

Tarrin Kael Pyrosian Chronicles
Book Two

Sword of Fire®

by James Galloway (aka Fel)

To: [EoF](#)

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Chapter 1

It was a beautiful summer day, with a warm, gentle breeze blowing across a large open expanse of lightly rolling hills, caressing the tall grass with the lightest of touches as a brilliant sun shone from a sky dotted here and there with small, puffy little clouds. Several hawks were soaring on thermals over the grassy hills, on the hunt for mice, rabbits, and other small birds, hawks who looked down upon a band of seven riders and four pack horses that made their way along a long unused track that left a grove of trees well in the distance behind them. The hawks paid these travellers very little mind, busy as they were in their hunt for a meal, to feed their hungry chicks nesting in the very grove the travellers had just departed, the only substantial stand of trees for quite some distance in any direction. The mice and rabbits lurking in the grass also didn't pay these travellers much mind as well, scurrying out of the way of their horses and keeping a mindful eye out for seeds and roots and tasty plants that grew in the midst of the grass, at least until the group got close enough for the scents of the travellers to reach them. Then they fled.

They fled because the smells coming from this group were *alien*, and one of them was the smell of a predator even if it wasn't completely understood.

This group of travellers was certainly something that the animals in this area had never expected, for they had come from another world.

Riding at their lead was a tall, handsome man with piercing green eyes, a long, thick blond braid, and riding atop a large, powerful black stallion. He wore a simple pair of leather breeches, a white cotton shirt and a black vest over it, with sturdy leather boots upon his feet. And much like every member of this party, he was much more than he appeared to be. His name was Tarrin Kael, and though he appeared to be human, he was not. He was a Were-cat, a creature infused with the magical gift of the common housecat, what many called a Lycanthrope. Though he looked completely human, it was but one of the three shapes he could assume, and it was not the way he usually appeared. His common appearance, the natural form of all Were-cats, was a hybrid form with both human and cat qualities, a human body but with hands and feet which were hybrids of hand and paw, black fur on his arms to just above the elbows and on his legs to just above the knee, vertically-slitted, piercing green eyes, and a pair of furry cat ears atop his head. Just as he could take on the fully human shape—though it was no longer natural for his breed of Were-kin, and caused most Were-cat considerable pain to assume—he could also take on the shape of the common housecat. His fusion with the Cat granted him supernatural strength, agility, dexterity, the ability to quickly regenerate wounds, and immunity to weapons which were not made of silver, imbued with magic, or were unworked weapons of nature, but it also imprinted the instincts of the cat into his mind. That was the curse that came with those powers, and it had nearly destroyed him. He was a very young man, but the trials of his life gave him a bearing and a demeanor that made him seem to be much older, which probably suited him better anyway. His was a

commanding presence, even in his human form, strong and powerful and radiating a quiet, sure strength that never failed to intimidate those who did not know him and remind those who did of just who they were dealing with.

Not that they ever forgot. Tarrin was, quite simply, one of the most powerful beings in his world. His Were-cat nature gave him overwhelming physical advantages, but it was his powers in magic which made him such an unstoppable force. He was well trained in every form of magic known on his world, one of only a very, very rare few capable of using more than one order of magic, but it was the fact that he was a being known as a *Mi'Shara* that stood him apart. He was one of only two, and they were capable of exceeding the limitations of the mortal realm if the need was great enough, and wield more magical power than any mortal could hope to control. He and the Urzani Sorceress Spyder were the only *Mi'Shara*, and they were beings who were all but invincible on their own world, Sennadar, blessed with these incredible powers to be used in the defense of the world itself against the titanic forces who sought to invade their home world and take its powerful magic for themselves.

Of course, the secret behind the secret of Tarrin Kael was what was hidden within him, for he had once been an actual god...for about ten minutes. He had used a mighty artifact from his world called the Firestaff to become a god in order to destroy another god, the dark and evil god Val. He had been restored to life, and though he was no longer a god, the infusion of divinity into him had altered his very soul, and over time he had regained minor aspects of his lost power. The representation of that power came in the form of a pair of wings made of living fire that had become a part of him some years ago, limbs more than wings whose size and shape he could control with but a thought, which he could hide when the needs suited him. They were hidden now, locked into his back where they were anchored to him and covered over with his own skin. He was a mortal but had certain aspects of a divine being, what they called a *demi-god*, a condition that caused him not a little trouble on his home world, for the gods there were afraid of him.

But this was not his home world of Sennadar. This was a brand new world, an unknown world, and he had come in search of those who had fled here thousands of years ago to escape a terrible war which had been fought in Sennadar, as well as coming in search of two of his friends who had been forced to come here, so he could take them home. He was rather excited about the idea of it, truth be told, coming to an exotic, unknown world where nothing could be taken for granted, where there was an element of excitement, even *danger*, and trouble could be lurking behind every corner. The problem with invincibility was that it became boring after a while, and here, in this unknown world, there was that aire of danger that made it exciting. It made it even more exciting in the fact that his Sorcery, Druidic powers, and his ability to use Priest magic all did not work here. He could still use Wizard magic—that worked just about everywhere—so at least he had some kind of magical reserve to call upon if things got hairy.

He blinked and looked down at a small black snake that slithered lazily across the path of his horse, and he wondered idly if the snake was venomous. Then he wondered if it was aggressive, then he wondered if it was edible. It *looked* like a common blacksnake, but there was no way to be sure of that, for this was a different world and nothing here could be taken for granted. This place felt like the Desert of Swirling Sands to him, a place where everything contained a hidden danger and everything had to be treated with caution and respect. They just didn't *know* what was dangerous and what

was not, so they had to be careful to treat everything like it was a potential threat until they knew one way or the other.

He led six other mounted horses, and they were seated by some of the best his world had to offer. That was why they were here. Immediately behind him was Mist, who looked like a small woman with tan skin, unruly, short black hair, and hawkish, sharply handsome features and sharp green eyes that made most people uncomfortable to look into for very long. She too was a Were-cat, hiding behind an Illusion of how she appeared in her human form, and currently she was his mate. The others knew all about Mist, so he was sure there wouldn't be too many messy incidents, for Mist was feral. Ferality in Were-cats was a dangerous trait, for she was like a wild animal inside, and she was capable of tremendous violence if she felt afraid or threatened. The problem was, a feral Were-cat feared *everything* that was not intimately familiar, everyone who was not a known and trusted friend. Mist was more than feral, though. She was a rough, crude, blunt woman who didn't see life the way any of the others did, and to her it was perfectly acceptable to make someone shut up by clawing a gash over his face as it was to tell him to be quiet. But despite her volatile demeanor and propensity for violence, she was a surprisingly patient, insightful woman who had a great deal of common sense, and was much more intelligent than she seemed. Tarrin had learned to respect Mist's opinions over the years he'd known her, for she often saw right to the heart of the matter, and her advice was usually good. She was also an unusual mate. Were-cat society was based on pure, physical strength, and in Mist's eye, Tarrin was dominant, which caused her to obey him utterly and without question, something that she just did not do with anyone else but Triana. His prior mates had not acted like that with him. Jesmind fought him every day, and Kimmie used clever manipulation to get him to do what she wanted, but Mist never did any of that. She would suggest a course of action, but would never try to force him to take her advice. She obeyed him without question and was always demure around him. She was also violently defensive of her mate's body and his reputation, and would not tolerate anyone disrespecting him in her presence. Mist was devoted to him in a way he'd never seen any female devoted to a male before, and sometimes he wondered if it was an entirely healthy situation.

Behind Mist rode Dolanna, a very small woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and who was the real leader of this expedition, dressed in a modest riding dress of soft brown wool with skirts divided for riding. Dolanna was a vastly wise Sorceress who was always calm and measured, and never panicked. She was their leader, a fact even Mist accepted, and they all felt better with her being among them. Dolanna was a very even-tempered woman who thrived in this kind of situation, where she could apply her cool logic and use her air of confidence to keep the others settled down. Even though she had lost her powers when they arrived in this new world—Sorcery didn't work here—she was still the most important member of their party, and they all held her in the highest respect. He had known Dolanna for a very long time, and he always felt much more confident when she was with him. She was a friend and confidante, someone who understood him in ways that most others did not, a close friend who he respected so much that his Were-cat nature saw her as a mother figure, and someone to which he deferred without argument. Much as Mist obeyed him, he obeyed Dolanna, because he saw her as the dominant. They *all* did that, truth be told, for to put your trust in Dolanna was to put your trust in the competent hands of a woman who would not let you down. She always spoke with stiff

formality, but her eyes and her expressions were always soft and gentle, and just her presence was enough to settle people down. Dolanna's wisdom and her ability to react quickly and concisely to unknown situations made her perfect for this mission, but he was more glad she was along because of their friendship.

Always near Dolanna was Azakar, a truly monstrous young man riding an equally monstrous horse, wearing a full suit of black plate armor. He was nearly half again as large as a normal man, though he was entirely human, a hulking, powerful Knight whose massive body hid a gentle, almost child-like personality. Azakar had been a slave for much of his life, and the abuse he had suffered at the hands of cruel masters made him very quiet and reserved, never wanting to draw attention to himself. The hideous scars from the lash that made his back look like a dry lake bed had not scarred his personality, for he was a caring, compassionate young man who took his duty to protect Dolanna very seriously. He was what the Knights had in mind when they created the order; dutiful, modest, skilled, kind, and filled with powerful resolve. While he was there, nothing would get close enough to Dolanna to even think about hurting her. Tarrin and Azakar had had their fights in the past, but they never lost their respect for one another.

Also near Dolanna, though he wasn't being open about it, was Haley. Haley was a Were-wolf, a quick-witted fellow with a fast tongue and a propensity for dabbling in crime. He wore a dark blue wasitcoat and breeches of Shacèan make, the cuffs of his white shirt ruffled with lace, flared black leather knee boots, and a sleek rapier hung from his belt which he could use with frightening efficiency. Tarrin rather liked Haley, for he was a sober-seeming Were-wolf with a sly, sardonic wit and who still appreciated humor, and was one of the few people who could make Tarrin laugh. He was along mainly because of Dolanna. They had known one another for a very long time, and though Tarrin couldn't prove it yet, he had the feeling that Haley's feelings for Dolanna extended well beyond the bounds of friendship. He never seemed to push it or reveal it, however, content to simply be Dolanna's friend, for harsh reality assured that they would never be anything else. Dolanna was human, he was a Were-wolf, and that made any kind of relationship absolutely impossible. Despite that, though, Haley was a welcome addition, for he understood the baser nature of humankind in a way that probably only one other person in their group could come close to matching.

That person rode behind Haley, looking thoroughly miserable in the summer heat when they'd all been dressed for winter, and her fur made it even worse. Her name was Miranda, and she was a Wikuni, a race of beings who resembled bipedal animals of many different kinds. Miranda was a mink Wikuni, with sleek, soft white fur and a human body, but with a head and face that was a combination of the best traits of human and mink. She was, by far, the cutest little thing he'd ever seen in his life. She had large, expressive blue eyes, and cute little mink button nose affixed to a softened muzzle, and a cheeky grin that would disarm absolutely anyone with its charm. Rounded mink ears poked out of a very thick expanse of luxurious blond hair, and a thick, lush tail peeked out from under a heavy brown wool robe, which was also blond; Miranda was an exotic Wikuni in that her tail was the same color as her hair, which often wasn't the same color as a Wikuni's fur. But Miranda was one of the most exotic Wikuni of them all, for she was an Avatar, a mortal blessed by a god upon birth, and carrying certain abilities that exceeded mortal kind. Miranda hadn't known that until just a few years ago, and finding out caused her to have a crisis of self-identity. She had left them all to discover who she

truly was, and had returned just a few months ago as a Priest. This was quite a surprise to just about everyone, for Miranda never seemed the type to be a Priest. She was a cunning, sly, dangerous young lady who had served her friend and queen, Keritanima, as a maid, a spy, and also as an assassin when the need arose. She was a very formidable woman who understood politics better than anyone but maybe Keritanima or Tarrin thought she did, and had made a career out of tricking people into underestimating her. It still seemed odd that she was a Priest to Tarrin, for her personality had not changed at all. She was still the clever little girl he remembered, all disarming smiles while those cunning eyes stripped one of all his secrets and left his soul bare to her whim. Only a fool would think that Miranda was not the second most dangerous person in that group. Miranda's god, however, seemed perfectly alright with having a Priest with her kind of personality, for she was a truly *powerful* Priest, one of the strongest he had ever seen, capable of magic that most other Priests couldn't even dream about. And unlike Tarrin's own Priest magic, she could use hers here. The fact that she was an Avatar allowed her to do so, and her magic was the way they were going to get home.

Behind her, minding the pack horses, was one of the little problems in this group. His name was Ulger, and he was also a Knight. He was a burly, slightly tall middle-aged man with a shaved head and a face criss-crossed with several scars. Ulger was a *very* good man in a fight, one of the best fighters the Knights of Karas could field, and Tarrin did kind of like him, but he had this bad habit of saying the absolutely wrong thing at the right time. Putting a muzzle on Ulger was something that he was already considering. Ulger had a nasty wit and a sly way of delivering his barbs, but he was also a fun-loving fellow who was just as much at ease being the brunt of the joke as he was the deliverer. There was a strange lack of self-consciousness about the scarred Knight that Tarrin could actually respect, for he was just as quick to laugh at himself as he was at someone else. Despite his tendency to blurt out the wrong thing to say, he was a very jovial, friendly man who was growing on the others as much as he grated on them, but also knew exactly when to drop his joking and get serious when the need arose.

Ulger was a gift from the gods in more ways than just one, though, for Sarraya seemed strangely attracted to the Knight as a recipient of her scathing wit, flitting around his head and being as annoying as possible to him. Sarraya was a Faerie, a race of very, very tiny blue-skinned beings with gossamer, multicolored, dragonfly-like wings. She had a head full of short, curly auburn hair that clashed with her blue skin, and wore a gauzy dress that looked to be made of spiderwebs. She was one of Tarrin's closest friends, but that friendship came with it a certain need for tolerance. Sarraya was a flighty little thing, impulsive and lacking in self control, with a razor for a tongue and a need to unleash it on everyone around her. Though she was a pain much of the time, she was a solid and true friend, caring and giving, and he loved her very much for it. Though she, like Haley and Tarrin, could not use her Druidic magic on this alien world, she could still use the magical power blessed to her by her race, which was the ability to turn invisible. Since she was an exceedingly tiny thing, able to fit in the palm of his paw easily, the fact that she could fly, go almost anywhere she wanted because her small size let her squeeze into openings no other could, and could turn invisible made her the ultimate spy. She should have died when she came here, for she was bound to their homeworld's magic, but she had found a way around that. That was much in line with Sarraya's personality. She was very un-Faerie in that she was capable of exceptional bouts of determination and self-

control if it was necessary, used usually when she was trying to get something that was denied to her. She had wanted to go, and she kept at it until she found a way to do it. Telling Sarraya *no* was a virtual guarantee that she was going to do it, no matter what it took.

They were a diverse group with a wide range of skills and abilities, but that was what they needed to do what they came here to do. They were here to find out what happened to the Dwarves who fled their homeworld five thousand years ago, them and the Sorcerers who had come with them, and they were also here to track down two of their own, Kimmie and Phandebrass. They had been forced through the gate to this world two months ago by an avalanche, and they were now lost in this alien world. That was their first goal, to find them, and then they would continue on with their original mission. Tarrin had hoped that his friends would be camped at the gate waiting for them, but they had not, so now they were following their trail. Haley, Tarrin, and Mist all could track it if it was necessary, so that wasn't much of a problem, but it was not knowing where they were or what trouble that crazy Wizard was getting Kimmie into that worried him. He'd already tried using his amulet to contact her, but it didn't work...and he'd more or less expected that. The ability to use the amulets to talk to others depended on the Weave, and there was no Weave on this world. The magically charged items still worked—why, he had *no* idea, for they should not—but that function specifically depended on the Weave to be used, and without the Weave to carry the message, it wouldn't work.

Right now, Miranda was providing their direction. She used a Priest spell that she called *Find the Path*, which was letting her track where Kimmie went, tracking her as easily as any of the Were-kin could without requiring them to crawl around on the ground snuffling for a scent like a bloodhound.. She had imbued Tarrin with the spell's effect instead of herself, and it was guiding him without fail along the exact path that Kimmie had taken when she passed by here two months ago. He could see the hoofprints of her horse as a ghostly radiance on the grassy plain that trekked off into the distance, and he was leading them along it.

It was odd that his vision wasn't so...cluttered. Usually, the strands of the Weave were interlaced within his vision with the real world, and he was forced to separate them. And here lately, he'd been starting to see, well, he could only call them *patterns*. Textures, shimmering forces, things he thought were magical focused around places, things, and people. They were faint and easy to ignore, but they were new, and Tarrin didn't like *new*. He guessed that it had to do with this new world, or his condition, but for now, it was really nothing to worry about.

He knew that his condition was letting him see and hear more than the others, for they couldn't hear the *welcoming*. He'd started hearing it as soon as he got here, and it had been getting both stronger and more joyous since he first noticed it. He didn't know where it was coming from or who was doing it, but someone was very happy that he was here. That surprised him a little, for he privately thought that he'd be as unwelcome here as he was at home. The gods of his world were terrified of him, for he was a mortal who had access to power that no mortal was ever meant to wield. That power was locked away from him, locked within the sword that he had created when he was a god, and had survived the destruction of his divine body. The sword was sentient after a fashion, and it held within it the power to transform his mortal body into something truly divine, and that gave him access to the divine power he had once wielded as a god. *It* decided when

the need was great enough to take that drastic step, however, and it was very, very picky. Only once had it ever done that, when he was fighting a nightmarish magical creation of the god Val, whom he had destroyed, a creation that had been born in Val's destruction and had been tasked with killing Tarrin to avenge his death. That was the event which had given him his wings, wings of pure, living fire which were now an integral part of him, a touch of divine magic that forever marked him as different from everyone else.

Perhaps the gods of *this* world weren't quite as high strung as the gods of his own.

It was a world that was amazingly similar to Sennadar, from what he'd seen so far. Strolling along this grassy, low and gentle hilly area was almost like running along the steppes of western Arak's savannah, except for the lack of raintrees. The grass smelled just like grass from home, and they'd already seen quite a few animals they recognized and, after inspection, discovered were exactly like the animals from home. Mice, bees, birds, flies and other insects, all were easily recognizable and exactly like home. There were some differences, however. The sky here was eerily empty, lacking the Skybands that striped the skies of his home, and there was no sense of magic here at all. This world's natural energy, what he would call the All, was radically different from what was at home, and that was what was causing them the most trouble right now. That major difference weakened him and the other Were-kin, for they drew power from the All which fueled some of their quasi-magical abilities. They could all still shapeshift, but their magical strength was greatly reduced, and experimentation had shown that the Were-cats' ability to regenerate was greatly weakened here. They still could not be permanently hurt by weapons not made of magic, silver, or an unworked weapon of nature, but wounds that would have instantly closed at home took *minutes* to mend here, and the aggravated accumulation of small wounds could kill them just as easily as it could kill any human. That was a very important thing to know, and it meant that they'd have to approach any battle with a measure of caution.

In a weird twist of things, however, that loss of strength was offset slightly, for there was something odd going on with *all* of them that seemed to cover that a little. All of them, even Dolanna, were stronger than they had been at home. He didn't understand how that could be, but it was most certainly the case. Dolanna, who was a very small, slim woman, could pick up items her own weight with only moderate difficulty, when she would have barely been able to get them off the ground at home. In the case of the Knights, it was very noticable, for they moved with a spryness of step that made it look like their armor was made of silk instead of steel. Even the horses were affected, for they moved as if there was nothing at all on their backs. For the Were-kin, it was a very noticable decrease in their strength, but this strange strengthening stacked onto what magical strength they did still possess still gave them superhuman physical power. Tarrin couldn't jump thirty spans into the air in his natural form here like he could at home, but he figured he could make fifteen easy.

Not that he really needed to jump. Tarrin's wings gave him the power to fly, and unlike most of his other magical abilities, his divine-imparted powers were still a part of him. Since that power came from within him, it didn't depend on the magical power of any dimension, and thus worked absolutely anywhere. The only catch was that in order to use any of his divine magic, he had to have the wings out, and that meant giving away the fact that he was not what he appeared to be.

That was an important consideration right now. They hadn't come across any sentient beings yet, but they had no idea how the people of this world would react to *exotic* circumstances. They were assuming that there were humans here, but that was just an assumption based on the fact that humans were the most populous race of their world, but they honestly had no idea what they were going to encounter, and how they were going to react. Tarrin had wanted to bring his pet Hellhound to help find Kimmie, but Dolanna had overruled him on the grounds that Forge may be too exotic, and might cause them problems. He definitely would if the beings of this world had experience with Demons, for he'd have a very hard time trying to explain how he came to be the master of a dog from the Abyss, and he doubted they'd listen when he told them that Forge wasn't evil. That was why he and Haley were in human form, and Mist was concealed behind an illusion of how she appeared when she was human—unlike him, Mist couldn't hold her human shape for any amount of time without it causing her pain—and Miranda was hidden under a heavy, voluminous robe to conceal her Wikuni heritage. Sarraya was too small to see from a great distance, and she could simply turn invisible whenever she wished to hide. Humans may be exotic here, but at least anyone who would see them would see seven *similar* beings, and that similarity might prevent some grief.

They crested a hill, and Tarrin reined in his horse as he looked down into a very shallow valley that had a brook rolling along its bottom, but it wasn't the small stream which had his attention. Down and to the right was a thin muddy scar that ran down one hill, across the brook, then up the other hill and out of sight. The glowing trail turned towards that line, and Tarrin fully understood why it did. That was a road, and Kimmie and Phandebrass had turned to get onto it, to find some kind of civilization. Mist and Dolanna came up to either side of him, and they all slowly gathered around the crest to look down.

"I take it she went to the road?" Dolanna asked.

Tarrin nodded. "Looking for civilization," he said aloud.

"Not a bad idea," Miranda observed, fanning the front of her robe.

"I think we should stop for lunch, and then continue," Dolanna announced. "We have been riding for hours, and I am growing hungry."

"Let's move down to the stream," Ulger proposed. "We can test the water, and if it's drinkable, we can use that instead of wasting our own stores."

"Sensible," Dolanna nodded.

They moved down and found a flat spot by the brook not far from the road, whose trampled condition hinted that others had camped in this very spot, for it was a flat stretch immediately beside a slow-moving pool in the brook, which had remarkably clear, clean water within it holding several large fish. They let the horses graze on the grass as Dolanna and Ulger took out some bread and cheese for them to eat, and Tarrin, Mist and Sarraya went down to the pool's edge. Mist hunkered down on all fours and sniffed at the water tentatively, then put her hand in and brought it to her lips. "It's safe," she announced. Then, her eyes glittering dangerously, her paw whipped into the water, plunging into it with a sound like she was ripping the surface, and it recoiled as quickly as it entered, bringing with it one of the larger fish at the bottom of the pool.

"Hey, can you fish a couple more of those out?" Miranda asked.

"If you want to eat them raw," Dolanna advised. "We do not have the time for a fire."

Azakar made a slight face, but said nothing, but Miranda chuckled. "Raw is fine with me. Wikuni aren't as squeamish as you humans."

"Raw fish is a delicacy in Shacè," Haley said.

"Everything is a delicacy in Shacè," Ulger said with a grunt. "I've never seen people who eat snails and frogs."

"You just don't have a sense of adventure, Ulger," Haley told him.

"I'll do my adventuring with my sword, not my tongue," he announced.

"Perhaps cooking them would be wise here," Dolanna offered. "These animals might carry diseases of which we have no knowledge."

"Don't worry about that, Dolanna," Miranda said. "I know a spell to cure diseases. We'll be safe enough."

"Ah. In that case, carry on," she said with a smile and a wave of her hand.

"How many do you want, my mate?" she asked.

"One will do, so fish out four if you don't mind," he answered. "One for each of us, plus whatever extra you want."

"I'll have them in a minute," she promised.

Mist was a proficient fisher, so she had lunch out of the pool in mere moments. Ulger kept giving disgusted faces as the four of them enjoyed a meal of raw fish, bread, and cheese, with water from the brook to wash it down. The fish tasted just like fish from home, but that was something of a broad generality and he knew it. But this particular fish tasted very good. It was his first meal here on this new world, and it also included food from this new world. That seemed like a good enough start to him. "Ick," Ulger said as he watched. "There goes my appetite."

"It's your loss," Haley told him. "These aren't bad. They taste like freshwater rockfish."

"Tarrin," Miranda said as they were finishing up. "Can you *please* do something about this robe? I'm begging! I'm going to die of heat stroke!"

"I'm not sure what I can do, Miranda," he told her. "Don't you know a Priest spell to fix it?"

"I can pray for one that makes the air around me cool, but anyone who gets close to me is going to notice it," she told him. "I need a permanent solution, and I just don't have one."

"I may not have one either," he warned.

"We won't know until you look, will we?"

He chuckled. "Alright," he said, standing up. "Let me go get the book and I'll see if Kimmie or the Gnomes put a spell in there that will help."

The book was a Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook, a gift from the Gnomes of Gnomlin, and it held all of the Wizard spells he could cast within it. Kimmie and the Gnomes had added spells into it beyond those in his own tomes, and he still hadn't managed to go through all of them because he was always busy doing something else. He went to his horse and pulled it out of the saddlepack, brought it back over to where they were sitting. He spoke the word that made the little thing expand to its full size, which took up his entire lap, and then he started paging through it.

"So that's a spellbook, eh?" Ulger said. "I always wondered what one looked like." He came over and looked over Tarrin's shoulder. "Tarrin, why are the characters *moving*?"

“They’re not,” he answered absently. “You don’t have the magical skill to read them, so they’re hiding themselves from your eyes. If you *could* read them, you’d be a danger to yourself and everyone around you. You don’t play with Arcane magic, Ulger, so Wizards take steps to prevent messy accidents.”

“Arcane magic?” he asked.

“Wizard magic. That’s what they call it. Kimmie kinda made that stick on me.”

The book wasn’t organized into sections or divided into groups of similar spells. Each page held its own spell, and they weren’t in any order. He had to go by memory and bookmarks which were liberally dispersed through it, each a different color, to find spells he was looking for. He leafed through it as the others finished their meals, and began getting ready to move again, til he found one that looked promising. “Here we go,” he said. “Here’s a spell that creates a duplicate of an object in size and shape but leaves what it’s made of up to the caster. It also creates the duplicate in the condition of the original when it was first made.”

“That’s *perfect*!” Miranda said with glee, clapping her hands. “Can you make a copy of this robe, but in a lighter material? Like cotton, or *plaxa* fiber, or silk? I’d prefer *plaxa*. It’s very light, it breathes, it’ll keep me cool, and it’s very rugged.”

“Easily, but I have to have a bit of the material that the creation will be made of, and it will disappear when I cast the spell. So will the item I’m duplicating. You have anything made of *plaxa* you don’t mind losing, and do you mind losing the wool robe?”

“I don’t *need* a heavy wool robe in the summer, and I think I have a shift,” she said. “Do you need the whole thing or just a piece of it?”

“Just a piece.”

“Then I’ll tear a swath for you, and you can cast it again with another swath to replace the shift itself.”

“Clever,” Sarraya said admirably.

“I didn’t get this far by being a silly girl, Sarraya,” Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

“Only when it suited you to look silly,” Tarrin added.

She gave him a knowing wink.

“I’ll need the robe, Miranda, but without you in it,” he told her. “You need to take it off.”

“Gladly,” she said, standing up and reaching for the belt holding it around her waist.

“You are wearing something under it, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.”

“Damn,” Ulger muttered just loud enough to hear, which made Haley laugh. Miranda gave Ulger a daring little smile as she passed him, going to fetch the shift.

More than just Ulger watched curiously as Tarrin accepted a torn piece of Miranda’s shift and the robe he was going to duplicate, then memorized the spell. Tarrin had a knack for it, and he was finished in mere moments. It actually was a very easy spell to memorize. When he was done he closed the book and spoke the word which made it shrink back to its tiny travelling form, and he stuck it absently in his pocket. He put the robe on the ground, laid out flat so he could see it, then put the swath of white shift on the ground beside it and backed up. Everyone else did the same, and he began the spell.

Wizard magic was done in the language of magic itself, a nonsensical tongue that seemed to make no grammatical sense. Then again, Arcane magic often contradicted itself, and operated by rules that nobody who practiced Wizard magic truly understood.

They had learned enough to gain some control over the power, but not enough to truly understand it. Wizards spent their entire lives in study of a force that their minds simply were not advanced enough to fully comprehend. He chanted in that strange language, which seemed both musical and discordant at the same time, his hands making five distinct and sharp gestures before him, one after another after another, as was dictated by the spell's formula. The words and the gestures were what shaped the force of the magic and would cause it to do what he wanted it to do. When he finished, he felt that tenuous connection to a force that existed *elsewhere*, and the magic came to him and then moved through him.

The torn piece of shift shimmered on the ground before him, then vanished, as did the wool robe itself. Almost immediately, a brown robe made of *plaxa* fiber, an exact duplicate of the original, appeared where the wool robe had been.

"I don't need a swath for the shift," he told Miranda as she handed him the other half of the torn piece. "Keep that in case you need something else duplicated. If I'm just replacing one garment with an undamaged duplicate of the same material, I just need the garment itself."

"Oh, alright."

He repeated the spell once more to replace the torn shift, and he was done. The casting of the two spells didn't tire him at all, for Wizard magic took a great deal of the Wizard's own energy to control the forces of magic and make them do what he wanted them to do.

"Why did you have to memorize it anyway?" Ulger asked. "I know how good your memory is, Tarrin."

"The words are in the language of magic, and they don't let themselves get memorized like that," he answered him. "I'll forget the spell in a few days or so, and I'll have to memorize it again. That's why you see Wizards with their noses in their books all the time. They have to keep memorizing their spells over and over again."

"Oh," he said.

"That certainly explains why my cub always had her nose in her books," Mist grunted.

"The more advanced a Wizard is, the longer they can remember a spell," he said, reciting what Kimmie had taught him when she trained him in Wizard magic. "I can remember a spell for about four days. Kimmie can hold one for six, and Phandebrass can remember a spell for almost a ride."

"That's surprising, but then again it's not," Sarraya laughed.

"Nothing about Phandebrass should surprise anyone anymore," Dolanna said mildly as Miranda belted the new robe around her curvy form. "How are the horses, Ulger?"

"We've just been riding a few hours, Dolanna," he scoffed.

"Yes, but we went from winter to summer. We should check them over to ensure they have adjusted."

"I'll see to it," Azakar said, standing up with a rattle of clanking armor.

"I can't let a brother Knight do all the work. I'll supervise," Ulger said with a roguish grin, following the huge Mahuut.

"You couldn't supervise a sleeping slug!" Sarraya piped up. "I'd better make sure that you stay out of Zak's way!"

The three of them moved to check the horses as Tarrin, Mist, and Miranda started cleaning up and getting ready to go, and Dolanna packed what few items they had taken out. Tarrin stretched out his arms, and several sickening *cracks* from popping joints accompanied the motion. “Does it hurt?” Mist asked.

“It never does, but sometimes I get a little stiff,” he replied.

“It certainly sounds like it,” Miranda told him.

Ulger and Azakar endured the Faerie’s scathing commands and comments as they checked over the horses, and proclaimed them fit. Tarrin mounted up after helping Dolanna onto her gentle mare, and Sarraya landed lightly on his shoulder. “You’re not ingratiating yourself very well, Sarraya,” he said in a quiet tone.

“Heh, who cares? I’m having fun,” she said in a wicked tone.

“Tread lightly around Ulger, little friend. He’s like Faalken was. He *will* get you if you annoy him.”

“Isn’t he the one that shaved the hair off one side of Zak’s head?”

He nodded. “Zak threw him overboard in retaliation. In full armor,” he added.

“Ooh, this trip is sounding more and more fun,” she said in a grim kind of anticipation.

“You’ve been warned,” he said mildly.

Miranda seemed much happier after they started out once again, following Kimmie’s trail as it turned left onto the road. The heavy wool cloak, combined with the summer heat, the beating sun, and her own thick fur, was making her utterly miserable. But *plaxa* fiber, one of the plant fibers the Selani made clothes and tent fabric from, was perfect for her. It breathed out the hot air and circulated cooler air in, keeping the mink Wikuni from overheating. Tarrin was glad for that, for he didn’t like seeing his friend uncomfortable. Now that her troubles were off his mind, he, Haley, and Mist were studying the road with a practiced eye that told them much. This road wasn’t much used, and it hadn’t seen rain in a while. There were traces of cart tracks on it, as well as horses, sheep, cattle, dogs, and strange three-toed tracks with claws that reminded Tarrin of *inu*. And most importantly to Tarrin, there were bootprints that were the size and shape a human’s foot in a boot would have.

“Human,” Mist announced. “Days old.”

“Are you sure, my dear?” Haley asked.

“Positive,” she answered. “I can smell it from up here. Humans. Really smelly ones.”

“Well, that answers one mystery,” Dolanna said. “There are humans on this world.”

“They seem to be everywhere. Like rats,” Mist grunted.

“Vermin,” Sarraya agreed from Tarrin’s shoulder with an evil little smile at Ulger.

“You’re closer to the size of a rat than me,” he answered with a smirk. “And you have eyes like a rat.”

“Children,” Dolanna said in a mild but firm voice. “Do the tracks go in the direction Kimmie went, or against it?”

“In the same direction,” Mist answered.

“Then let us be off.”

They travelled for about five hours, and Tarrin watched the empty sky start to show a front of clouds in the same direction as the sun seemed to be travelling towards the horizon. If the weather here was anything like it was at home, then that meant that there

was rain coming for this parched land, which was good. Though the grass was green, the earth was dry, telling him that the grass was feeding from ground water that was still high enough for their roots to reach. The land also seemed to start flattening, as the hills became gentler and gentler, and small stands of trees started to appear along hillsides and in shallow valleys through which the road was laid.

"It looks as if rain is moving this way," Haley announced.

"We have a few hours," Tarrin said calmly, looking back towards him as they crested a very low hill.

"It might not be an issue," Mist called, pointing. He looked forward again and saw a small village nestled in the bottom of the valley. If it could be called a village. It was a small gathering of rude mud and thatch huts surrounded by a wall of blackened logs, but there was a stone building down there in the middle of the village, rectangular in shape and with a strange symbol on its top, two small steel spires that angled away from one another, rising up from the roof of the building at angles from the ground rather than straight up, then bent and turned towards the ground at right angles, ending about a fourth of the length as the upsweeping side. There were farm fields surrounding the wall, literally right up against it, and there were humans toiling in those fields. The road split off to cut through the fields into the village through a gate, as the other fork circled wide of the village and continued on the way it was going. Tarrin peered at the humans in the field, and saw that they were dressed in rough homespun smocks and tunics, and often had either wrapped leather around their feet for shoes, at least those who had them. They used battered, worn tools, a very rare few of them steel, and most others made of bone or simple wood.

"By the Goddess," Dolanna said. "These people dwell in such crude conditions!"

"They look like Mahuut tribals from Valkar," Haley said.

"That stone building tells us that they are not as crude as first impressions suggest," Dolanna said after a moment of study. "Though the architecture is odd and the design is somewhat simplistic, these people have learned to work in stone."

"And steel," Haley added.

"Well, Kimmie's trail goes down into the village," Tarrin said. "So I guess we need to go pay them a visit."

"Sarraya, kindly hide," Dolanna said. "Let us give no impression that we are more than we should appear."

"You got it, Dolanna," Sarraya said, even as her form shimmered and vanished.

They started down towards the village slowly, and Tarrin reached into the pouch hanging from his saddle and withdrew the golden charm given to him by Spyder. It exactly resembled a Weavespinner's *shaeram*, and it needed to, for it was supposed to be affixed to the back of his and not be noticable. These people probably spoke no language that they would understand, so he wanted to be ready. "Let me do the talking," he called as they approached. The first villagers noticed them, and jumped up from their work in the fields to run through the gate of their crude wall, calling out. Tarrin listened to them shouting, and affirmed that they were speaking in no language that he understood. He affixed the charm to his amulet, and felt that odd surge of *awareness* rush through him, a heightening of sense of self and surroundings, an alertness imparted to him by the charm. It also granted him the power to have hear any language and understand it, and have his words understood by any who heard them. The only drawback to it was that he couldn't

control that, and if he *wanted* to speak in a language that someone couldn't understand, he had to take the charm off. Everyone who heard his voice would hear him seemingly speaking their own language, but for him, he heard their language as it sounded properly, but the charm gave him the ability to understand what they were saying.

All work stopped as they drew near, and the villagers ran into the village. Several men were visible at the top of the wall, holding hemp-stringed bows and arrows with steel arrowheads that flashed in the lowering sun. Four men hurried out of the gate, three men in chainmail hauburks and carrying rusty swords, and a fourth in a pristine black cassock and a large gold medallion hanging from a thick gold chain around his neck. This man's clothing was made of the finest wool, and he was clean and neat and just a little chubby, an aging man with a balding head of brown hair, a heavy, raw-boned face with a large nose and eyes that were small and set close together piggishly. Tarrin took an *immediate* dislike for this man. Why, he did not know, but he did. There was just something about him that Tarrin found annoying, upsetting, *wrong* about him. The man fidgeted a bit with his clothes, preening his balding pate of mousey hair that looked to be oiled down. Tarrin's casual eye swept over the three armed men, but the way they moved and the condition of their armor told him that they were no threat, so much so that even the sight of potentially dangerous, armed strangers didn't rouse the Cat within him.

Tarrin's large black stallion pulled to a stop not far from the men, more than enough space to kill them before they could reach him, then put both hands on his saddlepommel and regarded them with a slightly chilly gaze.

"W-Welcome, my Lord," the man in the cassock said in an alien language, yet Tarrin could understand him clearly. "Welcome to the village of Astun. Praise be to the One."

Tarrin said nothing immediately, staring at the man and letting the silence unnerve him a bit. It had the intended effect. "I have come from a distant land in search of two individuals," he said immediately. "One is a scatterbrained fellow with white hair, the other a slender woman with dark hair. Both were on horses. I know they passed by this village. When did they pass?"

"A-Are you a Hunter, my Lord?" the man asked in awe. "Have you been chasing those two Defiled all this time?"

"Defiled? Explain your term."

"Why, they were Defiled, my Lord! Evil! One wasn't even *human*, and the other practiced *witchcraft*!"

Immediately, Tarrin switched to the unspoken manner of the Cat, a language which the charm would *not* translate into a form all could understand, because it was not a spoken language. "Mist, tell Miranda to keep that hood up," he said quickly. "They hate non-humans here."

Mist relayed the command to Miranda, who nodded and carefully bowed her head without moving her hands. To do so would have revealed her fur-clad hands to the man in the cassock.

"Do you know which way they went?" he asked.

"Well, after my guards attacked them, they ran off to the south, along the road, my Lord Hunter," he answered. "That she-devil killed seven of my men! Has the Church sent word of their replacements?"

"I don't answer to the Church," he said calmly. "I seek those two for my own reasons."

The man blanched, his face turning white. Tarrin must have said something wrong, and he struggled quickly to figure out what it was. "Sure you didn't mean to blaspheme the One!" the man said.

"No, I meant no such thing," he said, understanding. "I meant to say I seek those two for personal reasons, that I'm not acting on the orders of the Church. I'm not a Hunter."

"Oh!" he said, making an odd motion with his hand, rising his flat palm to his right shoulder and crossing it to his left. "I'm sure He will forgive you for your mis-statement, my Lord." He sighed. "I was hoping that you were carrying a reply from the Diocese. My three men can barely keep these dullards in check. I've already had two of them try to escape."

"Too bad they didn't run fast enough," one of the guards snickered, glancing back into the village.

Tarrin looked over their heads, at the stone building. He realized it was some kind of temple, and there were two still forms impaled on wooden stakes outside of it. They had been impaled through their backs, and from the condition of the bodies and the black bloodstains, they hadn't died immediately. They had lingered for a long time, in agony as gravity dragged them further down the stakes, until loss of blood finally, mercifully, claimed them.

Tarrin's eyes flashed, and a sudden fury rose up in him. These men were, were *evil*. They had impaled those two for trying to escape, and let them die slowly and in hideous agony. His fury was mixed with a kind of moralistic outrage he had not felt since going to Dala Yar Arak and seeing how the Arakites treated slaves.

In a moment of utter clarity, almost as if the information were imparted to him by another, he understood. This church ruled by terror, and only by terror did they keep their minions in check. And from the sound of it, this church was large, was impressive, and ruled a very large area. Despite him saying he was from a distant land, the man assumed that his church ruled it. He spoke of a Diocese, meaning that they had divided up the land into sectors, and his talking about getting more men told him that he was but the end of a line of command.

Tarrin was in a furor, and his sense of justice demanded that something be done. *Now*. He dismounted his horse and threw the reins in Haley's general direction, and stalked towards the men in a kind of dangerous walk that put the three guards at sudden unease. "Tarrin!" Dolanna called. She knew him well, and could tell just by watching him move that he had bloodshed on his mind. "Tarrin, do not!"

He didn't answer. "Tell me, priest, exactly what crime did those two commit that warranted such a painful death?" he asked in a low, calm, deceptively dangerous manner that everyone behind him realized was a question that might sentence the one who answered it to death.

The man looked at him suspiciously. "Does the Church do things differently where you come from, my Lord?" he asked. "It's the standard punishment for a serf trying to escape."

"We don't have your Church where I come from," he answered coldly. "And if we did, I'd have wiped it out long ago."

The words hit the man like a slap in the face, and his chubby visage reddened up in sudden anger and outrage. "You're Defiled!" he said in understanding. "Kill him!" he barked at the three men, then he started to chant in a language that even the charm could

not decipher. To Tarrin's surprise, he was chanting in the language of the gods, the *exact same* language that Priests from *his* world used to cast spells!

The three men drew their shortswords and advanced, but not confidently. Tarrin's stance and his expression showed an absolute and utter disregard for the three armed men, as if they were absolutely nothing, and that kind of towering confidence never failed to intimidate.

He didn't even bother bringing out a weapon, because in that moment of intense, icy anger, he forgot himself and shapeshifted into his natural form. He was so piqued that he shifted into his *true* form, which included the wings, as they were now a natural part of him. Those wings seemed to strike utter terror into the three armed men, but the chanting of the Priest behind them seemed to bolster them into making an assault.

It was an assault doomed at its inception. Even without his overwhelming strength, he was more than a match for three fearstruck humans. The first one to reach him tried to thrust his shortsword through Tarrin's belly, but the Were-cat simply slithered aside and turned his wing so its edge met the man's neck. He altered the wing so that leading edge was sharper than a razor, which quite neatly decapitated the man as his own momentum carried him by. He twirled around the dead man, shielding his demise from the other two, then slapped aside the thrusting blade of the second with one paw and took out his throat with the other, sending a glittering trail of blood in an arc away from his slashing paw as the man fell to the side, yanked out of his path by the power of Tarrin's swipe. He spread his feet and assumed his slouching battle stance, then roared furiously at the last living guard or soldier or whatever he was, snapping his wings out in a display of pure, naked power. That display made the man falter in his charge, eyes wide and mouth agape, but he crumpled to the ground when an incensed Mist, her Illusion gone, hurtled in from his flank and savaged him with her Cat's Claws, puncturing about every vital organ the man possessed faster than the human could react to the first blow. She finished him by taking off his head with her five magical blades, sending five different pieces of head sailing off in the general direction of the path of her lethal blow. A sudden fountain of blood erupted from the neatly severed stump of the man's neck, then the body toppled over stiffly, muscles locked in shock at losing the brain's direction.

The Priest managed to finish his spell, which was an accomplishment when staring death in the face as he was, and a smoky haze appeared before him. It solidified after a moment into an ugly little creature with reddish skin, gangly limbs covered with warts, and a large head with black eyes, a big, hooked nose and a mouth full of sharp little teeth. Tarrin recognized the creature as a *quasit*, and it was the least of the many forms of Demonkind.

Now he knew that this church has to be utterly evil, for its Priests called on Demons for assistance.

"Now you are dead!" the man screamed in triumph. "Attack him!" he commanded the quasit.

But the quasit didn't move. It trembled in absolute terror when it looked upon Tarrin, for it could see what the Priest could not, and it fully understood just who, and *what*, Tarrin was.

The Priest looked on his servant with shock, then actually kicked it in the rump. "I said attack him!" he ordered.

It actually wasn't a bad idea. Only Wizard magic, Priest magic, or weapons alien to this world would harm a Demon, but unfortunately for the Priest, he didn't know that Tarrin possessed all three of those weapons. Had Tarrin been a regular, mundane mortal of this world, he would be utterly defenseless against the quasit, despite the fact that it was the weakest of its kind, with virtually no magic of its own.

Still advancing, Tarrin closed his paw on empty air, and his black-bladed sword was summoned from the *elsewhere*. Tarrin's eyes exploded from within with the greenish radiance that marked his anger, and licks of flame appeared around the fetlocks of his wrists and ankles. The quasit squealed in terror at the sight of him, and ran around behind the Priest to hide behind his ankles, quivering and clicking its teeth as they chattered. "He's mine, Mist," he called coldly as his mate stalked up on the man with murder in her eyes. She glanced at him with annoyance, but stopped, waiting with dreadful eagerness. "Your Demon sees what you can't, *human*," he said scathingly. "I can kill your quasit without even breaking my stride."

"Flee, master!" the quasit said in a creepy, soulless voice. "He is an Avatar! You face a *god*!"

"There are no gods but the One!" the man shrieked hysterically. "Destroy him, or I will send you back to Hell!"

"Then do so!" the quasit said defiantly. "Better to be sent back than exiled for one hundred years!"

This put the Priest in an obvious quandary. His best weapon against his attacker refused to obey. He swept his piggish eyes over them, then grinned suddenly. "Then attack that inhuman Defiled!" he said, pointing at Mist. "Kill his servants!"

This seemed to be a command that the quasit would obey. It skittered out from behind the Priest and launched itself into the air, giving out a keening cry. Tarrin simply put the flat side of his blade on his shoulder and watched, for Mist was in no danger at all. She knew it too, for she simply stepped into that pounce, then speared the quasit on all ten blades of her Cat's Claws when it reached her. It gave out a gurgling cry of surprise, then she flung it aside contemptuously, where it immediately started to decay into that hideous black ichor that burned and ate away at the tilled ground like acid. Mist plunged the ten tines of her magical weapons into the ground to clean the Demon blood off of them, then retracted them and moved away from the growing cloud of noxious smoke rising over the dead Demon. "Mist," he called in a reasonable tone. "Keep him from getting away, and don't let him cast any more spells. I have an idea, and I'm going to need him alive for it."

"My pleasure, my mate," she said with a ghastly look of anticipation.

The Priest, who understood what he said, blanched, and then turned to flee back into the village. She bounded after him, and caught him before he took ten steps. Though she was weakened by this alien world, she was still very, very strong, stronger than him, and she used that strength to grab hold of his neck. He snapped to a stop by that grip, his legs coming out from under him as they tried to continue moving forward. Mist punched him heavily in the middle of his back, knocking the air out of him, then stomped on the side of his foot. There was an audible *crack* as her blow on the awkwardly set limb broke his ankle, and another *crack* when she kicked him on the inside of the knee of his other leg, doing some serious damage to it. She yanked him back a little and then elbowed him in the side of his face, breaking his jaw and cheekbone with a blow that sent two teeth and a

long line of blood flying from the man's mouth. She turned and dragged him back to Tarrin, then dropped him unceremoniously on the ground in front of her mate. The Priest started sobbing, rolling over on his belly, then he tried to crawl away with his injured legs, but Mist planted her foot in the small of his back and slammed him to the ground, and held him there to keep him from getting away.

"Would you explain why you did that?" Dolanna said hotly. "This is *not* what I expected from our first meeting with these people, Tarrin!"

"The fat one conjured a Demon, Dolanna," Haley said in a mild tone. "I don't think he really *needs* to explain. That's explanation enough."

She gave Haley a withering look, then she blinked and chuckled a bit ruefully. "You make a point, old friend," she admitted.

"He's a Priest," Miranda said clinically. "But a Priest who summons Demons? I didn't think that was possible. Only Wizards can summon Demons."

"On our world, yes," Dolanna told her. "The rules must be different here, Miranda."

"True that, but if a *Priest* summons Demons, then the god he serves must be in league with them." She shuddered. "I don't even want to *think* about that. Gods collaborating with Demons? It's, it's—there's no words for it!"

"Exactly," Tarrin said flatly, glaring at the chubby little man as he stalked over to him. "Val had Demons who served him. This One sounds no different than Val." He sat down sedately on the ground in front of the Priest. "If he tries to talk, just grind your foot in him, Mist," he ordered. "He needs to be able to speak for this to work, but I don't want him trying to cast any more spells."

"My pleasure, my mate," she nodded.

"Wh-What are you going to do to me?" he blubbered thickly, trying to speak with a broken jaw.

"I'm going to use magic on you," he answered coolly as he took out his spellbook and spoke the word that made it expand to its full size. "My companions don't speak your language. You're going to teach it to them. After that, I'm going to leave you here. I'm sure the villagers here will take *very* good care of you."

"Good idea," Sarraya said as she winked into view, and landed in front of the Priest, who was whimpering and blubbering in abject terror at the idea of being left to the tender mercy of the very people he terrorized himself. His face turned white when he saw her, and she stuck her tongue out at him. "He's fat while everyone else is rail thin," she noticed. "I don't think the others like him very much."

"They'll probably kill him," Azakar said in a tone that said he certainly hoped they would.

"They'll do what's proper, all right," Ulger said with an evil little laugh.

Those villagers, who had run away to hide, were slowly creeping back out, like frightened mice coming to see if the cat had gone away. They were too afraid to come any closer, however, and Tarrin really didn't blame them all that much. After all, he and Mist was obviously non-human, and from the sound of it, they'd been taught all their lives that non-humans were evil. Tarrin found the spell he was looking for, and quickly memorized it. It required no material component to cast, but it would take nearly three minutes to complete. He'd have to chant three incantations over and over again while the magic gleaned the language out of the Priest and deposited into his friends. It was the Wizard version of the Druidic spell that did more or less the same thing, something

Phandebrass would have immediately sought to do once he realized they couldn't speak the language. But unlike the Druid version, this one would teach multiple people at the same time, having an area of effect around the one who was supplying the language. All they had to do was be inside that area of effect, and they'd be magically taught every language the man knew.

Tarrin spoke the word to shrink his spellbook and put it away, then stood up. "Everyone get around our fat friend," he called. "We have to be within six spans of him for this to work."

"Who'll look after the horses?" Ulger asked.

"I'll tell them not to stray," Haley said. "I can't use my magic, but I can still address animals. That doesn't really require power to do. It's a trick all Druids learn."

"I forgot about that," Sarraya chuckled.

"That's why I'm glad we have at least *one* experienced Druid along," Tarrin said.

"And what are you, Mister *I can make my own spells*?" she flared.

"Not as experienced as Haley, even if I can use stronger magic," he told her.

"And I'm not experienced?" she accused.

"You might be, but making you think straight for long enough to apply that experience is the trick," he answered.

"Well!" she huffed. "I'm insulted!"

"The truth hurts," Ulger said with a sly wink at the Faerie.

"You are *so* starting to go up on my list, iron-butt," she said dangerously.

"Fine. Wanna duel?" he asked in a swaggering manner, patting his huge broadsword's hilt.

"Children," Dolanna snapped. "Dismount and gather around the Priest, so that Tarrin may get this done quickly. It may not be well for us to tarry now that we have attacked their cleric."

"That sorry lot's not going to give us any trouble, Dolanna," Ulger grunted, looking at the villagers, who were hiding behind the walls. The men on the walls still looked down with their crude bows, but they were not firing at them.

Tarrin ignored them, taking off the charm as they all gathered around the Priest, and then he started the spell. He chanted the first part again and again and again, allowing the magic to infuse the Priest and find his language. When it was done—he could sense it—he started the next incantation, which implanted that knowledge into the minds of everyone within six spans of the Priest. Again, he chanted the same incantation over and over as he felt that knowledge implant itself into his mind, much faster than it had been lifted from the Priest, then when it was done, he chanted the third part, which sealed the spell and made the gaining of that knowledge stick. It wasn't permanent, but so long as they used the language frequently, the spell's effect would last until they stopped speaking it. Only when they actively stopped using the language would it start to fade from their minds. It would carry them well through until they left this world and went home.

The Priest, to his surprise, spoke three languages, and all three were picked up and implanted into them. He paused a second to sort them in his mind, to look them over and compare them to the languages he already knew. All three had certain grammatical similarities with one or more of the languages he knew, hinting that humans tended to think alike even across dimensions. The language they'd been speaking—called Penali—

had grammatical similarities to Arakite, and the other two had similarities to Torian and Ungardt.

“There,” he said, standing up and glaring down at the man with cold eyes, taking the charm off of his amulet and putting it in his belt pouch. He then spoke in Penali. “I hope these villagers show you the same tender mercy you’ve shown to them over the years, fat one,” he said in a ruthless tone. “And you’d better *pray* that nothing happened to my friends, or I’ll wipe your church off the face of this world.”

“The One will destroy you!” he said spitefully. “All power be to the One! You have made an enemy of the Church of of the One God!”

“I’m not afraid of gods, and if yours gets in my way, I’ll destroy him,” he said in a steely, lethal kind of voice that made the Priest blanch. But more than that, higher up in his consciousness, like whispers, there was a sudden outburst of elation...of *joy*. Tarrin could barely make sense of it, for it was so faint, so distant, so weak, but it was definitely there. Did the others notice that little surge? He doubted it. He had the feeling that it had to do with him being what he was that he could even detect that in the first place.

“Let’s go,” he said in Sulasian to the others.

“We’re leaving him there?” Azakar asked.

Tarrin pointed to the two staked bodies with a cold expression. “He deserves *that*. I’ll explain once we get moving.” Tarrin shifted back into his human form, retracted his wings, then stalked back to his horse and remounted. The others did the same quickly and efficiently. Then Tarrin led them in the direction where Kimmie and Phandebrass had fled when they’d been attacked by that Priest’s men, leaving an entire village full of stunned and confused people behind.

The encounter upset Tarrin, on more than one level. He could accept the concept that some people worshipped evil, it was an aspect of the human condition. It was that an evil order seemed to have so much control that bothered him. Seeing that made him think of what might have happened if Val had defeated him and conquered the world. Would scenes like that one, with the escaped serfs staked in the village commons as a warning to the others, have been played out in his own world? How much control did this Church of the One have over this world? Was it a national religion, or had it spread further than that? And where was the resistance to it if it had not in fact taken complete control? For that matter, where was the resistance even if it did? He rode on in grim, edgy silence, furious at that Priest, concerned at how much control they would have, worried that Kimmie and Phandebrass were in very real danger, and nervous about what was to come. The others rode behind him quietly, waiting for him to calm down enough to talk. All of them knew better than to press him when he was in that kind of mood, even Sarraya. But, as with many things, it was a mood that would quickly pass. Tarrin was capable of wild mood swings, an aspect of his Were-cat nature, and that was something that they also knew.

After he felt calm enough to talk, he explained what had happened, and what the Priest had said. “It sounds like this church is big and has a great deal of control,” he surmised darkly. “That means we’ll have to be *very* careful.”

“Miranda’s going to be a problem,” Haley said seriously. “She can only hide under a robe for so long.”

“I know,” Miranda said contritely. “But what can I do?”

There was a brief silence. “Mist,” Dolanna called. “Give Miranda your belt.”

“What? I—Oh, I understand,” the feral Were-cat said, reaching for her belt. Her image blurred when she took it off, causing her to appear in her normal form.

“Why do that?” Sarraya asked.

“The Illusion that causes Mist to appear human is tied to the belt,” Dolanna answered. “By giving it to Miranda, she will be able to hide under that Illusion. Mist, I fear, will have to endure her human form or conceal herself in cat form for now, until we find a different solution.”

“Won’t Miranda look like Mist?” the Faerie asked curiously.

“Yah. Don’t get any ideas, Tarrin,” the mink Wikuni said with a wink at him as she rode up to them, and Mist handed her the belt. She belted it around her slender waist, and her form blurred. When it was done, an Illusion of Mist looked back at them, but with Miranda’s cheeky grin.

“You don’t smell like me. Only an idiot would confuse us,” Mist grunted as she handed the reins of her horse to Tarrin, then gracefully swung her leg over the saddle and hopped lightly over to Tarrin’s horse. She hunkered down behind him and shapeshifted into her cat form, then slithered around him and laid down in the saddle between him and the saddlehorn.

“I don’t have your nose, Mist, so I guess I’m an idiot,” Ulger chuckled. “Miranda looks like she stepped out of your mirror.”

Mist looked up at Tarrin in a scathing manner that told him that she certainly agreed. “I’d like to put some distance between us and that village,” he said brusquely. “I don’t want to camp close to it.”

“Then let us make use of the light left,” Dolanna said. “Judging by the speed with which the sun has travelled, we have about two hours to sunset.”

They picked the horses up into a canter and put some distance behind them, and Tarrin spent that time brooding over the events of the day and enduring nearly two hours of steady rain, following Kimmie’s trail. The very shallow valley and the little river in its center dropped down out of those rolling hills onto a flat plain dotted here and there with stands of trees, where the river started meandering to and fro like a drunken sailor. Kimmie’s path cut through that river many, many times, as they moved in a straight line, probably seeking to flee from that village. Each time they entered the river they found the water strangely warm, almost hot, and the river itself barely more than four spans deep at its center. It was more like a creek than a river, but it was nearly twenty spans wide in places, definitely the size of a river if not the depth. The rain passed with surprising swiftness after about two hours or so, and the clouds raced away to grace them with a sunny sky that helped dry them out. The sun crept closer and closer to the horizon, and Dolanna was visibly starting to look around for a suitable place to set up camp for the night.

They found a nice flat, dry spot in the crook of one of the river’s many meandering turns, which put water to their backs in three of four directions. The river wasn’t deep, but it was still wide through that curve, and that would give them time to react if someone tried to splash through the river to reach them. The camp had much to offer as a defensible position. Ulger and Azakar both called a stop when they reached it, looking around and proclaiming that it was a suitable place to camp, for it was defensible. Dolanna agreed, and they started setting up camp.

Mist lounged about in cat form as the others worked to set up the camp. Azakar and Ulger took care of the horses, relieving them of their saddles and burdens and allowing them to roam freely to graze on the grass after Haley asked them not to wander from the area. Tarrin and Haley began to set up the tents, and Dolanna began preparing to cook dinner with Miranda after Azakar dug them a shallow firepit and fetched some of the firewood that was brought with them on the pack horses. Sarraya flew about and bossed them around outrageously, at least until she had to dive aside when Mist pounced at her from behind as she flitted around and gave Tarrin and Haley rude instructions in a condescending tone of voice. After that, she darted away and annoyed Ulger, staying well out of Mist's reach. Even in cat form, Mist was a force to be reckoned with. She laid back down, head on her paws and her eyes locked on Sarraya with an evil, predatory glint.

The sun set on their first day in this new world, and to all their surprise, only one very large moon rose not long after the sun set, a moon that was like no moon they had ever seen before. It was not white or red or brownish, like the four moons of their world were, it was blue and green and had bright bands and patches of white spread across it. Tarrin had never seen anything like it before, and he wasn't the only one who stared at it as it rose from the opposite horizon as the setting sun like the majestic rising of a dragon into the air. They were so enthralled by it that Dolanna nearly let their meal of cured, salted ham burn on the fire. "I was never much of a cook," she apologized as she started cutting away parts of the spitted meat, handing it out to the others.

Mist shifted back into her normal form and sat by the fire, obviously satisfied that it was dark enough, or perhaps tiring of being unable to speak. "I'll cook," she announced after taking one bite of the ham. "You're a bad cook, Dolanna."

"Is it, ah, safe for you to cook for us, Mist?" Ulger asked delicately.

"As long as I don't lick the spoon and put it back in the pot, yes," she answered him directly.

"How will you know how it tastes?" he asked.

She snorted. "Don't you humans *ever* use your nose?" she demanded.

"After years of wearing armor, it's better that I *don't* have a good sense of smell," Ulger laughed. "Else I wouldn't be able to stand it."

"Armor does get a bit fragrant," Haley chuckled.

"We can't wash it or it rusts," Ulger told him. "We clean it best we can, but it never seems to be enough."

"Well, I hope this lasts us until morning," Dolanna chuckled. "Faalken always used to do the cooking. He was a surprisingly good cook," she said with a misty, distant expression.

"He was a great man, Dolanna," Haley told her gently, patting her shoulder.

"He was the best of men, Haley," she sighed. "All of Sennadar was lessened with his passing."

"Well said," Ulger said stoically.

Tarrin was about to say something, but the faint sound of flapping wings caught his attention. Given that they were new to this world, it could have been about anything. Mist heard it as well, her head rising and her ears swivelling towards the sound, a sound that was approaching them. "We've got something small flying this way," she called, putting aside her ham and standing up.

“The light of the fire might be attracting it,” Dolanna pondered as Azakar and Ulger rose up and drew their swords.

Mist turned her head and cocked her ear at the sound, then snorted. “Bah, it’s nothing to worry about. I’d better think about trying to make them listen to you, my mate. That’s two that disobeyed you.”

“What are you talking about?” Tarrin asked, glancing at her, then something glittery appeared in the darkness past the light of the fire. It got larger as it approached them, moving erratically, until it was close enough for him to make out.

It was Fireflash!

Tarrin jumped up and rushed towards the drake, who swerved and tottered in the air, until it finally seemed to give out just before it reached him. The gold drake flopped to the ground, panting heavily, and Tarrin scooped up his precious drake in human hands and cradled him close to his body. Fireflash looked very, very weak, and he was panting so hard that Tarrin feared his lungs would burst. “You foolish drake!” Tarrin said in a strangled tone. “I told you not to follow!”

“How did he get to the gate?” Dolanna demanded. “Quickly, bring him here! Sarraaya, come here at once!”

Tarrin hurried his drake over to the fire and deposited him in Dolanna’s lap. The Sorceress inspected the panting drake, quickly, and Tarrin was very worried. His scales seemed to be dull, and he was moving very, very feebly. Fireflash was a strong little drake, and could fly all day and all night without getting tired. But he looked like he was about to die from exhaustion! Then he remembered Niami’s warning that Fireflash would die if he came here. And now he saw *how*. He wouldn’t die the instant he crossed over, he would slowly waste away like a man dying of thirst. But his thirst would only be satisfied by the magical emanations and energies of their home world, which did not exist here.

“Come here!” Dolanna ordered as she carefully handed Fireflash back to Tarrin, who sat down by the fire and put him in his lap. “The amulet you wear, does it require you to touch it or merely be close to it?”

“I only have to be close to it, Dolanna,” she answered. “It has a range of about a good hundred spans.”

“Then do not get further from Fireflash than that,” she commanded. “He needs the power of your amulet to recover.”

“You mean I’m going to be chained—“

“*Do you want him to die?*” Dolanna hissed in a voice so harsh that Tarrin was taken aback. “Now stay with him!”

“Yes, Dolanna,” she said sulkily, flitting up and landing on Tarrin shoulder, her arms crossed and a pouty look on her face.

Tarrin wasn’t listening, however. His total attention was affixed to his weakened little drake. Fireflash lay limply in his lap, still panting, eyes seemingly glazed, but he did manage to nuzzle at Tarrin’s fingers slightly when he stroked his snout. He collected him up in his human hands and cradled him to his chest, not minding the sharp pokes of the spikes at the ends of his wingbones in his arm. What a crazy thing to do! Why did he disobey and come here? For that matter, how did Fireflash *find* him?

Then again, his willful little drake would have come in a heartbeat if that was what he wanted. He would disobey Tarrin if it came to something like being left behind.

Fireflash had been with him for years, and he *really* didn't like to be separated. They were more than master and pet, they were friends, and Tarrin had felt just as incomplete without his little friend on his shoulder as Fireflash had probably felt being left behind.

It really didn't matter, though. He was here now, he was safe, and after some time exposed to Sarraya's amulet, he should recover. His day-long journey to reach Tarrin had shown that it wouldn't be instant death to wander beyond the range of Sarraya's amulet.

Mist cooked stew with the supplies they had brought with them, but Tarrin didn't eat but a few bites. He saved his bowl for a while, until after everyone but Azakar went to their tents, and gently hand-fed his drake once he felt strong enough to eat. Once he had food and water, Tarrin affixed the charm to the back of his amulet to ensure he didn't get sleepy, and sat right there by the fire with Sarraya, who had fallen asleep on a large pillow Dolanna had kindly put beside him. Azakar, who was standing watch, didn't speak, and neither did Tarrin. Though they had had their differences in the past, they were still very good friends, and they both understood that neither tended to want excessive conversation. Dwelling together in silence was more than preferable to both of them. If either had something to say, they would say it, and they both knew it. For them, the silence was neither awkward nor pregnant.

Throughout the night, as Azakar was replaced by Ulger, and then Haley, and then he stood watch alone, Tarrin sat by the fire and pondered what had possessed him to risk death to come through the gate, but that was just a mystery. Then he worried about what trouble Kimmie and Phandebrass could get into here. Kimmie had the sense to keep a low profile, but Phandebrass was going to be a major problem. He would be utterly incapable of keeping his mouth shut, and the longer he stayed around these people, the more danger he would pose to them both. Kimmie should be able to keep a throttle on him, at least up to a point. But he knew it was eventually going to come to a point where the two of them would have another confrontation like the one they had had at the village back there, and there was no guarantee it would turn out well. There was a possibility that they were already being tracked down by one of those Hunters that that Priest had spoken of, who the Priest had mistakenly believed he was. If that man had reported the incident, there could be Hunters on Kimmie and Phandebrass' trail right now.

Towards dawn, Dolanna emerged from her tent and came over to him, seating herself by the fire with him. She had her tea kettle in hand, which she placed by the fire to heat the water. "Did you sleep at all, dear one?" she asked.

He shook his head, stroking Fireflash's scales, which now looked lustrous and healthy. His breathing was strong, and it looked like a night exposed to the magic of Sarraya's amulet had restored him. His sleep was a natural one now. "I have the charm on, Dolanna," he told her. "At least it gave me time to think."

"About yesterday?"

He nodded. "They're in trouble," he told her. "Kimmie can keep her head down, but Phandebrass won't be able to. And I think that Priest reported what happened, so there's a chance that they have these Hunters on them now."

"Why do you think that?"

"He said he was waiting for new troops to arrive to replace the ones Kimmie killed," he answered. "So he had to tell them why he lost his men in the first place."

"But he thought *you* were the Hunter, dear one," she answered. "So perhaps they had not dispatched one yet. We could very well be ahead of him."

"I hadn't considered that," he admitted, nodding in agreement. "So he has to get through us to get to Kimmie. I don't think that's going to happen."

"I would hope not," she said with a mild smile. "I would ask that you keep your moral outrage under control, my dear one. We cannot afford to have half of this Church after us before we go a hundred leagues. I do not like what goes on here either, but we are but eight, and we face an unknown enemy who seems to have complete control of this land. We are the invaders, my dear one, and we cannot afford to fight a running battle."

"I know," he said with a snort. "But it doesn't look good for finding the Dwarves or Mother's lost children. If they survived after reaching here, this Church might have hunted them all down and destroyed them."

"I reached a similar conclusion," she said with a somber expression. "But we must be sure. That they still hunt we *defiled* means that there are still practitioners of magic and non-humans on this world. There is a chance that we will find them, or more logically, their descendants. After all, it *has* been five thousand years."

"We can hope, Dolanna," he said. "But right now, getting Kimmie and Phandebrass back in one piece is all I care about."

"Yes, that is the main goal we have right now," she agreed.

Mist came out of the tent he and her were to share, stretching languidly. She was nude, which made Dolanna give a hint of a smile, and then padded over and gave Tarrin a kiss on the cheek before booting Sarraya's pillow out of the way, startling the sleeping Faerie something awful, and sitting down beside him as Sarraya yowled in sudden fright.

"Hey! I was sleeping here!" she protested as she wobbled into the air, glaring at the Were-cat menacingly.

"So?" Mist said in a dangerous tone, giving Sarraya a flat look.

Sarraya had the sense not to tangle with Mist. She clamped her mouth shut and flitted up to land on Tarrin's shoulder.

"How is he?" Mist asked.

Fireflash had been awakened by Sarraya's high-pitched squeal, and his golden eyes blinked a few times before he looked up at Tarrin. He clambered to his feet and then turned and hurled himself at Tarrin's chest. He caught his little drake and hugged him lightly as he rubbed the side of his head against Tarrin's bicep affectionately. "I'd say he's just fine," Tarrin chuckled lightly. "It looks like he'll be alright so long as he stays near enough to Sarraya not to get too weak."

"We will have to observe and learn how long he can safely remain away from Sarraya," Dolanna told them. "Tarrin, ask him to use his breath weapon. Let us see if he retains that ability here."

Tarrin nodded. "Go ahead, Fireflash," he prompted to his drake.

"He understands the common tongue?" Dolanna asked.

Tarrin nodded. "Some. He has a vocabulary of about four hundred words, and *breath weapon* is one of the commands I taught him," he answered as Fireflash dropped down to Tarrin's legs, then sucked in his breath. A small cone of intense fire blasted forth from his open maw, aimed at the crackling fire before them. It washed over Dolanna's teapot, which caused the water within to instantly boil. Steam whistled shrilly from the spout as it sought escape from the container.

"I think your water is boiling, Dolanna," Sarraya snickered.

"I'm glad you're alright, scale-skin," Mist told the drake, patting him on the head. She yawned, then climbed to her feet. "I'd better get started on breakfast. I don't want to hear that scar-faced knight bitch about being hungry again."

"I would suggest that you dress before the others awaken, Mist," Dolanna told Mist politely. "If you would please."

"And you don't have to do all the cooking," Tarrin told her. "Miranda's a passingly good cook, and she likes to do it. She wouldn't mind sharing cooking duties with you."

"If I cook it, I know I'll like it," she said bluntly.

"And the rest of us better like it if we know what's good for us," Sarraya said slyly.

"She learns fast," Mist told Tarrin levelly as she padded back towards the tent.

"Sarraya. For my sanity, please, do *not* start on her," Dolanna said in a low whisper. "Mist will hurt you if you annoy her."

"I'm not an idiot, Dolanna," Sarraya replied.

"That remains to be seen," Mist called from the tent.

"You'll find that Mist is tolerant in some ways, Dolanna," Tarrin chuckled. "She *does* have a sense of humor. Just don't make her the butt of the joke, and you'll be just fine."

"This should be an, exciting, journey," Dolanna said with a sigh. "*Two* feral Werecats to manage. I believe I shall get gray hair after this."

"Better you than me," Sarraya said with an evil smile at her.

Haley emerged from his tent just as Mist came out and started collecting cooking utensils. He walked over and seated himself on the other side of Dolanna, pulling a small cloth pouch out of his waistcoat. "For you, Dolanna," he said. "This tea is the finest from the Shou Empire. I thought you might like to enjoy our first morning here on this alien world with a bit of luxury."

"Ever thoughtful, my friend," Dolanna said brightly as she accepted the bag.

"Though I believe we shall need more water. Fireflash boiled off most that was in my kettle, I fear."

"How are you feeling this morning, little one?" Haley asked Fireflash amiably.

Fireflash gave a few bright chirping sounds, then vaulted up to Tarrin's shoulder with a single thrust of his wings.

"Well, he feels chipper today," Haley chuckled.

"A night near Sarraya's amulet did the trick," Tarrin answered, reaching up and scratching his drake under the chin. "I think he'll be fine as long as he spends each night close to Sarraya. After all, he managed to get all the way over here without it."

"True," he nodded, testing the heat of the tea kettle with a hand, then drawing away quickly. "Ah, Tarrin, would you be so kind?"

"Certainly," he said, grabbing the hot kettle's handle and standing up. "I'll be right back."

Mist cooked them a large meal of porridge and bacon, with some flatbread and water to wash it down, and they started packing up the camp to prepare to move out. Azakar came over to Tarrin just as they were finishing and cleared his throat. "I think I should take point, Tarrin," he said. "No offense," he added quickly. "But an armored Knight in the lead might be smart, and Miranda can put the spell on me so I can see Kimmie's trail."

"I'll be fine, Zak," Tarrin told him mildly.

"Yes, but you're not as intimidating in human form as you usually are, and, well, I'm intimidating just about all the time. Sometimes all it takes is one mean-looking cuss riding point to discourage any kind of foolishness."

Tarrin laughed. "If you think it's safest, then I don't have a problem with it," he agreed.

"It *is* safest," he said bluntly. "It puts an armored Knight at each end of the group."

"Alright then. You're leading us today, Zak."

"I won't get us lost, I promise."

"I never thought you would, Zak."

When they got started, Azakar led them out. Tarrin and Miranda rode behind him with Fireflash on his shoulder and Mist in cat form in the saddle with him. Haley and Dolanna were behind them, with Haley leading the pack train, with Ulger bringing up the rear looking menacing and glaring at every blade of grass that went by. Sometimes Ulger reminded Tarrin so much of Faalken that it was like Faalken was reborn, but then again, he remembered again Darvon telling him that Ulger and Faalken had been the best of friends and partners in crime, for they had been mischievous terrors as cadets. Ulger was just being silly to entertain Sarraya, who was flitting around him like a moth drawn to a flame. At least Ulger was drawing Sarraya's attention away from everyone else, saving them from her barbs and witty little comments, and in that respect the fellow had already become everyone's favorite group member.

Kimmie's trail stayed away from the road, and she proved with that that she was a clever girl. She was cutting cross country, through the tall grassy plain, moving in a straight line as if she had somewhere to go, or she was being chased. There were no signs of battle or commotion in the grass, but after a month, it would have recovered by now. They rode through another brief shower that sent Sarraya scrambling under the cloak Tarrin pulled out to deflect the rain, only to come flitting out and be obnoxious again when the brief shower passed and the sun came out once more. Tarrin rode along in relative silence, again lost in thought as to this world and the rude welcome they had received. Miranda, wearing Mist's face, rode along with him also in silence, and her presence seemed to spark that line of thought within him once more. This Church of the One hated magic—at least any magic not Priest magic—and hated non-humans as well. From the way it sounded, there *were* non-humans out there, but they were probably very careful never to be seen. That was a small hope that any surviving Dwarves still lived here, probably deep underground if they stuck to their base natures, well away from the Church of the One and the Hunters that sought to destroy them.

He worried a great deal about this Church of the One. Tarrin could sense that they were going to be a serious problem, and what was more, something deep down inside of him told him that there might come a time that he might have to do something about them. He didn't know why he felt that, but he did. Part of him didn't want to make this any harder than it was going to be, but another part of him took exceptional offense to this Church of the One, and within him was the faint stirrings of a desire to stamp it out.

It wouldn't be easy, that was for sure, but Tarrin was never one to worry about frilly little details. If he wanted to do something, he did it. He worried about how hard it was after he got started. It was an aspect of his Cat-dominated mentality, often flying into something without thinking it through or having a solid plan for going about it. More

often than not, he made it up as he went along...but it always seemed to work out in the end.

The idea that he might be making an enemy of an organization that ruled everything around him didn't matter. The fact that he might run afoul of a god also didn't concern him. He had no fear of gods. If this One wanted a piece of him, he could just manifest himself nearby and try to take it.

After all, Tarrin too possessed a certain amount of power along those particular lines.

Some might call it overpowering arrogance...and they might be right. Tarrin was arrogant, and he knew it. All Were-cats were. The idea that he was willing to take on a god was the pinnacle of arrogance, but he simply didn't care. This One would have to manifest here in a weakened form, an Avatar, and though he wasn't as powerful as a god, all of his power was focused in the mortal world, and that gave him the raw might to challenge any god on any material plane and have a good chance to win. All of his power was *here*, and he could use it as he saw fit. Unless this One had the power of an Elder God from back home, his Avatar wouldn't bring enough to the table to defeat Tarrin. That wasn't arrogance in his mind, that was just the plain, bald, naked truth. And truth is truth.

He had no fear of gods. Not on this world, not back home, not anywhere.

Chapter 2

When Mist told him about wanting to assume her proper height, he really hadn't given it much thought. When he did, he thought fleetingly that it was going to be like it was for him after Shiika kissed him and caused his body's aging to accelerate at a frightening rate; the hunger, the weakness, the discomfort. Granted, he'd been lost in the Cat when that happened, barely aware of what was going on around him, only aware of the unbearable emptiness that had consumed him after he'd been separated from his sisters and his friends.

He could not have been more wrong.

Mist's transformation began the day after Fireflash's appearance, after another day of following Kimmie's trail across flat grasslands, moving in the direction that he would call south, since he was assuming that the sun rose in the east and set in the west like it did at home. She warned him that it had started that morning, as they packed the tents in a brief, heavy shower that seemed to be something like a norm for this region, and he hadn't thought much about it. He figured she'd be bad-tempered for a month or so as her body slowly grew out to its new size, because she said it would take about a month, and secretly he was hoping that it would end as quickly as possible. Mist was bad enough with her feral tendencies, but having her with a lightning temper was going to be very dangerous for everyone around her, even *him*. Having Mist finish this growth quickly would be best for everyone involved, even Mist.

But it was not taking a month. Most of it happened *that day*.

Mist didn't complain. Mist *never* complained. It was the sound of it that made it unpleasant for him. She lay quite limply in the saddle with him, sometimes panting quite heavily, and the sound of her bones cracking made him spend that day in a continual shudder. Around about lunch, he was wondering if Mist was going to *survive* what was happening to her, and he even consulted Dolanna on it.

"This is not Sennadar," she told him patiently. "She assumed it would take a month because she was going on what she knows. We are not home, dear one, and this alien world is affecting what is happening to her. All we can do for her is make her comfortable and wait for this accelerated growth to abate."

It was agonizing for both of them. Tarrin kept a hand on Mist's flank for the rest of the day, a hand of comfort and a steadying anchor to keep her from sliding out of the saddle, and he could *feel* it under his palm. Mist's body was growing at a phenomenal rate, and he could actually feel that growth under his hand. Her cat form, like her other forms, was growing larger as well, a reflection of her size in all her forms, and it was an indicator of his mate's progress.

By the time they stopped, by a small pond with unhealthy-looking green water, Much of Mist's growth seemed to have been finished. She was visibly larger now than she had been that morning. He put her on the pillow Sarraya had slept on to rest as they set up

camp, as Fireflash laid beside her both to give her company and to protect her. After they were done setting up camp, after the firepit was dug and a fire started, Mist dragged herself off the pillow and shapeshifted into her base form.

It was quite a momentous event.

The first thing that got everyone's attention was the sound of leather ripping. Tarrin's head whipped to her as he heard that sound, and saw her just in time to see her clothes literally burst from the strain of trying to contain her. They fell around her in tattered shreds, leaving her nude, but nobody noticed her nudity in the stunned gaping at her.

She was nearly as tall as Tarrin.

She fell to one knee, her paws hugging her midsection, and for a moment he had to gawk at her like a mouse staring down the gullet of a snake. Her body was just the same as it had been when she was short; highly developed muscle corded around a surprisingly feminine frame, a mixture of power and femininity that made Mist a paradox, for no one could look at her and deny neither her luscious curves nor her physical power, but it was like some god had grabbed her at both ends and pulled her out like taffy. Her face was still the same fierce, handsome visage he knew, but there was a new sharpness to it, the sharpness of maturity, and her eyes were more hawkish than ever. Her hair was still short and unruly, a wild black mass atop her head. She still looked just like Mist, but now this Mist was nearly ten spans tall, only a few fingers shorter than *him*. Tarrin rushed over to her and put his arm around her shoulder to steady her as she swayed on her knee. "Mist!" he said in a strangled tone. "Are you alright?"

"Have...to...cook," she said between labored breaths.

"You fool, sit back down!" he told her chidingly, yet commandingly.

"Karas' hammer," Ulger said, looking at her. "Is it me, or is she trying to catch up with Zak?"

"No wonder it hurt so much," Haley said clinically, inspecting her with his eyes. "I've never heard of a Were-kin doing *that* before. It usually takes rides. I'm surprised she lived through it," he added soberly.

"That's Mist you're talking about, Haley," Sarraya told him.

"True. Half of *Fae-da'Nar* thinks she's invincible."

"She's got that much of a reputation?" Ulger asked.

"My dear Ulger, from the point of view of *Fae-da'Nar*, you look upon probably the second most feared being on the face of Sennadar," Haley told him lightly. "Given she's beside the first, you understand why the Woodkin breathed such a sigh or relief when they heard they were leaving for a while."

"She doesn't seem all that mean."

"And what is this?" Miranda asked, tapping the half-healed gash over his eyebrows.

Ulger laughed. "A love tap," he replied. "I've gotten worse from frisky barmaids."

"I thought Triana was the most feared," Miranda added to Haley.

He shook his head. "They respect Triana, but they don't outright fear her. They know she'll obey the rules. But Tarrin and Mist have never been much for adhering to our laws. If it wasn't the fact that they'd kill a couple hundred Woodkin in any attempt to kill them, they'd probably have tried. They've debated killing Mist for years, and they really wanted to, but the fact of the matter was that nobody was insane enough to *try*. They knew it would take an army to do the job, and they'd lose a good chunk of it in the process."

Miranda chuckled humorlessly. "Now that's a reputation," she agreed.

"Why didn't the Druids just do it?"

"Ah, yes, that," Haley replied with a slight smile. "Well, it's not that easy, Azakar. Mist herself never showed any great aptitude for Druidic magic, but she does have one little trick that stopped that idea cold."

"What?"

"Mist can sense Druids," he replied. "She's Were-kin, and she can detect us. After she turned feral, everyone learned to stay out of her range. It was instant death to take one step past the markers of her territory, and she even killed Druids. Many Druids speculate that the markers of her territory were the limits of her ability to sense us. She killed Druids immediately and without question whenever they tried to come into her land."

"Yeah, that'd kinda put a stopper in that idea," Ulger chuckled.

"Doesn't that break the rules of *Fae-da'Nar*?" Miranda asked.

"Not when the Druid enters the territory of someone else, it doesn't," Haley replied. "Druids are respected and given safe passage as a matter of courtesy, not of law. Mist had every right to defend her territory from *anyone*, even Druids, as long as she marked her boundaries and put out the *cross this line and die* markers. Putting out those particular markers gave her the right to kill *anyone* who crossed the line. Given who she was, you'd understand why killing Druids who invaded her territory was so important."

"To prevent just what they wanted to do," Ulger surmised.

"Triana was the only one who could go into her territory," Sarraya added. "Most of the Hierarchs wanted her to kill Mist, but she wouldn't do it."

Tarrin ignored the talking over the others as he made Mist sit down on the pillow, then held her down with a hand on her shoulder when she tried to get up. "Didn't you hear me? I said *sit down*," he commanded.

"Yes, my mate," she said demurely, gripping his forearm in paws which were now absolutely huge. "I don't really feel much like standing right now anyway."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Some, but not as much as earlier," she answered. "I'm just really tired and *very* hungry."

"Stay there, I'll get you something to eat now while you wait for Miranda to cook dinner."

"I love being volunteered," Miranda laughed.

"I'll help, but get started. Mist needs to eat. *Now*. Trust me, I went through this myself."

"Just not as fast," Sarraya said clinically.

"I'll fetch some cheese and meat," Azakar said firmly. "You stay there, Tarrin."

"Bring a lot," Tarrin ordered.

"Tarrin, may I fetch one of your large cloaks for her?" Dolanna asked politely. He knew she wouldn't rifle through his packs without his permission.

"She'll probably fit in my clothes," he told Dolanna. "Bring a shirt and a pair of breeches too."

Azakar brought over a large sack of dried meat and cheese, and Dolanna threw one of Tarrin's cloaks over Mist's shoulders as she began to eat ravenously. He made to go help Miranda cook, but she waved him off and instead received help from Dolanna and

Sarraya as Ulger, Azakar, and Haley completed setting up camp on their own. After camp was set up, Miranda cooked a hearty stew in a pot over the fire with another pot simmering beans beside it, and Mist continued to eat. She emptied the sack of its cheese and meat by the time the stew was done, and ate most of that herself after letting the others take a plate. She then ate what was left of the beans after everyone took their fill of those as well, and then ate three loafs of bread and another wheel of cheese as they cleaned up the dishes and Azakar and Ulger removed their armor to tend to small spots of rust on them which had appeared after the last time they got rained upon.

Tarrin watched her eat in concern, but he was still quite bowled over by how fast she had grown. She had done all that growing in *one day*, and it looked to more or less be over. But why had it happened? It should have taken a month, but instead it had happened over the course of only one day. He didn't even want to think of how painful it had been for her, but this shocking development had him rightfully concerned.

The food did wonders for her. Her body seemed to visibly fill out as she ate, as that Were-cat metabolism absorbed the food and quickly used it to replenish weakened muscles, something that not even this alien world seemed to affect very much. After eating, she laid down by the fire and immediately fell asleep, cloak drawn around her like a blanket. Tarrin sat beside her, playing idly with her short, wild hair, trying to make sense of what happened. But there just wasn't enough information to even draw any kinds of conclusions. It was a mystery, a mystery they could simply pin on the fact that this was an alien world. Somehow, this world had caused her to grow in one day rather than one month.

It was quite an adjustment for him to see her so large. Mist was always such a small thing, not much taller than Dolanna, sometimes she seemed like a child to him. But now she was taller than Jesmind, almost as tall as him, and another reminder of her age. Mist was nearly seven hundred years old, one of the elder Were-cats, but her small size always made her seem so much younger. She looked more mature now, that was for sure, a new sharpness to her face that made her seem much like Triana was. He took hold of her paw, which swallowed up his human hand, stroking the short, thick black fur on the backs of her fingers and then rubbing his fingers along the thick pink pad on her palm. She was going to have a period of adjustment, that was for sure. Being taller changed everything, and after seven hundred years of being small, she had quite a long road ahead of her. Being with her like this in human form, it reminded him again how incredibly tall he was, how tall she was now, because now he felt like a child beside her.

After a while by the fire, Dolanna suggested that he take her to their tent. He shapeshifted into his natural form and collected her up, feeling how heavy she was now compared to before, and took her to their oversized tent. He packed her away on their single large sleeping mat and pulled the covers up around her, then went back outside and collected up the pillow. He brought it back to the tent and put it by their sleeping mat, then deposited Fireflash on it. He yawned and immediately curled up on it, allowing Tarrin to go back out to sit by the fire with Dolanna, Sarraya, Haley, and Miranda, as Azakar and Ulger went to their tents a bit early so they could get some sleep before their turns at watch. They talked for a while about what had happened to Mist, but they too had no real answers, and could only say what he had already thought, that they could only suppose it was this alien world and leave it as an unexplained mystery.

"Is she alright?" Miranda asked.

"We'll see in the morning. She will be a bit clumsy for a while, though."

"I can imagine," Haley said. "She'll literally wake up and be nearly twice as tall as she was before she went to bed. She'll have to learn how to move again."

"She will probably be a trifle sore as well," Dolanna said. "I suggest we give her a wide berth until she feels better."

"That might be a good idea," Tarrin agreed. "I need to go back in there. She'll sleep better with me there."

"That nose of hers even goes when she's asleep, doesn't it?"

"Now you know where Eron got his sense of smell from," Tarrin replied. "Though his is better than Mist's, she's still got quite a nose. Better than mine." He looked to Sarraya. "If you're not sleeping in my tent, at least try to sleep close," he told her. "So Fireflash can be close to your amulet."

"I'm making her her own little tent," Miranda told him. "It'll look like a doll's tent, but it'll be just her size. She can pitch it beside yours."

"How are you doing that?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I just need a little leather, some string, and a couple of sticks, Tarrin," she giggled. "Making something like that is easy."

"You're the resident seamstress, Miranda," he told her absently.

"A tent, for me? When can I have it?" Sarraya asked in excitement.

"I should have it done by tomorrow night," she answered. "I don't sleep much, and it gives me something to do with my hands while I'm waiting for everyone else to wake up, and I can work on it while we ride, since it doesn't take much precision." She looked at Tarrin. "Um, I did kind of filch some of that leather that Mist brought with her," she admitted. "Just a small piece of one hide. Do you think she'll mind?"

"To keep Sarraya out of our tent? She won't mind at all. In fact, she might kiss your feet."

"Hey!" Sarraya said waspishly.

Tarrin stood up, towering over them like a giant. "I'll see you all in the morning."

"Sleep well, dear one," Dolanna answered.

Mist slept heavily that night, and Tarrin, despite being sleepy, kept waking up during the night to check on her. He knew it was silly, because he knew she was fine, but he couldn't help it. Sarraya had flitted into the tent with them not long after he went to sleep, sharing the pillow with Fireflash, who didn't seem to mind her presence at all. Her presence also reassured him, since her presence when they had gone through the desert had become important to him, and having her near again was like the reawakening of an old need within him. It was well after midnight that he finally settled down and managed to sleep for longer than half an hour, arm draped protectively over his mate, the smell of her and the sound of her strong, steady breathing finally overwhelming his concern and allowing him to sink into a dreamy kind of contentment that made his sleep a peaceful one.

Well past dawn, he was stirred awake by her, as she caressed the side of his face with her paw. He opened his eyes and looked up at her, at a mysterious expression on her face, as she gazed down upon him. "What?" he asked sleepily.

"I'm just marvelling at how much smaller you look to me now, my mate," she told him with an enigmatic smile.

"Are you alright? Does it still hurt?" he asked, reaching up and putting his arms

around her.

"I feel like I got wrung out with the wash, but I'm alright," she answered. "I haven't gotten up yet, but I get the feeling it's going to be different."

"You're not going to fall over every time you take a step, but you'll have to get used to it," he told her.

"Alright then, let's give it a go," Mist said deliberately, sliding aside and rising up onto her knees. She put a paw down on the ground and put a foot under herself, then slowly rose to her feet. She towered over him that way, tall and regal and intimidating, at least until he got up himself. She was only a few fingers shorter than he was, and the change in aspect at looking at her was profound.

"You should fit in my clothes now," he told her. "That'll hold you until you make some new clothes."

"It should," she said, looking at her paw, turning it around so she could see both sides as Tarrin picked up the clothes that they'd selected for her the night before. "I feel...lighter."

"You're stronger," he told her evenly, handing her a pair of sturdy leather breeches. "And you'll bang your head on doorframes a lot until you get the hang of ducking. But you'll be alright."

She carefully stepped into the breeches, chuckling. "That will take some adjusting," she agreed, then stepped into the other leg and pulled them up. They were loose at the waist and very tight through her hips, since hers were so much wider than his, but they did fit her well enough. "I won't wear these long," she grunted, patting her hips.

"You'll bust out of them if you try," he noted clinically.

"I feel like I'm being squeezed by a Giant," she said, putting a paw on her backside.

"Miranda can help with the breeches," he told her. "She's a very good tailor."

"I can make my own," she told him absently.

"If she helps, you can get them done that much faster," he explained. "Oh, yes, she used a little bit of your leather. Not much, just enough to make Sarraya a tent."

"That's fine," she said. "I won't need all that much, and we can always ambush a few humans and take their clothes. I can make patchwork clothes out of them."

"Let's not be unfriendly to the natives, my mate," he chuckled as he handed her the shirt. Fireflash yawned and got up from his pillow, stretched, then vaulted up onto Tarrin's shoulder.

"From what I've seen so far, they deserve it," she shrugged as she pulled on the shirt. It was just a bit tight through her bosom, but otherwise fit her just fine.

"We'll see. We don't know enough about this place yet to draw any foregone conclusions."

Mist moved tenderly as they came out, and he could tell that she was already having trouble with her balance and her strength. She kept looking like she was about to topple forward at any moment. She walked around the camp gingerly at first as the others went about the morning chores, and Azakar and Ulger watered the horses, and seemed to become more confident with herself with each step. They all watched her without being obvious about it, and he could tell that they were all rather shocked at seeing her so tall. He knew she'd need another heavy meal to make sure she was fully restored, so he dug extra meal out of the sack and went about making an extra pot of porridge that would be served with the rest of the breakfast Miranda was preparing. "Should I add more

bacon?" she asked without much greeting.

He nodded. "And another loaf of bread."

"She's going to eat up our entire stores in three days at this rate, Tarrin," she warned him.

"She won't have to eat like this again," he assured her.

"I hope not. She might start giving me looks that would make me *very* uncomfortable," she said with a cheeky grin.

"She'd never eat you, Miranda," he said mildly.

"Oh? And how do you know that?" she asked lightly.

"Because Wikuni taste terrible," he answered as he went towards the packs.

Tarrin was right to fix so much food, because there was nothing left when breakfast was over. Mist ate everything that the others left behind after they took what they wanted, and then shifted into cat form and lounged by the extinguished firepit as the others packed the horses and got ready to go. She slept most of the day as Tarrin carried her, Fireflash, and occasionally Sarraya with him in the saddle. Miranda, hiding again behind the Illusion of Mist, sat in her saddle and finished sewing Sarraya's tent, then quietly started working on a new leather tunic for Mist. Miranda already had an idea of her size, since she had made clothes for Tarrin before, so all she had to do was add some extra room in the chest. She cut the leather when she stopped for a break, and her nimble fingers worked thick leather twine through holes she punched into the leather with an awl in the saddle. Haley watched this display of dexterity with undisguised admiration, that she could sew while riding on a horse, but she paid the Were-wolf little mind, for all her attention was on her work. Tarrin led her horse for her while she did so, because she wasn't paying any attention to where they were going.

By sunset that night, Mist had a sleeveless leather tunic in her size. She tried it on, neglecting to go into a tent to take off the tunic she was wearing, but everyone was familiar with Were-cat customs and didn't pay it much mind. "Nice," she told Miranda, twisting at the waist to test the fit. "Sleeves?"

"Tomorrow," she answered. "Those take a little work. I don't want to do that while riding."

"I'm surprised you managed to do that so well on a moving horse, Miranda," Haley told her.

"It's not like I was doing embroidery, Haley," she chided him. "If I wasn't moving, I'd have finished it in a couple of hours instead of it taking all day."

"You're better than me then," he chuckled.

The sleeves were ready by morning, and they lingered at their camp an hour longer than necessary to give Miranda time to finish sewing the sleeves onto the tunic. When she was done, Mist had a nice undyed buckskin tunic with laces at the neckline, elbow-length, and loose sleeves that flared very slightly at the ends. "You can make me pants too," Mist told her. "These are going to split the next time I bend over."

"That would certainly be a show," Ulger snickered.

She gave him a level look. "Look all you want, but remember that you'll never be man enough to have it, human," she told him.

Ulger gave her a slight scowl, Miranda laughed, and Haley winced with a sly twinkle in his eyes as Mist stalked off towards the tent she shared with Tarrin. "Might I suggest keeping your thoughts to yourself, Ulger?" Dolanna said with a light tilt to her voice that

betrayed her amusement, though her words was as formal as ever.

“Yeah, cause he’s not big enough to play with Mist,” Sarraya giggled.

“Not anymore,” Haley remarked.

“He never was,” Miranda added, which made Ulger scowl at her.

Pants weren’t that hard to make for Miranda, for she decided to use two pieces of material and simply lace them up the sides, while sewing them together on the inside seam. That would allow Mist to alter the fit to suit her by undoing the outside lacing and relacing it. She had to measure Miranda for the pants, which was something that Mist had never undergone before. “Hold still,” Miranda ordered as she held a knotted cord to the outside of Mist’s leg.

“Why are you wasting your time?” she said. “Just make them like Tarrin’s and add some space here.” She put her paws on her hips.

“I’ve never made pants for Tarrin before, so I don’t know his size,” she answered, looking up. Then she chuckled ruefully. “I still can’t get used to how tall you are now.”

“I’m surprised I grew this much,” she admitted. “I figured I’d just be a few fingers taller than Jesmind.”

“Well, I like it. I don’t feel like my mate is a child anymore,” Tarrin announced.

“Then it’s a good thing,” she told him with lowered eyes, then she raised them to look into his face with that same look of admiration that always seemed to be there.

Miranda flashed him a knowing grin, but said nothing.

By working well into the night, Miranda had the pants finished by late morning. She did the sewing work while they were stationary and did the easier parts, such as punching the holes for laces and making the leather thong, while they were on the move. Then it was a simple matter to lace the sides up, and then hand them to Tarrin. “There you are,” she said with a grin. “These should hold her until I make more.”

Tarrin held them up and admired them. They looked to be a perfect fit for his mate, and the leather lacing on the outsides of the legs would leave the skin beneath that mesh appealingly bare. She had sewn in a waistband that was almost continuous that would prevent the pants from falling off her if the lacing broke, and the pants had the customary slit and button in the back for her tail and the leather lacing in the front so she could get them on over her hips. The craftsmanship was outstanding, but that was the norm for Miranda. There was almost nothing that Miranda could not sew.

“Kimmie changed direction,” Azakar announced from the front, pointing off in a new direction. She’d been moving in a virtual straight line for days now that they’d been following the trail. The way Azakar pointed was what Tarrin would call east, for it was almost directly towards where the sun rose in the morning. “She went that way.”

“I wonder why she did that,” Dolanna mused. “Perhaps some new information came to light, or she saw something I do not see.”

“Or she was chased,” Ulger added, looking at the ground. “It’s been a month since she passed, so it’s impossible to tell if that happened.”

“Well, if we come across any decaying bodies wearing those uniforms those guards had on at that village, we’ll know,” Haley chuckled.

“I think there’s a wood over that way,” Azkar said, holding his hands up his bare head to shield his eyes from the noontime sun. “I think, it’s hard to tell. I think she went right for it.”

“This is where I miss Allia,” Dolanna said. “Her eyes would tell us.”

"I'll go look, Dolanna," Tarrin said, taking Fireflash off his shoulder and putting him on the horse's back in front of the saddle. He reached into his saddlepack and took out the violet visor that Allia had given him, which they used to shield their eyes from sand and the sun's glare. He used it when flying to keep the wind out of his eyes, which made it much easier to see. "We need to have a look around anyway."

"Do not reveal yourself, dear one."

"I'll be up too high," he answered her. "I want to get a look around. We've gone days now without seeing any human settlements, and I want to know if there are any around us."

"Why?" Sarraya asked.

"Because we need to resupply," he answered. "We're down to a ride's worth of food. I'd rather buy it than hunt it, because the only thing I've seen out on this grass plain to hunt so far are rabbits."

"Yeah, I noticed that. No deer, no elk, no antelope, nothing big," Ulger said. "That's unusual."

"Not if we're in a void surrounded by human habitation," Tarrin said. "They might have hunted them all out, and the other wild ones have no way to get in here."

"That, or they simply do not exist here," Dolanna reminded them.

"We've seen deer," Haley noted. "But then again, the deer from home don't live out on grasslands."

"Give me a few minutes," he said as she handed the reins of his horse to Azakar.

"Oooh, I'm coming too!" Sarraya said, zipping up from the back of the line and circling Tarrin a few times in her excitement.

Instead of dismounting, Tarrin nimbly climbed up to stand on his saddle, then brought forth his wings an instant before Dolanna sharply called for him to stop. "What?" he asked.

Dolanna smiled wryly. "Dear one, you just burned holes in the back of your shirt and vest. How are you going to fix them?"

"I'll-oh. Forgot about that," he grunted ruefully. "I'll have to use that Wizard spell to fix them."

"Next time, dear one, take them off. It will save you some trouble."

"I will," he promised. "Ok, we're going straight up, Sarraya."

"Straight up is no sweat!" she declared as she started ascending over them.

Tarrin put on the visor and lifted away from his horse, soaring straight up easily, almost languidly, as he momentarily lost his head in the glorious sensation of being able to fly. Even after years with the ability, the pure joy of it had never become old for him. He caught up with Sarraya, then cradled her in his paws as he accelerated faster than she could fly, quickly and easily getting them nearly two longspans above the ground.

"Showoff!" Sarraya accused as he levelled off and hovered in midair. She flitted around him, just a little unsteady as her multicolored wings beat frantically at the thinner air to keep her aloft.

"Alright, let's get a look," he told her, and he started looking around. They were in a bowl of sorts of flat land, with a mountain range visible to what he would call south, the direction they were moving, and a spur of that range creeping through to the east. There indeed was a forest to the east, where Kimmie went, not a large one, though, and just at the edge of his vision he could see the walls of a human settlement, on the other side of

the forest. Kimmie was moving in a straight line right for it. There was another very small settlement to the northeast, and there was a road that went from it and into the forest, north of where they would enter the forest if they followed Kimmie's trail.

"That looks like a village over there," Sarraya called. He turned to look, then looked off where she was pointing, to what he considered southwest. There was indeed a very, very small village there, or perhaps a large farm, just on the horizon, its cultivated fields just barely visible. "We need one of those Wikuni spyglasses," she complained.

"You-hey, Miranda might have one!" he said. "She had one at one time, I remember seeing it in her satchel when I was riding in it."

"Let's go ask her!" Sarraya said. "Care to give me a lift down?"

Tarrin took hold of her and dropped back down close to the ground so quickly his stomach rose up in his belly. He got down to within a hundred spans of Miranda and shouted down to her. "Miranda, do you still have that spyglass you had in your satchel?" he called.

"I think I do!" she shouted back, going for the shoulder bag that she always carried with her, which was now attached to her saddle. "I don't remember taking it out!" She rummaged through it for a few seconds, then pulled out a bronze tube. "Got it!" she called.

"What did you see up there, Tarrin?" Dolanna called as he came down.

"There's a city to the east on the other side of the woods that Azakar did in fact see, and a village southwest and northeast of us," he answered in a quieter tone as he hovered by Miranda's horse. The horse shied a bit from him, seeing the fire of his wings, but Miranda kept him steady as she handed him the spyglass. "The city looks good-sized, but I couldn't see that much. There's a road that runs from the northeast village into the forest, and it looks like it's headed for that city. Kimmie headed arrow-straight for that city."

"She must have needed something," Dolanna mused.

"I'll be back down in a few minutes," he told them as he took hold of Sarraya again and vaulted up into the sky. Once he got back to his former altitude he released the Faerie, extended the spyglass, and aimed it at the city. It took a bit to get it focused, but it allowed him to see much better. The city was about the size of Torrian before Tarrin had burned it down, surrounded by a log wall whose exterior had been charred to prevent attackers from using fire to burn it down. It did have a stone gatehouse, and from the look of it, they were building a stone wall in front of the log wall to replace it. They had the foundation laid, but had only just started raising it. The buildings within were made of wood, but they didn't look to be all that elegant. They had a slapdash quality to them, as if they were hastily constructed.

"Hmm," Tarrin mused.

"What?" Sarraya asked. "What do you see?" He described his observations to her, and she put her finger to her tiny chin for a moment in thought. "I wonder why they're building walls if this One guy controls everything?" she asked.

"Maybe we were wrong about that," Tarrin said. "But they certainly think they need to be defended from something."

"Yeah, from us," Sarraya said with a nasty little giggle.

Tarrin turned the spyglass on the road, and could barely make out a column of soldiers on that road, moving towards the city. He swept it past them, then grunted.

“That village northwest of the city, we must have passed by with it just under the horizon,” he realized. “We came from that general direction, but we didn’t see it.”

“We should have seen smoke from their fires,” Sarraya fretted.

“Sarraya, there *are* no fires,” he told her, looking at the village, which was too far away to make out much detail.

“Well, we can barely see it now, so odds were we couldn’t see anything on the ground, fires or no fires,” she told him.

“True. I think the land rises between the village and where we came through, that would have helped hide it. I wonder how long it’ll take those soldiers to get there.”

“What soldiers?”

“There’s a column of soldiers marching on the road,” he told her, zooming in on them again. “About a hundred, I think. They’re moving towards the city.”

“Walking? Not today.”

“You’re probably right there,” he agreed.

“How long do you think it’ll take us to get to the city? You’re the one with the better view.”

“We might get there by sunset if we don’t get hung up too much in the forest. It looks like it’s about five leagues away from where we are now. With these horses, five leagues is more than doable in half a day.”

Sarraya laughed. “Five leagues is doable in half that time,” she told him. “We could make twelve leagues easy on those horses. Twenty if we don’t stop too much and go at a canter. They’re very strong horses.”

“Yeah, but we have to go through the woods, and that’ll slow us a bit. If it’s got a lot of underbrush, we might not make it today.”

“Well, let’s go back down and tell the others, so we can get moving,” Sarraya told him.

After explaining what they saw, Dolanna wasted no time making her decisions. “Let us move towards the city and try to reach it by nightfall. I would like to sleep in an inn this night,” she announced. “And *this* time we do nothing untowards,” she said, levelling her steady gaze on Tarrin.

“I’ll try,” he promised as Azakar turned his massive horse in the direction Tarrin considered due east.

It took them a couple of hours to reach the edge of the forest, which was filled with massive hardwood trees that cooled the air considerably as they entered it, complete with all the sounds he would expect to hear in a wood, from squirrels and chipmunks to the scratching of woodchucks to the chirping of birds in the foliage high above and also on the ground, foraging among dead leaves that carpeted the forest floor. There was no underbrush, so they made very good time as they moved along Kimmie’s trail. It met up with a wide path, just large enough for a very small cart, about two longspans into the trees, and Kimmie turned onto that path. They did as well, making much better time as the forest began to show undergrowth, where holes in the canopy above allowed sunlight to filter down to saplings, bushes, and vines that obscured their vision on either side of the track. Mist stood up from where she was reclining, her ears swivelling towards the brush to their left.

“What is it, Mist?” he asked the black cat in the saddle with him.

“Humans,” she replied in the manner of the Cat. “Hiding in the trees.”

“Sarraya, be a dear and go take a look,” he said to the Faerie, who was sitting on the other shoulder opposite Fireflash.

“I’m on it,” she told him confidently, and though he didn’t see her, he heard the buzzing of her wings as she zipped off in the direction Mist was looking.

“What is it, dear one?” Dolanna asked.

“Humans are off over there,” he answered, nodding with his head. “Sarraya’s investigating.”

“Ah. I will inform Haley and Ulger.”

Tarrin pulled his bow out from the holster in his saddle, which slung it behind his leg, and uncapped the quiver slung on the opposite side, and Azakar drew his broadsword meaningfully after pulling his shield down from where it was slung on his arm to get a grip on it. The others also visibly prepared for an attack, as they waited for Sarraya to return with information about the hidden humans. Tarrin reflexively nocked his bow when he heard a rustle of leaves off in the same direction the humans were hidden, but refrained from drawing it when a squirrel erupted from a small bush and bounded across the track to a tree on the far side. He was about to pull the arrow off his bow when he heard the buzzing of Sarraya’s wings approach them. She landed on his shoulder and sat down sedately. “Nothing to worry about,” she told him. “Just a bunch of peasants. They’re gathering berries.”

“Perhaps you should foray out ahead of us to ensure the path is clear,” Dolanna proposed.

“Sure, Dolanna,” Sarraya answered, flitting off his shoulder. “I’ll be ahead a ways. If I see anything, I’ll come back and tell you.”

It took them most of the afternoon to reach the other side of the forest. They passed two groups of humans dressed in rough homespun smocks and tunics. They were very thin people who had the look of frightened animals, moving quickly and in a tight group, staring at the mounted party as it passed. They all bowed or curtsied as they went by, with fear in their eyes, and Tarrin realized that their very fine clothing-by their standards-the Knights’ armor, their weapons, and their horses had to denote them as rich or part of the nobility. If such a thing existed here. When they left the treeline, they could see a fair sized town, about the size Torrian had been before it burned down, surrounded by that blackened log wall. A large group of men worked outside that log wall to build a stone one, laying heavy stones in place under the eyes of three men wearing scarlet tabards. They had a crest of a white triangle on a black circular background on the chests of those blood red tabards, and they were gathered around a large scroll of parchment that one of them was holding, talking about something and pointing to it. They stopped when Azakar led them towards the stone gatehouse of the town, their eyes hard and uncertain as they watched the group pass by.

When they reached the gatehouse, Azakar pulled up to a stop and Dolanna moved her horse forward as six men carrying halberds and wearing rusty chain jacks with surcoats of the same scarlet and with the same device upon their chests stepped forward. “Good evening, my Lords,” the tallest of them addressed in Penali. “Praise be the One. What business have you in Dengal?”

Dolanna urged her horse up with Azakar’s. “We travel from one point to another, Goodman,” she answered.

“Hush, woman!” the man barked. “Let your betters speak!”

Tarrin's eyes blazed as a sudden well of icy fury roiled up in him, but Haley calmly urged his horse up to the front. "Forgive our customs, my good man," Haley said with a light smile, "but we have come from a great distance on a pilgrimage. Where we come from, it's customary for the one of highest rank to do the talking, and our good Lady here happens to outrank us all."

"That's bunk," he snorted. "Who would put a *woman* in any position of authority?"

"If that woman gives the order, we'll make you a head shorter, lout," Ulger said in an ugly manner, putting his hand on the hilt of his broadsword. "Now be civil, or we'll have to go get you a new tongue."

The threat present in those words was not lost on the tall, gangly man. He gave the shortest of bows to them and took a single step back. "What business have you in Dengal?" he repeated.

"We seek nothing more than a bed for the night and a chance to replenish our stores. We shall be gone with the morning sun," Dolanna answered him, perhaps a bit tartly. "Now stand aside."

"I can't let that, that *thing* through the gate," he said, pointing at Tarrin. Or, more to the point, pointing at Fireflash, who was sitting on Tarrin's shoulder. "What is that thing?"

"It's called a drake," Tarrin answered. "It's a very rare animal that lives on an island off the coast of our homeland."

"It's not normal. I don't see why the Church hasn't killed it yet."

"As it is still quite alive, I would say that the Church does not agree with you. Or are you now saying that you know better than the Church?"

There was a veiled threat so hideous within those words that the man melted out of the way, bowing several times and proclaiming that he did not.

"Very good. Now direct us to your finest inn."

"We only have the one, your Ladyship, the Three Masks. Straight down this street, about halfway into town, on the left. There's three wooden masks hanging outside the door. You can't miss it."

"Thank you. Enjoy your day."

"May the One watch over you," he said with another bow as they started moving forward.

"By the trees, I hope not," Sarraya whispered from his other shoulder.

The streets of the town, Dengal, were choked with half-dried mud, and the stench of human waste assaulted even Tarrin's human nose as they moved along the pedestrians. The contents of chamber pots and kitchen refuse were simply tossed out of windows into the streets, creating a miasma of stench that clung close to the ground, hanging almost like a smoky mist over the sewage filling the bottoms of narrow ditches dug into either side of the muddy street. Small wooden bridges connected the buildings to each side of the street to the street itself, or long wooden decks that were built out over them to provide passage for many people at once. The first thing that Tarrin noticed outside of the numbers of crudely dressed humans were the guards. Patrols of ten men in uniforms similar to those men at the gate roamed the streets, and there was never less than two in sight from the backs of their horses at any one time. All the citizens of the town gave these patrols a very wide berth, even if they had to wade in the ankle-deep sewage in the ditches on the sides of the street. The buildings themselves were made of rough timber,

log walls chinked with mud that lined the sides of the streets, at least until they got about a quarter of the way in. The buildings went from rough timber to slate tiles, wattle and daub, and even a few stone buildings that looked to be businesses, and what was not a surprise, the large, ornate stone building that had to be the town's chapel clearly visible at the end of the street. It had two spires on either side of its front and a stained glass window, with that same triangle and circle design, over the large brass doors that led inside of it.

The Three Masks was a small inn exactly where the guard said it would be. Nervous grooms took the reins of the horses as they rode into a very small yard to the side of the main building, then waited as they all dismounted. Ulger took one of them aside and spoke to him in low tones, and the whitening of the man's face told Tarrin that the Knight had made several nasty threats should anything happen to their horses, their packs, or anything within them. Tarrin picked up Mist and carried her after he dismounted, following the others into the inn's main building, a ratty doorway with no door, only an old blanket nailed across the doorway to provide some illusion of separation between outside and inside. Tarrin thought the place to be a seedy dive until they got inside and found a small yet meticulously clean common room with tables in the middle of the floor, a row of booths on the far wall, and a small, cozy little bar on the left. The door that was probably hung in the doorway before they arrived was laying between two chairs, and a small, portly man with a patch over his left eye and a head full of short-cropped graying hair was bent over that door with a carpenter's planing tool, shaving some of the wood off its edge. The tool he was using, Tarrin noted, was fairly well made and built around a sharp steel planing blade, hinting that perhaps these people were not as primitive as they seemed to be.

"Goodness me, we have guests!" the man said in surprise, putting the tool down. He took one look at them and then gave a false smile. "The Church is on up the street, my Lords," he told them. "They should have plenty of room for you."

"We're not from the Church," Tarrin told him, answering before Dolanna could speak. "We need rooms for the night."

"Well, then, welcome to the Three Masks. I'm Merik Thatcher. You have come to the best inn in Dengal," the man said brightly.

"You mean the *only* inn," Ulger chuckled.

"Well, that makes it the best, does it not?" he answered with a sly little look at Ulger. "Come in, my Lords, come in! And please forgive this mess, I've been meaning to fix this door for a while now. It's just the luck of the Defiled that you would pick this particular day to pay me a call. Would you like something to take the dust from your throats?"

"We would like our rooms, please," Dolanna answered him. "And perhaps directions to your greengrocer or nearest food merchant. Our travelling stores are growing thin, and we have need to resupply to continue our journey."

"Well, er, is that what you need, my Lord?" he asked, giving Dolanna an odd look before turning to address Tarrin. The man's eyes locked on Fireflash, but unlike the guard, this man said nothing, nor did he make any indication that Fireflash was out of the ordinary.

"You heard the lady, goodman," Tarrin answered him.

"Yes, I most certainly did," he said with a charming smile. "Please, have a seat if

you're of a mind while you're waiting for me to get your rooms ready, though I'd bet that you're tired of sitting by now. Such finery could only mean you rode here on horses, or perhaps even a carriage. Brolli, we have guests!" the man called towards the bar. "Start supper!"

"Aye," a feminine voice called from the back.

"Would you like to inspect our rooms, my Lord? You can look things over as I prepare them for you."

"That's my department, goodman Merik," Miranda told him with a smile, though the Illusion of Mist made it look predatory, when he knew Miranda wore her cheeky grin beneath it. "But judging from the condition of your common room, I think I'll find little to criticize."

"You'd be within your rights not say that with this door hogging the room and my clean floor littered with sawdust and wood shavings," he said with an honest smile.

"But it's a *clean* floor under that sawdust, goodman," Miranda told him with a straight face.

He laughed. "You honor me, my Lady. Are you sure you don't want something to drink?" he asked again. "I shouldn't be but a few moments to prepare your rooms, but you should spend those moments in comfort."

"I'll take whatever you have on hand, my good man," Ulger announced. "I could use a drink."

"Would you prefer ale or water?"

"Ale, of course," he replied.

"Anyone else?" he asked, but there was only silence. "Brolli, could you bring a tankard of ale out for our guest?" he called.

"Aye, Merik," she called back.

"I'll go prepare your rooms. If you need anything at all, just tell Brolli, and she'll get it for you. We, ah, can discuss the cost of the night's stay when I return. If you would follow me, my Lady?"

"Certainly," Miranda told him, stepping forward. "I'll only be a few minutes, my Lord, and I'll make sure that the rooms here are worthy of you," she said, giving Tarrin an outrageous smile when Merik couldn't see, and Tarrin inwardly groaned. Miranda was going to play up this notion that they were nobles, and he'd have to endure simpering and *my Lords* being thrown at him all night.

Ulger swung his leg over a chair and sat down as the woman Brolli brought out a crude ceramic tankard filled with dark ale. Brolli was a very small, thin woman of middle years wearing a homespun smock that left her legs bare, with heavy lines around her mouth, her graying brown hair pulled back from her face and done up in a tight bun. Brolli seemed a severe woman, but her smile was warm, almost gentle. Ulger took it and downed almost half of it in one swallow, then set it on the table before him with a heavy *clunk*. "Not bad," he said with a nod.

"Thank you, my Lord. Does anyone else want anything?"

"No thank you," Tarrin said.

The woman too stared at Fireflash for a long moment, who regarded her with his amber, reptilian eyes steadily, then she curtsied and hurried back into the kitchen.

"We must finish our shopping quickly, before the shops close," Dolanna told them. "Each of us will take some gold and fan out to buy what we need. Miranda and Ulger

will remain to watch our possessions.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Haley said. “It’s going to depend on where we can buy what we need.”

Merik returned with Miranda about ten minutes later. The disguised Wikuni gave Tarrin a bright smile, and Tarrin immediately was worried. “The rooms are more than adequate, my Lord,” she announced.

“Yes, I told you they would be. And your maid here has already settled the night’s lodgings, so we don’t have to worry about that,” Merik added. “Now, you needed the locations of merchants?”

“Yes,” Dolanna told him.

“There are several, and they’re all not far from here. Just go out the door, turn left, and then go either left or right at the next corner. That’s Market Street, and you can find almost anything you need in a shop or stall.”

“Thank you, good innkeeper,” Dolanna said.

“Now, my stablehands will take your things up to your rooms, so you can get to your shopping. Would you like them to port for you?”

“That will not be necessary,” Dolanna replied. “Azakar, please go out and make sure they do not unsaddle two of the pack horses.”

“Yes, Dolanna,” the Mahuut said with a nod, and he hurried towards the empty doorway.

“Very well. Miranda, you and Ulger shall remain here. The rest of us shall see to our stores.”

“Sure, my Lady,” Miranda said with a little curtsy.

“Merik! I need some help with this!” Brolli called from the kitchen.

“Excuse me, my Lord,” he said, bowing to Tarrin. “I’ll be back in a moment. Coming, Brolli!”

“What did you tell him!” Tarrin hissed at Miranda in Wikuni after Merik left the room.

“Only that you’re a travelling noble of *very* high rank who’s a historian, and you’re searching far and wide for ancient lore,” she replied. “Dolanna is your cousin, also a noble of high rank, and the rest of us are your servants.”

“Miranda!” Tarrin said sharply.

“Hey, it works,” she said with a cheeky grin. “By the way, you’re a duke of Sulasia. He has no idea where Sulasia is, but he certainly believes you’re a noble.”

“Our clothing leads them to believe so,” Dolanna said in agreement. “And her story will make things easier for us to explain.”

“How did you pay the man, Miranda?” Dolanna asked curiously.

“Oh, with some money I stole from a merchant along the way,” she answered absently. “That fat one in the litter.”

“But we were on *horseback*! How did you do so without him noticing?”

“I have lots of talents, Dolanna,” Miranda winked. “Some of them aren’t quite as obvious.”

Dolanna gave her a look, then laughed helplessly. “Perhaps I will have only Ulger remain. You should go to a moneychanger and trade in our nuggets for coin.”

“I can take care of that, Dolanna,” Haley said mildly. “I’ve had dealings with moneychangers. I’ll get us a good conversion rate.”

“Very well then. The rest of us shall buy our stores.”

“What should we get?”

“I will buy the meal and some bread, and also food for the horses. Haley will buy cheese and dried meat, and Tarrin will buy whatever vegetables he can find that will not perish on us quickly, as well as some beans. Azakar will accompany me, for I know he will not allow me to wander alone.”

“You’re right,” he agreed as he came back inside.

“But first Haley will get us some coin of the realm,” she said. “Are the horses ready, Azakar?”

“Yes ma’am,” he answered.

“Haley, ask Merik where we might find a moneychanger, then meet us outside. Sarraya, Mist, you shall remain here. Tarrin, you must convince Fireflash to remain as well, but we have seen how well he listens to you,” she said with a gentle smile at the drake.

“You got that right,” Sarraya giggled from her invisible perch on Tarrin’s shoulder.

“Certainly, my Lady,” he said with a rakish smile and a graceful bow, then he walked toward the kitchen.

Merik’s directions were fairly accurate, and they found themselves outside of a small, sturdy timber building whose entrance was flanked by two guards about ten minutes after leaving the inn. Haley spent perhaps twenty minutes inside, then came out with a small satchel that weighed heavily on its strap. “Not bad,” he announced, reaching in and taking out several small leather pouches. “I had him divide it up. Everyone take one, and Azakar will carry the rest. Nobody in his right mind would try to steal it from him,” he chuckled.

“I would say not,” Dolanna said with a smile at her massive protector.

They split up from there, and Tarrin walked along the street, looking for a place that sold vegetables. Greengrocers were a staple in any market in Sennadar, but this was a different world, and he was unsure what these people would do given the fact that the vast majority of them seemed to be very poor. There were people in what would be considered finery here, though their clothes would probably be worn by milkmaids and farmers back home, wool tunics of moderately fine weaving, or tanned leather, even a few garments that looked to be made of a finer material than wool, like cotton. But interspersed with those people in their finery were people wearing torn, dirty clothing shuffling down the street, looking longingly at the food displayed in stalls or behind windows while their clothes hung from them as if they were scarecrows. The place reminded him of everything he had hated about Dala Yar Arak, for these people were hungry, they were in need, and those who had the resources to help them did not care. He tried to distance himself from his displeasure, but it wasn’t easy when an example of it passed by him every few seconds, scrambling out of his way and bowing repeatedly.

He found a greengrocer not far from the intersection where they had turned onto the street, ran by a small, thin little man with bad teeth, sunken cheeks, and his right eye milky white from a cataract which made it useless. He fawned all over Tarrin when he came in, whining and wheedling in a manner which immediately got on his nerves. Tarrin looked over his goods, most of which he immediately recognized as foods from Sennadar as well. Beets and cabbage, beans and apples, peaches and plums, lettuce and turnips, rutabagas, nuts, and even some familiar looking berries. He also dealt in wheat

meal, but he didn't have any corn, nor did he have squash. Tarrin inspected his goods and found much of it to be of inferior quality, but the man did dry it fairly well, and could provide staples that would last for at least a ride.

Tarrin started making a list of what he wanted to buy when the little man started scowling towards the door. Tarrin turned to look, and he saw a very small, almost emaciated girl that looked to be about fourteen, standing there wearing little more than filthy rags. Her dark hair was long, tangled, and very dirty, and she didn't look all that steady on her feet. "What do you want, street urchin!" the man barked.

"I'll work for a meal, kind master," she said in a little voice, her eyes on the floor.

"Bah, you can do us all a favor and die!" the man shouted at her. "Grubby little thieves, you'll steal me blind the instant I turn my back!" He reached for a wooden pole of sorts leaning against a table of baskets holding his wares, but he winced in pain when Tarrin closed his hand over the man's wrist. Though he was in human form, he was still a head taller than the man, and his hands were powerful.

"You show a surprising lack of common courtesy," Tarrin told him in a cool, dangerous voice. Though he did not know the girl, part of Tarrin's fundamental nature caused him to be protective of children, *any* children, even those not his own. The man was not going to chase the girl down the street with a wooden rod while he was there to stop him. "You offered to work for your supper?" Tarrin asked her.

"Y-Yes, my Lord," she said in a trembling voice when she raised her head and looked at him, and saw him in all his finery. She then tried to curtsy, though she didn't do a very good job of it, for she was trembling too much to make it look graceful.

"Then you're hired," he told her. "I have things I need carried. You will carry them for me."

The look she gave him was apprehensive, yet slightly hopeful. There was a wariness about her that showed that she approached the offer with trepidation. Given that she was a young girl, he could understand why. Odds were, the girl had had her share of scrapes with those who would force their attentions on her.

"She can't carry what you've bought, my Lord," the man said gratingly.

"She's not. You will."

He spluttered. "I got porters for that!"

"Then get them. I want my goods loaded on a horse I have down the street."

"There's the matter of the payment, my Lord," the man coughed. "I don't bring out my porters until we've settled the bill."

"Fine, then. How much for all I want?" he asked, holding up his little piece of parchment.

The man blanched, and then he turned white. Tarrin had never expected that kind of a reaction. "S-Surely my Lord doesn't think I can *read*, do you?" he asked in a now fearful voice. "I'm not a nobleman!"

"No, certainly not. I just meant-nevermind," he grunted, putting the parchment away. "We've already discussed what I want. How much?"

"Ten silver *shar*, my Lord."

Tarrin gave the man a penetrating look, judging his greed against his obvious fear of Tarrin's seeming nobility. He then nodded absently. "I think you can imagine what I would do to you if I thought you were cheating me, so ten it is," he agreed, which made the man grimace just a little bit. He beckoned to the girl with a finger, and she shuffled

into the shop warily. She looked up at him with dark eyes, and then she backed away when he held out his leather purse to her.

"You will carry this," he told her. "Now take it and pay the man."

The girl goggled at him, but it was nothing compared to the look of abject shock on the face of the merchant. She almost dropped the leather pouch when Tarrin thrust it into her hands, and they trembled as they held more money than she had probably ever held in her entire life. Then, with deliberate intent, he turned his back on her to look at a table holding baskets of pears, apples, and peaches. Much to the merchant's surprise, the girl opened the pouch and poured out coins into her hand, then stepped up and started handing them to him. He glared at her the entire time, but he could say nothing, because she was now paying him for Tarrin's purchase. It was a lesson for the merchant in not passing judgement, for the girl had not taken the purse and run with it, as she had the chance to do. When he looked at her, he just *knew* that she was worthy of that trust.

"Now then, get your porters," Tarrin ordered the merchant. "I have better things to do than stand here."

Tarrin supervised the six porters who packed up his purchase, then made them and the girl follow him back to the horse, which Haley currently had. They had to go two blocks to reach it, and Haley had men loading it with his own purchases when he reached it. "I see you were successful, my Lord," Haley said to him with a very slight smile.

Tarrin gave him a flat look, then ordered the men to load the horse. The girl stood right behind him, clutching the leather pouch to her breast as if it were going to jump out of her hands and run away at any moment. "I see you got more than foodstuffs," Haley chuckled as he looked at her. "Quite a charming young lady. I think she needs to have sharp words with her tailor, however."

The girl flushed, lowering her head.

Tarrin paid her little mind. "I think I got enough to last us a while. I'm sure the horse is going to hate us for loading him down so much."

"I already told him that he won't have to go far with it," he answered with a sly little smile. "I'm sure he'll forgive us."

Tarrin and Haley watched as the porters finished loading the supplies onto the horse, who kept glaring balefully at Haley. The men moved quickly, casting fearful looks at Tarrin and Haley the entire time, even as the poorly dressed girl remained steadfastly just beside and slightly behind Tarrin, holding onto his leather pouch with both hands, keeping it clutched tightly to her breast as if to keep anyone from taking it away from her. The porters finished loading down the horse, and then rushed away quickly after Haley took up the reins. "What about the others?" Tarrin asked.

"They're using the other horse," he answered. "My Lord," he added with a smirk.

"Zyri!" a tiny voice called in a hushed manner. "Zyri, did you get any food? I'm hungry!"

Tarrin glanced at the young girl, who was trying to shoo a boy of about ten away, who was hiding behind a barrel on the other side of a sewage ditch, just at the mouth of a narrow alley between two shops. The boy was just as thin, bedraggled, and filthy as the girl was, with thick, limp brown hair but with lucent brown eyes. He saw a look of fear on the girl's face as she looked at the boy. "Telven! Go back to the alley! You can't leave Jal alone!" she said in a fierce whisper of command. "Go! I'll bring food when I get some, and get off the street before they see you!"

“But I’m hungry!” he whispered back from the water barrel.

She took one step towards him, taking a hand off the leather pouch and pointing down the alley. “Go back to Jal right now!” she hissed at him.

The crowd parted for yet another patrol, and the small boy suddenly darted back down the alley and out of sight. The girl seemed to want to bolt as well, but she did not move, clutching the leather pouch to her breast and wringing its top in her small hands as she stared at the ten armed men with something almost approaching terror. The ten men seemed about ready to march by, at least until one of them seemed to notice. He drew a heavy wooden rod from his belt and rushed towards her. The girl turned as if to run, then stopped and dropped to her knees, hugging the pouch tightly as she burst into tears. Tarrin wasn’t sure why she was doing what she was doing, but he wasn’t about to let that guard hit her with that baton. Tarrin stepped into his path, a tall, intimidating figure that brought the man up short immediately. He blanched when he saw the flat look in Tarrin’s eyes, and lowered his wooden rod. “Stand aside, my Lord,” the guard said immediately, giving the young girl a sinister look of eager anticipation.

“Why?”

“She’s stolen your purse!” he said in surprise, as if it was a stupid question.

“She’s done no such thing,” Tarrin snorted. “Now move on and don’t concern yourself with her.”

“Here now, you can’t order me around, nobleman,” the man said with sudden heat. “I’m a soldier of the Church. We don’t answer to *you*.”

Tarrin had to struggle to maintain his composure. Getting into a fight in the middle of the street was *not* what he wanted to have happen. “I’m not ordering, I’m *suggesting*,” he said in a level, deceptively mild tone. “I’ve hired her to fetch and carry for me, and she’s not done anything wrong.”

The guard mulled it over. “Alright, but keep a civil tongue when addressing soldiers of the One,” he commanded arrogantly.

“You will get all the respect you deserve,” Tarrin said in a flinty manner, the sarcasm lost on the man as he rejoined the other guards and moved on without any more discussion.

Haley went over and offered his hand to the girl. “It’s just not proper for a page of Lord Tarrin to be kneeling on the ground. There’s a certain amount of dignity that goes with the position,” he said lightly, giving Tarrin a rakish smile that said that he, along with Miranda, was enjoying teasing him over it immensely.

She gazed up at him fearfully, then, sniffing, she took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. She shuffled slowly back to Tarrin’s side, holding the pouch tightly and staring at the ground. Tarrin looked down at her, impressed that even in the face of that much fear, she would not run away. She was taking her job to carry his purse seriously enough to risk a beating over it. Or, perhaps, she was so desperate to feed that boy and the other she named, which Tarrin did not see, that she would be beaten by that guard if it meant getting food from Tarrin for performing the duty he set upon her.

Either way, that was *loyalty*.

Tarrin and Haley exchanged a look over the girl’s head, then the Were-wolf shrugged noncommittally. “Are the others almost done?” he asked.

“Probably, my Lord,” Haley answered. “With four of us out doing this, it wouldn’t take long.”

“Alright. Go ahead and take the horse back to the inn, and try to talk him out of his displeasure.”

“That may not be easy,” Haley said lightly, taking the reins. The horse was still giving Haley an accusing look. “It might take a few apples.”

“We have plenty,” Tarrin shrugged as Haley led the horse down the street. He turned and looked at the girl, who still stared at her feet. “Look at me,” he ordered. She slowly, hesitantly raised her eyes, and he looked at her face and realized that if she was cleaned up and had some food, she would actually be a rather cute young lady. There were hints of it in her cheekbones and her chin, a promise of something more lurking on that dirty face. Her dark eyes were lustrous despite her gaunt visage, stormy eyes that showed the strength of her will, eyes that looked upon him with both fear and gratitude, and an uncertainty of what was to come.

“I don’t need your service any more,” he told her, holding out his hand.

Immediately, she offered up the purse to him, but he simply closed his hands over hers, making her grip the pouch. There was the strangest tingle in that touch, of his skin on hers, as if there were something about this girl he should know, but whatever it was managed to evade his attention. “It’s yours,” he told her. “Get something to eat, take a bath, and buy some better clothes.”

Tears immediately welled up in her dark eyes. “Th-Thank you, m-my Lord,” she managed to choke out.

“You earned it, in my opinion,” he stated. “Now you’d better run along, before that Telven of yours gets into trouble.”

“H-He’s my brother, my Lord,” she told him.

“Don’t call me that,” he snorted. “I’m no more a Lord than you are, I just happen to have enough money to make them think I am. My name is Tarrin.”

“I’m Zyrilin, my Lord.”

“Well now, Zyrilin, you’d better go get something for your brother to eat,” he said gently.

The look she gave him was one of such gratitude that he thought he had never seen its like, as if he were some kind of Deva descended from on high to grant her this windfall, then she turned and ran. She jumped over the foul-smelling ditch of sewage and disappeared between two buildings, going the same way her brother had gone.

“Who was that, Tarrin?” Azakar asked as he led the other horse up to him. Dolanna was behind, fiddling with one of the straps even as the horse moved.

“Nobody, Zak,” Tarrin said with a slight smile. “Nobody at all.”

“Oh. Did you finish?”

He nodded. “Haley’s leading the horse back to the inn. He’s only about a block ahead.”

“We have completed our tasks as well,” Dolanna told him. “Let us return to the inn. I would like to get an early start in the morning. Us being here invites disaster.”

“I almost had one,” Tarrin grunted. “But I managed to keep my temper.”

“Wonders never cease,” Dolanna told him lightly, patting him on the arm. “Very well, *cousin*, let us return to the safety of the inn.”

