct you, I think we are done for today. I need guidance, and must take this up with the Council at once." She smiled at him. "And I will be sure to tell Ahiriya that your uncertainty and fear over your condition caused your outburst. After she understands the problem, she will probably forgive you your behavior."

"I really don't care," he snorted. "I'm not here to lick her slippers."

"That kind of attitude will create trouble for you, dear one," Dolanna warned. "It is not demeaning to give to others the respect that they deserve."

"When she proves she deserves it, I'll give it to her," he grunted. "Dolanna, thanks. I do feel alot better now. I was really afraid that something was going to happen."

"We shall see, young one, and you are welcome," she said. "Now, since you cannot practice, I suggest you learn. In the South Tower, there is another library. The *real* one, which holds the books that the Lorefinders study and the lore of magic and theory that we keep out of the hands of the Novices. Go there, and read. Learn. There is much you can learn by reading, even if you cannot practice."

"Nobody ever told me about that."

"And why do you think that is?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh, because they don't want to contaminate the process of learning how to touch the Weave," he realized.

"Precisely. But since you already have mastered that task, you cannot be contaminated by reading about the experiences of others. Go there and learn, my dear one. It will do you good."

"They'll let me in?"

"Yes. You wear Initiate red, and that is all you will need to gain entrance."

"I'll do it, Dolanna. Thank you."

"No thanks are needed, my dear one," she smiled.

He touched her cheek with his paw, taking in her beauty, realizing again now much the small woman meant to him, then he took his leave of her.

He didn't like the idea of the Tower meddling in his affairs, but Dolanna was right. He needed to learn how to control whatever happened to him before it killed him, and if that meant allowing people he perceived as enemies to do it, then so be it. Better to take the hand of an enemy than refuse it and jump blindly into death. The Cat was a survivor, and it wouldn't *let* him refuse a chance to live. It was a survivor, and would not allow his human pride or distrust to interfere with the need to survive.

Blinking, Keritanima focused her eyes again, following the intricacies of the Weave that Lula was using. She sat on a bench in the garden, for unlike most instructors, Lula was a plump, matronly woman who had the soul of a Druid. She loved the outdoors and the gardens, and she much

preferred to bring her students out into the greenery of the garden than keep them cooped up in the small, cramped rooms used for the initial touch. She told the Princess that she felt she had control of her ability, so they spent their days sitting on benches surrounded by the rainbow of color of the gardens. Keritanima had to admit, being in such a soothing environment helped her to learn as Lula started showing her multiflow weaves. The one she was doing right now was a mixture of fire and air, a small ball of yellow light that hovered over her palm. "Can you see how they go together, dear?" she asked. Lula called everyone "dear" or "sweetheart" or "love", even though she knew Keritanima's name. The Brat Princess had made her name, title, and pedigree very plain to the woman quickly, but she just pushed all that aside like it was dust to sweep under the carpet and treated her like a little girl. Neither Keritanima or the Brat quite knew how to take that. The woman was absolutely fearless, and she treated Keritanima like her daughter's best friend rather than an Initiate. The woman was a mystery that the Brat took to immediately, but Keritanima found almost hopelessly puzzling. "Now, by adjusting the flow of fire, we can make the light change color," she said, tweaking the weave hovering over her hand just a bit, making the ball shift from yellow to blue. "Alright dear, now it's your turn."

Narrowing her eyes, Keritanima touched the Weave and felt the power flow into her. Touching the Weave was something that was easy for her, almost natural, and she was shocked that some Sorcerers took months to master such a simple thing. She drew in fire and air, and then pushed them out into the area over her furred hand. Her amber eyes flickered quickly as they watched the flows begin to intertwine, until a small, dim ball of bluish-green light appeared over her hand. "Not bad dear, but you need a bit more air and less fire," Lula told her. Keritanima's brows lowered as she did as Lula ordered, until the ball grew in size and intensity, and then shifted to a solid sky-blue color. "Very good, dear," she said with a bright smile. "Can you make it change to red?"

Narrowing her eyes down to slits, she considered the request. It was a test, she was sure of it. She had to increase the flow of fire to go from yellow to blue, but what would require going from blue to red? Well, they were all colors of fire. Yellow fire was hot. Blue fire was actually the hottest, the kind of fire she'd seen in the Royal forges and foundries. But red fire...that had to be the coolest. The fringes of a fire were always red.

Decreasing the flow of fire entering the weave, she watched as it slowly shifted colors from blue to white to yellow to an orange-rust color, and then finally to red. "Very good, dear," she praised. "Now, how would you make it brighter without changing its color?"

"Increase both flows proportionately?" she asked in reply.

"Why don't you try it and see," she winked.

Keritanima did, increasing the energy in both flows, and the effect was striking. The small ball suddenly became almost painfully bright, and also expanded in size. "Very good dear, but remember that working with flows is always a very precise business," Lula told her. "That was too much. You have to go in small steps, dear, small steps."

Dimming it to a less eye-straining radiance, Keritanima looked at Lula and almost beamed. It was so, *wonderful*, working with Sorcery. It was hard to stay in character. The Brat would never look to her instructor with such respect and a desire for praise. But then again, Lula had that effect on people. It was probably why they had chosen her to introduce Keritanima to the Weave.

"I must say," a nasal voice called from behind, "that this is not at all what I expected to see."

The little ball suddenly exploded in a blinding flash, as Keritanima lost control of the weave. She whirled around on the seat and found herself staring at a rather ridiculous-looking rabbit Wikuni. His head was dominated by the large ears on top of his head, pink nose, whiskers, and a pair of large front teeth. His fur was a whitish gray all over, and a pair of pink eyes stared out from behind a pair of wire-frame spectacles. He wore a plain blue waistcoat with a leather belt holding up a pair of blue pants. A vest covered a white shirt under the waistcoat, into which was tucked the chain of a pocket watch, a technological marvel of the kingdom of Taiga, on the southwestern continent. The expression on the face was plain, almost dull, as if the mind behind those eyes reflected its rather foppish exterior. That couldn't be any further than the truth. Jervis, head spy for his Majesty, Damon Eram, king of Wikuna, was probably the crown's most experienced and competent gatherer of hidden knowledge. Probably one of the best in the world. Jervis used his rather ridiculous appearance as a weapon, which

hid his true ability and also his lethal abilities. Jervis often was tasked to eliminate threats to the crown, and that required an assassin's touch. Jervis had that touch.

"Highness," he said with a fluid bow. "I believe that his Majesty sent you here for an education. This is not the education he expected you to receive."

"That the girl has considerable talent in Sorcery was blind luck, sir," Lula told him. "I take it you know him, dear?"

"He works for my father," Keritanima said in a bored voice. "He's here to make sure I don't get any silly ideas."

"Allow me to introduce myself, madam. I am Jervis, head ambassador to the Tower while our jewel is in your tender care." He bowed to her extravagantly, his whiskers twitching and his eyes dancing with delight.

"Well, pleased to meet you," Lula said with a girlish giggle.

"My ship was delayed, so I'm afraid I couldn't get here sooner," he sighed. "But, at least I see that her Highness is behaving herself."

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," Lula snorted. "Keritanima has been a very attentive and pleasant pupil."

"Really," Jervis said in a calm voice. "How do you like the grounds, your Highness?"

"They'll do," she replied in a distracted voice. "My room is entirely too small, but I can't make them furnish me with one more appropriate for a high Princess."

"Not your rooms, the grounds," he said.

"Oh. They're pretty, I guess," she replied in a vapid tone.

"Do you have any complaints?"

"Where do you want me to start?" she replied.

"Just have someone leave me a list," he said, waving her off with a hand. "Considerable, you say?" he said to Lula, using a rather annoying trick he'd learned a while ago, bouncing around in a conversation to try to catch lies and half-truths. "How considerable?"

"Very promising," Lula said, both of them missing Keritanima's murderous stare. "She's got a lot of potential. She could rise very high in the Tower, if she applies herself."

"Unfortunately, her Highness has other pressing plans, I'm afraid," Jervis told her in an almost sincerely sad tone. "Perhaps her, gifts, could help her on the throne."

"I would dare say so," Lula said with a smile.

"Well, I have matters to tend, so I'll take my leave," he said, giving them both a deep bow. "Good morning to you, ladies."

Keritanima had no doubt that reports on her ability and what the Sorcerers were doing with her would be on her father's desk by tomorrow. The Tower wasn't the only magical order; no less than two priests of the Wikuni god were on the grounds. The chaplain for Keritanima's private guards and the Royal Marines garrisoned on the grounds, and also a cleric that served Jervis with his magic. One of the tricks of the clerics was that they could send messages over extreme distances. That information should be in the palace within the hour, she reasoned. Jervis would receive a response to it by tomorrow morning. It was still night in Wikuna, so they wouldn't wake her father up for something that wasn't urgent. Then they'd wait until a window when both the priest there and the priest here would be awake at the same time to send back any response.

She thought that it may be worth her while to get her hands on those reports. No doubt Jervis would uncover some tidbits that may be useful to her as well.

Tarrin caught up with Dar about noon that day, as he moved towards the main Tower to have lunch. He simply fell in step with the young Arkisian on the grounds, surprising him a bit.

"Tarrin!" he said in surprised happiness. "How have you been?"

"I'm doing alright," he replied with a smile. "I see you finally made it."

"I could have been here two rides ago, but they were holding all the Initiates back for some reason," he replied.

"How many?"

"Nine," he replied. "Remember that short blond that always stared at the floor?" Tarrin nodded. "She made it up here. I don't think you know any of the others. I know I don't."

"Well, I'm just glad to have another person to talk to," Tarrin said with a smile. "I miss all our talks."

"It seems strange to be in a room by myself," he said. "My closet-mate is a slack-jawed Torian with about half of his brain somewhere else."

Tarrin chuckled. Arkis and the city-state of Tor didn't exactly get along, but Dar was very much above judging people along socially drawn lines. The Torian probably was a slack-jawed imbecile. Dar was a very social person, and he enjoyed company. Probably a function of his youth and insecurity about his position. After all, what young person wouldn't feel insecure when about to travel down a road of power and danger. "Well, Keritanima tells me that you're next door to her."

"The obnoxious Wikuni? Yes," he replied.

Tarrin laughed. "She can be obnoxious, but for some strange reason, we're friends," he told the young man.

"You seem to attract non-human females, Tarrin."

"I happen to *be* a non-human, Dar," Tarrin replied with a wink.

"Sure, go and throw that in my face," the young man said, and then they both laughed. "Where are you at? I'd like to swing by and talk from time to time."

"Not far from the Headmaster's office," he replied. "Where he can keep an eye on me and Allia."

"I haven't seen her in a while. Do you know that she was actually *nice* to me when you disappeared?"

"She told me about that," he replied. "She's my closet-mate, so she's not very far from me."

"You mean they allowed that?"

"Allia didn't give them much choice," Tarrin chuckled. "You know how she is."

"Too well," he replied. "I kind of miss her. Guess I'm turning into a masochist."

Tarrin laughed. "She's not that bad."

"I seem to recall you telling me that once before," Dar said with a sly grin.

"Anyway, I hate to impose, but this isn't entirely a social visit."

"What's up?"

"I'd like you to do me a favor."

"Sure, what do you need?"

"There's a Novice that I'm friends with, the blond that came to the Tower with me," he began.

"Tiella? I know her."

"Good, because I'll need you to talk to her from time to time. It has to be where a Novice and an Initiate can speak without raising attention."

"The baths?"

Tarrin nodded. "She's doing something for me, Dar. She may have some information to give you from time to time, information that could get you in trouble if the *katzh-dashi* find out about it."

"That's not a problem, Tarrin," he said. "You know I'll help. You and I, we've been through alot together, and you're a friend. Friends help each other."

"You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, Dar," he said sincerely, putting his huge paw on the young man's shoulder. "You're one of the few humans around here that will even talk to me."

"That's their loss, Tarrin," he replied calmly. "Alot of them are afraid of you, but it's because they don't understand you. Not like I do."

"They never really gave you a choice."

"True, but things worked out anyway, didn't they?"

Tarrin smiled. Dar was young, but Tarrin had often been impressed at how mature and wise the boy was. His parents had raised him very well. He had a generous nature and an almost inhuman ability to accept others for who and what they are. Dar was everybody's friend and nobody's enemy. And that fact would help Tarrin right now.

"I guess they did," Tarrin said. "Anyway, enough chatter about nonsense. Tell me what happened after I left for the Initiate."

"It's only been a ride or two."

"Well, it feels like years," Tarrin told him. "Besides, we never really caught up after I ran away, so we may as well get ourselves current."

Dar laughed. "True enough."

They ran into Allia in the kitchens, and she invited herself to join them as they sat down in the small dining hall used by the Initiates. She listened quietly as Tarrin and Dar caught up on things. "So, was today your first day of instruction?" Tarrin asked.

Dar nodded. "The history they gave seemed incomplete," he said. "They made no mention of the Tower in Sharadar."

"You know about that?"

"I'm the son of a merchant clan, Tarrin," Dar smiled. "It's our business to know."

"I keep forgetting about that," Tarrin chuckled.

"A Tower in Sharadar?" Allia asked. "I have not heard of such a thing."

Tarrin briefly went over what Dolanna told him. "She said that the Tower up here keeps it quiet, because of how people feel about the *katzhdashi*."

"I don't see why," Dar shrugged. "Don't they send us to individual teachers tomorrow?"

Tarrin nodded. "When they've taught you a few basics, they're supposed to reassemble a class and teach weaves."

"How have you been doing with that?"

Tarrin shifted uncomfortably. "Well, let's say that I've hit an unforeseen snag," he said. "My instructor is talking to the Council to see what they can do to help me work through it."

"You say that like you're about to be executed."

Tarrin snorted. "I think you know how I feel about the Council," he said, and Dar nodded. "Asking them for help feels like cutting off my own tail."

"Well, it should work out," Dar told him. "How about you, Allia?"

Allia gave him an almost shy smile, something that made Tarrin look at her very carefully. She was actually *nervous* to be around Dar. That was something new. "I finally managed to touch the Weave this morning," she told him.

"You did? That's wonderful, Allia," Dar said, patting her four-fingered hand without thought. "They say that's the hardest part."

"That's the first hardest part," Tarrin said. "Congratulations, *deshaida*," he told her, putting his paw on her arm. "I know how it was bugging you."

"Now I know how you felt, *deshida*," she said. "I still seem to have trouble finding it, though. My instructor told me that it is a common occurrence."

"Master Sevren told me that it takes some Initiates months," Dar said. "I hope it doesn't take me months. I've already been here over a year. I'd like to move into a less restricting environment."

"Well, Initiates are allowed off the grounds, Dar," Tarrin said. "Why don't you spend this evening walking around the city?"

"Because they've taken that freedom away," Dar grunted. "No Initiate is allowed to leave until further notice."

"Nobody told me about that," Tarrin said, rubbing his chin. Why would they hold all the Initiates on the grounds?

"It just started today," Dar said glumly. "My first day as an Initiate, and they immediately strip one of our liberties."

"Maybe it's just temporary," Tarrin said. "It's starting to get a bit late. You going to be in your room after class?"

"I guess," he said.

"Well, when you're done, instead of going there, why don't you come to the south Tower? They have another library there. I'll be there."

"So we can whisper and get the Loremasters giving us dirty looks? I'll be there right after getting something to eat," he said with a laugh.

"But that will interfere with his learning to touch the Weave," Allia reminded Tarrin.

"Only if he reads the books," Tarrin told her.

"Then why ask me to come?" Dar asked.

"Because I want to talk to you," he replied, "and I'll be too busy to swing by your room."

"Oh. Well, I guess I can do it then," Dar said with a sly smile. "If I'm properly motivated."

"I've got some motivation right here," Tarrin told him, showing him his claws.

"Well, that doesn't really scare me anymore," Dar said with a grin.

"It will when you find out why you won't see them for long."

Dar laughed. "Alright, in order to avoid becoming Arkisian shishkebab, I'll be there. But right now, I gotta get back to class. The others are all leaving." A group of Initiates in similar beginner's red were all getting up.

"Alright. I'll see you tonight."

Dar nodded, then he got up and scurried over to join them. They were all giving him strange looks now, but he seemed oblivious to it. Dar didn't really see him as a Were-cat, Tarrin surmised. Dar saw him as just Tarrin.

If only others here could do that. Tarrin was a loner, and he thought he'd grown used to it, but the constant frightened looks and avoidance others gave him still stung. Only the *katzh-dashi* seemed to be able to approach him without fear, but he didn't trust any of them.

"Keep your schedule open for tonight, sister," Tarrin told her in Selani. "We're going on a trip."

"Where?"

"I want to go make sure my family settled in with my little mother alright," he replied. "Because mother tells me she's all but adopted you, we may as well make it a family gathering."

Allia laughed. "Your mother is quite a woman," she said. "She would've done my clan much honor had she been born to us rather than to the Ungardt."

"Mother would do well no matter where she is," Tarrin shrugged. "I also want to make sure my father's alright. I'm not used to seeing him in a sickbed. I'm worried about him."

"He's a strong man, my brother," Allia assured him. "He should be just fine."

"I'll know when I see him," he said seriously.

"You're a lucky man, my brother," Allia said with a smile. "You have two families now. Yours, and mine. If only my father could meet you. He would be impressed."

"He may get the chance, Allia," Tarrin said seriously. "He may get the chance."

The library in the South Tower *was* the South Tower.

The entire tower's volume was completely dominated by the massive library. It started on the ground floor and extended more than three quarters up the tower's height. Each floor was huge, more than thirty spans to the ceiling, and there were no separate rooms. Each level extended right out to the inside of the tower's circular walls. The levels also served to separate the subject matter of the rows upon rows of books. They had separate levels for magical theory, magical history of all four orders of magic, history, sociology, and a level dominated by ancient books that were all but falling apart, which housed the oldest lore which the Tower still possessed. They even had a level filled with nothing but the magical spell formulas that the Wizards used to create their magic, even though that information had absolutely no real value to the *katzh-dashi*. No mortal being could use more than one order of magic, Dolanna had told him during the journey to Suld.

That was a law set down by the Gods themselves. Because Tarrin was born with the ability to use Sorcery, that meant that if he ever tried to learn arcane magic, the magic of the Wizards, he would be driven mad as punishment.

He sat down at a table not far from where Lorefinders were taking those ancient tomes, literally falling apart, and using Sorcery to copy the words into new books, so that the lore held on the pages would not be lost should the book finally succumb to its great age. He'd pulled one of those freshly transcribed books from a shelf not far from the Lorefinders, curiosity driving him, and then opened it to find a script that looked like two spiders fighting in a web.

Blinking, he stared at the book. He figured that they would be transposing the information into the written common language, but what they were doing was literally copying from one book to another.

Someone chuckled behind him. He scented Jula, and turned to find that it was indeed her. She sat down opposite him and tapped the book, a smile on her face. "Now if you can read that, then I'm sure the Lorefinders would be overjoyed."

"What is it?"

"It's the written language that the Sha'Kar used," she replied. "You know who they were?"

Tarrin nodded. "They were the Non-human race that used to be in the Tower. When the Ancients left the world, the entire Sha'Kar race went with them."

"Yes, and everyone who knew their writing died two thousand years ago," she said. "Nobody's left to teach it, and the Lorefinders have been trying to decipher it for almost a thousand years. They haven't had any luck so far. Not even priestly or arcane magic can decipher it. Many think that the language is in itself magical."

"Another order?"

"No, that it actively resists magical attempts to decipher it. Unfortunately, it seems that all the important information that the Ancients kept was kept by the Sha'Kar. That leaves the descendants a bit in a pickle."

"You mean that the Ancients wrote all their knowledge down in this language?"

Jula nodded. "That's why we can't unlock the secrets of the Ancients," she told him. "They have it all written down in code. It may as well not be written down at all. Right here in this library is everything the Ancients ever knew, and it may as well be on the greatest moon," she said with a wry chuckle. "You have no idea how much that upsets a great many *katzh-dashi*. It's right here at our fingertips, but we can't read it."

Tarrin leafed through the book, and found a blurry patch in one corner. "What is this?"

"I guess it was an illustration, or drawing," Jula replied. "The magic the Lorefinders use literally copy the contents of one book into another. They already know what the forms of the letters look like, so they can make those sharp and clear. But the illustrations are another matter. Since they don't know what they are, they can't copy them clearly. So they get copied just as they appear in the old books."

"Why does this happen?"

"Age," Jula shrugged. "Time eats away the ink, the pages wear away, any number of things. That's why we don't even know what the Sha'Kar looked like. There are no surviving drawings, illustrations, or paintings of them."

"Aren't they described in a book?" Jula shook her head. "Why not?"

"Would you describe a pair of pants in a book of history? A flower? A spoon?"

"That's a silly answer."

"No, it's not. Those are common everyday things, things we expect would be around two thousand years from now. Why waste time describing something everyone has already seen?"

Tarrin thought about it. "Oh," he finally realized. "Everyone back then knew what a Sha'Kar looked like, the way everyone today knows about the Wikuni."

"Precisely. So they never really went into depth about them. All the books about the Sha'Kar were written in their language, and we can't read them. All we've managed to find out about the Sha'Kar is that they were a very human-looking race, just a bit taller than humans on the average, and were frail and delicate beings. They also had large eyes, and some in the Tower think that they may have had pointed ears."

The description sounded a little like Allia, up until the "frail and delicate" part. Allia was by no means frail and delicate. She only *looked* delicate, because she was so beautiful. Maybe the Selani and the Sha'Kar were very, very distantly related.

"When a lot of people in the Tower saw Allia, they thought that maybe the Selani and the Sha'Kar shared some kind of common ancestor," Jula told him, mirroring what he was thinking. "I think they've already put Sha'Kar books in front of her to see if she could read them."

"She didn't tell me about that."

"I guess she didn't think it was very important," Jula told him. "And since they're still working to break the language, I guess that means it didn't work."

"I guess not."

"So, why are you in here?" Jula asked. "You should be in class."

"My instructor had to talk to the Council, so I was given the rest of the day off," he replied. "She told me to come up here and read instead. But she didn't tell me what to read."

"I suggest that you start with *Studies On Efficiently Spinning Weaves*," she told him. "It was written by a Sorcerer named Walina about a thousand years ago, but her techniques on weaving spells are still fundamental principles taught to all our students. She was a real trailblazer."

"Where can I find that book?"

"It's that big book they keep on the pedestal in the entrance hall," she smiled. "But you can get another copy over there. Nobody's allowed to touch the original." She pointed to a shelf across from the Lorefinders, just behind the circular desk that served as the main station for the librarians.

"You should just ask the librarians, Tarrin. Tell them what you're interested in, and they'll send you right to it."

"I wasn't sure they'd let me have important books, since I'm just an Initiate."

"Tarrin, this library is for any who can touch the Weave," she told him. "You have as much right to be here as the Keeper herself." She glanced around. "Well, it's about time for me to get back to what I was doing. I'll see you later."

"Later," Tarrin mirrored, standing up with her.

Walina's book was very interesting. She described the raw forces that the Sorcerer was working with when they were touching the Weave, and then went on to discuss techniques of weaving flows that expanded on simple spellcraft. Techniques like knotting a weave so it would sustain itself for a while without having to be maintained, and layering one so that a second weave would activate after the first unravelled. Sorcery was limited in that there was no such thing as permanent spells for them, except when using Ritual Sorcery. All their magic lasted only as long as the Sorcerer concentrating on it. The effects of that magic could be permanent, like healing, but the magic itself was not. Knotting a weave made it draw on its own magic for a while, depending on the complexity of the weave and how well the knot was made. But even a knot only lasted a while before the weaves naturally untied themselves. Layering, Walina wrote, required tremendous skill to use, because placing one weave inside another without them interacting took considerable skill. Tarrin could see why. His own knowledge of Sorcery was somewhat limited, but his own short experience with it told him that flows loved to interact. To weave them in such a way that they wouldn't interact wouldn't be easy.

He was interrupted by someone knocking on the table, and he immediately scented Allia and Dar. He looked up in surprise, and realized that he'd been reading, totally absorbed, for the entire afternoon. "I wondered if you were awake," Dar said with a chuckle. "That must be some book."

"Actually, it is," Tarrin replied. "How did it go for you?"

"Boring," he grunted.

"How was your day, sister?" he asked Allia.

"They have started teaching me weaves," she replied. "I still cannot touch the Weave half the time, but they seem to be rushing me."

He only gave her a terse nod. He already had a good idea why. "Wait here a second," he told them, standing up. He went over to the librarian's station, where two small, older women busily sorted through a large number of books. They were sisters, from their scent, and had similar brownish, leathery skin and graying brown hair. They wore dresses of a pearly gray, made of a good wool by the smell of them, and were both well made and well maintained. "Excuse me, but can I borrow this?" he asked, holding up the book he was reading. The woman looked up at him, and to her credit, didn't so much as flinch when she realized who was talking to her.

"Let me see it," one of them said, holding out her hand. Tarrin gave her the book, and she glanced at the cover and opened it. "Yes, you can take this one with you," she told him. "Just write your name down on this sheet of parchment," she instructed, hastily scribbling the name of the book in a column on the right. There were a lot of names and a lot of book titles on that sheet of parchment. She turned it around and offered the quill pen she was using to him.

Tarrin took the small pen between two large fingers, struggling with it a bit. His body was very handy and he felt comfortable in it, but his oversized paws were simply incapable of some things. One was handling the tiny quill pen with enough delicacy to be able to write legibly. He had the agility and dexterity, but to try would probably break the pen. Such a delicate thing put between his fingers would most likely break, no matter how gentle he was trying to be. He solved the problem by taking on his human hands, feeling the ache instantly shoot through his knuckles and fingers as soon as claws were replaced by nails, and he quickly scrawled his name down on the page. It wasn't very pretty, because the shooting pain made it difficult to write with elegance, or even efficiency.

"You need to work on your penmanship, Initiate," she said in distaste, looking at the writing.

"That's the best I can do," he told her bluntly, letting his paws come back. He cracked his knuckles and flexed his fingers, working out the pain.

"At least until you have a pen that fits in these paws."

"Alright, I can accept that," she said with a straight face. "You have to either bring the book back or check it out again in three days. Don't be late."

"I won't," he said, putting the book under his arm and then going back to his friends.

Lounging in his room, Allia sitting on the bed behind him, playing idly with his tail as she read from a book given to her by her instructor, Tarrin puzzled through the book written by this Walina. Even though he'd had so little practical instruction in Sorcery, a lot of what the woman wrote made a lot of sense, and it went beyond the tricks she wrote about. The woman seemed to have a fundamental understanding of the Weave that went quite beyond that of the normal Sorcerer. She explained the flows and their power, the act of using Sorcery, even the mysterious seventh sphere in terms that Tarrin could easily understand.

Though Dolanna had already told him, Walina's writing drove home the very significant point that Sorcery was the magic of life. It represented the six basic forces that affected mankind: earth, air, fire, water, the power of the gods, and the human mind's intelligence and drive, and in a more esoteric way, the human will. It also encompassed the seventh sphere, that which held all the others together, and the power of this seventh sphere was limited only by the ability of those who tried to use it. Where the other six spheres represented single forces, the seventh was both its own unique power and a power that comprised the other six, at the same time. It was all six, and none of them. That didn't make much sense to him, and Walina didn't explain it. She wrote that it was a paradox, a living representation of the mysterious ways in which the world worked, ways incomprehensible to mortal minds.

Because it was the magic of the world, it was limited to the world. That meant that Sorcery had no effect on things and creatures that existed outside of Sennadar's natural order. Tarrin already knew what that meant; the creatures conjured up by Wizards. They weren't of this world, they were brought in from somewhere else. Sorcery existed in a balance between the other four orders of magic, where each was checked by another's power,

and itself held yet another in balance. Walina explained that there were no physical or magical rules for why this was the case, only that it had to be something set forth by the Elder Gods, the ten gods of creation who represented the primal forces of the universe. Sorcerers could disrupt the magical spells of Wizards and Priests by cutting them off from the Weave, for the magic they utilized had to travel *through* the Weave to reach them, despite the fact that it originated from a place not of the Weave. Sorcerers could also create Illusions, something which only they could do. Sorcerers, in turn, could be choked off from the Weave by Druids, who had the power to alter nature itself, and the Weave was a natural part of the world. Wizards could Conjure creatures from beyond Sennadar, and had the most versatile type of magic. There were thousands of researched magical spells for use by the Wizards, waiting to be learned and used by them. And since Arcane magic, the magic of the Wizards, was a learned skill and not a natural ability, anyone with sufficient intelligence could learn its secrets. This made the Wizard both the most common form of magic-user, and the most versatile. Priests could perform true healing and cure diseases, something that Sorcerers couldn't even come close to matching, and they could disrupt Druidic magic by using their power to call on their patron God to isolate the Druid from the power of nature which was at his command. A Sorcerer's healing was a very limited and crude form of healing when compared to the granted power of the priest. There was a bit of overlapping. Both Sorcerers and Priests had healing capability, and Wizards could cast spells called *phantasms* that made people *believe* that something was real when it was not, which was a shortcut to the power of Illusion. And though only Wizards could conjure beings from outside the world, which were the most powerful of creatures, all four orders of magic had the capability to summon types of beings and creatures particular to their orders. Priests could summon forth spiritual forces called *Avatars* which were minor physical manifestations of the God's power in the world, and therefore would help the priest, and the priests of the twin gods of death, Dakki and Dakku, could speak to the souls of the dead to gain information. Both Sorcerers and Druids had the power to call forth beings called *Elementals*, creatures comprised entirely of one of the four elements that existed in nature. They would obey Druids without question, but they did not like Sorcerers, and would resist any orders given to them by a calling Sorcerer. Druids could also directly summon forth beings of nature to act in the

defense of the Druid. Tarrin himself fell into that category; if a Druid made such a summons, and he was in range to hear the call, he would be compelled magically to respond. Tarrin was human-born, but Were-cats were Were, and all Were were creatures of the land.

Sorcery was the only order where magic was not permanent for the most part. Only spells woven in Ritual Sorcery, utilizing the seventh sphere, were truly permanent weaves, and they usually tended to be Wards and the enchantment of mundane objects with magical capabilities. But, on the other side of the coin, Walina wrote that Sorcery was the most powerful of all four orders, for three simple reasons. Firstly, that a Sorcerer could stop the magic of Wizards and Priests. That Druids could stop them was generally not an issue, due to the fact that Druids were an even rarer breed than Sorcerers. Secondly, that only Sorcerers could combine their power in linked circles, which magnified their power tenfold. And thirdly, because a linked circle, using High Sorcery, could directly control the weather. Not even Druids could accomplish that feat, because the weather was the most powerful natural force there was, and no one Druid had that much power. Walina wrote that some suspected that the Sorcerer's inability to create permanent weaves was a check placed on their power, but she herself considered it simply a natural function of the Weave itself. Spells woven from the Weave were not natural, and flows pulled from strands always tried to return to them, which made weaves unravel. Tarrin had to agree with that.

It seemed pretty complicated, but Walina wrote that she firmly believed that if a Sorcerer understood how all types of magic worked, it would help him or her in dealing with the magic of the Weave. Tarrin wasn't so sure about that, but everything else he'd read so far seemed to make sense, so he'd take the author at her word.

The door opened, and both of them looked up to see Keritanima almost fly into the room, then slam the door behind her and lean against it. There was a wild look in her eyes, and she had a few crumpled sheets of paper in her furred hand. Tarrin was about to say something to her, but then he realized that her obvious panting was making no sound, and that he hadn't heard her bump up against the door. She also didn't have a scent.

"Ker--" Allia began, but he cut her off with a quickly waved paw.

The door opened again, going *through* the Princess. Or, Tarrin realized, through her Illusion. The real Keritanima strode in calmly, shutting the door, with a very wide grin on her face.

"That was an illusion?" Allia asked in surprise.

Keritanima nodded, her eyes bright and her grin evil. "Pretty good, isn't it?" she asked brightly in Selani. As always, when she wanted to talk about something important, she spoke in Selani. That told Tarrin her visit wasn't entirely a social one.

"It wasn't making any sound, and it doesn't have a scent," Tarrin told her critically.

"Spoilsport," she said with a teasing smile, sitting down on the chair by the small desk. "You and me are the only two with noses that sensitive, and I didn't weave in the spell to create the sounds. I have too much trouble weaving more spells than one at a time." She pulled her hair away from her face. "But it'll do wonders driving Jervis and his men crazy. I've already sent them chasing after an image in the maze, then I just walked away wearing the illusion of a human."

"You're getting good at this," Tarrin said.

"I think I have a knack for it," she said with a shrug. "I think I may need it," she said, holding up the three pages the illusory Keritanima had been holding. "I got these from Jervis' desk."

"What are they?" Allia asked.

"Reports about me," she replied. "It seems that the *katzh-dashi* never said anything about training me in Sorcery. Jervis almost scared my fur off this morning, and he sent a report off almost immediately. The reply came back about an hour ago."

"That fast?"

"Priests of Kikalli are on every ship the Wikuni puts afloat, and there are two of them on the grounds," she told him. "They've developed magic that lets them talk with each other over any distance. That lets us move our ships around very precisely, and it keeps us in control of the seas. The priest sent to aid Jervis sent off the message, and the priest there at the Royal Palace relayed the response from my father."

"How did you get those?" Tarrin asked curiously. If they had been private reports, then she'd had to do something sneaky to get her paws on them.

Keritanima only grinned at him slyly. "A good magician doesn't reveal her secrets," she winked, then she smoothed out the papers and looked at them. "The first is the message Jervis sent. It tells father that, for one, I have talent for Sorcery, and that the Sorcerers haven't taught me anything other than Sorcery since I got here. My father replied with a suitable consternation," she said with a slight sniff. "My father thinks I have the mental capability of a goldfish, so for them to tell him that I have talent in Sorcery is about the same as telling him that livestock is doing navigational mathematics."

Allia chuckled, but Tarrin only gave her a calm look. "That's what you want him to think, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but it'd be nice if he at least *suspected* that I wasn't a total waste of space," she said with a tightness in her voice that set off a bell in Tarrin's head. Keritanima *wanted* her father to find out that she was more than she appeared, but she'd die before she gave it away. She didn't want to be queen, but she also wanted her father's respect. It was quite a paradox, one he felt that even she couldn't reconcile. Keritanima's act was aimed at her sisters and enemies more than her father. After all, her father wasn't trying to kill her to get the throne. He was probably fighting off his own enemies to keep it.

"He also demanded them to send the message again, to make sure they got it correctly. After they confirmed it, he went into one of his rages. He replied that he didn't send me here to learn Sorcery, and even though he understood the need for me to learn how to control it, that I'd better be getting the education the Tower promised to give me. He told Jervis that if they didn't take me out of the Initiate and put me in normal classes, he'd drag me back home."

"That," Tarrin said after a moment, "could be a problem."

"Slightly," she grunted.

"How long do you think it's going to take for them to make that decision?" Allia asked.

"It's going to depend on how effective the Tower is at stalling," Keritanima replied. "They obviously want me in the Initiate, and they'll play their own game to keep me there. It's going to be a dance between the Crown and the Tower until one of them blinks. After that, things will definitely happen. So this means that we have to act before things get dangerous enough to slow us down."

"We're moving up?" Tarrin asked.

Keritanima nodded. "I want to go visit the cathedral in three days," she told him. "And we can't be delicate about it, either. It's going to be an old fashioned robbery, Tarrin. We're going to steal anything we can carry out of there that'll be useful to us." She put the papers on his desk. "And because that will cause a row, we can't keep it anywhere obvious. So I'd like you to steal a good waterproof tent and several chests, and try to sneak them into the courtyard inside the maze. We'll cover the chests with the tent canvas and camouflage it so anyone looking in from the top of the Tower can't see it."

"They can't see it anyway," Allia told her. "I've been to the top of the Tower, and the courtyard isn't visible from it. You can't even see the statue."

"As tall as it is, I'm surprised," Keritanima said sincerely. "I'd have thought that anyone could just look right down into it. What *can* you see?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing, just hedgerows," Allia replied. "It's like there isn't a courtyard."

"Allia, the courtyard is too large," Keritanima protested. "You *have* to be able to see it."

"Maybe not," Tarrin said cautiously.

"What?"

"Maybe they can't see it," he said.

"Tarrin, how could they miss something like *that*?" the Wikuni demanded.

"Maybe it doesn't want to be seen," he said after a brief hesitation. "There's something magical about that place, Kerri. I think all three of us

agree to that." Both of them nodded in agreement. "So maybe the place hides itself. It's obvious that nobody knows that it's there. Or at least nobody bothers to visit it."

"You mean that someone or something went out of its way to create a place that nobody can find?"

"I found it," Tarrin said calmly. "Maybe it's just someplace that a *human* couldn't find. Maybe a Sorcerer used a weave from the flows of Mind that hides the place, and since I'm not human, it didn't affect me."

Keritanima gave him a very penetrating look, then she snorted. "I don't think I like where this is going, so I think I'll drop it," she told him tersely.

"Why not?"

"Alright, since you want to press it, think a minute. Allia said she couldn't see the place from the top of the Tower."

"That's right," Allia said. "I couldn't see anything."

"So, Allia *isn't human*," Keritanima pointed out. "So there goes that theory. I can't explain it, and I don't think I want to know *how*, but I'll accept that something is hiding that place."

Tarrin thought that he knew, but he wasn't sure if he should tell them. Even his friends knew his sanity was tenuous, and if he started claiming that he had spoken with the Goddess of the Sorcerers, they'd probably go running for the Keeper. And he really wouldn't blame them. He was pretty sure that she kept the courtyard hidden, but he didn't know why, and he wasn't sure why she allowed him to find it.

"Alright, but do we want to depend on that?" Tarrin asked. "My parents live in the city. I'm going to go visit them tonight. If I ask, they'll probably let us bring the booty there."

"No," Keritanima said. "The Priests may be able to track it down with magic if we hide it in the city. But I'll bet my furry tail that their magic won't penetrate the Ward surrounding the grounds, so they won't know where to look to find what we steal."

"That's a very good point," Allia agreed. "If we have to live with the Ward, we may as well use it in our favor for a change."

"Just so," Keritanima agreed with a smile.

"Well, I was going to tell you this later, but since you're here, it may as well be now," Tarrin began. "I went to the library where they hold all the real books on magic, Kerri, and your idea of researching may come up empty."

"Why?"

"Because the Ancients wrote everything down in the language of the Sha'Kar," he told her. "Nobody knows it anymore. Jula told me that the Tower already has almost everything the Ancients knew in their library, but there's nobody left that can read it."

Keritanima scratched her muzzle absently. "So they lied in the lesson where they said the Ancients took everything with them."

"Probably not," Allia said. "They very well may have. What the Tower managed to gather is probably the books that the Ancients missed. It may be everything they knew, and it was just copies of what was already here."

"True," the Wikuni agreed. "So, it's a bust?"

Tarrin nodded. "Everything of importance to the Ancients was written in Sha'Kar, I was told."

"That's not what I was after, Tarrin."

"No, but Jula's talk made it apparant that the *katzh-dashi* had already tried what you wanted to try," he told her. "She described the Sha'Kar from what she said were records left behind that they could read. I think that's a pretty good indication that they'd researched as much of the Ancients as they could too, because she said the Lorefinders have been trying to break the code of the Sha'Kar writing for a thousand years."

"Hmm," the Wikuni pondered, eyes dropping to the floor as her fox ears ticked reflexively. "I think you're right, brother dear," she said absently. "I didn't know about the Sha'Kar books."

"I didn't either. I think the Tower keeps them a secret," Tarrin replied.

"That, or it's something that nobody talks about," Keritanima added. "I've noticed that there are alot of things that people don't talk about around here." She stood up. "That makes the cathedral that much more important,"

she announced. "More and more, it looks like almost everything we'll be able to use will be what we can take out of there."

"If there's anything in there at all," Tarrin added.

"Don't be a pessimist," Keritanima chided.

"You shouldn't pin all our hopes on a cloud," Tarrin returned.

"I'm not, believe me," she said. "If we can't find anything useful in the cathedral, then we're just going to run. We'll have to take our chances."

"You keep talking more and more about running," Allia noticed.

"That's because I have no intention of going back to Wikuna," she said bluntly. "It's either the throne or the grave for me, and the throne will *lead* to the grave. I have a much better chance here."

"You're Wikuni, Kerri," Tarrin said. "That makes you very easy to find."

"True, but I'm getting as far away from the sea as possible." That sounded as unnatural as one could get to Tarrin. Wikuni were born on the deck of a clipper, and to ply the seas and trade was all that their race lived for. "My father's reach shortens considerably once you lose sight of the sea. Besides, the only place we can go to escape the Tower is Allia's desert. The Selani are the only people that can protect us."

"I'll not have my father challenge the Tower until I know there's a good reason to run," Allia warned her. "You may be casual with my people, but my clan will be taking a very serious risk in harboring us if the Tower wants us badly enough. You forget, you're talking about an order that can send the weather itself to attack my people. My people can't fight the wind."

"Allia, as far as I'm concerned, we already have reason enough to run," the Wikuni replied. "It's blatantly obvious that they want something from us. They didn't bring us here just in the interests of interracial peace. They want something from us, and it must be bad, because they won't tell us what it is. You don't withhold information unless that information threatens your plans. If this task wasn't anything serious, or it wasn't dangerous, we'd have already been thoroughly prepared for it long before we took our first crack at touching the Weave." She sat back down again irritably. "I have the very strong feeling that we're being offered up like sacrificial lambs to further the Tower's goals, and I'm a girl that's learned to listen to her gut. It's saved

me more times than I can conveniently count. That tells me right there how bad the Sorcerers want it. To put *me* in danger risks a war with my father, and no kingdom that borders the sea is insane enough to get into a war with Wikuna. And you, Allia, if your father found out that they killed you for their own ends, I have no doubt that the Selani would Call Council and pour over the Sandshield like a tidal wave of destruction."

Both Tarrin and Allia were quiet for a very long moment. Keritanima was right. If this task wasn't dangerous, they *would* have extensively prepared them for it. A soldier that fully understood the objectives of the mission stood a much better chance of successfully completing it. And the Tower was going to an awful risk. If Damon Eram or Allia's father found out that their daughters were being trained for a suicide mission, the destruction would reach staggering levels, because those forces would have to take Sulasia apart to get at the Tower itself. Wikuna and the Selani were two of the forces in the Known World that no nation wanted to cross, because they had a *very* long reach.

"I don't know about you two, but I don't want to be here when they decide to choose one of us," she told them bluntly. "I have the feeling that Tarrin will be their choice, but if he should fail, one of us would be next. I've lived too long to get killed by something that I never intended to cross paths with in the first place."

The attention of half the world is fixed directly on your shoulders, Tarrin remembered the Goddess saying. Yes, he would be their choice. But for what?

"I can't argue with your logic," Allia said finally. "So I'll have to admit that it would be a risk I would allow my father to take. And after we tell my father about what went on here, he'd certainly protect us. He did not send me here to become a pawn in the Tower's games."

"The only part I can't figure out is *you*," Keritanima said, pointing at Tarrin. "You're the one part that doesn't fit. And I want to know why."

"How do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

"Because how you ended up here doesn't make sense," she said directly. "One thing we all share is that we're all non-human. But you started out

human. That link between us falls apart when I try to figure out why the Tower brought you here."

"It was bad luck that Jesmind--"

"No," she cut him off. "You told me that Jesmind was controlled. Someone *sent* her after you, and I've seen you fight. You wouldn't have stood a chance against her as a human, controlled or not. She would have ripped you in half the instant she got her claws into you."

"I didn't *let* her get her claws into me," Tarrin flared. "I held my own long enough for Dolanna to get there and use Sorcery on her." He grabbed his left arm almost unconsciously, the arm Jesmind had bitten.

"I'll grant you that," Keritanima said. "But you said yourself that them getting you as well as us was blind luck. I don't think so now."

"Why?"

"Because, brother dear, they'll choose *you*," she said with penetrating eyes. "I believe in luck, but this is luck that would make Bekir herself look twice." She got up again and began to pace. "You're a black sheep, Tarrin," she began. "You ended up non-human by accident. You're not important, you're just a farmboy from a backwater frontier village."

"Well thank you very much," Tarrin said acidly.

"Brother, you mean the world to me, but I'm looking at the big picture, not my view of it," she said with a disarming smile. "You *are* a nobody, Tarrin. You're not important. Or you *weren't* important before Jesmind sank her fangs in your arm. That's when you *became* important. Me and Allia, we share certain commonalities. We're both royalty, and we're both non-human by birth and upbringing. You don't fit in with us. You're a human in a non-human's body. Sure, you're not human now, but you were born human, and you still try to act human. Maybe that's what makes you so important, or maybe it was indeed just raw blind luck. Either way, the Tower will use you, and *they* know why. I want to know too."

"That doesn't explain why you think Jesmind was sent after me," Tarrin said bluntly. Keritanima was starting to jump around, and he couldn't quite follow her line of thought. She tended to leave things out when she was

talking her way through a problem, so he focused on the part he did understand.

"Because of the one thing that *does* link us all, Tarrin," she said. "We were born as royalty. You were born with royal blood, even if you were brought up as a country bumpkin. You're the son of a clan-chief's daughter. If you didn't know, an Ungardt clan-chief is a king. That makes you a prince. I don't think the others in your party have that distinction."

Tarrin gaped at her.

"You know what I think happened?" she said. "I think they set Jesmind loose on you to *infect* you, not to *kill* you. And then they were going to collect you up and train you to do the same thing that the Tower wants us to do, because the rumor and information I've gathered so far points to something that more than the Tower knows, something that's important enough for kingdoms to fight wars over. But you ended up in the Tower instead of with them, whoever they are, and when they realized that, they did their best to kill you. The reason that they almost specifically came after *you* is the same reason why I'll believe that you'll be chosen for this task. We don't come anywhere near you, Tarrin. Not in strength, fighting ability, survivability, or power in Sorcery. You're the logical choice, and that's why the ones that don't have you want to kill you so badly."

Tarrin stared at her in shock. He had no idea what to say, no idea what to do. It all rang true with an awful clarity, and there was a logic to it that he could not deny.

"But now that you're having trouble controlling your power, they'll get unpredictable," Keritania added. "They'll bend you backwards trying to get you to do it right. And they'll want it *now*. Just be careful, Tarrin. As soon as they think that you can't get your power under control, the *Tower* is going to try to kill you. You're much too dangerous a weapon to be allowed to leave here alive, because they know that *they* will snap you up and try to get you to do whatever it is that they want done. So even if you can't control your power, make them believe that you can. It'll only extend your own life."

Tarrin was both awestruck and dumbfounded. Everything that she said fit in with everything that had already happened, and they were motives that

explained a lot of what had already happened to him. Even he had wondered at how he survived the fight with Jesmind. Keritanima could be right; maybe the collar around her neck *prevented* her from killing him. One of the few things he remembered about the nightmarish fight was her poised to kill, the pose that she was locked into when Dolanna wrapped her up. He had no idea if that blow would have been delivered now, because she *did* follow through with a blow meant to kill at the very beginning, when he'd woken up to see her trying to rip out his throat. Was she there to kill him, or to turn him Were? It was a chaotic jumble in his mind, and he struggled to remember something, anything, about the fight that would tip the scales for one side or the other. But it was a blank. He had blocked the majority of the fight from his mind, because of the intense pain he sensed he had endured both in the fight and in the subsequent transformation. Because he wasn't sure, then Keritanima's offering had some merit. It did explain the attacks, and it also explained the Goddess' cryptic remarks about his importance. But the attacks could also be explained with Jesmind being sent to kill him, and for mainly the same reasons.

Keritanima trusted her instincts. Tarrin had learned that lesson as well. He wasn't sure about all of it, but something in what Keritanima had said clicked within him. What she said made sense. He didn't know if it was right, but it made more sense than anything else he'd come up with. He had no idea how she could so fluently and quickly reach those conclusions, but it made him realize just how intelligent the complicated little Wikuni really was.

It was at that moment more than any other that he realized that his very life was being held in the slender Wikuni's manicured little paws. And that he trusted her with it explicitly.

She had literally bowled him over with her observations, and had left him speechless. Sudden rage coiled up in him at the thought that someone may have done this to him, had had Jesmind turn him Were just to make him suitable to complete some form of task. It sent him flying into the highest type of rage he could hold without losing himself to his animal instincts. How *dare* they destroy his life! What right did they have! If that was the case, then whoever did would pay, and pay *dearly*. He would have absolutely no mercy. Allia's hand came to rest on his shoulder, and that was when he realized he was actually trembling with rage. His mind whirled

with possibilities, but the same icy discipline that kept him from going crazy when he found out he'd been turned. Were again clamped down on his mind, forcing him to calm down and think rationally. Emotion was tossed aside, and a steely layer of cold reasoning took control of him. "Either way, Kerri, it makes one thing very clear."

"What?"

"We can't leave until we have a better understanding of what's going on," he said. "We have to know what we're up against before we try to get away from it, and as much as we can find out about what's going on. Who they are, how many there are, what they may do if we run, and how bad they want to follow us. We may *need* to know in order to escape."

"That's what I intend to do," she said. "I have to think about what you told me for a while. I have to make new plans. Oh, yes, Tiella bathes at the second bell, so you should go talk to her in the morning. That's what I came in here to tell you in the first place, and I'm running out of time. I'm sure that Jervis' men realize that I'm not in the maze, and they're probably looking for me."

She came over and licked the side of his cheek with her fox-like tongue, her version of a kiss, then took Allia's hand warmly. "Keep him from gnawing on the furniture, *shaida*," she said in an outrageous voice that broke the tension.

Allia laughed, and Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "I will do my best," Allia said in a completely insincere serious voice. "Take care, and be careful."

"I'm always careful," she said, her tail swishing back and forth as she quickly went to the door, opened it, looked both ways, then scurried out.

"That was eventful," Allia said carefully. "I think she's hit some truth, but not all of it."

"I think so too," Tarrin said in a somber voice. "I think so too."

"Well, it won't do you any good to sit in here and brood. We have an appointment, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember," he said. "We'll go as soon as it's dark."

"Good. The time with your family will do you good. This place isn't good for you, *deshida*. It keeps you too nervous."

"I have a good reason to be," he said, leaning back onto the bed.

"Then let's go take it out on the practice field," she said. "It's been too long since we worked out, and a little exercise will do your mind good."

"I think you're right," he agreed. "I need to find my staff. I lost it in the fight with that thing, and nobody's returned it yet."

"Someone has to have it," she said. "Let's go find it, and then we'll go onto the field."

They were two ghosts flitting through the darkness, and despite the very heavy patrolling and human presence, they passed through the Tower grounds like shadows.

Moving with absolute silence, Tarrin and Allia crept along the buildings and through the clearings with guards all around them, moving confidently and quickly between gaps in their patrols. Allia was Selani, and they had developed hiding and the ways of stealth quite beyond the human ideas of it. She proved she was everything her race was said to be by keeping up with the Were-cat as he moved on padded feet that made no sound, using his ears and nose to ferret out the position and direction of the guard patrols so they could more easily work around them. Because he had been trapped there, Tarrin knew the grounds better than most of the guards, and he knew where every nook and cranny was that would allow the Selani to hide herself from sight. Tarrin simply changed form, and used his small cat body as a disguise. At a distance, the guards couldn't tell Tarrin from any of the other cats that roamed the grounds.

--*How much further?*-- Allia signed to him in the Selani hand code. She could understand him when he spoke in the manner of the Cat, but she couldn't reply in the same way. But it was a moot point, for her hand code was just as comprehensive as her spoken tongue. There was a handsign for almost every word in her language.

"Not too far, just past those buildings," he replied in the unspoken manner of the Cat, hunkered down in the dewing grass as they watched a

ten man patrol march by with torches casting dancing shadows on a series of low buildings behind them. Some of them were wearing heavy cloaks, to hold off the autumn chill. Winter wasn't far away, Tarrin knew, and the cloudless night wasn't doing much to keep what heat was left from the cool day trapped near the ground. The first frost couldn't be but a few days off.

She made a slight whistling sound to make him look at her. --*How far away is the house?*--

"Now that I'm not sure of," he replied. "It's been a while since I came from there. I remember how to get there, but I was in cat form when I did it. The distances aren't the same to me, because it takes me longer to get places in this form."

--*Ah. It still can't be that far away.*--

"Suld's a big city, litter-mate," he said, using the cat's concept of the word *sister*. "But it didn't take me more than an hour to get to the Tower, so I figure that it'll take us about half an hour to find it. Alright, let's move."

Tarrin shifted back to his humanoid form, and the pair darted across a large open area, the last of them before reaching the fence, and then slipped between two low storage buildings that faced the perimeter fence. He looked to and fro, testing the air with his nose, straining to hear movement with his ears. There was no guard patrol nearby, and he thought that they had enough time to negotiate the passage through the fence.

They ran on silent feet up to the fence, and they immediately began a pre-arranged plan to get through the fence as fast as possible. Allia first reached out, to see if the Ward would prevent her from passing through it as Tarrin did the same, to show her where it was. Allia's hand passed through, where Tarrin's hand was stopped. Once they knew that, Tarrin bent down and put his paw out, and Allia stepped into it. After two silent hefts to prepare themselves, Tarrin vaulted Allia into the air, pushing her as she jumped off his driving paw. She soared up and over the fence, then landed and rolled gracefully on the paved street beyond. Tarrin pulled off his shirt quickly and tossed it down over the ward, between the bars of the fence. Whatever magic the bars of the fence held that kept others out, it didn't react to non-living things, so it did nothing to the cloth of the shirt. Tarrin changed form quickly and rooted under the tail of his Initiate shirt, then

wriggled through and under the bars, squirming out of the neck on the far side of the fence as Allia took out a cloak with a deep hood from where it was tied onto her back, shook it out, then put it on. Then he changed form again, snatched up his shirt, and the pair of them sprinted off into the darkness.

They slowed down and worked the streets parallel to the fence until they crossed a street that Tarrin knew, and then Allia followed him silently as Tarrin backtracked the path he took to get from his little mother to the Tower. It hadn't been all that long ago, but his point of view was different in his base form, so it took some adjustment that slowed them down a bit. The streets were occupied, but as he thought, he didn't attract a great deal of attention. They simply took him for a Wikuni, albeit an unusual one, and that was the end of that. Allia *would* attract attention, were she not hiding herself in the deep folds of the long cloak and hood she was wearing.

It took him almost an hour, but he finally found the stately house behind its iron fence. In his humanoid form, he could appreciate how large and grand his little mother's house was. Tomas was a very successful merchant. "Is this it?" Allia whispered as Tarrin looked to see if anyone else was on the street.

"This is it," he confirmed, jumping up onto the top of the ornate iron fence, then reaching down and helping Allia up and over it. They worked through the almost dead garden, a garden prepared for the winter's cold, until they were at the front door. Allia knocked on it boldly as Tarrin stood off to the side, out of sight of the door. Janette was the only one that knew how he looked out of cat form, and he didn't want to startle or surprise whoever opened the door.

It was the matronly, gray-bunned maid, Nanna. "Yes, may I help you?" she asked politely as she took in the dark, mysterious stranger standing on the doorstep, hidden in the shadows of a cloak and deep cowl.

"I am looking for the Kaels," Allia said in her accented voice. "I was told that they would be here."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you have the wrong house," she said. "This is the residence of the Kellers."

Tarrin quickly changed form, and then boldly walked out onto the porch in front of Allia. He meowed to get Nanna's attention, and the matronly woman looked down. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and then she gave out a gasp that turned into a smile. "Oh, *he* sent you," she said. "Yes, yes, please come in."

Allia entered in with Tarrin as he padded in through the open door. All the scents he remembered from the house were there, as well as scents of his parents and sister, and it washed a wave of nostalgia and misty memory over him. In many ways, the house and the people in it were family to him. His real parents, and the adopted family that had taken a nearly insane Tarrin and, with love and attention and giving him a quiet place to work through his problems, returned him to a balance with himself. Janette was only a little girl, but she held a place in his heart that only his mother, Dolanna, and Jesmind shared. He would kill for Janette, just as quickly as he would give his life to protect her. "Allia, tell her I'm going to change, so she doesn't get frightened."

"Madam, he's going to change. He doesn't want you to be frightened."

"Let me close the door," she said, shutting the door and throwing two heavy bolts. "He won't frighten me, my dear. I've already been told about him."

Tarrin returned to his humanoid form easily, and Nanna gave him an appraising look that almost made him feel uncomfortable. "I must say, you're very, large," she said with a charming smile. "I don't see how you fit yourself into such a little body."

"Magic," Tarrin said with a shrug. "I've missed you, Nanna. How have you been?"

"Things have been slow," she sighed. "Janette moped around for a while, at least until Janine got her another cat. I'm afraid that Socks isn't half as obedient as you were."

Tarrin laughed. "I'll have a talk with him," he promised. "Was there any trouble with my family?"

"Janine was a bit put out, but you know how she is," Nanna said with a wink. "But now she has two little girls to turn into little ladies, and she gets

along rather well with your mother. Tomas and your father act like they've been drinking buddies for fifty years."

"I knew that they'd take a liking to my family," Tarrin said, with a relief in his voice that belied his words. "I'm just sorry I had to send them here, but I couldn't think of anywhere else safe."

"It's alright, Tarrin," Nanna told him. "Tomas and Janine wouldn't turn them away, though Janine would complain about it a while. They're very good people." Nanna suddenly blushed. "And all that time, I thought you were a cat. I do hope that you'll be discreet?"

Nanna had a habit of talking to herself, and the things she said when she thought she was alone were very private. He fully understood why she blushed. "And what would I have to be discreet about, Nanna?" he asked in a direct voice.

She chuckled. "You're such a good boy," she said, reaching up and patting his cheek. "And this is Allia?"

"I see my parents talk," Tarrin said ruefully. "Allia, this is Nanna."

"A pleasure," she said, removing her hood, then unbuckling the brass buckle that held the cloak on her shoulders. She reached out her slender four-fingered hand confidently, and Nanna took it.

"Such a lovely young woman," Nanna said with a smile. "I've heard quite a bit about you, Allia. Tarrin's mother thinks of you as sent by the gods."

"No, I am not quite as important as that," Allia said with a rueful smile.

"Nanna, who's at the door?" Tomas' voice called, and he appeared beyond the entrance foyer. He looked just fine, much to Tarrin's relief, and he gave out a laugh and a broad smile when he recognized the visitors for what they were. "Well, look who drug in the cat," he said with a broad smile. "It's strange to see you that way, Shadow."

"Tarrin," he corrected with a grin, going over and taking Tomas' hand fondly. "I hope you don't mind that I sent my family here, Tomas. But I didn't know of anywhere else safe."

"They had to explain a bit as to how they knew who we were, but once we found out all the details, we were happy to accept them," Tomas assured him. "I've already made a few business deals with your father," he said slyly. "Do you know how much his apple brandy fetches in Suld? Not to mention his arrows."

Tarrin laughed. "You are a merchant to the core, Tomas," he said.

"Thank you," he winked. "And this must be Allia," he said, looking at the beautiful Selani.

Tarrin nodded. "Allia, this is Tomas, Janette's father," Tarrin introduced. "Tomas, this is Allia, my sister."

"I'll assume that the relationship isn't natural," Tomas said with a smile as he accepted Allia's hand.

"We were not born siblings, but we are in every other sense of the word," Allia said calmly. "Tarrin is like blood to me."

"Then you'll be like blood to us," Tomas said simply. "We've all but adopted Tarrin's family, and there's always room for one more at our table."

"You are most generous, Tomas," Allia said.

"What's the use of having money if you can't use it?" Tomas smiled. "Come, I know quite a few people who will be overjoyed to see you. They're in the parlor. Nanna, why don't you forget taking care of the dishes and come join us?"

"I'm almost finished, Tomas," Nanna replied. Though she was a servant, the servants in Tomas' house were very well treated, and almost like family themselves. Nanna never used titles for them when they were alone. When they had company was another matter. "I'll be along in just a bit. You know how messy Deris is when he cooks, and how much I hate dirt."

Tomas laughed. "Don't take too long, Nanna. And make Deris help you clean up his mess."

"I always do," she said with a smile. Deris and Nanna were married, and it helped make the house seem more like a family affair. Only the butler, Dernan, had no kin or family in the house. But he was such a sweet old man that everyone treated him with respect, courtesy, and a great deal of

friendship. Janette called him Grandfather. Thinking of Dernan made Tarrin realize that it wasn't him that opened the door. "Where is Dernan?" Tarrin asked suddenly.

"He's gone to Three Forks to see his family," he replied. "His sister has taken ill, and they asked him to come."

"That's quite a journey. When did he leave?"

"Five days ago. He should be two days out of Ultern by now." Three Forks was a city south of Torrian, and they could have gone that way to reach Suld. But the river at Marta's Ford was much faster. There was a road that linked Three Forks to Ultern, but that was a fifteen day journey through unclaimed forest. There wasn't so much as an inn between Ultern and Three Forks, and it was a dangerous road. Tarrin hoped that Dernan was wise enough to travel with an armed caravan.

They entered the parlor, with its large fireplace where Tarrin had spent so many nights, the plush furniture and the tasteful portraits and art decorating the walls, but it was the people inside that Tarrin fixed his attention upon. Sitting in her favorite chair was Janine, a book in her lap, and in another chair near her was his mother, Elke, who was actually doing needlepoint. Eron Kael was sitting in a large chair by the fire, and Jenna and Janette were sitting on the bare floor off the rug, playing a game with metal jacks and a ball made out of a strange springy substance that made it bounce very high.

Jenna saw him first. She gasped and jumped up, startling Janette, and charged towards him. "Tarrin!" she cried, and he knelt down and let her fling herself into his arms. Jenna was a tall girl, but she still only came up to the base of his ribcage. Tarrin picked up his sister and twirled her around, then set her down as Janette managed to stand up. Elke was already halfway to him, and Janine had put her book aside as Eron struggled to his feet.

"I see you found it," Tarrin said to his mother as she embraced him.

"Your directions were lousy," she accused, going over to hug Allia. "How are you, Allia?"