Merik and Brolli served up a mutton stew for dinner which actually wasn’t half bad, which they all enjoyed after Ulger and Azakar redistributed their purchases through the saddle packs to balance the load of each horse. They ate in the common room, which

only had six or seven other patrons all night, all of them men dressed in finery and often accompanied by women who looked to be wives and one or two armed men serving as bodyguards. They spent most of the night in conversation with Merik however, as Miranda and Haley skillfully dragged quite a bit of useful information out of him. Dengal was a new city, only about twenty years old, built as a stop for the army of the Church as it marched to the east, over the mountains and to the lines of a war that they were fighting with what Merik called “heathens,” primitive tribal humans who didn’t worship the One. These “heathens” were, in Merik’s description, “unwashed barbarians who believe that the spirits of animals are gods and worship them.” The Church was forcibly converting them to worshipping the One, and had managed to conquer nearly three quarters of the territory held by this other group of humans. There was a short bit of panic when Merik produced a map and asked them to show him where Sulasia was, but seeing that map was in and of itself a stroke of good fortune. It mapped out a vast empire that the map marked as *Pyrosia*, and according to the map, Dengal was in the extreme southeast corner of it. The empire had conquered about nine tenths of the landmass, with only a strip of land along its eastern border, on a peninsula separated by the rest of the continent by a mountain range, and a long strip of land over a mountain range on the north not being denoted as owned by the empire. There was another peninsula of land almost touching the one to the east, that trailed off the map, making it look like part of either a different landmass or a large island. That road leading northwest he’d seen that afternoon ran back into the empire. The west side of the kingdom was a coast line, and Miranda glibly explained that theirs was a small island nation off the west side of the map, far removed from the center of the Pyrosian empire. Merik seemed to accept this explanation on its face, and laughed and said that it explained why they seemed to have different ways. “I thought that the Church taught a uniform doctrine, but I guess that it is a *little* different from region to region,” he chuckled.

“It does teach a uniform doctrine,” Miranda answered. “It’s just that we opened our arms to the Church only about ten years ago, so we’re still learning,” she winked.

“I see the light of truth shines into the hearts of all the pure,” Merik said piously. “Your people must be untouched by the taint of the Defiled for you to see the light of the One and want to be part of it.”

“Most likely. We’re out here on our pilgrimage so we can take information of the rest of the world back home,” she explained. “There’s only so much you can see on a map, you know.” She pointed at an area beyond the northern border of the empire.

“What’s up here?”

“Oh, those are the Dread Lands,” he said. “A wilderness filled with dangerous beasts and monsters. The children of the Defiled used to hide up there until the Army of Light destroyed them. Now it’s filled with the Sub-Humans. You know, orcs, gnolls, kobolds, goblins, those kinds of creatures.”

“Ah. We came along the south edge, and now we’re going north. I see it’d behoove us if we made a left turn before we got over these mountains,” Miranda chuckled, pointing at a mountain range that divided the empire from that region.

“Have you visited Pyros yet?” he asked. “Certainly you can’t visit the Church’s holdings without going to see the seat of all. You just have to see the Altar of Truth, and the Obsidian Cathedral, and the Wall of Purity!”

“We were going to save that for last,” she explained. “So the memory of it would be

freshest in us when we go home to tell everyone what we've seen." She pointed at the landmass trailing off the east side of the map. "Is this an island?"

"That's the continent of Auomar," he explained. "The Haunted Lands. It's a cursed place, filled with the ghosts of the Defiled who the Church destroys. The One cursed Auomar long ago when a pagan religion managed to take hold there and seduce the weak, which triggered the first Crusade of Holy Might. Since the Defiled are also cursed, when they die their souls are trapped there, and they wander the land killing anything alive that steps onto the shore. There's nothing alive on that entire continent now, not even plants. The souls of the Defiled are cursed, and they can't find joy in the light of the One, so they wander the Haunted Lands for all eternity, suffering for their darkness."

"When did that happen?" Miranda asked. "When did people first start seeing them, I mean?"

"I'm surprised you've never heard of it," he said with slight suspicion.

"We're very isolated, good Merik," she said, flashing him a disarming smile. "We didn't even know about Pyrosia until fifty years ago."

"Well, the first Crusade was about two thousand years ago," he answered. "Until then, the souls of the Defiled wandered all the land, but after the One cursed the earth of Auomar, they all became trapped there. Even the souls of the Defiled that are found and destroyed now are trapped on Auomar."

"Sounds like an unpleasant kind of place," Miranda said.

"I wouldn't want to go there," Merik chuckled.

"We have no Defiled where we come from," Miranda said. "I wonder what they look like."

"Well, some of them look just like you and me," he answered in a conspiratorial whisper. "There are those who are born Defiled, the ones that aren't human, and then there are the ones that become Defiled when they embrace false gods, or start practicing witchcraft. Since regular people can become Defiled, you never know if the stranger you're talking to walks the path of light or has succumbed to the darkness and become Defiled."

"Oh," Miranda said, glancing at Tarrin with a wicked little smile. If Merik only knew just *who* he was talking to, he'd understand how correct his words really were. "So, all non-humans are Defiled?"

Merik nodded. "It's the taint of evil staining them. Only the pure can walk the path of light, and only humans are pure. The Sub-Humans and the other races originally were human, but they were cursed by the One to show the taint of evil within them in way a that all those who walk the path of light could see, so they became something other than human. The Sub-Humans are too stupid to be a threat, and sometimes the Church uses them to do things, since the One said that all those who are cursed may be used to serve the One in bondage, in retribution for their rejection of him, before being wiped from the world. But the other Defiled are too smart or too dangerous to serve the One, so they're hunted down and destroyed. Especially the *witches*," he said in a harsh whisper. "The Hunters of Truth do that, go around and hunt down the witches."

"How would one know a witch?" Miranda asked in what Tarrin saw was utterly feigned fascination, acting as if she hung on Merik's every word to make him talk.

"There's no way to see one on the street and know what he is," he answered after looking around. "But the Hunters can find them. The taint of their unholy magic leaves

a mark on them that the Hunters can find, but I don't know how. Maybe they're blessed by the One to see darkness, since they themselves walk so closely down the path of light."

"Oooh, that sounds dangerous," she breathed.

"It's not a job I think I could do, facing the forces of darkness every day," Merik said. "But the Hunters protect the rest of us, so I'm glad there are men out there that can. Oh my, here I am ignoring my other guests. I must be along now, Miranda. I'll be back in a while, and we'll chat some more."

"Certainly," Miranda told him as he got up, then she turned to Tarrin after he was gone. "Quite an interesting bit of information," she said soberly in Wikuni to him.

"I think we might want to leave before dawn," Tarrin grunted. "If these Hunters really *can* sense other magic-users, then we might not want to linger here for long. This is a good-sized town, and they might have a Hunter in residence."

"Amazing that a religion can call itself pure and walking in the path of light when it summons Demons to serve it," Miranda said acidly.

"Didn't you hear him, Miranda? He said the that One said that they can use the Defiled to serve the Church. Wouldn't you think a Demon is Defiled?"

She looked about to say something, then the comprehension dawned in her eyes. "You're right. Some kind of 'fight fire with fire' mentality."

"No, a tool of terror. And I think if there's one thing a Demon would be good for with this church, it would be a tool of terror. The reasoning for it is just sophistry to explain to the lay populace why their Priests are summoning Demons."

"You know, this religion of theirs almost doesn't sound evil had we not seen what they do to people who disobey them," she said grimly.

"I know. But it's all nothing but a well orchestrated lie to maintain power, and nothing more." He looked at Merik who was chatting with another patron. "Merik believes in this Church because he's swallowed the line they've given him. He doesn't question them, and he's closed his mind to the starving people around him and the fear in everyone's eyes, seeing it as normal. He himself also lives in fear, but the Church has deflected that fear away from itself and put it on the Defiled. They keep the people so afraid of these shadowy Defiled that they don't think about who's oppressing them in the first place."

"An old political trick," Miranda said with a nod. "Passing the marked coin."

"Aye."

"Well, we've learned a good bit from him. We've also learned that there are nobles, but the nobles aren't exactly connected to the Church."

"And that the Church controls them," he answered, then he described what happened between him and the church soldier.

"Puppets on the strings of the Church," Miranda agreed. "Where is Mist?"

"Up in the room with Fireflash and Sarraya. If Sarraya's still alive," he chuckled. "I'd better go up."

"Alright. I'll tell Dolanna about what we learned, and tell everyone we're going to leave early, so we'd better get some sleep."

"Good idea."

Tarrin went up to his room, and found that everyone was indeed still alive. Fireflash was chasing Sarraya around the room in tight circles as the Faerie laughed. Mist had the

shutters closed and was in her natural form, eating a bowl of stew that Tarrin had brought up for her earlier, ignoring the laughing Faerie as the drake chased her through the air.

"I'm surprised you haven't killed them," Tarrin chuckled.

"They're not bothering me, my mate," she answered.

"We're leaving early."

"How early?"

"As early as possible. Miranda dragged some information out of the innkeeper."

Tarrin related what Merik had told them. "If there's a Hunter here, we don't want to linger."

"Good idea," she agreed pushing the bowl aside. "Let's go to bed."

"Isn't it a bit early?"

"Not for what I want to do," she said, standing up and giving him a direct look.

Sarraya laughed. "I guess this is where I get thrown out. I'll go sleep with Haley. Open the door for me, Tarrin, and see you in the morning," she said, winking out of sight.

Tarrin let Sarraya out the door, then shifted into his natural form, locked the door, and took Mist's paw. "Not a child any longer," she cooed to him as she snuggled up against him and kissed him. He didn't have to bend down at all to kiss her.

"You never were," he teased lightly.

It was well into night when Tarrin and Mist were awakened by the sound of a tolling bell. He rose up from the sturdy bed and looked towards the shuttered window, shifting into human form as he climbed out of bed to open it and look outside.

"Why are they ringing that damn thing this late?" Mist complained, sitting up in the bed.

"Stay there, I'm going to open the shutters," he ordered, then he did so. The street below was quiet and deserted, but people were opening doors and windows and looking out, just as he was. He watched them for a moment, until he started seeing men and women in nightclothes and robes filing out of their doors, and walking towards the center of town. He had no idea why, but the bell had to be some kind of a signal or something.

"Why are they coming out?" Mist asked, coming up beside him to look out. She was in her *human* form, something she very rarely did because of the discomfort of it, and he was surprised that she was so tall even in her human form. She hadn't bothered to put anything on, and one older fellow happened to look up at their window and see much more than he had expected. He gaped for a moment, then gave a wolfish grin and saluted Mist with the hand not carrying his cane.

"Put on a shirt or something, Mist," he chided her.

"Why?"

"So we don't offend the locals."

"I don't know, that one didn't seem too offended to me."

"That's probably because he's a dirty old man. Now put on a shirt."

"I like humans not afraid to be themselves," she said with a snort, leaning out to look down the street.

"Girl, you're about to learn a valuable life lesson. Now go put on a shirt."

"Oh, alright," she huffed, pulling back into the window and hurrying over to the bed. She picked her shirt up off the floor and pulled it over her head, then came back to the window and leaned back out. "They're all going that way," she said, looking out the

window towards the middle of town.

"The bell's ringing!" Merik called from the hallway. "Everyone up, please, the bell is ringing!" He knocked on the door. "My Lord, the bell is ringing! Please get up! We can't be late!"

"We're up," he called.

"We, my Lord?" he asked curiously through the door.

"Skip it. Go wake up the others."

Mist and Tarrin watched the humans mill around outside for a moment longer, then Tarrin leaned out to look with Mist towards the center of town. It looked like the entire city was coming out of their houses and moving towards the chapel in the middle of town. "I guess we should get dressed," he surmised.

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened. "Oh, pardon me, dear one," Dolanna said mildly from the doorway.

"Come in, Dolanna, you're not looking at anything you haven't already seen," he answered without looking back at her.

"I think you should dress and prepare to leave. I do not have a good feeling about what is going on, and I think we shall leave when it is over. Azakar and Ulger will pack the horses when they are dressed.."

"Good idea," Tarrin agreed.

"Well, at least half of that sight is cute," Ulger's voice called from the doorway.

"Be careful, my mate, Ulger thinks you have a cute butt," Mist told him evenly, which made Ulger burst into laughter. "Don't turn around, or I might have to fight him for you."

That made Ulger almost fall over laughing. He staggered out of the doorway, and the sound of his laughter trailed away.

"You are a wicked woman, Mist," Dolanna said lightly.

"Well, *I* think it's a cute butt," she said, looking down at Tarrin's backside. Then she reached down and patted it fondly.

"I'm so glad you approve," Tarrin said dryly.

"At least you cut short any remark Ulger might have made about you, Mist," Dolanna told her.

"Bah. He wouldn't know what to do with my butt if I gave it to him," she snorted, which made Tarrin laugh.

"Well, dress quickly and prepare to leave, my friends," Dolanna ordered.

Mist gave Tarrin a roguish smile and goosed him, then moved to shutter the windows. "Let's get going," she told him.

They dressed and packed their things, and Mist shifted back into cat form after they were ready. Tarrin's arms were full with packs, Fireflash, and Mist as he came down, until Haley quietly took his pack. "Dolanna wants you to stay with the pack horses, Mist," he told the black cat in Tarrin's arms quietly, since Merik and Bolli, wearing nightclothes, were very close to them, trying to urge their guests to get going in stronger and stronger terms.

The black cat nodded, and Haley collected her from him gently, then beckoned to Fireflash. "I'll take care of your cat, my Lord, and your drake," he said audibly. "She'll settle down once we put her in the saddle."

They got moving quickly after that. Azakar and Ulger led the horses as the others

walked at the tail end of the procession of the citizens of the town as they filed towards the middle of the city. Tarrin wasn't sure what was going on, but from the looks of sleepiness in those around him, he realized that this wasn't a normal occurrence. Something special was going on. Tarrin honestly had no idea what to expect as they reached the large square before the town's chapel. The whole population of the town was there, almost two thousand people, packed into a large open area before the chapel's iron fence, behind which was built a large wooden platform that rose over the top of that fence. There were six figures on that platform, two adult-sized, three smaller ones or men on their knees, and one was unmistakably Demonic. It was a *vrock*, a twelve span tall vulture-like Demon, with bird-like legs whose feet were equipped with wicked talons, human-like arms and hands also equipped with talons, and large feathered wings anchored the a skinny body that supported a vulture's head. It held a black-bladed glaive in its hands, towering over the men on the platform, holding its pole with the single-edged blade mounted atop it negligently in its hands.

"They've caught a witch!" someone whispered to his right, and then a rumble of gossip rolled through the back edge of the crowd.

One of the standing men raised his arms, and the crowd hushed. "Good citizens of Dengal! You have been summoned to witness the execution of the One's justice!" the man boomed. Tarrin saw now that he was wearing one of those red robes that denoted him as a Priest. "This night the blessed Hunters have entered our town and captured a practitioner of witchcraft! The witch has been caught, as well as two who have tried to hide him, witch-lovers!"

There was a rumble of cheering through the crowd, which died down when the Priest raised his arms again.

"Blessed be the One!" the man shouted, and the crowd shouted the same phrase in reply, raising their hands to the sky. Tarrin, Dolanna, nor any of the others bothered to do the same. Then again, since they were at the very back edge of the congregation, nobody seemed to notice.

"Show us the witch!" someone shouted from the crowd, and there came a chant of "Witch! Witch!" from the mob that got louder and more demanding as the seconds passed. The Priest let it go on for a moment or two, then beckoned for the other man standing beside him to do something. The man took a few steps over to a kneeling person on the platform, did something that Tarrin couldn't see, then hauled him up.

Not onto his feet, into the air.

This "witch" was nothing but a *child*!

The man was holding up a child that could not be more than eight years old, small and thin and dressed in filthy rags, the figure's hands and feet bound with heavy chains. "Here is your witch, caught practicing his foul magic in your very town!" the man screamed. "This I attest under vow to the One!"

Rather than be offended that their "witch" was only a child, the crowd immediately started screaming hysterically, calls for the child to be executed, beheaded, to have his entrails ripped out with hooks, and even more vicious things. The people had no care that the one they wanted destroyed was nothing but a child.

Tarrin balled his hand into a fist. He was not about to let these maniacs kill a child, but to intervene would reveal to the town that he too was a *witch*. He struggled within himself for a long moment, knowing that he was going to put them all in danger if he

stepped in, yet unwilling to allow what was about to happen come about.

The *vrock* turned and looked directly at him. Tarrin tried to get his emotions under control, ducking down just a bit to hide in the crowd since he was taller than most everyone else. But the Demon continued to stare in his direction, and the reddish eyes of the monster began to glow visibly.

"Damn," Tarrin muttered. "Dolanna, go that way. I think the Demon sees me."

"How would-oh," she said seriously, remembering when he told her that Demons could see him for what he really was, just as he could see them. "What do you want us to do?"

"Get away from me," he answered. "If it comes at us, I'll make sure they don't even think about you."

"Very well. If it is needful, we will meet you in the forest. I am sure you can find us."

"Easily," he said as he ducked down and moved away from them. Dolanna shooed the others in the other direction, putting distance between them. The Demon kept staring in his direction, and it tightened its grip on its glaive. Tarrin realized that the crowd had quieted down somewhat, and he raised his eyes to look and see what was going on. The Priest was ranting about the evil of the Defiled, and how they were about to send the evil witch to eternal torment in the Haunted Lands, and then he spouted off about the glories of the One, but Tarrin's eyes were locked on that Demon, and its eyes kept looking right in his direction.

"And now it is time to have the Defiled destroy their own!" the Priest shouted as the crowd fell silent in dreadful anticipation. "The time has come to rid our world of the stain of evil and send this witch's soul to eternal torment in the Haunted Lands!" The Priest pointed at the Demon, but the Demon wasn't looking at him. He gave a low call of command, and the Demon glanced at him in obvious irritation, then turned towards the child that the second man was still holding aloft. Tarrin heard the other two scream, and his heart seized up when he recognized one of those voices.

It was Zyrilin!

Tarrin looked to the Demon's immediate left and saw that it *was* Zyrilin, on her knees and her hands chained together, struggling against those chains now. He realized that the chains were anchored to the platform to keep the prisoners from trying to escape, and both of the other children were now struggling against those chains desperately, almost hysterically, as the one held in the man's hands did not move.

The Demon took one more step towards the child, then raised his glaive to spear the small form through the middle-

And Tarrin lost all sense of self. One moment he was standing there in disbelief, the next he was hurtling through the air towards the Demon, wings out, shapeshifted into his natural form, his black-bladed sword in his paws, and an infuriated, defiant shriek of outrage emanating from his lips, a sound that overwhelmed all other sound and stunned everyone into awed silence. Trailing licks of fire from his wings, which had lost their usual smooth consistency in his fury, he lanced through the air right at the Demon, who had turned and raised its glaive to defend itself, both surprise and a kind of grim recognition in its eyes, as if it had suspected he was there but had *not* expected such a brash attack. The blade of Tarrin's sword seemed to erupt into flame, and fire burst from the fetlocks on his wrists and ankles, making Tarrin look like he was afire as he arced

over the crowd and raised his sword to cleave the Demon right down the middle.

It was not a clash of power or a meeting of weapons that heralded Tarrin's arrival on the platform, but sudden deception. The Demon simply vanished as Tarrin tried to cut him in half, his sword leaving a trail of fire behind it, and the enraged Were-cat barely had the presence of mind to remember some of the abilities of his foe. He raised his weapon and spun just in time to parry aside the attempt from the Demon to spear him in the back, having teleported himself behind Tarrin as the Were-cat made his charge. The Priest gave out a sudden cry, then immediately began chanting, but the other man coolly pulled out a dagger and moved to slit the throat of the child he held by one steady arm before him, who was not moving. That look of cool reasoning evaporated into a shriek of terror, then agony, when Tarrin raised a paw and unleashed a concentrated blast of pure fire from his paw, which raced over the child's shoulder and immolated the man's head. The man dropped the child and staggered back, and then, in a sickening display, his head literally exploded from the pressure of blood and fluid within the skull flash-boiled by the intense heat of Tarrin's attack. The headless body then fell backwards off the stage and landed on the ground below in a boneless heap, flame licking at the shoulders and arms of his red tabard. The Priest started chanting in the language of magic, but Tarrin could do nothing about it as he turned to face the Demon. Sword met glaive as the Were-cat parried a surprisingly subtle and deft series of shallow slashes and stabs from the weapon, then the *vrock* pressed the haft of his weapon against Tarrin's sword, locking them in place as they pushed at one another.

Forget magic, mortal fool, and grant me the power to summon! he heard the Demon command of the Priest telepathically. *Your magic won't do you any good against this enemy!*

The Priest nodded in understanding and pointed at the Demon with both hands. Tarrin instantly moved to stop that, as he spread his wings and sent almost a dozen lances of living fire from their inner expanse, flying fast as arrows at the Priest. They all impaled him at varying angles, making his body shudder horribly before Tarrin withdrew them and let the body fall, but he didn't do it fast enough. The *vrock*'s eyes glittered dangerously, and if it could smile with that beak, Tarrin knew it would have been doing so. That close to the Demon, he felt its power reach beyond this dimension, towards that place where Demons existed, and call to its kin in a plea for help.

This was the most dangerous aspect of Demonkind, he knew. In Sennadar, they could not *do* this, but this was *not* Sennadar. The Demon was summoning others of its kind, using its power to form a gateway between their worlds. And each of *those* Demons could also summon *other* Demons. Though only the original Demon could remain in this dimension, the others could only remain until the magic that granted them the power to come here waned and they were dragged back to their own dimension, they wouldn't need much more than a few moments. He knew what would happen. The *vrock* would summon other Demons and then back off and have them fight for it. So long as it had the magical reserves, it could keep those other Demons here for as long as it could expend the magical power to hold them here. If Tarrin could kill the *vrock*, the other Demons would be banished back to their own dimension.

He was only vaguely away of the screaming of the humans in the crowd beyond the fence as he suddenly found himself surrounded by three *glabrezu*, who had appeared around him. The dog-headed, four-armed menaces immediately attacked, using their

huge pincer arms with their wicked points at the ends to impale Tarrin, but the Were-cat simply wove through them like a dancer, his burning sword flashing with arcs of fire as he retaliated in kind. The pincer hand of one of them tumbled to the platform, twitching and clacking spasmodically, with a slash of Tarrin's sword, but he was struck from behind by another, staggering him forward. He made to cut one in half at the waist, but the huge Demon simply vanished as it teleported out of harm's way. A paw off his sword protected him from another stab, as he grabbed the pincer with his paw and pushed back, sliding his feet across the wooden platform. He sensed another one coming from behind, so he slid aside as the one who had vanished tried to spear him in the back, right between the wings. He lunged at the one whose hand he had severed, and it too vanished, but Tarrin had seen this trick once too often. Spears of fire blasted out of the backs of his wings, flying outwards behind him, and they managed to reach the Demon just as it reappeared. It howled in agony when the living fire pierced its flesh, and then fell off the platform and started dissolving into that hideous black ichor on the far side of the fence, just before the terrified crowd. The attack so surprised one of the other *glabrezu* that it didn't move fast enough when Tarrin turned on it, and Tarrin's burning sword sent its head flying into the crowd with a single powerful swipe. Tarrin took two fast steps towards the last one, who looked suddenly nervous, and then he reared back and threw the sword, point first, right at its head. It reflexively teleported itself out of harm's way, but the *glabrezu* wasn't his intended target. The *vrock*, who had had its line of sight blocked by the other Demon, did not see the sword until it was too late. It looked as if it had tried to teleport out of the way, but the sword's chisel tip caught it right over its heavy hooked beak. Its head was slammed back by the force of the blow, and it crumpled to the platform's edge, slid a little, then tumbled off to fall to the church's courtyard below. The last Demon's form wavered, and then it vanished as if it had been swallowed by dark smoke.

There was dead silence from the crowd. Without even a thought, he raised his paw, and his sword floated up from the ground below, its blade still bathed in fire. His wings still pulsated irregularly with flame, illuminating the three children like it was a bonfire before them, two of them staring at him in terrified awe, frightened of him yet unable to look away. He knelt quickly by the limp form of the third child, grabbing hold of the chain and snapping it with a flex of his paw. The limp form of the child was so small, so very small, and it tore him up inside to see him, to think that they were about to murder him. He put a finger thicker around than the child's wrist on his neck, and felt a very faint pulse. He stood up and turned to regard the silenced, stunned crowd, and his wings suddenly flared into incandescent brilliance as his outrage spilled over into his wings. "You people are unbelievable!" he raged at them. "Trying to murder a *child*! How can you be so cruel?"

"Get out of our town, you filthy creature!" one brave person shouted at him. "All Defiled must die!" another one shouted. "It's the will of the One God!"

"One god?" Tarrin shouted furiously. "Your all powerful god that sees all and can do anything? Well *where is he now*?" he raged. He turned and pointed his sword at the ornate chapel behind him, and a blast of the hottest fire the world had ever seen lashed out from the tip. It struck the building right in its stained glass window, and the entire impressive building simply detonated in a fiery explosion of smoke, fire, and debris. The population of the town was blown off their feet, and smoking chunks of debris rained

down on them. "Bring him out!" Tarrin screamed at them, rising off the platform to hover over the square like Death Himself coming to take them all. "You follow a god that keeps you living in terror, and kills little children! All I've heard of your One God since coming here is purity and truth, while he has his Priests preach to you nothing but *hate* and *fear*. Do you want truth? I can give you truth!" he raged. "Your One God is a liar and a bloody *coward*! If he's as powerful as you think, then why isn't he here to kick my ass! Does he fear a single mortal? Am I too much for him? Is a single *Defiled* so terrifying to him that he hides under his bed, afraid to come and face me? Or does he not care about any of you enough to protect you now?"

He swept a scathing gaze across the populace, rage mixing with disgust, then turned back to the children. He broke the chains of the other two, then turned and picked up the unconscious child, cradling him in his powerful arms. The other two looked at him in awe, but the girl seemed to recognize him, putting her hands over her mouth and gaping in consternation. "That's right, little bit," he told her gently, holding out his paw to her. "Do you want to fetch and carry for me again?"

She gave him a fearful smile. "A-Are you a witch?" she asked in a bare whisper.

"Yes and no," he winked. "As you can see, I'm not what I seem to be, but it's not witchcraft. I'll explain later. Right now, I have to get you and your brothers somewhere safe." He reached his paw out to her. "Here. Come with me, little bit, and I'll protect you. You'll always be safe with me."

She reached out and put both her chained hands in his paw, and when she touched him, he felt the strangest feeling, a sense of peace, of security, of love. There were also feelings of fear, of concern, of uncertainty, but under it all was also the strangest hint of *power*. There was a power hidden within this thin, bedraggled young girl, a strange power that seemed familiar, yet at the same time was something he had never experienced before. It was dormant, latent, lurking within her and simply waiting for it to be realized. He didn't know what kind of power it was, but in a way, it seemed boundless.

"Are you going to blow them up, mister?" the boy said in fearful excitement.

"They're not worth my time," he answered, standing up and glaring down at the terrified people of Dengal. "Now come here, both of you. Stand with me."

"What are we going to do?" the boy asked.

"Leave," he answered, snapping out his wings. They grew larger, and larger, and even larger, until their span was nearly forty spans across. He had never done this before, but he knew that it was more than possible, knew deep down inside himself.

Fire was an element of *change*.

The wings furred in upon them, covering him, the child in his arms, and the two at his feet, covering them, enveloping them, surrounding them in a warm sensation of utter protection. The fire without expanded, grew, picked them up as it took form, as the fire expanded into an image, a form, of Tarrin's own personal choice. The fire grew and grew until a form of a dragon loomed over the square, a dragon made of living fire with Tarrin at its heart. He closed his eyes and raised his consciousness up into the shell of his own creation, just as if he were pushing his consciousness into an image projected though the Weave. Just as he became the illusion, he now *became* the dragon.

That dragon, a dragon made of living golden fire, and safely holding within it Tarrin and the three children, opened eyes of glowing green and glared down at the terrified

peoples of Dengal. Then it spread its mighty wings and carried itself into the sky, a beacon of bright golden light illuminating the darkness, leaving the town and its burning chapel far behind, with only the sound of the young boy Telve's amazed, delighted laughter left behind for them to hear.

Chapter 3

It took Tarrin a while to calm down, but the fact that he was flying managed to make that come about faster than, as well that the surprising condition in which he found himself.

Simply put, he *was* the dragon.

He was looking through its eyes, was hearing through its ears, he could even smell through its nose. The form made of his living fire actually breathed, even though there was no internal organs within outside of the three people contained within it, but that breathing did supply air to those locked within the fiery expanse of its shape. It felt...*strange*, to have his consciousness raised into his creation. He was aware of his true body in a way that wasn't like how it was when he projected into the Weave, aware of it and able to see through his eyes, hear through his ears, and so forth, but that part of him seemed like an *extension* of his body, rather than the fireform dragon being the actual extension. He could see and hear and smell through his *real* body, but he couldn't *move*. He found he could switch that distinction in his mind, shifting his consciousness between his true body and the fireform body, aware of both, capable of moving both, but forced to push his consciousness into one or the other, but not both simultaneously. He found that his creation of his own living fire was faithful to the form, but lacked the powers of a dragon. That was little loss, however, for he could still use his *own* powers while raised into his creation. It had the proportioned size and shape, moved just like a dragon, but lacked its weight and lacked its magical powers. The monstrous form, with a winspan of nearly sixty spans, weighed little more than the four mortal bodies contained within it. Fire in and of itself was a nearly weightless substance.

It was just so strange. He looked down on the darkened expanse below him, aware that his brilliant body of living fire—colored gold, probably because of his partiality to Fireflash—was visible for *leagues* in every direction. He was a beacon of light in the moonless sky, and anyone awake and outside probably was looking at him right now. In a way, he wanted that, for he wanted the others to see which way he was going and go that way, to follow the road to the northwest because that was what he was flying over. It was something like pushing himself into a projected Illusion, but not entirely. It felt more real, for he could feel with this fireform, and he could touch, where in an Illusion he could not. He could *feel* the wind rushing past him as he flew northwest, could *feel* the surprisingly cool night air, even as he could *feel* the movements of the three children contained within the shape. He had set it so they could see out of the fireform but could not be seen from the outside, looking out through windows to appreciate the fact that they were flying.

But, as exhilarating as flying was, and as strange as this newfound ability seemed to be, he knew that he had to land and hide. Once they got over the shock, they were going to send a force out after him. Besides, he needed to check on the unconscious boy, and

he wanted to do that on the ground. That, and he felt they deserved a little explanation, and probably some reassurance. He had little doubt that they rather unsettled at the moment.

So, rather suddenly, he lowered his head and dove down towards the ground at a surprising rate of speed. The girl, Zyrinin, gave a squeal of fright as the feeling of weightlessness gripped her, but the boy Telven just laughed delightedly. He aimed for a very small clearing in the forest canopy, which had no signs of life in it outside of grass and a single fallen tree laying beside a very small brook that cut through the middle of it. He landed by that tree, fiery feet touching the cool grass, and as soon as he was safely down, he withdrew from his fireform and reversed the process that created it. The fire of its body wavered irregularly, then it compacted, compressed, swirled down smaller and smaller until it was again nothing more than his own wings furled around the four of them. He then opened his wings, reducing them to their normal size and folding them behind his back. The girl looked a little traumatized, but the boy just laughed and jumped up and down in place a couple of times. “That was *so* neat! Let’s do it again!” he cried out.

Tarrin didn’t listen to him, however, as he set the small body in his arms down on the grass, leaning his head against the log, and inspected him. He was thin as a stick, gaunt, and a bit pale. There was dried blood on the back of his head, and an impressive knot underneath it—the reason he was unconscious, most likely. Despite that injury, his breathing was strong, and his heartbeat was steady.

“Jal!” the girl cried, kneeling beside him, putting her hand on his forehead and taking hold of his hand with her other. “Is he going to be alright, my Lord?” she asked fearfully.

Obviously, concern over her brother even overruled the dramatic manner in which they escaped from Dengal. “Looks like a bump on the head is all,” he answered her gently. “With a little sleep, he’ll be just fine.”

“Are you a Defiled, mister?” the boy Telven asked him boldly. “Like Jal?”

“Telven!” Zyrinin said sharply.

“That’s no such thing as a Defiled,” Tarrin snorted. “I know magic, yes, but magic’s not *evil*. If magic was evil, wouldn’t that mean that the Priests of the One, who use magic, are Defiled too?”

Telven looked at him. “Well, aren’t they the pure?”

Tarrin snorted again, more darkly, and stood up. “Umm, my Lord?” Zyrinin said meekly. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” he answered. “My friends are going to come this way, and when they get here, we’ll get you three out of here and somewhere safe.” He gave her a level stare. “And don’t call me *Lord*. My name is Tarrin, as you recall. I’m rather fond of it.”

“Yes, my—“

“Aaat!” he cut her off, which made Telven giggle.

“T-Tarrin,” she said, giving him a shy smile.

“Better,” he said with a curt nod.

“How did you, uh,” she started, but he looked back at her and chuckled.

“I’ll explain it later,” he said as he withdrew his wings, retracted them into his back, then willed his skin to grow over them. “Is Jal really what they think he is?” he asked.

“Uh, yes, my—Tarrin,” Zyrilin answered honestly. “He can do witchcraft.”

“*Magic*,” he corrected her. “Witchcraft is something else.”

“What *is* witchcraft then?” Telven asked.

“A made-up term to make magic sound like something evil,” he answered bluntly.

“But there *is* witchcraft,” Zyrilin said astutely. “Else you wouldn’t know what it takes to do it.”

He gave her a glance, and she flushed for speaking up. Tarrin was mildly surprised; this girl was very observant. “Yes, there *is* such a thing as witchcraft, but it has nothing to do with what the Priests of the One say it does. Witchcraft is also called Necromancy, at least where I come from, and that’s magic that deals with death and the dead. There’s absolutely no way a half-grown child could so much as read a book about Necromancy. Witchcraft *is* evil, but what they call ‘witchcraft’ here is little more than a loose term for any kind of magical force that’s not the Priest magic of the One. If anyone in this place is practicing evil magic, it’s the Priests. They’re summoning *Demons*,” he said with a hiss.

“But that’s just them calling the Defiled to destroy the Defiled,” Telven protested. “So they don’t become unpure.”

“Boy, when a Priest summons a Demon, that means that the god he worships has an agreement with the Demons to allow it,” Tarrin said in a flat, dangerous manner, staring at him in a way that made the boy shrink back from him. “No *pure* god allows his Priests to do such a thing. Demons are the *enemies* of the gods.”

“But doesn’t the One have power over everything? Even the Defiled? Even his enemies?”

“Telven!” Zyrilin hissed, “behave!”

“Boy, if the One controlled everything, then *why are there Defiled?*” he asked in a powerful voice. “If they’re evil and must be destroyed, why doesn’t he just *destroy* them? Well? I’m waiting for an answer.”

Telven obviously had no answer for this, the major hole in what he’d seen of the teachings of the One so far, so he fell silent.

“So, if you’re not a witch, then what are you, Master Tarrin?” Zyrilin asked, repeating her question.

“There’s no real term for what I do here in this place,” he answered her. “Let’s just say I use magic and leave it at that.”

A ghostly voice seemed to whisper out of the air to his right. “*Tarrin, where are you?*” It was Miranda, probably using one of her Priest spells.

“I’m along the road northwest from the town,” he answered. “Where are you now?”

“*We’re still trapped in the town. They haven’t opened the city gates.*”

Tarrin swore. “Want me to come back and knock them down?”

“*No, you don’t have to do that,*” Miranda replied with a laugh. “*We’re waiting for everything to settle down, then we’ll get out and come to you. Right now, I’m tracing Kimmie’s movements through town so we can get back on her trail after we pick you up.*”

“Where is that voice coming from?” Zyrilin asked.

“Quiet, little bit,” Tarrin told her. “Are they coming after me?” he asked.

Miranda laughed. “*They’re still in shock,*” she replied. “*I have to say, Tarrin, you know how to make a point. There are pieces of that chapel laying out in the fields surrounding the town. They’re also a bit disorganized because you killed their highest-ranking Priest. Is that child alright? I don’t see any blood on him.*”

“You’re using the scrying pool spell?” he asked.

“*Of course.*”

“I didn’t realize you could use it to communicate.”

“*This is a different version of it. A bit more advanced,*” she said with a slight chuckle. “*How did you do that dragon thing?*”

“I’ll explain it when you pick us up,” he replied. “We’ll be waiting.”

“*Alright. Be careful out there, Tarrin.*”

He turned and looked back at the three children. They were gaunt and dirty, and they looked both hungry and exhausted. He wasn’t sure if should feed them or let them sleep, but looking at them, seeing how upset and surprised they were, sleep wouldn’t be easy. So he’d better feed them. He stood up and turned his nose into the wind, testing the many scents he found within it, and detected no less than five animals that smelled familiar to him, squirrel, rabbit, groundhog, snake, and deer. There was also a hint of bear in the air, but it was distant and a bit stale.

There was also something on the grass under him. He dropped to all fours and tested it, and found a very faint trace of human scent...and horses. It was very old, days, maybe even a ride. The grass and ground also showed very faint signs of human activity, he saw. A small group of humans had used this clearing as a camp several days ago. To his surprise, they’d been careful not to damage the site, for it barely showed any hints that they were here.

He stood up and looked back at the three children. Telven and Zyrilin were obviously afraid, but Telven seemed to excited for it to affect him too much, and Zyrilin was too concerned for her youngest brother. She sat beside him, stroking his hair, watching him carefully. Obviously, those two needed something to do.

“We’ll probably be here until well after dawn,” he told them. “You need food, and you need rest, so we’re building a camp. Telven, take that stick laying over there and use it to tear up the ground right there,” he said, pointing with a large finger. “We need to make a fire. After you’re done turning the ground over, stomp it down so it’s flat.”

“Why do we do that?” he asked curiously.

“So we don’t catch fire to the grass,” he answered. “Zyrilin, look around for small twigs and branches in the clearing and gather them into a pile by the firepit. I’m going to go get us something to eat. After we have a little food, we’ll get some sleep.”

“What are we waiting for?” Telven asked.

“My friends,” he answered. “They’re still in Dengal. They have to come get us.”

“Are they witches too?” Telven asked.

“*Telven!*” Zyrilin hissed hotly.

Tarrin ignored that. “Do as I told you to do,” he said, turning and walking towards the woods. “I won’t be gone long, and I’ll be within earshot. If you need me, just yell, and I’ll be right there.”

Tarrin could tell that Telven was too conditioned in the teachings of the perverted religion of the One to easily give up on his preconceptions. But for some reason, Zyrilin seemed able to accept what Tarrin had said. He put that aside and dealt with the food problem, which didn’t last for very long. He happened across a bedded herd of deer not far into the woods, in a large thicket, and moments later he had dinner thrown over one shoulder as he cleared the trees and returned to the tiny meadow. Telven was about halfway done with the firepit, though he wasn’t doing a very good job, and Zyrilin was gathering up the dead branches of the fallen tree and stacking them near where Telven

was working. She kept looking to Jal, and every time he so much as sighed, she rushed back over to him to check on him and make sure he was alright.

Feeling that his normal form was intimidating them a little bit, he shifted into his human form and approached. They stopped and watched him as he dropped the young doe to the ground, then knelt by it as he drew the dagger from his belt. “Well?” he asked as Telven continued to stare. “We don’t eat until you get that firepit ready, boy. You’re holding up *my* dinner.”

“How do you do that?” Telven asked excitedly. “Make yourself look different?”

“It’s part of what I am,” he answered casually as he started cleaning his kill and getting it ready to eat. “I’ll explain it all later. Now get back to work. Or are you not hungry?” he asked pointedly.

That cut the questions short. Telven worked hard and fast until he had a large patch of ground turned over, then he stamped it down as Tarrin quickly and expertly dressed the kill. They watched in curiosity, Zyrilin by Jal’s side, as he built a fire, and to Telven’s disappointment, didn’t use magic to get it started. A Sulasian Ranger could start a fire with two sticks, and though he wasn’t one, he’d been trained by one. Once he got the fire going, he cut sticks for a spit and got the venison roasting over the fire. The two children watched these actions as well, both with some hungered longing as they looked at the venison cooking over the fire. There was nothing but the sound of the crackling fire, and then a ghostly light as the odd blue, white, and green moon of this world rose up over the trees of the clearing. The patterns of white on that moon had changed once again, as they seemed to do so every night when it rose. He noticed that it was waning, that it had been full when they arrived but now only about three quarters of it was visible.

After the venison was roasted well enough, he allowed them to eat. He watched as they attacked the venison like starving wolves, but he also noticed that Zyrilin took one large slab and set it aside, telling Telven that it was for Jal when he woke up, and she didn’t so much as look at it. He had to chuckle at that a little. “Zyrilin, there’s an entire deer over here. You don’t have to hold back food. I roasted this for *you*. I’ll put on more in a bit so Jal will have something when he wakes up.”

“But—“

“But nothing. Eat.”

She flushed a little, then attacked the food she was saving.

After he made sure both of them ate as much as they could, he checked on Jal as they got some water out of the tiny brook. The young boy was sleeping comfortably now, and Tarrin marvelled at him a moment. Jal looked much like Zyrilin in the cheeks and chin, but his nose was a bit longer, and his eyes were a bit smaller and a tad further apart. His hair was a sandy blonde rather than the dark, almost black hair of his sister and brother, dirty and shoulder length, the bangs falling over his eyes. He looked at Telven and realized that the boy didn’t look much like his siblings. His face had a width about it that wasn’t present in his brother and sister, his eyes were blue instead of the hazel of Zyrilin and whatever color eyes Jal had—he hadn’t seen them yet—and there was a hint of stockiness in the boy’s emaciated frame that suggested that the boy might grow up to be very large and quite strong. Zyrilin looked to be about fourteen or so, Telven about eleven, and Jal looked only eight or nine.

“Is he alright, Master Tarrin?” Zyrilin asked quickly as she knelt beside her brother, putting her hand on his forehead and stroking his hair gently.

“He’s fine. He’s about to pass into a natural sleep,” he answered.

“Did you use magic to find out?” Telven asked quickly.

“Magic is something I only use when I *have* to, Telven,” he said patiently. “Like with all things, there’s a time to use it, and it’s not right to use it when it’s not needful. If I just ran around and magicked everything, I’d be disrespecting my gift.”

“Oh. How did you learn magic?”

“It’s a very long story, and we don’t have time right now,” he answered, giving the boy a look. “You need to sleep. The others won’t be here until dawn at least, and I think you’ve had a *very* busy day.”

“But I’m not sleepy!” Telven complained. “Not after they locked us up in that dungeon, then they were going to kill us like *we* were the ones that were Defiled in the square, then you appear with your magic sword and fight the executioners, and then we *flew*!”

“I don’t care if you’re tired or not,” Tarrin told him shortly. “Lay down. If you can’t sleep, then *pretend* to sleep. Either way, I want you on the grass and eyes closed. You too, little bit.”

“But I have to—“

“Sleep. I don’t think Jal will wake up until morning if we don’t disturb him, and he can use the sleep. It will help him recover faster.” Tarrin reached into his pouch and withdrew the charm that allowed him to go without sleep, and affixed it to the back of his amulet. There was that familiar rush of alertness that always came with putting it on, as if someone had dunked his head in icewater, then it settled down. “Lay down. We have a long way to go, and I don’t want you falling out of the saddle tomorrow.”

“Saddle?” Zyrilin asked.

“We get to ride a horse?” Telven said in excitement.

“Trust me, it’s not as great as you think it is,” Tarrin chuckled. “By tomorrow night, you’ll really hate it.”

“Why?”

“Saddlesores,” he answered.

“What are those?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow. Now lay down.”

“But—“ Telven started, but Tarrin gave him a withering stare that effectively shut him up. He pointed at the ground near Jal, beside his sister.

“Boy, you’re walking a very fine line. I don’t have much patience with people who don’t obey me. Now lay down and go to sleep, or pretend. Either way, I don’t want to hear you make one more sound until sunrise.”

Telven looked fearfully at him, then quickly crawled over beside Zyrilin and laid down.

“I can stay up,” Zyrilin offered. “I have to watch Jal.”

“Jal doesn’t need watching,” Tarrin told her. “Sleep. You’ll need it.”

“What, what are you going to do with us?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know yet,” he answered. “But for now, you’ll be going with us, at least until we can find someplace safe for you.”

“Where are you going?”

"I don't really know quite yet," he answered. "We're following the trail of a pair of our friends who are lost. When we find them, we have to accomplish a mission, and then we'll be going home, I suppose."

"What mission?"

"I was sent here to find some people who disappeared from my—my homeland a very long time ago,"

he answered, not quite ready to explain things in detail yet. "If there are any left, I'm supposed to offer to bring them home, and then I'll be going home as well."

"Who are these people?"

"You wouldn't know them, little bit," he told her, then he glanced at her. "Or maybe you might. There are two distinct groups of them. One group is made up of non-humans, about yea big," he said, holding his hand up beside him about the height of an average Dwarf. "They're stocky people, have beards, and they're craftsmen by nature. They're called Dwarves."

"I've never heard of them."

"The other group are a mixture of humans and tall brown-skinned people that have pointed ears. They'd call themselves *katzh-dashi*."

She gasped and stared at him wildly. "Those are the Damned!" she told him breathlessly. "They're the first Defiled, the ones that brought the blight of evil to the land!" She stared at him in horror. "You're—You're one of the Damned!" she said with barely a whisper.

"They still exist here?" he asked quickly.

"Only legends," she answered, giving him a fearful look. "Nobody's seen one of the Damned in a long time, or at least no stories I've ever heard. The Priests say the Damned were destroyed centuries ago, and that their taint infects the pure and makes them Defiled." She gave him a sheepish, frightened glance. "Are, are you one of the Damned, Master Tarrin? Are the stories false?"

"I'm a *katzh-dashi*, Zyrilin, but we're *not* the Damned," he told her evenly. "We are magicians who serve our Goddess."

"There are no gods but the One," Telven said reflexively from where he was laying down, then sat up and put his hands over his mouth.

"It's alright, Telven," Tarrin said with a light chuckle. "I'm sure that you're a bit surprised right now. And you're wrong, there *are* gods outside the One. His name should tell you that, you know. If he's called the *One God*, doesn't that mean that there's more than just one? If he was the only one, wouldn't he be called something else?"

"All other gods are false," he said immediately. "Fake gods."

"If Mother ever heard you say she was fake, she'd probably paddle you," Tarrin chuckled, holding up his amulet. "This is the symbol of my Goddess."

"That's the mark of the Damned," Zyrilin told him. "They brand that on the Defiled before killing them, so if something happens and they actually survive or escape, they're marked so they can never hide." She sniffled. "They did that to Jal. The brand's on the back of his right hand."

"They didn't brand you?"

She shook her head. "We were going to be killed because we were harboring Jal," she answered. "Not because we're Defiled."

Tarrin got up and moved over to Jal, then knelt and carefully turned his hand over. She was right, it was there. The *shaeram*'s triangles and circle burned into Jal's hand, the wound still raw, his flesh red and blistered around it. He looked at it, and realized quite soberly that now they had proof that the lost children of the Goddess had indeed been here. They had been the Damned, and they had been caught up in the holy war of purity that the Priests of the One God waged on the land. His heart sank as he realized that odds were, most of the children of Niami were now dead, and he had little hope of finding any left. Not after five thousand years. And since these fanatics held non-humans in the same regard as Sorcerers, he also had little hope of finding any Dwarves alive. Odds were, they had been killed not long after coming here, and the symbol of Niami had become the mark of hatred and the mark of evil in this world.

She'd be very upset when he told her.

He sighed and put his amulet back under his shirt, then slid back a bit and sat down cross-legged on the ground, close to the children. It looked to him that now, the only thing they really had to do was find Kimmie and Phandebrass, and then take them home. He would need to poke around a bit more to make sure of his assumptions, but he already knew that he wouldn't look for very long, nor would he probe too deeply. He was fairly certain that the children of the Goddess that had brought the Dwarves to this world had perished here at the hands of religious zealots, as had the Dwarves themselves, most likely.

Such a pity, and such a waste. The last of the Dwarves, who had survived the horrors of the Blood War, escaping to this world to try to find a place of safety, only to walk out of one fire and into another. Sometimes, he felt, life simply was not fair.

"Well, Miranda can get rid of that brand," he told them. "Easily."

"Who is she?"

"Miranda is a Priestess," he answered. "She can heal Jal and remove the brand, like it was never there."

"Why isn't she trying to kill you?" Telven asked.

Tarrin gave him a curious look, then he laughed. "Miranda's not a Priest of the One God, Telven. She's a Priest of a god named Kikkalli."

"There are no gods but—"

"I wouldn't finish that if I were you," Tarrin interrupted him with a slight smile. "Just wait until tomorrow. You'll see. When you see Miranda, you'll never be able to say that again." He pointed at Telven. "Now, I've given you enough leeway, young ones. Lay down and try to get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a very long and trying day, and you'll need your rest."

"Are you going to watch? They say there are orcs and bandits in the forest," Zyrilin said fearfully, looking around.

"I'll be watching, little bit," he answered gently. "Don't worry. I won't let anything hurt you. As long as you're with me, you will always be safe, and you will always be cared for. I promise."

She gave him the most profound look of sincere gratitude he had ever seen on anyone's face, then she laid down beside her injured brother and closed her eyes, putting a hand on his shoulder as if to reassure him that she was there. Telven laid down on her other side and closed his eyes, laying on his back with his hands under his head, and Tarrin took out his Gnomlin Travelling Spellbook and spoke the word that caused it to

expand to its full size. He figured that now was as good a time as any to go through it and see if there were any spells in it that would be useful to know, and besides, it would give him something to do other than brood over what he had learned from Zyrilin this night.

He already felt like this was a wasted trip, and a fruitless one. Were it not for his need to find Kimmie and Phandebrass, he would probably be telling Miranda to take them home in the morning. But, he did owe it to Niami to make sure of it. He'd need to look around and see if there was any evidence that some of the Dwarves or the *katzh-dashi* survived after he found Kimmie and Phandebrass. He owed it to Mother, and he owed it to the memory of those he felt had died long ago. If only to make sure that they were dead.

Morning dawned over the tiny clearing, the light catching the dew that had fallen during the night and making the grass of the clearing almost make it look like it was glowing. Tarrin sat by the fire, his spellbook back in his pouch, and several Wizard spells now comfortably within his memory. They were combat spells mostly, battle magic that he might have a need to use, most of which would require no material components. But he also memorized a Wizard spell the Gnomes put in the book that he knew would be *very* handy, a spell that mimicked the Druid's ability to Summon. The spell required a small diamond as a material component, but if he had one, he could summon any one object that he possessed that was weighed less than he did. They had quite a few diamonds in a pouch on Dolanna's horse, gems brought along with them to use for money, and he silently told himself that he was going to have to lay claim to them. With that spell, he could summon to him anything that he owned. Right now, that would be very nice, for he wanted his bow, which was still slung to his horse. He didn't need it, not really, since they still had nearly half the deer left over from last night, but he'd feel comfortable having a missile weapon at hand, because of the sounds.

There had been something out there about a half an hour ago, a large group of creatures on foot. They had spoken in a harsh, guttural language he had never heard before, and they had passed within two hundred spans of the clearing, on its east side, moving north. They had been moving quickly, as if they were trying to get away from something, and hadn't put out any scouts. That had worked in Tarrin's favor, for their lack of scouts meant that the main host of them passed without ever knowing how close they had come to Tarrin and the children. That close call had made him feel decidedly unarmed. Because of the dangers involved in revealing the fact that he could use magic, it meant that he had to hold magic back as a weapon of last resort. That was especially true because of Telven, for the boy seemed to have this obsessive need to talk about Tarrin's magic, and kept calling him a witch or Defiled. If he kept doing that and did it in public, he could get the group attacked.

Besides, because of the tremendous danger involved in using any kind of magic in a public forum, it meant that magic had to be his last option at all times, because using magic would mean that absolutely everyone who saw him do it would then have to die, even the innocent bystanders, for they were just as much a danger to him and the others as a Hunter. It would be the only way he could protect himself and the others from attack, for a survivor or observer could run straight to a chapel of the Church of the One and bring a cadre of Hunters down on them. So, he had a choice. Use magic and destroy

everyone who saw him, even women and children, or attempt to solve the problem by mundane means.

To Tarrin, that was little choice at all.

"Tarrin," Miranda's disembodied voice called from just before him.

"Miranda," he replied in acknowledgement.

"We're out of the city, and on our way. You're about two hours' ride from us, or so. I can't locate you with magic, at all, Tarrin, so I'm using a spell that's leading me to those children with you."

"My amulet defeats any attempt to locate me with magic, that's why. Do you need me to do anything?"

"No, nothing at all. I'm using a rather archaic old spell that's allowing me to lock in on that unconscious boy, and I have a marker set where Kimmie's trail is, so we can come back to it. She went due north from Dengal."

"Any trouble?"

"None, the city's in chaos right now," she answered. "Almost all the Priests are dead, not just the High Priest. Most of them were in the chapel when you destroyed it. The city guard did open the gates this morning at dawn, so we just rode out, about five minutes ago. We're not the only ones. I think about a quarter of the city's population is leaving the city and moving northwest along the road. The gossip we're overhearing is that they think Dengal is cursed now, and they won't stay. You're not on the road, are you?"

"No, we're in a clearing about a longspan from it," he answered.

"Good. We'll be there as soon as we can, Tarrin. Do you need anything?"

"I'd feel more comfortable with my bow, but it's over there."

"Hold on." Tarrin waited with mild curiosity, then he gave a slight start of surprise when Miranda's hand simply *appeared* out of thin air, above his head and about two spans in front of him. She had his bow and two quivers of arrows in her hand, reaching them out to him as if she was kneeling on an invisible platform above and before him.

Tarrin chuckled. "My, that must *really* be an advanced version of the spell," he told her.

"You bet," she said in a cheeky manner. "Take them, Tarrin. I can't drop them, and it's making my arm numb to reach into the pool like this."

Tarrin took his bow and the two quivers, and she withdrew her hand back into nothingness. *"Need anything else? Make it count, I can only reach into the pool twice."*

"Not that I can think of," he answered. "We have everything we need here. I've been hearing things moving around in the woods, so I wanted my bow as a safety measure."

"I can understand that. Alright, we're on the way. See you soon."

"Be careful," he told her.

"Dolanna's leading us, so that's a rather dumb thing to say," she said with a giggle, and he knew she ended the spell because her giggle ended abruptly.

"Wow, was that magic? Was that the other witch?" Telven asked breathlessly.

"Boy, if you don't stop calling me that, I'm going to make you forget that word," Tarrin said in an ugly tone, pulling his bowstring tentatively to ensure that it wasn't damaged. Then he remembered that the thing was enchanted to be unbreakable, and pulled arrows from his quiver one by one to check them.

"Why do you have that when you can just magic things?" Telven asked.

“*Telven!*” Zyrilin said hotly, slapping him on the shoulder. “Sit down and be quiet!”

“Yes, Zyri,” he said meekly, sitting by the embers of the fire.

“Stir up the fire, and we’ll warm up the rest of the venison,” Tarrin told them absently as he eyed the fletching on one of his arrows. “Good morning, Jal.”

Zyri gave a gasping sound, then rushed over to where the small boy was sitting up. His eyes were bleary, and he held his hand over the brand on the back of the other carefully. Zyri put her hands on his face, then hugged him fiercely. “I was so worried! Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?”

Jal looked at her with his dark eyes, and nodded.

“He doesn’t talk,” Telven told him excitedly. “Not since what happened with Mama.”

“What happened with your mother?” Tarrin asked curiously.

“It’s when we found out Jal’s a witch,” he answered. “Mama tried to take him to the chapel, but Papa wouldn’t let her. They started fighting, and Mama slapped Papa. Well, Papa did magic on her, and he was all surprised and stuff. Papa was a witch, and he’d never known it til then, Zyri says. Papa got took away by the church soldiers, and we never saw him again. Mama died a few days later. The neighbors threw rocks at us cause Papa was a witch, and one hit her in the head and she died. Jal did magic when it happened, but lucky for us nobody saw it.”

Tarrin sighed, seeing that even in this world, people could truly be ugly towards one another. The rest of the family was condemned in the eyes of the people because of the actions of only one. It just showed him how deeply these people were conditioned to hate.

Tarrin looked gravely at the young boy, who simply stared back at him unblinkingly. “I’m sure you know how to roast meat?” Tarrin asked the children.

“I can do it,” Zyrilin said happily after she saw that her brother was well.

As he checked all his arrows, Zyrilin helped her brother get something to drink from the brook and Telven got the fire going again, then she and Telven spitted the meat he had cut into sections and wrapped in the doe’s pelt near the fire. He watched from where he sat as they heated breakfast and then started eating, as Zyrilin helped Jal get something to eat before she started herself. He put his arrows back in the two quivers and simply waited, because they really had nothing to do until the others arrived. The three children ate quite a bit, so much so that Telven groaned and laid down by the log after he was done. “I haven’t eaten this good since Mama died,” he said with a sigh of contentment. Tarrin went over and knelt by Jal, then turned his head so he could inspect the injury.

“Well, this’ll heal up in no time,” he said. “Any headaches? Dizziness?” he asked the boy.

Jal nodded, and wagged his open hand before him.

“Alright. Just don’t get up, and it should pass in a while. Sometimes dizziness lingers when you get bumped in the head. Trust me, I know.”

“Show him what you can do, Jal,” Telven prompted. “The nice man’s a witch too!”

“*Telven!*” Zyrilin said reproachfully, but Jal simply nodded. Tarrin watched on as the boy closed his eyes, a look of quite serious concentration on his face, and then he held out his hands.

What happened next shook Tarrin to the foundations of his soul. The boy created a small globe of water between his hands, and then it froze solid in the span of a blink of

the eyes. But under that, Tarrin *felt* what the boy had done. He felt it quite distinctly and quite sharply, because what the boy had done was so similar to Sorcery that he was open to the sense of its use. The boy had reached out and touched...*something*, just like touching the Weave, but the boy did not touch the Weave. Instead, he reached beyond this world and tapped directly into some other power, and the resonations of that touch were familiar to him.

The boy had directly made contact with those dimensions where Elementals lived. The boy had drawn substance and energy directly from the plane of Water. The substance had appeared before him, and the power had been channeled, had been directed, to cause the water to freeze. In addition to representing water, the plane of Water also held sway over weather, and to a lesser degree, cold. Ice was water, and the cold of ice became part of the sphere that represented water's power. All four elements had little tertiary representations like that. Fire also represented change and concealment, earth represented continuity and growth, and air represented weather and lightning. Air and water overlapped with the weather, for it required both air and water to make weather happen.

Tarrin gaped at the boy in shock. How could he feel that? And yet he could, as clearly as he could see the little boy before him, holding his little ball of ice proudly. It felt so, so *much* like Sorcery, but it obviously could not have been! Incredible!

"Um, master Tarrin?" Zyrilin asked meekly. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, little bit," Tarrin said, blinking and shaking his head. "It's just that your brother's ability stirred something in me. I could *feel* it when he used it."

Jal nodded gravely.

"You can feel it when other people do this too?" Tarrin asked.

Jal nodded again.

And *that*, Tarrin realized, was how Hunters found the witches. Because the Hunters *were* witches.

"Jal, listen to me, and listen to me carefully," he said grimly. "Don't use your power unless I tell you that you can, or you think that your life depends on using it. It's very important. When you use this power, people who can sense it are going to know, and not all of those people are going to be friendly to you. I think that's how the Church finds witches, I think they're using people with this gift to hunt down the others."

Jal nodded, covering the raw brand on the back of his hand reflexively.

"Wow, you mean the church uses witches to find witches?" Telven said excitedly.

"I think it's a definite possibility," Tarrin said brusquely, standing up, then throwing his braid back over his shoulder. "I'm going to look around. I want you three to stay here by the fire. I won't be out of earshot, so if you need me, just yell. Some things passed near the clearing before you woke up, and I want to see what they were."

"How can you tell?" Telven asked.

"They leave footprints," he answered evenly. "Someone who knows about that can tell who made them, how many there were, which direction they were going, and how long ago they passed since making the tracks."

"Ooh, you're a woodsman?" Telven asked breathlessly. "One of those men who explores the wild forests?"

"My father was. He taught me everything he knows," he answered, slinging his quivers, one over each shoulder, and uncapping the one on his right.

“But, I thought witches just did witchcraft,” he surmised.

“Telven!” Zyrilin snapped hotly.

Tarrin sighed, then he chuckled despite himself. “Keep them out of trouble, little bit,” he told her. “If you need me, just yell.”

“Yes, master Tarrin,” she replied immediately. “I think we need to clean up the camp a little, and maybe cut some more meat for lunch,” she announced. “May I borrow a knife, master Tarrin?” she asked him.

Tarrin unsheathed his belt dagger and handed it to her. “Don’t lose it,” he told her. “Someone I care about gave me this.”

“I’ll be careful with it, master Tarrin,” she told him with a shy smile.

The separation gave Tarrin time to think, even as he quickly located the tracks those people left behind earlier. Jal’s power wasn’t Sorcery, but it certainly *felt* like it...at least initially. He had no idea why Jal’s gift spurred that sensation in him, because it should have been impossible. Sorcerers could sense the use of Sorcery, that was true enough, but what Jal did wasn’t Sorcery. Sorcery couldn’t be used on this world, because there was no Weave. And because of that, he shouldn’t have sensed the use of that boy’s power. The idea that the powers were somehow similar, just similar enough to spur that sense of it in him, occurred to him, but it seemed outlandish.

Or perhaps not. Sorcery was a gift from Niami, but it was also, in its own way, *elemental* magic. The seven Spheres represented seven forces of nature; fire, water, earth, air, the power of the mind, the power of the gods, and the binding force that held it all together. This “witchcraft” was obviously elemental magic, a direct tap into the power of the Elemental planes. Just as Wizards drew from *elsewhere*, these “witches” drew from points of magic that Sorcery could access. Perhaps that commonality was allowing his powers of Sorcery to sense the use of this magic. After all, he wasn’t *totally* powerless as a Sorcerer. Just as he could speak to animals using a Druid’s trick, he could still use the senses that being a Sorcerer granted him. Those aspects of his abilities didn’t require the use of the magic itself.

Yes, that made sense. He went over it once again as he found the tracks of the people or things who had passed earlier, and found that the theory was sound. He saw no holes in it. He’d need to talk to Dolanna about it, and perhaps Haley as well, and have Jal use his power again to see if Haley could sense it.

The tracks were not human. That was immediately obvious to him. They were about an hour old or so, made by creatures who were *humanoid*, but not *human*. The tracks were booted, made by people wearing shoes and boots, but those feet had an unnatural breadth to them, and the pattern of weight distribution in the tracks told him that whoever made them walked with a kind of rolling gait not found in anyone who wasn’t a five year veteran sailor. After about ten minutes of careful inspection, he deduced that there had been about forty of them. They had moved due north, and had done so very quickly, so quickly that he found little bits and pieces of things they’d dropped but had been too much in a hurry to stop and pick up. They were crude possessions of people he realized were raiders and hunters, and those paired with what he remembered Merik say told him that these had to be those *orc* creatures. Sub-humans, Merik had called them.

Strangely, though, the tracks seemed vaguely familiar. He wasn’t quite sure why, but they did. But he was too busy to dwell on that, so he dismissed it in his mind and moved on to the matters at hand.

There was no sign of pursuit, so Tarrin figured that the commotion down in Dengal had spooked this band, who probably made a living by preying on travellers on the road, and they were now beating a hasty retreat northwest, shadowing the road, to avoid any kind of armed conflict with soldiers out of the city. Little did they know that a good thousand or so people were *also* moving in this general direction, people who had fled Dengal, and if they stopped for any amount of time they might get more than they bargained for.

They weren't really a threat, so Tarrin dismissed them in his mind and went back to the clearing.

And he was met with a rude greeting. Instead of finding the children making themselves either useful or a nuisance, he was greeted by a band of thirteen men wearing mismatched, patchwork armor and carrying rusty, badly kept weapons. There were four horses picketed behind them, being cared for by two middle-aged women in dirty, torn homespun smocks. They had the children sitting by the log, where they clutched at each other fearfully and watched these men. Tarrin had heard their voices well away, and had crept up to the edge of the clearing to get a better look at them.

"I told you to relax, kids," one of them, the tallest of them announced. "Don't cause any trouble, and you won't get hurt. We will take that venison, but I'll leave you enough to get to Throce. Isn't that noble of me?" He held up Tarrin's dagger, the one Mist had given him, and smiled. "And I got this excellent knife to boot!"

"Give that back!" Zyrilin said defiantly. "I promised I'd take good care of it!"

"Oh, we know a street rat like you couldn't get something like this unless it was given to you," he chuckled. "So, where are the men you're with? Why did they leave you behind?"

Zyrilin glared at the man, but said nothing.

"I think maybe we should take the girl with us," another man, who had a scraggly black beard and watery, close-set eyes, said with an evil laugh. "She'd be more fun than those two mules."

"You always did like `em young, Gort," another man said, then he laughed. "And unwilling."

"It's better when they put up a fight," the man Gort said with a leer at Zyrilin, who shrank back from the man's stare.

"Not today, Gort," the man, who seemed to be the leader, announced. It was *not* a friendly tone. "And never when you work for me."

"I liked it better when Dorl was leading us," Gort said openly.

"Dig him up and tie him to his saddle, and you can have him again," the leader told him. "I just wouldn't get too close. After three months, I'm sure he doesn't smell all that good."

Tarrin pondered the situation. The children seemed to be safe enough, because this bandit leader didn't seem inclined to hurt them. On the other hand, it was dangerous to assume that, because the men he was leading didn't seem to be similarly inclined, and there were many more of them than there was of this one man. Getting into a fight with thirteen men wasn't such a good idea, but using magic was out. If one of them got away, he'd have Hunters all over him, and besides, he didn't want to do something like that in front of the children. It may traumatize them, and that would make it hard to move them around.

Perhaps there was a middle ground here. Yes, there certainly was, he realized as he shifted his position as quiet as a stalking cat, and pulled out an arrow.

"I suggest you turn around and leave!" Tarrin shouted from his place of concealment. "I don't want to have to hurt any of you! So just give the girl back her knife and get out! You can even keep the venison!"

"Now you're gonna get it!" Telve said smugly. "He's a witch, and he's gonna magic all of you!"

Tarrin cursed, and at that moment, he probably would have brained that boy if he was close enough to reach him.

"I'm not much afraid of the boastings of a foolish boy," the man said, but his eyes were serious. Tarrin saw that he was somewhat handsome, with strong features and short coal black hair that reminded him briefly of Faalken's hair color, but this man's hair was straight as straw as it came out from under a rusty conical helmet. Like the others, he wore piecemeal armor, but this man had a much better sword at his belt, and was holding Tarrin's dagger in his hand. "Well now, my shadowy friend, I think you should come out and hand over your purse and belongings. Hand them over, and I think we'll see fit to let you leave here alive and unharmed."

The man flinched when an arrow came sizzling out of the foliage before him, hitting the very top of his helmet. The impact made the arrow break and spin away behind him, but it also knocked his helmet off his head. "Boy, I can peel you out of that armor from where I am," Tarrin called. "Want to lose your belt next?"

Another man drew his sword, but he yelped when Tarrin sent another hastily nocked arrow flying, striking the flat of the man's nicked broadsword. The impact surprised the man, and the weapon was jarred from his hand.

"Next man to draw a weapon gets an arrow through the wrist," Tarrin shouted to them. "The man after that gets an arrow through the eye. I'm being courteous out of a need to be civil in front of the children, but don't push my patience."

"It's only one man!" one of the bandits called. "We can rush him easy!"

"Fine, Thol, you go first," another said acidly.

"Looks like we have a marksman in the trees," the leader chuckled. "But I think you're in no position to bargain. The next arrow that comes at us is going to cost one of the children a finger."

Tarrin silently swore, afraid that something like this might happen. Tarrin swapped his bow with his staff in the *elsewhere*, then slid around the tree behind which he was hiding and started working way to the left. "Fine. I didn't want to have to do this, but you leave me little choice."

He struck like a viper, erupting out of the forest about fifteen spans away from the closest man. His sudden appearance took them all aback for that critical instant he needed to close on the man before he could draw his weapon, his booted feet moving like lightning. He set the staff like a spear or lance as he jumped over the little brook, then lunged at his target the instant his feet hit the ground. The man managed to get his hand on his sword hilt just when the tip of Tarrin's staff struck him in the chest, sending him flying back as Tarrin drove through him. He skidded to a stop, turned, and whipped the staff into the back of the man closest to the first, who gave out a "*whuuaff!*" sound as he was pitched forward, tumbling into the brook Tarrin had jumped to reach them.

“Get him!” several men shouted as they started drawing weapons in unison, but Tarrin was lost in the moment. His mind was clear and open, and there was no fear. Just as Allia taught him, he was unthinking, his eyes taking in all, feet and hands and body moving in perfect harmony as he lost his doubt and worry and concern in the rhythms and forms of the Dance. In the blink of an eye, he became one with the ground, with his staff, and with the men around him, becoming a living weapon whose mission was to defend the children from harm. Killing was not a necessity here, for all he had to do was frighten these men into running. They were bandits, mercenaries, and would retreat once he put enough men on the ground. In fact, killing would best be avoided, to keep Telven from spouting off at the mouth, and to keep from traumatizing Jal any more than he probably already had been. The staff was a perfect weapon for that, for it only dealt a killing blow when Tarrin specifically wanted to do so.

Pulling the staff up into the center grip, both ends whistled shrilly as he spun it before him, using its speed and deception to put off the two men before him who had drawn their swords. One man rushed at him from behind, but his sword found nothing but empty air as their blond braided adversary simply melted out of the way. The man didn’t even have the chance to cry out when Tarrin’s staff rapped him on the back of the head as it spun in from behind the man, and he collapsed to the ground in a boneless heap. Another man lunged in when he saw the staff lash out, but Tarrin saw his attack coming from half a longspan away. Still spinning through the evasion of the sword, he simply moved a bit further to the side, completed his rotation, and brought his foot up. The man obviously had never conceived of such an attack, and as such made no attempt to defend himself as Tarrin’s foot connected with his face solidly, making the man’s head snap back. He’d been in the act of rushing forward with a dagger in his hand, and his body kept coming forward as his head went the other way, which made him swing up into the air. Though he was in his human form, Tarrin was still awesomely strong, and the power of his kick literally made the man flip over in midair. He landed on the top of his head and his knees, then slid down to his belly and sank into unconsciousness. Tarrin brought his foot down and raised his staff grimly, his expression simply *daring* another man to try to attack him.

The nine men still on their feet all paused at that rather impressive display, but the voice of their leader spurred them on. “He’s only one man!” he shouted. “Whoever takes him down gets his gear!”

He’d never fought in human form against so many people, but the experience was not wholly bad. He didn’t have his blazing speed or his agility, but Allia’s lessons easily translated into the human shape, and he had no trouble adapting himself for combat in a weakened state. The men he fought were novices in fighting, and it became glaringly obvious after the first minute of the renewing of hostilities. Tarrin quickly backed up a bit to put the brook behind him, limiting attempts to come at him from behind, as the men moved to engage him. men, all armed with short swords, pressed Tarrin from the front as the others tried to circle behind him, but the men couldn’t so much as get a blade within a span of Tarrin’s body. The two ends and middle of Tarrin’s staff were always there to catch the weapons, turn them aside, or he simply wasn’t there to be hit if they encountered no resistance. They also did not work together, each man fighting as an individual, and it was a simple matter to shift his position to make the three men jostle into one another, fouling each other up. The others thought he was so involved with the

three before him that he was an easy mark, and a short man lunged in from the right flank with his broadsword out before him like a spear, intent on impaling Tarrin in the ribs. The man gave a look of shock when the end of Tarrin's staff suddenly appeared at his eye level, then slammed into the noseguard of his barrel-shaped helmet, sending blood flying as the man's head snapped back. He staggered back, hand over his face, and the other three men found that the attack came so quickly that Tarrin was again in a defensive position before they had a chance to capitalize on his attack on the fourth man. He blocked several more attacks from the front, ducked under the heavy swipe of an axe initiated by another man who had come up on his left flank, the slithered aside when a man who had managed to work in behind Tarrin tried to stab him in the back with a short sword. He took a hand off his staff and slammed the back of his fist into the face of the man wielding the axe, then grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him as he shifted aside, flinging him into the three men in front of him. He shuffled aside of the man he flung and gave a sudden sharp downward stroke with one end of his staff, knocking the sword out of the hands of the man who had jumped the brook and tried to stab him in the back, then reversed his momentum and spun the same end that had disarmed the man up and under the man's chin. The sound of his clicking teeth was audible as he was literally lifted off his feet, then flopped in the air and landed on the backs of his shoulders on the ground. His legs went over his head, and he rolled backwards into the brook.

With feet as light as a dancer's, Tarrin was the one that pressed the attack now, coming in on the three men who were trying to untangle themselves from the fourth that Tarrin had pushed into them. The fourth man dropped to the ground as the men simply threw him down to meet Tarrin's attack, and their three swords worked feverishly to deflect the whirring ends of Tarrin's staff. It seemed to them like there were ten of them in that blurred, whizzing mass, striking with blazing speed, slapping, lunging, striking from every angle at once, as Tarrin's feet moved as if they carried no weight whatsoever. They only seemed to come down and take firm hold of the earth as Tarrin hunkered down slightly, then exploded upwards with his staff's end screaming through the air. The blow carried so much power that it sent the sword of the man on the far left spinning out of his hands and high into the air, and caused Tarrin to leave his feet. Even in the air, he turned out to be more than a match for the men, as he turned in midair and brought a leg straight out, catching the middle man squarely in the chest and sending him catapulting backwards from the raw power of the blow. The instant the other foot hit the ground, the man seemed to collapse on himself so quickly that the two men thought he vanished, but the man on the left had his feet knocked out from under him as Tarrin performed a spinning foot sweep, landing on his side and ribs and having all the wind knocked out of him. Tarrin spun around and regained his feet, then drew up his staff and swatted the disarmed man, still confused over what had just happened and too slow to react, squarely in the side of his helmet of leather with iron plates sewn to it. He spun as he fell to the side, and didn't get up when he hit the ground. The man with the axe, whom Tarrin had thrown into his companions, struggled to get to his feet from his hands and knees, but Tarrin almost absently took up his staff and jammed the end of it into the back of the man's head, sending him right back to the ground, where he held the back of his head with both hands and kicked his feet into the dirt in pain. Tarrin took one step back, whipped his staff up into the ready position smartly, and squared off against the last of them.

The four men who weren't rolling around on the ground groaning, one of which had a broken nose, gaped at Tarrin in absolute shock, and one of them was the troop's leader. Tarrin took a hand off his staff and crooked his fingers at them, inviting them to come and play, though his expression was like stone and his eyes hard.

Telven summed up the expressions on the men's faces quite well with a single word. "Woah!"

"Who wants to be number ten?" Tarrin asked in a cold voice, his eyes moving to the four men in turn.

"Er, well, perhaps we could reach some kind of accommodation," the bandit leader said hesitantly. "You're obviously a professionally trained soldier, much better than us. The One knows how much better, since I see that you managed to put down nine of my men without killing anyone. I don't think I want to fight you, and I'd rather not lose any of my men. It is my responsibility to keep them alive, you know."

"Then gather your men and leave," Tarrin told him, rising up to stand erect and grounding an end of his staff. "Keep your weapons. You have nothing I want, and I saw orc tracks out in the forest, so you may need them. And give her back her knife," he reminded him.

"I—yes, I think we can live with that," the man said, giving Tarrin a deep bow.

"I am certain you will, for you shall not circle back on him," came a familiar voice. Tarrin looked past the man and saw Dolanna and the others, riding through the part in the trees through which the men themselves had rode, coming up beside the two women and the horses they were tending. Azakar and Ulger had their swords drawn, and were riding into the clearing resolutely. Fireflash vaulted from Dolanna's shoulder and landed on his own, nuzzling his neck fondly as Tarrin patted his flank. "Tarrin. I see you could not resist playing a bit while waiting."

"You know me, Dolanna," he said evenly. "I hate to sit around."

"Nine, not bad," Ulger said with a chuckle. "Then again, they look like they fight like women, so it probably wasn't all that hard."

"Bandits never do put up much of a fight," Tarrin shrugged, and Ulger laughed and nodded in agreement. "I think Sarraya could have taken them."

"Gentlemen, I believe this is where you gather up the men on the ground and stagger away," Haley said lightly.

Under the watchful eyes of Azakar and Ulger, the bandits did indeed slowly crawl off the ground, organize themselves, and move towards the horses and the two women tending them. Then they limped off the same direction from which Dolanna had come, moving towards the road. But the man who had been leading them lingered just long enough to present Zyrilin with the dagger, then he too walked away. Oddly enough, he was chuckling to himself, and had a strange bounce in his step.

"I trust you are well, dear one?" Dolanna asked, with a sly little smile.

"They were babies," he snorted, looking at the children. "How was the ride up?"

"Nervous," she answered. "Everyone is on edge. We do stand out, so we have been getting any number of stares."

"Then maybe we should settle in here for a little while and let them go by."

"No, there are too many. If we wait them out, we will be here for days. Besides, we are going that way," she said, pointing away from the road, behind Tarrin. "We only took the road for the expedience."

“Well, we need to reorganize a little,” Tarrin said, looking at the children. “They’ll be riding with us for a while, at least until we find someplace safe to put them.” He looked over the horses, and realized there were too many. “I see someone thought of that.”

“You’ve got to keep on top of things,” Miranda said with a grin from behind Mist’s illusory face. “I realized we’d need at least two more horses, so we bought them. At an outrageous price,” she growled. “The stableman took advantage of the panic to make some fast money.”

“I’m surprised you let him get away with that.”

She held up a small leather pouch. “He *thinks* he did,” she winked.

“You stole it back from him?”

“No, I was the soul of propriety,” she said piously.

“So while she was being the paragon of virtue, she distracted the man so *I* could do it,” Haley said lightly.

Tarrin laughed. “You two are terrible.”

“Yes. Isn’t it fun?” Haley agreed shamelessly.

“That’s alright, we need to make lunch anyway,” Miranda announced. “We can stop a little while.”

“That would be a good idea, Dolanna,” Azakar said. “I want to check one of the pack horses. It was stumbling a little when we turned up this path.”

“Indeed. Then let us pause for a meal and to ensure our horse is well.”

Tarrin helped Dolanna down from her saddle, then picked up Mist and set her down as well. He looked back to the path, then nodded. “It’s safe,” he told her.

The three children all gasped when Mist shifted into her humanoid form, then patted Tarrin on the face with her huge paw. “You scared me a little, my mate,” she told him.

“Sorry,” he answered, reaching up and touching her face.

“How did you do that dragon?”

“I’ll explain it later,” he told her.

The children gasped in unison when Sarraya winked into visibility, flitting around Tarrin and Mist before coming to a hover in front of him. “You have *got* to tell me how you did that!” she said excitedly. “Right after I poke you in the eye for scaring me half to death!”

They got the fire going and had a hot lunch, as Miranda made a quick but tasty stew. The children gaped at all of them in turn, huddled together near the fire, but it was Mist and Sarraya that seemed to dominate their attention. Sarraya flitted around them, inspecting them boldly, and the children could only stare at the tiny Faerie in both shock and wonder. “They need fattening up,” she declared.

“We’ll take care of it. Well, everyone, this is Zyrilin, Telven, and Jal. Miranda, when you’re done cooking, could you heal Jal’s hand? They branded him.”

“Really? I’ll take care of it right now. You should have told me, Tarrin, we can’t leave Jal in pain,” she said sharply. “The youngest?”

Tarrin nodded.

“A-Are you that other one’s sister?” Telven asked boldly, though his eyes were wild when he looked at Miranda.

“Not exactly,” Miranda said with a wink, then she cancelled the Illusion. Telven gasped in her face when he saw Miranda’s furry reality, but Miranda just gave him the

cutest little cheeky grin and winked at him. “I know, it’s quite different, isn’t it?” she asked lightly.

“Are all of you witches?” Telven asked.

“I’ve been called a witch more times than I can count,” Miranda told him with a girlish giggle. “Among other things. Now then, you’re Jal?” she asked, looking to the boy.

Jal nodded.

“He, um, doesn’t talk, Lady Miranda,” Zyrilin offered.

“I’m no lady, little lady,” Miranda laughed, holding out her furry hand to Jal. The boy offered his branded hand hesitantly. “Tut, this is nothing to worry about, but I bet it stings, doesn’t it, Jal?” she asked in a gentle manner, which made the boy nod.

“What are you?” Telven asked.

“*Telven!*” Zyrilin hissed.

“I’m sure he’s never seen one of me before,” Miranda told Zyrilin with a wink. “I’m called a Wikuni. My people live a very, very long way from here.”

“Are they all as pretty as you, Lady Miranda?” Telven asked boldly.

She gave him a wolfish grin. “Why, I’m flattered, young one,” she told him. She took out her amulet and displayed it prominently outside her dress, a requirement to do Priest magic, and started chanting softly in that language that Priest magic required. Tarrin knew this spell, it was a spell to heal injury and also to restore disfiguring conditions, restoring the body to an undamaged state. Under her gentle hands, the red, raw flesh on Jal’s hand soothed, and the black char of the brand faded away. When she removed her hands, Jal’s hand was as if he had never been branded. Zyrilin gaped at Jal’s healed hand, and touched it reverently, then Telven took his turn touching where the brand had been. He looked up at Miranda in surprise.

“Now, Telven, look me in the eye and tell me that all other gods are false,” Tarrin said in a neutral tone, though Miranda gave him a sly grin; she knew he was amused.

“Who knows what witchcraft can do?” Telven shrugged.

Tarrin sighed, threw up his hands, and turned to stir the stew.

After eating, Azakar went to check the horse that had stumbled, and a much more animated Telven tagged along after him, asking him endless questions. Azakar endured the boy nobly, answering those questions he could, and bluntly telling him that he was not the man to ask when it came to others, mainly concerning witchcraft. Tarrin, however, told Jal to do his magic one more time for Dolanna’s benefit. Tarrin was quite sure he wasn’t crazy when he saw Dolanna’s eyes widen when he did so.

“It is not Sorcery, but I can feel it!” Dolanna proclaimed.

“I know,” he agreed. “He’s calling on power from the Elemental planes. I think that since Sorcery is mainly elemental magic, *and* we Weavespinners can also access that power, it’s letting us sense it when he uses it.”

“I must agree with your postulations, dear one,” she said after a moment. “It certainly does make sense. Can they sense its use as well?”

Jal nodded gravely.

“So, the Hunters of the church are actually magicians like Jal,” Haley surmised. “Working for the enemy.”

“That, or their power is awake, but unrealized,” Tarrin added. “The Church thinks they’re holy or something because they can find the witches, when they’re actually

witches themselves.” He snorted. “I don’t like using that word. I think I’d rather call them magic-users. *Witch* is an ugly term.”

“I do not know, dear one,” Dolanna smiled. “Given that they are magicians in touch with elemental forces, I think calling them Elementalists would be more correct.”

“That’s too long, Dolanna,” Haley told them. “Let’s just call him special, and leave it at that.”

Jal gave them a shy smile.

“Now, dear one, how did you create that dragon?” Dolanna suddenly pressed.

“Yeah, I’m dying to know!” Sarraya agreed.

Tarrin looked around, then stood up and brought forth his wings. Zyrilin and Jal stared at them, but he more or less expected that. “Well, I always knew I could create fireforms,” he said as fire appeared around his paw. It swirled, then suddenly contracted down into the shape of a kitten, which promptly jumped down from his paw and sat by the campfire at his mental direction. “The dragon was just a fireform. Since it was a part of my wings, it was a part of *me*. All I had to do was push my consciousness up into it the same way I push it into a projection, and I could operate through it. For a while, I *was* a dragon,” he said in a strange kind of voice. “It was fun.”

“Clever,” Haley nodded.

Jal was looking at the kitten made of golden fire, and started reaching out for it. “Don’t,” Tarrin warned. “It may look cute and harmless,” he said, kneeling down and picking up a twig, then setting it against the fireform’s back. The twig burst into flame. “But it’s not as harmless as it looks.” He brought a wing around and presented it to Jal. “But *this*, you can touch,” he told him.

“Can all witches do that, Master Tarrin?” Zyrilin asked, as both of the children couldn’t resist reaching out and touching Tarrin’s wing. “Will Jal grow wings of ice?”

“Tarrin’s powers are not what you would call magic, young one,” Dolanna told her. “They are...different. Jal will not grow wings of ice, for Tarrin’s abilities are not the same as Jal’s.”

“Yeah, because Tarrin’s a god,” Sarraya piped up.

Tarrin glared at Sarraya in an unholy manner.

“Well, it’s true,” she grinned. “Well, almost. What is it they call you, Tarrin? Ex-god? Former god? Unemployed god?” she gave him a wicked smile, but it turned into a yelp when a thin strand flowed out of Tarrin’s wing, slid behind her, then lashed her on the bottom. She rubbed her backside with both hands, and gave him a pouty look. “That hurt,” she complained.

Zyrilin looked at Tarrin, then giggled with her hands before her mouth.

“Ignore Sarraya,” Tarrin told them. “She has no idea what she’s talking about.”

“I, I think it would be wonderful to have wings,” Zyrilin said, touching Tarrin’s wing.

“You don’t want these,” Tarrin told her grimly. “They aren’t worth the price I had to pay to get them.”

“We should be on our way,” Dolanna announced. “If Azakar is finished?”

“I’m done, Dolanna,” the Knight called back. “The horse is fine. Just a minor bruise under her hoof. She’ll be good as long as we don’t run.”

“We must traverse virgin forest. I doubt we will even be able to ride,” Dolanna answered him.

“There are non-human creatures out in the woods,” Tarrin told them. “I tracked a large group of them that passed about four hours ago or so.”

“Orcs!” Telven said with both fear and excitement. “Ooh, are we going to go fight orcs?”

“Dear child, wise travellers *never* go looking for battle,” she told him. “Mist, Sarraya, could you please range ahead and ensure our path is safe?”

“Sure,” Sarraya said with a nod of her head.

“It’ll give me a chance to get used to this,” Mist said, sweeping a paw up her torso. “I need some activity.”

“I can lend a hand also,” Haley said. “I feel a need to let Scar out a while.”

“Scar?” Ulger asked.

Haley shapeshifted into his hybrid form, the large, sleek, menacing wolf-man which had been known as Scar back in Dayisè, the form in which Haley moved about when he didn’t want to be known. Zyrilin and Jal gasped in surprise yet again, and Telven ran over and jumped up and down in front of Haley. “Wow! Are all of you Defiled?” he asked in excitement. “Can all of you turn into animals? Are you a wolf?”

“I’m a Were-wolf, son,” Haley told him evenly.

“Wow! Are you going to eat us?”

Haley laughed, not an entirely pleasant sound. “Son, the stories you’ve heard of us are all wildly blown out of proportion. Were-wolves don’t eat people, you know. People taste terrible.”

“At least they have Were-wolves here,” Mist surmised.

“Or stories of them, at the least,” Dolanna added.

Tarrin withdrew his wings, and in so doing, the fireform cat at his feet dispersed in a tiny whirlwind of flame. “There are some other things Zyrilin told me we need to talk about, Dolanna, but we can do that on the move,” he told her. “Right now, finding Kimmie and Phandebrass as fast as possible is our only concern.”

Leading their horses, the group moved into the wild forest west of the clearing. The growth was too thick for riding, but the horses had little trouble navigating the woods with their riders leading them by their reins. Zyrilin and Telven had each been given a horse, leading the animals behind Tarrin and Dolanna, but Jal rode in Tarrin’s saddle as he led the horse. As they walked, following a trail that Mist and Haley were marking for them that told them it was safe, Tarrin told Dolanna about what Zyrilin had told him, about the Damned, and then told her his fears over what had happened to their long-lost brothers and sisters.

“I doubt there are any left,” he told her with a sigh. “I think they and the Dwarves came here seeking safety, and walked into a different kind of trap. After five thousand years, I’m sure they’ve all been hunted down and killed.”

“There is merit to your argument, dear one, regardless of how I wish it was not so,” she agreed with a somber nod. “But we owe it to Mother to make *sure*. Had they died, I think she would know, for their souls would join with her in the after.”

“Can they? Dakkii isn’t here, Dolanna. She can’t come and take them.”

“The soul can find its way without the help of Dakkii,” Dolanna told him. “Though it may take them some time.”

“So, either they’re still alive, or their souls are trapped here,” he said quietly. “Maybe in Auromar, if the story of that curse is true.”

"It is a possibility."

"If that's the case, I don't see how we're going to get them home."

"Miranda can handle that, dear one," she told him. "You forget, Priests can turn the undead. A Priest of exceptional power can destroy them, sending their souls on to their reward. Do you not think that Miranda is of exceptional power?"

"You have a point," he agreed with a nod.

"Either way, we owe it to Mother to make sure," she told him.

"I know. But I think that once we get Kimmie and Phandebrass back, most of us should go home. Get out of harm's way."

"Some of us for certain," Dolanna agreed. "But I shall remain. Mother is depending on us."

"So, how does it feel to be the enemy?" he asked her quietly. "Now *we're* the evil ones."

Dolanna laughed lightly. "I am sure we will survive, dear one," she told him. "In a way, being known as one of the Damned certainly gives me a formidable reputation."

Tarrin looked at her, then laughed, then he sighed again. "Trust me, my friend. Having that kind of a reputation is not something you want."

She reached over and put her hand on his shoulder. "I know, dear one. I know."

Haley, Sarraya, and Mist led them out of the forest in a matter of hours, and they found themselves blocked by a surprisingly deep yet small river. They mounted, with Haley and Miranda leading the horses of Zyrilin and Telven, as Jal rode with Tarrin. It was a little crowded on Tarrin's horse, with Tarrin and Jal in it, Fireflash on Tarrin's shoulder, and Mist riding in her cat form on the horse's back in front of the saddle. They went nearly two leagues before they found a ford, and then crossed the river and moved out onto a hilly plain between the forest and another forest nestled on the foothills of a low mountain range to the east. Miranda took over the lead once they forded the river, as she used her Priest magic to locate the marker, then used a little bit of mathematics to use the direction of that marker and Kimmie's path to angle in and cross her path without having to go back to the marker she set. Miranda admitted that her trick depended on Kimmie not making a sudden right or left turn, but nobody objected when she offered to try, for it would save them two days of travelling.

As they rode, Telven asked endless questions, but those questions became further and further apart as the effects of riding a horse started making themselves known to him. Those questions turned into complaints, and then into a kind of incessant whining that got on everyone's nerves. Zyrilin, on the other hand, endured the discomfort, and snapped at her brother whenever his complaining got too grating on the others.

They stopped for the night under a single oak tree that stood in the grassy plain, a huge tree that looked to have been there for centuries. Haley and Sarraya ranged out to scout the outlying terrain, and Mist did as well, but she returned quickly to cook. There was scant firewood, forcing them to draw on the wood they'd brought with them, and Mist also drew on their supplies to make supper. The children sat by the fire and watched everyone else, though Telven still complained about how sore he was, but his complaints weren't as shrill as they'd been when he was bouncing in the saddle. "Stew and beans?" Ulger asked, looking into the pots.

"That's right," Mist told him, stirring the stew.

“But we had stew for lunch.”

“If you don’t want it, don’t eat it,” Mist replied evenly, but there was a dangerous touch in her voice.

“I’m not saying you’re not a good cook, Mist. I love your cooking. I just think we need a little variety.”

“We don’t have the supplies for variety,” she answered, looking at him. “There wasn’t much to go on in the market.”

“Ah. Then I’ll go out and see if I can’t get some rabbits in the morning, so we can have roasted rabbit for dinner tomorrow,” he told her. “If I catch them, will you cook them?”

“Certainly,” she answered.

“Will you need my bow, Ulger?” Tarrin asked.

“I brought a sling,” he answered. “I used to be quite good with it when I was a boy. It’s time I shook off the rust.”

“What, um, what is a sling?” Zyrilin asked, faltering after realizing she was talking.

Ulger reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a leather cord with a pouch sewn into its middle. “Sling,” he said, showing her. “Put your finger in the loop on this side and put a rock in the pouch. You spin it over your head and then let go, and it sends a rock at your target. It takes a while to get the hang of it, but this little thing can be as deadly as a bow at close range. And it’s very easy to carry,” he said with a conspiratorial wink. “I keep this with me so I always have a weapon.”

“Wow! Can you teach me?” Telven asked breathlessly.

“Sure, I have an extra one in my pack,” Ulger told her. “What about you, Zyrilin? A sling’s a perfect weapon for a young lady. It doesn’t take much strength at all, but it gives you something to protect yourself with.”

“You, um, you would do that for me?” she asked shyly.

“I asked, didn’t I?” Ulger told her with a wink. “I’m a Knight, honey. When a Knight says he’ll do something, he *does* it.” He looked to Miranda. “Oh, Miranda, dear, you think you can make one of these?”

She gave him a scornful little laugh. “Are you trying to be funny, Ulger?”

“I know how hard it will be for you. It’s such a *complicated* bit of leatherwork.”

Miranda laughed. “I can make about ten of them before the stew’s done. But, speaking of sewing, I think we need to make something a bit better for our guests instead of filthy rags.”

“I think this would be a good time for Tarrin’s spell of replacing damaged clothing,” Dolanna suggested. “It will take too long to make clothes for them.”

“That’s a good idea,” Tarrin nodded. “But they’ll have to take them off. I take it that tent over there is theirs?” he asked, pointing at a rather crude, smaller tent that they had not brought with them.

Miranda nodded. “I bought it when I got the horses. It’s a crude one, but it’ll serve them for now.” She gave him a cheeky grin. “I got them a tent and bedrolls and blankets.”

“You think of everything,” he commended.

“No, Dolanna thinks of everything,” she replied with a look to the Sorceress. “I remembered the tent, but she’s the one that remembered the other things.”

“Alright then, children, we need you to go into your tent and remove your clothing,” Dolanna said, clapping her hands to get their attention. “There are blankets within you can wrap around yourself when you come back out. Bring your clothes with you.”

“What do you need our clothes for?” Telve asked.

“Because we are going to repair them, and we cannot do that when you are wearing them.”

“After we get your clothes fixed, we get some dinner, and Miranda makes you some slings, we’ll go out and learn how to use them,” Ulger added.

“Hold on, hold on,” Mist said. “Cleaning up the clothes doesn’t mean much if they’re still dirty underneath them. They need baths.”

“We should have stopped at that river,” Azakar grunted. “I could use a bath myself.”

“It’s simple enough,” Mist said. “I know Kimmie had a spell that created a bathtub and hot water that always stayed clean. I’ve seen her use it. And I know she put all of her spells in Tarrin’s spellbook.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ulger nodded. “I think we could all use a turn in the bathtub.”

“We have the time,” Tarrin agreed, going over to his pack and pulling out his book.

“Oh, that reminds me. Dolanna, I need a couple of our medium-sized diamonds.”

“For what, dear one?”

“There’s a spell in here that lets me summon possessions, just like a Druid,” he said, taking out his book and holding it up to her. “But it takes a diamond to do it. I’d like to have one on hand in case I need to summon something important.”

“Ah. Feel free to take them from the strongbox, dear one.”

“I just wanted you to know,” he told her.

The spell was easy to find, and after he memorized it, he cast it behind the largest tent. It created a very large ceramic bathtub filled with delightfully hot water. Rather than each person using the tub singly, it was decided that it would be shared by pairs. Dolanna took Zyrilin with her as they bathed, for Dolanna’s calm manner would keep Zyrilin calm, and then Ulger was the one that took Jal and Telve for their turn. As Ulger kept the boys busy, Tarrin used the spell to restore clothing on Zyrilin’s dress, as she stood wrapped in a blanket and watched. Tarrin was surprised that the filthy rags she’d been wearing had originally been a rather pretty blue dress made of stout, soft wool, and the badly tattered shoes on her feet had been very handsome leather slippers. Zyrilin’s parents must have had a little money for them to put their daughter in such a nice dress, when most peasants wore crude homespun smocks and tunics.

“Well, here you go,” he told her, offering the dress and slippers to her.

She reached for them, but the blanket’s tail slipped out of her other hand, and the blanket dropped to the ground. Zyrilin gave out a surprised squeak and clutched the dress to her, blushing to the roots of her hair, but Tarrin’s attention had been caught by something on her stomach. He knelt, reached down, picked up the blanket, then draped it over her shoulders, but then he deliberately made her move her hands so he could see her stomach. She didn’t try to cover herself, standing there with her face red as Tarrin got a good look at a rather nasty scar on her stomach. It ran from the base of her ribcage on her left and ran diagonally down her abdomen, ending at her right hip. He touched the scar tentatively with his finger, and felt that it was old. “What happened, Zyrilin?” he asked in a gentle voice, yet a voice that demanded an answer.

“It was a church soldier,” she said in a tiny voice. “He—“

“I don’t think you have to finish that, little bit,” he said, pulling the blanket around her. “Nobody will *ever* touch you again, not if you don’t want them to. I’ll make sure of that.”

She gave him the strangest look, then burst into tears. She threw her arms around his neck and clutched onto him tightly, like a frightened child, weeping out a long-ago pain and a memory that was best forgotten. He put his arm around her, comforting her, and again, he felt that strange sense of power within this little girl, who had been through so much pain in such a short life. He barely knew her, but already he felt a powerful attachment to this strong young lady, who had endured pain and suffering and continued to fight, caring for her brothers with as much self-sacrifice and devotion as any mother would have for her children. This was a girl—a *woman*—of hidden strength, a strength unrealized because of her young age, but so glaringly obvious to any who looked upon her.

In that moment, he knew that Zyrilin was now just like one of his own daughters to him. And he would protect her, nurture her, help her grow and help her discover her place in this dangerous world.

He simply held her until she was done weeping, then put his hands on her shoulders as she drew away. “Alright now?” he asked gently.

She nodded, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Go get dressed, Zyrilin, and Ulger will show you how to use a sling,” he told her.

“Zyri,” she said meekly, though she was giving him a shy smile. “Only my mother calls me Zyrilin.”

Tarrin chuckled. “Well, gods forbid you confuse me for your mother,” he said, which made her giggle. “And since we’re going on about names, *please* don’t call me *Master Tarrin*. It really annoys me.”

“But, but—”

“I won’t melt if you call me by my name, Zyri,” he told her. “Say it. Tarrin.”

“Tarrin,” Zyri said, giving him a misty-eyed smile.

“Good. See, I’m still here,” he said grandly, tapping her on the tip of her nose like he’d done with all his children. “Now go get dressed.”

“Yes, sir,” she said automatically.

Tarrin watched her go, and Mist stepped up to his side. “Strong,” she deduced in her manner, though Tarrin understood her meaning. Mist was a woman of few words.

“Stronger than she looks,” he agreed.

“Aren’t they always?” she asked. “We get the bathtub last. The stew should be done by then. Want to eat first?”

He shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Change, please. I hate seeing you that way when it’s not necessary.”

Tarrin chuckled, and shifted into his normal form. “Happy?” he asked.

“Very,” she replied, putting her paw on his side. “Do you think Kimmie’s in that much danger? Dolanna told me about what you were talking about.”

“She’s in danger, but she’s got a level head, my mate. It’s Phandebrass I’m worried about.”

“Amen. But we’ll catch up. We’ve already gained ten days on them. I found their trail.”

“They must have lingered in Dengal,” Tarrin mused. “We’re, what, twenty days behind?”

“More like eighteen,” she answered. “But they were moving fast out of Dengal.”

“Probably with a Hunter on their tail,” Tarrin grunted. “We’ll probably find the body soon. Kimmie wouldn’t tolerate a tracker on her tail for very long.”

“Not if she has any sense,” Mist agreed. “And I taught the girl to have sense.”

“You know, I think Kimmie was one of your finest works, my mate,” Tarrin told her with a chuckle.

“You’re just saying that because she’s one of yours,” Mist retorted. “I hope you don’t start comparing. Since I’m last, I have too much to compete with.”

“Each of you is unique. Comparing you would be impossible. And as long as you want me, I’m yours.”

“Then prepare to be mine forever,” she said with a purr in his ear. “Because I *do* love you, Tarrin. I know you know that.”

“I know, Mist. And I’ll always honor those feelings. At least until you can make me love you back, like Kimmie did.”

“You were human. It’s part of your nature to love. I have no concern about it at all. It may take time, but you’ll love me just as much as you love Jesmind and Kimmie. All I have to do is treat you with love and respect, and it’s a given,” she told him evenly, patting him on the side. “I have to check the stew. I don’t want to hear Ulger whine about a ruined dinner all night. I might have to cut him short.”

Tarrin chuckled, but it masked his surprise at his mate, watching her as she sidled away. He did know that Mist loved him, but never quite that way. He wasn’t sure if she was *capable* of it, because of her extremely feral nature. But it seemed that she was just as attached to him as Jesmind and Kimmie. In a way, that made him very happy, for of all his three mates, he certainly got along best with Mist. She lacked the jealousy of the other two, was more content just to be with him, didn’t needle him or harass him or anything like that. She just wanted to be together, living her own life, letting him live his own, but sharing those lives together in happy harmony. He was also very glad that she *could* love a male like that. It was a good sign that most of the savagery of her former nature had been healed with time, compassion, and love. Tarrin had started her down a path that Kimmie and the birth of their son had completed, and now she was a different female than she had been before.

Part of him was surprised at her surprising calm about it all. She felt that making him love her wasn’t a chore, it was simply a matter of time, and she was more than content to simply wait for it to arrive. That, actually, was a part of Mist’s nature. She was very accepting of things, and looked on the world in a way that very few people did. Since it would come in time, she was more than willing to simply wait for it to arrive. Until then, she was perfectly content with what she had. It reminded him of when he was human, how calm she had been then. She had told him that she since she knew what he would do, there was no reason at all to get into a twist over things the way Jesmind did. Mist accepted it, had faith in her understanding of Tarrin and faith in her love for him, and simply stepped back and allowed things to come about as she knew they would. That had really endeared him to her then, to her and his daughter Julia, and that endearment had not diminished at all since that time.

Could he love Mist romantically?

Not just yes, but *bloody hell, yes*.

She was right. He didn't feel that way yet, but eventually he would. Given their intimacy, and his still-human need to have romantic feelings for the woman sharing his bed, him developing love for Mist was an inevitability. She was simply going to wait for it to happen, calmly, measuredly, with all the dignity she possessed. And when it came, she wouldn't gloat or become arrogant in her achievement, she wouldn't harp on it or let it become the central aspect of her life. It would simply be an acceptance of what is, to be savored in the moment of fruition, then simply added to her life as a part of it she would treasure, but not allow to rule her.

In many ways, Mist was definitely the best of his three mates, and he was developing a powerful respect for her.

Haley stalked up beside him, still in his hybrid form. "Did Mist tell you that we found Kimmie's trail?" he asked.

"Yes, she did. You just got back?"

He nodded. "I was tracking a group of non-humans. When I caught up to them, I was shocked. They're *Waern*, Tarrin. They look just like them, except their skin is kind of grayish-green, where *Waern* are more ashen colored."

Tarrin clicked his claws, a Were-cat's version of snapping one's fingers. "Damn, that's why those tracks seemed familiar!" he said. "I'll bet what we call *Waern* at home, they call *orcs* here."

"You think a group stumbled through the gate and kind of populated this world?" he asked curiously.

"It's certainly possible. You know how fast *Waern* breed."

"True enough, that," Haley chuckled. "Sarraya's still out there. She wanted to have a good look at them, but I think she just wants to torment them a little bit. She hasn't had a chance to prank anyone for a while now, and she's getting itchy."

Tarrin chuckled. "I feel sorry for the *Waern*."

"So do I. Is that a bath I smell?"

Tarrin nodded. "One of Kimmie's spells. You know how she is about taking baths."

"The first Were-cat I ever met that didn't hate water," Haley told him. "I can smell Ulger and the boys in that direction, so I take it we're taking turns?"

Tarrin nodded again. "We'll be last."

"We always are when humans are around."

"Any rabbits out there? Ulger wants some for dinner tomorrow."

"I hope he's hungry. It would take him a week to eat all the rabbits within a longspan of the camp," Haley answered lightly. "My, that stew smells heavenly. I think I'll go try to filch a bit of it. I much more enjoy a bath if I've had a good meal before getting into it."

"As long as it's done, I don't think Mist will object. She's no stickler for silly human traditions like a set meal time."

"You're her mate. The rest of us are a bit more cautious around her," he said with a sly smile.

"That's actually a wise thing," Tarrin agreed sincerely.

Tarrin replaced similarly fine clothes for Jal and Telven, hinting that their parents had to be at least modestly well-off, and then they ate. After dinner, Ulger and Azakar taught Telven and Zyri the basics of using a sling, and Mist, Tarrin, and Haley ended up

sharing the bath before the spell's duration ended and Tarrin had to cast it again. Tarrin thought at first that Mist might have a problem sharing the bath with Haley, but he realized quickly that that was a stupid supposition. Mist tolerated Haley well enough to spend time with him—she was probably more comfortable with him than any of the others—and she had no reservations about sharing a bath with just about anyone she didn't mind. After getting cleaned up, Tarrin, Mist, Haley, Azakar, and Ulger decided on the watch schedule for the night, and they packed the children off to their tent to get some much-needed sleep. Tarrin, who had drawn the long straw and managed to get out of watch duty for the night, also retired to his tent. He'd been awake for two days now, and as soon as he removed the charm, he'd immediately get very sleepy. Tomorrow was going to be a long and busy day, and he had a feeling that he was going to need his energy.

Chapter 4

The next day wasn't arduous as much as it was simply long.

They awoke before dawn to get moving, and encountered their first little obstacle. Zyri's restored dress, though pretty, wasn't made for riding. Rather than having a neophyte to riding attempt to ride sidesaddle in a saddle not designed for it, Dolanna allowed the girl to borrow one of her dresses until Miranda could alter the one she had. Zyri and Dolanna weren't too far from the same size in height, but Dolanna was certainly more developed through the bust and hips than the dark-haired girl, so Dolanna's dress hung off from her a little bit.

The second obstacle was Telve. It wasn't long before the boisterous boy was again complaining very loudly and incessantly about the discomfort of riding, and he was getting on *everyone's* nerves. Sarraya turned out to be the one who literally saved the boy's life, for she started bantering with the boy, flitting around his head, distracting him from his saddlesores, which caused the complaining to ease considerably. Telve had no idea how close he had been to death; Mist, riding with Tarrin in her cat form, was about to go back there and shut him up, no matter what it might take to do so.

The third obstacle presented itself just after an early lunch, in the form of another group of bandits. They came riding around a hill just as they were mounted and preparing to move on, either an ill-timed surprise attack or one done out of haste at just finding quarry. There were twelve of them, all of them riding horses and wearing mismatched and badly maintained armor and wielding battered weapons. This time, Tarrin was not alone, and this time, there was no quarter being given for the sake of the children.

It was an absolute slaughter, at least for the bandits. Though only four of the riders moved out to confront these twelve attackers—after Tarrin quickly passed Mist off to Miranda so she could remain behind and help protect the children and Dolanna—they were more than enough to handle twice that number. Tarrin, Ulger, Azakar, and Haley didn't look as dangerous as they were—well, Tarrin and Haley anyway—but the bandits quickly learned the folly of their hasty assault. They faltered when they got close enough to realize that Azakar was *really that big*, that it wasn't a trick of the distance on the eye, but the lead attackers didn't have a chance to turn around and run. That falter became a sudden realization that they got in over their head when Tarrin sent two arrows into their number, taking out the two men in the lead, nocking and firing faster than any of them had ever seen a man use a bow, before stuffing the bow back into its saddle sheath and having a sword literally *appear* in his hands. By the time the ten survivors reached the four who had moved to intercept them, it was too late to retreat. Azakar chopped them out of their saddles with his massive sword, which would be a two-handed weapon for anyone but him, flicking the heavy blade almost negligently as he dispatched the first two to reach them. The other three unfurled behind the monstrous armored behemoth before

them like a spider trapping its prey, and the bandits were quickly thrown into chaos. Ulger was one of the best fighters that the Knights had, and he showed it by taking down two bandits with almost scathing disregard, not even bothering to fence or feint. His broadsword wasn't as large as Azakar's, but he swung it with the same blinding speed, literally cutting men down with single swipes that came so fast that they had no chance to parry or evade them. Tarrin didn't like fighting from horseback, mainly because he was much more mobile on his feet and all his training had been geared towards fighting on foot, but he knew the fundamentals of mounted combat from training sessions with his father. His staff wasn't an effective weapon on horseback, so he opted instead for his sword, wielding the huge sword with only one hand and using the Cat's Claw bracer on his left wrist as a shield. The bandits could tell that Tarrin seemed tentative to battle, but it was an unfamiliarity with mounted combat, and not their mistaken belief that it was because he wasn't a very good fighter. After fencing a little bit with the first bandit to reach him, he quickly became accustomed to guiding his horse with his legs, and then he took down the bandit opposing him with ease, smacking his sword aside with the Adamantite bracer on his wrist, then skewering him with his sword with his reply. Fireflash made sure to contribute as well, flying over the heads of the bandits and unleashing small blasts of fire at them to harry them and put them into a near-panic, making it very easy for the others to finish them.

But the most surprising combatant was Haley. Wielding his rapier and a basket-hilted dagger called a *main-gauche* in his left hand, the Were-wolf showed that he had learned well from the Shacèans. Even from horseback, Haley was a pure fencer, toying with his opponents for a moment before sending his slender blade expertly right into their hearts or throats, confusing them with dazzling swordplay, weaving his rapier before them in a mesmerizing dance that defeated any attempt their weapons made to touch him before sending its point into a vital point on their bodies. Haley didn't seem to want to initiate any attack, content to let his attacker make the first move, then kill with a riposte.

It was over before the bandits knew what happened, before any of them could even consider a retreat. In a shockingly short amount of time, all of them had been killed, and twelve startled and confused horses now roamed the grassy dale in which the battle had taken place.

"Nice," Ulger said professionally, cleaning his sword with a rag before sliding it home in its scabbard. "These bandits don't look to have ever really *used* their swords."

"I don't know, that one right there seemed to have some training," Haley countered, pointing at one of the dead men. "He actually managed to parry me once."

"Probably just luck," Azakar said grimly. "What shall we do with them?"

"This isn't populated territory, so we don't have to bury them," Ulger answered him. "I say we round up their horses, unsaddle them, then set them free. We can't let them go carrying all that stuff around."

"Let's make sure Dolanna agrees with you," Haley answered.

"Aye."

Dolanna did in fact agree with Ulger, at least up to a point. "Select the best two horses from them and add them to our train," she instructed. "I think we might find it wise to bring in some extra horses now, in case Kimmie and Phandebrass have lost theirs. And if not, at least we will have two additional horses to work with in case of any problems later on."

“We can do that, Dolanna,” Ulger nodded. “Alright, Haley, I think you and me are the best judges of horses. Let’s go pick a pair of winners.”

“After you, Ulger,” Haley said with a motioning of his hand towards the milling animals.

“Wow, can you teach me how to fight like that?” Telven asked Azakar breathlessly.

Azakar removed his helmet and regarded the boy with a sober eye. “Do you want to learn because you want to protect others, or do you just want to learn just so you can kill people?”

Azakar’s poignant question seemed to strike at Telven, for the boy felt silent, and his eyes became suddenly troubled.

“Think about that,” Azakar told him. “If you want to learn how to protect someone, then ask me again tomorrow. But I won’t teach you how to fight just so you can kill people. That’s wrong in the eyes of Karas, and he would be disappointed in me if I did.”

Tarrin was rather surprised. That was the first time Tarrin had ever heard Azakar mention the name of Karas in such a, a *holy* manner. Tarrin hadn’t been sure if Azakar worshipped Karas, for it wasn’t really a requirement to be a Knight. Obey Karas, yes, but it wasn’t necessary to *worship* him.

After a long lunch, during which Miranda altered Zyri’s dress so she could ride in it, they continued along. While Telven complained, Zyri asked them what they were doing. After she did so, Dolanna glanced at Tarrin, who nodded. If the girl was going to travel with them for any amount of time, her understanding the truth would be important for her.

“Well, child, we have come seeking two of our friends,” she answered. “That is what we are doing now. But we also have come to find out what happened to some long-lost members of our order, the *katzh-dashi*. But, given what you have told us, it is highly doubtful that any of them are left alive. Now we will simply find out what happened to them, seek out any who might still be living, and then take them home if we find any.”

“But the Crusade was two thousand years ago,” she said haltingly.

“We do not age the way you do, child,” she told her. “There may very well still be some of them alive after two thousand years, but I am not sure. These Hunters seem to be very thorough.”

“Yes, but they’re geared towards catching *witches*,” Sarraya added. “Sorcerers aren’t the same. Trees, you can’t even use your magic here!”

“Where is your home?” Zyri asked.

“We do not come from your world, child,” Dolanna said bluntly. “We come from another.”

“How can there be anything other than the world?” Zyri asked.

“Every world is like a ball,” Tarrin told her, bringing out his wings and creating a little ball of fire in his palm, which floated over it. “Think of this as your world right here, little bit. Everything is inside of it. The planet, the moon, the sun, the stars, everything. *Outside* of this ball, there are other balls,” he said, creating another and having it circle around the first slowly. “This is how the planes work, Zyri. Every world is endless, eternal, but it’s also an enclosed universe to itself. But there are other universes, just as boundless and eternal, that exist in other places. There are gateways between these different dimensions that allows someone to travel from one to another. That’s how the original *katzh-dashi* came here, using a gate to come from our world to

this world. We came here using the same gate.” He saw her confused look, then made the balls vanish and retracted his wings. “Think of your world like a house. It’s your own personal space, kind of like your own little world. But you can leave your world simply by opening the door, where you find *other* houses outside. Every world is a house, and every world has a door that lets you enter and leave the house. We came in through the door to this world, to this house.

“And, and it’s not the same on your side of that door?” she asked.

“As different as night and day, dear child,” Dolanna told her. “The One does not exist in our world. Just as every house has different furniture and different decorations, every world is different from one another. Each world has its own peoples, its own gods, and so on. There are some similarities between worlds, though. There are humans in your world, and humans in mine, and your world looks remarkably similar to ours. The plants, the trees, the animals, they all look familiar to us, because we have them in our world as well. In fact, this grassy plain looks almost indistinguishable from the northern plain of Sharadar,” she told her, looking around. “I could almost feel like this was my home, that the forest over there is the Haunted Wood, and that the Inner sea is just over the horizon to the north. But this is not. This is the grass plain north of Dengal and between the forest and the low mountains to the east.”

“But the Priests say that there’s only the world, heaven, and hell,” Telven said. “If you’re not from here, then you’re either from heaven or hell. And since you’re witches, you must be from hell,” he concluded quite logically.

“Demons come from what you call hell, Telven,” Tarrin told him. “Do I look like a Demon to you?”

“You do when you’re the other way,” he answered boldly.

Sarraya laughed. “He’s got you there, Tarrin. You *do* look a little Demonic when you’re in your normal form and you have your wings out.”

“Well, I can prove that to you, Telven,” he said calmly. “Remember when I killed the Demons at the church?”

“Yeah.”

“What color was their blood?”

“It was black and icky smelling.”

Tarrin drew his belt dagger and slid it across his palm to create a thin line of blood, then showed it to Telven. “And what color is my blood?” he asked.

“Red.”

“Then I’m not a Demon,” he said in a measured tone. “And since I’m not a Demon, how can I be from hell, since only Demons live in hell?”

Telven wasn’t prepared for that. He floundered a bit, looking to try to start talking, then he just shrugged. “They say witches come from hell,” he stated.

“You don’t listen to your Priests,” Tarrin told him. “They say they get their *power* from hell, which is itself a stupid and completely wrong conclusion. They say that’s how they become Defiled, and lose their purity. So that means that they’re not from hell. Now, I’m obviously not a Demon, we’ve established that I don’t come from hell, I *do* come from another world, and I’m obviously *not* from your One’s heaven. So then, exactly where did I come from?”

Telven struggled with that bit of logic for several long moments, then sighed and shrugged again. “I dunno.”

“Well, he admits he doesn’t know everything,” Tarrin said coolly. “That’s a first.”

Zyri laughed, and Jal, who was riding on a horse being led by Zyri, gave a shy smile of his own.

“Some things, you just have to accept when you don’t understand them, Telven. Trust me on this one, it’s something I have a *lot* of experience with.”

“What’s it like in your world?” Zyri asked.

“Well, it looks a lot like yours,” he answered. “But it’s not just humans. There are more humans than any other race, that’s for certain, but there’s more than just them. We have the Wikuni who live across the sea,” he said, pointing at Miranda, who was again hiding behind an Illusion of Mist. “There are the Sha’Kar, who serve in the Towers and do the will of my Goddess. There are the Selani who live in the desert, and the Were-kin and other forest folk who are called the Woodkin, who live in the vast forest west of the desert. There are *orcs* in our world too, but we call them Waern, and we have a bunch of other races related to orcs that we call Goblinoids as a whole. There are the Aeradalla who share the desert with the Selani, and there’s the Vendari, who are a race of lizard-men even bigger than me, Mist, and Zak.”

“They sound scary,” Zyri said.

“The Vendari can be scary-looking, but once you get to know them, you’d be surprised how nice they can be,” he answered.

“And you don’t fight with each other?” Zyri asked.

“Gods no,” Dolanna laughed. “The Sha’Kar are our brothers and sisters, as close to us as close can be. The Vendari and the Wikuni are some of our best friends, and we have very good relations with the Aeradalla and the Selani. The Woodkin tend to keep to themselves, because most humans do not really understand them, but they too are friendly with the humans. The only non-human race that really causes us any trouble are the Goblinoids, because they would rather steal what they need than make it themselves.”

“But there’s fights, or you wouldn’t have Knights.”

“Yes, there are occasionally fights,” Dolanna admitted. “But it tends to be humans against humans more than anything else. When we have fights on our world, it is most often one kingdom fighting another, or very rarely the worshippers of one god having fights with the worshippers of another, though that happens only once in a *very* great while.”

“It sounds nice.”

“It is, but I think this world would be nice if it wasn’t for the One,” Tarrin told her. “This world would be much better off if he’d just drop dead.”

“That’s blasphemy!” Telven gasped.

“It’s only blasphemy if I cared about what the One felt about it,” Tarrin answered flatly. “If he wants to take issue with the fact that I think he’s a plague on this world, he can come over here and try to tell me so. I’d *enjoy* that particular opportunity,” he finished, flexing his fingers in an ominous manner.

“You’re not afraid?” Zyri asked in disbelief.

“Little bit, I’m not afraid of *any* god,” he told her flatly. “Not even the One.”

Zyri gaped at him

“Ah, it seems that we’ve found Kimmie’s tailers,” Haley spoke up lightly, pointing ahead.

The conversation forgotten, Tarrin and the others looked ahead. There were several bodies littering the grass, and a change in the wind brought the smell of decomposing flesh to them.

“Ewww!” Telven squealed, putting his hands over his nose and mouth. “That smells awful!”

“I do not think we need to get too close to them,” Dolanna suggested.

“I’ll go look,” Haley offered. “I’d like to know if they were from the Church.”

“Be my guest,” Miranda said, just before she sneezed.

They circled wide of the carnage as Haley inspected the corpses. There were seven bodies there, but they didn’t get close enough for Tarrin to see if they were wearing Church uniforms, because their clothing was badly mangled from both whatever killed them and also stained from the process of decomposition. Haley moved his skittish horse through the scene, then trotted him over to the group with a slight smile on his face.

“Church soldiers,” he affirmed. “Judging from the condition of the bodies, it was certainly Kimmie and Phandebrass who killed them. They were killed by magic and by something with very large claws.”

“That would definitely be Kimmie,” Miranda agreed.

“How could you tell?” Telven asked. “They’re all icky looking.”

“It’s not all that hard, young man,” Azakar told him. “It just takes a willingness to look at something unpleasant to find the clues left behind.” He turned to look at Dolanna. “We should start thinking about finding a site for camp, Dolanna.”

“Well away from this place, that is for certain,” Dolanna told him. “Let us move up a couple of longspans and then start looking for a good place.”

They found an excellent campsite about an hour before sunset, a flat, dry patch of grass beside a very strange river that flowed from the north, then turned to the east. The river wasn’t very large, but it was surprisingly deep, and it held water that was so clear that the bottom of the river, some twelve spans down in the middle, was as visible as the grass at the riverbank. There were large plants growing on the riverbed, undulating in a slow yet steady current that led off to the east.

“Now that is bizarre,” Ulger said, kneeling at the bank of the river and looking into it after they had finished setting up camp.

“Spring water,” Mist told him. She had shifted into her normal form and joined him at the riverbank for a moment to get a drink. “I’ve seen water like this, but never in a river this big.”

“It’s safe to drink, right?” Ulger asked.

Mist nodded. “It might taste a little heavy, but it’s safe.”

Ulger dipped a hand into the water and brought a cupped palmful to his mouth. “Heavy? It tastes great!” he said, taking the waterskin off his belt and pouring the water within out onto the grass.

“It’s got the steepest bank I’ve ever seen in a river flowing this slow,” Sarraya said, flitting over and landing on Ulger’s shoulder. “There’s no slope at all. It goes from river’s edge to the very bottom just like that.”

“Don’t ask me how it got like this,” Mist snorted.

“I hope we don’t have to cross it,” Ulger grunted. “It might get tricky.”

“Kimmie’s trail goes along the river’s edge, and she’s still on horseback,” Azakar told him as he stacked firewood by the firepit. “If she crossed it, she did it at a ford, so we should be alright.”

The evening was pleasant enough. Tarrin watched Ulger give Zyri and Telven lessons with a sling, and they had an excellent meal of rabbit stew and roasted rabbit, victims of Ulger’s sling during the course of the day. Tarrin was mildly surprised at the Knight’s accuracy with what was basically a hunting weapon, even when mounted on a moving horse. Tarrin opted to take the watch all night that night rather than have his friends not get enough sleep, and after everyone else went to bed, he took out a rolled leather kit that held all his fletching tools and got to work with it.

By morning, he was quite satisfied with the result. He had three small bows, designed specifically for Zyri, Telven, and Jal, one made out of a large section of blueleaf wood that he’d brought along with his fletching equipment, in case he needed to make a new bow, the second made of yew, and the third made of elm. The bluish wood wasn’t often used for bows in Aldreth, not when there was oak handy, but Tarrin had found that blueleaf wood was an excellent wood for people who weren’t all that strong. It was resilient and gave a good feel for the pull, but wasn’t so strong that they’d find fully drawing the bow impossible. It was the perfect training wood, because they’d learn how to fully draw the bow without it exhausting them, teaching them proper form, yet still have enough power behind the arrow to bring down small game, and perhaps send an arrow a good three hundred spans with a favorable tailwind. Tarrin had brought a blueleaf bow staff as part of a group of six, the other five of which were woods more mainstream for use as adult bows, and it had always been part of his fletching supplies, so he’d brought it out of habit. That habit had been good luck for him, for he’d had it on hand to do this. He’d used the blueleaf wood to make a bow for Jal, the yew to make a bow for Zyri, and used the elm bow staff to craft a bow for Telven. They were proportionally the size of longbows for the children, each one specifically made just a bit too large so they could grow into them.

It had been a long time since he’d made a bow. He’d forgotten how easy it could be when one had the proper tools and wasn’t entirely worried about being utterly perfect. The bows had been hastily made, but they were still quality work, very simple longbows without recurve or additions. The only real extravagance he had put into them was a nock in the handle to help guide the arrows.

“I see you were busy during the night, dear one,” Dolanna said as she came out of her tent, wearing a simple robe over a nightshirt.

“It gave me something to do with my hands,” he shrugged, looking up at the sky. “Our good luck is over concerning the weather.”

She looked up with him, at dark bands on the eastern horizon that was hiding the sunrise. “We will survive, though riding in the rain was never my favorite pasttime,” she told him. “For the children?”

“Something in me objects to them learning how to use a sling and not a bow,” he answered.

She chuckled. “You are from Aldreth, dear one. They give infants longbows there almost as soon as they can grasp it. I have never seen a group of people who were collectively more accurate with a bow than those from Aldreth. They truly made a name

for themselves during the Battle of Suld. General Kang was utterly astounded by their accuracy.”

“Well, we do favor it,” Tarrin nodded in agreement, picking up the bow he’d made for Telven. “I’ve never so much as picked up a sling in my life. I’ve always had one of these.”

Dolanna was about to say something, but her eyes narrowed as she looked behind him, then she looked to the fire. “Dear one, have you brought more firewood from the packs?”

“No, I didn’t,” he answered, looking at the fire, which was still merrily burning, and then to the firewood. He looked at it, wondering why Dolanna would ask that question, then he blinked and realized that the same amount of wood was in that pile as there had been when he started on the bows. And he’d gotten so wrapped up in crafting them, he couldn’t remember a single time he’d put more wood on the fire outside of throwing wood shavings into it and the splinters of wood he’d taken off the bows as he made them. But that was not enough wood to make the fire last that long.

The fire had burned all night without fuel.

“Huh,” Tarrin said, looking at the pile of wood. “I never noticed the fire dying. It never did.”

“Dear one...do you feel different?” she asked him intently, her eyes serious.

“Obviously, you have caused this to happen. Fire is your realm. But—“

“I haven’t had my wings out all night, Dolanna,” he protested. “I can’t use my powers without bringing them out.”

“I think you might want to explore the boundaries of your abilities once again, dear one,” she told him, pointing at the fire. “That is still burning strong and well, and you have not stoked it. Now that I look closely, I see that there is nothing but ashes remaining. The fire is burning atop them.”

“That shouldn’t be possible.”

“It should not, at least with your powers being the way they are at *home*. But this is not Sennadar, dear one. Just as Sorcery and other forms of magic are different here, then perhaps so are your powers. Try to do something.”

“I, alright,” he said, holding out his hand and trying to create a small ball of fire in his palm.

And it appeared.

“Well,” Dolanna said with a smile. “I think that this world is starting to affect your abilities, dear one.” She reached into his hand and took the ball of fire from it, which did not vanish once it left his hand. “But the fireform cat you created the other day *did* vanish,” she said with suddenly pursed lips. “This might be an aspect of a shift in your power. Perhaps when you discovered you could join to a fireform, you unlocked a new branch of your powers heretofore undiscovered, which is only now beginning to manifest in a way we can see. That, or the realization caused a sudden increase in your powers, like making a jump between Sorcerer and *da’shar*.”

“I don’t see how, Dolanna. I’ve had these powers for years, and I know them well. They’re not like Sorcery. They tell me what they can and can’t do, after a fashion.”

“As I recall, dear one, you *were* resistant to Phandebrass’ attempts to help you explore the extent of your abilities. He told me that you might very well be capable of

other things, but you lacked the desire or motivation to explore those boundaries. Perhaps they told you only what they thought you wanted to hear.”

“Maybe.”

“And as I also recall, you *did* tell me that you had no idea how to use these powers when the sword changed you.”

“Those are a different set of powers, Dolanna.”

“Are they? They are just *stronger*, dear one. The powers you have now are just shadows of your true potential. If you could not use your full power because of a lack of understanding of it, is it not a logical assumption to say that you might have also not fully learned how to use the *shadow* of that power as well, since you have never fully explored its limits?” She held the little ball of fire out so he could see it. “This does not lie, dear one. Your powers *are* different now, or stronger, else this ball would not be here.”

He couldn’t refute her logic, or the ball of fire in her hands. “It’s possible,” he acceded.

“Dear one, tell me something. The powers you have in your current state. Are they still considered divine, or aspects of fire?”

He gave her a look. “It’s still divine power, Dolanna. It just manifests as fire.”

Her eyes glittered for a long moment, and she gave him the strangest look. It was *amused*.

“What?”

“Nothing, dear one. Just satisfying an old curiosity, that is all.” She touched the fire in her palm with a finger, and saw that unlike a fireform or the fire of his wings, this was normal fire, without substance.

“Morning,” Haley called as he came out of his tent. He was wearing nothing but a pair of linen knee-length undergarments, the name of which escaped Tarrin. They were a Shacèan garment...he thought they were called *braes*, but he wasn’t entirely sure. The garment did, however, show off a very sleek body, the perfect blending of muscle and slimness. Tarrin could admire Haley’s physique for the appeal it would hold for a human female. “No one else is up?”

“I’m letting them sleep a bit,” Tarrin answered. “Sleep well?”

“Well enough,” he shrugged, stretching. “How was your night, Dolanna?”

“It was pleasant, dear friend,” she replied with a gentle smile, reaching her hand out to him as he approached them. He kissed the back of her hand gallantly, then seated himself by the fire with them. “I see now what I heard you two talking about,” he announced, nodding at the small ball of fire in Dolanna’s other hand. “Having growing pains, Tarrin?”

Tarrin chuckled. “I guess so,” he agreed. “It feels weird to know that I can do things without having to take out my wings. I’m curious to know just how much I can do without doing it.”

“I don’t understand why you had to take them out in the first place,” Haley divulged. “After all, they were always there, just hidden.”

“In a way, the size of the wings determines the power Tarrin can bring to bear,” Dolanna told him. “Remember in Dengal, when he created the dragon of fire? Remember how his wings expanded in size before he did so?”

“Yes—ah, I see,” Haley nodded. “So, if you can use your powers now, with them at their smallest size, I’d wager that your powers are growing.”

“Or I’m learning how to get around that little condition,” Tarrin added. “Every rule has an exception, you know.”

Haley chuckled. “That’s the truth,” he agreed. “Would you like some tea, Dolanna? I have some excellent leaves from Xau Lu. It’s a mellow flavor, just a hint of tang, strong yet smooth on the palate.”

“When do I not want tea, dear friend?” she told him with a smile.

Tarrin reached behind him, and produce Dolanna’s rather worn travel kettle, and set it on one of the heated stones circling the fire. “It should be ready in a couple of minutes,” he told her.

“Would you like some, Tarrin?” Haley asked. “I have plenty.”

“I’m not all that fond of tea, Haley, thanks anyway,” he answered.

“Alright then. Be right back.”

They watched him go, and Tarrin picked up the bow he had made for Zyri, inspecting it. “I wonder how many kinds of tea he has,” he mused. “Every day he offers you something different.”

“I am curious to know myself.”

“Then ask him.”

“And ruin his fun? I think not, dear one. He enjoys surprising me,” she said with a strange little smile.

Tarrin looked at her for a short moment, then went back to inspecting the bow. He considered telling her his suspicions about Haley’s true feelings, but he decided that that might not be wise with Haley in possible earshot. “How long have you known him?”

“About fifty years,” she answered. “At that time, he was running a moneychanging business in Tor. He must move every ten years, or the locals notice that he does not age, and they get suspicious.”

“Ah. When did he open that inn in Dayisè?”

“Fifteen years ago,” she answered.

“I’m glad he was there. He was a lifesaver.”

“He is always there when I need a hand, dear one,” she said with an odd look towards the tent.

Tarrin quietly considered that look, and wondered if Dolanna had the same hidden feelings for Haley that Haley seemed to have for Dolanna.

The others started getting up, and Tarrin decided not to talk about this change in his power quite yet, at least with the others. He quietly pondered it as Mist made breakfast, and after he presented the children with their new bows and promised them he’d teach them how to use them in the evenings. He wasn’t sure if was a change in his powers, or if he’d simply acclimated to this world or his powers to the point where he could now access them without having his wings out. He actively avoided thinking about that power or using it too much, because the others didn’t understand the way he did just what those powers were and what they meant. They were the curse that made him separate from everyone else, the constant reminder that he could never again be a true part of the mortal world. He didn’t like to dwell on what that meant for too long, or it depressed him, to know that he simply didn’t *belong* anywhere. Unable to be understood by mortals, yet scorned by the gods, he was trapped between the two, cursed to an existence where he could look into both worlds and yet not be allowed to belong to either.

But at least he still had his friends and his family. Thank the Goddess that they at least accepted him for what he was, and at least with them, he did truly feel as if he *belonged*.

Sometimes, just feeling that way was all that mattered, regardless of the fact that it was merely an illusion.

They followed that strange river for two days before angling off to the northwest and travelling for five more days. The weather turned nasty on them, raining off and on every single day, sometimes so heavily that they were all soaked to the skin before managing to either find or construct shelter. One storm drenched them so quickly that Tarrin couldn't even create a shelter from a fireform before he got soaked.

The days were quiet introspection for Tarrin, as he pondered the significance of the change in his abilities, but no amount of thinking about it produced any real answers. Fireflash and Mist's presences in the saddle were a strange comfort to him as he thought about it, tangible reminders of the anchors that held him to the mortal world. Each evening after making camp, he and Ulger took turns teaching the children how to use their weapons, which also turned into a swapping of instruction between them, as Tarrin picked up a sling for the first time and started learning how it was used, and Ulger took some lessons in the finer points of marksmanship from an Aldreth bowman, who were now, after the battle of Suld, regarded as some of the best archers in all the world.

After the others went to sleep, Tarrin would go out a ways and try to understand how his powers had changed. It only took a few days of practice to determine that unless he had his wings out, his powers were very limited, restricted to little more than producing fire, and creating fireforms no larger than Fireflash. With his wings out, he found no real change in his abilities...they were the same as they had been before. They weren't stronger and they hadn't changed, the only real change seemed to have been in the fact that he could now produce very minor effects without having to take out his wings.

He pondered on that for an entire night and half a day, sitting in the saddle and thinking it over as Azakar guided them northwest, following Kimmie's trail. The children had become accustomed to riding horses now, so much so that Jal's horse wasn't guided anymore. Haley had taken the boy aside and taught him how to control his horse, and he'd been an apt pupil. Then again, Haley had also cheated a little bit by telling the horse to keep up with the other horses. Telven didn't complain about saddle sores anymore, and he'd become a little more accustomed to the peculiarities of the group in which he found himself, so Tarrin didn't mind him at all now. Then again, Sarraya still bantered with Telven, keeping the boy amused and keeping him out of everyone else's hair. Truth be told, Tarrin thought that Sarraya rather liked Telven. In him she found someone more along the lines of her own level of maturity. Despite the fact that she was an intelligent female, aged and wise, and a powerful Druid, Sarraya was *still* a Faerie, and that fundamental fact would never change. It would make her an eternal child; mischievous, petulant, impulsive, and flighty.

"Hold on," Azakar called, holding up a mailed hand to stop the group. "There's something wrong."

"What do you mean?" Tarrin asked.

"The path's all messed up. I see both hoofprints and footprints, and they go all over the place."

Haley quickly dismounted, and to the gasps of Zyri and Telve, he shapeshifted into his hybrid form. Mist also jumped down from Tarrin's saddle and shapeshifted into her normal form, and the two of them started going over the grass before them. Tarrin looked out ahead of Azakar, and saw a flat patch of grass with a black scar roughly circular in shape, looking like a firepit. The grass *did* look a bit trampled in places, as if a group had stopped to make camp, but Tarrin wasn't close enough to it to give it a good inspection.

"There was a fight here," Haley said immediately. "I can smell hints of blood. And that burned place is from a Demon getting killed."

"A Demon?" Ulger said in concern, riding up from the back of the group.

"Kimmie and Phandebrass were ambushed," Mist told them, moving around on all fours, analyzing the scents and visible marks left behind. "There were at least four different Demons and about fifteen humans."

They all waited anxiously as the two of them combed over the scene.

"Phandebrass ran off that way on foot," Haley said, pointing southeast. "From the smell of it, he was pursued. I'll go track this down, Mist."

"I'll come with you," Sarraya called, flitting off Telve's shoulder and zipping over to the Were-wolf.

"Alright," she said in a low growl. Mist continued to comb through the area quickly yet methodically. "Kimmie's scent disappears, but there's no Were-cat blood anywhere," she finally announced. "She could have used magic to escape, something that doesn't leave a scent behind."

"Can you see anything, Zak?" Miranda asked.

"No, the trail just stops right here," he answered her.

"Hmm. If she used magic to escape, my spell wouldn't be able to show us that," she fretted. "It would simply pick up where it starts again."

"Can you find it? If she didn't go far using magic," Tarrin added.

"Yes, but it might take me some time. I'll have to scry for it."

"Let's hold off until Haley gets back," Ulger said. "Kimmie's trail might pick up with his. That's what I would think it would do. Odds are, she covered Phandebrass so he could escape, then used magic to get away and joined him somewhere else."

"A definite possibility," Dolanna agreed. "Mist, were there any casualties?"

"I'd say a bunch," Mist grunted. "Human blood is everywhere. I think Kimmie and Phandebrass killed all the humans, and only ran from the Demons."

Haley came loping back over a small rise. "Well, I found Kimmie's scent," he announced. "There are three more patches of burned ground over there. It looks like they killed the other three Demons. There's also horse tracks that lead off to the north over there. From the looks of it, Phandebrass chased down the horses, they killed the last of the Demons after catching up to them, and then moved on."

"Zak, go look, if you please," Miranda prompted.

"Sure, Miranda," he nodded, then spurred his horse into a quick gallop.

"I guess she didn't get them all at that last battleground," Ulger grunted. "That, or this was a group called in by the other group before Kimmie wiped them out."

After a moment, Azakar galloped back and reined in before them. "Yeah, the trail picks back up over the hill," he announced. "From the looks of it, they got out of here at a dead run, going northeast."

"Can you blame them?" Sarraya said acidly. "It's not every day you have to kill Demons, you know."

"Quiet," Tarrin said absently. "I don't like this. I think we'd better catch up as fast as we can. How far are we behind now?"

"About fourteen days," Mist answered. "They hadn't been moving very fast, so we were catching up."

"That will probably change now," Dolanna said grimly. "Let us hope that this time, they destroyed all eyes which were following them."

"Yah, I don't think fighting Demons on a daily basis is something anyone but Tarrin would feel comfortable doing," Sarraya said, giving Tarrin a sly wink.

He ignored the Faerie. "We might want to think of picking it up a little."

"Agreed," Dolanna nodded. "Let us finish this day's ride at a canter."

"Still, though, that's quite a feat. Kimmie and that mage killing twenty people?" Ulger asked, then he laughed.

"I'd think I didn't train her right if she couldn't," Mist snorted before shifting back into cat form and jumping up onto Tarrin's boot, then vaulting back up into the saddle with him.

They rode through the rest of the day at a canter, and with a silence that came with knowing that their friends were in much more danger than they first believed. They all kept looking for traces that someone had been following Kimmie and Phandebrass, even Sarraya stopping her bantering with Telven to flit about to either side of their path and look for traces of others. Kimmie's trail turned almost due west after about an hour of moving northeast, and they reached the upper edge of the forest that they had passed through to reach Dengal by sunset. The forest didn't extend across their path, ending some league or so to the south. They put out two on the watch that night, and moved on the next morning with the same urgency.

After two more days of an increased pace, skirting north of the forest and moving out onto a slightly hilly grassland not much different than what was on the other side of the forest, the strain of it was starting to show on the children. They had just gotten used to riding, and days of moving at a canter was making them sore and stiff once more. Telven again started complaining, and even Zyri modestly asked if they could take an extended break when they camped for the night. "Even I could use a few extra hours out of a saddle," Haley admitted. "Maybe we should set an early camp tonight."

"It might be a good idea," Dolanna agreed.

They set an early camp in a small grove of pear trees, that looked to have been deliberately planted at one time, but had not been tended by human hands for decades. Tarrin wasn't entirely happy about the delay, but he knew that the other needed a little rest, especially the children, and he didn't want to push them too hard. He wasn't sure of their opinions of him quite yet, and he didn't want to alienate them. He took Fireflash with him as he hunted for something fresh for dinner, ranging almost halfway towards the forest before crossing paths with an animal that looked like a small elk. After getting it back to camp, he found out it tasted like elk as well.

"It's a bit small," Mist told him critically.

"We have no idea how big it's really supposed to be, and it'll feed all of us," he retorted.

"True."

As Mist cooked, he gave the children a lesson with their bows. Telve didn't like it all that much, much more interested in the sling, but Zyri and Jal were rather taken with their bows. Jal seemed to have a knack for it, naturally doing what needed to be done to make a good shot.

"Where did you learn how to shoot bows?" Zyri asked him.

"My father," he answered. "Raise your elbow in a bit more, little bit. That's better," he said as she practiced drawing her blueleaf bow. "You want a straight line with the arrow and your arm. Crooking your arm like that's going to put your aim off."

"Was he a hunter?"

"He was a soldier," he answered. "A member of an elite part of the Sulasian army called the Rangers. They were woodsmen, trained to use the forests of our kingdom to their advantage while they protected the land from invaders."

"Did he ever fight a war?" Telve asked excitedly.

"Not a war," Tarrin shook his head. "Thankfully. The worst thing my father ever had to deal with was bandits, and Goblinoids. My father taught me everything I know about the forest, and how to survive in it."

"I've always been afraid of the woods," Zyri admitted. "It's dark there, and you can't see what's there."

"And what's there also can't see you," he told her.

"I never thought of it that way," she said after a moment of contemplation.

"Is your father as big as you? What color is his fur?" Telve asked.

"My father is human," Tarrin answered calmly. "So is my mother."

"But, but how—"

"What I am isn't how I was born," he answered the boy. "It's a condition that can be passed on to humans. I caught it, and now I'm a Were-cat."

"Are we going to catch it?" Telve asked with a kind of wary excitement, both afraid of and intrigued by that idea.

Tarrin chuckled. "No, you won't catch it," he answered. "It can't be passed by accident. It has to happen on purpose."

"So someone did that to you on purpose?" Zyri asked astutely.

He nodded. "It's a very long story, Zyri, but the short of it is yes, it was done on purpose. I wasn't very happy about it at first, but now I rather like what I am, and I know that it had to be done."

"Why?" she asked.

"That, little bit, is a story so long it can't be told in one day," he chuckled, handing her an arrow. "Now, this time, release smoothly. Don't jerk, that makes the arrow fly off target. Remember, keep the bowstring on your fingertips, not in your knuckle joints, and remember what I taught you about releasing the string. Just relax your fingers and the bowstring slide out of your grip. Trust me, it's not going to make the arrow go slower."

After letting them practice a while, they put aside the bows and Tarrin joined as Ulger taught them how to use the sling. Tarrin was naturally quite agile and dextrous, even in his human form, and he caught onto the trick of it almost immediately, mainly because his training with the bow already gave him a knowledge of distance and trajectory needed to make a sling stone hit a target. "By Karas' hammer, Tarrin, that's not bad," Ulger said appreciatively as Tarrin's stone struck the knot of the tree which was their target. "You should put that bow down and go with the sling."

"Not in this lifetime," Tarrin told him evenly, which made him laugh.

"Just keep practicing," Ulger told him. "You might find someday that that sling may be just what you need. Mine has saved my life several times over the years."

"I think I'll have Miranda make me one," he nodded in agreement.

The elk was a good filling meal, and it made them all quite drowsy, sitting around a cheery fire and with soft bedrolls beckoning in the tents surrounding it. "Well, I guess we'd better draw for guard duty," Ulger yawned.

"Just go to sleep," Tarrin told them, taking the charm out of his pouch and affixing it to the back of his amulet. "I'll keep watch tonight."

"You sure, Tarrin? You've been relying on that thing a bit too much here lately," Ulger told him.

"Ulger, I once wore it for over a year," he told him sharply.

"What does it do?" Telven asked.

"I don't have to sleep as long as I have it on my amulet," Tarrin told him. "I'm going to stay up tonight and keep watch so everyone else can get some sleep."

"That sounds neat!" Telven said. "You'd never have to go to bed again!"

"I think it would be boring," Zyri said after a moment's thought. "I mean, what do you do all night when everyone else is asleep?"

"That, little bit, is the double edge sword," he said with a slight smile. "Keeping watch all night is boring if I have nothing to read or nothing to do."

"Then what will you do tonight?"

"I'll think of something, Zyri. I always do."

"Well, I'll stay up with you," she announced. "You shouldn't be alone."

"You will go to bed," Mist ordered. "If my mate wants company, he'll come wake me up."

"Maybe not that kind of company," Sarraya whispered conspiratorially to Haley.

Tarrin stood up and shapeshifted into his normal form, so he had access to his powerful senses, moving without even thinking about it so Fireflash wasn't dislodged from his customary place on his shoulder. He swished his tail a few times to get the stiffness out of it, then sat back down beside the fire. "I'm going to get some sleep, my mate," Mist told him. She came over, leaned down and kissed him. "Want me to stay up with you?"

"No, no, go get some sleep," he told her. "If you want to keep me company, get up before dawn. That's when I get bored."

"Alright. Night."

"Sleep well."

"I think Mist has the right idea," Haley said with a yawn as the female Were-cat stalked off towards the tent she shared with Tarrin. "See everyone in the morning."

"If you want someone to relieve you, Tarrin, you can come get me," Azakar said as he stood up.

"Don't worry about it, Zak."

One by one, the others took to their tents, until only Zyri was left. "Well?" he asked her impatiently.

"I don't want you to be alone," she said in a small voice. "And I want to hear the story of what happened to you."

"It's not a good story, girl."

"I'm not worried if it's a bad story."

"No, it's not a *nice* story," he told her honestly. "I don't think you're ready to hear it."

"Why?"

"If you did, by the end of it, your opinion of me would be *much* different," he told her, giving her a steady look. "I was a much different person back then, and I wasn't nice."

"Who you were doesn't matter as long as you're who you are," she said sagely, then she blushed and gave him a sheepish smile. "It's something my father used to say."

"Your father was a wise man. Now go to bed."

"But you'll be alone."

"I'm used to being alone," he told her, then he looked into the fire, his eyes distant. "Bed. Now."

"Yes, sir," she responded, then got up from the ground and brushed off her skirts. He was a little surprised when she put her hands on his shoulder, barely missing Fireflash, and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night," she said, then she scurried off to her tent.

Fireflash hissed a little as she retreated from them, but Tarrin just chuckled. "Stand down, you big fraud," he chided.

Fireflash snorted a little, then jumped down onto his leg and looked up at him.

"You staying up with me, little one?" he asked.

Fireflash gave him a serious little look.

"I could use the company," he said with a smile, reaching down and scratching the drake between the horns. He brought out his Gnomlin Travelling Spellbook and spoke the word that made it expand to its full size. "I also need to work on this a little. I'm trying to figure out Kimmie's spells."

Fireflash gave a little chirp, moving so Tarrin could put the book in his lap, then laying down on Tarrin's lap just below the bottom edge of the book.

"Sometimes I agree," he chuckled, then got to work.

He expected Mist to wake up early and come join him, but he didn't expect Zyri. She came out of the tent she shared with her brothers well before dawn, wearing one of Dolanna's nightshirts. She padded over in the warm, muggy night on bare feet and seated herself beside the fire.

"Go back to bed," he ordered.

"I'm not sleepy anymore," she replied in a measured tone, looking up at him. "Do you want some breakfast?"

He chuckled. "You're going to cook?" he asked.

"I know how to cook," she said in a slightly challenging tone.

"I'm sure you do," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

Fireflash vaulted over to land on Zyri's shoulder. The girl gasped in surprise, and froze like a startled fawn. "He won't hurt you, little bit. He's just curious."

She remained still as Fireflash sniffed at her shoulder, but she started giggling when the drake stuck his nose against her neck, which turned into loud laughing when he flicked his tongue along the base of her jaw.

"Fireflash, behave, the others are still sleeping," Tarrin chided the drake absently. "He's playing with you, Zyri. He likes you."

"Well, I kind of like him too," Zyri offered. "Can I hold him?"

"Sure," he answered. "If he doesn't like you, he'll just gas you."

"He'll what?"

"He can breathe out a gas that paralyzes people who breathe it in," he explained.

"The effect lasts a few minutes, but it's not all that pleasant."

"Wow, really?" she said in surprise. "That sounds really neat."

"I had him do it to me once to test its power. Trust me, you don't *want* to be gassed."

"If you say so," she said, gingerly taking the drake off her shoulder and holding him before her. Fireflash didn't object at all, and cuddled with her when she held him up against her chest.

"He definitely likes you," Tarrin informed her.

"What is he called?"

"He's a drake. I told you that once before."

"I forgot. He looks like the pictures of dragons they have in the old books."

"He's a cousin to dragons, just *much* smaller," he answered her. "A real dragon is about five hundred spans long."

"Do they look like him?"

"He's a perfect replica of a dragon. Only smaller," he chuckled. "*Much* smaller."

"How big is five hundred spans?"

He held his hands about a span apart. "This is a span. A fully grown, mature dragon is five hundred of these long. The tops of their backs are about a hundred spans off the ground."

"Wow!" she gasped. "That's bigger than, than a warehouse!"

"Dragons are the most powerful creatures on my world. *Nobody* crosses them, but thankfully, they're a peaceful species that doesn't like to get involved with the smaller races."

"They sound scary."

"They look scary, and sometimes they can seem a little scary, but once you get used to them, you find that they're actually rather nice. One of my best friends is a dragon."

"Really? What's he like?"

"She. Her name is Sapphire. She's a blue dragon. She's not so much as a friend to me as she is a part of my family."

"Blue? She has blue scales instead of gold?"

He nodded. "She's a bit arrogant, but you have to expect that from a dragon. They *are* powerful, and they know it."

"I can't imagine something being that big," she said hesitantly.

"I know. It boggles your mind when you first see one. You almost can't believe your eyes."

She was quiet a long moment. "I want to hear the story," she told him, then she blushed and gave him a demure look.

He looked at her, then chuckled. "I don't think you're going to take no for an answer," he told her.

"Not if I can get you to tell me the story," she answered.

"Well, if you want to hear it, that's fine. But understand now that it's not the kind of story you want to hear. Like I said, you'll never look at me the same way again."

"I'll be the judge of that."

He gave her a long look. "Alright, but remember, little bit. You asked for this," he told her sincerely.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to tell, as he reckoned things. That, or Zyri had woke up much earlier than he thought, for he finished the tale of his adventures before sunrise, even before Mist woke up and joined him. He told her the story evenly, without much emotion, describing the darkest of his deeds with the same detached tone as he described the greatest of his accomplishments. He left little out, even describing the destruction of Val and the battle with Val's shadow which had unlocked the hidden power within him.

"So, you were a *god*," she said in wonder. "No wonder you're not afraid of the One!"

"The key word there is that I *was* a god, Zyrilin," he said grimly. "Not anymore. The wings, the power, they're like ripples in the surface of a pond after the rock is thrown in, just a shadow of what I used to be. I'm just as mortal now as you are, the only difference is that the echo of my lost power still resonates inside me, and that gives me the power I have now. I can die just as easily as you. The reason I'm not afraid of the One is because I understand the power that gods use, and I know that he can't use *all* of his power against me. In the mortal world, here, his power is limited. Since he is, the power he can use against me is probably about the same as the power I have now. That makes us even."

"What's it like? Being a god."

"I'm not a god," he told her again.

"Well, having all that power," she amended.

"I'd give it all up in a heartbeat," he answered immediately. "It's not a blessing, little bit. It's a curse. If I could free myself from this power and be totally normal again, I'd do it without thinking twice."

"But you have the power to do almost anything," she protested.

"I do, at least if my sword decides it's necessary to unlock my full power," he admitted freely. "But just because I *can* do something, that doesn't mean that I *should*. My goddess taught me that lesson long ago, as I struggled to control my Sorcery."

"I wish I could use magic like that. I'd always be safe, and me and my brothers would always have food and a house and never be hungry again."

"Zyri, remember what I told you about Jula?" he asked, and she nodded. "Think about what happened to her before you say that again. Don't make the same mistake she did. The greater your power, the greater your duty to use it responsibly. The day you seek power for its own sake is the day that the power controls you instead of you controlling it."

Zyri frowned, looking into the fire.

"Listen to my mate, girl," Mist told her as she came out of the tent. Zyri looked at her, then blushed a bit when she saw that Mist had no clothes on. "He speaks from experience. Hungry, my mate?"

"A little, but you need to go put on a robe."

"She's not seeing anything she doesn't have herself," she shrugged him off as she passed by the girl and sat on her feet by the fire.

"Well, I don't have a tail," Zyri offered meekly, which made Tarrin laugh.

"What time is it?" Tarrin asked Mist. She *always* knew.

"About an hour before sunrise," she answered. "We'll need to get an early start to make up for the time we lost to the early camp and the rain."

"Um, Lady Mist, Kimmie's your daughter, right?" Zyri asked.

"Yes."

"But I thought Kimmie was Tarrin's girlfriend, that she's the mother of two of his children."

"She is."

"And he said you're the mother of his son."

"I am."

"Well, um, uh," she hedged.

Mist gave her a piercing look. "Were-cats aren't humans," she told her. "Tarrin is my mate, but Were-cat natures don't let us stay together forever. When we can't stand each other anymore, we'll split up. When we do, he'll go back to Kimmie, or maybe go to Jesmind. The three of us share him, because we all love him. So we take turns being his mate."

Mist had to be the only person he knew that could say the word *love* and make it sound like so business-like.

"Oh."

"That's good, girl. Don't apply your human morals to us. We're *much* more different from you than we look," Mist told her.

"I'll try, but it's not easy," she admitted.

"We always want to think of others the same way we think of ourselves," Tarrin said absently. "It's a trait I've seen in many races, not just humans."

"Racial arrogance," Mist grunted. "We all think we're better than everyone else."

"True enough," Tarrin nodded. "You know, you should practice your human form, Mist. I'd like to have you around in something other than cat form more."

"I should take my belt back from Miranda," she growled. "Too bad you can't use Sorcery here. We could really use your Illusions."

"No use wishing for what you can't have," he told her.

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"I don't really care. Surprise me. Just put on a robe before you start. I'd rather avoid all of Ulger's impending comments."

"True," she agreed, standing up easily. She paused to put her massive paw on Zyri's head lightly, a touch of *fondness*, then she stalked back towards the tent she shared with him to dress. That surprised Tarrin just a little bit, because Mist's feral nature didn't allow her to act so comfortably with strangers. Then again, Zyri was still a child, if nearly an adult, and she'd demonstrated to him before that she rather liked the girl.

"Feel very, *very* lucky, little bit," Tarrin told her quietly.

"Why?"

"Mist likes you. She's *extremely* finicky when it comes to liking people. And since she does, my opinion of you just went up a few notches. Mist is never wrong when it comes to judging people."

Zyri blushed rosily, but said nothing.

Kimmie's trail, which had veered almost due west, was true to its course. They followed it during the morning, a morning marked with a difference this day, for Mist was riding one of the spare horses, in her human form. Tarrin had suggested she practice

her human form, and she had taken that as an order to do so. Sarraya kept intentionally calling Mist Miranda and Miranda Mist, which quickly aggravated both of them to the point where Sarraya spent a couple of hours trailing the group from a distance after Miranda used a Priest spell to freeze her to the spot over which she hovered, unable to move, which lasted nearly five minutes. It felt nice to Tarrin to have his mate riding beside him instead of in the saddle with him, able to talk to her and her able to talk to the others without relaying her words through Tarrin. She did look a little silly, however, for she didn't have a set of clothes that fit her smaller human body, and her clothes hung off of her like she was a girl playing dress-up, wearing her mother's dresses. She was just about Tarrin's size in her human form, just a little shorter, so after they stopped for lunch, he dug a spare shirt and pair of breeches out of his packs and gave them to her. He had no spare boots, so she was forced to go barefoot.

"I'm afraid I'm no cobbler, Mist," Miranda chuckled ruefully. "I could probably do it if I had the supplies, but I don't. I could sew you some leather shoes kind of like slippers, though."

"I don't care one way or the other, Miranda," Mist grunted in reply.

"Make them, if you would please," Tarrin told Miranda with a nod. "There might come a time when Mist may have to move around in human form, and she'll need shoes."

"You got it," Miranda said with a cheeky grin, a very alien sight considering she was doing it with Mist's face. "I'll make them tonight, when we stop."

"Hold," Azakar called, reining in at the top of a shallow rise, the bottom of which only Azakar could see.

"What is it?" Tarrin asked.

"Trouble," he said as Tarrin crowned the hill. He looked down and saw a large group of grayish-green skinned Waern—*orcs*, they called them orcs here—running to the south, towards the forest some half a day's ride away. Tarrin could see that this wasn't a complete band of Waern—*orcs*. These were females and children, and they had absolutely nothing with them. Whatever had happened, it had caused them to flee their encampment without taking anything with them, literally running for their lives. They weren't grouped up, they were a long line of stragglers as the faster ones outpaced the slower, and the youngest of the children who had been separated from their mothers were the ones lagging the furthest behind.

The cause of that rout came around the turn of the shallow valley to the north a moment later. It was a large column of red-uniformed men on horses, almost three hundred of them, and the thin sound of a trumpet or horn reached them as one of them sounded their pursuit. They were racing towards the fleeing orcs, swords and spears flashing in the noontime sun, blades that were already stained red with the blood of the band's warriors.

"Yay, the army's killing orcs!" Telven said excitedly.

Tarrin, however, was starting to feel the first stirrings of outrage. These soldiers were obviously intent on running down and slaughtering defenseless females and children. Tarrin had never had much love for Waern, and since they were Goblinoids, he had an ingrained hatred of them, but still, Tarrin could not stomach the idea that these men were about to kill *children*. That was the one thing that Tarrin would never willingly do, kill a child, no matter what race it happened to be.

“There’s no need for this,” Azakar said grimly. “They’ve beaten the band’s warriors. Running down and killing the women and children is going too far.”

“You Knights are too soft,” Mist told him with a growl. “The only good Waern are dead Waern. That band will join up with another band, and in five years you’ll have more Waern raiders.”

“Your racial bias against Goblinoids is talking, Mist,” Miranda said evenly. “Or would you strike down a Waern infant?”

“Yes,” Mist said brutally, giving Miranda a flat look. “I’m no simpering human, Wikuni. If you’re looking for mercy for Goblinoids, don’t look for it from me.”

That seemed to take Miranda back a little. But then again, it was more or less what Tarrin expected. Mist may have come a long way, but she was still feral, and she was capable of such actions. In his own way, so was he.

“Ah, but Mist, these aren’t *Waern*. These are *orcs*,” Haley told her.

“Different name, same Goblinoid,” Mist told him with a dangerous look.

“Regardless of our feelings, there is nothing we can do about this,” Dolanna said in a tone of finality. “Were we inclined to intervene, we would have to face far too many soldiers to handle. In this, we are forced spectators.”

“Well, I’m not watching it,” Miranda said with dignity, turning her horse around and starting back down the hill. “Come get me when it’s over.”

“I’m not either,” Sarraya agreed, flitting after the Wikuni.

“I have no desire to watch myself,” Dolanna announced, and she too turned her horse to go back down the hill.

Tarrin too didn’t want to watch this. Senseless destruction was something that he had too much of in his lifetime. And yet, he found that he could not turn away. He watched with cold, almost emotionless eyes as the soldiers bore down on the tail end of that disorganized band of Goblinoids, which was made up of mostly very small children and females who looked to be either old or lamed. He kept his outrage in check as they got closer and closer, even when some of them lowered their spears, and he flinched when the lead soldier stabbed his spear into the back of a fleeing female who had turned and threw her arms out to slow the advancing attackers, to protect the children. She collapsed to the ground and was trampled over by the horses, but she had managed to slow the lead elements of that attacking force for a few more seconds, giving her life to grant life to the others, if only for another moment.

He found himself unable to look away as the soldiers spread out and encircled the slowest of the fleeing orcs, trying to surround the entire host, an icy fury building up inside him to see what they were doing, and yet be unable to put a stop to it. He couldn’t fight them all, and that made him powerless to prevent what he knew was going to happen. He watched as the horses of the soldiers allowed them to race past the females and children on either side, then rein in and veer in front of them, cutting off their retreat. The sixty or so orcs were now surrounded by the humans on horseback, giving up their race and gathering in a tight circle, as the children cried and the females screamed in fear or anger, or perhaps both.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. It was generally over now. Not that the orcs ever really had a chance in the first place. But now they were trapped, unable to flee, and the soldiers had just ensured that they would kill them all without having to ride all over the place to chase down the singles that might escape, had they tried to kill them all by

chasing them down from behind. He opened his eyes and saw that the children were still on the hilltop; Jal looked confused, Telveen eager, and Zyri looked very sad.

"Down the hill," Tarrin told them, pointing towards where Miranda and Dolanna had gone.

"But I want to see!" Telveen protested. "They're gonna kill Defiled is all, we get to see it all the time on the stands back home!"

"Fool cub, you have no idea what you're talking about!" Tarrin snapped at him hotly, which made Telveen flinch. His sudden flash of anger made him forget himself, and he shapeshifted into his *true* form, which included the wings. Those wings flared out, suddenly turning bright red, a visible symbol of his growing anger. "Or have you forgotten that *you* were on that stand, and you'd be dead right now had if I hadn't have saved you?"

A thin squeal from the bottom of the hill got Tarrin's attention, and he turned to look. He wished he hadn't. One of the soldiers, just one, had darted his horse in close to the trapped orcs with a spear and used it to impale an orc child, no more than a toddler, and raised the body up over his head, still on his spear shaft. The child was not dead, convulsing and writhing on the shaft. And the soldier was laughing, as the others gave a great cheer at the slaughter of an innocent, at the cruel wounding of a *child*.

All shreds of rational composure were lost in the sight of that.

With a scream of such outrage that no voice could truly define it, Tarrin hurtled at the soldiers like a fiery missile fired from a catapult, wings trailing licks of fire behind him. His mind was consumed in a red haze of outraged fury, and there was nothing that mattered to him in the entire world in that moment than eradicating the mounted soldiers so thoroughly that not even their ashes would infect the grass beneath their feet. There were too many for him to take on as he was, so his infuriated mind recalled a memory of what he had done before, creating the shell of another form around him and joining to it, which would make him much larger, much more capable of dealing with a large group.

Expanding to massive size, Tarrin's wings exploded out to either side of him, then quickly collapsed around him as the enraged Were-cat willed them to do so, to begin the process of change that would transform him into another shape.

But this time, something was...different. It struck him so suddenly that it knocked him from his fury for a moment, as he felt the fire infuse *him*, reaching into his mortal form and touching what was there. In that fleeting moment of lucidity, he felt his body yield to the power of his fire, to the power of his divine power, and become fluid. Tarrin wanted size and power to deal with a large group of humans; well, the divine power within him, always seeking to do what Tarrin wanted of it and much more aware of what it was capable of than he who commanded it, responded to that desire.

To the others, it was an awesome sight. Tarrin's body simply melted away within the core of the fire, as it as well was transformed into living flame. He became a living entity without set form, able to mold the exterior of its borders at will, a true being of *change*, which was the representation of fire's impact upon the world.

The exterior of the fire suddenly billowed outward smoothly as Tarrin's mind reverted to memory, to experience. He needed to be able to take on three hundred men—or, more to the point, stop them from slaughtering the orcs. That didn't actually require combat if he could scare them enough, and if he wanted to scare someone, then he knew the perfect shape in order to do it. Tarrin's fire expanded, changed, twisted, grew,

growing bigger, and bigger, and bigger, until it hovered over the entire valley, taking on a solid, defined form, displaying a shape with which his friends were more than familiar. The fire completed that shape, and then, in a blinding flare of incandescence, the fire faded, retreating within the form it had just shaped, leaving behind true flesh and blood and bone in its stead rather than solid, living fire.

In an earth-shaking cloud of dust, Tarrin landed on the floor of the valley. His human form was gone, and in its place, stood a five hundred span long dragon with golden scales.

It could be said with certainty that *everyone* in that valley was absolutely stunned, including Tarrin. He had no *idea* he was capable of something like this! This was not creating a fireform and joining to it, this was real! Tarrin had *shapeshifted* into a form other than a human, cat, or his natural hybrid state! He had shapeshifted into a gold dragon, a true, living, breathing, gold dragon. He had the scales, the claws, the blood, the flesh, the bone, even the *breath weapons* of a gold dragon, he could sense it within himself. The change was absolute, complete, perfect in every detail save gaining the *mind* of a gold dragon. The Cat within objected violently to the taking of an unnatural form, but then it suddenly and mysteriously fell silent, as if it realized that this was nothing more than temporary, or perhaps that it found the shape to its liking. He wasn't sure. He had no idea how he had done it, had no idea he was *capable* of it. Tarrin had just crossed the threshold and expanded his power to shapeshift to include forms that was not natural to him. His wings, his power, seemed to have touched on that basic, ingrained ability within him and augmented it, allowing him to exceed his normal natural limitation. He seemed to understand, perhaps subconsciously, that his familiarity with dragons was the reason he was able to take the form, that and the fact that he had *touched* one, in the form of Sapphire. He had touched her, and in that touch, the understanding of how they were built from within was opened to him, just like he needed to have touched something in order to Summon it with Druidic magic. In that touch was all he needed to perform his magic. He had copied Fireflash's abilities into a dragon's body, merging them to form what he was now, which really was a gold dragon. After all, drakes were perfect replicas of the dragons they resembled...only much smaller. He understood in that moment of clarity that he could not shapeshift into any animal that he had not personally touched, and that change was absolute, gaining the powers and abilities of that creature, while retaining his own mind. He also understood in that moment of clarity that his own divine powers were locked away from him while he was shifted into another form, as his wings of fire, the source of his power, were not there. He could shapeshift back, but until he did so, all of his other powers were denied to him. He sacrificed them in order to do this, trading his divine powers for whatever abilities he would gain in taking a different form.

Shaking off the enormity of what he had just done, he looked down upon humans and orcs that looked no larger than beetles to him now, like little tin soldiers on wooden toy horses. The humans gaped up at him in terror, as they looked upon something so unimaginably huge that it defied rational explanation. The horses started to shy and prance as Tarrin, who seemed to have an imparted understanding of how this body worked, took a single step towards them, moving a forepaw, that zoomed him fifty spans closer to them in one lurch. It was almost dizzying, looking down from such a height, unused to how it changed his perspective, how much *smaller* everything looked to him

now. He took another step, and then his head was within striking distance of the closest of the humans, but they probably didn't understand that quite yet, since their ability to gauge the length of his neck was restricted by their point of view. Tarrin singled out the one who had impaled the orc child, who was now mercifully dead, and then his head lanced in with such speed that it shocked all the humans so badly that they were frozen in place. Massive jaws closed on that particular human, and he was killed instantly when Tarrin crushed him between his huge teeth, taking him right off his startled horse. The taste of blood in his mouth was pleasing to him, but he had no desire to eat human flesh, so he opened his mouth and flung the mangled body out to the side. It sailed for almost fifty spans before finally hitting the ground.

The humans and orcs alike were terrorized into near paralysis, though the horses were not so overwhelmed. They started whinnying in terror when Tarrin's dragon head retreated, trying to rear or pull away, but a single word from Tarrin, spoken in a certain manner that the horses would understand, the Druidic trick of addressing animals, calmed them.

"Anyone else going to kill an orc?" Tarrin asked in a sibilant tone, as he worked to make human speech from a maw not designed for it, his voice so deep it quivered the grass before him. "No? Good. Then all of you can drop your weapons right now and ride back the way you came, and never come back." He waited a moment, but nobody moved. "Now," he snapped.

The clatter of dropped swords and spears was tinny, high-pitched in his now much larger ears.

"Go," he ordered, rising up on his hind legs and pointing to the north. They seemed to understand that he was letting them go, so they spurred their horses quickly and bolted the way they came, wildly flailing their horses with the reins and kicking their flanks to make them go faster. Tarrin looked to the orcs, who stared up at him in terror, but he found that he had little love for them. He only wanted to stop the humans from killing the children, that was all. "Go," he ordered. "And bother the humans no more, unless they bother you first. That is my price for saving you."

Tarrin came back down on all fours and sat sedately, folding his wings behind him, as he watched the stunned orcs turn and run towards the south, continually looking over their shoulders. He felt a bit foolish, but his sense of outrage had been satisfied in killing the one who had killed the child, and he had managed to defuse the situation and prevent an atrocity without laying waste to the entire region and staining his standing with the children. That, in his opinion, was a good thing.

Sarraya flitted up over his snout, so tiny that she was almost invisible to him, and he heard her voice in his ears, so high-pitched it was almost funny, but he found that he could easily hear her. The main problem was that her voice sounded like a whisper, lacking any real power. Dragons, he discovered, had ears that were capable of hearing a truly stunning range of sounds as well as being exceptionally sensitive to the faintest sound, from the squeak of a mouse to those sounds so low, so deep, that only a dragon could make them, and only a dragon could hear.

"Ohmygosh, Tarrin, is that *you*?" Sarraya gasped, flitting up to his eyes, which was about fifty times bigger than she was. That close, he could make out her amazed expression.

Tarrin ignored her for a moment, looking down at Dolanna, who was riding up to him with a similarly amazed look on her face. “Dolanna,” he called. “I think you were right. That’ll teach me for not listening to you.”

“Is that an Illusion, dear one?” she called up to him. “A trick of light of the fire you create?”

“No. This is *real*,” he told her, holding out a monstrous forepaw. “I *am* a dragon. I shapeshifted into this form.”

“But that is not possible!” she gasped.

“It isn’t, except I have *these*,” he said, jerking the thumb on his forepaw behind him, motioning at the huge wings on his back. They were not his wings of fire, but Dolanna would probably understand what he meant. “They touched my shapeshifting ability and used it to do *this* to me. It’s a perfect result, though,” he admitted. “I even have the breath weapons.”

They all stared up at him in shock, and he started to understand all those things Sapphire used to talk about. “I know, I’m all big and impressive. Stop gawking at me,” he told them irritably.

That made Sarraya laugh, and that seemed to break the mesmerizing effect on the others.

“And people thought you were already big,” Miranda called up to him, shouting a little bit.

“You don’t have to shout, Miranda. I could hear you if you whispered.”

“I wonder if you could do that to one of *us*,” Haley said in contemplation. “Instead of just yourself.”

“That’s an intriguing idea,” Miranda told him.

“This is a huge change in your power, dear one,” Dolanna said seriously.

“Actually, it’s *small*,” he answered, looking down at her. “It didn’t take much at all for my power to do this, just nudge a power I already have a little bit. The *result* is just big. You forget, Dolanna, I *am* a shapeshifter. It’s part of my very being. My power used my own shapeshifting power to do this, not its own power. All my power did was let me pour myself into a different mold.”

Dolanna looked thoughtful for a long moment, and then she finally nodded in understanding. “Will you have trouble changing back?”

“Of course not,” he replied. He willed the change, and just like that, the process began. Tarrin’s body suddenly became fire, as the core of living fire that was Tarrin detached itself from the rest, returned to its normal size, and then reformed into his normal shape. The fiery shell then it evaporated like smoke, and Tarrin’s winged form became visible in the heart of it, until he was the only thing left. He slowly drifted down to the ground, his feet lightly touching the earth, and he started walking towards the others, who were now nearly a hundred spans ahead of him.

They all gawked at him, but none more so than the children, who all looked absolutely overwhelmed by Tarrin’s display.

“Dear one, we absolutely *must* talk,” Dolanna said breathlessly as Tarrin shapeshifted back into his human form.

“I know. But we’d better get going before they realize the dragon’s gone, and come back.”

“Yes, we still have to catch up to Kimmie.”

“The trail is over there,” Azakar announced, pointing back down the hill.

Tarrin remounted his large black stallion and retracted his wings, then turned his horse. “Let’s get moving.”

Chapter 5

Peace.

Sometimes it was hard to find among the others, but now, after what had happened the day before, it was even more elusive. Tarrin hadn't felt so self-conscious in a very long time, because they all wouldn't stop staring at him. He couldn't understand why, after all of the things they had seen him do over the years, that that one thing would suddenly make them gawk at him like frightened lambs.

In a way, he felt like staring at himself. He never *dreamed* he would be capable of something like that, and the strange thing was, it was a relatively *simple* trick. The size of the shape was no barrier to the ability, the only restriction was that he couldn't change into any animal or living thing that he had not previously touched. That was the only condition required to assume a form using that trick. It had been so, so *easy*, like it was something he should have realized he could do all along, but had never noticed until that moment. And the feeling of it, being that large, looking down on everyone like they were insects...no wonder dragons were so arrogant. It was hard to take someone seriously that would fit in the palm of your hand.

He'd brooded over it all afternoon, and after they made camp as well, taking watch once again to be alone. But still he brooded, staring into a fire that never needed to be fed, sustained by his own power without him even concentrating on it, because though the trick itself was an interesting one, the meaning of it very much had him worried. His powers were changing, they were *growing*, and that frightened him deep down inside himself.

Always before, the ability to separate himself from his power had provided a buffer, a way for him to feel *normal*. When his wings were hidden, he had no powers, nothing that distinguished him from everyone else, and that made him feel almost like he belonged. But now, now the power was changing inside of him, manifesting even without the wings, driving home the stark reality that he was *not* normal, and he did *not* belong in this world. He was an abomination, they called him, a creature that was neither mortal nor divine, with aspects of both yet truly belonging to neither group. It was his curse to walk the land and be among those who could never understand him, who would either be afraid of him or jealous of him, and be rejected by those who could, rejected and reviled because he was just enough like them to remind them that they were not as powerful and invincible as they believed. Too divine to be a mortal, not divine enough to be a god, he was trapped between the two, and that left him without any sense of inclusion. He was a singular, unique being, alone, and destined to remain so for the rest of his life. And that made him feel *alone*.

Strange that a Were-cat would have such a need to belong, but he did. Tarrin was born human, and he had always been surrounded by friends, by family, a core of people who had literally defined his existence. They still stood beside him, he knew they did,

but now, now they were starting to stare at him, now they were forgetting about *Tarrin* and seeing the *power*. That hurt, more than a little bit, but he also knew that it was a temporary issue. Once they got used to it, they'd start treating him like they always did. Azakar would be distant around him, Sarraya would annoy and insult him, Haley and Miranda would joke with him, Ulger would irritate him just a little bit with his comments, Dolanna would quietly guide him, and Mist would be there to support him. He could only hope that they would get over it soon, because he didn't think they understood how much their change in behavior towards him had upset him.

So much so that, after Ulger woke up and couldn't go back to sleep, he had left the camp to clear his head and sort things through. For Tarrin, that meant indulging in the one aspect of his divine power that he was never sorry he had, his ability to fly. Up high, above a deck of low clouds, Tarrin could find peace in the blowing of the wind, sanctuary in the cold bite of the thinner air, and a moment's peace communing with the stars. Hovering in midair, he stared up into the sky, trying to understand why he was changing, why his friends were starting to worry more about the change than they were about him, and worry about Kimmie and the danger this world put them all in.

Could this world be affecting his powers? It was certainly possible. This *was* a different world, after all, with its own set of rules concerning just about everything. Sorcery didn't work here, Druidic magic didn't work here, so maybe the rules for using divine powers were also a little different. Maybe it was like grounding; he had to spend time in an area to ground to it so he could Teleport back there, so perhaps he had had to spend time on this world for his power to attune to it, and maybe here, his powers were actually a little stronger than they were at home. There, the gods hated him, and actively strove to suppress him. Here, the only god he had truly sensed as being active was the One, and though the One certainly couldn't like him all that much, the One did *not* control this entire world. The One was a god of *man*, not one of the gods who controlled the Balance, gods who directed the world's primal forces. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he was certain of it. Those gods, well, he didn't know where they were, or if they even cared enough to bother to show themselves. The Elder Gods back home barely took notice of the mortals, for their attention was focused on keeping the world in harmony and maintaining the Balance. There was a good chance that the Elder Gods of this world simply didn't care about the struggles of the mortals. They were just a tiny fraction of the totality of the Balance, unnoticed until something they did, or something did to them, upset the Balance.

Gods. Maybe they *were* exerting themselves a little, for he was starting to feel just a little *manipulated*. He wasn't sure why, or how, but he had this strange, almost instinctual feeling that someone out there was goading him. Every time he lost his temper, he exhibited a new aspect of his power, and he couldn't shake the feeling that someone out there was *goading* that, setting up scenarios that were inciting him into reacting. Were they testing him to see how strong he was? The One certainly came to mind. He *knew* Tarrin was moving around, and by now, he had to understand that Tarrin was not just an extremely powerful mortal. Tarrin posed a viable threat to *any* god just because of who he was, because he possessed the power to destroy a god's icon. And since he'd already made it clear that he detested the One, it was possible that the One was directing his minions to set up atrocities in his path to test the extent of his power. It also showed that the One was willing to throw away a few hundred men, but not so willing to

throw away too many, else he'd send an army after Tarrin. If that were indeed the case, it was a tactical risk, exposing a smaller unit to attack to reveal the strengths of the enemy, and plan accordingly with the main bulk of one's forces. Put into those terms, the reasoning made sense, up to a point, because it made little sense to throw away men to test something he could discover by sending a single powerful Demon, so there was a nagging flaw in his reasoning. Though he had the feeling he was being pushed somehow, he wasn't sure who was doing it, or why.

This was supposed to be *easy*, damn it all. Just come here, track down Kimmie, search old books for lore, talk to people, find the Dwarves and information on the lost Ancients, and then go home with whoever they found that was willing to go with them. This wasn't supposed to turn into a game of hide and seek with a power-hungry god whose stranglehold on the land was a direct affront to Tarrin's sensibilities. It most *certainly* was never meant to become anything other than a mission to recover either people or information. But things were by no means easy now.

He was afraid. He knew himself enough to be able to admit that. He was afraid of the power in him, power that was starting to grow. He was starting to use it for more than the occasional joy flight now, actively use his power, something he had never done before. By never touching it, he had distanced himself from it, tried to ignore it, tried to pretend that it wasn't there just to delude himself into feeling that it didn't matter. But it *did* matter, and no amount of wishing could ever change that.

Bringing his sword out from the *elsewhere*, Tarrin gazed upon the black blade and pondered it for a long moment, feeling the curious warmth of the blade against the pad on his palm. What he wouldn't give to throw it away, it and everything it represented, just abandon this power within him and return to being mortal...being *normal*. But that was impossible now. The power came from the very core of him, inseparable by any definition. There would be no miraculous happenstance this time, like what happened when his Were nature was stripped from him by the curse the Elder gods placed on the Firestaff. The power came from his *soul*, it was his *soul* that had been forever and irrevocably altered. His was the soul of a god, a divine incarnation that had been forever changed in the moment of his ascension.

If he kept using his power, it was going to grow, and that chasm between him and the others was going to get wider and wider. It had already begun, with the shapeshifting. He would feel less and less like he belonged with them, and they would see him more and more as someone other than who he was. They would see the power instead of the man behind it. But that might be unavoidable, if he kept relying on his power to get them through this hostile world, and he kept *enjoying* the use of that power. He had enjoyed using his power to take on a new, different form. He couldn't deny that, any more than he could deny his love of his ability to fly.

It was times like this when he felt the separation from his mother, from Triana, from his sisters, and especially from his Goddess most keenly. Always before, whenever he felt lost or confused, one of his sisters, or his mother, or Triana could help him work through his problems. When it was a *big* problem, like this one, Niami was always there for him, ready to guide him, to reassure him, to support him as he struggled through and found a solution. But they were beyond his touch now.

Or were they?

All he needed was something linked to Sennadar, something ingrained into the fabric of that universe, and he could use it as a bridge to reach into his own world using a Wizard spell that allowed communication between two dimensions. Wizards most often used it to talk to Demons and other otherworldly spirits to gather information, but there was nothing stopping him from using it to talk to someone in *Sennadar*. He just needed a material link to his world. And he had the *Firestaff*. If anything—

—Wait. It wasn't there. Tarrin searched through the other place that was the *elsewhere* with a sort of sense of it provided by his amulet, a knowledge of what was held within it and where it was, and he found it was missing. Where did it go? He didn't take it out, not even once, since coming to this world—

Oh. That was right. Niami said it wouldn't allow itself to leave Sennadar, or they would have just tossed it through a gate to be rid of it. Obviously, the *Firestaff* had managed to extricate itself from the *elsewhere* and remained behind.

Odds were, it was lying in the snow in front of the gate. He hoped the Goddess or someone had the foresight to pick it up.

If he couldn't use the *Firestaff*, he needed something else. It had to be something that was inexorably tied up with the power of Sennadar, something that was bonded to his world in such a way that its fundamental identity could not be altered. Wizards often used weapons forged by Demons, weapons made of the stuff of the Abyss, which was so unique that it maintained a tie to its home dimension.

His sword might work. It was an artifact created on Sennadar, and the circumstances of that creation gave it a unique tie to his home world.

Then again, Sarraya's amulet was *perfect*. It met every condition. But, given that it was the only reason that she and Fireflash could survive here, he didn't want to tamper with that amulet in any way. He would try it with his sword first, and if that failed, and Sarraya and Fireflash agreed, he could try it using the amulet...but *only* if they had a dire need to talk to someone in Sennadar. He wouldn't risk their lives just because he wanted to talk to someone from home to help him work through his feelings. That would be unspeakably callous of him.

If only he could just Whisper, or bridge. But there was no Weave here, and Sorcery was denied to him. Things would be much easier if he could just use his Sorcery, because the Goddess would be within reach of him at all times, but that was quite impossible.

A faint flicker of light danced across the flat of the blade of his sword. At first, he thought it a reflection of the rising moon, that odd blue and green moon, but it was the wrong color. Tarrin ignored it, then he sighed and again looked up at the moon. He would save that for later, just in case he felt so lost or uncertain that talking to Niami was absolutely necessary.

Silly of him that he felt the need to run to Niami the instant he started feeling uneasy. He was an *adult*, for the tree's sake. He'd have to work out his problems himself.

The first step, he supposed, was not hiding from his power anymore. He had it, there was nothing he could do about it, and that was that. It was about damn time he accept that fact. He didn't have the time to be childish, he was putting Kimmie's life at risk by trying to hide from what he was. If finding and saving Kimmie meant that he could no longer pretend to be a mortal, then so be it. Her life was more important than any immature impulses he was suffering through.

No matter what it might cost *him*, the only thing that mattered was what it would cost *her*.

Lowering his sword, he looked into the sky, up at the stars, then looked down to the clouds below him.

It was time to grow up.

"I'll make you proud, Mother," he said quietly, to himself, then he straightened up a bit. "I'll make you proud, *Niami*."

I am always proud of you, kitten, her voice touched him, but as if it had come from a great distance.

"Mother?" he called in surprise.

That title no longer suits me, Tarrin, her reply came. *You are no longer my child, and I should no longer address you as one. If anyone has earned the right to call me by my name, it is you.*

"How are you doing this, Mo—Niami?" he asked.

I am doing nothing, Tarrin. You are.

"I am?"

You wanted to talk to me, and so you are. I would guess that now, you're strong enough to do it. I take it your powers are awakening?

"You knew this would happen?"

Tarrin, since when do I not know what's happening to you? she asked winsomely. *I knew that your powers would grow if you started using them. Always before, you've avoided doing that, but I would guess that since you have fewer options there, you've been forced to fall back on them.*

"More or less."

How goes it?

Quickly, Tarrin summarized their progress thus far in finding Kimmie. He told her about the One, and the troubles he was causing this world, and then explained the One's hatred of magic and non-humans and related what Merik had told them in Dengal.

Hmm. That might cause it, if it's true, she told him. *The spirits of my children haven't returned to me. I thought they were alive because of that, but if the One has trapped their souls in that world, then that would certainly explain it as well. You need to free them, Tarrin.*

"How do I do that?"

Easy. Open a gate to Sennadar. If the One is blocking the souls of my children from entering the Astral, then you need to give them another way to reach me.

"How do I do that?"

There are Wizard spells that create gateways between worlds, Tarrin. They're extremely powerful spells, and only the greatest of Wizards are capable of casting them, so naturally, Phandebrass can do it. Phandebrass has several versions of the spells in his spellbooks, but he can't use them in Sennadar. He's collected them over the years, you know how he is. You need to find him and tell him that he must cast one that has a sustained duration. The instant a gate is opened to Sennadar, I can call my children home. The One can't stop it.

"But the Elder Gods won't allow a gate into Sennadar," he protested.

I'll handle that from this end. Just find Phandebrass and tell him what we need. When he's ready, let me know, and I'll make arrangements with my mother.

“We’re on his trail right now, Mother,” he told her. “He’s with Kimmie.”

Then finding Kimmie is what’s important. When you recover her and Phandebrass, we can recall the souls of my children, and I can bring them home. And you can come home.

“That sounds strangely vehement, Mother.”

Niami, Tarrin. I’d much prefer it if you call me by my name.

“It won’t be easy thinking of you by any other name.”

You’re not a child anymore, Tarrin, she said with a light manner. I’ll have to find a new name for you as well. It just won’t do to call you kitten now.

“Niami, kitten sounds just fine.”

She laughed. Much as I love to call you that, it’s not suitable for you now. A name is an important thing, Tarrin. It is more than a way to call someone, it is a representation of who one is, and who one is to another. It’s no longer proper for you to call me Mother, so that must stop. And since I can’t think of you as a child anymore, I have to address you properly.

“You lost me.”

She laughed again. It’s a god thing, Tarrin. Well, actually, it’s a concept of all non-mortal beings, not just gods. A name has great power, just ask any Demon. The names they use aren’t their real names.

“I remember Kimmie teaching me about that. Now, why are you so vehement about me coming home?”

Let’s just say that the idea of you coming home isn’t sitting well with some of the others, she answered. They like you where you are. Out of their hair. But don’t worry about it, Tarrin. They are not going to do this to you. I won’t allow it.

“They don’t want me to come back?” he asked in disbelief.

Let me worry about that, Tarrin. They’re not going to treat you like this, not so long as I have an iota of life left in me. They often dismiss me because my power isn’t vital to the Balance, that I’m the only expendable Elder God. But they’re going to find out how powerful I really am, and just what happens when they cross me.

Tarrin blurted out a short laugh. He’d never heard her so, so, *indignant* before.

“What are you going to do?”

If they think the power of my magic isn’t all that important, well fine. They’ll have to learn how to live without it.

“What do you mean?”

Tarrin, the power they give to their Priests comes through me, she said with a little anger in her voice. If they want to act like frightened children and dismiss me when I assure them that you’re no danger, that’s fine. This child is about to storm away from the playroom in a tizzy, and she’s taking her toys with her.

What she was saying dawned on him. “Mother! You’re going to deny the Priests their magic!”

You better believe it, honey, she said smugly. If they want to act on something this important to me without even listening, then I see no reason to continue being nice. They want to play this hard, so hard is what they’re going to get.

“You’re going to get in a load of trouble!” he warned. “I’m not worth that much!”

I say you are. Prove me wrong.

She'd used that reasoning against him before. He'd had no answer for it then, and he still had no answer for it.

"But, but what about the Balance?"

Tarrin, dear, if you recall, I told you that magic is the only aspect of our world that isn't vital, she reminded him. Because of that, I can completely withdraw my power from the world and it will go on as it always did before. That gives me much, much more freedom than any other Elder god. Because the others have annoyed me, I'm going to withdraw the Weave from the other gods, and nobody, not even my mother and father, can force me to stop. And not just the Elder gods, Tarrin, all of them. The Youngers are going to scream bloody murder, and I'm just going to point to my parents and tell them that they'll have to take it up with Ayise and Shellar. Mother and father are going to have an absolute furor on their hands, but I'm not going to budge. Not a finger. Either they let you come home, or no Priest will so much as light a candle with magic ever again.

The image of that in his mind, of Ayise and Shellar in that other-dimensional place where they truly lived, trying to calm down a pack of furious Younger gods, was just too funny to keep silent. She was going to blackmail her parents into getting her way, and there was nothing that they could do to stop her. If she didn't allow the Younger gods to grant magic to their Priests, the worshippers that gave them their power may lose faith in them and stop believing, and that would make them weaker. Niami was playing a major trump card, because she was manipulating the Younger gods into rallying together and demanding that the Elder gods relent on this issue. If nobody could truly force Niami to stop, then she held every Younger god in the palm of her hand...and she was about to close her fist around them and squeeze. "Niami, you're something else, do you know that?"

I know I am, she replied impishly. Just leave it to me, Tarrin. I'll get my way, one way or another. My parents and my brothers and sisters often overlook me, but they will not ignore me for long.

Tarrin couldn't help but laugh. "Mother, you're going to throw the entire world on its ear. I do appreciate the thought, though."

I told you not to call me that anymore, she said sharply. Brand it into your memory, Tarrin. I am not Mother to you anymore. Find another nickname for me, or call me by my name.

"It's not going to be easy. I've always thought of you as *Mother*."

Well, you'll have some time to adjust before you get home. I'll just have to think of something else to call you that sums up my feelings for you.

"Mother—Niami, it would please me if you just called me *kitten*," he said honestly. "Not as a term addressing me as a child, but as a term of endearment. It pleases me when you call me that."

Well, if that's what you want, then kitten is who you will be, she told him with a warm voice. But no more a child.

"I'm starting to feel less the child," he said seriously. "If I'm going to bring Kimmie, Phandebrass, and the souls of my brothers and sisters home, I'm going to have to suck it up and do for myself. There's no *Mother* here to hold my paw this time. I didn't anticipate running into a problem like the One, but I'll find a way to do what I promised I'd do. I won't fail you, Niami."

Tarrin, when a girl puts her trust in you, she cannot go wrong, she told him seriously.

Tarrin looked down, flattered by her complement, and then he noticed for the first time the ghostly white aura surrounding the blade of his sword. It almost looked like, like...*magelight*. He brought the sword up to his eye level and studied the nimbus, which hovered around the blade in smoky wisps. He felt nothing from the sword, but that wasn't unusual, for he rarely felt any kind of power coming from it.

"Well, Niami, I think I see how I'm doing this now," he said with a hint of curiosity in his voice. "Or, more to the point, my sword. *It's doing this.*"

Truly? Well, we knew the sword had power. And I'm certainly not going to complain.

"Me either."

You should look into that, kitten. The sword obviously has some other abilities outside of its ability to grant you your true power. Those abilities might be useful to you.

"It's never done this before," Tarrin mused in curiosity.

It's never needed for you to have it do it before, Niami told him. *It's reacting to your need, kitten. Artifacts do that when they're in the hands of the person they were created to serve. It's tied to you, Tarrin, and that means that its power is also growing. You and that sword are linked. Changes to you are going to affect it as well.*

"I didn't think it would work that way."

Well, kitten, an artifact's power depends on the god who created it, and it's not static. If a god's power grows or weakens, the power of the artifact changes to reflect that.

"I'm not a god anymore."

No, but that power remains, and that power is what created the sword. That power is changing, and so the sword's power is also going to change.

"Oh."

Niami chuckled. *You still have much to learn about the power of gods, kitten.*

"That's no lie." He looked down, and saw a glint of shimmering light among the clouds below. Even from that distance, he knew that that glint was off Sarraya's multicolored wings. "Sarraya's looking for me. I think it's time to go."

Alright, my kitten. Now that you know how to do this, don't be a stranger. I miss talking with you, and I worry about you terribly because I can't sense you.

"I'll be fine, Niami. Please tell everyone I'm alright, and that I'm working on getting home as fast as I can."

I will.

"I'll try to contact you again in a few days."

I'll be waiting. Fare well, Tarrin, good luck, and I love you.

"I love you too, Niami," he said, and then, unsure of how to make the sword stop, he simply sent it back into the *elsewhere*. He looked down at the approaching Faerie, and he had to admit that he felt much better now. He knew he had to be more mature, more responsible, but it also felt good to get a little guidance. And besides, it made him feel better to talk to Niami, it always did, and it probably always would. He felt a new feeling of purpose, and he also knew that his change in plans was alright with her, that he had made the right choice, was doing the right thing. That mattered to him, mattered very much. He looked up at the moon once more, and felt, for the first time in a while, that things were progressing in a satisfactory manner. He knew that working around the One wasn't going to be easy, and he also knew that there was a direct confrontation coming when he tried to free the souls of the Ancients from the One's prison, but he felt much

more confident about it now. He was here for a reason, and that reason was what he had to keep in the forefront. His personal outrages over the One kept clouding the issue, and he had to stop letting that happen. He was here to recover the Ancients, and hopefully the Dwarves, and bring them home. He was also here to get Kimmie and Phandebrass back, and take them home as well. He also had to find a good home for the children...or, if they wished it, take them home with him as well. He wouldn't mind taking them in, not one bit. Truth be told, he rather liked having them around.

Sarraya was panting when she reached him, flopping on her stomach on his shoulder. "Geez, Tarrin, do you think you could have gone a little higher?" she asked acidly. "You know I can't fly well in thin air!"

"I didn't know you were coming."

"How else are we going to get your attention when the clouds block your view of the ground?" she wheezed.

"What do you need?"

"There's more church soldiers on the move," she said breathlessly. "They might be the same ones, we don't know, but they're moving in from the west. Dolanna wants you back, we're about to move out."

"We're *going* west," he fretted. "We'll have to go through them."

"We're going to circle around them. Haley scouted them, there's about two hundred or so on horseback, and we can get around them. We might have to kill a few scouts, but we can get around them without too much trouble." She crawled up and then sat down properly on his shoulder. "Miranda's put a marker on Kimmie's trail, so we won't lose it. I wish I knew how she did that," she grunted.

"Priest magic," he answered.

She slapped him on the neck. "I know that, you dingleberry!" she said indignantly. "Don't get cute with me, Tarrin! I'm in a bad mood from having to fly halfway to the moons to come get you!"

"Excuse me," he said mildly, but the banter was obvious in his voice to those who knew him.

"I hate you," she growled. "Come on, let's get back. You're holding the rest of us up."

It was a simple matter to fly down, and when he got under the clouds, he saw that the camp was packed, and everyone was mounted. Mist and Haley were gone, out scouting the soldiers, most likely, and they were waiting. Tarrin descended and landed lightly in his saddle, then retracted his wings. Fireflash was on Zyri's shoulder, and he kept making the girl giggle by flicking his tongue against her ear. He was playing with her, Tarrin could tell, doing it on purpose. Jal looked half asleep, and Telven looked both nervous and excited at the sudden packing of the camp before dawn, and the impending maneuver to go around the soldiers.

"I am sorry to come fetch you, dear one, but we did not want you to come down and find us gone."

"It's nothing, Dolanna," he said with a wave of his paw. "Thanks for giving me the time. I feel better now."

"That is what matters, then," she said, walking her horse over to his and reaching out to pat his furred forearm.

"Haley and Mist are out scouting?"

Dolanna nodded. "Azakar, has Haley waved us forward?" she asked the Knight. "I know he saw Tarrin descend."

"Hold on, I can't see him now," Azakar answered, taking off his helmet. Tarrin saw a faint light wave back and forth in the darkness to the west. "There he is. He's waving us up."

"Then let us go," Dolanna ordered.

"What's that light?" Tarrin asked.

"One of my spells," Miranda answered. "It imbues light on an object. I cast it on a few pebbles and gave it to them so they can signal us."

"Clever."

"I've been around the block a few times, Tarrin," Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

"Put on your Illusion, Miranda. That white fur all but glows in the darkness,"

Dolanna instructed.

"Oh. Forgot about that," she said, and then her image blurred for a second before changing into the visage of Mist's human form.

"Want me to move up with Haley and Mist?" Tarrin asked Dolanna.

"No. I like to keep one Were-cat with the host at all times, dear one. That is significant defense if anyone should attack the children or the horse train."

"Or *you*," Ulger told her.

"I have you and Azakar to defend me, Ulger," she told him with a light tone. "A girl cannot get much more protection than that."

Miranda and Ulger looked at each other. "A Were-cat," they said in unison, then they both laughed.

"Give me a few minutes to rest, and I'll get out there and help Haley and Mist," Sarraya told them.

"No, Sarraya, you rest," Dolanna told her. "Mist and Haley can manage."

Following directions from Haley, Azakar led them in a wide circle around the host of church soldiers. They got within a longspan of them at one point, but the men hadn't noticed the group of travelers. They would realize that something was wrong, though, because they passed the corpses of two men in church uniforms along the way. Both of them had been mauled, Mist's work, as he realized she was making their deaths look like some kind of animal attack. Mist's claws could easily pass for bear marks now that her paws were bigger.

Mist was an effective path clearer, for they encountered no major problems as they circled the eastbound soldiers. They stumbled back on Kimmie's trail, which had angled slightly to the south, and then they returned to following it after Haley and Mist rejoined them.

"That went well," Haley said in satisfaction. "I forgot how fun it can be to stalk."

"You should get out more. You're as quiet as a flock of ravens fighting over a carcass," Mist admonished him.

"I was quiet enough," he said with a wink at her, which made her snort and give him a flat look.

"How many were you forced to kill, Mist?" Dolanna asked.

"Nine," she answered.

"Woah! You killed nine men and nobody noticed?" Telven asked in surprise.

"I know what I'm doing, boy," she said, giving him a look that made him a little intimidated. "I'd be a sorry hunter if I couldn't pick off a straggler on the edge of the herd."

"You make them sound like food," Telven said, making a face.

"They're not, but the basic premise is the same," she told him. "Sometimes you'd be surprised how often humans act like herd animals. I think you're distantly related to sheep."

"As long as we're smarter than sheep, I won't say a word," Ulger chuckled.

They continued on at a brisk canter after sunrise and well into the morning, stopping only briefly for breakfast. They stopped again briefly for a quick lunch of bread and cheese, and then stopped once more in the midafternoon as Kimmie's trail abruptly turned south. "What is that girl doing?" Mist growled as they turned to follow. "She's just zigzagging around out here. That's stupid."

"Not if she's being followed," Haley said seriously.

"This is open territory. She can zigzag when she hits forest. You don't waste time when you're exposed, you run straight for cover," she answered shortly.

"Mist does raise a point," Dolanna. "What *is* Kimmie doing? I do not understand her reasoning for turning. They have followed this westerly course for days. Why the abrupt change?"

"I'm sure we'll find out when we catch up to her. We can ask," Ulger reasoned.

"Hold on, the path turns west again," Azakar said, holding his hands up to his eyes to shield them from the sun angling on from his left. "She only went south about half a longspan."

"Alright, now *that* doesn't make much sense," Ulger agreed. "Rabbit," he called, pointing.

As they'd been doing all day, all three children quickly took out their slings and loaded them, then tried to hit the rabbit. Telven got his stone off first, but was nearly three spans off the mark. The rock scared the rabbit, which turned and bolted, and that caused Zyri's stone to also miss. Jal came closest, trying to lead the rabbit, but it turned and raced the other way, which caused his stone to miss. Had the rabbit not turned, Tarrin saw, he probably would have got it.

"Aww!" Telven growled in disappointment.

Without much concentration, Tarrin smoothly pulled his bow from the saddleskirt, knocked it with an arrow out of the quiver hanging from the saddlebow, shook Fireflash off his shoulder so he could aim, and then sent the arrow flying at the rabbit. It looked to be off course, but the rabbit suddenly turned back into the arrow's path, which caused it to skewer the animal squarely through the body, killing it instantly.

"Rabbits always zigzag when they run," Tarrin instructed them as he dismounted. "You have to remember that."

"That wasn't bad though," Ulger said. "You got a little too excited there, Telven. Don't loose if you're not calm enough to make a good shot, or you'll scare the food away. You were pretty close too, Zyri, at least if it hadn't have run. And Jal, I think you'd have got it if it hadn't have turned. That was a good lead."

Jal smiled bashfully.

“You three had better buck up, though. Tomorrow, *you’re* getting our dinner. So if you don’t bag anything, none of us are going to eat. And you don’t want to know how surly I get when I’m hungry,” Ulger warned with a rakish smile.

“I’ll try, Master Ulger,” Zyri told him.

Tarrin fetched his rabbit and carried it back to the horses. “Dinner?”

“I’m sick of rabbit,” Miranda said, making a face. “I want something out of the stores tonight. We can save it for tomorrow.”

“There’s not much dried meat left, and all the fresh meat is gone,” Mist warned.

“Beans and porridge is about all I can muster, or maybe a vegetable stew. I’m saving that meat.”

“Why?”

“Because eating meat makes riding in the rain easier to take,” she answered.

“Mist, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It may not to you.”

“We do need to find a settlement soon, to replenish our stores,” Dolanna said.

“Or hunt up something other than rabbit,” Azakar said. “There’s been a few herds of what look like elk.”

“We should hit humans again soon,” Sarraya piped in. “Their road went off to the northwest from Dengal. We went north, now we’re going west, and there were those soldiers. We can’t be too far from a village or something. Maybe close enough to see. I’ll go up and have a look around,” she offered.

“That is a good idea, before we lose the day’s light,” Dolanna agreed. “We might have to leave the trail long enough to find a place to buy food. Go ahead, Sarraya.”

“I’ll be right back,” the Faerie announced, flitting up from Telven’s shoulder, then quickly rising straight up over the group.

“If we’re taking a minute, I think I’ll get down and stretch my legs a bit,” Haley called, then he dismounted.

“There’s a village over there, southwest!” Sarraya shouted down after descending low enough to be heard. “It’s a little one! And I think I see the walls of a town off to the west!”

“How far?” Dolanna called to her.

“We can get to it by midmorning tomorrow,” she shouted back down. “The village is about an hour’s ride away!”

“I think we can go on to the town,” Dolanna decided. “The village might not have what we need, and we need to limit our contact with the citizens of this land as much as possible.”

“Why?” Telven asked.

“Because it prevents...accidents,” she replied, glancing at Tarrin.

“Those aren’t accidents,” Ulger chuckled. “I’d say that they were pretty darn deliberate.”

Tarrin gave Ulger a cool look, which made the Knight laugh. “Hurry up Sarraya, before I get peeled out of my armor!”

“It would serve ya right!” she shouted back down. “I don’t see anything else, I’m coming back!”

“Shall we move on a little more or camp now?” Miranda asked, as Sarraya flitted down and landed on Tarrin’s other shoulder.

“Let us make the most of the daylight,” Dolanna announced. “Haley.”

“I’m ready,” he said, swinging back up into the saddle. “I wouldn’t dream of holding us back, Dolanna.”

They approached the town about midmorning, and saw that it was set on a river than flowed from north to south in a shallow valley on the grasslands. The land inside that valley was cultivated, and there were a large number of small villages, collections of hovels, and some lone farmsteads up and down that shallow valley for nearly two leagues in both directions. The town itself was quite large, about the size of Ultern, taking up both sides of the riverbank, and most of the shallow valley floor where it was situated. It was surrounded by a stone wall that was about thirty spans high and looked to be about fifteen spans thick, but it wasn’t easy to tell from the distance at which he was viewing it. There was a guard tower at a road some longspan or so south of where they were, at a road leading southwest, and another two guard towers on the opposite side of the valley, guarding roads that went west and northwest. There were small outpost-like guard houses at regular intervals along the valley’s rim, each of which was manned by ten men in the uniforms of church soldiers. Each guard house was only a few minutes away from the one to each side by horse, and there were horses tethered to posts behind each shack.

This was a town, Tarrin saw, that felt threatened by something. Then again, fear was how the One kept control, so it wasn’t a shock that they were afraid.

They rode south to get on the road, earning several very long looks from the guards at the houses and the tower that they passed, then rode down into the valley and towards the city. Peasants dressed in rough homespun smocks, many without shoes, toiled in the fields, and Tarrin noticed that they were under the watchful eye of nearby church soldiers, and even the occasional black-clad Priest or church official overseeing the farming effort. The children looked a little antsy, but Tarrin just gave them a long look to calm them down as they rode along the raised road through the fields, a road that was pitted and rutted, though dry and packed hard. It had not rained since that spat through which they had ridden several days ago, the road reflected that.

They waited behind a caravan of four wagons and about twenty men who had the looks of mercenaries about them, who were on horses immediately behind the horses at the city gates. The guards inspected each of the wagons as the drivers waited, and then they were waved through. They waited and watched, and Tarrin glanced at Mist, who was actually in her human form, riding one of the new horses. She and Miranda looked eerie together, but anyone who looked at them would probably just think that they were twins. Dolanna urged her horse forward, taking the place of the first wagon before the guards standing in the way of the opened city gates.

“What business do you have in Teram?” the tallest of the ten men asked in a bored voice.

“We seek to buy supplies in order to continue our journey,” Dolanna answered him.

The man glanced at her, then snorted. “Funny, having a *woman* address me. Now someone with a brain tell me why you’re here.”

“You’d better listen to the lady, my friend,” Haley told him lightly. “Or she’ll have you beheaded on the spot.”

At that, Azakar immediately drew his sword.

The man’s bored expression evaporated instantly. “Here now, what business is this?”

"This *woman* is a *Lady*," Azakar told him in a *very* dangerous tone. "Address her with respect. If she gives the order, I'll take your head off."

Though the man had never seen the black armor of the two Knights, the immediate threat of that monstrous sword was not lost on the man. "M-My apologies, my Lady," the man said, bowing suddenly.

"Must we go through this at every city gate we visit?" Dolanna asked Tarrin in Sharadi, obviously exasperated.

"Prejudices die hard," he shrugged in reply.

"Stand aside," Dolanna ordered the man in Penali. "Once we have our supplies, we will be away from your city and bother you no more."

"No horse or wagon enters Teram without being searched," he said gruffly.

"I am sure that that edict does not apply to nobles," Dolanna told him in a stern manner. "I have yet to be searched at any city I have visited thus far. I will not submit to such a search now."

"If you want through this gate, you will be searched," the man said stubbornly.

"Right, just like those caravan guards were searched," Haley said with a sly look.

"Or does the search rule only apply to people you don't like?"

"They weren't pack horses," the man replied.

"But they went through without being searched," Haley objected.

"Tarrin, do you have any spellbooks in the pack horses?" Dolanna asked him quietly in Sharadi as Haley engaged the guard in a short argument. "Anything we do not want them to find?"

"Not that I can think of, but if they search us, they'll see our amulets. You know what those mean here," Tarrin answered.

"Here now, do you want us to think you're witches?" the man snapped. "Where do you come from that you don't speak Penali?"

"We come from a small island nation far to the east," Dolanna told him. "Only recently brought into the church. If our use of our native language offends you, then perhaps you should not listen."

The man's face reddened, and Tarrin saw that this was about to get out of hand. It wasn't like Dolanna to be so combative, but then again, he'd seen already that she had issues with people thinking that she was some kind of dumb animal because she was a woman. He stepped his horse up in front of Dolanna and leaned his elbow down on the saddlebow, getting closer to the guard. "Alright, listen," Tarrin said in a very reasonable tone. "We need supplies. That's all we're here for. You can have half the city guard follow us around if you want, that's just fine, but you're holding us up, and we have to be done and on our way before we lose too much daylight. So, you can search our pack train, but since you didn't search the men in front of us, then you're not searching us. So, do the search and let us go on."

"Not without a search of all horses, you're not," he said adamantly. "No horse passes this gate without being searched."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Fine, then. Fireflash."

The gold drake, who had been sitting on the saddle behind the saddlebow, jumped up and sucked in his breath, then blasted a cloud of greenish gas in the man's face. He

gasped in surprise, and that intake of air was all it took. He shuddered, then collapsed to the ground in a boneless heap.

“Witchcraft!” one of the other men screamed, moving to draw his sword.

“Please,” Tarrin snorted. “Haven’t you ever seen a drake before? They’re native to my homeland. Witchcraft,” he said scornfully. “Now then, anyone else want to get ugly?”

Fireflash put his forepaws on Tarrin’s forearm, over the saddlebow, and hissed at the men threateningly, then snorted out just enough greenish gas from his nostrils to make the men take notice of it. Tarrin’s dismissal of their claims of witchcraft seemed to have dissuaded them from that idea, most likely because of the manner in which he did.

“Wha-yoodoo-tamee?” the paralyzed guard slurred, his arm twitching jerkily.

“Making you more tractable,” Tarrin answered him, then he looked up at the other guards. “I hate having to talk over idiots. Now, I don’t have a problem with you searching the pack horses, but since you let the guards ahead of us pass unsearched, you won’t lay a hand on our mounts or us. Understand?”

The remaining guards nodded, glancing at the paralyzed man repeatedly. “What about our sergeant?” one asked.

“The animal in my lap here can breathe out a gas that paralyzes anything that comes into contact with it. The effect only lasts a few moments. He’ll be fine in a little bit, but he’ll have one serious headache after it wears off.”

They stood there, staring at him.

“Well? Get on with it.”

They did so, quickly and with surprising thoroughness. To their credit, they didn’t tear up the packs, and Haley and Miranda watched to ensure that nothing disappeared, but the men searched all their packs quickly and without making a fuss about anything.

“Move along,” one of the others said to them as the man on the ground, whom the others had not touched, started moving jerkily.

“You’ll be able to move again in a few minutes,” Tarrin told the man steadily. “The effect is temporary. Effective, though.”

“Quite,” Miranda said with a smile at him.

They rode into town, which was much different than Dengal. Everything about this town revolved around farming. The streets were wide, to accommodate wagons, and rudely dressed peasants walked the streets with the finer dressed townsfolk, displaying the odd separation between the classes that Tarrin had never seen anywhere on Sennadar. Most of the space near the gate was taken up by large warehouses, and peasants were loading wagons to either side of the street, under the watchful eye of uniformed men.

“This must be a main food producer,” Haley noted as they moved past warehouses, into a residential area of sorts with shops scattered here and there along the buildings. “It looks like almost all the food they grow here goes somewhere else.”

“And they don’t let the peasants eat any of it,” Miranda added, looking back over her shoulder. There were no peasants where they were now. “It’s almost a crime that those people are so thin when they’re surrounded by food. It must be torture for them to be hungry and have it *right there*, but not allowed to so much as take a grain of wheat.”

“Kikkalli certainly wouldn’t approve,” Tarrin said, saying aloud what Miranda was thinking.

Miranda nodded grimly.

“Let us get this finished quickly,” Dolanna announced. “Tarrin and Haley will see to our stores, and the rest of us shall wait here. Take the pack horses and hurry, dear ones,” she told them.

“Why the change?” Ulger asked.

“We did not enter the town on the best of terms, Ulger,” she answered. “It will be best for us to stay together as much as possible. Tarrin and Haley can handle themselves, and what is more, they are used to operating either alone or in small groups. They will be more than safe.”

“Can we at least get down off the horses?” Telven asked plaintively.

“We can rest in that park over there,” Dolanna said, pointing to a patch of grass between two buildings a little further down the road, which had several children within it, playing with strange wooden hoops which they rolled about the lawn with sticks.

“That looks fun. Maybe I can show them my sling,” Telven said eagerly.

“We’ll get this done as fast as we can,” Haley assured them. “Anything special we should pick up?”

“Fresh meat,” Mist told him. “And more vegetables for stew.”

“It does not matter, so long as you hurry,” Dolanna told them.

“We’ll just surprise you then,” Haley said with a sly smile. “I’ll have to find something worthy of you, Dolanna.”

“Haley,” she said flintily.

He laughed, then took the reins Ulger offered to him. “Come on, my Lord. Let’s go shopping.”

“Fireflash, stay with Mist,” Tarrin ordered, picking the drake up from the saddle, and lobbing him into the air. He unfurled his wings and flapped over to Mist, landing on her shoulder, then sliding around the back of her neck to stand between her shoulders so he could look back at him.

“I’m coming with you,” Sarraya whispered from his other shoulder. He’d forgotten that she was there.

“Fine.”

Tarrin and Haley split up further down the street, after each of them agreed on what they were going to buy. Haley was going to handle meat, bread, and cheese, and Tarrin was going to handle vegetables, grain, meal, and perhaps some wine to accent the meagre fare. They secured directions to shops from a citizen, and got down to business. Tarrin found almost everything he needed in a single greengrocer’s, who had almost everything Haley needed as well. He unobtrusively sent Sarraya to go tell Haley about the place, and bought all the vegetables that they needed, four large bags of meal for porridge, a large sealed clay jar of raw flour, and even managed two baskets of fine-looking eggs and a small cask of ale. With that much, they had not only ready-made food available, but had the supplies on hand to make others from scratch if needs be. Haley met him at the door as he started loading it on his pack horse, and quickly moved in to buy most of what he needed as well.

“I just need meat now,” Haley said as he finished his shopping, and Tarrin helped him load it on his pack horse. “The merchant suggested a butcher just down the street. Want to come, or are you going back?”

“I’ll tag along with you,” Tarrin answered.

The butcher to which they had been directed was more than happy to see them, given that Haley all but bought him out of dried beef and mutton, bought a large amount of salted pork, and also bought nearly an entire butchered cow. “Ye must be feedin’ an army, good Master,” the thin, smallish butcher said, rubbing his hands before his bloodstained apron nervously.

“No, just people who eat a lot,” Tarrin answered, which made the little man laugh in a wheezing voice. “Road travel makes a fellow hungry.”

“That it does, that it does. Off to see the world, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, y’uns be careful,” he said. “The One be with ye, and thank you for the business.”

“Any time,” Haley told him with a smile.

They left the little man’s shop with everything they needed except the wine. “The greengrocer warned me off on that,” Tarrin told Haley. “He suggested a cask of ale instead. He seemed to know what he was talking about, so I decided to take him up on it.”

“His shop wasn’t exactly swanky, Tarrin, and good wine isn’t cheap,” Haley nodded. “I think we can work with the ale. Dolanna doesn’t much like ale, but she can always drink tea.”

“How much tea did you bring?” Tarrin asked.

“Enough to keep her on her toes for at least another month,” he answered with a grin. “One of my bags is full of nothing but tea.”

“I was curious about that.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t smell it,” Sarraya told him from her invisible hiding place on his shoulder.

“How much have I been in my natural form lately, Sarraya?”

Haley laughed. “I’m not the only one packing a secret. Didn’t you wonder what that little barrel is that Ulger brought?”

“Gunpowder,” Tarrin answered. “Kerri gave it to us. Ulger wanted more, but Kerri didn’t think it was too good of an idea to give him too much. He might get bad ideas.”

“That does sound like Ulger,” Haley winked. “I didn’t know you knew about it. I thought Ulger was keeping it a secret.”

“Why do you think I’m keeping Fireflash away from it?” Tarrin asked.

Haley laughed. “Good idea.”

“I wonder,” Tarrin said, watching two women in wool dresses walk by. Neither woman was exactly pretty, but their dresses were of good quality, of different shades of blue. “How they got into this situation.”

“You mean, how the One got so much control? Odds are, the One started out much like Val did.”

“But on this world, he *won*,” Tarrin said grimly.

“More or less,” Haley nodded. “The gods of this world either underestimated him or didn’t care, and he took control. I know you’ll hate me for saying this, but it does look like he did a better job at running things than Val would have,” he admitted. “I don’t like his methods any more than you do,” he said quickly, “but at least he managed to build *something*. Val would have destroyed the world.”

“You think so?”

“Val was about *control*,” Haley told him. “After he got it, that need to control would have eventually destroyed everything. That’s what’s happening here, or at least the start of it.” He swept his hand out. “The One wants to control everything. He doesn’t yet, else he wouldn’t be fighting a war back on the other side of Dengal. He’s built this society to gain that control. All of them, they’re nothing but elements in his grand army of conquest, from the highest-ranking general to the oldest peasant. And that’s what keeps this society together. But after the One *gets* control, then all of this will turn on itself. His need to control will destroy everything he’s built.”

“I never took you for a thinker, Haley,” Tarrin said soberly, nodding. Haley’s words made a certain amount of sense.

“I’m three hundred years old, Tarrin,” he chuckled. “Once you live that long, you’ll start thinking about things whether you want to or not.”

“What do you think’ll happen?”

“As long as the One has something left to conquer, then this will work,” he said. “But the minute he finishes, then it’s over. That’s what happened to the Urzani empire. After they conquered the world, they had nothing left to do. Their society turned decadent, and they were eventually destroyed. It took a thousand years, but it did happen.” He bent down and picked up a small piece of straw lying on the dirt street. “No society that stagnates, that thinks it has nothing left to do, can survive. That’s why the Younger Gods and the Wikuni gods back home always push us. They want us to grow, to reach new levels, to expand and find new paths. Gods like Val and the One, they want everything to *stop*, to be the same for all time. Like the creation of a perfect world where nothing ever changes. It doesn’t work, because people *need* challenges, need to change and grow. The Urzani taught us that.”

“That’s profound.”

“That’s Miranda,” Haley admitted with a chuckle. “She explained that to me.”

“I’d say that Miranda is much more the Priestess than even I thought,” Tarrin said quietly.

“You should sit down and talk with her some evening,” Haley told him. “You’d be amazed at what you can learn.”

“I can see that,” Tarrin replied.

They walked the pack horses back to the little grassy park, but to his surprise, saw that not everything was well. Zyri was crying, being held by Dolanna, and Mist and Miranda were nowhere to be found. Tarrin glanced at the town’s children, who were still playing with their toys in the grass, but his attention was focused on Dolanna. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Telven and Jal are missing,” she answered. “They were playing with the other children, and we were letting them. After so much time in the saddle, we thought it would be good for them. But when we looked back to check on them, they were gone.”

“Mist’s tracking them,” Ulger told him. “It took a bit of doing hiding her so she could, you know.”

“Fireflash went with her?” Tarrin asked.

Dolanna nodded.

“How long ago did you notice they were gone?”

“Not long after you and Haley left,” she answered.

“Well, it looks like they went full circle,” Azakar said, pointing down the street. “There’s Jal.” Tarrin looked down the street, and saw the young boy, running towards them. He had a whitish rod of some kind in his hand.

“Hold on, why is he holding a club?” Ulger asked.

“That’s *ice*,” Tarrin said. “He used his power. I told him not to!”

Tarrin stepped up when Jal got close to them, and caught the boy by his shoulders. He was dancing in place, and his eyes were wild and fearful. “Drop it,” Tarrin ordered, and the boy dropped the shard of ice. “What’s the matter?”

Jal looked to try to say something, but nothing would come out of his mouth. He instead turned and pointed back the way he came. Tarrin looked over Jal and down the street, and saw a large complement of church soldiers and Priests, some on horseback, and on the lead horse, riding with a Priest, was *Telven*!

“That’s them!” Telven shouted. “They’re the witches, and one of them is one of the Damned!”

Tarrin was absolutely stunned. Telven *betrayed* them! Tarrin’s mind swam in an ocean of disbelief, and he could only stare at the men who were racing towards them, trying to rationalize it. But *why*? He had saved Telven from death, had taken care of him, had shown him kindness and given him a place where he could belong...and this is how he repays them? After the church of the One tries to kill him, Telven goes back to them? Why? Why, for the gods’ sake?

Still reeling, Tarrin put Jal behind him and surveyed the men bearing down on them. There were at least thirty, and he counted five black-robed Priests. Telven’s betrayal had stunned him, but now that shock was yielding to outrage, and to fury, a fury he quickly contained. There were too many innocents here for him to lose his temper, and doing that would put his own friends in danger. He shifted into his normal form, and then his eyes ignited from within with the glowing green aura that marked his anger, and finally, in stark majesty, his wings exploded out from his back, causing a sudden cascade of screams and shouts from the citizens who witnessed it.

“Get them out of here!” Tarrin shouted at Ulger, looking back to him and pointing at Dolanna and Zyri with a paw. “Jal, go to Zyri!” he ordered of the boy who clung to his leg, trying to shake him off, as he brought forth his sword from the *elsewhere*. The blade immediately burst into flame, as licks of flame sprouted in his fetlocks on his wrists and ankles.

“Tarrin, we can help!” Azakar said, drawing his sword.

“Don’t abandon Dolanna,” Tarrin hissed, crouching and holding his sword in both paws. “Telven, have you lost your mind? Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“I’m getting rid of witches!” Telven shouted back at him.

“They tried to kill you!” he screamed.

“That was all Zyri!” he shouted back. “I never wanted to keep that witch of a brother, but I couldn’t live by myself!”

There was little time for further debate, for the first of the mounted soldiers were almost on him. Instead of attacking them, Tarrin held out his paw and shouted “*STOP!*” in a powerful voice, shifting his intonation just slightly, which was how a Druid addressed an animal in a manner in which the animal would understand. All the horses charging at him suddenly whinnied in surprise, then pulled up short. They did so with such sudden speed that five of the soldiers went flying over the heads of their mounts,

landing on their backs on the street. "Buck your riders and run!" Tarrin shouted at the horses.

They obeyed. All the horses started bucking and thrashing, causing the foot soldiers to scramble in every direction to keep from getting trampled. The moment of chaos distracted all of the soldiers, and Tarrin used that critical moment to wave at the others, to get them mounted and out of harm's way. "Go now!" Tarrin snapped at them. "Find Mist and Miranda and get out of town!"

"Tarrin!" Dolanna barked, but she said no more when Tarrin decapitated the first man to reach him with his blazing sword, sending an arc of fire into the air along with the man's head. Tarrin backpawed the still erect, headless corpse, flinging it to the side to get it out of the way as three more men charged him with wild cries and their swords drawn and brandished. Both men came to an instant halt when they were impaled by spikes which erupted from the inner surface of his wings, sizzling across the space between them. Those two spikes tossed the men aside contemptuously, and he saw that the rest of the host was starting to get organized. There were too many to fight, not when they could get around him and attack the others. He needed magic here.

Sending his sword into the *elsewhere* to free his paws, Tarrin started chanting in the discordant language of magic, which made all five Priests suddenly start screaming in the languages of the gods. But Tarrin's spell was much faster to cast, and when he held out his paws, palms out, and then jerked his arms upward, they suddenly flared in a strange brownish glow. The earth around the men began to buck and heave, and then massive slabs of stone exploded from the ground, sending dust, dirt, and small stones flying in every direction. More and more of the slabs thrust from the street, until a large wall of rock separated Tarrin and his friends from their attackers, stretching from one side of the street to the other.

"Go now!" Tarrin snapped at them, dancing back a few steps when a section of the wall suddenly began to glow with a whitish radiance. That section of the wall vanished with a wavering flash of light, dispelled by the magic of the Priests. Tarrin immediately began to chant again, his fingers weaving an intricate pattern before him as he quickly and flawlessly chanted the formula of the spell, even as the first of the soldiers ran through that hole, followed by a Priest, who skidded to a stop and began to chant himself. Tarrin's paws burst into flame at mental command during the course of the spell, for he needed an open source of fire for the spell to operate properly, and after he finished chanting, the spell latched onto the fire around his paws and consumed it to power the spell's effect. Smoke billowed out from Tarrin's paws at a phenomenal rate, quickly covering the width of the street, and then the cloud of dark matter rolled away from him. There came a storm of coughing and choking as the spell washed over the first of the men, causing the Priest to stutter and lose his place in the spell, ruining it. The cloud engulfed their attackers, and the sounds of their hacking and coughing told Tarrin that the smoke would make it impossible for the Priests to cast any spell that required any significant amount of time. That worked in his favor, as only those kinds of spells posed a major threat to him.

One man staggered out of the cloud of smoke, hand over his mouth and sword held low, then an arrow appeared in his chest. The man staggered backwards two steps and collapsed, and Tarrin glanced back to see Zyri, alone, eyes full of tears and a strange expression of a mixture of anger and fear on her face, sitting on her horse and with her

bow in her hands, quickly reaching for another arrow. Ulger was riding back towards her, in the act of clapping his barrel-shaped helmet down over his shaved head.

“*Have you lost your mind, girl!*” Tarrin shouted at her vituperously, absently smashing another man who staggered through the smoke to the ground with his paw, then calling his sword from the *elsewhere* and impaling him through the chest with the chisel tip. “Get out of here now!”

“I won’t let them kill you!” she said in a strangled tone. “I won’t let Telven kill you!”

“Ulger!”

“Come on, fool girl!” Ulger growled at her. “It don’t do Tarrin no good to hold them off if you won’t leave!”

“But he’ll be killed!” she protested.

“Youngling, if they don’t have no Demons with them, ain’t nothin’ gonna kill Tarrin!” he snapped at her, regressing to some dialect Tarrin had never heard before. “He’ll just turn into a dragon and flatten the whole lot, but he can’t *do* that as long as we’re under his feet! Now come on, you’re putting him in more danger by sitting here than you would be if we were runnin’!”

Zyri looked tortured for a moment, her eyes lingering on him, but Ulger’s words seemed to have finally sunk in. She turned her horse and bolted in the direction the others went. Ulger waved at Tarrin. “Show ‘em a hammer of Karas, brother Knight!” he shouted, then he too charged after the others, an old saying among Knights.

Ulger actually had an idea there. It was something that Tarrin hadn’t even considered. He turned and chopped another man who staggered out of the cloud down, then backed up a few steps. Fury still roiled through his mind, but concern for Mist and Miranda was also there. He really couldn’t flatten anything until he was certain both of them were out of harm’s way, especially if their tracking Jal would bring them back to this area. He wasn’t worried about them getting away, but he didn’t want to accidentally kill them while they were doing so. Backing up again, Tarrin again sent his sword into the *elsewhere* and lunged down and pried a pebble out of the hard-packed dirt of the street. He again chanted in the language of magic, gesturing with only one paw as the other held the pebble, and then he threw the pebble to the ground before him and completed the spell. He quickly turned and rose into the air, then flew back away from the spell’s area of effect.

In a sudden flurry, dirt erupted from the ground, flying in every direction, showering into the smoke, against and onto the roofs of the buildings to each side of the street, and onto the street immediately before the Were-cat. In a matter of seconds, the magic of the spell had dug a pit nearly ten spans deep and stretching from one side of the street to the other, and was almost twenty spans across. Another man staggered out of the cloud of smoke, which ended just before the pit, and then fell into it with a sudden cry of alarm.

That would slow them down.

But it wasn’t enough. His wings flaring with sudden light, globes of fire formed around Tarrin’s paws, and then he thrust his arms out to either side of him. Cones of intense fire blasted forth from his paws, slamming into the faces of the buildings to either side of him, causing their thatch roofs and plaster-covered timbers to burst into flame, moderately sized fires that would spread to every building on the street in about ten minutes if they were not stopped.

Now they had a choice. Put out the fires, or chase him and let the city burn to the ground.

A sudden blast of wind blew from Tarrin's back, and it attacked the integrity of his cloud of smoke, tearing it apart quickly. He saw most of the men had crawled through the hole in the wall, and the five Priests were all chanting now that they could breathe and speak once again. Quickly, without thinking much about it, Tarrin created ten fireforms in the shape of ravens, and sent them after the Priests. The ten birds made of living fire streaked across the pit and attacked the Priests with shrill cries of outrage, setting fire to their hair and clothes as they clawed and pecked at the men's eyes and faces, shattering their concentration and causing chaos as the soldiers tried to knock the fireforms away with their swords and shields, to protect their Priests.

Movement from behind him made him turn, just in time to see another large complement of soldiers appear with another group of Priests, cutting off his escape. The soldiers rushed forward at a barked command of one of the Priests, swords raised and shields presented, and they were too close for Tarrin to use another Wizard spell to delay them. He also didn't want to set *another* fire, because if he did, it might cause the fires to rage out of control, and that might put Mist and Miranda in danger if they were nearby.

The charging soldiers saw the fire-winged Defiled creature snap those wings out, flaring them open, and then they saw the wings start to have dark lines appear in stripes running parallel to the upper edges of the wings. Their charge faltered, however, when the bands of wings suddenly split away from each other, the dark lines revealed as separations between each individual tendril, and the man suddenly faced a man not with wings of fire, but with a multitude of small, rope-like tendrils emanating from his back. They tried to back up when the formidable-looking monster rushed forward, his feet seemingly not even touching the ground, until he smashed through two men and penetrated their front line, getting right into the middle of them.

The surprise turned to terror when those many rope-like tentacles suddenly came alive, each one moving independently of one another. Like a hundred angry whips, the components of Tarrin's wings attacked the men surrounding him, a dizzying cloud of independent movement as each tendril lashed around him without touching any other. Men were literally sliced apart by the fast-moving whips of fire, each one's edge honed down to a razor-sharp edge. Blood, swords, body parts, gore, and pieces of slashed armor flew in every direction around the Defiled, who stood in the center of that whirlwind of death with his eyes closed, head bowed, arms tucked tightly to his chest to keep them out of harm's way, and a look of intense concentration on his face as the multitude of pieces of his wings ripped every soldier around him for ten paces in every direction to pieces. Screams were cut horrifically short, replaced by the shrill sound of the whips of fire as she whizzed through the air, and the sound of metal, bone, and flesh yielding to the edge and the tremendous speed of the solid fire which sought to shear them in twain. Men were slashed into bits where they stood, before they could even turn to run, and only those at the furthest edge of the reach of those whips of fire managed to make any kind of defensive movement, and those pieces were themselves sliced apart in the lethal whirlwind of death that surrounded the Defiled creature's body..

In a matter of seconds, it was over. Every man in the attacking host who had charged at Tarrin was dead, and there were only a few pieces of them left large enough to be remotely recognizable. Tarrin's body was covered with blood and small bits of the

remains of his attackers. The hundred fiery whips retracted and grouped together into the recognizable shape of wings behind him, and then they merged together once again to form two solid masses.

The Priests and those soldiers who remained behind to protect them stared at the blood-covered Were-cat in awe and terror, and then one of the soldiers turned and fled.

"Tarrin! We're trapped at the gates!" Miranda's voice called to him faintly, as she talked through one of her spells. *"They closed the gates, and we're in the middle of a throng of citizens trying to flee! We need your help!"*

"I'll be there in a minute," he called. If they were out of harm's way, then there was no need to be careful anymore. "Move off the street. Get out from in front of the gates."

"We're moving," she answered.

Ulger had a damned good idea.

His wings suddenly exploding out to five times their normal size, they folded around Tarrin's body as it suddenly blazed forth with the light of fire. Again, his body *became* fire, became a sentient force without form, and the wings that enfolded that awareness provided the means by which that formless consciousness could create a new form to house itself. The fire grew, expanded, grew larger and larger, took up the street, rose above the houses, expanded to staggering size, and then took on the shape of the dragon. Then the power of Tarrin's might infused the fire, gave it flesh and blood bone, and the fire evaporated away to reveal the full might and majesty of Tarrin, who was no longer a Were-cat, but was now a full-sized gold dragon.

From his new perspective, Tarrin looked down upon the terrorized men with scathing disregard, for they were now no larger than ants to him. A paw so huge it could hold a man in its palm rose up from the ground, and then slammed down into the street with such force that it shook the buildings, knocked men off their feet, and left an imprint in the ground nearly five spans deep. Tarrin turned to face the street that would take him back to the city gates, but two of the Priests began to chant in the language of the gods, preparing to cast spells to either attack Tarrin or protect themselves.

Drawing in his breath, Tarrin turned his head towards those to chanter. They had no idea how bad of a decision that was. He was going to ignore them, but not if they were going to take action against him. Tarrin's huge maw opened, and then he used a dragon's most fearful and destructive attack, his breath weapon.

A raging hellstorm of fire, compacted into an expanding cone that started at his mouth, blasted forth from that open maw. The fire spun about itself as it expanded in size, as it moved away from Tarrin's mouth, and by the time it hit the street, the cone of fire was nearly fifty spans across. It struck the knot of soldiers and Priests and engulfed them with a loud roaring sound of flames. Tarrin ended the attack after just a second or two, and the cone of fire dissipated quickly, leaving nothing behind on the street except melted rock, blackened earth, and a few bits and pieces of red-hot, melted metal scattered among a fine layer of white ash.

Using that weapon told him much. It told him that a dragon didn't have an *unlimited* supply of the magical energy that powered it. He had enough left to use four, maybe five full-power breath weapon attacks, and since a gold dragon's paralyzing gas was a component of the fire weapon, it also depleted the gas built up in the pressurized bladders that flanked his lungs, where the gas was produced. But he wouldn't need his breath weapon to get everyone out of town. All he needed was his massive size.

Tarrin glanced to his left, and saw the original group of attackers, trapped on the far side of the pit, staring up at him in awe. Among them was Telven, who had betrayed them, betrayed him, sitting on the ground where the horse had thrown him off, staring up at him in shock and fear. Tarrin felt an irrational surge in him to blast Telven into ash, but no matter how angry he was, he still wouldn't hurt a child.

"This is all your fault, boy," Tarrin told him grimly. "If you're so devoted to the One, then go to him. But you've made your choice, so live with it. You've given up your sister, your brother, and the life I could have provided for you, and traded it in for a life of hating Defiled and being afraid. If you hate us so much that you'd kill your own brother and sister, then I want nothing to do with you. Pray you never see me again. If you do, child or not, I'll kill you."

Tarrin left him there, marching down the wide street as people screamed and ran in every direction, his tail smashing the fronts of buildings in as it swayed to and fro with his gait. He could see over the entire city, and his eyes were locked on the gate that they had used to come in, which was where the others were at. He moved just slow enough to let the terrified townsfolk scramble out of his way, passing by throngs of soldiers and more than a few Priests, who could not think of anything to do against *that*, so awe-inspiring and intimidating Tarrin looked to them now. He turned a corner, knocking down two buildings on the corners as he did so, leaving a pile of debris in the intersection as he tried to squeeze through the tight confines. The streets were only just wide enough for him, and the corner wasn't wide enough to let him squirm around without doing damage. But it put him on the street that led to the city gate, and he could see it clearly now. The mob of townsfolk gathered at the gate all looked at him, and he saw that they were going to get in his way, so a little clearing was necessary here. He took in his breath and emitted an earth-shaking roar, heard for longspans away, as he picked up his pace into a deliberate trot that told everyone in front of him that he was coming down that street, and they had *better* get out of his way.

The result was nearly mindless panic. The mob in front of the gates, who had been trying to get them open, now screamed in terror and fled to either side, running down both sides of the street that ran just inside the outer wall of the city. The large crowd gathered in front of the gate quickly started to thin, and Tarrin picked up his pace when the street before him cleared of people. Guards on the walls shouted and ran back and forth over the gatehouse and to each side of it, and several arrows came flying at Tarrin when he got within range of them, but the arrows struck his armor-like golden scales and rebounded harmlessly. He didn't even *feel* them. He roared once more, then lowered his head and broke into a sudden bounding gait as he bore down on the closed gates. His backswept horns were presented to that wooden barrier, like a ram preparing to butt heads with a rival, and he lunged forward and locked his neck just before he made contact with the gates.

The impact was deafening. Squealing metal and shattering wood created a cacophony of sound as a cloud of debris plumed outward from the city wall as Tarrin's massive head rammed the gates, sending shards of wood into the closed portcullis on the far side, which was bent outward and tore free of its mountings when it was struck by a gigantic creature who weighed almost as much as the gatehouse itself. The portcullis slid down Tarrin's horns and got stuck, but the mighty gold dragon paid the weight of it no mind at all as he backed up two steps and rammed the gates again, knocking what was

left of the gates off their hinges and getting the twisted portcullis off his horns. He then backed up a step and removed his head from the now open archway. He turned and scanned the crowds, and quickly made out Azakar almost two blocks down on his left, well away from the gates. He looked more carefully, and saw that Mist and Miranda had joined the others, that everyone was together. Jal and Zyri were mounted, and both of them looked pale and shaken. He didn't want to expose to the crowd that they were with him, so he reared back on his hind legs and spread his wings, which cast a shadow over nearly two city blocks. A single thrust of those wings pulled his massive body into the air, and Tarrin was silently awed that creatures that were so unimaginably huge had the ability to lift that size, and all that weight, into the air using perfectly natural means. A blast of fierce wind whooshed away from the ground under him as the displaced air roared away from his wings, and the people all screamed in collective fright when that monstrous body suddenly began to fall as the wings performed an upstroke, but it rose again even higher into the air as those sail-sized wings again pushed down the air, which pushed the body upwards.

With just three more strokes, Tarrin was at a cruising speed and ascending over the farm fields outside the city. It was a great deal of work to fly using wings, he discovered as the effort of pulling his monstrous bulk into the air registered on muscles that weren't often used, and some which didn't exist when he wasn't in that form. His wings beat the air, lifting him higher and higher as he gained more and more speed, until he had enough momentum to execute a turn. He did so, turning in a wide arc around the city's wall, watching the gate he had knocked down. He flew completely around the city, continuing to ascend, and when he came around to the gate once again, he saw his friends had managed to squeeze through the gate with their horses, and were pounding across the farm fields almost due south, moving to follow the river as it wound its way southward. Tarrin took note of that, and then stopped turning and arced his way eastward, back the way that had come. All eyes would be on him, allowing the others to escape unnoticed, and he could simply change into something much, much smaller and circle back to meet up with the others later on.

Tarrin flew out over the edge of the valley and out of sight of the men and women in the city, leaving the city behind him, and unmitigated chaos in his wake.

Chapter 6

Rage.

Tarrin had experienced many different types of rage. From the mindless fury of the Cat in its many degrees to the icy, cold rage of his human half, to almost every shade of anger, fury, rage, pique, irritation, annoyance, and discomfort in between, but he had *never* felt like this before.

He had never felt *betrayed*.

Not even Jasana's treachery that turned him Were the second time had registered to him what Telven's act had. He found that he could think of nothing else as he flew south, away from the city, then used a low-hanging cloud to change out of his dragon form and into his own, mainly because the dragon was making his outrage even worse. Dragons were noble creatures, and they reacted to betrayal in a manner even more vehement than a Were-cat. Though he wasn't part dragon as he was part cat, the characteristics of the form did have some influence on him when he borrowed their form. Changing back into his normal form freed him of a tantalizing impulse to turn around and raze that city to the ground.

How could he do it? How could he return to people *who tried to kill him*? It made no sense! Tarrin had to admit that he didn't give the boy the same attention that he had Zyri, but he had shown him kindness and concern, had offered him a place with him, had tried to make him happy. He was willing to throw that away to go back to an order that would kill him? He'd been willing to murder his own brother, all because he had succumbed to the hate that the Priests of the One preached to their masses. Telven—

—he had to stop thinking about it. He was getting furious again, to the point where a tiny village not far from the road began looking like an inviting target for venting righteous wrath. He couldn't fathom what that boy could have been thinking. To turn his back on his family, to spit in Tarrin's face the way he did, to try to murder Jal...it was just inconceivable to Tarrin and to the Cat. The Cat was much more flabbergasted than Tarrin, almost into insensibility, and Tarrin knew what that meant. Once it managed to recover enough to be semi-rational again, it was going to try to overtake him and send him into a rage, like it did after Tarrin found out that Jasana had been the one to put the blood in the potion. The time in dragon form had muted it a little, but he could feel it rising up in him, preparing to unleash its pent-up outrage on anything and anyone.

He had gone far enough. He was almost two hours ahead of the others, and he knew that Miranda was already leading them to him. He descended and landed by the river, which was shallow and fast-moving here, the sound of water splashing on rocks reaching his ears and making him feel a little more tranquil. He blew out his breath and sat down in the grass by the riverbank, looking down at the water, seeing the glow of the light of his wings on the surface of the water. He shivered those wings slightly, but did not retract them.

And he would not. *Ever.*

Someone had to stand up. Someone had to walk down the street and be *not normal* and show the people that the Priests were lying to them. Someone had to show them that the One was the one who was their enemy. Someone had to show Telve—

—Telve...for Niami's sake, *why?*

He would hide no more. He didn't care how much trouble it caused him. The wings were a part of him, and he would not hide them. If he had to slaughter every church soldier and Priest in every town he visited along the way to finding Kimmie, well, that was so much the better. But he would not hide his wings again. He might need to withdraw them temporarily to negotiate tight quarters, and certainly when he went to sleep or Mist would scalp him, but he wouldn't hide them, he wouldn't hide who he was, anymore.

He had to shake himself to calm down again...he was right on the verge of exploding. He glanced down and saw red, and at first he thought his vision was hazing over from his anger, but he realized that he was still covered in blood, and the smell of that blood, which he hadn't noticed until now, was aggravating his temper.

Well...there was a river right here.

Undressing, having to retract his wings to get them out of his shirt, he trudged down into the water until it came up to his waist, and then spent a considerable amount of time in the surprisingly warm, slightly muddy water scrubbing blood off his skin and out of his hair and fur. After he was done, he bent to the laborious task of washing the blood out of his shirt and trousers and vest, but found that it wouldn't come out. Nonplussed, Tarrin simply used a Wizard spell to cleanse his clothing, then left them laying by the riverbank to dry as he sat on a rock half submerged in the river and rebraided his wet hair. He sat in the waning light of the afternoon sun, feeling its warmth rain down on him, and finally felt like he was calming down. The simple act of getting clean took his mind off Telve, off how betrayed he felt, and let him look at things with more logic and less emotion.

It was a given now that anything the children knew about him and the others, now the Priests of the One knew. That meant they knew about his power, they knew about Mist and Miranda, they knew about Dolanna, and they probably knew that they were from another world. He wasn't sure if that information was good or bad, for there was an outside chance that perhaps the church would give Tarrin a *very* wide berth if they knew just who they were dealing with. But that was probably just wishful thinking. Odds were, the church knew that Tarrin and Dolanna were Sorcerers, or what they called *the Damned*, and they were going to specifically make it a point to come after them. Tarrin and Dolanna were the embodiment of everything the church preached against.

Fine. Let them come. He was tired of hiding.

Shaking his head a little, feeling the weight of his damp braid, Tarrin looked down at his leathers and blew out his breath. He wouldn't wear them wet, so he shifted into his human form, complete with its set of clothing, and sat back down on the rock after laying his clothes out to dry in the waning sunlight. He looked up at the sky and saw the clouds start to roll in from the west, threatening to hide the sun as it crept closer and closer to the horizon. It wasn't going to be easy now. The Priests now knew about Tarrin's shapeshifting, and he was pretty sure that they now knew about his weakness against silver. He was pretty sure he told Zyri about that, and he had little doubt that Zyri had repeated the tales he told to her to her brothers. He would not be surprised at all if the

next batch of Hunters to cross paths with him were wielding silvered swords. They knew about the others too, so it was going to be dangerous for everyone.

Fine. He didn't care anymore. If he had to leave a trail of bodies behind him on his way to get Kimmie and Phandebrass, that was just fine with him. Perhaps, after he killed enough of the One's people, the god would get the message and call off his followers. He'd lost his sense of adventure with all this now. All he wanted to do now was find Kimmie and Phandebrass, arrange for the gate spell to be used, and then *go home*.

Sighing, leaning back on his hands, he curled his wings around himself a little and looked up into the sky, his expression pensive, distant. Sometimes he cursed his wings and what they represented, but at that moment, there was a strange comfort in them. They were warm, radiating a gentle heat that soothed him, and he was aware of every square finger of them in a way that no one would really understand. They were more than simple appendages, they were a manifestation of the power that he had once possessed, and that was what he was aware of at that moment. By mere thought, the wings lost their ragged appearance and became like an Aeradalla's wings, with structure and feathers, colored in the hues of fire, in reds, blues, whites, oranges, and yellows, which gave them a strange mottled appearance. They looked grand, he supposed, after staring at the inside slope of one, but he liked them the other way. They reverted to their normal appearance, looking not quite like an Aeradalla's wings, not quite like Shiika's wings, something of a vague hybrid of the two, whose borders shifted slightly as the living fire seemed to undulate like a dancing flame. Their power was needed now, for without Sorcery, without Druidic magic, facing what he knew that they were going to face, they were going to need everything they could get. Miranda couldn't protect them all, he knew that. If he was going to do what he intended to do now, he needed all the power they could give to him.

He was going to end this madness. He was going to get Kimmie and Phandebrass and get everything done as quickly as possible, so they could all just go *home*. He would take Zyri and Jal with him, raise them as his own, and they would leave Telven to face the consequences of the choice he had made. Zyri and Jal would grow up happy and wanting for nothing, but Telven would reap the harvest of the seeds he had sown this day, living out his life being afraid and hating.

"Well, *I'm glad to see you're calm*," Miranda's voice came out of thin air, just behind him and to his right.

"Miranda. How far away are you?"

"*About a half an hour's ride. Are you going to stay where you are, or do you want to come to us?*"

"I guess I'll come to you, it's faster," he answered. "Which direction?"

"*We're due north of you*," she answered.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," he told her, standing up. "Let me get my clothes," he added, looking at his damp clothes laid out on the ground.

"*We'll be waiting.*"

Tarrin collected his damp leathers, and then, still holding them, he spread his wings and lanced up into the air. He quickly oriented himself due north and picked up speed as he gained altitude, until he was nearly a longspan above the ground, and the terrain below was laid out before him like a verdant blanket, and easily visible for longspans in every direction. What would take half an hour on horseback he could traverse in a matter of

minutes, so he started looking for them not long after he levelled out his climb. That high up, he could see the storm front to the west much more clearly, and he knew that it was going to start raining sometime during the night.

He spotted them, still mounted, standing their horses by the riverbank not a few moments after looking at the storm. He immediately started descending, feeling that strange lightness in his stomach, like he was falling, but by now he was used to that sensation. He was upon them quickly, flaring out his wings and twisting a little in midair, then putting his feet on the ground a dozen or so spans away from them.

He didn't expect what happened. Zyri burst into tears and slid off her horse, then ran towards him. Her action startled him a little bit, but he should have expected it. The poor girl had had her own brother betray her. He opened his arms to her, and almost staggered back when she slammed into him, clutching him tightly, sobbing into his chest. He saw that Jal was mounted with Mist, sitting in front of her. His mate had her paws around the boy in a protective manner, and that he was leaning against her. He was also trembling, not a little bit, holding onto Mist's paw with both hands, hands which were shaking so badly that he doubted the boy could have gotten off the horse.

"Did you have any trouble?" Tarrin asked Dolanna in a neutral voice.

"No, dear one. Did you?"

He shook his head. "I didn't kill Telven, though I should have," he growled. "If anything, I want the boy to live long enough to appreciate the mistake he made today."

"I—I—can't believe...he'd do that!" Zyri said chokingly.

"Hush, little bit," Tarrin said with infinite tenderness, stroking her hair. "I think we should camp here, Dolanna."

"We might be too close, dear one," she said hesitantly.

"Zyri can't ride right now, Dolanna," Haley told her. "And I think we all need a chance to sit down and collect ourselves."

"Don't worry, Dolanna," Tarrin said in a quiet, flat tone that they all knew too well. "*No one* will bother us."

"I, very well," she said with a nod.

Tarrin accepted Fireflash onto his shoulder, dipping his head down to nuzzle his pet briefly, then held his hand out to Mist as she dismounted and approached him. Her huge paw swallowed up his human hand, and standing beside her like that reminded him how huge she was now, as big as him. It was easy to forget sometimes. "Are you well?" she asked.

He nodded. "Well enough."

They set up camp right there, but Tarrin couldn't do very much. Zyri was still crying uncontrollably, so he ended up sitting right where he'd been standing, holding her close and letting her cry herself out, keeping his wings partially curled around them both as a measure of comfort. He ended up with Jal as well, for the boy came over and sat beside him, still trembling, until Tarrin unfurled a wing and wrapped it around him. He didn't clutch onto Tarrin as Zyri did, but he stayed up against his side, holding onto the outer edge of Tarrin's wing to keep it around him...as if he felt safe while wrapped within the living fire.

After the camp was set up, Dolanna, Sarraya, and Miranda sat with him as Mist cooked and the others scouted the area, wary of the church sending soldiers or Hunters to

kill them. Tarrin kept hold of the children as the smell of stew reached them, stew and potatoes baking on stones surrounding the fire, and pan bread baking just beside them.

"What happened?" Miranda asked quietly. "What we didn't see. I felt some serious magic flying."

He nodded. "I got into a spell war with the Priests, then, once Ulger came back for this little tiger here, I was free to change and deal with them."

"Tarrin, we must face—" Dolanna started, but he cut her off.

"I know. Everything we've told the children, the Priests know now. They know about me, you, what we're doing here, everything."

Zyri started crying harder again, but Tarrin put a hand on her back to calm her. "It's not your fault, Zyri. Or yours, Jal. It's something that would have eventually happened no matter what. This is the third town we've visited where we've done major damage, so it was just a matter of time." He glanced at the fire. "That suits me just fine," he said. "I'm tired of hiding."

"Completing our tasks will be harder, I fear," Dolanna said.

"Maybe not," Miranda mused. "If Kimmie's smart, and she is, she'll have avoided civilization. I'm hoping that this was the last city she visited. The girl should have realized by the time they got here that just staying out in the country was the smartest thing to do."

"I'm not sure what they're doing, but there does seem to be a kind of plan," Sarraya injected. "They moved in straight lines from place to place. They're going where they're going on purpose."

Miranda nodded in agreement. "We can only hope that they finished what they were doing, and now they'll stay off the main shipping lanes."

"If only we could contact Kimmie," Dolanna fretted. "She has an amulet. But mine simply will not work."

"Are there any Wizard spells in the book that can let us talk to her?" Sarraya asked Tarrin, landing on his other shoulder.

He shook his head. "I've looked. Kimmie and Phandebrass have spells that can do that, but I guess they either never put them in my book, or they're too advanced for me."

"If we cannot talk to Kimmie, then we must have her talk to *us*," Dolanna stated. "We must let her know we are here."

"She might already know, if rumor has gotten ahead of us. Stories of a fire-winged man with a tail shouldn't be hard for her to identify."

"This is not Sennadar, Sarraya," Dolanna sighed. "If anything, we are ahead of any rumors. We travel much faster than most anyone else. The only ones that might have advance information is the church of the One, and they would not disseminate that kind of information."

"Oh. Yeah, you're right," Sarraya agreed.

"Well, *you* can travel faster than anyone," Miranda proposed, looking at Tarrin. "If you can carry me, we can hunt down Kimmie. We can make up the twelve days in a matter of hours."

"We could do that, but we're not," Tarrin said. "I won't leave the others undefended. If we go, we leave the others without any kind of magical protection. Since anything that comes after us will be a magic-user, that's unacceptable."

“Then take us *all*,” Sarraya said casually. “In dragon form, you can carry half a village, Tarrin.”

“Have you ever ridden a dragon, Sarraya?” Tarrin asked pointedly.

“Well, no,” she answered.

“Trust me, you don’t want to learn when you’re a longspan above the ground.”

“Then just basket us,” Miranda said with a grin. “You said Ariana carried you around in a basket. We just make a really big basket, and you carry it while you fly.”

“Fine. Make me a basket big enough to carry us all,” Tarrin said bluntly.

“I—ah. Point taken,” she winked.

“That is an idea though,” he agreed. “We just don’t have the resources to carry it out right now. It would be way too dangerous for you all to try to ride on my back. The only real safe place is just behind my head. Anywhere else, and you’re going to fall off.”

“What about further down the neck?” Sarraya asked.

He shook his head. “My neck is narrowest just behind my head. Go further back and you’re sitting on a flat space you can’t lock your legs around. There’s no way for you to keep your seat if I turn. You’ll slide right off my neck.”

“That would be a problem, yes,” Miranda winked.

“We don’t have to rush,” Tarrin said with hard eyes. “We’ll catch up to Kimmie and Phandebrass. We’ve already cut their lead by more than half.”

“Why do we not have to rush?” Dolanna asked pointedly.

“Because I’m not going out of my way to accommodate anyone else anymore,” he answered. “I’m going to find Kimmie and Phandebrass, and then we’re going home. And Goddess help anyone who gets in my way,” he finished in a seething hiss.

“Tarrin, we are not here to start a holy war,” Dolanna warned.

“I’m not going to,” he told her. “But *I will not hide*. Not now. I’m going to walk down the street in my normal form and with my wings out. If they’re stupid enough to get in my way, they’ll pay for it. If they leave me alone, I leave them alone. Sneaking around hasn’t worked for us, Dolanna. Now, we do it the Were-cat way.”

“It’s about damned time,” Mist said with a snort from the fire.

“Dear one, *you* are the reason sneaking through has not worked,” she said with a slightly accusing look. “Though, I must admit, I might have done what you have done myself. I find the church of the One repugnant, evil, and completely despicable, and nothing would please me more than wiping it from the face of this world. But that is a fight we cannot win, so we must be more careful.”

“We had to be. But now I can flatten anyone who crosses us.”

“Literally,” Miranda said with a throaty chuckle.

Tarrin nodded. “This change in my power was just what we needed to be able to just bull our way to Kimmie. If we come up against more than we can handle at any one time, I just change into a dragon and sweep them aside. He shifted slightly, keeping his grip on both children, then looked over at Dolanna. He could see that she wasn’t sitting well with his intentions, but then again, the look on her face told him that she knew better than to push him. The expression on his face made it clear that he would not be moved in the matter, and she knew him well enough to understand it. The breadth of the friendship between them was such that they often communicated with one another without saying a word.

“Well, then, I must ask, what do we do now?” Dolanna said tentatively. “Going to cities will be difficult, and we will need supplies.”

“We go anyway,” Tarrin said bluntly. “When I said I won’t hide, I meant *I will not hide*. If I have to kill a few hundred zealots, then so be it.”

“Tarrin, you are talking war.”

“Perhaps it’s about time someone brought a little taste of conflict to the lives of these sheep,” Tarrin growled. “If they want to hate me and everything that I stand for, then let them see it up close and personal.”

“Dear one,” she sighed, “let us not backslide. If you are so intent on this, then I will accept it. But we do not have to go looking for trouble.”

“Yeah, it’ll find us all by itself,” Sarraya said with an evil little chuckle.

“My meaning is, do not become what they think you to be,” she said patiently. “Show them that they are wrong, not that they are justified to believe as they do.”

Miranda nodded. “I’d listen to Dolanna, Tarrin,” she agreed. “I know your temper’s all up in a knot right now, but think about that once you calm down a little.”

“I probably will, at least after I calm down some,” he grunted, squeezing the two children in his arms. “These two are the only reason I’m not out trying to hunt down someone to kill.”

“I think you being in your human form is helping with that, dear one,” Dolanna said with a slight smile. “You were ever more reasonable when your human half has greater prominence in your mind.”

“Are you saying that we’re irrational, Dolanna?” Mist asked gratingly.

“Yes, Mist, you are,” she said honestly.

Mist snorted. “Finally, a human that understands us,” she said, leaning over the stewpot to test its aroma.

Sarraya laughed. “Were-cats are easy to understand. Just stuff a bucket of attitude into a perfume bottle, and you have the average Were-cat.”

“Let’s not start comparing races, Sarraya. I wouldn’t want to embarrass all of you,” Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

“Yeah, like your people are all that impressive, fuzzybutt,” Sarraya shot back.

Haley and Azakar reined in their horses on the far side of the camp, and Ulger came up just behind them. They let the horses join the others in the free-roaming miniature herd that made up their horses—they were told not to wander—and the three came over and sat down by the fire. “There’s no pursuit anywhere,” Ulger announced. “There was a column of church soldiers that went west from the city, but they’re no threat to us.” He looked over to Mist. “That smells good.”

“It’s not ready,” she said with a warning stare.

“But I’m hungry,” he complained.

She held up a single finger and extended her claw. “Remember what happened last time you stuck your hand in my cooking?”

He put his hands behind his back. “Well, the blood did make it taste better,” he admitted.

“If you’re that hungry, grab some bread out of the food pack,” she told him brusquely as she stirred the stew, then put a lid on it and placed a spit holding several strips of meat beside the hanging kettle. “As soon as the meat’s cooked, it’ll be ready,” she announced.

“Well, I think we can unsaddle the horses,” Haley announced. “I don’t think we’ll need a quick getaway tonight.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Azakar announced, turning and going back to the horses.

“I’ll give you a hand, Zak,” Miranda called, then got up and hurried after him. “I need to learn how to do this. I don’t know much about horses.”

“Helping you will keep my mind of of Mist’s stew,” Ulger chuckled, then he turned and went to aid his brother Knight.

Zyri and Jal refused to let go of him as they ate dinner, and it took quite a bit of coaxing to calm them down and get them to eat something. Tarrin took that opportunity to change back into his normal form and put on some dry clothes, but they returned to his strong arms as soon as they were finished. Zyri’s storm of weeping seemed to be over, but she continued to cling to him, keeping her head against his stomach. Jal, whose exhaustion had finally overwhelmed him, had fallen asleep, and had slumped down into his lap. Tarrin put a paw on Jal’s back, which was nearly as large as Jal’s back itself, then wrapped his wings around them to give Zyri some additional comfort. Being surrounded by someone, feeling safe and protected, he felt that she needed that right now. The others sat around the fire a while, but one by one they drifted off to their tents, until there was only him and Mist. She sat with him, and he opened his arm and wing to her and let her snuggle up against his other side. And for the first time in a while, he felt curiously *complete*. He had a mate in one arm and a child in the other. Zyri wasn’t his child, but her need had awakened his strong protective instincts, and at that moment it really didn’t matter that she wasn’t one of his children. She *needed* him, and that was all that mattered.

“I think we don’t do this often enough,” Mist said in contentment, putting her paw on the back of his, which was still resting on Jal’s back. It still looked a little odd that her paw was almost as large as his. Mist was only a shade shorter than him now, as towering and regal as Triana.

“I know,” he agreed. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“No,” she answered honestly. “There’s a time for brute force, and a time for stealth.”

“But Telve’s going to tell them about us. We can’t hide.”

“We can’t hide, but you going around with your wings out will draw every eye to us,” she told him. “We don’t have to *hide* to be *overlooked*. We’re stalking our prey, Tarrin. We can’t do that stomping on every dry leaf in the forest.”

“I know, but,” he said, then he sighed. Then he chuckled. “Wasn’t it you you were just agreeing with me?”

“I agree that we stop sneaking around, but that doesn’t mean I agree with us marching up to Kimmie and inviting every church soldier and Priest to take a shot at us along the way. You know I’d never tell you what to do, but you asked my opinion.”

“You always give good advice, Mist.”

“Odd that I’m agreeing with a human on this one,” she snorted. “But at least Dolanna won’t pretend like the human way is the only way. I’ve never met a more arrogant species.”

“It’s a racial flaw,” he shrugged.

“I’m amazed that you used to be one of them,” she snorted.

“Well, we all can’t be perfect,” he answered. “Now then, feeling better, little bit?”

Zyri sniffled. “A little,” she replied in a weak voice.

"It helps to talk about it, kitling," Mist said in a surprisingly gentle voice.

"I can't believe he'd do that," she said weakly. "I can't believe—"

"Just let him go, Zyri," Tarrin told her. "He's made his choice. If he's old enough to make that choice, then he's old enough to live with the consequences of his actions."

"But he's my brother!" she protested.

"And look what he did to you," Tarrin told her. "You did nothing wrong, Zyri. The fault is *his*. He's not a child anymore, little bit. What he did today was tell you that you don't have to protect him anymore. He's made his first adult decision, honey. It's the wrong decision, but it was his to make. Just don't dwell on it. He's decided what he wants to do with his life. Don't let his decision ruin *your* life."

"But, but—"

"There's no *but*, kitling," Mist told her bluntly. "The boy's gone. Face it. If he ever does show up again, odds are I'll kill him."

Zyri blanched at Mist.

"Don't be surprised, girl. You listened to Tarrin's stories, you know what we're like. We don't take well to betrayal. You can say that that's the *worst* thing you can do to a Were-cat, because among us, our word is our bond. I'm amazed that Tarrin didn't kill him on the spot, but sometimes he does stupid things."

"Thanks," Tarrin said dryly.

"Tarrin told you what to do, girl," she continued. "You have to live your own life. You don't have to look after him anymore, and you don't have to be Jal's mother. So, the question is, what do you want to do?"

Zyri looked away from her, and put her head against Tarrin's stomach again. "I don't know," she answered in a small voice.

"Then think about that instead of thinking about that treacherous brother of yours," she instructed in a cold tone. "You can't change the past, so just accept it and move on. And think about what you want to do with your life instead of worrying about your brothers. One's gone, and one has people to watch for him now, so you don't have to be his mother anymore."

Zyri was silent. Tarrin stroked her back and her dark hair, then patted her shoulders. She responded by grabbing the edge of his wing in her small hands and playing with the solid fire, tracing her finger along a border between colors that often made the appendages look like they had feathers.

"Well, if anything, you have time, kitling. It's not something you can decide here and now. But don't let me catch you moping."

"Yes, Mist," she said quietly.

"Well, you're being awfully motherly," Tarrin teased in the manner of the Cat, which Zyri could not hear or understand.

"Someone needs to be," she replied in similar fashion. "Besides, she looks at you like her father. It's only fitting that she feel like she has a mother too."

"Strange family," he mused with a slight smile.

"You? Talking about a strange family? Please," she retorted.

"True," he chuckled aloud. "Now, little bit, you need to get some sleep. We'll have a long day tomorrow. Go to your tent and get some sleep."

"Can I stay with you tonight?" she asked after a moment. "I, I don't want to be alone."

“Well, I think we can let you, but just for tonight,” Tarrin said after looking at Mist, who nodded.

“You’ll have to wait a while, though. Me and Mist are on guard duty,” Tarrin told her.

“That’s alright,” she said. “I can stay awake.”

She was quiet a moment, and Tarrin looked down and saw that she was asleep.

“Riiiiight,” he drawled in a quiet tone.

Finding Kimmie’s trail as it left the city was going to be a problem, but one that had an easy solution. After everyone was up and ready to go, Tarrin flew very high up into the sky over the city, so high that nobody would notice him, and used Miranda’s spyglass to find the magically marked trail she left behind, for he was the recipient of Miranda’s tracking spell that morning. Sarraya was with him, so after he saw that she left the city travelling on the road going east, he was supposed to send Sarraya back with the information and wait where they could see him to lead them to the path. But since it was on the road, he decided that it would be easy enough to find it, so they both returned to the group and forded the river a longspan north of where they were camped, on what looked like a rarely used wagon path.

Tarrin knew they were all looking at him. He was riding at the forefront, but after a night of thinking it over, he decided that listening to Dolanna and Mist was the wisest thing to do, so he was in his human form and his wings were concealed. Mist was right; even if they did know about him and the others, there was no reason to be flaunting himself all over the place and draw every eye to him. He wasn’t alone in the saddle, however, for Fireflash was on his shoulder, and Jal was riding in the saddle in front of him. Jal was still a little traumatized by yesterday, so he kept the boy with him to reassure him. He spent the time following Kimmie’s trail by having Jal use his power, both to get used to how it felt when he did so and to see how much control Jal had over it.

Not much control at all, he discovered. Jal could create water and ice, but the ice he created was crudely shaped in the form he wanted it to be. Tarrin berated him a bit for that, and started trying to teach him how to refine that ability, to make shapes *exactly* the way he wanted them to be. Tarrin had no experience with the boy’s power, but he figured that his ability to create ice was similar to a Druid’s Conjuring ability, and it just took a little mental imagery and concentration to get what he was after. Tarrin demonstrated with fireforms, which, he figured, was a pretty close approximation to what Jal was doing.

They made little progress that day, though it was an eventful one for its own reasons. After a half a day of travel, they managed to skirt the farms and come up onto the road and rejoin Kimmie’s trail. And once on that road, they started meeting other travellers. The people didn’t panic or run away, which told them all that their descriptions hadn’t gotten out to the commoners quite yet, but they also noticed a steady decline in the number of people that passed by. After a few hours, they met no more travellers, and Ulger noted darkly that that meant that they were going to run up against a patrol of church soldiers very soon, when word of them got back to a local chapel or roving patrol.

Ulger’s prediction was quite accurate. About an hour before sunset, a column of thirty mounted soldiers came trotting over a small rise and bore down on them, then reined in suddenly when they got close enough to see who they were. This told Tarrin

that the church soldiers *did* know about them, and had been on the lookout for them. Tarrin handed Jal off to Dolanna and urged his horse forward, ready to change form and kill them the instant they became an obstruction.

“Stand aside,” Tarrin said in a blunt manner.

“By order of the One, you will surrender and be tried for the crime of witchcraft!” a thin, reedy looking fellow with a gold tassel hanging from the epaulet of his red uniform called.

“Boy, I just told you to stand aside,” Tarrin said, staring at him. But he glanced back and saw Dolanna, saw the reproachful look on her face, then sighed and looked at the situation through her eyes. If he killed his way to Kimmie, he was going to create a big mess and put his friends in danger. On the other hand, he was *not* going to hide who he was. After all, he saw it as being relatively pointless now, because of Telven. He had no doubt that every Priest of the One within a hundred leagues knew exactly who he was and what he could do, and knew all about everyone else in their group as well. So, he had to reach some kind of a compromise between those two needs.

Haley came up beside him and whispered, “you think you’re commanding enough to get the attention of thirty horses? They don’t obey me outright all the time.”

Tarrin chuckled. “I think I can do that,” he answered, then looked at the officer. “I’ll tell you one more time, stand aside. I’m sure you know who I am and what I can do, so, do you *really* want to fight with me?”

The man looked a little uncertain, but he drew his sword anyway. “Surrender now!”

“Fool,” Tarrin snorted, then sat up in the saddle and shouted, changing his inflection to allow the animals to understand him. “Run that way for a while!” he shouted at the horses, pointing to the north. “Ignore your riders’ commands! Run fast and don’t let them dismount!”

The horses all blinked, looked at one another, then turned north and bolted at a dead run, leaving a wake of startled shouts and cursing. The officer, who hadn’t had a very good grip on his reins, tumbled out of the saddle after about fifty spans, and was trampled over by about six horses that were running behind his own. He lay limply in the grass, moaning weakly, and he did not move.

“Nice,” Haley complemented. “I never could get that much command into my voice.”

“Take some lessons from Triana,” Tarrin told him.

Haley laughed. “No doubt there,” he agreed. “You know, eventually they’re going to realize that any soldier on a horse will never get within ten paces of us.”

“There are always birds,” Tarrin shrugged. “I think a flock of birds descending on them would make it a little hard for them to charge us.”

Haley laughed richly. “We’ll sic an army of squirrels on them,” he said in a devious manner.

“Chipmunks. They’re more daring.”

“I don’t know, I always thought woodchucks were pretty brave,” Haley said seriously as they watched the horses continue to pound to the north.

“Well, if we want to delve into the realms of utter daring, then we should definitely be looking into otters,” Tarrin replied. “Think an army of otters would make them quiver in terror?”

Haley gave him a look, then laughed delightedly. "Let's stick with birds," he said after a deep breath. "At least they're always handy. We might have a tad of a problem rounding up enough otters to make a difference."

Azakar walked his horse up to them and regarded the prone officer distantly. "Cute," he noted.

"Thank you," Tarrin replied soberly.

"Druids are much more than magic, Zak," Haley chuckled. "Make a Druid your enemy, and all of nature is going to be against you."

"I'll remember that," he said slowly, then urged his horse to continue down the road.