"I am very well, *kaisha*," she said, which was a Selani term for mother. That Allia would call Elke "mother" was a clear indication of how she felt about Tarrin's parents.

Tarrin crushed his father in a fierce hug, and Eron winced a bit. "Still tender, father?" he asked, holding Eron at arm's length.

"A bit, but at least the Sorcerers fixed my knee," he said. "I don't limp anymore."

"Well, at least they're good for something," Tarrin said with a smile. He pushed his father aside gently and knelt as Janette approached him, almost warily. Tarrin held his paw out to her tentatively, emotion rising up in him. "Little mother," he said in a voice of the most profound respect and love.

She threw herself into his arms, and it was all Tarrin could do to keep from crying. The little girl meant as much to him as his own parents or sister or Allia. He enfolded her, surrounding her in his arms the same way she would enfold him in her protective embrace, and the same feeling of peace and security swept over him at her touch as it used to do when he was her pet.

She looked up at him with teary eyes, and he was amazed at how easily she accepted him as more than just her cat. She truly was a wondrous little girl.

"They gave me a new cat, but it's just not the same," she told him in a serious voice.

"I'll have a talk with it, little mother," he promised with a gentle smile.

Nanna brought out a plate of sweetmeats, and that gave them all a focal point. Tarrin folded Janine up in a warm hug as she came over, and she just smiled at him and swatted him on the shoulder. "I almost didn't believe her, until your parents showed up," she told him in an accusing voice. "That was a mean trick to play."

"It wasn't a trick, Janine," he told her. "I *needed* the time here."

"Your parents explained that to us," she told him.

"I hope I'm still welcome."

"Tarrin, you may have started as the family pet, but now you're family," she assured him in an uncharacteristically gentle voice. "You're just as welcome as my own mother."

"I've heard things about your mother," Tarrin winked. "That doesn't sound very encouraging."

Janine laughed. "Well, you're as welcome as my mother to *me*," she corrected. "How Tomas feels about it is another matter." She looked at Allia, who was busily trying to answer a million questions thrown at her by Elke. "This is Allia?"

"Yes, she's like a sister to me, and she's been completely adopted by my family," Tarrin smiled. "My mother adores her so much she hogs time away from my father and Jenna."

"Well, I'm sure she'll fit in here just fine," she said with a smile.

After the initial disturbance was over, everyone sat back down. Tomas and Janine sat in their favorite chairs, and Eron and Elke sat on chairs to the side. Jenna and Nanna sat down on the sofa on the other side, forming a box with the fireplace. Tarrin sat cross-legged on the floor with his back to the fire, and Janette was seated firmly in his lap. His arms were around her, almost protectively, and she was playing with the tip of his tail. Allia sat in a similar position beside him. Tarrin got serious, beginning to explain to his parents and his friends what was going on in the Tower. He left out a few things, like Keritanima's ideas about what happened to him, but he did make mention of the fact that the fight with the Doomwalker had altered his powers in Sorcery.

"It was you," Tomas said suddenly. "You scared off the bandit."

Tarrin nodded. "I used Sorcery, totally by reflex, because I'd been in cat form so long that I couldn't remember quickly how to change back," he told him. "That's why the knife was hot. I burned him with fire, and he ran back out the door." He looked down at Janette. "That was when I realized that I couldn't stay here anymore," he added. "Because I was afraid that I'd accidentally hurt you, or my little mother. That's something that I'd never forgive myself for, if it happened."

"While he was gone, I understood what he had been going through," Allia continued. "They paid me so much attention that I felt very uncomfortable. Members of the Council would ask about my progress, and they began to watch me at all times. I do not see how Tarrin endured it. They were about to drive me mad."

"Well, at least now you're pretty sure that they want something from you," Eron said.

"I've known that for a while, father," Tarrin told him. "But now it's getting serious. After the fight, and the accident--" he winced and closed his eyes. The memory of that pain was still fresh in his mind, and he couldn't think about it without shuddering. "Now that I may not be any use to them, they may decide that I'm not worth the effort."

"They wouldn't *do* that!" Janine said in shock. "This is the Tower we're talking about! The *katzh-dashi*! They've never lifted a hand against anyone!"

"The Sorcerers aren't what everyone thinks they are, Janine," Tarrin told her. "They're just as ruthless as any other organization with power, and they'll use that power. If I'm no use to them, they'll get rid of me. If only to keep me out of the hands of their enemies. I'm too dangerous to be allowed to run loose."

"I think you're jumping the bow, son," Elke said. "This is all just the Wikuni's conjecture."

"Yes, but if there's one thing I know about Kerri, it's that her conjecture usually ends up being true. That's one very smart little Wikuni." He shoved the tip of his tail into Janette's face, which made her giggle and try to keep the attacking appendage away. "We're going to be trying to find out what's going on, but it may not be easy."

"The Wikuni is setting up spies and information gathering," Allia said. "She seems very adept at it."

"It's how she survived," Tarrin told her.

"Hopefully, the actions will pan out for us," Allia continued. "Without us knowing what is going on, it puts us at a serious disadvantage."

"Have you heard any rumor about the light?" Tarrin asked Tomas.

"Some, but it's been mostly just rehashing of how it looked. I only heard one rumor that it was a bad omen, but there wasn't any real support for it, and they didn't go into detail."

"Well, something's going on. It's obvious now," Tarrin said. "We're doing our best to find out what it is, without letting them know that we know."

"What can I do to help, Tarrin?" Tomas asked.

Tarrin felt tremendous warmth and trust in the willowy man now. "At the moment, nothing," he said. "But it wouldn't hurt if you always kept a copy of your shipping schedule around. Just in case."

Tomas nodded. "I have six ships now, Tarrin. They're coming in and out all the time. I'm sure that any of them could handle a bit of extra passage."

Tomas understood perfectly. That was a tremendous load off his mind. Tomas would get them out of Suld, if it came to having to run. "You have no idea how comforting that is to me," Tarrin told him.

"It's always good to keep friends comfortable," Tomas said with a smile.

"How did you manage to get time to come here, Tarrin?" Eron asked.

Allia gave Tarrin a smile, and Tarrin laughed. "They didn't," he replied. "I gave myself the time off."

"They'll throw a fit if they find out," Eron laughed.

"Let them. Right now, they need me more than I need them. That lets me really push things."

"No doubt," Janine agreed. "Well, if you're playing hookey to be here, let's not waste your time with serious conversation that depresses you. Why don't we play some King's Castle? Your mother says you're very good at it, and I'm tired of Tomas losing all our games."

"I do *not*!" Tomas challenged.

"Then you be partners with Elke," she replied in a sweet voice.

"I'd rather have a chance at winning, Janine," Elke said, which made Tomas snort.

"I'll show both of you. Eron, do you hear this slander?"

"Oh, no, I'm not getting into this one," Eron said. "I'd have a very hard time trying to prove you don't lose by keeping us from losing."

That made both women laugh, and Tomas gave Eron a blistering look. "Then let's play Tarok," he offered.

"I hate Tarok," Janine objected.

"Precisely."

"You're very close to sleeping in the guest room, dear," Janine said in a dangerous tone.

"Put your money where your ego is, dear," Tomas said. "King's Castle. If me and Tarrin lose, I'll sleep on the floor tonight."

"You better make sure you find enough blankets," Janine said with a competitive grin. "Let's give my husband a backache, Elke."

"I think I can enjoy a bit in Tomas' suffering," Elke said with a nasty grin.

"That's mean, Elke."

"I'm Ungardt, Tomas," she told him. "We like being mean."

"I'll play, but I have other people to visit tonight," he said, giving Janette a telling squeeze. "Before it's her bedtime."

"Then I'll play for you, Tarrin," Eron said. "You visit with Janette. I'll put Tomas on the floor for you."

"He wouldn't do that!" Tomas challenged.

"Tarrin is half Ungardt, and my son, Tomas," Elke smirked. "He likes being mean too."

"You ruined it, mother. He'd have never known I would throw the game if you wouldn't have opened your mouth."

"Traitor," Tomas said sourly at him.

Tarrin just gave him a fanged grin, and that made the ladies laugh.

"This is cheating," Tomas growled. "I'm surrounded by people who want me on the floor tonight."

"You expected sympathy from this group?" Janine asked in feigned shock. "You need to wake up, dear."

"I would like to watch," Allia said. "I have never seen this game played before."

"I'll teach you the rules, Allia," Elke told her. "It's an easy enough game, if you're paying attention to what you're doing."

"Are not all games so?" Allia said, getting up as the adults started towards the card table in the far corner of the room.

"You come too, Jenna, so you can continue the tradition of female superiority in cards," Elke said, slapping Tomas on the shoulder with enough force to send him staggering forward. Sometimes his mother didn't know her own strength.

"Well now, it seems that I've got a certain little mother to catch up with," Tarrin told Janette, tapping her on the nose with the tip of his tail and making her giggle. "I've missed hearing all about your dolls, Janette."

"You don't care about my dolls," she challenged.

"I care about everything about you, little mother," he told her, pushing her off of his lap. "Now then, there's only one way that I can really visit with you."

"How is that?"

Tarrin reached under his shirt, and withdrew the small wooden toy that had been the main plaything in their many games. He dangled it from the end of its string, giving her a gentle smile, and then handed it to her.

"Oh, Shadow wants to play," Janette said with a beaming smile.

"Shadow does indeed," he told her with a gentle, loving smile, then he hunkered down and shapeshifted into his cat form.

Laughing, Janette dropped the scratched, battered wooden figure on the floor, and Tarrin pounced on it, feeling all his cares and worries melt away in lieu the pure simple joy of the game.

Chapter 15

Tarrin and Allia returned to their room just before dawn. They had slept over at the house, Allia in the extra guest room, Tarrin at the foot of Janette's bed, and Tomas on the floor in the parlor. The sense of peace and calm of the house was still with him as they crept into their own rooms just before the other Initiates began to stir to prepare for the coming day. It had been very good for him, a night without any worries or cares, surrounded by the people that he truly trusted. He met Socks, his replacement, and had a long talk with the black cat with white paws about what was correct and proper, and what was not. Because Tarrin was Were, the cat listened to him, and would obey. Tarrin couldn't force obedience, but housecats held Werecats in very high regard. Socks would behave now. He also got to see his family and Allia interact, and he was surprised. Allia fit in with them perfectly, and it was as if she filled the only missing piece. She was Tarrin's older sister, Jenna's confidante, and his parents saw her as the one child they had lost. Tarrin had had an older sister, named Alexa, but she had died in infancy, two years before Tarrin was born. Allia became that lost daughter, filling the only true hole in the hearts of his parents. And what surprised Tarrin was how totally comfortable Allia was with being adopted into Tarrin's rather unique family. Elke was a very strong woman, powerful, willful, and wise, and Allia respected her tremendously. Eron was a bit more laid back than his wife, easygoing and with a wit, a bit quiet and always speaking to the point, but he had a quiet calm strength that seemed almost unshakable. Eron was the rock from which the family built its foundation, and Allia had immediately understood that. Jenna was mystified by the ethereally beautiful Selani, and Allia had begun to teach her the forms of her people more suitable for her small frame.

It was a reminder of what he had lost, and a goal which now stood before him. Tarrin would have his family. They would all live together in peace, and want for nothing. When all the craziness was over, when he and Keritanima and Allia could come out of the desert without fear, then he would live as close to his family as he could. The bad taste he had for the

Tower meant that it wouldn't be in Suld. Tarrin would rather return to Aldreth, where his non-human nature wouldn't be so serious, and where he could use his non-human status to help the village with the other non-humans that drifted in from the Frontier to trade. It was what he wanted, it was what he decided he was going to have, and by the gods, it was what he was going to get.

But there were other things to attend to, and that was what occupied his mind as he descended the stone stairs to the baths, scenting the passage of the Novices mingling with the smell of cloth and mineral-rich water, of heat and steam, and of the rock itself. Tarrin had developed the habit of bathing when there were the fewest people in the baths, because his presence still caused a bit of commotion with Novices, and even Initiates. The fights he'd had and the rather gruesome things he'd done to his assailants had terrified most of the other students, and they would have nothing to do with him. They were, after all, only children. Tarrin couldn't really blame them for it, but it hurt to see the fear in their eyes as he passed, to hear the whispers that they didn't realize his sensitive ears could pick up. But if luck was with them, then the Novices wouldn't be scared of him much longer.

It didn't take him long to find Tiella. She was in the cooler water, and she had her knees bent so the water covered her to the neck. Even after months, Tiella was still so modest that she couldn't stand bathing with others.

The area around Tiella cleared immediately when Tarrin slipped into the pool, holding a bar of soap, and approached the pretty former villager. "You missed a spot," he told her absently.

She turned around, and then smiled. "Tarrin," she said warmly, standing up in the water. When the move lifted her breasts above the surface of the water, she blushed furiously and sank back into the water.

"Tiella," Tarrin sighed, "I think that you shouldn't worry about that with me. I've already seen them. It doesn't make any difference now."

Her face turning red, she stood up quickly, water splashing, and she glared at him. Then she realized what she did, and then blushed even more and laughed ruefully. "Alright, I give up," she told him. "But if you stare, I'm going to pull your tail off."

"Let me make it up to you," he said, going around her and lathering her back with the bar of soap.

"Well, alright, but I wouldn't let anyone else do this," she said, allowing him to wash her back. "How have you been?"

"Busy," he said.

"I heard. Are you alright?"

"I've healed up, but there have been some side effects. Sorry if I don't go into them right now."

"That's alright. Did you know that I'm almost done with the Novitiate?"

"No. That was some quick work."

"The training I got from Gerin really helped," she said. "He was a lot more than a herbalist. He was very interested in the world, and he taught me a lot of it. I was allowed to skip over a lot of classes."

"Congratulations," he told her.

"Thanks. What's the Initiate like?"

"I really haven't been in it long enough to form any opinions, Tiella," he told her. "So far, it's been just like the Novitiate, except without all the silly rules. We can eat when we want and bathe when we want, and our time outside of classes is our own."

"That sounds almost dreamy compared to the schedules," she said sourly. "I'm tired of living by the clock."

"Well, just buckle down," he told her. "When do you take the final test?"

"In five days," she replied. "I've already been told that I shouldn't have any trouble passing it. Then I'll move to the Initiate."

"Hmm," Tarrin said. "This may change some things."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you still clean the Keeper's office?"

"Yes," she replied. "Every day."

"Then I want you to do me a favor," he said quietly. "But it may get you in trouble."

"What's the favor?"

"If you see anything about me, or hear them talking about me, or about what happened to me, could you pass that along?" he asked. "Anything that sounds like it'll affect me."

"I guess so," she said after a moment. "Why do you want to know that?"

"Something's going on, Tiella," he told her. "They want something from me, or want me to do something for them, but they won't tell me what it is. Well, I want to know *before* they ask me to do it. I want to know what I may be getting myself into."

"Oh," she said after a moment. "I can do that for you, Tarrin," she said. "I think I've already seen some things, and I know that the Keeper asks how you're coming along almost every day. When you were missing, she was almost in a constant rage."

"I know," Tarrin said quietly. "What did you hear?"

"Well, they were trying to get the Wikuni to give them a clipper and a crew," she said. "It sounded awfully important, but the Wikuni are mad at them for some reason, and won't do it. They keep talking about someone's education. It's a really big thing. The Keeper and that stupid-looking rabbit Wikuni were even shouting at each other yesterday."

"I know what that's all about," Tarrin grunted. "What about the ship? Did they say why they wanted it?"

"I think I heard the Keeper tell him that they needed it to get somewhere," she said. "She was flattering the Wikuni with how his people were the best sailors, and they'd need that skill."

"They are," Tarrin told her absently. "But she never said why?"

"No," she told him. "Just that they wanted one. Maybe they want to send some Sorcerers to the Stormhaven Isles or something."

"Maybe it's important, maybe not," Tarrin said. "Anything else you can remember?"

Tiella was quiet for a few moments. "Not really," she said finally. "They really don't talk around us that much, Tarrin, and we're only in there for a couple of hours at the most."

"Well, that may change," he said. "What time do you clean her office?"

"After lunch, every day," she replied.

"Well, do me a favor and keep your ears open," he told her. "I have the feeling that the Keeper may be *very* talkative for the next few days."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just trust me," he said with a chuckle. "I can't come and talk to you ever morning. That'll look very suspicious. So I'm sending someone. You remember my roommate in the Novitiate, Dar?"

"The cute Arkisian?" she asked as she rinsed herself off and turned to face him. Tarrin noticed that she was blushing. "Yes, I remember him."

"Good. He's the one you'll need to talk to. If you have anything you want me to know, tell him, and he'll give it to me." He gave her a look. "You like him."

She blushed deeper. "Well, he *is* cute, Tarrin, and he has nice manners and he's been nice to me when we talk. And I have to stand here and talk to him while I'm naked as the day I was born."

"He will be too, so it's not like you're not on even ground," he reminded her. "I'll tell him to be very friendly to you. If it looks like you two are sweet on each other, it won't look unusual if you're talking in whispers."

Tiella blushed furiously, and gave him a murderous look. Tarrin realized that Tiella had a crush on Dar. That was almost perfect. He could orchestrate a bit of matchmaking easily. Dar needed a girlfriend, and there weren't many girls out there better than Tiella. Tarrin would make sure that Tiella was well rewarded for her risk, and giving her the object of her affection seemed a very appropriate gift.

No friend of Tarrin's went hungry.

"You'll do it for me?" Tarrin asked seriously.

"I'll do it," she almost fumed. "But I'm mad at you."

"What for?"

"Making me whisper and get close to Dar?" she said.

"Don't worry," Tarrin said with a wink. "He'll be very receptive. Even if I have to grab him by the neck and shake him."

"*Tarrin!*" she gasped.

He only smiled at her. "I'll see you when you're in red, Tiella. Good luck."

"That's it? You're leaving?"

"I'm skipping my morning class," he said with a wicked smile. "I figure they'll find me in about ten minutes. I don't think you want to be around me when they catch up with me."

"Uh oh," she laughed. "Are you going to be nice?"

"No," he said in a flat voice.

She laughed again. "Then I think I want to be out of here," she agreed. She reached up and patted him on the cheek. "I'll keep my ears open for you, Tarrin," she promised.

"I appreciate it," he told her.

"Now, I think it's time for us to go," she said. "It's almost time for my breakfast, and I don't want to go to class hungry."

"I should find a quiet place, so my yelling doesn't raise a fuss," he winked.

"You do that," she laughed. "Now turn around so I can get out of the pool."

"You are such a wimp," he teased, going to the edge and pulling himself out. He shook himself to get rid of the excess water, then picked up a towel from a chair. "See you later," he told her, walking over towards his clothes.

Five days. It wasn't that much time, and it may not do him much good, but Tarrin could fix that. So, the Keeper raged. Tarrin's mother also raged, and the one thing he knew about her was that when someone is in a rage, it's nearly impossible for them to keep quiet about why they're so upset. Tarrin would make sure that the Keeper was *very* talkative when Tiella and the

other Novice workers arrived to clean her office. If Keritanima was right, they'd come find him in a tizzy, and would send him somewhere for him to work on fixing his problem. The worst thing he could do to set the Keeper off was refuse to go.

That was easy enough.

After drying off and dressing, Tarrin started back upstairs. He'd eaten before coming to the baths, and that book on the Weave was unfinished. It was a fascinating book, and he'd already sent Keritanima off to get her own copy that morning. He would probably finish it by lunch, and there was an entire library of interesting books there waiting for him.

He was met at the top landing by three Sorcerers. One of them he identified as Amelyn, the Mind Seat. She had a very perturbed look on her face. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "You didn't show up for class today!"

"My instructor told me that until she got advice, all my classes were cancelled," he said smoothly.

The woman seemed to turn that over in her mind several times, looking for something which she could use as a basis to scream at him. "You will address a *katzh-dashi* as Mistress or Master, Initiate," she said in a cold, hostile voice.

"I will address you in a manner of respect when you prove you deserve it," Tarrin said in a dangerous voice, eyes narrowing as he came up the last few steps. That put his head well above the three of theirs, and he used that height to intimidate the small woman. "Now get out of my way."

"You will come with me," Amelyn said with a glare. "The Council is going to try to help you overcome this problem."

"No."

"*What?*"

"I said no," he hissed. "I'm not going to do *anything* until I can go visit my parents. My father was hurt, and I want to see him. That means that you're going to lower the Ward so I can go to them, because I'm not going to have them put themselves at risk of another attack by coming here to see me."

"How *dare* you--"

In a heartbeat, she was against the wall, her slippered feet dangling about two spans off the ground. She held onto Tarrin's wrist, her eyes wild, as his paw full of silk dress kept her suspended above the floor. "I dare alot when it's *my* parents who were hurt, and I have no idea how they are," he said in a steely, low voice. "I don't know who you people think you are, but you keep forgetting that it's *my life* you're trying to control. I've had as much of that Ward as I can stand. I want to see my parents, and I want *off these grounds*, and I want it *now*. You're not keeping me caged anymore."

"You will not make demands of us!" she snapped at him, though it was plain she was almost terrified by the hostile look in his eyes. She had alot of guts. Tarrin could respect that.

"I'm not making demands," he said, letting go of her. She got out to arm's reach of him, and smoothed her rumpled blue dress, seemingly unconcerned by the rough treatment. "I'm telling you this simply. Either you lower the Ward and let me go visit my parents, you'll *let* me go see my parents whenever I want to do so, and you'll let me off the grounds when I need to get away from this place for a while, or I stop everything. I will not go to classes, I will not learn, and I'll break the left arm of every Sorcerer you send to my door. I want the same privileges and rights as other Initiates. There is no negotiation in the matter. Those are my terms, and I won't accept anything less. I'm not living in your damned cage anymore."

"But you'll be opening yourself to attack! You may be killed!"

"Better to die in an alley in Suld than live one more day trapped in this prison," he said with enough fervor to make Amelyn's two companions take another step away from him.

"This, isn't something that I can approve right here," she said hesitantly. "Only the Keeper can make that kind of decision, and she's at the Royal Court this morning."

"Then tell her when she gets back," Tarrin told her calmly. "Because I'm not doing *anything* until I see my parents, *off* the grounds."

"And if she declines?"

"Then you'll be feeding me for nothing," Tarrin said flatly. "I'm not afraid of you, Amelyn, or your Council. You can't hurt me, you can't use your Sorcery on me, and if you get nasty, I'll just start killing people until you stop. I figure that you'll give me what I want, because I'm not asking for anything outrageous, and I'll be *very* dangerous to keep on the grounds if you don't. Now if you'll excuse me, get out of my way."

"I haven't excused you, Initiate," Amelyn said in a hostile voice.

She squeaked once when he backhanded her in the shoulder, then it turned into an explosive loss of breath when she slammed into the wall. The other two Sorcerers stared at him in utter shock, totally dumbfounded that he would actually *strike* a member of the Council. He didn't hit her that hard, only hard enough to get her out of the way. "Now I'm excused," Tarrin said flatly, walking past the winded Mind Seat, and having the other two hug the walls to get out of his way. "And Amelyn, don't *ever* get in my way again," he warned her as he walked away. "I wouldn't shed a tear over spilling your guts on the floor."

All in all, that went as he expected. He established his demands, made the consequences clear, and also made it plain to them that he wasn't afraid to fight the Council. Either verbally or physically. They didn't know if he was stable. He'd take advantage of that.

Tarrin stalked away, looking to them like he was one step from a rage, but they didn't see the smile on his face.

Tarrin spent the time after confronting Amelyn as far away from everyone as possible, so he took his book, changed form, and crept into the courtyard in the middle of the maze. With the statue of the Goddess watching on, he reclined in the grass near the fountain, surrounded by smells of grass and trees and flowers, letting them distract him from reading the book. The garden, and the maze, were warm and comfortable, and that was an aspect of the magic that saturated the grounds. Long ago, he'd learned, the Ancients wove powerful magic that kept the gardens warm all year round, permanent magic that always ensured that the Tower would have green trees and vibrantly colored flowers. The magic had also infused the plants, making them bloom all year round in a perpetual spring. The air

outside the garden was cool, almost crisp, and the late autumn sun carried a magical warmth that made it feel like it was early summer. It was but one secret lost to the modern *katzh-dashi*, lore locked within books that nobody could read, driving the Lorefinders crazy with its tantalizing proximity.

There was no going back now. But then again, he knew that there was no going back the minute he told Keritanima--or she told him--what was going on. He'd set events into motion that would ultimately end with him fleeing the Tower, and would put him in a great deal of danger. But he'd grown used to that feeling. He didn't feel safe in the Tower, not even around the very people that professed to be so worried about him, and it had developed into a constant tension within him that almost seemed to be a part of him now. It had been the visit to his parents that made it vanish, made him understand what it was and how it affected his behavior. It was what made him so short-tempered and waspish. Hitting Amelyn was a good example. He never meant to strike her, but when she laid her attitude down on him, he simply *reacted*, and that had been the result. And it had felt so normal that he had brushed it off, as if it was an entirely proper thing to do. To the Cat, he guessed it was. Exertion of physical force was perfectly acceptable to his animal instincts, for to them, the ends justified the means. He wanted her out of the way, and she was moved out of his way. Had he been outside the Tower grounds, he doubted he would ever have done something like that. And now that he knew about it, understood it, he would have a better chance of controlling it.

It still made him nervous, though. He had no idea how to play these games of intrigue. He hoped that what he did was a good way to start. It was designed to both set up the rebellion Keritanima wanted, and also to try to provoke the Keeper into divulging something of use to them in front of Tiella. His friend would only have five days to help, because he knew her, and he knew that she could breeze through the final test of the Novitiate. Tiella was *very* smart. He'd rather have set things up with the Wikuni first, Goddess knew how many of her plans he disrupted by acting on his own, but it had been a spur of the moment thing. The Cat liked spontaneity, and it impressed that characteristic into Tarrin's conscious mind.

Two worries, very different, but neither of them easy to put aside. The balance in him seemed stable enough, but actions like what he did to Amelyn never failed to start making him worry about where he stood within

himself. Because of the totality of the merging between him and the animal instincts, he had lost the ability to tell where his rational mind ended, and his instincts began. He guessed that was good, but it was still a frightening concept. The old Tarrin, the idealistic, dreamy youth who was probably a bit too naive, was gone. He was dead. There was nothing but the new Tarrin now, a brooding, moody individual always one step from hurting someone. But maybe the new Tarrin would himself fade away in time, giving ground to the aspect of himself that he discovered the night before. An entirely different Tarrin appeared last night, one that even surprised him, that of a carefree, playful young Were-cat who felt perfectly at ease with himself and those around him.

That was a reaction to his environment, and it made him realize that he was very much an animal in that regard. He was being influenced by what he felt around him. He never felt safe in the Tower, was always on his guard and always wary and afraid, and it showed in his behavior. When he escaped from the Tower, if only for a night, it was as if he had been reborn. But what worried him in that regard was how long he could endure the environment of fear before it permanently scarred him. Jesmind had talked about being Feral, and now he had an idea of what that meant. The idea that he would never feel safe anywhere, would always live in fear, was almost enough to send him into a panic.

Forgetting the book, Tarrin changed form and curled up in the grass beside it, finding the ground much more comfortable when he was in his cat form. The warmth of the sun almost seemed to stroke his fur, and it seduced him into closing his eyes and simply basking in it.

You seem troubled, my kitten, that choral voice shimmered around him.

"Goddess," he said respectfully in the manner of the Cat. "Where have you been?"

Where have you been? she demanded in reply. *As you can see, it's not like I can step down and go for a walk.*

"Yes you could."

True, but it always sounds good, she said in a choral echo of silvery laughter.

"I thought you left for good."

Kitten, I am always with you, she told him in a loving voice. You may not feel me, but your heart does. You should listen to it. The amulet you wear connects you to me, just as much as the brands on your shoulders connect you to Fara'Nae. It lets us keep track of you, and make sure you're doing alright. I worry about you. So does she, for that matter.

"I guess I feel good that you do," he said honestly, then he caught her words. "She *worries* about me? Who?"

Fara'Nae, kitten, she replied. Your brands make you one of her children too. She keeps an eye on both you and Allia. Now, since I'm glad that I can still lure you in here, let's move on to the business I have with you.

"You lured me in here?"

Why else did you want to come? she asked winsomely.

"I wanted to go somewhere where nobody would bother me."

Yes, and all it took was a little reminder of my courtyard to bring you to me, she told him. Don't worry at it, kitten. It's a god thing.

"I'll take your word for it," he said urbanely.

She laughed delightedly. *Look at my statue, kitten, she ordered, and he raised his head and did so. Around the nude figure's neck was a shaeram, one that looked like it was made of silver. You see the shaeram? I want you to take it and give it to Keritanima. It's for her, just as your amulet was for you and the ivory shaeram was for Allia.*

"Why don't you just lure her in here?"

Because Keritanima is agnostic, she replied calmly. That means that, though she knows the gods exist, she doesn't actively worship any of them because they haven't proved that they want her.

"That doesn't make any sense."

It's a common trait in mortalkind, kitten. She's rejecting the gods, because she feels that they have rejected her. It would take a god speaking directly to her to prove that she's wanted, but her agnosticism prevents any god from speaking directly to her. I can't speak to her heart until she opens it to me.

"You spoke to me."

Yes, but you had an open mind, and you don't reject the gods, she replied. Keritanima's heart is closed, because of her position. She can't afford to be open to such things, because she sees it as a weakness, a way for her enemies to come at her. She's even more distrustful than you.

"Oh," Tarrin mused, thinking that he understood it. "It sounds like you want her."

She is a good woman, kitten, the Goddess told him. No god turns away from a subject in need, and Keritanima is in need. If she's not careful, she'll end up like her father. Dark, cynical, and obsessed with holding onto her throne. It would be a tragedy to see such potential wasted. She's just like you, my kitten. All she needs is some positive support and a bit of nurturing, and she'll turn out to be a wonderful queen. The kind of queen that's remembered for thousands of years for her beneficent rule.

"She doesn't want to be queen."

We'll see, the Goddess said slyly. I want you to give her the amulet, kitten. Give it to her, and tell her that it's a gift from the goddess of the katzh-dashi. If I'm right, it will give me enough of an opening to speak to her heart.

"That'll probably make her suspicious."

Yes, it will, but it will also make her curious, the Goddess replied. That curiosity may be enough. Keritanima is just like the fox she resembles. She's intensely curious, and once her curiosity has been piqued, she's almost incapable of not satisfying it.

"I noticed that about her."

I rather thought that you did. I've also noticed you noticing some other things about her.

Had he been in his humanoid form, he would have blushed. "I guess it's just curiosity," he replied. "All that fur must itch underneath those clothes."

Look at it from her side. She's never known anything else, now has she?

Tarrin couldn't argue that point.

Just do me my favor, kitten. Try to get it to her as soon as you can. It's rather important.

"I will," he promised. "I have a question."

Go ahead.

"What's going on? I know you know."

Yes, but I can't tell you, she said, almost regretfully. There are things that you have to discover on your own, and the actions you take because of what you know will decide your future. I can't interfere, because they must be your choices, unclouded by nudging and advice. I can't tell you anything you don't already know, but I can clarify some information you already possess.

"If I were to throw out an assumption, would you tell me if it's right?"

Some yes, some no, she replied. It will depend on how correct it is.

"Can you tell me what happened to me? In the Conduit?"

All I can say is that it awakened your true power, she replied. It is a part of who and what you are. They call you a Weavespinner, and they are correct. But they don't understand what that title truly means.

"What does it mean?"

It means that you are the Mi'Shara, she replied cryptically.

Mi'Shara? What in the world did that mean?

"That's not much of an answer."

It wasn't much of a question, she replied whimsically. Time is growing short, my kitten. Do me my favor and give Keritanima the amulet. There will be time enough for talking later. Remember, I do have other things to do, and I'm putting them off to talk to you.

"I'm so sorry to disrupt your schedule," Tarrin said dryly.

The Goddess laughed, a sound that vibrated in his soul, and in the strangest way, pleased him greatly. *You are a treasure, my kitten, she told him. We will talk again soon. Until then, be well, and remember that I love you.*

And then the sensation of her was gone, leaving inside him an emptiness, and even more questions. And one certainty.

The Goddess had planted that information, just as deftly as Keritanima directed her spies. She was salting him with information he would need for those future choices, information that would allow him to make those choices.

The Goddess also had a hand to play, and she was playing it through him.

Tarrin realized that he was an instrument of the Goddess of the Sorcerers, but he also knew, in his soul, that she cared for him. She wouldn't do something horrible to him. It was a complex relationship, that was true, but he *trusted* her.

He had faith in her.

Changing form, Tarrin waded through the fountain and carefully, gently slipped the amulet's silver chain off the statue's neck. The smell of the silver rose his hackles, and his pads burned where it touched him, clear warnings to him that the metal posed a danger to him. He stared at the statue for a long moment, taking in its flawless beauty, but his attention was focused on the gentle, loving expression on its face.

He had no idea what mire of intrigue he was thrown into, but he had the feeling that the Goddess would provide, even as he was certain that she was also a player in the game. Tarrin was her trump card, and he realized that he would do what she asked, if only because he trusted her, he believed in her.

She was his Goddess, and he had a duty to obey.

"I do believe," he said to the statue, cupping its lovely face with his paw's palm. "I do have faith. And I don't think I'll ever be alone." He leaned in and, ever-so-gently, kissed the statue on the cheek.

Then he was gone, to find Keritanima, to come to terms with the stirrings of religious contentment he felt inside.

In the empty courtyard, where not even the wind reached, the elegant, beautiful statue was smiling, and its eyes blazed with incandescent white light. The grass and flowers rippled from the power emanating from the

statue in cascading waves, invisible bands of pure power that shivered the air itself.

The incandescent blazing eyes of the statue dimmed, and the expression on its stone face was one of joy.

Tarrin caught up with Keritanima just as she broke class for lunch. Tarrin himself was still a bit dazed after accepting the Goddess. It was a strange feeling, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Keritanima looked distracted, no doubt because her mind was still engulfed in the teaching of Sorcery. The Wikuni was indeed a natural, he realized. After only days of training she could conjure up very effective illusions. Allia, on the other hand, was still struggling just to pull flows from the strands. After the individual training, then they would all be put back into a class, where they would learn standard weaves, and also learn more about the Tower, the Goddess, and other things that only concerned those who could become *katzh-dashi*.

"Tarrin," she said in a nasal voice that told him that he was addressing the Brat Princess. "Want to come eat lunch with me?"

"I guess so," he replied after a slight hesitation.

"You forgot something," she flared, her amber eyes flashing.

"Your Highness," he added absently.

"That's better," she said calmly.

"What did you learn today?"

"Oh, I learned lots of things!" she said brightly. The Brat Princess shared Keritanima's enthusiasm for Sorcery. "Lula's such a good teacher. She taught me a weave that chills my milk, and a weave that makes stone become soft like clay, and another weave that warms the air around me if I'm cold."

"It sounds like you're doing very well."

"I *love* Sorcery!" she beamed. "It's so *fun*!" She patted him on the arm. "I'll never have to worry about getting dresses the right color, or freezing my tail off in that drafty old castle my father makes us live in, and I'll be

able to do all those little things that nobody can ever get right. I can finally make everything just *perfect!*"

"I'm so happy for you," he said absently. She punched him in the arm. "Your Highness."

They stepped out into the cool autumn air, and Keritanima winced against the bright sunshine briefly. She imperiously glared at him until he offered his arm to her, and she placed her hand within it. He escorted her across the grounds, towards the main Tower. "What did you do today?" she asked idly.

"Not much," he said. "Just read, napped, and almost killed Amelyn."

She gave him a direct, penetrating stare. "What happened?"

"She got on my nerves," he said in a blunt voice. "I told her that I wouldn't do anything until they let me out of this damned prison to see my parents. My father was injured, and I want to see him and make sure he's alright. So I told them that I wasn't going to do *anything* until they let me out of here to see my father."

"You tell them, Tarrin," she giggled. "Don't let them push you around."

"Not anymore," he grated.

She squeezed his arm gently. He took that as a blessing as to what he had done. That was a relief. If he accidentally screwed up Keritanima's plans, it could create a big mess.

"Oh, and I have a present for you," he said suddenly.

"A present? For me? How sweet," she beamed. "Can I see it?"

He fished the silver amulet and chain out of his trousers. The amulet itself was too bit to put in his pocket, so he'd had to cinch the amulet between the waist of his trousers and his skin and put the chain in the pocket, and it had been creating a burning itch on his hip ever since.

"Isn't this one of those Sorcerer necklaces? Those shay-rams?"

He nodded. "I was told to give this to you," he told her in Selani. "It's very special."

"Who told you?" she asked in Selani.

"*Her*," he said, tapping the amulet device before placing it in her waiting hand.

"You're serious," she said suspiciously, her eyes widening a bit.

"Would I lie to you, *shaida*?"

"No, but you may believe something that's not true," she said. "You mean *she* talked to you?"

He nodded.

"*She*. Her."

"Yes, *shaida*," he said patiently. "*She* did."

"What did she say?"

"We'll talk about that later. She just told me to give this to you, and I'm not about to disobey. It's a gift from her."

"You're positive--"

"*Shaida*, I'm absolutely positive," he interrupted.

Keritanima took the *shaeram* and held it up, inspecting it meticulously. "It really is lovely," she said in the common tongue. "And I love silver. It's prettier than gold. I won't get in trouble for wearing this, will I?"

"Does Allia for wearing hers?" Tarrin replied calmly. "They know she wears it."

"You're right, I guess," she said with a vapid smile. She pulled the chain wide, then slipped it over her head and settled it under her red Initiate dress. "Thank you, Tarrin. I love presents, and this one is very pretty."

"I'm glad you approve." She glared at him. "Your Highness."

Keritanima snapped their way through the main Tower's corridors, bullying other Initiates and Novices out of her way with sharp comments and ugly stares. Tarrin walked along with her, silently amused as he watched the Brat Princess in action. She really did have being a pain down to an artform. She could irritate almost anyone. They reached the kitchens, and after fixing plates for themselves, they went back outside to sit on a stone bench at the edge of the gardens to eat.

Tarrin was fixated by what was going on over on the training grounds of the Knights. It wasn't that far from the gardens. One of Keritanima's massive lizard Wikuni guards was on the field, being pressed by four cadets at once. Using a warhammer with a head almost as big as a log, the huge monster of a Wikuni kept his attackers well in control. Tarrin noted that the Wikuni swung that warhammer with an exacting precision that spoke of his true skill, a skill that would allow him to strike any of his attackers exactly as hard as he wished.

"I didn't know you let your guards train with the Knights," Tarrin noted.

"What they do on their own time isn't my business," she shrugged.

"He's really giving those cadets a fight," Tarrin chuckled. "They'll never touch him."

"Of *course* they won't," she said with a wicked smile. "That's Binter. He's one of the best Marines my daddy has. That's why he was sent to be my personal bodyguard."

"What about the other one?"

"Sisska," she said. "She's good, but nowhere near Binter."

"She? She doesn't look female."

"Binter and Sisska aren't Wikuni," she told him.

"They're not? What are they?"

"They're Vendari Lizard Men," she replied. Tarrin had heard stories of the almost legendary Vendari. They were massive lizard-men who lived on the continent of Sharadar, in the Jungles of Vendar. They were very advanced and cultured. The Vendari culture centered around war and combat, but they also had a very, very refined sense of honor and propriety that didn't make them barbarically warlike. They treated fighting as a field of honor, something to take very seriously. Because they didn't raid, and their powerful sense of honor prevented them from breaking the treaties they had formed with their neighboring nations, the Vendari often hired out as mercenaries in wars in other parts of the world. Honor was everything to a Vendari, and he would die rather than have his honor stained. They also were well known for living by a strict code that prevented them from lying.

A Vendari absolutely would not lie. Ever. Because of that, they were often employed as messengers and arbitrators.

"How did the Wikuni end up with Vendari in their army?"

"There's a very small colony of Vendari who live in the jungles of Wikuna," she told him. "Binter and Sisska are Vendari, but their allegiance is to Wikuna. Almost every single one of them is either in the Army or the Marines, but to keep them centralized, they're allowed to be stationed at home, so their colony isn't disbanded by them having to serve in different places."

"That's considerate of your father."

"Keep the Vendari together, and they'll have little Vendari, who grow up into future soldiers," Keritanima said with a smile. "It's not an act of consideration. My father never does anything that doesn't help him, either personally or as King."

"No wonder they look the same," Tarrin said. "Female Wikuni always have breasts, even reptilian ones. I guess the same isn't true for Vendari."

"I can tell the difference, because females smell different. Sisska was sent so she could enter my bedchamber when I'm not dressed. Sisska is Binter's wife."

The cadets were called off, and the massive Mahuut cadet, Azakar, was sent in to challenge Binter. Azakar was by far the largest man Tarrin had ever seen, but he was almost a full head shorter than the incredibly huge Vendari. Those two had the rare distinction of being taller than Tarrin, something to which Tarrin was not accustomed. Tarrin came up to Azakar's chin, but he probably only came up to Binter's chest.

"This should be interesting," Keritanima said between bites of roasted pork.

"Azakar's good, but he's not *that* good," Tarrin said. "Binter will have him down within two minutes."

Much as Tarrin predicted, the Vendari put Azakar on his back only about a minute into the fight. Binter's raw size and power made him almost invulnerable to the smaller humans, because he understood how to use that size and power to his utmost advantage. He had a style like Karn the

blacksmith back in Aldreth, he set his feet and dared someone to try to move him. He moved with deceptive slowness, until he could explode into action and take his opponent off guard.

Azakar was called off, and one of the Knights was sent on to challenge the Vendari. "*Now* it gets interesting," Tarrin said. "That's Ulgen. He's one of their better Knights. Ulgen will give Binter fits, because he's sneaky."

As they ate, they watched Ulgen and Binter dance around. The Vendari was forced into a real fight, and Ulgen gave him a serious run for his money. Ulgen understood the advantages of his adversary, and forced Binter to attack him in ways that eliminated the majority of his advantage. Ulgen was a wily Knight, one of their better fencers, flicking his heavy broadsword with as much delicacy as a Shacèan Musketeer. He put Binter back on his heels as the Vendari struggled to use the warhammer, not a weapon of finesse, to block a clever and intricate series of light slashes and thrusts. Being put off balance took most of the threat out of Binter's responses, and it put the pair on even terms. After about five minutes, however, Binter got the Knight off balance by using his weight advantage, and then used his huge muscled tail to slap Ulgen to the ground. Just like Tarrin, Binter understood the advantage of his tail, and had learned how to use it as a weapon in a fight.

"I think that with two Vendari guarding your door, you'll be very safe," Tarrin predicted after watching that. It took a good fighter to put Ulgen down in five minutes. Ulgen was no wet-nosed puppy.

"That's the idea," Keritanima said with a giggle. "Forget the two hundred Marines garrisoned here. Binter and Sisska are all I need."

"Where are they, anyway? I never see them."

"They're on the far side of the grounds, in the southern corner. They train on their own field. There's a bit of, friction, between the Marines and the Knights. I think it's a professional desire to see who's better. So they're kept apart to prevent a general war on the grounds."

Tarrin chuckled. "Wikuni Marines squaring off against the Knights of Karas? That would be a war."

"I was curious about something," she said.

"What?"

"I noticed that all the Knights are branded, just like you and Allia. What's going on with that?"

"Oh," Tarrin said with a rueful chuckle. "Allia branded me so I could be her brother," he began. "Well, the Knights consider me and Allia to be part of them, and if you know anything about the Knights--"

"Where All Are One Under Karas," she quoted the Knight parable, the one core ideal which identified the Knights as a group. "So they saw your brands, and decided that if you two had to wear them, so did they."

Tarrin nodded. "Now every Knight who passes training is branded in the Ceremony of Spurs. They have the holy symbol of Karas on one shoulder, and the standard of the Knights on the other."

"I'm sorry to say it, but you warrior types are weird," she said in a serious voice that made Tarrin burst out laughing. "Well, you are," she said in a defensive voice as Tarrin reclaimed control of himself. "I'd never let someone put red-hot steel on my shoulder just to feel like I belonged."

"You wouldn't do it even if it meant that you attained what you dreamed of attaining for years?" he asked.

"Well, in that case, I probably would," she acceded.

"The Knights wear those brands like badges of honor now," Tarrin told her. "They're all very proud of them. And, I've been told that a priest of Karas is always on hand to help out, just in case. I get the funny feeling that they cheat a bit by having the priest deaden the feeling of the cadets just before they're branded."

"I'd rather be knocked out," Keritanima grunted.

"You may have to endure it," Tarrin mused.

"What? Why?"

"Because Allia *really* likes you," he replied. "I've caught her almost calling you *deshaida* a few times. And if you want to *visit* her clan someday and be accepted, that means you have to be sister to the Selani in all but blood. That means you accept the brands."

Those amber eyes became lucid and calculating for a moment, then faded back into the vapidness of the Brat Princess. "Well, I hope it doesn't hurt," she said.

"It does, trust me," he said with a shudder. "The pain is part of the ceremony."

"You're not making me look forward to this," Keritanima said with cool disdain. "Besides," she said in Selani, "it's not something the one without honor would do." There really wasn't a Selani word for *brat*, because such individuals didn't exist in their society. They were killed long before a word could be created to describe them.

"Who knows?" he said.

"Humans are such weird creatures," Keritanima said seriously.

"I'd have to agree," Tarrin said with a smile. "I used to be one of them, you know."

"I'd never have guessed," she teased.

They finished their lunches in relative silence, watching the Knights give Binter a bit of exercise. Tarrin felt a curious closeness to the Wikuni sitting beside him. She was much like him, a lost soul, someone very out of place with her situation, and he remembered what the Goddess had to say about her. He'd always liked her before, at least after he met the *real* Keritanima, but he realized that his feelings for her had deepened. It wasn't a romantic attraction, it was much what he felt for Allia. She was becoming close to him, like another sister. Their circumstances had brought them together, but that togetherness had formed what he hoped was a mutual bond of trust and friendship, and love.

He put his paw on her shoulder, and she looked up at him. She was about to say something, but when she looked into his eyes, her own softened considerably. Just for a moment, the Brat Princess dissolved away, and Keritanima looked up at him and smiled, then brushed her bushy tail up against his back. "It would honor me greatly if I could call you my *deshaida*, Keritanima," he said formally in Selani.

"The honor would be mine, Tarrin," she replied in Selani. "And it would honor me if I could call you my *deshida*."

"I would find great honor in it," he replied sincerely, squeezing her shoulder.

"Yes, well," Keritanima said, her voice just a bit flustered, "I'm glad you think so." He could see her soft eyes hardening again, as she regained her composure and returned to her assumed personality. Keritanima had to stretch it to talk with him civilly as the Brat, but there was no way she could maintain her facade when such honest emotion passed between them.

"Are you ready for our little gathering?" she asked idly, getting herself under control.

"I'm always ready," he told her.

"Good. It's about time for us to get back. What are you doing?"

"Being as inactive as possible," he said with a wicked smile. "I think I may go find my staff and go challenge your Vendari bodyguard."

"It's your teeth," she said with an evil smile.

"They grow back," Tarrin shrugged.

"Well have fun with those weird warrior things," she said with a teasing look in her eye. "I'm going to go learn about *real* power."

"Enjoy," he told her as she stood up. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Oh, I *guess* so," she drawled. "You've proven that you're worthy enough to spend time in my august presence."

"I'll just bask in your aura, Kerri," Tarrin said dryly, standing up.

"I'll have to go get my aura polished, then," she winked. "You need a tan."

"You're so kind to me."

She laughed, then put her hands on her shoulders, rose up on her toes, and gave him a short lick to the cheek.

"Isn't this a bit out of character?" Tarrin asked quietly.

"Of course not," she said flippantly. "The Brat really likes you. It's why she tolerates your impertinence. Besides, she's amused by your wicked ways. You're always entertaining."

"Witch," Tarrin grinned.

"Count on it," she said with bright eyes, then she stepped away. "I'll see you tonight, Tarrin," she said. "Have fun. Oh, and thanks for the present. We'll talk about it tonight."

"I'll try, and you're welcome," he told her, then he watched her saunter away.

He chuckled again. Keritanima was quite a woman.

I told you so, the Goddess' voice echoed in the depths of his mind, her tone amused and teasing, and then it was gone just as quickly as it came to him.

"You stay out of this," he said aloud, in a playful banter. But there was no response.

Tarrin glanced at Binter again. Oh, yes, he'd like a match against that monster of a Vendari. He had the feeling that he may need some experience fighting larger opponents. The Gods only knew what would jump out of the wall to attack him next.

Tracking down his staff wasn't easy. They'd taken it from the battleground, and he had to ask around for almost an hour until he found out who had taken it. It ended up in the laboratory of a *katzh-dashi*, a small, plump little man with a balding pate and a rotund face. He smelled heavily of spices and garlic, and the lingering traces of the smells of many, many types of plants were trapped in his brown robe. His laboratory was in the Northeast Tower, a small area that was dominated by a row of huge glass windows that ran along the right wall. Lining that entire side of the room were rows and rows of plants, flowers, and vegetables, all growing in long wooden troughs filled with sod. The entire room smelled of earth and plants and life, and it twinged the animal within him in the most curious way.

"Ah, I wondered when you would show up," the little man said in a gentle voice from where he was pruning an amazingly little tree in a brazed brass pot. "You want your staff back?"

"Please," Tarrin replied directly. "Why did they bring it here?"

"I wanted to study the wood," he replied. "I specialize in plants and botany. Ironwood is exceedingly rare. It only grows in the northeast corner

of Sulasia. Do you know that it's so bouyant that a staff like that one can support the weight of a grown man?" he asked, pointing to Tarrin's staff. It was laying on a long table near the door, an open book with scribbled notes sitting beside it. "And it doesn't die. The wood in that staff is still alive, even after being cut away from its parent tree. If you planted that staff in the ground and left it, it would grow into another tree."

"I didn't know it was still alive," Tarrin said in surprise, going over and picking up the staff. He inspected it, and realized that it had been cut, right at the very end. He grounded it, and saw that the man had shaved about a quarter of a finger off its length. "You cut it."

The man gave him a surprised look. "Well, yes, I took a sliver off the end. I'm surprised you noticed."

"It pays to know a weapon that may save your life some day," he said sagely.

The man chuckled. "Oh, yes, that's right. They said you're half Ungardt. I'll fix that right now. I'll put the length back."

"How can you do that?"

"Inititate, Sorcery can very easily affect plants," he said with a smile. "I'll just urge it to grow back out to its old length. Give me the staff. I have to be touching it to do this."

Tarrin watched curiously as the little man touched the Weave. He could almost see the intricate and complex spell the man wove, from all six Spheres. The flows gathered inside the staff, going through the Sorcerer rather than gathering from strands, tangling themselves in a seemingly chaotic mass of confusion, but Tarrin could tell that the rotund Sorcerer knew what he was doing. Then the chaotic mess *snapped*, and it turned into a very orderly and sensible weave. Once he was done, he released it into the staff, and Tarrin saw it grow that lost bit of length back, and even fill in some of the nicks and scratches that had been inflicted upon it.

"There we are, good as new," he said, handing Tarrin the staff. "I took a bit off of it so I can get an ironwood tree to grow," he explained. "I've always wanted to study it in a controlled environment. And not have to trudge through the forest for a month to find a tree," he added, patting his wide belly. "I'm not built for field work."

"How did you yank on it like that?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Yank on what?"

"You wove the spell strangely, then it was like you grabbed it by the ends and snapped it into shape."

The Sorcerer gave him a very strange, penetrating look. "It's a common trick when dealing with a very complicated weave," he replied. "Since it's hard to weave them tightly at a distance, we weave them in something that we're touching in a wide pattern, bringing the flows through us rather than pulling them from strands. Once we have all the flows in place, we just tighten it down into a working weave. I didn't notice that you were touching the Weave."

"I'm not," he said absently. "I can sense weaving around me without having to touch the Weave."

"Interesting. That's not supposed to be possible. But you're Were. It's very possible that your enhanced senses can sense something that ours cannot."

"Maybe," Tarrin said carefully.

"Well, studies on Sorcery aren't my areas of expertise. I'll leave that for others." He tapped the staff. "You should be very proud to have this, Initiate," he said. "You take good care of it, and it takes good care of you."

"You talk like it's alive."

"It *is* alive," he reminded him. "It has needs, and you provide for them. In return for that, the staff remains literally unbreakable, and it will always be something that you can depend on." He smiled. "Ironwood isn't a completely natural wood. There's a bit of magic hiding inside the staff, a natural magic that gives the wood its unusual properties. That's a part of what I want to study."

Tarrin looked at the staff curiously. He was right, it *was* alive. Ironwood never dried out, it always remained vibrant and strong. It was almost totally unbreakable, and would bend rather than break even if enough force was exerted on it to make it give. Only rigorous sawing could cut the wood. It made the best bows and staves, and the bark could be carefully stripped and shaped into powerful bowstrings that would never break. When he learned

about the rare and prized wood from his father, he took its properties to be simply natural. Now he understood why it had properties that no other wood had. Maybe there was a bit of old magic in the wood, placed inside it by some forgotten Mage or Sorcerer, or perhaps even a Druid. A magic that changed the wood forever, and also passed on its properties into the trees spawned from it.

"Well, I have to be going," Tarrin told the Sorcerer. "Thanks for taking care of it for me."

"It was my pleasure," the rotund man smiled. "Oh, here it is," he said suddenly, turning and pointing to a huge earth-filled jar in the center of the room, surrounded by several tables holding glass beakers and tubes. There was a very young Ironwood sapling in the pot, only a span tall, with but a few twigs and leaves. "That's your staff's baby," he said with a chuckle. "I've been helping it grow with Sorcery. It's a very stubborn tree," he said with a laugh. "It doesn't want to grow faster. I guess that goes along with its nature."

"Maybe it does," Tarrin agreed. "I have to go. Thank you again."

"Any time," the little man said with a smile.

Tarrin reached the field during a scheduled break, where the cadets were sitting on the ground, panting and sweating in the cool air, while the Knights stood in groups and talked with each other. Binter stood with Ulgen, Darron, and Faalken, showing them a very large, ornate warhammer with a double head and a spike on the top. Faalken looked a trifle uncomfortable holding it, and he handled it with a slowness that told Tarrin how heavy that hammer was.

"Tarrin," they all greeted as he joined them. "You're looking well after Allia kicked you all over the field yesterday," Faalken added with a grin.

"You're just jealous that I can last that long, Faalken," Tarrin retorted calmly.

"Tarrin, this is Captain Binter, commander of the High Princess' personal guard. Binter, this is Tarrin, one of the Tower's Initiates that is partly owned by the Knights."

"Her Highness speaks about you often," the massive Vendari said in a curiously deep, hollow voice. The Vendari had a squared snout and black, dead eyes, eyes that would chill anyone who squared off against him in combat. His crest looked like a mohawk, riding high over his green-scaled head, and Tarrin could see that those scales were small but very compact and tightly organized. They looked to be a very effective natural armor. That close to him, Binter's raw size was incredibly intimidating. He loomed like a mountain, a massive mountain of a Vendari that was nothing but sleek muscle and raw power. He wore only a pair leather straps crossing his chest, connected to a wide belt holding a shortsword, and a furred clout over a pair of black trousers. Like Tarrin, he wore no shoes, letting his clawed feet touch the earth. He had similar short, wicked-looking claws on his hands. Tarrin was eight spans tall, towering over most humans but Azakar, who averaged about six spans in height. Tarrin only came up to Binter's chest. He had to be ten spans tall, almost as tall as an Ogre, but not as wide or plodding. He was sleek, powerfully built but not at the expense of his agility, and he was all warrior. Binter would be an absolute terror in battle. Now Tarrin appreciated why he was chosen to be Keritnima's personal bodyguard. Nobody would *dare* attack something like *that*. "It is an honor to meet you," he continued.

"The honor is mine," Tarrin replied cordially. Exposure to Allia and her culture, which placed honor in very high regard, would help him in dealing with the Vendari. To the average Vendari, honor was life. To lose honor was to lose life, and they were known to kill themselves after being dishonored. Killing one's self was an acceptable path to regaining honor. "Being the personal guard of the Princess is a station deserving great honor."

The Vendari's maw curled up in the most curious way. Almost like a smile. "Honor and Blood," he said.

Tarrin gave him a curious look. That was something Allia said occasionally, and its meaning was obscure. It was a Selani term for duty that brought honor, but often also brought hardship. It was a task, an ordeal, to be endured. But once it was done, great honor came to those who managed it. She often called her being sent to the Tower a trial of Honor and Blood.

"Then look for the honor at the end of the task," he said formally.

"Always," he said. "You have the bearing of a warrior, and your features cast you as Ungardt. Or partly. Do you know the Ways?"

"I was taught by my mother. This," he said, holding up his paws, "is something that happened a bit later."

"I have never faced an adept of the Ways," he said. "I would be honored to take the field against you."

"I don't fight purely in the Ways as much anymore," he chuckled ruefully. "My best friend is Selani, and she trained me in the Dance."

"Then you have received some of the best training there is," the Vendari said. "The entire world respects the fighting prowess of the Ungardt and the Selani. My honor would double to face you."

"I came out here to challenge you anyway, Captain," Tarrin said with a grin. "I've never faced an adversary your size before. I thought it would be a good learning experience for me."

"Then we will both profit from an exercise," he said sagely. "Would you prefer unarmed combat, or armed?"

"Both," he smiled. "Full contact."

"I would not want to hurt you," he said in concern. That drew some laughter from the Knights.

"You're not going to hurt him, Captain," Faalken promised. "Tarrin's alot tougher than he looks, and he packs quite a wallop. He could probably pick you up and throw you."

"I don't doubt it," Binter replied. "I have never faced one like you before, so it is best to expect anything. That way you do not suffer a nasty surprise." He took his hammer back from Faalken. "But if you want a full contact exercise, then I would be honored to give it to you."

"Just watch that stick of his, Captain," Faalken said as the pair moved into the sand-filled area used for sparring. "He's very nasty with it. And be careful. He's got alot of nasty little tricks."

"The staff is a very effective weapon, Sir Knight," Binter said calmly. "It is not often used because it can be ineffective against a heavily armored

opponent. But when both men are unarmored, it is a very dangerous weapon."

"I'm glad *someone* appreciates my taste," Tarrin said with a laugh. "The Knights have been badgering me to give up my staff and take up a sword."

"Tarrin, if you used a two-handed sword, you'd be an absolute nightmare," Ulgen told him. "With your strength and speed, nobody would even want to get within ten spans of you."

"I have had so much trouble with that," Binter grunted. "Hold on."

"What?" Tarrin asked.

"We do not use 'spans' in Wikuna," he said. "We have a different system of measures. Ten spans is roughly a quarter over eight feet."

"Feet? What a strange term," Tarrin said. "What is a foot?"

"It's a bit longer than a span," he replied. "A foot has twelve inches, where a span has ten fingers. A finger and an inch are almost exactly the same length, so we use them as the base to convert from one system to another," he said, holding two of his huge fingers apart at the length of a finger. "You use finger, span, longspan, and league. Those terms in our system are inch, foot, mile, and also league. One of your leagues is four longspans. One of ours is three miles, and oddly enough, they're precisely the same distance. So we try to use leagues when dealing with Sennadites."

"I thought everyone used the same system," Tarrin mused. "Even the Selani use spans and longspans."

"Probably because they learned it through contact with you and the Empire of Arak," he replied. "The Arkisians brought that system from Arak when they broke away from the Empire, and it spread through Sennadar. The Wikuni and many kingdoms on the continents of Sharadar and Godan-Nyr use the same system, and there's another that's widely used on the continent of Valkar."

"You're very learned, Captain," Tarrin said in appreciation.

"The wise soldier learns as much as he can," he said, almost chanting from a learned passage. "The wise warrior will survive much longer than the strong one."

Tarrin had to give the Vendari a great deal of respect. Their ways of fighting mirrored the Ungardt and the Selani. Perhaps the three cultures had all stumbled upon the true secrets of the ways of the warrior. Both the Ways and the Dance preached self defense over starting fights. Both held high the ideal that their forms were learned not to create aggression, but as self defense against aggression. Despite their serious ability, the Ungardt were not aggressively expansionistic. They colonized islands in the northern reaches of the Sea of Storms, but didn't make war on their neighbors.

"Very true," Tarrin agreed. "Where do you want to begin?"

"Armed," he said with a smile, hefting his hammer.

They squared off against each other, Tarrin holding his staff in the end grip, and Binter holding his hammer by the very end of its handle. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I'm ready," he replied. "Let's go."

As the Knights looking on expected, the first few minutes were nothing but the pair feeling each other out. Tarrin tested Binter with light jabs and swings, keeping the massive Vendari out of reach and on guard with his longer weapon. He showed to be smooth and deceptively slow, but the ease of his movements told Tarrin that he could move much faster than he appeared. He was trying to bait Tarrin into thinking he was slow, a tactic Tarrin had used himself a time or two.

Binter was the first to give over feeling Tarrin out. He lunged in with shocking speed, hammer leading, but Tarrin had been expecting such a move. He twisted out of the path of the hammer easily, turning in a way that a human wouldn't be able to duplicate, almost with his shoulders facing behind him as he ducked and weaved himself around the hammer's carved head. He turned to the side, and his tail lashed out like a whip, striking the Vendari in the backs of his ankles. Tarrin's tail wasn't as strong as the rest of him, but his inhuman strength gave the limb enough power to easily beat a Knight in arm-tail wrestling. That power swept the very heavy Vendari's feet out from under him, and his shoulder slammed into the ground with a thud that Tarrin felt under his feet.

Binter laughed as he sat up, snaking his own heavily muscled tail out from under him. "I was about to do the same thing," he said. "I didn't think

that such a small, dainty tail could do something like that."

Tarrin swished that tail back and forth behind him, giving Binter a smile. "It's the longest limb I have, so it would be silly of me not to learn how to use it," he said, reaching down with a paw and helping the Vendari back to his feet. He flicked his tail over his shoulder and halfway down his chest, until the tip came to rest just above his navel. "It gives me a lot of reach at my flanks, and makes sure anyone coming up from behind has something to worry about."