They camped in a small dell between two low hills, and as Mist cooked, Tarrin made sure to keep Zyri and Jal busy. Dolanna and Ulger seemed to understand that, so they too kept the children engaged. While Tarrin worked with Jal to refine his ability, Dolanna taught Zyri a little Sulasian. Then Ulger took both of them for their sling lesson. When they were done, and after eating, Tarrin gave them their lesson in bows, then they all sat for a while before going to sleep, engaging in small talk as Tarrin stared up at that strange blue, green, and white moon. He had the strangest feeling when he looked at it, a feeling that touched on that other part of him, the divine part that was still trying to find itself inside him. It was distant, but it was a feeling of *reaching out*, like something, or someone, was desperately trying to talk to him. He also sensed that something or someone was actively trying to prevent that, an interposing hand between them and Tarrin that sought to block all communication.

That didn't take any time to figure out. He could sense, *feel*, that there were other gods in this dimension, so that interposing force had to be the One, striving to prevent those other gods from communicating with Tarrin.

"Tarrin?" Dolanna said for the fifth time, then she reached out and touched his arm. Tarrin blinked and looked at her, saw that her dress was soaking wet but had wisps of steam escaping from it, then saw that they were all looking at him.

"What?"

"Turn the heat down, hon," Miranda said with a wink, pointing at the fire. Tarrin saw that she was standing over by the tents, along with everyone but Dolanna.

Tarrin looked at it, and saw that the flames were white-hot. He felt the heat against his face, and realized that it was hot enough to melt lead.

"Oh. Sorry," he said, causing the fire to return to normal with barely a thought.

"Alright, Jal, now try to pull the water from my dress," Dolanna instructed, holding her arms out. "And thank you, dear one. You kept it from bursting into flame. That was quick thinking, child."

Jal blushed and gave her a sheepish smile. Tarrin watched as the boy closed his eyes and screwed his face up in concentration, holding his hands out to Dolanna. Then, with surprising suddenness, the water saturating her dress pulled out of the fabric in ropy tendrils, collecting into a gyrating ball in front of him. He collected up enough water to make a ball the size of a sora melon, then froze it solid with a single touch.

"Well done, nice and dry," Dolanna said with quiet praise, which made Jal blush again. "What was that about, dear one?" she asked Tarrin.

"I, I could sense someone trying to talk to me," he answered, looking at the moon again. "But I also sensed someone trying to block it. I think the other gods of this world are trying to contact me, but the One is interfering."

“There are other gods?” Zyri asked in surprise.

“Of course there are,” Tarrin chided. “I’ve sensed them before, when we first arrived here. But after that, they fell silent. I never thought to wonder why until now, because I’ve always had other things on my mind.”

“Perhaps it would be worth our while to try to contact them,” Dolanna suggested. “Given the One’s positions, they must be against him. Perhaps they can give us information that will aid us in finding Kimmie. Perhaps *they* can talk to her.”

Tarrin shook his head. “They can’t,” he told her. “She doesn’t know about them or believe in them. A god can’t talk directly to a mortal who doesn’t acknowledge his existence.”

“That is a rule of *our* world, dear one. This *is not* Sennadar,” she reminded him pointedly.

“I know, but it’s still possible that it applies here. There are certain rules that apply to *all* gods, set by the God of All Himself. That might be one of them, I’m not sure.”

“Who?” Zyri asked.

“The God of All,” Tarrin told her absently. “The Creator of all the universes. This world may have been created by a god, little bit, but this *universe* was created by the God of All. He creates a universe and brings into being a single god within it, who he directs to run his or her universe as he sees fit. On my world, that first god, or goddess in this case, is Ayise. I don’t know who that is here, but I’m certain it’s not the One.”

“How do you know?”

“A primary god like a first god has unlimited power, little bit. If the One were that god, we’d all be dead. He could kill us with a thought.”

“Then how can the Goddess blackmail Ayise if she has ultimate power?” Azakar asked curiously.

“Because she set the rules on Sennadar about how gods control the forces of the universe, and she’s bound by them as much as any other god, Zak. She can’t just change them when they don’t suit her. Niami’s using those rules to blackmail her mother into letting me come home.”

“Well, why can’t she? After all, she has unlimited power.”

“When a god makes a contract, they *must* honor it, Zak,” Tarrin told him. “It’s one of those rules that the God of All set down. When Ayise created the system that the gods of Sennadar use, she placed herself *inside* that system, and because of that she’s bound by its rules as much as any other Elder or Younger god. If she’d just kept herself aloof of her system, she *would* be able to blow Niami off. There’s also the fact that Ayise actively invested some of her power into her children. She doesn’t have unlimited power anymore, Zak. When she had her children, she gave each of them some of her *own* power. In a way, if you look at the ten Elder Gods, you can say that the other nine are just extensions of Niami’s power, each with a different focus. But they’re individuals, truly her children, so when she gave away her power to create the Elder Gods, she ended up placing her power into gods that weren’t just simple extensions of herself.”

“Ah. I think I understand. Ayise wanted to run the universe with others, not all by herself.”

“That’s the general gist of it, Zak,” Miranda said with a wink. “Ayise is female, so the motivation to have children and nurture them most likely is the reason why she did what she did. A *male* first god probably would have kept all his power for himself.”

"I never thought that gender would really matter," Azakar said. "I thought gods would be above that. I thought they were male or female because they wanted to be."

Miranda and Tarrin looked at each other, and laughed. "Zak, the concept of *gender* is a multidimensional constant," Tarrin told him. "The two primal forces in the universe, *animus* and *anima*, know no boundaries. Think of gender as an aspect of the power of the God of All, reaching into every universe."

"Why is that?" Zyri asked, then flushed and bowed her head.

"Because the primary focus of the God of All is to *create*," he answered her. "To make sure of that, the forces of *animus* and *anima* infuse the multiverse, and their influence encourages creation. That's why, no matter which universe you visit, you are absolutely guaranteed to find one common denominator anywhere you go."

"Males and females," Ulger surmised.

Tarrin nodded. "Males and females. And it's more than physical, as we all know. *Animus* has a different way of thinking than *anima*, so there's a fundamental difference in how males act than females. The way that shows up differs from race to race, but males almost always have different ways of doing things than females do. That's one way *animus* and *anima* maintain separation."

"That's the truth," Sarraya snickered.

"There are some exceptions, though. There always are, both in nature and among some societies. The Selani are a good example of that. Males and females do act differently, but you have to pay *very* close attention to see it. They all seem the same to people who don't know them."

"Where did you learn all this, Tarrin?" Ulger asked curiously.

In answer, Tarrin brought out his wings, then fanned them a little ostentatiously.

"Oh," Ulger said, then he laughed.

"They do more than decorate my back, Ulger," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"Well, I've noticed that you and Mist don't act too different," Azakar said slowly.

"No offense," he said quickly, looking at Mist.

"None taken," Mist told him. "Though if you think me and Tarrin act alike, you need to pay more attention."

"We're *were-cats*, Zak," Tarrin explained. "We have something else influencing us that doesn't worry about gender. Besides, Mist is right. If you think me and her act alike, you do need to pay more attention."

Ulger yawned. "Well, this is interesting and all, but we'd better draw for guard duty so I can see if I can get some sleep."

"I'll take first watch," Tarrin volunteered.

"I wonder why the first god here doesn't do anything," Sarraya mused.

"Odds are, he simply doesn't care," Tarrin shrugged. "A god whose primary focus is keeping the universe running usually doesn't have time to pay attention to the little things like the One." He sat down by the fire, which was burning without wood now, but burning brightly and cheerfully in the firepit. The bottoms of his wings bent in from contact with the ground, and he absently shortened them to take that into account. Ulger was standing up and stretching, but Dolanna was staring at him in a curious manner, then she sat down before him. "What?" he asked her, noticing rather uncomfortably that she was staring at him intently.

“Dear one,” she said hesitantly. “Would you do something for me without asking questions?”

“Sure,” he answered, “but why—“

She reached up and put her fingers on his lips to silence him. “Bring out your sword, dear one.”

Not sure what she had in mind, he obeyed her, calling forth his sword from the *elsewhere*. “Alright, here—“

“Take hold of your amulet, dear one, and try to contact Kimmie.”

“I—“

“No questions,” she interrupted. “Just do it.”

He sighed. “Alright,” he agreed as he took his amulet in his paw. “Kimmie.”

There was nothing, at least at first. But after a few seconds, he felt a strange sensation coming from the amulet, as if it was *trying* to work. “Put your will behind it, dear one,” Dolanna told him. “Treat it like a weave.”

Without moving, Tarrin did as she directed, exerting his will against the amulet, treating the device like it was a weave he had created, something that required concentration to weave and maintain. “Kimmie,” he called again, with more authority in his voice.

He distinctly felt something, and there was a faint light touching his eyes from below. He glanced down, and again saw the blade of his sword limned in ghostly radiance, like wisps of solid light, floating and ghosting around the black blade like smoke. He nearly lost his concentration when he saw that, but he also felt a sudden surge of power rise up in the sword, surge into him through his grip on the hilt, a power that felt so much like the power of Sorcery that he could not have told them apart. He directed that power into his amulet almost by instinct, and brightly light erupted from between his fingers as the device flared into incandescence. The muted flows in his amulet surged with power, and that power reached out, he *felt* it reach out, spanning an unknown gap.

“*T-Tarrin? Am I going crazy?*” Kimmie’s voice weakly emanated from between his fingers.

“Kimmie!” Tarrin said in surprise as more than one person by the fire gaped in astonishment. “Kimmie, we’ve come to get you! Where are you?”

“*Tarrin! Oh, Tarrin! Is it really you? Am I dreaming? Oh, please don’t tell me I’m dreaming!*”

Tarrin exchanged confused looks with Mist. “Kimmie, what’s wrong? Where are you? Where is Phandebrass?”

“*I don’t—*“ she started, and then there was a strange *taint* that floated across his fingers. “*Well, I see you finally figured out how to use the amulets.*”

Tarrin’s face turned white, because he knew that voice. It was a voice he thought he’d never hear again. “Shaz’Baket!” Tarrin said in an ominous growl. The *Marilith* general of Val’s armies! The last he’d seen of her, she cut Eron’s throat and left him for dead just before abducting Jasana! “If you—“

“*Oh please, spare me the empty threats,*” she said scathingly. “*As you’ve probably deduced by now, your little playmate belongs to me. You see, after getting banished from Sennadar, I’ve been looking for a way to pay you back for destroying my Master. Well, it was just luck that Kimmie happened to wander away from the protection of your gods,*

and the One graciously agreed to allow me to come here to give me that opportunity. But she's not the one I want, Tarrin Kael. You are."

"If you want me, witch, you'll get more of me than you ever dreamed," he hissed.

"Oh, I've heard," she replied in an infuriatingly conversational tone. "A demigod now, I've found out. Turns out you weren't god enough to slay my Master without dying yourself, and lost most of your power when your cursed Goddess found some miracle to bring you back. Demons quiver in fear when they realize they may come up against you. Certainly, a lowly little marilith like myself could never defeat someone as mighty as you. But you see, I don't have to," she said with a chuckle. "Turns out that you've pissed off the One something fierce, Tarrin Kael, and he'd like to have a little chat with you. But he wants that little encounter to take place where everyone can see him grind you into the dust. He didn't think that you'd come and face him without a little, incentive. It's just lucky that I happened along. I'm providing you with sufficient motivation to come face the One, and the One gets to destroy you, which is what I wanted in the first place."

"So, Tarrin Kael, the One extends an invitation for you to come to Pyros and face him in a duel, where he will destroy you. You don't have to do that, though, but if you don't, then Kimmie becomes my new toy. I'm sure you know what Demons do with the souls of the mortals they possess, Tarrin Kael," she said in an evil little whisper. "If you don't want that for Kimmie, then come to Pyros and just try to defeat a god."

Tarrin made no sound, but the light around his sword suddenly blazed forth into white fire, a clear indication of his anger and outrage. That white started staining the wings on his back, as pure, incandescent white infused the wings where they extended from his back and crept steadily towards the edges in a ragged, irregular pattern. Tarrin rose up onto his feet, his face an icy, emotionless mask. "I'll crush your soul like an egg, Demon," Tarrin said in a barely audible voice, but in a tone that made Dolanna crawl back from him in sudden, inexorable fear. "No matter what it takes. I'll make you pay."

"Then I'll take that as an acceptance of my offer," she said with morbid enthusiasm. "Oh, and don't think that we'll just let you waltz into Suld like a visiting carnival," she chuckled. "The One is still coming after you, because he wants to kill everyone with you first. He wants you to suffer before putting you out of your misery, and I know you oh so well, Tarrin Kael," she said with an evil little lilt in her voice. "The best way to make you suffer is to make those you love suffer. How will it feel to know that you have to stay with the others to keep them alive, but that delay leaves Kimmie in my tender care that much longer? You'll keep them alive, but every day you'll know that she's suffering, and that you could put an end to it simply by abandoning the others. I will sing her sweet screams to you every night," she promised in a dreadfully eager voice.

Tarrin's eyes exploded from within with the unholy green aura that marked his anger, and his wings lost their usual smooth composition, flames rising up from the surface that was now reds, oranges, and yellows mixed with snowy white. His vision began to blur over with red as the impact of the Demoness' words sank into his mind, and an image of Kimmie being tortured by that soulless monster every day quickly caused his temper to boil over. The fire beside him roared up into a pillar of fire that reached halfway to the heavens, the air around him shimmered and took on a palpable aura as his power superheated the air around him, and the searing heat of both it and him assaulted the others and caused the horses to turn and run in fear.

"Uh, Dolanna," Ulger said fearfully.

“Now we run,” Dolanna said sagely and with authority.

“Dolanna? What’s wrong?” Zyri asked as Dolanna took her hand, then she yelped when the small woman yanked on it as she broke into a run, forcing the girl to keep up or be dragged.

“Everyone, back!” Dolanna shouted. “Move away from him *now*!”

“Dolanna!” Zyri squealed. “What’s happening?”

“Tarrin’s going to rage, that’s what!” Sarraya said fearfully as she buzzed by the girl. “And we don’t wanna be *anywhere* near him when he loses it!”

But not everyone was running away from him. Mist was instead lunging towards her mate, and Dolanna had turned just in time to see her action. She was virtually floating through the air as she vaulted at her mate, rising up about ten spans above the ground before descending on a trajectory that would take her right to her mate. Dolanna saw that she had the empty stewpot in her paws, holding it behind her, and she also saw that Tarrin did not seem to comprehend that Mist was hurtling at him. She lanced through the air, breaching the shimmering aura that surrounded him, which caused her clothing and her fur to literally burst into flame. Tarrin did snap his head up to look at her, but only after she was too close to do anything about it, for she whipped the stewpot around with a savage cry, swinging it like a weapon, and she aimed it right at his head.

The impacting *clong* was so loud that it made everyone stop in their tracks. The cast iron pot hit Tarrin right in the temple, and the raw, naked force behind the blow caused the sturdy pot to buckle. Tarrin’s head was snapped to the side with a spray of blood, as well soaring skin, hair, and bits of bone, as the pot ripped away his scalp and the nubs that served as legs ripped into his skull. The pot could do him no true harm, for it was a worked object, not a weapon of nature, but the raw power behind it, wielded by a Were-cat who was nearly as strong as he was, was more than enough to cause the impact of it to knock him senseless, as well as give him a concussion. Tarrin was flung to the side, through the pillar of fire that was his own creation, his sword spinning from his paw. It landed point first in the ground and stayed there, wobbling back and forth in the ground as its master collapsed onto his side in a boneless heap, where he did not move. Mist slowly got to her feet as fire licked at her clothes and in her fur, throwing down the destroyed pot and regarding her mate with eerily emotionless eyes, but she flinched and gaped when a torrent of water deluged over her. Jal had run back, and was using his ability to inundate Mist, a large jet of water emanating from his hands as he extinguished the fires burning on her.

She paid him not a whit of notice, for after standing there a moment as if stunned, she rushed to her mate’s side, picking his head up off the ground and seeing that he had already healed. The others also rushed back as Mist carefully checked her mate, and saw that he was merely unconscious. She had done him no permanent injury.

“Mist!” Dolanna said in a frightened tone. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Dolanna,” Mist said grimly, collecting her mate up in her arms. “I need to get him to his bed.”

“That was very fast thinking, dear one,” Dolanna told her. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m a little cooked, but I’ll be alright,” she answered in that same emotionless tone. Dolanna looked at her, and realized that Mist herself was but one step from flying into a rage as well. Kimmie was her daughter, after all, and they had all heard the terrible

proclamation issued by the Demon who had somehow used Kimmie's amulet to speak to them.

"I, see," Dolanna said hesitantly. "Say what it is you need, and it is yours. We are yours to command."

"Just bring me some water and stay out of my way," she answered, looking down at the diminutive woman with eyes that flickered from within with the greenish aura that marked an angry Were-cat. Mist was somehow controlling her Cat nature, actively trying to suppress a rage, something that Dolanna knew she had never done before.

"Zyri, *stop!*" Miranda snapped demandingly.

Dolanna turned to look, and saw that the girl was reaching for the hilt of Tarrin's sword, her eyes wide and her expression shaken.

"Dear child, *never* touch that sword!" Dolanna told her quickly and intensely.

"I, I wanted to take it back to him," she told them in surprise.

"Leave it where it is, kiddo," Ulger told her seriously, coming up beside her and putting his hand on her shoulder. "That's not something that any of us messes with. When Tarrin wakes up, he'll get it. Until then, it stays right where it is."

"Is it dangerous?" she asked.

"If Tarrin's not holding it, yes, it's very dangerous," Miranda told her.

Mist snorted, detouring just enough to march over to the sword. She grabbed hold of the hilt without a second thought, and then pulled it out of the ground. "It won't hurt me," she told them gratingly. "Now soemone hold open the tent flap so I can get Tarrin in bed."

He first became aware of pain behind his eyes. It was a dull pain, and it messed with his ears in a way that made him feel like he was both falling and spinning at the same time. It also darted in and out of his thoughts, scattering them whenever they tried to organize. He was able to take control of his senses, though, and knew that Mist was in his tent with him, but that she smelled like burnt hair.

He grunted quietly and opened his eyes, but found his vision both blurred and doubled. Two hazy images of Mist appeared to his eyes, leaning over him, her visage so distorted that only the scent of her told him who it was. The image of her sharpened and then became recognizable, but she didn't smile. He could smell her tension, her pent-up anger. Whatever was keeping her from exploding was beyond him, because she was but a hair's breadth from flying into a rage.

"Do you remember what happened?" Mist asked immediately, still staring at him with those penetrating eyes.

"You hit me with the stewpot," he said in a flinty tone, then he sighed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered emotionlessly. "Do you remember the rest?"

The mere mention of that caused his wings to flare with bright light, and his eyes to limn over in green. Just the thought of Kimmie in clutches of that monster was enough to send him spiraling into a rage, but Mist's paws closed over his quickly. "Not here," she told him intensely. "Not *now*."

"You're, you're right," he said, blowing out his breath. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No," she replied. "I got to you before you could. What do we do now?"

"What can I do, Mist?" he sighed. "I can't leave the others. That bitch knows that, that's why she taunted me with it."

“How will they know?”

“Mist, love, this is the One’s territory. If he’s anything like the Younger Gods back home, he can see anything important that goes on here, and I leave way too much of a footprint to move around without attracting his attention, so he can see what we’re doing. If I leave, he can send his troops, or even worse, Demons, after everyone else. The instant I leave, the rest of you will be swarmed.”

“They have to catch us, Tarrin.”

“Demons, Mist. All they have to know is where we are, and they can Teleport right to us. If I leave, you’ll get a face full of Demon.”

“If they can do that, why haven’t they done it by now?” she asked pointedly.

“I, I don’t really know,” he answered honestly. “They *can* do it. Why they *haven’t* done it is a mystery to me. After all, if the One wanted to get rid of me, he could just summon up a few hundred Demons and sic them on us.”

“He wants to kill you himself,” Mist told him.

“No, he intends to face me because he’s the only one who *can* kill me,” he answered. “The question is why make me come to Pyros? Why not face me *here*, away from any civilization?”

“You can ask him that just before you rip out his heart,” Mist told him in a cold, concentrated manner.

“That’s a promise,” he answered with narrowed eyes.

“You don’t touch the Demon bitch, Tarrin,” Mist warned him, flexing her fingers as her eyes exploded from within with green light, and her ears laid back. “She has my daughter, and that matters much more than what she means to you. The Demon is *mine*.”

At that moment, Tarrin felt a fleeting feeling of *pity* for Shaz’Baket. If the Demoness could look into Mist’s eyes at that very moment, she would know true fear. On Sennadar, there were three understood rules which all life followed. Be in harmony with nature, be in harmony with the gods, and *never* make Mist angry.

He put his paw on her cheek, and she patted the back of it fondly. “Do you feel well enough to move? We’re breaking camp and moving on.”

“Are the others ready?”

“No, but they will be,” she answered brusquely.

“What time is it?”

“Midnight, more or less.”

“They’re asleep?”

“No.”

“Have they slept at all?”

“I don’t think so. They’re waiting to see if you’ll be alright.”

Tarrin got up. “We *should* move now, if only because the One’s troops have to travel to reach us. And I know they’re coming, so we shouldn’t make it easy for them.” He glanced at his wings, then folded them behind him rather than retract them. “We can stop somewhere and get some rest, then move on.” He looked at her. “Let’s pack.”

“I’ll do it, you go out there and make the others get ready.”

He nodded, kissed her on the cheek, then burst from the tent. The others were already standing, having heard him talking, and Fireflash zipped from Haley’s shoulder and landed on his, chirping and rubbing the side of his head against Tarrin’s neck affectionately. “Are you well, dear one?” Dolanna asked carefully.

“Mist knocked the rage out of me,” he answered curtly. “Everyone pack. We’re moving.”

“Pyros?” Ulger asked in a serious manner. Tarrin looked at him, and saw that the Knight was tense, like a man about to do war.

“As soon as we find out which way to go,” he answered. “So we’re going north. We’ll accost the first person we find to get directions, and start out. We have to get to Kimmie as quickly as we can.”

“The other question we must answer is what happened to Phandebrass,” Dolanna said grimly. “Dear one, before we move, contact him. We must know if he was captured.”

Tarrin nodded, and realized his sword wasn’t in the *elsewhere*. “Where is my sword?”

“Mist took it to your tent,” Sarraya answered him.

“Mist *touched* it?” he asked in shock.

“It did her no harm,” Dolanna told him quickly. “I think it knows her, or knows that she is your mate. It did not strike at her.”

With but a thought, Tarrin called to the sword, and it responded by floating quickly through the opened tentflap and to his waiting paw. He closed his paw around it as his other went to the amulet, and then he set his will against the amulet. “Phandebrass,” he called as the sword’s blade again limned over in ghostly radiance, almost like Magelight, and spots of white appeared within his wings.

“I say, Tarrin! Thank the gods you finally arrived! I say, where are you, lad, and how are you making the amulet function? There’s no Weave here!”

“I have no idea,” he growled. “What happened? I just found Kimmie. The church of the One has her.”

“Aye, nasty business, that was. I just barely managed to escape, and I’d be dead if not for Kimmie. We were ambushed by a few dozen Demons. Kimmie used the Shadow Step spell on me about an instant before a Vrock took my head off with a polearm, she did. I say, I still get a strange feeling across my neck when I think of how close that was. I say, anyway, the spell teleported me about a longspan away, and I’ve been on the run ever since, I have. Where are you, lad?”

“About half a day south of a city called Dengal,” he answered. “We need to find you, Phandebrass, but we can’t go out of our way. The One is using Kimmie to force me to come to Pyros and fight him, and every day she’s in their prison is a day they can torture her. So I’m going to Pyros to get her back. One way or another,” he said grimly.

“I say, lad, I can meet you along the way. I’m in Pyros right now, I am, and I’ve been trying to find a way to break Kimmie free. I also have some new friends you should meet. They’re part of the Shadows, a group of Elementalists and Wizards that help find people and get them to safety before the One’s Priests kill them. I say, I’m glad you’re here, I am. I’ve had a bear of a time trying to get Kimmie out. I can start on the road to Dengal right now and we can meet in the middle.”

“He may be of more use to us there,” Dolanna said. “Especially if he has met other magic-users that might help us.”

Tarrin nodded. “Just stay in Pyros, Phandebrass, and find out everything you can about where they have Kimmie, how many people are guarding her, the layout of the city, anything you think might be useful to us when we go get her. And if you think you have a chance to get her out before we get there, by all means, take that chance. We can’t let

them keep her any longer than absolutely necessary. But *don't get caught!* We need your help to do what the Goddess needs done before we can leave, so don't get yourself killed."

"*I say, lad, I'll do my best to be careful, I will,*" he promised. "*How are you doing this?*" he demanded.

"I honestly have no idea," he replied. "I just am. Do you still have your spellbooks?" he asked impulsively.

"*Not all of them, no,*" he answered. "*I lost my full set when Kimmie shadow stepped me to safety. All I have left are my travelling spellbooks and everything I was wearing when she stepped me. I say, I'll just have to be careful not to lose them, I will.*"

Tarrin felt a sudden pang of concern. "Which spells did you lose?"

"*I say, none, lad, none at all,*" he replied. "*I have three of Phandebrass' Collapsible Spellbooks, my own creation,*" he said proudly, "*and they hold all the spells I have, they do. But I'm down to my last set of books, I am, so I have to be very careful with them. If I lose these, I'm up a tree, I am.*"

Tarrin sighed in relief. "Good. I'll try to contact you every other day or so to make sure you're alright."

"*I'll do what I can, lad. Kimmie's one of my best friends, and I want her out of there, I do. I say, are you alone, or do you have others with you?*"

"I have Dolanna, Miranda, Mist, Ulger, Azakar, and Sarraya. Haley's also here, but I don't think you know him."

"*We've met a few times. I say, courteous fellow, well-mannered, he is. Sarraya? She's not dead?*"

"She had a plan to get around that," Tarrin said, giving Sarraya look. The Faerie preened herself shamelessly.

"*Don't let me start prattling, lad,*" Phandebrass said seriously. "*I know that we both want Kimmie out of the One's prison and safe as quickly as possible, so I won't hold you up, I won't. I'll do everything I can to get ready for you when you get here, so we can go right after her. If you're in Dengal, then you're about nine days away from Pyros. It lies on the road that goes, dear me, let me get my map, hold on.*"

There was a protracted pause, and Tarrin spent that time looking at the others. They were all tense, wary, but Zyri and Jal looked afraid and confused. But there was a singular sense of *urgency* that seemed to emanate from everyone now. They all know what dire straits Kimmie was in right now, and they all wanted to rescue her as quickly as possible...even the usually addled Phandebrass, who was showing uncharacteristic focus on the matter at hand.

"*Thanks much, Lorak,*" Phandebrass' voice came from the amulet again. "*Lorak gave me a map. Unrolling it now, I am. Here we are. The road that leaves from the east side of Dengal is the road to Pyros, lad. It turns to the north, and you'll go through six villages and two good-sized cities along the way, Brund and Varga.*" There was a pause. "*Lorak says he can send word towards you to the circles of Shadows in the cities to be on the lookout for you, and help you if you need it.*"

"We won't need it," Tarrin said in a quiet tone. "Trust me, Phandebrass, nobody's going to miss me when I come that way. I'm not going to hide. You might want to tell this Lorak to get his people out of those cities. I'm coming for Kimmie, and I'll destroy anything and everything that gets in my way."

There was a lengthy pause. *“Very well, lad,” Phandebrass said seriously. “I’ll have Lorak pull his people out of Brund and Varga. No, Lorak, I’m not joking. I say, when Tarrin says something like that, he’s not joking, he’s not, and he’s the kind of magic-user that can back up his claims. I say, we’ll know he’s close to Pyros because of the columns of smoke that are rising into the sky behind him. I say, there won’t be a chapel or temple to the One left standing between Dengal and Pyros, and the road’ll be littered with dead church soldiers.”*

“I’m glad you understand,” Tarrin told Phandebrass bluntly.

“All too well, lad. And hit a few of them for me as you come north. I’m rightly incensed, I am.”

“I can do that.”

“Alright then, lad, contact me again in two days. I say, I hope to have some information ready for you by then, I do. Until then, be well, and good luck.”

“You too. Be safe.”

“Good journey,” Phandebrass said, and he Tarrin took his paw off the amulet.

Tarrin regarded the others with narrow eyes. “Anyone have any objections?” he asked bluntly, looking right at Dolanna.

She sighed. “No, dear one. Any objection I make will be ignored. And I feel the same outrage as you. It is clear from the words of the Demoness that they know where we are, so it will be pointless to hide. So if we cannot hide to move quickly, then we will ride proudly and with heads held high, and drive our way through like a Wikuni clipper cutting the waves of a storm.”

And with that, she rather pointedly reached into the bodice of her dress, withdrew her silver *shaeram*, and set it outside her blue dress, displaying it for everyone to see.

“Nobody touches little Kimmie that doesn’t become a crusade for the Knights,” Ulger said flatly, punching his fist into the open palm of his other hand. “As Karas gives me strength, we’ll ride through them like Death Himself and take her back from that unholy god and his Demon pets.”

“Aye,” Azakar agreed with hard eyes. “She’s family to a Knight, so that makes her one under Karas. It’s only unfortunate that we don’t have more brothers here to exact vengeance. I’d like to see how brave these churchmen are when a column of Knights comes riding over the hill.”

Tarrin looked down at his sword, which was still glowing with wispy light. Now that he was looking at it, aware of it, he sensed the power it held more clearly, and felt that power respond to his awareness. He realized that the sword was using *Sorcery*, it was in touch with the Weave. He could feel it clearly. It was somehow reaching through the dimensional boundary between Sennadar and this world and making contact with the Weave.

He had no idea how it was doing it, but it was. The sword was bringing the power of Sorcery into this new world, and Tarrin had drawn on that power when he had used the amulets, had used the power the sword had drawn to fuel the weaves in the amulet to make them work. He drew on that power once more, weaving a simple spell of Fire and Air which caused a ball of light to appear over his palm.

There was no joy in this discovery. There was only relief that he had access to another tool he might need to deal with the One and his Demons. The power was substantially weaker than what he was used to, and it required a supreme amount of his

own energy and concentration to control it, as he was weaving from power drawn literally from another world, but even that weak power might make a tremendous difference. After all, it wasn't the power, it was how it was used. There was a great deal he could do with this power, especially if...

"Dolanna," he said, looking at her. "Can you feel it?"

Her eyes were wide, and a bit wild. "Yes, I can!" she answered immediately. She reached out towards the sword, and then he felt it respond to *her*, allowed her to touch the power within and draw it out. She wove a spell of Air and Fire, creating a silvery sheen of light to sparkle between her hands. "I can touch it!" she exclaimed.

"Is that Sorcery, Dolanna?" Haley asked in surprise.

"Yes, Haley, yes! Tarrin's sword has somehow made contact with the Weave! The power within it is very weak, but it is there, and I can draw on it! It is like weaving through a projection, but it at least is *something*!"

"That's how he made the amulet work!" Sarraya said, snapping her fingers. "Where it was drawing power from the Weave at home, now it's drawing power from *him*!"

"Yes, Sarraya, I suspected as much earlier, because our items still function even without the Weave. I knew that *something* has to be powering them, and now we know. It is Tarrin's sword!"

"That's nice to know. Now let's pack," Miranda announced. "One of my best friends is being held by a Demon, and that's not going stay that way for long."

"Aye!" Ulger boomed, pounding his fist into his palm again.

Tarrin looked at them, his glowing sword in his paw, and he felt both towering fury that Kimmie was being held and was suffering, but also tremendous relief and pride in his friends. They felt as he did, and they would not falter, no matter how hard the path to Pyros would be. He knew that with them, with their help, Kimmie was as good as home already.

It was just a matter of going to fetch her.

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Chapter 7

The ride was long and arduous for the children, but it was filled with grim resolve for the others.

They followed Tarrin, whose wings were unnaturally bright, lighting the way and illuminating everything around him, and anyone who got close to him could feel the heat emanating from him, even noticable in the hazy summer night. His wings were a beacon that drew every eye to them, and not all of them were friendly.

Not that it mattered. On two separate occasions, small roving patrols caught the light of Tarrin's wings and moved to investigate, and were summarily wiped out. Tarrin didn't even allow anyone to so much as draw a weapon. He simply rode forward on the six man mounted patrols, then incinerated them where they stood with a hellish inferno that raged from an open paw, horses and all. The display frightened the children and concerned the others, for they had never seen Tarrin use his power like that before, nor had they seen such a *display* of it. Tarrin very rarely used his divine abilities, and even when he did, they were always tightly controlled, focused, and never any stronger than what was necessary to get the job done. But this was a naked display of overwhelming power, an extension of his anger. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Tarrin had that kind of power without using any of his magic, since he was so reluctant to use it.

The trip through Dengal was quick and tense, but there was no major warfare. Instead of going around the city wall, Tarrin led them right into the destroyed gate, and the guards inside were wise to get out of his way without a fight. The fact that he blasted the two outside the city gates to ash when they moved to impede him was all the motivation they needed to get out of his way. He then led them straight through the city, as soldiers ghosted their route on other blocks, watching but not interfering. Word had obviously reached the east gate as well, for it had been opened well before they arrived, allowing them to leave without having to knock it down.

Once they were on the east road, they picked up into a canter and rode throughout the night. Tarrin kept his sword out, and the entire time it continued to glow with that ghostly radiance, as if he was using it to do Sorcery, and Dolanna rode right beside him. But that was not what he was doing. The sword allowed him to reach across the dimensions and touch the Weave from home, but with no Weave here, it meant that any use of Sorcery would be extremely limited. He could use no weave that manifested anywhere but from him, since there was no Weave to carry the power, no other place to push flows out of the Weave. That did give him some range, since the flows would come from the sword, but not the kind of range with which a Sorcerer was used to working. Without the power of the Weave to call upon, they were limited to what weak power the sword would provide, or *what they could hold*.

Both of them were building up the magical energy of Sorcery, drawing it off the sword, and holding it. A well trained Sorcerer could hold power for a good deal of time,

but a Weavespinner, immune to the heat that the power introduced into the body, could hold the power for however long they wanted. In fact, since there was no Weave, the power literally had nowhere to go until it was actively used. It couldn't bleed off, and an incidental contact with a strand wouldn't drain the stored power away by giving it somewhere to go. So, through the night, both Tarrin and Dolanna siphoned the power of Sorcery from the sword, storing it away to be used at a later time.

Over the night, both of them had managed to build up a decent amount of power. By dawn, creeping over a low range of hills to the east and staining red a bank of ominous clouds on the western horizon, Tarrin could sense that Dolanna had managed to build enough power to unleash one relatively strong spell. They were forced to use normal Sorcery without a Weave to work with, working only with the power within, but that would be more than enough. Dolanna had enough power built up to last her a while, so long as she rationed it wisely. And so long as she stayed near the sword, she had the ability to replenish that magical energy, albeit very slowly.

Strangely, Tarrin's absorption of that power seemed faster than Dolanna, and unlike her, it seemed to have a visible effect on him. Zyri pointed it out when they stopped for the morning, to rest a while and eat before continuing on, pointing at his back. "Your wings are turning white," she announced.

Tarrin looked back and saw that she was right. The upper edges of his wings were indeed white, all the way to where the joint would have been, were they real wings, a stripe of white along the top edge that extended down into the interior of his wings in a ragged, patchy manner. Immediately, he sensed that it was because of the Sorcery built up inside him. That power wasn't resting in him, it was drawn into his *wings*. In a way, that made a kind of sense. They were magical constructs, a manifestation of his divine power, and they were inexorably linked to the sword, which was also nothing more than an exterior aspect of his divine power. The sword seemed to be the gateway to Sennadar, a bridge back to the Weave...perhaps, in their own way, his wings were also linked to the Weave, in a way that made them more receptive to containing the power of the Goddess.

Or maybe that was Niami's doing.

Either way, that white coloring was indeed being caused by the power of Sorcery, almost like the ghostly magelight of High Sorcery staining his wings.

But he paid it little mind. He just nodded absently at Zyri, then immediately sat cross-legged on the ground and put the sword in his lap, which still glowed with ghostly radiance even after he took his paw off the hilt. He closed his eyes and put the palms of his paws on the blade, then tried to open himself more to the power of the sword. He wanted to draw in power until he absolutely could not hold any more, and for him, that was a *considerable* amount of power, because he was a *sui'kun*. The strong wash of Dolanna's scent over him preceded feeling her put her hands on his paws, and he opened his eyes to see her seated before him, hand on his paws, eyes closed and a look of serene concentration on her face. He could feel her open herself, as if opening herself to the Weave, but instead directing it towards the sword...exactly as he was doing. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, then tuned out the entire world to work on gathering as much power as he could for the short time that his attention wasn't required to guide his horse or keep his eyes open for attackers.

"What are they doing, Mistress Miranda?" Zyri asked the Wikuni curiously.

“They’re soaking up magic from the sword,” she answered. “Both of them can do a type of magic that we didn’t think could be used here, but it turns out that Tarrin’s sword is going to let us bend the rules. It’s complicated, so let me just say that using this kind of magic is going to make them draw it from the sword *before* they can do anything with it. Usually they wouldn’t do it this way, but since there’s no Weave here to power their magic, they have to build the power up first and just hold it until they use it.”

“They’re going to hold that power?” Ulger said in sudden concern.

Miranda nodded.

“Oh, nevermind. I forgot, Dolanna’s a *da’shar*. It won’t hurt her.”

“Since when does a Knight know anything about magic, Ulger?” Sarraya asked with a wicked lilt in her voice.

He grunted. “It’s a Knight’s duty to know how Sorcery works. It lets us work with Sorcerers better. Any Knight who’s won his spurs knows as much about how Sorcery works as a Sorcerer.”

“We had classes when I was a cadet, on Sorcery. That lets us know if the Sorcerer is about to do something dumb,” Azakar added.

“Well, those two are going to be out of it, so let’s just work around them,” Haley announced. “We have horses to feed and water and breakfast to arrange. Let’s get ourselves together.”

“Azakar, Ulger, horses. Miranda, breakfast. Haley, Sarraya, Fireflash, scout. Zyri, Jal, help Miranda,” Mist commanded in short, tense words, as she took up an erect posture near her mate and Dolanna. She looked ready to kill the first person who came within ten spans of them, and seemed to instantly forget they were there.

“Uh, I’m not arguing with her,” Haley said in a low voice, then chuckled. “Well, we’ve been given our orders. Let’s get moving!” He then hunched down and shapeshifted into his handsome gray wolf form, then loped off into the high grass by the road, quickly vanishing from sight.

“Okay, Fireflash, you go that way, I go this way,” Sarraya pointed as she instructed the drake, who was on the saddle of Tarrin’s horse. “Don’t go far, and come back if you see humans.”

Fireflash chirped in understanding, then turned and vaulted into the air, then flapped off in the direction Sarraya had indicated. Sarraya’s body wavered into invisibility, and the buzzing of her wings indicated that she was flying off in the opposite direction.

Miranda cut some dried meat and cheese for them, but they didn’t get the chance to eat it. Haley came bounding back mere moments after leaving, shifting into his human form in midair. “There’s a patrol of soldiers coming this way!” he shouted. “Call it, Mist!”

She looked down at Tarrin and Dolanna, who did not even move. “Fight,” she growled, her eyes exploding from within with greenish radiance. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“Uh, you’re not going to take on an entire patrol by yourself, are you Mist?”

In response, Mist held up her arms, displaying her Cat’s Claws, and then extended the narrow blades. The metal flowed over the backs of her paws, then down over her fingers, to form two-span long, delicate little edged blades that were attached to her fingers.

“I’d take that as a yes, Ulger,” Haley said smoothly. “Do you want me to help?”

She snorted disdainfully, then loped off in the direction from which Haley had come.

“That’ll be ugly,” Ulger grunted. “She’s been in a mood ever since we found out what happened to Kimmie. You know she’s going to boil over on those soldiers.”

“I think it will do her some good. I’d rather her vent on *them* than *us*,” Haley noted.

“True enough,” Ulger agreed.

“Will Mistress Mist be alright, Master Ulger?” Zyri asked fearfully.

“Honey, worry about those soldiers, not Mist,” Miranda chuckled humorlessly. “Mist is every bit as tough as Tarrin is, and unless they have someone who can do magic with them, they can’t even hurt her. That complement of soldiers had better pray that they have a Priest with them, or they won’t stand a chance.”

“Not even a Priest is going to matter,” Azakar said bluntly.

“True, but he’d slow her down for a minute.”

“Not even a minute,” Azakar countered.

“I’m going to angle off and check over there,” Haley said, pointing at a small grove of trees to the southwest. “Make sure they don’t have scouts trailing us from a distance.”

As Miranda and the children prepared something to eat, the sound of Mist’s arrival at the patrol reached them. First it was startled shouts just over the little hill to the south, then it was confused shouting and cursing mixed in with the screams of the injured. Then it turned to chaos very quickly, and the shouting and cries began to fade as, from the sound of it, the patrol broke and ran to escape from the infuriated Were-cat.

She came back about the same time Haley returned. Blood matted her arms, and it was spattered all over her clothes and face. Her eyes were still glowing green, as if the expression of her anger had not been nearly enough to calm her down. “I’ll fill a bucket so you can wash off,” Miranda told her calmly. “I think the blood smell isn’t doing you too much good.”

“Are you alright, Mistress Mist?” Zyri asked in concern.

“They were a bunch of frightened little rabbits,” she growled. “They won’t be following us again.”

“Did any get away?” Ulger asked.

Mist gave him an unholy look.

“I didn’t think so,” he said, then he chuckled. “Good.”

As the others did what they could, Tarrin continued his deep contemplation of the sword. Dissatisfied with the rate at which he was drawing power, he submerged himself into the sword directly, exploring it, seeking to cause it to deepen its connection to the Weave. He was linked to the sword body, mind, and soul, but he found that the sword was resistant to any attempt to breach its outer boundaries and discover the power inside. The sword was a part of him, but he found it very intent to remain distinctly separate, even attempting to hide itself from *him*. The sword did not want him to look inside it. The sword did not want him to know how it was touching the Weave. The sword did not want him to see how it worked. He found that the harder he pushed, the more resistant it became, until it became obvious to him that he was not going to win this little battle. Unable to deepen his connection to the Weave by forcing his sword to open up to it more, he instead reached *through* the sword, trying to draw directly from the Weave, much like how he reached through the Cat to touch the All.

That *worked*. Tarrin found the power on the other side of the sword, and though it was distant, it was familiar power, the power of the Goddess, and it heard his call. Power surged into and through the sword, whose dim glow suddenly flared to brightness. It was

still little more than a trickle compared to the kind of power he could draw if he had direct contact with the Weave, but it was more than he could draw before, and that was good. Dolanna's eyes snapped open suddenly, then she smiled and then closed them again, firming her grip on the backs of his paws.

Moments became minutes, and minutes became *hours* as Tarrin and Dolanna sat there, as the sun rose higher into the sky, and was then covered over by a bank of ominous clouds. The others became more and more impatient, but none of them would dare attempt to disturb Tarrin. The only ones who could do so without risking injury were Mist and Dolanna, and neither seemed inclined to do so. Dolanna was also absorbed in what she was doing, and when Miranda delicately breached the idea of getting Tarrin to stop so they could move, she waspishly retorted that Tarrin would move when Tarrin bloody well *wanted* to move.

"We're losing time, Mist," Miranda pleaded. "And it's just giving them more time to get soldiers here. If we don't move soon, we'll have a few *hundred* soldiers to deal with instead of just a roving patrol."

"We'll leave when Tarrin is ready, and not a second before," she replied adamantly. "You think I like sitting here when we can be moving? I don't," she snorted. "But we have to trust Tarrin. He wouldn't hold us up unless he had a damned good reason. He knows what he's doing."

"Honey, I think we need to have a little talk, very soon," Miranda sighed, but she gave Mist a cheeky grin.

"It's going to rain," Azakar announced, looking at the sky. "If we're stuck here until Tarrin and Dolanna snap out of it, then let's at least get something over them so they don't get wet."

"Or us either," Ulger grunted. "We don't have time for tents, but we can set up some lean-tos with the tent poles and some canvas. We'll be able to knock those down in less than a minute when Tarrin's ready to go."

Ulger, Azakar, and Haley set up a trio of crude shelters, then Haley ranged out again to keep watch on the area. Sarraya and Fireflash returned from time to time to report in, Fireflash having to wait impatiently for someone who could understand him to return, until he growled in frustration from Miranda's shoulder and began hissing in a strange manner.

"What's the matter, Fireflash?" Miranda asked in concern as the drake continued its strange hissing.

"Ssssssssspeaths"

Miranda started, then snagged the gold drake from her shoulder and held him before her. "Fireflash!" she said in shock. "You're *talking*!"

"He's always *understood*, he's just never *spoke*," Mist told her shortly. "I'm think he's sick of waiting for Haley or Sarraya to translate for him."

Miranda gave her a surprised look.

"Tarrin always said that Fireflash had the ability to talk. Tarrin said he's as smart as any human. He's just never had the compunction to try until now, I guess. When he lived with us, we always knew what he wanted."

Fireflash nodded vigorously. "*Thrass no hhhumahhsss.*"

"He said there's no humans," Zyri announced, then she blushed slightly and assumed a meek posture.

“Well, since it seems you’ve got an ear for figuring out what he’s saying, I say it’s your job to translate for us,” Miranda winked. “Fireflash, report to Zyri when you come in.”

The drake nodded, then he wriggled until Miranda let go of him. He swooped into the air and then flapped away towards the south.

“I didn’t realize that you were so fluent in Sulasian, Zyri,” Miranda winked at her. “I couldn’t make heads or tails of what he was saying.”

Zyri blushed and returned a sheepish smile. “Mistress Miranda, I’ve been meaning to ask a question.”

“Sure, honey.”

“Why is it you can do your magic when Tarrin can’t?” she asked. “He said he was a Priest of his Goddess, but he can’t do that magic here. But you’re also a Priest, and you *can*. Why?”

“Well, let’s just say that I defy the rules,” she winked. “I’m a little different than Tarrin. My relationship to Kikkalli is a bit more direct than his is to his Goddess. The special circumstances of our relationship lets me use my magic here.”

“How is it different?”

“Honey, I don’t think you’d understand it. It gets very, very, complicated.”

“You make things too complicated on purpose, Miranda,” Mist grunted. “It’s simple, child. Miranda is an Avatar.”

“What is an Avatar?”

“She has a direct connection to Kikkalli, because Kikkalli blessed her when she was born,” she answered. “That special blessing lets Miranda use her magic anywhere she goes. That’s something that other Priests can’t do, because a regular Priest can’t use magic on a world where his god isn’t worshipped. That’s why Tarrin can’t use his Priest magic here, but Miranda can.”

“My, that *is* a pretty good way to explain it,” Miranda chuckled ruefully. “I didn’t know you knew so much about it.”

“I don’t speak, but I *do* listen,” Mist told her flatly. “And I’m not stupid.”

“I never thought you were,” Miranda told her.

“Well, why can’t a god just give that blessing to a Priest?”

Miranda smiled. “Because they have to do it when the Priest is *born*,” she answered. “I guess my goddess had the feeling that I might be needed some time in the future, so she blessed me when I was born.”

“Well, don’t gods *know* who they’ll need later?”

Miranda laughed. “Gods aren’t as all-powerful as they want mortals to think that they are, honey,” she winked. “They want mortals to believe that they are, though.”

“Why?”

“Well, it gets complicated, honey, but I’ll try to make it easy to understand,” she said, with a sly little look at Mist. “There are two kinds of gods, I’m sure you remember Tarrin explaining that. There’s the ‘creator’ god, and then there’s the other gods in a world. The creator god is apart from the others, because he was here first. But all the other gods, like the One, are only here because the people living on the world want him here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Give me a minute, honey, I’m trying to fill in the background a little bit. Gods like the One are created because regular people decide that there’s a need for him, and that belief causes him to come into being. The One will live as a god as long as people believe that he is one. When no one believes he’s a god anymore, he’ll disappear.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t think I explained it very well,” she said with a grimace.

“Gods depend on mortals for their very existence,” Mist interrupted. “They’re created when mortals develop true faith in them, and they exist as long as people have that faith. Gods are created by mortals, and they depend on the mortals who believe in them.”

Zyri’s expression was still a bit muddled. “Doesn’t that mean that gods aren’t really gods?”

“I told you it was complicated,” Miranda grinned. “Gods *are* gods, honey, with powers far beyond the mortals who believe in them. But that power comes from the mortals who worship them. The more mortals there are that worships a god, the stronger he is. As long as *one* person out there believes with all his heart in a god, that god has power. But when there are no more mortals who believe in a god—“ Miranda snapped her fingers—“poof. They’re not gods anymore. The relationship between a god and a mortal who worships him is pretty complex, but it boils down to ‘you comb my fur and I’ll comb yours.’ The god gets power from the belief of the mortal, and the mortal gets a god to believe in. People need that, they really do. Our belief in our gods is one of the cornerstones of just about every mortal society I know of. Us mortals like having someone up there to watch over us, I suppose.”

“That’s why the One is conquering everything,” Ulger added from the other lean-to, where he was sitting on the ground, sharpening his sword with a wetstone. “He wants more power, and one way to get it is to force people to worship him. Kind of like the K’Tar subversion that took place in middle Nyr some five hundred years ago. The One is pulling the same stunt, but on this world, there are no Elder Gods to step in and pull his leash.”

“I don’t think she knows about Sennadar history, Ulger,” Miranda winked.

Dolanna blew out her breath and stood up, then smoothed out her dress. Jal ran over to her, and she put her hand on his shoulder with a smile. “Are you alright, Dolanna?” Ulger asked.

She nodded. “I am carrying such an amount of power that I think my hair is standing on end, but I am well,” she answered. “It has been so long since I did this, I have forgotten how it feels. Had I a Weave to work with, I could Teleport with the power I hold. So long as I ration its use, it will last me quite a while.”

Jal screwed up his face in concentration, and a small glittering flower made of ice appeared in his hand. He offered it to Dolanna, who took it with a gentle smile. “Thank you, dear one,” she told him. “It is too bad it will melt. It is quite lovely, one of your best works yet.” She passed her hand over it, and the ice flower shimmered briefly. She handed it back to him, and Jal felt it with confusion. Zyri came over and touched it, then she gasped.

“It’s glass! She changed it into glass!”

“Transmutation,” Ulger chuckled. “You’re back, Dolanna.”

"It feels good to be back," she smiled. "That little exercise cost me power I cannot afford to waste, but on the other hand, a test was in order to ensure it would work as it should."

"Is Tarrin nearly done?" Miranda asked.

"I know not, but I would doubt it," she answered. "Tarrin's capacity far exceeds my own, but he is drawing power faster than I was. His wings are nearly halfway white. I would assume that when they are fully white, he will be finished."

"Odd that it shows like that on him. That's not entirely a good thing," Ulger grunted. "If someone can *see* how much power he has built up, they might have an advantage."

"Tarrin can change the color of his wings at will," Dolanna assured him. "He can mask it easily. Where are Haley and Sarraya?"

The rain started abruptly as they explained what they were doing, and they all had little to do but hunker down and wait for it to end. Haley, Sarraya, and Fireflash remained out in the rain, scouting, returning occasionally to report, but they all watched Tarrin's wings as they visibly expanded the white which was the indication of the power he had built up. In the span of another hour the white completely infused his wings, all the way down to the very tips, until they no longer resembled solid fire. When it was done, they looked like solid *magic*.

"I think that's—" Ulger started, but Tarrin's sudden movements startled him into silence. Tarrin immediately stood up, knocking the lean-to over, and snapped his wings out. He lifted into the air as the wings expanded to five times their normal size, then stared down at them with eyes that made all of them uncomfortable, for they glowed with an incandescent white energy, the power of the magic which was within him.

"Everyone under me," Tarrin ordered in a distant yet intensely focused voice.

"Tarrin, what are you doing?" Dolanna called to him.

"Going to Pyros," he answered. "*Now*."

"Now? But—" Dolanna started, but then she sighed. "Very well. Give Haley, Sarraya, and Fireflash time to return, they are out scouting."

"What is he going to do?" Azakar asked Dolanna worriedly.

"I do not know, but he obviously thinks that it is possible, and I am not going to argue with him. That is quite impossible right now. He will not listen to anyone."

"Is it possible?" Ulger asked.

"Tarrin's powers are much stronger than mine, Ulger," she answered. "Yes, I think it might be possible, but without a Weave to work with, I do not see how he is going to do it. I will simply have to wait and see what he has managed to come up with."

"Sarraya! Haley! Fireflash!" Tarrin's voice boomed, shaking the grass and clearly audible by people a league away. "Return!"

"Well, at least he's keeping us dry," Ulger grunted, looking up at the huge wing which was shielding them from the rain. "Let's get this stuff packed before the others get back, Zak."

Haley bounded in first, shifting into his human form and shivering. "I hate it when my fur gets wet. I'll feel all clammy and musty for days," he grunted. "What are we doing?"

"Tarrin thinks that he can get us to Pyros right now," Miranda answered. "So we're going to hitch a ride."

"Everyone mount," Tarrin ordered in that same intense voice.

“Hmm, now it gets interesting,” Miranda said, as she moved towards her horse.

By the time they were all mounted, Sarraya and Fireflash both had returned. Sarraya immediately sought out Dolanna’s shoulder, while Fireflash landed on Mist’s saddle. “I see he’s all cranky again,” Sarraya grunted. “What are we doing?”

“He thinks he can get us to Pyros, so we are waiting to see what he does,” Dolanna answered.

Tarrin’s body rose up a bit more into the air, until they were all in front of him, then he looked down at them with those eyes that glowed white with the power contained within him. “Hold onto your reins,” he ordered, even as he extended a paw forth and presented his open palm to them all.

There was a blinding flash of light, and a series of tendrils of ropy magical energy burst forth from his open paw, each one seeking out a horse. It touched each horse in the forehead, above and between the eyes, and it caused each of them to shudder and whinny in shock. The magic infused each horse, causing them to suddenly glow with incandescent light. That light bulged on their backs ahead and to each side of the saddles or packs on them, just over their front legs, then suddenly shot out at surprising speed. Those spikes of light bent, then grew longer, then ended and caused the spikes to grow down, elongating along its width, flaring out.

The light faded quickly, and it caused all of them to blink. Dolanna gasped, Miranda laughed, and the others just stared mutely at their horses, whom Tarrin had infused with his magic and altered at their most basic level.

Every single horse, be it mount or packhorse, now had huge, feathered wings protruding from their backs, just over the shoulders of their front legs. In unison, they all beat those wings once or twice, then calmly folded them to their sides, covering the legs of their riders with feathers.

“He Transmuted the horses!” Dolanna gasped. “They’re now Pegasi!”

“Pega-what?” Ulger asked in surprise.

“Pegasi, an extinct animal from Sennadar, which died out in the Blood War. Horse-like animals with wings!”

“You mean these things can fly?” Ulger asked in shock.

“Yes,” Tarrin answered flatly. “All of you strap yourselves to your mounts. You’ll find lashing straps on the saddles and on the stirrups. I made them while I was changing the horses.”

They all moved quickly to do so, Ulger wrapping his straps as tightly around his armored body as he could while swearing and muttering under his breath, then leaning over to tie the straps that would go over his lower thigh. “Does this thing know it can fly?” he asked Tarrin acidly.

“It knows,” Tarrin answered, as the white of his wings flared brightly, then was replaced by the usual colors of red, yellow, and orange that were normal for them, though now there were scattered spots of white, as if the individual licks of flame that resembled feathers, each its own color, now had a new color added to the mix. “It was born to fly,” he added cryptically.

“Not only do we have to bloody *fly*, we get to do it in a soaking rain,” Ulger growled under his breath as he cinched the knot around his leg so tightly that it would have cut off the circulation in his leg, were he not wearing armor.

"I think it's brilliant!" Sarraya laughed brightly. "Since he can't carry us all, he found a way to find something that *can*! They can't follow us now!"

"The flying Demons can," Tarrin said in a focused voice. "But they don't want any part of me in the air."

"Why is that?" Haley asked curiously.

"They fly depending on their wings. I *don't*," he answered. "I can fly rings around them, and now that I have my Sorcery back, they can't Teleport to save themselves or ambush us."

"There's no Weave here, dear one," Dolanna reminded him carefully.

"Wards don't need the Weave," he answered, staring at her.

She opened her mouth, then laughed. "I stand corrected," she said with a light smile.

"What is a Ward, Mistress Dolanna?" Zyri asked, who looked a bit shaken from seeing her horse change right underneath her...but her sense of shock had been getting numbed after so many days around the magic-users which made up Tarrin's group.

"A magical barrier of sorts," Dolanna answered her. "Tarrin will set it so the Demons cannot use their magical powers anywhere near us. They will be forced to fly to us and attack us with nothing more than claws or weapons, and under those conditions, Tarrin is quite right in that they stand no chance against him. His mastery of flight is too insurmountable."

With little more than a thought, Tarrin wove out the Ward from the power within him, setting it so its boundary was a thousand spans out from him in every direction, truly a huge Ward that would take a great deal of power to create. He set the Ward so it would stop all magic inside its volume except for Priest magic and Sorcery; doing so sacrificed his own ability to use Wizard magic, but he didn't think that he'd need it all that much, and the fact that a great many Demons knew some Wizard magic as well as their natural magical powers made it important to stop it. The Ward wouldn't interfere with his divine powers in any way, so that was not even a worry. He could see the flows extend out from his wings, flow out to the determined distance and then branch out like spiderwebs as he wove them together to form the Ward's boundary. He charged the flows of the Ward so it would last an entire day, which drained nearly half of the power he had siphoned from the sword, and then snapped down the weave and released it. The air some distance from them shimmered visibly, and then returned to normal. "The Ward is set," Dolanna announced.

"Then let's go," Tarrin announced. "I want to be halfway to Pyros by nightfall."

"Can these things go that fast?" Ulger asked.

"A Pegasus is one of the fastest things there are with wings," Tarrin snorted. "We could be there today if we left this morning instead of now. Now let's go."

"Er, how do we make them fly?"

"They know what to do," Tarrin told them impatiently. "And they're much smarter than horses. Just get them going."

Hesitantly, Dolanna shook her reins. "Alright then, my friend. Let us be off," she told the winged animal. It whinnied excitedly and spread its wings, and then vaulted into the air with a single powerful thrust. Dolanna gasped and gave out a surprised cry as the Pegasus lanced into the air, gaining speed and altitude with each stroke of its wings.

Without urging, all the Pegasi vaulted into the air as well. Zyri screamed in fright, clinging to the neck of her Pegasus, but Miranda and Haley looked strangely unruffled by

this amazing change in their mounts. Ulger kept a death-grip on his reins, but Azakar simply patted his monstrous black-coated mount on the neck as its large wings pulled them higher and higher into the air, as the Pegasi started to circle to gain altitude before turning to the north. Tarrin rose straight up, looking both majestic and terrible with his fiery wings and his glowing eyes and the look of icy fury on his face, then he turned to the north as the lead Pegasus did the same.

They were everything Tarrin said that they were. The winged horses cut through the air with incredible speed, and the land beneath them seemed to blur as they travelled longspans in a single minute. The wind in their faces was strong and sharp, and the raindrops struck with stinging force, causing them all to wrap up in cloaks and caused Ulger and Azakar to clap down their visors and depend on their armor to stop the stinging rain. But the rain didn't last long, as they flew out from under it and steadily moved into skies with groups of thick clouds with gaps between them, pouring sunlight in golden shafts down on the land below. Zyri and Jal seemed mesmerized by the sight of it, and they weren't the only ones. Haley looked down on the land below with dreamy interest, but Ulger kept his eyes locked straight ahead.

"Look!" Haley called, pointing down at the ground. They all looked down at an armed column of men wearing the uniforms of the Church, riding hard to the north. Many were pointing up at them.

"I think the One is sending out his orders," Dolanna said. "That means we should expect an attack soon, as soon as he summons Demons who can fly and they realize that they cannot teleport into our midst. I doubt he expected us to do *this*," she chuckled.

Dolanna was right. About an hour after she predicted it, five twelve span tall *vrock*s appeared before them. They were huge Demons, with a vulture-like body and large feathered wings on their back, each carrying a black metal glaive. Tarrin immediately brandished his glowing sword and surged ahead of the others, his wings flaring brightly with reddish light as the appearance of the Demons gave his anger a visible outlet. All five seemed to flinch when they entered the boundary of the Ward, but they levelled their glaives like lances and locked their wings as they hurtled towards the Were-cat.

They were quite shocked when the Were-cat's trajectory suddenly changed, and he dropped under their glaives, changing so sharply in midair that it could not possibly be natural. They realized quickly that Tarrin's method of flight was *magical* in nature immediately on seeing that, but the lead *vrock* didn't have the opportunity to dwell on its significance. Tarrin changed again, flying directly under the Demon, while his sword quite literally sliced it in half from head to foot, cleanly down the middle of its body as he went by and underneath. The two halves tumbled from the sky with its glaive as Tarrin turned so sharply that it almost defied belief, literally turning back on his own path and coming up on the tails of the Demons with no loss in his speed. He overtook them before they registered that one was already dead, and he cleaved his blade right into the back of a second one. It squealed in pain and dropped away from the others, black blood spraying from its mortal wound as it fell from the air, still clutching its glaive. The other two on the outside veered away in opposite directions, turning sharply to evade their nimble attacker, while the third doggedly kept on a straight line for the flying horses.

Tarrin accelerated to kill the one racing towards the others, but a blinding bolt of lightning lashed out from the host and slammed into the Demon face first. It caused its head to literally explode, and the body tumbled from the air like a rag doll thrown from

the top of a tree. Dolanna pulled her hand back, still with arcs of lightning dancing around it, and she gave Tarrin a vicious smile. "This is *not* Sennadar, dear one!" she shouted. "Sorcery is an *alien* magic here!"

And so it was, he realized. Since Sorcery was not a magic of *this* world, then Demons summoned to *this* world were not immune to it. Dolanna turned and unleashed another blast of lightning on the Demon to her left, striking it in the wings. The blast seemed to paralyze it, and it fell from the sky with a shriek of pain.

The final Demon, realizing that it could not fight back against a magician and an aerial foe with vastly superior maneuverability when its own powers were effectively neutralized, dove for the ground, seeking to escape. Tarrin reared up and wove a weave of Fire, Water, and Air, then snapped it down and released it from his open paw. A jagged blast of lightning, the same spell Dolanna used, arced through the air between them, then struck the Demon squarely in the back. It shrieked in a horrid manner and lost control of its dive, spinning and free-falling towards the ground. Unlike the others, though, the Demon's image vanished when it fell a certain distance, and Tarrin knew that it had Teleported itself to safety.

"I think they got the message," Ulger grunted.

"I think so," Miranda agreed confidently. "Just don't even bother trying. They're just lucky Dolanna got to them first. I was already starting my banishment spell."

"I forgot that you could do that," Dolanna called to her.

There were no more interruptions, and the Pegasi made fast time flying through the summer day. By nightfall, when the land beneath them had changed into a vast, slightly hilly grassland of lush green rather than brownish tan with stands of trees dotting the landscape, they were fully halfway to Pyros. They had passed by a good sized town just before landing, but were at least three leagues away, more than far enough to avoid local patrols. Tarrin landed just off the road, within sight of a large, sprawling farm nearly a longspan to the west, and folded his wings as the Pegasi circled as they descended, then reared up and landed gracefully one by one. Ulger was the first one out of his saddle, nearly tearing the straps in his haste to get away from the flying horse. Everyone did join him, though, stretching cramped muscles and working out the kinks of being mounted all day. Haley laughed and summed up how they were all feeling succinctly.

"I would guess that it's going to be a race to the nearest bush?"

Miranda laughed. "I've been looking for a nice bush for about an hour now," she agreed. "Let's just say that the bush over that rise is the gentlemen's bush, and that little shrubwall over there is the ladies'?"

"Why should we have to walk farther?" Haley asked with a sly smile.

"Because you have less clothes to work around," she replied frankly.

Haley chuckled and bowed gracefully. "As always, your logic defeats me," he said with an outrageous little smile.

"I've always been a gracious winner. Now excuse me while I run to the little girl's shrub."

And she did. Literally.

Mist looked to Tarrin immediately, but the Were-cat said nothing. He immediately sat down where he stood, cross-legged, wingtips bending against the ground, tail curled around his legs, and put his sword in his lap. He put his paws over it and closed his eyes,

tuning out the world in his communion with the power within his sword. Mist scowled, but then moved to the pack horse and started unpacking her cooking supplies.

"He needs to eat," Miranda fretted, looking at him. "This can't be good for him."

"You will leave him alone, Miranda," Dolanna warned. "Look at him. Look at Mist. Both of them are but one step from losing control. This is how Tarrin deals with his rage, my friend. He shuts out the world and broods, and though it is not good for him, it protects everyone else from him. Mist seems to deal with it by keeping herself occupied with small matters."

"I noticed that he's been, well, *distant* since last night," Ulger grunted. "Even this morning, he never said an extra word, never made a single move that didn't have purpose."

"That is his way," she affirmed. "He will act thus until we reach Pyros."

"Then?"

"Then, my friend, we will see what happens," she sighed.

Mist cooked a hasty meal as the others changed out of clothes that had been soaked and then dried by the wind, leaving them a bit scratchy, but the dinner was still good. She then paced back and forth at the edge of the camp while the others rested a bit before seeking their tents. Tarrin had not so much as moved the entire time, looking like a statue, even when Fireflash landed on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck. There was a calm to the night that everyone noticed, a lack of wind, a stillness, a quiet even among the animals and insects of the night, almost as if they sensed Tarrin's simmering fury and feared to draw his attention.

Then once again, Tarrin snapped to his feet without warning, startling most of them. He opened his eyes, which still blazed with incandescent white energy, and extended his paw to his side. He again wove a Ward of Sorcery, causing it to curtain over their camp, then he snapped it down and released it. The air around them shimmered, and then returned to normal as the Ward became active. He then put his paw to his amulet.

"Phandebrass."

"*I say, I'm here, lad,*" he answered immediately. "*I have much to report, I do.*"

"Go ahead."

"*They've moved Kimmie to the main cathedral,*" he began. "*That was done this morning. It was done in an awful hurry, it was. Something must have happened that has them spooked.*"

"I'd say we know what that is," Miranda chuckled.

"*There's also about half an army of Demons here now,*" he continued. "*I say, the One must have his archpriests summoning Demons in a chain. They've taken to patrolling the streets, they have, and there's been some rather messy incidents. People are getting nervous, they are. They've also put a ridiculous number of Hunters on the streets, they have. Every patrol has a Hunter in it, almost like they know we're here and they're trying to find us. They can't find the Elementalists as long as they stay underground, they've discovered over the years, so they're relatively safe, they are, but they can't leave their complex.*"

"*Now, as to the cathedral, I've managed to find out that they're holding Kimmie in the dungeon underneath it,*" he informed them. "*There's only one way in or out, there is, through the basilica itself, but I'm not sure exactly where. I say, finding a map of the main cathedral has been impossible, it has, and the Demons on the streets makes using*"

magic extremely dangerous. As long as they're out there, I can't get a lock on Kimmie with my magic."

"Phandebrass, tell everyone there that you care about to get out of Pyros," he ordered in a voice seething with pent-up anger. "I'll be there at sunrise the day after tomorrow. There won't be anything left when I leave. Do you understand me?"

"That soon? I say, how did you come so far, so fast? Did you fly ahead of the others, lad? Are they alright?"

"They're with me."

"I say, lad, I'll do my best. It won't be easy to convince the Shadows that I'm serious, it won't, but I think I can get them to leave. Since we'll have a whole day to do it, we will, we should be able to filter out of the city tomorrow without attracting attention. We might have a problem getting the Elementalists out with all the Hunters, but we'll do our best, we will. I say, what's the plan?"

"The plan is I get there and raze the city to the ground. We take Kimmie, and then we leave. That's all the plan I need."

"Lad, they'll kill Kimmie the first time you set fire to a building. We need to get to Kimmie before you start rampaging, we do."

"Just stay out of it, Phandebrass. Get out of the city. I promise you that Kimmie will walk out of Pyros alive and well. Just leave it to me."

There was a protracted pause. *"Very well. I leave it to you, lad. We will vacate Pyros immediately, we will. I hope that what information I managed to gather helped."*

"Phandebrass, you just saved Kimmie's life. Now get out of Pyros."

"I say, I'll be out in the morning. Where will we meet?"

"We'll find you. Now go."

"I say, very well. Good luck, and may the holy might of Azur and the Lorekeeper bless your thoughts with purity."

Tarrin took his paw off the amulet and sat back down. He was quiet a long moment, and the others stared at him. "The One eavesdropped on our last talk," he announced, then he looked up. "Mist, this will all hinge on you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I can get you close to Kimmie, but I can only send *you*. If I can get you in there, can you get to her and get her out by yourself?"

"Easily," she snorted.

"Timing will be everything, Mist. I have to send you well before we get to Pyros. You have to get to Kimmie *after* I engage the One, and get her out *before* I reach the Cathedral. That means you'll have to stay there without being found for some time, and there won't be a large window of time when you act. I can't make it look like I'm stalling, and the One absolutely *must* believe that I'm coming to the Cathedral to get Kimmie."

"Get me within a longspan of my daughter, and I'll have her safely away before you can draw another breath," she answered intensely.

Tarrin's eyes narrowed, and the light and heat of his wings suddenly intensified.

Miranda gasped, then laughed. "Tarrin! You really think it's there?"

"Where better to put it?" Tarrin answered here evenly. "The One is arrogant and overconfident. He'll have it sitting in the nave of his main cathedral for everyone to see, even if they don't know what it is. I'll bet my life on it."

“Won’t that cause problems for Mist getting to Kimmie?”

“He won’t know that she’s there, and that will let her get to Kimmie,” Tarrin answered.

“What are you two about?” Ulger asked.

Miranda laughed. “Is it safe to talk?”

Tarrin nodded. “The Ward I put up blocks the One. He can’t see us or hear us in here. He overheard what me and Phandebrass said, but nothing more.”

Miranda gave him a wolfish grin, then turned to Ulger. “When the One moved Kimmie to the cathedral, he gave Tarrin a chance to come right to it and not be obvious about what he was doing. So, when we get there, Tarrin’s going to charge straight to the main cathedral, and the One is going to think he’s coming for Kimmie. But Mist is going to get to Kimmie *first*, so when Tarrin gets there, he’ll be free to do what he really means to do.”

“What is that?” Ulger asked impatiently.

Dolanna’s eyes brightened, then she too laughed. “Dear one! That is *clever*!”

“Tarrin is going to attack the One’s *icon*,” Miranda told Ulger. “If he can destroy that, then the One will lose his connection to this world, and it will just about make him and all his Priests powerless.”

“As long as it’s there,” Ulger grunted. “But then again, even if it’s not, it’s not like it will be a total loss. Tarrin gets the chance to flatten the center of the One’s power. This church is huge, and if you destroyed its headquarters, I think it would put the entire thing in disarray.”

“You see the point,” Tarrin announced in a low voice. “Tomorrow morning, I’m sending Mist ahead so she can get into position. Sarraya, you’re going to be Mist tomorrow, so anyone who looks sees that she’s still with us.”

“How am I going to pull that off?” Sarraya asked, flitting up to his face. “There’s just a *little* bit of a height difference!”

“Mist, give me your belt,” Tarrin ordered, holding his paw out to his mate.

Miranda laughed. “Clever!” she praised. “Can you shrink it without damaging its magic?”

He shook his head. “It won’t work that way. If I shrunk the belt, it would just make a Sarraya-sized Mist. I’ll have to go from the other end.”

Sarraya glared at him indignantly. “Don’t you *dare* make me taller, Tarrin!” Tarrin fixed the Faerie with a withering stare, which brought her up short. “Well, uh, I *can* be put back to my rightful size, right?”

Tarrin snorted shortly. “Mist, I’ll need to change your amulet,” he commanded. “You’ll need some defense against fire for me to send you ahead. I’m going to copy the weave that the Goddess put into Camara Tal’s amulet so you’ll be safe from it. It’s about time you got that anyway.”

“I can’t take it off, my mate,” she reminded him.

“I know, so you’re in for a long night,” he answered her, sitting down cross-legged on the ground. She sat down in front of him, but he immediately reached down and grabbed her by the legs, then scooped her up and put her on his lap. He took hold of her amulet in his paw, and immediately set to work.

“I wonder how he’s going to pull this off,” Ulger grunted as Tarrin closed his eyes.

“If there is anything I have learned about Tarrin over the years, my friend,” Dolanna told him soberly, “is that you should *never* underestimate him. If he thinks he has found a way, then odds are, it will work.”

It was one of the hardest things he had ever done. It would not have been had he been at home, but this was not home.

He had to alter a complex weave set down by his own Goddess in order to add something, and do it in such a way that it did not destroy its other functions.

It took him literally all night. He had to expand out the weaving of the amulet and study it for a *long* time, come to understand how it worked, then start inserting his own weaving into it that would allow it to do what he wanted it to do without interfering with anything else. Half of that time entailed finding just *where* to make his weaving, then going through the long and complicated task of weaving it in. He had to use the power within himself, constantly siphoning more off from the sword, to create the permanent weaving and then seal it so it would not dissipate. Flow by flow, he interlaced his own addition into the amulet, moving with infinite care and caution, until he was finally finished. An hour before dawn, as Ulger stood silent watch over the camp in a warm, stiff wind that whipped over the grassy plain, Tarrin carefully withdrew his power from the amulet, allowing the weaving to return to its normal state, which included a new addition. Then he sealed the weaving once more, rendering it permanent.

He opened his eyes and saw that Mist was sleeping, sleeping sitting upright and stock still, her paws on his shoulders for balance. He felt Fireflash on his shoulders, draped across them, also sleeping peacefully. He shook her gently, and those glorious eyes opened immediately. “Done?” she asked.

He nodded. “Now it’s time to test,” he said.

They both stood up gracefully, though Tarrin’s knees and back popped from an extended period of time in one position. Fireflash He raised a paw and caused fire to come forth, dancing in his palm, and held it out to her. “Slowly.”

She looked at him a moment, then understood what he wanted. She extended her paw towards the fire, then pushed it inside. “I can feel the heat, but it’s not burning me,” she announced. “There’s no pain.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted. Now I can send you ahead without it frying you to a crisp in the process.”

“Exactly how are you going to do that, Tarrin?” Ulger asked curiously.

Fireflash erupted from the tent that Zyri and Jal shared, then landed on Tarrin’s shoulder and nuzzled him exuberantly. Tarrin patted his drake on the head absently, then took him in an arm and stroked his sleek scales with his other paw. “Fire is connected to itself,” Tarrin told Ulger in an absent manner. “Fire may be here or there, but it is all simply *fire*.” He pointed to the dying coals of the campfire. “I’ll send Mist into that fire, and join it to another somewhere else. She’ll come out of the *other* fire. I can sense many fires a great distance to the north, and from the number of them, that just *has* to be Pyros. I’m going to pick one, take a look through it, and if it looks good, Mist goes through. It’s not Teleporting, but it’s almost as good. The only drawback is that if you’re not immune to fire, you’re going to get burned going through it. That’s why I had to make Mist immune to it, the way me and Dolanna are.”

“You can do that?” Ulger said in surprise.

Tarrin nodded. "I'm not sure how, or how I know that I can, but I can," he answered. "It's like I always knew, but I never really thought about it because I never needed to use it before."

"How will Mist find Kimmie once she's through? We don't even know what building she's being held in."

"I'll find her," Mist told him brusquely. "I know where they're holding her, after all. All I have to do is find some lone human and drag the location of the main cathedral out of him."

"True," Ulger agreed. "Are you going now?"

Mist looked to Tarrin, then she nodded. "The more time I have to get into position, the more certain it'll be that I'm where I need to be when the time comes," she announced. "When do I act, my mate?"

"When you hear me coming," he answered. "Trust me, you will *not* miss it." He reached into his belt pouch and handed Mist a tiny book, his Gnomlin Travelling Spellbook. "When you free Kimmie, she absolutely *must* get you out of there. The Shadow Step spell is in this book. If she's forgotten it, she can read it right off the page. When you free her, she must get you two out of there, you can't come back out through the cathedral."

"I understand," Mist said soberly, putting the book in her belt pouch.

"That's why you're sending Mist," Ulger realized. "If Kimmie was immune to fire, you could just use fires to find her, then reach out and grab her and bring her back," he said brightly.

Tarrin gave Ulger a long, steady look, but it was slightly amused, and a bit respectful.

"Well, why not find Kimmie with fires, then send Mist or Dolanna right to her?"

"Because the One will feel it if I start poking around his cathedral," Tarrin answered. "I'm going to drop Mist at the edge of the city, and she'll work her way in. If I tried to reach right into his cathedral, he could interfere. And I'm not risking the life of whoever gets caught between us as we fight over control of the gateway."

"Oh. I forgot."

Tarrin gestured at the coals of the fire absently, and they roared into flame at his command. They burned high and bright and hot, rising up as high as Tarrin was tall. Tarrin handed Fireflash over to Ulger, then he and Mist walked over to the fire, and then Tarrin closed his eyes and put his paws into the flames. He reached into the fire, into the core of it, reached into the core of his own power. He extended his wings, which flared with bright light as he accessed powers that he had never used before, but also inherently, instinctively, knew were there and knew how to use. He then reached out with that power, the power within him, that defined him, the power of *fire*, feeling the location of every single fire for a hundred leagues in every direction. Every farmer's fire, the flames of every soldier's campfire, the licks of flame on the wicks of lanterns and candles on every bedstand, on posts on streets, every cookfire, they all were known to him in that instant. He found a large concentration of fires far to the north, a very large number of them, and then picked one at the fringe of that concentration at random and opened himself to it.

He saw in his mind a hazy image, distorted by the heat of the flames, of a small, almost crude room that looked to be the entirety of the structure. There was a single standing form in it, a woman in rough clothing, her back to the fire. Two figures slept on

pallets near the fire, and the hovel's doorway was open, showing a street beyond that looked empty and deserted.

Perfect.

"Mist, cat form," Tarrin said distantly as he deepened his connection to the fire. Mist shifted into her cat form immediately as the fire's flames shuddered, and then stopped as Tarrin reached into the fire, then reached through the intervening distance to the other fire, joining fire to itself and creating a *union* of fire with itself, causing to separate fires to become one. He had no idea how he did it, but he did. The fire again started moving, but its flames turned from reds and oranges, to blues and whites. "Go. And the Goddess be with you."

"See you soon, my mate," Mist replied in the manner of the Cat, then she bounded fearlessly into the fire. The union of fires caused her to exit from the fire on the *other* side, and he saw her immediately scamper through the room and out of the open door before the woman in that room turned around. Tarrin withdrew himself from the fire, which caused both fires to return to normal.

"She's through," Tarrin told Ulger.

"Not much of a goodbye," he noticed.

"It's not a goodbye," Tarrin told him. "We'll see each other again tomorrow. And neither of us are in the mood right now for affection. It's our way, Ulger."

"You think she'll be alright?"

"Stop thinking of Mist as a *woman*, Ulger," Tarrin said bluntly. "Women are not as helpless as you tend to believe. Mist will do exactly what she needs to do, and do it well. Nothing can stop her, because she won't let it." He folded his wings behind him, and slashed his tail a few times. "When I get to Pyros, Mist will be exactly where she needs to be. I have faith in her."

"Not misplaced faith, that's for certain," Ulger chuckled.

"Faith in Mist is never misplaced," Tarrin answered evenly, as the Knight handed Fireflash back to him. He stared into the fire, his glowing eyes a mystery of complex emotion. "Wake the others. It's time to go."

The others were surprised to find Mist already gone when they awoke, but Ulger was sure to describe how Tarrin did it in lustrous detail as Miranda cooked breakfast. Tarrin sat nearby with his sword in his lap, eyes closed and distant from the world, even oblivious to Fireflash's insistent nudges with his nose for attention. "It is alright, little one," Dolanna told him, patting him on the head as she went by. "He will be back to normal in just another day or so. He is just worried about Kimmie, that is all."

"I'll play with you, Fireflash," Zyri announced, coming over to Tarrin. "I know how it feels to be alone. I miss him too."

Fireflash vaulted over to her shoulder, then flicked his serpentine tongue in her ear, which made her convulse slightly and giggle uncontrollably. Jal however, came over and sat in front of Tarrin, his hands on the Were-cat's shins, staring at the sword intently. He then lifted his hands and produced a sculpture in ice of Tarrin's sword, which immediately started to melt when exposed to the radiant heat of Tarrin's wings.

"Yes, he's very hot," Haley chuckled. "It's the wings. They always radiate heat, but here lately, since he's been so worried about Kimmie, they're hotter than usual."

Jal pointed at Fireflash.

“Oh, him? He’s immune to fire. It’s because he’s a drake. He *breathes* fire, sprout, don’t you think he’d be immune to it too? If he wasn’t, he’d burn his mouth every time he did!”

Jal seemed to ponder that, then looked back to Tarrin. He extended his hands, a look of intense concentration on his face. Then a wave of cold emanated from his hands.

The result was a bit startling to the boy. Fog instantly formed around Tarrin and Jal, a thick, heavy fog that was cool and a bit clammy, but also was quickly torn apart by the stiff wind blowing across the plain. Jal had a wild look in his eyes, then he actually giggled aloud.

“That’s what happens when cool, wet air meets warm air, kiddo,” Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

“That is a rather clever little trick, though,” Ulger chuckled. “Instant smokescreen.”

Azakar finished saddling the Pegasi, patting his huge one on the neck fondly and getting nudged with the horse’s snout in return. Only Azakar’s massive charger had the strength to move the equally massive Mahuut. “Will this wind interfere with us? I’m still new to this.”

“I think we all are,” Dolanna said with a light smile. “But I think it will not be an issue, my friend. These animals know what they are doing. They will carry us safely through this wind.”

The camp was broken down after breakfast, before the dawn, just as the false dawn’s light faded from the eastern horizon. Tarrin stood up suddenly just as the last flap was tied on a pack on one of the pack Pegasi, as if he’d been aware of everything going on in the camp even with his eyes closed. “Mount,” he ordered. “Sarraya, come here.”

“Aww,” she growled. “I was hoping you’d forget.”

“Dream on,” he grunted as she landed on the ground before him, such an incredibly tiny thing, not even coming up to his ankle. “This might tingle.”

“What are you doing exactly?”

“It’s a Wizard spell. It will last until sunrise tomorrow, or until I cancel it. It will just grow you, it won’t change you any other way. But I doubt you’ll be able to fly.”

“Probably not,” she sighed. “Alright, go ahead. Let’s get it overwith.”

Tarrin began chanting in the discordant language of magic, his paws forming five distinct gestures before him as he did so, each gesture occurring at a precise point in the incantation. He then pointed at Sarraya and uttered the final word of the spell, and he felt that alien magic from *elsewhere* surge into and through him, then affect Sarraya in the manner in which he intended.

Very quickly, Sarraya began to grow. She grew a span in a matter of seconds, as her auburn locks crept higher and higher in comparison to Tarrin. Her dress of gossamer cobwebs enlarged with her as she expanded, growing at an astounding rate, until her curly cap of hair was level with Tarrin’s lower chest. Still she grew, getting taller and taller, until she was eye to eye with Tarrin.

“Put on the belt,” Tarrin ordered.

Sarraya looked at her hands, then laughed. “I don’t look any larger, at least until I look around,” she told them. She looked at her feet, then all around her. “I’m used to this point of view, since I can fly. It’s just odd to see from up here while my feet are on the ground.” Miranda handed her the belt, and she buckled it around her waist. “How do I make it work?”

“Just want to look like Mist. That’s all there is to it,” Miranda replied.

Sarraya nodded, and almost immediately, her bluish-skinned form wavered, until a illusory duplicate of Mist stood in her place. “How do I look?”

“Like Mist,” Ulger answered.

“Good. Now, someone might have to help me get on the horse. I’ve never done it before.” There was a sound of low-pitched buzzing, and Sarraya sighed. “Flying is definitely out. I’m too heavy for my wings to lift me. I feel like I weigh as much as a cow. I’ll be glad to get back to myself when this is done.”

“Help her, Zak,” Tarrin ordered as his feet left the ground, and he hovered there with his feet dangling just fingers over the ground.

“Showoff,” Sarraya muttered darkly.

With Azakar’s help, Sarraya managed to get onto Mist’s Pegasus. The Knight helped tie her to her saddle, then he mounted and quickly strapped himself to his mount as the others did the same. Ulger helped Jal and Zyri, and Fireflash settled in on Zyri’s saddle, just in front of her, as the scarred Knight finished tying the thongs around her legs. “He won’t fall off, will he?” she asked, pointing at Fireflash.

“Has he yet, shorty?” Ulger asked with a wink. “He’ll be fine, don’t worry about him. I’d worry about Sarraya. She’s such a big fat cow now, she might break her straps and fall off.”

“Hey! I’ll get you for that, Ulger!” Sarraya snapped hotly.

“You’re stuck in that saddle,” Ulger teased.

“I won’t be forever!”

“Yeah, like you’ll remember what I said tonight,” Ulger said, making a dismissive motion with his hand. “Sometimes I think you only remember your own name because people say it all the time.”

“Oh, that’s *it*,” Sarraya said darkly. “When I get back to my normal size, we’ll see who remembers what.”

“Fine with me. I’ll just get to swat you.”

Sarraya muttered some rather ugly obscenities, her eyes boring into the Knight, whose expression was flippant, almost taunting.

“Children. Ulger, you are holding us up. Mount, please.”

“As you command, Dolanna,” Ulger said in a swaggering manner, making sure to give Sarraya a smug look that sent her into another round of withering profanity.

“That’s a *very* offensive man,” Haley noted to Miranda.

“Funny, though,” Miranda replied with a wink.

Tarrin led the way as the Pegasi vaulted up from the ground, following the fire-winged Were-cat as he rose into the air. They circled around him as they gained altitude, then they all turned to the north with the vindictive Tarrin leading, sword still in his paw, still glowing with ghostly white energy, leading to the north, to Pyros, and to a confrontation with the One. Tarrin felt confident in his plan, confident that despite being overmatched by the power of a true god, that the power that he *could* bring to bear would be enough. With Kimmie out of the picture, with Mist retrieving her and getting her out of harm’s way, he could come at the One without reservation, without consequence, and without mercy. He would ram the One’s icon down his throat and then bury them both so deeply into the ground that it would take an army of workers a month to dig him out. Tarrin’s fury had been icy, contained, since discovering Kimmie’s fate, but that control

would not last once he had Pyros in his sight and the One so close at hand...and he welcomed the opportunity to lose control of his rage and use it as a controlled weapon against the One.

If the One wanted to fight Tarrin over the streets of Pyros, so all his worshippers could watch him destroy Tarrin and bask in their adulation, then he would give the One that opportunity. The worshippers of the One would see their god fighting valiantly against whatever it was the One told them that he was...and then he would burn them to ashes. Them, their streets, their buildings, everything. When he was done, Pyros would be a crater, a scar in the earth filled with lava, much like the crater of Gora Umadar back on Sennadar. The One had gone out of his way to infuriate Tarrin, and now he would reap the harvest of wrath that he had sown with seeds of hatred.

The One wanted to fight him. So be it. The One was going to get everything that he wanted.

And more than ever dreamed he'd have to face.

To: [Title](#) [EoF](#)

Chapter 8

They had no idea that they were doomed.

Mist carefully wandered through the streets of this large city in her human form at first, and then in her cat form, a city filled with buildings and streets of red stone and gray slate roofs, the same red stone as the solitary, steep-sloped mountain that rose high to the north, a mountain that Mist saw was an active volcano. It was nearly the color of blood, and in Mist's mind, that was almost fitting. These animals worshipped a monster for a god, and they were about to face their punishment for doing so.

Unlike most of those around Tarrin, or Tarrin himself, Mist did *not* have any compassion, or compunction to spare these people. Centuries of ferality had hardened her in ways that most did not understand, and the Cat had no warm feelings for these people. That meant that if they all died, it wouldn't even so much as make her bat an eye. In fact, the Cat in her cried out to destroy them, because they were more cruel than she had ever been.

The differences in them were so obvious. The people involved with the church wore either black or red, cassocks or robes of flowing splendor, escorted by guards and soldiers wearing plate armor with red surcoats and carrying broadswords. Then there were the rich city folk, who wore finery out on the red-bricked streets, carried in litters, riding in carriages, or walking, but never without armed men protecting them at all times. Then there was everyone else, dressed in rough homespun clothing, moving through the streets with fear in their eyes. Twice she had seen instances of the guards or soldiers of the rich beating on some hapless poor person, who had done something that someone had taken offense to.

She felt no pity for them, however. There were a thousand times more poor people than rich people, and they allowed it to happen to themselves. They had the power to make it stop, but they let fear rule them. And even if they died, well, dying for something you believed in was much better than living in fear all your life.

She knew what it was like to live in fear. For centuries she was trapped by her own fear. After the Were hunter had wounded her and made her barren, she had become feral, and had been miserable. Afraid of everything and everyone, unable to even trust those she respected, like Triana, she was condemned to a life of unending solitude. She had hated it, hated it with every fiber of her being, but she just could not overcome the fear. She had even wanted to kill herself, but the instincts of the Cat would not allow it. The instinct of self-preservation would prevent any attempt to end things...she knew that oh too well. So she lived in that prison for hundreds of years, alone, afraid, tormented by what she had become, and haunted by what she wanted to be.

Kimmie had been her first true victory over her fear...if it could be called that. The poor girl was half crazy when Mist found her, but her life wasn't any easier after she took her in. Mist had been afraid of Kimmie, and Kimmie seemed to sense it, because she was

always very careful around her bond-mother. But Kimmie was her first true conquest of her ferality, aided by her instinct, her *need*, to raise a child. She had never felt any love for the dark-haired girl, only an instinctive need to teach her the ways of Were. Her ferality even overruled the instinctive need to protect the girl, for by protecting her she would have to put herself in a position where she could not protect herself against *Kimmie*.

But then Tarrin came. The injured cub had healed away the scar in her body, the scar in her mind, with the gentlest of touches, and that first time he had touched her, she had sensed the *beauty* inside him. She had wanted that beauty from the instant she became aware of it, but she was afraid of him. So instead she managed to conquer her fear for the briefest of times to allow herself to take him for mate, with the hope that he would give her a child of her own, a little piece of the beauty of him that would be part of her life forever afterward.

It was safe to say that Mist had instantly fallen in love with him, but it was love at first touch rather than love at first sight. She just hadn't understood what she was feeling back then, she knew now.

He had sired Eron, and Eron had filled the void in her heart, and in his own way, had healed his mother of much of her feral nature. Her life's single wish had been fulfilled, she had a child of her own, and it caused her to mellow out quite a bit. She had even reconciled with Kimmie and came to discover love in her heart for her former bond-child, and it brought a richness, a warmth into her life that steadily, quietly, and gently lifted the cold hands of fear from her soul, allowed her to accept her ferality, but chain its power, bringing it to heel. She was feral, would always be feral, but now she had *control* of her ferality. It did not rule her anymore. She could still sense the fear, but it no longer ruled her life.

But her love for Tarrin was much more than love, even she seemed to understand it. She loved him, but in a way, she was devoted to him in a way that even frightened *her*. Of all the females, she was the only one that didn't go crazy when he was turned human, because she knew in her heart that he would want to be Were, and that knowledge gave her comfort. She trusted him far more than she trusted herself, a trust that was nearly blind in its faith. There was nothing that she would not do for him. She knew that, accepted it in a calm way despite the alien concept of it, because what she felt for him had nothing at all to do with her instincts, and despite how far she had come, she was *still* feral, and always would be.

Being Tarrin's mate, *finally*, had made her the happiest female anywhere. She knew that he didn't love her quite the same way yet, but again, she had faith in him, and faith that her love would open his eyes, just as Kimmie's had done. Until the day when she heard him say those words, she would wait. And unlike most Were-cats, Mist had the patience of a stone. Before turning feral she had been grounded in common sense, and that sense told her that sometimes one had to wait to get something worthwhile. She would wait as long as it took to get what she wanted.

Perhaps that had been why turning feral had been so hard on her. She had been very un-Were in her outlook before being wounded, and then had the full brunt of the worst aspects of her Were nature thrust upon her. She had not handled it well, and that only made her ferality worse.

But that was all in the past, and the past had no meaning for a were-cat.

The main cathedral of the One was certainly unmistakable, and she had been moving steadily towards it all morning. It was a huge black-walled monstrosity built at the far end of the city, on the edge of the slope of that volcano. It was vast, towering over all the other buildings of the city with its black walls and its towering minarets and towers rising around a main building that was capped by a gold dome that whose top would rival the central tower of the Tower complex at Suld. It was built on a shelf of sorts that put it higher than the ground of the city before it, so it was visible to everyone in the city at all times, an eternal reminder of their god and his station over them.

Kimmie was in a dungeon under that thing, and that Demon bitch Shaz'Baket was also there...and those were Mist's current two reasons for living. To retrieve her daughter, and kill that Demoness.

Tarrin was coming...she could *feel* it, like a whispering in her soul that grew faintly stronger with every passing moment. His fury was growing with every second, and when he arrived, he would be a hurricane of furious wrath. He was not a god, not even close to the power of one, but his fury and the rightness of what he was doing would give him what he needed to face the One and defeat him. Tarrin had faced adversaries much stronger than himself before, and he'd won every time, because that was what he did. She had no doubt that he would triumph over the One. He had bested that dragon in Sha'Kari, he had defeated Val, so there was no doubt in her mind that he would defeat the One. It may not be easy, and it might not be pretty, but he would win. She knew he would, and since she knew it, it was simply a matter of calm acceptance for her. All she had to do was ensure that her mate could attack the One without reservation, and that meant getting into that cathedral and hiding somewhere close to Kimmie, so she could act when she knew it was time to do so.

Getting there was no problem. Nobody accosted her, even in her human form, because one glare was enough to make anyone back away from her quickly. Though she wasn't dressed in frilly finery, her clothes were very well made, clean, and neat in appearance, making the poor people believe she was rich, and the rich people think she was crazy for not going out without armed escort. She simply marched through them all, uncaring about them.

It took her nearly an hour to reach the cathedral, because she didn't want to make it obvious that that was where she was going. It was well separated from the rest of the city by a large wall around the base of a gentle slope that led to the plateau where the thing was built, with a heavily fortified gatehouse defending the breach in the wall. Getting further simply required a little change. She slunk off into an alley and shapeshifted into her cat form, then idled on the road leading to the gatehouse long enough to catch a ride on a fancy carriage that was going up to the cathedral. She sat on the axle beneath the carriage calmly and steadily as it rocked and bounced on the red brick street, then rode it as it carried her up to the cathedral building.

Nobody paid much attention to Mist as she crept past fearsome-looking guards and into the cathedral proper, entering a vast antechamber filled with gold statues, ivory-inlaid stone and wood sculpture on the walls and doorframes, and velvet curtains hanging before each doorway, tied back and away. Mist got a cold chill in her soul when she entered that room, entered the base of power of the One, literally walking into the mouth of the beast. She could feel his presence in the place like a palpable aura of cold settling

around her, and had the distinct feeling that he would notice if she were there...if it wasn't for the fact that he wasn't distracted.

Tarrin. She was going to kiss that man when this was over. His approach was distracting the One, just as he said it would, and it was allowing her to invade his personal domain unnoticed.

Secure in her anonymity, Mist crept through a doorway, her mind locked on the mission before her. She would find out where Kimmie was, and then hide somewhere nearby. When Tarrin arrived, she would spring into action. She would free her daughter and then escape with her, and that would give Tarrin freedom to exact righteous vengeance on the One without fear of harming Kimmie. She would do her part, and do it exactly as Tarrin expected it to be done.

She would not fail him. She would *never* fail Tarrin. No matter what it took, she would find a way to succeed, because he expected it of her, just as she knew he would succeed because she expected it of him.

He had faith in her. She would not let him down.

Not ever.

It was a day spent in tense, anxious silence.

From the instant the Pegasi lifted up from the ground, nobody said a single word for the entire time that they were airborne. The only sounds were the wind in their ears and the deep *whoosh* which emanated from the large wings of the Pegasi on which they rode, as none of them seemed willing to break the pregnant silence around them. The winged horses followed Tarrin as if they had been commanded to do so, as if the brilliant light that emanated from his wings had enraptured them and caused them to follow him blindly.

They landed once around midday, and Dolanna dared to break the silence to ask why. Tarrin simply pointed to a nearby brook and said not a word, immediately sitting cross-legged on the ground and putting his sword in his lap, a sword that still had the ghostly white radiance around it that announced to them all that it was in contact with the Weave. The others rested and grabbed a quick meal, but Tarrin did not move a finger while they were doing so, did not speak. When the others were ready to go, Tarrin did not move, forcing them to wait on him, which seemed to them to be counter to what they were doing.

But they didn't understand. Timing was everything. The battle with the red dragon on Sha'Kari had taught him that brutal lesson. Timing was everything, and he was not going to mess things up by getting there at the wrong time. The optimal time to reach Pyros was sunset, and the engagement with the One should take place in the dark of night. In that environment, with no daylight to diffuse the light of his wings, their brightness would serve almost as well as the sun in the face of a charging army. They would attract the eye, and when his sword dipped in front of them, it would be lost in the background light of them. That would give him the advantage. It also gave Mist plenty of time to find Kimmie and get into position, for what she had to do was also a matter of critical timing, and he wanted her to have plenty of time to be ready.

And so, he caused them to wait a while, then he finally deigned to allow them to go. They flew for most of the midday and afternoon, and as they moved north, he became aware of the gnawing sensation that he knew was the One ahead of him. They were close

enough to sense one another now, and he felt a sudden explosion of anger and anticipation...and not a little excitement. The One was *looking forward* to this, wanted to fight. Tarrin, on the other hand, only emanated raw, naked fury, so much so that the One could not possibly feel anything else. That also served to prevent the One from sensing that Tarrin *did* have a plan, and it had already been set into motion. From what the One could feel from Tarrin, all he knew was that the Were-cat was so angry that he barely contained any rational thought. The One probably thought that that gave him an advantage, but he didn't understand the complexities of his opponent, whose mind was effectively layered. He was able to be that angry and think at the same time, because the Cat did all the raging while the Human did all the thinking. The duality of his mind could often be as much an asset to him as it was a liability, when its unique aspects were used the correct way.

Tarrin stopped them one more time about a half an hour before sunset, when the spires and towers of Pyros were just beginning to become visible over the northern horizon. He did not sit this time, only stood there with his sword in his paw, still as a stone. The only thing that changed about him was that the glowing white radiance around his sword flickered, and then vanished. He turned to look to his side, then extended a paw and pointed his open palm at the ground some spans away. A sudden blast of fire issued forth from his hand, striking the ground and swirling around itself, and it remained after Tarrin ceased the gout of flame, burning angrily in the grass, remaining even after it consumed its fuel, but not spreading from where it was burning. He then reached out with his paw and wove a frighteningly complicated Ward that was nearly five hundred spans across, a dome of absolute protection that would stop any magic from crossing its boundary, and canceling all magic but Sorcery within it. No Demon could Teleport within their midst, and the Ward would render their magic unusable. That would give them the ability to kill them relatively easily, for few Demons were a match for Azakar, Ulger, or Haley in a battle with weapons, and the magic of Miranda and Dolanna would destroy them quickly. He pointed at the ground, and a fire erupted from the ground, burning brightly and without fuel, in the middle of an open area that would serve as a good camp.

"Stay here," Tarrin finally spoke, sending his gaze over them all. "This is as close as you can get."

"For what, dear one?"

"For you to stay safe," he answered in a detached manner.

"But we're still two leagues out of Pyros," Ulger objected. "It'll take us ten minutes to get there from here!"

Tarrin fixed Ulger with such a penetrating, emotionless stare that it made Ulger flinch.

"Uh, I think that Tarrin means that we're much safer way over here," Haley said lightly. "And we'll be out of his hair."

"Well said," Miranda nodded soberly.

Tarrin spread his wings and rose just slightly into the air, looking down at them. "Wait here," he ordered. "I'll be right back."

"Tarrin, be careful," Dolanna warned. "Remember, he *is* a god, and Pyros is filled with Demons who will aid him against you. He will have powers, just as you do, and may know magic. Do not underestimate him."

"I won't," Tarrin replied. "I don't have to kill him to win, Dolanna. Remember that. All I have to do is get to Kimmie."

Dolanna nodded knowingly. "May the Goddess' light and love shine down on you and protect you, my dear one."

Tarrin closed his eyes and nodded his head ever so slightly, then turned and flew off towards the north, towards Pyros, and towards the One.

"Do you think he'll be alright, Dolanna?" Miranda asked, reflexively reaching out and putting her arm around Zyri's shoulder, as the little girl watched Tarrin fly away with frightened eyes.

"I think that if all goes as he envisions, then he will be well," Dolanna said, then she took hold of her amulet in a steady hand. "Well, on to matters, then. We need something to eat."

The others got down to the business of preparing the evening meal, for now they could do nothing other than wait. But Zyri stood in place, hugging Fireflash to her breast, simply watching Tarrin dwindle into the distance, until only the light of his wings could be seen, and then well after even that was gone from her eyes. She did not move, she only looked to the north with an expression of haunted fear. Tarrin, the scary non-human who had shown her such kindness, was going off to fight with the One. She knew what had happened to him, that he was more than a mortal, but he also made sure to explain to her that he was by no means a god. And now he was going off to fight with a *god*. The others seemed to think that he could win.

Well, if he could fight a god and win, wouldn't that make *him* a god? Maybe he was, and he just didn't know it. Adults loved to say that, that people were this or that, and just didn't know it.

Either way, she was worried about him. In his own way, him and Mistress Mist had become like her own mother and father, taking in her and Jal and caring for them, teaching them things, showing them kindness, even a little bit of love. For two orphans, that was more than they could have ever dreamed to get. She often felt lost and confused traveling with this group of people *from another world*, but no matter how lost she was, just feeling like she *belonged* with them, that they like her and her brother, that they didn't throw them out after Telven betrayed them, was all she could have dreamed about.

And now Master Tarrin, a towering figure of authority, of power and strength, and a surprising wellspring of wisdom and guidance for her, was going away to fight the One to get back his friend. And he was doing it without showing a whit of fear. She always felt so safe when he was near, so protected, knowing that he was so strong and he would protect her from whatever would do her harm. And oddly enough, she still felt safe and protected, even knowing that he was gone and where he was going, what he was about to do. But it didn't lighten the burden of worry from her heart.

"Be careful, Master Tarrin," she whispered in Penali. How rarely they used her native tongue now, always speaking in that *Sulasian* language that Tarrin had taught her with magic, but speaking words from her heart itself. "Come home soon."

Sunset. The last sunset that Pyros would ever see.

Tarrin had traversed the distance to the large city quickly, then, when he got within a longspan of it, he landed on the well-worn road leading to Pyros and began walking. Every step brought him more and more into focus, prepared him for what was to come.

He knew exactly what he was going to do, exactly how to make it happen, and went over the steps of it in his mind over and over again as the Cat's rage built with each step, drowning out those rational thoughts to any Demon or god that might try to eavesdrop on his thoughts.

This had to be a *physical* confrontation. Tarrin was well aware that the One's magical power far outstripped his own, because the One *was* a god. He had a full charge of Sorcery and every Wizard spell he could comprehend memorized, but he knew that it might not be enough. The One would have the innate powers that were a part of him, part of his being a god. Every god had those kinds of powers, just like Tarrin's mastery of fire, but the One's would be different, because he was a god of mortals rather than of a natural force. Tarrin would be at a disadvantage in that regard, because the One knew what Tarrin could do—roughly—while Tarrin had no idea what powers the One possessed. On top of that, the One could certainly use magic. He doubted that a god who hated any non-Priest magic would actively use Wizard magic, but Tarrin knew that he could use *every Priest spell that existed*, because gods could use any spell that they could bestow upon a mortal, and the One was a powerful enough god to grant the most powerful spells to his Priests. So he had to take it to the One with his sword, force the One to deal with him weapon to weapon, try to take magic out of the game as quickly as possible. It had to be a loud and explosive confrontation, to alert Mist that he was there and that he had engaged the One, and give her time to get to Kimmie. Then, after Tarrin felt that Mist had had enough time, he would simply disengage from the One and attack the One's cathedral. If the One's icon was in that cathedral, and Tarrin could get to it, then the battle was *over*.

Tarrin didn't have to fight the One to *beat* the One. The battle was nothing more than a stalling tactic.

Oh, but there *would be* some serious fighting. Tarrin's fury demanded ripping out the One's eyes and stuffing them down his throat. If he could kill the One's physical manifestation, his avatar, before going on and destroying his icon, well, that was just that much better. He doubted that he could do it, but it would be very, very wonderful if he could.

The gates of Pyros stood before him, closed, and were heavily manned with both human guards and Demons. *Vrock, Glabrezu, Hezrou, and Nalfeshnee*, the four lowest rungs of the strongest of Demonkind, were present on that wall and in front of that gate, waiting for him. Behind that gate was a very large city built of reddish stone, the same reddish stone as the steep-sloped volcano which stood behind the city itself. The roofs were covered with gray slate, and the architecture was crisp and exacting, much different from the rude mud hovels of the serfs and the ragged timber buildings in most of the smaller towns. This was the pinnacle of Pyrosian society, and they held back their riches and glory for themselves and themselves only, as if to make Pyros seem even more grand by making it beautiful while actively keeping all other holdings of the One ugly and poor. It spoke much of the One's mentality.

Tarrin came to a stop some distance from those front gates, studying them. The One was not here. He was not going to meet Tarrin immediately, he wanted Tarrin to fight his way through his minions.

Very well. That was his first mistake.

He started forward, walking at an inexorable pace, as if nothing was going to prevent him from moving forward. But every step became longer and longer, and his pace quickened with each step, until he went from a walk to a blistering run, sword bursting into flame as he took it up in both paws, just before his feet left the ground and his wings snapped out, carrying him forth along the ground like a diving eagle. He did not rise his feet more than a finger off the ground, displaying with his actions his intent to go *through* that gate rather than *over* it.

The Demons all took on a surprised expression when they realized that they could not Teleport to him. The Ward that Tarrin had woven to protect them while they were flying was still active, and it was centered on *him*. When they came within the Ward, their magic would no longer function. They quickly formed up in front of the gates, *vrock* carrying their glaives while the other Demons intended to use nothing but claws, teeth, or fists.

Not that it would help them.

Tarrin rammed into the very center of their line like a Wikuni cannonball, sword over his head, then he whipped it down on the *vrock* in the center. The vulture-like Demon raised his glaive up to defend itself, but the burning sword sheared through the metal haft of the weapon and cleaved the Demon's head in two. The Demon fell back, but Tarrin turned and drove the tip of his sword into the chest of a *hezrou*, then ducked under the lunge of a *Glabrezu's* pincers. That pincer hand sailed away with the stroke of Tarrin's sword, then the Demon squealed in agony when a dozen fiery lances erupted from the inside curves of Tarrin's wings and plunged into its body. Those lances withdrew, and then Tarrin's wings divided into irregular tendrils, then spread out. The Demons found themselves facing a foe not with wings, but with an innumerable number of ropy, whip-like tendrils attached to his back. And to their horror, they discovered that the Were-cat could move each one independently.

It was like fighting a foe with twenty arms. The Demons were immediately pushed back as those whipping tendrils whizzed around in a dizzying frenzy of motion, striking with such force that they cut into the bodies they impacted. A few Demons backed away from him fearfully, some lifted their arms to protect their faces, but the armed *vrocks* pressed in, using the reach of their weapons to strike at the Were-cat from outside the seeming range of his fiery whips. All five *vrocks* lost their heads as a pair of whip-like appendages expanded in length and slashed across their necks, each whip changing trajectory to strike true as it passed from the last victim.

Using the sudden reel of his foes, Tarrin reformed his wings and turned on them with his sword. Black blood flew with every stroke of his burning sword as the staggering Demons found themselves overwhelmed by the raw fury of his attack. The Were-cat's face twisted in a snarling mask of pure hatred and Demons were struck down with every blow, overwhelmed by the ferocity of his attack and off kilter from losing their ability to use magic.

After striking down the last Demon, surrounded by pools of smoking black sludge, Tarrin turned on the gates themselves, massive gates of brass-banded hardwood and with a portcullis before it. Tarrin's paw suddenly was engulfed in flame, flame that coalesced and brightened, until he leveled his paw at the gates and unleashed that might. A concentrated blast of fire, hotter than anything the humans and Demons above the gatehouse could imagine, blasted out from the enraged Were-cat's paw. The fire was not

red, or yellow, or even white, it was *blue*, and when it struck the portcullis, it caused the metal to instantly wither away like wax thrown into a bonfire. When the fire struck the wooden gates, it caused the wood to *explode*, sending shards of fiery wooden splinters flying for hundreds of spans in every direction. The shockwave of that detonation shattered what was left of the gates, and collapsed the red stone archway over the gates. Stone squealed and men screamed as the gatehouse collapsed into the passageway, causing a cloud of dust to billow out from it in both directions.

There was a moment of eerie silence, as the last of the echoes of the collapse bounced back to them, and before the moans of the injured in the twisted wreckage of the gatehouse became too loud. The air around Tarrin became hazy, like the shimmering of air over a hot rock in the desert, and when he moved forward, blackened imprints were left behind from his feet as he walked. Tarrin's eyes glowed green in the fading light, backlit by the brilliance of his fiery wings, and the shards of wood in the wreckage upon which he tread as he climbed over the ruins of the gatehouse burst into flame as he passed over it.

In dramatic fashion, Tarrin had gained entry into the capitol city of the One's large empire, Pyros. And he was there to destroy it.

"I HAVE COME!" Tarrin bellowed in a voice that was impossibly loud for any mortal being. The sound of his voice shook the dust from the rafters of buildings across the entire city, shattered windows, and terrified the population of Pyros. "COME OUT AND FACE ME, YOU COWARD! YOU WANTED TO FIGHT ME? THEN STOP COWERING IN FEAR BEHIND MY MATE AND FACE ME, YOU SPINELESS DOG!"

Tarrin's wings suddenly expanded to five times their normal size, then they collapsed in on him as he turned his power on himself, *became* the fire, and then caused himself to assume a different form. The fire of him expanded, extended, grew to immense dimensions, then it vanished from him in a wave of flame as it left flesh and bone behind. Tarrin had again assumed the form of a gold dragon, and that dragon keened a mighty roar that again shook the foundations of Pyros, then he turned his massive head, craned his neck as he sucked in his breath, then unleashed a hellish inferno of fire on the buildings to the right of the street leading in from the gatehouse. The stone was volcanic rock, highly resistant to heat, but even that was no defense against the withering might of Tarrin's breath weapon. Slate exploded, reddish volcanic rock shattered, and everything within those buildings was either melted to slag or burned to ash in the blink of an eye. Tarrin sustained his breath weapon, raking it across a large swath of the city block adjoining the city gate, leaving behind a massive fire in his wake when he finally ceased the blast.

Demons again rushed at him from the walls, but Tarrin simply turned his head, sucked in his breath, and then unleashed another cone of fire. Demons were immune to heat and fire, just as he was, but they could not resist the *force* of the blast, as all that superheated fire and air slammed into them like an avalanche. They leaned into the cone of fire, protecting their faces, but one by one they lost purchase and were sent flying, tumbling along the ground. And when the fire ended, they didn't think quite fast enough. The first one never saw it coming as Tarrin's monstrous forepaw crushed it into the red bricks of the ground, which now glowed a ruddy red from being superheated. Tarrin was *not* native to this world, and neither was the dragon form which he occupied, so the

Demon had no defense against him. There was nothing left but a black smudge among shattered red bricks. The second one saw it coming, but couldn't Teleport itself to safety. It tried to do that first without thinking, without realizing that Tarrin's Ward was *still* up, and it too was crushed into a liquid by Tarrin's titanic weight. The others, realizing that they had no magic and nothing but teeth and claws against a creature so massive that they could do little more than bite at its feet, scrambled up off the ground and fled towards the open land beyond the shattered gate.

Tarrin let them go, turning his head back to the city. He unleashed yet another blast of fire to his left, setting another massive fire among the ruins of what was not instantly destroyed, then he turned and unleashed the last of his fire at the walls themselves, killing several dozen city guardsman who were scrambling about in fear and confusion. His gas sacks were depleted, and he could use no more of his breath weapon.

But the form had served its purpose by intimidating the Demons into giving up. The massive dragon form turned to flame, then dissipated, leaving nothing behind but Tarrin, wrapped within his own wings, at the center of it. He unfurled his wings and lightly descended to the ground.

Obviously, Tarrin was not going to draw out the One with wanton destruction. It seemed that he didn't care about the state of his city. The One *wanted* him to come forward before he acted, for some reason. He didn't understand why. The One should have come out the instant he arrived, to defend the city, but he did not. He was allowing Tarrin to advance, maybe all the way to the cathedral itself. Was he that arrogantly overconfident? Was he going to allow Tarrin to come within striking distance, confident that Kimmie's captivity would stay his paw?

Spreading his wings, Tarrin rose into the air and lifted himself above the buildings, then started towards the cathedral. But when he did so, he sensed an immediate reaction from inside that cathedral. He distinctly felt a sense of *manifestation*, as the direct might of the One came from wherever he truly was and took solid form here, in the material plane. That convinced him that the One's icon was *definitely* in that cathedral, and that his decision to abandon destroying everything along the way and just come right after the One had provoked a reaction. He didn't understand why, though.

On the far side of the city, a massive column of light descended from the heavens and illuminated the golden dome of the building, and there was a strange harmonic hum shimmering in the air. The One was resorting to *theatrics*, Tarrin realized in surprise, because his material form was *already* here. The light became incandescent, almost too bright to look at directly, and then it began to wane. Within the light was a silhouette, a form that became visible as the light faded from around it.

It was the One.

He resembled a human, wearing gleaming silver plate armor and carrying a broadsword and a kite shield with a center spike. He had no helmet, showing a perfectly handsome face and piercing blue eyes to the world, as well as a head full of platinum-blond hair that was long and flowing, pulled back from his face in a tail. And to complete his majestic appearance, he had a pair of feathery wings on his back, spread out as he appeared, and then folded behind him. A nimbus of soft light surrounded him, and even from that distance, Tarrin could tell that he was at least twenty spans tall.

"Cease, minion of evil!" the One's voice boomed in Penali across all of Pyros, echoing off the volcano behind him. "Thy reign of terror ends here!"

The sight of the instigator of the abduction of his mate caused Tarrin's control to waver, then succumb to the fury within. He gave no frilly speeches, no dramatic standoffs, he simply charged at the One with such speed that he left a trail of flames behind him with a furious howl that was nearly as loud as the One's booming voice. Tarrin was only dimly aware of his body briefly becoming pure flame, *becoming* the fire, then expanding. When the flames extinguished, his body was larger, the same size as the One's, some part of Tarrin's mind having made him big enough to fight the One weapon to weapon. Tarrin's sword had enlarged as well to stay the same size to Tarrin, and he held it in both paws as he streaked directly at the glowing god. The One moved forward to intercept him away from the cathedral, flying but not using his wings. He raised his sword and shield as Tarrin advanced upon him, ready to do battle.

The first contact between them sent shockwaves through the city. Tarrin reared back with his sword over his head as he careened at the One, then brought it down with every fiber of his being. The One blocked it with his shield, and the impact between sword and shield created a brilliant flare of light and a cascade of angry sparks to rain down on Pyros. The One staggered back through the air with the raw power behind the blow, and there was a look of shocked surprise in his eyes. But Tarrin did not relent, immediately striking again, and again, not bothering to try to get around the One's defenses, instead beating directly on his shield, falling back on the classic Ungardt tactic of shield destruction. The One's entire body shuddered as the burning blade of Tarrin's sword impacted his shield, sending a steady rain of glowing sparks raining down on the city below. Tarrin did not relent, striking with such raw power and such speed that the One could do nothing but protect himself with his shield, until one particularly savage blow, where Tarrin turned in a full circle and chopped at the One like a woodsman cutting down a tree, sent him careening back and put a charred slash through the gleaming metal of his shield. The Were-cat immediately took one paw off his sword and began chanting in the discordant language of magic, making a single gesture with his free paw.

A bolt of jagged lightning issued forth from his paw and blasted through the open space between them, but the One was quick to counter. He raised his shield and presented it to that attack, which struck it and harmlessly reflected away, lancing through the night to Tarrin's left. The lightning created an earth-shaking *BOOM* that shuddered the entire city.

Foolish mortal, thy magic has no effect on a god! the One's voice taunted within his mind.

Tarrin did not even think a reply. The attack had served its purpose. It was never meant to harm the One. But it *was* a loud declaration that Tarrin had engaged the One in battle.

The nimbus of light brightened around the One, and he surged forward. He pointed his sword at Tarrin, and Tarrin felt a wave of raw *power* issue from the god's material form, as a god unleashed his divine might into the world. An incandescent blast of power raced towards him, but Tarrin simply slithered to the side like a skimmer on the surface of a pond, then his wings snapped out and he hurtled forward with his sword leading, closing the distance before the One could try again. He could not allow this to become a battle of power; it had to remain a physical confrontation, or he would lose.

The One assumed a defensive posture, his feet looking as if they were standing on solid ground, and met Tarrin's blow with his shield. Tarrin did the same, putting his feet

on a solid nothing beneath them, and continued his frenzied assault. The One's face became serious as the Were-cat unleashed a flurry of quick, shallow slashes with his huge weapon, moving it with dizzying speed and grace. The One barely managed to keep up with that whirling blade, which trailed flame as it moved that distracted the eye, blocking with his shield or parrying with his broadsword when the weapon came at him from the right instead of the left. Tarrin raised his weapon and started a downward chop, then shifted the angle of the blade with such speed that it totally fooled his foe. Tarrin's sword dipped under the edge of the shield, slashing across the metal of the One's armored greave, leaving a deep rend in the metal protecting his shin. There was a brilliant burst of sparks and a strange bluish light emanating from that slash through his armor, and it effectively wiped the smirk off the One's face when he realized that he was facing a master of armed combat.

Tarrin had scored first blood, and it infuriated the One. With a howl of furied outrage, the One pressed in, his broadsword dancing with the grace of a flitting Faerie, but Tarrin was more than capable of keeping up with it. Tarrin parried a series of light strokes and several shallow stabs with ridiculous ease. The One was a fencer, and fencers relied on speed and deception. But the One's fighting style was *crude* compared to many warriors Tarrin had faced in his life. His style was simplistic and relied on speed, but against Tarrin his speed was no advantage. Forget a demigod, the One would lose a battle with Allia or Tsukatta hands down.

Unless it was all a feint, of course. The One suddenly pressed Tarrin with a blindingly fast series of slashes at Tarrin's head, but Tarrin had little trouble dealing with this sudden onslaught, for he was *still* slower than Tarrin. The One had been hiding his true speed behind a deceptive feint, then unleashed his full speed in a burst to try to take Tarrin off guard, which was admittedly a clever tactic. Tarrin had done the same thing himself many times.

"What's the matter?" Tarrin hissed in a low growl. "Having trouble battling a *mortal*, even with a sword and shield? Here, let me make it more interesting for you." Tarrin took his left paw off his sword and extended the Cat's Claws, then immediately put the One on the defensive as the god had to deal with a truly stunning array of lightning-fast attacks from both the sword and the five lethal blades extending from the Were-cat's left paw. Despite the large difference in reach between his huge sword and the claws on his paw, Tarrin managed to use them both, slashing his sword against the One's shield, continuing to concentrate on that defensive barrier, then lunging in with the Cat's Claws and driving them before him like a spear, or raking them at the edge of the One's shield, or turning the back of his paw to the One's sword and parrying it away harmlessly. The One became so consumed by trying to protect himself from the sword and Cat's Claws that he left himself totally open. So, when Tarrin struck heavily with his sword against the One's shield, then slashed the Cat's Claws against its edge, he was totally surprised when the Were-cat spun in the air and brought out his foot, claws out and leading, and smashed it into the One's pretty little face. The claws caught him just in front of the ear and hooked his jaw, and they dug into his flesh and ripped nasty gashes through his face as the foot continued along. The pad on the ball of his foot hit him right on the edge of his mouth, and they sent teeth flying as the One's head was snapped to the side.

The One spun to the side, then staggered back and righted himself, a gauntleted hand to his face. His face was a mask of outrage and fury. "You, you, you *hurt* me!" he

screamed incredulously, taking his hand away to reveal three deep gashes in his cheek, one of which cut clear through and into the cavity of his mouth.

Tarrin just glared at him viciously, then quickly pulled in his arms. His wings snapped out, and a dozen slender lances of fire erupted from the inner surface of his wings, streaking towards the One, aiming for his head and his body. But the One made a furious slashing gesture with his shield, and Tarrin's lances struck something *solid* and were deflected away. Tarrin withdrew them as the One gave him a look of utter contempt, and then pushed out with both of his arms.

What came next was not a bolt, but a *wave* of pure power, and Tarrin had nowhere to go. He found himself staring a wall of white energy that took up his entire field of vision, hurtling at him with shocking speed. Instead of trying to defend himself, Tarrin took his sword up in both paws and slashed at that power as it reached for him. The blade struck it, and he felt *resistance*, as if he were striking a solid object. Tarrin didn't let up, he sheared his blade through the wave of the One's power, which caused it to part before him like a curtain. It went to either side of him harmlessly, but did catch on his wings, which pulled him off balance before he could make them fluid and pliable and slide through the hole without resistance. The One looked shocked that his blast of power had not caught Tarrin, but did not delay or relent. He made a slashing motion with his sword, and Tarrin felt something *impact* him from the side, like a gigantic fist. It struck with such force that Tarrin felt that his head was going to come off. Stunned, he was swept off the invisible platform on which they had been battling, hurtling towards the city at an alarming rate. He shook off the cobwebs and sensed his quick approach to the ground, then flared out his wings and arrested his descent. He felt them pull at his back as they defied his momentum, but they prevented him from slamming into a gray-slatted roof, under which was a window where two children watched on in muted awe. He landed on the roof of the building, and spotted another wave of power hurtling towards him. In an instant of protectiveness, he called on the power of Sorcery. He wove a weave of Air and Fire and released it from his paws, then projected it before him as a shield of pure force. Even though he had marked all within Pyros as doomed, seeing a child in danger had caused him to rise up and protect without even thinking, as his instincts overwhelmed his reasoning.

Tarrin was crushed down to one knee as the wave of power struck his shield, assaulting him as if he were holding it up with his own paws. He clenched his teeth and poured more power into the shield as the wave of force threatened to tear the weaving, as a shimmering globe of blue opposed the white energy which was the One's attack. That attack shattered the buildings to each side of the row house upon which Tarrin stood, and the slates under his feet cracked under the strain, but the shield of magic held up against the assault.

The shield dissolved as Tarrin streaked back into the air, sword held in both paws as he raced to close the distance. It was quickly degenerating, and he had to reestablish a physical confrontation, to avoid having to fight the One power against power. But the One, who had been stung in a physical clash, seemed determined to prevent Tarrin from getting anywhere near him. He backed away as he began chanting in the language of the gods, preparing to cast a Priest spell, which caused Tarrin to double his speed to reach him before he could finish. The One finished his spell before Tarrin could reach him,

however, and a raging column of fire descended from the heavens and struck Tarrin, engulfing him in a raging inferno.

Idiot! Didn't he have any sense at *all*?

Tarrin burst forth from the column of fire unscathed, but found that the One was gone. The brief moment that Tarrin's vision had been blocked by the fire had allowed him to vanish. Tarrin opened his senses and quickly located the One, for the power he emanated could not be hidden, and Tarrin turned and slashed his sword through another blast of power that had screamed in at him from the left flank. The One flowed backwards in the air and prepared to do it again, but Tarrin had had enough. He wove together a weave of Air, Fire, Water, and Divine power, with token flows from all the other spheres, a chaotic mess of flows that formed one of his favorite and most powerful magical attacks. Tarrin's paws burst forth with the glowing, wispy nimbus of Magelight as he used a spell of High Sorcery, snapping it down and releasing it just as another incandescent wave of force was unleashed from the One's sweeping sword.

The brilliant bolt of chaotic magic Tarrin unleashed lanced through the air and slammed into the wave of force unleashed by the One, then punched through it and raced towards the One. But the One simply raised his shield, and Tarrin's attack was deflected harmlessly up into the sky. Tarrin streaked straight up and away from the wave of force, which passed under him and slammed into the city below, shattering even more buildings. The One seemed to not care about his city or his people. It didn't matter how many died as long as he got Tarrin. The One spread his feathered wings, and motes of light appeared before them. Those motes got larger, turning into little white balls, and then they all streaked directly at Tarrin with amazing speed. Tarrin careened to a halt and instantly started chanting in the discordant language of magic, then made a slashing motion with his left paw. A scintillating wave of magical power erupted from his paw, growing and expanding as it traveled away from him, and it intercepted the illuminated orbs. In brilliant puffs, each orb exploded into harmless light as they touched the effects of Tarrin's spell, a spell designed to dispel magic that touched it...and even the divine power of gods was considered magic, as far as the spell was concerned.

Tarrin and the One both started chanting in unison, Tarrin in the language of magic, the One in the language of the gods, their voices unnaturally loud as their words echoed from the buildings and from one another. Tarrin heard the words, knew that the One was about to use a spell intended to kill instantly, one of the mightiest Priest spells of all...a spell that focused the power of a god into a touch that caused instant death. Tarrin continued to chant even after the One completed the spell, and an ominous black cloud formed around each of his hands. Now the One would rush in and engage in melee, and try to touch him. He had nearly five minutes until the power of the spell dissipated, five minutes to touch Tarrin's bare skin with his own, or touch him through organic material, like his clothing. Tarrin continued to chant, his voice strong and unwavering as death dove on him from above, those black-shrouded hands leading as the One sought to end the contest quickly. Tarrin made six precise gestures, then snipped the thongs of a belt pouch with a claw, grabbed it, and slung its contents into the air around him. Thousands of motes of glittering light surrounded the Were-cat as the quartz dust refracted the light from his wings, from his eyes, creating a display awe-inspiring in its majestic, terrible beauty. Tarrin completed the spell with a final shouted word, and then he flinched in the oddest manner.

Just before two perfect duplicates of himself separated from his body.

The One pulled out of his dive, confused and swearing as *three* Tarrins, each moving independently of the others, suddenly raced towards him, each wielding a burning sword. Tarrin charged fearlessly, despite the fact that the two duplicates were merely shadows, solid magic that looked like the caster of the spell, and could do no harm. They would be disrupted the instant they were touched. But each of those simulacrum gave off the exact sense of presence as their creator, which was to say that there was *no* sense of him at all thanks to Tarrin's amulet and its ability to hide him from magical detection, so the One absolutely could not tell the fakes from the original. Only one could harm, but since he had to defend against *three*, and also the fact that the death spell would discharge into a simulacrum if he touched it and render it useless, the One had reason to be intimidated by this counterstroke. The One pulled up and began chanting in the language of the gods, the Priest version of the exact same spell that Tarrin had used, the spell to dispel magic.

There was a counterspell for that, and now they were close enough to each other for the One to be in range of its effect. Without thinking, Tarrin also began to chant, pulling up and uttering the words of the spell, then he completed it and pointed at the One. Tarrin felt the strangest *surge* from deep within him, like a power that had been hidden had suddenly been awakened. Newfound power flooded into him, through him, then was released from him and crossed the distance to the One. A sphere of magical silence settled around the god's Avatar, taking his voice and leaving him unable to complete the spell. It was a simple spell, a quick spell, a spell that neophytes used, but it had valid tactical worth even in a duel using magic of the magnitude they were using.

Tarrin felt dizzy. He wavered a bit in the air even as his duplicates surged ahead, putting a paw to his forehead, feeling both drained and energized at the same moment, confused and out of sorts.

Silence was a *Priest spell*. And the energy that had powered it came from *him*.

He had used a Priest spell! And the power had *not* come from the Goddess, it had come from *himself*. He had granted himself the power to cast a spell!

That was impossible! He couldn't *do* that like he was! Maybe if he was in his divine form, if the sword changed him, then maybe, but not with his mortal body!

The One's eyes were wild, and a look of absolute shock was gracing it. That look of shock was mirrored on Tarrin's own for a brief moment, but the Were-cat snapped out of it and lunged ahead, flames from his wings trailing behind him as he took up his sword in both paws and held it to his side.

Toying with me? If you wish to use your full power, then so be it! I was but providing you with a shell of greater power than your own to make sport of you! Now face my true power!

The voice, indignant and outraged, thundered into his brain from everywhere at once, and Tarrin sensed a sudden eruption of divine energy, the likes of which he only felt when a god was doing something so powerful that it altered the very texture of reality. The Avatar of the One became incandescently bright as the god channeled incredible power into it, infusing it with such might that it no longer adhered to mortal boundaries. It ceased being a mortal Avatar and became a direct manifestation of the god, a *true* Avatar, the wounds on his face vanishing and the black cloud disappearing from his hands.

For a moment, Tarrin had a terrifying vision of the shadow of Val. That was the same kind of power he was sensing now coming from the One. The gloves were off, the One was not playing anymore. This was a divine being, and now Tarrin's magic would no longer work against it. All he had were his divine-imparted abilities of fire and his sword as weapons.

The One brushed aside Tarrin's simulacrum with a wave of his hand, making them vanish, then he thrust his open palm at Tarrin. There was no spell, no magic, just a release of divine will as the One brought his direct power to bear in the mortal realm.

It was like being struck with a hundred mountains. The air was crushed out of him as a pure force of staggering dimensions literally smashed him out of the air. Nearly every bone in his body was broken as that force impacted him, sent him racing towards the ground, and he could do nothing more than swim in a sea of pain. He felt the sword slip out of his shattered paw, a paw that was already beginning to knit itself back together, and the intense pain eased enough to allow him to think. He was not going to stop himself in time before he hit the ground, he knew that. Since he could not arrest his descent, he had to find a way to mitigate the impact, because slamming into the ground was perfectly natural, and it would kill him.

Easily done.

Tarrin folded his wings around himself and caused his body to merge with the flames, to be one with his power, to *become* the fire. His mortal form melted into flame, but the wings remained, causing him to become a being of pure fire surrounded by a material shell that was invulnerable to anything but a god. Turning to pure flame would protect him against the impact of hitting the ground, as fire liquid, fluid, and wouldn't be hurt by something like hitting the ground, while his wings would prevent that impact from causing his form to dissipate when it hit.

The orb of solid flame that had become Tarrin punched through the roof of a warehouse, then slammed into the floor beneath. There was a huge explosion of wood and dirt as Tarrin hit like a cannonball, but his wings did not falter in containing his fiery form, and that immaterial body was immune to the physical impact of hitting the ground. He returned to his physical form as his wings unfolded from around himself, and to his surprise he found himself uninjured. He had reformed himself without the broken bones, in effect healing himself during the transformation. He has lost his sword, but knew that he could get it back with a thought, and knew that moving *right now* was absolutely imperative. He turned and lanced through the back wall of the warehouse, just as the entire building literally vanished in a blazing column of incredible might, like silver flames, as the One used his divine power to consume the building in a column of pure divine energy.

Rising up from the smoke and dust created by the One's powerful attack, Tarrin called his sword to him, and the instant his paw closed over it, he felt the sword's power explode, felt in that touch that the sword's true power was unlocking, and unlocking the power within him. The sword blazed forth with intensely bright flame as the power that Tarrin had once possessed was released from its prison. Incandescent flame flowed over the sword, then up his arm, quickly enveloping him in the purity of its radiant might. That power touched him, infused him, saturated itself into the core of his being even as the fire continued up into the heavens, as once more the sword released the true power of Tarrin's divine nature. He felt the almost ecstatic rush of power rage through him, felt

his mind expand as it was touched by divine power, and felt his body's very nature change in a subtle manner as the power transformed him into something capable of wielding it. The column of fire enveloping him slowly dissipated, until the One found himself staring at a being with hair and fur that was flame, radiating a heat so intense that wood and cloth would instantly turn to ash if it were placed close to him. The One found himself facing a being that could *fight back*.

Again, Tarrin ceased to be a mortal. Just as the One had infused his Avatar with direct power, so Tarrin had once again infused himself with his own imprisoned power, and become an Avatar, a direct physical manifestation of his own power.

The urgent calls began almost instantly. *Run! Run!* a startling number of voices screamed at him urgently, distracting him for the slightest of moments. He realized immediately that these voices were the other gods of this world, and now that Tarrin was a being more sensitive to the workings of gods, things that a mortal could not sense, they could directly communicate with him. But Tarrin ignored them. He focused on the One, on keeping the One's attention for just a few moments more, to make absolutely sure that Mist had gotten Kimmie away from the cathedral before he acted. *By the God of Gods, you must flee!* One voice rose above the others, but Tarrin ignored them. *The One is more powerful than you are! Do not face him!*

Tarrin could sense that power. Yes, the One was much stronger than he was, but that didn't matter. Tarrin had faced beings much stronger than himself before.