"You learn well," Binter said respectfully. "Always know yourself. Now, let us continue, and this time I won't underestimate your snake of a tail."

Binter didn't try anything dramatic again. They engaged in a good, heavy workout, sparring against one another at a furious pace that made the observing Knights a bit dizzy. Binter was powerful, but just like Allia, he was *fast*. Tarrin was awed that someone so huge, so massive, could move with such viper-like speed. But unlike Allia, Binter's blows from his hammer packed an incredible punch, driven by his huge, heavily muscled frame. Tarrin was bleeding from two hits from that hammer after about five minutes, strikes heavy enough to tear his skin, while Binter had some blood coming from his snout from where Tarrin had whacked him across the muzzle. He was very big, and Tarrin found that he had to adjust many of the forms he used to deal with someone that had such a long, long reach, and the speed to close the distance in a heartbeat if he tried to back out of reach of Binter's weapon.

But most of all, Binter was very, very skilled. Tarrin was hard pressed to keep that hammer away from him as the Vendari used incredibly complicated thrusts, parries, and feints, confusing the young Were-cat in a dazzling display of control of his weapon. Tarrin had no idea where it was going to come from next, and he relied on his Were-cat speed and agility to make up for his disadvantage in training. Tarrin switched to a middle grip and engaged the Vendari at close range, using the two ends to do the same thing to Binter that Binter was doing to him. That put the Vendari back on his heels, as he tried to fend off the two jabbing, slapping ends of Tarrin's staff that came from impossible angles and in places that it seemed the staff couldn't reach. Binter's black eyes seemed to shimmer, and a smile lined with blood graced that toothy maw as he regained his center and pushed

Tarrin back, then re-engaged. Binter used his free hand like a shield, expertly smacking away or blocking the staff while using his hammer in harmonious motions to the defense of his free hand, blocking and attacking in the same movements. Tarrin too could attack and defend with the same weapon at the same time, and it turned into a subtle contest of who could attack and defend in the most interesting manner. Binter rushed forward and locked the smaller Were-cat down, making Tarrin push against the hammer to keep from being driven to the ground, and they both attacked with their tails. Without even seeing what they were doing, Tarrin's tail engaged Binter's heavier, muscled tail in a quick contest of agility, as Tarrin kept that heavy tail from wrapping around his ankle as Binter did the same.

But Binter didn't count on Tarrin's flexibility. Unlocking his back, he simply bent backwards, causing the Vendari to rush over him as Tarrin's resistance to his pushing simply vanished. Tarrin's head hit the sand just behind his ankles as the Vendari soared over him, but Tarrin reached out and grabbed the Vendari's wrist just as he went over. Tarrin pulled on that wrist to arrest Binter's forward motion, and then he walked over his head even as he pushed off with the hand holding the staff, and he curved through the air gracefully and put his feet against the Vendari's belly. Binter's breath whooshed out of his lungs as the Were-cat punched all of his weight down on the green scaled belly, exactly in time with Binter's impact with the ground, driving his feet into the Vendari's stomach and pinning him between the unforgiving ground and Tarrin's crushing feet.

Tarrin squatted down on top of the Vendari, paws on his shoulders, but Binter was clearly out of it. He was gasping for breath, Tarrin could feel his chest try to rise under his feet, and he was sprawled out on the ground like a passed out drunken sailor. The tip of his muscled tail was twitching uncontrollably.

"Now that was something you don't see every day," Ulgen said with a chuckle. "I swear, it looked like Tarrin bent himself in half."

"Tarrin, you can get off of him," Faalken called. "He can't breathe with you standing on him."

"Oh, sorry," Tarrin said, stepping down off of the Vendari and standing beside him, staff held loosely in his paw, waiting to see if he was going to be alright.

Binter finally got his wind back, and the first thing he did was laugh. It was a grating, hollow sound that sent a chill up Tarrin's spine. "I have never in all my years encountered such a devious trick," he said with a rueful chuckle. "You must have bent yourself completely backwards."

"I can do it," Tarrin shrugged. "It doesn't exactly feel good, but I can touch the backs of my ankles with my head if I have to."

"How did you end up on top of me?"

"I'm part cat, Binter," he said with a wolfish smile. "We always land on our feet."

"I just hope not to be what you land upon next time," Binter said. "You are truly a warrior of honor. You are a worthy opponent."

"I'm honored you feel so," Tarrin said.

"I see much of your own style in the staff. I would like to see you in the forms," he said, getting back to his feet, and then setting down his hammer.

"Are you ready?"

"Vendari recover quickly," he said dismissively. "You only knocked the breath from me. I am quite able to continue."

Binter proved even deadlier in unarmed combat, but Tarrin too also had a natural aptitude for it. His Cat instincts were familiar with hand to paw combat, and they surfaced in him as he and Binter traded quick, jabbing blows as they felt each other out yet again. Tarrin let himself to join with the Cat, entering that serene, trancelike state where there was no thought, no fear, no emotion, only him and his enemy. The Cat gave him even sharper reflexes and instinctive senses of danger and threat, his conscious mind drew on Tarrin's knowledge of the martial arts, and they combined to create a lethal adversary. Binter found himself hard pressed to lay a finger on the sleek Were-cat, who used his speed and his ability to move in ways that exceeded human capability to confound his larger opponent. He was the blade of grass in the wind, the smoke rising from the campfire, twisting, weaving, always just within reach, but never where he could be touched. Tarrin didn't strike back, allowing Binter to lose his temper and start making mistakes, but Binter proved that he was no fool. He was extremely

disciplined, and no matter how many times he missed, he simply tried another tactic without losing control.

Binter managed to make the first point, finally catching the Were-cat high in the side with a backhand. Tarrin's paw flashed and grabbed that hand as it tried to withdraw, then he twisted around to put his back to the Vendari and executed an Ungardt hand throw. Binter sailed over Tarrin's body in a high arc and slammed into the ground on his back, but the Vendari showed no signs of feeling it. He simply swept Tarrin's feet out from under him with his other hand, knocking him to the ground. They both rolled to their feet, and Binter smiled and glanced at Faalken. "You were right," he said. "He *can* pick me up and throw me."

"He's alot stronger than he looks."

"I noticed," he said, wiping a line of blood from his maw. "Those were not just the Ways. I saw a great deal of the Dance in your style. You have done well to combine them into a single form. With your speed and power, I'm surprised that you rely so much on defense."

"I just prefer defense," Tarrin shrugged. "I was trained to fluster an opponent, then take him down when he loses his temper."

"An acceptable style," he said with a nod. "But you should also learn to know when to use more aggressive techniques. Some opponents won't lose their tempers."

Tarrin nodded. Jegojah had been almost icy in his control, and it was *he* that goaded *Tarrin* into losing his temper. And Tarrin paid for it, dearly. "I usually don't have to go that far," Tarrin said. "If I get too aggressive, I--" he cut off, looking at the Knights. "Let's just say that I'm Ungardt enough."

Binter nodded. "Berzerker," he said. "We have them in our own race."

Tarrin gave him a curious look, but said nothing. "Let's work on that," Binter said. "Come at me with a more aggressive technique. Don't worry about hurting me."

"Alright. Are you ready?"

"Let's begin."

Binter turned out to be an excellent teacher. After working with Tarrin for about an hour, he began to break down the Were-cat's technique and style, and began working with him to perfect it. Tarrin also realized that, though he got in some lucky shots because Binter was unfamiliar with Tarrin's unique abilities, Binter was by far the better warrior. He taught Tarrin several Vendari moves that relied on raw physical power, power that Tarrin possessed. He helped Tarrin improve his style when fighting with his claws, developing Tarrin into using a flowing, sweeping form that allowed him to rake and slash with impressive speed and precision. Binter had his own claws, and he knew how to use them. And Tarrin gained a lot of experience in fighting a much larger opponent. He knew that the larger the opponent, the more of a target his knees became. Binter reinforced that, literally teaching Tarrin how to take down members of his own race. "The larger they are, the more dependent they are on their knees," he preached. "We have had a lot of experience against Ogres and Giants, and attacking their knees and hamstrings is the most effective technique."

"Ogres? Why would you need to fight Ogres? They're rather peaceful for Goblinoids."

"They are over here. In Wikuna, they are very, very aggressive. The Giants aren't quite so aggressive, but sometimes a rogue Giant or two comes down from their lands to raid." He looked up at the cloudy sky. "It's getting late. Her Highness is nearly finished with her classes, and I have duties to perform." He approached Tarrin and then touched his chest, his muzzle, and then reached out with his huge hand. "You are a warrior of honor," he said formally. "I greet you as a man of respect."

Tarrin wasn't quite sure if it was proper, but he mimicked the Vendari's movements, and then he clasped Tarrin's paw when he offered it. "And you are a warrior of greater honor," he said in reply. "Any who ask of you will hear that I hold the utmost respect for you."

"You have proven yourself to be worthy of honor, Tarrin of the Were-cats," Binter told him. "You will be accepted by our fire if you ever ask for hospitality."

"How did you know I was a Were-cat?" he asked curiously.

"You forget who I am tasked to defend," he said with a smile, a smile that seemed cold with those dead black, expressionless eyes.

"Oh. I didn't realize she talked about me."

"She talks a great deal about you," he told him. "She is quite taken with you and your Selani sister. I have never seen her so genuinely fond of others."

"I'm very fond of her. Though I have no idea why," he added in a slightly rueful voice. "She can be very obnoxious sometimes."

"Yes, but you see what is inside, not what she shows to the world," Binter said with a steady look. Tarrin stared at him. Did he know Keritanima's secret? "I must be going. I enjoyed our match."

"So did I," he said. "Be well."

"Honor to you," he said in farewell, picking up his hammer and then striding away on his long, powerful legs. Leaving Tarrin to wonder at how much he really knew. Binter seemed a very intelligent Vendari. Maybe he had penetrated Keritanima's disguise, and merely said nothing, because it was against his honor to do so. Bodyguards had to be as discreet as they were capable of defending their employer, because they saw a great deal of their employer's private life. If Binter felt it against honor to speak about Keritanima's private life, he simply would not do so. Even if ordered to by Keritanima's father. And he would gladly die before speaking what he felt honor bound to withhold. That was the Vendari way.

Keritanima surely knew how to pick effective companions, Tarrin mused. With Miranda to act as her decoy, and Binter to act as her champion, she was very deeply entrenched.

He wondered idly what was taking the Council so long. His demands weren't that complicated. They should have at least sent someone to talk to him by now.

"Allia should be getting out soon too," Tarrin said to Ulgen and Faalken. Darran had wandered off to help as the cadets practiced thrusting with wooden replicas of swords. "I'd better go."

"Don't mind me asking, but why aren't *you* in class?" Faalken asked.

"I'm on strike," he said calmly.

"You're what?"

"I'm on strike," he repeated calmly. "I won't start going to classes again until they meet some of my demands."

Faalken gave him a wild look, then both he and Ulgen began to laugh. "I've never *heard* of that!" Ulgen snorted between bouts of laughter.

"Tarrin, I knew you had guts, but to make *demands* of the Council! That takes serious--"

"That will do," Darvon said bluntly as he approached.

"Yes, Lord General," Faalken said with an outrageous smile. Tarrin saw that Faalken was feeling plucky. Why he was crazy enough to pick on Darvon was quite beyond him. Tarrin bowed as the aged leader of the Knights reached them.

"You're looking good, Tarrin. You ready to give up on the Tower and take your rightful place over here?"

Tarrin chuckled. "I may not be far from it, my Lord General," Tarrin said. "I've grown tired of the way they treat me, so I'm on strike. I'm not going to another class until they treat me with more respect and consideration."

Darvon gave him a wild look. "You are serious?" he asked.

Tarrin nodded. "I want the same treatment as all the other Initiates. They were so serious about that when I was a Novice, and now they pin me in here with that Ward and treat me like a prisoner. Well, I'm tired of it."

"It's a dangerous game you play, Tarrin," Darvon said seriously.

"I can handle it, my Lord General," Tarrin replied. "They really can't do anything to me. What are they going to do, ground me? Put me in chains?"

"They'll give you serious punishment."

"Who's going to deliver it?" Tarrin asked pugnaciously. "They'll have to do it when I'm being *very* unfriendly. I don't think there's a Sorcerer in the Tower that doubts how physical I can get if they upset me, and whoever tries to exact that punishment runs a serious risk of losing his guts."

Darvon gave him a serious look. "You walk down a dangerous path, cadet," he warned. "The Council can get very nasty when they put down insubordination."

"It's no more dangerous than their path. They can't handle me like other Initiates, my Lord General. I'm a lot more dangerous than the average Initiate. I'm not asking for anything outrageous, and my ability to inflict damage on the Tower is already very much understood. The choice of how things happen after this is theirs."

"That's blackmail, Tarrin," Faalken said with a chuckle.

"That's an ugly word for it, Faalken," Tarrin said with a very slight smile. "True, but ugly. I prefer to call it standing up for my rights as an Initiate."

"I can commend your resolve, but not your methods, Tarrin," Darvon said. "To threaten violence to get your way is unseemly. It's not the Knightly way."

"It's all I have, my Lord General," he shrugged. "It's not what I wanted to do either, but it's already clear that the Council won't listen to me, and they don't care about what I want or need. My father was injured the other day, and I don't know if he's alright, because I can't leave the grounds. I want to see him. I want off these grounds. Them pinning me in here upsets the Cat within me, and that makes it a lot harder for me to keep my inner balance. Eventually, I'm going to lose control of myself and snap, and someone is going to get hurt. But they don't understand that. My kind can't stand being caged," he said with his eyes igniting from within with their unholy greenish radiance, the clear sign that a Were-cat was getting angry.

"Tarrin, son, calm down," Darvon said soothingly, putting his toughened hand on Tarrin's shoulder. "I'll go have a talk with the Council. They'll listen to me. They'd *better* listen to me," he said in a dangerous voice. "I'll make sure they understand that you're doing it for your own well being and the safety of everyone around you, not because you're feeling snippish."

Tarrin blew out his breath. "Thanks, my Lord General," he said gratefully. "I need *someone* to stick up for me. I've been feeling abused."

"You're one of us, Tarrin," Darvon said bluntly. "We are all One Under Karas. You have the entire Order of Karas behind you, and they will listen

when I make that clear to them." He smiled grimly. "I don't think they want the Order to walk out on strike as well. What is good for you, is good for us. If you strike, then so shall we."

Tarrin gave him a strangled look, then he burst out laughing. "You'd do that for me?" he asked between peals of laughter.

"We wear brands, don't we?" Darvon replied with a smile. "You forget what being One Under Karas means, my boy. We are all one, and what affects one affects us all. What one does, if he acts in the Knightly way, is done by all. I find honor in your strike, my boy. You're trying a non-violent means to reach a much needed goal. That's very chivilrous, because you're thinking more of the well being of those around you than you are of yourself. That's very commendable." He gave Tarrin an evil grin. "If they don't treat you as they treat other Initiates, and allow you off the grounds, then all Knights will be recalled to the chapterhouse, and no Knight will accompany any *katzh-dashi* until our demands are met."

Faalken was actually rolling around on the ground, lost to gales of howling mirth. "They'll have a cow!" Faalken gasped. "Oh, take me with you, Lord General!" he wheezed. "I have to see the look on the Keeper's face!"

"Not if you're going to roll around in the mud like a pig," Darvon said to him bluntly.

"Isn't that violating the covenant that binds the Knights to the Tower?" Tarrin asked seriously.

"Not at all," he replied with that same evil grin. "There are clear strictures that say that no Knight will be sacrificed, left for dead, or abused by the actions of the Tower. Well, they're abusing *you* with this treatment, and the Knights call you one of their own."

"But I'm not a true Knight," Tarrin protested. "That's a sticking point, my Lord General."

Darvon drew his sword. "Kneel!" he said in a thundering voice, a voice that made Tarrin instantly and unthinkingly go down on one knee. "By the power vested in my by Karas, god of Law, god of Duty, patron god of Sulasia, as is my right as the Lord General of the Holy Militant Order of the Knights of Karas, I decree that Tarrin Kael has proven his worth to Sulasia,

to the Knights, and to Karas. I knight thee, Sir Tarrin Kael, Baron of Aldreth, keeper of the codes of the Covenant, Knight of the Order, defender of the faith, and hammer of Karas." The sword touched him on each shoulder. "Rise, and know that you are One Under Karas."

Tarrin stood up slowly, staring at Darvon in shock.

"And keep in mind that I never made you swear any oaths of obedience," Darvon winked. "You're officially a Knight, but remember that you can break our rules any time you see fit. I think I'll give you a new title. I think your official position will be as Knight Champion, a lone Knight who serves nobody but the Lord General. And as Lord General, I hereby order you to do whatever you want."

Tarrin gaped at Darvon. Faalken got up off the ground, brushing sand out of his mail shirt, his merry eyes literally dancing with mirth. "Well, let me be the first to welcome you, brother Tarrin," Faalken grinned. "Does this mean he outranks me?" he asked of Darvon.

"Yes!" Darvon replied vehemently.

"Well, you don't have to get snippy," Faalken teased his superior.

"Bring that she-devil here, Tarrin," Darvon said. "Let's make her a Knight Champion as well. She's already one of us, so let's make it an official title."

"Yes, my Lord General," Tarrin said woodenly, rushing off to do his bidding.

Knight Champion. When Tarrin was back home, before the festival, all he ever dreamed of was becoming a Knight. Of enduring the grueling training, of showing he was worth the title, of proving that he could be one of the elite, the best of the best. The standards of promotion to the spurs weren't about piety, or even about theological ground. The Knights were warriors, and their prime requirement was fighting ability. Only the best fighters in Sulasia, or the ones with the most potential, lasted long enough to reach the point where they could be considered, and not all of them won spurs. Because of this, the Order looked the other way when it came to which god the Knight worshipped. The Knights were a militant arm of the

church of Karas, but their decreed position as defenders of the *katzh-dashi* made it a less pious order than other militant arms of the church. They had services and went through the motions of being a holy order of Karas, but over half of the Knights never showed up for services. And this was allowed. Being a Knight only meant that if Karas ordered them to go somewhere, they had to obey, no matter which god they truly worshipped, because Karas was the sponsor of the order. And that was it.

Tarrin was a Knight. The dream that had occupied so many of his afternoons, teased him in his dreams, caused his mind to drift from the daily chores on the farm, it had come true. Not in the way he thought it would but had come to pass. Tarrin had knelt before the Lord General, and had been touched by the sword. Darvon had named him Baron of Aldreth, and that was expected. All Knights were instantly given titles of aristocracy. Tarrin *was* a Baron, a noble, the instant Darvon decreed it to be so. Darvon had that power, usually a power only available to the King. But Tarrin's title brought with it no land, no revenues. It was a title in title only. That was the tradeoff for Darvon's ability to grant titles, he could grant no land and no money. Tarrin's name would be entered into the rolls of the Knights, and would thus be officially recognized as aristocracy. The only advantage that would give him would be that he was exempt from taxes. He would never have to pay a brass bit in taxes in the kingdom of Sulasia. It was a dream come true, a dream he had all but forgotten in the chaos that had become his life after leaving Aldreth. Knight. He was a Knight. He was what he had always wanted to be, and for some strange reason, despite his situation, he found tremendous comfort and a sense of accomplishment in it.

Despite everything, he had finally realized his most deep-seated dream. He was a Knight.

In a bit of a euphoric daze, Tarrin wandered around the North Tower until he found his sister, who was en route from her class in the main Tower. He said nothing, only grabbed her by the arm with a big smile on his face, then dragged her to the training field over her strenuous objections.

"Brother, you're making me angry!" Allia warned in the common tongue. "What are you doing?"

"He's bringing you to me," Darvon told her as he pulled her closer.

"Lord General, what do you need of me?" she asked politely as she reached him.

Darvon drew his sword. "Kneel!" he barked in that voice of command, and Allia found herself kneeling before him before she knew what she was doing. "By the power vested in my by Karas, god of Law, god of Duty, patron god of Sulasia, as is my right as the Lord General of the Holy Militant Order of the Knights of Karas, I decree that Allia of the Selani has proven her worth to Sulasia, to the Knights, and to Karas. I knight thee, Lady Allia, Baroness of the Desert of Swirling Sands, keeper of the codes of the Covenant, Knight of the Order, defender of the faith, and hammer of Karas." The sword touched her on each shoulder. "Rise, and know that you are One Under Karas."

She stared at him in disbelief, rising to her feet. "That title is only in name, Allia, but you *are* one of us," he told her. "There will be no oaths of obedience or any demands on you. You are a Knight, but you are free to do as you will. Your official title is Knight Champion, a Knight who answers only to *me*. And I officially order you to do whatever you want to do."

She stared at him for a moment longer, a stern look on her face. "No demands upon me? I will not be bound under Karas?"

"No," he assured her. "I'm certain that Karas knows that you're already spoken for, Allia. You were given a title and an official place among us, but not any duties that we would have to perform."

"Then why do it at all?"

"Let's just say it's insurance that the Tower treats you with the respect you deserve," Darvon said seriously. "We don't take kindly to one of our own suffering from mistreatment."

Allia looked directly at Tarrin, and then she nodded in understanding. "I will accept your title," she said calmly. "I would find great honor in being considered among the esteemed ranks of the Knights of Karas."

"You are One Under Karas, sister Allia," Darvon told her bluntly. "Your trials are ours, and your happiness is ours. And it is we who are honored to have such an outstanding woman listed among our own unworthy names."

"You have been practicing your flattery, Darvon," Allia said sweetly, which made Darvon blush slightly.

"You're deserving of flattery, sister Allia," Darvon grinned. "Now, I'm sure that Tarrin dragged you from something important, so you should be on your way. I have a little visit to pay to the Council," he said grimly. "Faalken, Ulgen, make sure it's made official. Now, if you'll excuse me."

They all bowed as the Lord General of the Knights departed, stomping towards the main Tower like a man about to do war.

Faalken and Ulgen quietly took their leave to go do the Lord General's bidding, leaving Tarrin and Allia to walk back to the North Tower. "What was that about?" she asked him in Selani.

"I told the Lord General why I was on strike," he replied, still trying to suppress the elation he was feeling. "He said that since they consider us Knights, he'd put a hand in on our behalf. If they don't give me what I deserve as an Initiate, the Knights will stop serving the Sorcerers until they do."

Allia gave him a look, then she laughed. "That's very clever," she said. "Most Sorcerers won't walk the city streets without a Knight attending them. That effectively traps them in the Tower with us."

"Yes, but I'm just touched that Darvon and the Knights would do this for me," he said with profound respect in his voice.

"I see. And they Knighted us to give them an official standpoint?"

Tarrin nodded.

"You do know that we have succeeded beyond anything that Keritanima hoped," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"She wanted the Tower in an uproar. What more could we possibly do put the Tower on its ear and make it spin in circles?"

Tarrin considered that. Pitting the Knights against the Sorcerers would only confound the confusion Tarrin had caused by going on strike. He hadn't heard anything back from his actions yet, but he had no doubt that there were words flying in the Chamber of the Council at that very moment.

It could very well be what would push them over the edge, and make information that they needed shake from tight-lipped mouths. Where Keritanima's spies would pick it up and bring it to her, through Miranda. He had to laugh. "I guess I could go claw up the library," he said with a teasing smile.

"We'll save that one for later," she said with a wink.

"I'm shocked that the Knights are willing to take it this far. Their motto of All Are One Under Karas is more than just a pretty phrase."

"They are worthy of the honor they hold," she said quietly. "To put all at risk for the sake of one, that is true honor. I must sing of this to my clan. It must be recorded in our histories."

"A Knight," he said, his voice trembling. "We're Knights."

Allia put a hand on his arm. She knew about his youthful dream, and her warm eyes rejoiced with him that he had attained a goal he felt had been forever put out of reach. "There is only honor in it for me because I stand at your side, my brother," she told him. "You honor my family and our clan. My father cannot deny that."

"That reminds me," he said, coming back to earth for a while, "we have to decide what to do with Kerri."

"What do you mean?"

"Your clan won't give her refuge if they don't trust her," he said seriously. "I can't make the decision to allow her to accept the brands, but I don't know if your people will accept her unless she has them. It comes down to your wisdom, *deshaida*. What should we do?"

"I've been pondering that for a while, brother," she replied. "I don't know how my clan would accept her. She has the manners, but she would seem to them to be weak. Many of my people hate the outsiders, even Wikuni. She would have to be better, stronger, faster, than my people for them to accept her."

"She's a Sorceress, sister," he said bluntly. "You told me yourself that the Selani respect the *katzh-dashi*."

"After we explain why we're there, that respect will disappear, my brother," she told him. "She would *have* to carry the brands. They wouldn't accept her any other way."

"That's your department, my sister, and your decision. You would be her sponsor. Is she worthy?"

"From what I know of her, yes. I *do* like her, my brother. A great deal. She is calm, intelligent, and she is loyal. And she makes me laugh. I would find great honor in having one such as her to be my sister. But I will have to ask the Holy Mother. As always, it will be her decision."

Allia and Tarrin walked back towards their rooms, thoughts on the future, spirits riding high in the achievement of a long-desired dream, and hopes that they had done well by their Wikuni companion, who wanted the Tower to be so shaken up that the information they desired sifted up to the top. Tarrin felt that things were beginning to look good for them, that they would find what they needed to find, understand what it meant, and if it was not good, then make plans for the future to confound what the Tower wanted of them. They had found new allies in the Knights, staunch and determined men that would help them fight against the injustice being done to them. And they would help Tarrin and Allia most simply by standing up to stir the pot which the three non-human conspirators had brought to a boil.

If they only knew what chaos they were causing at that moment. Chaos that would shake the very foundations of the world.

Chapter 16

"He did *what?*" the Keeper exploded from her desk, jumping to her feet only moments after taking her seat. Amelyn, her face pale, stepped back from the diminutive Keeper, rightfully fearing to be singled out by the Keeper's wrath for the bad news. The Keeper was notorious for punishing the messengers who were bearing bad news, and because of that, nobody *wanted* to be the one to break things to her. Not even members of the Council could escape such wrath.

The Keeper was in a foul mood. Her appointment at the court of King Erick had not gone well. Erick had men of learning around him to explain to him what the light from the Tower had been, and the legends of what it meant, and now he was starting to interfere with their plans. Erick wanted Tarrin, and he wanted him *now*. It was all the Keeper could do to remind the young, brash king, only two years on his throne, that the treaties between the Tower and the Crown could not be broken, nor could they be used to force the *katzh-dashi* to hand over their young charge. It had turned into a shouting match, much to the shock of the court, a shouting match where truly ugly threats of invasion and magical retribution flew between the Keeper and the young king freely. The Keeper had never liked Erick. He was a spoiled wastrel whose only talent was finding men capable enough to run the kingdom in his stead, while he spent vast amounts of the kingdom's money on horses, palaces, and debauched luxuries. He was lazy and hedonistic, interested only in his fortunes, his possessions, and his power as king. He was such a disappointment coming from the line of Aralon, which had put a long succession of outstanding kings and queens on the Lion Throne of Sulasia for six hundred years. Erick represented to the Keeper the end of the Aralon dynasty, and the noble houses of Sulasia were already beginning to jockey for position to succeed them. The nobles were as dissatisfied with Erick as the Keeper was, and the Keeper didn't foresee him surviving long on the throne. Erick wasn't stupid enough to understand this, and had managed to surround himself with competent people who were paid more than other noble houses could match, money that ensured their

loyalty and his continued reign. Erick was mad for power, but only for power that he didn't have to dirty his own hands to acquire. That made Tarrin and the pending events very appealing to him.

What King wouldn't jump at the chance to gain the powers of a God?

It was already starting to look ugly. Reports from the Tower in Sharadar had arrived, and the news was grim. The Mage-King of Zakkar had already begun to mass his impressive array of army and navy, all reinforced by thousands of Warmages. The Emperor of Arak, the mightiest nation on the face of the world, was beginning to call in his legions from their war with the empire of Godan, which was itself a mighty kingdom on the continent of Godan-Nyr and Arak's longest and most hated enemy. Nyr, the smallest of the Three Empires of Middle World, had remained carefully neutral through their larger neighbor's century-long war, but now it was massing its armies. Even among the smaller kingdoms of the West, there was activity. Arkis was building its own legions, and the mountain kingdom of Daltochan had closed its borders. Draconian knights had begun attacking Dal mining caravans around the Petal Lakes, and the Ungardt had begun to call in their warships.

It told Myriam Lar much. Most of those nations were not surprising to see preparing, but others were. The Ungardt had a dislike of magic, yet they seemed to know what was beginning to come to pass. So did Daltochan, but the Dals were a strange people, taciturn and introverted, so it was hard to know what was going on on the high plateaus of their mountain nation. But Arak, Zakkar, Godan, Nyr, Arkis, they all had mages in close attendance to the kings and emperors that ruled those kingdoms, and what had happened the night of the sign had sent magical shockwaves across the world that *nobody* who could command magic could miss.

It had begun. There was no disputing that now. And Tarrin was the key.

The world would descend into a war which would rival the titanic struggle against the Demons five thousand years before, a war to rival the Great Blood War. And it would be fought over the possession of one man, a simple young farmboy from Aldreth.

Tarrin was a *Mi'Shara*, a Man Who Once Was, and he was the key. Not since the Ancients walked the earth had someone of his raw,

unprecedented power graced the Tower. Weavespinner, Were-cat, he fulfilled all the requirements set forth in the *Book of Ages*, before that ancient tome had disappeared. He was of noble blood, but his blood was not human. Nobody understood exactly what the term *Mi'Shara* meant, but it was a term from the Old Tongue that translated to mean He Who Was, or He Who Once Was. Gender irregularities in the Old Tongue could also allow it to be translated to mean She Who Was, or She Who Once Was as well, depending on the context in which the word was used. The strange thing was that the *Book of Ages* made no reference to his title, only to his requirements. He would be a non-human of noble blood, who had the power to wield Sorcery. Such beings were exceedingly rare. The Sha'Kar, the vanished race that had occupied the Tower with the Ancients, had been the only non-human race to demonstrate an aptitude for Sorcery. In a thousand years of searching, only two others had been found. Allia and Keritanima.

Nobody understood *why* these rare individuals were termed *Mi'Shara*. Nobody understood what "Once Was" meant, because nothing ever said what they had once been. All they had to work with was the passage in the *Book of Ages* that described them, nonhumans of noble blood who could wield Sorcery. Tarrin, however, did seem to fit that term better than his female companions, because he once was human.

What was even stranger was that it was written that the *Mi'Shara* were only the ones with the *best* chance of achieving the ultimate goal. *Anyone* who knew where to go and what to do could also reach the ultimate objective. That meant that half of the world would want to capture *Mi'Shara*, and Tarrin specifically, to get it for them. The other half would be seeking to kill Tarrin and all *Mi'Shara* to prevent them from getting it first.

It would have been much easier if it was written that *only Mi'Shara* could reach it. That would make it easier for the Tower to protect their assets from capture. It was much easier to protect someone from kidnapping than it was to protect someone from being killed.

The *Book of Ages*. If only she could *hold* that ancient, much treasured tome, if only once. In that book was written the entire history of the world up to the Breaking, the last known copy of the book that had once been known as *Denthar's Compendium*. The only book of ancient history that

was *not* written in the indecipherable language of the Sha'Kar, for it had been scribed by the priests of Denthar, the god of knowledge and lore. All of the books had been destroyed during the Breaking, except for one. And that had been found in a trunk in a noble's manor just after the Sorcerers returned to the Tower. Very little was known of the world before the Breaking, a time known as the Age of Power, when magic was so prevalent that the common farmer often utilized enchanted tools, and the most average layman knew a cantrip or two. Before the Weave was torn. Much ground had they regained since that horrible time, both the Sorcerers and the world. The Weave had almost completely mended itself, though there were still a few places in the world where the Weave had not grown back. Magic-dead areas, called deadzones, peppered the Known World, and were often populated by people who had gotten on the bad side of a Wizard. Magic had returned to the world, but not as Sorcerers this time around. It was the Wizards who were the most common type of magician, mainly because so many Sorcerers had been killed in the Breaking, and unlike Wizardry, Sorcery was an inherited power rather than a learned skill.

The deaths of so many Sorcerers had almost scoured the gift from the world, and the diluted powers of the less gifted children who remained weakened considerably. The Ancients were always careful to pair their most powerful members, so that their children would have the gift on both sides of their family, and be even stronger. Such selective breeding vanished in the Breaking, and the inherited gift thinned through the years, until the Sorcerers returned to the Tower and again began to carefully nurture the inherited power in their members. A selective breeding program had yet to be initiated, mainly because the Council had not yet garnered enough favor among the *katzh-dashi* for the idea. Times had changed, and the culture had changed. What the Ancients had done was no longer acceptable to the modern man, especially among the female *katzh-dashi*. But in its own way, it had begun again. *Katzh-dashi* did tend to marry within the order, if only because only another Sorcerer understood the rigors and demands of Sorcery. And the children of these internal unions almost always displayed aptitude in the gift. Amelyn was the child of just such a union. She had been born and raised on the grounds, and the Tower and the *katzh-dashi* was all she knew and all she had ever wanted. And she was powerful, ranking among the most powerful of the *katzh-dashi*.

But even her power seemed insignificant compared to Tarrin. He could somehow tap directly into a Conduit, and that awesome raw power would try to flow into him. He couldn't control it. The Keeper couldn't see how anyone *could*. The power of a Conduit was all seven Spheres, just like a strand, and that meant that Tarrin was being filled with the power of High Sorcery. The Sorcerers could only handle High Sorcery in circles, where the incredible demand and strain was spread out among a group. But Tarrin had the raw power to be able to draw on High Sorcery alone. And it was simply more power than even his considerable ability could control. Circles, wielding High Sorcery, even they would not attempt to tap directly into a Conduit. They would only try to draw the sphere of Confluence from strands. The power of a Conduit was even more than a circle could control, and yet this young farmboy from a forgotten corner of Sulasia could tap directly into that awesome power, and he could do it alone.

But being able to access it, and being able to control it were two different animals.

It was a complicated problem, something that had occupied the Council's attention the entire day before. They were already working on how they could help him overcome his problem, somehow resist the flood of High Sorcery and be able to work with normal flows and weaves. They had wanted to study him, but the Keeper wouldn't be there to help out. She had spent all day at court.

And now Amelyn bursts into her office, and tells her that Tarrin *refuses* to accept any more training!

"He will not come," she said in a quivering voice. "He told me to tell you that he won't learn any more or do as we say until we lower the Ward and let him off the grounds." She swallowed. "He made it clear that anyone trying to force him to do anything does so at his or her own peril."

"I will not tolerate rebellion *in my own Tower!*" The Keeper said in an absolute explosion of fury. "That boy will learn *now* just who holds his leash, I swear it!"

"Keeper!" Amelyn gasped. "Tarrin isn't entirely stable! If you push him, he'll go mad, and then what use will he be to us?"

"I *don't care*," she snapped. "I want Tarrin back in class, and I want it *now*. He has *got* to be ready, and this new problem of his is going to jeopardize things as it is. We absolutely cannot allow any delays."

"But if he goes mad?"

"Then we'll just have to find a way to reverse it," she snapped. "We don't have any more time, Amelyn! Don't you understand that? We have to take risks now!"

"I think the risk you're talking about is too great," she said. "All he wants is to be allowed off the grounds to visit his family. That is not an outrageous demand."

"It is," she said grimly. "I just came back from court, Amelyn, and King Erick *knows* about Tarrin. He demanded that we hand him over to him. Now more than ever, we have to protect him, because Erick's not the only one that's going to come after him. If someone else takes him, or someone kills him, then where will that leave us? Or Sulasia? Or the world? The Wikuni and the Selani don't have his power, Amelyn. I don't know if they can do it. Even if I have to keep him chained in a cell, we're keeping our hands on that boy. And when the time comes, we'll release him to do what *must* be done."

Amelyn looked about to say something, but the door to her office burst open, and an infuriated Darvon marched in. He looked completely enraged, and the Keeper inwardly groaned. Darvon was almost too stubborn to handle, and it looked like he wasn't about to be put off by anything.

"Keeper, we will talk, now," he said hotly. "We're going to have a little talk about Tarrin."

Now what? "What did he do now?" she demanded irritably.

"Tarrin told me that you're keeping him trapped on the grounds," he said. "He also told me that he has refused to do anything else until he is granted the same rights as the other Initiates."

"He's being held on the grounds for his own safety, Darvon," the Keeper said calmly, but it was even clear to him that her voice was highly strained. "Someone with considerable resources at his disposal is trying to kill him."

"Yes, and I think you know all about that," Darvon retorted. "What you're doing to him is wrong. He has a phobia against being caged. I think you know that too. Well, he told me that he's taken as much as he can stand with being *caged* on the grounds. If you don't let him out, he's going to end up hurting someone."

"He'll just have to endure it, Darvon," she told him. "It's much too dangerous for him to be outside of our protection."

"And what of his decision to strike against you?"

"That won't last long," she said in a sudden growling voice.

"So, you would oppress your own people, when all they want is to be treated like everyone else?" he asked pointedly.

"He's *not* everyone else!" she said in sudden fury. "He's a Were-cat, and he's as dangerous to the people of Suld as he is in danger! He stays on the grounds, because it keeps him safe, and it keeps Suld *safe from him!*"

Darvon gave her a calm look. "I see," he said. "Then that is your choice."

"You better believe that it's my choice," she said with a hot look.

"Fine. I should tell you, then, that we have long considered Tarrin and Allia to be our own. And not long ago, I decided that they have indeed earned the right to have their names on our rolls. I have Knighted them both." The Keeper's expression went from anger to horror in the blink of an eye. "Because Tarrin feels himself treated unjustly, he has decided on a non-violent means to solve his problem. As Lord General, I fully support the actions of my Knight. Furthermore, our code demands we do the same." He said that last with a slight, evil little smile. "We are All One Under Karas. So, the Knights hereby withdraw their support from the Tower and the *katzh-dashi* until such time that our Knight is treated with the respect due to his station. All Knights will remain on the grounds or in the chapterhouse, and all Knights in the field are going to be recalled."

"You can't do that!" the Keeper gasped. "Tarrin's an Initiate, bound by the oaths of the *katzh-dashi*! He can't take the Oaths of the Spurs as well!"

"He didn't," Darvon said with a wicked smirk. "He is Knight by title only. We lay no claim on his services, but his station does grant him the

right to our support. So, you can keep trying to control him, but know that the Knights will fight you every step of the way."

"You fool!" she said explosively. "Do you have any idea what you are doing? What you're jeopardizing?"

"Oh, am I throwing sand into the plans of the *katzh-dashi*?" he asked mildly. "And what plans would those be?"

The Keeper gave him a furious look. "What I'm about to say goes no further than this room," she told the Lord General.

"Keeper, is it wise--" Amelyn began, but the Keeper cut her off.

"Amelyn, if *Erick* knows, then Darvon won't be long in finding out," she said dismissively. "And perhaps Darvon can help us get Tarrin back under control."

"What are you talking about?" Darvon asked suspiciously.

"Sit down, Darvon," the Keeper said, motioning at one of the chairs in front of her desk. She sat down as he did, and then she calmly explained the entire situation to him.

Darvon's eyes rose, widened, and more than once they gaped at her in shock. But it was the truth, the real truth, and he knew it.

And it made his blood run cold.

After he regained his composure. "I may understand why it's necessary, but you have a very edgy Were-cat on your hands, Keeper. It would be wise to give in to his demand. Tarrin is unbelievably stubborn, and if you push, he'll just dig in his heels and won't budge. I think we can reach a compromise that gives him his freedom while still keeping him protected."

"I'm listening," the Keeper said after a moment.

Bandit was the name that Keritanima had given to her cat, and he had a personality to match that title. He was mischievous, fearless, and he absolutely would not mind the Wikuni at all. He held himself aloof from the Wikuni princess, and his imperious manner irritated her to no end. The cat should know, after all, that it was being addressed by royalty. Entire armies

would obey her commands, and she was one of the most important women in the world. The very power of life and death was being held by her, capable to use as she saw fit, and the blasted cat still had the nerve to claw up her curtains, tear up her bedding, and use her favorite chair for a scratching post.

More than once she considered passing sentence on the rebellious feline for crimes against upholstery, and have Binter execute it on the spot. But she needed it. And as if it could understand how important it was, it did whatever it wanted with absolute impugny. But then again, cats always did that anyway. It wasn't like it was intelligent or anything. It just had no idea who it was dealing with.

And thus began the brief but memorable war between Keritanima and Bandit. But the High Princess of Wikuna discovered, to her chagrin, that the the cat was even more stubborn than she was. No matter what punishment she used, the cat simply would not get it through its thick skull that what it was doing wasn't acceptable behavior. Even getting a pitcher of water dumped on it wasn't enough to keep it from tearing up her curtains. That was when Keritanima resorted to Sorcery. After discovering that Bandit didn't like loud noises, she wove together a weave that created a loud *bang* every time she caught him doing something that he wasn't supposed to be doing. It was a loud noise, it went everywhere, and it soon had all the Initiates on her floor complaining.

And it perfectly concealed her conversations with Miranda when she needed to speak to the pretty little mink Wikuni about things she didn't want Jervis to know. She had no doubt that Jervis had his pet priests using spells to eavesdrop on them. After several ear-shattering explosions, however, she doubted that he'd be listening for long.

Miranda was sitting on the bed behind the Princess, brushing out her hair with smooth, even strokes. Miranda was a cutie, by any race's standards. With high, wide, impish cheeks and a pink button-nose, her animal features enhanced a more humanoid face than normal Wikuni. Miranda's muzzle was very short, and her mouth was much more humanlike. Her white fur almost passed as skin, and she had a very thick head of blond hair that cascaded down her back like a fur cape. She parted it to the side, and a huge plump of blond hair stood over her eyes and face,

which bobbed and swayed every time she moved her head. Her round mink ears popped out from that thick head of hair, just making her look cuter. Miranda was very cute, very sweet, and she seemed very innocent. And she was a very good actress. Miranda had been personally trained by Keritanima in all things underhanded, and Miranda was as smart as she was pretty. She was very good.

After giving any eavesdroppers an earful, Keritanima sat calmly as Miranda gave her the daily report. Rumors and innuendos passed from Miranda's lips as often as things brought in by the wide network of spies that Miranda had helped set up, workers and servants as well as people specifically hired from the city and brought in to root out information. Keritanima had a very comprehensive list of all the freelancers that worked in Suld, and several of them were now on her payroll. She had agents at court, in the King's bedchamber, and three of them in the Cathedral of Karas. She had several more scattered through the noble villas, and the whisperings of the nobles found their way onto her desk, in triplicate. If she really wanted to know, she could find out what the Duchess of Ultern had for breakfast that morning.

And by now, Jervis had just as extensive an operation. Jervis had a larger budget, and he didn't have to work while keeping his identity a secret. She had no doubt that Jervis was receiving all the information she was, and perhaps a little bit more. Jervis had access to the communications of the priests of the Wikuni, something that Keritanima didn't enjoy.

So she managed to buy off a member of Jervis' staff. Now a copy of everything that crossed the rabbit Wikuni's desk ended up on her own as well.

Keritanima listened calmly as the mink Wikuni brushed her hair. Even Miranda's voice was cute, a high yet rich voice that seemed to go perfectly with her deceptive appearance. The focus of her report was the meeting, or more to the point, the shouting match, between the Keeper and King Erick Alaron. "My sources tell me that they really got after one another," she continued to her employer. "Erick threatened to use his army to overrun the Tower, and the Keeper threatened to bury Suld in a blizzard. And all of it was over Tarrin."

"Did you find out why?"

"Not yet," she replied. "All I know right now is that Erick knows something about Tarrin, and that it makes him very, very important. Erick demanded that the Keeper hand him over to the Crown. It's not something that Erick's talked about in open court, and it's been hard information to come by. I bought one of Erick's mistresses last week, and I arranged it so she's spending tonight with him. She'll drag it out of him. She's very good at that. I'll have a detailed report for you tomorrow at lunchtime."

"Very good," Keritanima replied calmly.

"You know, you should think of starting to wear your hair up," Miranda told her, grabbing two handfuls and lifting it up from her shoulders. "It's getting long. Maybe swept over to one side, with a gold chain woven into it. Yes, that would look pretty."

"You think so?"

"Yes, it would make you look more mature," Miranda told her.

"Why don't we try it?" she asked. "Didn't we bring some chains?"

"I have some in my room," she assured her.

Something told him that today was going to be rather eventful.

Tarrin pulled his red Inititate shirt over his head, flexing his paws absently after pulling the tail down to his trousers, listening to the sounds of activity coming from Allia's room. He knew that it would be eventful because the Council had had almost a full day to mull over Tarrin's demands, and he was positive that they'd return with an answer for him. It would have to come before class, he knew. Tarrin's instincts told him that time was starting to become a precious commodity, and they wouldn't wait around. He wasn't quite sure how he knew that, but he did.

Alot of things had been weird to him since yesterday. Tarrin had finally calmed down over the achievement of his childhood dream, and it also allowed him to explore the strange feelings he had towards the Goddess. She had been right, he had never been an overly religious person. The concept of loving a deity was indeed new and strange to him, but it was something that he couldn't deny in himself. Something about the Goddess had touched him on a very deep level, on top of the genuine affection and

trust he felt in her. She had always spoken plainly to him. She didn't treat him like a child, and she had made it clear from the beginning what she expected of him and what she wanted from him. Tarrin's Were-cat nature seemed to accept that kind of treatment willingly. Better an honest enemy than a dishonest friend. It was why Jesmind had gone off the deep end after he left her, because she thought that he lied to her, and that shocked her values to the core. Tarrin was more cynical and, in his own way, more worldly than his fiery bond-mother. Jesmind was born Were, and her preconceptions of the world had been set for her. She lived in a very small world full of others that shared those values, and no matter what she said, her ability to function in the human world wasn't as good as she thought. Jesmind would accept whatever anyone said to her as the truth, until it was obvious that he lied. And then she would punish the liar, if she could catch him. Tarrin wasn't quite as trusting as Jesmind.

That made him approach the Goddess from a defensive standpoint, and she had managed to worm her way through his defense and into his heart. But, being a Goddess, Tarrin realized that she knew exactly what to say to manage to pull that off. But his trust in her, his faith, wouldn't let him believe that she was using him. He could tell that she wanted something from him, something that she hadn't said yet, but she had also made that clear, nearly from the beginning. If he asked her straight out if she wanted him to do something for her, she would answer honestly. Tarrin could respect that.

But over it all, the towering love that he felt in her presence, both from her and from him towards her, told him beyond anything that his heart had been won over. She had indeed got herself another follower. But the strange thing was that he had no idea quite how to take it. He understood what gods were, but the Goddess seemed to break all the molds. She wasn't a distant, all-powerful voice that was to be obeyed blindly. She was more like a person than a god, with her own personality, and even a quirky sense of humor. Senses of humor weren't often associated with divine beings, and that sense of humor made her seem more real than if she were to manifest her true power before his eyes. Tarrin felt a very powerful personal connection to the Goddess, and he wasn't sure if that was how she wanted him to feel towards her or not. But that was tough. That was the way he felt, and he wasn't about to change it.

And something told him that that suited the Goddess just fine.

She'd captured him the very first time she talked to him, he realized. When she gave him permission to lie, when she explained what she expected from him, she had him. That planted a deep seed of trust in him that had bloomed into love and sincere faith. She could very well have demanded him to obey her every command, and he would have been bound by both honor and his Were need for honesty to obey. But she allowed him to make his own choices, even allowed him to lie. That had been it. Everything else had just been waiting around for him to make that one simple conclusion.

Tarrin sat down on the bed calmly, holding up the *shaeram* that graced his neck, studying it. Its black steel shimmered in the light of the cloudy morning pouring through his window. It was the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*, but it was also the holy symbol of the Goddess, and its design held many meanings. Dolanna had explained them to him once, long ago. But it was what the Goddess had said to him that had been gnawing at him since last night, a night spent reading a book on theology he got from the library. *The shaeram is for her, just as yours is for you and the ivory one is for Allia.*

The Keeper had given him this *shaeram*, and alot of the hostility he felt for her was directly attributed to it. Yet the Goddess said it had been for him. And the other two had been direct presents from the Goddess to Allia and Keritanima.

Did the Goddess make the Keeper give him the amulet? Just who had placed the weave on it that kept it from coming off his neck?

Sometimes the Goddess seemed to be listening, and sometimes she didn't. He knew that she could hear his thoughts. She called it listening to his heart, but it was more like listening to his head. He wondered if he could *incite* her to listen to him.

"Goddess?" he called tentatively. "Are you there?"

Only because you'd be very disappointed if I weren't, she answered impishly. *Make it quick, kitten, you have no idea how busy I am at the moment.*

"What do you mean by that?"

Your faith is very tentative, she replied calmly. If I weren't to answer, you'd start thinking that what you feel, and what you think I feel for you, are wrong. I can't answer you all the time, kitten, but when it really matters, I'll be here. You were wondering who chained you to that necklace, weren't you? Tarrin didn't answer, and he suddenly felt very guilty for even thinking of accusing the Goddess. Well, I know this will sting, my kitten, but though I didn't place the weave, I fully support it being there. You can't lose that amulet, Tarrin. It's absolutely imperative that you keep it, and it was the only way to make sure that nobody could take it from you. So I nudged the Council into making sure that it won't come off. That keeps you from losing it, and it keeps others from taking it off of you.

"If you can nudge the Council, why don't you nudge them into stopping driving me crazy?"

Things aren't that easy, my kitten, she said. We don't take direct actions like that. You know that. I'm the patron goddess of the order, but that doesn't mean that they all do what I say all the time. The katzh-dashi have duties to perform, the same as the Knights. So long as those duties are being performed satisfactorily, I really don't have the right to intervene. I don't like a great deal of what goes on in that Tower, but I have rules to obey the same as they do.

"But you're the Goddess," he said in consternation. "They *have* to do what you say!"

Kitten, many mortals don't listen to their gods, she told him simply. And I hate to burst your bubble, but need I remind you that I'm an Elder god. You read that book that explains the distinction last night. Well, we may be more powerful than the Younger gods, but we have more stringent rules on how we can use our power to affect mortals. Human society simply doesn't fall into our sphere of influence, kitten. I can't directly take matters into my own hands, or I'll get in trouble with Ayise.

That seemed strange. He did read the book, and understood the difference between the Elder and Younger gods. The Elder gods were the ten gods created at the beginning. First there was Ayise, the Allmother, and she bore the other nine. The Elder gods represented the primal forces in the universe, the forces of nature and the forces of life. Earth, air, fire water, time, creation, life, death, and magic, those were the forces that were

represented by the ten Elder Gods. The Younger gods are all those gods who came after the Elder gods, after the human civilizations took hold. Civilizations that had a need for gods to look over them, gods that weren't busy with running the universe. Many Younger gods had spheres of influence that overlapped the Elder gods, like Talon, who was the Younger god of the forests that also fell under the influence of Leia, Elder goddess of nature, but many Younger gods occupied niches that the Elder gods did not. The Younger gods represented civilization and human nature more than elemental forces. Love, war, hatred, peace, these were represented by Younger gods. Many Younger gods were patrons of entire kingdoms, the way Dallstad was god to the Ungardt, Karas was the god of Sulasia, and Sheniiia was goddess to the island folk of the Stormhavens. But some gods, like Talon and Dommammon, god of the moons, overlapped with the Elder gods, and when they did, the Younger gods served the Elders in that regard, taking a bit of the burden off the Elder gods and letting them have more time to deal with mortalkind. The Elder gods were different from the Youngers in that they couldn't be destroyed. A Younger god's power was tied to the mortals who worshipped him, and if there were no worshippers, the Younger god died. If the Younger had been born mortal and ascended into divine status by other gods, then he returned to being a mortal, to live out his natural life. But Younger gods born of other gods, or who were created to fill a need, these simply died. The Elder gods were true immortals, and they existed without the need of mortal followers.

And because they didn't need mortals, that restricted their ability to interact with them. All the Elder gods had temples and priests, just like the Younger gods, but the Elder gods didn't gain any additional power by this association the way the Younger gods did. From what the Goddess was saying, an Elder god couldn't really put a hand into the world unless it directly affected one of their own worshippers.

Precisely, she confirmed. And even with our own people, we are somewhat limited. Because we only give power, we do not get any in return, it is considered a gift and not a symbiotic relationship. That means that we can't be as demanding as the Younger gods in what we want our priests to do, mainly because it isn't something that we couldn't do ourselves. Unlike the Younger gods, we Elder gods can and do directly affect the mortal world with our power, so we don't really need priests. The Younger gods have to

work through their priests to directly affect the world when it doesn't involve their portfolio of control. That's why that restriction is there, to keep us from taking our priests for granted. It keeps us humble.

"I'm still not sure I understand that," Tarrin said.

Tarrin, gods are powerful, but they're not wise, she told him impishly. Many of us are just as immature and silly as humans are. The Elder gods especially, because we really don't have to answer to anyone but Ayise. Ayise saw this, so she put limitations on us so that our actions couldn't disrupt the mortal world. Right now, I could, with a thought, kill every single living being on Sennadar. It's within my power. But I can't, because I have my own rules to follow. Kitten, it's very complicated. Let's just say that we have our own little hierarchy up here, and one of the rules is that Elder gods can't directly influence mortals. Anything a mortal does at the behest of an Elder god is because they choose to, not because we force them to.

"Alright, I can understand that. But why can't you make the Council listen to you? Couldn't you just take away their power if they disobey?"

I don't give you your power. You're tapping into the power that I maintain to keep magic in the world, so you're accessing my power without me directly giving it to you. If you were priests, and I was supplying you with your magic, then I could make you do anything I want by threatening to withdraw my support. But it doesn't work that way with Sorcerers. To answer your question, no, I can't take away your power. It's a natural ability, not a granted power. The only way I could take away a Sorcerer's power would be to kill him, and I'd rather not bump off the ruling Council. It would take me years to rebuild the order.

"Just bring in priests to convince them."

Kitten, I'm not allowed to have priests, she explained. My association to the katzh-dashi came at a price. To support the order, I had to give up priests, because an Elder god can only have one organized following of mortals. It's part of our rules. To make it a bit more plain, the Sorcerers are my priests. They do do my work, kitten. Sometimes I have to push them very hard, but they do it. The situation makes it hard for me to directly control the katzh-dashi, because I can't force them to do what I want.

"But isn't it a rule that no mortal can access more than one type of magic?" Tarrin asked. "If the *katzh-dashi* are both Sorcerers and priests, then that's *two* orders of magic."

Why, I do believe that you're right, she said in an impish voice. That does seem to violate the restriction, doesn't it?

"So you *do* grant power to the *katzh-dashi*," he said triumphantly.

Only for important religious ceremonies, she replied calmly. Consecration, rites, things like that. No, I don't grant them priest's spells. They don't need them. They are Sorcerers, after all. Not much of a threat for me to say "do what I want, or you can't consecrate ground anymore," now is it?

"Oh," he said quietly, leaning back and thinking. "I guess not."

Watching you try to outthink me is very amusing, kitten, she told him with a silvery laugh. If I weren't pressed for time, we'd be arguing all day, but I do have other things to do. So we need to cut this short.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think about that."

You are dear to me, kitten, but you're not the center of the universe, she teased. Yes, I love you. There, your fears are abated. Can I go now?

Tarrin laughed. That was something he certainly never expected to hear from a Goddess. "Well, I guess so," he said.

I'm so glad that I have your Royal permission, she said dryly. I want you to think about something for a while, my kitten. A puzzle for you.

"What?"

*Isn't it curious that *katzh-dashi* are allowed to defy the rules? Kind of makes you wonder why.*

"It does," he said honestly.

Keep your eyes open today, kitten. The answer to that riddle will be right in front of your face. All you have to do is see it.

And then she was gone, leaving him feeling hollow and empty inside.

"Were you talking to someone, *deshida*?" Allia asked as she opened the door to the communal closet. The fact that she was carrying her shirt in her

hand and was topless didn't even register to him. Modesty was a loose concept to the Selani, and Allia had no fear of walking into Tarrin's room nude. She had done so, many times.

"Sort of," he replied calmly, and she simply nodded and said no more.

There was a knock on the front door, and Allia opened it without bothering to put on her shirt. But it was only Keritanima. She gave Allia a curious look as she came in, and her boxy muzzle had a worried frown on it. She waited for Allia to close and lock the door, then she started immediately. "We're going tonight," she said in Selani. "Things are starting to happen. We have to move."

"What happened?" Tarrin asked.

"I had an informant close to the king, and I was supposed to get some important information from her today," she said. "Well, this morning she turned up dead. She was poisoned. I think someone's trying to put a leash on my operations. I think it's Jervis, but I have no idea why. He has no real reason to interfere."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I bought a man in Jervis' office, and by now Jervis knows about it," she replied. "He'll try to feed me misinformation, but I bought the man to keep Jervis' eyes off the fact that I'm using Sorcery to rifle his desk."

"What?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

"Lula taught me a weave that lets me see into places where I can't usually see," she replied with a smirk. "I have to be rather close to where I want to look, though. That's the only drawback. I'm literally looking over his shoulder when Jervis is reading his daily reports."

Tarrin laughed, and Allia smiled. "I knew you were devious, sister, but that is masterful," she said appreciatively.

"Only what, less than a month since you touched the weave, and you can already weave Illusions and other spells," Tarrin said respectfully. "You're a natural, Kerri."

She shrugged. "Lula thinks so too," she said. "She said she's never seen someone that can learn weaves so quickly. I hate to burst her bubble, but it's

only because I can precisely recall things I see. All I have to do is see her weave a spell once, and I can copy it perfectly. Then she just has to explain how to alter the effects with varying the flows, let me practice it a few times, and I'm set."

Keritanima once told him that she could just remember everything she reads. When Tarrin asked his father about it, Eron called that an eidectic memory. Whatever it was, it was proving to be a godsend. In a shockingly short time, Keritanima had already progressed further than most Initiates who had been so for years. With Tarrin incapable of using his power, and Allia just learning how to control it, she was much, much more important than either of them in this little game.

"Anyway, something's going on, and it looks like someone else is actively trying to stop me from finding out what. So that means that we need to step things up," she continued. "We're going on our field trip tonight. Dress warmly." She sat down on the chair. "I hate moving so fast. After all, I've only had my network up for a couple of weeks at the most."

"What is this 'week'?" Allia asked.

"A Week is a Wikuni term for measuring days," she replied. "There are five days in a week. Kikal-day, Arga-day, Bor-day, Tori-day, and End-day. Two of our weeks make up one Selani March or Sulasian Ride, which are both ten days. My men are reputed to be good, but I haven't had the time to settle them in," she fretted. "Robbing the Cathedral will make things tense, and I just hope they can deal with the increased security."

"Why not send them instead?" Tarrin asked.

"They don't know what to look for," she countered.

"Neither do we," Allia pointed out.

"Well, we have a better chance of figuring that out than they do," Keritanima said defensively. "Besides, I think the three of us will be rather good burglars. With you two's stealth and my experience, we should be able to pull it off without raising a whisper."

"Experience? You've done this before?"

Keritanima gave Allia a wolfish grin. "Many times," she winked. "I was a thief before I was the High Princess, Allia, and the increased attention

forced me to stop sneaking off. I was trained by the best in Wikuna."

"You have had quite an education, Kerri," Tarrin chuckled.

"A girl has to have a hobby," she said with a wink. "We'll discuss the plan tonight, before we go."

"You have a plan?" Tarrin asked.

"Tarrin, you never go thieving without a plan," she told him with a huff. "The planning is the most important part."

"I thought you just snuck in and took things."

"That's sloppy work," she said critically. "The objective of a thief is to take the most valuable things in the fastest possible time, without getting himself caught. A good thief makes a plan. He knows where he's going and what he's looking for before he ever sets foot in the place he's robbing, because that maximizes the profit while minimizing the danger to himself. I have a copy of the plans for the Cathedral, including most of their secret passages and chambers. We'll meet in my room after dinner and make our plan."

"But we don't know what we're looking for," Allia said.

"True, but because I have a copy of the Cathedral's plans, I have a good idea of where to look for it," Keritanima told her. "There are three hidden rooms large enough to serve as a secret library. Our plan will mainly focus on what path we take through the Cathedral to cover each room."

"How did you get your hands on a copy of the Cathedral's plans?" Tarrin asked.

Keritanima only winked at him in reply.

"Have I told you lately that I love you, Kerri?"

She laughed. "I love you too, brother," she replied. "I can't stay much longer, or Jervis will think I'm up to something."

"You are."

"But he's not *certain* of that," she winked. "And Allia, remember to put your shirt on before you leave today," she told the Selani with a teasing smile. "I'm sure you walking around topless doesn't bother Tarrin, but it'll

give the other Initiates a fit. Brel would probably have a heart attack on the spot."

"Perhaps I should do that, if only to make the man shut up," Allia said sourly. "I'm growing tired of his moralistic ravings. I don't see why he can't understand that Tarrin and I are brother and sister, and not lovers."

"Maybe he has those kinds of thoughts about his own sister," Keritanima said with a wicked little smile.

"That's a very sickening thought," Allia grunted. "Humans can be *so* depraved."

"True, but they're interesting. I have to go. See you two in my room after classes."

"We'll be there," Tarrin replied.

"Hmm, maybe I *should* go knock on Brel's door bare to the world," Allia said with an evil look in her eyes. "That man has been on me for days about our living arrangements. He accuses me of being a harlot and a tramp, though he never comes out and says it directly, and it's obvious he thinks that I'm seducing you on a nightly basis. Perhaps some revenge is in order."

Tarrin laughed. "I'm sure he'd appreciate it, sister," he told her with a broad grin.

Allia meaningly put her hands on the waist of her trousers, and that sent Tarrin into gales of laughter. It only intensified when she pulled them down, exposing her every intimate charm to him, and then stepped out of them. She stood there wearing nothing but her boots, and that seemed to be even more amusing to him for some reason.

"Excuse me for a moment, my brother," she said with a flat voice, though her eyes were dancing with delight. "I have some vengeance to exact."

"Have fun," he managed to say, as she opened the door, and then stepped out into the hallway wearing nothing but a pair of boots, her long silver hair, and a vicious grin.

"Oh, I will," she promised, closing the door.

Allia was a treasure. He had no idea how he managed to live so long without her in his life.

Tarrin started counting. By the time he reached thirty, there was a strangled bellow from further down the hall, with Brel, Master of Initiates, telling Allia hysterically to go back to her room and put some clothes on! About two minutes later, she calmly stepped back in through his door, and the look on her face was absolutely evil. It only made Tarrin fall off the bed in bouts of helpless laughter.

"That was definitely worth the effort," she said idly to herself. "The look on his face will keep me smiling for a month." She slipped off her boots, righted her pant legs from where they had been pulled inside out when she took them off, and then stepped back into her trousers.

Perhaps it was the ultimate in bad luck that an enraged Brel opened Tarrin's door forcefully just as Allia bent down to pull her pants up, and she had her back to the door. He took one look at the Selani's shapely backside, her posture leaving absolutely nothing to his imagination, and then he simply fainted dead away at the threshold.

Tarrin was basically a loss at that point. It took him almost twenty minutes to recover control of himself, and Brel lay there the entire time, as other Initiates crowded around him around Tarrin's door. Allia dressed herself with a calm certainty that told everyone she felt absolutely no shame in what she had done, and stood by the door and waited for Brel to wake up. Her icy blue eyes kept the other Initiates from questioning her, and most simply meandered off to spread wild rumor and stories of the event to the others.

After recovering control of himself, Tarrin stood up and gave Allia a grin, patting her on the shoulder just as Brel began to stir. His eyes looked up at the pair blearily, then raw horror crept into them.

"Never question my morals again, Brel," Allia told him coldly. "Else what I do next makes this look innocent by example."

The shrivelled old crotchety Sorcerer blanched at the cold-eyed Selani, his wrinkled face turning pale, then scabbled to his feet and rushed away hurriedly.

"You're an evil woman, *deshaida*," Tarrin laughed. "And I love you for it."

"I love you too, *deshida*," she said with a wicked little smile.

Darvon's scent touched Tarrin's nose just as the man came into view at the door, with the massive Azakar trailing behind him. "I take it you were having fun with Master Brel?" the aged Knight asked idly.

"He could not accept that Tarrin is not my lover," Allia said bluntly. "I decided that it was time for him to understand a few things."

Darvon took one look at the hot-eyed Selani, and he chuckled. "I'm sorry I missed it. It must have been good."

Just thinking about it made Tarrin laugh again. "It was priceless, my Lord General," Tarrin assured him. "I always knew my sister is an evil woman. She proved it."

Allia only gave Darvon a wicked smile, which made him laugh. "I never doubted it," he said.

"What brings you into the Initiate's quarters, my Lord General?" Allia asked.

"Business, my sister, business," he said. "I had a talk with the Keeper yesterday, Tarrin. Some changes were made."

"Really?"

"She agreed to allow you off the grounds, but only if you give her a day's advance warning," he told him. "But she refused to allow you to go alone. So if you leave the grounds, you have to go with Azakar here to accompany you, and at least one Sorcerer. You may be a Knight, but even you have to admit that someone is out to get you. It isn't Knightly to refuse the help of the order, and we look after our own. So Azakar here has been assigned to accompany you and act as your bodyguard, and you get to choose the Sorcerer you want to go with you. You have to admit, this is much better than the complement of *katzh-dashi* that the Keeper was demanding on. I had to make some ugly threats to bring the Keeper down to this."

"Lord Tarrin," Azakar said with a curt bow. Azakar was still a cadet, where Tarrin was a vested Knight. That changed things between them, for Tarrin had always liked the massive young man, and Azakar had always treated him with courtesy.

"I guess I can accept that, my Lord General," Tarrin said.

"Good. You've been granted permission to go see your parents right now, but you have to be back by lunch. They want to return to your education. Dolanna is waiting for you at the gate. She goes with you too, and Faalken's going to accompany her."

So they *had* been willing to compromise. That told Tarrin a great deal. They wouldn't suffer outright defiance from any other Initiate.

Tarrin did indeed mean something to the Council. This was complete proof for his long-standing suspicion.

"Then can we go now? I guess I don't have that much time to see my father, so I can't waste any standing here."

"We just have one stop to make, Tarrin," Darvon told him. "At the Academy. Azakar here needs some new spurs."

Azakar gave Darvon a stunned look.

"Did you think that we'd let a *cadet* have a job as important as accompanying a Sorcerer, Azakar?" Darvon asked with a grin. "You'll be going out there with the honor of the Knights to uphold. It's better for everyone if it's your honor too, now isn't it?"

"Welcome, my brother," Allia told the huge Mahuut with a gentle smile. "It is time for my class. Until later, Darvon, *deshida*," she said, giving Tarrin a quick kiss on the cheek, then patting Azakar's shoulder as she passed by.

"Well don't stand there looking like a fool, cadet!" Darvon barked at Azakar. "Let's move!"

Azakar looked almost about to explode with pride.

He was wearing a surcoat over his mail shirt and a pair of silver spurs that denoted him as a Knight, and he looked like he was about to faint. Tarrin mused at it with a chuckle as they approached the gate leading out, where Dolanna and the cherubic Faalken stood waiting for them. The air was crisp and noticeably cool, but the bright sunshine belied the chill in the air. The day was so crisp and clear that the individual colored lines of the Skybands were visible, which usually was only possible at night. They were all the same dull white, but the faint lines that separated the colors were just barely visible, if one studied them intently enough. Such a crystal-clear day was unusual.

Tarrin greeted Dolanna with a warm smile and taking her small hands, and Faalken was already digging at the new Knight, teasing him about his newfound status. They were surrounded by Tower guards, and people filed in and out of the grounds through the front gate. Standing by the front gate were the Keeper, Koran Dar, Amelyn, and the willowy blond Council member whose name Tarrin didn't know. Even from there, he could smell them, and they were all *very* anxious. It permeated their scents. They were afraid he'd go through that gate and then never come back, he was certain of it.

The idea had crossed his mind a few times, but there was no telling what would happen to Allia and Keritanima if he did fly the coop. They would all escape, but it would be a time of their choosing, and when the Tower had the least chance of getting them back.

"Well, dear one, are you ready?" Dolanna asked.

"I'm ready," he said. "I'm surprised they're even bothering to send you three with me."

"Why is that?"

Tarrin only smiled at her in return.

"Oh dear," she murmured. "Just be careful, my young one."

"Always, Dolanna. Always."

The four approached the Council members, who wordlessly linked into a circle. Tarrin could feel the connection join among them, as if each reached out and joined invisible hands with the others. He wasn't quite sure

what was going to happen next, but Dolanna seemed calm and confident, and she payed the Council little mind as she smoothed her blue silk dress and wool cloak absently.

Then, the hands of the four Council members started to glow in a ghostly white light. The radiance that marked the use of High Sorcery. A *hole* silently opened in the empty air in front of them. It was surrounded by nothing, but the borders of that hole were limned in a pulsating bluish energy. Tarrin could see that they had somehow punched a hole in the Ward, a hole that would allow him to pass through it. He couldn't see what weave they had used to perform such an act, but it obviously involved all seven Spheres. High Sorcery *always* involved all seven Spheres.

"Be back by the tolling of the noon bell," the Keeper said in a tight voice, staring at Tarrin intently. "Don't make us come look for you. It won't be pleasant."

"Like you could find me," Tarrin snorted as he stepped through the penetrated Ward. He waited until Dolanna, Faalken, and Azakar were with him, and they stepped into the streets of Suld.

It was the first time he'd ever been in the city during the daytime. The streets were filled with people, dressed in all manner of clothing but sharing a common theme of warmth against the chill of the late autumn day. Sulasian doublets and breeches and long-hemmed dresses dominated the streets, but the occasional woolen mantle of an Arkisian, or the waistcoats and unusual appearances of the Wikuni were also rather common. Even the ruffled shirts and coats and tight-fitting pants called hose favored by the Shacèans. Several fur-clad Ungardt were strolling through an intersection, giving way to a horse-drawn open carriage that was occupied by a pretty middle-aged woman wrapped in an expensive velvet-lined cloak. A Torian woman, whose multitude of tiny braids clearly marked her city of birth, seemed to be haggling with a rough-faced Dal who wore the slate gray pants and brown cloak that were common among them. Suld was a city of trade, the largest city on the western coast, and from the city, on the well-maintained roads that criss-crossed the kingdom, goods travelled to Daltochan and northern Shacè, even into southern Draconia and Tykarthia. Sulasia was famous for its craftsmen, and merchants from all over the world came to Suld to buy what were considered to be the best durable goods in

the world. A Sulasian wagon would last ten years longer than one built by other hands, and there was a heavy demand for Sulasian four-banded barrels, famous for their durability. Daltochan was famous for metalwork and weapons, but Sulasia was famous for the things that modern man used in his daily life.

It gave Suld a multinational aire that Tarrin couldn't miss. Suld was the capital of Sulasia, seat of the Lion Throne, but the city looked more like a crossroads of the world. In Suld, Tarrin's obvious exotic appearance didn't attract as much attention as he thought it might. Some people gave him second looks, but by and large, he was left alone. But then again, the hulking ten span tall menace travelling beside him may have alot to do with that.

The only think Tarrin didn't like about it was the smell. He'd grown used to that foul miasma since being on the grounds, since it carried over into the grassy, natural setting of the Tower. Out in the city, with the humans all bustling about, it intensified that pungent amalgamation of waste, sweat, anxiety, animals, weathered stone, wood, and fire. There would be no way he could backtrack even his own scent in that unpleasant riot of smells.

After they were about ten blocks from the Tower gate, well out of sight from the *katzh-dashi*, Tarrin stopped by a large tavern, whose weathered sign showed a mug resting on the skull of a Troll. Trollskull Tavern, it was called. It wasn't that far from Tomas' house, and it would be a good place for them to wait for him.

"This is as far as you go," Tarrin told Dolanna and the others. "Just wait here for me. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"I have to accompany you, Tarrin," Azakar objected. "It's my duty."

"It's also your duty as my brother Knight to accede to my wishes," he told him calmly. "I'm not in any danger, Zak. Trust me. But I'm not leading the eyes following us back to my parents. I had them hide for a *reason*."

"Just let him go, Zak," Faalken told him calmly. "Tarrin can take care of himself, and he could lose us so easily that at least we look dignified this way."

Tarrin chuckled. "True enough," he agreed in a modest voice. "I'll be back soon. Just have a drink and some breakfast, and I'll come get you

when I'm ready."

"Alright, just be careful, dear one," Dolanna said, patting him on the arm.

He left them there, he quickly and easily lost all his followers by stepping into an alley, shifting into his cat form, and then squirming through a hole in a wall into a building that turned out to be a warehouse, sneaking through, and then slowly making his way to the house. It wasn't easy in cat form, because he had to cross a lot of human and horse traffic, and more than a few people actively tried to kick him when he got close to them. But he reached the back door without a whole lot of trouble, shifted back into his humanoid form, and found it to be unlocked.

Nanna was busily chopping onions as Deris tended a pot sitting on the metal stove. The wood stoves were from Wikuna, and they were all the rage with anyone who could afford them, because they made cooking so much easier.

"I must say, you two are alert," Tarrin said, making both of them jump. Nanna whirled around with her chopping knife held like a sword, then she took one look at him and laughed.

"Don't do that to an old woman!" she threatened, putting the knife down. Then she laughed. "Is Allia with you?"

"Not today," he replied, stepping forward and taking Nanna's hand.

"So this is Tarrin. I'm sorry I was too tired to stay up the other night," Deris said with a grin.

"Deris," Tarrin greeted calmly.

"Are you playing hookey again?"

"Yes and no," he smiled. "Are my parents here? I need to talk to them."

Eron is down in the cellar, teaching Janine how to brew his brandy. Your mother is in the parlor with some relative of hers."

"Relative? Mother--" Tarrin suddenly laughed, then left Nanna standing there as he rushed to the parlor.

Elke was sitting on the sofa, and a large, older man with steel gray hair and a powerful frame sat across from her. He had a patch over his right eye, with a wicked scar running up from his jaw, over his cheek, and under that patch. His features were rugged, almost brutish, and his body looked as intimidating as his face appeared. A beak of a nose was a bit red, and his single eye was just a bit bloodshot.

Anrak Whiteaxe, clan chief of the Whiteaxe clan, had a bit of a cold. That, or he was hung over. But he wasn't stupid enough to come into his daughter's presence after drinking.

"Grandfather!" Tarrin said in surprise, making both of them look at him.

"Tarrin, lad," he said in a voice roughened by a lifetime at sea, standing up. "Ye're as Elke described ye. I think ye look good that way."

Tarrin laughed, then rushed over and crushed his grandfather in a fierce hug. "When did you get in? Mother said you'd been visiting. How did you know to come here?"

"She saw my ship in the harbor," he replied, then he pushed him away enough to sneeze.

"I told you to do something about that, father," Elke told him.

"I will I will," he snapped. "Ye're lookin' healthy, me boy. Taller. And with fur."

Tarrin chuckled. "Well, that wasn't my choice, believe me," he said.

"Elke told me all about it," he said. "I been lookin' fer that Were-cat woman to give her a piece of my mind, but she's not showin' up in ports. She should save herself the trouble and come find me, so I can get her overwith."

Tarrin laughed. "Leave her alone, grandfather," he warned. "She's not worth your trouble, and I've more or less forgiven her for what happened. It wasn't entirely her fault."

"Me? Give up a grudge? I ain't *that* old, lad."

Tarrin laughed. He missed Anrak. The burly old sailor was quite a character. "How's the clan?"

"Doin' fine, my lad, doin' fine. Yer uncle Jarl is doing the paperwork for me while I keep us bringing in the coin. It's a good situation for both of us."

"I keep telling you that you're getting too old for wandering, father," Elke said sourly. "You should spend at least every other trip at home, so you have a chance to recover from your journeys. It's not healthy for you to be running all the time."

"I'll stop wanderin' when I'm dead," Anrak grunted. "And only cause dead men can't walk."

"Well, you'll stop wandering until I get rid of that chill," she said in a steely voice. "You can't go out on the winter seas with a cold. It'll go into your lungs, and they'll be throwing your carcass over the rail within a ride."

"I ain't the only one sick, so we're wintering here," he replied. "I ain't gonna risk my men to the chills, and there's already ice out on the seas. It's too dangerous to sail north."

"Already? It's not even winter yet!" Elke said in surprise.

"It's been a warm summer up north, hon," Anrak told her. "The ice flows have been breaking up, and the summer current's been haulin' them out of the Bay of Ice. There's been ice in the water all summer, but now that it's colder up north, it ain't breakin' up and meltin' like it was in the summer."

"Well, at least you'll be wintering where mother can keep an eye on you," Tarrin chuckled.

"Only cause my men can't sail," Anrak said with an evil grin at his daughter. "I'd rather spend my winter in Dayisè, where it's warm all winter, and the ladies are much more friendly."

"Mother would kill you," Elke warned.

"Yer mother can't catch me," Anrak grinned.

"I can fix that."

"Ye wouldn't!"

"Try me."

Anrak gave Elke a sour look. "Ye're ruinin' my golden years," he accused.

"I'm making sure you live to enjoy them," she replied bluntly. "Mother would split your skull with a frying pan if she knew you were cheating on her."

"I ain't cheatin' on yer mother, Elke. I ain't that stupid."

"I thought not," she said with a slight smile.

"What brings you back here so soon, Tarrin?" Elke asked.

"I demanded to be let out--legally--and see you," he said. "It was generally just misdirection, because I can get out any time I want, but at least now I don't have to sneak over to see you. My escort is waiting at a tavern while I visit," he chuckled. "At least they were smart enough not try to follow me."

"Escort?"

"I can't leave without a Knight and a Sorcerer accompanying me," he told her. "Lucky for me they gave me a Knight that just got his spurs, someone I can effectively bully. And I get to choose the Sorcerer that comes, so I can always get someone that I can convince to let me go on alone. That reminds me. Have you and father given any thought as to where you're going to live? You can't stay here forever."

"Actually, we have," Elke said. "I haven't been home in years, and Jenna should meet the clan. We were considering travelling with father back to Dusgaard. We could hug the coast to avoid the ice, and be back in Dusgaard before the harbor freezes. After spending a year up there, we were going to go back to Aldreth."

"Ye never said nothin' about that to me," Anrak growled.

"That's because you'd just argue," Elke told her father with a false smile.

"That may be the best thing," Tarrin said. "We have to face facts. Because of me, you're in danger here. It may be best if you get some distance from me."

"Danger? From what?" Anrak demanded. Elke calmly related the story of the attack by the Doomwalker, and the many attempts on Tarrin. "By the

ice, daughter, why didn't ye say so? We'll have ye home safe by New Year's Day."

"The only reason we're even considering it is because Jenna has proven she can control her gift," Elke said. "She can wait a year or two before going back to formally training with the Sorcerers."

"There's always room for one or two more, grandson," Anrak told Tarrin seriously. "If ye want protection, the Whiteaxe Clan always looks after its own."

"I appreciate that, Grandfather, but the Tower has a long arm," Tarrin replied. "I've already got somewhere much safer in mind, somewhere even the *katzh-dashi* won't go to unless invited."

"Allia's clan?" Elke asked.

Tarrin nodded. "Not even the *katzh-dashi* are stupid enough to come after us if we have the protection of the Selani," he told her. "They'd come over the Sandshield and wipe Sulasia off the map."

"No doubt," Anrak chuckled evilly.

"But we can't leave yet. Not until we have a full idea of what's going on."

"Any luck so far?"

Tarrin shook his head. "Keritanima's run into opposition. Someone keeps killing her informants."

"That's a Wikuni name," Anrak deduced. "By the sound of it, she's someone in a very high station. Nobility."

Tarrin nodded. "She's in this with us," he replied. "That reminds me. We *might* come visit in the middle of the night, or we might not. Either way, pretend that we were never here."

Elke gave Tarrin a slow grin. "That sounds underhanded."

"We do have some plans along those lines, yes," he agreed with an urbane smile.

"I'll have Deris leave the back door unlocked," Elke said.

"No, just have him not bar the door. Just use the lock. Kerri says there's no lock made that she can't pick. We'll see if she's just bragging tonight."

"The High Princess of the Wikuni can pick locks?" Elke asked in surprise.

"Mother, Kerri is full of surprises," Tarrin chuckled. "And unfortunately, I have to cut this short. It took me longer to get here than I planned, and I have to be back at the Tower by the noon bell."

"This *is* Keritanima-Chan Eram ye're talkin' about, ain't it?" Anrak asked suddenly. "I heard that she has the brain of a sand shrew."

"She has the brain of a genius, Grandfather," Tarrin said with a laugh. "She just pretends to be an idiot. And that's priviledged information," he said sternly. "If I find out you've been blabbing, I'll take out your other eye. Do you understand me?"

"He's gotten aggressive, daughter," Anrak noted to Elke.

"It suits him," Elke said with a shrug. "And it *is* important you keep it quiet, father. Their safety depends on Keritanima's little game. If you get my son in danger, I'll gut you like a pig and drag you around by your entrails. Do we understand one another?"

"As sweet as ever, eh daughter?" Anrak said with a rueful, gravelly chuckle.

"Just making sure you understand the consequences," she warned.

"In *this* family, there are always consequences," Anrak said.

Tarrin returned to Dolanna and the others half an hour before the noon bell, and they had him back on the grounds by the determined time. After a quick lunch in the kitchens, Tarrin was summoned to the Chambers of Seven, which was the council chamber used by the Council. Tarrin was not looking forward to it. Just as he suspected, the Council itself was going to try to correct his problem in using Sorcery, and that made him very nervous. Tarrin didn't trust the Council. He had some friendly feelings towards Koran Dar, because the man seemed calm, wise, and gentle, but he was only one of the seven. Of the others, he only had had contact with Amelyn and

Ahiriya, and neither of those meetings had been entirely friendly. He didn't even know the names of all seven.

And now he was going to be forced to put his life in their hands. That didn't set well with him, and by the time he reached the ornate, bronze gilded door that was the entry to the Chambers of Seven, his tail was lashing back and forth like a farmer reaping wheat with a scythe.

For the ruling body of the *katzh-dashi*, they kept themselves in a humble state. The room wasn't that large, and it was totally devoid of all decoration. The gray stone walls were illuminated by a large glowglobe hovering in midair over a circular table made of white stone. Inlaid on the surface of that round table was a *shaeram* device, in full color, and around that table stood seven simple padded chairs. Where each triangle that represented a Sphere pointed away, a Council member sat, and Tarrin realized immediately that the Seat of each Sphere sat with their own color pointing towards them. The Keeper, who represented no Sphere, sat in a void between two spheres, and she also faced the door. Seven faces turned to look at him, and Tarrin very nearly turned around and left. They were hard faces, all of them younger than he would have imagined for a ruling body of a world power, a couple of them outright hostile, and their scents were as hard as their expressions, though they were tinged with fear. They were his enemies, he knew that at that moment. They had always been.

"Come in," the Keeper ordered. "We have much to do."

"What are we going to do?" Tarrin asked, staying by the door.

"You will address the Keeper in a term of respect!" Amelyn snapped at him suddenly.

"Amelyn," the Keeper said sternly. "We're going to try to help you," she told him. "We have to understand what's happening to you when you try to touch the Weave, and then we'll try to help you work around the problem."

"What do I have to do?" he asked warily.

"Just come in, and have a seat on the table," the Keeper said. "Right in the middle."

Approaching them, he stepped up onto the table, but as soon as he looked down at the *shaeram*, memories of the fight with the Wraith flooded

into him. He almost couldn't bring himself to step across that green circle, and it made him extremely nervous and unsettled to seat himself cross-legged atop the concave star that represented the Goddess. He wrapped his tail around his body and rested it in his lap.

"Very good. Now, reach out and touch the Weave. If you feel yourself losing control, let it go, wait a few minutes, and then touch it again."

Silently, Tarrin assented the room. It was in very close proximity to the Heart, and the air was almost saturated with very large strands that carried a lot of magical energy. There was a lot of power in the room. Touching the weave was almost instinctual for him, and he achieved communion with the Weave as easily as others may pick up a basket. He felt that sudden heat approach, the avalanche of raw power that always sought him out when he touched the Weave, and he broke away before it had a chance to find him.

"That was too soon, Tarrin," the Keeper's voice called to him. He looked down at her, and could see her form shimmering in a curious way that seemed to tell him that she was touching the Weave. "We have to see what happens, and you broke contact too soon."

"I'm not going to *let* that happen, Keeper," he said adamantly.

"We're here to cut you off, Tarrin," she soothed. "We won't let it get away from you. Just touch the Weave again, and this time let whatever happens happen."

"That's easy for *you* to say," he snorted under his breath, then he reached out and touched the Weave again. Almost immediately, the onslaught of magical power was upon him, and he gasped reflexively as it tried to fill him with the full power of the Weave. It overwhelmed his ability to let go of the Weave instantly, creating a connection so powerful that just letting go wouldn't be enough.

He felt something try to fall between him and the Weave, an invisible something with no substance, yet had a palpable effect on the magic trying to flood into him, but it was rebuffed forcibly when it tried to choke off the flow of power into him. In half a heartbeat, his body was saturated with power, energy that built and built and built and had nowhere to go. He felt another attempt to limit that influx of magical energy, but it was again slapped away by the raw magnitude of the energy it was trying to stop.

In sudden desperation, he opened himself to the Weave more fully, allowing the energy to flow *through* him rather than build within him. That helped, but not by a great amount. The power still sought to build inside him, but it did slow it down. That gave him the time he needed to recover his wits, to remember how to sever himself from the Weave, and he slammed the door in the face of that power. The backlash put spots behind his eyes and a sudden pounding in his head, a shockwave of intense pain through his body, and it even made the seven Sorcerers studying him reel back in their seats as if struck by a physical blow.

"Amazing," he heard Koran Dar murmur.

Tarrin sagged a bit, paws to his head as the pounding eased. The pain faded quickly, but it left an imprint of itself in his mind. He opened his eyes just in time to see a ghostly white radiance, wispy like smoke, fade from around his paws.

It had been the first time he'd let it go that far, foolishly trusting that the Council could control him, and the pain of disconnection was almost intolerable. His body was trembling from the lightning-fast wave of pain the rushed through it, as if some intangible being had flown through his body. Panting, he put his paws on the table to brace himself, letting the trembling cease and the memory of the pain dim.

"Alright, Tarrin, try it again," the Keeper said.

"No," he snapped. "I felt you try twice, and you couldn't stop it. If you didn't know, that *hurts*. I'm not going to torture myself just so you can study me." He felt the Cat rise in his mind, and a sudden irrational fear began to choke off his reasoning. He had no idea where it came from, but it was incredibly powerful. It was all he could do to stop himself from jumping off the table.

"Tarrin, you have to trust us," the Keeper said in a reasoning tone. "We can't help you until we have a complete understanding of what's wrong. If you let us try again, we could succeed this time." He felt them all join into a circle, and the Keeper's body almost began to glow in a white aura to his eyes. She was the lead of the circle. How he knew that, he had no idea. "Now, one more time," she said. "Try it again."

That they joined in a circle meant something. Perhaps joined, they *could* control the power. Tarrin pushed that irrational fear away enough to get a center on himself, then reached out and touched the Weave.

Almost instantly, he was overwhelmed by power. There was more of it, and it came faster and harder than it did before. Thought disintegrated before that tidal wave of power, and only sensation told him that something was trying to stop the energy. But again, to no avail. The incoming power simply flowed around the attempt to block it, overwhelming it, pulling it into him.

And in the instant it was carried into him, Tarrin was forcibly joined to their circle.

He felt an expansion of consciousness as his own power and even his mind reached out and made a connection to a greater whole. The Group Consciousness of a circle. And in that fleeting moment, he understood several fundamental truths. Sorcerers could join in circles no larger than seven, for an eighth member with a similarly structured mind created a permanent group consciousness, a mass mind that existed independent of the bodies of the Sorcerers involved, an amalgamation of the personalities of the victims. And when the circle was broken, the mass mind faded away, leaving the linked Sorcerers nothing but empty shells.

But that mass mind was formed because of the similarities between the minds of those forming the circle. Seven humans, who thought in similar ways, could form a safe circle, but eight would push the similarities over that intangible border, and create a permanent mass mind. Tarrin was not human, and because of that, human weaves of mind couldn't affect him. The human mind could not comprehend the way his mind worked, and thus could not affect his thoughts. But Tarrin's dissimilar mind joined to a circle of seven and made it eight.

And the dissimilarity of his mind prevented the formation of a permanent mass mind.

In that glimmer, he understood why the Ancients could do what legends said they could do. The Sha'Kar had been living then, and the Sha'Kar were not human. The Ancients could safely join into circles larger than seven. He wasn't sure of how the actual mechanics of it worked, but it was now

obvious that the Ancients could join into circles of at least eight. And who knew what limit the Ancients truly had? Perhaps they could form circles with a specific arrangement that allowed even a hundred Sorcerers to combine their powers into one massive effort. A circle of a hundred Sorcerers with the power of the Ancients could move mountains. That was how they earned their reputation.

In joining into the circle, Tarrin had wrested control of it away from the Keeper. He felt the power flooding into him dissipate into the other seven, reducing the burden it was placing on his body, returning rational thought into his mind. He had never been in a circle before, and the sudden intrusion of the alien minds into his consciousness caused the Cat to instantly and savagely react, pushing the unknown thoughts away with such force that it disrupted the tenuous bonds that kept them linked in a circle.

Instead of a violent tearing away from the Weave, Tarrin simply let it go. But the backlash he had suffered the first time was now placed fully on the Council, as the power inside them evaporated like smoke and caused that shockwave of pain. The Keeper almost fell over backwards in her chair, and the little blond Water Seat fainted dead away. The remaining six all had looks of agony on their faces, which passed quickly into holding their heads in pain.

"What just happened?" Ahiriya groaned.

"Tarrin somehow got into the circle," the burly Earth Seat managed to say. "His Were-cat mind disrupted it. And a good thing too, else we would all be dead."

He hadn't understood it the way Tarrin had, he realized. How could they miss it? It was so *obvious*. But Tarrin said nothing. The less they knew, the better it would be for him.

"Why do I hurt?" Koran Dar said in a voice not too much like a sailor with a hangover.

"I think we're feeling the backlash Tarrin felt the first time," Amelyn said groggily. "With us linked to him, he pushed it onto *us*. Goddess, Tarrin, if *this* is what you felt, then I won't ask you to do it again."

That earned a bit of respect in his mind. His opinion of Amelyn had just improved by several degrees.

"We can't try that again until we research *how* it happened," the Keeper grunted, rubbing her temple. "Tarrin, what did you feel?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. "There was the rush, then I felt something connect to me, and then my instincts attacked it as an invader," he replied. "I didn't suffer a backlash this time."

"That's because *we* suffered it for you," the Keeper grunted. "But I have to agree with Amelyn. If *this* is what you feel, then we can't ask you to keep doing it. We'll go speak with the Lorefinders and see if there's a less painful way for you to try to get a grip on your power."

"I appreciate that, Keeper," he said calmly. He knew that the only reason she said that was because now *she* was at risk to suffer his pain. Him suffering was just fine, until she had to share in his agony. Then it was unacceptable. "May I go now? I don't think we'll be doing anything else."

"No, I think not. Go on. Just get some rest, there's no telling how that backlash will affect you."

"Thank you," he said calmly, getting down from the table, and leaving without a word.

That had been important, in more ways than one. Tarrin had received a hint of the ancient secrets, lost to the *katzh-dashi* since the Breaking. The true secret of the Ancients' power had been partially revealed.

And the Council had completely missed it. Then again, Tarrin had the feeling that in that instant, he was the only one of them that was coherent, so he alone could understand the forces at work on all eight of them.

He had to talk this out with Keritanima. The Wikuni's intellect and ability to reason were needed.

What Tarrin got was both Keritanima and Dar. When it was time for all the other Initiates to get out of class, Tarrin wandered over to Keritanima's room, and found her in the company of Dar. They were sitting in her room at the table, chatting idly while playing a game called chess. It was a Wikuni game that had become popular in the western kingdoms, because it required even more strategy than stones, and the lead-cast figurines used to play the game were easy to make. Miranda was sitting sedately on the bed,

working on some embroidery, and Sisska and Binter stood vigil beside the door, protecting the Royal person. Tarrin nodded to Binter and Sisska as he entered, and Miranda flashed him a cheeky smile, unleashing her undeniable cuteness upon him. She was sitting with her long, very bushy tail curled up around her ankles, to keep the luxuriantly furred appendage out from underfoot. Her tail was the same yellow color as her hair, something of an oddity among Wikuni. Usually, a Wikuni with fur had colorings that matched their brother or sister animal. Keritanima was a perfect example, for her fur perfectly matched the distinct patterns of a fox, even down to her ears, hands and feet, and tail. Miranda's tail should have been white, like her fur, but it was instead yellow, the color of her hair.

Tarrin noticed absently that Dar was the only one in the room that *didn't* have a tail.

"Hullo, Tarrin," Keritanima said without looking up. Like him, her nose was very sharp. She reached down and made a move, and Dar winced.

"Ouch," he said. "I was hoping you wouldn't see that."

"Dream on, Dar," she teased with a wolfish smile. "Want to give up now, or are going to go through the futile motions of trying to dig yourself out?"

Dar laughed. "I'll quit while I'm behind," he decided, setting one of the pieces on its side. Tarrin had no idea what significance that move had, because he didn't play the game.

"It's refreshing to find a human that knows how to play a real game," Keritanima told him. "Want to lose again?"

Dar laughed. "No, not right now," he said. "Judging by the look on Tarrin's face, he wants to talk to one of us."

Keritanima glanced at him, her penetrating amber eyes taking in everything at once. "Me," she said calmly, her voice losing its vapid demeanor instantly. "Would you mind excusing us for a while, Dar?"

Dar gave Keritanima a curious look, and nodded. "I'll see you at dinner?"

"Sure," she replied. "Save me a seat."

Dar patted Tarrin on the shoulder as he passed by, and then was let out by Sisska. "You're getting cozy with him," he noted after Sisska shut the door.

"I like him. Both of us do, for that matter," she shrugged. "He's impossible to not like. I've never met anyone quite like him."

"He had the same effect on me," he replied. "I think that's why they made him my roommate."

"It's possible. Something's on your mind, Tarrin. Why don't you just get it off your chest now?"

"Why don't we go take a walk," he said, giving Binter and Sisska a fleeting look.

"They know about me, Tarrin," she assured him. "They've been my guards for three years, and their honor forbids them from revealing the truth about me. Isn't that right, Binter?"

"It is so, your Highness," he said calmly. "We have both sworn ourselves to secrecy. Death Herself could not make us reveal what we know to those who do not."

And that answered that suspicion.

Tarrin sat down on the bed beside Miranda and began to relate what had happened in the Chambers of Seven in a calm, analytical voice. "I have no idea how I know some of it," he grunted after explaining what he felt when he joined their circle. "I've never really been taught anything about circles. Just what Dolanna's said in passing. I knew that they couldn't go over seven, but I never asked why."

"Lula hasn't really gotten into circles either," Keritanima said. "I think that's something they teach after the individual instruction is complete. Lula said they'd be reforming a class again soon. Maybe even in a couple of days. Lula likes me. Maybe I could get her to teach me a bit about circles tomorrow."

"That may help, but what about the conclusion? *Could* we form a circle larger than seven, as long as there's a mind of another race present?"

"It certainly seems logical," Keritanima said after a moment. "Mind weaves don't affect members of other races, because of a dissimilarity in the way different races think. It only stands to reason that if circles are limited by a similarity in the thought processes of the Sorcerers that make them, then Sorcerers with *different* thought processes could expand that limit. By only themselves, at the very least, or perhaps they can act as a buffer between two smaller circles, letting two circles join into one through them."

"I never thought of that," Tarrin said, thinking about it. Who was to say that the lead of a circle couldn't turn around and join *another* circle?

"But I think that you're right, brother," she said. "There's a good chance that you may be onto something. Too bad we can't really take advantage of it. There are only three of us. Four, if you count Dolanna. Actually five, if we let Dar into our little group. And Dar hasn't yet managed to touch the Weave."

"There may be *something* we can use, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "When I got swept up into the Council's circle, the stress put on me suddenly lifted. I was still being flooded, but I could almost control it. I shunted most of what I couldn't control onto the Council, and that left me coherent enough to understand a few things before the circle was broken."

"What broke the circle?"

"I did," he said. "The Cat in me doesn't like the sensation of joining consciousness. It attacked the circle's bonds as soon as they formed, and it broke them before I could really get a handle on what was going on. I think it was an instinctive reaction. With some practice, maybe that part of me could accept a circle."

"We're not going to experiment, Tarrin," she warned. "I have a fondness for my own tail."

"I'm not asking you to, sister," he assured her. "But you're the smartest of us. If anyone could think up a way we could use this information, it's you."

"Not without a better understanding of the subject," she said emphatically. "Maybe a visit to the library is in order. They have to have a couple of books on circles there."

"That's always an idea," Tarrin agreed. "But that'll have to wait."

She nodded. "We have bigger whales to hunt tonight."

"I'll take care of it, Princess," Miranda said demurely. "I know where the library is. I'll find the books you'll need."

"Thank you, Miranda," Keritanima told her sincerely. "You're too good to me."

"Someone has to be, Princess," she said with a disarming smile. Tarrin glanced at Miranda, and he caught a very slight little smile.

"Be careful, Miranda. You don't have appearances on your side here."

"What does that mean?"

"My younger sister, Jenawalani, she's a mink too," Keritanima told him. "That let Miranda get through the palace at home a little easier. They look nothing alike, but from a distance, it's hard to tell them apart."

"My tail is longer than Princess Jenawalani's, and her coloring is more gray than white," Miranda told Tarrin calmly. "And she's shorter than I am."

"And she's ugly, where Miranda always has the eyes of the young men," Keritanima said, which made Miranda's cheek fur ruffle slightly. A Wikuni version of a blush. "Sisska, be a dear and escort Miranda tonight. She's starting to attract attention, and the rather unpleasant deaths of few of my spies means that I have to start protecting the important people."

"It will be as you command, Princess," Sisska said in a deep, rumbling voice. A voice that was not even remotely female. Now that he looked at them, he couldn't easily tell Binter and Sisska apart by anything other than scent. Binter's crest was larger than Sisska's, and she was shorter than him, but they weren't very apparent distinctions. They were equally muscular, and there were no real physiological differences between their genders. No, Sisska was a bit slimmer than Binter, but she was still awesomely muscled.

"Deaths? You mean there were more?" Tarrin asked.

Keritanima nodded. "Three," she replied. "All of them were my spies at court. Someone's trying to undermine my operation, and now I'm not so certain that it's Jervis. Ahiriya has her own people, and I have the feeling that it's her."

"How can you tell?"

"Because wanton killing isn't Jervis' style," she replied. "He prefers to buy off enemy spies and turn them into double agents, because he has such a large budget to work with. Ahiriya is reputed to have a heavy hand. Eliminating the opposition is more in line with her way of doing things. It also makes sense. Jervis doesn't care what I know, because it's not his job to keep me in the dark. He's just here to keep an eye on me, and use his information network to search out and remove threats to my safety. In that respect, Jervis works for *me*. But Ahiriya has a very real need to keep Miranda from finding out what's going on, and then taking steps to protect me, or passing that information on to Jervis. Right now, Ahiriya is probably doing everything she can to disrupt both my and Jervis' operations, because they both represent a threat to the interests of the Tower. I don't doubt that a few of Jervis' men have also turned up dead. I'm waiting for him to get his daily reports, so I can confirm that."

"Sometimes you scare me, Kerri," Tarrin told her.

"Why?"

"It's almost frightening, how smart you are."

She gave him a shy smile. "I'm glad *someone* appreciates me," she told him.

There was a knock at the door, and Binter opened it to reveal Allia. "I am sorry I am late," she said in the common tongue, scurrying in. "Alloran would not let me leave until I master multi-flow weaving. I am exhausted."

"It's not easy, is it?" Keritanima asked in Selani.

"Not remotely," Allia agreed. She sat down on the other side of Miranda, who put aside her embroidery and began to listen to them attentively. Like Tarrin, Allia accepted Miranda and the Vendari without question. They trusted Keritanima's judgement.

"Miranda, I need the plans," Keritanima told her.

"Yes, your Highness," she said calmly, standing up and retreating to the communal closet linking Keritanima's room with hers. She returned as Keritanima moved over to the bed, and helped the fox Wikuni spread them out. On the large rolled parchment were detailed plans of the T shaped

building known as the Hammer Cathedral. The hammer and scales were the symbol of Karas, and they had built their main cathedral in that shape and places a huge sculpture of a set of scales at the head of it to honor the god.

"Alright, this is our target," Keritanima said in a brusque, businesslike manner. "There are three rooms that we'll have to check out. Here, here, and here," she said, pointing to rooms within the "heads" of the hammer shape. "These two are linked by this secret passage, but we'll have to cross the cathedral's open passages to get to this one. We'll enter through this servant's door here," she said, pointing to a door in the left branch. "We should be able to reach the secret passage that links to this room easily and without attracting attention. We'll check out these two rooms, then go through these secret tunnels so that we have the smallest amount of open area to cross," she explained, tracing her clawed finger along a series of dashed marks that ran through the cathedral's walls. "That will put us in the third chamber without putting ourselves at too much risk. After we're done, we leave through this servant's entrance," she concluded, pointing to a door that mirrored the one through which they would enter. "Tarrin will carry our loot. I'll take point, and Allia will bring up the rear. We'll use your little trick to get over the fence, Tarrin, but Binter will be there when we return to help us get our loot onto the grounds quickly."

"You think you can manage landing after I get you over the fence?" Tarrin asked.

"I'm not a china doll, Tarrin," she said with a teasing smile. "I may look like a little slip of a girl, but I know how to land after falling some distance. Trust me. I'll be fine."

"I have worked with her on the field, Tarrin. She is capable," Allia assured him. "She is much stronger than she appears."

"Why thank you, Allia," Keritanima said to her with a grin. "We'll leave on the first bell after sunset. Dress in clothes suitable for sneaking around."

"That's it?" Tarrin asked. "That's the plan?"

"That's the plan."

"I thought it would be more complicated."

"The simpler a plan is, brother, the easier it is for it to succeed," she told him patiently. "Our only real danger is getting caught out in the open in the cathedral. For something like a simple break-in and theft, I hope things will go smoothly and easily. They have priests and acolytes up and moving at all times, so we'll get our share of excitement." She looked at Miranda. "Did you pack my skulking clothes?"

"I'll have them ready for you, Highness," she assured her. "I've also got the sacks you asked for. They're in my clothes chest."

"What would I ever do without you, Miranda?"

"Let's hope you never have to find out," the mink said in a lilting voice, a gentle smile on her face.

"Indeed," Keritanima agreed with a toothy grin. "Alright, we'll meet on the Knight's field on the first bell after sunset," she told them.

"I'll be there," Tarrin assured her.

"As will I."

"Pray to your Goddess, Tarrin," Keritanima told him. "We may need her help before all is said and done."

"I thought you said this would be easy."

"I said I *hope* it will be easy. I'm a cynic, brother dear. I'm sure something will come along and ruin my elegant little plan. It's best to be ready for it now, than scrambling to cover it when it happens."

"Things should go well," Miranda assured them. "It's such a simple plan that it can't help but to succeed. I'll have the books you want here when you return, Highness."

"Is everything ready for us?"

She nodded. "The tents you asked for are where you wanted them to be in the maze. I had some trouble getting the waterproof chests in there without arousing suspicion, but they're waiting for you as well."

"What do we need those for?" Tarrin asked.

"We have to put this stuff *somewhere*, Tarrin," she replied. "We can't very well just stick in our rooms. Nobody ever goes into the courtyard, and

nobody will disturb it if we hide our booty in there. Put it in waterproof containers and throw some good waterproof canvas over it, and it'll be just fine. A good thief is as ready to dispose of his loot as she is ready to get it. The longer you hold stolen goods, the better chance others have of pinning the crime to you."

"That makes sense, I suppose," Tarrin said dubiously, noticing the bright, eager look in Keritanima's amber eyes. She *liked* stealing things.

"Trust me. I've done this before."

"That's what scares me."

"You," she said, slapping him on the forearm.

"Is she like this at home, Miranda?" Tarrin asked the mink curiously.

"No," she replied. "She's worse."

"*Miranda!*"

"It's the truth, Highness," she shrugged. "You don't *have* to do all the things you do. I can do it, or find someone to do it for you. You just enjoy the game."

Keritanima gave Miranda a withering look, then she laughed ruefully. "Alright, alright, I do like being a sneak. It's much more entertaining than listening to my father's teachers rant about history and etiquette, and it keeps me ready for Jenawalani and Veranika's assassins." She looked to her maid again. "Do you have my diversion ready?"

Miranda nodded. "They'll never know you left, your Highness," she assured her, scratching her little pink button nose absently.

"What diversion?"

"Oh, just a squad of Royal Marines getting into a very nasty brawl," Keritanima said with an evil smile. "They'll provide us with a good ten minutes to get out of here unseen."

"You're scaring me, Kerri," Tarrin said.

"What?"

"Is there anything you *can't* arrange?"

Keritanima laughed. "I couldn't get the Keeper married," she said with a wolfish smile. "So I guess there are some things that I can't manage."

"All in all, *deshida*, I prefer her having the skills," Allia said with a slight smile. "She makes it much easier for us."

"True enough," Tarrin agreed. "I think I want to get something to eat before we go."

"Dar is waiting for us anyway," Keritanima shrugged. "Let's go eat. We have a long night ahead of us."

Miranda halted Tarrin as he left behind his two sisters, and he stopped to see what she wanted. "Watch her," she said in a low voice. "She sometimes loses her head on these little excursions. She can be too impulsive. Keep her focused on the plan."

"I will," he promised. "Why don't you come with us and eat? There's always room for one more."

"Maybe next time," she said with a cheeky smile, a smile that enhanced her almost insufferable cuteness. "I have some errands to run."

"Well, alright. Hope they go well."

"Oh, they will," she said with a smile, letting Tarrin leave the room. She looked to Binter and Sisska, and they all traded a calm, knowing look. Binter moved with surprising quiet as he moved to shadow the Princess, keeping an eye on her, and Sisska closed the door behind him. "We have much to do, Sisska," she said in a calm, businesslike tone.

"Much," the Vendari agreed. "Her Highness needs us, and we must help as we can."

Miranda sighed. Keritanima would *not* be happy about this. "Do me a favor and go get Jervis, Sisska," she said. "It's time that we had a little talk."

"It is about time," Sisska said bluntly, picking up her massive two-handed axe and setting it on her shoulder, then going out the door. Miranda bolted it behind her, fingering a small dagger she had at her belt.

Ahiriya was becoming an inconvenience. Jervis would listen to her, Miranda was sure of it. They may be at odds from time to time, but at the

moment, they were working towards a common goal. She was sure that Jervis would agree to her little plan to get at the truth.

The truth was all that mattered.

Keritanima had taught her well, and unknown to her Royal employer, Miranda did alot more than she would ever know. Talking with Jervis wouldn't be the first time that the cute little mink Wikuni had acted outside her employer's knowledge, but it was always for Keritanima's good. Miranda took Keritanima's well being seriously. It was her duty, it was her role as protector, friend, and confidante.

It was her reason for living.

Chapter 17

There was a bit of anxiety wound up in what they were doing, but on the other hand, there was also an undeniable excitement about it.

Tarrin sat sedately on his haunches in the sand near one of the posts, his eyes scanning the dim, misty night, a night that promised frost. His small cat body blended with the shadows of the post, making his sleek black fur blend into the night and turn him into nothing but a pair of intense green eyes. Heavy clouds dimmed the usual light from the moons and Skybands, clouds that helped keep the warmth of the land trapped against it. Clouds that would only work in their favor. Humans had long adapted to the light of the Skybands at night, and when clouds covered the land and threw them into total darkness, they had a great deal of trouble seeing. Even with torches and artificial light. But to Tarrin's night-sighted eyes, the landscape was illuminated by light that the human eye couldn't see, or was too dim for it to use. The field and grass were painted in black, white and gray to his eyes, for it was too dim to see in color, but that black and white view of the world was every bit as sharp as it would have been if the sun was shining down on him. He could see Keritanima's stealthy approach, her feet not even disturbing the grass.

As could Allia. His sister was behind the post, keeping watch. She wore a pair of black trousers and shirt that Miranda brought to her at sunset, and her bright silver hair was bound into a black cloth and tied into a wrapped tail behind her. Her dusky skin helped her fade into the murky shadows. Allia's eyesight was her most dangerous weapon, for she could read an open book from one hundred paces away, and her night sight was just as acute as Tarrin's was. She was *shepa*, Scout, for her clan, for her unusual eyesight wasn't normal for her people, but did occur with enough frequency for the Selani to have a special word for her type.

Keritanima was an entirely different person. Gone was the meticulous dress and carefully groomed appearance. She wore black trousers, shirt, and boots just like the ones she had sent to Allia, and large leather bracers were

tied around her forearms. A black cloth was over her head, with holes cut in it for her fox ears, and her russet hair was tied at the tip of its tail to keep it behind her. Where Keritanima looked soft and pretty before, she looked sleek and deadly in her skulking garb, for it clung to her slim form and accented her in ways her dress never could. Also gone was the vapid expression of the Brat, or the calculating expression of the Keritanima he knew. In its place was a woman with dancing eyes, fully enjoying the danger to come, who moved with the grace of a cat even while those amber eyes took in everything around her.

Tarrin shapeshifted absently as she reached them, and her gloved hands started moving in the Selani Code, the hand-language her people had developed. That put Allia back on her heels. The Selani didn't *teach* that to outsiders. --*Alright, are we all ready?*-- her hands asked.

--*How did you learn that!*-- Allia's hands asked with a snapping motion that betrayed her disbelief.

--*Sister, there's very little that the Wikuni don't know,*-- Keritanima replied with a smirk. --*I was taught the Code at the same time I was taught the spoken tongue. It was so I'd have an advantage when dealing with Selani.*--

--*That's quite an advantage,*-- Tarrin noted.

--*This is the first time I've ever used it. I was afraid I was getting rusty.*--

--*You are,*-- Tarrin noted.

She glared at him. --*Let's move. We're on a tight schedule.*--

One thing Tarrin had to admit. She may be a Princess, she may be smart, but she moved like Allia. Keritanima's flowing movements made absolutely no sound, and her flowing style produced no sharp movements that tended to attract the eyes, even when the eyes couldn't see. That she could alter the very way she moved, seemingly at will, was yet another example of just how remarkable she was. Keritanima was always graceful, but the perfect ease in which she moved without making a whisper of sound made her grace in a dress look like a cow trying to two-step by comparison.

They reached the fence without incident, having to wait for a few moments for them to move between the roving patrols, and they moved

with quiet, efficient stealth. Tarrin first heaved Allia up and over, then tried to be gentle as he pushed Keritanima's foot as she lept off of his boost. But he realized that there was no reason to be gentle with her. She landed on her feet on the far side of the fence, then expertly tucked in and rolled through her momentum to prevent injury. She knew what she was doing.

After squirming through the fence, they were off. The city of Suld never truly slept, but the night streets were not nearly as crowded as they were during the day, and that allowed Keritanima to lead them unerringly towards the Hammer Cathedral. She had memorized a map of the city streets, and it allowed her to guide them on empty streets and through dark alleys, staying out of sight from anyone who may want to watch or follow.

They stopped to wait for a trio of drunken Wikuni to stagger down the street, hiding in the shadows of an alley. The lamps on poles that illuminated the street kept them back a bit in the alley, out of the direct light, and the rough voices of the sailors echoed on the walls lining the street. From behind the wall, faint sounds of giggling could be heard.

"Someone's having a good time," Keritanima whispered in a chuckle.

"Let's hope they stay focused on what they're doing," Tarrin whispered back. "There's a window right over us."

"Well, I guess that'll depend on him," the Wikuni said with a wink.

"You never had to fight off Jesmind," Tarrin replied absently.

"I certainly am glad of that," Keritanima said with a grin.

Tarrin gave her a look, then snorted.

"They are gone," Allia whispered from behind. "Let us move."

The Hammer Cathedral was surrounded by a large iron fence, much in the same way as the grounds of the Tower were. But this fence only came up to Tarrin's waist, a decorative boundary, and its simple gatehouse and gate, which were more normal sized, were neither ornate nor functional. Tarrin didn't understand why full sized gates were placed on a fence an elderly woman could climb over. They went over that fence directly across from the servant's entrance, but had to hide behind a row of small trees while armed men wearing the livery of the church marched by. The huge sculpture of the Scales of Justice were visible to his night-sighted eyes not

far away, and he took a moment to be impressed by them. The pans hung from chains as thick as his leg, and the stand from which they were suspended towered of the large hammer-shaped building which rested beside it. Each pan had to be twenty spans across, and they hung perfectly level with each other. It was said that a single raindrop could make the scales dip to a side, so perfectly balanced they were, but they never did. His father had told him the legend of the scales, that only living things placed upon them made them move. They were used to try criminals against the church, where the power of Karas pronounced judgement on the accused by placing them in the scales. If the accused was guilty, the scale dipped. If he was innocent, the scale rose.

And now they were about to commit a crime against the church. Tarrin mused on that as they darted across the gravelled pathways of the grounds around the cathedral, reaching the small door used by servants and acolytes when performing their daily chores. That door was locked from the inside, but Keritanima knelt by the door and reached into the leather bracers on her arms, and withdrew narrow steel prods. Lockpicks.

It only took her a brief moment to give the lock, set directly into the door, a few expert nudges and pokes, and then she turned the lock. The door creaked open slightly, and she gave her friends the slightest of smiles before they slipped inside.

The interior was much different than the grim stone people saw outside. Banners hung at regular intervals along the walls, both symbols of Karas and tapestries, breaking up the dark monotony of the gray stone. Karas was a god of justice and law, but Karas didn't feel that the pursuit of law and justice had to be sober and taciturn things. The interior of the cathedral, even the servants' passages, were well lit and decorated, seeking to raise the spirits of all who tread the shaped, polished slate stones beneath their feet. There was a long red rug that ran along the center of the passage, starting just in front of a straw mat set by the door so that entrants could clean their shoes, and then trailing off towards the juncture between the three wings of the building.

According to Keritanima's plans, Tarrin remembered that the two flanges of the building were used as storerooms, quarters for the inhabitants, and places of spiritual enlightenment and entertainment. In other

words, it was just like the barracks, or the Initiate's Quarters. Behind the doors lining the walls were storerooms, quarters, chambers of peace for prayer, and places where they taught the tenets of their faith. The main section of the cathedral, which formed the handle of the hammer, was the nave and main cathedral area where the services for the public were conducted. Because they were in the residential areas of the building, that meant they ran a better risk of being discovered. But they didn't have far to go.

His every sense alert, Tarrin scanned the torchlit passage with his eyes, sifted through the air with his sensitive nose, listened for even the tiniest sound, seeking to learn of the approach of a resident or guard well before they saw his group. But they encountered nothing as Keritanima led them twenty paces up the wall and then pointed quickly to a large, nondescript section of stone wall. That was the location of the door to the secret passage. Their main task now was to find how it was opened before someone wandered along the passageway and discovered them.

Allia pointed along the door's very faint outline, for it was built so well that only Allia's sharp eyesight could make out its borders. That gave Tarrin and Keritanima a place to look. Tarrin and Keritanima leaned in near the wall and sampled its scent with their noses, sorting through the smell of stone and cloth, the lingering traces of man-smell that permeated the passage, until Tarrin found an area of the wall that had human smell on it. He reared back and looked, and saw the slightest impression of some kind of round button or mechanical device in the narrow crack between two shaped building stones. Reaching between the seams of a stone with the tip of a claw, he pressed that little button.

The secret door opened inward with utter silence, swinging on oiled steel rods that pierced it from the top and the bottom. Keritanima nodded to him with a wink, and they quickly slipped into the dark passageway as the door began to close on its own.

Tarrin felt Keritanima touch the Weave, and a very faint ball of white light appeared over a single finger. "Alright, that was the hard part," she whispered to them. "The first of the rooms we're going to check out is at the end of this passage."

"Lead on, sister," Allia said calmly.

The passage was narrow, cramped, and its stone walls and floor were not as smooth and attractive as the passages outside. Built within the wall, it often cramped down or expanded to follow the contours of rooms that were on the other sides of the walls. There was a smell of mildew and stagnation in the passage, but there was enough man-smell to tell Tarrin that it was travelled with regularity. The stones beneath his pads were slick and clammy, and they were cold enough for him to feel it through the thick pads that protected his feet. There were no cobwebs to be seen, and Tarrin could make out soot stains on the arched ceiling of the passage. No doubt the torch fires burned any cobwebs away.

The passage joined with another that ran off to their right, and it led to a series of stone doors on either side of the widened passage. From that side, it was impossible to tell if the doors were secret on the far side, but Keritanima ignored all of them as she led them along the hallway. She shooed a rat out from underfoot, the animal having no fear of the non-human smells of the invaders. She led them around a corner, and into a hallway that ended in a bronze-gilded door of stone. It had a huge lock on it, running through a pair of eyes that held a thick bronze bolt in place to keep the door from opening, and the door's tarnished appearance hinted that it was not often used.

"This is it," she said, drawing out her lockpicks. She set the little ball of light in midair just over her shoulder and went to work on the lock. It succumbed to her superior skill quickly, and she set it carefully on the floor. Tarrin and Allia turned that bolt eye so it could be drawn, and it made a high-pitched screeching sound as metal grated on stone. Tarrin winced, and Keritanima's ears laid back slightly, then she gave them a glaring look and nodded. Slowly, Tarrin pulled the bolt from its socket in the stone, trying to minimize the squealing and squeaking of the bronze as it ground over stone. But it came loose of the hole in the wall, and he pulled on that bolt like a handle, pulling the door open.

It creaked on unused hinges, and slowly opened into a large room that was kept in utter blackness. Keritanima pointed, and her little ball of light ghosted into the chamber to illuminate it before they entered.

It was a treasure vault. Rows of chests lined the floor, and a shelf on the far side of the room held several large gems and works of art. One of those

chests was open, showing a large number of gold and silver coins.

"Well," Keritanima said in a light voice. "Too bad I'm not here for money."

"Why would a church have such wealth?" Allia asked curiously. "Is not their duty to help the poor?"

"Churches are money-making institutions, sister," Keritanima snorted. "Most churches spend as little as possible on things they're supposed to do. Behind their words of god and piety, they're just as greedy as everyone else."

"It is sad," she said.

"That's why I don't follow any god," Keritanima said bluntly. "Their priests are even worse than the nobles, and their gods won't do anything to stop them."

Tarrin wondered what Karas would think of all this. Tarrin wondered if he even knew.

After closing and locking the door back, Keritnaima led them along a series of dark, empty passages towards the middle of the building, approaching the nave and gallery that marked the main cathedral chamber. She led them to a nondescript door of molded wood, protected only by a rusted out lock that disintegrated when Keritnaima put a lockpick in it. Shrugging, the fox Wikuni dropped the remains and opened the door, then sent her little ball of light in to illuminate it.

It was a crypt of some kind. A sarcophagus rested in the middle of the dark, bare chamber, plain stone with no markings, resting on a simple stone slab. That struck Tarrin as odd. According to Eron, the church had a catacomb complex under the cathedral, where their priests and the faithful were often buried in crypts. Why have a single crypt here, in the dank secret tunnels of the cathedral? And why put a lock on the door?

"I wondered where this was," Keritanima whispered.

"What is it?" Tarrin asked.

"That's the tomb of Arbok," she replied. "Arbok was a priest of an evil god that vanished long ago. The priests of Karas executed him for crimes

against Karas, then buried him on ground sacred to Karas, so that Arbok's spirit could never have peace. That was their pronouncement of justice on him."

"It is wrong to punish one beyond death," Allia said shortly. "Death is the ultimate punishment."

"Tell that to the priests," Keritanima said. "The priests of Karas have a nasty reputation. They're almost as bad as the priests of Pygas the Avenger when it comes to revenge. But they call it justice," she shrugged. "This means the big room on the other end of the cathedral is probably what we're looking for." She threw her tied hair back over her shoulder, then slashed her tail in the air a few times behind her. "Now comes the hard part."

"What?"

"Crossing the Nave without being seen," she said with an eager grin.

"Miranda was right. You *do* enjoy this," Tarrin grunted.

She only gave him a wicked smile, then licked him on the cheek as she turned away from the doorway.

Getting across the Nave wasn't as hard as Tarrin thought it would be. The huge chamber, filled with stained glass windows and a huge mosaic on the floor of Karas' symbol, rows and rows of pews separated from the dais and altar by an ornate polished wooden rail, was populated by some ten young men. They were all very young, looking to be acolytes, and they were attended by a single portly man with small round scars pocking his face. The man was short and had greasy hair, and he was dozing in a chair not far from the dais as the young men scrubbed at the floor and pews with soapy water and brushes. All of them were wearing a simple black robe tied with a white belt. The door though which the three non-humans looked was in the far back corner of the massive worship chamber, behind the dais and the altar. The back wall of the Nave was lined with four ornate, gold-inlaid doors. Those were probably doors to private chambers of very high ranking churchmen. Fortunately for them, all the young men and their overseer were on the far side of the huge room.

"One at a time," Keritanima said in a whisper. "Tarrin, you first. That's where we want to go," she told him, pointing to a door on the far wall.

Tarrin nodded, hunkering down, and then shifting into his cat form. He crept out into the huge chamber, noticing the ornate paintings on the ceiling, and he wondered idly how they got the painter up there.

A bell suddenly tolled somewhere over his head, and it scared Tarrin half out of his wits. He fought the wild urge to scramble up and under something, to seek cover, but he realized that nobody could see him. He was behind the dais, and he was so small that he was out of the sight of the men on the other side of it. The bell tolled six more times, and then it fell silent, but Tarrin stayed frozen until he was sure that the loud noise had indeed come to an end.

Staying near the wall, he slunk across the large chamber, quickly and quietly reaching his goal. He shifted back and opened the door, then stepped through it before anyone noticed.

The passage beyond was a mirror of the one into which the secret passage had emptied. It was just like the passage they'd found when getting into the cathedral, wide and well lit, with a carpet running along the center and the walls decorated with many paintings, banners, buntings, and tapestries. He kept an eye on that empty passageway as Keritanima and Allia slipped across the Nave unseen.

"There are no guards," Tarrin noted to Keritanima as they waited for Allia.

"There never are," she whispered back. "The priests are trained to fight. They serve as their own guards."

"But they should have men stationed in the halls," he told her.

"You can tell them if you want," she said with a wink. "I'm rather glad that they don't. If they did, this would be alot harder."

It very nearly ended a moment later. Just as Allia rejoined them, one of the doors in the passageway creaked open. Keritanima had just started down the passageway, and she quickly opened the closest door to her and ducked inside, which had been the very first door leading from the Nave. Tarrin and Allia fled inside with her, and they found themselves in a small room filled with long racks holding black robes similar to what the young men and overseer in the Nave had been wearing.

"Idea," Keritanima said, looking at them.

"Bad idea," Tarrin said as his ears picked up footsteps stopping just in front of the door Allia had just closed. His heart jumped a bit in his chest when he realized that the man was about to open the door!

--*Hide!*-- Keritanima signed quickly, and they scattered. Tarrin had the easiest of it, for he simply changed form and got behind the door as it opened. He didn't see where Keritanima and Allia went, but when the light flooded in from the hallway, blocked by the shadow of a man, there was no sign of them. The man, a middle aged man of tall stature and a balding ring of gray hair on his head, stepped in wearing a simple black robe of a rougher weave than the ones hanging in the room. Tarrin hid in the shadows at the corner of the room, his black fur melding with the darkness, ready to shift back and attack the man, should he catch sight of his hidden sisters. But that proved to be unnecessary. He removed his robe calmly and pulled one of the others off the wall, showing no sign that he had seen any activity in the room. Hanging his robe in its place, he then tied the new robe around his waist and filed out as calmly as he had come in.