Faster than a mortal eye could track, Tarrin was again in the face of the One, who seemed unsurprised at Tarrin's revelation. Burning sword met kite shield, and their touch created a storm of spark-like motes of pure magical energy to rain down on Pyros. That blow seemed to shock the One, because Tarrin had sensed that the One had been expecting something much more than a purely physical attack. The One replied with his broadsword, but Tarrin parried it easily away from him. But behind that sword there seemed to be a strange sense of *might*, an odd power, almost limitless, focused on Tarrin's form. But that power could not touch him, sliding through him, like a phantom wind that went through him harmlessly.

Then he understood. The One was trying to fight Tarrin in more than just the mortal realm. But Tarrin had *no* power outside the mortal realm, did not exist anywhere but *here*. He was a being of divine power trapped in the mortal world, and only power that affected the mortal world could touch him. It was the limitation he suffered for being what he was, but in its own way it was also his advantage, for the One could not use his full, true power against him. He could only use the power he could manifest in the physical realm, which had to be limited to avoid unraveling the very fabric of reality. The material world was just not sturdy enough to support the true power of a god.

Tarrin took advantage of that revelation for the One to try to end it quickly. He pressed in, sword slashing with such blazing speed that the mortal eye would see nothing but a fiery blur, pressing the One and forcing him to back up. Tarrin continued his single-minded focus on the One's shield, marring the smooth silver finish of its outer face, trying to remove it from the duel by either destroying it or ripping it off the One's arm. The One seemed the stagger for a moment, then Tarrin sensed that he had recovered, and was about to reply.

He felt the power build up, sensed the One call it into the mortal world, and Tarrin was forced to do the same. He called to the endless power within him, summoning it

forth, focusing it into his off paw, and then projected it forth in the form of a defensive barrier as the One unleashed his power in the form of an attack.

Again, it was like being struck with a mountain. Tarrin snapped out his wings and was pushed back by the power the One hurled at him, but the defensive barrier held, deflecting it away. The One came charging in behind the blow he had released, but Tarrin was ready for him. He shifted the texture of his barrier to turn it into a physical force, and it caused the One to bounce off of it as he tried to get to Tarrin before the Were-cat could recover. Tarrin manifested his power as fire hotter than anything that could ever be created in a mortal realm, then unleashed it at the One in a concentrated, spiraling blast. But the blast struck the One's shield and was deflected, bouncing up and racing into the heavens without touching the One.

Tarrin had expected that. He took up his sword and charged the One, who now had a smug look on his face, and tried to take his head off. The One parried that blow, sending another cascade of white sparks to the city below, then presented the face of his shield to Tarrin and released his power once more. Tarrin evaded it by dropping down, then rose up with a mighty slash of his sword, trailing an arc of fire, which the One narrowly avoided. The One raced through that fire, sword taking on an incandescent glow as he rushed in on the Were-cat's defenseless flank as he recovered from his blow, then stabbed it through the exposed flank of the Were-cat.

But the Were-cat's body simply dissolved into smoke an instant before the sword reached him. The arc of fire behind the One suddenly twisted and reformed into Tarrin's physical form, and the Were-cat reared back with his sword over his head, then chopped it into the One's winged back without hesitation.

It almost worked. The One somehow managed to turn around and barely managed to catch the weapon on his shield, but it was a poorly executed block, putting the One at a disadvantage. Nonplussed, the Were-cat rained massive blows down on the One, using raw power to prevent a quick recovery, which were parried or blocked with sword and shield awkwardly as the winged god tried to recover himself. Tarrin pressed in, causing the One to back up step by step on the empty air on which they battled, raining heavy blows on the One's shield and sending a steady stream of spark-like motes of pure magical energy flying with every strike. The air around them began to writhe and distort as it was saturated with magical energy, and the sky above them began to cloud over, the clouds racing around a nexus that was directly over the pair. The power they were releasing into the world was beginning to affect the reality of the material plane, unnaturally twisting the natural order, but neither of them noticed as the One managed to recover himself, then began to counterattack, flicking light stabs and slashes of his weapon in reply when Tarrin struck at his shield, forcing the Were-cat to quickly parry or evade the weapon. It halted his forward progress, and put them on even footing once more.

But why was the One not *using* his power more liberally? Tarrin didn't quite understand. He had changed into a direct manifestation to unleash his might, then tried to fight Tarrin god to god, but now he seemed perfectly comfortable with a pure sparring match of weapon to weapon after that single attempt to use his power.

Simple, my doomed, hobbled opponent, the One's voice crooned in his mind. *You cannot defeat me. So have at me. Your fighting will do nothing but inspire more awe in*

my subjects when I destroy you. After all, the epic battle is remembered much longer than the easy victory.

“Hardly,” Tarrin snarled aloud, snapping his wings out, which instantly grew five times their normal size, and calling on the power inside him. It focused in his paws, and then he unleashed it through his sword. Just as he had done when fighting the shadow of Val, Tarrin released his power in a raw state, nothing but power itself, and that raging maelstrom of divine energy lashed at the One. The One rose up and met that power with his own, and when they touched it set off a violent explosion of power that knocked both of them away from each other. Tarrin raced through the chaos of magical energy left over from that detonation, like a soup of pure magical energy, and brought his sword down on the One’s raised weapon. “Seeing you struggle against me will make them wonder why their god couldn’t kill a *mortal* so easily,” Tarrin hissed at him scathingly. “And if you admit that I’m something other than a mortal, well, then how can there be more than the One when the One says that there’s not?”

You are the Demon Prince, the One replied jovially. And I must say, you look the part. You have risen up to challenge my mastery of your kind, and when you are dead, my people will rejoice that the Defiled once more serve their betters.

Tarrin growled. So, that was the game. He reached out with his senses and realized that Mist and Kimmie had *not* left Pyros yet, and that made him wary. He had to hold off the One a little bit longer, but he couldn’t make it apparent that he was stalling.

Or did he? No, he did *not*.

“You haven’t finished it yet, One,” Tarrin growled at him, in a voice loud enough for the people beneath him to hear. “I can sense the other gods of this world, and I can’t sense any kind of interest from the creating god of this dimension. Even now they cry out to me, and your creator doesn’t seem to care. They’re weak, but they are *there*. How did they get away from you? Can’t find their faithful, can you? Your Hunters can’t reach them, can they?”

They are cowards, and will die soon, he answered.

Tarrin dropped down from the air until his feet dangled just over the level of the roofs of the buildings and raised a single paw, calling again on the boundless power within him. It surged forth and gathered inside him. He focused it into his paw, built it up like water behind a dam, then unleashed it as a brilliant spiraling cone of blue-white fire. It raged through the air, falling well short of touching the One, passing under him harmlessly as the One descended to engage Tarrin. At first the One smirked at him, then looked back and realized that he had never been the target of the attack.

The blast of spiraling fire was aimed directly at the One’s cathedral.

NO! the One’s voice screeched in outrage and shock, and his glowing body simply vanished from where it was and reappeared in front of his cathedral, shield presented and ready to deflect the blast to protect what was within.

Connected to his fire, Tarrin yielded to his fire, merged with it, *became* the fire, then touched the fire of his attack. Fire was connected to itself, it was separate manifestations of the same thing, and as such it was all merely *fire*. Tarrin’s fiery form vanished in a gentle puff of expanding flame.

The vanguard of Tarrin’s blast suddenly contorted, then expanded as Tarrin reformed his physical body from that fire. That fire was traveling at incredible speed, so when the fire faded and left Tarrin’s physical body behind, he was racing ahead dizzily with the

rest of that stream of fire immediately behind him. He took up his sword in both paws as the One's glowing eyes widened in shock, then coiled up like a spring with his sword to his side. He uncoiled and whipped his sword from the One's right to his left, the tip of his sword catching the One's shield, which had been positioned to deflect Tarrin's attack of fire, and jarred it far out to the side. Tarrin slammed into the One with his shoulder, and the fire behind him caught up, pushing them both forward, like riding a cannonball fired from a Wikuni cannon. The One screamed in surprise and outrage and then simply vanished, but Tarrin did not. He impacted the side of the One's cathedral and was slammed through.

In an explosion of stone and dust, Tarrin penetrated the outer wall of the One's center of worship. He found himself in a vast chapel with many pews and benches facing a raised altar to his right, and behind that altar stood a regal statue of a winged human holding a sword and shield, nearly twenty spans tall, the detail of the sculpture so amazing that the sculpture nearly looked like a living thing.

It was the One's icon.

The fire of Tarrin's attack struck the far wall and exploded back into the chapel, instantly setting fire to anything that could burn, creating a hellish firestorm contained within the cathedral's walls. Tarrin surged out of that inferno with his sword raised, lancing through the air at the One's icon, sword suddenly burning brightly, eagerly, in anticipation of delivering the telling blow.

NO!!!!!! the One shrieked in his mind as the distant voices of the other gods suddenly rose up in breathless anticipation, and the One's icon animated itself, as the god resorted to his last line of defense to protect his icon...using the icon itself. The stone sword of the icon moved, the shield turned, and caught Tarrin's savage blow on its stone face, creating an intense flash of light as Tarrin's direct might made contact with the One's direct might. He struck again, and again, and again, a blazingly fast flurry of immensely powerful blows, each one sending a shockwave from them that shuddered the cathedral's walls. The One's icon did not move smoothly or fluently, but it moved just fast enough to use its shield to protect itself, a shield that lost pieces of itself with every attack, as chips of stone went flying with every blow. Tarrin focused the power within and unleashed it through his sword, but the One's direct manifestation appeared in the confined space between Tarrin and the One's icon and caught that blast on his shield, reflecting it *directly* back at him. Tarrin was forced to slither to the side to avoid his own attack.

The look on the One's face was almost mindless in its outrage, indignation, and fury. Tarrin had made a direct attack on the One's link to the material plane, and he seemed just as outraged that Tarrin had known it was there as he was infuriated that he would dare try. *How...DARE...you!!!!* he managed to call out into Tarrin's mind, that voice holding all his immeasurable dismay and anger.

Tarrin retracted to his normal size as he wove a simple weave of Air, but a weave of intense power. A shimmering aura of red formed around the Were-cat's winged form, as the weave was woven and charged with power, and more power, and even more power. The reddish glow was discordant and chaotic, but the One ignored it as he rushed forward with his sword leading, but Tarrin could sense that the One was preparing to unleash a direct blast of his divine might well before he reached the now smaller Were-cat.

The red glow around Tarrin suddenly became coherent, symmetrical, a globe of angry red energy as Tarrin snapped the weave down...a spell ready to be released.

"Chew on this," Tarrin said calmly, and he released his spell.

The people of Pyros, who had seen the invading Demon and their god go in the direction of the One's cathedral, all had their eyes locked on it in that terrible moment. The gold-domed basilica which was the seat of the One's power simply *shattered*. The golden dome of the basilica rocketed into the sky, oddly undamaged, as the building under it exploded in every direction, sending jagged pieces of stone arcing high into the air, straight out, sending a cascading shower of smoking rubble raining down on Pyros. The deafening shockwave of sound and pressure washed over the city, an ear-splitting *BOOM* that shattered every window in the city, and even caused some of the shabbier huts and dilapidated buildings to collapse.

There was a massive cloud of dust where the cathedral used to be, which boiled anew when the huge golden dome of the basilica returned to the ground, sending a squealing sound over the city as it struck the ground and broke apart, sending large, jagged pieces of metal tumbling down the slope of the volcano to the base of the mountain below. But within that cloud of dust was a glowing shine of light, bright white and pristine, and the voice of their god thundered over the city to assure them that he had not been destroyed.

"*My beautiful cathedral!*" the One's voice raged. "*Now you are DEAD!*"

If Tarrin ever really, really wanted to tick off a god, now he knew how to do it.

In that boiling cloud of dust, the light of the shield of divine magic that the One's Avatar had raised to protect the icon cut through the darkness, illuminating the dust itself in an eerily, hauntingly beautiful display, like tiny particles of solid light suspended in the air. The ground beneath them was scoured clean of everything, but the ground itself was untouched. That was *important*, for he could sense Mist and Kimmie somewhere beneath him, and that ensured that his attack tried to destroy the One's icon *without* putting them in jeopardy.

Tarrin reared back and threw his sword at the icon of the One, and the burning weapon lanced through the air at the stone statue. The One quickly interposed his Avatar, and Tarrin's sword struck the One's shield and clattered to the ground, its fire quickly disappearing. Tarrin left it there and called his staff out of the *elsewhere*, infusing his favorite weapon with divine energies to give it the power to harm the One. The staff began to glow brightly, and continued to glow as Tarrin's feet left the ground and he surged forward. Holding his staff in the end-grip, almost like a sword. But the One seemed to have lost his taste for the game, for his eyes burned with seething fury. He held out his shield, and a blast of pure power impacted Tarrin, knocking the air out of his lungs and sending him careening off the flat ridge upon which the cathedral had been built. The One boiled out of that cloud like Death Himself, howling with fury and outrage, his face no longer handsome and composed. A concentrated release of power much more powerful than anything that the shadow of Val used against him came raging at him, a blindingly white expression of the One's power, but the Were-cat simply rose higher into the air, avoiding it as it slammed into the city below. There was no explosion, nothing like that, it simply caused the buildings and red-bricked streets to dissolve as if

scoured by the sands of the Sandshield until nothing was left, leaving nothing behind but smoking dust.

I will flay your skin from your flesh! the One raged in Tarrin's mind as he sent another blast at him, which Tarrin again evaded easily. *I will strip the soul out of you and imprison it in a gem to decorate my sword!*

"I thought you wanted an epic battle, a grand show," Tarrin taunted lightly as he raced at the One. Staff stuck shield with a dull *thunk*, and Tarrin continued past the One and aimed a blow at the back of his head. The One turned and caught the staff on his shield once again. "Doesn't the destruction of your cathedral make this more epic? Or are you just worried that because I *can* strike back at you, you don't look quite so grand and impressive to your people? After all, I just blew up your cathedral...aren't you god enough to protect it from a measly little nothing like me? Upset that you're not as invulnerable and all-powerful as you think? That you're just as *limited* as the gods you say don't exist?"

Oh, that did it. That more than did it. The One shrieked in mindless fury and lost all composure, as Tarrin's taunts caused him to lose his temper. He lashed out at Tarrin with nothing but raw power, power with no finesse, no control. Tarrin evaded it and sent a dozen fiery lances out of his wings at the One in reply, and the One was too angry to coherently consider a defense. He tried to barge through them, deflecting two with his shield, but four of those lances got around his shield and struck him in the chest, left side, and leg. And they *penetrated*. The One cried out in surprise and pain when Tarrin's lances penetrated armor and struck at the divine energy beneath, a direct assault on the integrity of the One's Avatar. An *injury*.

"Can't fight me the way you want, can you?" Tarrin continued to dig as he rushed forth and delivered a series of heavy blows at the One's shield with both ends of his staff. "You can only use energy you can manifest in the physical world against me, and your precious city is under us. If you blow it up, nobody will be here to see your grand victory, will there? So you flail at me with just enough power to try to kill me without doing any permanent damage to the mortal realm...but it's not enough, is it? I'm a better fighter than you, and you know it. All you have is your power, and you can't *use* it the way you want to. Doesn't that frustrate you? Doesn't it eat at you to feel so *limited* in the face of a mere *nothing*?"

You are being a fool! one of the voices of the gods raged at him. *Do not do this! His icon is your goal, you are being stupid!*

Tarrin ignored that bit of advice and evaded another savage release of power from the enraged Avatar with delicate grace, then took up his staff and jammed the end of it into the One's face. His head snapped back and he staggered backwards in the air, and when he came back up it was clearly apparent that his nose was broken. Unimpressed, Tarrin reared back and stabbed at his neck, but the One managed to get his sword up and parry the blow just wide. Tarrin spun away from that, going in the direction the One's sword had knocked his staff and whipped his tail around, hitting the One in the side of the head with its tip, then slammed the outside curve of his wing into the entirety of the One's body. Hundreds of small spikes suddenly erupted from the outside curve, driving deep into the One's Avatar and causing him to scream in pain.

A shockwave of might erupted from the One's form, sending Tarrin flying backwards, stunning him briefly. Tarrin shook out the cobwebs just in time to twist to

the side to avoid getting skewered by the One's sword. The Cat's Claws snapped out its claw-like blades over his right paw, and he drove them into the One's shield. The four extended blades penetrated the marred surface, and Tarrin caused them to bend, to hook into the One's shield. When Tarrin spun away in the opposite direction, avoiding another swipe of the One's sword, he yanked with his right arm and tore the shield out of the One's grip. Instantly, Tarrin brought forth the power deep within and focused it into his left paw, the paw holding the sword, and unleashed it at the One's now unprotected flank.

The One saw it coming, and unleashed a blast of his own as a counter. Those two energies met between them, and exploded into a fiery mass of destructive power as their energies battled one another in the air between them. Both of them anchored into the fabric of reality to avoid being knocked backwards by the shockwave, a shockwave which thundered across Pyros and flattened the buildings directly beneath them. An incandescent, blazing globe of energy boiled between them as their divine energies struck one another, did battle, and cancelled each other out, releasing that energy into the physical realm.

Tarrin pushed both paws before him as the One continued to add more and more power to their duel, forcing Tarrin to do the same or be overwhelmed. The raging orb of destruction between them expanded in size as they both added more and more power, a dreadful kind of tug-of-war that sought to *push* instead of *pull*. Tarrin threw more and more into it, feeling the power in him rise up, and then the rate of that increase began to wane. Tarrin discovered, to his dismay, that he could offer up no more, that he had reached the limits of his divine abilities. Tarrin was, after all, only a *demigod*, without the full power of a truly divine being, and his ability to channel divine energy into the mortal world was restricted by his unique state of existence. The One, on the other hand, did not have that restriction. Tarrin felt keenly in the place of the shadow of Val in that moment, unable to put anything more behind his assault, knowing that he was being overwhelmed, but not in a position to pull out of it cleanly. But he would *not* make the same mistake that the shadow of Val made, try to overwhelm the One in a frenzied, suicidal assault.

He had not wanted this to become a battle of power, for he knew he would lose. And that was exactly what it had become.

Disengaging himself from the fabric of reality, Tarrin *skewed* his power, wrenching it in an odd manner, which caused the direct focus of his might to shift from straight ahead to slightly to the side. The One's power found no resistance on one edge of their meeting, and boiled forward. But, since it was still meeting Tarrin's power, it was deflected by that steady stream of might, reflecting off of it and sending it out wide. Tarrin flowed quickly to the same side where he had skewed, shifted his power with the delicacy of a master fencer, and it was just enough to allow him to avoid the raging might of the One's divine fury.

It is only a matter of time! The One crooned in malicious delight. *Now you know you can never match my power! Eventually you will make a mistake, and you will be mine! And the people of Pyros will rejoice at having seen their god win a battle of epic proportions against the servants of darkness!*

"Too bad they won't be alive to remember it," Tarrin hissed at the One vituperously.

The One's eyes widened as Tarrin dropped from the sky, so fast, like an arrow fired from a bow. If the One could somehow hear his thoughts in this new state of being, then he had no doubt what Tarrin intended to do.

Destroy Pyros.

Tarrin reared back, then punched his paw into the red brick street of Pyros as he landed, driving his fist deep into the earth. Tarrin's power immediately flowed into the ground, under it, deeper and deeper, seeking out his own power deep within, the magma beneath the crust of the earth, the liquid fire which was of his realm. Tarrin called to the magma, commanded it to do his bidding, and the magma could not disobey. His wings doubled in size, and doubled again, becoming like sails attached to his back, sails of solid fire that were a physical indication of the immense power he was releasing into the world.

FOOL! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? the One's voice raged in his mind.

Tarrin looked up at the One as his eyes changed color from green to an ominous red, as Tarrin touched on the fire within the earth and sent wave after wave of his own energy deep into the ground to give the magma the energy it needed to do his bidding.

To the north, the steep-sloped volcano, upon whose slope the cathedral to the One was built, began to rumble and smoke.

"I just beat you," Tarrin answered in an evil hiss, his eyes shifting from blazing green to brilliant red as he came into communion with the core of his power, and touched on the core of this world. Tarrin had created a massive upsurge in magma in the neck of the dormant volcano. The hardened plug in the neck of the caldera would hold that magma back until the pressure became too great, and then the volcano would literally explode with such power that it would wipe Pyros away as if it had never existed. "Now *nobody* will be here to see your victory! You just destroyed the seat of your power and thousands of your own worshippers, and for *nothing*!"

With a howl of pure outrage, the One thrust his sword at Tarrin far below, and then unleashed his full might. He did not hold back. The One *could* save the city, but it absolutely required that he destroy Tarrin *right now*. So he struck at Tarrin with absolutely everything he could bring to bear.

Tarrin was not prepared for what the One threw against him, for it made the shadow of Val look like an apprentice Wizard using a cantrip. Tarrin disengaged himself from the ground and threw all his power forward, forming once again a defensive barrier to protect himself from the One's might. But the One's power was *immense*, and it was all Tarrin could do to hold it off. Tarrin screamed in rage and pain as he fell to one knee, holding his staff before him, holding onto either end, channeling his power through his weapon, fighting to keep the One's power away from him. Tarrin tapped into his reserves of Sorcery, weaving that power into his barrier, then called directly on the magic of the Wizards, then directly sought power from the earth itself in the manner of the Druid, feeling the All of this world suddenly awaken itself to his presence, then move to comply. The *Mi'Shara* called on all the magic he could muster to bolster his defense, hurling all the magic of the mortal world into the shield woven by his divine power to reinforce it, to protect him from the wrath of the One. But Tarrin was not home, and his access to the magicks of mortalkin were severely restricted here. In seconds, his entire reserve of the magic of Sorcery was gone, and his connection to that *elsewhere* from which Wizard magic flowed became unstable, and then was cut off, and his touch on the All of this world disrupted when Tarrin began to lose his focus. Blinding pain assaulted

him as the One's power started burning away the shield, the pain of trying to hold back an avalanche, and then his shield faltered and failed. He covered himself with his wings in a feeble attempt to defend himself from that torrent of divine wrath, but it was but a pittance in comparison to the raw, unmitigated might that the One hurled at him.

This time, Tarrin was not the equal of a god.

The earth around him evaporated, and the integrity of his wings was all but destroyed as they tried to hold back the wrath of the One. Pain like he had never felt roared into him as the power of the One sought to shatter his very existence, to unmake his body and utterly destroy him. Tarrin's power rose up and tried to protect his soul from that overwhelming assault, but only just.

It was an instant that lasted an eternity, as the full power of a god struck him, and in that eternity he understood his mistake. He had played the One's game, had not disengaged to seek out and destroy the One's icon, had allowed his hunger for revenge trap him into an encounter that he would be hard pressed to win. In that moment of eternal torture, Tarrin frantically scrabbled at his last defense, trying to channel enough focus through the soul-rending attack to do it. Tarrin reached into himself, to his connection to fire, and then sent out his mind disjointedly, seeking out that part of himself he had left behind, his last defense in case things went terribly wrong.

He found it. He pulled the tattered remnants of his wings about him, and merged with their fire. Fire was connected to itself, and in that state of purity, despite the One's assault, he was able to step through the unity of fire and remove himself from the One's proximity.

In a puff of smoke, the physical form of Tarrin Kael, but a heartbeat from total destruction, simply evaporated.

Far to the south, the self-sustaining fire that Tarrin had placed on the ground at the camp roared into a blazing pillar, and then took form. Tarrin Kael emerged from that blazing pyre. His body was marred with horrific wounds, and his wings were shreds of quivering flame that twitched spasmodically. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed to the ground in blissful oblivion.

"By Karas' hammer!" Ulger swore as he jumped up from the ground, staring at Tarrin's body.

"Miranda!" Dolanna shouted as she rushed over to him. "Miranda!" She knelt by his body and turned him over, and was immediately covered in blood. His left arm was mangled beyond recognition, his tail was gone, his right leg was nothing but exposed flesh and bone, and there was a gaping hole in his flank that exposed his ribs, liver, and entrails. He looked as if he'd been mauled by a hundred bears, and blood flowed from every part of his body. "*Miranda!*" Dolanna shrieked in panic. Given the horrific nature of his wounds, his lifespan could be counted in *seconds*.

And then she was there. Chanting softly in the language of the gods, she placed her hands on Tarrin's chest. His body began to glow with a soft white light as the healing power of Kikkalli infused him, bolstered his body and kept it operating as it searched through him to understand the nature and extent of his hurt. Then it set to work repairing the damage, knitting wounds together, urging the growth of new flesh, new bone, new skin, gently prodding misplaced organs and tissue back to its respective place and sealing

it within newly regrown flesh and bone and tissue. The spell took long moments, as Miranda continued to chant in a stately, serene voice, as the power of Kikkalli brought Tarrin back from the brink of death and renewed his physical form, saving him from death.

Miranda blew out her breath and sagged, putting her elbows on Tarrin's now whole chest. "By Kikkalli's winds, I just barely managed to make it," she wearily told them. "What did this to him?"

"Tarrin has lost," Dolanna said fearfully. "Can you not feel the wrath of the One in the air? The One has defeated him, and even now searches for Tarrin to finish him off."

"Why isn't he coming?" Azakar asked pointedly. "And what happened to Mist and Kimmie?"

It was chaos. And it was *perfect*.

Mist slunk through the dark passages of the dungeons beneath the Cathedral in her cat form, keeping an ear on what she was hearing outside. Tarrin and the One were dueling somewhere out over the city, and Mist was frantic with worry.

She was *late*.

She had found the passage to the catacombs, but the door had been *closed*, and the cathedral always seemed to have people in it. The door was in the nave itself, behind the altar on the back wall, and she could not change form to open the door without giving herself away. So she had been forced to wait, hiding under the altar's black silk drape, literally sitting under the nose of the dreadful god which had come to dominate this part of the world...a god that did not notice her. Tarrin was right, his approach had the One's total and undivided attention. It was several minutes after she heard Tarrin arrive that someone finally opened that door, and she darted in just before it closed.

Now she was moving quickly through the dark, candle-lit tunnels, following the faint scent of her daughter back to its source. The large black cat blended in perfectly with the shifting shadows of the underground passage, and the red-garbed Priests and guards paid her no mind whatsoever as she quickly yet methodically tracked Kimmie's scent. They had taken her through just yesterday, and her trail had not yet been swallowed up by the heavy human smells contained in the stale air of the chamber.

For long moments Mist traced her daughter, having to hunker down as the earth shook several times. By the trees, Tarrin was *really* going at it out there! She had to hurry, she knew that her mate couldn't hold that monster back forever! She had to find Kimmie and get them out before Tarrin reached the Cathedral, or they very well may get killed. She went down a flight of stairs, through a series of twisting passages, then reached the landing of another flight of steps.

She went down and into a place that reeked of the unnatural scent of Demons. The fur on her back started to bristle at that scent, but it also told her that she was getting close. She reached an iron-bound door at the end of a long, empty passageway that had the smell of Kimmie wafting under the edge, as well as the evil reek of Demonkin. The closed door signaled an end to stealth; she would have to open the door to get past it, and reveal herself.

She debated doing that for a moment, until the entire cathedral shook violently, and the sharp sound of breaking stone echoed down the passage. She was out of time...Tarrin was *here*!

She shifted into her normal form, and extended the Cat's Claws. She heard some kind of muted sound from high above as she took a few steps back, then she exploded forward.

She hit the door the exact instant that the entire earth shook as if some titanic hand had struck it. A sound so loud that it was a physical force rocked the earth just as Mist struck the door with all her impressive might, shattering it and bursting forth from the passageway and into the room.

It was a large room with rough stone walls, reddish stone like everything else, and it was obviously a torture chamber. Several cruel devices to inflict pain were situated in the room, but the focus of Mist's attention was on the far side, where her beautiful, gentle daughter, Kimmie, was chained to the far wall on manacles hanging from a bolt above her, holding her arms up. Her naked body was dirty and covered with dried blood, matting her orange tabby fur, and her head was hanging low. She was not moving. Beside her, large and terribly impressive, was the *marilith* Shaz'Baket. The night-haired Demoness, with six slender arms and the lower body of a massive snake, had her back to the door, looking up at the ceiling, but was in the act of turning to look in her direction. She did so, looking at Mist with red-irised eyes, and there was a moment of surprise. The thunder of whatever had happened above echoed through the chamber as the Were-cat and the Demoness faced off against one another across the expansive room. Then she *laughed*.

"Cleverly played, Were-cat," she purred. "He sent you to recover this one while he plays with the One. But to get her, you have to get past *me*." She spoke a single word, and a different style of sword appeared in each of her six hands.

"I was counting on it," Mist snarled, then she exploded across the room with a screeching howl of utter, unleashed fury.

Shaz'Baket had faced Tarrin in combat, so she knew what to expect from a Were-cat. But that was a paltry shadow of what the Demoness faced in Mist. The female Were-cat was beyond fury, fighting to recover her child from the clutches of an enemy, and that unity of need of both Human and Cat gave her a strength and determination that paled in comparison to what Shaz'Baket had seen from Tarrin Kael. Immediately she was knocked backwards as the female attacked her with those flashing, blindingly fast claws, coming from everywhere at once, staggering the Demoness back in a display of naked, raw, savage hatred.

Mist drove the Demoness back, and back, and back more, her arms blurring with blazing speed as the need to punish the Demoness united with her desperate need to recover her daughter and get them to safety before Tarrin destroyed Pyros. The Demoness' six swords just barely managed to parry or block those lethal blades extending from the Were-cat's fingers as the Were-cat pressed in on her with her face twisted in a savage snarl of utter hatred. She attempted to riposte with two stabs at Mist's left flank, but had both of her weapons swatted aside by the *same* paw in quick succession, then had a third blow blocked by the black metal of the bracers covering her wrists. She used four weapons to parry a series of savage rakes with those claws, but could not find an opening to reply.

Shaz'Baket was stunned at the raw ferocity behind the assault, giving even more ground, until the tip of her snake tail touched the wall behind her. Even when accelerated with Druidic magic, Tarrin Kael did not seem so fast! She surged ahead just as the Were-

cat launched herself into the air, and quickly tried to lean back to give herself room to deal with this sudden turn of events. But the Were-cat was too close, was inside the reach of her swords.

Mist's five blades punched into empty air just where the Demoness' head had been an instant before, as the Demoness teleported herself out of harm's way. But she did not panic, landing with both feet and one paw on the wall, then turning and springing back the other way. She had heard all of her mate's stories about how Demons fought, and she knew *exactly* where the Demon bitch had appeared. She would appear directly behind Mist and try to kill her before she could turn around.

And that was exactly what she had done. Instead of getting a clear shot at Mist's unprotected back, Shaz'Baket instead got a face full of the Were-cat's unleashed fury. She howled in pain when Mist's claws raked three deep, almost surgically neat slices in her face, slithering backwards with her swords flashing to keep those lethal claws away from her. Black blood flowed down her neck as the Demoness struggled to use her six weapons to protect herself from her opponent's *two*, but she could not match the raw ferocity of her opponent. What was nearly as bad was the steady stream of half-hissed, half-growled obscenities and curses that flew from Mist's mouth as she assaulted the Demoness, ear-withering profanity in a chaotic mixture of languages that would do any Demon proud, giving voice to the Were-cat's outrage and anger.

Mist's deadly claws sought out the Demon's flesh with every swipe, even as they protected her from the Demoness' answering blades. Sparks flew as blade met claws, and the ringing sound of metal on metal reverberated constantly through the chamber as the two did battle at a frantic, almost unmatchable pace. The Demoness reared back and projected a column of fire at her opponent, one of her innate magical abilities, but the Were-cat came right through it with no fear. The fire had not touched her! She slid backwards again and raised four of her six hands, and set forth a lightning bolt of magical power, another of her innate magical powers. The Were-cat did not even try to dodge, allowing it to hit her with its full force. It staggered her back just slightly, creating a smoking, smoldering hole in her shirt as arcs of electrical energy danced over her body, but she continued to advance, seeking out the Demon's flesh with her claws. She enacted another of her innate powers, speaking a single word with such power that it unleashed a stunning force on any who heard its utterance. But the Were-cat came right through it, seemingly oblivious to its power, for the word had no effect on her. The Demoness raised her weapons and frantically tried to fend off the Were-cat's physical assault, for the Were-cat was again within reach of her, and the ringing chime of steel against Adamantite reverberated in the chamber. The Demoness' tail wrapped around the leg of the large rack behind her, then whipped it around her body as she turned, hurling it at her foe. But Mist simply reared back and slammed her forearm into the torture device, knocking it aside contemptuously, and did not waver for an instant in her methodical, unstoppable advance.

What was stopping her magic! Something had to be protecting the damned Were-cat, or the word of power would have stunned her, and this duel would be over! She slithered backward yet again, and then her eyes locked on the amulet around the Were-cat's neck. It was a *shaeram*, a holy symbol of the Sennadar goddess of magic, but it was glowing with a soft, gentle light. *That* was what was doing it! She enacted yet another of her

impressive array of innate magical abilities, seeking to disrupt the effects of magic before her, attempting to dispel the amulet's protection.

A magical wave of power swept out from the Demoness and struck Mist, but the anti-magic of the dispelling power was disrupted when it struck the amulet, exploding into motes of visible blue light that surrounded the infuriated Were-cat. Those motes danced around her, moving in her wake as she surged ahead.

Shocked, Shaz'Baket realized that she was not going to disrupt the amulet. It was *divine*. The power of a god was protecting the Were-cat, and she could not counter that. And it was clear already that she was no match for this hellion in a physical confrontation.

With a howl of frustration, the Demoness fixed a withering glare on the Were-cat, and then disappeared.

Panting, trying to get herself under control, Mist retracted the Cat's Claws. From the look on the Demon's face, she knew that she was beaten, so she ran away like a coward. She turned immediately and ran to her daughter. She used a single blade of the Cat's Claws to cut the manacles off her wrists, and her gentle, precious cub collapsed into her arms. "Kimmie!" Mist said in a strangled tone. She was covered in dirt, dried blood, and worse, and she smelled like Demons, but her pulse was strong and her breathing regular. She was unconscious, but she was alive.

This put a serious kink in the plan. Kimmie was supposed to use Wizard magic to get them out of Pyros, but that was obviously impossible, and they could *not* dawdle. Even now that Demon bitch was going for reinforcements, and they had to get out *now* or get trapped by a superior force. Mist had to carry Kimmie, and she wouldn't be able to fight. Throwing her daughter over her shoulder, she raced to the doorway, then into a dust-choked passageway. She raced past stunned and terrified Priests and church soldiers, absently killing a few as she passed with her clawed paws, retracing her steps back to the door that led to the cathedral proper.

It wasn't there. She came out of what she could only call a hole in the ground and onto a devastated, barren scene of utter destruction. There was nothing left but a single pristine white statue of the One with several nicks in its shield, with smooth slate tiles on the ground surrounding it, which ended abruptly in a perfect line some ten spans from the statue. Everything else, even the tiles that were on the floor, were gone, scoured away by the titanic force of Tarrin's magical might.

That was the One's icon. It had to be. And the fact that it was here, and Tarrin was not, told her that Tarrin had failed to reach it.

The volcano behind her began to rumble, and the earth shook, and then there was a blinding flash of light from the city below that struck Mist to her soul. She could *feel* her mate's pain. She felt it as if the One had unleashed his attack against *her*. She staggered and bent over, almost toppling Kimmie to the ground, panting to recover from the pain, pain that shot all over her body like a million angry hornets stinging her inside and out.

By the trees!

Sudden palpable concern for her mate washed over her, but bent over like that, she spotted something laying near the One's icon. It was long and black, gleaming in the light of the odd blue and green moon, and it called to her with a singular purpose.

It was Tarrin's sword.

Of course. Now she understood what had to be done. She put Kimmie on the ground gently, then quickly raced over and took up her mate's sword. It did not strike out at her. She felt the One pass over her, looked up and saw his glowing body going up to the volcano. She didn't understand why he was doing that, why he didn't seem to be aware of her. All she knew was that her mate had risked his life to leave the sword behind, had left it for *her*, to do what he had failed to accomplish.

And she would finish it. She would not fail her mate. Not *ever*.

She took up Tarrin's sword, the artifact that linked him to his own power, and then charged at the icon of the One. The blade of the sword burst into angry flame, and then she leaped into the air, high, high into the air, and raised the sword over her head with both paws to deliver a killing blow.

The icon seemed to suddenly flare, as the One became aware of the imminent threat that the Were-cat mortal now posed. But the One's physical manifestation was busy saving Pyros by destroying the blockage that was preventing the volcano from exploding, and that half an instant of delay between when the One's Avatar was able to act and capable of dealing with Mist was a half an instant too late.

The One's icon animated, raised its shield to protect itself against Mist's blow, but the Were-cat simply *landed* on the shield, digging her claws into its marred stone surface, pitted from where Tarrin had struck at the icon himself, and then she lunged over the rim of the shield and brought the sword down on the stone head of the One's pristine icon.

The sword split the stone like water. The blade sheared through the head of the statue right between the eyes, and then there was an explosive release of energy that flung her away from it. She sailed through the air and landed on the ground, then bounced and slid to a halt beside her daughter. She was dazed, the release of power had literally ripped the clothes off her body, but she was generally unharmed. The icon of the One made a horrific squealing cry, like a wounded badger, and the Avatar that had just appeared to deal with Mist began to writhe and shriek as if in agony, holding its head with both hands as his wings beat frantically at the air. She had not destroyed the icon, but she had *damaged* it, had wounded the One, and now he was incapable of doing anything against her. She could flee with her daughter and her mate's sword, and as long as she ran fast enough, she was safe.

She jumped up and grabbed her daughter by the hair and drug her away, then grabbed hold of her by digging her claws directly into her back and hauling her up onto her shoulder. Carrying her daughter over one shoulder and her mate's sword in her other paw, the Were-cat fled from the devastation of the plateau just as the volcano behind them seemed to explode, erupting with furious might that sent ash and cinders high into the sky along with huge fiery boulders, and lava began to boil over the rim and down the slopes. She ran down that steep slope as lava boiled down the slope, directly towards the city of Pyros, directly towards the narrow ridge where the cathedral had once stood, directly towards the icon of the One. An icon that had blazing light pouring from a stone head that was cleaved in twain that illuminated the city below just as brightly as the red light from the lava on the slopes above it did so.

She raced into a city about to be destroyed by the final stroke of her mate's answering strategy, and left behind a god whose icon had been damaged, which partially disrupted how he could interact with the physical world. She raced into a city in chaos and left behind a god in pain, and a world about to be turned on its ear.

She raced the streets of Pyros unchallenged, towards the shattered gate where Tarrin had entered, with a feeling of fierce satisfaction. Her daughter was safe, her mate was badly injured but was alive—she could *sense* it—and though they had not destroyed the One's icon, they had destroyed the base of his power and dealt a direct blow to the god himself.

She ran through the shattered gates of Pyros with her daughter over her shoulder, her mate's sword in her paw, and her clothes ripped from her body. She left Pyros knowing that though they had not destroyed the One, that though her mate was wounded, they had still managed to *win*...because Tarrin had placed his trust in her, had depended on her, had *needed* her to complete what he had not been able to complete.

And she would never fail her mate. Not *ever*.

To: [Title](#) [EoF](#)

Chapter 9

Tarrin would not wake up.

That single fact more than had everyone on edge. His body was whole, but his wings were still shredded, in tatters, and he would not wake up. Not even Miranda's healing nor any spell she attempted to cast could rouse him from his unconscious state. Her healing could not restore his wings, the magic just seemed to slide off of them like water, and the state of those wings seemed to hint that Tarrin was still grievously injured, in more ways than simply what damage was done to his mortal body.

It lent itself to more than a few troublesome complications. No one could hold onto Tarrin and keep a mount stable in the air because of his great size, not even *Azakar*, so the Pegasi, created by Tarrin specifically to get them around quickly, were now forced to galloping along the ground. Mist and Kimmie were still missing, Phandebrass was nowhere to be found, and what was worse, the only person who could quickly find and communicate with them all was in no state to do so. There were church soldiers, Demons, and men wearing black tunics that seemed to have rank over everyone—Hunters, Miranda had guessed, and Dolanna did not disagree—swarming the plains south of Pyros.

Or what might be left of it. They saw the titanic volcanic eruption from where they had been waiting, as the towering cone of the volcano suddenly burst forth bright lava that illuminated the entire northern horizon, and that eruption only intensified as time wore on. The earth shook and rumbled with nerve-jarring regularity as the mountain to the north seemed to spew forth an endless flow of liquid rock, and ash began to fall on them as burning cinders created streaks of brilliant red in the sky, molten rocks that had been ejected from the volcano with such force that they had managed to travel *longspans* before falling back to the earth. One of those fiery missiles very nearly hit *Azakar*'s massive winged charger, and that was Dolanna's indication that it was just too dangerous to wait any longer. They had no idea what happened to Mist and Kimmie, but they knew that if anyone could find them, it would be Mist. She would reach the camp and see them gone, then track them down.

But the flaming cinders were only one danger. Four times in the span of an hour, they were ridden down and attacked by mounted patrols of church soldiers, each one being led by a vulture-headed, winged Demon. Those flying Demons were finding them from the air and directing the ground forces to them. Haley, *Azakar*, and Ulger were forced to defend the host, for Dolanna's finite amount of magic would not be used unless she had absolutely no other recourse. But Dolanna's magic turned out to be not needed, for Miranda stepped up and displayed the little known ability of Priests to use their magic offensively. Miranda knew any number of powerful combat spells, and she used them against the church soldiers, disrupting them, banishing the Demon that was leading them, breaking them up and giving the two Knights and the Were-wolf enough of an advantage

to finish off groups of more numerous adversaries. The Pegasi seemed to have no trouble operating in a fight on the ground, keeping their wings tightly pressed up against their bodies, effectively pinning the legs of their riders and making it nearly impossible for them to fall out of their saddles, and displayed their greater intelligence by predicting and anticipating what their riders were going to do. They would look at the situation and react with surprisingly accurate combat instincts, which made it much easier for the Knights and the Were-wolf to take control of a skirmish.

They retreated to the south for half the night, as Azakar carried Tarrin's inert form across his saddlebow, forced to share his mount with a highly upset Fireflash and an almost grimly concerned Sarraya, then he would hand off his precious cargo to Dolanna, whose small Pegasus would struggle with the oversized Were-cat's bulk added to her rider's slight weight. Those times when Tarrin was slumped over her saddle, his feet nearly dragging the ground, Dolanna tried as best she could to assense what was wrong with him, using up her precious reserves of Sorcery with probing weaves used by healers to determine the extent of one's injuries.

What she found made her very, very nervous. Tarrin's wings were more than a simple extension of his hidden divine abilities. They were much like a metaphor, a symbol, of that power. When he used his powers, the wings reacted, as they must. And when he used more power, the wings expanded in size, as if to grant him the ability to do as he wished. His wings *were* his power, were that divine aspect of his dual existence, and whatever the One had done to him, it had injured him at that level. Miranda had healed his mortal body, but she could do nothing to heal that other part of him. What she found after studying what was left of his wings was that they were not healing. In fact, upon closer inspection, she realized that they were slowly dissolving away, as the shreds and tendrils hanging limply from the top edges slowly yet inexorably evaporated, ceased to be.

His wings were *dying*. And if his wings died, then so would he.

But there was absolutely nothing that she could do, that any of them could do. Their mortal magicks had no effect on Tarrin's wings. None of them knew what to do to heal a *god*, for that was the side of him that had been injured, and that was the side of him that they had to heal, and heal *quickly*. At the rate that his wings were dissolving away, Tarrin would not live to see the sunrise.

Then it hit her. There was only one chance here, one possibility. His sword. He had not returned with it, so he was separated from its power. The sword was linked to him, and in a way it contained the power that he was either unable or unwilling to wield in the mortal world, keeping him separate from the majority of his true power. Tarrin's wounding would have weakened the power of the sword—they were linked—but it would still have power, and that power might be what Tarrin needed to stop the slow degeneration of his wings and restore the divine aspects of his power.

She called them to a halt around midnight as her smaller Pegasus pounded its hooves across the plains in step with Azakar's charger, her hand on Tarrin's wing even as they rode, keeping careful track of their rate of decay. She turned her mount to face them, and looked at them all grimly. "Tarrin is dying," she announced without any kind of warning. "I do not know what to do to help him, but all I can think of is that we *must* find his sword. It is part of him, and maybe its power can stop what is happening."

"What's happening, Dolanna?" Sarraya asked fearfully from Tarrin's back.

“His wings are dying, little one, and if that happens, then he will die with them,” she answered. “Tarrin and his sword are linked, for the sword is a part of him. There is nothing that Miranda or I can do for him, so finding his sword is our only option. We can only hope that the sword will realize the extent of his harm and do what it can to help him. That is going to mean that we have to turn around and ride back the way we came, through the soldiers. We must fight our way back to Pyros and locate his sword as quickly as possible.”

“Why don’t we send a couple of people ahead through the air,” Ulger offered. “They won’t be able to touch us—”

“That’s not an option unless I go with you,” Miranda warned. “You don’t want to face a Demon in the air, Ulger. Not without some magical backup. And if I leave, then those that remain behind won’t have any protection. We have to stay together. If we split up, we’re going to lose someone.”

Dolanna nodded. “So our only options are to ride back or find some way to secure Tarrin and fly.”

“Just tie him to a pack horse,” Azakar announced. “Since he won’t get any worse if he gets banged around, it won’t matter. We have to do this *fast*, so we don’t have many options.”

Dolanna gave Azakar a glance, then nodded. “That is our only option,” she agreed. “Ulger, Haley—”

“Already on it, my friend,” Haley called as he jumped down from his Pegasus. “We’re just leaving the packs behind?”

“We have little choice,” she answered. “Just cut it loose and help Azakar lash Tarrin to the mount.”

“Another of those firebombs is coming,” Ulger warned as he looked up at the sky.

Dolanna looked carefully at it. No, it was not. It was a fiery mass, that was true enough, but it was moving too *slowly* to be another glob of ejected magma. Dolanna studied it as Haley cut the straps of the packs off the largest of the pack Pegasi, then she started making out a faint silhouette.

It was not a glob of fire. It was *Tarrin’s sword*! It was flying through the air of its own accord, straight towards them! And grasping the hilt, with an inert form gripped tightly with the other arm, was *Mist*!

Miranda laughed in delight when she looked up, and Dolanna gave out a fervent cry of relief. “Mist!” she screamed. “Mist, oh, I am so happy to see you!”

“It’s about bloody damn time you asses stopped!” Mist shouted back at them angrily. “My paw’s numb from gripping this thing, and I think my shoulder’s dislocated!”

Mist’s feet hit the ground, but she would not let go of the sword, so she ended up being dragged along with it as it pulled itself towards its master. “Someone take Kimmie! I can’t let go!” she called urgently, her eyes widening in surprise.

Haley surged towards her as Ulger and Azakar lunged forward, but Zyri reached her first. She was nearly knocked over by the much larger Were-cat, but she grabbed hold of Kimmie’s leg and refused to let go. She too was dragged along on the ground behind Mist as the Were-cat struggled to free her paw from the sword, but for some reason she could not let go of it. “Ngghh! It won’t let go of me!” she shouted, fear creeping into her voice. She threw Kimmie off her shoulder, who landed on top of Zyri, then grabbed her

wrist with her other paw and tugged at it even as she tried to find purchase with her clawed feet.

“Just let go!” Azakar barked at her as he caught her by her waist, then he too was jerked along with her.

“You think I bloody damn well didn’t think of trying that already, you idiot?” she raged at him vehemently. “It’s stuck to my paw!”

“Do not fight it, Mist!” Dolanna called quickly. “Let it do as it wills!”

“I have a choice?” she snapped acidly as the sword drug the Were-cat towards Tarrin. Dolanna waved Azakar off, who let go of her and snatched up Kimmie from the ground, then backed away. The blade exploded into even brighter, brilliant flame as it got closer and closer to its master, who Haley quickly and insightfully ran back to Tarrin and pulled him off the Pegasus. He laid Tarrin on the ground quickly and all but dove out of the way as the sword, whose heat was so great now that Haley’s hair was starting to singe as he retreated, advanced quickly on its dying master.

The sword touched Tarrin, and there was nothing but a blazing column of fire, fire that rose all the way into the sky. Mist screamed, but not out of pain. Hers was a scream of surprise as the fire engulfed her, and her shadow vanished into the fierce inferno. Hidden within the blazing pyre, Mist felt the sword’s power flow into her mate, pouring into the shattered remnants of his wings, aggressively shoring up the delicate lattice of surprisingly gentle energy which was Tarrin’s godly power. Mist’s unwilling grip on the sword gave her an odd insight into what was going on. The sword had surrounded them with fire, Tarrin’s element, for he drew power from fire just as fire drew power from him. The sword had taken a grip on her and dragged her into it because she was his mate, and even now her presence registered to Tarrin in his unconscious state. The sword was using her love for him as a cudgel, beating him over the head with it. He could feel her through the sword, aware of her nearness, and that awareness produced the necessary reaction out of him, shaking awake his instincts and desire to live from the torpor they had undergone, the state of shock from which he still suffered after the brief yet savage confrontation with the One. Tarrin’s mind and his will reacted to the touch of the sword, reacted to the sudden realization that Mist was alive and well. She felt Tarrin’s divine nature open itself to the power of the sword, draw power from it, draw in the power of the fire around him, and send it into his dreadfully injured wings, which were also the direct representation of his power. The systemetic decay that had been taking place, the slow death of his divine nature, was quickly and effectively stopped as new power flowed into him, revitalizing him, replacing what was lost and giving him the extra power he needed to start the process of repairing the damage that had been done.

Quickly, almost shockingly quickly, the fire evaporated like smoke. Tarrin lay on the ground, still unconscious, his wings still tattered, and looking in no way different than before. Mist was on her paws and knees beside him, the sword still in her paw, looking dazed and bleary. She grunted weakly and rose up onto her knees, putting her paw to her forehead, and that sound made Tarrin move. He seemed to try to roll onto his side, but got about halfway there before collapsing back onto his stomach, and he moved no more.

“Goddess!” Dolanna said intensely as she rushed forward. She put her hands on Mist’s shoulder, then a palm to her forehead, then patted her on the shoulder before kneeling down and putting her hand to Tarrin’s cheek. “I think he will be alright,” she announced. “I must observe him for a while, though.”

“He’ll be fine,” Mist said wearily. “The sword bandaged him up. Sort of.”

“Did you feel what happened?” the diminutive Sorceress asked.

Mist nodded. “It was hard not to, since it wouldn’t let go of me,” she replied. “I felt it flood him with power, probably what the One injured. His wings will heal themselves, he just needs time, that’s all. It wanted me there to let him know that I’m alright.”

“It did? You are certain of that?”

She nodded. “It did what it was supposed to do. When Tarrin sensed me, he started actively trying to heal himself.”

Miranda gave Mist an oddly curious look, then her eyes widened. Then she turned halfway away from them, crossed her arms beneath her breasts, and looked back towards Mist with a narrow-eyed, very slight, clever little smile. But that faded the instant she looked at Kimmie. She rushed over to the Were-cat, who was laying partially on top of Zyri, and rolled her over. Then she pushed her sleeves up and immediately started chanting in the language of the gods, the medium through which Priest magic operated.

“Let’s put a tent up for him,” Ulger offered. “And for Kimmie. She gonna be alright Miranda?”

“I’ll tell you in about ten minutes,” she replied after a long pause.

“Let us simply make camp,” Dolanna said. “We are all tired and need to rest. We will rest for the remainder of the night and move on in the morning. Kimmie and Tarrin need time to heal, but we simply cannot stay in one place for long.”

“Mist! Come here and hold her down before she starts thrashing!” Miranda barked.

“I’ll help, Mistress Miranda,” Zyri offered.

“You’re not strong enough hon. Mist is, though,” she replied with a wink.

Mist was indeed strong enough. For nearly twenty minutes Miranda used her Priest magic on Kimmie, and she did start convulsing and thrashing not long after her bond-mother came over to pin her to the ground. Miranda blew out her breath after Kimmie stopped struggling, wiping her hand over her furry forehead to get her hair back into place, then gave Zyri a sly smile. “She’ll be just fine,” she announced. “Jal, time to earn your supper, hon. Come over here and give Kimmie a very thorough shower. We have to get this blood and dirt off her. Just don’t drench *me*,” she said with a teasing wink. “Wet Wikuni are very unhappy Wikuni.”

Jal, who had been hiding behind Haley nervously, advanced with a shy smile, his eagerness to use his power evident on his face.

“How is she, my friend?” Dolanna asked.

Miranda blew out her breath as she stood up, and Jal began inundating Kimmie with warm water as Mist scrubbed the grime from her. “She’ll be alright,” she answered. “The Demon tortured her, in both body and mind. The body I can fix, but the mind...well, we’ll see. I tried to literally erase out her memory of what happened as best I could, but Were-cats aren’t easy to work with. It was all I could do. I’m sorry.”

“That might be enough,” Dolanna said quietly.

“If I did it right, she’ll have absolutely no memory of anything that happened for the last five days, since *before* she was abducted. If I messed up—well, let’s not go there.”

“I have confidence in you, my friend,” Dolanna assured her. “As soon as we have tents prepared, let us move her and Tarrin into them.”

Miranda knelt beside Kimmie again and watched as Jal produced a steady, strong stream of water from his hands, water that was warm and clean. “Zak, go fetch us some

towels, and a blanket.," she ordered, and the Knight simply nodded and hurried to the pack Pegasi. "So, Mist," she said, looking over Jal's head at her. "I want to see you after we get Kimmie packed away into a bedroll. I want to check and make sure the sword didn't do you any harm."

"I'm fine."

"That wasn't a request," she said in a mild yet authoritative tone. "The kind of power you were exposed to can leave damage that you can't see or feel or sense. I want to make sure you're alright, and I won't take no for an answer."

Mist gave her an ugly glare, but Dolanna intervened. "Miranda is being wise, Mist," she said. "It would behoove you to do as she asks. Best to ensure that you have no hidden injuries *now* rather than when those injuries might suddenly surface and impact your abilities at a bad time."

Mist snorted. "Alright," she agreed.

"Now let us not tarry. We must get Tarrin and Kimmie into bed and let them get as much rest as we can before we must move on."

Pain was a sensation to which Tarrin Kael was more than accustomed. During his short life, he had experienced it in all its myriad forms, at more levels and forms that most other living beings could not even imagine. He had felt the intense, body-wracking pain of being turned. Twice. He had experienced physical pain that would drive humans mad, and had felt the icy pain of betrayal, had felt the mind-wrenching agony of loss. He had experienced pain in body, mind, and even soul. He had experienced more pain that any living thing should have to experience, and it was an unwelcome guest in his home, a visitor whom he despised, yet still knew intimately well.

This was a *new* pain.

He had never felt anything like it before. It was a physical sensation but it wasn't, a kind of phantom pain in something that wasn't there. And it was driving him batty.

The pain was aching in his wings. There was the expected pain along the torn remnants of what was left, but the pain that really was annoying him was pain in parts of his wings that simply were not there anymore. He'd heard stories of how men who'd lost hands or feet sometimes felt pain as if they still had them, but he didn't really believe them. Well, he believed them now.

Oh, he knew before he was even conscious what kind of shape he was in. He remembered every instant of it, as the One's power ripped through his wings, attacked his very divinity, tried to kill him by destroying the divine aspect of his being, which severely injured his mortal body simply as a collateral effect. The One hadn't been trying to kill Tarrin, he had been trying to *destroy* him, had tried to destroy his very soul. But the One had underestimated Tarrin, for Tarrin had gambled on Mist being able to complete the task.

She had been partially successful. He could sense it, sense a drastic reduction in the sense of the One's presence on the land, and the wary eye that always seemed to be looking over Tarrin's shoulder was now gone. The One's icon was damaged, but not destroyed, and even now the god was laboring to repair it. Even as Tarrin labored to repair his wings. Both of them had been injured, damaged, wounded in their battle, and Tarrin knew that now, now it was a race to see who could heal first. They both had

suffered injury, and now both of them were partially crippled. The One had lost part of his touch on this world, and Tarrin had lost access to his divine powers.

That he could tell with just the most casual assensing of himself. His powers were tied up with his wings, they *were* his wings. With his wings injured, he would be incapable of using his divine abilities. The only thing he could do would be to try to heal them, which was what he was doing even now. It wasn't something that require active thought, and it was the only kind of divine action that he could take. Until his wings were healed, he would have to do things the mortal way.

Given the amount of wing that was destroyed and the rate he was healing, they'd be restored in about a month. But, he could sense that the damage to the One's icon was much more extensive, and it would take him *longer* to repair his icon than it would take Tarrin to heal his wings. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. That meant that for right now, they were equally incapacitated. *But*, since Tarrin would heal *first*, it meant that Tarrin would have a window of time to hunt down the One's icon, and destroy it.

He turned his attention to his physical senses. The smell of canvas told him he was in a tent, a tent which had seen some visitors. Everyone had been inside the tent at one time, but Mist, Dolanna, Miranda, and Zyri and Jal had been the most frequent visitors. He was alone at the moment, but their voices were just outside the tent, as was the sound of a campfire. He was laying on his side, and he could feel the aching throb in his wings, a throb that became a sharp stab of pain when he moved. It made him wince, and he went about the business of getting up very, very gingerly.

He should have known that Mist would sense or notice him moving almost instantly. By the time he had rolled up to a sitting position, Mist was flinging the tent flap aside and rushing in. She didn't slam into him, she knelt beside him quickly and put gentle paws on his shoulders, his face, his chest. "Tarrin!" she called urgently. "Are you alright?"

"I'll live," he grunted as Miranda, Haley, and Dolanna appeared in the tent's entrance, and Zyri wormed past them and quickly moved to his bedroll and sat down beside it. She didn't touch him, but the concern was evident all over her face. "Is Kimmie alright? I can smell her on you."

Mist nodded. "She's sleeping in the next tent. She was in no condition to use magic to get us out when I got there, so I carried her back out and found your sword. I used it on the One's icon," she told him. "I think that's what you wanted me to do."

He nodded. "I knew I had no chance to get at his icon so long as he had his Avatar there, so I gambled that if you were still there, then you couldn't get out. So I left it there hoping you could backstab the One while his attention was fixed on me."

"A very brazen gamble, dear one," Dolanna said with a smile.

"Sometimes crazy works," Tarrin shrugged. "I knew that Mist can pick up my sword, and you don't have to be a god to attack an icon. You just have to have a weapon capable of doing damage, that's all."

"Well, it almost killed me," Mist grunted. "I got knocked across where the cathedral used to be. I'd have finished him, but I figured doing that would kill Kimmie, and the volcano was erupting, so I didn't have time to stand there and debate the issue. I had to get Kimmie out of there."

"You did enough," Tarrin told her. "The One's lost most of his power on this world while he fixes his icon. That means he can't grant his Priests any spells stronger than the

basics, he can't directly communicate with them, and he can't keep track of us anymore. We have some breathing room."

"What about *you*, dear one? Are you well?"

He shook his head. "The One's power comes from his icon. Mine comes from *these*," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "I've lost my powers too, until they're healed. Me and the One are in the same fix, but I can heal my wings faster than he can fix his icon. I'll get my powers back *first*. And when I do, I'm going to hunt his icon down and finish what Mist started," he declared flatly.

"Dear one, if we have enough time, we will be gone long before then," Dolanna told him gently. "All we must do now is find Phandebrass and have him open the gate."

"No, Dolanna. Ni--the Goddess has to arrange to allow Phandebrass to open that gate. She doesn't know when that's going to happen, and until my wings regrow, I can't *tell* her. We're stuck here until I get my powers back."

"Silly boy, I can ask Kikkalli to relay any message you might need," Miranda told him. "It won't be as fast, but I can do it. I'll have to get her attention, and that might take some time. She can barely hear me as it is, and this won't be just a request for the power to cast a spell. It might be a few days before I finally get in contact with her."

"Why is it different?" Ulger asked from behind her.

"Think of hearing calls for power for spells to be something of an automatic reflex," she answered, turning to look at him. "Half the time she doesn't even realize it's going on. That's how the *ki'zadun* managed to infiltrate the order of Karas, friend. He didn't *know* just who he was granting spells *to*. As long as the agents went through the motions and kept themselves in good standing with Karas, he kept granting them spells. Younger gods aren't omnipotent, old friend. He did his best to keep up with what was going on, but the Priests who were agents of Karas had been very well trained before entering the Priesthood about how to hide their true loyalties. They were taught how to show a false front to Karas, and if you didn't notice, it *is* possible to fool a god."

"I always wondered about that," he grunted.

"Karas wasn't the only one with traitors in his order. Every Younger god, even Kikkalli, had a little house cleaning after what happened in Suld."

"They didn't try it with an Elder god?" Haley asked.

Miranda laughed. "Hon, you don't toy with gods who can kill you with a thought," she answered him. "Elder gods *can* do that, *especially* if you're one of their Priests who has gone awry. Ayise doesn't give a flip if you smack down one of the mortals who follows you. It's entirely an internal matter. You cross an Elder, and he'll drop you dead on the spot. The *ki'zadun* was very wise to keep them at arm's length."

"That would make the idea of it a bit nervous," Haley laughed.

"I take it Phandebrass isn't here yet?" Tarrin asked.

Dolanna shook her head. "We told him that we would find him. Unfortunately, that poses a problem now, since you cannot make contact with him."

"He knows which way we were coming," Tarrin grunted. "If I know him, he's not very far away. All we have to do is let it be known where we are, and he'll find us."

"That is a dangerous idea, dear one. If we let it be known where we are, then the soldiers of the One will also come for us. We have been fighting running battles all night. It seems that the Demons have stepped in to lead the troops now that the One is incapacitated."

“I was hoping that losing their god would take the fight out of them,” Tarrin fretted.
“It has not,” she answered.

Tarrin winced as he shifted his weight, then pulled himself onto his feet. There was a rather brilliant flash of pain through his wings as they shifted, but the pain eased back to a dull throb quickly. There wasn’t much at all left of them, just a pair of ragged bone-like appendages sticking out of his back which had torn tatters of living flame dangling from them limply. They were so damaged that he couldn’t even retract them. “Well, this is going to make riding fun,” Tarrin growled.

“I take it you cannot withdraw them?” Dolanna asked.

He shook his head. “They’re too injured to do *anything*,” he answered. “I won’t be able to retract them for a while. I’m not even sure if I’ll be able to shapeshift.”

“No, it is best not to experiment,” Dolanna warned. “Besides, if you cannot withdraw them, then there is no reason for you to change form to conceal yourself. They will simply give you away.”

“How is Kimmie?” he asked.

“Physically, she’s alright,” Miranda told him. “The Demon tortured her mind as well as her body, though. I erased her memory of the last few days to purge it from her mind, but I’m not entirely sure how well it worked. I figured if she had no memory of it, it wouldn’t affect her state of mind.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Tarrin agreed, thinking back to Julia. “Let me go see her, then if someone wouldn’t mind cooking something, I’d like to get something to eat.”

“I can do it, Mistress Mist,” Zyri offered in a small voice. “I don’t want to take you away from your daughter.”

“You’re a good cub,” Mist told her steadily, a paw on her shoulder.

“What do you want for breakfast, Master Tarrin?” she asked.

“Girl, I’ve told you not to call me that,” he grunted. “I’ll take just about anything. I’m not picky when I’m hungry.”

“I’ll find something,” she said with a bob of her head, then scurried out of the tent.

“I’ll give her a hand,” Haley said from outside. “Come on, Jal. Let Tarrin see Kimmie, then he’ll have time to say hello to you.”

Tarrin stepped out of the tent carefully, to prevent snagging his injured wings on the sides of the tent, and walked into an eerie scene. The air was thick with very fine ash, and smelled of sulfur and lava. The sky overhead was boiling with dark clouds of ash, from which the fine ash fell like snow, and the clouds were very low and very thick. They blocked the light of the single moon, making everything more than twenty spans from the fire black as pitch. Haley, Azakar, and Ulger had to shake the ash off things before they packed them, and the Pegasi shivered and flapped their wings often to get the ash out of their feathers and off their coats. Tarrin paid the strange scene no more mind, rather gingerly made his way across a small, hastily erected campsite to the next tent over, and his spirit soared just a little bit as her scent touched his nose. He threw aside the tent flap to see her laying in a bedroll, nude under the blankets he could tell, sleeping peacefully. There was no sign of her ordeal on her face, hers was the visage of a calm, untroubled slumber. That was a *very* good indication. She began to stir as Tarrin ducked into the tent, sucking his breath in when his wing snagged on the edge of the tent, and those beautiful blue eyes opened when he knelt by her bedroll. She looked up at him in

sleepy bemusement, then she laughed softly. “Well, either this is a very vibrant dream, or something went horribly wrong somewhere,” she said to him with a slight smile.

“Let’s just say that something went horribly wrong,” he answered honestly, in a tender, gentle voice. “How do you feel?”

“Fine,” she answered, stretching languidly. Then she reached up and put her paw on his cheek. He put his paw over hers and closed his eyes, revelling in her nearness. “I’m glad to see you too, Tarrin,” she said winsomely, though there was nothing but honesty in her voice. “What happened?”

“Something that required Miranda to wipe it out of your memory,” he answered bluntly. “Something you *do not* want to remember. But it’s over. We managed to get you back, and that’s all that matters.”

“Phandebrass?” she asked fearfully.

“Fine,” he answered. “We need to find him, but we absolutely know for a fact that he’s just fine.”

“That’s a relief,” she sighed. “Last thing I remember was going to sleep in our camp. I take it things went wrong after that?”

He nodded.

“What happened to your wings, darling?”

Tarrin glanced back. “Let’s just say that it might give you an idea of how wrong things went,” he told her seriously.

“I, see,” she said in a quiet voice. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll heal,” he told her. “Everyone else is fine.”

Mist ducked under the doorway and entered the tent. Kimmie gawked at her, then laughed. “Mother!” she cried. “What happened to *you*?”

She glanced down at herself. “Oh, that’s right, this is new to you,” she mused. “I decided to be my proper size. Being half Tarrin’s height made it a bit awkward being his mate.”

Kimmie laughed. “That’s wonderful, mother!” she proclaimed. “I’m so happy for you!”

“I see you’re well,” she noted, sitting on her heels on Kimmie’s other side, her paw stroking her hair tenderly. It wasn’t often that Mist displayed her maternal feelings for Kimmie.

“I get the feeling that I wouldn’t have been,” she answered. “I don’t remember what happened, and I think our darling here convinced me that I don’t *want* to know.”

“You don’t,” she affirmed in a strong voice. “You were taken by that same Demon bitch that nearly killed Eron, and she used you to trap Tarrin into a fight with the One. That’s all you *ever* need to know.”

Kimmie gave her mother a stricken look, then swallowed nervously. “I think you might be right about that, mother,” she said in a quavering voice. “How long—how many days did I lose?”

“Three days?” Mist asked Tarrin.

“Maybe four. We’ll have to ask Miranda,” he answered. “Alright, Kimmie...exactly how did you end up here?”

Kimmie did not miss the intrinsic threat hidden behind those words, so she fixed Tarrin with a steady, honest gaze. “Phandebrass was showing me the gate. He managed to find out the location, even though you wouldn’t tell him. We went the way we did for

speed, darling, the gate being on the path was just a bonus. When we got there, we were attacked by several—I have no idea what they were. They were very ugly and white, and *big*. They trapped us in the canyon, and more on the canyon rim triggered an avalanche. We could either flee through the gate or get buried. I'm sorry, darling, but we did what we had to do."

"Yetis," Tarrin grunted absently. "You must have stumbled across a pack of them. Usually they're not aggressive, but if they set up their camp in the canyon, then they probably would have attacked." He looked back to her. "They abandon a campsite if it's compromised...that's why they weren't there when we arrived."

"So you're not going to blame us?"

"No. I'll probably kill Phandebrass anyway, but I don't blame you."

Kimmie chuckled weakly. "My turn. Who's looking after our children?"

"Jula," he answered. "She's with them at the Tower. Forge is with them."

"I was really missing Forge," she grunted. "He's a Hellhound. Given this One's tendency to let his Priests summon Demons, having a pet Hellhound might have stopped a great deal of foolishness." She blew out her breath. "So, what's the plan?"

"Find Phandebrass," Mist said first. "We need him to free the souls of the Sorcerers so Tarrin's Goddess can get them off this world. Then we go home."

"You have no idea how nice that sounds," she sighed. "Do you have your spellbook, darling?"

Tarrin nodded.

"Good. I've lost mine, and if you remember, I copied all of my spells into yours," she winked. "There's a spell in there that will find Phandebrass."

"Which spell?" Tarrin asked. "I went through the book from cover to cover looking for a spell that could lead us to you?"

She gave him a perplexed look, then she chuckled. "Well, I didn't write a description with it," she answered. "And it wouldn't work for you, darling, because I never set the spell up for you. It's a spell that allows an apprentice to know which direction her master is in, in case she ever gets lost. It's a cantrip, one of the first an apprentice learns, and the master has to set the spell. Phandebrass did that for me, so I can use the spell to find him."

"Do you feel well enough to move?" Mist asked.

"I feel just fine," she answered immediately, then she reached under the blankets briefly. "Just as soon as someone finds me a robe or something, I'll be ready to go," she announced with a slight smile. She looked past Tarrin and Mist, then rolled over on her side. "And who is this handsome young man?" she asked, looking at him.

Tarrin looked back, and saw Jal and Zyri standing at the tent entrance, partially hiding behind the flap. Dolanna was standing behind them, and Miranda behind her. Jal was blushing. "That's Jal, and Zyri," Tarrin told her. "We picked them up a while ago."

"Well, you're looking good," Miranda told Kimmie with a cheeky grin.

"I'm feeling fine. Have a dress I can borrow?"

"I'm almost done altering one for you," she answered. "You were rather undressed when Mist got you back to the camp. I've been working on it a while. Give me a few minutes and I'll bring it to you."

"You're a lifesaver, girlfriend," Kimmie laughed.

"Do you feel well enough to travel, Kimmie?" Dolanna asked. "Tarrin?"

"Whether I am or not, we have to move," Tarrin answered over his shoulder.

"I feel just fine, Dolanna," Kimmie answered her. "Let me get dressed and I'll be out to help."

"If you come out now, I'd be more appreciative!" Ulger called from across the camp.

"If I did, you wouldn't get any work done!" Kimmie called back immediately, which made Zyri giggle. "You brought Ulger with you? The Knights must have been hard up for decent people," Kimmie told Tarrin with a wink. "Who else is here?"

"Azakar," he answered. "And Haley and Sarraya. You've met everyone else."

"Sarraya? How's she surviving here?"

"The bug actually planned ahead," Mist grunted. "Which is a miracle. She made a talisman that lets her survive here. She and Fireflash both are here. Both of them are out scouting around right now. They're small and they can fly, so they're better at avoiding being seen." She snorted. "I had to pry Fireflash off Tarrin and throw him out of camp to get him going. He came back twice, then Haley explained to him that he was helping Tarrin more by watching out for enemies than he would be sitting in the tent."

"That sounds like Fireflash," she said, sitting up in the bedroll, then sitting cross-legged on the mat with the blanket in her lap, which left her chest bare. "Does that hurt, darling?" she asked, reaching up and very gingerly touching his wing.

Tarrin winced at the touch. "Yes, it hurts," he said bluntly. "But there's nothing to be done about it. They just have to heal."

"What did that? I didn't think anything could even hurt your wings."

"The One," he answered. "We'll explain it all while we're moving."

"Well, give me the spellbook, and I'll memorize that spell so I know where to take us," she prompted.

Tarrin looked to the tent flap, where he saw Jal's presented back. The boy had turned around after Kimmie sat up and exposed her breasts, but did not leave. "Jal," he called. The boy didn't turn around, but turned his head slightly. "Go to my tent and get my saddlepack."

Jal nodded and hurried off.

"Come in, Zyri," Tarrin called. "Come introduce yourself."

The girl stepped out from behind the tent flap and filed in, keeping her eyes down and averted from Kimmie. She stopped just inside the tent flap and folded her hands before her demurely. "Nice to meet you, Mistress Kimmie," she said in a small voice.

"She's just a little lady, isn't she?" Kimmie laughed. "Come in, sweetie. And drop the *Mistress*. Only my apprentice calls me that, and it drives me batty."

"But, um, you're not properly dressed."

"Honey, girls are allowed to see each other naked," Kimmie winked. "And Tarrin doesn't count. He's technically my boyfriend, and the father of my children. There's nothing here he hasn't already seen."

"You had your turn, daughter," Mist warned tersely. There was plenty of underlying threat in those words, showing that Mist's maternal feelings for Kimmie only went so far.

"Don't be silly, mother," she said dismissively. "I wouldn't *dream* of trying to interfere in your happiness. Don't be a Jesmind, *please*."

Mist gave her a strange look, then actually laughed. Mist did not laugh often.

Kimmie snapped her fingers—not easy when one's hands were covered with fur and there were thick pads on the tips of one's fingers—and pointed at the tent floor beside

Tarrin imperiously. Zyri shuffled in and sat down beside Tarrin. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Zyri,” Kimmie said, holding her paw out to her. Zyri took it and shook it. “I can smell both my mother and Tarrin all over you, honey. Are they taking care of you?”

Zyri nodded, giving her a slightly surprised look. “They’re letting us live with them ‘til they find a good place for us.”

“Well, she speaks flawless Sulasian,” Kimmie noted clinically. “I see you found that tongues spell, Tarrin.”

Tarrin nodded. “I’m glad I did.”

“Did you get all three languages they use? Only the Priests speak anything other than Penali. One of them is a language they only use in the west, and the third seems to be a language they only use in the Priesthood when dealing with each other.”

“I got the other two,” he assured her. “I used one of their Priests when I did it.”

“We just got buzzed!” Ulger shouted from outside. “Throw on a blanket or something Kimmie!”

Mist immediately stood up, and there was the sound of commotion outside the tent. “Buzzed?” Tarrin asked Mist.

“One of the flying Demons just flew over the camp. Every time that happens a column of soldiers comes. They guide them to us,” she answered. “If it’s like the last couple of times, we have about twenty minutes to get ready.”

“The Demon won’t attack?” Kimmie asked.

“The first one did,” Mist grunted. “Miranda destroyed it with magic. The rest must have seen it happen, they won’t come anywhere near the Wikuni unless they have at least three and have soldiers behind them.”

“I take it we don’t have long?”

“No. Miranda!” Mist boomed. “Get that dress in here *now*!”

“I’m bringing it! Let me bite this thread off and it’s ready enough!”

Miranda scurried in at the same time as Jal, who blushed furiously and turned away from Kimmie. Miranda was carrying one of her homemade dresses, one of the blue ones, whose hem had been lengthened and the sleeves made longer, as well as some lengthening in the bodice to account for Kimmie’s taller height. “The stitching holding the bodice to the skirts isn’t totally done, so be careful,” she warned.

“I’m sure it’ll be just fine,” Kimmie said with a nod, taking the dress. “Let’s hope it fits.”

“I know your size, silly,” Miranda said dismissively.

Tarrin stood up and took the saddlepack from Jal, who militantly kept his back to Kimmie as she climbed out of the bedroll and pulled the dress over her head. Mist helped her thread her tail through the hole in the back of the skirts, then the Were-cat tugged and pulled on the bodice and skirts until she had it where she wanted it. “It clashes with my fur, but I guess I can live with that. That’s why I always preferred brown. When a girl has orange fur, her color choices are a bit limited.”

“You can worry about fashion later, Kimmie,” Mist chided darkly. “We have to get the camp packed and move. I don’t want to engage them as long as Tarrin’s injured.”

“I’m fine, Mist,” Tarrin snorted. “If—“

Tarrin never finished that statement. Mist’s paw clamped onto the upper arch of his wings where they came out of his back, then squeezed. It sent a white-hot lance of pain

through him, making him cry out in pain and his knees unlock, making him hunch over and drop to his knees.

"You were saying?" Mist asked bluntly. "I know you, my mate. If we engage, you'll run right into the middle of it, and you're in no condition to fight."

"Alright, *now* you're starting to sound like Jesmind," Tarrin said in a panting tone after she let go of his wing, climbing back to his feet. His wing still throbbed with the beating of his heart, which seemed odd to him because blood didn't go into them.

"I don't care what you think of it," she said defiantly. That was *very* unusual, for Mist usually deferred to him no matter what.

"You're fighting a losing battle, darling," Kimmie warned lightly in Torian. "You've riled her protective side. Now you have to live with it," she finished with a wink.

Now it seemed to make a bit more sense. Mist was *extremely* protective of him...if this was just an aspect of that protectiveness, then it explained why she was going against her demure nature when regarding him.

"Don't do that in front of me, daughter," Mist warned darkly. Mist didn't speak Torian.

"I'm just telling Tarrin to give up, mother," she said with a sly smile. "He won't win this one."

"Oh. Carry on, then," she announced, then turned and left the tent without another word.

"Would you like to help me get everything ready, cubs?" Kimmie asked the children. "I have to memorize this spell so I can guide us, so I need a hand packing up the tent. Would you like to lend me a hand?"

"I'll help, after I get Master Tarrin something to eat," Zyri replied, and Jal, who had finally turned to look at her, nodded vigorously. There really wasn't much to do, just pack the bedroll; nothing else was in the tent.

"That's sweet of you," she said, taking the spellbook that Tarrin fished out of the saddlepack and handed to her. She spoke the word that expanded it to full size, then looked around. "Oh, I think I'd better do this outside," she mused. "They can't knock down the tent if I'm in it."

Tarrin carefully navigated the tent flap behind Zyri, keeping his wings away from the edges, and saw everyone working hard and fast. Kimmie's tent was the only one still up, and Azakar and Haley quickly and efficiently packed the gear onto the pack Pegasi. One of them had been stripped of its packs, for use by Kimmie, with only the leather pack saddle remaining on it. That would only do if they stayed on the ground; Kimmie would need a proper saddle if they took to the air. Kimmie stopped and gawked at the winged horses for a long moment, then laughed delightedly. "Tarrin! Where did you get them, and what are they?"

"They're our horses. Well, our Pegasi now," Tarrin answered. "I Transmuted them when it became necessary to move very far very fast."

"You used Sorcery?"

Tarrin nodded. "My sword can touch the Weave. I have no idea how. Me and Dolanna used that touch to build up a charge of Sorcery. I've burned all mine, but I think Dolanna still has some held back for emergencies."

"I'll have to look into that when we have the time," she mused. "Now if you'll excuse me." She quickly padded over to the firepit, which had only the ashen remains of

a fire within it, and sat down and opened the book. She immediately lost all notice of the outside world as she turned to the proper page and began to study.

Fireflash lanced in from the edge of camp and slammed into Tarrin's chest, making his wings shudder with pain, but he folded his paws over his drake and stroked his scales tenderly as the drake cooed and chirped in exuberant relief. "I'm alright, little one," Tarrin chuckled as Fireflash nuzzled his neck aggressively. "Just mind my wings, they're still hurt."

Fireflash chirped in understanding and took his place on Tarrin's shoulder, carefully keeping his tail near Tarrin's shoulder to avoid accidental contact. Tarrin immediately paid his drake's position so close to his injured wings little mind; it felt odd when his drake was *not* on his shoulder. That he was there only seemed proper.

"Nice to see you up and about, Tarrin," Haley said tersely as he cinched a bagged tent onto a saddle pack. Zyri rushed over from one of the other saddle Pegasi and offered Tarrin a large chunk of dark bread and some cheese. Tarrin took them and then patted Zyri on the shoulder fondly, and the girl rushed back to help Jal pack Kimmie's bedroll. "Hand me that pack there?" Tarrin reached down and grabbed the pack, then lobbed it to the Were-wolf. "Thanks," he grunted as he piled it on top of the first.

"I've heard the doom and gloom. Mind telling me what's really going on?"

"Pretty much the doom and gloom," he answered honestly. "We've been fighting skirmishes with advance elements of the One's army all night. Now that that Demons know where we are, he's finding a column of troops to bring back to us. He won't try it by himself because Miranda can blow him out of the water if he gets within shouting distance of her, and somehow they know that."

"Demons are defenseless against Priests," Tarrin told him, handing him another pack. "If the Priest is strong enough to banish, it's gone, and there's nothing it can do about it outside of trying to get to the Priest before he can finish the spell."

"That's good to know," he said with a nod. "The main thing now is to get out of sight, but that's not going to be easy. Even if you could shapeshift, these winged horses are rather, unique," he chuckled. "Our best bet is to find a forest and hide in it for a little while. That neutralizes their aerial reconnaissance, and it puts us in the advantage."

"No, we have to find Phandebrass, and running to a forest isn't going to get us there," Tarrin grunted. "We'll just have to plow through the soldiers." He was about to say something else, but an idea occurred to him. "Or maybe not. Dolanna!" he called.

"What is it, dear one?"

"How much power do you have left?" he asked her from across the camp.

"Not much," she answered. "I have used most of it in the battles last night."

"Think you have enough for a sustained Illusion?"

"Yes, but I cannot hold it for long."

"Think you can hold it for an hour?" he asked. "It wouldn't be a complex Illusion, just a basic one."

"A basic one? Perhaps," she told him. "I take it it must be large enough to hide us all?"

"Yah," Tarrin replied. "But it's just going to be an Illusion of a single color, so you shouldn't have too much trouble making it large."

Dolanna started to speak, then laughed. “That’s clever, dear one,” she answered. “Yes, I think I can do that, but it might not be necessary. The ash is thick, and we would be hard to see.”

Tarrin looked up at the sky, which was thick with dark clouds spewing from the volcano. The smell of ash and brimstone was heavy in the air. It was perfect. That low cloud of ash restricted visibility, and the fine ash drifting down from the sky was seriously cutting visibility—no, wait. The ash was very fine, and though it was little more than a nuisance right now, if they were flying, the fine ash would be like sand blowing in the desert. Without eye protection, the Pegasi would very quickly be blinded by the soot and ash. Tarrin reached into the saddlepack in his paw and dug out his violet crystal visor, turning it over in his paw, pondering how to get around this problem.

A Ward. A Ward would do it, but Dolanna might not have the energy to—hold on, he *had* their energy source. If it still worked, anyway. The sword’s power was linked to his own. His wounding might have altered the power the sword could bring to bear.

“Where did you put my sword?” he asked Haley.

“It’s laying on the ground where your tent was,” he answered. “We can’t touch it, so we just rolled it out of the tent opening, then packed the tent.” Tarrin looked in that direction, and saw his sword laying on the ash-covered ground, almost buried in the two fingers of ash that covered everything.

Well, this could be the first test. He put on the visor and then reached out to the sword, commanding it with a single thought to return to his paw.

The sword seemed to shudder on the ground, then rose up from the earth and sailed through the air. The hilt turned towards him in midair, and slid comfortably into his grip. The sword’s blade had a few licks of flame slide along its length when Tarrin touched it, then fell dark. Tarrin pushed his awareness towards his weapon, and found that it responded to him. It knew what he wanted to know, and communicated to him in a way that he could not quite describe that it could in fact still do as he wished. The blade of the sword started to glow with a faint, wispy white light, a wispy nimbus that looked just like Magelight. It wasn’t the white fire from before, it was much more subdued, and Tarrin sensed that the sword’s ability to reach back into the Weave had been reduced. It would take them longer to draw power from it, but the simple fact remained that they could still use it.

Well, at least Dolanna could. Tarrin tried to open himself to the power of the Weave, but the instant he tried, his wings exploded into a savage rake of pain that lashed through them, then through the rest of his body. It was so intense and so sudden that it made his mind swim in a dark haze, threatening to make him pass out.

Dazed, Tarrin fought through the cobwebs and tried to comprehend why that had happened. His wings had *nothing* to do with his Sorcery. Why did they react that way? They had tried to absorb the magic first, he realized, as they had before.

That was easy enough to circumvent. After all, his wings had nothing to do with Sorcery. He tried again, being very careful to tell his wings to stay out of it, and again felt a wracking pain through them. He had been halfway ready for it this time, so he disconnected himself from the power immediately. He blew out his breath and tried one more time, and was again assaulted with pain.

Annoyed, Tarrin tried to understand why it was happening, then he caught a glimpse of his wings as he looked to the side. Of course. The wings were divine, but they were a

part of him, they were physical limbs, and they were *injured*. Sorcery put stresses on the body, even on a *da'shar* or *sui'kun*, and the stresses of the magic of Sorcery were causing his wings pain. He couldn't block his wings from touching the power because they were a part of him, a part of his body, and his entire body was a conduit for the magic. With his wings injured, he wasn't going to be able to draw power because they couldn't tolerate the stress of holding the power right now. But he *could* weave directly from the sword. It would take much longer, but it was more than possible. He'd been using the power as a Sorcerer. Now it was time to weave like a *da'shar*, weave without drawing in.

That was the only way.

"I'm alright, little one," Tarrin said absently to Fireflash, who was urgently nuzzling his neck. He reached up and patted the drake's head, then turned and looked at Dolanna, who was approaching him. "Think you can make a Ward to block this ash, Dolanna?" he asked.

"Easily, dear one," she assured him. "Are you fit to ride?"

"Fit or not, I don't have much choice," he grunted. "We *have* to move."

"I have the spell," Kimmie called. "I've already cast it. Phandebrass is due south, and now he'll know I'm looking for him."

"How is that?" Azakar asked her.

"The spell has two parts," she answered him. "The first tells me which direction he is. The second tells him that I just used it, so now he knows I'm alright, and that I'm looking for him. He'll stop if he can and wait for me to catch up to him."

"Good, I'd hate to chase him around," Azakar said as he finished cinching the strap on a pack Pegasi's last pack.

Azakar and Ulger roughly knocked down the last tent, and didn't bother to fold it and pack it away properly. They tied it up with its own guide ropes, then jammed it onto the back of the least loaded pack Pegasus and tied it down.

"Is the camp packed?" Dolanna called, looking around at the hastily abandoned campsite.

"Just finishing up, Dolanna," Ulger replied. "Go ahead and mount up. We'll be on the way in a minute."

It took the help of Mist and Haley to get into the saddle, because the act was excruciating. Tarrin panted from the effort once he was in the saddle, slumped over the saddlebow as he tried to get over the pounding throbbing of his wings. Odd that limbs that had no blood in them would resonate with pain with the beating of his heart. Fireflash jumped down into the saddle and laid down between him and the saddlebow, his usual spot, and Tarrin patted him on the back before, then he pulled his bow from the saddleskirt where he usually kept it stowed. Give me a quiver," Tarrin called to Azakar as he sheathed his sword in the spot where he had taken the bow.

Azakar nodded and went over to a pack Pegasus.

"What are you doing, my mate?" Mist asked dangerously.

"I can't fight, but I don't have to just sit back and be useless," he answered. "If I can ride this thing, I can shoot a bow."

Mist turned it over in her mind, then nodded. "Good enough," she told him, then went over and mounted her own Pegasus.

Azakar handed him two quivers brimming with Tarrin's hand-made arrows, which were hung from each side of his saddle. Pulling those arrows was a bit tricky in his natural form, but the power he could put into his bow with his current strength would give him a range that was almost ridiculous. Tarrin sent the bow into the *elsewhere* where he could call it in a second, then grabbed the reins.

"Umm, I've never ridden one of these things," Kimmie called nervously as she mounted one of the newly freed up pack Pegasi. Ulger took a cord of rope and tied one end of it to Kimmie's foot.

"Just hold on without breaking the Pegasus' ribs," Tarrin told her. "We're going to be careful until we get you a proper saddle. Ulger's strapping you to the Pegasus, so you can't fall off."

"I wondered why he was tying ropes on my foot," she laughed.

Ulger quickly and efficiently strapped Kimmie to her mount. He tied a rope between her feet that looped under the Pegasus, then used the leather thongs on the pack saddle and some extra rope to very securely lash her to the Pegasus' back.

"Everyone tie in," Dolanna called as she gracefully mounted her own Pegasus.

Tarrin forgot to do that. He tied the leather thongs that they'd added to the saddles and tested them to make sure the knots were good, then took the reins again. "Azakar, you will lead with Kimmie just behind you," Dolanna told him. "Follow her directions."

"Aye, Dolanna," Azakar nodded as he finished tying himself in, then clapped down his visor.

"Do not worry, dear one, I will use a Ward to block the ash, or we will all be blinded," she told him.

"Oh. Good," the Mahuut nodded, putting his visor back up. "Sarraya back yet?"

"Not yet," Dolanna answered. "Haley?"

The Were-wolf nodded, then raised two fingers to his lips and unleashed an ear-piercing whistle that almost seemed to resonate with Tarrin's teeth. He had *never* heard a whistle that loud before.

"Ouch," Kimmie growled, patting her ears.

"Sorry, should have warned you," Haley chuckled.

"That's a neat trick, Haley," Tarrin said admiringly.

"I'll teach you how to do it later," Haley answered with a smile. "It's not hard."

They waited for several moments, then Sarraya's voice reached them. "Coming!" she shouted, then she appeared out of the drifting ash. "I'm here, I'm here! Well, good to see you up, Tarrin. You okay, Kimmie?" she said, flitting around each of them in turn as she addressed them.

"I'm fine. I'm just surprised to see you," Kimmie winked.

"I'm full of surprises," Sarraya grinned in reply. "You feeling alright, Tarrin?"

"I'll live," he answered her shortly as she landed on his shoulder.

"Alright, let me raise the Ward, and we will be ready to go."

Kimmie had no trouble with riding a Pegasus, but Tarrin did. The Pegasus knew he was injured, and to its credit, it tried very hard to be as gentle and smooth as possible, but there was only so much it could do. Every downstroke of its wings caused a subtle jar, and that jar was a shockwave that raced through Tarrin's wings. The cloud of ash was breeding its own weather, so the Pegasus had to deal with sudden crosswinds, updrafts, and downdrafts that caused it to shift sharply in the air. But Tarrin had endured greater

pain before, back when he'd been shot, so he simply gritted his teeth and used all the tricks that Allia had taught him about how to control pain to try to blot it out. He kept his eyes on Dolanna's Pegasus and concentrated only on following her. There was nothing else but keeping himself behind that winged horse. There was no pain, there was no time, there was only Dolanna, her white Pegasus, and the need to keep himself squarely behind them.

He was so lost in himself that when the white Pegasus before him put its hooves on the ground, Tarrin was surprised so much he lost his center when his own mount landed. The pain was a white jag through his wings, so much so it put white spots in his eyes, and he almost bit off the tip of his tongue when his teeth clamped shut in reflex. He looked around and saw that they were still under the ash cloud, though it was much thinner than it had been to the north, so much so that the sun peeked through as a dim white disc. They were on a road, a deserted road, except for ten men and women wearing heavy cloaks and riding horses. They all turned to look towards them as the Pegasi shivered and beat the wings to clear the ash out of them before folding them, and none of them moved for a moment.

Then he heard Phandebrass' wonderful voice erupt from the middle of them. "Pegasi! I say, I thought they were extinct! How did you find them? Do they live here?"

"Phandebrass!" Kimmie cried out, urging her mount forward. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, my dear, just fine," he answered, removing his hood. He had an ugly slash on his face, just outside his right eye, that went from his hairline to his chin. "As you can see, we've had a bit of excitement here and there, but nothing we couldn't handle. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she answered as the others squared off against the Arcane mage and his nine hooded companions, who still had neither moved nor spoken.

"I say, what happened to *you*, Tarrin?" Phandebrass asked.

"The One happened," Tarrin said evenly. "We had a bit of a fight. Neither of us got out of it easy."

Phandebrass laughed as all nine of his companions gasped in unison. "Did you get him?"

"Mist did," he said, looking at his mate. "He's not gone, but we bought ourselves some time while he repairs his icon."

"We will explain it later, my friend," Dolanna said. "Right now we must find a secure place to hide. Tarrin cannot ride for much longer. He must rest."

"I'm afraid there's nowhere safe anymore," one of Phandebrass' companions, the one to his right, announced. "The soldiers of the One are scouring every house in every city, searching for Defiled, and they're patrolling the roads and lanes so thickly it's nearly impossible to get around them. We had to flee from our last safe house, and lost several good men and women during the course of it."

The fellow removed his hood, and Tarrin wasn't the only one to gape at him.

He was the mirror image of a Sha'Kar.

Almost. He had the same light, delicate features, the same pointed ears, the same slender, graceful limbs. But his skin was fair, almost pale, and his hair was the deepest, darkest black that Tarrin had ever seen. His almond-shaped eyes were the color of molten gold, and they swept over them all like an eagle's gaze.

"I say, at least they didn't get us all, Lorak," Phandebrass told his companion. "I say, dear me, how rude. Lorak, these are the friends I was telling you about. Everyone, this is Lorak, an officer in the Shadows. He's an Elementalist, he is."

Lorak only nodded curtly.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, though the circumstances leave much to be desired," Dolanna greeted him.

"A dark truth," Lorak agreed. "Our only choice is to flee cross country. I'm sorry, but stopping anywhere within a league of a road is suicide."

"How did you get this far if they're that thick?" Haley asked curiously.

"I say, Lorak is an Air Adept, he is," Phandebrass answered. "He knows a spell that's as close to invisibility as one of Dar's best Illusions. He's kept us hidden from the soldiers, he has."

"They're not spells," Lorak chided Phandebrass absently.

"I know they're not, but it helps me classify your capability to think of them as such, it does," Phandebrass answered.

"What do you plan to do?" Dolanna asked Lorak.

"Flee," he answered. "Our only recourse is to seek refuge with the Dura. Not even the soldiers of the One have been able to breach their mountain fortress. I just hope that they understand how desperate we are. The word's already gone out to all our cells to flee into the wilderness and make their way to the Dura."

In unison, Tarrin, Mist, and Kimmie all picked up their ears and turned north, down the road. All three of them could hear the very faint sounds of hooves pounding the ground. "What is it, dear one?" Dolanna asked him.

Tarrin called his bow from the *elsewhere*. "Company," Mist growled. "Twenty horses, and I hear something that I can only assume is a Demon. I've never heard anything quite like it before."

Ulger and Azakar surged forward. "Tarrin, back with the others," Ulger ordered as both the Knights drew their massive weapons and clapped down their visors.

"You would fight *twenty* soldiers and a Demon?" another of Phandebrass' hooded companions asked incredulously in a lilty, feminine voice.

"Twenty? That's it?" Ulger snorted. "I was hoping it would be a challenge. You ready Zak?"

"Ready," he answered.

"Fighting isn't needful," Lorak called. "I can hide us."

"Not from a Demon, you will not," Dolanna answered bluntly. "And they are too close to outrun."

"We've hidden from Demons before," Lorak protested mildly. "They're not immune to my power. They will go right by us so long as we allow it."

Dolanna pursed her lips. "Tarrin?"

He nodded. "I'd rather not fight if we can help it. Besides, if they discover us that close, *we'll* have the advantage."

"I don't see how," Lorak said calmly.

"I can kill half of them before they can blink if I can get close enough," Mist stated flatly.

"Me and my mother have certain physical advantages, friend," Kimmie said with a light smile. "They won't stand a chance."

“Ah. I remember Phandebrass talking about that,” he said as he moved his horse well off the road. “No matter, gather around me please. The closer you are, the easier this is.”

They all gathered their horses and Pegasi around the strange pale Sha’Kar, and the dark-haired man closed his eyes. Tarrin could feel him reaching out, reaching, reaching *beyond*, and then he seemed to make his connection, for power flowed through him. He was a bridge, a conduit between the material plane and the Elemental plane of Air, Tarrin realized, and he was directly channeling its power. A light, warm wind blew from him, washing over them all, and then it seemed to coalesce and swirl around them for a brief moment. Then it shimmered and vanished.

“There. No one move. Keep as quiet as you can. The Windwall will mute sounds, but it can’t block them entirely. We wait for them to pass, then we move on.”

Tarrin nodded, and they all waited. They did not have to wait long, however, for the first of the soldiers appeared a brief moment later, charging out of the dark pall that was the falling ash, like a black fog. More appeared behind him, and more behind them, until their entire disorganized column was visible as it charged down the road. Above and just behind them all was a *vrock*, and its large feathered wings beating the ash-choked air, which muted and distorted the sounds from far away, was the strange sound that Mist was hearing. Tarrin put his palm on his Pegasus’ neck to make it stay still, but it wasn’t necessary. The Pegasi were very intelligent animals, could partially understand their language, so they already knew to be calm and quiet. The horses among them shied just a bit, but their riders quickly settled them down as the mounted Church soldiers pounded past them. They galloped past without even giving them a second look, and moments later they vanished into the black pall.

“And that’s that,” Phandebrass chuckled. “We’ve been hiding like this all day, we have. So, it’s good to finally be with you again, lad. Where are we going?”

“For now, nowhere,” he answered. “My wings are injured, so I’ve lost my powers until they heal. You have a task to do before we can leave, but you can’t do it until I get back in touch with my Goddess. So for right now, we’re waiting on Miranda to get in contact with Kikkalli, so she can relay messages for us.”

“What am I to do?”

“Free the trapped souls on Auromar,” Dolanna answered. “They are the fallen spirits of my brothers and sisters. The Goddess wants them to return to her.”

“You are of the Damned!” one of the cowed, robed figures gasped.

“If that’s what you want to call us, yes,” Tarrin answered in a cool voice. “We are *katzh-dashi*.” He turned back to Phandebrass. “So, we have to go to Auromar. I guess we’ll move in that general direction until I have my wings back. When I do, first I’ll go kill the One, then we’ll release the trapped *katzh-dashi* and go home.”

The casual way he said it made it not quite register to the robed men and women with Phandebrass for a moment, then they all gaped at him from beneath their deep hoods.

Phandebrass chuckled. “Well, I think we should go with Lorak,” he suggested. “Else your second mission will fail, it will.”

“What mission?”

“The Dwarves, lad,” he answered. “They’re called *Dura* here, they are. The Dwarves have a stronghold far to the north, in a mountain range buried in snow. I say, they might not be the descendents of the Dwarves of Sennadar, but if anyone would know what happened to them, the *Dura* would.”

Tarrin mulled it over in his mind. They just *might* know what happened, at that. Tarrin was here to find out what happened to the children of the Goddess, but also to find the Dwarves and bring them home, if they were still alive. If these Dura did in fact know what happened to the Dwarves, then they might point him in the right direction. Or they might be the Dwarves of Sennadar's descendents, which was also a possibility.

He looked to his side. "Dolanna?"

She shrugged. "We are trapped here for a while regardless," she answered. "Auromar will not go anywhere, dear one, and the nature of the place suggests that we do not go there until we are ready to leave. And we *should* find out what happened to the Dwarves. For Gnomlin and Clangeddin if nothing else."

"It might be wise, Tarrin," Haley spoke up. "There's safety in numbers right now, given how dangerous it is. These winged horses of yours will let us get to Auromar quickly whenever we're ready for it, so it wouldn't hurt to go with Lorak. If he'll have us, that is," Haley added with a smile at the strange Sha'Kar.

"Friends of Phandebrass are welcome among the Shadows," Lorak said immediately.

"I think it's a good idea," Miranda agreed. "It'd be nice to know where we're going for a change."

"Thanks," Tarrin said dryly.

"Any time," she said with a cheeky grin.

"Well, since it does seem to be a good idea, we may as well go with Lorak for now," Tarrin announced.

"All of you are welcome among us," Lorak announced. "We must be on our way, and we've waited long enough for that patrol to leave us behind. We can take care of the introductions while moving."

"That is fine, but we *must* stop soon," Dolanna pressed. "Tarrin must rest."

"I'll be fine, Dolanna," Tarrin said in a grim tone. "I'll deal with it. I won't put us all in danger."

"Shana is an Earth adept. She could heal you," Lorak offered.

"Aye, I can," the one called Shana agreed. "Och, there isn't a wound or hurt ever made that I couldn't heal."

"There's nothing you can do for me," Tarrin told her. "Nothing can heal this."

"Isn't such a thing as *nothin'*, friend."

"Trust me, you can't heal him," Sarraya told her, and judging from the looks on their faces, she had become visible on his shoulder. Fireflash stirred from the saddle, looking up at him, then at the others, then laid back down. "Unless you happen to be a god, that is," she added. The woman gave Sarraya a shocked look, which made Miranda laugh. "Get used to us, friend. We'll shock you right out of your shoes about fifty times today. We're unusual people, and if you think I'm unusual, you have no idea what's coming. I'm nothing compared to *that*."

"I'm sure it will," Lorak said calmly. "Follow me, please, and don't lag behind."

"You were saving it for that, weren't you?" Tarrin accused.

"Ohhh, you bet," she answered with an evil chuckle. "I'll laugh every time I remember the looks on their faces. I live for that."

"We all know only too well," Tarrin grunted as Lorak turned his horse north, and they all moved to follow.

Chapter 10

It was decidedly odd.

That was the only conclusion that Tarrin could draw as he traveled with the Shadows over the course of the day, as they fled to the northeast to swing wide of Pyros, charging back into the thicker ash and the protection it afforded to them from the eyes of their enemies. Riding itself was excruciating, but he didn't allow it to show on his face or in his demeanor, using Allia's mental exercises to block out the pain. His Pegasus was trying to be careful, but there was only so much that it could do. Every bounce in the saddle caused a jagged flash of pain, but Tarrin managed to block it out mostly by doing what he did before, concentrating on something to the exclusion of everything else. Earlier he used Dolanna's mount as his focus, but this time he focused on Lorak.

Lorak mystified Tarrin, who talked as they rode, answering Dolanna's questions. The first thing she asked him was what race he was. He called himself an Elara, and said that at one time the humans referred to his kind as *elves*, at least before the One came to dominate much of the world. She then asked him if he had ever heard of the Sha'Kar, and he replied that he did not. When she described a Sha'Kar, Lorak looked shocked, and told her that Elara that looked like that were called Demora, and they were evil and malicious. The Demora lived deep underground, or had at one time, for they were presumed extinct, for no one had seen a Demora for a thousand years.

"Umm, you're named after the moon?" Zyri asked, then clamped her teeth shut. They were speaking in Penali, because Lorak and the others didn't understand Sulasian.

"That is the name of your moon?" Dolanna asked Lorak curiously.

"We're named for the moon because that's where we're from," he answered the girl calmly. Lorak wasn't the kind that got ruffled, Tarrin noticed. "The moon is its own world, full of life and populated by the Elara. The One will turn his eyes to our moon when he finishes conquering this land, so we work very hard to keep him in check."

"The *mai-ji-din* used to transport us back and forth," another Elara added, a brown-haired male that had been introduced as Thren. "Our most learned Wizards. They know spells that open gateways between here and Elara."

"That is why Master Phandebrass is welcome and needed by the Shadows," Lorak explained. "He is human, but his skill and mastery of the arts of Wizardry are exceptional, even by our own reckoning. He is *mai-ji-din*, a Gatemaster."

"Why do your Gatemasters simply bring your people back to Elara?" Dolanna asked.

"Two hundred years ago, the One altered the nature of the land under his dominion," Lorak answered. "He changed things so our Gatemasters can't open gates into or out of his domain any longer. We're trapped here. The only way we could get back to Elara would be to flee to Auromar, but that's all but impossible."

"Why is that?" Dolanna pressed.

“The One’s navy is patrolling the straits between Pyrosia and Auromar,” he answered. “They attack any boat on the water. Even a single man in a rowboat. It’s a two day journey between the eastern tip of Pyrosia and the western edge of Auromar, and there’s simply no way a ship can make it without being attacked. The One knows about the Shadows, and took these steps to isolate the agents from Elara. By blocking the *mai-ji-din* from opening gates into Pyrosia, he forces us to run a gauntlet at sea where we have a major disadvantage. But that doesn’t completely stop us,” Lorak smiled. “Some Wizards and Elementalists know magic that lets us cross the straits safely, so we can get new agents into Pyrosia. Just not many.”

“That’s why the eastern tip of Pyrosia is the last unconquered area,” Thren informed them. “Those that oppose the One have concentrated there to give our agents a safe place to go when they attempt to make the crossing. The eastern peninsula and the stronghold of the Dura are the last bastions of resistance left in Pyrosia. The One has conquered everything else,” he added with a sigh.

“Hold. If the One can change the land to stop your Gatemasters, why can your gods not simply do the same?” Dolanna asked. “That creates a stalemate.”

“There are permanent gates that lead from Pyrosia to Elara, part of the nature of the universe itself,” Lorak answered. “The One controls them on this side. When he finishes conquering Pyrosia, he’ll use them to try to invade Elara. So, the longer we can prevent him from finishing his conquest of Pyrosia, the more time we have to prepare for his invasion of *our* home.”

That seemed to be the primary and complete interest of Lorak, and the other two Elara with him, Thren and a female with blonde hair and lovely, delicate features named Neh. As they talked more, heard Lorak explain things, the more he understood the simple fact that protecting his homeland was Lorak’s driving, almost obsessive, concern. He could tell from the way he talked, the words he used. He had that same single-minded determination that anyone would probably have if his entire way of life was being threatened. To Lorak, Thren, and Neh, everyone in Pyrosia was there to stall the One. They were pieces on a chessboard, units to deploy. That was a general’s mentality, and understandable, but there was a certain coldness about Lorak that he didn’t entirely like. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but he’d put his finger on it eventually.

Sarraya took complete advantage of the newcomers. With calculating casual remarks, she dropped shock after shock on the Shadows, mentioning just in passing that Tarrin had fought the One, noting to Dolanna that he’d wiped Pyros off the map, then just mentioning that Tarrin and Mist had managed to seriously damage the One’s icon. When they didn’t know what an icon was, she treated them like children, feigning shock that they didn’t understand something so *simple*.

“How can you do such a thing?” Neh asked.

“All gods are represented in the material plane by an *icon*,” Miranda explained. “It’s their link to this universe. While they really exist in another plane, they use the icon to direct their power here. The icon makes them invulnerable in the material world, but it’s also their one true weakness. Destroy a god’s icon, and he loses touch with the material world until he replaces it. That takes *years*. When Tarrin was lured to Pyros to fight the One, Mist managed to nearly cut his icon in half using Tarrin’s sword. That seriously damaged the icon, and that’s why the One himself isn’t charging an Avatar at us right now.”

"I've never heard of an icon," Lorak said mildly.

"It's not something that only a god's High Priest would know about," Miranda told him. "Gods keep it a secret, for obvious reasons. Even if a mortal can't do any real damage to an icon, if they knew about them, they might be tempted to *try*. And the resourcefulness of mortals is not something even gods take lightly."

"If only a High Priest knows, then how do you know?" Lorak asked, his tone mildly challenging.

"Because Miranda *is* the High Priest of her goddess," Sarraya said smugly. "High Priestess, actually. Her Grandness might suffice, but I think she likes being called Her Absolute Wondrous Eminence."

"Enough, Sarraya," Miranda chided.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's Her Magificent Muckety-Muckness, right?"

"How'd you like a black eye?" Miranda threatened.

"I think you have to catch me first," Sarraya taunted from Tarrin's shoulder.

Tarrin felt Fireflash slide over from his other shoulder, then he heard Sarraya squeak in surprise. The gold drake vaulted from Tarrin's shoulder and flew over to Miranda's Pegasus, with Sarraya's wing clamped in his teeth. The Faerie had no choice but to follow along, kicking and screaming at the drake, even punching him once in the side. Fireflash landed on Miranda's Pegasus, in front of her saddle, and spat out her wing, dropping her to the back of her mount. Then he sat down and looked up at Miranda expectantly.

"Um, hi," Sarraya said with a nervous laugh, trying to back up, but backing into the drake.

"Hi," Miranda said with a voice that was both light and cutting at the same time. "You were saying something, weren't you? Something about my title?" she asked, putting a single finger on Sarraya's belly, which effectively pinned her to the back of the Pegasus.

"I think Wavemistress sounds really nice," Sarraya said wheedlingly, reverting to Sulasian. "Traitor," she snapped at Fireflash.

Fireflash ignored her completely.

"That's a good little drake," Miranda smiled, patting him on the head with her other hand.

"I'll get you, scalybutt," Sarraya growled at the drake.

Without blinking, Fireflash reared back slightly, then unleashed a small blast of greenish gas directly into Sarraya's face. The Faerie screamed in surprise, then flopped limply to the back of the Pegasus.

"I think Sarraya forgets that Fireflash understands Sulasian," Miranda said in Penali with a sly smile. "I do believe that he decided to get you *first*. Doesn't that just burn you up?"

Sarraya made several gurgling sounds.

Nodding gravely, Fireflash leaned down and clamped his jaws on Sarraya's leg, then vaulted off her Pegasus and flew back over to Tarrin. The Faerie flopped bonelessly in the air as she was carried, her gossamer skirts riding up to bare her blue-skinned rump. He dropped the Faerie in Tarrin's saddle, then lept up onto his shoulder and wrapped himself languidly around the back of Tarrin's neck.

"Would someone explain what just happened?" Lorak asked.

“Sarraya got to experience my drake’s breath weapon,” Tarrin answered. “It paralyzes the muscles for a short time. She’ll be alright in ten minutes or so.”

“Ah. She won’t require any healing?”

“No, it does no harm. It just paralyzes, that’s all, and the effect is very short-lived.”

Sarraya made several more gurgling noises. Tarrin picked her up by gripping her two upper wings, pinching them between his fingers, then laid her limp body down in the cup of his palm.

“Maybe Fireflash should gas her more often. It seems to be the only way to shut her up,” Ulger said with a rasping chuckle.

“I think it might be the only way to shut *you* up too,” Miranda proposed.

“I can take a hint.”

“Really? After how many times?” Miranda pressed, which made Haley laugh.

By sunset, they were well away from Pyros, but the blowing winds made the ash and the cloud above even thicker. Gray ash fell like snow, covering everything, blotting out the sky and making the late afternoon blacker than the blackest night. Tarrin had no idea how the Elara was navigating, but he led them arrow-straight on his course and did not waver, so Tarrin suspected that he knew what he was doing. After Dolanna’s power waned and her Ward dissolved, Lorak took over the task of protecting them from the choking ash and dust-like cinders that drifted from the nasty remnants of Tarrin’s battle with the One with his Elemental powers. Tarrin’s entire body was drained from the pain in his wings, and by the time Lorak called for a halt to make camp, Tarrin was sagging heavily in his saddle, with Ulger leading his mount. Sarraya, who had been cowed into behaving by Fireflash’s treachery, kept patting his arm and trying to cheer him up with light smiles and clever little remarks, often at the expense of the others. But Tarrin’s alertness waned with the passing of the hours, as the pain of his wings slowly yet inexorably consumed his ability to think. By late afternoon, there was nothing but the pain, and he stopped responding to the others.

“We will stop here,” Lorak announced. “Bedrolls only. We will be away by midnight. We’re still too close to Pyros to stay in one place too long.”

“Tarrin? We’re stopping,” Sarraya said, which barely registered to him. Goddess, he was so tired. Tired and weary, and he wasn’t entirely sure where he was. He was dimly aware that the horse—if that was what it was, it had wings—wasn’t moving anymore. He saw someone else get down off his horse, and realized that that meant that they were stopping for a while. The throbbing of his wings eased somewhat now that the mount wasn’t bouncing him up and down, and part of him debated trying to move as the other part of him found the idea of remaining absolutely still to be quite a wonderful concept. But in the end, the realization that he could lay down if he got off the mount overruled the idea of staying where he was.

It took him a moment to figure out how to make his leg work. He tried to pull it free of the stirrup three times, but for some reason he couldn’t get it out. He leaned down a little to look, and the shift caused a flash of pain to race through his wings and into his back. Gritting his teeth, he leaned down even further, reaching for the stirrup, and then realized that he was sliding in that direction, that his other foot had come free of the stirrup.

“Tarrin!” Kimmie cried out in surprise when Tarrin tumbled out of his saddle.

The Pegasus tried valiantly to prevent him from hitting the ground. It stiffened its wing and locked it against its side, but Tarrin was too tall, too much weight came over the top. Tarrin lurched over the wing, and the Pegasus swept that black-feathered appendage out and almost fell to the ground itself, collapsing its legs to reduce the distance he would fall. Tarrin landed on the Pegasus' wing, and the impact of his shredded wings with the flight feathers of the Pegasus was like someone had ripped him in half. He screamed in pain, arching his back to pull them out of contact with everything, but the act did nothing to stop the pain, it only made it worse; he was laying on his side, and the act scraped his wing across the feathers of the Pegasus.

Mist was there immediately. Her powerful paws grabbed hold of his arm and dragged him off the feathered wing of his Pegasus, then turned him onto his stomach. His claws sank into her forearms above her Cat's Claws, so deeply that blood poured to the ash-choked ground in rivulets as Tarrin's wicked claws embedded themselves in her flesh, but she did not even flinch. "Grab his feet!" Mist ordered sharply. Kimmie moved to obey, but Azakar reached him first, his powerful hands clamping on Tarrin's ankles as his arms flexed to resist any sudden convulsive kicks, his face a stoic mask. Outside of Kimmie, Azakar was probably the only one who had the raw power to succeed in that task.

But no convulsions came. The pressure taken from his wings, the sharp stabs eased, and the relief flowed through him. His claws retracted from his mate's arms, and he suddenly felt weak as a kitten.

"Is he well?" Lorak asked calmly.

"No, he's bloody not well!" Kimmie shouted at him angrily. "He's injured! We should have stopped!"

"The fault is his," Lorak shrugged. "All he had to do was speak. And since no one spoke in his stead," he added, sweeping his gaze across them, "then I would guess that you didn't think he needed to stop either."

Kimmie's face flushed guiltily, and she raced over to help her bond-mother pull Tarrin off the ground.

The cobwebs clearing from his mind, he slid up onto his knees, then sat back on his haunches. He put his paw to his head, then shook it as the last of the pain bled away, leaving him coherent again. "I'm alright," he announced in a weak voice.

"That didn't look very alright to me," Mist grated at him.

"Just drop it, Mist," he grunted. "Just someone find me something to eat and let me sleep. I'll be fine."

"Let's get the tents up," Haley called, putting a scarf around his face to protect it from the falling ash.

"No tents. They take too long to pack," Lorak called.

"Fine. You can lay in this ashfall and get a volcano up your nose, but I'm pitching a tent," Haley told him calmly. "Or do you want to sit on your horse and keep the ash off us all night?" he offered in a reasonable tone.

Lorak blinked, then he chuckled. "Point well taken. We will have to make time, I suppose."

"Not all of us have tents," Thren fretted.

"I know a spell that creates a magical one," one of the human Wizards with them called, a youngish fellow with red hair and pale skin that seemed to be permanently

burned by the wind and sun, who was named Kord. Kord didn't look much like a Wizard, because he was built like a Dal, with wide shoulders, a barrel chest, and arms corded with thick muscle. Kord looked more physically imposing than anything else. He wore a simple brown robe, but left it unbelted and open in the front, and underneath it he wore a brown wool tunic and leather breeches. "It'll be big enough for us all."

"I say, so long as it leaves no magical impression, it'd be safe enough," Phandebrass told him. "Demons can sense magic, so it can't be active, it can't."

"Well, then it's not a good one," Kord frowned.

"Men," Shara grunted. "Och, just pitch yuir cloak over the top half of yuir bedroll and weight the sides down with stones, an' face the opening away from the wind. Yon quiver there has plenty of arrows in it ta' serve as poles. The ash willna' blow in."

"Clever," Miranda nodded in agreement.

As most of them worked to set up the camp site, Tarrin sat on the ground, cross-legged, slumped over so far his elbows were on the ash-choked grass. Mist and Kimmie checked him in turns, but they didn't stay with him, because there was really nothing that they could do. Sarraya and Fireflash did, however, Fireflash sitting on the ground beside him as Sarraya walked back and forth on his back, inspecting his destroyed wings carefully. "You know, Tarrin, I think they've grown back a little," she told him. "This piece and that piece were torn back closer to the arch of your wing this morning. They've sewn themselves back together a little."

"I really couldn't say," Tarrin told her. "I can't see them, and they don't feel any different to me."

"I wish I could do something for you," Sarraya said sincerely. "Even if it really didn't do that much." She walked back towards his neck. "Hmm, maybe there is something we can do," she mused aloud. "Fireflash, come up here a second."

Fireflash looked up at her.

"No, up here. I need you to do something for me."

He snorted derisively.

"Alright, not for me, for *Tarrin*. Sheesh," she huffed. "You can't still be mad."

He snorted, a hint of greenish gas billowing from his nostrils.

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry," she growled. "I won't get you back. I promise."

"Don't trust her," Tarrin warned. "She may mean it now, but she'll forget all about that promise in about an hour."

"Tarrin!" Sarraya snapped.

"Truth is truth," Tarrin said absently.

"Well, do it from down there, then. Let me move, then blast Tarrin's wings with your fire. I want to see if it makes the pain go away."

Fireflash looked at Tarrin expectantly, and the Were-cat shrugged. "It can't possibly hurt me," he told his drake. "You know that."

Fireflash nodded.

"Oh, don't use up all your gas," Tarrin noted quietly. "She might try something if she thinks you can't gas her."

"Grroah!" Sarraya growled in a squeaky voice, stamping her foot on Tarrin's back.

"See? She thought of that too," Tarrin said with a slight smile at his drake.

Fireflash nodded to Tarrin with an impish look on his scaly face, then backed up a step. He sucked in his breath, then lunged his head up and forward. A brilliant gout of

bright red flame erupted from his mouth, spiralling around itself to form a concentrated cone. That cone of fire washed over his left wing, and it actually did feel somewhat better. The pain eased noticeably, at least so long as Fireflash kept the fire going. When he stopped, the pain slowly started creeping back into it.

“Did it help?” Sarraya asked, looking over his shoulder down at Fireflash.

“A little,” he answered honestly, as the drake released another puff of greenish gas, then stared up at the Faerie deliberately.

Sarraya growled in her throat, then pulled up out of the drake’s sight. “We should build a nice fire and let you sit in it,” she mused, touching the base of his left wing gingerly. Even that light touch sent a shiver of pain through him.

“What made you think of that?”

“I remember what happened when the sword came back to you,” she answered. “It surrounded you in fire to try to heal you. Fire is your element, Tarrin. It just stands to reason you’ll feel better if you’re surrounded by it.”

“What is this? Analytical thinking? Logic? Reasoned and controlled conclusions? Is that Sarraya on my back, or an evil copy?”

“I’m not a total ditz!” she objected.

“No, just mostly,” he answered.

“You!” she snapped. “Why do I even bother?”

“Because you love me,” he answered evenly.

“Well, that’s true,” she said with a chuckle, patting his back gently. “I’m not sure we can make a fire, though. We’re supposed to be hiding, you know.”

“This ash is thick enough, the light won’t go ten paces,” Mist said as she passed by. “I’ll get on it right now.”

Mist did just that. Lorak objected strenuously to the idea of a fire, but he learned the first rule of interacting with Phandebrass’ friends...*never make Mist angry*. Shara managed to heal the fracture in his jaw, and regrow the three teeth that Mist knocked out after Lorak put a hand on her, teeth that Mist collected up in her paw and kept for some strange reason. The Elementalist looked about ready to use magic against her, but quick words from Phandebrass, who pulled him aside and spoke very quickly and very quietly, headed that idea off.

“Give me a hand here, Kimmie,” Mist ordered. “Light this wood, then help me bring Tarrin to the fire.”

“I’ll get burned,” Kimmie protested.

“Get my belt. Sarraya, where did you put it?”

“I gave it back to Miranda,” she answered from Tarrin’s back.

“What good will your belt do?” she asked.

“Tarrin made it for me. Put it on and you won’t get burned.”

“You’ll need it, mother.”

She shook her head. “He did the same thing to my amulet before we went to Pyros. I’ll be safe. That belt gives us four people who can’t be hurt by fire.”

Miranda handed the belt to Kimmie, who donned it just before using a simple spell to light the fire. It quickly burned up to a respectable blaze, then Mist and Kimmie took Tarrin’s arms and helped him over to the fire. Instead of sitting or standing directly in it, Tarrin sat at its edge and leaned back just enough to allow his wings to make contact with the flames. The fire immediately pulled towards him, ghosting up his back like phantom

fingers, coalescing around his injured wings. The pain immediately eased, which caused tense muscles to relax, and he sighed in relieved contentment. The flames were like a hundred massaging hands that caressed the pain away, and for the first time all day, he was almost comfortable.

“Better, my mate?” Mist asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “Sarraya actually came up with a good idea.”

“You make it sounds like it’s never happened before,” Sarraya fumed from Zyri’s shoulder.

“The problem is that all your good ideas get lost in the avalanche of silliness,” Tarrin answered her, leaning back on his paws, putting most of his back and the back of his head into the fire.

“Now that is something you just don’t see,” Lorak chuckled as he came to the fire. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“It stopped hurting years ago,” Tarrin answered. “Me and Dolanna are immune to fire, it’s a side effect of our ability to use our magic.”

“I know any number of Fire adepts who would kill for that,” Lorak told him. “Of all the Elemental arts, that’s the most dangerous.”

“Well, you are a bit different from me in that regard, dear one,” Dolanna said with a slight smile. “I would like to inspect your wings, if you do not object. I promise I will try to be gentle.”

“They don’t hurt right now,” he told her.

“Yes, but I am not sure if they will remain thus when I start touching them,” she reminded him.

“True. Go ahead.”

As the others prepared for some rest, Dolanna rolled up her sleeves and put her hands into the fire, inspecting Tarrin’s wings. Her touch didn’t hurt, but it wasn’t entirely pleasant, like fingers sliding over raw skin. She inspected the tattered remains of his wings methodically and thoroughly, then had him try to move them, but with no success.

“It is as I suspected,” she said in a brusque manner.

“What?” Tarrin asked.

“Your wings are still evaporating.”

“What? I thought you said—” Mist began, but Dolanna cut her off with a hand.

“*Parts* of them still are,” she said sharply. “But the main sections of them, the top arch where bones would be in a bird’s wing,” she informed them as she touched the top arch of his wing, “are mending, and very quickly. I think that your wings are excising those parts that cannot be saved and concentrating on rebuilding themselves from the core. I suspect that after they have healed the main arch, they will begin working on regrowing the body.”

“Then it’s not evaporating,” Miranda mused. “It’s just pulling wing from one place and using it to patch another. Don’t forget Dolanna, those aren’t *real* wings. It needs to do that anyway. Tarrin looks like he has monster cobwebs growing out of his back.”

“Thanks,” Tarrin said dryly, which made the Wikuni give him a cheeky grin.

“Everyone needs to get some rest,” Lorak called. “We have a long way to go.”

“Go take a nap, Mist,” Tarrin told his mate. “I’ll be fine.”

“I won’t leave you,” she stated bluntly.

“There’s nothing you can do, I’m actually quite content right now, and you need to sleep,” he said. “I’m going to lay back and take a nap. You need to do the same.”

“But—“

“But nothing,” he said with a hint of sternness in his voice. “Sleep. *Now.*” He pointed towards the tent that Azakar and Ulger had just finished raising.

Mist lowered her eyes, then nodded. “As you wish, my mate. Come, cubs,” she said, holding her paw out to Zyri and Jal. “Let’s get you put down. You need all the sleep you can get.” She looked back at him. “Are you sure—“

“Go,” he said, pointing at the tent. “Don’t make me get up and spank you. I’ll be in a very bad mood.”

Mist smiled slightly, then leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips before marching off to the tent with the children in tow. Kimmie stood up herself, then chuckled. “I forgot you could do the impossible,” she told him.

“What?”

“Make mother obey someone,” she said with a wink. “You sure you’re alright?”

“I’m just fine. You need to get some rest too, Kimmie. You may not remember it, but you had a very exhausting few days. Even Miranda’s healing’s not going to fix it all. You need some sleep.”

“Yeah, she already warned me that I needed to get some sleep,” she nodded. “Rest well, dear.”

“I’ll be fine as long as I don’t move, and I’m not moving any time soon,” he told her.

She gave him another smile, then got up and went to the tent.

Tarrin laid back, wriggling just a bit to shift the coals and burning wood around so it didn’t jab at him, then drew in a breath laced with flame and smoke, then sighed in contentment. Breathing inside fire wasn’t exactly good since it put smoke and cinders into his lungs, but he never seemed to have much trouble with it, for some reason. The fire soothed the pain of his wings, and that was worth breathing acrid-smelling air for a little while. The sound of it consuming the wood was serene, calming him, and the presence of the element of which he was part, which was part of him, helped along the mending of his wounded wings, and the injured power that they represented.

After all, the wings were but a metaphor for the true injury he had suffered at the hands of the One, even as the blow that Mist struck to his icon was but a metaphor for the actual damage that she had meted out against it. In the world of the gods, metaphor was a powerful symbol as a way for the material world to rationalize the immaterial power that gods wielded within it. What one saw was only a representation of what was *really* going on. Even with his wings, it was a metaphor. The physical representation of them had been damaged, a metaphor of the real injury he had received, and even their healing was nothing but a metaphor for the mending taking place within him. He could feel that part of himself drawing in the power of the fire around him, using that energy, that power, to help restore the delicate matrix of divine energies that was his power.

Odd, that. Ever since he’d gotten the wings, he had hidden from the power they represented, hated it, denied it. If he could separate himself from it and be a mortal again, he would do it in a heartbeat. But he had come here, to this new world, and had come to depend on that power...even to *enjoy* it. It had expanded, become stronger, and he had learned to use it in new ways. It had saved Zyri, Jal, and Telven, then saved them

again when Telven betrayed them. It rose up and achieved its full potential when he fought the One over Kimmie, and though it had been found lacking, it had done enough.

He was mortal, but had the powers of a god. The others didn't understand what that meant—well, Miranda certainly did. She was the only one who understood what it made him, and she empathized with him more than the others. She too was a singularly unique being, and she had had to learn what that meant when she left Keritanima and Wikuna and embarked on a journey of self-discovery. But where Miranda had a place in the world, Tarrin did not. He was a walking abomination, something that should not exist, something that the Elder Gods back home would sooner destroy than have around. But as this world had seen, a direct confrontation between Tarrin and a god could have disastrous effect on the very fabric of reality itself. Even hobbled, only able to focus his power in the physical world, Tarrin had managed to do catastrophic damage to the land itself. Had Tarrin been able to wield a god's true power, his conflict with the One could have devastated the land for leagues in every direction.

He couldn't remember the battle, but he had visited the twenty longspan hole in the world that his battle with Val had created in Gora Umadar. It was a veritable sea of boiling lava, which would churn and bubble and remain exposed to the air for the rest of eternity, for there was a lingering remnant of the power that was unleashed at that place that would never allow the land to heal. It was a scar, a blight, a *curse* on the very fabric of reality itself, and not even the Elder Gods could repair it. It would remain a boiling lake of lava until time was no more, and all things ceased to be.

That was what happened when gods fought one another in the material plane. That was why the Elder Gods could take no direct action against him. They feared exactly what had happened at Pyros...or what used to be Pyros.

And here he was, using the power he had vowed to himself he would never use against a god that sought to destroy him as some kind of sick, twisted spectacle to incite more loyalty and worship from the mortals under his dominion. Tarrin could feel him out there even now, feverishly laboring to restore his icon, an icon buried under a mountain of volcanic rock, ash, and lava, wrapped in the fiery cocoon of the earth's blood, awaiting the moment it was whole once more and could burst forth the One's power back into the world. The One was not an Elemental god, he could not draw on the power of the fire around him to accelerate his healing as Tarrin could. All the One could do was try to communicate to his Priests, probably through the Demons, that more worship was needed, more adulation, for that was the power that the One would use to heal his damaged icon.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Tarrin closed his eyes and concentrated on what he felt deep inside him, concentrated on that power he always strove mightily to ignore. He could sense the wound, and he could also sense that that power, which always worked of its own volition it seemed, was currently busily at work mending the damage. He could feel the energy in the fire that surrounded him infuse his being, bolster the power within, grant to it its power so that it could be used to heal the damage done. This was his power. This was what he *was*. And it was both what he did not want to be, and what he had feared he would become. He had used his full power in direct conflict with a god. He had ravaged the land, he had destroyed an entire city. He had become everything that the Elder Gods were afraid he would become. He had become the *Aleax*, the embodiment of the power of Chaos, the dark manifestation of the power of the *animus*.

A force of primal destruction, which only sought to unmake all and revert the multiverse back into the state of Entropy from which it had been formed.

And they had been right.

Though he lacked the remorselessness of the Demons, he had become no better than them. They sought to rule through destruction. Tarrin, it seemed, could not help but destroy, even when he did not want to. Every time he exercised his power, he brought about ruination and devastation, no matter how hard he tried not to. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Tarrin never exercised his power unless he was angry, and when he was angry, he simply didn't care. That was most of the reason why he was so afraid of it. He had doomed Pyros for no other reason than to give Mist the opportunity to finish the task he had been unable to complete.

He could sense them out there. The fire was expanding his consciousness, making him more in touch with the divine aspect of his being. Even injured, he could still use those senses. The world lost its *reality* to his eyes, to his ears, and became overlaid with sounds and sights and smells and sensations that a mortal couldn't comprehend, a humming continuity of wellness that beat like the heart of a child, surging through this dimension. It was the *soul* of this universe, the manifestation of the Elder God who had been created to oversee this dimension, a soul that seemed to be in hibernation. He could feel it out there, present but unresponsive, almost as if it was a power without conscious direction. There were other concentrations, other points of dichotomy that were made aware to him. He could sense the dark shadow of the One not far away, an immensely powerful presence hovering over his icon, and he could feel the rage and fury like an acid taste on his tongue. There were other presences on this world as well, and even one a great distance above him—the god of the Elara most likely. All of them were very weak, very distant, and all of them seemed to be trying to reach out to him, trying to make contact with him. All of them were desperate, terrified, almost panicked, even the stronger sense of presence coming from the god whose domain was so high above them.

Why? Why contact him? And why were they so afraid?

The One, of course. Tarrin was a being of divine power who didn't depend on the faith of the mortals to survive, just like an Elder god. They had probably been hoping for exactly what happened, that Tarrin would fight the One and hopefully destroy him. But it hadn't been a victory for either side, more like an aggravated stalemate that put their battle on hold until one of them was well enough to take it up once more. Whoever healed first was going to defeat the other, by striking before the other could defend against it. Tarrin's arrival to those other gods was probably looked upon as a gift from the God of Gods, a savior who would face and defeat the One before he eradicated the mortals who followed them.

He was no savior. He would have come and went without interference, had the One not made the eternal mistake of abducting Kimmie. That was a fatal mistake, for now Tarrin was angry. And it wasn't rage, it was the cold, seething anger of the *human* in him, an icy fury that was in its own way ten times more dangerous than the volatile temper of the Cat. It gave him a clarity of purpose that would not be denied, and that was to mete out righteous punishment on the One for daring to lay a hand on one of his mates. Tarrin would hunt down the One, no matter how long it took, and finish him...because now it was *personal*.

Those were worries for another time, though. Right now, healing himself was the primary objective, so he closed his eyes and bent to the task. The main focus right now should be minimizing the pain that was making him a burden, keeping them from moving as fast as they needed to move. So that was where he began.

The hours in the fire had done a world of good, for when he removed himself from it, his wings had an entirely different look. The ragged remnants no longer dangled from the top arch like cobwebs, for they were gone. The main arches of his wings were now whole, like the bones from which the rest of the wing would sprout, two slender spikes of living fire jutting from his back. Though he could not move them yet, they were locked in a folded position, the majority of the pain was gone. There was only a dull, nagging ache, as his wings had consumed much of what was causing the pain and used that material to rebuild the main arches. When he left the fire, he found he could move without pain, only that dull ache in them was there, and that pain was easily controlled. He felt an entire world better.

He felt so much better than he actually picked up Zyri and twirled her a couple of times in the air when she came out of the tent, making the girl squeal in surprise. “Good morning,” he told her brightly. “Sleep well?”

“Master Tarrin! You’re feeling better!” she said happily.

“I am indeed, little bit,” he told her. “And I told you before—“

“I know,” she sighed, then she giggled when he tapped her nose with a huge finger. “Your wings look better.”

“They are,” he answered. “Most of the pain is gone. They just ache now, and that’s not bad at all. Where’s Mist?”

“She and Mistress Miranda are off talking,” she answered, pointing out into the ashfall, which still was thick in the air. “Everyone else is still sleeping.”

“Not everyone,” Ulger called in amusement from the far side of the three tents that were erected. “Good to see hear up and about. Up to riding?”

“I’m fine,” he answered. “Just some dull aching, nothing I can’t easily ignore. How’s Kimmie?”

“She looked fine last I saw her,” he answered. “She’s probably still asleep. We’ll have to wake up and get moving soon though.”

“Demons?”

“Actually, just soldiers,” he answered, scratching his cheek just below the wicked scar marring it. “I’ve heard them ride by several times. This black fog won’t let you see more than ten spans in front of you, so they haven’t seen us.”

“So much the better for us.”

“Aye.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“About six hours,” he answered. “I was about to start waking everyone up. Want me to go find Mist and Miranda?”

“No need,” he said with a wave of his paw. “They know I’m awake.”

Tarrin picked up Jal after he came out of the tent and, with a child in each arm, he went back over to the fire and sat down. Fireflash flew from the tent and landed on his shoulder, nuzzling his neck, and Tarrin suddenly felt very sedate and content. “I figure we’ll just grab something quick to eat before starting out,” Tarrin mused, then he

chuckled as Jal gingerly touched his wings. "They're better, they don't hurt anymore," he told the boy. "How are you?"