"That was nervous," Keritanima whispered as she came out from behind a robe rack.

"That was too close," Allia agreed with an explosive sigh, coming out from behind another.

Tarrin shifted back and looked at his sisters. "How far do we have to go, Kerri?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"About fifty paces, then we turn into a side passage," she replied. "I think we could make it, wearing these robes."

"We may as well," Tarrin shrugged.

They stepped out wearing the robes. Tarrin and Keritanima looked a little strange, for their tails did create a bit of a bump in the seat of the robes, and Tarrin almost stepped on his twice as it tried to find a place to hang without being scrunched up against something. Keritanima's lushly furred, luxuriantly bushy tail was causing her even more problems. Tarrin finally wound his tail around his waist to get it out of the way.

It was a very nervous fifty paces. That side of the cathedral was a lot busier than the other side had been, and the trio had passed by no more than three groggy, sleepy priests as the men moved towards the Nave. Luckily for them, the three men had not given them a very close look. They heard more activity behind them, and Tarrin dared to look back. Men were coming out of the doors they were passing, priests being called to the Nave by that bell that had nearly scared his tail off. They didn't look at the three of them that closely, but more than one gave them a second glance. Maybe because they were going the wrong way.

They reached a four way intersection in the passageway, and the three of them turned up into one that no men were coming out of. Keritanima was staring at the wall, counting her steps under her breath, and Tarrin and Allia were just following her blindly. She stopped, looked towards the men filing past the intersection, then motioned at the wall beside her with a gloved hand.

It took them only a moment to find the button that opened the secret door, but this one had no man-smell to make it obvious. It was Allia's keen eyes that spotted it, a very dust-choked little spot on the wall between two stones that held the button that opened the door. And unlike the first one, this door squeaked loudly in protest as it opened. The noise made the hair on Tarrin's tail frizz, and he desperately looked back towards the intersection to see if anyone else had heard it. Keritanima dove in almost as soon as it began to open, and Tarrin and Allia piled in after her.

As the door squealed closed, Tarrin looked down the dank passage. It was pitch black, and unlike the first one, this one was filled with cobwebs and smelled heavily of mold and stagnation. Keritanima touched the Weave and created her little ball of light again, and it illuminated a rubble-strewn passage with an uneven floor, the skeletal remains of rats and other creatures, and thickly covered in cobwebs.

"This is a good sign," Keritanima said. "Maybe the priests don't know about the hidden chamber."

"How could they forget?" Tarrin asked. "They're right on those plans you got."

"It took me a while to find those, Tarrin, and how often do these men look at the plans?" Keritanima asked calmly. "As long as the place isn't crumbling around them, they probably never think of looking at things like engineering plans. Maybe they just stopped using this section, and it was forgotten over the years. Remember, brother, the cathedral is almost five hundred years old."

"I didn't know it was that old," he said.

She nodded. "Let's move. Time's wasting."

It was slow going, because they had to tear down cobwebs and avoid stepping on things that *crunched*. The passage was in disrepair, and the slick floor, littered with debris, made footing treacherous. They turned into a side passage, and went down a flight of dilapidated stairs that took them underneath the cathedral's main level. The passage ended in a slimy stone door with a pull ring. Keritanima pulled on it, and it opened into a similarly eroded passageway. It lacked the cobwebs and the dead rats, but it did have the crumbling mortar in the walls. Tarrin felt a strange twinge as they entered the new passageway.

"The door is secret from this side," Keritanima noted curiously. "I wonder why."

"Who knows?" Tarrin asked.

"This passage shows signs of recent travel," Allia said, pointing to a footprint in the dank lichen decorating a stone on the floor.

"Let's hope we don't find whoever made that," Keritanima said. "This way," she pointed, and they started in the same direction as the footprint had gone.

The passageway turned twice, and ultimately led to a large door bound with a bolt and two chains, and it was locked three times. They also found the owner of that boot. It was a lone priest, by the tattered remains of a black robe decorating the skeletal body, looking to be long dead. Long enough for mold to grow on the bones. There was no sign as to what killed the man. It was as if he simply died when he reached this place.

The twinging Tarrin felt was stronger, and he realized that it was coming from the door. He reached out with his senses, and could almost *feel*

the magic tied up into the door. Keritanima had just knelt by the door, and was reaching out for the first lock with a pick in her hands.

Tarrin pulled her away from the door hurriedly, making her sit down hard on her own tail. She gasped and glared at him, but didn't shout. "What did you do that for?" she demanded in a harsh whisper.

"The door is magical," he warned her. "It may be trapped."

Keritanima gave him a speculative look, then he felt both her and Allia touch the Weave and assense the door. "There *is* a very, very old spell on it," she agreed. "Hundreds of years, by the way it settled into the stone."

"Perhaps the spell is a trap, and it killed that man," Allia surmised.

"Lula never taught me how to unravel the spells made by priests," Keritanima said, a bit helplessly. "How do we go about it?"

"I think I have an idea," Tarrin said. He had to do this fast. Reaching out, he touched the Weave and almost immediately struck. Others had tried to cut him off from the Weave enough for him to have an understanding of how it was done, so he wove together a spell consisting almost entirely of Divine Power, Fire, and Mind, and then he unleashed it on the door. The weave surrounded the door, and then it hardened into a barrier that choked the enchantment off from the Weave. The spell didn't get its power from the Weave, but it received it from its source *through* the Weave, and that gave him a way to disrupt it. The same way a Sorcerer could block the powers of a priest, Tarrin attacked the permanent spell placed on the door in the exact same manner.

The door shimmered and then went dark at the same time that Tarrin's paws suddenly exploded into radiance, the white wispy aura that denoted the use of High Sorcery, and he found himself struggling against an onslaught of power. It was even more this time, more and faster and harder, and it was only him fully expecting what was coming that allowed him to tear himself away, cutting himself off from the Weave. He still suffered a backlash, a backlash severe enough to disturb the air around him and send a short gust of wind to pull at the clothes of his sisters. A backlash that put him on his knees, panting heavily as he tried to find some coherent thought.

"What was that?" Allia asked.

"That was *High Sorcery!*" Keritanima gasped. "Tarrin, how did you do that?"

"I can't *help* but do that, Kerri," he panted. "It's the problem I'm having."

"No *wonder* the Council is in such a twist," she said in awe. "I thought you were just having a problem with control, but you just did something Lula said was impossible for one person!"

"Let's save this for later," he said, managing to get back to his feet. "The weave I put on the door isn't going to hold forever. When it weakens, the spell on the door will come back, so let's get it open before that can happen."

"You didn't destroy it?"

Tarrin shook his head. "I don't know how," he said helplessly. "But I *do* know how to cut people off from the Weave. That's what I did to the door. The barrier I wove around it will sustain itself, but only for a few minutes, so move, sister! You don't have all day!"

She nodded, and was working on the first lock immediately. She got it open, then opened the second in a matter of seconds, but the third turned out to be challenging. She hastily prodded and picked at it, then one of her tools snapped audibly. She cursed and pulled another from her bracer, her hands moving with steady precision even as the seconds ticked away. When Tarrin felt the weave blocking the door began to unravel, he took a step towards the kneeling Wikuni. "Kerri, hurry!" he said in a strangled tone. "It's almost broken!"

"Got it!" she said, pulling the lock off and backing away just as the barrier collapsed, and the door shimmered with magical light.

Keritanima blew out her breath, then she laughed ruefully. "Well, that was interesting," she said in a playful tone. Touching the Weave, she wove together a spell of air that allowed her to move things with Sorcery. The bolt of the door turned and pulled free of the wall, then she used weaves of solid air to push the door open without touching it.

"Why didn't you pick the locks using that?" Allia asked.

"Pick locks with air weaves?" Keritanima asked. "Do you have any idea how precise and delicate you have to be to pick a lock without jamming it?"

"Then I guess you can't," Allia shrugged.

"Now it's a challenge, sister," Keritanima grinned. "I'll *find* a way to do it."

Tarrin helped Keritanima back to her feet, and the fox Wikuni pulled off the robe and swished her tail a few times. "Now let's see what's worth protecting with a magical trap," she said with a twinkle in her amber eyes.

The interior was dark and surprisingly dry, and Tarrin sensed that magic kept the room thusly. The room held only one thing, a large bookshelf that stood alone in the center of the room, and was loaded with books and scrolltubes. About fifty books, all bound in black leather, and some twenty or so scrolltubes on a small stand on the top shelf. Each tube looked to be made of ivory. Thick dust was covering the books, tubes, and the shelf, and prints formed in the dust on the floor as the trio moved into the room. There was nothing else in the room.

"Jackpot," Keritanima whispered in a reverent tone. Tarrin and Allia followed her as she approached the large stone shelf, then pulled a book at random from it. The cover had imprinted on it a *shaeram*, a clear indication of what the book was about.

"And this is what we came for, my *deshar*," she said, using the Selani term for siblings, holding her hands out to the bookshelf. "If we're lucky, this is everything the priests knew about the Sorcerers. If we can't find something useful in this, then there won't be anything useful to know."

"Strange," Allia mused. "I expected there to be more."

"I'm glad there's not," Keritnima replied. "There are a lot of books here, *deshaida*. You'd be surprised how much information you can put in this many books, if you're methodical about it." She reached behind her, for the canvas bags she had stuffed under her shirt and into her belt. "Alright, pack them in tightly, Tarrin. Scrolls in their own bag."

Tarrin ended up with three large bags packed so tightly with books and scrolltubes that there was no danger of them opening and becoming damaged. They weren't too heavy for him to easily carry, but they were very bulky and unwieldy, ensuring that he would have to move carefully. He had them at his feet, getting ready to pick them up, but Keritanima sighed and stared at him. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting ready to pick these up," he said.

"Why carry them?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I've seen you shapeshift with things in your hands," she told him. "They just disappear. These things are going to bang around and make noise, and risk damaging them. Why don't you just make them disappear, and let Allia carry you out of here?"

"I've never tried that before," he said honestly. "I know things go elsewhere when I shapeshift with things in my paws, but I don't know if something this big will do that."

"Try," she said dismissively.

"What if they disappear, but never come back?" he asked pointedly.

"Good point," she said after a brief consideration. She pursed her lips, then pulled out an empty sack and handed it to him. "Now try," she said.

Nodding, Tarrin stepped back, then shifted into his cat form. The sack vanished, as he knew it would. He then returned to his humanoid form.

And the sack was in his paw.

"Good. Now try it with one bag," she told him.

After a bit of experimentation, Tarrin found that all three sacks would vanish when he changed form, locked in that *elsewhere* created by the amulet when he changed his shape. And more importantly, they would be back in his paws when he shifted back, as would everything *inside* the bags.

No wonder the Goddess didn't want him to lose the amulet. It had just proven how incredibly useful it could be.

Stuck in his cat form, Tarrin found himself riding in the cowl of the black robe Allia was wearing. Paws on her shoulder, he peeked up over her shoulder, watching as they moved. He wondered at the amulet for a moment, then remembered that the Goddess had given *Keritanima* an amulet. One that was for her, like the one Allia wore was for Allia. He had the suspicion that he knew one of the things that it would do.

"Keritanima," he called in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"What?" she asked, turning around. Then she gave him a curious look. "How did I understand that?"

"The amulet!" Allia said in understanding, snapping her fingers.

"That amulet you wear lets you understand me like this," he told her. "It was a gift from the Goddess of the Sorcerers. I guess she wants us to be able to communicate."

Keritanima touched her chest, where the amulet was resting under her shirt. "Clever," she said after a moment. "Can we speak that way?"

"No," Allia replied. "But it does let us understand Tarrin when he does it."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"It honestly never occurred to me," Tarrin replied.

"Let's worry about it later," she said. "We got what we came for. Let's get out of here with it."

Using Sorcery to erase the prints that betrayed their entry into the room, then close the door and replace the locks, Keritanima led Allia back along the secret passageways, until they were again by the squeaking door leading to the main passages. "We don't have far to go, and hopefully the robes will let us just walk out of here," she said. "It's not that much past midnight. We should get back to the Tower with enough time to stash the books and still get some sleep before class in the morning."

Tarrin was pulled out of the cowl and set in the crook of Allia's arm as she pulled the hood over her face. "If anyone challenges us, let me do the talking," Keritanima told her.

"Alright," Allia agreed, and Keritanima opened the secret door.

It turned out that it wasn't necessary. Keritanima led Allia into empty hallways; obviously the ceremony that the priests woke to perform had been completed, and the hallways were again empty. Keritanima led Allia down the passage, all the way to the end, where a single simple wooden door marked the passage out of the cathedral. It was locked, but that was easy enough, considering it was nothing but a bolt keeping the door closed. Keritanima pulled the bolt and opened the door, letting the cold air into the

passage, and then she stepped out. Tarrin felt the cold air against his fur, making Keritanima's and Allia's breath mist before their faces, as the fox Wikuni shut the door behind them.

They were out. Tarrin let out his breath explosively, which wasn't very much for his small cat body. From there on, it should be quick, and hopefully easy.

"And there we are," Keritanima said in a bright whisper. "Let's get back. I'm sleepy."

Keritanima and Allia ghosted into the darkness carrying Tarrin, who was carrying their booty, leaving a sleeping cathedral behind. A cathedral that had not noticed the presence of the intruders.

Tarrin discovered that it was rather nice to be carried.

After burning the robes in a narrow alleyway, Keritanima and Allia quickly and effortlessly made their way back to the Tower grounds. There wasn't as much danger of being spotted now, because a Wikuni wasn't that much of an oddity on the streets. And though Allia was Selani, her tell-tale silver hair was bound in a black cloth, and she only looked like a rather slender Mahuut woman. Selani and Mahuut shared the creamy brown colored skin, and the Mahuut were a very tall people, so Allia's unnatural height didn't make her look out of the ordinary. Tarrin was the one that would make them so noticeable, and with him in his cat form, he was no longer so noticeable. Tarrin rode in the crook of Allia's arm, being held gently yet firmly as they made their way back towards the safety of the Tower's grounds.

Looking back, Tarrin was very pleased. It had went very well, except for being scared out of his fur by that bell, and a couple of moments of adrenalin. Keritanima's much touted plan had worked and worked well, and despite Miranda's warning, the Wikuni stuck with it. The location of the books had been curious, but what was even more curious was their total disregard for it. The room had been abandoned, almost seemed to be forgotten, and the information had been guarded only by an enchanted doorway. Was it the real information, or just a decoy? Keritanima thought it

was what they were looking for, but he wasn't so sure. He'd have to see it before he decided.

Tarrin wasn't even sure what the information was supposed to be. Keritanima had high hopes that there would be some forgotten lore in there that they could use to protect them from the *katzh-dashi* when it came time for them to run, but Tarrin had the feeling that there was more to it for the Wikuni. He had the feeling that she wanted to know just for the sake of knowing, an almost obsessive need to understand more and more about Sorcery.

Tarrin realized that he was curious about Sorcery, even interested in it, but it wasn't the focus of his life. Then again, with all the chaos in his life, there wasn't a real way he could get interested in something. He was too busy trying to keep his sanity and keep himself alive. Thoughts of survival dominated most of his pondering, thoughts of discovering what was going on, who was trying to kill him, and why he was so bloody important. If they were to treat him like anyone else, Tarrin had the feeling that, were he not in such a situation, he would leave at the end of the Initiate rather than staying to become *katzh-dashi*. As long as they taught him how to keep from killing himself, he was content. His interest in Sorcery of late was simple self-preservation, to find a way to get around his control problem so that his power would be useful to the others when it came time for them to flee.

The sight of the ornate iron fence ended his musings, as Allia raced over the cobblestones and gently set him down. He already understood what needed to be done, as Binter approached from the shadows of an empty guardpost. He shapeshifted back into his humanoid form, the three sacks appearing in his paws, set two down, and then lobbed the third over the fence to Binter. He did it twice more, throwing the sack of scrolltubes very gently, then helped Allia and Keritanima over the fence. After they were safely over, they all dashed for cover with the sacks, because torchlight began to brighten further down the line. A patrol was coming. Tarrin went back into his cat form and darted into a shadowy corner across the cobblestone street from the fence. Tarrin watched the squad of eight men file by at a leisurely pace, then he came back out as they disappeared around the corner of a storehouse some hundred paces away. Once it was safe, Tarrin pulled off his leather shirt and used it to get across the Ward,

then picked it up and put it back on as he hurried to rejoin his companions. Keritanima was grinning like the cat that got into the cream, and Allia wore that same expressionless, cool expression that she always wore. Very little got her excited. That was one thing he really liked about her. Keritanima was mercurial, but Allia was methodical and dependable, as solid as the mountain stone.

Tarrin took over the task of carrying the books when he reached them, and Binter was sent back to the Wikuni's room with a few curt gestures. Where Binter was, the Princess was, and that was a ploy that kept people's eyes away from her more than once. The trio of conspirators flitted across the grounds like ghosts, moving without attracting the attention of the guards, and easily entered the magically warmed air of the gardens and disappeared into the hedgerow maze.

Keritanima breathed an explosive sigh of relief as soon as the living walls of the maze surrounded them. "I was so worried we were going to get busted right before we made the maze," she said in a surprisingly loud voice.

"We may yet still, if you keep shouting," Allia hissed at her.

"We're safe now, Allia," she said assuringly as they turned a corner. "They may catch us coming out, but they won't catch us with what we've got."

"And how would you explain how you are dressed?"

"The same way I've done it the last three times," she said, looking over her shoulder and winking. "The Brat is famous for doing weird things. Even she likes to put on dark clothing and skulk around with no protection every once in a while. It satisfies her need to be adventurous."

"Sometimes I do not understand you, sister," Allia grunted.

"Then I'm doing it right," she replied in a frippant tone.

Everything was in readiness for them, and it told him two things. One, that Miranda was very thorough, and two, that Miranda could find the center of the maze. A single tent had been erected not far from the fountain, in a large open area. Inside that small tent were four modest wooden chests and four neatly folded lengths of waterproof canvas. She had even thought

to have a trio of simple chairs with throw pillows placed in the seats and a small table set up in the tent, so that anyone visiting it would have somewhere comfortable to read.

Tarrin had felt a sense of peace and assurance flow over him when he stepped into the courtyard, and for the first time, he understood what it was and where it was coming from. He knew it was somehow connected to the Goddess, but he realized that the courtyard was holy to the Goddess, and that gave the sacred ground a very different feel for anyone who followed her. The courtyard was holy ground, and her presence there was powerful.

"I *told* her not to do that," Keritanima snorted as they entered the tent and looked around. Keritanima had the place illuminated with one of her little conjured balls of light.

"Do what?" Tarrin asked.

"Bring someone else," she replied. "I really don't think that Miranda dragged those chests in here by herself. They may look small, but those chests are very heavy."

"Even if it was Binter or Sisska?"

"Even them," she said adamantly. "I seriously debated letting Miranda in here."

"Why?"

"I don't know," she said after a brief pause. "Maybe because this place feels very private to me. I really had to bring myself to telling Miranda to come in here."

Tarrin didn't say anything. Keritanima was feeling that same closeness to the Goddess he did, a feeling that was always intensified there, in her courtyard. Keritanima was being affected by holy ground. That told him something about how she felt towards the Goddess.

"Anyway, let's take advantage of it," she said. "Time to pack away the booty."

They placed the books and scrolltubes into the chests, packing them carefully so that they wouldn't be damaged and looked orderly. Tarrin looked at the books as he did so, noticing that very few of them had any sort

of marking on their black leather covers. The book with the *shaeram* on it was an exception rather than a rule. He opened one randomly and looked at it, and found it to be written in a very exacting hand, the precision of a writer who had been penning books for years. The short passage he read seemed to be talking about political affiliations among different magical and nonmagical orders in the west. He opened another book, and found a list of names, complete with dates and comments. The dates were from over two thousand years ago, and the comments seemed to be abbreviated words marking something the reader would understand. The key for those abbreviations was probably in the book.

Two thousand years? The book was *that* old? It looked like it was bound only last ride! He remembered the feeling of magic he felt in that room, and then he remembered that the place was a bit *too* clean, *too* dry. Perhaps that magic also preserved the books in their good condition.

"What is it, Tarrin?" Keritanima asked.

"This book has dates in it from before the Breaking," he replied. "I was musing that it doesn't look that old. That magic in the room must have preserved the books."

"It would be a wise thing to do," she agreed. "And the priests of Karas are anything if not methodical."

"They made a spell that lasted for over two thousand years," Tarrin said, mainly to himself. "That's some serious magic."

"Well, don't give them too much credit," Keritanima warned. "No doubt it took them some effort to do that."

"I guess," he shrugged.

"At least we know that the books are from before the Breaking now," Keritanima said as she placed scrolltubes in a chest. "That means that we might find something very useful in them."

"If not, then we wasted a whole night."

"Of course we didn't," Keritanima said. "We had fun, and we got to play together."

"You are weird," Tarrin told her flatly, which made Allia laugh.

"Of course I am, dear brother," she winked. "I'm a Wikuni. We're all weird."

"To your toenails," he agreed.

"Well, I'm done," Keritanima said, folding up the sack. Tarrin too was finished, but Allia was still placing the last few books into a chest. She too had paged through one or two of them while putting them away. Keritanima took one from her with a smile, the one with the *shaeram* on it, then opened it. "In common," she said. "I think I'll get started. I'm too wound up to sleep right now, and we have to start reading them sometime."

"We should all take one book," Allia said, reaching in and picking one up.

"No," Keritanima replied. "I'm not taking them out of the courtyard. If someone picked up one of our books and tried to take it back to the library, we'd have alot of explaining to do. If you want to read them, it will have to be done here."

"I guess that is only wise," Allia agreed after thinking about it for a moment. "How will you arrange that much time?"

"By not getting much sleep," she grunted. She sat down at the table and put the book in front of her, then opened it to the first page. "Tarrin, would you be the greatest brother in the world, and go get me something to eat? I'm starving."

"And how do I explain carrying a tray of food into the maze?" he asked

"Not if they don't see you carrying it," she winked.

"Do you think you want to trust food I carry around that way?" he asked pointedly.

"We won't know until we try, now will we?" she asked with a grin.

"I'm hungry as well," Allia said, patting her flat belly. "I would be very honored if you would do this for us, Tarrin," she smiled at him, just a little bit too sweetly. "Clan members always help one another."

"I never had to put up with this from Jenna," he grunted sourly. "And since when did you start teasing me, sister?"

"I guess Keritanima is a bad influence on me," Allia said with a sly smile.

"Tarrin, swing by my room and tell Miranda to give you my scribing kit," she added.

"Goddess help me," he said in a plaintive voice, turning and changing form, then loping out of the tent.

When dawn came that morning, it found the three of them still in the courtyard. Tarrin was in cat form, curled up on the table and regarding Keritanima while she continued to read. Allia was laying on a canvas cot brought by Tarrin, asleep to at least look presentable for the next day. Miranda was there as well, sitting in the chair across from Keritanima, writing something down in an empty book studiously.

Keritanima had all the books on the table. She had skimmed through each one to get an idea of what information it held, and Miranda had written it all down on a small book she had brought when Tarrin came to fetch items for Keritanima. Miranda had returned with Tarrin instead, and she had taken the role of secretary and scribe, helping Keritanima catalog and document the suspected information held within each book. Tarrin was shocked that it had taken the entire night, but there was supposedly a lot of information in the books. Most of it was history and observations, as the priests watched the *katzh-dashi*, watched them and wrote everything down. They had compiled lists of members, Council members and their histories, and even a list of the Novices and Initiates coming and going. The church had people deep into the structure of the *katzh-dashi* for them to get some of that information.

She had just begun to unroll the scrolls. Tarrin was lounging somewhere between sleep and wake, letting the harmony of holy ground lull him with sensations of security and peace, when Keritanima's ragged gasp startled him out of his reverie.

"What is it?" he asked in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

She gave him a strangled look. "Do you know what this is?" she demanded in an almost hysterical voice, a voice that had Allia awake and instantly alert. Miranda gave Keritanima a calm, assessor's look.

"No, tell me," he replied calmly.

"This is a *primer!*" she said almost exuberantly. "It's a key for learning the language of the Sha'Kar!"

Tarrin gave her a stunned look, then jumped off the table and changed form. "You mean--"

"It'll take some work because this scroll doesn't have a guide for their written alphabet, but this is what the Lorefinders have been looking for for a thousand years!" she declared. "With *this*, and alot of work, we can read what's in the books in the library!"

"What's on the other scrolls?" Allia asked immediately.

Keritanima unrolled another one. "It's the same," she said, and then she was silent until she went through them all, leaving her friends in a state of quiet, nervous anticipation. "This is a comprehensive guide to learning the language of the Sha'Kar!" she finally said. "The priests have been sitting on the one thing the Tower has been hunting for for a thousand years!" She gave Tarrin a triumphant look. "And you thought we may not find anything useful!" she declared with a laugh.

The Sha'Kar. Books written in that ancient, mysterious language were all that were left now, and nobody could read them. The language had resisted every attempt to decipher it, even magical attempts. And now they had found the one thing that could break that ancient language, a series of instructional writings on learning it.

But why was it so *easy*? That information should have been ferociously defended, and the church should have *used* it! Did the church truly not know that they had it? That passage and area were run-down and unkempt...could they have forgotten that it was there over the years? That seemed unlikely, but there was a simple truth staring at him in that they had it. Maybe they did forget it. Maybe a high priest had ordered the room sealed, and over the years, the memory of it and what it had once held had been forgotten, lost in the musty old tomes of history kept by the church historians. There to be found, but lost among the sea of old lore accumulated by the church over the years.

Keritanima was actually jumping up and down, twirling in circles with a scroll to her breast. "This is it! *This is it!*" she squealed, acting like a little

girl who had just been given a pony. "I couldn't have *asked* to find anything better than this!"

"Highness, you're about to tear the scroll," Miranda said soothingly.

Keritanima's face became horrified, and she instantly calmed down, though her tail was absolutely writhing behind her. "We have to get started, tonight!" she said excitedly. "Miranda, I want you to do something very important for me," she said. "Something that you may not like."

"What is that, Highness?" she asked.

"I want you to transcribe the scrolls into a book," she said. "I know how fast you can write."

"That's going to occupy a great deal of my time, Highness," she said after a moment. "I do have other duties."

"You'll have to make time, Miranda," Keritanima said happily. "I'll help, but I'll be spending most of my time studying these. And I'd like to have a backup copy. Just in case."

"I won't say no, Highness," Miranda sighed. "I will get to work on it today. May I take the scrolls from the courtyard?"

"No," Keritanima told her. "They stay here, where they're safe."

"It isn't going to be easy to explain why I spend hours at a time in the maze, Highness," she said calmly. "The scrolls *must* be removed."

Keritanima took on an agonized look. "You're right," she sighed. "Alright, you can remove the scrolls, but no more than two at a time. And they're to be heavily guarded at all times. Either Binter or Sisska have to carry them when you don't actively have them in front of you." She gave Miranda a blunt look. "I'll impress them with how absolutely vital the scrolls are. They are to defend them to the death, if necessary."

"Yes," Miranda agreed calmly. "You have class in about an hour, Highness," she reminded.

"Already?" she said plaintively. "I guess so. We'd better sneak back to our rooms. *Please* get started on this as soon as you can, Miranda. It's important."

"I will be grouchy today," Allia said as she sat up. "I can do without sleep, but it always puts me on edge."

"Then stay away from me," Tarrin said absently. Allia glared at him, then laughed. "I should get going too," he added. "I have no idea what they'll want me to do today. I'm in limbo until they decide how to go about training me."

"You should go, Highness," Miranda said calmly. "I'll pack up the books and organize the scrolls. You go and get ready for class."

"I--yes, yes," she agreed. "We have to keep up appearances. I have no doubt that my veneer as the Brat is already starting to show thin. If I'm not careful, my secret will be out. Is it safe to leave?"

Miranda nodded. "I have people keeping the other people away."

"Good. Come on, Allia. I think we could use a bath before class."

"Yes, a night's work does tend to linger," Allia said. "Coming, brother?"

"In a minute," he said. "I'll help Miranda pack things. No reason leaving her with all the work, and I don't have to be somewhere."

"Alright. I'll see you tonight?" Keritanima asked.

"Of course," he smiled.

Keritanima and Allia filed out, chatting warmly with each other. Those two had really come together.

Miranda knew precisely how to arrange the books so that they had a very logical order, and she directed Tarrin as they put them all back in the chests. Tarrin had a strange feeling that Miranda had something to say. That was why he remained behind. The cheeky, almost criminally cute mink Wikuni was an enigma to Tarrin, and something about her struck at him on a level that he couldn't understand. It was almost like a kin-closeness, though it was not the same feeling he had had with Allia, or Dar, or even Keritanima. Miranda was different. Very different. But he had no idea why, or how he knew. It was as if he was instinctually drawn to her.

"You're staring at me," Miranda said with that cheeky smile.

"I am?" he asked. "Sorry. I'm just trying to figure something out."

"What?"

"You," he replied. "Keritanima absolutely adores you, but she doesn't seem to treat you that well. Why do you stay?"

"She treats me much better than you'll ever understand, Tarrin," she replied calmly. "If you're wondering why I ended up with these tasks, remember that I *am* her maid, after all. It's my job to do things for her. Did she control herself in the cathedral?"

"She stayed to her plan," he replied calmly, setting a stack of books into a chest and closing it. "It went very smoothly. I was surprised."

"I think you two are a good influence on her," Miranda said smoothly. "She's usually much more erratic. Brilliant, but erratic."

"How long have you been her maid?"

"For six years," she said. "I was only a girl when I was put in her service. They felt that if she had a maid her own age, it would help her. She was a very...lonely girl. It had to do with her situation."

"She never talks about that," Tarrin said, taking another book from her. "Would you?"

"It's very simple, Tarrin," she replied, stacking a few books and handing them to him. "Everyone that she liked was killed."

"What?"

"You don't understand Royal politics," she said calmly. "When Keritanima was young, she was second in line for the throne. She had one ahead of her and two behind. Keritanima showed the most promise at that age. She was much smarter than Jenawalani and Veranika, and Sabakimara was smarter than them, but still wasn't quite as smart as Keritanima. Sabakimara feared Keritanima. A great deal. She felt that her younger sister may either kill her, or the noble houses would have Sabakimara killed so that a more effective queen could take the throne. At the tender age of nine, she tried to have Keritanima killed."

Tarrin gaped at her.

"Does that help you understand what growing up in the palace was like?" she asked calmly. "As soon as Keritanima could understand things,

she was started in the training to be a prospective queen. She learned from her father, and few are as nasty and underhanded as Damon Eram. Damon hates everyone, even his own children. If not for the need to continue the line, he would have had them all killed at birth. The infighting between the daughters is almost legendary in Wikuna," she sighed. "Each of the four of them were trying very hard to kill off the other three. After all, a lone heir is a guaranteed heir. Keritanima wasn't as savage as her sisters. She never tried to kill them, she just evaded their assassins, because she had this twisted idea that they could be a family. Anyway, after a couple of years, it became apparent that Sabakimara wasn't going to kill her sister, so she started a terror campaign instead. Every single one of Keritanima's friends died. All of them. Anyone who showed even the most remote affection for her was killed."

"Goddess," Tarrin breathed.

Miranda nodded. "It almost worked. Keritanima was driven almost to the edge of madness, but then they gave me to her. I rather liked her, and I was someone that she could talk to."

"Why didn't Damon Eram stop it?" Tarrin asked.

"Because he doesn't care," she replied sadly. "Damon Eram's only rule to his daughters is not to try anything to *him*. As far as he's concerned, they can kill each other off. At least until there are only two. If only one were left, then she would start eying the throne, and he wouldn't tolerate that. I honestly believe that if there was only one daughter left, Damon Eram would try to kill her."

"That's *horrible!*" Tarrin gasped. A family at war with itself? Tarrin's close family was the only reason he was still alive! Without them, he had no idea what he would do. How could a *family* hate each other so much? It struck him on many levels, for the Cat's need to protect the young also felt shocked and violated by such brutal behavior.

"Yes, but that's politics in Wikuna," she said calmly. "We pretend to be more civilized than the humans, but in many ways, we're more barbaric than the Plainrunners of Valkar. It wasn't long after that that Keritanima started sneaking out of the palace, and fell in with Ulfan and the thieves of Wikuna. They taught her how to protect herself, and she taught alot of it to

me. That's when the Brat Princess was born. Everyone in Wikuna remembers when Keritania was a bright, intelligent, serious young girl who showed tremendous promise as a potential queen, but they think that what was done to her left her the way she is now. Sometimes, I almost believe it myself. She doesn't let on, but what happened to her has left her very scarred."

"I had an idea that her childhood was harsh, but that's brutal," Tarrin said, pitying his sister. "She won't talk about it. And now I know why."

Miranda nodded, handing him another stack of books. "She's good. Too good. Now everyone in Wikuna honestly believes that she's been left slow by her ordeal, and that she's not fit to rule. Just about everyone in a position of power in Wikuna has tried to kill her, because she's the heir apparent, and they don't want a damaged monarch on the throne. Even her own father has tried to kill her. But she's still alive, and that drives them wild."

"Her own *father*?"

"He thinks she's weak," Miranda said bluntly. "He thinks that a *real* Eram wouldn't have been affected by something as silly as love and friendship. Damon Eram goes through the motions of trying to mold her for the throne, but he really wants to get rid of her. That's half of what sending her here was about. It was an attempt to root her out of the very secure power base they think I've built around her, to leave her open and exposed and easier to get at. I've already eliminated about ten assassins sent to kill her. Jervis, poor soul, he has the task of rooting out assassins that the man who sent him to do the job is sending in the first place."

"I can't believe this," Tarrin said in shock. "What kind of man is he to try to kill *his own daughter*?"

"A power-mad maniac," Miranda said calmly. "Damon Eram only cares about three things. His throne, the continuation of the Eram line on the throne, and the power of Wikuna as a whole. In that order. He is absolutely ruthless. He killed his own brothers and sisters to be the heir, killed his father to get the throne, and has killed and destroyed to keep other noble houses from gaining enough power to challenge his rule. Damon Eram could stand eye level to a Giant if the skulls of everyone he's either killed or ordered killed were stacked underneath him."

"That is awful," Tarrin said voicelessly, in total disbelief.

"Unfortunately, it's set a bad trend," Miranda said sadly. "In order to beat the Eram line, the other houses have had to sink to their level. It's made politics in Wikuna very bloody."

"I'm just shocked," he said sincerely. "I can't believe that people would be that cruel."

"It's the real world, Tarrin," she sighed. "I don't like what I do, but I do it. Keritanima depends on me. She'll make a good queen, if she ever comes to accept her role, and can convince the nobles of Wikuna that she's fit to hold the throne."

"Do you want her to be queen?"

"I want her to be happy," she replied. "But sometimes, what one person wants or needs is overshadowed by what others need of them. Wikuna is desperate for a good, compassionate, fit monarch. The savagery of the Eram line has weakened the entire kingdom, and if it's not stopped, then Wikuna will be like Yar Arak. Keritanima is the only possible choice. She's the only Eram left with decency, and few in Wikuna could be a better ruler than her. The fight over the throne would destroy the kingdom, if there ever was a succession."

"But if she orders you to run with her, you will."

"Of course," she said calmly. "She's my Princess, and she's also my friend. I'll always be here for her, even if I don't agree with the decisions she makes."

Tarrin put a paw on her shoulder, and she gave him that cheeky grin that magnified her almost unbearable cuteness. "I think Keritanima is in good hands," he told her sincerely.

"I'm so glad you appreciate me," she smiled. "You know, if we're not careful, we could end up being friends."

"I think that's already happened," he told her with a smile.

"Ah well. Water under the bridge, and all that," she said with a roguish smile.

"Guess you're stuck with me."

"I can think of worse people to be stuck with, believe me," she told him. She closed another chest lid. "Looks like we're down to scrolls."

"Let's finish up, and I'll escort you back to Binter and Sisska. That way your cargo is protected."

Miranda picked up the first two, then modestly slipped them into the bodice of her maid's dress. "I think it's protected now," she winked.

"What a hiding place," Tarrin mused. "But you've got a bulge in your stomach."

"Most people don't look at my stomach, Tarrin," she said, using her hands to emphasize her white-furred cleavage.

"I know. I'm more of a tail man myself, though."

Miranda laughed. "Well, I think I can give you something to look at, then," she said, sweeping her very, very thickly furred blond tail around and brushing it up against his side.

"I do love that tail," Tarrin mused as they closed the chest holding the scrolls, threw canvas over the chests and table, then left the tent.

It was a cold blustery day everywhere but in the garden. There, though it was still overcast and blustery, it was pleasantly warm, and the flowers and green plants continued to thrive and bloom. On cold days, the garden became a very popular place, as *katzh-dashi*, servants, guards, and Knights visited it to feel warmth on their skin not made by the dry heat of a fire, and to recapture a bit of spring green when surrounded by leafless trees and winter-browned grass. The blustery day brought many into the garden, and its white gravel pathways were crowded with many people as they walked along the flower-lined pathways and marvelled at the Tower's one true vanity. One of those pedestrians was Miranda, wearing a lovely little gray maid's dress that offset her white fur and blond hair and tail perfectly, and her passing caused more than a few heads to turn. Unlike Allia's ethereal beauty, Miranda's cuteness seemed to awe and sweep away everyone who crossed her path. Where Allia's intense beauty inspired jealousy in women, Miranda's cuteness only made them treat her like an old friend. Miranda always left a trail of whispered "how *cute!*" remarks wherever she went, but

she was careful to always dress in clothing that showed a bit of fur-clad cleavage, or hugged her curves, so that the onlooker firmly understood that he or she was dealing with a woman, and not a little girl. She could easily change her clothing to look like a younger teen--she *was* only nineteen, just a year older than Keritanima--because her type of cuteness was always associated with youth. And like Jervis, Miranda had learned how to use her appearance as a weapon. Nobody--*nobody*--ever associated such a cute, precious little thing with activities like spying, extortion, blackmail, even such grisly things as interrogation, and even murder. People tended to say things in her presence that they normally wouldn't say, for they were disarmed by her cuteness, and the trend in both human and Wikuni alike to treat someone like her with inordinate friendship than they would with others. Miranda had learned from her employer in how to raise vapidness to an art, for few associated people as cute as her with intelligence either. A few little eyelash flutters, a couple of breathless, brainless remarks, and a whole world of privileged information was opened before her. Sometimes it took a bit more, and more than once she'd had to trade kisses and even more in darker alcoves in the palace...but such activities in themselves were occasionally quite enjoyable. Provided she was trying to get information from a handsome young nobleman.

It was a meeting of deceptive importance, on more levels than people who witnessed it could possibly understand. The foppish rabbit Wikuni, Jervis, happened to cross paths with the mink at a meeting of pathways, and they travelled on in the same direction at the same pace. At first, nothing was said. They were merely travelling in the same direction. But then the rabbit Wikuni took out his most treasured pocketwatch and began to wind it, hanging his hooked cane on his forearm as he went about his task.

"You're looking well, Miranda," he said in his lilting, slightly squeaky voice. "Could you kindly ask the fellow with the crossbow to stand down?"

"Only when you order your man with the flintlock to do the same," she replied in a calm, almost friendly voice. "Really, Jervis, why bring a man with a *musket* on the grounds? They're much too noisy."

"Not when a priest casts a spell of silence," Jervis replied.

"Clever."

"Thank you," he replied modestly. "Was there anything specific you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes," she replied. "How many men have you lost?"

"Nine," he said with a grunt. "You?"

"Fifteen," she replied calmly. "We have to put a stop to this. Good men are hard to find."

"Indeed. So, you wish to call a truce?"

"We were never really opposing one another, Jervis," she said calmly. "We just work in different ways to the same goal."

"True. But if we weren't opposing, you could have been more open in your activities. And you didn't have to buy one of my men."

"Jervis, that's like asking a canary not to sing," she told him with that cheeky smile. "How else do you expect me to find out what you know?"

Jervis chuckled. "It's just not polite," he told her.

"I'm not one much for pleasantries, Jervis," she told him.

"True, true. So, you wish to combine our actions?"

"Just along this task, old friend. I do have other operations going. No need to bog you down in those."

"Yes, yes. I do too, to be honest. So, what plan do you have in mind to put Ahiriya in her place?"

"I have a very simple one," she replied with a cheeky smile and a wink. "It's time for us to play a game of Beri Bally Bell."

Jervis laughed. Beri Bally Bell was a children's game where one person was blindfolded, and everyone else wore a small bell. The blindfolded person had to catch someone else, using the sounds of the bells to guide them. But many times, the number of bells and the sounds they made made it difficult for the blindfolded person to single any one out. A coordinated group of bell wearers could utterly confuse the blindfolded person.

"And what will lure Ahiriya into taking the blindfold?" Jervis asked with a smile, a smile that showed his bucked front teeth.

"Nothing short of a little misdirection," Miranda replied with a smile. "Our bells will be information. We pretend that we find something very damaging to the Tower, make sure she hears about it, then set out agents to give her a bit of confusion. The activity should draw out her people, and then we can deal with them."

"Simple, yet very thorough. Now I understand why you're such a worthy opponent, my dear."

"Thank you. It's always nice to be respected by one's peers."

"I think we can work together, my dear. When do you want to start?"

"Tomorrow seems a very uneventful day," she replied with a smile.

"It does indeed. I have a very empty calendar. I think I can pencil in some time."

"I'd appreciate it."

"When are you going to take up my offer and come work for me, Miranda?" Jervis asked. "You're wasting your talents protecting Keritanima. You need to be working for the Crown."

"I'm just not interested, Jervis," she said politely. "I'm happy where I am. Let's leave it at that."

"Well, the offer is always open," he told her.

"I appreciate that."

"I go that way. Have a good day, my dear."

"You too, Jervis," she said mildly, and they parted ways.

A few moments. That was all they were together. To the casual observer, it seemed nothing but a chance meeting, a moment of polite conversation, then a parting of convenience. But the casual observer would never comprehend the titanic magnitude of the simple arrangement that had been formed between the pair of spymasters. A formidable arrangement indeed.

Tarrin had no idea what they wanted him to do that day. He thought that he'd probably be in limbo while they talked things out, but that turned out to

be a daydream. They were waiting for him when he returned, and it took a few minutes of fast talking to explain why he wasn't in his room, why he wasn't in his Initiate uniform, and why they'd never seen him leave. But it was fortunate that it was Koran Dar that had been the one to come fetch him, and the man's mild nature and respect for Tarrin's privacy kept him from pressing too hard. That the Council members always came for him themselves was a fair indication to Tarrin of how important they thought he was.

After convincing the Amazon man that he needed food and a bath before starting, Tarrin got everything attended to as quickly as he could. He didn't want to leave the Council waiting too long. He arrived at their chamber not long after leaving Koran Dar, and found the room populated with the Council, the Keeper, and six men and women wearing white robes. Surprisingly, Brel was among them, and the old man's sour face and hard eyes hinted that it wasn't entirely by choice. The other five were pattern Sorcerers, they looked young or in their early middle age, yet their eyes made them appear older--

Tarrin blinked, and looked at Brel. He was *old*. In fact, he was the *only* Sorcerer he'd ever seen that looked old. Every other Sorcerer he'd ever seen looked much like Dolanna, or Jula, or Sevren. They appeared mature, but never old. The seven members of the Council, the most powerful and supposedly wisest of the *katzh-dashi*, all looked like they were Elke's age.

What made Brel different? Why was Brel the only Sorcerer Tarrin had seen that actually looked old? It was a puzzle. Could something *stop* the Sorcerers from aging? Maybe they'd discovered weaves that retarded aging, or perhaps only made them appear much younger than they actually were. Perhaps it was a weave that Brel couldn't accomplish, because of lack of contact or access to a certain Sphere.

Tarrin stopped, staring at Brel so hard that the man began to look uncomfortable. *Why* did Brel look old? What made him different from the other *katzh-dashi*? He was Master of Initiates, a very important position, so it couldn't be because he lacked access to certain Spheres, or even lacked training or experience. They wouldn't put someone like that in that position, because he may be called upon to deal with an Initiate who had a weave get

away from him. No, Brel's experience or ability wasn't what made him different. It had to be something else.

Maybe the puzzle wasn't why Brel was old, but why everyone else was *not*. He found himself staring at a room full of young faces, or mature faces, and he had no doubt that not a single one of them was really as old as he or she looked. Why had he never noticed this before? Tarrin was usually a very observant young man, because he was raised in the forest and had a hunter's eye.

A fleeting memory of a conversation the day before seemed to answer that puzzle. A talk with the Goddess. *Isn't it a rule that no mortal can access more than one order of magic?* he had asked, and she had told him yes. But she had also told him that the *katzh-dashi* were granted certain limited priest powers in order for them to be capable of functioning as the priestly order of the Goddess, since she was forbidden to have priests when she sponsored the Sorcerers.

Isn't it curious that katzh-dashi are allowed to defy the rules? she had asked him. *Kind of makes you wonder why.*

It was a riddle for him to think about, but in all the confusion the day before, he'd honestly forgotten about it. But he thought he had the answer now.

The stricture stated that no *mortal* could access more than one order of magic. If the *katzh-dashi* didn't age and die like mortals, that made them something *other* than mortals.

And that allowed them to circumvent the stricture in a limited manner, reflecting their limited access to priest magic.

To give her children access to their limited priest magic, the Goddess altered the way they aged, or simply stopped it altogether, to raise them out of the category of *mortal*. It also had the added boon of keeping her small numbers of Sorcerer children alive.

Brel looked relieved when Tarrin stopped staring at him, and he turned his gaze on the others. Just how old *were* they? They weren't as young as they looked. They couldn't be. Their scents matched their appearance, so that was no indicator. Perhaps they were that old, but only physically. Scents couldn't lie.

"And what is the matter *now*, Tarrin?" the Keeper asked in a huffy voice.

"I was just wondering how old all of you *really* are," Tarrin said calmly, looking around the room. "I've never seen so many of you in one place before, and Master Brel there looks keenly out of place."

That caused a bit of light chuckling and some knowing looks passed between them. "It's not polite to ask a lady's age, Tarrin," the Keeper smiled.

"I'm not polite," Tarrin said bluntly.

That wiped the smile off of her face. "Why we look how we do is something that you'll learn at the last stage of your Initiate," she told him in a dismissing tone. "It's much too hard to explain, and we don't have time to waste on it."

"Make time," Tarrin said. "Because I don't think I'll *get* to the last stage of the Initiate."

That made the Council stare at him, then glance at each other nervously. "And what nonsense is this?" the Keeper asked.

"I don't have to stay," he told her bluntly. "The latter stages of the Initiate are for those who go on to become *katzh-dashi*. I have no intention of becoming *katzh-dashi*. After I'm taught how to control my power without hurting anyone, I'll be leaving. So I'll never reach that stage of the training."

It was *technically* true, anyway.

"Well, if you must know, when a *katzh-dashi* serves for a period of ten years, they take the Vows of the Goddess. When we do that, we simply stop aging," she said calmly. "It's one of the gifts given to us by the Goddess. Master Brel there came to us as a middle aged man when he began his Initiate. How he appears now is how he appeared when he took his Vows."

And that answered that. The Goddess stopped their aging, and when they were no longer technically mortal, she could bestow her blessings upon them. Making a *katzh-dashi* stop aging wasn't a gift, it was more like a change so they could receive their true gifts. It was just a change with beneficial side-effects. It explained why most of them looked mature, in

their thirties or early forties. Some took years to pass the Initiate, and that would make them middle-aged after their ten years of service.

"Now, enough silliness," the Keeper said. "Come sit on the table, Tarrin. We're going to try a few experiments to see what limit your power has. I promise you that you won't have to touch the Weave without being restricted in some way. And if you feel anything unusual while trying, you're free to stop and let us know. We don't want this to be painful for you."

"Alright," he said suspiciously.

That began a very curious morning, where the Council would cut him off from the Weave at varying strengths *before* he tried to make contact with it. And unlike the previous attempts, this time the Council could manage his power, if but for a few moments. By reducing his ability to touch the Weave, it lengthened the amount of time he had before the power that tried to flood him could wear away at the barrier they placed in front of it. They had tried stopping that flood while it was in progress the time before. This time they put obstructions in front of it before it could really get moving.

But it was still no solution. It took the combined might of the Council to slow the flood by a moment or two, but it did give Tarrin long enough to perform a few simple weaves, and it gave him time to let go of the Weave before that flood hit him and neutralized his ability to separate himself from his magic. He was very careful not to let it catch him; the pain of tearing himself away was enough to make it something to avoid if at all possible. And the Council, fully understanding that their circle was in very real danger should Tarrin get overwhelmed, were also very careful to be ready to break the instant Tarrin did get overwhelmed.

After a morning of such careful, delicate probing and experimentation, they had found that Tarrin's raw power could be briefly contained by a barrier. They had studied how his power worked, and the Keeper had promised him that the six Lorefinders in attendance, of whom Brel was part, would study that and try to come up with a new, more effective barrier that they could use for him to help him control that power.

The Keeper leaned back in her chair, rubbing her eyes. The lunch bell had just sounded on the grounds, and the Council looked a bit harried. It was real work for them to use their power to control Tarrin's, so he could do what the Lorefinders asked. "I think this is a good stopping point," she said. "We've made real progress today."

"Yes," a dark-haired Sorceress, Lilenne, said. She was the Mistress Loremaster, the lead of that organization of knowledge-seeking *katzh-dashi*. She was a Shacèan, with a thin, graceful neck and a swallow's eyes. She was pretty, but there was a sharpness to her features that Tarrin found a bit unnerving. She looked like a bird of prey. "We have made good progress, yes? I think we can find a control solution for you, Tarrin. Maybe something that you can even use for yourself to give you more time, yes."

"I'd appreciate it," Tarrin said sincerely. "I can't learn if I can't use the Weave, and I can't get out of here if I can't learn."

"Yes, well, a solution, we will work on that for you, yes. Have no worry. I notice you use our library."

"It's a good way to study what I can, Mistress."

"A good attitude, yes," she said with a hawkish smile. "Come to the library tonight. A book, I will give to you, on High Sorcery. Maybe it will help."

"Is that wise, Lilenne?" the Keeper asked.

"High Sorcery, it is his domain, Keeper," she replied calmly. "If he can access it alone, then he should learn as much about it as possible, because nobody will be there to help him. Mistakes, it will help him avoid them. Best he be armed with everything he can, yes?"

"You're the Lorefinder, Lilenne," Amelyn told her. "We will accede to your judgement in the matter."

"Tomorrow," she told Tarrin, looking at him, "be here at sunrise. We will keep working."

"Yes, Mistress Lilenne," he said respectfully.

"You are excused, Initiate," the Keeper told him. "You have done well today."

"Thank you," he said, scooting off the table.

It wasn't as long as he thought it would be, but he definitely felt it. He was tired, both from effort and from fear. He was *afraid* of Sorcery, because he knew what was waiting for him if he was flooded. That pain was something nobody could ever get used to, and it was pain that he would avoid at all costs. Only if threatened with more pain than he would feel tearing himself away from the Weave would he subject himself to that kind of punishment. The morning of feeling it right on the edge of him had exacted a toll, and he felt drained by the time he walked out the door.

He thought about the Goddess' riddle for him, and its solution. So she had worked a way around the restriction for her people, but why was it so important to *him* that she would send him off to find out why? It really didn't make much sense. After all, he never intended to become *katzh-dashi*, and it wasn't like that would do him any good anyway. Maybe she was just testing him, to see how observant or how smart he was. Maybe she wanted him to know for some other reason, something that he couldn't comprehend. The Goddess was obviously trying to carefully set him up for something, but unlike the *katzh-dashi*, he *trusted* the Goddess. If she wanted him to do something for her, he probably would.

Miranda's wise words about a person occasionally having to give up personal need to fulfill the needs of others rang in his mind for some reason. Maybe the Goddess *needed* something from him, and because he was one of her children, he would have to try to fulfill it for her.

Maybe everything she was doing, and everything around him, was preparing him for the choice that she said he would have to make. And that choice would involve whose needs he would strive to fulfill.

The thought occupied his mind as he went to the kitchens and fixed himself a plate for lunch, then sat down in the small Initiate's dining hall and pondered on it. Because he was so preoccupied, Dar managed to sit down at his table before he scented or noticed the young man, and that startled him. His claws were out and halfway across the table before the young man flinched, but they stopped well short of his nose.

"Don't *do* that!" Tarrin gasped as he pulled his paw back. "*Never* sneak up on me, Dar! It's dangerous!"

"I didn't realize you weren't paying attention!" Dar objected. "By the Scar, Tarrin, you're hard enough to sneak up on as it is, and I've seen what you do when you're surprised! Do you think I'd do it to you on purpose?"

Tarrin gave him a look, then laughed ruefully. "No, I guess you wouldn't," he agreed. "How is class?"

Dar gave a sour sound. "It's like trying to grab smoke," he complained. "I can feel it out there, but I just can't seem to find it."

"It was the same for me," he said. "Just stick with it. It'll come to you."

"I hope so. It's aggravating. And Keritanima doesn't help. She makes it look *easy*."

"Huh?"

"She was standing in the hall practicing her weaves as we came down the hall to our practice rooms," he complained. "She's only just begun the Red, but she throws weaves around like a full *katzh-dashi*. It's really annoying."

"Kerri is, special," Tarrin chuckled. "I think she's a natural."

"That's what my teacher calls her," Dar agreed. "But she uses the term *daughter* for some reason. She always calls Keritanima 'that lucky daughter'. I'm not sure what it means."

"Me either," Tarrin told him. "The *katzh-dashi* use a lot of strange terms that only they understand."

"No doubt," Dar grunted. "I talked to Allia this morning."

"Oh? And where is the wound?"

Dar laughed. "She's not like that anymore," he grinned. "She looked haggard. Did you keep her up last night?"

"We were doing something," he said calmly, but the direct look in Tarrin's eyes made Dar nod knowingly.

"Speaking of something, I also talked to Tiella this morning too," he said. "I think there's something wrong with her."

"Why do you say that?"

"She's beet-red," he said. "Does she have a chill?"

Tarrin laughed. "No, she has a little problem with modesty," he replied. "She likes you, and it mortifies her that friends see her without any clothes on."

"Is that all?" he asked. "We have communal baths in Arkis. I'm not used to that kind of a reaction."

"She's from a little, very straight-laced and highly moral village, Dar," he said. "Just seeing a woman's bare knee is a scandal retold for years there."

"How barbaric. Were you like that?"

Tarrin shook his head. "My mother is Ungardt, and my father is from Suld. They're a bit more cosmopolitan, so even before *this* happened," he said, holding up his paw, "I had a little more open viewpoint about that kind of thing."

"Strange," he mused.

"Truly," Tarrin agreed.

"She likes me, you say? We barely know each other."

"She's a good judge of people, Dar," he said mildly.

"I must say, she's very cute. I wonder if I could convince her to go for a walk in the garden with me."

Tarrin didn't say anything, and Dar missed his grin. "What did she have to say?"

"Not much," he replied. "She hasn't found anything out about what you asked her to find. Not yet. She said that they've been too busy to really say anything to her."

That, Tarrin could understand. "Well, at least she's keeping me posted," he said.

"She went on and on about the Initiate," he said. "She's being moved over here in a few days. She's really anxious to get over here."

"I seem to recall you doing the same thing, Dar," Tarrin chuckled.

"Yes, well, it *is* alot more interesting," he admitted.

"You just wanted out of the kitchen."

Dar laughed. "I will *never* touch another pot or pan for as long as I live," he said emphatically.

They enjoyed the rest of their meal with idle chatter, and Dar had to scurry back to class. Tarrin had a need to talk to someone, and all of his friends were busy, so he found himself in the company of Sisska and Miranda. The delicate, cute little mink was scribing from a scroll and into a book, and Tarrin was shocked at the raw speed at which she could write. She had already completely transcribed the first scroll, and was halfway through the second by the time Tarrin was let in by Sisska and took a seat across from the small table which she used as a desk. Miranda's writing was crisp, clear, and exacting, and she could write with such speed that it seemed almost inhuman. He noticed that the pen wasn't a quill pen, it was a curious wooden pen with a strange metal tip. Ink seemed to come out of nowhere, appearing on the paper, though there was a pot of ink sitting on the table by the scroll.

"Tarrin," she said in greeting as he sat down. "Excuse me if I don't give you much attention, I'm rather busy at the moment."

"It's alright," he told her. "Where is the ink coming from?" he asked curiously.

"This is one of the inventions from Telluria," she told him. "It's called a fountain pen. You fill the pen with ink, and the special tip makes it come out only when you're writing. You can write very fast with one, because you only have to refill the ink every few pages rather than ever few lines."

"Interesting."

"Expensive," she said, leaning back and blowing on the page to accelerate the drying of the ink. "This pen cost me almost five hundred gold lions."

Tarrin gaped at her. "Five hundred *gold* coins?"

She nodded. "They're dreadfully hard to make, so they're very expensive. But in my position, it was worth the cost." She turned the page,

then looked up at the scroll, and began transcribing again. "I hope to be done with this by the end of the week."

"I didn't realize you'd be so busy," he said in apology. "I'll just come back later."

"We don't have to talk, Tarrin," she said, looking up at him and smiling. "If all you want is company, feel free to stay. Sisska plays a very good game of chess. Don't you, Sisska?"

"I will teach you, Master Tarrin, if you wish," the massive Vendari female offered.

"Why not?" he shrugged. "Where is Binter?"

"Watching her Highness," the Vendari said, coming over after firmly barring the door. "The Tower forbids him from accompanying her, so he always follows her to be near, in case of attack."

"I can't blame him," Tarrin said. "You two take your job seriously, and it would probably drive him nuts to let her run around out there by herself."

"Binter protects her Highness when she is away from Miranda. Miranda is my child."

"Child?"

"A Vendari term for the one they protect," Miranda said from the table.

"At least it's not a trial of Honor and Blood," Tarrin said to Sisska with a smile.

"It can be at times," Sisska said with a faint glimmer of humor. "Miranda is more reckless than her Highness. She gives me fits sometimes."

"I can't help it if you can't keep up," Miranda grunted from her chair. "Now stop distracting me. I almost made a mistake."

"Yes, Miranda," Sisska said in a calm, bass voice. "The chessboard is in the closet, Tarrin. Please fetch it for me."

"Sure," he said.

Chess was complicated, but Tarrin's grasp of strategy and tactics, taught to him by his parents, and a quick memory allowed him to grasp the more obvious ideas behind the game. Sisska showed that she was indeed good,

explaining some of the more subtle concepts of the game, and effective ways to use the advantages of the different pieces. After Tarrin got a good basic idea behind the game, he began to play against Sisska. Sisska showed no mercy, however, defeating him soundly time after time. But Tarrin wasn't one to get frustrated, and Sisska always explained the mistakes he made after each game. That allowed him to learn quickly how to avoid obvious errors that kept costing him the game. Keritanima's cat, Bandit, curled up in Tarrin's lap to sleep, and Tarrin accepted his little cousin calmly, absently petting it and scratching it behind the ears as he furiously thought ways to make the game less humiliating for him.

By the time Keritanima and Allia entered the room, actually giggling like little girls after Sisska rose to unbar the door and let them in, Tarrin had reached the point where Sisska had to use strategy to beat him. He still had no chance against her, but he did make her work a little to secure victory. "What are you doing in my room?" Keritanima demanded of him when she saw him.

"Losing," he said sourly as Sisska took another piece after sitting back down.

Binter entered just behind the nonhuman females, and closed and barred the door quietly. "Well, maybe it's just as good that you're here. I was going to send Bandit to find you."

"What's on your mind?" he asked, making another move.

"We're going to have class," she smiled. "All three of us have to learn what Miranda's working on. How is it going, Miranda?"

"I'm done with the first two. I was about to go get the next two."

"I told you she's good," Keritanima told Allia.

"That little pen of hers helps," Tarrin said. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Telluria is famous for inventions," Keritanima shrugged. "The wood stoves we sell were originally a Tellurian design. Lately, they've been working on a machine that uses steam to drive gears. They call it a steam engine."

"What good is that?" Tarrin asked.

"They intend to use them in ships, so ships don't have to depend on the wind anymore," Keritanima said. "The Ministry of Science in Wikuna has picked up the idea, and they're also trying to fit the steam engines to power ships. It has some promise."

"How would steam make a ship move?" Tarrin asked.

"The steam drives a paddlewheel," she explained. "Like the waterwheel on a mill. The paddlewheel pushes the ship along, no matter what direction the wind is blowing. They're faster than anything but a clipper with the wind full astern."

"I still don't see how it would work," Tarrin said dubiously.

"I'll draw it out for you sometime, Tarrin," she said, sitting down on the bed beside him. "Right now, the engines blow up more often than they work. They need refinement." She had the book Miranda was using in her lap. "Alright, put aside the game. Miranda, be a dear and clear a path for us to the sanctuary. We have a lot to learn, and we don't have much time."

"Yes, Highness," Miranda said calmly, standing up and unthreading her tail from the hole in the back of the wooden chair. "Sisska?"

The massive Vendari female stood as well, then picked up her huge, wicked axe from the corner where it was standing.

"Give us about half an hour, Highness," she said in a calm, business-like voice.

"Half an hour," Keritanima mirrored, and the pair filed through the opened door. Binter quietly rebarred the door after they left. She opened the book with slightly quivering hands, looking at the neat, exact, almost mechanical writing that issued from Miranda's steady hand, staring at the writing almost reverently. "Here is the future, my *deshar*," she said in a low voice. "Your future and mine. Right here in this little book."

"But it is not yet complete, *deshaida*," Allia noted.

"That's because we haven't finished it yet, sister," Keritanima said, staring at it. "When it's done, this will be the most important book in the world. It's our passage out of here."

"You put too much hope on that, sister," Tarrin told her. "I can't deny that it'll be useful, but it's just that. Useful."