Jal smiled shyly, and patted his shoulder.

"That's good to hear. What do you think of the Shadows?"

He raised his eyes slightly.

"They're just like you. Give them a chance. They might be able to teach you more than I can. They know how your power works, after all. I'm just guessing."

He shrugged, then pointed his small finger in Tarrin's face.

"We'll see. As you know, I'm none too fond of strangers."

"I would hope that you'd think different of us," Lorak stated calmly as he came out of a tent. "Are you feeling well?"

"Well enough," he answered. "And to me, *everyone* is a stranger unless they've been with me a while. I'm sure Phandebrass took quite a bit of time to explain some things to you while I was sleeping."

"He did."

"Then I'm sure you understand what not to do," he said bluntly. "Just remember, Lorak, I do *not* take orders. You'll only try *once*."

"Yes, I discovered that little racial aspect from your mate," he said, rubbing his jaw absently.

"Then we understand one another," he said, standing up with both children. "You can teach Jal how to use his power, can't you?"

"I can't," Lorak said calmly. "He's a Water adept. He needs to be taught by someone of his own element. Water adepts are fairly rare, though, we don't have one with us. But when we join up with others, I'm sure there will be one among them. He can instruct the boy. Now if you will excuse me, I have to get everything ready."

They watched him go back into the tent, and Tarrin turned back to the fire. Jal, his eyes glittering in the light, held out a hand and caused a rod of ice to form in his hand. Again, Tarrin felt an odd *tingling* when he did that. He held out the icy dowel, adding to it, until it became a startling likeness of the Elara, then wiggled it back and forth in a fair imitation of Lorak's flowing stride.

"Jal! Be nice," Tarrin admonished in a low voice, as Zyri giggled with her hand over her mouth.

After a cold breakfast, and after he got the expected examination from Dolanna, Mist, and Kimmie, they started out once again. This time Tarrin was alert and well, with only a minor dull ache in his wings that was no problem at all for him to ignore, falling back on Allia's training in how to ignore pain. He rode with his bow in his lap, for almost twice an hour they had to stop and allow Lorak to hide them as soldiers galloped by, or Demons flapped overhead. They rode as fast as they dared in the thick black ashfall, but as it started to thin after several hours of riding, they started going faster and faster. It was impossible to tell time in that endless blackness, but when it started to thin, as they started getting out from under the ashfall, the faint white disc of the sun started showing high in the sky. "Phaugh, noon," Ulger growled. "We must have got up and started moving at midnight."

"We're moving into a large region of farmland," Lorak told them. "The roads here are small and winding. There is little in the way of cover, so we're going to be spotted quickly after this ash cloud lifts."

“Then we just go faster than they do,” Haley said lightly.

Lorak gave him a cool look, but said nothing.

“Open farmland? That should be fast movement,” Miranda mused.

It was indeed. As the ash cleared and they could see further, they picked up the pace, until they were doing a brisk canter through neat rows of low farm crops. They moved in a straight line until a fence got in the way, then, more often than not, Lorak simply knocked it down with his Elemental magic. Farmers watched the horses and Pegasi plow through their crops with slack-jawed astonishment or dark glares, but did nothing to interfere. Tarrin kept his eyes open and kept scanning the skies, looking for the large silhouette that would be a *vrock*, the church’s primary airborne scout. He kept his bow in his lap and an arrow nocked half the time, ready for whatever might come. They continued to move north, out of the ashfall, until they had finally broken out from under that black cloud. Lorak no longer had to protect them from breathing in the ash with his magic, and they could again see without the ash reducing visibility. They finally rode over land that wasn’t ankle-deep in gritty ash, and the smell of sulfur finally cleared out of Tarrin’s nose. Getting out of the ash was a relief, but it also lent itself to a new set of problems, for it could no longer hide them from the soldiers of the One.

Around sunset, his diligent scanning of the skies paid off. The outline of a *vrock* appeared from the ash behind them, moving towards them in almost a perfect straight line. Tarrin reined in his mount and turned it, then quickly nocked an arrow, set his legs around his Pegasus to keep it from fidgeting, and drew his bow in a smooth motion. The magical bow bent back as the arrow’s fletching touched his cheek, and he took careful aim at the figure, which was swooping towards them to investigate, to get a closer look. He blanked out all distractions and became one with his bow, with his target. The slightest shifting of the wind was immediately sensed and his aim adjusted, the gleaming metal arrowhead shifting by a hair’s breadth. “Tarrin?” Kimmie asked, but he did not hear her.

With a slight exhale, Tarrin released the arrow. It *whizzed* away from them at shocking, almost insane speed, as the unbreakable bow allowed Tarrin to put all his inhuman strength behind that arrow’s flight. The arrow disappeared from view almost immediately, and three seconds went by without him even moving. Then the outline of the *vrock* kiltered wildly in the air behind them, and almost immediately started plummeting to the ground.

“Wow,” one of the Shadows said in a low tone.

“Good shot,” Azakar said appreciatively, coming up beside him.

“Thanks,” Tarrin said. “Want to give it a go?” he asked, offering his bow.

“I doubt I could draw it,” Azakar chuckled.

“Sure you can, you’re strong enough,” Tarrin told him.

“Can you do that every time?” one of the Wizards asked.

“Nobody can do that every time,” Tarrin snorted.

By the time they camped, Tarrin still felt just fine. And he felt fine the next day, and the next, as they continued to ride due north, through huge tracts of farmlands, and down onto a flat plain. Tarrin’s wings started to show a lengthening along the bottom edge, as they slowly began to regrow, and he was in a relatively even temper. The pain was easily tolerable, leaving him only a little sore at the end of each day, and Mist did not give him the chance to see if it would get worse. Six times during those three days, they were run

down or ambushed by church soldiers. They were not full columns, only roving patrols of fifteen men, and none of them had stood a chance. Ulger, Azakar, and Haley combined with Mist to hold the men off, away from the numerous spellcasters behind them, as the Wizards, Elementalists, and single Sorcerer rained death upon them with magic. No battle lasted more than two minutes, for half of the church soldiers would die within the first fifteen seconds. The rest of the battle became a stalling tactic by the Knights and Mist, stopping the men from reaching the spellcasters before they had a chance to unleash another volley of death-dealing magic. Mist glared viciously at Tarrin just before the first of those skirmishes, warning him that he would answer to *her* if he dared enter melee, so he stayed with the Wizards and Elementalists, serving as the last line of physical defense should one of them get past the fighters. He used his bow during those battles, not even bothering to use Wizard magic, firing into the crowd with surgical precision to pick off enemies. Tarrin's mastery of his bow so impressed Zyri that she all but started ignoring Ulger and his sling lessons, practicing with the bow Tarrin made for her almost every time they were not moving, and often while on horseback as well. If they weren't at a canter, Zyri had her bow out. She didn't waste arrows when shooting from horseback, as they couldn't recover them, so at first she had Jal make ice arrows for her. They lasted more than long enough for her to nock and fire them, but Tarrin chided her for getting her bowstring wet. That ended that, until Shara started creating arrows made of light, strong stone, with vanes instead of fletching. They worked just as well, they didn't damage her bowstring, and Shara could provide her with a virtually unlimited supply. She had natural aptitude for the weapon, and she showed marked improvement even over those few short days, because she seemed to have a burning desire to get better.

Watching Zyri gave Tarrin some peace, watched as she fired her bow at little targets that Phandebrass was creating with Wizard magic and hanging out in midair for her early one afternoon, but his mind still wandered to the battle, and to what happened afterwards. It was time to face the fact that he had used Priest magic, that he had granted *himself* the power to cast that spell. And he had done it *before* changing, before the sword transformed him. And then there was what he felt when he drove his paw into the earth and commanded the magma below to do his bidding...that sense of *connection* to this world. It wasn't just then, though. Throughout the battle, it was as if the world, this dimension was...attuning itself to him.

Or...was *he* attuning itself to *it*?

Without much thought, Tarrin raised his paw. He reached within, through the Cat as he always did, and searched for the boundless energy, the power, of the All. But it wasn't there, as he privately suspected. But then again, the Cat knew only the All of home, it would be incapable of fathoming a *different* All. An All with a different sense, a different presence. In its way, the All was the indirect manifestation of the power of Creation, the power of Ayise, the Allmother, the goddess who had created the world of Sennadar. After all, the All was the collective power of life present on Sennadar, and that life existed because of Niami, the goddess of Creation. The All of this world would be a manifestation of the Elder god of this dimension, and as such would most certainly have a different sense, even if it had the same power.

This time, Tarrin did not reach through the Cat. He reached *directly* for that power.

And it was there. It was weak, feeble, listless. The All had a kind of sentience about it, a sentience that was deadly to the Druids who used that power, but this power had no

sense of that sentience. It was power without guidance, energy without form, magic without direction. It was simply *there*. Perhaps that was a symbol of the seeming indifference of the Elder god of this world, who seemed to have created the world and then disappeared.

Immediately, his mind wrapped around what it would take to command this power. The All acted on the will of the Druid and carried out the task, but in its *own* manner. This energy would *not* do that; it would have to be directed step by step, point by point, walked through the entire procedure to perform any task. Where a Druid only had to create an image of an object and intend it appear, someone here would have to tell the power exactly what they were going to do, then explain to it in exhausting detail *exactly* what it had to do to carry out the task. That was not something that the average mortal could do, for it would take an intimate understanding of the forces of magic and the aspects of reality.

Phandebrass could probably do it, though, Tarrin reasoned with a slight smile.

But Tarrin... Tarrin most definitely could *not*. He had no idea even where to begin trying to do such a thing. He may have some divine power, but he did *not* have the mind of a god. Without that power of sentience to aid the Druid in the use of that power, it was absolutely out of the question. Tarrin wouldn't even *dream* of trying to use that.

So...that was out of the question. He put that aside and went back to the troubling reality that he cast a Priest spell. He remembered how it felt, how the power seemed to flow out of his very soul, through his physical form, and then manifested. It felt much the same as when he cast Priest spells powered by Niami, but now he knew what it felt to *give* that power rather than *take*. It had been frightening, it had been shocking...and in a way, it had been beautiful. And he knew that he could do it again, at least after he was whole again. It was not just a one-time deal.

It was scary. He knew his power had changed, had grown, but this. This wasn't just some trick, this was starting to encroach on the power of a *real* god. He shouldn't be able to power spells, because he wasn't a god. He just had limited divine power that was focused in very specific, very rigid forms. Most of his power was locked away in the sword, for crying out loud. There just seemed to be no way he could do it. He couldn't understand how it happened, he couldn't even begin to ponder just how he had managed to do it.

Perhaps it was best just to say that he *did* do it, and that he just couldn't explain it. When his wings were whole, he'd be able to do it again, he just knew he could.

His wings. He looked over his shoulder, and saw that they were growing nicely. The bottom edges of the arch of his wings was longer, starting to thicken, and the dull red and yellows were starting to sharpen, to become clear, almost like new feathers or scales on the surface of his healing wings.

There wasn't much else that he could really do, and Tarrin was never one to dwell on things that he couldn't change. That was the way things were, he couldn't change it or understand it, so he just had to accept it.

And that, was that.

Farmland yielded to virgin grassland quickly once they entered the flat plain, as they continued to hurry to the north, grass that showed signs of heavy traffic by groups of mounted men, patrols of the One's church with whom they sparred on four occasions that

first day they left the domesticated farmlands. A single look back told them all that the One's soldiers were following, but they were moving too quickly for enough reinforcements to catch up with them to attempt an assault. The Pegasi were just as tireless on the ground as they were in the air, and the Shadows had had the foresight to choose durable animals capable of extended activity.

The opportunity to ride without pain allowed him to observe the Shadows more closely. Tarrin only knew the names of a couple of them...and he really didn't care to know any more. They mattered very little to him, they were nothing but extra weight. But Dolanna felt that traveling with them was to their advantage, and he would not gainsay her. But watching them let him understand how things worked among them. Lorak was the utter and undisputed ruler of their group. They deferred to him in all things; in fact, it seemed like they had no opinion that was not his own. Some men or women ruled in that manner through charisma or exceptional leadership, but so far, Lorak had shown neither of those traits. He was too driven, too single-minded to show the kind of charisma that would create that kind of devotion, and so far, few of his command decisions seemed to show a vast intelligence. Tarrin hadn't quite figured out why they followed him so blindly, but there obviously had to be a reason. He'd figure it out.

They were certainly unsure about Tarrin and his group, however. He could see it in their eyes, even after so many days with them. Tarrin frightened them, Kimmie frightened them, Mist frightened them even more, but oddly enough, Miranda was the one that seemed to frighten them the most. The Were-cats were obviously not human, but they looked *somewhat* human. But Miranda, Miranda was decidedly *inhuman*. The only thing that made her even remotely seemed normal was the fact that she wore clothes and could talk. He wasn't sure why that seemed to bother them, that the fact that Miranda didn't have a human face made her more frightening than the Were-cats, but it did. Tarrin was cold, Mist was downright violent, but they still were less afraid of them than they were of Miranda, who was as friendly as could be...at least at first. The only one of them that seemed to want to have anything to do with her was Shara, the Earth Elementalist who served as their group's healer.

They couldn't see how beautiful Miranda was...none of them could. There was an aura of purity around Miranda that shone like a beacon, the power of Kikkalli that made her what she was. It wasn't an aura of power or might, it was an aura of *love*, the love of a mother for a child, the special bond between Miranda and Kikkalli that gave her the power to use her magic in this world. Tarrin had sensed that bond since the moment he met her, but only now could he see it. Again, it was a disturbing alteration in his own power, and he wondered if Miranda could see anything like that about him. Miranda was a very special mortal, blessed by Kikkalli from birth as an Avatar, but only after she had become a Priestess did she really come into that birthright. Of them all, Tarrin probably had the easiest time talking to Miranda about his concerns or his power, for she was the only one that could really understand. Just like him, Miranda was in something of the inner circle of divine ability, a mortal that really *did* know what was going on, privy to information and knowledge beyond mortal ken.

"Why aren't there any farms out here?" Haley asked. "This is fertile land, and flat as a board. It's perfect farmland."

"That's why," Shara said, pointing to the northeast, where the hint of forest lurked on the horizon. "That's called the Fangwood. Rumor says that there's all manner of nasty

beasties lurkin' within, so the farmers willna' till any land within a day's walk. You willna' find a single man or woman within a day's walk o' that place."

"It's all subterfuge, of course," Lorak said calmly. "We used to use the Fangwood as a base, so we encouraged those kinds of rumors. We stopped using it some ten years ago, but the rumors remain."

"Why did you stop using it?" Tarrin asked. "It's a perfect way to lock down a good piece of the One's army if you can raid his farmland."

"After the One sealed away his lands from our Gatemasters, we deemed it too much of a risk to try to reinforce the outpost after too many parties were ambushed. We pulled it east, closer to the coast, on the far side of the Goldblade Hills. But that outpost was destroyed after the One cut our lines of communication with the Dura."

"How far are we from the Dura's fortress?" Dolanna asked.

"Some twenty days, at least," Lorak answered, pointing. "We'll have to cross the Stonespine Mountains first, then through a vast forest that covers the land between the Stonespines and the Ice Mountains. What concerns me most is the Stonespines. There are only a few passes through them, and the Pyrosians have built citadels in the passes to defend them. The One's church was always terrified of the Dura for some reason, the citadels are part of the defenses they built to protect themselves from the Dura." He snorted. "Foolishness. The Dura almost never leave their fortress."

"If they're anything like the Dwarves from our legend, the Pyrosians have reason to be afraid," Miranda mused. "They were powerful and fearless warriors. They were regarded as the greatest warriors of their time. I'd love to see how they'd fare against the Ungardt, or the Selani, or the Vendari, though," she chuckled.

"What I wouldn't give to have Binter and Sisska here," Tarrin grunted. "We've been lucky so far. It's just a matter of time before we run into more soldiers than four people can hold off. They could hold off a squad all by themselves."

"I wonder how they're doing," Sarraya piped in from Tarrin's shoulder.

"Probably trying to keep their patience," Tarrin chuckled. "Just think about it. Keritanima *and* Faalken? They must be about to go crazy."

Sarraya giggled. "Probably," she agreed. "We might be better served asking for someone we could get though, like Var and Denai."

"Perhaps they won't be necessary," Lorak said, reining in and then suddenly standing in his stirrups and looking to the west. Tarrin looked out in that direction as well, and he saw a small column of mounted men, riding northward. From that distance they were little more than specks against the grass, but even from that distance he could see that they weren't church soldiers.

"Are they ours?" one of the other Shadows asked.

Tarrin felt that odd sensation again as Lorak used his power, but what he did was quite beyond Tarrin. "They are," he answered. "Twelve men, most of them guards. I only see two casters with them."

"That's ten swords to help defend us," Neh said in her lilting voice. "Signal them, Lorak."

Lorak immediately responded to the Elara female in an authoritative voice, using his their native tongue. Tarrin's ears picked up instantly as he heard that language, for its similarity to Sha'Kar—or more specifically, the ancient root language of Urzani, whom Spyder had used for him once—was uncanny. Neh blushed and lowered her chin, then

noded silently, quite obviously reprimanded in some manner. He went over what Lorak said multiple times, puzzling out the separate words, putting a finger to his chin in furious thought as he struggled to piece together what just transpired.

It did not take him long. Tarrin had a knack for languages, and when it came to linguistics, everyone brought it to him first. *Silence, girl. I'll signal them when I'm sure it's safe, and not a moment before.*

Well, he didn't see anything in there mean in that, but the tone of Lorak's voice hinted to Tarrin that the Elara didn't like any kind of challenge to his authority.

Tarrin's heart fluttered a moment as he had a revelation of sorts. The orcs were Waern who had come to this world through a gate, and settled in...could it be that the Elara were those beings who existed before the Urzani? Could they be the ancestor race of Spyder, Miranda, and Allia? Tarrin remembered a conversation with Spyder a long, long time ago, when she remarked in passing that the parent race of the Urzani were called *elves*. Well, Lorak had said that the humans here also called his kind *elves*.

Tarrin looked at Dolanna, who had a similar thoughtful look on her face, and then to Miranda, who was whispering Lorak's words over and over to herself, and then to Phandebrass, who was furiously writing in one of his books. "Phandebrass," Tarrin called, but the Wizard waved him off with his free hand, which caused the book to nearly slip out of his saddle. "Phandebrass!"

"I say, not yet lad," he replied quickly in Sulasian. "I must write that down. I—" he started, then he looked up at Tarrin, who simply nodded. Then the white-haired Wizard laughed. "I say, capital! Is it?"

"Yes," Tarrin said again. "Lorak, how long have your people been here?" Tarrin asked.

"That's a strange question," he answered as he used his magic to create another spell. Tarrin had no idea what it did...it was probably some kind of scrying spell of some sort. Some of Lorak's magic seemed to deal with vision and images. "We've always been here, since the day Elara formed our world from the hair of her husband, Keralon, who then breathed life into us."

It took a significant realignment of his thinking, but he was able to do it. "Are you sure?" he asked, using the same ancient, archaic dialect of Urzani that he was certain that Lorak would understand.

He couldn't have produced a more profound effect if he'd clubbed Lorak out of his saddle. Lorak's spell got away from him, then disrupted as all three of the Elara stared at him like he was a live snake. "How do you come to speak our language?" Thren demanded instantly.

"Actually, I don't. Not completely," he answered in Penali. "But it's based on an ancient dialect of Urzani, which is the root language of the Sha'Kar, and I *do* speak Sha'Kar."

"Tarrin is gifted in the realm of language," Dolanna told Lorak with a smile.

"How would some ancient language from a people I've never heard of be related to our own?" Lorak demanded.

"I'd hazard to guess that it's because *you're* related to them," Tarrin mused. "Either you're also descendents of people from Sennadar, or some of them came over and were introduced into your society. Or, maybe some strange twist caused you to develop a very

similar language, who knows. But that seems a bit far-fetched to me. I'd bet you're somehow related to the ancestors of the Urzani."

"Possible, but it's impossible to conceive that we did not come from here," he said flatly. "If there's any relation between the Elara and this ancient race you describe, perhaps *we* traveled *there* instead of *them* traveling *here*."

"Possible," Tarrin admitted without much emotion. "If your history goes back some fifteen thousand years. That's when the Urzani destroyed their parent race and conquered the world, so it would have to be before that."

"Our noble history goes back *much* further than that," Lorak said stiffly.

"Which only helps reinforce my point," Tarrin said calmly.

Miranda laughed. "We might be distant cousins," she announced. "The Wikuni are descended from the Urzani, though it's a bit hard to explain how, given how I look," she said with a cheeky grin and a wink.

"It is *impossible* that you would be in any way related to *us*," Thren said with sudden hostility.

"Anything is possible," Miranda told him with sudden seriousness. "Wikuni look the way we do because we were touched by the hands of our gods and changed, a physical reminder of the fact that we were taking up a new life. Before we looked like this, we looked much like *you*."

"I will not hear that our bloodline turned into *mongrels*," Thren said hotly. "You can't be related to us, and that's that."

Tarrin's eyes narrowed dangerously, as did Mist's and Kimmie's, but Miranda put her hand up to stay them. Were-cats took being called those kinds of names personally. "It sounds like you're suffering from a raging case of racial superiority, Thren," Miranda said with a clever little smile. "I guess that's something of a rampant disease here on Pyrosia, where there are only like three races. We don't have that option on Sennadar, because there are so many different races. Each one has its own advantages and disadvantages, but when you put them on the scales, you find out that they all balance out to be the same. No race is better than any other race. What advantage you have is made up by another race in some other area. Despite the glorious fifteen thousand or more years of your noble history, it seems you still have a great deal to learn. Elara are no better than humans, who are no better than the Elara."

"Think you're better than me, honey? Well, get down off your horse and arm-wrestle me," she challenged with a cheeky grin. "After all, not only am I not an Elara, I'm also just a *girl*."

"A preposterous idea," he objected.

"Only because you think you can't lose," she taunted, dismounting.. "Prove it."

"We do not have time for foolishness," Lorak grated.

"We have time," Tarrin told him. "While they're ironing this out, you can signal those others. We're not moving anyway. Or are you afraid that Thren might lose?" Tarrin asked pointedly.

"Very well," Thren growled, after Lorak nodded in his direction. "If only to make you fall silent."

Tarrin had to suppress a chuckle, because he knew that Thren had no chance. Miranda, like everyone else, was much, much stronger on this world for some reason, and he had little doubt that she couldn't whip this slender Elara.

Without any kind of table to use, Miranda laid down on the soft, thick grass, propped herself up with her left arm, then planted her elbow on the ground before her and waggled her fingers tauntingly at Thren. The Elara laid down opposite her, propped himself up, then presented his arm and clasped Miranda's furry hand solidly. "I take no joy in winning against a helpless opponent," Thren stated. "And I certainly don't like to enter physical challenges with women. As much as I admire a woman's mind, it's obvious that they just don't have the physical gifts of men."

"Well, you're just making it even more humiliating when you lose," Miranda teased, the poof of hair that hung over her eyes, the flare of hair that was parted to the side, bouncing as she moved her head. "Would someone count to three, please?" she asked.

Haley, who was trying hard not to laugh, stepped his Pegasus up. "Very well. One...two...."

Just as Haley said "three," Miranda lunged forward, opened her maw, and grated her tongue up the entirety of Thren's face. Despite Miranda's very human appearance compared to many Wikuni, she still had the teeth and tongue of her bonded animal, a minx. Her tongue was very long, very wide, and she slurped it over Thren's pretty little face from chin to hairline. The Elara flinched and spluttered, and offered up absolutely no resistance to Miranda's arm when she drove his hand towards the earth.

"I win," Miranda said with a cherubic smile as Thren coughed and rubbed at his face with his left hand. Sarraya burst into uncontrollable laughter, almost falling off Tarrin's shoulder, as Kimmie, Haley, Ulger, Shara, and a couple of the other Shadows joined in.

"A clever trick, madam, but just a trick," Thren said darkly, continuing to rub at his face. "I didn't expect you to cheat to prove your point."

"Rules? Did you hear me mention rules? You just *assumed* I'd be all noble and sportsman-like, because I'm such a well-behaved young lady," she said with a wink. "So, despite the fact that you're a big, strong, studly young Elara, you lost to a bandy-armed little girl in arm-wrestling, because you *underestimated* me. Think about that." Then she leaned in and licked him again, just a light tap on the cheek, before getting up and going back to her mount.

"You're mean, Miranda," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"That's why you love me," she replied as she remounted.

Tarrin laughed.

Thren rolled over so he was sitting on the grass, then he too laughed in spite of himself. With a foolish little smile, he got up and went back to his horse.

Lorak got back to the business at hand, and after using another spell, which made Tarrin tingle, the small group of mounted men immediately turned and galloped towards them. Thren kept staring at Miranda the whole time as they waited, and seemed to be doing his best to keep from laughing. It was a simple lesson that she taught the Elara, but an effective one. Miranda was *not* a woman to take lightly, not in any way, shape, or form, and her lesson carried more within it than the simple dressing-down of a cocky young man. She had proven herself the equal of an Elara, by displaying traits that weren't immediately apparent. It was a poignant and necessary lesson for Thren, as well as for Lorak and Neh.

The mounted men slowed down when they got closer to them, could see Tarrin's half-formed wings and Azakar's massive size as *not* a trick of distance, and Miranda's obvious inhuman appearance. They saw that the mounts of these strange people weren't

really deformed, that they had *wings*, that these were very, very unusual people. They were very cautious as they closed the final distance, eleven men in assorted, mismatched pieces of armor that had the look of caravan guards or mercenaries, and two robed figures. One of them came forward as the others stopped, a tall, rugged human with long brown hair tied in a tail and trimmed beard, then he made a curious gesture by holding out two fingers, then passing them over his eyes.

“Skord?” one of the Shadows behind them called, one whose name Tarrin did not bother to learn.

“Yemil,” the man returned. “Master Lorak,” he said, bowing in his saddle.

“Are you two all that’s left of Thoravi’s circle?”

He nodded. “They knew exactly where we were. I think they did the entire time,” he said with a grim frown. “Everyone I managed to contact is moving north. Have you seen anyone else?”

Lorak shook his head. “You’re the first.”

“Who are your, ah, companions?”

“They are visitors from another plane of existence, caught up in this insanity,” Lorak answered honestly. “The companions of whom Master Phandebrass spoke.”

“Then it’s my sad pleasure to welcome you to hell,” Skord told them. “I am Skord, leader of the Thoravi circle. I see you have no fighters with you aside from two very formidable-looking gentlemen,” he said, nodding towards Azakar and Ulger. “I lost most of my circle to the Hunters, but our defenders managed to spirit me and Lienne to safety. I think we’ll be a good match.”

“Put your men under command of our two Knights,” Lorak ordered, turning to them. “Which of you has rank?”

“That would be Dolanna,” Ulger chuckled. “Or Tarrin, actually. He’s a Knight Champion, answerable only to the Lord General. He outranks us.”

“You know that’s just a technicality,” Tarrin snorted.

“You know I would not dream to command a military formation, Ulger,” Dolanna told him.

“Well, if you’re going to delegate your rank, I guess that would put it on me. Both me and Zak are Captains, but I have more time in with my gold spurs.”

“Then our soldiers are under your command,” Skord told him.

“We should move, it is not wise to stand about,” Lorak called. “We will organize ourselves when we camp for the night. Until then, everyone simply needs to stay together.”

“Do you think the Dura will accept us?”

“We have nowhere else to go, Skord,” Lorak sighed. “And even if they don’t, at least we know that the One’s armies won’t attack us so close to the Dura. Even if they don’t actively help, just their presence will help protect us. If worse comes to worst, we can call to the Gatemasters at home and have them try to open a gate. The land of the Dura isn’t under the One’s domain, they *should* be able to open a gate there. None have tried before, it is only speculation, but I am somewhat confident that it can be done.”

“I certainly hope so,” Neh sighed.

“I just need enough time to heal,” Tarrin grunted. “After I’m whole, the One won’t matter anymore.”

“Why is that?” Skord asked.

Tarrin's eyes flared with the unholy greenish radiance that marked an angry Were-cat, and he closed his paw into a fist. "Because I'm going to kill him. And I won't fail this time," he hissed.

"*This* time?"

"Tarrin and the One have already had one spat," Sarraya announced, and judging from Skord's expression, she had just become visible on Tarrin's shoulder. "That's what caused the volcano to erupt. It got a bit flashy towards the end."

"Sarraya," Dolanna called with authority. "Tarrin has certain abilities, that allows him to do battle with the Avatars of gods," she explained to Skord. "The One kidnapped one of us and forced Tarrin to battle with him at Pyros. Both of them were wounded in the exchange, which is why the Priests of the One are not using their magic to track us down."

"You fought a *god*?" Skord gasped.

"I'm not afraid of gods, Skord," Tarrin replied in a cold tone, turning his Pegasus. "When I heal, I'll go back to what's left of Pyros and finish the One off. Everything we do until that is just stalling for time."

"Be that as it may, what Master Tarrin plans has little to do with us," Lorak said after clearing his throat. "We just happen to be traveling together for mutual protection."

"If he can fight a god, I'll take that protection," one of the soldiers behind Skord whispered to his fellow soldier.

"So will I," the other replied.

"Let's go," Lorak commanded, turning his horse northward. "The sooner we can get into the forest north of the Stonespines, the better."

Chapter 11

Tarrin wasn't sure which was garnering more attention from the newcomers...him, Miranda, or the Pegasi.

Not that he cared. Having so many strangers around caused both him and Mist to all but withdraw from the group. They rode at the back of the column when it moved, to keep them all in sight, and always kept as many of them as possible in sight whenever they stopped. The two feral Were-cats seemed to become a single unit of wary surveillance, watching each other and helping each other keep all these potential threats under a watchful eye. But it was probably unfortunate that him and the other two Were-cats seemed quite interesting to this Skord and his band of soldiers, who seemed to want to ask endless questions. He learned almost immediately to direct all those questions to Kimmie, because Tarrin and Mist would have very little to do with him.

Again, though, it was Miranda that seemed to capture the attention of the others almost immediately, and not entirely positively. Her obvious inhuman appearance, so much more so than the Were-cats, again attracted overwhelming attention, and Tarrin still hadn't quite figured out why she was so much of an item of interest to these people. Only Skord didn't seem to have any fear of Miranda, riding along with her the first day he'd joined them and politely but quite thoroughly trying to grill her for all kinds of information. Skord reminded Tarrin of Phandebrass, an inquisitive fellow with a sharp mind, but he also seemed quite tolerant of the alien nature of some of Lorak's companions, more curious about them than afraid. There was also something of a thin, wispy aura around Skord that Tarrin found pleasant, something that his awakened divine senses could detect, something that was missing from Lorak and the others. He wasn't quite sure what it was or what it meant, but Skord seemed quite agreeable to Tarrin in some ways, but Tarrin's ferality wouldn't allow him to explore this agreeable quality.

For most of them, though, it was the Pegasi that seemed to most solidly take their attention. They gawked at the winged horses almost all of that first day, which unsettled them just a little bit, making them a bit jumpy. They'd already been restless from being forced to stay on the ground for so long, so Tarrin ordered that all the Pegasi be taken on a "recreational flight" the morning after Skord's group joined them. Perhaps that had been what caused it, he supposed, for the guardsmen were infatuated with them since that morning. Ulger still seemed very uncomfortable flying on the back of his mount, which his mount seemed to take as somewhat offensive. The Pegasus stomped on his foot after they landed and dismounted, then headbutted him in the back several times as they walked the mounts back to the area where they were keeping all the horses.

"Now listen, you feather-headed mutt, don't be getting me mad," Ulger warned the Pegasus as they reached the edge of the pasture where the horses were contentedly grazing. The Pegasus responded to this threat by pulling his reins out of Ulger's hand, then quite deliberately turning his back on the Knight. "Serves you right, you—" Ulger

started, turning around, but that was a fatal mistake. The instant Ulger took his eyes off the winged horse, it leaned forward, pulled its back legs off the ground, then drove both back hooves into Ulger's armored back. Ulger slid about five spans along the grass before coming to a stop on his stomach, with two impressive hoof-shaped dents in the shoulders of his backplate. He laid there for just a moment, then moved to get his elbows and knees under him, but the Pegasus came over and put a foreleg on the small of his back and put enough weight on it to stop that.

"Hey!" Ulger said in a growling tone. "Get off me if you don't want to be in Mist's stewpot!"

"I think you'd better apologize," Haley said lightly as he let his own Pegasus to a large trough of water that one of the Wizards had created using magic.

"What do I have to apologize for?" Ulger demanded.

"Oh, all the yelling and screaming when we were flying, to start," Haley chuckled. "Not to mention all those times you threatened to brain your Pegasus every time it went down."

The Pegasus snorted out a neigh and nodded its head vigorously.

"It shouldn't scare me like that!" Ulger snapped.

"No, I think you should have a bit more faith in your Pegasus," Haley told him evenly, his tone more serious. "He wouldn't let you fall. Well, he might let you fall *now*, but only if you're really being an ass," he chuckled, giving the Pegasus a warm smile.

"I am not apologizing to my horse," Ulger stated adamantly.

The Pegasus put both forehooves on Ulger's back, then started to press down. There was the clear sound of bending metal in the air.

"Hey! You're bending my armor!"

"I think you'd better rethink that declaration," Haley chuckled. "You're in no position to make any, you know."

"Stupid animal—"

That was cut off when the Pegasus put *all* its weight on its forelegs, which caused Ulger's armor to squeal in protest. The Knight gave out a breathless "*whuff!*" and tried to struggle out from under his mount.

"Down," Tarrin ordered tersely as he came up to them. The Pegasus gave Tarrin a single nod, then removed himself from the back of his rider. Tarrin reached down and hooked his claws into the base of that backplate, then hauled the Knight up off the ground, holding him almost by the seat of the pants, from the look of it. He turned to face Ulger's Pegasus, then held him up so he was dangling at eye level with the animal. "First thing, Ulger, *never* call them stupid. They're probably smarter than you are, and if you didn't notice, they can understand what you're saying."

The Pegasus nodded, glaring at Ulger openly.

"Apologize."

Ulger was defiantly quiet.

Tarrin bent down, then slammed the Knight into the ground. He was *not* gentle. Ulger's armor made a loud clatter as he impacted the ground, and the Knight's eyes were just a bit woozy when Tarrin picked him back up. "That was the only warning you're going to get, Ulger," Tarrin warned in an ominous tone. "Don't disobey me again. Now apologize. *Both* of you."

Ulger wasn't stupid enough to miss the threat of impending violence in Tarrin's voice, were he not immediately obeyed. "I'm sorry I insulted you," Ulger said grudgingly. The Pegasus simply bowed its head in an act of contrition.

"Good. Go take your armor off."

"What? Why should I—"

Tarrin shook him just enough to make him hold his tongue. "You're afraid of flying," the Were-cat noted. "There's nothing wrong with that, but you need to get over it. So you're going to spend most of today in the air. You're today's flying scout."

"But you need me on the ground," Ulger protested.

"I'm sure that Zak can direct those new men well enough. You need to get over your fear, and the only way to do that is to face it." Tarrin looked to the Pegasus. "You understand that it was his fear talking. You've dealt with him on the ground, he's much different."

The Pegasus nodded.

"Good. Do you feel up to spending today airborne?"

The Pegasus nodded vigorously, obviously very happy about the idea.

"I'll feel naked without my armor," Ulger complained.

"It needs to be fixed, and besides, you won't tire out your mount by making carry that extra weight." Tarrin dropped him unceremoniously, then padded off with those long, slow strides that made him seem to move in slow motion, yet was a pace faster than a human could match. Fireflash soared through the air and landed on Tarrin's shoulder, nuzzling him affectionately and getting an absent pat on his flank from the Were-cat, who was watching the new men with hawkish eyes.

"*Thhhaarriihhh*," Fireflash hissed sibilantly.

"Keep practicing, little one, you'll get it eventually," Tarrin told his drake affectionately. "It took Sapphire a while to learn too."

They encountered no patrols or flying Demons that day, which was, in Tarrin's opinion, not a good thing. He wanted to see if these new men could fight, and besides, fighting patrols was the norm, and Tarrin didn't like deviation from the norm. If the patrols were pulling back, either they had other orders, other plans, or they were moving ahead to ambush with combined forces. Tarrin sent Ulger far ahead to scout around noon, but he came back to report nothing but empty farmland as they passed the Fangwood to their right, and nothing within the Fangwood but animals, thanks to Haley's quick scouting of it.

By evening, the dull ache in Tarrin's wings became more noticable to him, and it made him just a little short tempered...at least more than usual. He had his first and only brush with one of the new soldiers that evening as they made camp, hissing threateningly at a man who tried to offer him a skin of water. The others kept their distance after that, which suited Tarrin just fine...he had no doubt that Lorak or Neh had made sure to explain the rules to them. He sat by a fire with Dolanna, Mist, and Miranda, as Haley and Kimmie ranged out to hunt some fresh meat, and Sarraya flitted around with Fireflash chasing her after she poured one of Phandebrass' inkwells onto his head. Gouts of fire and gas erupted from the furious drake's mouth as he chased the more agile Faerie around, but Tarrin paid them little mind. Fireflash wouldn't hurt Sarraya—much—and she deserved anything she got if he caught her. Ulger was out with the Pegasi, rubbing his mount down and spending a little quality time with him. Ulger had spent the entire

day in the air more or less, and though it didn't teach him to love flying, at least he'd learned how to tolerate it. Zyri and Jal trotted over, both of them holding their bows. "Master Tarrin, have you seen Mistress Shara?" she asked hastily. "We need more arrows."

"I think she's over at Lorak's tent with the others, honey. They're having a talk," Miranda told her.

"You mean Master Phandebrass is talking and they're all trying to interrupt him," she giggled, and Jal smiled impishly.

"Probably," Tarrin agreed with a slight smile. "How many have you hit?"

"I hit nine, and Jal hit two," she said proudly.

"Then you need to go back twenty steps," he told her, looking at the circular target made of soft earth and wood that jutted out of the ground which they were shooting at, something that Shara had used her magic to create for them. "Why do you need more arrows?" he asked curiously. "I see bunches of them out there."

"But then we won't know what we hit," she protested. "And we'd have to go down and—nevermind," she said sheepishly when Tarrin fixed her with a cool stare. She grabbed Jal and started towards the target.

"Lazy, lazy, lazy," Miranda laughed.

"Just seeing what she can get away with is more like it," Mist grunted, watching them.

"Have you been able to move your wings yet, Tarrin?" Miranda asked.

Tarrin glanced back at them. "Not yet," he answered. They were almost halfway formed now, looked definitely like wings, but wings with their feathers clipped. "I was thinking of stealing my sword back from Dolanna tonight and seeing if that won't help them heal a little faster."

"Well, she didn't use any Sorcery today, so she probably won't mind," the Wikuni mused. "The pain eased any since yesterday?"

She asked this question every night, and Tarrin's response had yet to change. "No," he answered.

"Anything unusual? New?" she asked.

Tarrin glanced at her. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, just fishing from the rail here, but something tells me to ask that. Well, *someone*," she corrected.

"Oh, what information is *she* fishing for?" he asked bluntly.

"She's worried about you, Tarrin," she said immediately. "And if you don't recall, Kikkalli is how Niami's getting information about you. They want to know if anything feels different, or if you've noticed any changes."

He was quiet a moment. "Well, I'm starting to see things, things I can't really explain," he told her, turning and looking at Zyri. "There's like a nimbus around some people, glowing colors. Some people's colors seem to hint at some things, others just strike me in certain ways without me seeing anything."

"Really? Give an example," she pressed.

"Well, there's that new Elementalist...Skord. There's an aura around him that seems, well, agreeable. Something hints at me that Skord might be someone I could get to know. Lorak has a sense about him that's almost completely opposite, but that's not

something I can see...it's just something I can feel. There's a coldness around Lorak that doesn't sit well with me."

"Well," Miranda mused. "Well, well, well. What do you see around me?"

"A blinding light," he told her honestly, looking at her. "Well, it would be blinding if it were real, but it's that strong. I know what that is. When I look at you, I can see your mother's power around you. It's a mark of what she did before you were born. It's the mark of what you are. Almost like she was reaching out to you and putting her hands around you."

"Well, I hope she's not trying to wring my neck," Miranda laughed.

He ignored that. "What I can see around you would be impossible to hide, girl. It's *holy*. I bet every Demon that looks at you immediately sees it. I bet they can *feel* it from a longspan away. It's like a beacon of holy power, and that's the kind of power that Demons fear more than anything else. That's why they either come right after you immediately or start running as soon as they take notice of you."

"I'm just a popular girl," Miranda said with a winsome smile. "What do you see around Mist?"

"Nothing," he answered. "I told you, I don't see things around everyone, at least not all the time."

"Ah. What about Jal and Zyri?"

"Nothing. The only one I can see anything about in our group is Phandebrass."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," she giggled, "but what do you see?"

"Power," he answered immediately, looking in the general direction of the Wizard.

"That's not much of a surprise," Miranda said, tapping her muzzle thoughtfully.

Dolanna and Haley came over from the other group. "Might we sit a spell, Tarrin?" Haley asked politely.

"You never have to ask, Haley," Tarrin chided as he waved his paw at them.

"I'm a Were-wolf, Tarrin," he said dismissively. "If I didn't have manners, I wouldn't be much of a Were-wolf."

"I didn't realize that thieves had manners," Miranda winked.

"Of course they do, that's how they keep their victim nearby while they pick his pockets," Haley said with a smile in reply as he and Dolanna sat down.

"What are they talking about over there?" Mist asked.

"Not much, I fear," Dolanna answered. "Lorak is exploring the possibility that Phandebrass can open a gateway once we reach the Dura."

"Does he have that kind of spell?" Tarrin asked.

"Lorak carries copies of them with him," Haley answered. "From what I've pieced together, they already gave him the spells, and he's learned them. Kimmie's studying them right now, but she doesn't think she can cast the spells. She told me it's magic on a level she's never seen before."

"How are you feeling, dear one?" Dolanna asked Tarrin.

"I feel fine," he answered.

"I would challenge that statement, given your earlier behavior," she said with a slight smile. "What is wrong?"

"Oh, just more ache than usual," he said, shrugging absently. "Added to being surrounded by all these strangers."

"I thought as much," she told him. "Lorak has started quietly hinting that he would like for someone to teach him Sulasian," she informed them.

"No," Tarrin and Miranda said in unison.

"My feeling as well, but one wonders why you would be against it, Miranda," Dolanna said.

"Lorak has no *reason* to need to know Sulasian," Miranda stated. "Besides, if he does learn it, I'll just start speaking Sha'Kar."

"He might be able to puzzle some of that out," Tarrin mused aloud.

"Wikuni then. You can just translate for me, Tarrin," she said with a cheeky grin.

"How many are you up to now, Tarrin? Twelve?" Haley asked with a chuckle.

"Thirteen," he corrected absently. "Sulasian, Arakite, Sha'Kar, Sharadi, Selani, Ungardt, Wikuni, Amazon, Duthak, dragon, and the three languages from here."

"Dragon? Sapphire taught you *dragon*?" Haley said in surprise.

He nodded. "About half of it. Dragons are born knowing their language, so when I took the shape of a dragon that first time, the rest of the language got imprinted into me. I hadn't really thought of that until now," he admitted with a thoughtful stare past Haley, into the night.

Haley laughed. "You should teach us to speak it, so we have a failsafe fallback language."

"I can't speak it like this," he said. "Many words are based on the shape of a dragon's mouth, and I can't reproduce those sounds."

"Ah. Clever," Haley said after thinking a moment.

"Don't you already speak Arakite, Haley?"

"What caterer to the worldly traveler doesn't?" Haley answered with a smile.

"Figured. All that time in Dayisè, you'd *better* speak Arakite."

"And Shacèan," he chuckled, then he looked to Dolanna. "But I think my favorite language has to be Sharadi," he admitted. "There's a sense of formality and ancient traditions lurking in it that appeals to a Were-wolf. We've always been ones for tradition."

"It is an ancient language, Haley, virtually unchanged for thousands of years," Dolanna smiled. "It is only logical that it would seem thus."

"What language do the Woodkin speak?" Miranda asked curiously.

"We don't have a *common* language," Haley answered her. "Generally those closer to this or that area speak whatever they speak around there. Generally, most in the west speak Sulasian, or an old dialect of it, from back when Sulasia destroyed Rauthym and annexed the lands abutting the Heartwood. The people on the eastern side of the forest speak Arakite, because of the Arkisians, and the ones in the south speak whatever local dialect of Shacèan or Torian happens to have dominance. There's also a large number of local or dead languages floating around in there. I know one pack of Were-wolves who speak Ruri, the language of Rauthym. They're the *only* ones I know of who know that language, probably the only people left in Sennadar that do. If you want to be able to speak to most anyone in the Heartwood, you'd best be able to speak both Sulasian and Arakite on top of whatever language you learned growing up."

"Ruri eh? Talk about secure communication," Miranda chuckled.

"That's why they do it," he nodded.

"That wouldn't be your old pack, would it Haley?" she asked with a grin.

“No, but I convinced a certain handsome young female to teach it to me,” he said with a laugh.

“Audry?” Tarrin asked, and Haley nodded. “That girl’s full of surprises,” he mused.

“Be careful then,” Dolanna said with a smile. “You speak a language that Tarrin does not. That is not something he will allow to stand for long.”

“I speak two,” he chuckled. “Shacèan and Ruri. But he speaks about nine that I don’t, so he has no reason to be jealous.”

“Well, I’d better get dinner going,” Mist announced.

“You don’t have to keep cooking,” Miranda told her. “They have people for that.”

“They can cook for themselves,” she said bluntly, standing up. “I won’t eat anything *they* make, and I won’t let Tarrin or the cubs either.”

She stalked off without another word, going to where they had their packs set, near the horses and Pegasi, and Haley watched her go. “Cubs? Sounds like you have two new children, Tarrin,” he said in a quiet tone, full of amusement. “That sounded rather final to me.”

“I won’t mind,” Tarrin shrugged. “I have a big house, and it’s sitting empty at the moment.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t. Sounds like you don’t have much choice,” Haley chuckled.

After dinner, after an evening as Lorak and Skord compared information and made plans, which Tarrin didn’t bother sitting in on, darkness caused most to seek out their tents. Lorak seemed to want to object to the fire that had been built for Tarrin, but it just took one glance in Mist’s direction to make him hold his peace. He’d tangled with Mist once already, and it seemed that Lorak was the kind that learned his lessons. Tarrin sat within the large fire, which caused wild curiosity by the soldiers before they went to their tents, his sword sitting on his legs as he closed his eyes and concentrated in silent meditation. The power of his element seemed to be awakened by the presence of his sword, and he could feel much more energy around him than other times he had done this. He wondered idly why there was more around him this time than the others, more energy surrounding him, but he could find no easy or quick answer. All he knew was that there seemed to be more around him to work with, more available energy to use to bend to the task of repairing his wings, and he had to take advantage of it while he could.

He could hear their voices now. He didn’t tell Miranda that. He could hear them, like whispers, like ghostly sounds that seemed to be far away, but they were clearer now than they had ever been before. He could hear them talking to each other, hear them trying to talk to him. He wondered what they were trying to say...who they were. There were eleven of them that he could hear, and not all of them were friendly. One voice railed and screamed and raged, hurled curses that were directed at *him*, but it was just as distant as the others.

That was the One. The other ten were the remaining gods who inhabited this world.

He touched the blade of his sword, and those voices suddenly became much closer, much clearer. Touching on the power locked within the sword, the other part of his dual existence, brought him closer to that power that was locked away from him...that he had locked away from himself.

That was true enough. That power was *his* power, and it was *him*. The sword was *not* something separate from himself, with its own will, it was *him*. The sword locked

that power away because he *wanted* to be separate from it. That was a simple, fundamental truth, something he had always evaded or ignored, because he did not want to understand, he did not want to know, he did not want to admit it. He had long denied the divine part of his being, because it represented something he did not want to face.

That he no longer belonged in the mortal world.

But now he faced a threat from the *divine* side of things, and now he found himself desperately needing that power. And it was there, still locked within his sword, simply waiting for him to call upon it. It could not just instantly heal him, for the wounds done to him were dealt by a divine hand, and thus made them true. But if he could touch on that power, unlock it, it would help accelerate his ability to repair the damage done to him. Unlike the One, he did *not* rely on others for his power. It was all his own.

He meditated on this truth for long hours, until the concept of time dissolved into the recesses of his mind. He looked within, trying to find the path to the power locked in his sword, trying to understand how he had separated himself from it, and learn how to unlock it.

It was not easy. Walking through the tunnels of his mind, he found multiple barriers in his path...barriers he himself had erected. They were the isolation of man from god, mortal from divine, a series of blocks he had put inside himself to deny the truth within, to cling to his mortality despite the grim reality of his condition and futility of such an act. They were barriers he discovered that he *could not* penetrate, because despite his need to find that other part of himself, he still refused to accept, deep down in his soul, what he was.

There was no getting past that. To unlock his full power, he had to *accept* his divinity, he had to abandon his mortal life and fully embrace the power of his divine soul. That was something that he would not do, that was something he would *die* to avoid having happen, because he desperately feared destroying everyone and everything around him should that come to pass. He hated who he was, hated it with a passion, because he was afraid of it. It was his only real fear, and in a way it had replaced his old fear of losing himself to his ferality. Now he feared losing his mortality, of giving up his life...it would be like dying to him, and the Cat joined with the Human in raging against that possibility. Self preservation was the most powerful instinct within him, and both sides of his nature agreed that accepting the power of his godhood would end his life as a mortal...which would not be allowed.

But he did feel that he could make progress. Maybe he couldn't *accept* what he was, but he could *acknowledge* it. He could *admit* it. That was a step in the right direction, and he found that to be relatively easy. Yes, he could admit that he was at least part god. Yes, he could admit that he had that power, and yes, he could admit that right now, he *needed* it.

That did matter. He felt more of a connection with that other side of himself. Acknowledging that the power exists allowed the power to touch him more strongly...odd, that was. It was almost like a mortal admitting the existence of a god, which allowed the god to make contact with him...just like what happened with Keritania and the Goddess. Keritania had to *acknowledge* she existed before Niami could even begin trying to communicate with her. He had never acknowledged his power the way he had like this before, and it was like opening a door inside of him, just a little bit.

He felt that power blossom inside him like a rose, flowing into him from his sword. It was a warm, gentle sensation flowing into his wings, and for the first time in many days, the pain was completely washed away...if only for a moment. He became aware of the fire around him, surrounding him, and he touched on its power, commanding it in a way he had not been able to since his injury. He made it hotter, intensified it, feeding his power into it even as he drew power from it, forming a symbiotic bond with the fire. He felt that power surround him, to the point where he wasn't quite sure if he was still on the ground or not, but he was too lost in his work to worry about such trivial things. He bent this influx of power to the task at hand, sending it into his wings, attempting to repair the damage done to them during his battle with the One.

He had no concept of time. There was only the time when he was working to repair his wings, and then the instant when he felt a paw grab hold of his ankle. That touch instantly conveyed to him that it was Mist grabbing hold of him, reaching into the fire. She was concerned, but she was also quite happy about something, and a little excited. He opened his eyes and found her looking *down* at her, and realized he was hovering in the air within the fire, a fire which was no a raging bonfire whose flames reached a hundred spans into the air.

With but a thought, he caused the fire to subside, until it was gone. He dropped to the ground at a stately pace, then looked at Mist for a moment without recognizing her by sight, absorbed in looking upon what was *within*, looking directly at her soul. What he saw inside of her was much different than what was outside. Her soul was a loyal, loving soul, shining like a blazing star with both its purity and its power, and he realized that the bonds of loyalty shining in her soul were tied directly to him. The loyalty and trust he had earned with her since that first day he'd met her, healing away the scar deep inside her and restoring her ability to have children had only strengthened over the years, blossomed into a powerful love that made Jesmind or Kimmie's feelings for him but candles held up to the sun. Mist's devotion to him was so utter, so absolute, that her soul almost seemed to begin where his ended, the ghostly tendrils of their bonds visible to his eyes, snaking between them like wispy cords. Tarrin was a male who had many powerful bonds with many people, for it was in his nature to be so accepting. His bonds with Mist were powerful, but in their way, so also were his bonds with Allia and Keritanima, or his bonds with the Goddess, or his bonds with Dolanna, his bonds with Triana and his parents and Sapphire, and his bonds with Jesmind and Kimmie, and his children. But where Tarrin's soul was receptive to holding others, Mist's soul only had room for him. Not even her own child held the same place inside her soul that Tarrin occupied.

She was smiling at him. He blinked, then looked over at her, and impulsively reached out and put the pad of his palm to her cheek. She cupped his paw with her own and gave him a look of sedate, boundless love, the utter contentment of a woman who had everything in the world she would ever want.

"What?" he asked absently.

"Are you killing the One today?" she asked.

"Why ask that?" he retorted.

She reached past him, over his shoulder, then he felt her grab his wing. There was some pain, but it wasn't sharp or raw. She pulled on it, and Tarrin felt it move. He looked over his shoulder as she continued to pull, and saw, to his surprise, that his wings were now fully fledged and grown out. They *looked* whole, even down to the licks of

flame that appeared to be feathers. But they were a shell, nothing more, because inside of them there were still injuries to heal away. Tarrin found that he could move them, but he still could not retract them, nor could he cause them to change shape. He had made significant progress towards repairing them, however. At first, he had shored up the arches to provide a foundation. Now, he had accelerated filling them out so he could again move them. Now simply came repairing the rest of the damage, to fully restore the powers and abilities that those wings represented. He could sense about himself that by restoring partial functionality of his wings, he now had access to *some* of his divine power. Not much, and certainly not anything spectacular, but he had certainly regained the ability to affect fire, and to create and extinguish it. He could fly again, though that wouldn't be quite as easy as it usually was. If he really pushed himself, he *might* be able to shapeshift, because that power really wasn't a very hard one to enact. Traveling through fire was absolutely out of the question, as was any kind of large-scale expression of fire or direct implementation of divine power. No matter how small of a thing he did, though, he already knew that it would come with a cost in pain, since he was using a half-healed ability. It would be like trying to run on a sprained ankle...more than possible, but certainly not pleasant, and also with a risk of injuring it worse.

"Oh," he said, flaring his wings out to their full wingspan, shivering them a bit, then folding them behind him sedately. "I managed to get them filled out, but they're still not whole. It's going to be at least another ride before I'm fully healed. I can't retract them yet, but at least I can move them."

"Well, it's a start," she said with a nod. "Any pain?"

He nodded. "Not nearly as much as before, though. Now it just feels like an old half-healed cut." He looked around and saw that it was morning, and the camp was almost completely packed up. The horses were saddled and ready, and everyone was staring at him, even Dolanna. He had been in the fire all night, and had not even registered the passage of time.

"Are you hungry? I saved you some breakfast," Mist said, taking his paws in hers and staring over at him. Then, impulsively, she leaned over and kissed him tenderly.

"What?" he asked with a slight smile.

"I'm just relieved to see you healing, my mate," she told him. "And happy you're not hurting so much. Besides, I've told you I think you look so majestic with these," she told him, reaching behind his shoulder and touching the rising arch of his wing, where it came out of his back.

"You certainly don't seem to like them at night," he teased.

"They get in the way," she answered immediately. "Though they are convenient ways to get a grip on you that you can't break."

He should have known better than to joke about something like that. He cleared his throat as Dolanna and Ulger approached with Lorak. "Dear one, that is some dramatic improvement," she noted. "How much are you healed?"

"Just enough to flesh them out," he answered. "It's still going to be at least ten days before I'm completely whole. Maybe more, I'm not sure."

"Have you regained any of your power?"

He nodded. "A little," he answered. "I can do little things, but that's about it. And it will definitely hurt to do it, so I'm not doing anything unless it's a last resort."

"That is encouraging news," she told him. "Are you hungry? Mist saved you some breakfast."

"He can eat as we move," Lorak announced. "We've spent too much time here already. Have you gotten one of those winged horses into the air yet? We need a scout to ensure our path is clear, and to search for others so they can join us."

"Master Tarrin, Master Tarrin!" Zyri called as she ran up to him. She looked at his wings and smiled brightly. "You're better!"

"Some," he nodded. "What's wrong, little bit?"

"May I do the scouting? Please? I can be careful, and I'd love the chance to do something other than be in everyone's way."

"You're never a burden, girl," he chided. "But if you want to do it, you're more than welcome to."

She beamed him a brilliant smile. "Thank you, master Tarrin! I'll go get my Ped—Pegi—uh, the Pegisus."

"Pegasus," he corrected.

"You would send that child to ensure we're not ambushed?" Lorak asked sharply.

"She can do the job," he said coolly. "She'll be safer up there than she'll be on the ground, and she knows how to handle her Pegasus in the air. Besides, it will be good for her." He then fixed Lorak with an icy stare. "And you'd best remember right here and now that I don't *ever* let someone question me, elf. That sounded pretty close to you challenging my decision. I'm sure Dolanna explained to you how I deal with people who challenge me. Do you understand me?"

Lorak said nothing, turning to walk away. He didn't get far, however, when Tarrin reached out and grabbed the slender elf by the shoulder and whirled him around. Tarrin's claws snagged on his robe, tearing two small holes in it. "I said *do you understand me?*" he repeated in a voice that dripped with hostility.

"I understand you," Lorak answered, though his stiff back and his cold tone showed that he was not intimidated in the least.

Tarrin did decide to eat on the move, enjoying a breakfast of cold bacon and bread from the back of his Pegasus as he absently flexed his wings, getting used to the feel of them moving again. Despite the pain involved whenever he moved them, it certainly felt better than the two immobile *things* that had been there the night before. They moved across the relatively flat area towards low hills on the northern horizon, behind which he was pretty sure was that mountain range that Lorak had said was there, the one he'd said they might have trouble crossing. He watched through the day as those hills got closer, noticing a forest on the hills to the right of where they were going, that marked the end of the open grassland. Zyri swooped from one side of the sky to the other, flying in wide circles then coming back to see where they were now. She indeed handled her Pegasus with surprising competence for such a young lady, enjoying riding on its back as it flew through the air. Fireflash was riding in her saddle, and when the Pegasus slowed down, he would jump out and soar along with the winged horse.

Zyri swooped in and landed to the side of the main host in the midafternoon, about an hour before they were going to stop for the night, then galloped up to Tarrin quickly.

"Master Tarrin!" she called. "There's soldiers ahead of us!"

"Where?" Tarrin asked as Lorak, Skord, and Dolanna came up along with him.

“About a half an hour ahead, if you keep going this fast,” she answered. “But there’s more. There’s a big group of weird things over that way,” she said, pointing to the west. “They’re not on horses. There’s a group of soldiers on horses behind them, though. I think they’re chasing them. If they keep going the way they’re going, they’ll run into those soldiers directly ahead of us just a while after we go by.”

“How many soldiers stand ahead of us?” Lorak asked.

“Lots. Over a hundred,” she answered. “And there’s lots of those Demon things with them. A few tried to chase me after I flew close to them, but they couldn’t keep up. I didn’t want to lead them back to you, so I went a way out that way, and that’s when I saw the others,” she said, pointing again.

“What exactly did you see over there, child?” Dolanna asked.

“Well, they’re a bunch of weird looking people wearing odd clothes. They’re running kinda that way,” she explained, pointing northeast, “but they’re over there,” she said, pointing due west. “About ten minutes behind them on horses, there’s about another hundred or so soldiers. They’re from the One’s army, they’re wearing red, just like the ones ahead of us. I didn’t see any Demons with them, though. It looks like they’re chasing the people on foot into the soldiers ahead of us, because the people running are really stretched out, like they’re just running really fast and the kids and slow people can’t keep up with the faster ones.”

“How many of these people on foot are there?” Lorak asked.

“Kids? There are children with them?” Dolanna asked.

“Lots, and yes, Mistress Dolanna,” she answered. “It was hard to count that many, but there were lots and lots more than there were soldiers. But some of them were real small, like they were just kids. They were mainly at the back of the group.”

“It sounds like they’re being routed, and pushed into the waiting soldiers,” Skord grunted with a grim face. “An ambush.”

“I do not see why any Shadows would be ferrying children,” Lorak said uncertainly, frowning as he thought. “Or display such a lack of discipline if they were. If they have the advantage in numbers, they should turn and attack the soldiers, even if they’re mounted.”

“You assume that they’re Shadows,” Tarrin grunted, leaning over his saddle. “Zyri, did they look kind of green to you?”

“Orcs? They could have been,” she said. “You think they’re like those others we saw before we met Master Lorak?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” he nodded. “It’s not the first time we’ve seen them moving with their children. Did they have men with them this time?”

“I think so,” she answered. “The ones in the front were pretty big.”

“If they’re leaving their women and children behind, they’re definitely orcs,” Skord said with a little vituperous grunt.

Tarrin continued to ponder for a moment, then he sat up again. “I see what they’re doing now,” he said grimly. “We haven’t run into any soldiers for a couple of days because they’ve figured out where we’re going. They’re moving them up to those mountains to fill the passes, to stop us there. It’s easier for them to simply build up numbers in a place where we *have* to go instead of just chasing us around in the open. We’re not running away from them now, we’re running right *into* them.”

“How are they passing orders like that? If the One can’t speak to them, he can’t organize them,” Lorak asked.

“The Demons,” Dolanna answered. “They have their own ways of communicating, and it seems odd that there are so many of them. I cannot understand where they are coming from, if the One’s Priests cannot summon them anymore.”

“Maybe they were already here,” Tarrin said, “but that’s not really the issue. Lorak, are these passes large enough for us to slip by?”

He shook his head. “They are very narrow and somewhat treacherous,” he answered. “The objective of us moving fast was to get past them *before* they could build up their forces. We would have had to get past the citadels, but that would have been possible if they had not overmanned them.”

Tarrin didn’t like the implied accusation in that comment, that somehow *Tarrin* was responsible for their delay. “We don’t have the numbers here to fight our way through. And we can’t depend on finding any other Shadows. We have to keep moving, because if they’re pulling men into those mountains, we’re in the path of it.”

“We let the soldiers drive the orcs before us and go around,” Lorak said calmly. “They will be busy killing the orcs. We will circle as they engage, and I’m sure that the runners will keep them engaged more than long enough for us to get by them. Orcs are cowardly brutes.”

Tarrin sighed, getting down off his Pegasus. “Nothing is anything but a piece on a chessboard to you, is it, Lorak?” he asked. “I guess you don’t really care about the women and children, except that their slaughter just buys you time.”

“That is *exactly* how I feel,” he said bluntly. “What is coming is nothing but a winning situation for us. The orcs buy us time, and the soldiers kill the orcs.”

“Fine. When the time comes when we need a diversion, I’m going to abandon you behind us. That way you can slow them down while we get away. That sounds like a winning situation to me. You slow them down, and they kill *you*.”

“If it becomes needful to save my people, I would accept such a fate,” he said with quiet dignity.

“I’ll remember that, Lorak,” Tarrin said bluntly, walking out ahead of the horses.

“What are you doing, dear one?” Dolanna asked.

“We don’t have the manpower to get through the mountains. We need reinforcements, so I’m going to get us some.”

“You would *dare* bring the orcs into our midst?” Lorak said with sudden heat. “I would not allow those *animals* within twenty paces of me!”

“I’m not recruiting orcs,” he replied absently. “I’m just going to save them. Stomping on some church soldiers should manage that easily enough.”

Lorak looked at him in confusion, but understanding dawned in Dolanna’s eyes quickly. “Dear one! Are you sure you can do it?”

“We need it, Dolanna,” he answered. “That kind of physical force is something that the One’s men out here can’t counter, even with Demons. I’ll have to try. I may sprain something in the attempt, but as long as I can get there, that’s all that matters. If I can do it, we can just march right through them. They won’t be able to do *anything*.”

“Do what?” Skord asked.

Zyri looked at Tarrin thoughtfully, then she clapped and laughed. “At least it won’t be so scary this time!” she said.

“What do you intend to do?” Lorak pressed.

Mist rode up to them with Jal in her saddle, her eyes baneful, but her expression neutral. “He’s going to change into a dragon,” she told them before Dolanna could speak.

“Pardon my ignorance, but what is a dragon?” Lorak asked.

Zyri held Fireflash up. “A dragon looks just like this, Master Lorak,” she answered, “but much bigger.”

“*Much*,” Dolanna agreed with a nod and a smile as Tarrin walked away.

“I don’t see how one of these *dragon* creatures can be large enough to make such a difference,” Lorak said uncertainly.

He wasn’t sure if he could do it, but if he was right, if they had to go through an army that knew they were coming, they needed his dragon form. There was no way they could fight against him if he was in that form, not even with Demons helping them. He could save those orcs and have them help protect the casters as they simply rammed through the mountain pass that was the fastest route to the Dura’s fortress. If they didn’t obey him, he’d just eat them. That would be a *very* pointed lesson about disobeying the one who saved them from death. He had no doubts that the orcs would be troublesome, because they *were* Waern after all, but they needed the reinforcements that those orcs could provide. Even in dragon form, Tarrin would be hard pressed to protect the others if they were attacked by large numbers of soldiers who were willing to die just to do some damage. It might come to that...those soldiers would be smart to be willing to die rather than face the wrath of a Demon they disobeyed. There *were* things worse than death.

Affixing the charm to the back of his amulet, he continued to walk further and further away. He would need it now, to speak to the orcs and to remain constantly vigilant. He would be the main protection of the host as they drove through hostile territory, relying on his size and power to defend the group and destroy their adversaries. He got out far enough, then came to a stop and raised his head and closed his eyes, feeling the sun and wind on his face. This was going to *hurt*. He knew that already...but he wasn’t sure if he could do this. Shapeshifting was actually a minor power, very easy to do, but with his injuries, he wasn’t sure. The power was willing, but it was still not fully healed.

He had to do it, and wasting time wasn’t getting it done.

He started at his paws. Fire appeared around his paws as he suddenly held them out and over his head, then snapped his wings out. Just producing fire hurt, and the twinge in his wings told him that the next step wasn’t going to be very easy. He concentrated on his wings, and started making them expand. The pain was immediate and sharp, blooming throughout each wing, even creeping into his back as he commanded them to grow. Every finger they grew out caused him more and more pain, but he blocked it out and continued, going more slowly to prevent hurting something, out further and further until they were ten times their normal size, fiery sails rising from his back and casting shade across large swaths of land behind him. Once that was done, he put the image of the dragon in his mind, and willed the change to occur.

It was like someone stuck a sword in his back. Tarrin sucked in his breath, his eyes losing focus as his wings shuddered, then exploded into discordant flame. He focused through that sudden agony, keeping the dragon firmly in his thoughts as he felt the flame eat into his flesh, flame that was incomplete, almost tainted by injury, corrupting him and causing pain wherever it touched. But if anything his many years and many trials had

taught him, it was the ability to function through pain. He blotted the pain out, concentrated on what had to be done. He guided the injured power through its task, infusing him until his physical form was consumed by the flame, until he became a being of pure flame, unfettered by physical form.

The flame of his form expanded, grew, billowed out, though the motion of every lick of flame in that amalgam caused striking pain to boil through him. The movements weren't fluid and graceful as they usually were, they were sharp, erratic, almost jagged in the way the fire expanded, a reflection of the difficulty that he was having trying to do it. But he pushed on through the pain, and the fire got bigger, and bigger, and bigger. The limbs pushed out from the mass, as did the long, graceful neck and the whip-like tail, growing, expanding in discordant surges from this place and that, until the fireform was complete. With a wrench that would have made him suck in his breath were he in a physical form, he enacted the final change.

With a billow of flame away from the construct, flesh and blood and bone came into being beneath that fiery layer, and the fire was thrust away like a butterfly discarding a cocoon. The fire billowed out, revealing the massive form of a gold dragon as it evaporated away. The change was complete, he could feel it, but his entire body throbbed with jags of intense pain, so intense that he had to lower his head nearly to the ground and try to recover from it. Panting heavily, his breathing blasting waves of stiff wind across the tall grass, the titanic body of the gold dragon had replaced Tarrin's humanoid form. He blew out his breath one final time as the last of the pain faded, then he turned with two steps and craned his long neck to face the others, regarding them with massive amber eyes. He could sense immediately a fundamental shift in the power inside him, relegating it to a much dormant state. He couldn't use his *divine* abilities when shapeshifted, and as a result, that power was buried deeply within him, where he would have great difficulty accessing it. He realized that as long as he was shifted out of his normal form, the rate at which that power would heal, would become whole once again, would be much slower. But he saw little choice in the matter. They were only about twenty, and already there was a force of over one hundred to the west, and even more to the north. They *needed* him in this form, where his monstrous size would be a weapon against which the armies of the One could not stand. With him like this, he could crush a hundred soldiers in a matter of moments, if they even dared attack him at all. They'd probably run away.

Lorak and Skord were absolutely awestruck, and their horses shied nervously until Haley quickly rode up and started assuring them in the manner a Druid used to talk to animals that this massive form was no threat to them. They gaped at Tarrin like he was some kind of god fallen from the heavens, and Skord was physically trembling. "Well, Lorak, do you think I'm big enough now?" he asked pointedly.

"Amazing!" Skord finally managed to say, looking at Fireflash, and then back to Tarrin.

"Are you unhurt, dear one?" Dolanna asked in a conversational tone.

"It hurt plenty, but I didn't break anything," he answered. "I won't be changing back for a few days. I won't go through that every time I need this form. I'll just stay in it til I smash through the fort up in the pass."

Mist gave him a flat look, but said nothing.

“Perhaps now you understand Tarrin’s intention, Lorak,” Dolanna told him with a sly smile. “With the One’s Priests unable to use magic, what do you propose can stand in the way of something like *that*?” she asked, waving her hand at Tarrin.

“V-Very little, madam,” he agreed with a fervent nod. “But why save the orcs? What use are they to us?”

“Sometimes it’s not about what use someone is, Lorak. I’ll save the orcs because they need to be saved, and besides, I won’t let those soldiers hurt children. Not even orc children. Now, Zyri, lead me to them, the rest of you stay here.”

Spreading his huge wings, he thrust into the air, creating a backdraft of wind behind him so strong it almost pushed Skord out of his saddle. Zyri’s Pegasus climbed into the air a moment later and moved up quickly behind him, then came up even with Tarrin’s huge head. He glanced at her as he climbed higher into the air, and she was staring at him with a big smile on her face. “What?” he asked in irritation.

“I think you’re amazing, Master Tarrin,” she gushed with complete insincerity, obviously making fun of Lorak.

“Oh, get ahead of me and lead the way,” he told her waspishly. “And stay out of the way when I get there, young lady!”

“Yes, Master Tarrin!” she called over her shoulder as the Pegasus rather reluctantly got in front of him, seemingly afraid Tarrin would lunge forward and bite off everything between its wings. That fear clashed with the Pegasus’ understanding that it was Tarrin’s voice coming from that massive creature, and thus was a friend.

It didn’t take them long to reach the scene. Tarrin banked over and ran parallel to them but traveling the opposite direction, then looked over. They were indeed orcs, being chased by about a hundred men on horseback, who were now only about a minute behind the slowest of the running tribe. Tarrin could see that they were going slow on purpose, driving the terrified band of greenish-skinned humanoids before them, pushing them ahead for an easy kill with the ambushing party on the far side. He saw a few of the men look up and point, and he saw that Zyri was still flying in the same direction, soaring over the area and in sight of the mounted church soldiers, but not the orcs...she was behind them.

Bless that little girl, she was holding the attention of the men while the much larger Tarrin veered off and maneuvered for a clean pass at them. He contemplated just incinerating them from the air, but he wanted to save his fire. His gas sacks were completely full, he had six or seven good blasts in him, but there were other enemies out and about, and he might need that for another group of soldiers later on. If he landed, he’d have to deal with them with claws and teeth and tail, but that wouldn’t be all that hard. The only danger they really posed to him was if one had a bow and got a lucky shot in on his eye. It would take a lance driven by a man charging at full speed on a horse to put enough force behind it to penetrate his scales, and even then it wouldn’t go very deep...if they could hit anything other than his legs. His belly was a good twenty spans off the ground when he was standing on the earth, which wasn’t a good angle to drive a lance with force. They’d have to go for his legs and try to bring him down.

He banked around well behind the riders, nearly five longspans back from them, then came up parallel with them on the opposite side about five longspans away, getting the sun behind him. Once he had a good line, he turned sharply and, with a powerful thrust

of his wings, surged forward with a burst of speed, closing the distance like a diving falcon, rushing his prey before they took notice of him early enough to scatter.

One soldier did glance in his direction, he could see—dragons had excellent eyesight. That soldier looked back quickly, and even from that distance, he could see the look of surprise and confusion on his face. Even from that distance, it would be clear to them that whatever Tarrin was, he was flying right at them. Since they'd never seen him before, they had no idea how big he really was, and the sun glistening and reflecting off his shiny golden scales behind him would make his form hard to see clearly.

To the soldiers, he was a glittering, mesmerizing mass of sparkling gold flying out of the sun. They slowed their pursuit of the orcs, trotting to a stop to gawk at the mystifying object soaring at them, getting bigger, and bigger, and bigger...then it dawned on them that it was *too* big. And it was getting *bigger*. It blocked out the sun, and when that happened, they realized that what they were seeing was much bigger than it looked.

One soldier looked down at the grass some distance ahead of them, and he saw the shadow. The shadow of something so huge that it shaded *acres* of grass from the sun.

When he saw the realization dawn on them, he announced his presence to the orcs and his intent to attack with an earth-shaking roar, a sustained sound that sounded both reptilian and like a lion. Powerful strokes of his wings caused him to rapidly descend, skirting the ground with his legs, then a flare of his wings caused him to both ascend and slow down, then stall out and fall to the ground. The earth shook when his tremendous weight stuck the ground, but he did not stop and let them stare at him. He charged ahead in what looked like an odd lumbering gait, but it ate up the distance between him and the mounted church soldiers with frightening speed. The display was meant to terrify and intimidate, and it did exactly as Tarrin wished it to do.

Not to the men...to their horses.

Any animal would flee in terror at the sight of such a large predator bearing down on them, and the horses were no exception. Almost in perfect unison, every horse suddenly panicked, some rearing and bucking, some turning and fleeing while ignoring the commands of its rider. Men were carried away with their mounts or thrown to the ground as the horses panicked and bolted, and those men who were thrown immediately got to their feet. Some of them drew weapons, some of them just stared at him in awe and terror, but not one of them held his ground when Tarrin roared again. They turned and fled on foot, though such a thing would be total folly. Tarrin could walk faster than any of them could ever run, and the lumbering gait in which he currently moved would allow him to chase down and catch a horse with relative ease. A creature whose legs were twenty spans long could move with some tremendous speed, if only from the amount of ground each stride took.

Without breaking his stride, he trampled directly over those who had been the last to flee, crushing them into something not even identifiable. Those that weren't stepped upon were slammed by his lashing tail as he went past them as he lashed it back and forth behind him, leaving broken bodies in his wake.

"Buck your riders and run!" Tarrin bellowed at the horses as he chased them down, shifting his inflection so they would understand him in the Druid's manner. "Any horse with a rider on his back will die when I reach you! The rest of you, get out of the way!"

Horses were not stupid animals. The ones fleeing from him slowed down and immediately started thrashing, bucking, rearing, even rolling over on their riders to shed

them from their backs. The riders could understand Tarrin's dire warning, but they were no match for the panicked animals' frenzied strength and utter determination to live by getting them off their backs.

A steady stream of riderless horses flowed away from the mighty gold dragon as he charged the men they left behind down. Those men stared at the behemoth bearing down on them with terror in their eyes. Some just stood there, transfixed by terror. Some fled. Some drew their swords and shouted praises to the One and rushed forward. The only thing that they all knew in that moment was that they were all dead men. How they chose to die was the only thing remaining for them.

In moments, it was over. Tarrin showed no mercy, killing the soldiers of the One with his forepaws, smashing and stomping on them, crushing them in his jaws, killing them with blows from the tip of his tail, which moved so fast and with such force that it literally cut one man in two that took the full brunt of it at the very tip, where it moved the fastest. Three men had managed to get some distance on him while he was killing their braver or terrorized companions, then chased down the slower runners. Tarrin pulled up and reared up onto his back legs, in that squat-like upright position that dragons could assume to free up their prehensile forepaws for use. He chanted in the language of Wizard magic, his words booming across the plain as he made three precise gestures with those forepaws. He felt the magic flow into him from that *elsewhere*, and then channel into his paws to be unleashed in the form of lightning. Jagged arcs of lightning were released from his paws, raking across the ground and leaving a trail of explosions in their wake, cascading across the fleeing men and causing them to crumple to the ground in lifeless, smoking heaps.

Nodding to himself in satisfaction, Tarrin dropped back down to all fours, which caused the ground to shake, then turned to look at the orcs. They had stopped running, staring at him in unmitigated awe. That was good; he wouldn't have to chase them down. "Zyri!" he barked, looking up into the air. "Round up their horses and lead them back to the others! All of you stop!" he boomed, his voice carrying well across the grassy plain, speaking so that the horses could understand. "Follow the strange flying horse that will land and gather you up! I promise that no harm will come to you, you'll be joining the rider's herd!"

He turned and advanced on the orcs, moving more slowly, more casually, much less threatening. They just stood there, the children the closest to him, and watched him advance. "Have your chieftan or leader approach and make himself known!" Tarrin called to them. They didn't move, so he added a commanding "Now!" to that statement. He saw that the children and females were dressed in whatever filthy rags they could acquire, and the males were dressed in dirty clothes and bits and pieces of old, rusty armor. They were all carrying weapons of some sort, even the females, but it was apparent that the females had no idea how to use them. They were just carrying them to keep the tribe from losing them. He looked down at the two hundred or so orcs and decided that this many was just a bit *too* many. Discipline would certainly be a serious problem. He changed his plans quickly, before the frightened chieftan, a surprisingly large and burly fellow carrying a large, rusted battle axe, warily advanced out in front of the children, who were now with their mothers. "Who am I addressing?" he demanded.

"Kad, chieftan of da Two Fist tribe of da forest orcs," the burly orc replied in a quavering voice.

“Well, Kad, I just saved your tribe from the soldiers of the One,” Tarrin told him. “You owe me a debt.”

“Kad thinks youz can have anything youz wants,” he said fearfully, putting his axe on the ground in some kind of ritual. “Kad ain’t to be thinkin’ dat he can’t win a chief challenge against youz. Da axe of da chief be youz.”

“You’re a smart orc, Kad,” Tarrin said with grave dignity, advancing a couple of steps and lowering his head to about twenty spans over the orc, making him crane his neck up to look him in the eye. “I want the you to spread out along the plain and tell any bands of humans you see that aren’t soldiers of the One to regroup at the stronghold of the Dura.”

“Youz means the Shadows?” he asked.

Tarrin blinked. “That’s exactly who I mean,” he answered.

“Kad worked with da Shadows before,” he said, thumping his chest and relaxing a great deal. Tarrin obviously said something that made the orc chief relax...as much as one could relax when talking to someone that was over five hundred spans long. “Kad knows da sign so dat dey won’t be shooting da arrows at us or doing dat magic thing on us. Kad seen da One soldiers rushin up a’ north, Kad figured deyz was all tryin’ to get ahead of da Shadows, since dey all went and run away from da cities after da big fightin’ over in Pyros.”

Tarrin quickly reassessed his impression of this big, strong, rather pungent orc. He was *much* smarter than he seemed, even with his rather primitive language and odd dialect. The Waern back home were actually very smart, and that’s what made them the most dangerous of the Goblinoids, even more dangerous than Trolls. Kad here didn’t sound very intelligent, or look very intelligent, but Tarrin could see that he actually was a rather smart fellow.

“You have a firm grip of the situation, Kad,” Tarrin said respectfully.

“Youz a Shadow all done up magic-like into that big scaly thing?” he asked.

“No, but right now I’m helping them, because it’s in my best interest,” he answered. “The same as you’ve helped them in the past because you share a common enemy. The One.”

Kad spat. “May Gruumsh put boils on his butt and make him sit on firestone for da ever,” Kad growled.

“I see we share a similar opinion of him,” Tarrin said with a nod.

“If youz be against da Onez, youz be a friend to da Two Fist tribe of da forest orcs,” Kad proclaimed, thumping his chest again.

“That’s nice to hear. I want the you to try to find groups of Shadows and warn them, and tell them to take the pass that’s the fastest route over the mountains and to the stronghold of the Dura. That’s the way we’re going, so they’ll encounter the least resistance if they follow the path I take. I’ll make sure there’s nothing left behind to challenge them.”

“Da fastest route to da shorties, Kad gots it,” he repeated with a nod. “Da Two Fist tribe of da forest orcs will do honor to da debt wez owe youz,” he said proudly, thumping his chest once more. “Kad will have da tribe spread out and warn da Shadows and send them da way dey needs to be goin’. Iz just tell dem to follow dese big footprints,” he said, pointing at the ground. “Deyz *can’t* miss dem.”

“Very good. I’ll take my leave now. Those soldiers chasing you were driving you towards a larger force. I’m going to go kill them.”

“Youz saved da Two Fist tribe of da forest orcs. Youz want orc warriors to bash da heads of da One soldiers with youz? Iz send youz lots of warriors.”

“Keep your warriors with the tribe to protect them,” he said absently, looking south. There was...*something*. He could sense it, south of him, and moving this way. Was this another of those divine abilities? Was he sensing a Demon? Or maybe the Avatar of a god? Whatever it was, it was very powerful, and it tugged at him in an odd way. No...this was a *familiar* sensation. This was—

Telven? Could it be Telven? That was the only creature on this world with which he was familiar that wasn’t with him. Were they sending him with an army of the One, along with Hunters, using the boy’s knowledge of Tarrin to help try to capture or destroy him? He wasn’t sure. But whatever it was, it was far away. Very far away.

“Be careful and be well, Chief Kad,” Tarrin told him, glancing south again. “I leave you now.”

Odd, that, he mused as he turned around and ambled towards the northwest, towards the others, as Zyri finished rounding up the horses she could get and had her Pegasus lead them. She’d managed to get about sixty of them, following behind the Pegasus and to the group, where they would be relieved of their gear and burdens, the best chosen to be reserve mounts, and the rest released. Strange that he felt the need to be so...so *formal*. Perhaps it was part of being a gold dragon, he wasn’t sure.

The walk back to longer than the flight over, so it took nearly an hour for him to get back to the others. They had taken the time to build some fires for cooking, and Azakar and Ulger were engaged in an informal training session with Skord’s guards...which meant that they were beating them senseless and showing them why they were getting beaten senseless. Tarrin ushered Zyri ahead with the horses, then stopped and sat on his haunches outside the camp, craning his neck over and down so he was close enough to hear them. All of the Shadows watched Tarrin *very* nervously, and they were still a bit wild-eyed. Sarraya flitted up and landed on his nose, staring into his eyes with a broad grin on her face. Sarraya, who delighted in shocking people, probably thought that Tarrin had done the grandest thing in the world.

“A nice catch, Tarrin,” Ulger said professionally as he and Azakar came over, sheathing their swords. “Some of these horses are very good animals.”

“Well, you’ll have to deprogram them. Gods only know, the Priests of the One probably made them attend church services,” Haley said with a slight smile.

“Strip them of anything you want and pick the good ones to be added to our train,” Tarrin ordered. “And be ready to move. I want to get to that other group of soldiers right around sunset. I don’t want to camp with so many enemies so close. Let’s just go kill them, then camp.”

“Why sunset?” Lorak asked.

“Because you *never* fight a Demon at night,” he replied bluntly. “Trust me. I know.”

Tarrin watched as Skord’s men quickly started stripping horses of their saddles and packs, and his friends gathered up near him, as did the magic-users among the Shadows. Sarraya continued to sit sedately on his nose, looking down at the others from her lofty perch. “How did it go?” Ulger asked up at him conversationally.

“Oh, about as much as you’d expect,” he answered. “I landed and wiped out the church soldiers, then told that orc tribe to fan out and find groups of Shadows, and have them follow along behind us.”

“And you believed them?” Lorak asked, a bit disdainfully. “No offense, Master Tarrin, but you should not put weight in the words of an orc. You have no experience with them.”

“Chief Kad will do as I asked,” he answered evenly. “It seems he’s worked with the Shadows before. He thought I was one of you made this way by a magic spell.”

“Some of the orc bands out on the peninsula work extensively with the Shadows,” Skord mentioned. “If this orc tribe’s worked with us before, they probably *will* do as you asked, Master Tarrin.”

“I’d think that healthy fear would motivate them to obey,” Sarraya giggled.

“Probably,” Ulger nodded.

“How do those soldiers look?” Tarrin asked.

“Well, they’ve had solid fundamental training,” Ulger answered. “They’re not bad, but they’re not Knights either. Give me a month, and I could make something out of them.”

“They do have some potential,” Azakar agreed. “They’d give a cadet a good fight.”

“Pardon my pride in my men, but they’re some of the best-trained in the Shadows,” Skord said with slight indignity. “I think they’d be more than a match for one of your trainees.”

Azakar and Ulger looked at each other. “No they wouldn’t,” they said in unison. “Most of our cadets arrive at our academy already knowing *more* than your men do. We only take the best,” Ulger explained.

“How young are these cadets?”

“Kids,” Ulger snorted. “You don’t decide you want to be a Knight when you grow up, Master Skord. You decide when you’re still hanging on your mother’s apron strings, and work for it. It’s not a job, it’s a way of life.”

“Sounds very much like one,” Neh mused. “How long do you train?”

“That depends on the cadet. Some get through the academy in just a couple of years. Some take eight years.”

“Sounds interesting,” Neh said. “We might talk more about it later, Master Ulger.”

“Are they really that good, Mistress Neh?” Skord asked her.

“I’ve seen them fight, Skord. They are that good,” she answered. “It makes me wonder just how strong the peoples of your world are in fighting,” she said to Ulger.

“We have a good reputation,” he said modestly.

“Don’t be so humble, Ulger,” Sarraya grinned. “The Knights are considered one of the best fighting groups on Sennadar. Right up there with the Ungardt, and the Wikuni, and the Legions of Arak. But they all run like girls when the Selani and the Vendari show up,” she laughed. “You want to conquer someone? That’s who you ask to do it. Too bad both races are so stuffy and tied up with their silly honor.”

“Races? They aren’t kingdoms?” Skord asked.

“Unlike your world, Sennadar is populated by *many* different races,” Dolanna told him. “Humans are but one of many, though they are the most numerous. We share our world with the Selani, the Sha’Kar, the Vendari, the Wikuni, the many races of the Woodkin. There are many distinct groups within the human race as well. The Ungardt

are much different from the Dals, who are much different from the Arakites, who are much different from my peoples, the Sharadi, who are much different from the Nyrians, who are much different than the Shou. The Ungardt are a huge strain of humans, where my own people are quite small. The Tellurians are among the most innovative, while the Zakkites are among the most savage. Even among the humans of my world, there is great diversity.”

“I would much like to visit your world some day, Mistress Dolanna,” Neh said seriously. “It sounds fascinating.”

“I would be happy to host your visit, Neh,” she said fondly. “I have been meaning to ask...why such an unusual name?”

“Neh? It’s the short version of my name, Mistress Dolanna. My true name is Nehshimmarisanna. Lorak’s full name is Lorakimitasith. My mother always called me Nehshi, because my older sister is named Nehdorimistiri.”

“Ah,” Dolanna said with a chuckle. “A short version would definitely be more useful.”

“Long names have ever been the custom of my people,” she explained. “But it became an idea run away with its own conceit. I have friends who have names it takes nearly ten seconds to speak.”

Ulger laughed. “I’d hate to see a letter on Elara. The first page would be nothing but the address.”

Tarrin looked south again as that sense of presence seemed to get stronger. No, it was like...like it was *looking* for him. It was still quite distant, so distant he could barely make any sense of what he was sensing, but he was sure that it was a familiar power, something he had encountered before, and it was approaching him...and approaching quickly.

“What is it, dear one?” Dolanna asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” he answered. “There’s something coming from the south. Something strong.”

“South? Like from Pyros?” Sarraya asked quickly.

“Actually, yes, probably from Pyros,” he agreed. “But it’s not the One. I’d know if it was. This is something different, something I’ve sensed before, something strong. But I can’t figure out for the life of me what it could be. I don’t *know* anyone from here that’s not standing right in front of me.”

“How strong?” Dolanna asked.

“Strong enough to feel it from this distance,” he replied. He shook his massive head. “I’ll worry about that later. We need to get moving. I want to destroy the enemies ahead of us before sunset, and it’s obvious that we’re not going to make it in time. So just have everyone make camp here. I’ll go take care of it.”

“Alone? They have Demons, Tarrin,” Miranda warned.

“Dragons can hurt demons,” he said in a steely tone.

“Through an expression of Druidic power which you cannot access here,” Dolanna said sharply.

“I don’t need Druidic magic,” he told her, standing up. “I have Wizard magic.”

“Which you cannot exercise while simultaneously destroying a column of armed men!” she told him angrily. “You should not do this alone, Tarrin! The size of that form does not make you invincible!”

"The men will all be dead before I touch the ground," he told her as he took a step backwards. "And there are too many of them for our forces to engage while me and Miranda take on the Demons, and our forces haven't got a chance against them if I take on the men and leave Miranda to do it herself. It's safest for everyone involved if I just go by myself."

"I strongly advise against this, dear one," she told him bluntly.

"Trust me, Dolanna," he told her calmly. "My gas sacks are completely full. I can melt the entire column with one pass."

"I cannot talk you out of this?" she asked.

He shook his head, which made Sarraya nearly fall off his snout.

"Then go quickly and be safe," she said, as Mist gave him another of those cold stares. He was racking up quite a list of things she was going to ride him about, he was sure of that. Mist usually obeyed him without question, but she did make it clear to him when she disagreed with what he was doing. Her devotion was unswerving, but not completely blind.

"What does *gas sacks* mean?" Lorak asked Dolanna.

"It means that Tarrin can breathe fire," Sarraya answered before the Sorceress could respond. "I'd ask him to demonstrate, but he'd be using up his fire. From the sound of it, he's going to strafe the One's army and burn them to ash, then turn around and land to take on the Demons."

"Just so," he agreed, shaking his head to dislodge the Faerie from his nose. "If they're gathered together, I can kill them all with one pass."

"Dear one, we know that fire does not work on Demons, but would the gas *itself* be effective?" Dolanna asked.

Tarrin was about to reply, but stopped before he made a sound and thought it over. "I really don't know," he answered. "They *do* breathe here, even if I'm not sure if they *have* to. I'm not sure if it would work on them, though. Their metablism might make them immune to it."

"What does this gas do?" Lorak asked.

"Remember what Fireflash did to Sarraya?" Miranda asked, and Lorak nodded.

"That. Fireflash is just a teensy little replica of what Tarrin is. Drakes and dragons are related."

"You could always try," Haley reasoned. "If it doesn't work, you can come around on the next pass and ignite the gas before it disperses. That would be rather spectacular," he chuckled.

"I say, it would be positively explosive, it would," Phandebrass agreed. "Instead of burning in a controlled area, it would be like setting fire to fog, it would. I say, what an idea. I must write that down, I must. Where is my book?"

"This gas burns?" Lorak asked curiously.

"Of course," Kimmie answered, as Fireflash jumped from Zyri's lap and onto Kimmie's shoulder, responding to her beckoning paw. She scratched him between the horns, which caused him to nuzzle her neck affectionately. "The gas is the component that makes the fire. When it mixes with a fluid that a dragon can inject into it, it burns in a chemical reaction, but the gas itself is highly combustible." She touched Fireflash's throat. "There's a little gland in here that injects that fluid into the gas when he breathes it out, that makes it burn. He can decide not to inject it, though, which only causes him to

breathe the gas. That's how drakes, and dragons, can breathe either fire or the gas. Gold dragons and drakes are totally immune to any kind of fire, so their fire doesn't hurt them. They're also immune to their own gas, or they'd flop over paralyzed every time they used it. Each dragon or drake is immune to the effects of its own breath weapon, be it from the dragon or not. Blues are immune to lightning, blacks immune to acid, and so on and so on."

"I'm surprised you learned that much about dragons," Tarrin told her.

"I got curious after I met Sapphire," she smiled. "Blue dragons have a large series of organs that generates a huge amount of lightning energy instead of gas sacks. Even though it's biological, those organs themselves, and your gas sacks, and any dragon's breath weapon generating organ, are *magical* in how they create it. Part of what makes dragons magic."

"Magical organs?" Lorak said, then he chuckled. "That's hard to imagine."

"*You* are a magical organ, Lorak," Miranda told him with a smile. "You wield magic. How you do it, well, that's a mystery to me, but you do. You're a living, breathing creature that generates magic, therefore you're a magical organ."

"I say, that is a most *interesting* philosophical point of view," Phandebrass said with enthusiasm.

"I'll leave you to discuss it," Tarrin told them. "Wait here. I'll be back in a while."

"Be *careful*, my mate!" Mist demanded.

"I'll be very careful, Mist," he told her. "So long as I can wipe out the humans, the Demons won't pose too much of a danger. Not all of them can fly, and the ones that can won't come after me without *really* thinking it over."

He was about to say something else, but a sudden surge of magic seemed to rush through the area, like a ghostly wind that was visible to his eyes. It swirled around him, then rushed towards his packs, which were on the ground near the Pegasi. The Pegasi seemed to sense it as well, for they whinnied and quickly bolted from the area. Tarrin took but one step forward, but he stopped dead when the air above his packs seemed to shimmer, and then a pair of figures simply *appeared* in the air over the pack, dropping to the ground lightly.

Tarrin gawked in utter astonishment. Standing there, as calmly as she pleased, was a tall, beautiful woman with dark hair and large leathery wings. Beside her was a huge dog with glowing red eyes and a coat the color of coal.

Anayi! And Forge! Anayi was wearing the leather halter that Alus favored, freeing up their wings, and sleek black leather pants. She had a polearm in her free hand, a wicked hook-billed Lochabre Axe on an eight span long pole, a vicious weapon that would be perfect for someone with the ability to fly. She still had her black-bladed sword belted on her waist, however.

"Holy Hades, is that *you*, Tarrin?" she asked with a surprised stare.

"Forge!" Kimmie shouted in surprise, jumping to her feet. The massive Hellhound bounded away from the Alu and slammed into his master, knocking her down. Kimmie laughed as the Hellhound licked her face.

"How did you find us, Anayi?" he asked in surprise. "And what are you doing here?"

"Well, why I'm here should be obvious, Tarrin," she chuckled. "That one told Kikkalli what's going on here, Kikkalli told your Goddess, your Goddess talked to my mother, and she sent me. Your Goddess has an army massed at the base of the

Skydancers, ready to march into the pass and through the gate if they're needed. She's ready to invade this world if it becomes needful, to get the souls of her children back, and to help you. I was sent in first to come find you and help you, since I can Teleport. I've been jumping this way all day, looking for you."

"What?" he asked in surprise. "She's got an army?"

"The Elder Gods are violently opposed to the idea, of course, but right now things are very crazy on Sennadar," she said. "Your Goddess had some kind of fight with the other Elder Gods, and it's gotten messy. Right now, *nobody* can use magic of any kind except the Sorcerers and the Druids. Not even magical objects work. She's withholding magic from the world as some kind of protest against something the other Elder Gods did."

Miranda laughed so hard she almost fell over, as was Haley.

"The other gods are in an absolute furor, of course, but what can they do?" she asked with a laugh. "When it comes to magic, not even the Allmother can really do anything about it. Withdrawing magic from Sennadar *does not* threaten the Balance. Their hands are tied." She looked up at him. "Now, how in the world did you manage to do that, Tarrin? That's amazing!"

"Nevermind that, silly! It's so good to *see* you!" Kimmie said happily, getting out from under Forge and hugging the Alu. Tarrin pondered what she said as Anayi greeted the others, being introduced to Haley and Ulger, and renewing her friendships with Dolanna, Mist, and Miranda.

"Hold on a second," Tarrin said, his mind racing. "Mother's fighting with the other Elder Gods?"

She nodded, pushing Miranda away from the welcoming embrace. "Nobody knows why, but your Goddess has them all by the hair. She's acting on her own, defying the will of the other Elder Gods, but like I said, what can they do? They can't really *do* anything about it. She's an Elder God, answerable only to the Allmother, and the Allmother can't do anything short of killing her to make her stop. And she won't go that far, because what the Goddess is doing doesn't threaten the Balance. The Elder Gods are in a pickle, and it's letting your Goddess act with complete impunity. Remind me never to get on your Goddess' bad side, Tarrin. She's *brutal* when she's angry."

Niami said that she would resort to that if they didn't allow him to return home. Had it really come to that? Was she now using her ultimate weapon, denying magic to the world, as leverage to extort a promise that he would be allowed to come home? He certainly hoped not. What she was doing was making her many, many enemies. The Younger Gods in particular would be *very* angry about what she was doing, for stripping their Priests of magic threatened their power directly. There would be reprisals, and since they couldn't directly avenge themselves against Niami, that meant that they would exact retribution by making life very unpleasant for the *katzh-dashi*. He certainly hoped Mother had taken steps.

And what was this other thing Anayi said? An army massing in northern Sulasia? "What's the army for, Anayi?" he asked.

"That would be fairly obvious," she answered. "If it takes an army to get you back, or an army to get the souls of her children released, your Goddess has one ready to send in. She told me to tell you that they're there to get you to Auromar if it's needed, wherever that is. And it's not just a collection of mercs, honey. Your Goddess went out

and got some *damn* good forces. Sulasian Rangers, Ungardt, Selani, the Legions, Wikuni Marines, Aeradalla, and Knights. It's being commanded by Kang."

"Kang? *The* General Kang?" Ulger asked in surprise.

"Who else would you want for such a dangerous expedition?" Anayi chuckled. "Like I said, your Goddess went out and got the *best*. They're ready to march in on a moment's notice. Now tell me, how did you *do* that? Is it a Wizard spell? Honey, I've never seen any Wizard spell that could make the change *complete*. You *are* a dragon. Like you were born and raised one! Do you have the breath weapons and the magic powers?"

He nodded. "It was something I learned to do while I was here," he told her. "A power from my wings. I just got it back this morning. My powers are still healing after my fight with the One. I took this form after getting that power back, because the size of it gives us a major advantage."

"Ah, that explains it." She looked at his monstrous form. "Good choice."

"Thank you," he said with a nod.

"Do you happen to realize that this creature standing here is a *Demon*?" Lorak asked in a strangled tone.

"Oh, there are Demons, Lorak, and there are *Demons*," Tarrin answered him. "We know what she is. And that doesn't really matter. This particular Demon is a friend. The Hellhound is Kimmie's pet."

"You consort with Demons?" he asked in shock.

"Only certain ones," he answered. "Ones who've proved we can trust them. There are certain Demons who make my world their permanent home. They're allowed to remain there by our gods so long as they behave themselves. Anayi is one of those Demons."

"That's right," she affirmed, speaking in that manner which would allow anyone to understand her. That was an ability of Demons, the ability to understand and be understood by anyone, the ability after which the charm he had was patterned. "It's just a family of Demons, human. My mother and her children. My mother serves the gods of Sennadar instead of the Demon Lords, and in return they let us live there. Think of us as a family of traitors," she winked.

"You can trust Anayi," Tarrin told him bluntly. "In a way, she's part of my family."

"Why Tarrin, what a nice thing to say," she said, her face turning a slight shade of gray as her black blood filled her cheeks. "Oh, I brought you something," she said, reaching into her belt pouch. She withdrew a small crystal bell.

Sapphire's bell.

"What is that for?" he asked, motioning for Mist to take it. She did so with a nod.

"Sapphire told me that if I didn't bring it to you, I'd regret it. I don't know about you, but I'm not crossing *that* particular dragon," she laughed. "I'm not insane. She told me to tell you that you'd know what to do with it, and you'd better do it as soon as I reached you."

He certainly knew what the bell was for. It was a way to communicate with her. By ringing the bell, it triggered a spell that allowed them to talk. But would it work across dimensions?

No, this was a *different* bell, he could see, after a closer inspection. This one had a slight bluish tinge to its crystal, where the other one was clear. She must have made one that would allow communication between worlds. He could see an aura around the bell,

one of both magic and emotion. Great emotion went into the creation of this bell, the emotion of the one who made it. Love, concern, anger, they were all present in varying measures.

"We'd better do as Sapphire wants," he said, craning his neck down close to Mist. "Go ahead, Mist. Ring it."

She did so, tapping her claw to it. The bell immediately began to glow, and that ring began to chime, and that chime turned into a shimmering echo, which in turned became a choral voice, a voice that was so infused with power that it seemed that it could not be contained by a single voice. But this time, this time Tarrin could hear what was *really* inside that choral harmony. It was not power, as he had always imagined, it was *knowledge*. It was the harmony of a single voice that spoke with the wisdom of the ages, the voice reflecting the vast mind and knowledge and experience that was a *god*.

It was the voice of Niami.

"Kitten? Are you there?" she called.

"I'm here, Mother," he answered immediately. "Did Sapphire make this for you?"

"Clever kitten, yes, *she did*," she answered. "*It's the best we could come up with on short notice. I would guess that Anayi and Forge are there. Now, I've taken the liberty of assembling a force on our side of the gate. You say the word, kitten, and I'll have them march into that world. Do you need them?*"

"They couldn't reach us, Mother," he answered. "We're a very long way from the place where that gate opens. At best they could serve to distract, but it's so far away it wouldn't really do us any good."

"*Anayi was taught a gate spell, kitten, that would let her open a sustained gate between where she is and a place she knows. If she obeyed me, she stayed at the entry area long enough to be able to open a gate back to it. You could have that army by your side in a few hours. Now, do you need them?*" she asked again.

Tarrin considered it for a long moment, then he looked to Miranda. She shook her head immediately, telling him she would be very hard pressed to get them back home. Miranda was their only way home.

"No, Mother, I don't need them," he answered, ignoring Lorak's sudden hot look. He very much wanted an army there. "But if you would, if it's possible, I'd like about fifteen to twenty of the best warriors you have there to come through the gate. We need a bit of extra manpower, but not an army."

"*If you want twenty, you get twenty, my kitten*," she said immediately. "*I have just the twenty in mind, too. Would having Vendari and Selani there cause any undue problems?*"

"We're not hiding anymore, Mother. It's not a problem."

"*Perfect. Then you're Vendari and Selani, as well as others. They'll be coming through the gate in just a few minutes. Anayi.*"

"Yes, Mistress?" she answered immediately and with great humility, dropping to one knee before the bell out of reflex.

"*Prepare to cast the spell we taught you. I'll let you know when you may begin.*"

"I'll get started immediately, Mistress," Anayi answered. She got up and rushed out away from the others, pulling two belt pouches from her waist.

"*Your voice sounds strange, dear one. Are you recovering well enough?*"

“My voice sounds strange because I’m in another form right now, Mother,” he answered.

“I’ll say!” Miranda laughed.

“Really? What form is that?”

“A dragon, Mother,” Dolanna answered. “Tarrin has regained his ability to transform into forms other than a cat.”

“Ah. Now that’s clever, my kitten. If this One is as Miranda described to Kikkalli, now that his Priests have no power, he has almost nothing left with magic capable of challenging you in that form.”

“He has Demons, Mother, and lots of them,” he said with a grunt. “In fact, he has way more than he should, and there seems to be more and more every day. His Priests must have summoned a damned *army* of them before Mist damaged his icon, and now they’re all over the place. Every patrol of his soldiers seems to have at least one Demon with it.”

“It sounds like he’s using the Demons to take the place of his Priests until he repairs his icons. They will provide the terror and the power and the communication to keep the army and the populace in check.”

“We figured something close to the same thing. It’s good to have some confirmation,” he said, watching Anayi as she carefully poured diamond dust onto the ground, making a circle.

“How goes your healing, kitten?”

“It’s going,” he replied. “Slower now that I’m in this form, but it goes. I should be mended in about fifteen days or so.”

“Is everyone well? How is Kimmie? Does Phandebrass have the spell we need with him?”

“I’m fine, Mother,” Kimmie answered.

“I say, I have the spell, Madam Goddess,” Phandebrass answered respectfully. “I’ll need five perfectly cut diamonds and two hairs from an Efreeti to cast it, but I don’t think that will be much of an issue, it won’t. I have the hairs already, and they’re the hard ones to get, they are. I only need the diamonds, I do.”

“I’ll have them sent in with the ones coming to help you,” she said immediately. *“I can whip those up on the spot.”*

“I say, capital!” Phandebrass said with a smile.

“Anayi, they’re going through now. Begin casting the spell. By the time you’re done, they should be there waiting for your gate to open.”

“As you command, Mistress,” Anayi called from where she was. She backed up a few steps then began her spell, chanting the same incantation over and over again, while articulating the same six gestures at precise intervals, intervals which changed in how they were made in relation to the words she spoke. Tarrin listened to her chant and found that he could probably repeat the incantation, but his inability to make the gestures in his current form would preclude him from casting the spell himself. He could only use about half of the Wizard spells he had memorized, where he could adapt the somatics of the spell to his paws, where the missing finger didn’t matter.

“I’ve warned them about the form you’re in at the moment, kitten,” the Goddess informed him. *“So they shouldn’t panic.”*

“That’s good, Mother,” he replied.

"Now, I'm afraid I must go. The spell Sapphire put on this is powered by her, and she's looking about ready to pass out. So I have to end this now. Give Sapphire a few days to recover, then contact me again, kitten. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

"We will mother. Send my family my love."

"I will kitten. Fare well, and good luck."

Anayi completed the spell just as the bell's glow dimmed, and a swirling vortex of magical energy rotated into existence in front of her, within the circle of diamond dust she'd poured onto the ground, which had vanished when the gate opened. The first figure appeared in silhouette on the other side of that gate, then came through. It was none other than General Kang, riding a black warhorse with heavy barding.

"I think you just lost your job, Ulger," Haley noted.

"He can have it," Ulger replied seriously.

The next figure appearing in the gate was just as big as Kang and his horse, but it was on foot. It was a Vendari. When it stepped through the gate, Tarrin gave a start of surprise. It was *Binter*! And behind him appeared another familiar Vendari, *Sisska*!

"Holy Karas, what are they doing here?" Azakar said in surprise. "They wouldn't leave Kerri and Faalken alone!"

"What *are* those things!" Neh asked in shock.

"Those, my dear, are Vendari," Phandebrass answered her. "Among the most powerful and respected warriors on Sennadar. And those two are among the best of their kind. Our chances of reaching the Dura just went up exponentially, they have."

"I'll say," Ulger chuckled. "I wonder how they managed to let themselves get talked into coming here. I thought they wouldn't leave Kerri, Rallix, and Faalken."

"We will have to ask them," Dolanna mused.

Four more Vendari ambled through the gate behind Binter and Sisska, who were already being called over. None of them looked surprised at Tarrin's appearance, but then again, they'd been warned. Behind the last of the Vendari appeared a much smaller form, stepping out of the gate. It was a Selani. Two more appeared behind him, and Tarrin gasped when he saw them, and Sarraya burst out into delighted laughter. "Oh, trees, it's going to be fun now!" she cried out. "Var and Denai!"

"That is Var and Denai?" Dolanna asked in surprise. "I thought they had a son to raise."

"Now it's getting interesting!" Sarraya laughed. "Who's coming out next? I just gotta see!"

Three more Selani came out behind his friends, who immediately started moving swiftly towards his massive form. The next form was winged, obviously Aeradalla, and when it came through, he saw that it was none other than Ariana. Six Knights trotted through behind her, and all six were known to him, since he knew virtually all the Knights. Two Amazons appeared in the gate behind them, stepping through.

Tarrin almost fell over in shock.

It was Camara Tal and Koran Tal.

"*Camara*!" Kimmie squealed in delight, jumping up and running towards her.

"You're right, Sarraya, *now* it gets interesting," Miranda laughed.

Tarrin watched in interest as the large form of Ember bounded out of the gate after her master and mistress, two fierce-looking Ungardt came out behind the Hellhound, then another form appeared.

It was the last person Tarrin *ever* expected to see come out of that gate. He wouldn't have been surprised to see Triana, or Jesmind, or one of his children, or Sapphire, or maybe even Spyder, but of all the people he thought might come that he knew, this warrior, in his strange wicker armor and gruesome masked helmet, was the last one he had thought to answer such a call.

It was *Tsukatta*.

The mysterious interdimensional traveler, a warrior without equal who went from dimension to dimension in search of the mightiest opponents against which to challenge himself, was someone that Tarrin had not seen in *years*. And yet here he was, his two *katanas* nested in the sash around his waist, carrying his strange single-edged blade affixed to the top of a staff, looking something like that Lochabre that Anayi was now sporting.

"Tsukatta," Tarrin said in surprise, bowing his head eloquently to the warrior, causing everyone to look at him. "I'm surprised to see you!"

"Tarrin-san," he said with a respectful bow in reply. "It is good to see you once more, even if you wear that fearsome shape. Have you improved your fighting art?"

"I've tried, but I'm afraid I still am no match for you, old friend," he admitted with a draconic, toothy grin.

"Well, when you leave that form, we shall test ourselves against one another and improve each other. I've missed our spars. I am overjoyed to challenge Spyder-san, but your matches were thrilling and always surprising."

"Look at you, *deshida*!" Denai said in Selani with a laugh, coming up beside the *samurai*. "Allia told us you had many tricks, but by the Holy Mother's guiding hand, that's an impressive one!"

"Denai," he said fondly. "How is Chakan?"

"He grows faster and fleeter each day," she said. "The Holy Mother favors him, I think."

"It's good to see you again, *deshida*," Var said as he reached them.

"And you too, Var," he answered. "I'm surprised you'd leave your son to come here."

"The Holy Mother bid us come, and we are faithful to her will," he answered with a simple nod. "My sister cares for Chakan while we came to help. He's in the hands of family, so he's just fine. He wanted to come."

"I would have loved to have seen him," Tarrin smiled. "Var, Denai, this is Tsukatta, a friend of mine. Tsukatta, may I present Var and Denai, very old friends."

"Ah, the Selani of which you spoke, Tarrin-san," he said, turning and bowing to them. "I've had the honor of sparring against other Selani in the host. They are amazing, and I love the challenge of it."

"They line up to fight him," Camara Tal grunted as she reached them, with her arm around Kimmie. "They can't beat him, and it drives them nuts."

Sarraya whistled. "You must be *good*, human," she said with an impressed glance up and down his form.

"I am but a student of the fighting art," he replied simply. "As are we all."

"That's a cute one, Tarrin. Sapphire's going to be mad you didn't go blue," Camara told him.

"I could if I wanted, but that would require another change, and I'm not putting myself through that again any time soon," he chuckled in reply. "I'm surprised you're here, old friend. What about Shaul?"

"Sulina is watching her," Koran Tal answered. "She'll be just fine."

"Amazons don't coddle their children with endless attention," Camara snorted. "She's weaned, so she's just fine getting to know the rest of the family. They don't need me for that, but Neme said you *do* need me, so here I am. Mother will take her out to meet her aunts, uncles, and cousins. She needs to be introduced."

"Tarrin, good to see you, son...even though you're like that," Kang said as he walked over. "Perhaps you'd be kind enough to explain our situation."

Tarrin chuckled. "Always on business, eh Kang?"

"We can chat later, right now I want to know where we stand."

"Well, where we stand is you're in charge," Tarrin told him. "Ulger had been, since he's the senior Knight."

"Oh dear," Kang said fretfully. "I have my work cut out for me."

Sarraya exploded into laughter, and Ulger gave Kang's back a vicious glare.

"You have what you brought, about fourteen soldiers, three Were-kin, and seven spellcasters to work with. What we're doing is trying to get to a stronghold over mountains to the north, and we *will* have to go through resistance. That's why I'm like this. There's an enemy force of over one hundred to the north of us, and it has Demons in with it. We were about to go attack it before Anayi found us."

"You should have asked for more troops," he said immediately.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't allow any more to come than Miranda can get home by herself. This is the limit."

"Ah. That makes sense, I suppose. I'd rather not attack a superior force, no matter how good my troops are. Numbers are numbers. Any hope of reinforcements from these others I see here? The natives?"

He nodded. "If we can find bands of them, we can absorb them into the host."

"Then that's our primary objective," he stated. "We must strengthen our forces before driving through the defenses ahead. Ariana!" he boomed. "Excuse me, Tarrin, I'll leave you to catch up with the others." He started shouting again. "I want to talk to someone from the native forces! I need information! Ariana!"

"Does he ever take a break?" Ulger asked as Kang rushed off towards the Aeradalla, who was talking to Neh, just before she got pulled aside by Kang.

"No. That's what makes him so good," Camara Tal replied.

Binter and Sisska approached, and Tarrin bowed his head to them. "You two have no idea how happy I am to see you," he said. "How did you manage coming and leaving Kerri home?"

"Szath watches over them," Binter replied. "We know you do not like Szath, so *Sashka* ordered him to watch our children and sent us instead. Besides, one of our children is also here, so we had more reason to come than just to aid you," he said, looking at Miranda.

"I've grown up a bit since then, Binter," she grinned in reply.

"You will *always* be my child, Miranda," Sisska told her bluntly. "Now that I am here, Azakar won't be so overburdened watching over both you and Dolanna."

"Back to the apron strings," Miranda sighed, which made Tarrin chuckle.

It was a joyous reunion. Tarrin got to see people he hadn't seen for a long time, and got caught up on what was going on at home. He heard about the new reforms that Keritanima was pushing, how Faalken was being taught more and more to make him a good king, the way Shaul and Chakan were growing, how Tara and Rina were growing bigger and bigger, and how Tara was getting stronger and more skilled with her Sorcery. He heard how Jasana was being trained in the fighting arts by several people, including his mother Elke, his other mother Triana, the Knights, and Allia, even as she continued her education in Druidic magic under Triana's tutelage. He watched Ember and Forge renew their friendship. He also saw that Fireflash was overjoyed to have his Demonic playmate back, quickly abandoning Zyri to romp around with Forge, and now also with Ember.

But it wasn't what they didn't talk about that concerned Tarrin, and concerned him deeply. After everyone got settled in and they camped for the night—Kang wasn't about to order an assault on the forces ahead until he had a measure of what he was working with—Tarrin laid near their encampment, the charm affixed to his amulet before he shapeshifted still operating, which kept him awake. It gave him time to think, and he needed that right now.

Niami...what was she thinking? She'd jumped off the ship this time, there just was no other explanation. Sure, he was happy she was willing to fight for him, but she was now getting into a direct confrontation with the other Elder Gods, over him. She shouldn't be *doing* that. She was making them all very angry, and what was more, she was really infuriating the Younger Gods by denying magic to the world, magic they needed to help maintain the faith of their followers.

This was not a fight she should be fighting. Not now. Not when his return wasn't imminent. She was just grinding their noses in it, and the longer she kept it up, the more hatred she was going to generate.

Besides, he knew what this was going to cost her. The kinship of her brothers and sisters, the trust of her mother and father, and the respect of the Younger Gods. She was ostracizing herself, and doing it over just one mortal. It shouldn't be happening. She shouldn't be doing this.

He knew she was doing it because she cared for him, because she felt that they had given him an exceptionally raw deal. He saves the world, saves all of them, and they repay him by exiling him to this other world, passing him off to a new set of gods to let *them* deal with him. It was cold, it was cruel, it was inconsiderate, and it was downright rude. Granted, they were trying to stop him from doing what he did in Pyros, stop him from doing what he was going to do to the One. They were getting him off of Sennadar before he caused some major destruction, foisting him off into this world, where he could rampage and destroy all he liked because he wasn't *their* problem anymore. But still...not even to give him a *chance*, that's what really hurt. Before he came here, the only destruction he had wrought had been at Suld, and that was because of the shadow of Val...which *they* had arranged for him to battle.

It was completely unfair, but Niami...what she was doing, she shouldn't be doing it. He couldn't let her destroy her position among the gods over him. Couldn't she see that? Couldn't she see that if she did force them to let him come home, it wasn't going to stop? They would come after him, they would come after his family, they would come after his

friends, they would do anything to get rid of him, even resorting to the very same tactics that Val and the One had stooped to. He knew they would go after his children to make him leave. He knew in a moment of awful clarity that they would endlessly—

He sighed, bowing his head and closing his eyes. Of course. It would *never* stop. He would never have peace. They would watch him, they would shadow him, and whenever they thought they could manage it, they would try to get rid of him. That wouldn't be a direct fight, they wouldn't risk that, but they'd push him, try to trick him, harass him, endlessly aggravate him, try to force him out. And if they *did* think they could manage it, they'd try to kill him. Niami was fighting a single battle, but she wasn't looking at the horizon. He was, he could see the dark clouds massed there.

The Elder Gods would not let him come home. And if he did manage it, they would never rest until he was gone. He was Entropy, just like Val was, an aleax, chaos incarnate. A destroyer. An *abomination*. He was everything that they feared, and they would never—*ever*—leave him be. When they looked at him, they saw Val. When they looked at him, they simply saw Val with a new face. That he destroyed Val to save them didn't matter. When he took up the Firestaff and used it to become a god, he became everything that Val was in their eyes. He was the *new* god of destruction, the *new aleax*, the *new* manifestation of Entropy that threatened to unmake everything that Ayise had labored to create.

Sometimes he wondered why they ever let Niami restore him. Certainly they must have realized that he would be the way he was. But then again, he remembered what happened after he fought the shadow of Val, how Niami had said they had wanted him to be like Spyder, someone to call in when it was *big*. But he was *too* powerful, too much of the power he had once had was still inside him, and now they were afraid of him. They meant to get rid of him the way a blacksmith might discard a broken smithy hammer. Useful for a while, but then no longer worth keeping. No, he was more like a hunting dog...favored when he was obedient, but as soon as he started getting too big for them, they were afraid and wanted to get rid of them.

Gods forbid that their pet be strong enough to make them afraid.

Not that they didn't have a good reason. He proved in Pyros that he could be everything that they were afraid of, and even more. He had destroyed an entire city just to give Mist a chance to get at the One...and that had turned out to be not entirely successful. So, he had killed countless people just to buy himself more time, and then he would go right back after the One, destroy more, kill more, shatter this world if that was what it took in order to exact his furious retribution on the One for daring to kidnap Kimmie and do her harm. He would do it, no matter how much he knew he should not. His hatred and anger were so great that they overwhelmed his common sense, overwhelmed everything. Even now, knowing what would happen when he went back after the One, what it would do to this world, the people that it could possibly kill, he was going to do it. As soon as he was healthy enough, he was going to destroy the One...no matter what it took.

And that was why the Elder Gods were so afraid. He was proving them right, proving that they had reason to want him gone. Would it have been any different if, say, Dragor had earned the same kind of wrath that the One had in his eyes? Would he stop if this was happening at *home*, where people he knew and loved were involved, where those he loved were at risk because of his actions?

He knew himself enough to know the answer to that question. His was an endless, mighty power controlled by the mind of a mortal, with all of its flaws and shortcomings. He was a child with a burning torch playing in the hay barn...it was just a matter of time before he burned the building to the ground.

So, he was left with a decision. It was a cold, stark decision to face, affecting his entire life. More than just his life...it would affect the lives of everyone around him, everyone who knew him, everyone who loved him.

He had to decide what meant more to him.

It was a choice he did not want to have to make. But it was a choice that he must make, and must make now.

In the end, it was a choice that really was no choice at all. And that hurt him more than anything else.

You must be able to make the choices that must be made.

How many times those words had haunted him, had cursed him, had caused him to curse them. But they had never ringed truer in his mind than they did right at that moment.

He had to put a stop to it. He had to stop Niami from destroying herself. He had to protect her...and there was only way way he could do that. She was risking everything for him, risking eternal hatred and excommunication from her own family to fight for him. He just couldn't let her do that.

And he had to protect his own children. Those four beautiful children.

He had once told Niami that he would destroy the world rather than lose his daughter. But what would he do when faced with the grim reality that *he* was her greatest danger?

It was so unfair...but then again, life never really was about being fair. Not to his experience, anyway.

He looked down on the camp. Well, there was still much to do. He had friends to catch up with, a fortress to reach, souls to free, Dwarves to meet, a god to kill, and there were any number of little things he wanted tied up before the day he had to live with that decision came. That day would come, and it would come soon...he just had to enjoy the days that were left like each one was his last, for he knew that the memories he made in the coming rides would be among the last he would have that would be happy ones.

He had to make the most of it.

And he would.

Chapter 12

A single beat of monstrous, sail-sized wings was all that it took to keep the mighty dragon at a comfortable altitude, soaring to the southwest in a cloudless summer sky, the light of the sun glittering off shimmering golden scales. The air rushed over those scales like the caress of a lover, giving Tarrin a feeling of freedom and exhilaration that he only felt when he feet were not on the ground. It was a sensation he denied himself much too often because he had always feared the meaning of it, the power underneath that gave him that ability. He did not want to fly because he loved to fly, and flying might make him want to fly more, to come to take pleasure in a power that he had never wanted nor did he want to come to like.

Not that any of that really mattered anymore.

Tarrin soared high in the sky on a lovely summer afternoon, the air delightfully cool at that altitude as he conducted what Kang had deemed a “presence flight.” Both Tarrin and Ariana were flying far out from the main host to keep track of the movements of the soldiers of the One, and also to be seen by anyone else on the ground. Ariana was under orders to report those troop locations to Kang immediately upon her return. Tarrin was tasked to land and destroy those columns of church soldiers whenever he came across them, to prevent them from joining larger units and becoming a threat.

For four days now, Tarrin had been doing this. Kang had quickly taken complete control of the group, and had pulled them back to the south to get distance from the large column of enemy soldiers to the north. Lorak had had a conniption when Kang issued that command, but one savage look from Mist cowed him immediately. Tarrin put Kang in charge, so as far as Mist was concerned, anyone who said anything against Kang was directly challenging her mate’s decisions. Mist did *not* tolerate challenges to Tarrin’s authority. Lorak didn’t complain very long, though, after he sat in on one of Kang’s planning sessions. Lorak was *impressed* by the dark-skinned General, with his intelligence and his ability to plan. Kang didn’t intend to sit on his hands out in an open grassland for long, only long enough to locate and absorb more rag-tag groups of Shadows. His target number was fifty extra soldiers, he said he’d feel confident with that number, given the strength of some of those in the host and the heavy reinforcement the soldiers would get from magic-users.

Chief Kur of the orcs had actually helped them, for he had found one group of Shadows and sent them close enough for Ariana to spot them two days ago. She landed and, after explaining what was going on, led them back to the host, increasing their number by sixteen soldiers.

The group to the north hadn’t just been sitting idle. Whoever commanded it had sent out scouts, which the Selani promptly slaughtered. He then sent two *vrock* to fly out to the south to find out why his scouts hadn’t come back, which were promptly slaughtered by Ariana, who was just coming back from a scouting mission. They never knew what

hit them. When the Demons didn't return, he sent a skirmish force of thirty soldiers on horseback to find out what was going on to the south, but they never got within sight of the host. The Selani spotted them and signalled back, Kang sent Tarrin, and Tarrin destroyed them.

The bodies were left out purposefully. Kang wanted evidence of someone laying waste to the One's forces out where everyone could see it, as a psychological weapon against the enemy and an uplifting sight for those allied with them. Tarrin had left quite a few of those ugly battlefields all over the southern plains the way they came, as he located and destroyed any unit of the One's forces he could find, and he left them laying out for the vultures as a warning to the One's forces and a message to the Shadows: you're not alone. He was sure his huge footprints were causing all kinds of confusion and speculation, but that in itself was part of Kang's scheme. He wanted *everyone* to know about Tarrin, everyone to know about the titanic beast that was fighting against the One, a huge symbol of rebellion that might bolster more and more to join them against the One.

Tarrin could understand that, understand why keeping Tarrin a secret wasn't as good. These people had lived in terror for a very long time, terror of the One, terror of his brutal system, so they needed something tangible, something visible, something that they could *see* that looked like it was a challenge to the One, something mighty and heartening. Rebelling against the One would take more than just hope or faith, it was going to take action, and visibility. There were nothing but little villages this far north, so close to the lands of the Dura, and none around them because of the Fangwood, but he'd seen some tiny hamlets here and there, and he was certain that they'd seen him. Those would join with stories of the decimated Church forces and also the stories of when he assaulted a couple of cities in dragon form, to make them understand that this massive behemoth was out here destroying the One's forces...and under his large wings, rebels would find safety and security.

Good old Kang, never one for looking at the short term. Kang was already devising plans for assaulting the One's cities...just in case. When Tarrin explained what was going on, he immediately declared that the defeat of the One was the ultimate objective, and that was what he was working towards. Getting them to the Dura was only an intermediate objective.

Tarrin wasn't alone on today's flight. Dolanna rode on top of his head, between his horns, with ropes tied to both of the backswept horns and around her slender waist to keep her from falling off. It wasn't safe for a rider to be anywhere but right where she was; though there was plenty of space on his neck and back, between his spines, he moved his neck and back quite a bit because they were how he controlled his direction. Where a bird used its tail for control, Tarrin had to use his wings, head, and tail, and that required a bit of motion. Anyone riding between the spines on his neck or back or tail was in danger of getting crushed between them if he made a sharp turn. Though it was conceivably safe on his back to the side of his spines, just over his wingjoint, he wouldn't be able to talk to anyone when they were back there, and it would take a *lot* of rope to secure them. Because Tarrin was shapeshifted, it meant that the sword was shifted with him...so if she wanted to gather more power to fuel her Sorcery, she had to be very close to him.

There were other reasons for him bringing her along, though. Dolanna was one of those loose ends he needed to see to.

"I see something east of us, dear one," she called loudly, over the wind, in Sharadi. When they were alone, she always reverted to her native tongue. "It's too bad I won't waste the power to weave a spell to let me see better," she lamented.

Tarrin turned his head enough to look, but not enough to make him start drifting in that direction. His eyes, the eyes of an airborne predator, were very sharp. "It's a group of villagers, from that little village over there to the left of them," he answered. "Let's go pay them a visit," he said with a mischievous tilt to his voice.

"Be nice, dear one," she laughed.

"I'm not gonna swoop down on them," he explained as he banked east. "But if they have a Priest in that village, I want to do something about it."

When he got closer, he saw the village's chapel, the only stone building among the twenty or so thatch huts. The village was roughly oval in shape with only one gate in or out, the wall made of blackened logs that looked quite old. The chapel had the One's symbol on the door, but itself was only the size of a small cottage. The villagers were already starting to scramble when he descended, and it was a full rout when he landed, streaming out of the little village and the surrounding farmland. He ignored them, ambling up to the wall of the village as they screamed and ran in terror, then craned his neck over the open front gate and right up to the front door of the chapel. By gently brushing his nose forward, he managed to knock on the door.

"Dear one!" Dolanna said, then she laughed as he withdrew his head enough to see the door without straining his eyes.

To Tarrin's surprise, the door opened. He figured the people inside didn't give screaming peasants much notice. The figure that opened the door was a thin middle-aged human with graying and balding hair, wearing a black cassock with the symbol of the One sewn onto the chest. Tarrin looked at him, and there was an aura about this human that marked him as a true fanatical follower of the One, as well as a dark sense of maliciousness. This was a man who *enjoyed* hurting people.

The human wasn't entirely surprised to see him. No doubt that was because of the Quasit standing beside him, only coming up to his knee. "*You!*" he spat. "The One will hang your horns in the main cathedral, Damned one!"

"No running? No screaming and begging?" Tarrin asked conversationally.

"I will not dishonor my god by demeaning his might," he sneered. "I will fight you to my last breath, Damned one! If I die here, I die in his service!" he screamed, taking up the mace that was hanging from his belt. He pointed at Tarrin. "Attack!" he ordered his Quasit.

The Quasit wasn't that fanatical, but it didn't really matter. Tarrin turned his head sideways, opened his jaws, and bit the entire front of the chapel clean away, accompanied by a loud *crack* of shattered stone and a huge cloud of thick dust. The human Priest and his Quasit were somewhere in that mouthful of stone, wood, and thatch, but there certainly wasn't any screaming or moaning. He lifted his head up as the roof of the building, the front wall ripped out, collapsed in on itself, then tossed the mouthful of building material to the side casually. He then backed up until he was a safe distance away, turned around and started ambling out to where it would be safe to take off without the backdraft of his wings knocking down their little thatch huts.

"Dear one, do warn me next time!" Dolanna said breathlessly. "When you turned your head, you threw me against my ropes and knocked the breath out of me!"

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely as he thrust himself into the air with a powerful kick of his legs, tearing massive divots out of the ground, then his wings propelled him forward. He then began powerful wingbeats to gain altitude. "Has Haley ran out of new teas yet?" he asked.

She laughed. "Not quite yet, dear one," she answered. "But I know he can't have many more. He's not making me a new one every day now."

He was silent a moment. "You know he loves you," he said evenly.

"Yes, dear one, I know," she answered with a pensive sigh, barely audible over the wind.

"How do you feel about him?" he asked directly.

"That is a complicated issue, my friend," she answered. "I love him as a friend, certainly, but I never *allow* myself to think about him any other way, because he *is* a Were-wolf. That fact never leaves my mind, dear one. I have too much experience with Were-kin to ever drop my guard. Neither does he. He's always exquisitely careful when he's with me, not doing anything that could even in its most remote form cause me to turn. He won't even so much as blow on my tea to cool it."

"Ah." He was silent a long moment. "Well, if that wasn't in the way, how would you feel? If Haley was human?"

"Dear one, I wouldn't even attempt to think about it," she told him. "Because it's an absolute impossibility. The only possible option, should I come to love him, would be to allow him to turn me...and I won't do that. I've seen too many be destroyed by the power of Lycanthropy. You, and Kimmie, and Jula, you are very rare, and not just because you're Were-cats. I'm not so arrogantly confident in myself to think that I could handle being Were just because I have a greater understanding of them than most."

"I'm not talking about the realm of possibility, Dolanna. I'm asking *what if*. Now, *if* him being Were wasn't an issue, how would you feel about him?"

"I, I honestly don't know, dear one," she answered after a long moment, her voice uncertain. "As I said, I've never allowed myself to even explore the possibility."

"Really," he drawled.

He was absolutely sure she was blushing, though he couldn't see it. He could certainly feel her uncomfortable shifting atop his head.

"I've watched you with Haley, Dolanna," he said bluntly. "I happen to know that you *do* know."

She was silent a long time. "You are being cruel, dear one," she said in a wan voice. "Why make me consider such a thing when it is an impossibility?"

"I'm not trying to be cruel, but I wanted to hear it from you," he said, banking slightly. "If things weren't the way they were, you could find it in yourself to love Haley the way he loves you."

"It...would be possible," she said slowly.

"That's all I wanted to know," he said.

"Why ask that, dear one?"

"Because it had to be asked," he answered. "And maybe it had to be answered."

"I don't understand."

“You will,” he said cryptically, and then he would say no more, despite her repeated attempts to drag it out of him.

That was one to cross off the list.

Dolanna was pensive and a bit confused when they got back to the encampment, which was being patrolled by pairs of mounted Shadow soldiers. The tents were all raised, as well as some pavillion style open-walled tents under which many Shadows slept at night. Tarrin landed well away from it, then sidled up and lowered his head so Dolanna could get down. Every time he returned to the camp, all the Shadows gaped and gawked at him, and there was also a little bit of staring from his friends, specifically the ones who had come to help. Well, it wasn't that they were amazed he could do it, they were just really impressed with the size of the form he had assumed. Nothing about Tarrin really surprised any of his friends and family anymore.

After Dolanna slid down onto the ground, he raised his head, closed his eyes, and then willed himself to abandon his current form and return to his natural shape. He'd have to return to the dragon form before they started attacking fortified positions, Kang was planning those assaults with his dragon's size in mind, but until then he needed to be back in his base form. The body of the dragon, his golden scales seemed to dissolve into sudden flame, and then that large fiery form wavered and evaporated. Tarrin spread his wings and lightly lowered himself to the ground, amazed that the change back had been absolutely painless. His wings still ached a bit, but he could feel that they were better than they had been when he took the dragon form. The healing had been slower in that shape, but he *had* done some healing.

He shivered his wings and then folded them behind his back, then offered his paw to a surprised Dolanna after he reached her. “Dear one, why change back?”

“Because it's hard to talk to people by craning my neck over the camp,” he answered. “Besides, Mist would kill me if I stayed like that for much longer. She's been getting really short-tempered. I need to do something about that.”

Dolanna nodded as Zyri and Jal ran out of a tent, then saw him and immediately rushed towards him. “Master Tarrin, you're you again!” Zyri said breathlessly, running towards them. He reached down and scooped her up, then hooked Jal by the arm and swept him up off his feet as well. He carried a child in each arm as he moved up into the encampment, as the Shadows stared at him and whispered.

“Yup, little bit, at least for now,” he answered. “I don't need to be a dragon again until we punch through to the Dura. Now, where is Camara Tal? I need to talk to her.”