"Useful, yes. Important, undoubted," she replied. "But it's something more than that, Tarrin. It's a testament."

"To what?"

"To us," she replied, her eyes a mystery. "It's the defining statement that said that we were good enough. Better than the rest, and that we have won."

"*Deshaida*," Allia said, "give over on this need to prove yourself. You are my sister. For whatever you are, it is enough for me, and I will always love you."

Keritanima gave Allia a totally vulnerable look, full of powerful emotion, then she began to cry. Allia embraced her, stroking her hair, and Tarrin fully understood. Keritanima had never wanted anything more than acceptance from her family. Instead, they all tried to murder her. She had a new family now, a family that accepted her, loved her, and supported her. A family that loved her more than her own family ever did. Tarrin stood and accepted Keritanima into his arms, holding her close, with Allia keeping a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I want the brands," she sniffled from Tarrin's chest. "I want to be one of you. I want to *belong*."

"You always did, Kerri," Tarrin told her gently. "You always did."

"The Holy Mother will accept you, my sister," Allia told her assuringly. "And you will always be part of my family."

That word at first made her flinch in his arms, but then she looked up at him with teary eyes that betrayed the deep pain that pierced her soul, the pain of having those you love try to destroy you. Tarrin couldn't imagine what horror had been buried behind those eyes, both done to her, and the evil she had committed simply to keep herself alive.

"You are *deshaida*," Allia told her, patting her on the shoulder. "You are my sister. I would be honored to accept you into my clan."

"My father is going to adore you, Kerri," Tarrin told her, pushing her out to arm's length and looking down at her emotional eyes. He gave her a

gentle smile. "You're inheriting two families, sister. Allia's and mine. My father will take to you like fish to water, and my mother and the Whiteaxe Clan of Ungardt will also be your family."

"The Selani on one side, the Ungardt on the other," Keritanima said with a cheeky grin, though she was sniffing. "I feel very safe."

"You should," Allia smiled. "We take care of our own."

"We do indeed," Tarrin agreed. "You've given us so much, Kerri. Wisdom, intelligence, and a sense of security. It's time you got back what you give out."

Keritanima stared up at him, her eyes losing everything that had always clouded them before. The Brat, pain, defensiveness, fear, worry, loneliness. He stared into the core of her, and he found beauty. She put her cheek on his shoulder and just held him for a long moment. Tarrin and Allia kept her close, and he happened to glance up to the massive Vendari warrior, who stood ever near her. His black eyes were a mystery, but the single eloquent nod told Tarrin everything the silent warrior felt inside.

Chapter 18

It was necessary time off.

Tarrin lounged in the baths with Allia while the rest of the Tower slept, letting the slight hiss of the hot water and the sound of dripping lull them as they laid on towels by the hottest part of the pool, soaking up the heat. It was needed time. Allia had been very quiet for the last few days, as she seemed to step back and allow Keritanima the room she needed to work. Allia usually wasn't that talkative, but it was still enough for Tarrin to notice it. She'd had to share Tarrin with the Wikuni, and he felt that she had done so with tremendous grace and civility. Allia and Keritanima were very dear friends, and he had seen that bloom in the last few days, bloom into the relationship necessary for Allia to accept Keritanima as a sister. But it didn't take away from the simple fact that Allia needed the same attention that Keritanima did, and Tarrin had been lack in his duties as her friend and brother to provide it. Allia's patience about the matter was very commendable, but Tarrin knew that it was time to remind her just how important she was to him.

Allia was his sister, but she was also his best, closest, and most personal friend. The love he had for her transcended normal definitions; he loved her as much as any member of his own family, and it was a love so intense and powerful that he felt lost when she wasn't close to him. It was as deep as a love could be between two people who weren't romantically involved. They were friends, siblings, confidantes, and partners. There was nothing that he couldn't tell her, nothing that he wouldn't do for her, and he knew she was the same. That intense trust, between two people that were naturally very suspicious, formed the cornerstone of a relationship that defied Tarrin's every attempt to rationalize it. She had been there for him when he needed her, and now she needed him. And he wouldn't fail her.

So he brought her down to the baths, one of the few places where Allia would truly relax, and massaged and pampered her into total contentment. Such personal attention was vital for her mental well-being, a very tactile

and sensual assurance that she was loved and needed. Selani were a very sensual people, almost as dependent on their senses as the Were-cats were, because they lived in a world where the slightest misstep could bring death. By indulging in those senses, Tarrin put Allia's mind at ease, and it made her relax. She had been much too tense the last few days.

Allia sighed blissfully, her incredible blue eyes opening and staring directly into his own. "You do know how to spoil me, brother," she said with a gentle smile.

"You needed it," he replied. "You've been a bit nervous the last few days."

"It's the situation," she told him. "I don't feel comfortable being a thief. It goes against our ways."

"I know. I figured that was part of what was bothering you. But it was necessary."

"Yes, I'd have to agree," she admitted. "We aren't in a position where we can live by our codes. Survival is the first rule." She rolled over on her back and stretched languidly. "Besides, Keritanima did make it seem somewhat honorable."

"How is that?"

"By painting the church as an enemy of the *katzh-dashi*, who host us," she replied. "Stealing is wrong, but raiding one's enemy is more than acceptable. Until the Tower proves she is an enemy, I can find honor in striking back at her foes."

Tarrin chuckled. "That's one way to justify it."

"How do you justify it?"

"I don't," he shrugged. "I really don't care one way or the other."

"That's another way to justify it," Allia said with a smile, reaching out and nudging his shoulder. "What is this strange curiosity I see for Miranda?"

Tarrin looked at her. "I really have no idea," he replied.

"She is quite cute. I'm not sure how you'd feel sharing your bed with someone covered in fur."

"Allia!" Tarrin said in shock. "I don't feel *that* way about her!"

"You certainly feel something."

"I don't know what it is," he said. "I do like her, but something about her...*sings* to me. It's not romantic. I don't know what it is. I think of her as a friend, nothing more."

"She certainly seems to like you."

"I hope so," he replied. "I talked to Dar yesterday," he mentioned. "I think he's starting to get interested in Tiella."

"He needs a girlfriend," she said approvingly. "Tiella is a good woman."

"She'll be over here in a few days."

"I know. How have you fared without Jesmind?"

Tarrin gave her a strong look. "I guess I don't think about it," he said. "For some weird reason, I miss her."

"She meant alot to you, my brother," she told him. "I think that if your circumstances had been better, you would be married to her."

Tarrin sighed. "Maybe," he admitted. "She's too stubborn to make a good wife."

"She's just like you. That makes it a good match."

"Well thanks," he said with a snort. "How's class coming?"

"Much better now," she replied. "Yesterday I finally managed to understand the intricacies of weaving in multiple flows. I still need practice, though."

"Kerri can help with that."

"She's too busy with the scrolls."

"She needs to learn how to make time," Tarrin grunted.

"Like you made for me? This really was sweet, *deshida*."

"You're my sister, and you needed some extra attention," he smiled. "Besides, I longed to put my paws all over those places I'm not allowed to touch in company."

Allia laughed. "Don't start with me, brother," she warned with twinkling eyes.

"Maybe I just miss that about Jesmind."

Allia laughed again. "You're worrying me now," she teased.

"Just consider yourself lucky that I'm Were," he grinned, leaning up on his elbows. "If I were human, I'd be too busy staring at your bosom to give you the time of day."

"I get enough of that from the others, brother," she said. "I don't need it from you. What is it about human males that makes it impossible for them to look a woman in the eye?"

"Because there are better things to look at, I suppose," Tarrin shrugged. "Your eyes may be pretty, but to a human, they're not your most appealing attribute."

"Oh? And what would that attribute be?"

Tarrin grinned at her. "It depends on the tastes of the looker," he teased. "I've always been partial to tails. But you don't seem to have one, so I guess I'm left out." Tarrin snaked his tail up off the floor, letting it weave back and forth over his head to catch her attention. "And you can't tell me that Selani don't look."

"Of course we look," she challenged. "We just don't *keep* looking."

"That's no fun."

"Selani courtship is a serious affair," she told him. "Let's stop talking about this, before I start getting bad ideas and no way to carry them out. I'd feel dirty if I took a human for lover."

"No you wouldn't," he teased.

"Maybe not, if it were someone I respected," she admitted. "But I find humans to be...plain. They don't incite my interest."

"No wonder," he said. "What did you think of the teaching?" he asked, referring to the night of learning the basics of Sha'Kar.

"I noticed that it strikes a great resemblance to the Language," she replied. "Its structure is almost identical."

"I noticed. Maybe your people and theirs are distantly related. Some in the Tower think it may be true."

"It is possible," she said. "Our histories begin only about three thousand years ago, and our beginnings say we were a lost people, wandering the wilderness, until the Holy Mother's voice called out and led them into the desert, and into the true lands of peace and prosperity. Perhaps we are distantly related to them. It is possible." She put her chin on her arm. "But I don't think so. They vanished some two thousand years ago, and my people were firmly established before that happened. Had we been cousins, I'm sure there would have been contact and communication."

"Maybe. Perhaps we'll find out someday."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "Tarrin."

"Yes?"

"Have I mentioned lately how much I love you?"

Tarrin smiled. "I don't think you have to, sister," he said, reaching out and taking her slender, four-fingered hand into his huge paw, swallowing it up.

"Some things don't need to be said."

Keritanima was in a foul mood. She woke up after a long two days without enough sleep, and her shoulders throbbed furiously. Even the whisper of her red silk dress over those tender burns, that had blackened her skin and charred away her fur, made it feel like someone was dragging a wood saw over her skin. But in one way, she accepted that pain for what it meant, and what it did for her. They were the Selani brands, and they marked her as the sister in all but blood to a Selani warrior.

They told everyone who looked at them that she *belonged*.

She would gladly suffer that pain for the rest of her life if it meant that she was part of something that wasn't self-destructive. For her entire life, she had always stood outside, looking in through the window to long for what others had. She had wanted a family, but got the Erams. She wanted friends and joy, and got death and sorrow. She wanted happiness and peace, and got conniving, treachery, and murder. For the first time in her life since meeting Miranda, Keritanima felt good about something, felt there was a chance, that there was hope. It had lifted a tremendous weight off of her, a weight that had bogged down her soul for years. She had to keep them hidden, because there was absolutely no way for her to explain or justify them in the character of the Brat Princess, and in a way, that ate at her. She was *proud* of those brands, as proud of them as the Knights were of theirs, and she wanted the entire world to see them. But she had to keep them hidden, to keep up her appearances.

Keritanima's sense of peace only went so far to counter the effects of sleep deprivation and pain. She was in a truly black humor, so black that she stormed out of her rooms without saying a word, and giving no thought, no care, and no consideration to how others perceived it. The other Initiates were accustomed to Keritanima, so the word went out quickly that she had a look on her face that was worse than usual, and the hallways quickly depopulated before her.

Miranda watched her go, leaning up against the doorframe with Binter and Sisska behind her, a slight smile on her face. "My, that was abrupt," she mused. "It looks like you're in for an interesting day, Binter."

"So it seems, Miranda," he agreed in his deep voice. "I should bring a broom. She is likely to become violent by lunchtime."

Miranda chuckled. "May be," she agreed. "Binter, a boon of you."

"Yes?"

She reached into her bodice and withdrew a small note. "Take this to Jervis' office," she asked. "It shouldn't be too far out of your way, and I know you have little to do while her Highness is in class."

"I will deliver it after her Highness is in class," he promised.

"Enjoy," she told him with a straight face.

"Courage, my mate," Sisska said in a totally serious voice. Vendari humor tended to be subtle.

"I would rather battle an *oni* with my arms chopped off," he said soberly, then he went past Miranda and stalked out into the hallways behind the High Princess, to be nearby should she need assistance.

"I think this will be an eventful day," Sisska mused as they watched him go.

"Yes, I do believe that you're right," Miranda agreed. She looked back over her shoulder, and the five scrolls resting on the table. "A very eventful day indeed."

That day created a routine of sorts that became Tarrin's daily activity for the next month. The morning would be spent with the Council, as they and the Lorefinders continued to experiment and study, observing Tarrin's powers and trying to find a way to bring them back under control. The going was slow, because every attempt to create a weave strong enough to perform the task came up short, and the Lorefinders had to teach those weaves to the Council before each use, since only the most powerful of the *katzh-dashi* had a chance of containing Tarrin's raw power. It was exhausting for Tarrin, a mixture of effort, fear, and anxiety amplified by continued close contact with people that he didn't like. Of the Council, the only one he truly could say he liked was Koran Dar. The others all struck at him on a subconscious level that made him distrust them.

After lunch, he spent time reading in the library. Lilenne proved to be a wonderful librarian of sorts, and she always found for him books that were very interesting and also quite entertaining. She gave him books on High Sorcery and other types of Sorcerer's weaving, and that allowed him to understand how magic worked when it involved all seven Spheres. What his subconscious mind could grasp and use immediately, his conscious mind was slowly starting to comprehend. Though he couldn't practice, Tarrin learned a great deal about Sorcery through those books, for they taught which Spheres were used for which weaves, and explained the effects in some detail. If he ever tried to use them, it would only be puzzling out the magical strengths of the individual flows when they were woven

together into completed spells. All of the Sorcerer's most common weaves were taught in those books, the same books that Initiates from higher grades were forced to read in conjunction with their organized classes. Weaves like solid air, to move things, warming the air, conjuring forth fire and lightning offensively, creating light, raising the earth, creating sound where none existed, controlling water, melding one element into another so as to weaken the first, like introducing water into rock to turn it to mud, affecting temperature in objects to make them burn, or cause them to freeze, generating barriers of both physical and magical natures, even the basics of how to raise Wards, and a very brief introduction to the conjuring of Elementals. The fundamentals of Illusion were covered, how they were mixtures of Air, Fire, Divine Power, and Water, and the tremendous advantages of them were explained in detail in a book devoted completely to the subject. Illusions were limited only by the imagination of the weaver and the amount of power he could put into it. The larger and more intricate the illusion, the more power it required, and separate weaves had to be made to simulate sounds and smells and things like heat from illusory fire. Tarrin absorbed it all, and he found himself getting sincerely interested in the idea of learning how to do all those things.

But his power was dwarfed by Keritanima's astronomical advancement. She rose three steps through the Initiate in one short month, awing and dazzling her teachers and *katzh-dashi* alike with her utter understanding and almost instinctive ability to learn, duplicate, and alter weaves. In a shockingly short time, Keritanima could perform weaves that full *katzh-dashi* had trouble weaving together, and do it with a precision that made them think she'd been weaving spells since birth.

The afternoon and evening was spent with Allia and Keritanima. Miranda had scribed the scrolls into a book, and then the scrolls were put back in the courtyard. And they began to learn. It went much faster than any of them expected, because the language of the Sha'Kar bore a very striking similarity to the Selani tongue. Its structure was identical, and many of the words were hauntingly familiar, as if they had been extracted from the same root word. They all learned quickly, through their own unique advantages. Keritanima, because of her eidectic memory. Tarrin, because he had an innate aptitude for learning languages. Allia, because the language she was trying to learn was so similar to her native tongue. But what they didn't

count on was Miranda. She managed to learn it herself, through her scribing and being present when the others practiced. They all agreed that their accents had to be atrocious, but they had managed to gain a proficiency with it.

But it was incomplete. Without an alphabet, it really didn't do them much good in trying to unravel the mystery of the spidery Sha'Kar script. None of the books had that information in them, and it forced Keritanima to begin making preparations to do what nobody had done in a thousand years...break the code of the Sha'Kar writing. She would have a distinct advantage over every other person who attempted it, because she could *speak* the language, and would be able to recognize words if she could puzzle out their letters. The written form they had used to learn it was phoneticized, Sha'Kar words written using the letters of the Common tongue's alphabet, so the learner could pick up pronunciation and inflection correctly. There was no relationship between the two's written languages, and that was why it wasn't going to be easy.

Tarrin made use of his ability to leave the grounds, and visited his family every four days. He was always careful to take only Dolanna, and he always left them in various places around the city while he went to go see his family. They had decided to take Anrak up on his offer, and spend the winter in Ungardt lands. Anrak was waiting for a break in the stormy early winter, trying for a few clear days that would let him get up to Tykarthian ports before the next storm, and port-hop his way home.

It was the day of that departure that Tarrin broke his routine and slipped out of the Tower in the pre-dawn hours, then ghosted his way through snowbound streets in Suld. They planned to leave on the highest tide, taking advantage of a clearing of the usually cloudy skies and constant mixture of rain and snow that made Suld famous for bad winters. It had been cold enough to make it snow for the last five days, and it had managed to pile up to impressive levels along the sides of the streets.

By the time he reached the house, they were already packed and waiting on some of Tomas' men to pack their belongings on a sled. Jenna looked miserable in her heavy furs and cloak, with a red nose and eyes that told him she'd been crying. Jenna and Janette had become quite close, and now they were separating. Tarrin hugged his mother and father, then picked up

Jenna and held her in his arm as he greeted Tomas and Janine. Janette was still in bed, for they didn't want to wake her up and put her through the goodbyes. She had said her goodbyes before bed the night before.

"Looks like this is it," Tarrin told his mother.

She nodded. "It'll be good to visit home," she said. "I was worried that Jenna wouldn't be able to see her birthright."

"I'm going to be cold," Eron complained.

"Live with it," Elke told her husband. "You agreed to it."

He chuckled ruefully. "I know, but I'll still be cold."

"When are you planning on coming back?" Tarrin asked.

"Next fall," she replied. "I think we'll go back to Aldreth. It was nice to live in Suld, but I miss the village life."

"There are a number of villages on the coast, mother."

"I know, but Aldreth is our home. I don't think your father and I would really feel comfortable in some other village."

"No, I won't," Eron agreed. "Aldreth is the place for us, son. It took leaving it to really ram that home."

"At least I'll know where to go when all this is over," he said with a smile.

"We're ready to go!" Tomas called from the sled.

"Well, this is it," Elke said, embracing her son. "You take care of yourself. And write to us."

"I'll try," he promised, hugging her back. He turned and embraced his father, clapping him on the back. "You stay warm."

"I'll be spending the winter by the fire," he laughed. "You just stay well."

"I will." He cuddled Jenna close, then tapped her on the nose. "You stay out of trouble, stripling," he told her. "Mind our parents. And no using Sorcery on your cousins!"

"I'll be careful, I promise," she said with total insincerity. Jenna had learned some simple Mind weaves, especially one that made people take her suggestions as good ideas, and try to carry them out. That had already gotten her spanked about five times. A willful teen with the power to make others do what she wanted was a very bad combination.

"I mean it," he warned. "If mother and father tell me you're tampering, I'll come up there and kick your butt."

"They won't, I promise," she said with a grin.

Tarrin carried Jenna just a little ways off from their parents, to look at the sled. He set her down and looked at her for a long moment. Jenna, his sister. She was already blossoming into a lovely young woman, and she had a maturity to match her skills with her magical power. But she was also a child, and a child that Tarrin trusted. He and Jenna had always been close, even though they did fight as often as other siblings. She was leaving, and with his life ahead of him uncertain, she was a good friend to have. "Jenna, I want you to do something for me."

"What, Tarrin?" she asked.

He reached under his red Initiate shirt and pulled out a small wooden box. "I want you to take care of this for me," he said. "It has some things in it I've owned for a long time, interesting little things I found in the forest. I don't know where I'm going to be this time next year, and I really don't want to lose these. Would you take care of them for me?"

"Of course I will," she promised, taking the box. "May I?"

"Go ahead," he said, and she opened the box. "Wow, Tarrin, these are really neat," she said, holding up the gossamer wing. "What kind of insect owned this?"

"I have no idea," he said. "That's why I've kept it. Someday, maybe I'll find out."

"Who knows?" she said, putting it back in and closing the box. She slipped it into a small pack that probably held some of her personal belongings. "I'll take good care of it, Tarrin," she promised. "It'll be just fine."

"I hope so, brat," he said with a teasing smile, picking her back up again and whirling her around, making her giggle, then carrying her back over to his parents.

"Why didn't you bring Allia, Tarrin? I wanted to say goodbye," Elke complained when they returned.

"She's asleep, and she needs to sleep," he replied calmly. "I'll tell her for you, mother. Now you have to go, before Grandfather tans your backside for making him miss the tide."

After one more round of kisses and hugs, he watched his precious family pile into the sled, and with Tomas, start off for the harbor. Janine, with a heavy robe around her to ward off the chill, stood on the porch beside him, watching them go. "They'll be alright, Tarrin," she assured him.

"I know," he sighed. "Mother and father have always made their own luck, Janine. Now that they're out of the line of fire, they'll be just fine. I'm more worried about me."

"You have time to come in for some breakfast? I'll have Deris make you some pancakes."

"No, this wasn't a sanctioned visit, Janine," he told her. "I'm going to get in trouble for this as it is. I have to get back. I just wanted to be here to say goodbye."

Janine patted him on the arm. "A year isn't all that long, Tarrin. You'll probably be there to welcome them back where they call home."

"I hope so, Janine," he said soberly. "I really hope so."

The game of Beri Bally Bell that Miranda and Jervis cooked up had taken time to develop. But it was the nature of spies and other perpetrators of intrigue to have a great deal of patience. Splitting time between her scribing duty and her planning, Miranda had managed to work out most of the details with her rabbit Wikuni counterpart in just a few days. The real time came from pulling back their people and preparing them for the mission at hand. The sudden pullback of spies on the grounds and in the city had confused Ahiriya, but it did not stop her from her aggressive blockade of all useful information, nor did it stop her hunters from trying to

root out and destroy the agents the Wikuni pair had laced through the Tower, Court, or among the parlors of the noble houses.

It began later that day, when a certain agent belonging to Jervis was spotted by a Royal guard slipping quietly out of the office of Duncan, the Keeper's personal secretary. Inspection of the office had revealed several drawers and cabinets had been opened and rifled, drawers and cabinets that held sensitive information. This incensed Ahiriya, and she sent out her people to totally disrupt all operations in the Tower.

She had taken the bait.

Miranda had seemed rather smug that afternoon, as she sat quietly on a stone bench in the courtyard as Keritanima read from the book, teaching Tarrin and Allia more and more words from the Sha'Kar tongue. She had a needlework hoop in her lap, and her small needle flashed rhythmically back and forth as her precise hands created an intricate geometric pattern in one of Keritanima's frilly dresses. Keritanima, ever in tune with the subtleties of her oldest friend's moods, seemed irritated by Miranda the entire session. By the time the sun began to creep behind the living wall forming the boundary of the hidden courtyard, she looked almost completely exasperated.

The courtyard itself had become one of the Tower's great mysteries to Ahiriya and many others. They *knew* that Tarrin, Allia, and Keritanima disappeared into the maze for hours at a time. They *knew* that they had to be doing *something* in there for such a long period of time every day. Scouts, trailers, even attempts to follow them from the tops of the Tower all failed, however, because Tarrin and Allia knew how to cover signs of their passage, and the magic surrounding the courtyard hid it from probing eyes. People sent in to follow the trio were always left lost, wandering the maze for hours themselves, just to try to find the way out. The maze was huge, and it was very deceptive. Only a handful of people on the grounds knew their way along every twist and turn. The only ones that weren't Tarrin, Keritanima, Allia, or Miranda happened to be the four gardeners that kept the hedgerow walls neat and trimmed. And they swore up and down repeatedly that there was no courtyard within the maze, and there was nowhere other than a walkway itself where the three could go. It drove Ahiriya crazy, and it also stretched Keritanima's little game very thin.

The other thing had been the brands. Keritanima had always been very careful never to let others see them, but they had finally been seen that morning. Tarrin hadn't been the only one to leave early. She had visited the baths, and had the bad luck of crossing paths with a patrol of guards wearing nothing but a towel. The brands were in plain sight, for her fur wouldn't grow back over them, and she had little doubt that Jervis would have a report on his desk concerning them by morning. They had already talked it out, and she wasn't that worried about it. "We're starting to run out of time," she told them calmly after debating the issue. "They're moving quickly, and so are we. If I have to reveal myself, then so be it, because I have no intention of going back."

And that was that.

"And what are you so happy about?" Keritanima finally exploded at Miranda when they finished at sunset.

"Oh, nothing," she replied with a mild smile. "I've been working out a little deal with Jervis. It should be going off any minute now."

"You did *what*?" she gasped.

"Oh, come now, Highness, it's not like I haven't gone behind your back before," she said with a cheeky grin. "Jervis and I had an idea, and we decided to go with it. We should have the upper hand in the Tower and the city by morning."

"And what marvelous plan is this?"

"Oh, one of Jervis' men sacked Duncan's office," she said, biting the thread in two. "That made Ahiriya angry, and she overreacted, as usual. We're already in place to make her pay for it."

Keritanima blinked, and then she laughed. "Miranda! That's so *blunt*!"

"Yes, it was," she smiled. "Sometimes brute force does have advantages."

She laughed again. "I think I can live with Ahiriya's displeasure," she grinned.

"What difference does that make to us?" Allia asked.

"When Ahiriya goes to get Jervis' men for the break-in, Miranda's men will be there to get the drop on them," Keritanima explained. "They'll never expect Miranda to put a hand in, because what goes on between Jervis and Ahiriya isn't supposed to concern her. There will probably be open fighting in the halls of the Tower."

"Possibly," Miranda admitted. "Even if the Keeper throws most of our people out, there won't be many of Ahiriya's people left to interfere. In a scenario of smaller numbers, we have the advantage. Ahiriya has more territory to defend and fewer people to do it with. That gives us the advantage."

"I sometimes think that war is less complicated than this game you play, sister," Allia said. "It is fighting without fighting."

"The real fighting is probably going on right now, sister," Keritanima told her. "By morning, we'll see who came out on top."

"It will be us," Miranda said confidently. "I estimate we'll have twice the people that Ahiriya will have left, and the attack will put her out of sorts. Between Jervis and myself, she won't be able to keep us away from the information that we want for very long."

"That is very clever, Miranda," Keritanima said approvingly. "I think I'll have to kiss Jervis soundly on the lips after this. He actually came in handy."

"Jervis is a worthy adversary, Highness," Miranda said mildly.

"I know," she replied, then she gave Miranda a strange look. "Exactly when did I lose control of things here?"

"When you started learning Sorcery," Miranda replied with a cheeky smile. "You've been neglecting your operations, because you're so wrapped up in your training. It's a good thing I noticed it, and stepped in to pick things back up."

"I did, didn't I?" she said ruefully, scrubbing the back of her head with her clawed fingers. "That was very unprofessional of me."

"We're all entitled to the occasional mistake, Highness," Miranda told her with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Well, there is one thing for certain," Allia said. "It will make things nervous."

"That's true," Keritanima agreed. "If Miranda's right, it won't take us long to find out what they want from us. I can get that information from Erick, because I *know* he has it. And with as much as I've learned, we may be able to make it if we run."

"Only if we have reason to run," Allia said.

"True, but I have the feeling that we will," Keritanima agreed. "We'd better get back to our rooms. With the impending chaos coming, we'd best be barred in and safe."

"Yes," Allia agreed. "If there is going to be fighting, as you suspect, then we should keep ourselves clear of it." She stood up. "Let us sneak back in one by one. If there is a lot of tension out there, let us not enhance it with our sneaking about."

"Good idea," Keritanima agreed. "Go on, Miranda. I know you want to go see Jervis and see how things are going."

"Yes, the thought did cross my mind," she smiled, placing her needlepoint in a shoulder satchel, then sauntering out calmly.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Kerri," Tarrin said, standing up, hunching over, and then flowing into his cat form. "I'll sneak out the back," he added in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"See you tonight, my brother," Allia said, and he turned and wormed through a small hole in one of the hedges, following a path his cat's paws had tread a hundred times before.

Tarrin had done it many times before, and had never had any trouble. Because they ignored the many cats on the grounds, he was able to pick his way over to the North Tower with very little problem. But this time, he was met by the slim, pretty Sorceress, Jula. She was standing in his room, arms crossed, and she was staring at the door when it opened. "Jula," he said in some surprise. "What are you doing in here?"

"And what were *you* doing off the grounds?" she demanded. "I saw you in the streets of Suld this morning! They didn't give you permission to leave!"

"I had to see my parents," he replied calmly, stepping in and closing the door. "It was important."

"Tarrin, that Ward is there for your protection more than it's there to stop you from leaving," she said in exasperation. "It stops whoever is sending things after you from getting them onto the grounds."

"Like it stopped that Doomwalker?" he asked, stepping past her, towards the closet. She turned to keep her eyes on him, but he didn't pay her very much attention.

"How Jegojah got onto the grounds is something they're still trying to figure out," she said to him bluntly. "Doomwalkers are very powerful, Tarrin. There's a good chance it was able to breach the Ward with its own magical power."

Tarrin stopped. "How did you know its name?" he demanded.

He turned around, but it was too late. Little Jula, kind Jula who had braided his hair, had healed his father, had been there for his family, had been his friend, one of the few Sorcerers that Tarrin would trust enough to put his back towards, snapped a black metal collar around his neck. The very same collar that had been used on Jesmind. The instant that metal touched him, he felt its alien magic assault his mind, sweeping through it in a black wave of numbness. Tarrin's mind instantly boiled with nameless fury, and his eyes ignited from within with the unholy radiance that betrayed his anger. That rage attacked that mind-numbing magic, pushing at it, grabbing it and trying to tear it asunder, but the raw power of the attack was overwhelming, and the magic had specifically been created to subdue one of his kind. In sudden desperation, the Cat reached out, touching the Weave, but for the first time, the magic was not there to respond to his call. With a strangled cry, his claws snapped out and he lurched at that pretty face, a face etched in stone as it calmly watched the Were-cat struggle against the magic trying to wrest control of his mind.

But if he made it or not, he had no idea. His consciousness lost its footing, and he felt himself spiralling into a vast prison of black emptiness,

and he knew no more.

He had been defeated.

Jula swallowed, putting a hand to the pit of her stomach. He almost got her. Had he had one more step, those claws would have found her, and she would have not lived to see if it would work. Tarrin had stopped when he was but a finger's width from her throat, and then slowly stood upright, his face losing its mask of rage, and his eyes draining of that curious inner radiance that marked his anger. He was now docile, and suppliant to commands.

"Tarrin," she called calmly.

His ears picked up, and he looked at her.

"You will accept orders only from me. Do you understand?" He nodded mindlessly. "Follow me. Speak to no one as we walk."

"Tarrin do," his voice replied, but there was nothing in it that even hinted that the voice was alive.

It was a night of chaos, punctuated by shouting, and the occasional clashing of sword on sword. At first, it was very uncommon and erratic, but then it became so obvious that the Keeper was forced to mobilize the Tower Guard to put a stop to the violence. But even that only contained it, for the men that worked for Ahiriya were spurred on by their mistress, to seek out and eliminate the infestation of opposing agents. But what Ahiriya didn't understand until it was too late was that that was *exactly* what her counterparts wanted her to do.

It got so crazy that Allia didn't make it back to her own room. She stopped at Keritanima's room first to pick up a book she had left there, and Binter had barred her in after a fight started down at the end of the hall. The massive Vendari absolutely refused to open the door after that. With Binter guarding one door and Sisska guarding the other, the life of the Princess, her maid, and her guest were made very secure, but there was no attempt to get at them.

Allia slept fitfully that night, as the occasional sound of shouting disturbed her sleep, and also the nagging feeling that something was not right. As soon as Binter ventured into the hallway and proclaimed it safe, Allia was out of Keritania's room, and she returned to the coupled rooms that were hers and Tarrin's.

The first indication that something was not right was that Tarrin's door was unlocked. She entered his room, and found everything neat and clean and untouched. The bed had not been slept in--that, or Tarrin had made it so it looked *exactly* the same as it did the day before. That, she doubted. Tarrin favored sleeping in his cat form, if only to avoid having to make the bed, and that always disturbed the blankets. His staff was standing in the corner, and the books Lilenne had suggested to him were still sitting on the small table in the corner. That too was not normal. Lilenne demanded that the books be returned to the library the first thing every morning, so he had to drop them off before going to his appointments where they studied his power.

Concerned, Allia left the room and quickly hurried over to the main Tower. Things were tense, as large numbers of guards roamed the passageways, and Sorcerers, Initiates, and Novices alike moved around in a great deal of confusion and uncertainty. *Everyone* knew that something very strange had happened the night before, and it involved open fighting in the hallways of the Tower. But Allia didn't concern herself with others, she was there for only one reason, and that was to find her brother. She checked the three places that he may be in the main Tower, the kitchens, the dining hall, and the baths, but he was not there. The kitchen staff had not seen him, and neither had the Novices who tended the baths.

Fear beginning to creep into her, Allia returned to the North Tower and immediately sought out the two people that may have seen him. She found Dar first, as he was scurrying towards the exit to go to the main Tower for breakfast. "Allia, good morning," he said gently to her as she approached.

"Have you seen Tarrin this morning, friend Dar?" she asked immediately.

"No, I haven't," he replied. "We were going to play some chess after class. Why, what's wrong? Did he get caught up in that strange craziness last night?"

"I do not know," she said grimly. "Tarrin is not here. He would have told me if he was going somewhere."

"Why don't you go ask Keritanima, and I'll go ask Tiella," he replied. "I was going to meet her for breakfast."

"Yes, I was looking for her," she said. "Come back to Keritanima's room with your answer."

"Alright," he said, reaching out and patting her on the shoulder and giving her a reassuring smile. "He probably just wandered off. You know how he is."

"I hope so, friend Dar," she sighed.

When she returned to Keritanima's room, she was forced to pull Keritanima aside as a small ferret Wikuni chatted with Miranda. "Sister, Tarrin didn't go back to his room last night," she whispered to her in Selani. "His bed was untouched, and now I can't find him anywhere on the grounds."

"What?" Keritanima demanded, a bit too loudly. "You're sure?"

Allia nodded. "He isn't anywhere he would usually be."

"If he went out to watch the fireworks last night--" she began, then she snorted. "Come on, let's go see if he *was* in his room last night," she said, grabbing Allia's arm and pulling her towards the door.

Tarrin's room wasn't that far away from Keritanima's, so it only took them a moment to get there. With the immense Binter in tow behind them, Keritanima and Allia re-entered the room. Keritanima immediately closed her eyes and knelt on the floor, putting her black button nose close to the stone. "Tarrin *was* here last night," she said. "But he wasn't alone. There's a human scent here, one I don't know. It's female. She was here a while, but Tarrin wasn't. Bah," she snorted, standing up. "I'm not about to crawl around on the floor like a bloodhound." She raised a hand, and Allia felt her touch the Weave. A faint glow suddenly sprang into being on the floor, an erratic, splotchy trail of sorts that entered the room, moved towards the closet, then turned towards the center of the room. Then it merged back into the glow by the door. "That's Tarrin's scent," she said. "Now, let's follow it and see where it goes."

"Clever," Allia said. "You must teach me that weave."

"It's something I thought up a few days ago," she shrugged.

The glowing trail wasn't completely illuminated. As Keritanima walked along, the trail in front of her appeared, and the trail behind them winked out. They followed the trail through the North Tower and out onto the grounds, where the trail began to break up on the cold, frost-covered ground. Keritanima depended on Allia's sharp eyes to pick out the faint, weak glow among the frosted blades of grass, and they slowly tracked the trail across the grounds.

It ended at the main gate, where a group of guards stood vigil beside four or five covered forms. They eyed the pair of Initiates with hostility as they approached. Tarrin's scent trail went right through the gate, right across the Ward, to disappear into the streets beyond.

"What happened here?" Keritanima demanded.

"The same that happened on the grounds last night," one guard replied. "Enemy agents attacked last night, and they killed the guards to get onto the grounds."

"Posh," Keritanima snapped, coming over and lifting one of the blankets. The man had been young, and his chest had been caved in as if some Giant had grabbed him in his massive hand and squeezed the life out of him. That was not a wound caused by any weapon she had ever seen. "Unless the agents all joined hands and jumped up and down on his chest, I don't see how they accomplished *this*."

"They had to have had a mage with them," another demanded. "One of them was burned, and another was frozen solid."

"Arcane magic doesn't *work* on the grounds, blockhead!" Keritanima snapped at him. "This was Sorcery!"

"You're daft, woman!" the guard snapped back. "What would a *katzh-dashi* be doing attacking his own guards?"

"Idiots," Keritanima growled. "Allia, I'm going to follow the trail. I want you and Binter to go over to the far side of the grounds, to my Marines. Binter, I want you to order them to fall in and prepare for possible action. If Tarrin didn't leave by choice, and whoever made him leave still

has him, we'll make them pay in blood for it. If Tarrin was taken by a Sorcerer, then we may *need* some serious reinforcements."

"I will not leave you undefended, Highness," the massive Vendari said bluntly.

"You have to, Binter," she replied. "I don't have time to go get Miranda, and I need my men to be ready *now*."

"I will go get Miranda," Allia said. "Binter will not leave you unguarded, sister. It goes against his honor."

Binter nodded simply. No more needed to be said.

"I will go get Miranda, and have her prepare your men," Allia promised.

"Alright. I'll meet you on the Knights' training field. Have Miranda form my men up there. If it does come down to a fight, I'd like to invite the Knights to join it."

"I will," she promised. She reached out and gave her sister a quick embrace, then left them and ran on swift feet back towards the North Tower.

Miranda was still talking to the ferret Wikuni when Allia entered, and she was not about to be patient. She pushed the slim male aside, his black furred face looking like a mask over his eyes, and put herself firmly in front of the cute little mink Wikuni. "Keritanima is following Tarrin's trail off the grounds," she announced. "She bade me to come to you and have you form up her Marines on the training grounds of the Knights."

"What?" Miranda challenged.

"We do not know if Tarrin left voluntarily. If he did not, then Keritanima wants to be ready to sally out and reclaim him, by force if necessary."

"Slow down," Miranda said. "What happened?"

"There was another scent in Tarrin's room, a female that Keritanima does not know. I believe she suspects that this female either lured Tarrin out, or forced him. The trail leaves the Tower grounds. We found several dead guards at the gate where they left, and they were all killed by Sorcery."

"That's not Tarrin's style," Miranda mused. "Tarrin would have simply killed them hand to hand. Maybe it was Dolanna?"

Allia shook her head. "Keritanima has met Dolanna. She would know Dolanna's scent."

"You're right," she said, tapping her little pink nose absently. "I'll go ready the Marines. Allia, maybe this is something that the Council should know. They may have an agenda for Tarrin, but that means that they need him alive. They'll help."

"I, do not know how to contact them," Allia said helplessly.

"Then go find Dolanna," she suggested. "If there's one *katzh-dashi* you can trust, it will be her."

"I will," she said. "I know where Dolanna's room is."

With a living mountain trailing behind her, intimidating everything and everyone out of her way, Keritanima made good time along the slush-covered streets of Suld, following a very faint trail that glowed on the cobblestones before her. The traffic on the streets had partially muffled the weave she was using, which translated a scent's presence into visible light. The weaker the scent, the weaker the glow, and Tarrin's scent had been partially destroyed by the passage of people, wagons, and animals. But it was enough for her to slowly, painstakingly follow the fragmented trail, finding where it started again every time it vanished, slowly working them across the city.

It took nearly an hour, and Keritanima attracted a good deal of attention from the pedestrians. Mainly because she would not get out of anyone's way. When she had Binter overturn the cart of a merchant that angrily demanded she get out of the middle of the street, it caused more than a few of the curious to follow her at a discreet distance. The slender little Wikuni and her awesome bodyguard turned into the head of an informal procession that crept across the city streets of Suld, following something so strange that none of the followers had the faintest idea what she was doing. But Keritanima paid them no mind. She knew that this was it. It was over. And she didn't care.

There was no way she was going to be able to explain *this*. Keritanima arguing logically with guards, issuing sharp commands, possibly even leading her troops, these were *not* things of which the Brat was capable. But the Brat was only a figment of her imagination, where Tarrin was a very real part of her life, and he may *need* her. He had been so kind to her, being her friend, taking her in, giving her a feeling of peace and security that she had never felt before. She loved him, deeply, and the very thought that someone may have kidnapped him, and that they may be hurting him, raised an immense towering fury in her that made her want to smash the life out of the people with her bare hands. The Brat had been created to protect her, and right now, someone else needed her protection more.

Keritanima followed the trail into a courtyard, across some grass, over a waist-high iron fence, and then into a building. She looked up to see where she was, and almost had a heart attack.

The trail entered one of the servant's entrances to the Cathedral of Karas.

"Impossible!" she gasped. "Impossible!"

"What is this place, Highness?" Binter asked.

"It's the Cathedral of Karas!" she said in dismay. "Why *here*?"

"Why not?"

She glared at him, then stepped back and raised her hands. She wove together a very powerful weave, a weave she wasn't supposed to know, and sent a magical wave of probing Mind flows through the cathedral. The weave was designed to seek out conscious minds, to locate and count the number of sentient beings in an area. Mind weaves usually didn't affect members of other races, but this one didn't *affect* the mind, it simply registered the presence of active sentience. The Weave could also disseminate between different types of sentience, which allowed the user to discern if the people touched by the weave were of the same race.

Keritanima counted nearly six hundred people either in the cathedral, or far below it. Only three of those contacts registered to her as normal, meaning that those were Wikuni. The rest of them were not Wikuni. Keritanima realized with some dismay that she couldn't tell if one of them was Tarrin.

Changing tactics, she sent another weave of a similar type out, searching for *shaerams*. There couldn't be that many of *those* in there. Every *shaeram* had a tiny touch of the Goddess in them, for they were her holy symbol, and that resonance would respond to her magical probing.

Again, she was dismayed. There were *sixteen shaerams* either inside or underneath the cathedral. Keritanima had no idea if they were being worn, or simply being kept in drawers, and she had no idea which was Tarrin's.

She smacked herself. How stupid! Searching for *shaerams* to locate the touch of the Goddess was fine, but there was a way she could search for him using the same technique that would *prove* it was him!

Tarrin had the holy symbol of Fara'Nae branded to his shoulder, and it had just as much magical presence as a *shaeram*!

Victory! The holy energies of Fara'Nae's symbol reacted to her searching weaves of Divine energy, searching out Divine emanations of a specific type, that matched the very same emanations that came from the brand on her own shoulder. Tarrin was the *only* one that had that peculiar signature, unless they were holding a Selani.

Tarrin was almost two hundred feet below the cathedral.

Subterranean passages? What secrets did the cathedral hold that weren't on her plans?

"Binter," she said soberly.

"You found him, Highness?"

She nodded. "He's *underneath* the cathedral. He's not moving."

"Then let us go get him."

"No," Keritanima said. "We have no idea what we're getting into. Let's come back in force. I'm not going to challenge a cathedral full of priests unless I have an army at my back."

"Wise," he agreed.

Allia began to move with more and more urgency. She *knew* that something was very wrong. Her brother was in danger. She could *feel* it.

Allia was Selani, and Selani trusted those gut feelings alot more than humans did. That she *believed* that Tarrin was in danger was enough for her, and it caused her heart to race and her feet to move faster and faster.

Tarrin wouldn't leave without letting her know. He did occasionally wander off to roam the grounds, but that was the grounds. He would never leave the grounds without telling her. She mulled it over again and again, and every time she did, she walked faster and faster. By the time she was out the door, she was running. By the time she reached the main Tower, she was pushing people out of her way. She almost overshot Dolanna's door, sliding on the stone and coming back to it to knock with desperate urgency on the polished wood. There was no answer, so she knocked again, and again, and continued to knock until the door swung open abruptly.

Dolanna looked horrible. Her eyes were red, as was her nose, and she had a haunted look on her face that made Allia's blood run cold. Her blue dress was wrinkled and unkempt, and her dark hair was tangled and unattended. "Mistress Dolanna!" Allia said in shock. "Whatever happened to you?"

"It is a long story," she said in a hollow voice. "What do you need, Allia?"

"Tarrin is missing, Dolanna!" she blurted. "He did not come back to his room last night!"

"Perhaps that is for the best," Dolanna said in a weary voice.

"Dolanna!" Allia gasped. "He is *gone*! Keritanima tracked him leaving the grounds, and she found another scent in his room. We fear he was abducted!"

That made her blink. She pulled the Selani into the room and closed the door. "Abducted? Oh, dear!"

"What is it?"

"Allia, you have no idea what is going on!" she said, her eyes widening in comprehending horror. "They must have used the collar on him!"

"Mistress, slow down," Allia said, grabbing her by the arms. "What is going on?"

"Jesmind came to me before she left, and asked me to find out what was going on," she said. "I have been looking into things. Last night, I came across a horrifying discovery, something that has made me doubt the integrity of my own order. It is awful, young one. The Council has become monsters!"

"Dolanna!" Allia said, shaking her. "*Tell me what is going on!*"

She put her hands on Allia's shoulders. "Allia, Tarrin was not attacked by Jesmind on accident," she said with haunted eyes. "The *Council* had Jesmind captured, and they set her loose on him on purpose!"

Allia stared at her in shock.

"The Council wanted him to be non-human, so they captured a lycanthrope, the first one they could find, which was Jesmind. They had her infect him with her condition. They had a device left over from the time of the Ancients, a collar that controlled Were-kin. They used it on Jesmind, and made her attack Tarrin."

"You mean the *katzh-dashi* did that to him deliberately?" Allia said breathlessly.

Dolanna nodded. "Two days ago, that collar was stolen from the vaults," she said. "The Council kept it quiet, but they've been trying to find out who did it. This activity is what allowed me to find out the truth." She stared directly into Allia's eyes. "If Tarrin is missing, then whoever stole that collar has used it on *him*, and he has no defense against it. It enslaves a Were-kin's will." She pushed the Selani away, for her grip was starting to draw blood on Dolanna's arms. "Last night, there was some kind of war between two shadow groups in the hallways. The thief probably used that to cover Tarrin's capture."

"Holy Mother!" Allia gasped. "Miranda's plan backfired on us!" She grabbed Dolanna by the arm. "We must go see the Council!" she said hysterically. "Keritanima is finding Tarrin now, and we must be ready to take him back! By combat if necessary!"

"I will *not* go to the Council!" Dolanna said adamantly. "They *did* this to him, Allia! I will *not* face them! If I were to come face to face with them right now, I would try to kill them! All of Tarrin's pain, all of his suffering, *they caused all of it!* You did not see the worst of it, Allia, when he first

changed--" she stopped, her voice breaking. "He has come very far, but even now he feels the pain, and lives in fear of what he has become. And they sit there and watch him suffer day after day as they study him, *knowing* what they have done to him!"

The impact, the horrible truth of those words, they crashed on Allia like the most powerful sandstorm, and she reeled back from it. They destroyed her brother's life, and they sat there and studied him day after day, saying nothing, yet seeing their handiwork every time his tail moved. That they did it willingly, actively capturing Jesmind to infect him, it declared their evil and dishonor plainly. Dolanna was right. Allia would not be able to face the Council, else she would try to tear their faces from their heads.

"But we *must* have help!" Allia said helplessly. "If Tarrin is being held against his will, we may have to fight, and we may need the Sorcerers' magic! Where do we go?"

"Tarrin has friends among the *katzh-dashi*, Allia, more than he knows," Dolanna told her. "They will come to his aid. But right now, your best help stands with the Knights. He is one of them, as are you. Go to Darvon, go to him and tell him what happened. The entire order of the Knights will rise up behind you, and that is a force that no one in all of the West would want to face. If Keritanima can find him, the Knights will be the ones to get him back. I will go and speak to those who support Tarrin, and convince them to come and help."

"Yes, but are you safe walking the halls, Dolanna? If you know this horrible secret--"

"They do not know that I know, young one, not yet," she assured her. "The one who told me was killed during the night in the fighting. I will be very safe."

"I will send Faalken to you, Dolanna," Allia said decisively. "Do not leave until he gets here."

"I, I thank you," she smiled. "I would feel much better with my old friend standing vigil for me. I no longer feel safe walking the halls of the Tower."

"You are my brother's friend, and that makes you mine as well," Allia told her with a gentle pat on the arm. "You stay here, and Faalken will come

to you. You do not have to face such a burden alone."

The relief in her smile, in her eyes, spoke volumes. "Go now, Allia," she said. "It will take the Knights time to mobilize. If Tarrin is still in the city, or even if he is not, then they will find him."

The sudden arrival of two hundred fully armed, highly disciplined Wikuni Marines at the fringes of the Knights' training field at first caused a bit of a panic among the Knights supervising the cadets. They had no idea why they were there, for the Marines had direct orders to stay away from the Knights. But on the other hand, the famous discipline of their military organization also told the supervising Knights that if *all* of them showed up like that, then they were *ordered* to do it.

But before Darvon arrived on the field and a Knight could go over to the Marine Colonel in charge of the detachment and find out what was going on, Allia was seen running at full speed towards the field. Allia was Selani, and few alive could rival her foot speed. Her silver hair flying out behind her, she skidded onto the field and almost bowled over Ulger, who stood fast and helped catch her from her wild sprint. "Allia, what is the blazes is--"

"Not now!" she said in a strangled tone. "Faalken, go to Dolanna, right now!" she barked in a hysterical tone. "She needs you!"

"Allia, what--"

"*Right now!*" she screamed. "Ulger, I *must* see Darvon! Tarrin's life depends on it!"

"Tarrin? Allia, slow down," he said in a reasonable tone. "What's going on?"

"Tarrin has been kidnapped!" she said in a strangled tone. "Keritanima is out trying to find him now, and she wants us to be ready in force in case we have to fight to reclaim him!" She motioned at the Wikuni quickly assembling at the edges of the field. "She's called out her Marines, and she wants the Knights to stand ready as well!"

"So *that's* why they're here," he said. "Runner, summon Darvon!" Ulger barked harshly to a cadet standing at the edge of the field. "I don't care if

you have to drag him out of the privy, but get him here *now!*"

"Yes, sir!" the cadet said with a salute, then turned and ran back towards the barracks.

"Could the commander of the Royal Marines come forward?" Ulger called to the assembling Marines, as Faalken rushed off towards the main Tower.

The Wikuni that approached was an eight span tall monster of a leopard Wikuni wearing a gold braided rope that attached to the epaulet of his right shoulder and looped under his arm. He was huge, with a large chunk of his right ear missing and a wicked scar puckering the right side of his muzzle. Large amber eyes blazed down at Ulger as he approached, but the man's high discipline caused him to salute Ulger sharply. "Colonel Manx, commander of the third Special Division of the Royal Marines," he greeted.

Ulger saluted as well. "I'm Ulger," he said. "Your Princess ordered you out here?"

He nodded. "The command was conveyed by her maid, but we know it to be a lawful command. She gave us the password."

"Where is she now, Allia?"

"She's in the city, tracking Tarrin with her magic," she replied. "She said she would come back here when she found him."

"Hmm," he said. "You're sure that Tarrin was kidnapped?"

"I cannot guarantee it, but from what I have learned so far, it is a very good bet," she replied. "A magical device that can control Were-kin was stolen from the Tower vaults two days ago, and Dolanna suspects that it was used to spirit Tarrin off the grounds. You know as well as I that there is no way anyone could physically force him to leave."

Darvon approached, and he was plainly not happy. His armor looked a bit dishevelled, and his hair was still damp. "Could this have waited for me to finish dressing, Ulger?" he snapped.

"Lord General, we have a problem," Ulger said. "Tarrin is missing, and Allia thinks that he was taken against his will."

"Oh my," Darvon grunted. "You have proof?"

"Not solid, but I give you my word as a Selani and as a Knight that I am not willingly lying to you, Darvon," she said pleadingly. "Tarrin would *never* just leave without telling me. He is my brother!"

"You do have a point," he agreed. "You two seem to share the same brain. He wouldn't leave without telling you."

"Keritanima is looking for him now, using magic," she continued. "She had her Marines mobilize in case we must use force to recover him. She hoped that the Knights would assist."

"Assist? Your Marines had best save us some room, Wikuni," Darvon growled. "Tarrin is one of us, and we are all One Under Karas. Ulger!"

"Yes, Lord General?"

"I want every Knight and cadet who can walk assembled on the field in full battle dress in ten minutes!"

"Yes, Lord General!" Ulger said with a grin and a salute. "Sound the alert!" he shouted, rushing away from the Lord General and waving his arms. "We are on alert!"

"If he was taken, then we'll be ready to go get him," Darvon said in a growl. "No doubt the fighting last night in the Tower has something to do with all this," he added. "I *knew* I should have sent my Knights in there to stop it."

"I had the same feeling, Lord General," the Wikuni Colonel agreed. "But my orders were to remain in the barracks."

"Hindsight is always perfect," he grunted. "Since we may be working together, we'd best get to know each other. I'm Darvon."

"I am Colonel Manx," he replied. "You obviously hold rank over me, my Lord General. I accede to your flag, so long as your orders don't counter our existing orders."

"I appreciate that, Colonel," Darvon said gracefully. "We don't need any confusion on a battlefield. Let's hope that it doesn't come to that."

"The best fight is the one avoided," Manx agreed. "But if we do fight, it will be a good chance to measure ourselves against your reputation."

"Don't sell yourselves short," Darvon told him. "The reputation of the Royal Marines is towering, and no doubt well deserved."

"You are most kind, my Lord General," Manx said with a slight smile.

"Allia, go find yourself some good swords in the armory," Darvon told her. "I know you won't stand aside and watch."

"No," she said bluntly.

It was chaos in the compound of the Knights, and by the time Allia had a good pair of swords and a belt for them, most of the Knights had organized into sharp lines, and warhorses were hurriedly being lined up near the stables, in full harness. Miranda and Sisska were on the field as Allia returned to Darvon's side, and the maid was already starting to answer questions of the Colonel. "I can only tell you what I was told, Colonel," she told him calmly. "That we were to wait here for her Highness to return with news."

"She should not be out there alone," Manx said hotly.

"She has Binter with her, Colonel," Miranda said with a steady expression. It wasn't easy to ruffle Miranda. "If Binter can't protect her, then she doesn't have much need for the rest of you."

Manx glanced at the massive Sisska, standing near to Miranda and ready to attack if she was threatened, and he nodded slowly. "We need to organize," he said. "The Marines use tactics that the Knights probably do not. Let's iron out our arrangements now, before we have to do this in a combat situation."

"I agree," Darvon said emphatically. "Knights rely on their armor," he said. "We prefer to smash through the center of an enemy line, then break up the opposition and mop them up."

"We also prefer a direct assault, but across the entire line," Manx said. "We push them back in one push, driving them into their reserves, and we move quickly to keep them off guard. In this case, the Marines can flank the Knights at the tail end of a wedge, and when the line buckles around the Knights, the Marines can prevent them from enveloping your rear, and we can drive in and hold them in a state of disorganization while the Knights continue around and split up, and attack from the rear."

"This only works if you're fighting on a battlefield, gentleman," Miranda told him. "You happen to be in the middle of a large city. You won't have that kind of room."

"True, but it's our elemental style," Darvon said. "Even if we attack only ten Knights to ten opponents, we use the same basic tactics."

"Are your men trained for close quarters combat?" Manx asked.

Darvon nodded. "Allia's *really* brought us up to speed on close fighting. We can handle ourselves."

"The Marines train specifically for house to house combat and close quarters," he said. "It may be best if we have to attack a building if you let us take the lead."

"I won't argue about that, but having a squad of Knights there to smash through doors and use their armor to shield your less armored men may be useful."

"Yes, no doubt," he agreed.

They continued to debate the exact actions of their units for a quite a while, covering several different scenarios, from building combat to chasing down an armed column trying to spirit Tarrin out of Suld. But Miranda cut them short and pointed, saying "now we'll know exactly how to set up." Keritanima was running towards them with Binter just behind, and she was out of breath by the time she arrived. The Wikuni bowed respectfully, and the Knights did the same when they realized who it was.

"He's...in the Cathedral...," she panted. "He's...being held....underneath it."

"The Cathedral of Karas?" Darvon said in surprise. "Are you sure, your Highness?"

"Positive," she panted.

"I never thought I'd have to attack my own church before," Darvon grunted. "But if you say he's there, then he's there. We'll just have to go get him."

"They must...have dug out passages...not on the plans I had of it," she said, recovering her breath. "But I don't understand *why* they took him. It

doesn't make sense."

"It makes this a siege, Lord General," Manx said. "That means I'll have the better chance."

"The Cathedral is huge, Colonel Manx, and the Priests there will no doubt use their magic to defend it. I think we should start by trying to negotiate. After we surround the building, of course. The priests of Karas are one of the arms of our own faith. I can't see any reason why they would kidnap Tarrin, but maybe I can convince them to let him go without combat. Once I make it plain that the Knights *will* assault the Cathedral if they don't, they may change their minds."

"Miranda, go fetch the plans I have," Keritanima said to her maid. "We can use them."

"At once, Highness," Miranda said, scurrying off with Sisska behind her.

"You have plans of the Cathdreal, Highness?" Manx asked curiously.

"I needed them. Let's not go into that right now," she said decisively. "We need some *katzh-dashi*, gentleman. If we have to attack, we'll need Sorcerers to disrupt the priests' magic. Trying to attack the cathedral without magical assistance would be suicide. Did you talk to the Council, Allia?"

"No, but I did talk to Dolanna," Allia said stiffly. "She is rounding up Sorcerers we can trust."

"Trust? What in the Nexus is going on?"

"It is bad," Allia said in a trembling rage. "Dolanna had horrible news. I cannot face the Council right now. I would have to kill them."

Darvon gave Allia a startled look, but it was nothing compared to the way Manx was gaping at Keritanima. "Would you mind explaining to me what you're talking about?" Keritanima demanded.

"Tarrin was turned Were by the *Council*," Allia announced in a voice trembling with rage. "It was the *Council* that captured Jesmind and sent her after him. The same collar they used to control her was stolen some days ago, and Dolanna suspects that it was used to capture Tarrin."

Keritanima stared at Allia for a long moment, then she sighed. "I knew that the *katzh-dashi* were doing more than it seemed," she said in a disgusted voice. "I'm not surprised. They even had the foresight to send Dolanna to bring Tarrin back, just so a Sorceress with experience in dealing with Were-kin would be there to keep him under control."

"You mean to tell me that the *Council* had Tarrin infected deliberately?" Darvon demanded of Allia, his faced splotched in pure rage.

Allia nodded. "I have not heard it from them, but Dolanna is someone that I trust. If she says it is so, then she *believes* that it is so. She would never lie to me about something as important as *this*. That is enough for me."

"It may be enough for me too," Darvon said in a grim tone, "but it's something that I'll hear out of the Keeper's mouth for myself. Right before I smash her teeth in."

"May I watch?" Allia asked in a savage tone.

"I'll hold her so you can break her nose," Darvon growled.

"I would find that very pleasing."

"Let's not drift off course here," Keritanima reminded them. "When Miranda gets back with the plans, we'll need to organize a way to quickly surround the building without raising too much attention to it. Today is a service day, so we may be able to get in place before they realize what's going on." She grinned evilly. "They can't sneak him out, because I can pinpoint his location with Sorcery. If they start moving him, we can adjust our deployment to keep him solidly inside our lines."

"Pardon my boldness, Highness, but when did you learn strategy and tactics?"

"I do more than admire pretty dresses, Colonel," she said brusquely. "Now hush."

"Yes ma'am."

Miranda arrived with the plans, and she had company. Dolanna and a small group of robed Sorcerers were following her, numbering fourteen, and they included Sevren, Elsa, and surprisingly, Lilenne and Brel. One

noticeable absence was Jula, but perhaps Dolanna simply couldn't find her in time. Faalken was marching alongside the small dark-haired Sorceress protectively, and it was clear from Dolanna's expression that she had suffered some kind of emotional trauma. "Dolanna," Keritanima said gently. "We appreciate your help, and the help from all the rest of you."

"Tarrin is Ungardt, and from a clan allied to my own," Elsa, Mistress of Novices, said gruffly. She was carrying a wicked-looking axe, which looked a bit out of place for someone wearing a robe. "Ungardt care for their own."

"Now gather round everyone, let's get ready."

"Where is he?" Dolanna asked.

"Under the Cathedral of Karas," Keritanima replied.

"And by what right do you command us?" Brel asked sourly.

"By the fact that I'll have Binter here grab you by the ankles and tear you in half if you don't like it," Keritanima snapped, her eyes blazing.

"You're only an Initiate."

"She also happens to be a Princess," Manx warned in a flat tone. "We do as she commands."

"The Knights stand under her banner, Sorcerer," Darvon warned. "We will follow her commands as well."

Brel gave Darvon a look, then nodded. "Now your judgement I'll trust, Darvon," he said. "If you say she commands, then she commands. Let's see what we're going to do about this, your Highness."

Keritanima gave Brel an impish smile, then unrolled the plans, flattened them out with Sorcery and hung them in midair. "There are six entrances we have to cover," she said, pointing them out. "What he have to do is surround the Cathedral without raising an alarm. Right now, they're about to start services, so we should be able to do that. Once we're in position, our seven strongest Sorcerers will circle and create a Ward around the cathedral that blocks all magic. That's going to keep the priests from using magic to repel us if we invade."

"Our priests are trained for fighting, Princess," Darvon said. "They'll fight hand to hand."

"Yes, but they're nowhere as well trained as your Knights and my Marines," Keritanima said calmly. "Without their magic, we should be able to roll them under quickly and without a bloodbath. We're not there to slaughter everyone. We're there to get Tarrin and the people that took him. It's a big place, and I seriously doubt that everyone in there knows that Tarrin's being held there. Until we manage to figure out who did it, and how involved the church is, there's no need to kill everyone in a frock. They could be innocent."

Manx nodded sagely, and Darvon voiced agreement. "We will have to move quickly," Darvon said. "The Sulasian Army won't like armed columns laying siege to the city's cathedral. We have to get him out of there before the King's men can respond, so there's a certain call for haste in this."

"Yes, but after we have the cathedral completely overwhelmed, I hope they'll see reason and simply hand him over. But trust me, gentlemen, one way or another, we *will* get him back," she said adamantly. "After we have the cathedral Warded, we send in Darvon to negotiate. If he can't get satisfaction, we allow the worshippers to leave, then we invade. The mechanics of the invasion will be up to you, Colonel and my Lord General. I won't step on your toes in that regard. But I would like to see the cathedral taken with a minimum of killing. We'll save killing for the truly guilty."