Jal blushed furiously, and Zyri laughed. “That *Ambizon* is funny,” she said.

“*Amazon*,” he corrected absently.

“I didn't know a girl could be so big,” she noted.

“Sisska is a girl,” Tarrin informed her. “She's just not human. Why the blush?” he asked Jal.

He blushed even deeper.

Zyri leaned forward and whispered in his ear. “Mistress Camara didn't have anything on under her little skirt this morning,” she told him gravely.

“She never does,” he chuckled. “I take it Jal found that out the hard way?”

Jal nodded furiously, his face a brilliant shade of scarlet.

Tarrin smiled. "You'll get used to her, Jal," he promised. "Just remember that as short as you are, if you get too close to her you're gonna see things you might not think it proper to see. Just mind where you look when she's standing up."

Zyri giggled uncontrollably.

Camara Tal was in the "command tent," the large tent that Kang had brought with him that served as his personal tent and his command center. He, Camara Tal, Binter, and Lorak were looking over a map that the last group of Shadows had in their possession when they joined. It was a large map with deep creases and dark age lines on it, showing the entire continent holding the Pyrosian Empire. "There are three citadels in pass, General Kang," Lorak was saying as Tarrin entered. "This one is the largest, the one facing the Dura's lands. This one and this one are just support for the main one. Most of the fortifications are based towards the Dura, so we'll be attacking it from behind. I believe this fort here on our side has its fortifications equally set both ways, so it might be the hardest to overwhelm."

They all looked at him for a moment, Kang standing respectfully. "Well, it's good to see you back," he said. "Any reason why you changed after three days?"

"At least this way I won't eat our entire food stores in a single day," he shrugged. "I've depopulated the local herds of elk. Camara, I need to talk to you," he said immediately.

"Sure, Tarrin," she said with a nod.

He put the children down. "Go get your chores done," he ordered. "Then we'll go for a ride or something."

"Aww," Zyri huffed, but Jal simply nodded and scurried from the tent.

"No backtalk," he said, swatting Zyri on the rump with his tail as she shuffled out of the tent.

"Yes, Master Tarrin," she sighed, then chased after her brother.

Tarrin looked at Camara, then glanced at the others. "Come walk with me a while," he told her steadily, holding the tent flap open for her.

The cloudless afternoon sun shone low in the sky as Tarrin led Camara away from it. They walked in silence as they passed through the camp, her with her hands behind her back and him walking with that slow, measured pace so she could keep up with him. When they were well enough away from the others, walking out into open grassland with the camp well behind them, he finally spoke up. "I need your help," he began, speaking in Amazon to ensure their confidentiality.

"You know you don't have to ask," she answered in kind. "What with?"

"I need you to teach me every Priest spell you know," he told her. "Even ones I have no hope of casting."

She glanced at him, a single eyebrow raised. "That's a weird request, old friend. Would you mind if I asked why?"

"Two reasons," he answered. "The One has the ability to use Priest magic. When I fight him, he might fall back on it, and that means I have to be ready for it. If I can recognize his spells, I'll know what's coming." He furrowed his brow in thought and worry. "What I'm about to tell you, it can't go any further. You can't tell anyone else."

"You know I can keep a secret, Tarrin."

"I know. That's why I'm talking to you instead of Miranda," he told her. "Miranda can keep a secret, but only when it suits her. If she thinks it's better for her or for someone else, she'll talk. I can't risk that."

"That's a rather fair assessment," she said with a nod.

"There's also the fact that she's in active contact with Kikkalli. What I tell Miranda, Kikkalli will find out, and that means the gods of Sennadar will find out very quickly afterward. I can't have that, not about this.

"Why is that a problem?"

"I can't tell you unless you promise it goes no further."

"You have my word as an Amazon, Tarrin, I won't repeat what you say, not even to Neme. Not unless you tell me I can, or they find out some other way and ask if I knew. I will *not* lie to my Goddess, Tarrin. Not even for you."

"Fair enough." He blew his breath out. "I can use Priest magic here," he told her.

She looked at him for a long moment. "I thought that was impossible."

"It should be," he told her. "But I'm not getting the power from Niami. I'm getting it from *me*."

"What?"

"I'm able to cast Priest spells using my *own* power," he told her. "I discovered I could the first time I fought the One."

Camara Tal mulled that over for a *very* long moment. "That shouldn't be possible. But then again, your very existence isn't supposed to be possible," she said thoughtfully. "You can grant yourself spells?"

He nodded.

"How strong?"

"I have no idea. I haven't done it since the fight with the One, and besides, I've been wounded. I couldn't do it even if I wanted to."

"Well, you *do* have some of that kind of power," she said speculatively. "If all the other gods can grant spells, then so should you."

"But I'm *not* a god, Camara," he said pointedly.

"No, you're not. But you're not granting magic to *mortals*, Tarrin. You're granting it to *yourself*. In other words, you're just using the power you've already got in a different way. It's surprising that you can do it, but it's not entirely irrational to think that you *can*."

"You just lost me, Camara," he chuckled. "That's a bit too deep for me."

"Pft," she snorted. "You understand well enough. You just don't *want* to."

"That's an odd statement."

"No it's not. Not at all." She was quiet a moment. "So, you want me to teach you everything in hopes that *you* might be able to use it," she surmised.

He nodded. "Or at least some of the stronger spells. I doubt I'd be able to cast them all." He glanced at her. "You *do* know them all, don't you?"

She gave him a withering look. "I *am* the High Priestess of Neme, Tarrin. I know spells I haven't even taught my Second. Most of them were taught to me by Neme herself."

"Then I'm talking to the right Priestess," he said. "I've seen Miranda use some pretty clever and interesting spells here, Camara. I'd never even heard of some of them. Can you cast those kinds of spells?"

"Easily," she snorted.

"It makes me wonder why you never did," he chuckled.

"Because I didn't *have* to," she answered. "Someone else was more than capable, and Neme forbids the use of her magic unless there's no other way to do something. You know that."

"I know. I know that's why the others seriously underestimate your power, old friend. You're probably the match of Miranda, at least on Sennadar."

"I doubt that," she laughed. "Miranda is Kikkalli's daughter, and Kikkalli will cheat outrageously so her favorite daughter will win."

"That's probably true," he acceded after a moment. "Can we start tomorrow?"

"I have nothing else to do," she shrugged. "How about in the morning?"

"Sounds good to me. I have a couple of other people to talk to Camara, so I'll let you go back to the meeting. How's it going?"

"Kang won't budge without at least three hundred more soldiers," she snorted derisively. "I think he's being way too cautious. With you and what we have here, we can crush anything in our way. And I do *not* like sitting in the middle of an open plain in hostile territory, just waiting for someone to come along and attack us. I feel like I'm fighting naked, wagging in the breeze and nothing a big target for anyone to take a stab at."

"That would be quite a bit of wagging," he noted idly.

"Talk about wagging, I about fell over when I saw Mist. What happened to her?"

"She was short because she wanted to be short," he answered. "She decided she wanted to be her proper size, so she grew. We're shapeshifters, Camara, what we want actually affects how we look, to some degree. Mist's resistance to the idea of growing effectively stunted her growth."

"Interesting," she said, tapping a finger to her cheek thoughtfully. "You're free to sit in."

"No thanks," he said with a slight frown. "Were-cats aren't the kind that make plans."

"I've noticed," she grinned.

His next stop was at the large tent that belonged to Phandebrass. The Wizard was there with Kimmie and two Shadows who were Wizards, talking about something magical, no doubt. They all stopped talking when he ducked his way inside, and Kimmie rushed up and gave him a wordless hug. He returned it fondly, then kept an arm around her while he looked at the other two unknown humans. "Out," he said immediately.

They glanced at Phandebrass, who nodded simply. "I say, we'll continue this later," he told them. "What can I do for you, Tarrin?"

He took out his Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook and spoke the word that caused it to become its full size. "I want you to put every spell you can find into this book that's not already there," he told him, putting it on the folding table in front of the Wizard, dropping it on top of a bunch of scrolls and parchments. "You said you were down to your last set of books, so I want a backup copy in case something happens."

"I say, that's a wise idea, that is," he said with a nod. "How much space is left in it?"

"Nearly seven hundred pages," he answered.

Phandebrass fretted. "That might not be enough," he warned. "But I'll do my best, I can."

"Make it work," he said calmly.

“I’ll start on it—“

“Right now,” he said. “And you have at least three others who can help you. I want it done by sunset the day after tomorrow.”

“Two days?” Phandebrass said with a gape. “I say, Tarrin, that’s just not possible, it’s not.”

“You’re going to look funny without legs, Phandebrass.”

Phandebrass wasn’t sure whether to laugh or not, judging by his expression, but he finally decided against tempting fate and nodded gravely.

“I’ve put most of the book together, I can help a great deal,” Kimmie told them. “I know what’s in it and what’s not.”

“I say, that will help a great deal,” he said with a relieved nod.

“All his spells, dear?” she asked him.

“All of them,” he said adamantly.

“Alright then. Out of the tent, you’re in the way,” she said, shooing him out with her paws. “I’ll bring it to you when it’s done. Oh, and send Arkem and Rorace out to gather the rest of the Wizards and have them join us. This little collective effort might be useful for us all.”

“I say, it just might,” Phandebrass nodded.

Tarrin left them to their work. He knew that they’d never finish, but he also didn’t want them holding the army up if they decided to march, so he gave them an impossible deadline.

Fireflash zipped in a tight circle around him, then landed on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck briefly before flying off towards the two Hellhounds. Ember and Forge were playing like little puppies out away from the encampment, not far from the horses and Pegasi, amusing themselves while they guarded the mounts. Anayi was high in the air above the camp, scouting out any threats long before they reached them, while Ariana was out trying to find out Shadows on the plains. Tarrin took one look at them and knew that a new pack of Hellhounds was already imminent, and he wondered idly if the puppies would be true Hellhounds, or would have the altered temperament of their parents.

Academic, he supposed. They’d find out in a few months.

The last order of business for a while was, of course, Mist. He found her in their tent, and Miranda was with her. They were making new clothes for Jal and Zyri—more to the point, Miranda was doing the sewing while Mist did what she could to help. “Well, you’re looking short, Tarrin,” Miranda chuckled as he came in.

“I don’t need that for a while,” he answered. “Besides, it’s rather lonely like that.”

Miranda gave just one look at the sudden expectant look on Mist’s face, then smiled impishly. “I’ll clear out then,” she said delicately. “I’d rather not be assaulted by flying shreds of cloth.”

“That’s smart,” Tarrin told her absently as he took Mist’s paws. “I’m sorry I’ve been distant,” he told her. “But it was necessary.”

“I’m patient, my mate,” she told him as Miranda withdrew from the tent. “You’re not going back to that shape until you have to, are you?”

He shook his head. “No, I need time to heal, and I do it faster this way,” he answered her. “Besides, I missed you, my mate. Now, if you didn’t miss me, I can just go right back,” he threatened, moving to turn around.

Mist laughed and pulled him into an embrace. “Don’t be an idiot,” she told him before giving him a passionate kiss.

The next couple of days passed quickly for Tarrin. What was supposed to be a morning session with Camara Tal became an all day affair, and it carried over to the next day. She already knew which Priest spells he knew, because she taught them to him, so she simply picked up where she’d left off so many years ago. When he wasn’t with Camara, he spent time with Mist, or the children, or caught up more with his friends who had come to the Pyrosian continent to help him.

Some things were just too funny. No matter how much they tried, the Selani just could not best Tsukatta. None of them could come close to him, and in a way, that drove them absolutely insane. Not that he was better than them, but that he was a *human*. Selani, like most races, had a kind of racial superiority about them. It wasn’t quite prejudice, but Selani *expected* to be able to beat any human in a fair fight. In Tsukatta they had come across a human that they could not defeat, and that just rubbed them raw. They weren’t mean or snide or petty, Selani honor wouldn’t permit that, but Tarrin, who had a very intimate understanding of the workings of the Selani mind, could tell that Tsukatta really, really, *really* irritated them. One Selani, Veni, almost had an obsession with Tsukatta. She challenged him an average of three times a day, and was soundly thrashed every single time. Frustration had a great deal to do with that, he could tell, for Veni was a better warrior than she showed in her matches against him. But she kept coming, determined to defeat the human. Tsukatta confided that first night after he started learning from Camara Tal that he could see the potential in her as well, and was humiliating her on purpose to see if she could overcome her aggravation and frustration and show him the potential he could see in her. Tsukatta was one of the greatest warriors that Tarrin had ever seen in his life, as skilled and formidable as Allia, but his humility was just as boundless, as was his compassion and his desire to become better. Tsukatta was an excellent teacher, for he wanted others to reach their full potential, and worked to make that come about...often without them realizing it. Tsukatta was much like Phandebrass in his quest to better himself, but where Phandebrass concentrated on learning, Tsukatta focused on perfecting his fighting art.

Probably the most interesting thing he’d seen was when Tsukatta tried himself against Binter. Tsukatta had sparred against some of the other Vendari and had defeated them, but as good as he was, he wasn’t grown up enough to play with the Wikuni Queen’s personal bodyguard. Binter was, quite simply, the best the Vendari had. That was why he was the Queen’s protector. The match was, to Tsukatta’s credit, the longest he had had against anyone. Tsukatta and Binter were probably equal in skill, training, and experience, making it a totally fair fight, but in the end Binter simply wore the human out. Vendari were reptilian and were actually cold-blooded, and that lent to them an endurance that no warm-blooded animal could match. Their metabolisms were able to pump all the energy into the muscles rather than trying to fuel a draining biological temperature regulating system. Binter beat Tsukatta by exhausting him, adapting a nearly frenzied pace of fighting and maintaining it longer than any human or Selani could ever hope to maintain. That was the true secret of the Vendari; the swing of Binter’s hammer at the beginning of a fight would be just as fast and powerful four hours later, a feat of endurance no warm-blooded mammal could duplicate. Not even *Tarrin*, with his Were

gifts of regeneration, could maintain that level of activity for such a long time without tiring. Binter came at Tsukatta so hard and fast that the *samurai* had to match that fury, and he simply kept at it until Tsukatta faltered.

It wasn't short, that was for sure. Tsukatta was amazingly conditioned for a human, able to fight for hours at a time...which Tarrin had personally experienced in his spars against the wandering extra-dimensional warrior. It took Binter nearly an hour to finally exhaust the human, one hour of the most dazzling display of fighting that the world of the Pyrosians had ever seen. Both of them had fought without a single error, but Tsukatta's human limits were what allowed Binter to finally defeat him. Tsukatta simply could not keep up such an extreme pace for so long. It would be like running as fast as one could possibly run for an hour, and never slowing down a bit.

The Selani were amazed, the Vendari simply shrugged and went on about their business, but it was Tsukatta who amused Tarrin. After the fight, he simply laughed, accepted Binter's hand to get back up off the ground, and said in a panting wheeze "very well done, Binter-san. I will work harder, and hope to present a greater challenge to you the next time."

If anything, Tsukatta defined the word *tenacious*. He still strove to beat Spyder in a fight, and he would not stop until he did so. Tarrin had no doubt he would work to improve his already phenomenal endurance to better face Binter, or not make the mistake of trying to outlast a Vendari in combat again, going for the quick victory. That was the key to beating a Vendari...if you couldn't take one down in the first ten minutes, you were going to lose. That was just assuming you had the martial skill to last that long against a Vendari, of course.

The task that Tarrin had set before Phandebrass and the other Wizards had caused them to virtually disappear. All nine of them, including Anayi, labored in the tent Phandebrass used, working in shifts to transcribe the spells that Kimmie had earmarked into Tarrin's book. He wasn't sure if they'd succeed, but they were certainly going to try.

After spending most of the second day with Camara, he left her to go see what more Kang had planned since they began, and took Zyri and Jal for a flight on the Pegasi. Both of them had become rather good at flying on the backs of the winged horses, but Tarrin flew under his own power along with them as they soared to the southwest, along a route that Tarrin had already taken. He was taking them someplace particular, a small lake he'd seen during one of his scouting flights. It didn't take them long to get there, a small lake with reed-covered shores on all sides but one, where the elk and other roaming plain animals had trampled down an entrance to the water. The old ruins of a farm were built near that lake, as well as a rickety old dock that extended out into the water in the middle of that open lakeshore. In times past, a farmer had built that dock for a small fishing boat, but what had happened to them was no a mystery lost to the ages.

The lake was their destination, and the objective was some serious fishing. Tarrin had fashioned poles for them before coming, stowing them in the *elsewhere* during the journey, so all he had to do was scrounge up some worms for the hooks that Dolanna had had the foresight to add to their list of goods, and they were all sitting on the end of the dock, fishing poles in hand and lines in the water. Jal was more interested in the little fish visible under their feet than paying attention to his pole, watching the fish through the clear water. After watching them a while, he used his Elemental powers against the water, causing it to move according to his will, scooping up a startled fish and pulling it

through a tube of water he raised up from the surface of the lake, and holding it at the bulbous end. He gestured at the fish proudly, with a grin, but Tarrin chuckled and pointed at the lake's surface. "No cheating," he instructed. "Put it back."

The boy did as he was told, carefully pushing the startled fish back down into the lake, then releasing his control of the water. It dropped back down into the lake with a sudden splash, spraying all three of them.

"Yai!" Zyri gasped, flinching away from the spray. "Jal!"

He gave his sister a contrite look...one that was completely insincere. He meant to do that.

"I'm not fishing either of you out of the lake," he warned in a serene voice, staring out over the small lake's surface.

They fished in silence for a while longer, as the sun crept lower and lower in the sky, and he glanced at the two children. "You know, this lake reminds me a little of a pond not far from my house," he told them. "It's not nearly this big, though. It's in a little valley over the hill from my house, and the water is so clear you can see the bottom, even in the middle. There are these little fish with blue stripes on them that glow with a faint light in the night in the pond, making it look like there are fireflies swimming in the water. It's really pretty. I loved to go there with my children, at least when they were still little."

"It sounds pretty," Zyri said.

He was quiet a moment longer. "You two know that not long from now, we're going to go back," he told them. "I told you that I'd keep you until we found a new place for you. Well, here we are almost finished here, and we still haven't found anywhere for you. So you two need to think about something."

"What, Master Tarrin?"

"You have to decide what you want to do," he told her. "Before we go, you have to decide where it is you want to be. If you want to stay here, then we'll do our best to find someone who will take very good care of you. But if you don't want to stay here, well, that's not a problem. I've talked to Mist, and she's already got it into her head that you and Jal are as good as her own children. That means that if you really want to go back with us, you're more than welcome to. I have a really big house that's standing empty right now, and there's more than enough room for both of you. If you want to come live with me and Mist, we'd be glad to have you."

Zyri gave a little squeal and was suddenly in Tarrin's lap, hugging him tightly. "I want to go with you!" she told him ecstatically.

Tarrin chuckled, putting a paw on her back. "Well, that didn't take long for you to think over," he teased, then he looked at Jal. "Well, Jal? Do you want to think about it, or do you already know what you want to do? Mind you, you don't *have* to go just because Zyri's going. If you want to stay here, you're more than welcome to."

He smiled radiantly and pointed at Tarrin.

"Alright then, it's decided," he said. "You two are coming home with us. You'll live with me and Mist until you're old enough to be out on your own. That makes you *my* children, you know," he told them. "So I'd appreciate it if you stopped calling me *Master Tarrin*."

"What else should I call you?" Zyri asked.

"I don't know, I've always been partial to *Father*," he told her. "But if that doesn't make you comfortable, I understand. I know I can't take the place of your own father."

"Father!" Zyri cried out joyfully, hugging herself to his chest.

"Well, I guess that's not a problem after all," he chuckled as Jal scooted over and hugged his side. "Just wait until you see my house, cubs. You're going to love it. And I have—"

He stopped dead when the sense of it reached him, so much so that he immediately turned his head south, his ears picking up and swivelling in that direction. It was a discordant alteration in the very nature of this universe, a dark stain on the harmony of the material world. The voices of the other gods, always a murmur in the background to his ears, suddenly became fearful and worried, and they began to shout at him so loudly that he could nearly make out the words. The sense of that made the pit of his stomach hollow, and made his mouth go dry at the very thought of what it meant to this world, and how everything changed in the blink of an eye.

Oh, Goddess.

"Cubs," he said in a distant, almost musing voice, but one full of raw, unmitigated *fear*. "Get up. We have to go back to the camp. We have to go back right now."

"What's the matter Mas—Father?" Zyri asked.

"It's not safe here anymore," he answered. "We have to get back to the others. When we get there, I want you to pack up your tent and be ready to move, alright?"

"Yes, Father, we'll be ready," Zyri told him as she got off his lap.

Jal fished the fishing poles out of the lake with his power, and he followed along behind Tarrin and Zyri as they went back out onto the grass. A shrill whistle recalled the two Pegasi, and he hefted each child into the saddle and helped them tie themselves in.

"What's the matter, Father?" Zyri asked. "Why are you afraid?"

"The One just crossed the line, little bit," he said grimly. "He's committed the ultimate sin. We have to get to the Dura immediately. It's not safe to wait anymore."

"What happened? What did he do?" she asked.

"He's summoned a Demon Lord to this world," he answered. "You don't understand what that means, girl, and I won't explain it to you. Let's just say that it's the worst thing he could have possibly done, and leave it at that."

"Why is that so scary?" she asked.

"Honey, in two days, there's going to be an *army* of Demons rampaging across the land," he told her bluntly. "Not a few, not a dozen, not a hundred. *Thousands*. Demon Lords can summon as many Demons as they have that follow them. This Demon Lord will summon his entire Demon army here and they're going to destroy everything in their path. We have to get to the Dura. *Now*."

The Pegasi may not have felt the arrival of the Demon Lord, but they *did* understand what Tarrin was saying, and they were not stupid. They flew behind the Were-cat with the same dreadful urgency he had, getting back to the host as fast as their wings would carry them. He got about halfway there when Anayi came racing in from the west, banking around behind them and pumping her wings to catch up with them. "Tarrin!" she screamed. "Oh, Tarrin—"

"I felt it, Anayi," he said grimly. "Have you told the others yet?"

"No, I was out scouting," she told him.

"I thought you were helping Phandebrass," he said.

"I was, but Kang told me to go patrol," she answered. "We have to get back. We have to move. We can't stay in one place." She paled. "If he finds out we're here, he'll try to command me and the Hellhounds!" she said in a strangled tone. "Oh gods, Tarrin!"

"Anayi, stay with the children," he ordered, calling forth his clear crystal visor from the *elsewhere* and putting it over his eyes, protection for his eyes from the wind whenever he intended to fly very, very fast. "Guide them back to the camp. I'll go ahead and order the camp to start packing. We have to break through the citadels in the passes *before* that thing gets the majority of his army here, or he'll just have them Teleport right on top of us when we assault the citadels."

"Aye, Tarrin," she said, calming down a little.

Tarrin streaked ahead, his mind racing. What was the One thinking? Had he lost his mind? Only a maniac called forth a Demon Lord! Didn't he realize that the Demons were going to betray him the *instant* they had enough of a force here to eclipse him?

Gods, it was going to be the Blood War all over again.

The only thing he knew that was right now, getting everyone off of Pyrosia was an absolute necessity. They could not be here when the Demons broke free of the One and started rampaging across the land.

He lanced into the encampment not long before sunset and saw immediately that Forge and Ember were highly upset, pacing around Kang's tent in a frenzy of concern. "*KANG!*" Tarrin boomed in a voice so loud that only a deaf person could possibly miss it, landing not far from his tent. Both Hellhounds raced up to him and whined, pushing their heads against his stomach and side. He comforted them as best he could. "I know, I know," he told them. "We're going to move. Go to your mistresses and protect them," he ordered them. "I'll do what I can, I promise."

They gave him a sober look, then bounded off to do his bidding. Forge raced towards Phandebrass' tent, while Ember charged towards Kang's.

He didn't wait for Kang. Many of the Shadows and the warriors who had come from Sennadar were looking at him, so he addressed them directly. "Pack the camp *now!*" he shouted. "We're moving!"

They stood and stared at him in surprise.

"Didn't you hear me?" he asked, his wings flaring with sudden bright light, his eyes suddenly consumed in the unholy greenish aura that marked an angry Were-cat, and fire bursting forth from his fetlocks. "I said *pack this camp NOW!*" he boomed, pointing at the nearest human, a Shadow.

"Tarrin! Tarrin, what's wrong?" Kang called as he rushed from his tent, with most of the other "command staff" in tow behind him.

"Get this camp ready to move," he said with white-hot intensity in his voice. "We have to get to the Dura, and we have to do it *now.*"

"We need more men to—"

"*THAT WAS NOT A REQUEST!*" he shouted with such power and ferocity that Kang shrank back. The fact that his wings were now writhing, with flames dancing along the top arch, making it look like they were on fire, certainly helped ram home the impression that Tarrin was not going to brook any backtalk.

"Dear one, what goes on?" Dolanna asked as she rushed down to him, past a startled Kang.

“The One has called forth a Demon Lord,” he said in a grating voice. “We’re not safe here anymore. We’re not safe *anywhere* anymore now. We have to get to the Dura. We don’t have much time.”

Miranda gasped and put her hands over her mouth. Camara Tal closed her eyes tightly and muttered a few choice words in Amazon, and Dolanna paled and looked at Tarrin with terrified eyes.

Kang was the general of the armies of an Empire ruled by a Succubus, so he certainly understood what a Demon Lord was, and what it meant. “Miranda,” he called, looking at her, his expression grim and very, very concerned. “How fast can you cast that spell that takes us into the Astral?”

“It takes about ten minutes to set up and cast,” she answered him.

“Then get to work on it. We cannot stay here. Not now.”

“Flee? This is *my* world, General Kang,” Lorak said stiffly. “I will not abandon my home. I have fought against the One all my life, and I won’t simply turn tail and run because he’s conjured up some new kind of Demon.”

“In a year, there won’t *be* a world anymore,” Camara told him bluntly. “If your people have the spells to escape this world, then you’d damn well better tell them to use them.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Tarrin snapped at them. “This is the One’s domain, and that means Miranda can’t get us out of here. We have to get to the Dura’s lands, where the One can’t interfere.”

Miranda gasped, then nodded in understanding and agreement. “He’s right,” she affirmed. “I can’t use the Astral spell here, because the One changed his domain so those kinds of spells won’t work. I have to be on land he *doesn’t* control, so I have to get to the land held by the Dura before I can cast the spell.”

“Damn,” Kang growled. “Break camp!” he shouted. “Break camp and prepare for a forced march! Leave anything behind we don’t absolutely need!”

“Is this Demon truly that dangerous?” Lorak asked earnestly, as the camp exploded into a flurry of activity.

“Lorak, a Demon Lord can summon an *army* of Demons,” Camara Tal told him. “He’ll pretend to work with the One for a while, until he has enough of a foothold here, then he’ll turn on the One as well. And he’ll win. After he disposes of the One, he’ll have his army of Demons destroy *everything* in this world, until there’s nothing left but a barren wasteland. There are no Elder Gods in this world, and the other gods aren’t strong enough to stand against him, so that means there’s no one to oppose the Demon Lord. I’m sorry to tell you this, but this world is *doomed*. The best thing you can do right now is contact your people and tell them to get as many people into the Astral or through gates to other worlds as quickly as they can. Save as many as possible.”

“Imagine the entire world as Auromar is,” Dolanna told him. “That is what is going to happen, and I fear that there is no way to prevent it. A Demon Lord is as a god, and there is nothing that we can do. Escape is the only possible option now.”

“No,” Lorak said stubbornly. “There has to be a way. We didn’t fight this long just to lose *now*. I won’t see my people destroyed, and I won’t see them forced away from Elara. We have stood against the One for thousands of years and have persevered, even flourished, and we will not be uprooted. Not by the One, not by this Demon Lord. Run if you want, but the Elara will stay, and we will *find a way* to defeat this new threat.”

“Argue while we move,” Tarrin snapped as the children landed with Anayi close behind. “Quickly, cubs!” he called to them.

The camp was broken down in a chaotic frenzy of activity, as the soldiers worked feverishly to knock down the tents and pack them. At first Kang wanted to abandon them, but the need to keep his troops out of the weather overruled that idea. They were on the move within an hour after Tarrin’s return, riding or running at a brisk pace to the north, rushing towards the Dura’s lands. Every moment mattered now, and they knew it. They had to break through the citadels in the passes *before* the Demon Lord could get too many of his Demons into this world, or they’d be facing a vastly superior force. Tarrin, Anayi, and Ariana soared high over the host, keeping an airborne eye out for scouts or elements of the One’s army that might be moving north.

Tarrin took that time, as they marched on through sunset and continued to move by torchlight, to seriously reconsider his course of action. What he had originally planned to do was thrown out the window now. With a Demon Lord on the loose, everything was different now, and much more dangerous. He still had to get to the One and destroy his icon, however, and for more than just petty revenge now. It was now absolutely imperative to destroy the One and eradicate the main force that kept his armies together, which would also release the souls that the One had trapped on Auromar. He still had a duty here, a promise to Niami that he had made, a promise he would not break. He had promised her he would get the souls of her children back home, and he would see that through.

Getting everyone back home now was what mattered. His mate, his new cubs, his family and his friends, they had to flee now, had to escape this world. He would not let them stay here and become witness to a new Blood War.

But he would not abandon the Pyrosians either. These people had no defense, no hope, and if someone didn’t stand up to the One and this Demon Lord, they would all be systematically eradicated. He could not look at himself in a mirror ever again if he ran away from them now. In a way, this was *his* fault...had he not attacked the One, had Mist not damaged his icon at his behest, he would never have taken the drastic step of calling forth a Demon Lord. Now Tarrin had to face this counterstroke of his opponent, who had called on the power of a Demon Lord to obviously protect him, because they both knew who was going to heal first.

He thought furiously as he drifted above the host, his wings making him a beacon in the night. He had to come up with some way of taking out the One and sending the Demon Lord back to the Abyss. Usually, killing the one who summoned a Demon would send it back, but that wouldn’t work here. He’d have to *kill* the One, not just destroy his icon, and that was quite impossible. The One was in another dimension, in the Upper World, the higher plane of existence, utterly immune to anything Tarrin could do to him. The most Tarrin could do would be destroy his icon, but that wouldn’t send the Demon Lord back to the Abyss. To do that, he’d have to go to wherever the One was and kill him *there*...and he couldn’t do that. He’d be a mortal trying to destroy a god in that god’s home dimension, that was a task that defined the word *impossible*.

Alright, so banishing the Demon Lord was off the list of possibilities. His mind raced as he considered other options, the highest in his mind being to confront the Demon Lord and destroy his incarnation in this world. That would be *very* difficult, for that Demon Lord would have power that would rival his own. Dolanna wasn’t kidding when she said

it'd be as a god here, because it *would*. It would be just as strong as the One, maybe even stronger. Add the fact that he'd also have to deal with the One and whatever nasties that the Demon Lord would have summoned by then, and that was going to be a very risky proposition. He'd be fighting two beings with divine power and a horde of Demons, all at the same time.

He looked down and saw Binter and Sisska leading the host on foot, easily keeping pace with the cantering horses. Immediately behind them were the rest of the Vendari and the Selani, and Kang was behind them, with Lorak and Dolanna on one side and Camara Tal and Dolanna on the other. His other friends rode behind them, including Zyri and Jal—

—of course! That was the answer!

It wouldn't be easy to do, and it *certainly* wasn't something he wanted to do, but that was the most logical solution. It would wipe out the danger the One and the Demon Lord both posed in one fell swoop.

He thought about what had to be done before that plan of action was carried out, and realized that there was only one thing that had to be done. Much of what he already had planned fit right into this new course of action, it would just require more of him. What new that had to be done was that he had to make sure to get the host to the Dura, off of land controlled by the One, and getting them and anyone else who wanted to go off of Pyrosia. Niami would fix it so Phandebrass could open that gate, but it wouldn't be for the souls of Niami's children...Phandebrass would have to go to Auromar to do that. It would be for *them*. The souls of the *katzh-dashi* would be freed later, because right now, they were not as important as dealing with the Demon Lord was. They'd have to wait, and Phandebrass would have to open the gate for them later...though there was a chance that they'd be freed when he confronted the One. If he could destroy the One's icon, the One's power over the land would be broken, and those souls could escape on their own. Mortal souls had the power to pass into the Astral from the material plane, no matter *which* material plane it was. All he really had to do was stop the One from using his power to hold them here, preventing them from escaping.

So, he had to have Miranda contact Kikkalli and tell her to have Niami get Ayise to allow Phandebrass to open a gate into Sennadar. That was a bit convoluted, but it was what had to be done. He gauged the distance that he thought the host could travel in one day at a forced march, factored in the delay of getting past the citadels, and then added it all together to come to a figure Miranda would have to relay.

Ten days. They had ten days to get to the stronghold of the Dura. Tarrin had ten days to prepare for what must be done. It would be risky. It would be dangerous. It would be something he would very much prefer to avoid doing, because of the utter finality of it. Once it was done, it was done. There would be no going back, and his life would be at its end. It would mean sacrificing *everything*. But it had to be done. It just had to be done.

You must be able to make the choices that must be made.

He knew that it really was no choice at all...but that didn't make it any easier to bear. He accepted that choice with grim stoicism, for it had to be done. There just wasn't any other choice. As much as he hated it, detested it, despised that choice, it was a choice that was itself no choice but to choose.

But knowing it had to be done certainly didn't make it any easier to accept.

On the horizon, he saw the firelight of the One's forces that were camped there, and there were more of them now. They were directly in the path of his forces, and that meant that a battle was imminent, which would waste lots of time and just put their soldiers in needless risk. They couldn't throw men away or waste time on annoying inconveniences right now, not with what was lurking to the south.

That was easy enough to deal with.

Calling his sword forth from the *elsewhere*, he closed his paw around the hilt and felt the sword suddenly explode with hidden power, the blade erupting into bright fire. The sword certainly understood what was behind them, and understood his need. That red fire suddenly turned white as the sword did whatever it did to reach back into the realm of Sennadar and touch the Weave, and he felt that connection much more strongly than he had before. His wings immediately began changing from red to white like the filling of a goblet, as the sword caused his wings to visibly display the magical power Tarrin had stored within him.

There was no time to waste on silly deceptions or false fronts. Now was the time to use anything and everything that they had to get to the Dura, and that meant using drastic measures. That meant using Sorcery.

"Ariana, tell Kang I'm going to go ahead and clear the path," he called to the Aeradalla who was circling to his left and above him.

"Do you need help, my friend?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm going to use Sorcery," he told her. "You'll help me more by staying out of the way."

"I'll go tell him," she affirmed with a nod and sly smile, folding her wings a little and suddenly diving past him, towards the ground.

Tarrin surged forward, until the wind was stinging his eyes, he was going so fast. He paused only to fish his Selani visor out of the *elsewhere* and put it over his eyes, then he raced ahead of the host, his wings a bright beacon in the night, like he was some kind of monstrous firefly. It only took him about twenty minutes to get close enough to the One's forces to see that they had nearly five hundred here now, including at least twenty Demons, and those Demons were the ones whipping the camp up to get ready for him. They could feel him coming long before the scouts saw him.

Not that that would help them in the slightest.

Tarrin hated the idea of what he was about to do, but the rules all went out the window the instant the One called forth that Demon Lord. The only thing that mattered was getting his friends and family to the Dura, and getting them there *now*. If there was some way—

Wait. There *was* a way to get them to the Dura quickly. Tarrin had a great deal of power now with his Sorcery, if he combined that with his divine capabilities, he could get the entire host to the lands of the Dura and completely bypass the mountains and the forests beyond them. Actually, he felt completely *stupid* for not thinking of it already.

He'd Transmuted several horses into Pegasi already. Transmuting every horse in the host wouldn't be much harder. Then he could use Sorcery to create a large net, and he could carry *all* the supplies in his dragon form, as well as the Vendari. The Selani could double up with other riders on the stronger Pegasi.

Yes, that would work. They could reach the Dura in a couple of days, and then Tarrin could fulfill his last duty and discover if the Dura were either the descendents of the

Dwarves of Sennadar, or knew of them. Then Miranda could use her Astral spell to get everyone off of Pyrosia and to safety while Tarrin journeyed to the remains of Pyros and had his final confrontation with the One...and finished it, once and for all.

He suddenly banked away, and left the startled forces of the One behind. They didn't matter anymore. They meant nothing now.

He reached the host not long after that, which was moving quickly towards the force that was now behind him. He landed in front of them and simply stood and stared at them until Kang called for a halt of the formation. "Lad? Did you chase the enemy force off?" Kang asked.

He said nothing as he raised his sword, and its fire again turned white, which caused his wings to shift from red to white as well, glowing with such illumination that to the host, his form was as shadow. He opened his eyes, which glowed with an incandescent whiteness that blazed forth from the dark silhouette.

"Uh...Dolanna," Kang said hesitantly.

His feet left the ground as he rose over the force of Shadows and friends, and he immediately got to work. Every rider of a horse suddenly found himself grabbed by a glowing white strand of pure magical energy that erupted from Tarrin's wings, and physically hauled off his or her mount, or unbuckled packs and removed them from pack animals. Those strands delicately set the riders and equipment down, then struck the mounts, which caused them to blaze forth with brilliant white light.

Miranda looked around, then laughed. "Damn clever!" she called.

"What is he doing?" Kang asked her.

"He's turning them into *these*," she said, pointing at her Pegasus. "And since he's healed enough to use Sorcery, I bet he has a plan to carry the Vendari and Selani along. We're going to *fly* to the Dura! We won't have to fight our way through!"

Dolanna, however, wasn't quite as overjoyed at the idea of it as the others. She looked at Tarrin, and looked around and started counting the horses, counting the glowing reverse silhouettes who were even now starting to grow wings. "What troubles you, *shaida* Dolanna?" Var asked from beside her small Pegasus. Var and Denai often quietly shadowed Dolanna, seeing her more as a child in need of protection because of her small size and gentle demeanor than as a capable, even formidable, adult.

"I...nothing, Var," she said, glancing at Miranda. She too started counting the horses after she saw Dolanna doing it, then gave the Sorceress a sober look.

In mere moments, it was done. Every single horse was Transmuted into a Pegasus, including the pack animals...well over one hundred horses, changed at the same time. That was what of which Dolanna had taken notice, something that would have been impossible for just about any Sorcerer, except Tarrin, or Spyder. Tarrin gestured at the ground, pointing his sword at it, and pulled forth a large expanse of dirt and rock. His power shaped it, spreading it out, forming it into a large, heavy net with stout loops on each corner, then it shimmered from earth and stone and became stout, unbreakable *plaxa* fiber rope. He pulled forth another expanse of earth and rock, and this was molded into the shape of a large, wide, low-walled basket of sorts, with heavy braided ropes ending in loops.

Tarrin's glowing form backed away from them, and then his sword and wings burst forth in fire once again. The wings suddenly expanded, quadrupled in size, grew even more, then the folded around the now small form to which they were attached. The body

within melted away, succumbed to the power of the fire and became living flame, and that living flame, an entity without set form, went about the task of creating a new form to occupy. Fire grew from that central mass, flowed like water, expanding into a fireform shape of a dragon. The body was formed, then legs, head and tail quickly and smoothly grew forth, and then wings. When the fireform shape was complete, the entire construct flared with light as fire became flesh and blood and bone, and then the fire evaporated away like smoke, leaving behind the flesh and blood body of an unimaginably huge gold dragon.

"Load all the equipment into the net. I'll be carrying the Vendari and Selani and the Hellhounds in that," Tarrin said in a weary, exhausted, weakened voice, pointing at the net. "When we're ready to move, sit down in the basket and tie your legs down with the straps you'll find on the floor." He laid down on the ground, causing a small shockwave in the ground beneath their feet. "Explain to them how to strap into the saddles, Dolanna," he said, closing his eyes. "Kimmie, Phandebrass, come here."

Everyone was silent for a long moment, and the Shadows, even Lorak, seemed awestruck. None of them had *ever* seen a display of magic of that magnitude before. Kang blinked, then shook his head. "Why are you standing around?" he barked. "You heard him! Move! Sergeants, take command of your elements and get the gear loaded into the net! The faster we get done, the closer to the Dura we'll be!"

"I say, quite a demonstration, lad, it was," Phandebrass chuckled as he and Kimmie came over to him, looking up at his huge head. "What do you need?"

"I need my book," he told them. "Once we get to the Dura, how quickly can you finish it?"

"I say, give us one more hour, and we'll be finished," he said proudly. "You forgot, lad, I created Phandebrass' Amazing Duplication last year, we've been shuffling spells about using magic, we have!"

"We wanted to surprise you with it, dear," Kimmie grinned. "You didn't think we could do it. We wanted to prove you wrong."

He had indeed forgotten about that spell, and he chuckled at Kimmie. "You have it right now," he told them. "We're not moving until you finish that book. I need it." He craned his head up. "Kang!" he boomed. "Give Kimmie and Phandebrass anything they need. We're not moving until they finish the task I gave them."

"How long, lad?" he called back.

"Phandebrass says about an hour," he answered.

"Aye, that's a number I can work with," he called back. "It'll give us time to get everything packed and situated properly."

"Send the Selani out to scout," Tarrin instructed. "I was seen by some of the One's forces before I came back. They might send a skirmish force."

Tarrin let the others go about their business as Kang supervised the operation, but others wouldn't leave him in solitude. Dolanna wandered over with Var and Denai in tow, and waited patiently until her scent told him that she wasn't going to leave. He opened his eyes and looked at her, then raised his head. "What is it, Dolanna?"

"Dear one, I must ask. Do you feel...different?"

"How do you mean?"

"Do you realize that you Transmuted nearly one hundred horses at the same time?" she asked him. "And your transformation into the dragon was quick and seamless...it

caused you no pain. Are you fully healed, dear one? And how did you manage such a feat of Sorcery, even cut off from the Weave as we are?"

He blinked, then looked around, and then looked down at her. "I didn't realize it was that many," he said absently. "I just made only one spell, Dolanna, and then hit every horse with it. The Transmutation was an *effect*, not the spell itself. And as to me being better, yes, I'm almost fully healed. I'll be completely recovered in about two days in my natural shape, or maybe four in this one."

"I did not think that possible," she said quietly, tapping her chin with a slender finger. "How would you guide an *effect*? Transmutation is a very delicate art, dear one."

"It's hard to explain," he told her. "I guess I shouldn't say it's an effect, I should say it's more like I made the spell once, then just released it into each horse as I touched it without making me have to weave the core spell again. I created the spell so it would break down its weaving in the proper order on its own, so I wouldn't have to guide each spell. Cascading a weave isn't easy, but it's more than doable."

"I do not think I could do it," she told him.

"I think you could," he told her. "If I can do it, you can do it. You're much better than I am, Dolanna."

She laughed. "I think you flatter me, dear one," she told him.

"*Deshida*, a favor?" Denai asked.

"Anything, *deshaida*," Tarrin told her immediately.

"We saw *shaida* Dolanna riding on your head. Might I do the same when we move?"

He chuckled, a deep sound like the pumping of a vast bellows. Denai would definitely ask to do something like that, since it was new and exciting. Knowing her, she'd cut her ropes once they were airborne and try to ride standing on his head. "Of course," he told her. "Would you like to ride, Var? There's room for at least four between my horns."

"I would be honored," he said. "And I would like to ride with your adopted children. It is only right that we come to know the family of a *deshida*."

"You might have trouble getting them from Mist," he chuckled.

"Then she should also ride with us. We do not know your new mate very well. That is wrong."

"It might get a bit crowded with five," he said. "But as long as you don't mind being a little cramped, it should be alright. None of you will fall, that's for sure. Just be sure to ask Mist. Now. She doesn't like surprises."

"I will ask immediately, *deshida*," Var said with a nod, then he turned and stalked off.

Mist didn't mind at all. In fact, she seemed to warm to the idea immediately. That surprised Tarrin a little, because Var and Denai were strangers to her, and her ferality wouldn't usually allow her to get into a position like being tied to them with ropes while riding on the top of a dragon's head. Azakar was called over to help fashion a kind of harness for everyone, since he was so good with horses and saddles, and Haley drifted over and started helping as well. The combined wisdom of Haley and Azakar produced a flat leather skirt of sorts that would go underneath everyone, on top of Tarrin's scales, with several sturdy straps to tie each person down. There would be two rows on that skirt, two in the front and three in the back. Stout leather thongs would be tied between his horns that would go between the two rows, to which each person would tie a leather strap around their waist, and two thongs would be tied to short spikes that grew on the

ridge above his eyes that would trail back to the people in the front row, to give them something to hold onto with their hands. Finally, each person would have a single rope that would be tied to both of each person's ankles and would be tied around Tarrin's neck, a final line of defense against falling in case both the skirt and the leather thongs failed. Tarrin used Sorcery to create the design, and it took Haley, Azakar, Ulger, Mist, and Var and Denai almost a half an hour to get it tied securely onto Tarrin's head. It didn't bind at all, though it did tug just a little when he turned his head in certain ways.

"Nice," Haley said, binding the last strap securely, under the the base of his jaw.

"Mist, dig up something warm for the cubs to wear," Tarrin told her. "It's going to get cool up there."

"But *deshida*, it's the middle of summer."

"We'll be flying over mountains, Denai," he told her. "The higher you go, the cooler the air gets. Add that to the fact that we'll be flying quickly, so there's going to be a lot of wind, and you'll understand."

"Ah, like a sandstorm at night," she said, nodding.

"Exactly. Just without the sand."

"I'll go spread the word," Azakar announced. "Everyone should know what to expect."

"That is a good idea, Zak," Dolanna nodded.

"I think Miranda won't regret keeping that wool robe after all," Haley chuckled.

"She doesn't have it anymore," Tarrin said absently. "She lost it when I made her the one she has now."

"Oh yes, I forgot," he mused.

"Tarrin lad! I say, we're done!" Phandebrass shouted, running up to them holding Tarrin's spellbook in his hands. "It's complete, it is!"

"Very good," he said. "Give it to Kimmie for now. She can hold it for me until we get to the Dura."

"I say, very good. Give us a few minutes to pack our things, and we'll be ready to go, we will."

"I will tell Kang to start preparing to move out," Dolanna said. Tarrin nodded to her, and she quickly hurried over to the Arakite general.

After the skirt was secured, Tarrin allowed some of the Shadows, under Azakar's guidance, to secure the net. It would be slung so it would be cradled against his belly, using his own body to trap the gear in the net. Since he made it with Sorcery, it was already perfectly sized...all he had to do was hunker down over the net with the gear spread out atop it and allow the soldiers to slip the loops at the four main corners over the strong spikes that grew from the ridge of his back, then throw extra ropes over his back to tie it down at regular intervals to keep the supplies from shifting around too much. That exercise only took about fifteen minutes to complete, and after that, Kang ordered everyone to mount as the Vendari and Selani got into the basket, then they helped tie down Ember and Forge. They tied themselves into it securely, and Tarrin had the Knights tie the slings to the wrists of his forepaws. After that was done, he reached down with those huge forepaws and gripped the sides of the basket to get a feel for it, then picked it up to see how much weight he was going to be carrying.

Not nearly enough to make it a burden. He could do this easily.

“Everyone mount,” Tarrin called. “Make sure you’re bundled up. It might get cold up there,” he reminded them as he set his head against the ground. Var and Denai scrambled up quickly and easily, then helped Jal and Zyri up as Mist handed them up to them, then Mist climbed up herself. He felt them getting into position, tying themselves down. “Tell me when you’re ready up there,” he said quietly to those atop his head. “Is everyone ready in the basket?” he asked.

“We are secured and ready,” Binter replied immediately.

“Kang, everything I’m responsible for is ready,” he called to the general.

“Well, lad, nobody really told us how to ride these things,” he said ruefully.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just hold on. They’ll follow me. Ariana, Lorak, you’ll lead us. Lorak knows the way, and Ariana’s eyes are needed up front.”

“Aye, Tarrin,” Lorak nodded. “I can navigate using the mountain passes.”

“Anayi, you’re in the back,” he told her. “Keep an eye behind us.”

“Yes, Tarrin,” she said with a nod.

“Where is Sarraya?” he asked.

“I’m here!” she shouted from Azakar’s shoulder.

“Fireflash?” he asked.

“Kimmie has him,” Mist answered from over his eyes.

“Then when you give the word, Kang,” he prompted.

Kang nodded. “Sergeants, report when your elements are secured in their saddles and ready!” he boomed.

After about five minutes, each squad sergeant had affirmed that everyone in his element was ready to go. Tarrin used that time to instruct the Pegasi in what they were doing, and what he wanted them to do. They would follow him, and be mindful that most of them were carrying riders who had no experience with airborne movement...so they had to be rather gentle and cautious. If it came to combat in the air, they would allow those who had experience in riding Pegasi engage in that combat while the rest avoided it...meaning that Azakar, Ulger, Haley, Dolanna, Miranda, Ariana, and Anayi would be primarily responsible for protecting the host in the air. “Alright then, just hang on and let the winged horses do the flying!” the general boomed. “They’ll be following Tarrin, so they know where they’re going! Mistress Ariana, Master Lorak, if you would be so kind as to get us started?” he asked with a nod to them.

“Everyone grab onto something,” Tarrin told his riders and the people in the basket. “You’ll get jostled while I’m taking off.”

He reared up and spread his wings, then kicked away from the ground as they drove downward, creating such a force that it pulled his monstrous form high into the air. His body sank as the wings stroked upwards, then pushed him higher as they pushed down, pushing him higher and higher into the sky, until he had enough altitude and speed to make the flight smooth for those in the basket in his forepaws. He circled their makeshift camp several times along with Ariana and Lorak as they gained more and more altitude, creating a delicate ballet of aerial dance as the Pegasi joined that circling column, rising higher and higher into the sky, until Ariana and Lorak veered away from the circling column and started out to the north. Tarrin joined them after one more circling pass, with a large herd of Pegasi following behind him, allowing the mighty dragon to lead the way.

That high up, he could see the mountains. Beyond those mountains there was a forest, and beyond that forest was the lands of the Dura. Land outside the control of the

One, land where his friends and family could escape from this world. He had only to contact the Dura now, find out what happened to the Dwarves, and all the things he promised Niami would be done...after he confronted the One for a final time, a battle which would free the souls of his brothers and sisters, a battle which would destroy the One's icon, and a battle that would cripple the Demon Lord that the One had brought to this world, allowing him to be easily destroyed.

Everything would work out. Everyone he cared for would be safe, Lorak and the Elara would be able to rally their forces to crush the Demons who had already reached this world, and the damage he had done to this world would be repaired. There would be a war, there was no way to avoid that now, but at least he would give the Elara and the Shadows the advantage they needed to *win*, once the forces of the One realized that the Demons were the true enemy and joined forces to defeat them.

But for him...for him. That didn't matter anymore. He knew what had to be done. He knew what it would take. He knew what it would cost him. But it didn't matter. It had to be done, it just had to, or the world of Pyrosia would be destroyed by the dark might of the Demons.

Duty was honor, and the price of that honor was blood. Blood he had shed trying to destroy an evil god out of rage, blood he would shed facing that mad god one more time...not out of fury, but out of duty. He was the reason that Demon Lord was here, because he had failed to destroy the One the first time, and was poised to easily destroy him once he was fully healed and strong enough to face a much more injured, much weaker adversary. Everything that happened from this point forward was directly his responsibility, his fault, and he was not going to allow the Demons to destroy this world. Protecting the lands of Pyrosia was now his responsibility, his duty, and he could not turn his back on them...not now. Not when they needed him, not when they needed someone strong enough to face the wrath of a Demon Lord.

Honor and Blood.

The One would be destroyed, and the Demon Lord would have his wings clipped. He would make sure of that.

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Chapter 13

The sound of the beats of many wings, both large and small, broke the sound of the rushing air as a large flight of Pegasi kept pace with a mighty gold dragon, soaring between two mountain peaks, wings cutting through surprisingly cool, dry air. Bare rock flanked both sides of the formation as they flew between towering mountain peaks, the tops of which were still covered with snow, the span between them more than wide enough to support the full formation.

But it was what was below the flying animals that had the attention of all those who were riding upon them. Below the flyers was a carpet, a virtual *sea* of milling, shimmering, undulating humanity. The valley floor below was covered with humans wearing the red uniforms that marked them as the armies of the One, and there were *thousands* of them. They looked up at the majestic Pegasi and the overwhelmingly huge gold-scaled dragon and it caused their neat and orderly marching lines to break up and degenerate into the jumbled mass that was left in the wake of the flyers. There were other things in that mass, dark things, *evil* things...Demons. They watched those Pegasi and that dragon fly over their heads, and they did not try to intervene. They could *feel* what that dragon was, sense the radiance of divine power that surrounded the creature; they knew what he was, and they would not oppose him. Beings such as he were not things that Demons of their limited power took on in small numbers. They knew that they would stand no chance against him. They did communicate both ahead and behind that he had passed, but they took no direct action.

The formation banked along the curve of the valley, and a wondrous sight opened to their eyes. The horizon came into view with another mountain range far to the north, painted in bright light by the noontime sun, with a huge, surprisingly flat expanse of terrain between the two mountain ranges. The southern edges of that territory was covered with thick, brilliantly green and lush hardwood forest, with more and more evergreens mixed in with them as one moved further north, until the trees ended in a large grassy plain that ascended into the foothills of the mountains to the north. It would be an easy glide the rest of the way, much different than the hard climbing up the mountains, the endless corrections against buffeting crosswinds, and the up and downdrafts prevalent in the mountains.

But few were looking ahead. Most were looking down even as the armies below looked up, and they fretted. There was no way that the hundred or so of them could stand against an army that large. And unless the Dura had a major army at their disposal, they would not hold against it either.

They can feel you, Tarrin, Anayi told him as she banked over to fly close to his head, using the telepathic gifts common to her kind. In fact, the sense of you is so strong I don't think they can feel me because of it. I can hear them...they're afraid of you.

“Good,” Tarrin answered aloud, as he soared out past the two mountain peaks and saw the pass below plunge away from them. They were flying out over the slope of the mountain, and the ground retreated from them quickly, as the road through the pass turned to follow the slope of the mountainside. “Lorak, how far is it from the pass to the stronghold of the Dura?”

Lorak, who was flying just ahead of Tarrin, referred to a map that he had pinned to a flat board, so he could look at it without the wind tearing it apart. “It’s about three days on a horse. We should get there by late afternoon. We need to turn a little to the east,” he said, urging his mount to correct the course, referring to a compass in his other hand. Lorak’s ability to navigate using a map and compass had been a surprise. He would do well on any ship on the twenty seas back home. But what was more surprising was his quick adaptation to flying on the back of the Pegasus...but then again, the Pegasus was doing most of the work. He was just along for the ride.

“Very good. We’ll land in that open area between the forest and the mountains and eat, then continue on,” he commanded.

“I see it,” Lorak answered, even as his Pegasus nosed down a little to start descending.

“Ariana, Anayi,” he prompted, looking at the two winged females in turn. Anayi was flying by him, Ariana out in front of Lorak.

“Checking it out,” Ariana called, then she folded her wings slightly and started a steep descent.

The area was safe, so the host landed, wolfed down a quick meal, and rested for a brief period before taking to the air once more. They turned *back* towards the mountains to catch thermals rising in the afternoon air, then returned to the north-northeastern course.

Tarrin passed that time with the sound of Denai’s voice in his ears. She was grilling Dolanna, delving as far into Dolanna’s personal life as the Sorceress would allow her to go. It sounded like she was just being chatty, but in actuality Denai was feeling her out, trying to understand the friendship that he and Dolanna shared, and trying to fathom why he afforded the small woman so much respect. Dolanna wasn’t a warrior, was physically weaker than a Selani child, yet everyone who had seen her talk to Tarrin could tell exactly where she stood in their relationship...at the very least his equal, at the most the dominant. The Vendari in the basket held in his paws were completely silent, but it wasn’t fear. Vendari didn’t talk if there was nothing worth saying, that was all. They’d already remarked about the flight, made their comments about the two Hellhounds riding with them. That done, they passed the time in dignified silence unless answering a question or commenting upon what the Selani were talking about. The Selani with them did talk among themselves and with the Vendari, but they seemed to sense the Vendari’s preference for silence, and kept their chatter to a reasonable level.

Over the vast forest they flew, a forest with no roads, but there was definitely activity below. Ariana and Anayi pointed out large concentrations of the One’s forces under the canopy, showing that the men in the pass were just the tail end of a large army marching north to crush the Dura, and Tarrin would bet that a similar army was also marching east to destroy the last of the resistance on the peninsula that brought the Pyrosian continent close to Auromar. And once they cleared the forest, they saw the One’s armies forming up on the grassy plains, staging there while their members arrived and preparing to march

north, and led by *major* Demons. Tarrin saw no less than *ten* Glabrezu, and a large number of lesser Demons scattered among the host, the shock troops meant to blast through the Dura's lines with their invincibility and allow the forces of the One to destroy the Dura.

It was a grim sight.

But now the Demons and the One knew where Tarrin was going, and now they knew that they would have to deal with *him* when they came for the Dura, that Tarrin's divine might would stand between them and their prize. That would either cause them to immediately march to try to get there before the Dura had the chance to prepare for their arrival, or wait until they had an overwhelming army that could swarm the Dura over.

Either way, it wouldn't matter.

They saw no other signs of the One's forces as they continued north, but they did see patrols of short, stocky individuals either walking on foot or riding on massive, oversized wolves. Those were the Dura, and they universally turned and charged back towards their stronghold when they saw the dragon and the winged horses soar overhead, moving in a straight line right for their home.

By late afternoon, they finally came within sight of the Dura's holdings. They didn't have a grand fortress or a bustling city...in fact, unless one was looking for it, they'd miss the Dura completely. There were some farmlands down there, spread out in neat and orderly rows along the base of a large mountain, in a wide valley through which a river that came down from the mountains ran, nestled in the foothills at the base of that jagged mountain range. Those were Dura farms, and in the side of the mountain itself, a road leading up to it, was nothing but a pair of massive steel doors set into the mountain itself.

That was the city of the Dura. They lived underground, only having the farms above ground to grow food. All of their buildings and their society existed within the mountain itself.

The farmers of the Dura turned to flee towards their mountain stronghold when they saw Tarrin, and there was a large force of soldiers boiling out of those open doors towards the farms, a response to his presence. He paid them little mind for the moment, looking down to select the best place to land without destroying any farmland.

He felt...odd. He knew he should be excited to meet the Dura, to finally see if they were the descendents of the Dwarves of Sennadar, or knew what happened to them. But he was not. He felt almost nothing, only a little relief in that he would be accomplishing part of the task the Goddess had set before him. That was all it was to him now, the completion of a task. And the entire task would be complete when the souls of his *katzh-dashi* brothers and sisters were released from this world and allowed to journey beyond the bounds of this material plane, to join the Goddess in that plane of existence where she truly existed. When that was done, his task was complete...and there would be nothing more left to do but destroy the One and deal with this Demon Lord.

With a shudder of the earth, Tarrin landed between two neatly maintained tracts of farmland, growing cabbage on one side and turnips on the other, then set the basket down in which the Vendari, Selani, and the Hellhounds were riding. He then backed up and laid completely down as much as he could so as not to crush the supplies trapped against his chest and belly, putting his head on the grass to allow those riding on his head to get down and to allow the men to disengage the net and free him of his burden.

“We’re here,” Var said with quiet amusement. “Do you wish help getting down, *shaida* Dolanna?” he asked as Denai lightly dropped to the ground.

“I should be fine, Var, thank you for asking,” she replied, and he felt her carefully climbing down the side of his head, using some protruding spikes on the side of his head as hand and foot holds as she got back down to earth.

Anayi and Ariana landed close to him, then came up to report. “There are a large number of small stocky people running this way,” she told him as Var jumped down much as Denai did. “I think they’re the soldiers of these people.”

“Let them come,” he replied calmly. “But no one raise any weapons to them. We’re here to talk to them. Kang,” he called.

“Aye, I’ll get the people organized, lad,” he called back, then he started barking orders. In short order, men were checking over their mounts as men moved to get the net off of his body, and things were quickly started getting organized.

It certainly didn’t take the Dura long to get there. In just minutes, a squad of about thirty of them came boiling around a hill, rushing towards them wearing heavy plate armor. Despite all that weight, the short, stocky men moved with a confident pace that showed their strength. They slowed down when they got within a half a longspan, then stopped when Tarrin raised his head and looked right at them, carefully moved forward to give the men room to pack the gear onto Pegasi, then sedately sat down on the ground and bowed his head slightly in a kind of greeting. “We do not come as enemies,” he boomed, speaking in Duthak. “We are here to deliver important news from the southlands. Approach.”

The shock on their faces told him two things in that instant. First, that they spoke Duthak. Second, that these Dwarves *had* to be in some way related to the long-lost Dwarves of Sennadar. There could be no other way, because *they spoke Duthak*.

They looked among themselves, then they started advancing at a cautious walk. It took them about ten minutes to get close enough to shout back, and during that time the mounts were watered and fed and the net holding their gear had been removed from Tarrin’s belly, and those packs and bags and boxes were now being distributed among the Pegasi to be carried onward. “Who ye be, and why ye be here?” one of them shouted back to the host.

“My name is Tarrin,” he answered, hearing how the Dwarf spoke and instantly correcting some of his pronunciation. “Among us are members of the Shadows. Do you know the Shadows?”

“Aye,” the same dwarf called. “We be in contact with the Shadows.”

“Good. We bring important news concerning the One and his activities against the Dura. We also come seeking sanctuary. I don’t know if you know, but the One has destroyed the Shadows in the cities to the south. The Shadows have come seeking a place of safety.”

“I wouldn’t have any personal knowledge of that, ye’d have to talk to the Dain and the Elders.” He turned and talked to one of his men, who immediately ran off towards those doors in the mountainside. “I be asking ye to stay here while my runner sends word of yer arrival back to me officers.”

“That’s fine with us,” Tarrin called back. “We will wait right where we are.” He glanced back at the others. “I’ll warn you now, I’m going to use magic to return to my

natural shape. I only used magic to take this form to help get us here. I wanted to warn you so you wouldn't be surprised."

The dwarf laughed. "Aye, thank ye for that," he called back. "What manner of beast be ye when like that?"

"A dragon," he replied. "A creature not native to this world." Immediately, the draconic body melted into living flame, and then evaporated like mist on a sunny day, leaving behind the fire-winged Were-cat. That form drifted lightly to the ground, then after a quick word to the others to remain where they were, he advanced on the Dwarves. He shivered his wings slightly then folded them behind him, and he could tell that the Dwarves were getting a bit intimidated, because he kept getting bigger, and bigger, and bigger. When he was about twenty spans from them, he stopped, and spent a long moment just looking at them. They were just as the ancient art described them; short, stocky beings with wide, bold features, and copious facial hair. Every one of them had thick hair in reds or browns or blacks, one with blond hair, and thick beards that were long and well-tended. All of them wore heavy plate armor, but the way they moved in it told him that they were both incredibly strong for their size, and they wore the armor so often it was like a second skin. They were armed with axes and warhammers for the most part, though every single one of them had a shortsword sheathed on his belt. They were figures right out of history, out of *mythology* to him, and he had waited so long for this moment, so long that the excitement he thought he hadn't felt about this moment began to assert himself. All those years of studying the artifacts left behind by the Dwarves, the determination to find the descendants of that noble race, it had all culminated in this moment, when he stood before the object of his long quest and realized that the Dwarves were truly not extinct.

"I'd be askin' how ye speak the Dwarven tongue," the leader of the squad asked, staring wildly at the Were-cat, a creature that, too him, was probably even more fantastic than the dragon it had replaced.

Tarrin looked at him, then chuckled ruefully. "It took years of meticulous research," he answered truthfully. "Thanks for correcting some of my grammar. I didn't have anyone around to listen to, so I guessed at some of the pronunciation."

"Ye learned Dura from a book?" one of the Dwarves asked in surprise.

"I learned *Duthak* from a book," he said pointedly.

That made the leader of the squad give him a strange look. "Who are the Duthak?" he asked.

"You are," he told the Dwarf. "Or you *were*, a very, very long time ago. That's why I'm here. That's why I've come. Well, one of the reasons, anyway."

"If I might ask, what manner of creature be ye?" the squad leader asked.

"I'm a Were-cat," he answered.

"I ain't never heard of yer kind."

"I'd be surprised if you had, since we're not native to Pyrosia." He decided not to overload these Dwarves with too many shocks, so he decided to tread lightly around certain fantastic revelations. "We come from a distant land, a place so different from here that you could call it another world entirely. A place so distant we've never even heard of the One."

"Take us with ye," one of the Dwarves chuckled.

"I intend to," he answered bluntly, which made the nine Dwarves stare at him in shock. "That's one of the reasons I'm here. You, the Dura, are the descendents of the Duthak, who used to live where I came from. I've been sent here by your god, Clangeddin, to ask you to return home. But, given what's happened recently, it's now going to be more of a demand than a request."

"We ain't never heard of no Clangeddin," one of the Dwarves said.

"Ye got lots of nerve to come and say that, fuzzy," another called.

"Men!" the squad leader snapped. "Well, ye got guts to say that up front, fella," he chuckled.

"I've learned over the years that putting it on the table immediately stops certain arguments further down the line," Tarrin said dryly. "I won't make any pretenses as to why I'm here. I originally came here to try to convince the Dura to come home. But now there's a new danger stalking Pyrosia, something a thousand times worse than the One, and it's simply not safe for you to stay here. I'll meet with your Elders and your Dain and I'll tell them exactly what's coming, then I'll offer to take them home, to where your ancestors came from."

"That sounds unbelievable," one of the Dwarves snorted.

"Five years ago, I would have agreed with you, back before I had *these*," he said with such weariness in his voice that it made the Dwarves take notice, as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder at his wings. "While we're waiting for your runner, I'd like to invite you to come meet the others," he said, his voice normal once more. "A few of them have wanted to meet you for a long time."

The squad leader pulled back and conferred with his men for a moment, then stepped forward. "We'd be honored to meet yer friends," he announced. "We're kinda curious about a few of them, like those scaly big ones."

Tarrin chuckled. "They're Vendari. Just be polite and they're very amiable. Do you speak Penali?"

He shook his head. "Nay. Only the Elders deal with the outsiders."

Tarrin pursed his lips. "Then we have a problem. I'll have to fix it. Would you like to learn Penali, or do you think it would be better if I taught the others Duthak?"

"Ye can do that?" the squad leader asked.

"I'm a magician, sir Dwarf," Tarrin told him calmly. "I can do both, if it pleases you. It's not very difficult."

"Well, they won't be able to understand nobody if they can't speak the language," another Dwarf called aloud.

"True. Let me go take care of that now. Wait here, if you please. If someone who already speaks a language gets touched by this spell, it can confuse you."

"Aye. Call us up when ready."

Tarrin returned to the others, and realized that he wouldn't be able to get everyone within six spans of him to cast the language spell...unless he changed his size, that was. "I'm going to teach all of you the language of the Dwarves," he called out. "If any of you already speak it, say so now."

Nobody spoke up.

"Alright then. Everyone gather up in front of me, and include the mounts. And don't be surprised when I expand my wings, I have to have everyone within six spans of me."

There are too many here to do that, so I'm going to change the rules by changing my size."

They milled around a second, then gathered up. "Will this affect us?" Binter asked. "You know we are resistant to magic."

Tarrin nodded. "It's not really an invasive spell," he answered. "Basically it's going to teach your mind a language in such a way that you won't forget."

"Ah."

"If you have any problems, let me know afterwards," he told the Vendari. "I can fix it."

"I will."

After they were gathered up, Tarrin recalled the words of the spell he needed to use, then caused his wings to suddenly expand out to over twenty times their normal size, flowing out like the expansion of a summer dawn stretching its light across the eager mountains. Those sail-sized wings gently yet swiftly enveloped the entire host, encircling them and allowing him to get past the six span restriction by placing the entire host, Pegasi and all, within the boundaries of himself. He then chanted the second part of the spell, because he was using his own memory to supply the language. He chanted it over and over again, until he felt it implant itself in the minds of those within the boundaries of his wings, and then he chanted the final part of the spell, which caused the knowledge to seal itself into the minds of the recipients.

When he was done, when he retracted his wings away, he saw the look of grave concern on the face of Dolanna. He saw in her eyes, for the first time, that look of *questioning* there. She took several steps towards him, her face sober, but Haley intercepted her, turned her aside with some question or comment or something. She glanced back at him, her expression promising a long talk in the future, but allowed Haley to spirit her away.

After he was done, he invited the Dura to come join them, then began introducing them to the host. He learned that the squad leader was named Jurax, and though the Dwarf was understandably cautious, he was also curious and rather amiable. He met with the humans and the Elara and the Selani and the Vendari and the other, more exotic races with guarded yet sincere hospitality. The other Dwarves seemed similar to Jurax, a bit wary of the outsiders, yet sincerely curious about them. These Dwarves weren't openly hostile to outsiders as he thought they might have been, given their war against the One; perhaps even the solitary Dwarves understood the need for allies against such a dangerous enemy, and though they were new, these strangers were obviously allies. The presence of the Elara proved that much, for they were a race that the Dwarves knew, a race that was also locked in a battle with the One. It was a bit odd to see them to Tarrin, and he felt a strange satisfaction as Jurax shook Binter's hand; the Dwarf didn't even come up to Binter's thigh.

The runner returned with three Dwarves with graying beards and hair, wearing odd triangular surcoats over their plate armor. They had three triangles arranged in a pyramid, with a red square in the center; it was some kind of crest or symbol with which Tarrin was unfamiliar. Each of them carried an ornate, heavy warhammer, and shields were strapped to their backs. Jurax rushed over to them and quickly conferred with them, then they approached Tarrin. "Lieutenant Jurax said that ye have some critical information for the Dain," one of them, the tallest who had a scar over his left eye, said to Tarrin. "He

also said ye have some rather wild things to say,” he added. “But he vouches fer ye. If’n ye’d follow us, the Dain awaits ye.”

Tarrin nodded. “Lead on.”

The mountain fortress of the Dura was nothing like what Tarrin would have imagined. They’d been led in through the massive doors with about two hundred Dwarven warriors discreetly guarding them, and when they passed through that vaulted passageway, it was like stepping into another world.

The mountain in which the Dura lived was *hollow*.

It was obvious that over centuries, the Dura had systematically dug out the insides of the mountain to create absolutely immense chambers, or galleries, in which the Dura had constructed their city. And it was a city in every sense of the word, for the Dura had built buildings within the vast open space inside their mountain. Temples, warehouses, homes, shops, they were all here, lining streets that were neatly *paved* with meticulously shaped, perfectly square cobblestones. That they would pave a street which was made of bare rock boggled Tarrin’s mind for a while, but then he realized that they had paved it simply because it should be paved. That, and cobblestones were easier to replace than a bare rock floor, as the passing of millions of shodden Dwarven feet wore away the very rock floor on which they traveled.

The city of the Dura was split into four main galleries, each of which was half of the mountain with monstrous pillars and buttresses vaulting up from the floor to support the mountain’s peak above. Two galleries were on the level with the doors, and two more galleries had been carved out above the first, higher up in the mountain’s peak. The lower galleries were separated by a massive wall that ran right down the middle of the mountain, which was pierced by a single massive and heavily fortified gate. Tarrin and his friends got to see all four galleries as they were escorted into the mountain fortress of the Dura, going through both lower galleries, and then ascending a large, gently sloping ramp that curled around the back edge of the second gallery, ascending into the third gallery above. The top of that ramp didn’t end with a gate, but a monstrous stone block attached to chains in the wall, so huge that it would take an incredible amount of effort just to move it. That cap would lower onto the floor of the third gallery and block the ramp, which provided an absolutely ingenious and devastatingly simple method to stop any progress past the ramp. Any attempt to push that cap out of the way would require a herculean effort, and the smooth ramp would force that effort to be applied *uphill*, causing gravity itself to work in the favor of the defenders. The buildings in the upper gallery were larger, more ornate, but the presence of fortification here was just as prevalent as it was below, and the buildings of the fourth gallery were all huge, hinting that this was where the Dwarven nobility and the most important members of their society lived.

It was then that Tarrin understood the layout of the Dura’s city. Each gallery was a chokepoint, and it was separated from the others by a single gate, which was much easier to defend. He knew then that the fourth, final gallery would hold all the Dura’s most important people and objects, for it would require any invader to breach all three of the other galleries in order to reach the last. It gave the Dura three heavily reinforced and defensible chokepoints to stop any invasion, given that an invading force managed to breach the outer door. And getting past the cap that would block the ramp to the third

gallery would take a tactical genius. A very effective yet simple layout that provided maximum defense with minimum risk to the defenders. Any invader would have to fight five separate wars to conquer the Dura, one for each area the Dura could defend. And if these Dura were anything like their Duthak ancestors, any invading force would be facing an army of powerful, tough, and formidable warriors.

Tarrin could see Kang's approval of their design all over his face as they moved towards a huge citadel built inside the mountain, made of shining white stone. He kept looking around and nodding, his mind working as he took in the Dura's fortifications, and he knew that a part of Kang's mind was already at work on how he would breach those defenses, were he assaulting this place. Not that he ever would, but Kang was that kind of general, always thinking, always improving.

"A question, Lord Tarrin," Jurax asked politely.

Tarrin chuckled. "Just Tarrin, Lieutenant," he answered.

"Do only the males of your kind have wings?" he asked. "I saw your wife and her friend over there."

Tarrin glanced at Mist and Kimmie, then chuckled again. "We're not supposed to have wings at all," he answered honestly. "My wings are the result of what you might call a magical accident. As I'm sure you've noticed, they're not *real* wings, but creations of magic. But they're a part of me now...and believe me, they're more of a curse than they are a blessing," he said in a distant, weary tone.

"Why is that? It seems they help you do that magic I saw you do."

"They do," he admitted. "But they're not worth the price I had to pay for them."

"Ah." And Jurax delicately let the matter drop.

They were led to that citadel, where their Pegasi were taken by young Dwarf men and women wearing livery with that same crest on it, and then uniformed pages guided them into the keep itself. They walked along a grand hallway lined with detailed sculptures of male and female Dwarves, all in plate armor, all holding the same ornate double-headed battle axe. These were statues of past Dains, he realized.

They were brought to an antechamber, where more servants politely demanded that they surrender their weaponry, servants who spoke to them in Penali. Everyone complied with the request, though a few weren't exactly thrilled with that idea. After they were all disarmed, they were brought into a huge chamber which whose walls were lined with swords, axes, hammers, shields, and crests on large tapestries, and a few of them Tarrin *recognized*...they were the family crests of some of the Dwarven nobles from back home. The room was filled with Dwarves, all of them wearing either plate armor or mail shirts and all unarmed, but none of them could block Tarrin's view of the back of the room, which held a dais and a large stone throne chiseled from the dais itself, upon which sat a Dwarf male with coal black hair, and a thick beard tied into two tails under his chin. He wore a mail shirt instead of plate armor, with black leggings underneath them, and a large battle axe was hanging by a loop on a peg on the side of the throne's back.

These were, without any doubt whatsoever, the descendants of the Dwarves of Sennadar.

The Dwarves in the room stared at them all with unabashed curiosity and suspicion. Tarrin wasn't the only one to receive such stares, either. Ariana and Anayi were scrutinized, as were all the Vendari and the Selani as they filed into the back of the room, awaiting a formal announcement of their presence. Miranda seemed to attract an

inordinate amount of attention, as did his mate and Kimmie, but the humans among them, Lorak, and Haley did not, nor did Camara and Koran Tal, who, despite their height and odd copper coloring, were still humans. Not only were these visitors not Dwarves, but they were alien races that none of the Dura had ever seen before, and they were the absolute focus of all attention in the room.

A chamberlain rapped a stone staff on the floor sharply. "By the will of the Dain, I present emissaries of the Shadows to bring information of the southlands," the chamberlain boomed in a deep voice, speaking in flawless Penali. "Lord Tarrin, leader of the complement of Shadows, asks audience with Dain Darax o' the Dura!"

"Step forward," the Dain called in Penali, in a surprisingly young voice. This Dain wasn't long on his throne, that was for sure.

Tarrin immediately stepped forward, as did Lorak. They walked towards the dais, and when they got within about ten spans of it, at the edge of the Dwarves, who all stared at Tarrin in awe, they stopped. Lorak bowed.

Tarrin did not.

Tarrin's eyes were locked on this young Dwarf who was the leader of his people, studying him with eyes that could see more than just what was on the outside. He was young, but he was also wise and cautious. He had the spirit of a true leader, and would not rush to judgement. This was a leader that Tarrin felt would listen. He may not act in the way that Tarrin would prefer, but he would *listen* to what he had to say, he would give his words weight and ponder them. That would be enough, at least for now.

Just as Dwarven voices began to mutter in accusing tones at Tarrin's lack of respect, the Were-cat bent at the waist and put a fist over his heart, then bowed to the Dain ever so slightly.

"Do you want to start, Lorak?" Tarrin asked.

"I think you'd better. I'll just confirm what you say," the Elara replied. "You'll have better luck getting them to believe us."

Tarrin nodded, then turned to look at the Dain, who was now sitting up on his throne attentively. "What news do you bring from the southern lands, agents of the Shadows?" he asked.

"The Shadows are gone," Tarrin stated flatly, immediately getting that out of the way, which caused a collective gasp through the hall. "I'm sure you got some fractured communications from them before the end."

The Dain frowned. "As a matter of fact, we did," he admitted. "Just a few quick messages stating that the Shadows were moving towards us, seeking a place to regroup."

"Forget it. They'll never get here," Tarrin told him. "Which brings us to the news that matters." He shivered his wings, slashing his tail back and forth a few times before continuing, then fixed the Dain with a cold, piercing stare. "Right now, the One's armies are marching through the mountain passes, and they're coming to destroy you, Dain. We counted at least fifty thousand men, and more are marching north from the lands of the One."

The Dain waved his hand dismissively. "We've crushed bigger armies than that the One's thrown at us," he told them. "I can put a hundred thousand men on the field, Master Tarrin. They've yet to reach the mountain gate."

“I can see now that you’re feeling contentious, Dain, so let me get to the point,” Tarrin stated bluntly, which made the Dain scowl somewhat at him. “The One has summoned a Demon Lord into this world. Do you know what a Demon Lord is, Dain?”

That caused some nervous whispers to ripple through the hall. “I seem to recall some schooling on the subject,” he answered. “The nobles of Demons, if I remember.”

“That’s putting it very, very mildly,” Tarrin snorted. “Demon Lords can summon *every Demon that they command at any time*. That means that right now, there’s an army of *hundreds of thousands* of Demons to the south. As soon as that Demon Lord gets them organized and he destroys the One, he’s going to unleash them upon this world. When that happens, everything and everyone, even the Dura, will be destroyed.”

That caused a sudden firestorm of yelling and shouting, mostly curses and statements of incredulity aimed at Tarrin. The Dain gave him a cold stare, but could not meet the gaze of the Were-cat for long enough to look very intimidating. “Brash words,” Darax growled at him. “Be it humans or Demons, my armies can hold the Iron Mountain against any challenge. And what makes you think that this Demon can destroy the One?”

Tarrin glanced at one of the Dwarves close to him, sneering at him that he was a gutless pig for insulting the Dura, but a single flat stare cowed the mail-clad Dwarf immediately.

“Dear one, I think you take the wrong tack,” Dolanna said quickly, stepping forward. “Please excuse my interruption, Dain Darax, but my large companion tends to speak of conclusion without suitably explaining the conditions.” She put a hand on Tarrin’s side, and the Were-cat nodded his head to her and stepped back. “My companion does speak the truth, Dain Darax. The One, in an act of desperation, has summoned forth a Demon Lord in hopes that the creature can help protect him while he recovers from a battle against an opposing force, who very nearly destroyed him. What he does not understand is that this creature, this Demon Lord, is even stronger than he is, and its only objective now that it has been brought into the mortal world is to destroy all that stands and conquer this world, to add it to the material planes held by the Demons. It will pretend to cooperate with the One until it is strong enough to destroy him, and then it will unleash its Demonic horde upon the world with the intent of destroying absolutely everything that lives, even down to the last insect.

“I fear that there is nothing in this world that can oppose the might of a Demon Lord except for a god,” she told him gravely. “And because of the One’s crusade to destroy all who oppose him and eradicate all that is not human, there is no god left in this world with the strength to defeat the Demon Lord that the One has so recklessly brought into being. Unfortunately, right now the success of the Demon Lord in his mission is all but assured. No one on Pyrosia can stand up to him, and he and his Demons will sweep forth from the ruins of Pyros and devastate the land.”

She sighed. “Dain Darax, we have come to warn you of this gravest of threats, and to offer to you a means of escape from this fate. Among us are accomplished users of magic who can effect a way to transport your entire population to a place of safety. This offer we bring to you, as we shall also present to the Elara and any humans who seek to flee from this doomed world. Believe my words or discount them, but know that we are deadly serious about this, and in seven days’ time, we shall flee this world ourselves. When we are gone, any chance of escape from the Demon Lord once he destroys the One shall not be possible. Those left behind shall inevitably be doomed.”

“Ye are right, my Lady,” the Dain said after a long moment of contemplation, which passed as the Dwarves in the hall whispered furiously to one another. “Yer winged friend *does* tend to skip the details. Now I understand your reasoning a bit better, but I still see no danger here to me people. No force can penetrate the Iron Mountain. We will simply bar the doors and seal them and wait for the Demons to leave. I appreciate how serious ye think the threat of this Demon Lord is, but I don’t see how it can be any more dangerous than the One. The power of Dumathoin protects the Iron Mountain. So long as our god protects us, we’re all but untouchable within the safety of the Iron Mountain.” He looked to Lorak. “Have the Elara yet heard of this?”

Lorak shook his head. “I’ve not had the time to warn them, your Majesty,” he answered. “That’s one of the things we intend to do here. I can’t speak for my King, but I personally do not wish to leave. Even if it means my death, I would stand and fight against the approaching darkness.”

“Honorable,” Binter murmured.

“Quite,” Var agreed with a nod.

“You’re being stubborn, Darax,” Tarrin snorted, crossing his arms.

“Dear one—“ Dolanna began, but Tarrin held up a single finger to quiet her, raised from the crook of his elbow.

“You shall address the Dain as ‘Dain’ or ‘your Majesty,’” the Chamberlain said in a scandalized tone.

“Why? I see nothing before me that warrants that kind of respect,” Tarrin stated with narrowed eyes.

That caused a firestorm of shouting and curses levelled at Tarrin, and the Dain’s strong-boned faced flushed red. “I could have you executed for that,” he warned with a hiss.

“You could certainly try,” Tarrin returned, taking two steps forward.

“Dear one, this is not the time—“ Dolanna urged in a strong voice, but she fell silent when he shot her a withering stare over his shoulder.

“You have no idea who you are, or how you came to be here, do you?” Tarrin snapped at the Dain. “Don’t you keep records? Don’t you know where you came from? If you did, you certainly wouldn’t blow us off so quickly. Tell me, Dain Darax, where did the Dura come from?”

“What kind of senseless question is that?” he demanded.

“It’s not senseless at all if you know the answer,” Tarrin growled as Dolanna’s eyes lit up, and both Kimmie and Miranda smiled and started nodding emphatically. They knew exactly where here was going to go. “Clan Argak. Clan Mizkun. Clan Vorxin. Clan Uthen,” Tarrin began, pointing at the tapestries on the wall and reciting the names those crests represented. “Clan Twinaxe. Clan Thorm. Clan Bloodblade. All of them ancient bloodlines that stretch back into the mists of antiquity. Do you know where they came from? Do you know why every single one carries the triangle in the center of its crest?”

“I am not a sage of ancient lore,” Dain Darax said quickly.

“You should be,” Tarrin told him bluntly. “If you knew where you came from and how you got here, you’d be ordering the immediate evacuation of your Iron Mountain.”

“Preposterous,” he said hotly.

“Is it? Do you want to know where you came from, Dain Darax of the Stoneaxe Clan?” he asked, switching to Duthak, which made Darax gasp and stare at him in shock. “Do you want to know how the Dura ended up in the Iron Mountain? Do you want to know why—” he said, reaching behind his back—“there’s an imitation of *this* hanging on a peg from your throne?”

Tarrin pulled forth the Axe of the Dwarven King from the *elsewhere*, shining in the lights of the torches hanging from the walls, and he tossed it onto the dais of the Dain of the Dura contemptuously. It made a sweet, chiming *clang* as it bounced off the stone, then slid to a stop literally at the feet of the Dain.

Dain Darax stared at the axe in curiosity, and then, when he looked closer at it, the disbelief started to register in his eyes.

“That’s right. It’s the axe of the Dains. The *original*. Now ask me how I got it. Ask me how I speak Duthak. Ask me where I come from. And after I give you those answers, look into my eyes and tell me you believe the Dura will be safe within the Iron Mountain.”

“Holy Dumathoin, it’s *real*,” one of the Dain’s advisors said reverently after he rushed over and inspected the weapon. “It’s a mirror image of the Axe of the Dains!”

“How did you come to possess this, this, this imitation of the axe of the Dains, creature?” Darax demanded in an outraged tone.

“*Yours* is the imitation,” he said scathingly. “This is the *original*. Your ancestors simply made a copy of it when you settled here, because this one was lost to you.”

“I find that hard to believe. This axe was said to have come to us from Dumathoin himself, a gift laying on the slopes of the Iron Mountain when our ancestors first arrived from our long journey from a distant land, seeking out the song of the stone that drew them to the Iron Mountain.”

“So you only know a little of the truth,” Tarrin told him, drawing himself up. “Very well. I think it’s time for a history lesson.”

“Carefully, dear one,” Dolanna warned.

“I’ll be gentle, Dolanna,” Tarrin assured her with a nod. “Darax, the Dura were originally called the Duthak,” he began. “Your people came here from my homeland, Sennadar, fleeing exactly what is about to happen here. You left your homeland over five thousand years ago, and over the march of time, you’ve forgotten where you come from. Well, I’m here to offer to take you home, to where you began.”

“Impossible. The stone of the Iron Mountain forms the bones within us. We are as much a part of the mountain as the stone under my feet,” he said flintily.

“Really?” Tarrin asked archly. “Then how do I know so much about you?”

“Magic,” he replied. “Judging from those magical constructs stuck to your back, I’d be marking you as a powerful magician. Or maybe a Demon, or an agent of a god like the One. Any one of those could easily use magic to learn those things. After all, they’re a simple matter of recorded history.”

“Fine, then,” Tarrin said. “Do your ancient writings mention the *katzh-dashi*?”

That made Darax’s black eyebrow raise. “The Damned? Aye, there’s writings about them. They betrayed the Dura after we came to the Iron Mountain, after the Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain found their hearts impure and commanded us to cast them out. They tried to turn us away from our god, so we exiled them from us.”

Tarrin frowned deeply. “The Duthak turned on the Sorcerers?” he asked in surprise. “After they brought you to this world, saved your race from extinction?”

“The Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain doesn’t tolerate blasphemy,” Darax said arrogantly. “The Damned tried to draw us away from our god. We did only what needed to be done with heretics.”

Tarrin’s eyes narrowed. “Dumathoin, eh? I can sense him within the bounds of this hall. He’s afraid to come any closer to me,” he said absently. “Right now he’s beggin me not to lose my temper and take your head off in a bout of pique. Usually I try to keep myself from killing the ruler of a group of people I’ve journeyed halfway across the world to visit, but I have to admit, your attitude is making me *sorely* tempted.”

“My attitude?” Darax said in surprise.

“Any mortal who dares to believe he knows the mind of his god is just begging for some remedial education,” Tarrin said flatly. “Not to mention your god is getting annoyed with your lack of an open mind. He thinks you’re going out of your way not to allow yourself to consider the possibility that what I’m saying might be true.”

“And what of ye? Pretending to hear the song of stone, pretending to hear the voice of Dumathoin?” he retorted. “Where is that promised punishment? It would surely come to ye first!”

Tarrin didn’t listen to him, for his mind was distracted by a different voice, one that Darax could not hear. “I, see,” he said. “Dumathoin admits that he caused you to split from the *katzh-dashi*, but that was because they wanted to leave the mountains, and Dumathoin thought it was safer here. Humans just weren’t meant to live underground...the *katzh-dashi* longed for the sunlight and the wind on their faces, and left the Iron Mountain in search of a distant place, away from the One, that they could call their own. He also says that the parting was *amicable*, that you and the Sorcerers kept in communication until the One destroyed their colony on Auromar. It turns out Dumathoin had been right about that, I guess. After all, they’re all dead, and you’re still alive.”

“Charlatan!” Darax snapped as an angry wave of muttering passed through the hall. “Blasphemer!”

“I don’t worship your god, so it can’t be blasphemy,” Tarrin snorted dismissively. “Heresy maybe, but not blasphemy. If you’re going to call me names, at least get it right.”

Darax spluttered incoherently, then stiffened and stood up, almost stepping on the axe. “I won’t tolerate any more of this blasphemy! Guards, take this, *thing*, into custody immediately!”

“No!” one of the Dwarves standing to the side of the dais said quickly. “No, me Dain! The Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain wishes ye to hear this one out! I hear his voice singin’ through the stone!”

“Are ye sure, High Augur?”

“I’m positive, yer Majesty,” he answered. “Holy Dumathoin’s voice tells me that yon creature has something important to say, something that ye must hear.”

“There, if you won’t listen to me, listen to Dumathoin,” Tarrin told him flatly, seeing the play of disbelief on the Dain’s face, which quickly became dubious speculation.

“Dumathoin knows what’s coming. All the gods do. None of them would allow any of

their followers to ignore me, not over something like this. Isn't that right, High Augur?" he asked, looking at the Dwarf.

The gray-clad Dwarf closed his eyes and almost seemed to rock back and forth for a moment, then he opened his eyes again and nodded vigorously, his face ashen.

"I, I bow to the word of Dumathoin, then," the Dain said hesitantly. "Very well, creature. Say what ye must say to me, so I might hear these words and understand why they're so important."

Tarrin paused briefly to look at Darax, at the aura surrounding him, and found it more receptive to listening. So he began. "We had a war on Sennadar over five thousand years ago, called the Blood War. It happened when a god summoned a Demon Lord into our world. That Demon Lord and his horde of Demon servants very nearly destroyed the entire world before all the peoples of the world rose up to defend the land, including the Duthak, the ancestors of the Dura. During the course of that war, the Duthak were almost entirely destroyed. We thought they were killed to the last man, woman, and child until we discovered that a small group of Duthak had managed to flee to this place, to Pyrosia, in the company of a small group of *katzh-dashi* who had accompanied them to protect them. You, Darax, and all of you here, and the long-lost descendents of the Duthak, lost for over five thousand years.

"And that is originally why I came here. I have been sent here by the god you once worshipped, Clangeddin, to find you and to offer you a chance to return to the lands of your ancestors. But now things are different. The One has summoned a Demon Lord to this world, and now it's all happening *again*. There's going to be another Blood War, another war that could eradicate all life on this world, and I will *not* allow you to simply close up your doors and believe in blissful ignorance that a few hundred spans of solid rock is going to stop the Demons. They found all the cities of the Duthak on Sennadar, some longspans under the ground, and they totally destroyed them. Your ancestors sacrificed *everything* to defend Sennadar, to give you, their last descendants, a chance to flee to Pyrosia and keep the race of the Duthak alive. You won't close your eyes to that threat now and refuse to see the obvious. It dishonors you, and it stains the memory of the great sacrifice your ancestors accepted to give you the chance to live. The Duthak literally saved Sennadar five thousand years ago at the Battle of the Line, laying down the lives of *your entire race* to stop the Demon horde and turn them back. You will *not* sit there and believe that you're invulnerable in this paper shell of a mountain fortress and dishonor the memory of that sacrifice by allowing your pride to cause the complete extinction of the Dwarves from the world."

He looked around the chamber, and saw that he had everyone's undivided attention now. "Now, you have a choice to make Darax, King of the Duthak. You can hide in this mountain and cause the destruction of your people, you can accept our offer to return you to your homeland, or you can march out of this citadel and fight. That fight would be a fruitless effort, but as Lorak said, some would rather die defending what's theirs than simply leave it behind, and I won't dishonor their decision no matter how much I disagree with it. That choice is entirely yours. Our offer will stand. In seven days, we are leaving, and we will take with us anyone who wishes to go. And once we are gone, those left behind must choose to either accept fate and allow the Demons to kill them, or fight them to the last breath, as your ancestors once did five thousand years ago."

Darax was quiet for a *very* long time. “A grave warning ye bring, stranger,” he finally said. “Is the danger so great that it might bring about the end of all?”

Tarrin nodded simply. “Not even an Elder God can directly confront a Demon Lord, Darax. If they did, the battle between them would reduce this entire world to ash. But where an Elder God could use his power through the mortals of the world and defeat the Demon Lord, as was done on Sennadar five thousand years ago, there *is no* Elder God on Pyrosia to do the same. And the other gods that are present on this world simply don’t have that kind of power. So your choices are simple, Dain Darax. Leave with us or stay. If you stay, you can either hide in this mountain until the Demons kill you, or fight to the death to defend it. But if you fight, understand that you’re risking the destruction of your entire race. The Dura are the last of the Dwarves, Darax. If you die, then your race will be no more. If you fight, you risk the extinction of your entire race. If you stay behind and simply hide in this fortress, you *assure* it. But if you leave with us, then you ensure that the Dwarves will live on. I know it’s like I’m asking you to cut off your own leg, but you have to understand the risks you take if you decide not to leave Pyrosia. In two months, most likely, *there won’t be a Pyrosia left*. I can’t make that clear enough.”

Darax simply stared at him, his face grave. “Master Elara, do ye confirm what he says?”

“I can’t confirm with absolute certainty, your Majesty, but I can say this. What this man says, I *believe*. I have seen too much not to take him at his word. He believes it to be true, and I’ve seen enough with my own eyes to say that I believe it myself. I cannot say about your origins, but his information regarding the Demon Lord, and the danger it poses, I believe completely.”

“High Augur?” he asked, looking at the gray-clad Dwarf once more.

“The Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain’s song is grim, me Dain. He bids me to tell ye to believe the creature’s words. He also bids me say to ye that the choice ye must make must be without any guidance from Dumathoin...that this is a matter of mortal concern, and it must be the heart and a mind of mortals to decide the path which ye take. Dumathoin says that in this decision, ye will find no guidance from him.”

Darax looked at him for a long moment, sighed, then he reached down to pick up the ancient Axe of the Dwarven King. Tarrin gestured at the axe laying on the dais, which the advisor who was still standing beside it seemed reluctant to even touch, and it flew through the air, past the startled Dwarf, and into Tarrin’s waiting paw. Tarrin held it out to the Dain, allowed him to look at it, then he set it again over his shoulder and sent it back into the *elsewhere*. “The axe is *mine*, Darax,” Tarrin told him with a steady look. “If, over the course of the next seven days, you prove worthy of it, I will give it to you. But not before. I won’t dishonor everything that this axe represents by giving it to someone who doesn’t *deserve* it. This axe was wielded by the last of the Dwarven Kings, who used it while fighting on the streets of Mala Myrr against the Demons that were overrunning his city. He died on those streets and laid where he had fallen for five thousand years, until I found him. This axe,” he said, hefting it, “represents everything that the Duthak sacrificed in order to save Sennadar. It does not belong in the hands of a man who will not fully appreciate what it is and what it represents. When you prove you are that man, then I will gladly give to you this axe.”

Tarrin’s steely words caused quite a few dark mutterings, but the Dain seemed strangely impressed by Tarrin’s declaration, not angry. “Ye have brought me many

things to consider,” he stated. “I must also find a way to communicate with the Elara, to seek their wisdom to help me make me decision. Can ye be of help to me in this, Elara?” he asked, looking at Lorak.

“Not me personally, but we have one among us who can cast the proper spells to put you in communication with the King, your Majesty,” Lorak replied.

“Aye, very well. I will withdraw to consider yer warning, Lord Tarrin. I offer ye the hospitality of the Iron Mountain until I be finished with my ponderings and have a decision to give to ye. Master Elara, kindly make yerself immediately available to me chamberlain so we can arrange communications with yer King.”

“As you wish, your Majesty,” Lorak said with a bow.

“Chamberlain, find rooms for our guests, the best ye have,” Darax commanded. “This audience is over. Fare well all, and may the Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain bless yer hearths and forges.”

Tarrin sighed slightly and folded his wings behind him as the Dwarves around them filed out, staring at him and the others as they passed. Tarrin had the feeling that he’d impressed upon Darax the gravity of the situation. He also hoped that he had said what needed to be said to help Darax make the choice that Tarrin *needed* him to make.

And that choice would be to fight. This world would fall if the Dura did not help save it.

“No more evasions,” Dolanna said sharply, standing in front of the door to the chamber he shared with Mist and the children, her arms held out to block that doorway. The room was nice enough, if not for the fact that Tarrin’s head would hit the ceiling if he stood straight up, roomy and with comfortable furniture made of stone and padded with deep, soft cushions. Mist was with Kimmie, and the children were with her, which left Tarrin alone in the room with the book of Wizard spells that Kimmie and the other Wizards had finished, a book he had been studying intently when Dolanna came into the room, a book he had been reading over and over to understand more than just the spells written on the page, but the *language* of the magic, the *meaning* of the words. That was also the reason he’d been taking lessons in Priest spells from Camara Tal...not to learn more spells, but to try to comprehend the *language* of those spells. Niami had always told him that understanding the *why* of something was often more important than the *what*. He knew what was coming, he knew what he’d be facing when he sought out the One and had to face that Demon Lord, and he’d need every advantage he could get. If he could comprehend the *languages* of the gods and of magic, it might be the advantage that would allow him to complete his plan. But now Dolanna was here, and from the look of her, she wasn’t going to let him get out of certain explanations now.

And perhaps...perhaps now was the time to give them.

He closed his book calmly and laid it on the little table in front of the chair he was occupying, in his human form to keep from banging his head on the ceiling. “What evasions, Dolanna?” he asked mildly.

“Do not be coy with me, dear one, I know you too well,” she snapped at him. “What I have seen you do in the last three days says to me that there is *much* going on which you are trying to underplay. I know your ways, dear one. You have something planned, something you obviously intend to carry out by yourself, to protect the rest of us, some half-baked scheme which shall fall apart on you halfway through and cause you to carry

it out by the seat of your breeches. You will *not* do this to us this time. We are here to help you, dear one. You do not have to put us in a steel box and carry us under your arm."

Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "I guess I do have a habit of doing that," he admitted.

"Now, you are going to explain to me several things, dear one," she said adamantly, sitting down on that little table, directly on his book, and putting her feet on top of his in some token act of keeping him from getting up. "The first of which is your admitting to me that you are not as injured as you would lead us to believe."

He nodded. "I'm fully recovered," he told her. "I have been for a couple of days now."

"That should not be possible," she challenged.

"It is. It just required me to do something I really didn't want to do."

"What is that?"

"I made a choice," he answered.

"I told you, no evasions," she said in a stony tone. "You will explain this to me *now*, dear one."

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I would have thought that you'd understand that if anyone would, Dolanna," he told her. "My power has always been locked away from me because I refused to accept it. The sword is a symbol of that division, at first separated from me because of how I was brought back from the dead, and then it became a willing symbol after I rejected the power it gave to me after the shadow of Val brought it out. When we came here, it seemed to get stronger and stronger, and granting me more and more power, but actually it was just me starting to rely on power that I had never wanted to touch. Can you understand that?"

She was silent a long moment. "So the choice you made—" she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Was admitting what I've become," he told her. "The instant I did that, the power the sword holds from me accelerated my healing. It did in hours what would have taken rides. My pretending to still be wounded just gives me a reason to waste time, at least for you all. If they knew I was healed, they'd wonder why I wasn't going after the One immediately."

"We will come back to that," she told him. "I have noticed that *all* of my Sorcery works here, dear one, including things that just should not work, like Transmuting objects into living things. That requires the breath of Ayise to grant life, but she cannot reach here. How is this possible?"

"That power is coming through along with Sorcery," he told her. "In a way, my presence here is allowing the Elder Gods of our world to break the strictures set forth by the God of Gods. They're reaching into this world through *me*, and I'm reaching back into Sennadar through the sword."

"But you said the sword is just a part of you," she said, switching to Sharadi.

"Doesn't that mean that *you* are reaching back into Sennadar?"

"I guess I am, but I can't control that," he told her. "The sword is a part of me, but it's *separate* from me. I don't control its power yet."

"When can you? After all, you said you admitted what you are."

"For me to control the full power locked inside the sword, I'd have to become what I was when I fought Val," he told her. "The sword is simply the power I possessed then."

But I *can't* become what I was, Dolanna," he explained. "When the Firestaff changed me, it transformed my mind along with my body. The power in that sword is the power I possessed as a god, Dolanna. My *mortal* mind can't even comprehend that power, let alone control it. It will remain apart from me until the day I die, because if I tried to command that power, it would destroy me."

"It would not destroy you, dear one," she reasoned. "It's a *part* of you."

"So is Sorcery," he retorted. "And the ability of Sorcery to kill is well documented."

She was silent a moment. "I...see," she said, nodding. "So, in a way, you are now an Avatar of the Elder Gods," she reasoned.

"Not really," he said. "I really don't understand how the sword is reaching back into Sennadar to touch the Weave. I *really* don't understand it," he frowned. "If anything, I should be able to touch the Weave, not the sword, because Niami recreated my body when she brought me back, and she made certain, modifications," he said with a grunt.

"I have heard rumors," she chuckled. "Your ability to remain in human form—"

He nodded. "She did that. I guess you can call me an *Ancient* Were-cat now, like we were before the Breaking. She did some other things too."

"Would it offend you to tell me?" she asked with certain eagerness in her voice.

"She increased my power in Sorcery," he grunted. "Probably some kind of odd need to bring me up to Jasana's level. No offense, Dolanna, but Niami seems to favor me over most other Sorcerers. I think it offended her sensibilities that my daughter is a stronger Sorcerer than I am, so she cheated. I've never told anyone either of those things, and you'd better keep it to yourself."

"Mother's preference for you is common knowledge, dear one," she told him. "The entirety of the *katzh-dashi* knows that you are the favorite of the Goddess. That is why the order always defers to you. Alexis and Jenna have even given you a title. You are the Keeper of Keepers, the one who stands at the right hand of the Goddess, the favored of the *sui'kun*."

"Nonsense," Tarrin growled. "She did that, and back when I was on Sennadar, I could always feel her close to me, in a way I hadn't before. I think she did something else to me that let her keep closer track of me."

"There are rumors," she said in a sudden whisper. "Rumors that the Goddess' feelings for you go beyond the norm, even as a friend. Some speculate that her love for you is much more than simply the love of a god for a follower."

Tarrin blinked, then he paused a moment to consider her words. "I doubt it," he told her. "I know her better than most, at least as well as I can given I'm only a mortal, and parts of her personality I'll never be able to understand. I guess I can say that the face she presents to me never hinted at anything like that. But," he said, frowning. "But what she's doing now might prove that I'm wrong about that."

"How she is countering the exile?"

He nodded. "She shouldn't be doing it, she's risking getting on the bad side of the other Elder Gods over me. I don't think she'd do that for any other Sorcerer. She promised me a long time ago that she'd see to it I was happy after I recovered the Firestaff and destroyed Val. I'm sure she's only acting like this to uphold her promise, because I'm certainly not happy here and having them exile me was never part of the deal, but even then, she shouldn't be doing it, and she *knows* she shouldn't be doing it." He was quiet a long moment, recalling the way her behavior towards him had changed,

how she had tried to change the way he thought of her...was it simply a silly rumor, or was there something to it? It certainly wasn't unheard of...T'Kya, the Elder Goddess of the air and wind and weather, had fallen in love with a mortal, Dragor the Industrious, and had had a hand in his ascension to the ranks of the Younger Gods. But no, he couldn't believe that Niami would think of him that way. She had fought for him before, long before he had become close to her, going to great lengths for him. He had to believe that what she was doing now was simply her outrage at how he had been treated, not a hint of something more. "No, I'm positive that they're baseless."

"I believe so as well," she nodded. "Mother sees you as a son, not in that way."

He was quiet a long moment. Now...now came what he had dreaded having to say. He knew that it would come to this, because what was coming, what had to be done, it wasn't something that he could do alone. Now, now he would find out just how far Dolanna was willing to go.

"Dolanna," he began. "You know what's out there. And I'm sure you know that I've thought up a way to deal with it. It's half the reason you're here."

She nodded. "As I said, we would come back to that. I must say, what you have planned in some way must involve me if you were willing to bring it up first."

He chuckled. "You know me too well, old friend," he admitted.

"Yes, dear one, but it's my knowledge of you that makes us such friends," she told him, putting her hand on his knee. "Now, explain to me what we must do."

"I'm not sure I want to go through with it, Dolanna," he said, then he sighed. "But I can't see any other way. I don't want to do it."

"Do what, dear one?"

"What must be done," he told her grimly. "That Demon Lord being here is my responsibility, Dolanna. I failed to kill the One when we fought, and what's happening now is my direct responsibility. It's my fault. I have to face it, to stop it before it can destroy this world."

"Can you do it?" she asked.

He looked her right in the eyes. "No one on this world can do that," he told her. "But I do have a kind of idea about how I can shackle the Demon Lord and hobble him, which would give the mortals a chance to kill him. It has a good chance of succeeding, but I absolutely will only have one chance to shackle the Demon Lord."

"Why is that, dear one?"

"Because it will kill me," he told her bluntly. "And what's worse, it's going to force me to sacrifice one of you."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Demons get their power like any other magician, Dolanna," he told her. "They were stopped from using them in the Blood War when the Goddess used the Weave to deny them their magic. All I have to do is what I was born to do, Dolanna. I just need to form a Weave here large enough to bring the area around Pyros under my control, an area where the Demons can't use their magic, then seal the borders with a Ward that will trap them inside. If I get enough of them inside it, I can immobilize the majority of the Demon Lord's forces at Pyros, which will give the mortals enough time to kill off those outside the Ward, then march into it and destroy the Demons inside. If I can deny the Demon Lord his power, he can be killed just like any other Demon."

"But how will this kill you? I have seen you do such things before."

“Even I have my limits, Dolanna,” he told her. “What I’d be doing would have *nothing* to do with my divine power. It would be nothing but pure Sorcery. And even a *sui’kun* can be killed by the power of Sorcery if he reaches beyond the physical limits of his body, it would drain me to the point where my body would die from lack of energy. I can create the Weave and make the Ward, but it will kill me in the process.”

She was quiet a long moment. “And you would need me within your creation,” she reasoned. “To sustain it if you are right, and it did in fact kill you. I would need to be there to take your place. Even a creation such as what you’re describing would follow the same rules as the Weave at home...and the first rule is that the Weave cannot exist without Sorcerers. If I was not there, it would unravel upon your death, evaporate like smoke. Which would cause it to come to naught.”

“And now you understand why it’s a last resort,” he told her. “I have another option, that’s going to be just as deadly, but has a much slimmer chance of success.”

“Explain, dear one.”

“The Elder God of this world is either sleeping, or he doesn’t care, or he’s dead,” he explained. “I can sense something of him in the All of this world, but it’s too faint to tell which it is...or if he’s actually dead. Whichever it is, it wouldn’t really matter. I can reach into the All of this world and use it to do the exact same thing I could do with Sorcery. After all, *nothing* is impossible using Druidic magic, because it’s literally nothing but a mortal tapping into the power of the Elder God that created the universe. I could reach into the All and make this entire universe block the magic of the Demons, but it’ll kill me. And it would all hinge on whether or not I could get the spell off before I die. If I do, every single Demon in this world will lose his power, and we win. If I fail, then our last hope is gone.”

“That would be too much a gamble, dear one,” she told him. “The idea of trapping the Demons within a Ward is a much wiser decision. And despite what you think, I seriously doubt that it would kill you,” she scoffed. “Your power is such that you *could* affect such a large area, dear one. After you completed it, all you would need do is wrap yourself in a Ward that stops Demons and simply remain inside your creation, and there is nothing they could do. The only wild card is if your power can affect the Demon Lord. After all, dear one, they *do* possess certain divine abilities that transcend normal magic. Just as you can use your powers here without a Weave, this Demon Lord should be able to use his powers inside your Ward. What we need to do is come up with some way of preventing the Demon Lord from disrupting your Ward after you’ve created it. The first—“

Her eyes widened, and she clutched her *shaeram* in her hand. “There is a way,” she said. “It would require us invoking the power of the Goddess through your sword, using Sorcery. If your presence here allows our Elder Gods to reach into this world, we must call upon *them* to protect us from the godlike abilities of the Demon Lord. They can reach into this world through the sword, through *you*, and shield *us* from that power.”

“Us?”

“Us,” she affirmed. “You’re right, dear one, in needing me. If you in some way fail, I must be there to take over, to prevent it from all coming apart. But I doubt that it would come to that. All we need to do, dear one, is create a little piece of Sennadar here on Pyrosia, where the usual rules break down, and allow our Elder Gods to reach across the

dimensions and assert their power in this material plane. And you know what the one thing is that separates Sennadar from other worlds.”

“The Weave.”

“The Weave,” she nodded. “Create a *new* Weave, one linked back to the Goddess through the sword, and you have just shifted the very fabric of Sennadar into a different material plane. That link will let our gods reach out and protect us so long as we remain within its boundaries. If Sorcery is allowing them to reach into this world, all we need to do is create a *Weave* rather than just a *spell*. Infuse a portion of this land with the power of the Weave, and we give this entire world hope against the Demon Lord.”

“I think it just might work, Dolanna,” he said. “The Demon Lord has the same problem against me that the One did...he can’t use his full power against me. He can only throw what power at me that can manifest in the material world. My soul is that of a god’s, but my mind and body are still *mortal*. And that protects me from it. And on that level, with your power, my power, and what divine power I do still possess, it gives us a good chance to hold off the Demon Lord long enough for me to finish off the One...if the Demon Lord even bothers to fight. When he realizes that the One is what I’m after, he’ll probably just step aside and let me have him.”

“*Probably* doesn’t sound very certain,” Dolanna said speculatively.

“Since when does any of my plans not include grasping at straws?” he asked her.

She laughed. “Well said,” she smiled.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“It leaves much to chance, but I can’t deny the potential of your idea, dear one,” she answered. “If we have the chance to neutralize the threat with one well-aimed strike, we should make the attempt.”

“You know the danger,” he told her seriously. “You know what it will cost us.”

“That should not concern either of us in the slightest, my dear one,” she told him. “I have been placing my life in your hands literally since the day we met. I trust these hands, in ways that I don’t think you will ever understand,” she told him, reaching out and taking his human hands in her own. “I understand the danger, Tarrin. I know the risks. There is a very good chance that neither of us will survive it. If you fail, it will kill you. If what you create is too much for me, or the Demon Lord proves too much for us, then my life will be forfeit as well. But do you know what?”

“What?”

“I don’t care. I would follow you into Hell, Tarrin,” she told him, giving him a warm smile. “If that is the risk we have to take in order to save this world, then so be it. Two lives are more than a fair trade for the lives of every living thing on this world, if it comes to that. At the very least, we can do so much damage that it gives the others time to escape. But I don’t share your certainty,” she said with a wink. “I have faith that we will prevail dear one. I also believe that the Elder Gods will relent and allow you to return home...and we will be having tea on your front porch very soon.”

“I pray you’re right, old friend,” he told her.

“In a way, it only seems fitting, dear one. Many years ago, you and I and Faalken set out on a long journey. And though Faalken has fallen along the path, you and I remain. If what comes truly will be the end of that path, then isn’t it only right that we face that together?” she asked gently, touching his face.

“It seems so long ago,” he said distantly, patting the hand on his cheek. “And I’ve changed so much. So have you.”

“Only what is outside has changed, my dear one,” she smiled, touching his chest, putting her hand over his heart. “What I saw here has never changed.”

“So, you agree to trying it?”

“Don’t be silly,” she smiled. “In seven days, we shall journey to Pyros. I will be there to see you destroy the One, and together we will draw the fangs of the Demon Lord.” She made a face. “I do hope you have a plan for getting at the One through the Demon Lord?”

He snorted. “Stay away from him, keep focusing on the One, until the Demon Lord realizes that I have no interest in him,” he answered. “Like I said, there’s a very good chance he’ll just step aside. It does him much more good for me to destroy the One, as far as he’s concerned. I’d just be removing the last annoying obstacle in his plan.”

“And if he does not?”

“Then we just fight them both,” he answered. “And if we can’t kill the One, if the Demon Lord protects him and keeps me from getting to him, we seal them *all* inside the Ward, and turn to the Elder Gods to reach into this world and defend us from their power. I’ll put the power of the ten Elder Gods against the One and the Demon Lord, even if they are reaching across the planes.”

“Then our first step is to contact Mother and arrange things with the Elder Gods. If they won’t help us, then this plan has no chance.”

He nodded. “I need to tell her to have the Elder Gods allow Phandebrass to open the gate anyway,” he told her. “I was serious about that. I hope that the Dain will decide to stay and fight, but I also don’t want him to commit everyone to the cause. I’m hoping that he sends *some* people home. I’m also hoping that the Elara do the same. They have to think about protecting their races from destruction.”

“Hold a moment, dear one. If we can’t destroy the One, what about the souls of our brothers and sisters trapped on Auromar?”

“Phandebrass would have to go there and open a gate to the Astral,” he answered. “Just the way Niami originally wanted us to do it. It would be easy for him with a Pegasus to fly him out there. But if we can destroy the One, the souls of the *katzh-dashi* can escape into the Astral on their own, without any help from us at all. All we have to do is break the One’s hold over Auromar, and we do that by destroying his icon.”

“Yes. Very well then, dear one, bring forth that bell that Sapphire supplied to us and call to Mother. Let’s make sure the Elder Gods will help us first. If they will, let us sit down and plan out what we intend to do. Afterward, I’ll need you to share with me your knowledge of the land around Pyros, and the mountain. We need to start planning our course of action.”

“No time like the present,” he said, calling forth his sword from the *elsewhere*.

The Dura—Duthak as far as he were concerned—had most definitely maintained their mannerisms that Tarrin had read about during his study of the Dwarves. They were an industrious, serious lot with a near obsession for work, for craftsmanship, and for drink. The Dura did play, but they played with a single-minded determination that almost made it seem like work, and their senses of humor were rather unusual. They seemed

like a dour, serious lot, but Tarrin could read into that scowling façade and see the vibrancy of the common Dura's personality.

One thing that Tarrin saw, that probably impressed him more than most other things, was the Dura concept of self-reliance. There were no servants in the Dain's palace in the traditional concept of a royal palace. None. Yes, there were maids and butlers, but they didn't wait on people. The maids and butlers cleaned the rooms, but not personal chambers, only common areas. The cooks made food. The launderers did laundry. And that was *all* they did. There were no personal servants; only the Dain had personal servants in that regard, and even he only had servants who helped him with his schedule or relayed messages. The Dain dressed himself just like any other Dwarf, he cleaned his own room, and basically did all the things that any commoner Dura would do. Every Dwarf took care of his own affairs, looked after himself, and personified the ideal that every Dwarf was responsible for his own well being. If a Dwarf wanted food in his personal quarters, he went and got it. If he needed laundry done, he took it down to the laundry himself, and picked it up. Parents didn't even order children to run errands, ingraining into them at a young age the idea that a Dwarf is responsible for his own affairs.

That earthiness made Tarrin feel that the Dura were a people he could come to like. Tarrin himself had a towering scorn for the idea of being waited on hand and foot, and he had finally come among people who understood how he felt and left him alone. It pleased Mist and Kimmie as well, though Haley and Miranda certainly didn't seem very happy with the way the Dura did things.

Over the course of that first day with the Dura, the Dain didn't come back to Tarrin to talk, for he was locked in his study with Lorak, and then with Neh as she was summoned to get him into contact with the Elara. But Kang and Tsukatta were definitely very, very popular. They ended up with Dain Darax's command staff, led by a badly scarred Dwarf named Bragg, who only had one eye and a wicked scar running diagonally from his top right temple, over the black eye patch over his empty right eye socket, and cutting a deep furrow in the his cheek and upper lip. The right side of the base of his nose was gone, as were all the front teeth in his upper jaw, which gave him a permanent sneer and a rather unpleasant visage to look upon. Bragg's face wasn't much to look at, but he was every bit the general that Kang was, and the two of them had immediately struck up a rather unusual friendship based on contentuous argument over military philosophy. Kang and Bragg and Bragg's generals pored over maps of the area around the Iron Mountain and argued about troop positioning in the face of the large army that was marching north from the mountains, an army containing Demons, and how to best go about defending against it, as Tsukatta made suggestions that got him embroiled into the planning and revealed the wandering warrior's expertise in the arts of warfare, be them on a personal or army level. That army would get here before Tarrin and Dolanna left, so the Dura would have to meet it and repel it, with the help of the newcomers.

The Dura certainly had some opinions about the others. Binter and Sisska and the other Vendari were so huge that the Dura had misgivings about approaching them, but after they started talking, they started warming to the level-headed Vendari. They had no trouble at all accepting the Selani either, for they were the souls of courtesy. But the Dura turned a cold shoulder to the Knights and the other humans, even the Shadows, probably because of the impact the One had had on their lives, and they really, really

didn't like Miranda. Miranda's cheeky disposition just seemed to rub the dour Dura the wrong way, and they certainly weren't afraid to make their dislike of her known. Sarraya too got the rough side of the Dura, reducing her to screaming in frustration and retreating to the sanctuary of Tarrin's personal chamber. Ariana was personable enough for the Dura to talk with her, but they would have nothing to do with Anayi because someone let it slip that she was a half-breed Demon. The Dura were afraid of Camara and Koran Tal, and not just because they were so tall...there was just something about the Amazons that intimidated the Dura.

Fireflash spent the rest of the day with Tarrin, extricating himself from the sometimes smothering attention that Zyri gave him, for she was the one he was with if he was not with Tarrin. What surprised Tarrin more was that Forge and Ember also spent the rest of the day with him, lounging at the foot of the chair he occupied. Tarrin and Forge had always had a rather affable relationship, and Ember also seemed to have an honest affection for him...and Fireflash's relationship with the Hellhounds was never in doubt. To the Hellhounds, Fireflash was like a member of the pack. He and Dolanna finalized their plans when he contacted the Goddess, and she informed him that the Elder Gods were more than willing to supply their aid. Though they had exiled him to Pyrosia and they were afraid of him, not even they could deny that stopping the Demon Lord from destroying Pyrosia was what had to be done. As gods, it was their duty to oppose the Demons, and denying them the opportunity to conquer another material plane was imperative. Ayise *herself* had replied when Tarrin contacted Niami the second time and told him that the combined might of all ten Elder Gods would be there to shield Tarrin and Dolanna from the wrath of the Demon Lord as they ensnared him in their trap.

After they had that pledge, they pored over maps and decided where and how to approach, where the icon of the One might be, and the best way to go about getting at him with a minimal of an exposure of risk to themselves. But they stopped soon after that, for Mist returned with the children, and Kimmie came to visit, and then Var and Denai came to his room to visit, and then the three of them left together to explore the Dwarven city. Before they had a chance to begin again, Haley and Miranda came in to see him, accompanied by Binter and Sisska who had to walk hunched over and dropped to one knee any time they stopped. The mink Wikuni spent a few minutes complaining about how unfriendly the Dura were, then started giving him the same report she gave to Kang, reporting everything she and Haley had observed about the Dura, from their behavior to their military fortifications.

"They did a really good job with this place," Haley said. "One of Bragg's generals, Murgak, he showed me around. They really laid this place out with defense in mind. The entire city is one big fortification designed to defend the Royal Ward, where we are."

Miranda nodded. "When there's an attack, they bring everyone into this ward and then seal off the rest of the city, just in case their army gets overrun and enemies breach the outer gates. Their design isn't to protect Dain Darax, but to protect the citizenry. All the Dura are evacuated to this ward, and the rest of the city becomes a huge obstacle between the invaders and the people. Most of the buildings in this Ward aren't mansions, they're really shelters," she said in surprise. "Very few people actually live in this Ward, mostly just the Dain and the command staff and most of the clan leaders. The clans pull their people into this ward and put them in all these buildings, and that makes them virtually untouchable."

“Citizen really just means women and children,” Haley said. “And not all the women either. It’s kinda hard to tell them from the men because of those beards,” he said with a shudder, “but they have a sizable number of women in their army. I’d say about eighty percent of the Dura’s population can be put on the field in case of any major action. In a way, I can understand the Dain’s seeming arrogance about his chances here. If it was anything but a Demon army, I’d say that their Iron Mountain is all but impregnable.”

“Aye,” Binter agreed. “The Dura have done an outstanding job in the design of their mountain city. The *Sashka* would be hard pressed to conquer this place.”

Now *that* was a complement, if Binter was admitting that the Vendari wouldn’t be able to easily take the Iron Mountain in battle.

“It’s easy to understand why the Dura have been a pain in the One’s backside all these years,” Miranda chuckled. “They’re so heavily entrenched here that the One would have to sacrifice virtually his entire army to dig them out. I found out that the Dura have more farmland deeper in the mountain range, which is all but unreachable by men on foot, which they reach through very small tunnels that can be collapsed in case someone tries to use them to invade the city, so their food and their water sources are completely secure. They can’t be starved out, they can’t be defeated in battle, and they can’t be tricked with diplomacy, because the One would never resort to espionage. I think only the Elara are more secure than the Dura, and only just because they live on the moon.”

“No, the Elara have a gateway that opens to their moon, so they’re not as secure as the Dura,” Tarrin mused. “There’s *no way* into this city unless you can literally walk through rock.”

“How does it look for the Dura concerning the advancing army?” Dolanna asked.

“The army’s big,” Miranda replied. “Very big. Anayi and Ariana got together with Kang earlier and they guessed out how big it is, and it’s not good. They estimate that maybe around a hundred thousand men are within four days of the Iron Mountain, and however many Demons are included with them. Kang figures they’ll attack in five days. Bragg’s intent is to revert to his typical strategy, which is to march out and destroy them in a pass through the foothills south of the farms. There’s a place between two sharp hills that Bragg calls the Meat Grinder, it’s the only real option for an army on the march, given that the Dura control the hills. He intends to set up there and turn them away.”

“I remember seeing that pass when we flew in,” Tarrin mused. “Bragg’s right, it’s a good place to set up.”

“If we intend to have Phandebrass cast his spell in seven days, then we’ll be seeing a battle before we go,” Haley reasoned. “Kang has already pledged the assistance of our people, and Bragg basically browbeat the Dain into accepting. So we’ll be marching out with them.”

“I would have had our people go no matter what this Dain said,” Binter said. “It is a good chance to feel out the capabilities of our foe. A wise commander knows his opponent’s forces as well as he knows his own.”

“Bragg has plans for our Pegasi,” Miranda said with a cheeky grin. “He wants to put the Wizards and Elementalists on Pegasi and harass the enemy from the air during the battle.”

“That would work so long as the Demons don’t have any *vrock*,” Tarrin grunted. “But they probably will, and a mounted spellcaster is no match for a *vrock* in the air. I think what Bragg doesn’t realize is that the enemy can hold back almost all its Demons

until just before the battle, then have them simply Teleport in. He should expect a larger force than what's coming, and quite a few of them to be very, very powerful. First thing they should do is start having the spellcasters imbue every weapon they can get their hands on with a magic aura. That would be all it takes to make them capable of harming Demons. Add the weapons they can get to those of us from Sennadar, who are carrying weapons that *can* hurt Demons, and put them all in a reserve force that gets held back specifically to counter any Demons. The spellcasters themselves should also be held back and reserved just for fighting Demons."

"Kang already made those suggestions," Haley informed him. "His Empress happens to *be* a Demon, so he knows how to combat them. Bragg resisted the idea at first, but once Kang explained what he was going to be up against, he gave over on the idea."

"Tsukatta's going to command that reserve," Miranda told them. "The way they're going to set up is that Bragg handles the normal forces of the One, and Tsukatta and Kang will deal with the Demons and any spellcasters that the enemy might have on their side."

"Bragg also has some plans for you, Tarrin. He heard about how we arrived," Miranda winked. "He thinks you'd be quite an impressive surprise to drop on the One's army at the right time."

"That's fine," he said. "As a dragon, I'm sure I could do some damage to the One's forces. With sheer weight if anything else," he chuckled.

"Expect him to come around soon and ask," she warned. "Kang told him that *nobody* commands you to do anything, and that if he wanted you to participate in the battle, he'd better come ask you. *Nicely*."

"I'd have to go blue for that," he mused to himself. "Demons are immune to fire, but they're *not* immune to lightning. A blue dragon would be a much more effective weapon than a gold against Demons."

"Sapphire would be overjoyed," Haley smiled.

"She probably thinks it's sacrilege that I use the form of a gold," he chuckled in agreement. "I'll have to tell her it's just because I have two breath weapons when I use a gold. If blues had more than one, I'd probably use a blue."

"I'll let Bragg know that you'd be inclined to the idea, all he has to do is ask," Miranda noted aloud. "Well, that's about all I have to say. Haley?"

"Nope," he answered. "That covers about everything."

"Good. Thanks for the information. Now you can go," he said lightly, yet in a manner that made it clear they were dismissed. "You too, Dolanna."

She nodded and got up. "Should I intercept Mist?"

He shook his head. "You couldn't do that anyway. She won't disturb me, so it's not an issue. And the children know better than to bother me when I'm busy. I'll be fine." He reached down and picked up the Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook, then opened it to the page where he had stopped. "I'll see you at dinner."

"We'll be dining in the main hall with Darax and his clan leaders," Miranda giggled. "This'll be interesting, that's for sure. Sure you don't want me to stay, Tarrin? I can help with whatever that is."

"No. Bye, Miranda."

"Aww, come on, I know—"

"Miranda. Out," he commanded, pointing at the door. "Binter."

Binter nodded, and grabbed Miranda by the tip of her bushy tail, then got up and started towards the door as he waddled hunched over in that direction. “Ow!” Miranda squeaked when Binter pulled all the slack out of her tail, and she literally started being dragged backwards towards the door by her tail. “Binter! That hurts!”

“Disobedience is often painful,” he said sagely as he squeezed through the door, pulling the mink along behind him.

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Chapter 14

The dinner that Darax held for the visitors was not fun for anyone.

The reasons weren't very complicated, after all. Tarrin had not endeared himself to the nobles among the Dura, nor did he exactly make Darax want to strike up a friendship with him. He had been cold, deriding, and not a little disrespectful to Darax, and that was the kind of thing that the Dura nobles weren't going to forgive very quickly, or very easily. From the instant that Tarrin arrived in the hall, all conversation ceased among the Dura, and every eye glared at the winged Were-cat throughout almost the entirety of the meal.

It only got worse when all of their coldness and accusatory stares seemed to have absolutely no effect on Tarrin whatsoever. He chatted conversationally with his mate and Kimmie and the others, even told them about the clan crests of the Dura and their roots in Duthak custom. Every crest had a yellow triangle in the center in honor of Clangeddin, the god of the Dwarves, one way the Duthak honored their god in simple yet elegant ways. They had kept their pious nature, but that piety was now focused on Dumathoin, their new god. Tarrin's nonchalance and complete disregard for the hostility of the Dura only seemed to whip them up into a fever pitch before the main course was served, but they were literally trapped in the room with him. No Dwarf would leave the hall until Darax was finished eating; this was an ancient Duthak custom that seemed to continue to hold true. And since Darax was busy ignoring Tarrin by talking with Lorak, Bragg, Tsukatta, and Kang at his table at the head of the hall, the rest of the nobles were stuck waiting for Darax to finish his meal so they could leave.

It all came to a head just about the time dessert was served, meaning large tankards of Dwarven ale. One young Dwarf with a braided red beard stomped over, looked Tarrin in the eye, and boldly told the Were-cat exactly what he thought of him. His eternal mistake was doing that in front of Mist, whose intolerance for disrespect to her mate was reaching legendary proportions. The young Dwarf managed to stagger away, leaving a trail of blood that poured from his face, from where Mist had grabbed hold of his braided beard and literally ripped it off his face. Mist had lunged onto the table to rip off the Dwarf's beard, and Tarrin grabbed her by the tail to prevent her from trying to chase the Dwarf down and finishing him off. She made as if to throw the beard at the Dwarf's back, but then snorted and placed the beard deliberately on the table as she crawled down, putting it out in plain sight as a gruesome warning to anyone else who would dare speak so to her mate.

Mist's action caused a sudden firestorm of shouting and overturned benches as the Dwarves in the hall jumped up and prepared to do battle with Mist over her attack on the youth, at least until Tarrin intervened. The Dwarves knew something bad was about to happen when incandescent white light suddenly flooded through those wings on the Were-cat's back, casting his face into shadow that made him look positively ominous. With a

single wave of a glowing paw, he caused every single loose object before him, food, plates, tankards, benches, tables, Dwarves, even the rushes on the floor, to hurtle backwards against the wall Tarrin faced, and there it all stayed as if some gigantic hand was pressing them into the wall. Dwarves struggled and writhed, tried to push pieces of furniture off their faces, but the force holding it there was as inexorable as it was careful not to do any lasting harm.

“Was that entirely necessary, dear one?” Dolanna questioned sternly.

“Actually, yes, it was,” Tarrin answered, looking at the Dwarves pinned against the wall. “Better teach them this lesson now, before Mist kills one of them.”

“What are ye doing?” Darax screamed from his chair. “Release them at once!”

“I just saved their lives, Darax,” Tarrin said evenly. “I’m tolerant of disrespect shown to me, but my mate is *not*. If they move like they’re going to fight like that again, she’ll probably kill all of them.”

“Damn right I will,” Mist said with a threatening hiss at them, her ears laying back.

“I doubt that seriously,” Darax snapped. “Now release them!”

“Your Majesty, you’re about to make a very big mistake,” Kang said with quiet urgency. “You’re getting really close to accusing Tarrin of lying, and that is something you *do not want to do*. If he says it, he *means* it. And he probably did just save their lives,” he added. “Getting them away from Mist was only smart.”

“You show too much respect for these creatures, Kang,” the Dain said stiffly. “No single creature is a match for the nobles of the Dura.”

“Do you want to put money on that wager, my Dain?” Kang said with a sly smile. “I’ll put every copper bit in my purse on Mist right here and now.”

“Mist? Allow them to face Kimmie, Kang-san,” Tsukatta offered. “She is the least volatile of the Were-cats. She would not kill one of them out of pique.”

“Aye,” Kang nodded. “Well, what say you, my Dain? Do you think your nobles are up to facing just one of the Were-cats? They get a chance to beat up a Were-cat in retaliation for Mist ripping that beard off, and you get a chance to show the Were-cats what the Dura are made of. Everyone gets the fight they want, but nobody gets killed, and it’ll be sporting. What do you say?”

“What is Kang doing?” Dolanna demanded in a harsh whisper, speaking in Sharadi to Tarrin.

“Proving a point,” he answered, then he looked to Kimmie. “Well, dear, you think you’re up to a little exercise?”

“I’m wearing a dress, Tarrin!” she complained plaintively. “You know I hate fighting in a dress!”

“Won’t Kimmie get hurt?” Zyri asked in concern.

Kimmie chuckled, ruffling Zyri’s hair. “They can’t hurt me, munchkin,” she winked. “I’m more worried about one of them ripping my dress.”

Kang’s cleverly offered challenge managed to do two things. First, it deflected what could have been a very ugly confrontation between Darax and Tarrin, and secondly it appealed to a Dwarf’s sense of competition. Dwarves strove to be the best, even if they didn’t flaunt that superiority...but there was a fair bit of competing among them. They raced each other to see who could be the richest, who could make the best crafted items, who could be the best at what they were doing. Those who won were good sports about it, those who lost weren’t overtly jealous, even if they were covetous.

“A single Were-cat against all me nobles? That’s hardly fair.”

“If you think so, then accept the challenge,” Kang told him. “And my wager.”

“It’s yer money to lose.”

“Then take the bet,” Kang pressed.

“What say ye, nobles?” Darax called to the men and women pinned to the wall.

“Think ye can take a single southlander?”

There was a loud concerted cry of consent, as one of them yelled out “as long as there ain’t no cheatin’ magic!” It sounded to Tarrin like the nobles had some pride to regain.

“Does Miss Kimmie agree to be the opposition?” Darax called. “Fully understandin’ that ye can’t hold us responsible for any injuries ye might take during the fight?”

“Me against every dwarf in this room?” Kimmie said with a completely insincere look of trepidation. “Well, it’s the honor of the Were-cats at stake, so I’d have to accept the challenge, your Majesty.”

“You are *such* a liar,” Miranda said in a gleeful whisper to her, which made Kimmie wink slyly.

“We’ll be making it fair,” Darax said smugly. “No weapons, no magic. Ye’ll fight til Kimmie yields or she’s knocked senseless. Er, and the same applies to me nobles,” he added.

Tarrin and Haley looked at each other, then burst out laughing, which caused Darax to glare at them.

“What’s so funny?” Zyri asked.

“The rules the Dain set will make it impossible for his nobles to win,” Dolanna answered the girl.

“Shouldn’t we say something?” she asked.

“No. The Dain has made the rules. Now he must learn from his mistake,” Binter said sagely.