"My men are trained for non-lethal combat, Highness," Manx promised. "There will be a minimum of bloodshed."

"I know my Knights wouldn't like having to put our own priests to the sword, so we'll be gentle," Darvon mirrored.

"Good. Let's get moving. It'll take this many people time to get organized and start marching, and we have to get there before services are over."

The room was small, lit by a single lantern that hung from a hook on the low ceiling. The room was cool and somewhat damp, and Irvon hated it. The fat cleric sat behind a stone bench, glaring a bit at his Sorceress visitor. Irvon *hated* Sorcerers. They were tainted by the foul goddess that commanded their magic, and none of them could be trusted. That she would bring that *creature* into his cathedral, right under the nose of the thrice-

damned Tower, was an outrage. He stood there with a blank expression on his face, right to Jula's right, seemingly as stiff as a statue. Jula herself looked very smug, sitting in the chair he reserved for visitors, her hand patting the paw that creature had placed on her shoulder like he was some kind of pet.

He had no idea what came over her. He knew that Jula was operating under instructions from her own superiors, but they should have warned him. That creature was too dangerous to have around. That she would bring him there, to their hidden base, rather than simply run with him, was quite beyond him.

"I don't care *who* sent you, Jula," Irvon snapped at her. "I want that Were-cat out of here. If they can track him, then you'll bring the *katzh-dashi* down on our heads. I have orders from Kravon himself on the matter. I'm not to do *anything* to compromise our base here, and you can't get any more compromising than *that*," he said, pointing a fat finger at the Were-cat.

"I can't outrun the Knights, Irvon," she said calmly. "When they find out he's missing, they'll take Suld apart stone by stone looking for him. This is the *last* place they'd think to look."

"I don't care," he snorted. "What you have to do doesn't concern me. You bringing that thing here is endangering the Black Network's operations in Suld."

"I think it's funny that you're worried about it," she smiled. "Tarrin's amulet prevents anyone from finding him with magic, and nobody is left alive that saw me bring him off the grounds or into the cathedral." Irvon glared at her. That she killed four acolytes and a priest, the ones from above that had no contact with, or even knowledge of, the dark tunnels under the Cathedral, was going to be hard enough to explain. Irvon was High Priest of Karas, but he was also a ranking member of the Black Network. Irvon's position made the Cathedral the perfect and ultimate base of operations for the *ki'zadun*, their name in the Old Tongue. Nobody would expect a bastion of law and goodness to be the base of an organization that sought to subvert such things.

"I thought you had orders to kill him."

"They changed their minds," she shrugged. "He's a Weavespinner, Irvon. That alone makes him a valuable asset. We can find ways to use him."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Trust me, the collar controls him utterly," she smiled. "Tarrin, come down here and give me a kiss," she ordered. He bent down and kissed her gently on her upraised cheek, then raised back up. "Now be a dear and break Irvon's desk in half."

Irvon gave a strangled cry as the Were-cat raised its clasped paws and stepped forward, and just barely managed to get his legs out from under the desk as the creature's paws slammed into it, shattering the polished wooden desk into splinters. Irvon was dumped to the floor, falling backwards out of his chair, and he came up spluttering, with his fat, narrow-eyed face spotted red with anger.

"As you can see, he's completely subservient," she said with a light laugh. "And he will only obey me, Irvon. Keep that in mind. If something were to happen to me, he'd stand there until someone took off the collar. And you really wouldn't want to be here when that happens. Trust me." She leaned back in her chair and smiled at him. "Tarrin, come back over here," she commanded, and the Were-cat returned to its place beside her, paw resting lightly on her shoulder.

"I still don't have to like it, witch," Irvon snapped. "I want you and *it* out of here."

"I'm afraid you'll have to live with it for a day or two," she told him. "Unless you'd like to explain to my Mistress why the *ki'zadun* refused to harbor a fellow member, especially one operating under direct orders from her superiors. She would have a very long talk with you about that."

Irvon paled, and swallowed. *Nobody* crossed the Black Mistress, the ranking *katzh-dashi* in the Tower. She had a very ugly reputation. "Alright, but I want it in a dungeon cell, and in chains," he snapped.

"Why?" she asked. "Tarrin is just as obedient as a little puppy. Aren't you, my dear?" she asked with a laugh, patting his paw. "He's just as good here as there."

"I want to keep it out from underfoot," he said bluntly, "and keep you from getting any ideas."

"Oh come now, Irvon," she sighed. "I do despise you, but I've been ordered to let you live. I think we can be civil to one another. Yes, well, I *do* have to let you live. Now there's an idea. Tarrin, be a dear, and go over there and bite Irvon."

When Tarrin took a step forward, Irvon gave out a squealing cry and backed into the corner, preparing to call on the magic of Karas to defend him from the attack. That only made Jula laugh. "Tarrin, stop," she commanded, and he stopped moving forward. She stood up and smoothed her silk dress, giving Irvon a horrifically evil smile. "Tarrin, come here," she said lightly. Tarrin returned to her side, and Jula gave Irvon a smug look. "With him, we will win, Irvon," she said triumphantly. "He has the power to defeat the Guardian, and he has the power to get the Firestaff. And once we have it, then Val will be reborn, and we will rule. I'm certain that your part in that glory will be remembered. If you're not too much a nuisance, that is," she said with a cold smile.

"H-how? He's mindless!"

"Ah, yes. You see, the collar only subverts will, not intelligence, memory, or ability. If we give him instructions, he will carry them out. He won't have any choice. He'll know he's being controlled, and rage against it in the tunnels of his own mind, but he will *have* to obey. He knows what we're talking about right now. He can hear us, and he'll remember it. But he can't *do* anything about it. I'm sure that he'd just love to take me and strangle me with my own intestines. Wouldn't you, my dearest pet?" she asked of him, patting him on the cheek, but there was no outward reaction. "Yes, I know you would. But he can't," she told him with that same cold smile. "The collar makes him mine, and I am the only one he'll obey."

"You are deranged," Irvon told her seriously. "I have a service to conduct. Get that *animal* out of my office."

"Yes, go mouth your platitudes and demean yourself to replenish your pitiful power," Jula sneered. "If only Karas knew what kind of bootlicking sycophant he was granting his magic to."

"Yes, well, that's something between me and Karas, isn't it? Now take him to the dungeon. That's an *order*."

"Only because it pleases me to do so," she said. "I need to change my dress, and I don't relish the idea of baring myself in front of him. Why, the shock of my beauty may snap him free, and I'd have to fight off his advances. I've seen him naked, you know. I must admit, he's, impressive. If not that our lovemaking would change *me* into a Were-cat, I may be tempted."

"Sick," Irvon growled, stomping out of his office. "Just get rid of it."

"Indeed," she said. "Come, Tarrin. We have something to do."

The entire city of Suld knew that there was about to be war.

The entire order of the Knights of Karas, both from the Tower and from the chapterhouse, trotted in perfect rows along the streets of the old city, sweeping everything out of their way. They were resplendent in their black armor and snapping pennons, row after row of lances held at perfect angles, and visors lowered for battle. Among them rode two hundred Wikuni in mail shirts and carrying heavy broadswords, as well as perhaps a dozen Sorcerers. They were followed by rank after rank of smartly marching cadets, keeping a perfect cadence with the striking of armor-shod boots upon the centuries-old cobblestones. They had the grim demeanor of men about to do battle, and those expressions did not change. Two thousand armored warriors, human, Knight, and Wikuni, sent civilians scattering before them, crushing carts and wagons out of their way, and causing total confusion that spread along and before them like a wave crashing on the beach.

Leading the column was a rather unusual commander, a slight, slender fox Wikuni wearing an Initiate's dress, the indigo color marking her as a middle-grade Initiate. But her expression was hard, stony, and she was attended by the commanders of that host who made all who looked upon them realize that the slender little Wikuni was definitely in command. She looked infuriated, and her tail writhed behind her like a living thing of its own free will, like a dancing flame with a black tip caught in a stiff wind. She gave sharp, incisive commands, and they were relayed and carried out

by Wikuni and Knight alike with the smooth, precise coordination that marked good military units.

They caused an instant wildfire of gossip to rise up and sweep across the city, gossip of what they were doing, why they were there, and what was going on. It only intensified as they approached the Cathedral of Karas, but all gossip stopped when the Knights, an order under Karas, quickly and efficiently encircled the waist-high iron fence that surrounded the Cathedral, forming a wall of flesh and steel that nobody was permitted to cross. The Knights parted and the Wikuni rushed out, seizing anyone on the grounds but not yet in the church's walls, picking them up and carrying them back outside the wall of horse and man and armor that the Knights had created. The cathedral's bell began to toll, as if it marked the completion of the besiegement, telling all outside who were paying attention that those within had no idea they had been surrounded.

Keritanima nodded once the maneuver had been carried out, and gave Lilenne, who had become the leader of the *katzh-dashi* accompanying the host, a calm look. "Alright, Lilenne," she said in a cold voice. "Cut the Cathedral off."

The swallow-necked Shacèan nodded calmly, and she dismounted along with her other Sorcerer companions. Seven stepped forward, and then joined into a circle. The other seven also joined into a circle, and after a moment of preparation, the two circles reached out to the Weave.

Hands erupting in the wispy white aura of High Sorcery, the two independent circles erected powerful Wards that cut the entire building off from the Weave, a complete sphere that went high above the steeple and well below the crypt, an invisible bubble that isolated everything within from the delicate matrix of magical energy that either powered all magical spells, or provided other magic a pathway from its origination to complete a circuit to the caster. Within that sphere of Sorcerer-conjured anti-magic, there was no magic to power spells.

And no magic to power magical devices.

Deep within the Cathedral, a large bronze-bound door with three heavy bolts locking it in place shimmered in a brief display of magical light, and then fell dark.

Chapter 19

It was as sudden as it had been the first time. In a rush so abrupt that it almost took his breath away, his conscious roared back over the numbing magic which had it under his control, even as that magic seemed to wane and fade away.

Blinking his eyes, Tarrin instantly stood up from the filthy straw in which he'd been sitting, and he was *angry*. Anger wasn't quite the word. Pure, sheer, abject utter rage was a better definition. But instead of going mad and acting like an animal, he focused that sheer rage into his surroundings.

He was in deep trouble. He had indeed heard and remembered everything, so he fully appreciated where he was, and what was standing between him and freedom. He was *deep* in a vast underground complex occupied by a large number of armed men. From what he heard, many of the priests above knew about this place, and were indeed members of it. But many others were not. He had been brought down through a series of secret passages that led off a side corridor in the quarters area. He heard every word of what Irvon and Jula said, and then she had brought him to this tiny cell, and a man had locked huge manacles on him, with a thick chain designed more for a Troll than they were for a human. A chain ran from the manacles to the wall, secured into it by a huge eye bolt.

Something had disrupted the magic on the collar. That's what freed him. He could feel a very powerful force blocking off the entire area from the Weave...it had literally peeled back the strands and pulled them away from the entire area. Very powerful Sorcerers were maintaining that barrier, even now. He could feel it on the edges of his awareness.

Had they found him? They *had* to have. Why else would they be blocking magic over the entire region? They had tracked him down somehow, and had cast the barrier to do something. But it also had the side effect of freeing him from the collar's magical control. That meant that they

had to be close to him, and they may be armed and in force. If he could reach them, he could get himself to safety.

He had to get out. He was having enough trouble controlling his rage, to keep from snapping and going berzerk. This was the time to think, not to fight, because he couldn't afford being caught without getting close to the exit. And he was chained to a wall, with a collar around his neck, inside a tiny barred cell. Every fiber of his being screamed out to be free, building inside him an almost uncontrollable instinctive *need* to break out, to escape, to do *anything* he had to do to be free. It caused him to tremble, to lose control of his breath, as it built into a cold *thing* in the pit of his stomach that threatened to tear him apart.

The first thing was the collar. Desperately, he grabbed it in both paws and pulled against it, wrenching it side to side, until he felt the metal begin to give way. It squealed faintly under his pads, until it came loose of his neck with an audible *klink*. He threw the collar into the straw, resisting the urge to jump up and run, fighting against the impulses that screamed nothing but flight into his mind.

Chains rattled as he pulled them taut, testing the bolt. It wasn't that large, but it was solid. The chains themselves were very thick, and seemed to be well made. The fear built and built and built, and every tug on the chains made it stronger and stronger, until his heart was pounding in his ears and his breathing came in short, ragged gasps. He had never felt fear like that before, and it terrified him almost as much as the fear of being imprisoned did. His heart began to race, and he could see his pulse behind his eyes, hear it in his ears, feel it in myriad places under his skin, as he pulled and jerked and snapped at the chains, desperation beginning to take firm hold inside him.

"Ere now!" a voice came from outside. "They ain't never said nothin' about you makin' a racket! Shaddup and sit back down, mangy critter!"

Tarrin put a foot against the wall and yanked, pushing off at the same time. Metal squealed, groaned, and then rang as the bolt twisted in the wall, and then was broken off at the mortarline even as one of the chains broke free of the right manacle.

"Hey!" the voice outside shouted, and the door thumped loudly.

Tarrin could hear nothing but the pounding of his own heart, and the incessant, undeniable, animalistic urge to be free. Grabbing the chain on the left manacle, he twisted the eye where it was connected to the manacle and twisted it off, and then set his paws as far apart as he could to make the chain connecting his paws taut. Snarling soundlessly, his inhuman strength suddenly attacked that chain, as Tarrin pulled his arms apart with every ounce of his incredible power. The chain did not break, so he put his wrists together and yanked them apart, giving out a bestial cry as manacles tore skin, muscles ripped from anchors on bones, and ligaments tore and snapped. His overpowering need for freedom had overwhelmed his sensation of pain, and those arms inexorably pulled further and further apart, straining the heavy chain connecting them together.

The sound of the chain snapping under the irresistible force of Tarrin's augmented strength was accompanied by the sound of the throwing of the bolt on the door, and murky torchlight suddenly flooded into the room. "I said sit down and shaddup!" the voice called again as the door opened.

The pain had been too much. The pain, the rage, the inescapable fear, they assaulted Tarrin's mind in harmony, and he could no longer control them. His consciousness was again shunted off to the side, overwhelmed by his animalistic urges, conquered by the Cat. The Cat would be free.

The Cat would be free!

The man, a slim, unshaven sellsword, with a rank scent and a scarred face, took one look at the hunched Were-cat, arms free of the chains, a broken chain the size of a man's wrist hanging between the manacles. His eyes glowed from within with an unholy greenish radiance, and the look on his face was one of pure, unadulterated hate. He took one look at the man, his ears laid back, and he *roared*, his claws coming free of their sheaths.

"Sweet mercy!" the man screamed, slamming the door in the face of that apparition, even as it lunged forward.

But there was no mercy left. Tarrin's paw exploded *through* the closed door, opening up and grabbing the man by his arm. The man shrieked in agony when that inhuman grip closed over his arm, crushing bones beneath it, but it turned into a *whoosh* as Tarrin yanked, shattering the door by pulling the unfortunate man through it. The sound of the imploding door

echoed through the passages, and they were quickly accompanied by horrified, agonized shrieks and screams as Tarrin systematically savaged the guard. Unsatisfied with simply killing him, Tarrin unleashed his full rage upon the man's body, tearing, breaking, ripping, destroying, feeling the rush of flesh tearing against his claws, revelling in the sound of bones snapping within his grip. Tarrin's voice, a screeching roar of pure animalistic rage, drowned out the man's weakening screams and pleas, which were cut off when Tarrin grabbed the man's head between his paws and *pushed*, utterly destroying everything above his neck. Blood, bone, brains, and worse flew in every direction, spraying Tarrin and the walls with grisly ichor, and the smell of it drove him utterly mad. Even that was not enough. After the body fell to the floor, Tarrin continued to destroy it, sending gibbets and shredded bits of flesh, bone, leather, organs, and cloth in every direction, to stick to the walls and ceiling, to hang from Tarrin's body like grotesque jewelry, to slick the floor with blood and gore. When there was nothing even remotely human left to identify, when the remains of the man were spread all over the floor and the walls of the small cell, Tarrin raised his head to the ceiling and screamed, a raging howling roar of pure hate, pure rage, the purity of the need to survive at any cost.

Two more men appeared at the destroyed opening of the cell, and Tarrin whirled to face them, covered in the spoor of his defeated foe, and a look of pure rage, utterly devoid of rational thought, twisted his face into a fang-bared snarl.

"Holy Karas preserve me!" one of them gasped, but it was too late. With a roar, Tarrin sprang forward, killing one instantly when his paw found the man's face, and drove that head back and against the wall behind it, where it crushed between the wall and Tarrin's paw. The other managed to draw his sword, just in time for it to fall from nerveless fingers when a full swipe of Tarrin's clawed paw ripped the man's head completely off his body.

Tarrin gave another howling roar, a scream of rage, but also of triumph. He would be free! Now he would leave, using the memories of his human half, memories of hallways and passages that would lead back to the top, back to the outside, out of that prison! A man spotted him, then turned and ran down a side passage, but Tarrin didn't give him any mind. The Cat inside him was trying to get its bearings, to decide which way it was

supposed to go in order to find the way out, and it struggled to comprehend human conceptions to make that decision.

A sudden clamoring of bells startled the Cat, and it couldn't grasp that it was an alarm. Giving up for the moment, the Cat decided that moving was best. So Tarrin began stalking down the passageway, seeking something familiar that it could use to find the way out...a scent, a movement of the air, anything that seemed familiar. He turned a corner, and found himself staring at at least ten armed men, who immediately shouted at him and drew weapons.

But Tarrin had no fear. Snarling, he issued a raging howl, then rushed to the attack, totally oblivious to any danger. Swords pierced his flesh, but he felt nothing, ripping and raking and tearing, even biting, anything that he could get his claws on. He tore at faces, gouged out eyes, slashed throats and chests with his claws, raking with his feet to disembowel his adversaries. Skilled thrusts and swipes cut his flesh, drew deep blood, chopped off his left paw at the wrist, just below the manacle, but the enraged Were-cat felt no pain, no fear, nothing but the overwhelming need to destroy, to kill, and he had no mercy.

A brief episode of pain registered to him as his left paw grew back, almost as quickly as it had been severed. Their weapons were not magical, and the magical barrier that stopped magic seemed to be incapable of affecting his innate pseudo-magical abilities, such as his regenerative powers. But when Tarrin took that brief rest to allow it, it was because ten mangled bodies lay in various stages of disassembly on the floor around him. He was standing ankle deep in entrails.

That began a pattern, as Tarrin randomly stalked the hallways of the underground complex, looking for the way out, killing absolutely anyone who got in his way. He did not chase them down, but anyone who challenged his forward momentum or failed to flee at the sight of him was instantly and savagely attacked. A trail of savaged bodies marked his path along the dark, shadowy tunnels, as the mercenaries and warriors and guards sought to locate the intruder and neutralize him. Tarrin attacked them all, no matter how many there were, and he was soon soaked in both his own blood and that of his victims, leaving swords and daggers protruding from his body as grim testaments of the attempts to slow him

down, not feeling the pain in the haze of his utter rage. He killed them singly, in pairs, in groups, he killed anyone he could find, he killed them with utter ruthlessness. They were enemies, seeking to take away his freedom, and they had to die. In short minutes, dozens and dozens of the dead marked his grim, systematic passage along the winding, intersecting tunnels, creating a grisly path for others to follow to find him.

It came to a head in a wide passageway, almost like a gallery, with a set of stairs at the far end. A large complement of guards had gathered at the far end, at least thirty of them, and they all pointed and shouted as Tarrin stepped from the shadowy tunnel and into the brightly lit chamber, covered in blood and with a dagger sticking out of his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes and laid back his ears, then roared at the large gathering in a horrific scream of hatred and rage, and he hunkered down into a pouncing position.

"He's mad!" someone shouted as Tarrin gave out a harsh scream, and then charged.

"Go for the head!" someone else cried, drawing a sword.

It was a clash of rampaging, animalistic fury against desperate self-preservation. Tarrin attacked the men headlong, swatting away only what weapons came in for his face and head, and destroying anything he could grab hold of. Screams of pain and the dying quickly echoed up and down the passages as Tarrin killed anyone that came within reach of his paws, driving forward with such savage ferocity that the score of men remaining were unable to wrap around him, unable to take him from behind. They did eventual fold in around him, and he became a lightning-fast whirlwind of death, killing anyone foolish enough to try to stab at him with a weapon, grabbing swords and hands and arms and yanking their owners within reach of a decapitating blast from the other paw. The men between him and the stairs melted away under his mindless fury, and the others quickly began to spread out further and further. After more than half of them were dead, the remaining men finally realized that they had no chance against him, and they broke and scattered in every direction. The unfortunates that tried to flee up the stairs died swiftly as Tarrin caught up to them and dispatched them with decapitating rakes and head-crushing blows, sending bodies and body parts tumbling back down the stairs.

The young, robed woman at the top of the stairs, immobilized by the sounds of death and pain from below, was the first to see the Were-cat emerge from the dark stairs, covered in gore and eyes blazing with an unholy greenish aura that preceded the outline of his body as it emerged from the darkness. She was a thin thing, small, pretty, and she stared at him in a horrified gape, seemingly unable to move, paralyzed by his appearance. Others began to appear, armed men and even women, shouting and pointing and rushing towards him. But the pretty young lady was right there, mesmerized in some macabre fashion by the Were-cat's approach. She was unmoving, she was trembling, and she was helpless.

She was the first to die.

They were in place. Lilenne nodded to Keritanima, who tapped Manx on the arm, who gave a signal to his men. They rushed forward quickly with their swords drawn, their boots making little noise on the cold cobblestones of the large paved plaza surrounding the hammer-shaped building. The Wikuni Marines moved quickly and efficiently, covering each of the six entrances in four-man squads. Six Knights advanced over the fence for each team, and they quickly reinforced those Marines at the doors to prevent anyone from coming out or going in. A larger group rushed the massive main doors of the cathedral, which opened into the Nave of the church, where even now the High Priest of Karas was conducting the Service of the Ending Day, the last day of the ride, before a large congregation.

Keritanima was wrapped in an icy resolve. The Ward prevented her from locating Tarrin, but she was still searching the fringes of the barrier, seeking any hint of him should he cross through it. She would *not* allow them to keep him. He was her brother, and that term meant a lot more to her now than it did only a month ago. Allia stood beside her, just as grim and foreboding, and they were both feeling the same rage and fury. They were true sisters, and they were getting their brother back. They had been through too much together for her to abandon him now. She had never believed that she could ever feel the way she did for *anyone*, but she had to admit that she did. Tarrin was her brother, her friend, her dear companion, and without him, her life seemed empty. The very thought of him being lost

to her filled her with a nameless dread, and caused a fury in her so towering that she would be willing to fight the entire Cathedral with her bare hands to get him out of there. She had no idea what was going on, how they were treating him. They could be torturing him!

"Come on," she told Allia in a tight voice. "Darvon, Manx, Azakar, with us," she called. "Let's go knock on their door."

Binter and Sisska moved up behind the Princess with their huge hammer and axe, a truly formidable barrier to any who wished to do her Highness harm, and the group of very dangerous people dismounted and started across the plaza. It took them a moment to reach the huge, bronze-inlaid double doors that led into the Nave, with the Hammer and Scales of Karas etched into that burnished golden covering. Azakar took one door and Binter took the other, and they pushed them open with a sudden jerk that made them boom against their thresholds on the far side.

That sound caused the chanting voice of the High Priest of Karas, a short, pudgy man standing on a pulpit on the far side of the massive chamber, to falter. He looked up the long row of pews, at the wildly mismatched group of people entering the church, and did not pick his sermon back up. The church was very full, and almost all of them, commoners and nobles alike, dressed in their best, turned to look as the group of grim-looking visitors moved into the main gallery.

Keritanima strode in with a look and demeanor that anyone would take for a Queen, her amber eyes blazing as she kept them locked on the pudgy man standing on the pulpit behind the altar. It was a flat look, one of icy danger, and it made the priest slightly uncomfortable.

"All are welcome in the house of Karas," he said in an urbane voice. "Please, take a seat, my children, and we will continue the sermon. There is no shame in being late."

That caused a few light chuckles, but Keritanima's cold expression did not change. "You will release Tarrin Kael, and you will release him *now*," she said in a savage voice. "If he is not standing before me in five minutes, I'll have my Marines and your own Knights raze this cathedral to the ground."

"There is no call for this, threatening," the priest said in a calm voice. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about, um, Inititate."

"You will address me as *Princess* Keritanima," she snapped. And for the first time, she *meant* it. "Darvon," she barked.

"My Lord Irvon, you are holding the Knight Tarrin Kael within this building. You will release him *immediately*, or the Knights will take him by force. And as you've heard, we've had her Highness bless us with support from her own Marines, as well as a complement of *katzh-dashi* from the Tower. We have the cathedral surrounded, and the *katzh-dashi* have Warded this entire area against magic to prevent your acolytes from trying anything foolish."

The man gave the Lord General a look, and then it paled into one of pure horror.

"We *know* he is here, Lord Irvon," Darvon said calmly, but there was steel behind his eyes. "We will take him when you give him to us, or we will take him after bringing this cathedral down around your ears. Either way, we *will* take him. The choice of how it is done is yours."

The man Irvon looked unable to speak, but then he somehow got his composure back. The congregation began to whisper and gasp, murmuring excitedly among themselves as they drank in Darvon's words. "You are free to search, my Lord General," Irvon said in a strained voice. "I'll file my people out of here under guard and let you comb the cathedral, but I assure you, you will not find anyone that does not wish to be here. There is no need for violence or destruction."

"Then start turning your people out, Irvon," Keritanima said coldly. "Darvon, bring in a company of Knights to assist the priests with their evacuation of the Cathedral. Just so nobody gets overlooked."

"That is ridiculous!" Irvon said. "I am being very accommodating to you, people, just by offering to empty the Cathedral so you can put your minds at ease. But sending in armed men to take my people prisoner goes just a bit too far. I give you my word as a priest of Karas that we will cooperate with you."

"That word means spit to me, Lord Irvon," Keritanima snapped hotly, making many of the onlookers gasped. "I really don't *care* how ridiculous

you think it is. You can let the Knights escort them out, or you can pick up their remains when my Marines storm this building and kill anything that moves. It's your choice."

Irvon paled again, and stared at Keritanima in shock. "You would *dare--*"

"I dare anything," she interrupted, glaring at him. "Binter," she said bluntly. "I think the Lord High Priest is stalling. Would you go up there and brain him for me?"

The monstrous Vendari started ahead of the Princess, his massive warhammer held lightly in his right hand, his black eyes flat and promising death as he advanced up the central aisle to a cacophony of gasps and not a few screams from the congregation. "No!" Irvon said in a strangled tone, even as a group of armed priests quickly formed up around the altar and pulpit. "Alright, alright! I'll do as you ask!"

Binter looked back to Keritanima, who only motioned with her head. He turned and moved back towards her, and the entire populated Nave sighed in relief. It was in that moment of silence that it was heard.

It was faint, but it was very audible. It was a rolling, howling cry, the ear-keening call of a Troll, the sound they made while fighting.

"Troll!" Darvon said immediately, reaching for his sword.

"Binter," Keritanima said sharply, "where did that come from?"

"It came from beneath us," Allia answered for him, kneeling and putting a four-fingered hand on the floor. "It is under here."

"What's under the floor, Darvon?" Keritanima asked.

"The crypt," he replied uncertainly.

Eyes widening, Keritanima turned and fled back up the aisle, leaving the others confused. She had no time to explain. She burst through the open door, pointing towards Lilenne and screaming in a very impressive, booming voice.

"Lower the Ward, Lilenne! Lower the Ward *NOW!*"

Panting, the Cat wasn't sure if it could take this enemy.

He was covered in blood, both his own and that of his foes, and it had been a long and brutal path. Tarrin had been stabbed, slashed, hacked, poked, and slammed by a myriad of weapons, weapons that the Cat completely ignored. But the constant regeneration had begun to slow, and it slowed more and more as he was injured by those who opposed him. The regenerative abilities he enjoyed were quasi-magical, but they still drew strength from his body to operate, and that strength was nearly gone. Wounds that would have sealed instantly if he were refreshed were taking long, long moments to slowly knit together now, and it had left his body weary and his reflexes slowed. His body was tiring out, and even the Cat understood that he had to get free soon, before he was left incapable of healing a mortal blow.

It was a grisly marker by which his fatigue was measured. The hallways behind him were absolutely littered with the dead, mutilated, and the dying, as he cut a swath of destruction and murder right through the ranks of his opponents. There was no grace, no honor, and no mercy in his method of killing. He simply charged forward, accepted any injury that the victim dealt upon him, then ripped him limb from limb. Anyone who crossed him died, from armed guards to unarmed servants, they were all treated with the same merciless finality. Tarrin's feet left prints of red behind as he stalked forward in the large chamber, where a single Troll stood on the far side holding a huge club made from the gnarled taproot of a tree. Trolls were natural enemies of the Were-kin, and Tarrin challenged it with no fear as he stalked forward, paws out wide and preparing to rush the thing and tear out its throat. Men and women rushed in behind that Troll, some of them obviously spellcasters, but it was the ones with crossbows, bows, and swords that caught the Were-cat's attention. But there was no surrender, no mercy, no turning back. There was only forward, there was only rage, and there was only freedom.

With a savage roar, Tarrin burst forward, but his moves were not as fast, not as sharp, as they usually would be. Arrows and crossbow bolts slammed into him, staggering him, but he neither fell nor stopped. The Were-cat ignored the hammering missiles, keeping his attention on the advancing Troll. He ducked under and away from a massive sweep of that club, and lanced inside its swing as it carried through. His claws were out, and they

flashed once and once only as he slipped up and inside the Trolls' stance, sweeping upwards from the floor and raking right through the area covered by the foul monster's fur breechclout. The crippling move would have worked, had he not missed and struck the Troll on the inside of his thigh rather than the crotch. The move made the Troll give out a ear-shattering bellow, and the Were-cat found himself flying across the room. He struck the far wall head first, bringing stars to his eyes and sending to the floor in a heap, but the shuddering of the floor beneath him warned him that the Troll was advancing to finish him off.

He rolled just as several more arrows and crossbow quarrels struck the floor where he had been, then kicked out with his foot. The blow didn't have much behind it, but it was still enough so crack the shinbone of the Troll's advancing leg as it set it to drive Tarrin through the floor with its club. The Troll hopped back and bellowed again, taking its massive club in both hands and raising it over its head. It moved with surprising speed, catching Tarrin just under the arm as it quickly feinted the overhand smash, then switched to a vast underhanded sweep that caught the weary Were-cat off guard. Tarrin sailed through the air, landing heavily on the floor some paces away, arrow and bolts tearing out or breaking off as he rolled and skidded to a stop. Tarrin was dazed, so dazed that the Cat nearly lost its control of his mind and allowed his conscious mind to return, but the Cat was still too enraged to relinquish control yet.

Not until it was free.

The Troll limped forward with men and women advancing behind him, coming to end the Were-cat right then and there, and the Were-cat was too tired to be certain it would survive.

And then the Weave flooded back.

Screaming in sudden fury, Tarrin's eyes turned from their unholy green to a blazing, incandescent white as the Cat reached out and seized hold of the Weave, using its animalistic ferocity to take command of it. Raw power flooded into him like water over a fall, but where Tarrin's conscious mind could not control it, could not bear the pain, the ferocity of the Cat *could*. His paws literally exploded into Magelight, and the Cat lashed out with the deadly weapon immediately and brutally. A wave of solid air blasted past the Were-cat's thrusting paws, taking up the entire height and width of the

room, and it moved at a speed that defied sound. The Troll's body simply *crumpled* against the horrific force. In the blink of an eye, the entire far wall was smeared with red stains, bloody clothing, and shattered weapons and armor, from the bodies of everyone that had been before him. They had been crushed into liquid by the supersonic speed and force of the wall of solid air. There was a sudden ear-shattering *BOOM*, like thunder, that shook the entire complex and caused dust to shake free of the ceiling.

More. The Cat could control the power, but it couldn't allow it to build up, because not even the Cat could stop that mad influx of magical energy from flowing into him. If that happened, it would destroy him from the inside out. He had to expend that power, almost as fast as it built inside him.

Raising his eyes to the ceiling, Tarrin's entire body became engulfed in the wispy white energy as he gathered in the power he needed to use his magic to free himself in one mighty blow. He wove together a chaotic weave of Fire, Air, Earth, Confluence, and Divine power, adding the flows of Water and Mind just so they could be present within the weave of High Sorcery, and give the weave the true power of which it was capable. That weave built inside him, burning him with its power, its purity, scouring away his pain and replacing it with the true might, the majesty, the awe of the Goddess and her Weave.

He was one with the power, and he would use that power.

A low growl in his throat built quickly into a scream that seemed to go in harmony with the shimmering sound caused by the aura of magic around him, as he built up the power, the will, the rage to unleash his magic, to accept the searing, beautiful pain of High Sorcery and use the gift granted him by the Goddess to free himself from the prison of his enemies.

Then the weave was suddenly unleashed in the direction of his pointing paws, driving into the ceiling. It moved at speeds that transcended imagination, searing through the rock and mortar above him, burning through the layers of natural stone and earth, and vaporizing a hole through the floor of the crypt above. It continued on, blazing a hole through the crypt's ceiling, through the floor of the Nave, through the ceiling of the Nave, and up and into the heavens.

Allia watched Keritanima run, but she immediately understood that it was not cowardice. She heard the Wikuni shout for them to lower the Ward, and Allia felt it when it was done. The Weave flowed back into its normal place within the cathedral, the strands returning to their rightful places within the Nave. Allia didn't quite understand why her sister was so rash. Lowering the Ward was allowing the priests access to their magic!

And then Allia felt a weave of *horrific* power form, manifest, and then disperse in the blink of an eye. The entire Cathedral shook and shuddered in the aftermath of that incredible weave, and a loud *boom* rocked the floor beneath them, making the stone groan and squeal as it settled back into place. What *power*! She had never felt its like, never dreamed that anything like that could be done! She could *feel* it below them, a power twisting the very Weave itself, drawing it towards it as it built up power to do something else.

That was *Tarrin*! *Nobody*, not even a circle, could make the Weave do that!

"Get back!" she suddenly screamed in fear. She could feel it build, and build, and *build*, and she realized with horror that Tarrin was about to do something *serious*. And he was *directly under her feet*! "Holy Mother, everyone get back!"

Allia pushed Darvon out of the way, and the others scattered just as a strange light appeared in the floor. And then a beam of pure, intense, blinding white light erupted from that spot, splitting the air in a loud shattering scream that caused Allia's ears to start bleeding. It burned through the floor in an instant, then travelled up and through the ceiling of the Cathedral to travel towards the heavens. It sustained itself for no more than two heartbeats, but it made absolutely everyone within the Cathedral drop to the floor and scream in fear and terror.

The light faded to its blinding incandescence, but remained as a painfully bright shaft of pure white light that illuminated the Nave as if someone had pulled the sun into the chamber. Allia winced against that painful brilliance, then her mouth dropped when the silhouette of a humanoid being appeared within that radiance, fading enough to show the outline of a long tail. Even with the light, Allia could see that he was

absolutely *covered* in blood. From head to foot. And he had arrows sticking out of him!

"Tarrin!" Allia screamed in surprise, joy, and fear, shouting over the pulsating, choral shimmering sound emanating from that bright light. She *feared* her brother at that moment.

Floating within a cushion of his own power, Tarrin rose from the molten tunnel created by his weaving, raised into the Nave of the Cathedral of Karas, utter fury making his face a twisted mask of rage. Incandescent white eyes, blazing from within with the power of High Sorcery, locked on the pulpit where Irvon stood. The fat cleric stared at Tarrin in pure horror, unable to move, unable to act, unable to do anything but watch.

A black ball of sizzling power formed in his paw, crackling with electrical energy, as Tarrin built a weave of Confluence and Divine energies, with only token flows of the other spheres added to give the weave the power of High Sorcery. That black ball swallowed up the light, dimming it around him, sucked up the light into its utter black depths, even pulled the air into it. Tarrin gave the priest a merciless, snarling shout, and then hurled it at him. The priest, paralyzed by his own fear, could only stand there and watch as his doom hurtled towards him.

It struck him in the face, and where it touched him, it sucked everything inside it. Irvon's head contracted, pulling into that ball, bone splitting and spraying blood into the air, blood which stopped flying outward and fell back into the black ball. Irvon's body began to be sucked into the small ball, crushing down and into the small thing, no larger than a child's toy, yet pulling the entirety of the fat priest's corporeal form inside. The gloriously decorated and gilded pulpit too crushed under the magical force of that black ball, breaking asunder and following Irvon's body into its unimaginable black depths. The ball hovered in midair a moment, hovering over where Irvon and his pulpit once stood, and then it simply vanished.

Tarrin whirled around within his shaft of light, and his eyes fell on Allia. That face, that beautiful face, was like a slap in the face to him. It declared to the Cat beyond any measure that he was indeed free. Allia was near him, Allia would protect him. She would gather him up and carry him

to safety, because he knew that as soon as he let go of the Weave, he would fall unconscious. He has pushed himself too far. The Cat looked at its sibling, its sister, and it rejoiced, fading back into the background of Tarrin's mind, allowing his consciousness to regain control.

Tarrin looked on Allia with pure horror in his eyes, and then those eyes rolled back into his head.

The light rising up from the floor of the Nave wavered, and then it vanished. Tarrin's inert body crashed to the floor, unmoving, leaving an entire church full of awed, terrified observers to stare at him in shock.

Chapter 20

He had no idea where he was.

He only knew that he was clean, dressed in a soft cotton nightshirt, and the room held traces of the scents of Allia and Keritanima.

He was alone, and the room was illuminated by a single candle, burned well near to the nub. His body still ached, but it was a faint pain, distant and weak, and it would soon be gone. He felt extremely weak, and it was an effort to sit up in the bed and put his back against the headrest. His tail was tingling from where he was laying on it.

The manacles. They were still on his wrists. Nightmarish images swirled around the dark corners of his mind, images of what he had done while out of control. He couldn't remember details, but he knew that he had killed *many* people. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about that, but he was so weary that he knew that in his current condition, he wouldn't care if he destroyed an entire kingdom. He was just too tired, too numb. He knew that he would have to reckon with what he had done later, but at that moment, he was still in shock. It wasn't the time. Physically, he wasn't much better off. He had been healed, or he had healed himself, but it had left him so weak that he could barely move. He felt a bit dizzy any time he moved his head, and there was a light fuzz over his consciousness that demanded he return to sleep. But where the body was willing, the mind was not. A tremendous amount had happened, and his mind couldn't reconcile with putting it off until later.

He had snapped. *Really* snapped, not just lost his temper. It was exactly what Jesmind had been talking about, something she said would happen eventually, no matter how careful he was. He had never felt so *helpless* in his life. That much, he clearly remembered. The Cat had kicked him aside like a misbehaving pet and taken full control of him, and he watched himself acting and reacting through eyes he could no longer control. He still couldn't recall specifics of what happened, but something deep inside told

him that he didn't *want* to know. He did remember killing. Many, *many* people. That much was clear, but not how many, and how, and where he was. He only remembered searching for a way out, and killing anyone who got in his way.

Leaning forward, he put his paw to his cheek and rested his elbow on his knee, freeing his tail and feeling an angry buzz flow down it with the restoration of blood into the appendage. He didn't remember much of what happened after being freed of the collar, but he remembered everything *before* that with perfect clarity. Was this Firestaff what the *katzh-dashi* wanted from him? Jula had mentioned it. That Tarrin had the power to defeat the Guardian and claim it, and that it would bring back someone named Val. He had never heard of it before. What was it, anyway? It seemed logical that this Firestaff thing was what everything was about. But why keep it a secret?

He just didn't know enough about it to really know what to think. He had only heard that one reference. But he did remember her talking about some group named the *ki'zadun*. The Black Network. The name, Tarrin had not heard, but the title *was* somewhat common knowledge. They were a large organization of men and women devoted to ruling the entire world. They were rumored to be supported by the Black Kingdom, Stygia, one of Sharadar's closest neighbors and oldest enemies. It was reputed that the Witch-King of Stygia was the ultimate leader of the organization, using them as a covert army to spread his influence throughout the world. But whether that was true or not, Tarrin did not know. It was, after all, only rumor and gossip, tales told around the parlor on stormy winter nights.

Could Kravon be a member of that network? That was the only name that Tarrin had ever gleaned out of his would-be assassins.

Tarrin winced slightly, and a growl issued from the back of his throat. *Jula*. He didn't know if he got her, but she was going to *pay*. He *trusted* her! He trusted her enough to turn his back on her, and she drove the proverbial dagger into it! It was a betrayal at a high level in his mind, and a part of him had been permanently hardened against trusting others. He knew the term for it. Feral. But he didn't care. He would *never* trust anyone like that again unless they proved themselves to him beyond absolutely any shadow of a doubt. He would not let that happen again, no matter what. Even if it meant

sleeping with his back to the wall for the rest of his life. *Nobody* would imprison him again! Just the thought of it sent a cold chill through him, and he felt the Cat rouse from its corner in his mind and assess possible threat to its freedom. The Cat was still active, still vigilant so soon after it had taken control, seized his body to do what his conscious mind could not, or was not doing fast enough.

As soon as he was well enough, he was going to find her, and make her pay for what she did to him.

Looking down at his left paw, he flexed it a few times. It felt...odd. It was fully functional, just like his right paw, but there was a strange fuzzy sensation about it, and it felt curiously weak. He spotted the problem. The manacle on his left wrist was slightly bent, and it was pressing against an artery. He clutched the heavy steel cuff in his other paw and squeezed carefully, bending it back into a more comfortable position.

He stopped and looked at the manacles, his eyes distant. They had bound him with those manacles. Chained him to a wall and taken away his freedom. They represented the one thing that he feared over all others, the physical manifestation of his greatest fear. And it was something that he was terrified that he may forget some day. There was nothing that Tarrin desired more than freedom, nothing that he would not do to keep it, preserve it, or reclaim it. His freedom represented everything that he was, both as a person and as a Were-cat. The manacles represented everything that he could become. He had killed. Killed many people. Not even he knew how many, but he had the feeling that his memories of his actions would indeed slowly return to him. He had become the one thing he had always feared he would become. He had turned into a monster even worse than any Troll that ever lived, and it was all because they had taken away his freedom.

Never again. It would never happen again. And every day, those manacles would be there, on his wrists, their weight reminding him what price his freedom cost him, and they would never let him forget.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the headboard, feeling his ears bend a bit between his skull and the rough wood.

Never again.

The door opened, and the light from beyond touched his eyes. He opened them and found Allia entering quietly, holding a cup of some steaming liquid. She was alone. She wore a pair of leather breeches and a cottons shirt, and her *shaeram* hung visible about her neck, resting on the soft gray cloth. She didn't say anything at first, she only smiled at him warmly and sat down at the edge of the roughly made yet solidly constructed bed. She looked directly into his eyes, her own serious and searching, and then she handed the cup to him wordlessly. It smelled of chicken and salt.

"Where is everyone?" he asked weakly.

"Waiting outside," she replied, putting a hand against his forehead. "We thought it best for me to come in first."

"Why?"

"Because we weren't sure who we would find when you woke up," she said gently, but her words were blunt. It wasn't Allia's nature to evade things. "You were completely out of control, my brother. We didn't know if passing out would return your mind to you. But I see it did."

He nodded, taking a sip of the hot broth. It tasted sweeter than the rarest wine to him. "Not too quickly," she warned as he started to gulp it down, ignoring the burning of his tongue and throat.

"What happened?" he asked in a small voice. "I don't really remember anything."

"You fought your way back to us, *deshida*," she told him, patting his shoulder. "You--" she closed her eyes. "You used Sorcery the likes of which has not been seen in eons. You very nearly killed *me* with it."

He gave her a stricken look, but she only smiled at him. "There is no blame anywhere, brother," she assured him. "You gave us plenty of warning to get out of the way."

"I don't remember any of it," he said in a frightened tone.

"There wasn't much to remember," she said. "You blew a hole up to the Nave, then you rose up and killed the high priest with Sorcery. I think he had a special meaning to you. Your choice of death for him was...exotic."

"Irvon," he spat, trying to sit up. "He had me thrown in a dungeon cell! He had to pay for that!"

"He paid, brother, he paid dearly," she assured him.

"Where are we, sister? I've never seen a room in the Tower like this." Not even the Novices' rooms were quite that small. It only had room for the bed and a single washstand, which had a tiny chest tucked underneath it. There was just the door, with no windows, and the walls were a featureless, ragged gray stone with no decorations to break up their monotony.

"We are not at the Tower," she hissed. That surprised him. "We will *never* go back there!"

"What's the matter? Didn't they send the Knights to get me back?"

"No, *we* arranged that," she said hotly. "The Tower has *no* honor!"

That was serious. "What happened?" he asked.

"Dolanna discovered a terrible truth about the Tower, my brother. It is something that you may not want to know."

"Allia."

"I would think twice, my brother. In your current condition, it may send you back into a rage."

"Right now, Allia, I couldn't rage myself out of this bed," he told her. "Better get it over with now, while I *can't* do anything about it."

She sighed. "Dolanna discovered that it was not your enemies that sent Jesmind to kill you. It was the Tower, and they sent her to *infect* you. *Deshida*, the Tower deliberately turned you Were."

Tarrin gaped at her, his heart lurching. But in his weakened condition, it couldn't lurch that much. He felt shock, disbelief, betrayal in that proclamation, but it also followed a twisted logic that had gnawed at him for months. He should *not* have survived against Jesmind. Now he knew why he did. They had sent her in there to fight, to make it look good, but ultimately only to bite him and then leave him. He added that horrible truth to the great weight looming over his mind, something to work out when he felt more prepared to deal with it.

But it did expand his plans for vengeance. The Keeper wasn't going to get away with ruining his life. He was going to make her pay for it.

"Whoever took you used the same collar the Tower used to control Jesmind," she added. "It was stolen from their vaults some days ago."

"Jula," he hissed, his ears laying back. "It was Jula."

Allia gave him a surprised look. "Jula? But she is your friend!"

"She was lying," he hissed. "She was lying all along. They have to catch her, sister. I don't want to have to chase her across the West to kill her."

"Save that talk for when you are stronger, my brother," she told him. "You need to lay back down and sleep. Dolanna used a weave on you that will allow you to recover your strength much more quickly than usual, but even with that, it will take time. We didn't know if you would survive long enough to get you to safety. I have never seen you so wounded. It hurt me to see it."

"I don't know if I can," he told her in a small voice. "I'm afraid, Allia."

"Lay back," she said in a gentle, matronly voice, taking hold of him by his shoulders and helping him lay back down. "I will sing to you a song of peace, my dear brother, a song of peace and harmony, to soothe the whirling of your mind."

And then she began to sing, her rich, timbred voice raising in sweet melodies, singing a song of happiness and prosperity. Tarrin was captivated by the rich beauty of her voice, a voice that would charm the most savage monster, and he felt his fears and worries dissolve and blow away like sand upon the wind. She held his paw in her hands, and the feel of her touch, the sound of her voice, her spicy scent overpowering the smell of stone and polished wood, they all put him at ease. His every sense was overwhelmed by her closeness, and his utter trust and love he held for his tall, beautiful Selani sister allowed his mind to step down from his worries and fears and find nothing but sweet, rich harmony.

Such gentle thoughts faded by the time he was again awake.

Allia was giving him hot looks as he paced through the room, stretching himself out. He still felt somewhat weak, but he was more than strong enough to do what he had to do. He felt somewhere between sleep and awake, where his anger had been reduced to a hot spot in his mind, a mind that seemed curiously distant to him. He had no idea why, but it was allowing him to think somewhat clearly about what he had to do, and what had to be done.

He was still very angry, but he had a strange feeling of helplessness about it. He was angry, he was outraged...and yet, he didn't feel quite as angry as he actually was. It was an eerie feeling, almost bizarre, and he had no explanation for it. He suspected that the trauma he suffered at the hands of his bestial half had something to do with it, and at that moment, he really didn't mind all that much.

There would be a reckoning, and he preferred it not to be now.

"Take them off," she said in a dangerous voice.

"No," he replied flatly, ignoring her.

It was all about the manacles. They were still locked around his wrists, and he refused to remove them. They represented what had happened to him, and in a strange way, he feared to take them off, else he would forget what happened while he had them on. The memories of his actions were only just beginning to unravel from the confused mess of emotion and images knotted in his mind, a common effect after the Cat had taken control of him. It had happened before, but never quite so severely. Then again, he had never lost control of himself so utterly as he had earlier that day. It was still hazy, but the raw truth was that he had gone on a rampage, and a large number of people had died at his paws. That much he was certain of, but the specifics of it were still lost in the mists of his instincts.

"Take them off."

"I'm not going to take them off, Allia," he said bluntly, turning around. "Deal with it."

He found himself laying on the floor, with her knee in his back. "I said *take them off!*" she said harshly. "I cannot *stand* to see you with those things on your arms! Take them off *now!*"

"No," he said in a dangerous tone, getting up with her on top of him. His strength carried her up, until she was forced to back away or be tipped over. "Get used to it, sister, because I'm not taking them off."

"You are so dense!" she shouted at him. "Take them off!"

"No," he hissed, glaring at her. She gave him a startled look, then took a step back. Tarrin sighed, looking away from her. "I'm sorry, sister," he said contritely. "I just can't take them off."

"Alright, but we'll talk about that later," she said. "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm going back to the Tower," he told her. "My things are still there, and I'm going to catch up with the Keeper."

"I think I can live with that," she said. "What do you think we will do now?"

"Now? We run," Keritanima said as she opened the door. "It's good to see you up, brother."

"Kerri," he said with a smile. "Allia said you came to my rescue."

"You'd do the same for me," she said as she hugged him. "I don't think we're going back to the Tower. Not now. I've given myself away, and I wouldn't trust any of them."

"No, I don't think so," he said. "But I have no idea what to do now."

"Now, we get as far away from them as we can," Keritanima said. "Inland, or to the desert. One or the other."

"I don't have a problem with that," Tarrin agreed. "But first, I have a little visit to make there."

"What for?"

"I want my things, and I'm going to pay the Keeper a little visit," he said, flexing his claws in an ominous manner. "Jula too, if I can catch her."

"Tarrin, just drop it," Keritanima said. "They can't do anything more to you."

"This isn't about danger, this is about justice," Allia said. "They must pay for their crimes."

"Allia--"

"Don't try to stop me, brother," she said hotly. "What they have done to you is wrong. They must be punished for it."

"Allia, let me take care of it," he said.

"Tarrin, what you're talking about is dangerous. You don't just walk into the Keeper's room and smack her around."

"They'll never see me," he said in a grim tone.

"It's dangerous."

"I don't care."

"This isn't like you, Tarrin."

"No, it's not."

"Do not think to leave without me," Allia said hotly.

"Why don't both of you park it for a while?" Keritanima asked. "They're not going anywhere."

"Jula is," Tarrin said dangerously. "If I don't catch her before she gets away--"

"Tarrin, she's had *hours* to get away," Keritanima said. "She's already gone."

"I'm still going to try."

"Stubborn fool," she snapped, sitting on the bed. "I don't have any other brothers, and if you get yourself killed over something stupid, I'm never going to forgive you."

"I'll keep him safe, sister."

"You'll stay here," Tarrin told her. "I'll move faster alone, sister. For this, I *need* to be alone."

Allia glared hotly at him, but finally submitted to his steady gaze. "Alright, but be careful."

It was late in the evening, and Jula was terrified.

It didn't look it, but Jula was always one to be rather good at acting one way while feeling another. She moved with quick, smooth precision through the Tower, rushing back to her rooms after picking up some instructions from her superior. The Black Mistress had not been happy about the abysmal failure, but at least she didn't assign any blame to Jula. Jula had done her job, and done it well. That the Wikuni witch had somehow figured out a way to track down the Were-cat had been the ultimate in bad luck.

Just thinking of it both made her blood boil, and run cold. The Cathedral stronghold was one of the *ki'zadun's* oldest, largest, and strongest hidden bases. A thousand men and women were commonly within the passages, and those passages stretched out to every corner of Suld like a great spider's web. The only section of the city they avoided was the area around the Tower, and that was because many of the Sorcerers with special affinity for Earth would be able to detect the tunnels. That was why the blond Sorceress had had to lead Tarrin to the Cathedral, for it was the closest entry point into the complex from the Tower of Six Spires.

It was a complete loss. Irvon's death had only been the beginning, as Knights and Wikuni Marines used ropes to slide down the hole created by the Were-cat--she had never *dreamed* of feeling such *power!*--and had radiated out from it like a ripple spanning out from a drop into a pond. They killed or captured almost everyone inside the complex, who was still rocked back on their heels from the incredible savagery of the Were-cat's rampaging. Hundreds of years of work and planning had been destroyed in a single morning, and men that could not be replaced were either dead or captured. The entirety of the *ki-zadun's* operations in Suld had been compromised. Only the agents in Court and in the Tower had survived the sweep, because many of those tunnels opened up into the private residences of officers and ranking members of the Network. And what they had found in writing or records was even worse, for they exposed the operations of the Network in several other cities in Sulasia, the Stormhaven Isles, Shacè, and Tykarthia. The Network was large, it was powerful, and it was anywhere there were men and women of power.

Jula's name had somehow slipped through the sieve, but she wasn't one to take chances. So she was readying to leave. If anything, Tarrin was still out there, and he wasn't about to forget about her. Nobody knew where the

Knights had taken him, but wherever it was, she doubted he was still there now. His regeneration had probably restored him to mobility, and she had no doubt that she was probably at the top of his list of people to kill. The collar subdued his will, but not his memory. He knew who collared him, and judging by what he did to the people in the passages, she was taking no chances on any feelings of mercy he may be having.

Some of them made her physically sick. She had to admit, though, when Tarrin killed someone, they were *dead*.

Besides, with Suld compromised, all the remaining agents were scattering, in case their names did come up. Only a select few, like the Black Mistress, were remaining in place, mainly because their names wouldn't *appear* anywhere, and their positions were vital to Kravon to keep track of their enemies. Jula knew her identity, but she wasn't fool enough to repeat it. Besides, with her leaving, it was one less danger to the Mistress' position. Jula was very secure in that she would be allowed to live, for the *ki'zadun* had very few Sorcerers, and those that they did have were very important. She would be more useful somewhere else now, possibly Tor, Arkis, or maybe even Telluria. Somewhere warm. Jula was sick of cold.

She reached her room with a sigh of relief, and found everything where it was supposed to be. She was packing light, only personal keepsakes and a few dresses, and enough gold to get to Den Gauche. From there, she would travel to where they wanted her to go. Her single suitcase stood on a neatly made bed in the frugally appointed room, which was somewhat messy after her rush to prepare for her journey. The room was empty, and much to her relief, all she had to do was pick up her bag and go. She crossed the room, reaching out for her bag--

--and suddenly found herself face-first against the far wall, face throbbing and buised, a tremendous power holding her feet some half a span off the floor. By the neck. With only a slight chill through her, she realized who it was, and why he was there.

So close. She had been so close.

"I know much, Tarrin," she said in a calm, reasonable tone, making no attempt to resist. "I can tell you who's been trying to kill you, and who

ordered me to capture you. You can even go kill her, because she's right here in the Tower. All it will cost you is letting me live."

"That's too high a price to pay," he replied in a brutally cold tone.

She screamed only once, when those claws drove into her back. That scream turned into a ragged, stifled gasp when they hooked around her spine, just below her ribcage, and then ripped. She *felt* a section of her spine tearing free of her back, making a sickening sound like ripping of cloth, but it was a ripping of flesh and a snapping of bone and sinew. She could *feel* the hole it left behind, a hole so large that a child put his arm inside it, a hole that poured out her blood over legs that could no longer feel, could no longer move. The pain transformed into an icy coldness, a cold that warned her of her own impending death. Not from a blow from his paw, but from her lifeblood flowing out of her. Tarrin had opened her up like a fish, and now she was going to die slowly.

He threw her aside roughly, coldly, and she landed on her back, with a pool of blood forming around her. She looked at him, and saw nothing but pure, abject hatred. And a half a span of her own spine clutched his bloody paw. Her breath was coming in shallow, quick pants, and the cold spread up into the places where she could feel, the cold of the grave.

"That was for taking my freedom," he hissed. "If you survive, then consider us even."

He threw the grisly object in his hand down onto the floor, a trio of bloody pink bones with gray nerve dangling out of each end, and then he turned his back to her fearlessly and stalked away.

Shaking fingers reached into the pouch at her waist, fingers that fumbled open the flap. The cold was growing, growing, and her sight and clarity were fading with every beat of her heart. She heard him leave, knew that she had only precious moments before she would be dead, and only few seconds of rational thought before the cold within overwhelmed her.

Jula was a survivor. She had survived a long time, because she always understood the risks, and always planned for when those risks went bad.

Her trembling fingers pulled from the pouch a small glass vial, a vial filled with dark red blood. It was stoppered with wax to keep it from drying,

and the mark of death was etched plainly onto the side of it. The vial she stole at the same time that she stole the collar.

Not death. Life.

Biting through the stopper with chattering teeth, Jula let the blood flow into her mouth. She bit her own tongue and swirled it around in her mouth, letting that blood enter her bloodstream, then swallowed all of it. She put her head back as her tongue went numb, and then her stomach, and then they began to itch. Then to burn. That feeling began to radiate out from her tongue and stomach quickly, washing over her, even into areas left paralyzed by the destruction of her spine.

She gave out only a single ragged laugh as the tidal wave of pain swept over her, blasting away all conscious thought.

Myriam Lar was very upset.

She sat at her dressing table, brushing out her thick auburn hair staring at her own reflection absently.

Tarrin Kael was *gone*. The Knights had swept him up and spirited him away, and they wouldn't return him. Not only that, they had left the grounds and removed themselves to the chapterhouse. Darvon wouldn't say why, but the tone of his voice made it clear that he was mortally offended by something that the Tower did. She didn't know what they knew...because if they did, then they would be justified.

It still sickened her, but there had been no choice. At the time, they had only known of Allia when the plan was made. The Tower *needed* to be the ones to recover the Firestaff. There was no choice in the matter. Only in the hands of the *katzh-dashi* would the relic be safe from misuse. In the wrong hands, it could be disastrous. And soon it would reveal itself again to the world, following the five thousand year cycle of power that governed its operation. At the end of that cycle, or the beginning, it would reach its peak. And for one day and one day only, any who held it to the four joined moons could command its might, and bestow upon themselves the power of a God.

Not just any god. An Elder God, a truly immortal deity who would rival in power with the others of that most elite group. A god with no constraints,

with no bounds, existing outside the structured pantheon. The Elder Gods would be forced to rise up and deal with the usurper, and it would be a war that would destroy the world.

That couldn't be allowed to happen. The *katzh-dashi* would find it first, find it and keep it, securing it away until that day came and went, and it would be nothing but a useless curiosity for another five thousand years.

In this mad crusade, the *katzh-dashi* found themselves outnumbered and overwhelmed. Other groups, nations, kingdoms, they had more resources, and they already had a head start. The scramble to find the Firestaff, what some called the Questing Game, began more than a year ago, when a battered scroll was discovered in ruins in Sharadar, a scroll that hinted at the long-lost location of the Firestaff. It was written that it existed behind the wind, within the realm of eternal shadow, and guarded by a defender of power. The *Book of Ages* also mentioned the ancient artifact, a device with the power to destroy the world. It wrote that *Mi'Shara*, nonhuman noble-born Sorcerers, had the best chance of finding the artifact. But it also wrote that *anyone* who could find the Firestaff and either defeat or outwit its Guardian could gain ownership of it. A *Mi'Shara* simply had a better chance.

Mi'Shara were frightfully rare beings. When the choice was made to use a Were-creature to create one, there was only Allia, and there was a sincere fear among many in the Council that she would not be enough. So plans were made, and a Were-creature was located and captured for the task. The arts of Communing with the Goddess, to directly ask her questions of great importance, required High Sorcery. And even then the answers were usually very unreliable, either being too cryptic to comprehend or outright wrong, when she deigned to answer at all. The Goddess' unwillingness to lead her children had confounded Keeper and Council alike since the *katzh-dashi* had returned to the Tower, but in this case they had produced a good result. When asked if there was a human Sorcerer of noble blood to be found, the cryptic response led to Tarrin. He was the only noble-born Sorcerer they could find, an obscure villager in a long-forgotten corner of the kingdom, who was the son of an Ungardt princess. Dolanna was sent to perform the Test there, even though they already knew he had potential. She was also selected because she had made a study out of Were-creatures, both their

society and their physiology. If anyone could keep the fledgeling Were-cat sane, it was Dolanna.

They *needed* Tarrin, they needed him desperately. Keritanima had shown shocking potential, especially after she had absolutely stunned everyone by leading the quickly created alliance that attacked the Cathedral of Karas to get him back. She was not the spoiled, self-centered, immature brat that everyone thought her to be. Myriam had had the luck of being in Jervis' office, railing at him for his little activities the night before, when the news reached him. His jaw abosolutely *dropped* from his head. If Keritanima could fool Jervis, then that meant that she had all of Wikuna fooled as well. But where Keritanima showed incredible potential, control, and aptitude, she didn't have his raw power. Tarrin was a Weavespinner. A *Weavespinner*! That unprecedented power had not been present on the world since the time of the Ancients. If a *Weavespinner* couldn't challenge the fabled Guardian of the Firestaff and have a chance at victory, then Myriam couldn't think of anything that could. He was their best chance, and now he was out of their hands.

A dark shadow passed over the light flowing from the large window, closed against the winter chill, and Myriam found the breath to scream when something grabbed her by the back of her nightgown and pulled her out of her chair. The ceiling and floor traded places wildly until she found herself on her back on the floor, a knee on her pelvis and a huge, padded hand holding her by the throat. Two slits of intense green radiance marked the silhouette of a human figure, a figure with the other hand held up and away.

Not a human. A Were-cat!

"Tarrin, are you out of your--"

"Silence!" Tarrin snapped in a voice tight with fury. "I know the truth, Myriam! *You did this to me!*"

Myriam Lar, Keeper of the Six Spires, ruler of the *katzh-dashi*, one of the most powerful people in Sulasia, wet herself at that infuriated proclamation. But then again, few human beings could stare death in the face and not be affected in some way. Tarrin was infuriated, and his Were-

cat nature would not allow him to handle that fury in a very gentle or painless manner.

"You watched me, spied on me, let me go on here and suffer, and you never had the *nerve to tell me!* I should kill you for this! I want to kill you so bad that I can taste it! You *destroyed my life!*"

"What was done was done for the good of everyone," she said in a quavering voice, seeing her own death in those twin slits of unholy green fire. "It was not done without great need, Tarrin. We *need* you. We need you now more than any person, any kingdom, any civiliation, has needed someone before. And you can't do what you need to do unless you are what you are now. Yes, we changed you," she admitted in a tight voice, tight with terror. "But it was only because we had no other choice."

Tarrin grabbed at a bulge in her nightgown, then Myriam gasped in pain when he snapped the chain holding her *shaeram* around her neck. He held that gold amulet in his paw lightly. "I want to kill you so bad I can taste it, but that's not good enough." His paw suddenly exploded in white light, Magelight, and she felt him weave a spell into that amulet. He plunged the amulet down and pressed it against her chest, just under the collarbone on her right side, and she screamed in total, mindless pain. The amulet's gold burned into her skin, charring it, burning through and into muscle, even as the magic behind it burned into her soul.

When he relented, Myriam curled up into a defensive ball, crying and moaning, feeling the searing pain shudder through her with every beat of her heart. "I did that because there was no other choice," he hissed. "I'll never trust you again, Keeper. Know that. But also know that you have a traitor among you. If not for my need to keep others safe, I would kill you and be done with it. But their lives are in as much danger as yours, and it's all because of that.

"Jula collared me," he told her as she looked up at him. "She said someone ordered her to do it, someone here in the Tower. And it's a woman. I don't give a damn about you or the Tower, but I do care for those I'm leaving behind, and they're in danger so long as that traitor stays among you. I'm letting you live *only* because you're the only one that can keep my friends alive, Keeper. And if they die, then so will you."

"What happened to Jula?"

"I punished her for taking away my freedom," he said in a cold voice, a voice full of tightly controlled fury. "Just be glad I'm not doing the same to you. I should, but if I kill you, my friends will be in danger, and you'll just be replaced by people who will come after me. Now that you understand the consequences of chasing me down, I'm sure that you'll think twice about it. You have *no idea* what I'm capable of, Keeper. I'll raze all of Suld to the ground just to kill *you*. So leave me be, and I'll let you live. And every time you start to forget my warning, just reach up and touch your brand. It won't let you forget."

He stared down at her, then those slits of ominous radiance blinked. And then he was gone.

Choking, coughing, stifling a sob, Myriam Lar, Keeper of the *katzhdashi*, rolled to her knees, clutching her chest. The brand was throbbing, pulsing with pain, and she could feel its shape. It was a perfect brand of a *shaeram*. She rose up while supporting herself with her other hand and vomited, reaction to the fear, the shock, and the pain.

It was survival, but it was also doom. Without Tarrin, the entire world was in danger.

And there was nothing that she could do about it.

Entering the courtyard perhaps for the last time, Tarrin stared around the majestic scene, his heart heavy and his soul dimmed. He hated doing things like that, but it there really wasn't a choice. Getting Jula had been absolutely vital. He wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing she was out there, with her collar, waiting for him again. The Keeper too had suffered for her crimes, and even now he regretted not just ending her, or even not being more thorough with the punishment. But to kill like that mortified his human soul, even as the memory of what he had done had begun to return, memories that horrified him so deeply that he couldn't even express it in words. It had shocked him into a strange feeling of disassociation with himself, where what he had done seemed to be someone else, and it drowned out anything he may be feeling other than his anger for those who had wronged him.

If there was anywhere he would go, it would be the courtyard. The fountain still splashed its melody of nature, and the statue of the Goddess still stood atop it, all stone and water but also beauty and warmth. But he couldn't feel those things, could barely feel anything other than a numbness to his emotions, a blanket laid over his mind that only allowed the fire of his anger to bleed through. The statue's expression was melancholy, as if she could feel his pain, and would join in his suffering. The tent still stood to the side, where he and his sisters and sat and studied night after night, where he had gotten to know Miranda, where he had started to feel that there was hope for them all.

In a way, now there was. He was not going to stay there. Suld was dead to him now, and he had to leave. They planned to go to the desert, to beg sanctuary from Allia's clan. It was as good a place as any. Tarrin felt a distinct lack of interest in wherever his sisters decided to go. He would be with them, but it no longer mattered to him. Very little did, now that his unfinished business was no longer unfinished.

Things had come undone. Keritanima's secret was out. She had commanded the host that reclaimed him, and now everyone knew that she was much smarter than she appeared to be. Allia had almost become unhinged by his abduction, and it had taken some serious talking to convince her to let him handle the vengeance. Vengeance was an important business to the Selani. No crime went without a justifiable punishment. The Knights were leaving the grounds, breaking away from the *katz-dashi* over what they had done to him. The Cathedral had been purged, and it left precious few priests afterward to care for it and the congregation. The entire city was under martial law, as the King sent out his army to reclaim control of the streets after the fighting touched off a riot in the Market Quarter. It was a chaotic mess, but it was something that barely captured his attention. It was as if he had switched himself off, shutting down the parts of himself that felt or reacted to feelings. The only thing that came through that was anger, a towering, seething fury that demanded for those who hurt him to suffer in kind.

It will pass, my kitten, the voice of the Goddess called to him. *Like all things.*

"Goddess," he said in a calm, defensive voice. "You knew."

I knew, she admitted.

"Why didn't you tell me!" he shouted suddenly, rushing up to the statue. He fell to his knees by the lip of the fountain's pool, and the water inexplicably stopped pouring from the fountain's upper layer. He thrust his paws out at that statue, manacles on his wrists, showing them to her. "I deserved to know that they did *this* to me!"

Yes, you did, she agreed. But why I didn't tell you is exactly why you are here now. Does branding the Keeper change what has happened? Did crippling Jula make your pain any less?

"She *betrayed* me!" he screamed.

And you betray yourself by reducing yourself to her level, she replied sadly. You are a dry branch in a bonfire, my kitten. Your instability makes you dangerous, so I did not tell you. I would not tell you, even if I could have. If only for the sake of those around you.

There was no way he could refute that. If he had known the truth earlier, he probably would have lashed out and killed the entire Council. And that would have made things very, very messy for him and his sisters.

Things have come to you of their own volition, kitten, she said in a gentle voice. These were things that I couldn't tell you, because they would have interfered with the choices that you have made. And it is time for you to make them.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, curiosity overwhelming the anger he was starting to feel against the Goddess.

You have an understanding of what is going on now, she explained. It is time for you to choose where you are going to stand within it.

"What do you mean? Is this about that Firestaff thing?"

Of course it is, my kitten, she replied. Right now, that is the most important thing in the world.

"What is it, Goddess?"

The Firestaff is an ancient artifact, kitten, from a time before the Blood War. It was created so long ago that there is nothing left of those who made it, and all history of them has been lost over the ages. It holds the power of

creation inside it, an echo of the power that Ayise used when she created the world. If someone were to hold that staff on a certain day, and at a certain time, that power would be imbued upon the holder, and he would become a god. That day comes every five thousand years. And that day is approaching us soon, my kitten. Right now, half of the people on Sennadar are scrambling to find that staff, dreaming of immortality and godhood. But most of them don't realize the terrible price that they'll have to pay, and the damage it will do to the world.

"What do you mean?"

Tarrin, that power will exist outside of our rules, and that means that the new god will have no constraints. Ayise will be powerless to stop him, because he will not be one of her children. We will have to rise up and destroy the invader, because his very existence will threaten the Balance. Tarrin, my kitten, such a war would make the Blood War look like a skirmish. It would destroy every nation in the world, and send Sennadar hurtling back into the stone age.

Tarrin's eyes widened, and he gaped up at the statue.

Can you imagine what horror that would bring to the world? It's not something that we Gods relish, believe me. But we could avoid all of it, my kitten. If someone trustworthy were to find the Firestaff and keep it away from everyone else, that day could come and go without anything drastic happening. It would be harmless for the next five thousand years, and the world would continue on as it has been.

"Me," he breathed.

You, she agreed. The katzh-dashi created you, literally, to find the Firestaff. You represent their best chance to locate it. Myriam Lar intends to lock it away, but as you saw, the Tower is not a secure place. I can't trust my order to take care of it, my kitten. So that leaves me with you.

It is much to ask of you, Tarrin, she said sadly. All you want is to live in peace. I know it, and it pains me to ask anything more of you. You've suffered enough. And, to be honest, that is something that you can do. You could leave here and return to Aldreth, or go to the forest, and live in peace. But if someone gets the Firestaff and uses it, then your peace won't last. I can't say one way or the other what would happen if you don't do this for

me, my kitten. Things could turn out alright, but they also could not. I'm not one to sit around and trust to blind luck.

I can't trust my own order now. Believe me, Tarrin, I had no idea they managed to infiltrate my Sorcerers so thoroughly. I have you, and you represent everything I always tried to endear in my children. But I also know that I can't force you to do anything. I can only ask you. It's not something I would ask lightly, my sweet child. It will be a dangerous road, and its outcome is uncertain. There is a very good chance that you won't live to see the end of it. But of all those who seek the Firestaff, you, Tarrin Kael, Mi'Shara, you have the best chance to succeed.

Would you be my champion, Tarrin Kael? Would you seek out what must be sought, and protect it from those who would use it to harm our world? Would you take up my quest? Or will you return to the forest, or seek shelter among the Selani? Either way, I will still love you. Your decision, your choice, it is your own, and either way, I will support it. But there comes a time, my kitten, when the needs of an individual are outweighed by the needs of the many.

It is this choice that I have been preparing you to make, Tarrin. You must choose between danger and safety, pain and tranquility. Mine is the longer road, full of danger and sharp corners, but at least its ending is much more certain than the much easier path.

"But why *me*?" he asked plaintively. "Why give such trust to me? I don't even trust myself!"

Think about it, she replied. What does being a god represent to a mortal? It represents immortality, and it represents power. Tarrin, my sweet kitten, you already have both. What more would being a god bring to you? I know your heart, my kitten. Such things are not what you desire. All you want out of life now is a small cottage in the forest, where you can simply live. Of all the mortal-kin on Sennadar, you have the least ambition to such a lofty position, and that makes you the most dependable of them all.

Tarrin couldn't refute such simple logic. And she was right. Tarrin had no desire for such power. All he wanted to do was find somewhere nice and secluded, and just *live*.

He lowered his head, staring into the water, his mind lost in deep thought. He was torn between his Were impulse to run into the forest and be free, and his sincere love for and sense of duty towards his mysterious deity. She was giving him a choice, a choice between what he *wanted* to do and what she *needed* him to do. Either way, he would leave with her blessing. He had already suffered a great deal, and the Goddess made no guarantees that he wouldn't suffer more. He may even die. He would be risking his life for something that seemed intangible to him, a fairy tale lost in the mists of antiquity. But the consequences of his inactivity had been plainly spelled out. If he did nothing, then there was a good chance that the entire world would suffer. He didn't *want* any of this. All he wanted to do was be free. But agreeing to this would restrain his freedom yet again, place him in the yoke of yet another master. It went against his nature, just as much as doing nothing went against his human ideals. He was torn within himself, caught between his Were instincts and his human ethics, and neither was strong enough to overcome the other.

He remembered Miranda's words, a fleeting memory fluttering before him. *Sometimes, what one person wants or needs is overshadowed by what others need of them.*

And before his eyes, he could only see Janette, his little mother, and before her stretched a future of frightening ambiguity. She was so young, so young, and her life could be changed, or ended, by the decision that he made.

In the end, there really was no choice.

"I will," he said in a quiet voice.

The statue suddenly began to glow, and its eyes became incandescent. *You won't be sorry, my kitten,* she said in a delighted voice. *There are rewards, you know. I wasn't allowed to offer them to you as enticement. It had to be a choice made unswayed by promises of reward.*

Tarrin ignored that. He wasn't very happy about it. But he would do it. She *was* his Goddess, after all, and he would do what she asked. If only *because* she asked. "What do I do?"

I can't give you any direct help, Tarrin, she warned. *To do so would upset the rules.*

"Rules? What rules?"

Tarrin, you are not the only champion of a God playing this game, she warned. There are some Younger Gods who would risk destruction to gain that staff, because it would add to their power. They are forbidden from directly aiding their mortal champions, just as I am forbidden from aiding you. All I can tell you is that the first step to finding the Firestaff is to find the Book of Ages.

"But that's been missing for centuries!" he said helplessly.

Yes, but you already know where it is, my kitten, she said impishly. There are only three cities with libraries extensive enough to hold such a prized tome. And you can rule two of them out.

Extensive libraries? There were indeed three cities highly reputed for their libraries. One was the Library of the *katzh-dashi*, in Suld. Another was the *Cathedral of Knowledge*, which was in Sharadar. The third was the Imperial Library in Dala Yar Arak. It certainly wasn't in Suld, but how could he rule one of the other two cities out?

The Tower! Dolanna said that the Sorcerers in Sharadar had their own Tower! If the book was there, *they* would have found it, and let the *katzh-dashi* know!

"Arak?" he said uncertainly.

Don't ask me, she said in a light voice. I'm not allowed to tell you. I wouldn't be allowed to agree with you either, if I thought it was a question. But I would be allowed to agree with you if it was a statement made in sincere belief.

"It has to be," he said. "There are Sorcerers in the other two cities."

I do believe that you're right, she said with a silvery laugh.

Dala Yar Arak. The largest city in the Known World, home to *millions* of people. Capital of the largest, most powerful, and most feared empire on the face of Sennadar.

He had to comb the largest city in the world and find a single book. It defined an impossible task.

"You're not making this easy for me to take, Goddess," he said with a grunt.

She laughed. *It's why it's a quest, my kitten. If it were easy, it would be called an errand.*

"I guess so."

Remember that you're not alone, kitten, she warned. You're only one player among many, in a game of quests. You're all racing for the same prize, and only one of you can have it. You have an advantage over them, my kitten, but remember that getting the prize and keeping the prize after you get it are two different things. The Questing Game has already begun, and there are players ahead of you, as well as behind. Keep both eyes open, and trust in your friends. They will be there for you when you need them.

There was a short silence. *I know that this only adds on to an already eventful day and night, my kitten, but I had no more time. Think about things for me, and know that one can always find forgiveness outside before he can find it within himself. Take comfort in that forgiveness, and let it help you find it within yourself.*

"Can I let them know?"

Of course, she replied. They are players as much as you. But when you go, there are five people that you absolutely must take with you. Without them, your chance to succeed is greatly diminished.

"Who?"

Allia, for one, she replied. Without your sister, you would be lost. You would not be a complete family without Keritanima, and trust me, having her Royal Highness' pedigree to throw around could be a tremendous advantage for you. You also need Dolanna, because she is the only one who can soothe you and help you deal with what you are. You need Azakar, for his strength and his lineage, and you will need Dar.

"Dar? Why Dar?"

Not everyone is as valuable as he appears, my kitten, she replied. Dar has qualities that you overlook.

"What about the others?"

Others will certainly join you, my kitten, and you should always welcome friends, she told him. But those five I named, their unique skills and attributes will be a very great boon to you.

"What do I do with them?"

Well, you can start by getting yourself to Dala Yar Arak, she said impishly. What you do when you get there is up to you. But it would be best to get there first, wouldn't it?

"I guess," he sighed. He had thrown off one yoke, and had just taken on another. But at least this driver he could tolerate. His faith in the Goddess was the *only* reason he could allow it. "I'll find your Firestaff, Goddess, and then I'll make sure *nobody* can get their hands on it. Then I can be free."

You will be free, she promised, and you will be happy. I will make sure of that. But right now, time is wasting, my kitten. You have to go.

He nodded. "What about the tent?"

I will keep watch over it. You never know, you may come back here some day. I'll make sure that the books are here waiting for you if you do.

He felt...ridiculous. Why was he doing this? He had his freedom in his paws, and he was throwing it away. But it would be an empty freedom, a freedom with a dark cloud hanging over it. If someone else found that strange artifact and used it, it could destroy everything. Tarrin could endure being in thrall to the Goddess, mainly because he was one of the few people he would trust. He felt that she did indeed love him, and that working for her would be a mutually respectful relationship. He was nobody to go on some mad quest. He was a village boy who had started with dreams of Knighthood, and now only had dreams of tranquility. But galavanting off on some search for a lost artifact had never crossed his mind.

Standing up, he stared up at the statue. He wondered when he wouldn't feel numb anymore, and how he would feel about this when he didn't. How he would feel about a lot of things. He was still operating in a daze of sorts, an unfeeling state of mind that only allowed his grim tasks of payback to be considered. It was a heightened state of unfeeling, and the Cat had a lot to do with it. He stared at the statue for a very long moment, her words echoing in his mind, her choice stretching out before him like a road laced with broken glass.

But there really was no other choice. His little mother was depending on him to make her world safe, and it was something that needed to be done. He wouldn't trust an artifact of that kind of power in anyone else's hands. He would find it, and when he found it, he would *destroy* it.

It would never threaten the world again. Because he could possibly be alive the next time the Firestaff threatened the balance of life on Sennadar.

Bowing his head, he turned and left the statue, slipping back into the dark foliage that concealed the courtyard from the outside world. Where it was bitterly cold that night elsewhere, in the courtyard and the gardens it was warm and pleasant. But a cold wind emanated from the statue, a cold wind that permeated the maze, filtered out into the gardens, creeping through the gardens and giving the flowers and fruit trees and plants an unknown shock. Not enough to kill, but more than enough to make them close up in defense against the chill, protect themselves from that induced cold. The cold did gather around the tent holding the pilfered books and scrolls, coalescing around it like moths to a flame, and then shimmering into a clear dome of the finest crystal. To protect what was within against the rain, to protect the paper against the marching of time's inexorable advance, to defend against fading and having the parchment turn brittle in the dry protection of the dome.

And then the courtyard fell dark, as the light emanating from the statue faded. The expression on the face of that delicate stone maiden was stoic, resolute, like a traveller heading down the road leading home. A long and twisting road, full of bandits and uncertainty, but with something good at the end of it to make the journey worthwhile.

And the tent with its cache of books stood, books not truly read in all the excitement over finding the tutorial for learning the Sha'Kar language, books penned a thousand years ago and more, holding lore and information lost to the world. They sat in their dark chests, protected from the marching of time by the Goddess' dome, sheltered from the rain, cradled like children in the arms of a loving mother.

Waiting.

"*Tarrin!*" Dar protested as the Were-cat dragged him through the streets of Suld on a bitterly cold, crystal-clear night.

The trip back into the Tower was important for more than one reason. Tarrin swung by his room and picked up all his things, since the Council hadn't thought to clean it out yet. His staff was important to him, and he wanted it back. He had it, along with all his traveling leathers--he would never wear Initiate colors again!--and his personal effects. After that, he had picked up Dar, literally, grabbing his personal chest in one paw and Dar in the other, and carrying the blanket-wrapped Arkisian right out of the Tower. He had the sense not to raise a fuss on the grounds, but when Tarrin used his formidable magic to breach the Weave, suffering a horrible backlash for his efforts, Dar found his objections voiced after they were out of the Tower's earshot.

"I lost my blanket and I'm *cold!*" he protested. "Put me down!"

Tarrin stopped and lightly set him on his feet, looking at him. He was hopping from bare foot to bare foot to protect them against the biting cold of the flagstones, and his teeth were chattering. He was dressed only in a nightshirt, and it wavered with the cold wind and caused his dark skin to prickle with goosebumps.

"I'm sorry," he said calmly, putting down the chest and opening it. "Let's get you dressed."

"What in the world are you doing, Tarrin?" Dar demanded. "You could have just *asked* me to come with you!"

"I wanted it to look exactly like what it was, Dar," he said calmly. "An abduction. I'm stealing you."

Dar gave him a look, then laughed. "I'm not worth *that* much, my friend."

"You are to me," he said, handing Dar a pair of wool breeches. Dar literally jumped into them, then stepped into the leather shoes he kept at the bottom of the chest, which Tarrin had removed for him. "I need your help."

"Doing what?"

"I found out what the Tower wanted from me," he said in a neutral voice. "I also heard it from the Goddess herself. I, I have something I have

to do. So I'm going on a trip. I need your help, Dar. The Goddess said you know things that are important."

"Me? Why me?"

"I have no idea," he replied honestly. "But I need your help."

"Where are we going?"

"Right now, Yar Arak. From there, I don't know."

"*Yar Arak!*"

Tarrin nodded. "I'll explain it all when I get back to the chapterhouse with you," he said. "I only want to have to go through it once. Even I don't understand why I'm doing it."

"What are we doing?" Dar said plaintively.

They were all there. Darvon, Ulger, and Azakar sat with Faalken at a table in the chapterhouse's main study, a place for the prefect of the chapterhouse to receive guests. Keritanima and Allia sat on a sofa near the fire with Binter and Sisska standing at its ends in protection of the Princess, and Dolanna and Miranda sat on the sofa flanking it. Dar sat on a chair with his back to the fire, a heavy cloak around him as he warmed himself after his bitterly cold journey through Suld. The study was large and decorated richly to impress guests, with a rug from the East gracing the floor, and shields and banners from Knights of fame and history decorating the walls. A long, rich history of brave men and great warriors were represented on those walls, and it was every Knight's dream to be placed among such august names as Arymin, Luthor, Arthos, Beremos, Haldar, Pargen the Crusader, and the most famous and legendary Knight of them all, Marcus Lightblade. There were others there as well, others that Tarrin needed to talk to. Tomas and Janine had been summoned to the chapterhouse, and they sat uncertainly on a pair of chairs placed for them beside Dar. The only Sorcerer left in the Tower that Tarrin trusted, Sevren, sat on the other side of Dar, wrapped in a thick cloak himself, after just arriving in answer to the summons.

They were all still put out with him. He had left with no warning, and only Allia and Keritanima had known he left. And they didn't tell anyone.

He had to calm them all down by the time he returned with Dar, getting cool, displeased looks from Dolanna and Miranda. But it was something he had to do alone.

He recanted the events of the night, his dispatching of Jula, and the branding and warning he gave to the Keeper, then he went on to his life-shattering encounter with the Goddess. "I have no idea what I've gotten myself into," he said after finally explaining what it was the Goddess wanted him to do. "Every instinct I have is screaming at me to run into the forest and disappear, but I can't. Not knowing what I know now."

Sevren looked very thoughtful, and Dolanna's eyes were a bit haunted. "I never dreamed the Council would go so far," he said quietly, scratching his narrow goatee. "But on the other hand, if they felt that the circumstances were truly dire, it shouldn't be a surprise."

Tarrin nodded. "I think that's one reason why I went so easy on the Keeper. I should have killed her. But whoever has been trying to kill me has an agent in the Tower, and I don't relish letting that continue. I may reject the Tower, but I *am* a Sorcerer. I have friends there, like you, Sevren, and I can't just let this enemy run loose. She may have someone I care for killed, just to spite me."

"It won't be easy to expose her," he said. "The only one with the kinds of resources we'd need to expose her would be Ahiriya, but she can't be trusted."

"Why not?" Darvon asked.

"Because the traitor is a *woman*," Miranda said calmly. "Any woman in the Tower is a suspect, no matter what position she holds. But I can narrow it down for you, Sevren."

"I'm listening."

"You're looking for someone in a position of authority," she told him. "It doesn't have to be an office, only an experienced Sorceress with ties in the Tower and respect, but someone in an official office would have a better chance at remaining undiscovered. She'll be careful and meticulous, and may have mannerisms that mirror that part of her personality. Look for someone who is compulsively neat, and always preens herself to look her best in any situation. She'll also be very careful, and most likely will

eliminate anyone she feels is getting close to her. So I can't stress how carefully anyone searching for her will have to tread."

"That does not excuse them for turning Tarrin Were," Allia said savagely. "They still must be punished. Among my people, an eye for an eye is our motto. Tarrin should have bitten her."

"No," he said with a shudder. "I will *never* put someone else through what I've gone through, sister. There are some punishments that are too severe."

"But this does open things," Dolanna said. "I have heard the story of the Firestaff. If the time of its activation is indeed drawing close, it explains the chaos I have seen over the last few months. Anyone with knowledge of the legend will be trying to find it. If it is dangerous as Tarrin says, then we cannot allow it to be used. A war between gods would devastate the world." She looked at him. "I cannot help but feel partially responsible for all this. But that is not the reason I will go with you, my dear one. You are a friend, and you have been charged by the Goddess for a task. I will support you, for I too am a true child of the Goddess. What she wills is what I support. I dare believe that she has given us *all* a choice, else she would have directly ordered us to go. In my case, my choice is with you."

"Count me in," Azakar said. "Tarrin is my Sorcerer. I can't protect him if I'm not near him. I don't much like the idea of having to go back to Yar Arak, but I have my duty."

"I don't think I want to go back to the Tower after what I just heard," Dar said with a shudder. "If Dolanna will teach me, I'll go with you. That way I don't miss anything."

Tarrin looked at Allia. "Brother, my place is always by your side," she smiled. "So long as we can continue together, I do not care where we go."

"Kerri?"

She gave him a fuming look. "This is *not* what I wanted to do to get away from my father, Tarrin," she snapped at him. "Going to Yar Arak means a ship, and that's my father's domain. It'll be suicide. But if Allia is going for this insanity, I guess I don't have much of a leg to stand on."

"My place is at her Highness' side," Miranda said calmly. "I hope you have room for me."

"I can help you in that regard," Tomas spoke up. "The *Star of Jerod* is in port right now, being loaded for a trip to the Stormhavens. They had a poor harvest, and Queen Derienne has been buying up food for her people to live out the winter, and she's paying a sum that makes braving the ice worth the risk. After dropping that off, they're travelling to Den Gauche, and then on to Dayisè to pick up goods that'll be brought back up in the spring. I can arrange for a few cabins to be left available. When you get to Dayisè, you can find a ship going anywhere in the world."

"I really appreciate that, Tomas," Tarrin told him sincerely.

"Brother, you are driving me crazy," Allia said finally.

"What?"

"Take those things off!" she demanded.

Tarrin looked down at his arms, at the heavy manacles on his wrists. And when he saw them, his eyes turned hard. "No," he said grimly. "They aren't coming off."

She gave him a hot look, a look that promised that she was far from done, but said nothing further on the matter.

"So, we go to Yar Arak," Faalken said. "I've always wanted to go there."

"It's not what you imagine," Azakar said with a sharp closing of his eyes.

"It will make finding a pearl in a barrel of beads an easy task in comparison," Dolanna sighed. "Dala Yar Arak is the largest city in the world. To find a single book there will be an impossible task."

"And we won't be the only ones looking," Miranda reminded in a calm tone. "We may have to take it from someone else who finds it first."

"Yes," Dolanna agreed.

Tarrin looked down, his curious numbness beginning to wear thin. He would have to face what he had done, very soon. And now he had an extra

burden to bear over and above the stark truth of what he had done, what he had become.

What he *was*.

"I can't thank you enough," he said. "I don't really know how to do this. I'm no crusader or hero. I'm nothing like that. I'm just a villager."

"Tarrin, everyone comes from somewhere," Faalken said with a smile. "Trust me. If your Goddess didn't think you could do it, she wouldn't have asked you."

"You will not be alone, young one," Dolanna smiled. "We will be here to help you, no matter the circumstances."

"If you're going on my ship, you have to get ready," Tomas said. "It leaves at dawn. Captain Kern won't wait around."

"Yes, we should prepare. Do we have monies for an extended trip?"

"The Knights will open the coffers for you, Dolanna," Darvon told her. "I think we can support the activities of Knights sanctioned by the Lord General. You'll leave with enough to get you to Yar Arak and back in comfort." He leaned forward. "And while you're gone, I think the Knights will start entrenching themselves in the city. If Erick is trying for the Firestaff, we may want to be in a position to stop him if he actually manages to get his hands on it."

"Darvon, that is treason!" Faalken gasped.

"It'll be worse if that ass *uses* it," Darvon growled. "Erick doesn't make a very good king. He'd be a horrible god. The Knights are sworn to uphold the land, not her ruler. If Sulasia is better served by getting rid of Erick, then it's the duty of the Order to carry through with it." He looked at Tarrin. "And this city will always be open to you, Tarrin. You're a Knight, and we are all One Under Karas. We'll always be here for you if you need us. Just call."

"That makes me very very secure, Lord General," Tarrin told him. "If not for you, I'd still be imprisoned. I can't ever pay you back for that."

"You don't have to. The Knights look after their own."

"I'll do what I can for the Tower, Darvon," Sevren said. "Koran Dar is a friend of mine. I'm a little mad at him for agreeing to what they did to Tarrin, but I'll have a little talk with him. So please don't burn your bridges with the *kazth-dashi* just yet."

"I won't," Darvon agreed. "But until we feel that the Tower is secure, we won't be there, and no Knight will escort any female Sorcerer. You'll have to come here to talk with us."

"That's good enough," Sevren agreed. "Could I borrow Ulger and Kelliver for a few rides?"

"What do you need me for, Sevren?" Ulger asked.

"I think it's time that we took a little trip," he said. "We're going to the Tykarthian border."

"What's there?"

"The Citadel of the Hill," he said cryptically.

"So?"

"So, the Citadel has a complement of Sorcerers there," he said. "It's part of the treaty the *kazth-dashi* have with the Crown that ten Sorcerers be present at the four Citadels that defend Sulasia's borders. The Citadel of the Hill is the closest one, so we need to ride up there and have a talk with the *kazth-dashi* pulling a yearly rotation. I think they'll be more trustworthy than the ones at the Tower, and we may need their help. I'll have Koran Dar write a letter ordering them to return, and that will give us ten more trustworthy people to help us in the Tower."

"That is a good idea," Darvon said. "Ulger, you and Kelliver better get some warm clothes. It's going to be a frosty ride."

"Why ride?" Tomas asked. "I'll have the *Tenspan* sail them up there. That should cut a ride off the trip."

"But the ice--" Darvon began to object.

"The *Tenspan* is a raker, Lord General," Tomas told him. "It will have no trouble getting up there."

"I thank you, Tomas," Darvon said. "This is much more than we would have asked of anyone."

"I may be a merchant, but I'm also a Sulasian, Lord General," Tomas said. "I think that Sulasia needs us right now."

"Well said," Ulger agreed. "I'll go fetch Kelliver, Lord General. We need to start getting ready."

"Good idea," he agreed, and the Knight stood, nodded to Tarrin, and then exited the study. "I think it's time for all of us to start getting ready," he announced. "You all have a trip to take, and Tomas, Sevren, and I have a lot to do. Let's go start getting ready."

Tarrin felt curiously alone after they broke up and began returning to their rooms, to pack away their belongings and prepare. But for what he felt, there was no one to confide in. Allia would justify his actions, and Keritanima wouldn't care either way. But they didn't have to live with the terrible truth. A truth that had only just begun to impact him.

He had killed *hundreds* of people, with his bare paws. Without mercy. Some of them had been defenseless. He had turned into the monster he always feared he would become, and he knew that it could--no, it *would*--happen again. There was no way he could stop it, nothing he could do to prevent it. The next time he felt that threatened, he would snap, and the monster within would be unleashed. And now that he had agreed to this mad task for the Goddess, he knew he would be put in a position Goddess knew how many times where he would lose control. As the memories of his acts began to return, he began to fear himself more and more, fear what he was capable of doing. Once, he nearly killed his own mother. He feared for those around him, fearing that they too would find themselves at the points of his claws. That one thought was enough to send his mind whirling in dread, and he realized then that the tenuous balance he had found within himself had been destroyed. He was teetering on a razor's edge. Madness waited on one side, and turning into an emotionless monster waited on the other. He had thought that he had mastered that danger, had understood the Cat within him and found a harmony with it.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Madness was a very real threat to him, as was turning vicious. He dimly knew that that had already begun. He was turning Feral, and though he didn't understand the full truth of that name, that condition, he knew it was starting to happen to him. It didn't seem much of a life. Live insane, or live in fear and anger of everyone around him, without love or trust of anyone or anything. That in itself would drive him mad.

But he had a job to do. He promised the Goddess he would do it, and Were-cats didn't lie. He would try. He was a very unwilling participant in this game of hers, but there was too much at stake for him not to do anything. He had no idea what lay in store for him out there, in the large, dangerous world, but there was only one thing he cared about.

The Firestaff.

When he found it, he would destroy it, and then he could live in peace.

Peace was all that mattered.

He just hoped he would still be sane by the time he got there.

Tarrin left the study, his mind full, his heart heavy, and his future uncertain. But there was only one certainty left within him, one guarantee laying clearly before his path.

His fight for survival, for sanity, for his future, had only begun.

The night was cold, and it was starting to lean towards morning.

The *Star of Jerod* was an old ship, a galleon of Shacèan build, patched and with pitted paint and an aged feel that hinted at how much activity the old girl had seen in her time. She was moored up to a stone quay near the end of the long line of piers, on a private quay owned by Tomas and his merchant company. The place was relatively isolated, and that allowed them to board the ship without much fear of interference, even though activity could be seen on other docks and quays not far away.

Tarrin looked up at the old ship with a bit of uncertainty. He had never been on a ship larger than a riverboat before, and his old fear of how strangers would react to him had begun to gnaw at his mind. But it was Allia who showed the strongest reaction, staring at the ship in wide-eyed

fear, and glancing at the cold water of the harbor like it was a live snake. Allia had a fear of water, a fear born of her desert-born background, and for her, it was a supreme act of will to put her foot on the gangplank.

He looked back on the city. It was a city he really had never known. He had never really walked through it during the day, and every time he had ventured out, he had always been hiding, sneaking, or running. The Tower's seven towers rose up on their gentle hill near the center of the city, a stark reminder of what he was leaving, what had happened to him. It was his past, a past of pain and uncertainty, full of fear and foreboding. But there had been good times. There had been laughter and love, passion and terror, pain and joy. There had been tension, and there had been days spent in carefree companionship with his sisters. It had been good and bad, and though his mind wanted to dwell on the negatives, on how he felt at that moment, he couldn't look back at the Tower and say that every memory from it was a bad one. It was where he met Allia, where he met Keritanima, and where he had learned about the Goddess. It had dominated his life for the last few months, both as an object to attain, a place to live, and an institution to fear.

It was the Tower of Sorcery, and it had become part of him. Both the good and the bad, to mirror the dichotomous aspects of his own existence.

And now it was behind him. What had happened to him there had jaded him against the *katzh-dashi*...he would never trust them again. What had happened to him had changed him, in many ways, not all of them for the good. He could no longer look back on the Tower, look up to the Tower, take comfort in the Tower, or rage against the Tower. There was only him, his Goddess, his sisters, his friends, and the dangerous mission upon which they were about to embark.

Whatever happened now, he was on his own.

Tomas and Janine stood at the head of the gangplank. The others were already aboard, and Sevren had already returned to the Tower. The pair looked up at him with love in their eyes, and he couldn't look at them without both fear of himself and a profound respect for them. They had really been there for him, for his family, and he truly loved them like his own.

"I'm sorry I've been such a pain, Tomas," he said contritely, scrubbing the back of his head with a paw.

"Nonsense," he smiled. "Now get on the boat. The others are waiting for you."

He gave Tomas a rough hug, then he took Janine in his arms and squeezed her gently. "I'll miss you. Take care of my little mother for me."

"Always," she said, leaning up and kissing him on the cheek. "Now go on. Time is wasting."

With a last look at them, he nodded, then walked up the gangplank. Time was indeed wasting.

The battered old ship slipped its hawsers and drifted away from the dock with the receding tide, heading out towards the open sea. The crew quickly and efficiently raised the sails, and the grand old lady swooped into life, cutting the gently rolling waves as it ventured out into the world beyond the safety of everything he had known.

Tarrin stood at the bow, staring out over that vast expanse of water, with Allia under one arm and Keritanima on the other, as they simply enjoyed each other's company. It was a journey of unknowns, and a journey of danger. But before he could face what he had to do, he had to face what he had already done. That reckoning was coming. And soon. He wouldn't feel like he did forever. But with his sisters near him, he felt that he had a chance to come to terms with the horrible things he had done. Things still looked uncertain, even grim, but he couldn't allow his own uncertainty to drag him down.

He had to be strong. The Goddess was depending on him.

The sun peeked over the land behind, lighting the way for the tough old ship as she plied her way into the Sea of Storms, left Suld behind and embarked on another journey.

For the old ship, every journey was an adventure. And this one would prove to be no different.

Epilogue

The battlements of Castle Keening were mysteriously quiet, the ever-present wind that gave the high fortress its name in a rare respite. The cause of this calm was unnatural, and the night itself seemed to sense this. It was as if the night, and nature, had recoiled from the grim fortress, pulling away so as not to be corrupted by what was transpiring within.

The symbol inlaid into the floor was decorated with mother-of-pearl and gold, and it represented the three mystical forms of protection for Wizardy. A pentagram rested within a concentric circle, which was itself contained inside a thaumaturgic triangle. The threefold defense was necessary for the conjuring of the most powerful forms of extra-dimensional entities, such as Demons, for the power of only one was pitifully inadequate to contain such mighty entities. Nine Wizards stood within the large chamber, illuminated by a trio of braziers at the points of the triangle, three to a side of the triangle and with hand upraised from their voluminous black robes. They chanted in a discordant, ugly language, but the harmony of their speaking gave the chant an eerie choral quality that reverberated from the walls. Kravon stood at the center of the side considered to be the strongest of the triangle, his arms down, though his voice was raised with the others in their chanting.

Two burly, mailed guards dragged a third man into the chamber, a large, muscular man with dark hair and fair eyes. He was nude, and his body showed the marks of someone who was tortured into compliance. They had to carry the semi-conscious man to the edge of the triangle, where, at a nod from the this, cadaverous Wizard, he was cast into the triform symbol. The man lay there, groaning, though his groans were drowned out by the voices of the Wizards around him.

And then they stopped. Kravon stood alone when the other eight stepped back, and his voice alone suddenly thundered through the chamber. Arcane words of power flowed from his lips smoothly, flawlessly, and the three fires within the braziers suddenly began to flare and wane in

concordance with the power of his voice. He pointed at the man laying within the symbol and spoke a single word, and the braziers suddenly flared, sending flames high into the arched chamber, bringing the brilliance of the noontime sun into the dark gallery.

The man on the floor screamed. He writhed, got to his knees, held his head between his hands, and screamed a scream that only the dying could emit. Kravon watched with stoic interest as the man's body began to shudder, and then it suddenly turned gray. The man's spirit was cast from its mortal shell, and the body quickly dessicated, shriveled, flesh putrifying and eyes melting away. The body stopped shuddering and stood, and an ornate, archaic suit of armor simply *appeared* around the body. Red light appeared within those empty eye sockets, and a shield appeared on the figure's left arm.

"Why have ye summoned me?" Jegojah, Doomwalker, demanded in a dry voice, a voice from the grave. "Our bargain, it was fulfilled, yes."

"No," Kravon said calmly. "The Were-cat still lives. You have failed."

"The Were-cat, he is a Weavespinner," the dead figure said in a hissing voice. "This you did not tell Jegojah. Had Jegojah known, A better battleground Jegojah would have chosen. Battling a Weavespinner that close to a Conduit, it is suicide, yes. No fault of Jegojah caused Jegojah to fail, yes. The bargain, it is fulfilled. Now release Jegojah to rest, as was promised!"

"You failed me," Kravon said. "And you forget who holds your soul." The wizard held up a small diamond amulet, an amulet which throbbed with a soft light not unlike the rhythm of a man's beating heart. "You have little choice in the matter. Go out, and find the Were-cat Tarrin. Then kill him."

"No," Jegojah hissed. "A bargain, we had struck one, yes. A bargain fulfilled! A ten year's rest you have promised Jegojah, and a ten year's rest Jegojah will have!"

"That was then. This is now."

The Doomwalker growled in rage, then rushed forward. But he rebounded off the mystical shield created by the symbols separating the Doomwalker from the Wizard.

"I see you need persuasion," he said coldly, and pulled a small silver gong from his robe. He held up a small gold baton, then struck it. The gong gave out a discordant *twang*, and the very sound of it made Jegojah scream in agony and writhe on the floor. The gong had been made specifically to disrupt the natural harmony of the Doomwalker's captured spirit, and its sound made the throbbing pulses of the amulet's core to fluctuate and dim. The gong quieted back to silence, and the Doomwalker stopped spasming on the floor. It got up instantly and glared at the Wizard, its glowing red eyes promising tortures beyond human imagination should it find a way to breach the prison in which it was contained. "I could continue, and the gong will destroy your soul, Doomwalker," Kravon said in a cold, emotionless voice. "But you can serve me better this way. Find the Were-cat, Jegojah. Find him and destroy him. Bring me the Were-cat's head, and I will release your soul to eternal rest. Fail me, and you will suffer the gong for a thousand years."

"Your word, what good is it to Jegojah?" the Doomwalker hissed. "Once already you have broken it. What trust does Jegojah show an oathbreaker now?"

"You have no choice," Kravon said. "I *own* you, Doomwalker. Be glad that I am willing to give up your services after you succeed in your mission. If you refuse," he said in a trailing voice, holding up the gong.

"Jegojah will do it," the Doomwalker said in a deadly voice. "But be warned. Should you betray Jegojah again, for you Jegojah will come next, yes. A promise, that is."

"Save your threats. You have a mission to perform. Begone."

And with a wave of his hand, the Doomwalker simply vanished from the triform symbol.

"Is this entirely wise, my Lord?" one of the Wizards asked curiously. "I bow to your superior skill and intellect, but your logic escapes me. If you anger him enough, Jegojah will break free of our control."

"It is simple, adept," he replied. "The Were-cat cannot be stable, not after the way he went insane in Suld. We will attack him, and attack him, and attack him. We will kill everyone close to him, and then we will keep coming after him until he goes mad. We will drive him mad, and when he is

mad, he will no longer be a threat. I have already sent men to Dala Yar Arak, and more groups wait at every possible crossroads and port. We will make the Were-cat destroy himself. Jegojah will be a part of that."

"But after what happened in Suld--" the Wizard said, cutting himself off. That had been a *tremendous* setback to them. All of their operations in Sulasia were now compromised, as were many in Tykarthia, Daltochan, and Shacè. Three hundred years of careful planning and work had been destroyed, and they had lost a good many good people in the destruction of their complex. "Great Lord, the Were-cat is much too deadly for a man to easily kill."

"They don't have to kill him, Marek," Kravon explained. "They just have to keep pushing him. They've been ordered to hire every thug and cutpurse they can find to go after the Were-cat, so sheer force of numbers will eventually overwhelm him."

"But he'll kill them by the hundreds."

"That's exactly what I want him to do," Kravon said in a hollow voice. "The Were-cat was once human, and a young one at that. The reports I have on him don't make such activities good for his sanity. His mind can't rationalize such slaughter. Every man he kills will help us that much more. We'll throw men at him until he goes mad. No matter how many it takes."

"It seems a very dangerous plan."

"True, but sometimes dangerous plans are the best ones."

Jervis was in a strange mood.

He had never been boonswoggled before, and he wasn't quite sure how to take it.

Keritanima. Just the name made him want to laugh. What a ride she had given him! Oh, she was a clever one, she was. Clever and *good*. Jervis had never considered her to be anything more than an empty-headed brat, and now he knew that it had all been an act. An act that had misdirected an entire *kingdom*.

How had she done it? It would be impossible for her to keep something like that a secret! Certainly Miranda was in on it. If so, that explained a great deal of why Miranda was so enigmatically loyal to Keritanima. Binter and Sisska, Keritanima's bodyguards, also absolutely had to know. But they were Vendari. If she forced them to swear never to reveal her secret, they would take it with them to the grave. But outside of that small circle, who else had known the truth? If Keritanima did things right, not many. With Miranda to act as her front, to pretend to be the boss, she could easily and effectively run her operations from behind Miranda's skirts with absolutely nobody suspecting a thing.

Miranda was good, but now it was apparent that *Keritanima* lay at the center of the web of intrigue that had always been credited to her serious, cute little maid. She had played them all like lutes, and after looking back through the torrid past within the Palace, everything began to fit into place more and more. Yes, Keritanima had indeed been at the heart of things. And she had managed to keep herself hidden, keep her secret safe, even while absolutely surrounded by hostile agents and enemy spies. That was truly remarkable.

But why? That was the part that he couldn't quite figure out. Or at least he hadn't been able to before the letter arrived. She had no real reason to pretend to be an egocentric witch, yet she maintained the illusion of incompetence, even when it put her life at risk. But the letter explained everything. It made all of her activities come together into a grand plan with a single goal. And when he looked at that plan, at her actions, he was astounded. She had orchestrated a huge, massive, complex multi-layered plan to confuse her enemies, mislead them, eliminate those too dangerous, raise up incompetents that would help create an atmosphere of chaos, trick others into doing what she wanted them to do, and then separate herself from her father. And it was all done so she could *run away*, with an excellent chance of succeeding, and leaving nobody behind in Wikuna that would care. She had maneuvered the entire nobility of Wikuna just so she could turn and flee from her responsibilities.

And he had to admit that she had done a very thorough job of it. She was gone. She was nowhere in Suld. After banding together her Marines and the Knights and attacking the Cathedral of Karas, she had simply vanished. He had been totally at a loss, and then the letter arrived.

It was from her Highness, and it was terse, short, and to the point. It proved that Keritanima was indeed good, but it also proved she was a rash youth. It was a mistake. Yet something in her had forced her to carry out with it, even though she knew it was a mistake.

It was why he was standing in the small, windowless room that held nothing but a magical glowglobe illuminating the room and a large mirror resting on a brass stand. It had been enchanted by the priests of Kikalli, the Wavemistress, patron goddess of the Wikuni, so that he could see and hear whoever looked into the mirror's counterpart. That mirror was in the Royal study in Wikuna, and Jervis was waiting for his Majesty, Damon Eram, to arrive so he could personally deliver his report.

Damon Eram was going to explode. Jervis could see that already. But what Jervis wasn't sure about was what he would do about it. Damon Eram's feelings for Keritanima were well known in Wikuna. He despised her, felt she was weak and unfit to be queen, and Jervis suspected that the ruthless monarch had tried to put an end to her more than once. Jervis didn't like Damon Eram, but he was king, and Jervis was duty-bound to serve.

He appeared in the other mirror, dressed in a white silk shirt and riding pants. Damon Eram was a lion-Wikuni, a large and imposing and intimidating figure that radiated power and authority like a fire radiated heat. His mane was carefully combed and tended, his left lion-ear was pierced and holding a gold loop, and his more-human face stared at Jervis with a cold annoyance plain on it. Hot gold eyes stared at Jervis for a moment, and Jervis bowed smoothly in front of the mirror. "What is it, Jervis?" he asked. "Make it fast, I'm busy."

"I bring news to you, your Majesty," Jervis said calmly. "It's rather bad."

"What happened?"

"Well, to tell the truth, we're still not entirely sure," he said. "But the short of it is that the Princess has turned up missing."

"Is that all? Well, it's not the first time she's run away, Jervis. No doubt some Sorcerer didn't bow deep enough, and she went into a snit. Just send some men out and find her."

"I'm afraid it goes a bit farther than that this time, your Majesty," Jervis said. "This morning, Keritanima rounded up her Marines, and somehow

convinced the Knights and some *katzh-dashi* to aid her. She led them into the city, and used them to assault the Cathedral of Karas."

"She did *what*?" he said in a strangled tone.

"Oh, that's not the half of it, Majesty," Jervis told him. "It turns out that a friend of hers was being held in a secret underground complex under the church, a complex that nobody knew about. The attack was to recover him."

"I can't believe this! Erick is going to be screaming for reparations!"

"Actually, Erick really had no idea what was going on," Jervis said. "Things are very tense here right now, and they go very deep. Your daughter has managed to destabilize the political structure of the entire city, possibly the entire kingdom."

"How does she *do* these things?" he said in an exasperated voice.

"Well, your Majesty, I dare say she plans them," Jervis said.

Damon Eram gave him a flat look.

"It's true, your Majesty," he said in a calm voice. "I'm afraid that we all have been led around by the nose by her Highness. She's not the whimsical, self-centered little brat that she pretends to be. I have solid reports that she *led* the attack on the Cathedral, and her strategy was flawless. For her to convince Colonel Manx and the Lord General of the Knights, Darvon, to accept her flag is a statement in and of itself. Those two are reputed to be some of the best military men in the world, and they fell under her banner immediately."

"Are you joking with me, Jervis?" Daman Eram asked.

"I wish I were, your Majesty," he said. "She also managed to eradicate the presense of enemy agents hindering her operations, and quite effectively managed to wrap the entire Tower around her little finger while she was here. And she did it all while my men were watching her, men that will swear under oath as to what they saw."

"It had to be Miranda."

"No, Miranda is Keritanima's puppet, your Majesty," he said calmly. "Miranda capitulated to Keritanima immediately before the attack, and it was clear that it was Keritanima doing the leading. Everything we have

contributed to Miranda in the past actually came from Keritanima. She has used Miranda as a front to hide her own secrets, and it seems that Miranda was going along with it. I don't doubt that Miranda is good, but it's only because Keritanima *trained* her."

"I can't believe any of this," Damon Eram said hotly. "Keritanima is a half-witted little brat. She couldn't possibly do anything you've just said."

"Well, I think Keritanima felt that you'd feel that way, so she left me a letter. It just arrived about an hour ago, and it specifically demands that I'm to read it to you."

"Well? What does it say?"

Jervis unfolded the letter from where had put it in his pocket, then cleared his throat. "Dear Jervis," he began, giving Damon Eram a quick glance. "If you're reading this, then you're standing in front of the mirror talking with my father, just wondering what in the nine hells is going on. No doubt my father is very angry, and he can't believe a word of anything you just said." He looked up at Damon Eram's image. "Well, the truth of things is that I've beaten all of you. I survived my family's attempt to get rid of me, I survived the noble's desires to see Jenawalani on the throne, and I survived you, father. I've beaten you all, and now I'm free of you.

"So consider this a goodbye. I never thought it would thrill me so much to say that, but it does. I've worked for years to get to this point, where I could walk away from my family and never have to look back over my shoulder. And it's all because I left behind a kingdom that *doesn't care* if I come back or not. They don't want the Brat, they want that brutal little bitch Jenawalani. Well, I'm tired of dodging daggers thrown by her men, so I'm leaving. I've dotted my i's and crossed my t's, and made sure that nobody in Wikuna would be very happy if I ever returned to the Palace. I've undercut your position, father dearest. In just a few short days, you're going to find most of your trusted nobles and advisors dead. You'll be too busy protecting yourself from your enemies to worry about me."

"That little *bitch!*" Damon Eram suddenly exploded. "*She* did this?"

"Did what, your Majesty?"

"Jervis, there was a large round of assassinations last night. A lot of my best men are dead, and it's caused chaos in the administration. I'm still

trying to get things under control."

"Well, I dare say that should prove to you that I'm not joking," he said mildly, then he continued to read. "Consider this an abdication of my title. Actually, consider it a resignation from the family. I don't want anything to do with any of you, so just leave me alone. I have a new life now, with people who love me, and what I have there could never compare to it. I know how happy this makes you, father. Now you don't have to worry about me anymore. Now you'll be able to play your games of intrigue without having to worry about who takes the throne when someone finally gets you. I'm sick of it, I'm sick of Wikuna, and I'm sick of all of you.

"I loved you, father. I really did. I loved you until you tried to have me killed. Now I want nothing more of you, and if we ever stand face to face again, I'm going to kill you. Remember that if you send people to try to find me. I am what you made me, and that means you know that I mean it. Goodbye father. I hope I never see you again.

"That's it, your Majesty," Jervis said.

"I can't believe it!" Damon Eram raged. "Keritanima did all of *this*! And I never suspected her capable of it!"

"She's fooled a great many people, your Majesty," Jervis said.

"Find her, Jervis!" Damon Eram snapped in fury. "I want her standing in front of me before the summer solstice! She's not getting away with this!"

"Is that wise, Majesty?" Jervis asked. "She's already demonstrated how dangerous she can be. I don't think chasing her would be the best thing. She has cut her ties. It is best if you just let her go."

"Oh, no," he said in a seething fury. "She's coming back and she's going to answer for this. And she is *not* abdicating her position," he hissed. "If she doesn't want to be Queen, then she's going to have to cut her own throat."

"That is a strange position to take, Majesty."

"No, it's not," he fumed. "If she's good enough to do all of *this*, then she's obviously good enough to be Queen. I'll want to kill her when I get her back here, but I have to have a competent successor for the Eram line to hold the throne. This qualifies her."

"She is hated among the nobility, Majesty. There will be friction."

"Not after everyone who opposes her is too terrified to gainsay it," Damon Eram said grimly. "Find her, Jervis. I don't care what it takes. You have my entire fleet at your disposal. I want her back in the Palace by summer."

"It will be done, Majesty," Jervis said calmly.

The mirror winked out, leaving Jervis with his thoughts. It was a mistake. Keritanima was good, and that made her *dangerous*. If Damon Eram took her back to Wikuna, he would have more than he bargained for.

With luck, she would kill him and take the throne. If she was leaving because she found love, then that meant that she wasn't as heartless as the other Erams. Maybe she could restore the dignity of the throne.

But he had orders, and a duty to perform. He would find Princess Keritanima-Chan Eram, whether she liked it or not. And the letter was the only clue he needed. She would have been almost impossible to find if she left alone. But a Wikuni travelling with a Were-cat and a Selani were very distinctive, and that would lead him right to her.

They were the only ones with whom she had enough contact at the Tower to form any bonds of love. And she had exposed her secret to rescue the Were-cat. If that wasn't an act of love, Jervis didn't know what was.

Though it was winter, the Grove of Talbon the Druid was a vibrant, lush place, full of bloom and life, sustained by his natural magical powers. Most Druids had such groves, for it was a direct link to their powers of the land, their magic of nature, and it enhanced their magical abilities. Nestled in what many called the Frontier, the vast forest separating Sulasia from Arkis, it stood as a rallying point for many of the woodland kin who laired nearby. The *Fae-da'Nar* respected Talbon, and his gentle nature and calm smiles made many of them feel at ease. He was relatively new to the Frontier, having been at his grove for only twenty years, but in that short time his grove had become a meeting place for many of the woodland folk, and many of them sought out Talbon for his wisdom and healing. Just as a priest was the caretaker of his flock of believers, a Druid was the caretaker of the beings of *Fae-da'Nar*, providing for their needs and making them feel more

comfortable. Because they were beings of nature, tied to the land, Druids did not mind this duty at all. After all, when a Druid needed help, they were magically compelled to come to his aid. It was always best for the Druids to ease that compulsion by being friends with the beings they summoned, so as not to create friction. Talbon was especially liked among the humans who came to the Frontier, be them Druids, wanderers, hermits, or lone hunters, because he was a very personable and considerate fellow, and he was handsome. Many female Were-kin had secretly considered turning him Were just to have him, but such an act would be a terrible transgression against the laws by which they lived. Talbon radiated calm and assurance, and it echoed through his grove to soothe all who came to visit him.

That calm didn't do all that much for Jesmind. Talbon was the only Druid she really knew, for he wasn't too far from her den, and she'd been forced to travel all the way to him to send out her call. She had been waiting there for several days, as her message slowly managed to find her mother, and her mother responded to it. Talbon was a gracious host, keeping the Were-cat comfortable and entertained, learning what she had to bring in news from the lands outside. But it was obvious that the Were-cat was agitated, and Talbon was wise enough not to press her too far. Were-cats were especially volatile among the Were-kin, and their kind had a very nasty reputation. Talbon really didn't see why they had earned such a dark reputation, for he had never seen one that was deserving of it. True, they had tempers, but no more than a Were-boar. The only thing that made the Were-cats different from their cousins was that they couldn't hold a fully human shape without discomfort. But Talbon couldn't see why this would make the rest of them not like them.

And so Talbon abided with the distraught Were-cat in relative silence, waiting for Triana. That in itself would be something of a special occasion. All of *Fae-da'Nar* knew that name, for Triana was the oldest of her kind. She was a thousand years old, and she was a Druid of high caliber. But what was most important, Triana was respected by all of *Fae-da'Nar*. Even other Were-kin, who had a universal dislike for their unusual cousins, respected Triana for her age, her experience, and her wisdom. Talbon had met Triana twice before, and he had been impressed by her. He very much looked forward to speaking with her again.

She appeared at the edge of the grove silently, and Jesmind stood quickly and rushed to her mother. The physical similarities were striking. Jesmind was truly her mother's daughter, for they shared the same high cheekbones and narrow nose, the same beautifully sharp features. But Triana stood almost a head taller than her daughter, towering over almost everyone around her, and her face had a maturity about it that made everyone who looked at her realize that she was not as young as she looked. Triana had tawny colored hair that was almost perfectly matched by her fur, something of a rarity among Were-cats, and those green, vertically slitted eyes looked down at her daughter with curiosity when she embraced her fiercely.

"I'm happy to see you too, daughter," Triana said in a rich voice, a voice that was strong and sharp and deceptive for a female her size. "Now what can be so serious that you would have the Druids track me down? I was busy."

"You're always busy, mother," Jesmind said accusingly. "I need your help."

"For what? You're a grown woman, Jesmind. At least you *should* be."

"I don't know what to do, mother," she said immediately. She led Triana back to the log on which she'd been sitting, and as Talbon listened, she explained everything that had happened to her. It was obvious to Talbon that Jesmind was torn. She had done what she was supposed to do. She tried to kill a Rogue. But Talbon suspected that she wasn't quite so overmatched as she led her mother to believe. "I can't kill him, mother. Actually, I don't want to. The Tower did this to him. If we can get him out of there, he should be alright, and there are few enough males as it is. He's a good boy, mother. He just needs to get out of that place. It's killing him bit by bit, because he can't be himself. They won't let up on him. And I can't convince him to leave. He's so afraid of his magic, that he thinks they're the only ones that can help him keep it under control. I promised him I'd send someone in my place, because I couldn't risk getting into another fight with him."

Triana gave her daughter a long, steady look. "I, see," she said, which made Jesmind blush. "Is that how it is?"

Jesmind nodded emphatically.

"Then I'll go have a look at this Tarrin," she said. "You did the right thing, daughter. I'll go see him, and if I think he's worth salvaging, then we'll go from there. If he's too far gone, we'll have to put him down."

"Mother!"

"It's the law, daughter," she said in a voice that brooked no dispute. "I don't care how you feel about him, the law is the law."

"It's not fair," she said. "It's not his fault!"

"You spend a night with him, and you're attached to him?" Triana said in surprise. "That's not like you, Jesmind."

She looked away from her mother, staring at the ground.

"Look at me," she demanded, and the red-headed Were-cat was compelled to obey. *Nobody* disobeyed Triana. She met that penetrating gaze sheepishly, her cheeks reddening.

And Triana laughed. "No wonder," she said. "It's about time, girl. I was starting to give up on you."

Jesmind blushed even deeper.

"Alright, I'll see what I can do. But that's no guarantee."

"I didn't think it would be, mother."

"Talbon, you're looking well," she finally managed to say in greeting. "I'm sorry we didn't greet earlier, but my daughter here wasn't giving me the chance to put in a word."

"That's quite alright, Triana," he said with a disarming smile. "After hearing what she has to say, I don't really blame her. With a Rogue out there, it makes things uncertain."

"Not just any Rogue, Talbon," she sighed. "This one is a Sorcerer. That makes this a bit of a tight situation."

"Do you want me to call together a cadre?"

"Not yet," she said. "Let me take a look at him. I'll let you know how we're going to deal with him after I'm certain of it."

"As you wish, Triana," he said calmly. "It must have been a long trip. Would you like some tea?"

"Ever considerate," she smiled. "Yes, I would, thank you. Did you ever enlarge your cottage?"

Jesmind remained on the log as her mother and the Druid stood and walked towards a small cottage with stone walls, and ivy covering the outside. Her tail was lashing behind her, and her mind was full. Where was Tarrin now? What she felt from him, through the bond, it was *powerful*. She didn't mention it to Triana, because it was Tarrin at his worst, and that would have hardened her mother to him. Someone had done something terrible to him, and she was very worried. He was unsettled, unsure, afraid. She felt so much pity for him that it was breaking her heart, because he had nobody there to help him through it, to help him deal with what every Were-cat had suffered through at least once in their lives.

The realization that they were never fully in control.

Tarrin was so desperately alone, and he was too young to be able to deal with it himself. He *needed* Jesmind, but she couldn't be there to help him. Her instincts cried out to be there for him, but other, equally powerful instincts were forcing her to stay away from him, because he was much too dangerous for her to handle in her condition. She hoped that Triana could take up that role, because of all their kind, she would be the best at recovering her tormented bond-child and returning him to a life of relative peace.

She believed in her mother, and had the feeling that if anyone could help Tarrin, Triana could. She just had to reach him before he was too far gone. She wanted to do it herself. Tarrin was her bond-child, and he was special. She wanted to be there for him, to help him, to ease him through things, but she just couldn't. His Sorcery made him dangerous, and she couldn't risk getting caught between him and his anger should he use his powers while in a fury. She had other duties, other responsibilities, and they were just as powerful and immediate as Tarrin's. It had been a hard choice, but it was a choice that she had been forced to make.

She had been forced to decide between two children, both of which needed her. And she had made her choice. She placed her hand on her belly,

her thoughts grim and foreboding.

She only hoped that it was the best one.

Thus ends The Tower of Sorcery.

In book 2, The Questing Game, Tarrin and his friends embark on their dangerous quest, with enemies pressing in from all sides, and an important goal standing before them.