“I am *not* ruining my dress,” Kimmie said sternly.

“Then take it off, fool girl,” Mist told her.

“Good idea,” Kimmie said with sudden enthusiasm.

The Dwarves started laughing and throwing out rather unflattering comments when Kimmie stood up and boldly removed her dress as Tarrin released his magical hold on the Dura, who came stomping up towards the nude Were-cat with wicked enthusiasm in their eyes. Kimmie was not like any other Were-cat female, her body all feminine curves, no discernable muscular definition, and the she-softness of a human...but that was a deceptive trap that had cost more than one person his life. Kimmie *looked* all delicate and weak, but she was every bit as strong as any female Were-cat her size. The Dwarves stopped a few spans from her, then they started laughing and debating among themselves who would get the honor of going out there and basicly punching her in the stomach and making her beg like a little girl. They were lured into a feeling of overwhelming superiority because there were fifty of them and one Kimmie, and Kimmie looked like a weakling.

They were about to be thoroughly disabused of that notion.

They finally sent out a single male Dwarf, a rather burly tall one that came up to Kimmie’s slender belly who was wearing an ale-stained chain hauberk with bits of potato wedged in the chain links from where Tarrin had slammed all the food into the them.

“Give up now, lass, I don’t wanna hurt ye,” he said, cracking his knuckles threateningly as the Dura started to cheer him and jeer Kimmie.

Kimmie gave him a disingenuous smile, stepped up, and let him have it.

The cheering became gasps when the Dwarf literally sailed over the heads of his companions. Kimmie had struck like a viper, lunging out and grabbing the Dwarf by his chain jack, then rearing back and throwing him like a large rubber ball. He hurtled through the air and crashed into the wall behind them, then dropped to the floor and lay in a twitching heap.

“Here now, we agreed no magic!” one young bearded female Dwarf screamed in protest, putting her hands on her hips.

“I didn’t use magic,” Kimmie said in a seductively wicked purr, spreading her feet and putting her paws out, a mimic of the slouched fighting stance that Tarrin himself used, then she gave the Dwarves a deliciously evil little smile. “I’m not using anything that my parent didn’t bless me with when I was turned. My strength is *natural*. Want to see it again?”

The Dwarves took a unified step back, then one screamed out “get ‘er!”

They rushed Kimmie all at once, correctly guessing that it was going to take numbers to defeat an opponent with her physical power.

It was almost funny to watch. The shorter Dwarves found in the sleek Were-cat an opponent as fast as she was strong. She evaded the rush simply by vaulting over them, and she was on them from behind not even a heartbeat after her feet touched the floor. Dwarves started flying in every direction as she grabbed breastplates and chain mail shirts and simply tossed them this way and that, forcing whoever was in them to follow along with the armor. They managed to regroup enough to try to swarm her under, but their fists and feet and weight were like annoying bees to the Were-cat. They weren’t tall enough to hit her in the head, and her head was the only vulnerable part of her anatomy. Dwarves went flying with every sweeping blow of her arms, but to their credit, they didn’t give up. Those that got tossed aside quickly got back on their feet and ran right back into the fray. She danced and flitted and spun to keep them from swarming her, knocking Dwarves off their feet with pushes, light kicks, slaps of her tail, and the occasional hooking of armor and tossing aside like a sack of meal. But the Dwarves were determined and they were working together, managing to get Kimmie surrounded to the point where she couldn’t dodge them anymore. She evaded this tactic simply by jumping away again, adjusting her feet to keep from landing on a Dwarf that was on the ground, trying to recover from where she had thrown him. “Sorry!” she said quickly as she landed with a foot on either side of the younger Dwarf, then quickly flitted away before he had the presence of mind to try to grab her feet. They worked again to surround her, even as she sent them flying or batted them to the ground, until it became clear to the Dwarves that she was *playing* with them. That made them outraged, and it also helped focus their determination. One Dwarf managed to grab hold of Kimmie’s left foot after she knocked her to the ground with a foot to the rump, and that hold slowed her down just long enough for the Dwarves to converge on her. They slammed into her from every direction, grabbing her and trying to pull her off her feet, even as they continued to punch and kick her. She endured their pummeling with stoicism, even when one of them punched her in the groin deliberately, tensing up her muscles and letting them beat on the rock-hard shielding those muscles provided to the organs underneath, using her inhuman

strength and claws dug into the floor to keep them from pulling her down. Kimmie had Dwarves literally hanging off her arms after a few chaotic seconds as she went about the task of peeling them off of her, as they all continued to try to bring her down with sheer force of numbers. Kimmie dealt with them like a mother cat enduring the play of her kittens, being gentle with them, but clearly manhandling them...at least until one aggressive Dwarf went and decided to bite her tail. Kimmie yowled in pain and her eyes suddenly went hot with indignation, and she whipped around on the offending Dwarf so quickly that the Dwarves hanging off of her were thrown off by the sudden violent movement.

"How *dare* you bite my tail!" she shrieked in outrage.

"Ooo, mistake," Tarrin winced dryly.

"Big mistake," Mist agreed with a nod.

"Kimmie's tail is sensitive?" Haley asked with a broad grin.

"Very," Tarrin nodded. "She's mad now. It's over."

Kimmie's indignation was quickly demonstrated, because she stopped being gentle. Instead of knocking them down or tossing them aside, Kimmie balled her fists and started smashing them to the floor with stunning, crushing blows. Feet that only knocked them down, maybe booted them a few spans, now struck with such force that the unfortunate Dwarf on the receiving end was catapulted into the air, the armor he or she was wearing the only thing preventing a mortal injury. One unlucky fellow was grabbed by the ankle, and then Kimmie hefted that Dwarf up and used him like a living weapon, smashing him into his fellows like a club, then whipping him around in a circle and blasting him into anyone that was close enough to hit. Tarrin had this vision of that ridiculous pair he'd encountered while guarding the gateway back home, that Dwarf with the axblade helmet, the one that thought he was a battle axe, and it made him laugh to see Kimmie using the Dwarf in her paws as a weapon against his companions.

Fueled by righteous indignation, Kimmie systematically beat the entire Dwarven assemblage of nobles senseless. In mere moments, the hall was filled with groaning Dwarves laying haphazardly on the bare floor, about ten Dwarves on their knees yielding in hysterical voices, and in the middle of the splayed forms of the unconscious was a naked tabby-furred Were-cat, her shoulders heaving and her face screwed up in a mask of outrage and anger as she surveyed the ones who surrendered, just *daring* them to try to get up with her eyes.

Darax was silent for a very long moment, staring at Kimmie in shock and disbelief. "Maybe now you'll take our warnings seriously, your Majesty," Kang told him in a grim tone. "You've been too resistant to the idea that what's coming can't possibly be any stronger or better than your forces. Well, that little slip of a Were-cat just laid waste to your nobility. Your nobles were like biting gnats to her, couldn't hurt her at all, nothing more than a nuisance, and they lasted only as long as they didn't annoy her enough to make her squash them. That is *exactly* what you'll be facing when the Demons come. Beings you can't hurt without magical weapons, that will toy with you until you aggravate them, then they'll just kill you. Now, if Kimmie can do this, imagine what a Demon can do, who's bigger, stronger, and much meaner than Kimmie."

"Ye make a strong point, General Kang," Darax said with uncertainty in his eyes as he looked at his defeated nobility.

"Kimmie, enough," Tarrin called sternly.

She blinked, then blew out her breath, and then the sunny expression was back on her face, as if she had not just brutally beat up most of the Dwarven nobility. "Excuse me," she said politely as she stepped over a groaning Dwarf laying on the floor. "May I have my dress please, munchkin?" she asked Zyri, holding her paw out for the dress that the young lady was holding for her.

"A good fight," Denai said with a grin. "I might have to dance with you someday, *shaida* Kimmie," she offered. "I would love to see how good you are."

"I cheat, Denai," Kimmie warned with a grin.

"It looks like Kang's demonstration had more to do with the Dain's arrogant belief that his warriors can defeat Demons than teaching him about Were-cats," Dolanna mused her her voice. "I did not realize that he had been resistant in the planning meetings. I have not been there."

"They *can* beat Demons if they're prepared for them," Tarrin said with a wave of his paw, as the Dwarves started shakily getting up off the floor. Kimmie had broken a few bones, but hadn't done any serious injury, nothing that the Priests among the Dura couldn't fix with a few simple healing spells. "But maybe now Darax has an idea of what's coming."

That little demonstration made the Dura quiet and introspective as they were collected up off the floor, their injuries healed by Priests, and the furniture returned to its proper places with a few gestures of Tarrin's glowing paws. But where the Dura were pensive, Darax's young face was openly troubled. Maybe for the first time in his entire life, he had seen his warriors, his people, bested. And not just bested, but totally beaten down like a dog. For the first time in his life, Darax was realizing that his people *could* be beaten, that they were not as invincible as he had always believed.

All in all, Tarrin felt that maybe what happened would be for the best in the long run.

Though the others had taken an interest in the Dura, even the Vendari, Tarrin did not. Where most of his friends and family explored their city, talked to the Dura, got to know them and to like them, Tarrin remained closed up in his room, with his spellbook in his lap, or locked in deep discussion with Camara Tal over matters both magical and theological. This seemed strange to most who knew him, since he had spent so many years studying the Dwarves, but those closest to him understood that Tarrin's mind was weighed down by grim and weighty matters that blinded him to virtually everything except what was coming.

Tarrin was not the only one. Kang too had become obsessed to the point of forgetting to eat or sleep, as had Bragg, as the two of them went over the maps, went out and studied their proposed battlefield, and planned and planned and planned. They had no idea how many they were going to be facing, or how many of the dreaded Demons were going to be part of the battle. Bragg's general staff was just as busy, and it wasn't long before Binter and Sisska were drawn into the command staff, Lorak and Phandebrass were brought in to consult on the uses of magic, and one of the Selani, the son of a tribe chief named Zaran, was brought in to help the generals use his people most effectively. Anayi was drafted and tasked with the duty of keeping track of the advancing army, and only her. Ariana was a bit annoyed that her usual role was usurped, at least until Kang explained that if she was spotted, flying Demons would Teleport right to her location and attack her, and no amount of her vaunted flying speed would save her because they could

just Teleport in *front* of her at any time. They would do the same to Anayi, but Anayi could herself Teleport away, making it much safer for her to do it than Ariana. Given that Anayi had been inside the Iron Mountain and could instantly Teleport right back to it at any time, it would allow her to return with up-to-the-second intelligence on the movements and activities of the enemy.

At least Mist understood. He hadn't told her everything about his plan, but she knew enough to know that he needed to be well prepared, and what he'd been doing was preparation for this challenging task. She kept him quiet company, and kept the children from distracting him too much as he read through his spellbook over, and over, and over, struggling to comprehend the *language* behind the *words*. But it was very slow going, and at times he had to put the book down in frustration and go walk around.

Those walks around were rarely very pleasant. The Were-cats were *not* well liked now, both because of Tarrin's actions towards Darax and Kimmie's utter thrashing of the nobles. The Were-cats had stung the pride of the Dura on multiple fronts, by showing a lack of respect towards their young king, and beating them around the throne hall like disobedient dogs. Insolent glares followed him around, and they became truly heated when the Dwarves realized that the Were-cat, so totally engrossed in his own thoughts, didn't even notice that they were there, let alone took notice of their dislike of him...but after what happened in the throne room, none of them had the courage to confront him. The Dwarf whom Mist had de-bearded had been healed, but it would be years before he regrew his beard out, and the lack of a beard made him look quite different from his fellows.

That beard now hung on the wall opposite the door in their apartment, a very visible warning to any Dwarf who entered Tarrin's rooms what the price was for showing disrespect.

It was during one of those walks that he found himself standing in front on a bench that was too small for him in front of a fountain not far from the palace compound, staring at the cascading water without noticing too much what was before his eyes. There was a statue of a female Dwarf and a male Dwarf standing back to back on a rough rock in the center of the fountain, wearing heavy plate armor and brandishing battle axes. Water bubbled up from vents around their feet and cascaded down the sides of the rock, gurgling down into a wide, shallow pool. There was an inscription on the rock, which read *Dain Korgak VI* under the male and another which read *Dain Grendla III* under the female. They were statues honoring kings of the past.

Crossing his arms, he looked down into the water and decided that this might be a good time to touch base with some old friends. His wings flooded with the incandescent white light that marked his use of Sorcery, and he wove a weave of Water and Divine into the waters of the pool. Within seconds, the shell of animation was complete, and a tenuous link opened between where he was and the Elemental Plane of Water, beckoning to the spirit residing there to join him.

She answered immediately, as she always did. The surface of the water bulged, and then the form of the Elemental rose from the waters of the pool. As she always did, she took on a vaguely humanoid form when he did not select one for her, a humanoid form that was decidedly feminine. His water Elemental was the only one of the four that was *anima*, was female, and she always seemed to want that fact known for some reason. Two glowing green eyes appeared within the watery head of the Elemental's form, and

she nodded to him with stateful eloquence as the gentle link between his mind and hers was formed.

He chose his water Elemental because she, unlike the others, had a position of prominence and authority within her realm. She was best suited to answer his questions, even though his earth Elemental was much wiser and more learned than she was.

In that touch between their minds was all the information that he needed to pass to her. She immediately knew what he wanted of her. "Is it possible?" he asked aloud.

She was motionless for a long moment, then she nodded. *"If you know the proper Wizard spells, it is possible,"* she answered aloud, mirroring his own method of communication, in a voice that sounded like waves crashing against the sea. *"But you will suffer from the same restrictions as a Wizard by doing so. You are only safe from me, Master."*

"Can you think of a way around that?"

"If you sought the aid of Vishtee, the Mistress of Water, queen of the plane of Water, she could compel the others to obey. But she would not do such a thing for a mortal, Master, not even you."

"Even if she knew what I'm facing here?"

"The Demons cannot challenge us, Master, and the events of the material plane do not concern us." She glanced around. *"Would you grant me the boon of calling forth my cousin from the earth? We should seek his council in this."*

"Calling the other two would probably also be a good idea," he grunted. "They're probably worried, since it's been so long."

"I have been," she nodded.

In a matter of moments, he had all four of his Elementals present with him. The air elemental hovered over his shoulder, and the other three formed a ring before the fountain. After allaying worries with reassurances, he explained what was coming, and his idea to help combat it. "Can you think of any way I can call more than you four without risking them turning on me?" he asked directly. "If I could field a few dozen Elementals, it could *really* help. Demons have no defense against an Elemental."

"Using standard methods, no," the earth Elemental answered aloud, his voice sounding like the groaning of a deep cave. *"Sorcery will not permit you to summon a second Elemental of the same kind, because of the bond, and if you use Wizardry, you are bound by its rules. But,"* he said, glancing at the fire elemental, *"you have a different way of doing it, Master. You are a god of fire, and you can command that element. If you called out to the plane of Fire, the Elementals there would be compelled to obey you."*

"I don't want to *force* them to help me," he grunted.

"They have no reason to obey you willingly, Master," the earth Elemental grumbled. *"The happenings in the material world have no meaning to us. Your only recourse is to command."*

"Phaugh," Tarrin snorted, turning around and sitting on the edge of the fountain.

"Well, it was an idea, anyway."

"Why does the idea of command bother you so?" the water Elemental asked.

He ran his paw over his head, mashing an ear back. "I guess...I guess it means that I have to fall back on *that*," he told her. "You know I've never been comfortable with it."

"It is who you are, Master," she told him, putting a watery hand on his shoulder. "Try as we might to rage against that which we are, in the end it can never be denied. You have a chance to use it to your advantage, and perhaps save many lives. Don't turn your back on it because it means using power you despise."

"You're right, you're right," he sighed, looking to the fire Elemental. "Will it work?"

It nodded. *"We can't disobey when you call to us,"* it answered. *"If you used a Wizard spell to open a rift into the plane of Fire, you could command every Elemental near to it to obey you."*

"No, I won't do it that way," he said. "If I call them through a gate, then if they die here, they die."

"We cannot die on the material plane," the earth Elemental told him. *"All it would do is send our spirits back to our home planes. We would then simply reform another body from the substance of the plane. It would take longer and we would lose energy, but we would not die."*

"The only way to kill an Elemental forever is to slay us in our home plane," the air Elemental agreed.

"Well, that's something," he sighed. "How many fire Elementals could I call?" he asked, looking to the fire Elemental.

"I couldn't say, Master," it answered. *"It would depend entirely on where you opened the rift."*

"Here now, what manner of beasts be these?" a voice called.

Tarrin looked up and saw none other than Dain Darax, with two of his guards. He was wearing a gleaming silvered breastplate with sturdy black trousers, and was carrying his copy of the axe of the Dains. He didn't look hostile, just curious.

"Elementals, Darax," Tarrin answered politely. "Air, fire, earth, and water," he added, pointing them out. Each nodded to the Dain as he pointed to them. "Summoning an Elemental is a spell of magic. These are the ones that answer my call. I had some questions I needed answered, and I've found that Elementals are beings of wisdom as well as power. Sometimes these four beings are the only ones I can turn to when I need certain questions answered. After all, their knowledge is far beyond just this world."

"Well, pleased to meet ye," he said a bit uncertainly. "May I?"

"Please," he said, motioning beside him. Darax stomped over, giving the Elementals a quick look. They moved back a little to let him sit down.

"I done had a talk with Kang, and with Mistress Dolanna," he said respectfully. "I couldn't right believe one of the things she said. She said *you* were the one that fought the One."

Tarrin looked him directly in the eyes. "I did," he admitted. "I lost too."

"But still, ye fought a *god*. That seems impossible."

"It's not impossible," he said casually. "Gods can only use so much power in the material world. If you can stand up to that, you can fight a god. Granted, it's still way more power than most can match, but I have certain, advantages," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "These are a part of that. They give me the power to fight a god in the physical world."

"What are they?"

"An echo of a long-dead power," he answered. "Trust me, they weren't worth what I had to pay for them."

"I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, Darax, but it would take too long to explain it. Just think of them as a small fragment of a long-dead power that has enough strength to oppose the One, and leave it at that."

"I'll trust yer word on that. She said that ye mean to go back and finish what ye started."

"I will," he answered. "In five days, when the others go back to Sennadar, I'll go to Pyros and destroy the One."

"And the Demon Lord?"

"Dolanna and I have a plan for leashing him," he answered. "After that, it's going to be up to the people left on Pyrosia to kill the Demons. I won't be able to help."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll be dead," he answered bluntly. "And Dolanna will have to keep the leash on the Demon Lord."

"She said that it wouldn't come to that."

"Dolanna is too optimistic sometimes," he grunted. "And even if I do live through it, I'll have to retain the leash on the Demon Lord, which takes me out of the fight. That'll free up Dolanna, though."

"Can ye do it? Kill the One?"

"I can," he answered. "He summoned the Demon Lord out of desperation, because even though we're both wounded, I'm healing faster than he is. He knows that when I show up again, he'll lose. He summoned the Demon Lord to protect himself from me, but that was the biggest mistake he could have ever made. The Demon Lord will destroy the One the instant he has enough power in this world to do so, and then we'll be left with facing the Demon army he summons to conquer the world."

"Why not let this Demon kill the One?"

"Because that means he has the power to conquer the rest of the world," he answered. "Every minute that goes by is more power that the Demon Lord manages to amass. I have to kill the One as quickly as possible."

"Doesn't that mean that ye have to go through the Demon Lord to get at the One?"

He nodded. "I never said it was going to be easy," he shrugged. "But we have a plan for that. It's complicated, and excuse me if I don't explain it to you."

"Is there anythin' I can do to help with yer plan?" he asked in a steady voice.

Tarrin glanced at him. "Yes. You can send some of your people with Phandebrass," he answered. "But you can also stand and fight. That way you can help defend this world from the Demon Lord, but if we all fail, well, then the Dura will survive. The Duthak had that foresight, which is why the Dura are here now. Just show the same prudence your ancestors did, that's all I ask. That's all. I spent years studying your ancestors, and the Dwarves are remembered to this day, even after five thousand years, with the highest regard and respect. When your old god, Clangeddin, asked me to come to see if there were any Dwarves left, I agreed without hesitation. I have too much respect and admiration for your people to see them die here and now because you wouldn't take the steps to protect your people from extinction."

"Ye coulda said it like that instead of confronting me in me own throne room," he chuckled gratingly.

"I'm not one for diplomacy, Darax. I never have been."

“Lady Dolanna explained things to me. I understand better now. I’ve already decided that I’m sending some of me people with Phandebrass, enough to protect us from dyin’ out. But the rest of us, we’re stayin’, and we’ll fight.”

“The Elara?”

He nodded. “They refuse to send anyone away. They’ll stay and fight to the last man. They believe that with them up on the moon, there ain’t no way the Demon Lord can get at ‘em.”

“Just the way you thought that no Demon could breach the gates of the Iron Mountain.”

He nodded. “Seein’ that girl of yers beat down me nobles, that made me start thinkin’ that maybe we aren’t as safe here as I thought.”

“Be glad it was Kimmie. If it was Mist, you’d have buried a couple.”

“Aye, I was warned about her. But she doesn’t seem all that mean.”

“Say the wrong thing and you’ll find out.”

Darax chuckled. “Are these, well, alive?” he asked, motioning to the Elementals.

“Very,” he replied. “They come from another dimension.”

“They look very strange—no offense meant, ye understand,” he said quickly. “I just never saw nothing like ye before.”

“To us, you look very strange,” the earth Elemental boomed.

“Ah, they talk,” he said with a chuckle. “I be Darax, Dain of the Dura,” he introduced. “What names are yers?”

“Our names are irrelevant,” the water Elemental answered. *“They would be things we would never reveal to others. Should a Wizard discover our names, the Wizard could use them to make slaves of us.”*

“I didn’t know that. I beg yer pardon for askin’ then, madam.”

“Few who do not study the ways of Arcane magic would,” she answered with a simple nod.

“So these be advisors of yers?” he asked Tarrin.

“At times. They also help me in other ways, even if I just need to talk. They’ve been friends of mine for many years.”

Darax looked at them again, then stood up. “Well, I’d best be getting back to the planning. Just needed to step out for a bit of fresh air. Be well, master Tarrin.”

Darax stumped away with his guards, as Tarrin studied his back, until he made a decision. “Darax,” he called.

“Aye?” he asked, turning around. He flinched violently but managed to react in time to catch the object that Tarrin had lobbed at him. He stared at it for a long moment, his eyes a mystery.

It was the Axe of the Dwarven King.

“I think that belongs to you,” Tarrin called. “Take care of it, your Majesty.”

“With me life,” he said reverently, running a finger over the symbols engraved in one of the axeheads. “With me life.”

Time.

Sometimes time was an element of universal reality that completely mystified Tarrin. Even with all of his learning, and wisdom, and years of hard life that had grown him

beyond his years, he still just didn't understand how it could flow like a racing river or creep like a garden slug along a leaf.

Five days had seemed like lots of time before they left Pyrosia, but there was also the fact that the armies of the One was coming, and they had maintained a murderous pace. They got ever closer as Tarrin raced to complete his almost impossible task, to unlock the *meaning* of the language of magic, to understand the language of the gods, until it was apparent that they were going to arrive before he accomplished that task.

Ariana had predicted they'd arrive four days after they reached the Iron Mountain, three days before they were going to leave, and she had been exactly right.

Tarrin stood on the absolute pinnacle of the Iron Mountain, his feet resting precariously on a tiny ridge of snow-laced, windswept rock that marked the apex of the peak, standing erect against a howling wind that sought to tear him from his perch and send him hurtling off into the vast expanse of empty air before him. To the south, snaking out like a great living thing, were the armies of the One, advancing with singular purpose upon the towering monument that was the Iron Mountain, last bastion of the race of the Sennadar Dwarves. They looked like ants to him from that lofty height, tiny crawling things far beneath him, awaiting only to be squashed.

They weren't alone, of course. There were Demons down there...Tarrin could *feel* them. And the Demons could feel *him*. There was no doubt that every Demonic eye was locked on the summit of the mountain, staring up at the glowing, almost incandescent presence of a being not meant for the mortal plane, the shining light that was his divine soul that radiated out from him, a light that only other extradimensional beings could see. To them, the top of the Iron Mountain shone like a lighthouse on the shore, and the light that illuminated that snowy peak was ominous and dreadful.

Today...today, would be a day of change. The armies of the enemy were marching forward with inexorable certainty, extinguishing their torches in the dawn. They'd camped a few longspans south, and were now marching the final distance to reach the battlefield that Kang and Bragg had chosen...almost as if they knew where it was going to be. From the way it looked, they'd be set up on the far side of that narrow valley and ready to hit the armies of the Dura in about an hour...early in the morning, but late enough for the light of the sun to come over the mountain peaks to the south and shine in the faces of the Dwarves as the armies of the One charged. That was only prudent military planning, showing that whoever was leading that army knew what he was doing. Their forces would be warmed up from the march, but not exhausted and unable to fight. If they had discipline, they could set their forces and move within minutes of reaching a staging area, so long as the reserves behind that assault force formed up behind them as they charged. But that wasn't going to matter. No matter how many they had, no matter how many Demons they sent, Tarrin would ensure that they were destroyed. Tarrin would do his best to help eradicate that entire army and rob the Demon Lord of those forces later on, when the real war began.

It wasn't going to be easy, but Kang and Bragg had a good plan, and they had a tactical advantage with the terrain and the chosen battlefield. They would also initially be defending in an area that had been prepared with fortifications, which gave them another advantage. The enemy had an overwhelming numerical advantage, as well as Demons...but Tarrin's responsibility was to even those odds. And he had already planned that out.

He had to approach this with a minimalist bent. He had to accomplish his objectives and help win this battle while utilizing as little of his power as possible. He didn't want to show his hand to the Demon Lord as to what kind of power he possessed, didn't want to give the Demon Lord any reason to fear Tarrin's power. If he overstepped his bounds and gave the Demon Lord reason to worry, then the creature might join against the One to destroy him when he went after them...and Tarrin couldn't fight them both at once. He figured that it wouldn't hurt to use any ability that they knew that he had already displayed since he was wounded, mainly his Sorcery, shapeshifting, and minor use of his divine abilities. At the most, he would open the rift into the Plane of Fire and summon help if things got bad. But that was as far as he could go. If he showed any more power than that, then the Demon Lord might attack him when he arrived at Pyros instead of simply stepping back and allowing him to remove the last obstacle between the Demon Lord and absolute domination of this material plane. The entire key to this was to show that he was strong enough to kill the One, but that he was *no threat* to the Demon Lord. Tarrin's rage was his motivation for going back after the One...or so he would let them believe. That bitch Shaz'Baket was with the Demon Lord, he had no doubt that she had told him everything she knew about him, which was admittedly a substantial amount. That Tarrin would risk death by attacking the One with the Demon Lord standing in the way was not a stretch...that was something that he would definitely do. Tarrin's rage knew no fear, and more than once in the past it had blinded his judgement.

Tarrin was counting on the fact that Shaz'Baket knew all about him, and had told her master. He was depending on it. He would turn that weakness into a critical advantage.

Tarrin wrapped his wings, which now blazed with an incandescent white light at all times because of the tremendous reserve of Sorcery he had built up over the night, around himself to keep the chill of the wind off his skin, shaking his head a little after his braid whipped over his shoulder and flapped in the stiff wind, partially blocking his view of the valley below. His tail snaked up over his shoulder and wrapped around his braid, then pulled it back over his shoulder and under his wings to keep it secured.

Today would be the first day a brand new Blood War, the first day of the making of a new world. Today would mark the flipping of the hourglass...and when that sand poured out its last grain, the One would be dead, and the Demon Lord and all his minions would be safely contained. Then the hourglass would be turned over once again, its sands marking the destruction of the Demon Lord's forces and the liberation of Pyrosia from both the One and the Demon Lord.

And then it would be turned over once more, to mark the beginning of a new age of peace. And would the Goddess ensure that sand never poured out.

He closed his eyes as something familiar smacked into his shoulder, then crawled up and took shelter from the wind under one of his wings. "They're looking for you, Tarrin," Sarraya piped over the wind. "Did you have to come out here when it's so windy? I almost had my dress torn off!"

Tarrin looked up into the cloudless sky. "It's going to get worse, Sarraya," he said in an absent, almost lethargic manner. "There's a storm coming."

"Well, let's hope that it only rains over there!" she shouted. "What's wrong?" she asked after a moment.

"Nothing, old friend," he answered, looking back down at the army in the distance. "Just musing about the past and the future, and what more needs to be done."

“Don’t get all mopey on me now,” she said.

He didn’t answer.

“Kang wants you down at the army,” she told him. “They’ve sent out some of those flying Demons to scout, so he figures the fighting’s going to start real soon.”

“I know the plan, Sarraya, and I know the signals. I’ll stay up here, where they can see me, where I can be a powerful distraction. Those Demons down there are going to be too busy watching *me* than to worry too much about what the Dura and the others are doing, and that might help them. Tell Kang that when I’m needed, I’ll be there.”

“He’s not gonna like that.”

“Look into my eyes, then ask me if I care.”

Sarraya burst out into laughter. “Not a bit,” she giggled. “I’ll go tell him. I’ll even tell him what you just told me if he gets pecky.”

“Knock yourself out,” he said absently.

“Alright. I’ll see you down there. Be careful, Tarrin. It’s gonna be dangerous, you know. For you, I mean.”

“You too, old friend.”

She flitted out from the protection of his wing and dove down the mountainside, flying along the leeward side to protect herself from the wind, quickly vanishing from sight as she turned invisible...but he could still see the aura of her as a wispy outline encompassing empty air. But that too quickly vanished, as she raced away from him.

Tarrin watched her go, and then hefted his sword. The flame of the sword flinched, and then was replaced by the ghostly white aura that marked its connection to the Weave, almost looking like white fire dancing along the blade. He did not weave any spells, instead, he reversed the blade, then drove it into the stone of the mountain’s peak. The entire mountain seemed to shudder and flinch as flows of Sorcery suddenly raced through it, coarsing through the veins of rock, threading down and branching over and over again, expanding more and more as it raced down the mountain until they reached the base. Then the flows began to weave together into a coherent spell, a spell of High Sorcery that heavily involved all seven Spheres, a spell that had not existed until that moment. The spell infused the rock, introducing a Ward into the stone of the mountain itself that would instantly destroy any Demon who so much as put a clawpoint on any part of the stone. Built into the spell was a specific exclusion, to protect Anayi, Forge, and Ember. The spell would not hurt *them*, but would kill any other Demon. Tarrin charged the Ward so it would last for at least a few days, then removed the sword.

That was the last line of defense, in case everything went horribly wrong.

The white of his wings faded away, leaving them looking normal once more...a conscious move to conceal the charge he was carrying, nothing more. That spell had cost *him* none of the energy he had stored up, it had all come from the sword.

There was no more he had to do. He had already laid down a Ward over the planned battlefield to prevent any Demon from teleporting in or out, even Anayi. There was nothing left for him to do but watch, and wait.

Bragg was the one that had command of the front line, and there was no other place that the scarred general would ever want to be. It wasn’t that the general enjoyed killing and war—well, maybe not *completely*—but his place was with his men, fighting at the front lines, swinging his axe just as he expected his youngest, lowest-ranking, downy-

faced whelp of a private to do. Dwarven generals did *not* sit on horses at the rear of the line and bark orders at their troops. Dwarven generals stood right in the middle of the line and boomed those orders over the din with voices trained over the years to carry over the loudest battle, accompanied by a flag officer who waved certain flags to reinforce those commands.

Dwarven generals were warriors before they were generals.

As the sun rose over the hills to the southeast, the enemy moved in and set up. Though more than half of their forces hadn't even reached the staging area yet, there was already a seething sea of stinking humans facing them across the narrow valley that would serve as a chokepoint to prevent them from flanking his forces. He could see that those flying figures in the distance that were hovering over their armies had to be flying scouts, and they were reporting the position and fortifications of the Dwarven lines. That meant that the commander of the enemy forces was now making a decision, debating where and how to hit the fortified line.

That line was formidable. They'd dug a deep trench through the middle of the valley and filled it with sharpened stakes, then piled the dirt up on the far side to form a rampart that was would be manned by Dwarves with long pikes to kill anything that tried to climb up. Beyond that was an empty area, and then there was a zigzagging low wall of logs, behind which the rest of the army would stand ready to repel any invaders. Behind them was a natural rise in the valley floor, upon which were stationed all the magic-users, to give them an unobstructed line of sight to the open area beyond the log wall. Archers armed with crossbows were on the hillsides to either side of the log wall, so their elevation would give them greater range, to make the very act of reaching the trench a dangerous one. Their reserves were stationed behind the magic-users, in the open area beyond the valley, ready to rush in and support, and also ready to run forward with long planks that would be thrown over the rampart and trench to allow the Dwarven army to rush across the obstacle and press the planned counterattack. They were well positioned and safely entrenched behind solid fortifications. They were ready for the enemy army.

But Bragg saw no Demons other than the fliers in that army...which were what was supposed to make this such a dangerous battle. No, wait, now he saw one, and an evil looking monster it was at that. It was a gruesome looking thing, looking like a human woman with six arms, but it was like someone cut her in half at the waist and stuck her on the end of a giant snake. Eerie looking witch, there wasn't any doubt about that, despite the fact that her head looked completely human, and she had an impressive pair of uncovered breasts wagging freely about in the morning breeze. She slithered out on that snake body ahead of the forces, and boldly used some kind of spyglass to look over the fortifications his men had made over the last few days. Then Bragg saw another Demon, this one a disgusting looking thing that looked like some kind of cross between a frog and a lizard that walked on two legs like a man. It rushed out of the formation of rather nervous-looking humans and seemed to talk to six-arms, then it just *disappeared* like it wasn't there!

"Shaz'Baket!" Lady Dolanna gasped from well behind him, where the other magicians were gathered and prepared to repel the Demons. "They sent Shaz'Baket!"

"Ye know that six-armed wench, Lady Dolanna?" Bragg asked.

“She has been a thorn in our side for many years, General Bragg,” she answered. “Send for Kang immediately, General! This Demon is not a general you take for granted! And have Sarraya inform Tarrin she is here!”

“General? That woman’s leadin’ the enemy army?”

“And she will do it flawlessly, General Bragg!” Dolanna warned. “Have Kang join us immediately, General! It will take both of you to best this one on a battlefield!”

That didn’t seem to be necessary, for Kang was thundering in on his Pegasus as fast as the animal would carry him. “Dolanna, is that who I think it is?” he shouted before he got there.

“It is, General Kang!”

“Recall all available reserves from the Iron Mountain *AT ONCE!*” Kang boomed in a mighty voice. “Binter! Binter!”

It was sudden chaos as Kang issued twenty commands in the span of two heartbeats, and without consulting General Bragg. The Dwarves seemed reluctant at first to obey, but a voice that cracked like a whip motivated them into obedience, as Kang issued his orders in a blistering voice that would make his own mother jump to obey. Kang quickly reorganized the entire front line, and pulled them all back behind the log wall.

“Sarraya!” Kang screamed. “Sarraya, go back to Tarrin and tell him that Shaz’Baket is commanding the enemy army! We need him down here with us *immediately!* Binter, pull back the Vendari and the Knights behind the front lines and be ready to move quickly to any part of the lines where you’re needed! And send a runner to recall Tsukatta immediately! He’s with the third reserve brigade!”

“This goes against our plan,” Bragg protested.

“We need to change the plan,” Kang spat. “I’ve faced this one before, Bragg. She’s as dangerous as they come. We made our plans based on the assumption we’d be facing a *human* general! This one’s smarter than any human general the One has at his disposal, and she’s not going to make this easy! We can still win, but it’s not going to happen the way we had it planned!”

“*It’s so nice to be appreciated,*” a disembodied voice purred maliciously between the Arakite and the Dwarven generals.

“I hope you brought lots of corpse carts, Shaz’Baket,” Kang grated in reply. “And you’re a fool for revealing your ability to eavesdrop.”

“*Oh come now, I’ve looked forward to this moment for years, Kang,*” she answered eagerly. “*I’ve never forgiven you for defeating me at Suld. I know it was you who commanded the armies. Now I’m here to exact my revenge by defeating you and your Dwarven allies...and I’ll do it without any additional help. What does it prove to beat you when I know your plan? So go ahead and make your plans, make sure I can’t pick them up. I want you to come at me with everything you’ve got, human, and then I’ll grind you into the dust. I’ll show you, I’ll show EVERYONE, that I am the superior commander!*” she screamed hysterically. “*Today I regain my respect! Today I prove that no human can defeat me on the field of battle! Come, Kang! Come and taste your death!*”

There was protracted silence. Kang looked back to the magicians, and Neh nodded as if to say that Shaz’Baket could no longer hear what was being said. “I think she’s a bit irritated,” he said with mild amusement, but his face was grim.

“Ye’ve faced her before, eh?” Bragg asked.

He nodded. "Many years ago. She came *this* close to winning that battle," he said, holding his thumb and forefinger a hair's breadth apart. "She's one of the most brilliant military minds I've ever had to face, Bragg, and I won't deny it. If you wanted a war, my friend, you just got one."

"If ye've fought her before, then I'd say that ye should have complete command," he said with respect in his voice. "Ye have the advantage of experience."

"That's gracious of you, General," Kang said with a grave nod. "But I didn't beat her alone last time, and I won't beat her alone this time. We had quite a few gifted strategists that day. In actuality, it wasn't me who beat Shaz'Baket that day, it was Queen Keritanima-Chan Eram. She made a critical tactical decision on the battlefield that turned out to bring us victory in the end."

"Well, be that as it may, what do ye suggest we do?"

"First, force her to commit her Demons to the battle. She has them hidden somewhere. And there's only one way that we can do that without exposing our forces to her numerical advantage."

All of them looked back to the Iron Mountain, their eyes affixed to the summit.

"He parks himself between us and the enemy. She'd be a maniac to send her human soldiers with him standing in the way in dragon form. He just has to be close enough so the magicians can assist him when she sends her Demons to attack."

"Aye, that's sound thinking," Bragg agreed with a nod.

"Uh, Kang," Ulger said grimly. "You think Sarraya got up there yet?"

"I doubt it, Ulger. Why?"

"Because here he comes!" he shouted, pointing to the sky.

They all looked up and saw a huge dragon descending from the mountain's peak. But where usually golden scales would shimmer in the morning sun, now blue scales shone in the dawn's light, and a sleeker head, with more slender horns and a more rounded snout, topped the draconic body. The blue dragon bellowed a keening cry full of rage and fury, and it adjusted its speeding dive to angle itself directly into the forces of the enemy...directly at Shaz'Baket.

"He knows she is here!" Dolanna screamed in fear. "Kang, Tarrin is out of this battle!"

"What do ye mean?" Bragg asked as Kang swore sulfurously.

"Tarrin and the Demoness have a long personal history," Dolanna answered. "He will stop at nothing to kill her, no matter what it takes. The very sight of her puts him into a rage! He will ignore all commands until she is dead!"

"Well, at least he'll keep her busy," Kang said darkly. "She might have trouble leading her forces with Tarrin chasing her around the battlefield. Set pikes and prepare to stand fast!" Kang boomed.

"Dolanna...I think Shaz'Baket made herself noticeable on purpose," Kimmie said fearfully. "I think she meant to draw Tarrin out."

"I know, dear one, but there is nothing we can now," she said fretfully. "She will send her Demons after him. We can only hope he is strong enough to escape the trap she has baited with her own body."

With a roar that thundered across the valley, the blue dragon screamed over the reserves and the front lines of the Dura, creating a powerful backdraft of wind with his

passing, so low to the ground that the tips of his wings nearly brushed the hillsides that formed the narrow valley between them. He careened into flat plain beyond those hillsides, his maw open and ready to swallow the Demon whole.

She gave an evil smile, but that smile turned to a horrified expression when the boundary of Tarrin's Ward, centered on himself, that prevented Demons from using their innate power to teleport away, washed over her. And then she sensed the second Ward created within the first, a Ward that would kill any Demon who touched it.

But that Ward touched Shaz'Baket, and seemed to waver, to encounter some vast power that rose to oppose it. It buckled under the pressure of that massive power, and then was broken.

Shaz'Baket was protected by some strange power, and that protection saved her from instant death.

Even without the instant death, the power that protected Shaz'Baket from the killing Ward did *nothing* to disrupt the Ward that prevented her from teleporting to safety. The Demoness turned and desperately lunged aside even as Tarrin's jaws snapped shut, moving just fast enough to save herself from a much more agonizing but no less final instant death.

The dragon crashed into the ground, unable to pull out of his dive, moving with such speed that he slid almost a quarter of a longspan, losing scales as his massive form plowed the ground. An entire formation of the One's soldiers vanished in a cloud of dust and an earth-shaking crashing roar, crushed and mangled into unrecognizable forms by the tons and tons of weight that drove them beneath it.

For a moment, there was stunned silence, only the echoes of the impact with the ground bouncing off the mountains to the north. The cloud of dust expanded and ascended into the air, but then it suddenly shuddered, contracted, and then was torn apart by massive wings. The blue dragon appeared within the remnants of the cloud of dust, its sleek form marred with patches of lost scales, and gruesome dark stains that were all that was left of some of the soldiers that were crushed under it when it slid across the earth. There was nothing but a deep, wide scar in the grassy plain leading to the dragon's form.

Almost as soon as Tarrin regained his feet, *hundreds* of Demons simply appeared all around him, but beyond the perimeter of his Ward, some hundred spans away in every direction. Demons of all kinds, from demi-Demon *manes* even to two mighty *balor*, forming an encompassing ring around him. Every single one of them was armed with a twenty span long lance, the shafts made of wood or bone or metal or other materials, but all were capped with a three-barbed spearhead that was sleek and deadly, specifically made to punch through the scales of a dragon and get hung up inside the flesh by the barbs. Human soldiers lost their discipline and fled in terror as the dragon regained its feet, struck by the terror that little races felt facing a dragon, or perhaps terrified of the Demons that were now among them. Either way, they ran in every direction that would take them further away from the dragon.

Tarrin made the first move. He drew in his breath, a deep sucking sound like the rush of wind in a cave, which caused many of the Demons to surge forward almost in unison, levelling their spears at his glittering sapphire scales to try to impale him from every side. They knew what that act heralded. Nearly all of the higher Demons, instead of rushing forwards, began to chant in the language of Wizard magic, preparing to either attack or

defend using the only asset available that might stop the breath weapon of a dragon, or stop a dragon from using it.

But most of them were not fast enough. With a snap forward of the neck, Tarrin unleashed a blast of intertwined bolts of lightning from his maw, which immediately fanned out to form a wide cone of devastation. That cone was aimed directly in front of him, and it spread out in a wide arc that electrocuted dozens of Demons of various types, Demons that tried in vain to escape the blast. He sustained the breath weapon, turning his head to the right as his body turned with it, killing more and more Demons as the ones behind and to the flanks rushed in to skewer him.

But dragons had more weapons than just their breath weapon.

Outside of the breath weapon, the singular most dangerous asset a dragon possessed when used against the little races was the tail. Turning to the right caused his tail to lag behind the turn of his body, and then that two hundred span long appendage suddenly careened around his body, moving so fast that it made a *crack* sound like a gigantic whip. It extended out like a gigantic sword, and many of the Demons at his rear flanks, who were so intent on impaling him with their spears, never saw it coming. Most of them were ripped in half by the sheer power behind the blow as that long tail whipped around his rear quarters, sweeping them aside like so much wheat harvested by the farmer's scythe. Those that reacted fast enough either dove to the ground or used wings or some other ability to get out of the way.

The Demons that were on his left flank were the only ones left to attempt to impale him with their spears, but they found that he was ready for them. Even as he turned, he brought his belly low to the ground, then folded down his left wing and pushed it against the ground well away from his body. The Demons suddenly found their spears striking the membrane of his wing, not the scaled hide of his flank, punching through the skin of his wing but unable to find purchase in his side. The wing flinched and shuddered as dozens of spears drove through the membrane stretched between the bones, but then all those Demons found their spears torn from their hands as the wing snapped upwards, taking those spears with it. The barbs in them caused them to stick fast to his wing, and the Demons were not strong enough to keep hold of them.

His turn and counterstrokes prevented a vast majority of the Demons from reaching him, but he didn't stop them all, and he had done nothing to prevent those Demons utilizing magic from completing their spells. Several *vrock* and *nalfeshnee* who had used their wings to avoid his tail landed on his back, and drove those spears down into his armored hide, their points piercing his scales and finding yielding flesh beneath. Those Demons casting spells completed them in a staggered procession, and the blue dragon found itself being pounded by magical missiles, struck by rays of intense cold, or cones of fire, or jets of corrosive acid, or fast-moving shards of stone that cut as deeply as an arrow fired from a Sulasian longbow. Those magical effects raced towards the dragon—
—and then simply fizzled away before striking his scales.

Those Demons who were knowledgeable in the ways of magic immediately understood what had happened. Protecting the dragon was a Wizard's spell called the *anti-magic shell*, an aura of utter anti-magic that destroyed any spell that entered into its area of effect. It had *no* effect on Wards of Sorcery that were *outside* of the area of effect of the anti-magic shell, which prevented the shell from disrupting the Wards. It also had no effect on the dragon's breath weapon, which was a natural ability. The

dragon couldn't *regenerate* the magic that powered its breath weapons, but it could use the breath weapon that magical effect had *already* created. He was simply using up his charge, and so long as the shell was in place, he couldn't recharge those reserves of lightning power. It was a layered defense of multiple orders of magic, all designed to protect the dragon from its most dangerous enemies on the battlefield...the Demons.

The blue dragon whipped his head around on that long, serpentine so he was looking down his own back, then unleashed another blast of intertwined bolts of lightning. Those bolts struck his scales and danced along them like water on a sizzling fry pan, doing him no harm, but when they struck the Demons on his back, still holding onto their spears to try to drive them deeper and deeper into his flesh, they found targets not immune to their formidable power. Those Demons on his back were electrocuted by the power of his breath weapon, and all were thrown from him as if struck by a gigantic hammer, smoke issuing from their fur, scales, or mangy skin.

The draconic eyes that turned on the nearest *balor* weren't filled with mindless rage, but instead a cold, calculating, cunning and seething fury, the cold anger of the *human* lurking within Tarrin, an anger that only made him more dangerous. Shaz'Baket had sought to lure him out and drive him into a rage, which would make him easier to kill. Tarrin had used that assumption against her, and had managed to wipe out two thirds of the Demons she had summoned to deal with him after drawing him into combat.

With an ear-splitting roar of defiance and fury, Tarrin's head lanced forth, extending along that ninety span long neck to almost instantaneously close the distance between the dragon's body and the *balor*. The creature registered this action and moved to evade the dragon, but it was simply not fast enough. It vaulted into the air even as Tarrin adjusted his aim, and those massive jaws snapped shut on the *balor*, impaling it on six-span long teeth and crushing it into an unrecognizable mass of dissolving black ichor inside the dragon's mouth. He spat out the acidic mass contemptuously even as he turned and drew in his breath once again, turning on those Demons that had been on his left flank, the ones that now no longer had the long spears that were now embedded in his left wing, spears with which to try to kill him. Those Demons turned and fled, by either foot or wing, and as soon as they escaped the Ward that stopped them from teleporting, they vanished from sight, fleeing certain death.

Without their magic, not even Demons were a match for the awesome might of a *dragon*.

The only ones left were the stupid ones or the overly brave ones among those who had not lost their spears and had evaded his lightning and his tail, but had not fled. They continued to try to get close enough to use them, but the dragon proved that it was as swift as it was powerful. Landbound Demons evaded swipes of his forepaws and his lethal jaws, while the Demons who could fly tried to contend with his sail-like wings and whiplike, lashing tail, which sought to swat them from the air and also served to prevent them from getting to his body. They were working together, the Demons on the ground trying to distract him so the airborne ones could get in a killing blow, trying to turn him so a flying Demon could get over one of his blocking wings and dive down to try to drive a spear through his spine or neck. Several times, the dragon had to quickly move to avoid one of these dives at him, hissing in pain and anger when another spear was driven into him, and another, and another, as each diving Demon tried to strike him in a vital area, but only managed to lose its spear as the dragon moved and allowed it only to

wedge itself into its flesh. The Demons on the ground tried to rush up and spear him from underneath every time he contended with a Demon diving at him from above, but those that tried were often crushed to the ground by a forepaw, or killed by that whipping tail. They also kept his attention as the flying Demons rearmed themselves by picking up the spears of the fallen, laying all over the ground, and then returned to the air for another attempt.

The dragon tired of their tactics and retaliated by rearing up and pounding his wings in the air, over and over, repeatedly flapping them with such power that the tortured earth around him suddenly issued forth huge clouds of stinging dirt, dust, and bits of roots and grass that were driven with the force of a sandstorm before the power of his wings. The flying Demons could suddenly no longer see even a form as monstrous as that of the dragon's in the thick soup of dirt and dust that had been kicked up by his wings, found their eyes painfully clogged with dust and grit, and found themselves flying blind. The loud *whoosh* of the wings even defeated any attempt to navigate the blinding dust with sound, filling their ears with nothing but the beating of the wings against the dust-choked air.

They did hear, however, the sudden intake of breath.

They tried to flee, but had no bearings from which to take to escape. Those on the ground and those in the air turned in random directions, trying to escape the Ward that prevented them from escaping using teleportation, but it wasn't fast enough. The dragon raised his head, then unleashed his breath weapon once more.

Not at a target, not in any specific direction, but *up*, and Tarrin used his control of that breath weapon to make it as wide as possible.

The flying dust and dirt diffused that blast of bolts of lightning that this time were *not* intertwined, scattering the lightning, breaking the bolts apart into smaller arcs as the airborne material served as a perfect conductor to spread the charge out. The entire cloud of dust and dirt suddenly became charged, lightning arcing through it in a wild storm of furious bolts, as the cloud of dust provided the lightning a path to ground and caused jagged arcs of lightning to cascade down from the top to the bottom in a discordant, almost frighteningly beautiful display. The Demons within the dust cloud were electrocuted instantly, falling to the ground and dropping from the sky, leaving only the dragon, who was himself immune to the power of his own breath weapon.

To those outside, there was a moment of eerie quiet, only the echoing thunderclap of the breath weapon bouncing back from the distant mountains. Every eye was on that cloud of dust, and every eye flinched when that roiling mass seemed to shudder, then to buckle, and then exploded outward. The forces of both armies then saw the blue dragon sitting sedately where it had been, head slightly bowed, as four strange forms moved quickly around its body, laboring to remove the spears that had been driven into him. Each one was singularly unique, an amorphous mass of coherent air, an amalgamation of earth and stone that walked on two legs but had arms that would drag the ground, a winged gorilla-like construction made of pure fire, and a sleek humanoid mass of water that had fifty-span long whip-like appendages protruding from its back. They all watched as those four *things* removed the spears stuck in him with both haste and efficiency, pulling them out of his back and flanks with fast jerks, pulling them out of his wings by pushing them all the way through the holes to prevent the barbs from further tearing the membranes.

In response to this, more and more Demons appeared a distance away, armed with long spears, but behind them appeared a large number of *humans*, dressed in black robes and wearing collars with chains attached to them. More Demons appeared, and more, and still more, until there were *thousands* of them on the field. It was an entire formation of Demon-kin, manned primarily with the mindless, four-span tall sexless beings called *manes*, the weakest of all Demon-kin and what served as the numbers and the expendable arrow-fodder for their battles.

Unable to use his rage against him, Shaz'Baket was resorting to sheer numbers to overwhelm the dragon, and calling on those human Wizards who had been enslaved after they summoned a Demon one time to many, and lost their souls to their former servants to break the Ward preventing teleportation, as well as to try to disrupt the anti-magic shell that protected him from their magic.

When the last spear was removed, the dragon's form suddenly dissolved into fire, then evaporated like smoke, leaving behind Tarrin Kael, holding his burning sword in both paws, hovering some hundred spans above the ground. They watched as the fire of his sword danced along the blade and then jumped down his arms, touching on the black metal bracers that had adorned his wrists for many years, activating their final power, the power that he had never before until that day had the need to utilize.

The bracers shuddered, then seemed to *explode*, becoming a fluid mass. That fluid mass rushed up his arms with amazing speed, then covered over his chest, his torso, his hips, over his back, flowing down his legs, until all of his body except for his head was covered by the undulating, liquid metal. That metal shuddered once more, and then shimmered with magical light for a brief instant.

When the light faded, Tarrin Kael was adorned in a suit of black armor patterned after the armor of the Knights of Karas, upon the chest of which was the *shaeram* of the order of Niami contained within the chest of a dragon whose wings flared out and over his shoulders, shoulders which showed the etched relief of the sword and spear symbol of Fara'Nae on one shoulder, and the hammer symbol of Karas on the other. The armor covered every square finger of him except for his head and his wings, and it glittered in the light of the morning sun.

The armored Were-cat took up his sword in both paws and raised it over his head, which suddenly blazed forth with incandescent white light, the light of Magelight, the visible indication that Tarrin was reaching back into the realm of Sennadar and making a connection with his goddess, with his mistress, with his friend, with Niami, and it showed that she answered that plea for help without hesitation. Tarrin's wings flushed with that same color, until they were painful to look at with the naked eye. The Magelight flowed down the hilt of the sword and covered his armor-clad paws, flowed down from his wings to dance along his back, until his entire body was outlined in a nimbus of wispy white magical energy. That erratic nimbus seethed and writhed, and then it snapped into coherence, forming the concave four-pointed star which represented a *sui'kun* at its full potential, where mortal and god were joined in power, joined in mind, joined in soul, and united in a common interest. Through Tarrin, Niami could now channel unlimited power into this battle, for when *sui'kun* acted within the desires of the Goddess of the Weave and with her direct blessing, their power was almost unending.

The Demons did not wait to see what was going to happen. They vanished in unison, guided by the telepathic commands of the *marilith* Shaz'Baket, and then reappeared at

the edge of the Ward that prevented them from teleporting within its boundaries. The instant they appeared, they charged forward with all the speed that their legs or wings or tentacles or hooves could carry them, seeking to reach the Were-cat before it could finish whatever he was doing, something that could potentially be catastrophic. As the Demons charged, the enslaved Wizards all began chanting in the language of magic, working to breach the Ward that prevented the Demons from reaching him instantly, for he was too far away to affect directly with most magical spells of battle.

They weren't going to make it. Tarrin dropped to the ground as his Elementals got behind him, and the concave star of the Goddess of Magic turned red, and its boundaries began to shimmer and undulate as Tarrin wove a weave of pure Air on a massive scale, a weave he had used many times before, a weave that was as devastating as it was easy to create. In the span of two heartbeats, the weave was charged to its full potential, as that shimmering, chaotic flux of red energy seemed to freeze, and then contract around him to form a perfectly smooth, ruby-colored dome of magical light. Most of the Demons slid to a halt, then turned and tried to flee back out of the Ward, trampling one another while the *manes* had not reacted to the command to flee, and continued to shamble mindlessly forward with their long spears in their hands.

There was an earth-shaking *BOOM* that heralded the release of the spell, and everything in front of Tarrin simply vanished as a rush of air raced away from him at speeds that defied rational explanation, creating a shockwave of pure air that was so powerful that it shattered stone, liquified flesh, and pulverized teeth and bones into dust. Demons simply vanished into a black spray of ichor as that shockwave blasted into them, sending a wall of dust, dirt, bits of rock, and the sundered remains of the Demonic horde roaring away on the wake of that shockwave of air. That shockwave savaged the area before him, losing power and energy as it traveled away from him, until it was nothing more but a hurricane-force wind that knocked the enslaved Wizards from their feet, sending a roiling cloud of caustic dust into the formations of human soldiers that were set up well away from the Were-cat and the Dura, and had even while they fought been ordered to move back, to give them room, to save them for the fight with the Dwarves while the Demons and the dragon traded blows.

Fire may be Tarrin's element, but his fortè in Sorcery had always been an affinity for Air weaves.

But the opposition scored its own victory in that exchange. Tarrin felt the integrity of his Ward shudder, and then tear as one of the enslaved human Wizards managed to complete his incantation even after getting knocked down, using a spell that destroyed magic within its area of effect, one that would affect a weave of Sorcery. The Ward preventing Demons from teleporting close to him came down, removing his last significant defense.

The black metal of his armor became fluid once more, then flowed up and over his face and head, then solidified once more to form a sleek helmet patterned after a dragon's head, complete with backswept horns adorning the top of it. He raised his sword in both paws as his Elementals flanked him, the blade burning bright with fire, and levelled it directly at Shaz'Baket, who was a considerable distance away, well behind the front formations of her human army. The distant *marilith* fumed visibly, and turned to issue some kind of order to the last surviving *balor* that was now standing beside her. But before that *balor* could do anything, fire enshrouded Tarrin, and then consumed him,

leaving behind nothing but his Elementals, who themselves quickly vanished. The Earth and Water Elementals submerged into the ground, the Air Elemental winked out of sight, and the Fire Elemental vanished in a puff of smoke.

A column of fire erupted on the earthen rampart not far from the forces of the Dura, a column which seemed to freeze like some kind of sculpture. It then flowed back into itself, changing its shape as the flame molded itself into the form of a humanoid being, at least until a section of the fire flowed outward and formed large, impressive wings. The flame shuddered and then billowed away, leaving behind flesh and blood and bone and metal, the towering Were-cat in his black armor, wings flared out as if to shield those behind him from the numerous forces positioned on the far side of the narrow valley.

Although the powerful Ward Tarrin had created the night before blocked a Demon's ability to teleport, it did *nothing* to prevent him from using fire as a gateway to travel from one place to another. Tarrin was once more behind the protection of a Ward that would stop the Demons' ability to teleport, their most dangerous ability, and *this* Ward, much larger, much stronger, much more carefully woven together, would be nearly impossible for them to break. This Ward carried within it powerful protections that would destroy any attempt by a Wizard to dispel it or tear it. It was literally a creation of Niami herself, woven through him the night before, and no mortal would be the match of a god's creation. So long as he was within the protective safety of his goddess' magic, he would be just fine.

One by one, his four Elementals reached him, remanifesting themselves, flanking him to stand with him in defiance. But it was a fifth presence that surprised him a little. He glanced to his left to see a lone Dwarf wearing heavy plate armor, enamelled red as blood, with a barrel helmet with heavy, curled ivory horns affixed to the sides. The wagging red beard told him exactly who it was without seeing the Dwarf's face.

"I'll not be dishonorin' the axe of me ancestors," Darax said steadily, hefting the Axe of the Dwarven King in his hands confidently...not as a symbol of office, but as the weapon it most certainly was. "No Dwarven king sits in his keep and lets his people do his fightin' for him."

"This isn't the place, your Majesty," Tarrin told him grimly.

"I won't be sittin' in the back," he protested.

"No, I mean that this isn't where we're going to make our stand. The magicians have no clear line of sight at the attackers. I'm just here to piss off Shaz'Baket. I just ruined her little trap she meant to use to kill me quickly. I can't just hide behind the rampart and not let her see how badly it failed."

Darax chuckled maliciously. "Well then, allow me to help ye." He then bellowed several extremely crude and offensive curses, banging the flat of his axe against his breastplate and beard. "What happens now?" he asked. "I'll admit I'm still learnin' the complexities of tactics from Bragg."

"Well, she can't send her humans with me and the Shadows here, because our magicians can just wipe them out. So she'll send her Demons to charge the line and break our formation, *then* send in her humans. She wants to take this pass so she can flank us and just grind us against her superior numbers. We want to hold this pass until she loses so many Demons that the Demon Lord won't send her any more. Every Demon we kill here today is one less we'll have to face later. Once they're dead, the Demon Lord can't summon them back to this plane for one hundred years."

"I get it. What'll be our greatest threat?"

"The Demons who can fly," he answered. "They can attack from the flanks for the rear, and they can get a clear line to try to attack the magicians directly. Look for Shaz'Baket to send quite a few *vrock* and *chasme* on suicide attacks to try to kill the Wizards and Elementalists just as her Demons on the ground make contact with our front lines, to keep them from stopping the assault."

"Aye, I remember Kang warning about that to Bragg."

"Look for Lorak to deal with that," Tarrin chuckled as he mentally commanded his Elementals to retreat back to the army. "And my Elementals, as well as Anayi and Ariana. I've fixed it so three of them can fly. They'll be responsible for breaking up the attacks on the magicians. Let's get back to the others."

"Alrighty. Nice armor. It almost looks Duran."

"Not quite," he smiled through his visor. "It's something I hoped I'd never had to use."

"Why is that?"

"You know how uncomfortable armor is?" he asked. "I feel like I'm wearing my mother's pots and pans."

Darax looked at him, then laughed as they turned and hurried back to the others.

"Did all of that serve some kind of purpose, dear one, or did you do it just to make my heart stop?" Dolanna commanded crossly as he joined the others. All of them were looking at the armor he had on.

"Oh, it had a purpose, alright," Tarrin grunted. "Shaz'Baket knows she can't bait me now, and she also knows that I can use my Sorcery. I want her to think *very* carefully about that before she commits her forces."

"But that'll make her commit everything," Kang protested.

"Exactly," Tarrin growled. "Ulger."

"Aye, Tarrin?" he asked from across the group.

"Did you put that little surprise in the trench?"

Ulger grinned evilly. "Right where you wanted me to," he answered. "Can you hit it without seeing it?"

"Easily, I just have to know where it is, that's all."

"Exactly where we planned to put it," he assured.

"What surprise?" Kang asked.

"Remember those kegs of gunpowder Ulger brought along?" Tarrin asked.

Kang's face screwed up, but Kimmie and Miranda laughed delightedly.

"We decided this might be a good time to use them," Ulger said with a nasty grin.

"You should have told me," Kang protested.

"And ruin the surprise? Karas forbid," Ulger protested.

"You have to stop hanging around Sarraya, Ulger," Kang said darkly, then he stomped off, muttering curses under his breath. But he returned immediately. "Alright, ladies and gentlemen, it looks like it's about to get serious!" he called, pointing. Across the valley, hundreds and hundreds of Demons were beginning to form up, the vast majority of them being the small, stupid *manes*. Most of them were unarmed, but the front four ranks of the assembling formation were equipped with the long spears that they had tried to use against him. Larger Demons were herding the *manes* into position using

whips and claws, using pain to motivate them into obedience. More and more Demons were pushing into position, and the skies over the far side of the balley were starting to get populated with flying Demons, circling over the army and preparing for their part.

"Nice armor, Tarrin. Where did you get it?" Ulger asked.

Tarrin raised his left paw, and the five blades of the Cat's Claws extended from the tips of the armored gauntlets.

"That armor is the *Cat's Claws*?" Ulger gasped.

He nodded. "Karas probably decided that it wasn't proper for me not to have any armor," he said, tapping the symbol of Karas on his left shoulder. "I *am* a Knight, after all. I've never used it before because I don't really like armor. You know that. But I thought, given this particular situation, it might be best. I've never really fought in this kind of a battle before, so it's best not to take chances. Against a horde of Demons, armor isn't a very bad idea," he admitted.

"I never knew they could do that," Ulger mused.

"I like to keep a few secrets, Ulger," Tarrin said with a slight smile behind his visor. "It adds to my mystique."

Ulger laughed.

"Can Mist's claws do that?" Kimmie asked.

"They can," he answered. "They can do everything mine can do."

"Does she know they can do that?" she asked.

He glanced at her. "Of course she knows."

"She's never told me!"

"She knows when to keep her mouth shut," Tarrin grunted. "You don't make something that can save your life common knowledge."

Can't argue with that," Kimmie grunted.

They quieted down and got serious as the Demons completed their preparations. Kang called for the magicians to get ready as quite a few of those flying Demons suddenly vanished, and then reappeared at the edge of the Ward that stopped them from appearing on top of the army. Tarrin took his sword in both hands and stood in the middle of the line, ignoring any attempt to move him, and he wasn't alone. Over his generals' strenuous objections, Darax stood immediately beside the Were-cat, taking an offered shield from a Dwarven soldier and preparing himself to stand at the focus point of the impending charge.

The Demons began to move. Led by the surviving *balor*, those hideous foes began marching inexorably into the valley, giving out bone-chilling cries and shouts to unnerve their foes. A large phalanx of *manes* were flanked by many assorted Demons, and a large complement of armored *Cambions*, male half-breed Demons, brought up the rear, all of them armed with all kinds of assorted weaponry. There were *Alu* among them, but since *Alu* could fly, they were high in the sky, preparing to attack from above when given the order. Tarrin flexed his wings a few times and then folded them behind him, and clapped Darax on the shoulder with a paw.

"Good luck, your Majesty," he intoned.

"Aye, you too, Lord Tarrin."

"Luck? Phaugh, we don't *need* luck," Ulger grunted as he moved up with them. To either side of Tarrin, the strongest and most heavily armed and skilled of them gathered, the anchor to which the line would cling when the Demons struck. Darax found himself

wedged between Tarrin and Binter, looking like a child between two adults, and Sisska took up the position on Tarrin's left. Azakar stood to Binter's right, and Ulger to Sisska's left, and to either side there stood a staggered array of Knight and Vendari, armor and strength, to stand fast against the approaching horror.

There was a light clatter close to his ear, and through the smell of the metal of his armor, he realized that Fireflash was sitting on his shoulder. "Go back to Mist and the children, little one," he ordered. "This is no place for you."

The drake hissed ominously, and did not move.

"This is going to be a war, my friend. I can't protect you. I'll be busy."

He hissed again.

"Alright. Be careful, and remember your fire won't hurt the Demons. Use your gas."

He chirped in understanding, and jumped atop his helmet.

The ground beneath their feet began to shudder from the footsteps of the approaching army. They could see most of them, for they stood uphill from the Demons because of the natural slope of the valley floor, could see that terrifying mass of evil striding closer and closer.

"Set, shields!" Kang boomed.

In unison, those Dwarves armed with a shield presented it forward, and their lines contracted to form an interlocking wall of metal and wood, a tactic shared by both Arakite and Dura. The only hole in that shield wall were the twenty or so beings in the middle, the most dangerous of them all, the ones that didn't *need* a shield wall to protect themselves from the advancing horde.

The Demons began to trot.

"Set, pikes!" Kang's voice thundered across the valley.

A cascade of rasping wood and metal heralded the lowering of the pikes held by the first three ranks, a bristling wall of deadly steel that would make any attempt to get past the log palisade they defended a deadly undertaking.

The Demons began to run, screaming and shouting in those unearthly voices, as the short *manes* vanished behind the earthen rampart as they neared it.

"Lorak, close the lid!" Kang screamed as the flying Demons all began to surge forward.

Lorak, the Air Elementalist, raised his hands and used his power to create an impressive wall of solid air that centered around the magicians, anchored to the ground to create a solid barrier that would prevent any attempt of a flying Demon to reach them.

"Phandebrass!" Kang boomed.

The white-haired Wizard began to chant in the language of magic, a spell that Tarrin had read in his book, but had never cast before. It was a defensive spell called the *spell engine*, a field of magical energy that would absorb any incoming hostile magical spell and hold that magical energy, which then Phandebrass could use *himself* to power any spell that he cast. Only the most powerful Wizards could cast that formidable spell, a spell that Tarrin wasn't willing to try because of its complexity.

Tarrin was impressed. With two spells, Kang had just protected his magicians from their greatest vulnerability, the flying Demons.

He didn't have much time to enjoy it, for the first of the Demons came over the earthen rampart, the monstrous *balor*, with his jagged sword in one hand and his nine-tailed whip in the other. It stopped short and then thrust its sword at them, unleashing a

massive bolt of lightning at the line, directly at Tarrin. But the Were-cat brought his sword up and allowed the bolt to strike the blade. Lightning danced through the fire of his sword, but went no further. The massive beast snapped out its wings and gave an ear-splitting roar of rage and fury, and then pointed at the lines and remained where it was as its army poured over the rampart, to either side of it.

The Dwarves all gave out a tremendous cry, a battle cry of defiance and challenge, and the *manes* charged the line with their long spears. They charged across the flat, open area between the rampart and the palisade with surprising speed given their short stature, rushing to the attack.

But then the magicians behind the lines unleashed their magical fury on those charging Demons. A volley of magical spells streaked over the front lines, and before them, *manes* were consumed in huge storms of ice that fell from the sky, or struck by jagged bolts of lightning, or literally melted to piles of black goo by jets of evil green acid. Some fell into deep pits created by magical spells, some had their feet sink into the ground, and have the ground hold them fast. Some were struck blind by the power of magic, and some were struck by great blows of magical force. All up and down the line, the charging *manes* were whittled down in number as they tried to rush across the open field.

The Demons on the ground were not the only ones encountering heavy resistance. With keening cries, dozens of winged Demons surged forward, spreading out, and then they began diving at the Duran army with long spears, aimed at the magicians kept behind the front lines. The vulture-like *vrock* and the hideous fly-bodied *chasme*, the long-limbed scaly *nabassu* and half-breed *Alu* dove fast and straight, but they all veered away when the fastest of them, those to get there first, suddenly slammed into some kind of invisible wall. It was Lorak's creation, the powerful Air Elementalist utilizing his power on a large scale. One of those that turned away, a sleek *vrock*, seemed to literally explode in a puff of feathers and black ichor as it was intercepted by Tarrin's Air Elemental. A *chasme* buzzed angrily past its dead companion, but it was literally sliced in half by the Water Elemental's long tendrils as they slashed through the air from the flank. The magical creature flew through the air using wings of ice extending out of her back just below those tendrils, and she dipped aside as the Fire Elemental raced past her to intercept two more *chasme*, who banked away from their assault on the magicians to flee from its long, burning arms. Several more seemed to wobble in midair and then crash into the hillsides, struck by the crossbow quarrels of Ariana as she fired on them from high above, using her exceptional skill with her hunting weapon to kill them before they got anywhere close to threatening those on the ground. Anayi, wearing a red breastplate supplied to her by the Dura to distinguish her from other *Alu*, had circled around those attacking Demons and dove behind them, unleashing spell after spell at them from behind, even as a few Wizards and Elementalists on the ground unleashed their attacks up at them from below. Caught in a magical crossfire of bolts of lightning, fiery missiles of magical energy, and pale beams of magical light that had many assorted unpleasant effects when they made contact with them, the magicians and Anayi managed to break up the organized attempt to dive at the magicians. Several of the *Alu* had pulled up and attempted to rain magical spells down on the magicians, but their attempts were absorbed by the *spell engine*, which Phandebrass almost immediately used to power one of his own spells. It was not aimed at the flying Demons, however. He chanted loudly

and powerfully in the language of magic, and the *balor*, recognizing the spell, turned and dove back over the earthen rampart as the Wizard threw a handful of powdered lodestone into the air, which vanished almost as soon as it was released.

Fiery missiles suddenly streaked down from the heavens themselves, a rain of deadly rocks that had fallen from the stars, and impacted into the field between the rampart and the palisade. Those impacts shook the ground and resonated in every ear a titanic *BOOM* that threatened to deafen them all. Those in proximity to those impacts simply vaporized, just as they had when Tarrin had used his air shockwave. The field through which the *manes* charged suddenly became a smoky, dusty wasteland of deep craters, smoking holes, rapidly decomposing bodies, and noxious pools of ooze burning into the ground, but Phandebrass' spell had turned the entire field into an obstacle course of dangerous, deep holes that would make any kind of coherent impact with the lines of the Dura absolutely impossible, not to mention the hundreds of Demons that he had destroyed with the might of his spell. It was a spell called *meteor strike*, and it was one of the most powerful and devastating combat spells a Wizard could employ.

But *manes* were as fearless as they were stupid, and they charged right through the vicious magical counterattack. Their job was to take the brunt of the counterstroke, to die so the stronger Demons could reach the lines without as much danger to themselves, and in that capacity they performed their task well. The first of the *manes* to reach the palisade was skewered on the pike of a Dwarf, as it tried to thrust its long spear through the palisade and shield wall, but the long pikes of the Dura were longer than its spear. Instead of trying to dodge or evade, it simply ran right into the pikes in a mindless attempt to do what it was instructed to do, with no regard for itself. Its body immediately began to dissolve into that acidic black ichor, and the Dwarf holding that pike shook it frantically to get the body off the pikehead before its caustic remains ate the weapon away.

The *balor* behind the lines, that was now looking over the rampart, widened its eyes at that sight, and immediately turned its head back to the main force, no doubt reporting to Shaz'Baket that the Dura were armed with weapons that could kill Demons.

The *manes* that reached the center of the line were not skewered on pikes. They were instead engaged with swords, axes, hammers, and maces, the weapons of the Knights and the Vendari. Tarrin and Darax stood solidly in the center of that line, chopping down anything that got within reach. Darax showed that while he was still learning the arts of commanding armies, he was a fearfully effective warrior when it came to swinging his axe in melee combat. His strokes were powerful and expertly aimed, but they also did not overreach by a finger. He struck with exactly the force it would take to kill his opponent and returned to the defense position before the body so much as had the chance to fall to the ground. Darax knew the intricacies of fighting with his axe.

The bodies of the *manes* began to pile up at the palisade, as more and more of them managed to get through the sustained magical barrage and reach the lines of the Dura, only to be speared on pikes or mowed down by the center of the line, but even the dead began to affect the battle. Their bodies quickly became smoking piles of noxious, acidic slime, and those piles began to eat at the ground, eat at the logs, burn into the weapons of the Dura, and created a foul miasma that was affecting the ability of the Dura to breathe. Tarrin called to his Elementals for help, and they responded quickly. His Air Elemental disengaged from its battle with the winged Demons and streaked across the palisade,

creating a brisk wind that blew that poisonous pall away from the Dura, back over the field. His Earth Elemental, which had been submerged into the ground the entire time, used its power over the earth to suck underground the pools of black ichor that were the remains of the Demons dying at the palisade. It started at the east side of the field and moved west, creating a furrow of overturned earth as it moved that either caused the remains of Demons to be pulled underground or turned earth over on those remains, either way helping to neutralize their detrimental effects.

But the Demons were making headway as well. One of the *Alu* Wizards in the air over the magicians managed to cast a spell that disrupted Lorak's wall of air, and the winged Demons converged on the magic-users with coordinated haste. Several of them were blasted out of the sky by the Elementalists and Wizards who had turned their attention from the *manes* to their own safety, but those that managed to get through found themselves facing a barrier nearly as impervious as Lorak's wall. Tarrin's Water Elemental hovered over the magicians, and she caused her form to change, to shift, as she spread out her liquid form to form a protective barrier between the Demons and the magicians. Neh raised her hands and cast a spell into her liquid form, causing it to freeze solid in an instant, covering the magicians in a thick dome of ice. *Vrock* slammed into that frozen dome with their taloned feet and drove their feather-decorated halberds into the ice, but could not penetrate it. *Chasme* and *Alu* struck it as well, the winged half-breeds pounding on it with weapons as the hideous fly-Demons used their innate Demonic power to project fire to try to melt their way through, to get at the magicians within.

To the Demon's shock, that barrier of solid ice became liquid water again almost instantaneously, as the Water Elemental shifted her form from ice back to water, as was her power to do. They had all been standing or clinging to the dome except for a few *chasme* who had been trying to burn through, and all of them that had been doing so were suddenly sucked into that liquid mass, enveloped into her form and held there as she contracted herself back into a singular mass of water. The Demons thrashed and struggled, but they could not escape from within her watery form. The Wizards among them could not speak to cast spells, and their attempts to project fire to boil away her form would not succeed in time to save them.

The *vrock* and *chasme* within her form struggled and then began to shudder and convulse as currents of water within her form rammed them like the striking of a Giant's hammer, striking them on the head and in the vital points of their bodies, killing them with quick and brutal efficiency. Those bodies were ejected from her form before they could decompose and taint the water that made up her physical form. The *Alu* trapped within were simply held within her as they struggled, as she killed the pureblood Demons, until their struggles slowed, and then finally ceased. One by one, she ejected the inert form of an *Alu* before it could decompose, killing them by drowning them. The *chasme* that had evaded that grim, watery demise did not live long enough to get around the Water Elemental to reach the magicians. Those that weren't killed by the magic of their prey when the Water Elemental's form contracted were shot out of the sky by Ariana's crossbow.

But they had managed to breach one of the defenses of the mortals, and Lorak was not recovered enough to create a new wall, leaving them vulnerable to aerial assault. The Water Elemental shifted form once more, creating four spidery legs to stand upon the

ground as she created a mass of watery tentacles atop her amorphous form, long whip-like appendages that lashed out at any Demon that tried to reach the magicians.

“Archers!” Kang boomed over the shouting and cursing and screaming of the line, waving his sword and then pointing it behind him. The flagger with him made three gestures, instructing the archers to start shooting at the flying Demons, to help protect them now that the wall of air was breached.

The reduction in the magical onslaught keeping the *manes* at bay caused many more of them to reach the palisade. In a grinding roil of clashing metal, the Dura kept the small Demons away, held the line, kept the suicidal charge from breaking their defenses as Tarrin’s Elementals strove to prevent the dead among the Demons from affecting the battle with their noxiously decayed bodies. After a few chaotic moments, fewer and fewer *manes* rushed over the rampart, fewer and fewer picked their way across the tortured earth to hurl themselves against the Dwarven lines, but Tarrin knew that their dwindling numbers only heralded the next wave, a wave of Demons that would be *much* more dangerous.

And they didn’t wait.

A disorganized surge of Demonic foes rushed over the rampart with shrieking, bone-chilling cries, all of the land-bound Demons which were led by a thundering charge of *Cambions* that were mounted on warhorses. That cavalry charged across the broken ground as quickly as they could, but they were slowed considerably by the many deep craters and pits in the field caused by the magic of the defenders, and that gave Kang enough time to react. He pointed at the charging cavalry and boomed a quick order, and the flagman issued that command, a command for the archers to turn from the aerial Demons and prepare to loose against the advancing horses.

“Haley, *NOW!*” Tarrin screamed at the top of his lungs. The Were-wolf, fighting further down the line, rushed back towards the spellcasters, going to counter this assault in a way that only Tarrin, Haley, or Sarraya could.

This was an eventuality for which they had planned a counter.

“STOP!” a voice absolutely thundered across the line, but it was not Haley. It was the piping voice of Sarraya, augmented by a Wizard’s spell. The Faerie must have got back to the battle and performed this task before Haley could reach the magicians. But though it was a different voice, she was no less effective than Haley; in fact, she was probably *more* effective, for Haley often had trouble commanding instant and unswerving obedience from animals.

In a single instant, every horse up and down the line skidded to a halt, most of them throwing their *Cambion* riders over their heads, and bringing the thundering cavalry charge to a screeching halt. The horses obeyed the command of a Druid out of instinct, out of reflex, and the tactic was as simple as it was devastating.

Those horses didn’t live long enough to obey the second part of Sarraya’s command, to turn and run. The *hezrou*, *glabrezu*, *nalfeshnee*, and *babau* that were charging behind the horses slammed into them from behind and tore them apart in their maddened rush towards the lines of the Dura. They trampled quite a few of the *Cambions* under them as they continued their rush forward, but those halfblooded Demons managed to regain their feet and join the charge with the others.

It was not the same result. The much larger, much stronger pureblooded Demons crashed into the lines of the Dura like an avalanche, and the lines of the Dura buckled

under the assault. The screams of the dying drowned out the clash of steel against steel or the sickening *crunch* as Dwarven weapons penetrated Demon flesh, or claws or pincers or talons ripped through heavy Duran armor to rip the life from the flesh beneath. The only place the line did not fall back, the only place where the defenders held to the palisade, was in the middle, where Tarrin, Darax, and Binter served as the anchor that held against the onslaught. Demons fell before them with every chop of the axe, slam of the hammer, slash of the sword. The Knights and the Vendari maintained their position while the Dwarves to either side were pushed back, as two Dwarves fell for every Demon that sank into the chaos of the struggle, being felled by a Dwarven axe or a crossbow quarrel fired from the hillsides, or the magical spells of the magicians behind. The Dura were pushed back, and back, and back more, paying in blood for every step they were forced to take backwards, pulling in their lines to fill the holes created by the fallen. But the Dwarves would not collapse under the overwhelming attack, thrusting with their pikes, chopping with axes and hammers, pushing back with their shields as they strove to prevent the Demons from breaking their lines.

They would bend, but they would not break.

Demonic claws scraped at his armor, but could not penetrate as Tarrin chopped down foe after foe, slashing at the frenzied Demons that strove to overwhelm them with sheer ferocity and overwhelming force. But in Tarrin and those around him, they faced men and Vendari who could withstand that kind of chaotic push, could be the rock against which the crashing of their wave of fury would break.

“Kang had best call it soon!” Binter growled as he crushed the head of a *hezrou* with his warhammer.

“Not yet,” Tarrin answered, decapitating a *nalfeshnee*’s ugly boar head from its body, then kicking the still body back into a charging *Cambion*. That halfbreed Demon simply slithered to the side with amazing grace and charged directly at Tarrin, but it was Darax who intercepted him. The Dwarven king parried a fast, lithe slash of the *Cambion*’s black bladed scimitar and then chopped his knee almost in half, nearly amputating his leg at the knee. The creature staggered and dropped to one knee, and looked up just in time to see Darax bring his axe over his head, and plant the half-moon blade firmly in the top of the black-skinned creature’s skull. The body convulsed jerkily as Darax wrested the blade free, then Binter’s tail slammed into it and sent it hurtling back into the writhing horde of Demonic creatures. “Give the Dura a chance to push back. If they can’t hold the line here, they shouldn’t be fighting this war.”

“Why aren’t they using their fire?” Ulger called as he chopped a pincer off a *glabrezu* that tried to impale him with it, then a trio of pikes punched into its body, wielded by the Dwarves behind them.

“Because of me,” Tarrin answered, driving the chisel tip of his sword through the throat of a skeletal *babau* wielding a hooked glaive. “All it would do is give me a weapon to use against them.” Another *glabrezu* rushed in behind the *babau* and managed to catch Tarrin’s blade on its pincer arm. Tarrin took one paw off the sword to catch the other pincer, and they were caught in a deadly game of push, each trying to throw the other off. The Demon was taller than Tarrin, but he was stronger, which made their pushing at one another an even match.

“I thought fire didn’t hurt them,” Ulger grunted.

Two whip-like tendrils lashed out from Tarrin's wings and ripped through the Demon in front of him, shearing through its chest to cut it in half. "It does like that," Tarrin growled as the body fell to the ground in pieces.

"True," Ulger laughed as he helped Azakar dispatch a squealing *nalfeshnee*.

The push into the Dwarven lines became critical when, as if on cue, all the Demons pushing against the lines suddenly began to use their innate magical abilities. None of them used fire, but they had many more weapons than fire. Dwarves were struck by magical missiles, or paralyzed by chilling gazes, and several large billowing clouds of deadly, poisonous gas materialized over certain parts of the line. To Tarrin's left, a sudden surge of Demonic creatures pushed deeply into the line, threatening to break through into the reserves stationed not far from the back ranks. Bragg shouted orders, calling reserves in to help hold the breach, but Kang raised his sword and then chopped it down in a quick motion. "NOW!" he boomed, and the flagman raised both flags, crossed them, then snapped them down in a brisk motion. That was accompanied by a blaring blast of a horn, so loud that it carried over the din.

In unison, every Dwarf able to do so dropped to one knee and presented his or her shield in a defensive posture. Tarrin and the Knights and Vendari did not kneel, but Tarrin's wings suddenly flushed with blazing, incandescent white light, drawing every Demonic eye to him, and causing an instantaneous reaction. As one, they all surged at the Were-cat to stop him from unleashing that power, from doing whatever it was he was supposed to do that was so dreadful that it would cause all the Dwarves to seek protection against it.

But Tarrin was not the focal point of this planned tactic, he was only the diversion.

They all heard it clearly in just seconds, the clear, powerful voice of Miranda, chanting in the language of the gods. But she was not chanting a spell, she was chanting an ancient prayer, a ritual, a formula, one that the Demons knew all too well. Many of them froze for a critical moment, trying to assess this lone Priestess and determine if she had the power to carry that ritual to its conclusion. Many of them ignored her after that second of assessment, turning to kill more Dwarves, but the stronger of the Demons, the wiser, they did not. They howled and screamed and plowed through the Dwarves that were kneeling at their feet, trying to reach Miranda before she could complete that ancient prayer.

Those that managed to get through the lines of the Dwarves found themselves slamming headlong into an invisible wall made of solid Air. Behind Miranda, hands raised, was Lorak, defending Miranda with his Elemental magic and giving her the time she needed to complete the ritual.

Unable to physically reach her, and defended from magical attack by Phandebrass and the *spell engine*, the Demons turned and started to flee.

"I call upon the light of my goddess, the Wavemistress Kikkalli!" Miranda's voice cried out, "*Somthuri demathetro modiacious! Amran jemtachi gyathra!*" Miranda's voice began carrying behind it a choral quality, as if it was no longer just one voice who was speaking. There was another voice behind hers, beneath it, and that was the voice of Kikkalli herself. "I abjure ye, creatures of darkness!" she said, her voice almost visible in the air with its power, and no longer did it carry any hint of Miranda. This was the voice of Kikkalli directly, as she spoke through her daughter, through her Avatar, and directly

manifested the holy might of her power into the physical world. “Let the light of the gods cast ye back into the shadows from whence thou came! *BEGONE!*”

Miranda’s body exploded with a light that shone with such purity that it could not be anything other than divine. That divine light radiated out from her in all directions, and whenever it touched the flesh of a Demon, that Demon simply *evaporated*, its form consumed by the divine wrath of the Wavemistress and banished back to the Lower World, the remnants of them fading in the summer breeze like fog burned away by the morning sun. Demons squealed in agony even as their voices faded into the light, becoming distant, as if they had fallen into some unimaginable void and tumbled away. That light struck Tarrin’s wings, and then, inexplicably, they too began to glow with the same divine light, as if capturing that power and infusing it into themselves, and they too glowed with the same damning radiance that destroyed any Demon which that light touched.

In the span of a few heartbeats, it was over, and there was an ominous silence. Every Demon that had come over the rampart was gone, their forms melted away by the power of the light of Kikkalli. Kang had played his trump card, and that was the fact that, through Miranda, he could call directly on the power of a goddess, and that kind of power was something against which a Demon could not stand. Kikkalli had destroyed the Demonic attackers, and Kang had labored to bring them in so he could destroy as many as he could.

That act did not come without cost, however. As the light faded, Miranda slumped, and then dropped to the ground. The stress of having her mother push her aside and use her was too much for her to bear, and it effectively removed her from the rest of this battle. Anayi soared in from her sheltered place of protection against that attack, gathered her up, and whisked her away, rushing her back to the Iron Mountain so she could rest safely.

“Reset the line!” Kang boomed, snapping the Dwarves out of their reverie. They all returned to their feet and quickly reassembled at what was left of the palisade, as replacement pikes were passed down with new Dwarven troops to replace the fallen, as the dead and injured were quickly carried off the field to be tended to behind the lines. The *balor* that was still behind the line moved to stop over the rampart, but it quickly put up a massive hand and squealed in pain, then turned and fled back out of sight.

“Tarrin, yer wings!” Darax said with surprise. “They’re still glowing with that light that Lady Miranda used to banish the Demons! *They can’t stand it!*” Darax chuckled with malicious glee. “Inform Kang at once!”

“It might not last long,” Tarrin told him as he could feel under his armored feet that Shaz’Baket was preparing something, probably another charge of her Demonic minions.

“Use it while ye can, me friend! Go after that Demon!” Darax urged. “Get ‘em before he can get away!”

“A wise idea,” Binter agreed.

“Yeah,” Tarrin nodded, and he surged forward in the air, carried by the power of his wings, until he landed on the earthen rampart. The *balor* was still running away, and Tarrin flared out his wings to their full wingspan and presented them garishly to the enemy army, letting them see the echo of Kikkalli’s power still trapped within them. The *balor* seemed to not be affected by the light as it fled, but that was probably because it wasn’t *looking* at it, Tarrin reasoned. It was just an echo of that original power, much

weaker, just strong enough to cause pain to any Demon who looked upon it. The *balor* had spread its huge wings and taken to the air, and vanished from sight almost as soon as Tarrin drew a bead on it and prepared to use his wings to kill it, getting beyond the Ward that prevented teleportation. But, before he could decide whether to press the issue, the glow faded from his wings, causing them to return to normal.

But from that vantage point, he could clearly see Shaz'Baket moving her human forces into position. In fact, he saw only a handful of Demons in the enemy army now. She was not going to attempt to assault the Dura with Demons again. She was sending in her humans.

They'd done it, at least for now. She was either out of Demons to use, or was not willing to risk the ones she had left in a second attempt. Miranda had devastated the Demonic invaders with a single attack, so now she either only had humans left, or was saving the Demons she had in reserve for a later maneuver in the battle. He saw that she was also calling up those collared Wizards she'd summoned while trying to kill him, no doubt bringing them to try to counter the magical firepower they had supporting them.

Poor Shaz'Baket...she had no idea that Miranda could do what she did. Thus far, her planning and execution had been exemplary, had used her resources wisely and well, and had even risked her own neck to try to draw Tarrin out and kill him, but a lack of intelligence about her opposition had crippled her efforts thus far. He may hate her, but he had to respect her.

Wait. Tarrin's eyes widened as he stared at what he was seeing, and what he was seeing was that the *entire* human army was starting to move. Every last one of them. Shaz'Baket was not holding anything back in reserve...she meant to assault the line with *everything*. But that was crazy! They all couldn't fit in the valley!

No, it wasn't crazy. By throwing everything into the valley, she'd have those forces that didn't have room to engage right there and ready to start trying to envelop the Dwarven lines if they managed to push them back. She *was* holding the majority of the army back in reserve, but she was putting them potentially in harm's way, risking attacks on them by keeping them close enough to quickly close the trap if her charge succeeded. It was a gamble, but Shaz'Baket was both clever and cunning, and she obviously believed that it was an acceptable risk to take.

He also saw that she was thinking creatively. Large numbers of soldiers were dispatched from the main host, and those men rushed towards the steep ridges to either side of the valley, where the archers were entrenched, and began trying to climb up. The archers started turning on those men, firing at them from their elevated positions, but there were a great many of them, and they were climbing with a desperate frenzy, and utterly without concern for their own lives. No doubt that Shaz'Baket had made any number of dreadful promises about what would be done to those men if they failed to take out the archers, and they were more afraid of that than they were of death.

Actually, they were going to succeed just by their attempt, he realized. The archers couldn't focus on the main army so long as they had to defend their own positions from the climbing enemies.

Tarrin lowered his sword and considered what was before him. With the Demons being held back, they were going to try a more conventional attack on the Dwarven line that probably had as much a chance of success as the Demon assault had, by sheer force of numbers. He knelt down on the rampart and pondered why she'd sent the Demons

first, instead of trying to send the humans first and then sending the Demons to support them, and then he realized that the Demons actually had had a very strong advantage. If not for the fact that they'd hastily prepared weapons able to harm Demons, they would have been able to tear through the lines of the Dwarves literally unimpeded. Sending the Demons *now* seemed like a foolish venture, but given what information Shaz'Baket had had at the time she made the decision, it was a sound one. But, after seeing that when she sent the *manes*, why did she send the second assault?

A look back at the sweating, panting Shadows explained her tactic.

Shaz'Baket had used the Demons to wear out the magicians, he reasoned. Now she was sending the humans with her own support Wizards behind them, after the defending magicians had to expend a great deal of energy protecting the line from the initial assault. The power of the magic of the defenders coupled with their defensive positioning in the narrow valley was their primary defenses against the huge numbers of troops she had behind her, so she had used part of her army to exhaust that defensive resource. Tarrin had thought that she would use the humans as pawns for the Demon part of her army, but she had done the exact opposite...she had used the *Demons* as pawns for her *human* forces.

She was damn clever.

He knew what the next order was going to be before Kang even shouted out the command. And he knew what Shaz'Baket's counter was going to be as well.

"Tarrin, go!" Kang boomed. "You know what to do!"

He did, but he pondered the idea of attacking Shaz'Baket directly, to try to disrupt their chain of command. Kang wanted him to attack the enemy armies in dragon form, and Shaz'Baket would counter that attack by using the Demons she had left, as well as her Wizards, countering overwhelming physical force with magic. It was what she attempted to do when she tried to bait him out...the real threat hadn't been the Demons with spears, they were nothing but a diversion, an annoyance to hold him in one place long enough for the Wizards to try to kill him using magic. Unfortunately for them, Tarrin knew that that was going to happen, and had taken protective measures to stop it. He had just enough emerald dust to cast the *anti-magic shell* one more time, and he needed to save that for the right moment...probably when his life depended on it. And he didn't want to just repeat his earlier trick, because they'd be expecting it.

His job was to cause chaos in the enemy ranks. He was going to use dragon form to do that...but couldn't he accomplish the same objective by simply *going after Shaz'Baket*? There was little doubt that he could get at her, and he'd only have to contend with whatever Demons she called up to protect herself from him. But even that might be enough to disrupt her chain of command, because she'd be too busy saving her own neck to command the army

A distant rumble got his attention. He looked up, and saw a thick bank of clouds rolling in from the west, almost over them now. It was a weather front, and there was a rain curtain starting to slicken the mountains and hills west of them, with a few flashes of lightning illuminating the clouds briefly.

The storm was here.

"Return," Tarrin said quietly, absently. All four of his Elementals quickly made their way to him, surrounding him, awaiting his commands. "You know where it is?" he asked, tapping the ground meaningfully and looking to the Fire Elemental.

It nodded.

“Good. You four stay with Binter, and obey his orders. He knows the battle plan, and will know how to best use your abilities to help the army. Tell him he has command of you. Explain that to him, and tell him that he needs to relay the order to the Fire Elemental,” he said, looking at the Water Elemental.

She nodded, then inquired as to his plan of action.

“The storm’s here,” he answered, then looked to his Fire Elemental. “Don’t go past the rampart, not for any reason,” he warned, and it nodded in understanding.

All four of them cautioned him to be careful. He nodded to them, and then spread his wings and pushed himself into the air. He streaked out over the rampart and up into the air as Shaz’Baket moved her forces forward, a lone attacker preparing to attack an army of over one hundred thousand. He knew that Shaz’Baket could see him, and was almost certainly expecting him to change into a dragon and park himself on the valley floor, serving as a huge obstacle between the two armies, something he was sure she already had a plan to circumvent.

She wouldn’t expect this.

Instead of hurtling forward, he shivered in the air, and then raced straight up, towards the clouds above. Higher and higher he went, until he was thousands of spans above the ground, and the lower edge of the dark, boiling clouds was just a few hundred spans over his head. Tarrin’s wings flushed with the incandescent white light that marked his connection to the Weave through his sword, as it reached back through the dimensions and touched on the power of Niami. In a heartbeat, his wings glowed so brightly that they were almost painful to the eye, and Magelight began to appear around his armored paws, the power of High Sorcery.

A power that, at its pinnacle, could directly affect the *weather*, the most powerful natural force in the world.

Flows of all seven Spheres raced out of him and surged into the storm, tentatively at first, but more and more and stronger and stronger after that initial contact, a contact to assess the power of the storm, its direction, and the natural factors that were going to affect that direction and intensity. Tarrin wove a stunningly intricate and awesomely powerful weave into the thunderstorm, his flows reaching longspans away from him as they wove into the fabric of the storm itself and began to take control of it, began to influence it.

There was a rumble of thunder, and the storm suddenly surged ahead, even as it began to rotate around Tarrin’s form, as his power drew it in and caused it to reform and intensify.

Even from that distance, even despite the fact that he was not a Demon, he clearly heard Shaz’Baket’s telepathic orders.

HE’S TRYING TO USE THAT STORM AGAINST THE ARMY! STOP HIM NO MATTER WHAT IT TAKES! her mental voice echoed through his mind. She must have sent out that command with such strength and concern that it caused him to hear it.

Shaz’Baket had personal experience with a *sui’kun*’s ability to affect the weather.

But it was too late now. He was completely in control of the storm, and its power was now his to command. Winged Demons appeared all around him, *vrock* and *nalfeshnee* and *Alu* and *chasme*, even the last remaining *balor*, who appeared so close to him that it immediately lashed out with its whip. Tarrin swept his arm to the side, which

caused a wall of wind to blast down from the clouds above and deflect that scourge's nine tails. The *balor* suddenly burst into flame as it lost its temper and spoke three words of Wizard magic, tracing a pattern in the air before it with the tip of its sword, but it got no further.

Fireflash, who had managed to hold his position nestled in between the horns on Tarrin's helmet through the entire battle, launched himself at the *balor* like an avenging Revenant, hissing and growling. He lanced right at the monster's face, then released a strong blast of his greenish gas breath weapon right in the *balor's* face. The mighty Demon shuddered, then its sword fell from its numb fingers and it dropped out of the sky like a stone.

"Timely, little one," Tarrin chuckled as he turned to face a halberd-wielding *vrock*. The vulture-headed Demon dove at him with his halberd, but an ear-splitting *CRACK-BOOM* vibrated the very air around them as a bolt of lightning issued forth from the clouds above and struck the Demon right between the wings.

Normally, a Demon would have nothing to fear from such an act, for storms were a natural aspect of the world in which they were in, and therefore they were immune to their power. But *this* storm was shaped by the hand of a Sorcerer, which was a non-native magic, and gave every aspect of it, from the lightning right down to the wind that blew and the rain that fell, a slight touch of alien magic that gave it the power to do a Demon true harm. The *vrock* literally exploded in a puff of feathers, black blood, gore, and flames, falling to the earth even as it melted away into that grisly ichor.

But there were a great many of them, and most of them could use magic...and Tarrin couldn't use his *anti-magic shell* and control the storm at the same time. He was also not safely behind a Ward that would keep them from doing what the *balor* had tried to do, appear within striking distance of him and immediately attack. He had to move quickly or they were going to kill him.

He wove a simple spell, a solid shield of Air that he placed over him, and then wove deeper into the storm, affecting how it operated. He called forth a blinding fury of rain, which poured out of the cloud in a massive deluge that made it hard to see anything ten spans past one's own nose. The shield of air kept the rain off of him, and the rain bought him some time as the Demons tried to see through it and fly through the heavy rain and gusting wind to get at him, concealed him and made it hard for them to see where to teleport to, keeping them from appearing and instantly attacking him.

He continued his weaving, however, causing some of the rain to be blown back up into the cloud, where it would freeze and come back down. But he kept pushing it up, and pushing it up, and pushing it up, as more and more layers of ice formed on them, until he had caught up in the winds of the storm a nice supply of good old hail. He kept that held back, however, as he caused the storm to drift out over the approaching human armies, as the rain line crossed over the front ranks of the marching soldiers as they moved into the pass. He felt Fireflash get back on his helmet, and also slithered aside as a *chasme* streaked by him, trying to impale him on that long spike sticking out of the front of its face. He moved again reflexively, which literally saved his life as the same Demon vanished from sight and reappeared directly behind him. Had he not moved, it would have skewered him in the back. He turned again, and felt something *clang* against his armor, and felt a heavy blow strike him in the side, which spun him around. A *vrock*

had raced by and swung its glaive at him with everything it had. The weapon's blade had shattered, sending a cascade of metal fragments spiralling towards the ground below.

The armor had stopped the weapon.

But still, that was *too* close.

His wings suddenly became so bright that they shone through the heavy rain of the storm, and the Magelight around his paws flowed up and around him, until his entire body was covered with the wispy nimbus. He used that power to reach into the storm and start affecting it, feeding it power it did not otherwise have in order to create weather effects he wasn't going to get out of a storm of that size and intensity any other way. Massive flows of Air and Water were sent into the storm, latching into its core and suddenly inundating the storm with power, tremendous power. The gray clouds thickened visibly, going from a dark gray to black, as they blocked most of the light from the sun above them even as its edges expanded and cast the valley below into an ominous darkness. The wind blowing out of the storm suddenly turned cold as ice, a deadly warning for all the Demons struggling to reach the Were-cat that was causing the storm to intensify.

Before the Demons could reach him again, while they were distracted in that split second when the storm's wind changed, he released the hail. Chunks of ice as large as a child's fist suddenly erupted out of the cloud, striking with stunning force, even breaking the light bones of the *Alu* and tearing holes in skin from jagged edges. The dozens of flying Demons were hammered by a relentless onslaught of pounding ice, literally battering them out of the air and forcing them to teleport away to keep from getting beaten to death. That hail slammed into the front ranks of the human army, forcing them to raise their shields to protect themselves from the deadly barrage, but they continued marching forward. More and more of them moved into the hailstorm, using shields to protect themselves, but then they all began to trot, and then to charge forward.

Clever girl. She was trying to get her army engaged with the Dura before Tarrin got up enough energy in the storm to be able to do anything serious, force him to risk killing Dwarves if he used the storm's power. It would take time to get up something massive, like a tornado, and she was going to try to break the Duran lines and—

—it came out of nowhere, stuck him squarely in the back, something so massive that it almost knocked him out when it struck him, causing him to lose his control of the weave, and lose control of the storm. All light vanished as he felt something try to crush his armor, then he realized dimly through a swimming haze that he was *inside* something.

Inside the mouth of a gigantic beast!

Pain assaulted him when he felt the armor squeal and bend in protest, as massive teeth sought to rip him apart, crush him. He just barely managed to register seeing Fireflash woozily wobble away, literally flying between two gnashing teeth the size of an anvil and escaping from the maw of whatever gigantic beast had him in its mouth. He reacted out of instinct, reflex, causing his body to melt away into flame, and then vanish in a puff of smoke as he became one with fire and transferred himself to a fire elsewhere, the fire of his Fire Elemental. He reformed himself, the flame rising from the Elemental and twisting into his humanoid form, and then the fire blew away, leaving behind flesh and bone.

Suspended in midair, Tarrin stared upwards in awe and disbelief.

Diving down on them, with the angry sky roiling and rumbling, as the weaving he had done to the storm was interrupted, causing the storm to writhe like a dying snake as the natural forces he set into motion lost their direction and their power, was a *dragon*. But this was like no dragon he'd ever seen before, because it had scales the color of the darkest night, making it look like nothing but a murky silhouette against the angry sky with two glowing red eyes all there was about it that gave off any light whatsoever.

It was a *shadow dragon*!

We have dragons in the Abyss too, Shaz'Baket's voice chided inside his mind, directed right at him. *Did you think I wouldn't be ready to stop you when I made my charge? Now let the mortals fight, Were-cat. My friend wants to play with you. I'm sure you won't disappoint him...because if you do, he'll play with your Dwarven friends instead.*

Tarrin's sword blazed with angry flame, a reflection of his anger. A Demonic dragon! That, that *witch*! But he should have expected nothing less from her! She had tried to bait him out and kill him, then used her Demons like fodder to wear out their spellcasters...and now she had the perfect counter to keep Tarrin from wiping out her army, by forcing him to fight her shadow dragon, taking him out of the defense of the Dura by forcing him to keep the shadow dragon from killing them. She had come to this battle with a plan, and thus far, it was *working*.

Surging forward, Tarrin lost his form to the fire once more, becoming a part of it, and then he reshaped that flame into a form of his own choosing. The fire grew and expanded, twisted and writhed, until it held the shape of a dragon, and then it billowed out and vanished to leave behind flesh and blood and bone. The sleek blue dragon landed on the ground over the trench and rampart as the skies above flashed with lightning, and thunder rumbled across the valley. The storm Tarrin had created still had all its energy, but now had no guiding force. It would complicate the battle because it would be intense, a powerful thunderstorm that would dump heavy rain and wind and lightning on the battlefield, might even spawn a tornado, for it had the energy to do so if the conditions were right for it to form. As a blue, any lightning that might strike him would do Tarrin no harm, and his great size would protect him from the worst of the wind and the rain, just as it would for the shadow dragon. It would make flying tricky, but would pose no real danger. Huge wings thrust him into the air, and he launched himself at the shadow dragon with a thunderous roar, even as the shadow dragon gave out a keening, screeching cry and turned to dive directly at him.

Below the two dragons, below the storm, Kang prepared his lines for the impending charge of the *marilith's* armies, as the cunning Demoness herself slithered behind the main assault force with a sword or axe in each of her six hands, preparing to join the battle in person, eager to begin the slaughter.

Two clashes were about to shake the world itself, one above, and one below, dragon against dragon, general against general, and either of them had the potential to determine the future of the world.

And above them, writhing and gathering itself, was the rogue storm created by Tarrin and then broken free of his guidance by the attack of the shadow dragon, preparing to unleash all the energy Tarrin fed into it upon the land below.

To: [Title](#) [EoF](#)

Chapter 15

Darkness was shattered by the brilliant flash of lightning, illuminating a chaotic scene of controlled insanity.

Tens of thousands of human troops rushed through the narrow valley that was the Dura's defensive position with tens of thousands more waiting, charging towards a trench lined with stakes, beyond which stood the army of the Dwarves and their unusual allies who maintained their position behind the remains of a palisade made of logs. No reserves were being held back; those who had not yet moved were simply waiting for the chance to rush forward behind their compatriots. The human troop leaders were confident that their Demonic allies had won them the battle, had weakened the Defiled and the Damned beyond the trench and had tired out their witches. To their thinking, all it would take now would be a charge of the Duran lines, to break them and allow their superior numbers to overwhelm their dogged, frustratingly competent adversaries. They were very wary of the Demons who were among them, but the strange female Demon who led them was a strong, brilliant commander, and they took faith and morale from her ability to lead, even if she *was* Defiled herself, one of the unholy slaves that would serve the will of the One until he no longer had use for them. The armies of the One charged across that narrow valley as crossbow quarrels rained down on them very sporadically from the valley walls, as only a few of the archers tried to slow them between shots at the climbers that were trying to overrun their elevated positions.

The first men among that charge reached the trench, and followed the paths of the Demons that had come before them, lanes in the trench clear of stakes. They surged over the rampart, and hesitated just a moment to survey the land before them.

A jagged, cratered, blasted wasteland with small fires burning here and there, and wafts of evil black smoke rising from the ground. And beyond that, rows upon rows of armored Dwarves, pikes set and ready to receive them

There would be no hurried charge across *that* ground.

But, there was no turning back now.

High above the bipeds, another clash was about to commence. The night-scaled shadow dragon was diving at the climbing blue, using altitude to its advantage as it rushed at its larger opponent. The blue dragon kept a close eye on it, for it remembered its lore about these dangerous monsters. Part dragon, part shadow, they dwelled mostly on planes of existence other than the material plane, wherever there was shadow and an absence of the guidance of the gods of good. This one came from the Abyss...but it wasn't a *true* Demon. Much like a Hellhound, it was a product of the Abyss, but lacked the bloodline that made it a true Demon. Just like Forge, this monster lacked the basic powers of the Demon—teleportation, the ability to create darkness—but it was a dragon,

which meant that it had the strength, the size, the power, the intelligence, and of course, the breath weapon.

It dove straight at the blue, wings folded back, glowing red eyes narrowed, neck locked. Tarrin turned to meet it head-on, shrieking a thundering cry of challenge and rage, which the shadow dragon answered with its high-pitched keen. Tarrin pulled in his wings as the shadow dragon streaked towards him, and both dragons inhaled sharply as the other came close to being in range of breath weapons. They hurtled towards one another at incredible speed, but despite that speed, both knew instinctively when the other was in range of their breath weapons.

The blue dragon unleashed a single bolt of lightning, highly controlled, from its maw, which arced across the space as straight and true as an arrow. But the Shadow dragon closed its eyes, and its form was lost in the dark shadow of the cloud above them. Its outline became murky, hard to make out, and then it was completely gone. The lightning bolt arced through empty air, sizzling up into the cloud above.

It was gone!

Tarrin banked hard, unsure of what had just happened. There was no sense of magic about what the enemy dragon did, it was like it simply melted away! Those night-colored scaled had simply been swallowed up by the shadows of the storm cloud over them! He didn't have much time to think about it, for his experience with monsters and creatures with the ability to Teleport—whatever it did wasn't that, but he wasn't taking any chances—told him where and how it would be most advantageous for the enemy to attack, and wasn't going to fall into those traps. Instead of climbing, he put his wing over and began a steep descent, sacrificing the advantage of altitude because that was what he *should* do, get higher than the enemy. A high-pitched screech from overhead told him that he had made the right decision, for he looked up and saw that dragon now—

—diving right at him!

He had no chance to turn in time. The night-scaled dragon struck him like a catapult stone, ramming him from above with its smaller, lighter body, slamming him out of his flight path. Long black claws ripped into his sleek blue scales, sending blue scales, blood, and bits of tissue flying as the shadow dragon attacked the joints of his wings, trying to disable his ability to fly, even as the spines that ran down the ridge of his back punched into the softer belly scales of the shadow dragon's torso. Tarrin was pushed down into a steeper and steeper dive as the dragon sought to tear through the tendons that gave him control over his wings, even as the blue dragon thrashed under it to keep it from getting a clear strike.

Tarrin reacted out of instinct. His whip-like tail careened in and slashed the shadow dragon directly across its left wing, ripping a bloody rend through the membrane almost halfway up to the bone. The dragon screeched in pain and let go, kicking off to keep Tarrin from hitting it again, for if he slashed a deep enough cut through that membrane it would cripple the dragon's ability to fly. Tarrin heard the shadow dragon blast out its breath in a strong *whoosh*, and in terror he realized that he had nowhere to go.

It struck him directly. The shadow dragon's breath weapon wasn't fire, or cold, or lightning, or acid, or anything Tarrin would have expected. It was solid shadow, dark as pitch and colder than the touch of Jegojah. It stuck him with little physical force, enveloping him quickly like a cloud of fluff, but in that touch it sought to rip out every iota of warmth within his body. He thought to tuck in and dive out of it, he thought to

bank away, but the cold literally paralyzed him, and his mind was sent spinning into a shock, as if it had been dunked in icy water. There was nothing but bright lights popping behind his eyes as he lost the ability to see or hear or taste or smell, and the only thing he could feel was the biting cold that reached inside of him and sucked out every bit of his warmth. That cold touched him, touched him to the soul, and leached away the warmth of flesh and spirit both.

He literally fell out of the inky cloud, for he was suddenly too weak to move. The cold had drained him of his strength, and he found it hard to think, hard to move. The ground hurtled towards him with shocking speed, but he could barely move, even as his mind understood the danger. He barely managed to get his wings out, which arrested his downward momentum as he arched out of the dive.

Tarrin's belly scraped the ground, grating away the grass and leaving a long scar of torn earth as he just barely managed to pull up in time, as he felt his strength slowly flow back into him, the icy cold pushed away by the boundless energy of the divine soul inside of him. Just as the All had once reacted to the kiss of a Succubus so many years ago to replenish energy stolen from him, his divine soul reached into his mortal coil and brought back sweet, wonderful warmth to his muscles, burning away with the purity of heat the dark, tainted cold that the dragon used as a weapon.

By the fires, what a *weapon*! That dragon's breath weapon was, in its own way, the most dangerous breath weapon of *any* dragon! Had he not been who he was, he would now be too weak to fight! Even if the cold of the breath weapon didn't kill outright, its strength-draining cold would ensure that the victim was incapable of fighting back afterwards!

And it had touched him. In that touch, everything that was the shadow dragon was open to Tarrin's inner eye. What it did, that trick where it melted away, that was a natural ability of the creature, the ability to become one with shadow and move through it, exactly the same way that Tarrin could become one with fire and use it to move from one place to another. It had the ability to control shadow as well, moving it, changing it, manipulating it to its own ends.

And it was not a *Demon*. It was a *dragon*. If it came from the Abyss, that just meant that it *lived* there. There was nothing Demonic about this creature, its bloodline was pure, it was to the very core of its being a dragon. But, in its own way, that made it even more dangerous. Tarrin had weapons to use against Demons that wouldn't work against a dragon.

It was smaller, but oh was it *dangerous*. Tarrin had a newfound respect for this adversary.

He had touched it, he now knew what it could do, and that knowledge gave him an understanding of what he had to do to defeat this creature. It was not a creature of direct confrontation. It was like Miranda, it was a creature of guile and deceit, saving the physical confrontation for that moment where it would be most advantageous, just as it had attacked before by trying to rob him of his ability to fly. It would stalk him, use its ability to control shadow to try to trick him, then it would attack in a way that maximized its advantage. And it would certainly try to get into a position where it could use its breath weapon again without retaliation.

The first step to beating it was that breath weapon. He looked back and saw the rain coming, and smiled inwardly as he banked towards it. That cloud the dragon breathed

would not fare well in a thundering downpour, he'd wager. And the lightning would work to his advantage. He could get an instant recharge off it, and blue dragons could attract that lightning; it was one of their natural abilities.

It was time to start using his brain, and force the shadow dragon to play the game by his rules.

The first contact with the restored lines of the Dura was sporadic. The more nimble of those first human soldiers managed to pick their way across the tortured wasteland between the rampart and the palisade, dodging the steady rain of arrows and crossbow quarrels that fell on them from behind the Dura lines. They made contact with the Dwarven forces, trying to get past the pikes and spears and push into the lines. Those first humans were skewered or chopped down by the front line, who were armed with swords and axes rather than pikes, but there were five humans to replace every one that fell. More and more, faster and faster, those humans, screaming war cries and rushing to avoid getting trampled by those coming from behind, crashed into the lines of the Dura and were quickly rebuffed. The bodies fell where they were, unable to retreat, unable to pull back, unable to move forward, and almost immediately a pile of bloody corpses began to amass outside the palisade's remains. Human soldiers were quickly running atop their own dead as they charged the line with almost mindless ferocity and utter fearlessness, lost in the religious hysteria that had whipped them into a frenzy...or perhaps they were simply more afraid of their Demonic leaders than they were of death.

Though sporadic at first, the Dura and their allies found themselves trying to hold back a virtual sea of seething, furious humanity within minutes, as more and more of the human armies crossed the wasteland and pressed the line. Humans were literally stacked two deep on the pikes, pushing up against the shields with their bodies even as they tried to stab at the Dura through the gaps between their interlocked shields, and still more pressed in from behind like some kind of living tidal wave. The magicians behind the lines held their spells as Dolanna and Lorak shouted commands, as Kang barked orders and pointed at a part of the line with his sword, which caused Tsukatta to rush forward with a company of reserves behind him. That part of the line began to press inward, and then, like the opening of a lock, a single human soldier managed to drive his sword through the visor of a Dura soldier, and his fall broke the line. That single small gap suddenly got pushed wider and wider apart as humans poured into the gap, three men replacing every one the Dwarves chopped down. Dura looked to the hillsides and the withering fire of their archers, but they saw the hillsides crawling with humans, and their archers fighting hand to hand with them, unable to assist. The archers behind the lines kept a steady rainbow of steel and wood flying over the front lines, but their arrows and quarrels were not managing to slow the advance, only reducing the numbers that reached the lines by a pitiful amount.

Then Phandebrass struck. That hole in the line became empty as the Wizard stepped forward and used his magic, causing a savage blast of fast-moving shards of ice to rake through the humans who had managed to get over the palisade, literally tearing the soldiers apart. The surge was halted by that single spell, and the Dura closed the hole.

But the magicians weren't done. A brown-haired Elementalist used her magic as well, and before them, the rushing mass of human soldiers, screaming in anger and

challenge, suddenly cried out in surprise as the ground beneath them became suddenly soft and pliable, the hard-packed earth and torn sides of craters becoming as soft as mud, sucking under their feet. The charge of humanity was stopped almost in its tracks as ever soldier in the no-man's land between the rampart and the palisade suddenly was knee-deep in a thick, sucking, hungry mud that would not break its grip upon them.

Those struggling to get free of the mud did not do so for long. Much to the horror of the Dura, they saw the humans coming over the rampart hesitate, then, as if by some unspoken command, start using their *own men* as bridges over that gooey trap, trampling upon their own and pushing them deeper into the mud to get across and to the Duran lines. Those that struggled too savagely against being trod upon were quickly executed by those above, sacrificed to become little more than a stepping stone for those behind.

Never before had the Dura seen such mindless fanaticism out of their human foes. They had fought them many times, and always before they had displayed quite normal traits for any sentient race, among them a regard for both their own lives and the lives of their companions. But this was almost terrifying, to see them killing their own with callous disregard, and it made the Dura on the front line nervous and tentative when the first of those treading on the backs and heads of their own soldiers reached the palisade. Perhaps the reason for that fanaticism breached the rampart quickly after the first of the humans reached the palisade, that six-armed Demoness, pointing at the line with one of her ornate swords and shouting aloud for them to attack without mercy. One of the huge lizard-things—Vendari, they were called Vendari—bellowed in challenge to that voice, a massive monster of a creature wielding a huge warhammer, pointing the head of it at her and saying something in a language none of them understood. The Demoness hissed defiantly, and then she rushed forward with her troops, obviously intending to join the battle personally.

Behind the Demoness a series of robed figures appeared, and at their arrival, all the magicians behind the lines reacted. Dozens of spells—bolts of fire and lightning, beams of light, fiery missiles, black arcs of energy—were unleashed at them from the magicians, sizzling across the air and striking true. The rampart at the feet of those robed figures erupted in a gout of dust and flying dirt, but the fringes of some kind of protective magical barrier were clearly visible through the dust as it actively repelled the magical attacks. Those robed figures began to cast spells back towards the Dura, but those reciprocating bolts and beams and arcs went over their heads and attacked the magicians. But just as the magicians failed, so did those robed figures, as their spells changed directions and were sucked into the strange glowing pinwheel which seemed to rotate over the head of the white-haired Wizard.

The Dura quickly lost track of the doings of the magicians as the humans again crushed into the lines, coming harder and faster than before, such an incredible press that the line was forced backwards, driven back by the sheer force of their numbers. But the line did not break, did not fail, this time backing up at Kang's command rather than try to hold fast and risk another breach like the one before. But one step became two, and two became four, until the front line found itself nearly ten paces from the palisade, the orderly line bulging in several different locations as Dura fell and those behind quickly stepped up to take their places before the humans exploited the hole and tried to break the line. The Dura held the line with all the valor and determination for which they were famous upon two worlds.

But they were in no way prepared for Shaz'Baket.

She was careful not to assault the line where the Vendari and Knights were stationed. She struck not in the middle, but at the extreme east side of the Duran lines, almost against the valley wall. The *marilith* swept the pikes and spears from doing her harm with contemptuous swipes of her six weapons, then crashed into the Dwarves with an eerie, haunting grin of eager anticipation, her weapons immediately setting to the task of slaughtering any Dwarf within reach. The Dura withered under her assault, and immediately a hole was opened in their lines, a hole that was deepened by the Demoness as she advanced. She pushed spans behind the line, then reared up on her snake body and brought forth fire from two of her hands that gripped sword and axe, then projected it into the Duran lines. The shrill shrieks of those on fire split the din of the battle, as some charred and died where they stood, some convulsed on the ground, and some broke and fled trailing flames, trying to push through the press of other Dwarves around them. That act widened the breach and allowed more humans to pour in, until the armies of the One had an established penetration of the lines. The *marilith* continued moving in a straight line along the valley's edge, pushing deeper and deeper in, trying to drive through the Duran forces and breach into their reserves, using the valley wall as an anchor to which her forces clung, preventing the Dura from flanking them.

But that steep hillside could serve both sides. Kimmie broke off from battling the Wizards of the One's forces and turned to deal with the breach, a single magician tasked to stopping the penetration, and the Were-cat quickly took in the situation and selected the best means to go about it. She threw a handful of pebbles into the air and chanted loudly and strongly in the language of magic, then completed her spell with a stab of both paws towards the breach. The spell was not aimed at the enemy forces, but instead at the hillside behind them. Her spell caused the earth to shake, and then caused an explosion of dirt and rocks to erupt from the hillside higher up, but just under where the Duran archers and the human climbers were engaged in furious hand to hand combat, blasting out a section of the hillside and creating a landslide.

It wasn't deep or large, but it was large enough. It was no avalanche that came down the mountain, but the shower of dirt and rock was moving fast enough to sweep the feet out from under the humans that were caught in it, right where the Dura had set up their front line, just behind the palisade. The Dura tried to swarm over that landslide almost as soon as it had ceased, quickly killing those humans who had been knocked down by its power, but they and everyone else stopped for just a moment when they heard a thunderous detonation high above and well down the valley, which made them all turn to look.

Just as the rain hit the front line, they saw it. The black dragon was locked in savage claw-to-claw combat with a brilliant blue-scaled dragon, as lightning thrashed around them, and struck the blue dragon repeatedly. They were easily visible because there was a brilliant nimbus of light that surrounded the blue dragon like the sun, a kind of inner radiation that was almost too bright to look upon, a light so bright that it illuminated the clouds above and the ground below, taking the place of the bright sunlight which those clouds were blocking. The detonation was some kind of spell that one of them cast, and it was apparent to all that not only were they fighting tooth and claw, they were fighting spell for spell, as magic was cast back and forth between them even as they sought to rip the life from one another. The two thrashed in the air, locked in physical combat even as

each hissed and spat the words of magic at one another, wobbling erratically in the air as they tugged and pulled and raked. A sudden swarm of hailstones rained on them, obviously magical in nature and not a product of the storm, pounding the blue dragon's back as the night-scaled beast pulled itself under its larger foe, but the blue caught a clawhold on its foe and completed its own spell, which caused the night-scaled dragon's head to bob dangerously and caused its actions to become erratic as it fought off some kind of effect that wasn't readily visible. The blue raised its head and unleashed its breath weapon into the air above it, a wide fan of arcing lightning bolts, but the rain caught the blast and deflected it in every direction, even caused it to arc back into the two dragons. That blast made the black-scaled dragon let go and veer off, then bank frantically as the thunderstorm above unleashed its own lightning, lightning which *directly struck the blue dragon!* But instead of hurting the beast, it seemed to be absorbed by it, then it turned its head and immediately unleashed another blast of its own breath weapon, this time a tightly compact blast of intertwined lightning bolts, again diffused by the rain and spread out. But even with that diffusion, the attack missed as the night-scaled dragon dove towards the ground, seemingly free of whatever affect that had gripped it seconds before, as tendrils of pure darkness seemed to start to ooze out from between its scales, leaving behind itself a trail of liquid night as it streaked towards the ground, then disappeared from sight behind the valley wall. The blue dragon hovered high in the air for a moment, its voice audible over the rain and the shouting as it chanted in the language of magic. The nimbus of light around it had started to fade noticeably, but at the conclusion of that spell it rejuvenated itself, became bright as the sun once more, and the blue dove down and out of sight as it chased its quarry.

Their disappearance caused the fighting to erupt once more with even more savagery. The Dura struggled to close the hole and trap those who had breached the line, and for long moments there was unorganized, chaotic fighting on top of the landslide as Dura and humans fought in a jumbled mass, trying to secure the area for their side and organize coherent lines to prevent it from being retaken. As they did that, Shaz'Baket continued her forward push, spreading her human forces that were behind that melee thinner and thinner as she drove towards the far end of the valley along the wall. Her forward movement was almost completely unchecked as she raced ahead, slaughtering Dura like a reaper harvesting wheat, leaving a long trail of the dead behind her as her humans filled the space she left behind.

Until she met Tsukatta.

The samurai warrior reached her when she had nearly gotten halfway to the far side of the valley, joining the battle with an undulating warcry, holding a sleek *katana* in each hand. The human waded into combat with the *marilith* with neither hesitation nor reserve, engaging her confidently. The Demoness at first simply sought to sweep the human out of her way, but her attempt to simply kill him with a cascade of attacks with all six weapons nearly cost her her head. He parried all six of those attacks with ease, and she was out of position to defend when he turned that parry into a sweeping slash directly at her neck. She slowed to a halt and tried again, using a complicated and deceptive series of slashes, stabs, and feints with all six weapons to confuse her opponent and leave him open, but he again parried every attack with ease, and saw through her feints and correctly predicted exactly where and how the true attack would be executed. She was shocked when he turned aside the axe blow meant to carve a deep hole in

between his ribs with both of his swords, then stepped up and kicked her directly in the abdomen, just above where her snake scales began, and kicked her so hard that it left spots in her eyes. She slithered back and out of range as those two weapons tried to carve a V in the front of her neck, literally scissoring off her head had it managed to land.

She engaged the human again, using every weapon she had to its utmost, seeking to swarm the human under her six weapons and do him in, but found herself becoming frustrated and flustered by this strangely armored human. Every attack was parried or evaded, and she was quickly put on the defensive by his two weapons and his *feet*, as he used his arms and legs in addition to his swords to combat her. She quickly became unsure what was coming next, whether he would attack with his swords, or try to kick her, or if his elbow or knee would come seemingly out of nowhere and strike her, seeking any vital or sensitive area. How could he hold his own against her! He did not move with superhuman speed, and though he seemed stronger than a human should be, he was not much stronger than she. But her every attempt to overwhelm him with martial prowess or simply outnumber him with her six swords against his two was met with defeat, as the human simply saw through her feints or was prepared for her attacks, and she found herself heavily challenged to meet his answering forays, for his swordwork was exacting and brilliant, the two weapons weaving before him with such stunning complexity that it seemed that there were fifty blades whirling between them.

So dazzling was the martial challenge before them that Dura and human both paused fighting one another to watch, captivated by two masters of the art of war locked in deadly combat with one another.

As she fought him, she realized that his advantage was not speed, or strength, or magic, it was *experience*. This was a warrior so well versed in his art that it gave him the capability of battling a mighty *marilith* in her own realm of expertise, armed combat, and give her a serious challenge. This human, she decided, would be a much better slave than a trophy. She could find many uses for someone of his ability and skill. And when she was done with him, there was always his soul to claim.

And then there was another! Shaz'Baket nearly lost her head when a dark-skinned female joined the fray, one of those cursed Selani, and then a white-haired male whose hair was plastered to his head and face by the heavy rain, both armed with swords. Her intelligence from when she was on Sennadar marked these two as Var and Denai, personal friends of that damned Were-cat Tarrin Kael. They joined with the human warrior and attacked the *marilith* with utterly perfectly aligned attacks, each unconsciously aware of the other two as they attacked in a perfect symphony of lethal, dizzyingly complicated and swift strikes with sword or *katana*. The *marilith* found herself giving ground to avoid losing her head to those deadly swords, as the air around them rang with the continuous chime of metal against metal, as the Demoness was put completely on the defensive. Six ornate swords and axes worked feverishly to stop the four swords and two *katanas* of her adversaries, as her snake body began to slither backwards to give her more room. The three of them managed to stop the Demoness' advance, but a *marilith* had more weapons than just swords.

And she used those weapons. She slithered backwards very fast, just enough space to give her time, and then shouted in the language of magic. She screamed only one word, but it was a word of such mystical power that any who had the ability to hear it was struck by its force, the power of the Word of *Stun*. Everyone around her, human, Dura,

and Selani all, shivered and flinched, and then were knocked backwards away from her by the power of that mystical utterance, knocked to the ground where they lay senseless, unable to move or act or think.

All save one.

The wicker-armored warrior stood before her, the only standing human, Dura, or Dwarf within twenty paces, his swords held low at each side and the eyes behind that gruesome visage on his mask looking directly at her. There was a mystical symbol glowing on the front of his armor, a power she recognized as being laid into it by a *Wu Jen*, a mystical user of magic from certain universes who shared a culture similar to that from which this warrior had originated, a sigil that deflected the power of her mystical word and protected him from its effect.

Behind him, the scaled Vendari who had shouted his challenge at her was reaching them, a monster of a creature, the size of a *glabrezu*, wielding a massive warhammer, his green scales glistening as the thundering downpour streamed water over him. There was another, wielding a huge axe, and yet one more, holding a huge two-handed sword, and these were not opponents to take lightly. Shaz'Baket knew what Vendari were, and knew that one of their most potent weapons was the fact that they were *extremely* hard to affect with magic. With three of them *and* that magnificent human warrior, she would be hard pressed to hold her own against them. Shaz'Baket was arrogant, but she was *not* stupid.

Now, perhaps, was the best time to end this. She had achieved enough penetration.

With a single telepathic command, it began.

The hillside exploded outward with dust and dirt and rock, dust and dirt that quickly fell to earth within the rain as mud, and large numbers of stubby, barrel-like creatures called *Xorn* erupted from the earth itself, each with three arms and three legs distributed at regular intervals along the circumference of its body, and an eye between each of its arms, with a maw on its rounded top. Each of those creatures was a denizen of the Elemental Plane of Earth and enslaved to the Demon's cause, and each of them had in one of its three hands the hand, pincer, tentacle, or claw of a Demon. *Xorn* had the power to walk through earth and rock, and they could take with them anyone that they were touching. And at the forefront of those Demons was the *balor* that had survived the initial assault.

In the blink of an eye, Shaz'Baket had dozens of Demons at her side, every one of the surviving Demons from the attempts to kill Tarrin and break the lines of the Dura, deep behind the lines of the Dura. The Were-cat's Ward prevented them from teleporting in or out, but there were other ways to use magical travel to achieve optimum surprise.

The *balor* was the first to act, and that was as it was meant to be. It would be unleashed upon the enemies now that Tarrin was locked in combat with the shadow dragon and their magicians were busy fighting the enslaved Wizards. The *balor* was nothing more than a force of furious destruction, chaos personified, and it easily filled that role by standing at the forefront and leading the Demons as they rampaged through the lines of the Dura. The great Demons charged right at the human warrior, but it was one of the Vendari that stepped up to meet its charge, the hammer-wielding one. The *balor* tried to project its aura of fire, but the thundering downpour smothered the flames as quickly as it could create them. It was nonplussed, however, meeting the Vendari with its jagged sword and brutal whip confidently as the scaly beast took up its hammer in both hands and met its charge without so much as blinking.

In moments, a pitched battle raged around the breach, as the rest of the Vendari, Knights, and Selani reached the area, where the strongest of the Demons battled with the best of Sennadar in a furious melee that might decide the outcome of the battle. Two Knights, one Vendari, and one Selani were already dead by the time the last of the Knights joined with battle. The *balor* and *marilith*, the two mightiest of the Demons, had their hands full with a single Vendari and a single human warrior, as the remaining Demons and the otherworldly mortals battled in a furious frenzy that left the Dura watching a little dumbfounded, so dumbfounded that a thunderous series of detonations back near the center of the original line did not attract their attention. Steel and magic clashed with claws and fangs as the titanic forces struggled against one another, with casualties on both sides. A *glabrezu* crumpled and fell decaying to the earth, victim to a Selani longsword, as a huge Knight was impaled on the glaive of a *vrock* and tossed aside, even as the mortal defiantly stabbed the vulture-Demon with his sword, crippling it. That *vrock* had its head split in half by one of the huge Vendari and its axe, who was then bathed in a blasting cone of intense frost that was issued from the paw-hand of a boar-headed *nalfeshnee*. The Vendari simply shook off the frost and turned on the fat Demon, but before the Demon could face the Vendari, he was skewered from the flank by a Knight with a scarred face. That Knight and Vendari then teamed up to help the hammer-wielder battle the *balor*, and the two Selani that had been stunned on the ground recovered before the humans and Dura, and again aided the human against the *marilith*. The other Knights, Vendari, and Selani battled against the remaining Demons, outnumbered by them but proving that those superior numbers only made it an equal fight. The Dura and the forces of the One also jumped into that fight, until it was a chaotic, nightmarish scene, the sounds of the dying, the sounds of magic, the sounds of steel on steel raging over the sound of the driving rain.

Just as the forces of the Dura and their allies began to take the upper hand against the Demons, as Binter fought the *balor* literally to a standstill, and started pushing it back once he received help from Ulger and Sisska, as Tsukatta, Var, and Denai pushed Shaz'Baket back further and further towards the wall, a similar explosion shuddered the earth on the far side of the valley. Another incursion of Demons shuffled in by Xorn appeared on the far side of the valley, well ahead of Shaz'Baket's position on the east side, consisting mostly of *cambion*, *vrock*, and *hezrou*, the halfbreeds and the weaker types of pure-blooded Demons. But just because they were weaker than *marilith* or *glabrezu* did not make them any less dangerous. They tore into the Dura on the far side of the valley, ripped into the first formation of reserves waiting to rush forward if needed, causing immediate chaos behind the lines. Kang and Bragg screamed orders and caused the reserves to react swiftly to the assault, but the Demons had already carved a deep breach into the Dura formation, and they broke through and into the open ground between formations within seconds. Other formations quickly converged on the Demons and attacked, creating a pitched battle behind the lines, lines that were inexorably being pushed back towards the Demons everywhere but in the center. But the Dura were out of position, and the Demons were moving very quickly, almost at a run, ignoring their rear, rushing forward with all speed towards their objective. Kang himself interposed himself once he realized where those Demons were going, drawing his sword and waiting on the back of his Pegasus for them to reach him, for the magicians were behind him. The warriors that had been charged with the protection of the magicians surged forward, led

by Camara Tal, who was personally defending the safety of her husband, and Darax, who had been given command of the Elementals by Binter, got word of what was happening and dispatched Tarrin's Elementals to assist Kang. The four Elementals took up position around Kang, as did Haley, who had pulled himself away from the front line when Shaz'Baket had broken through, but had taken up a position near the magicians just in case she attempted to reach them herself.

With a powerful cry, Kang spurred his Pegasus to rush forward as the Demons broke through the second attempt to contain them, and the others charged with him. Kang met the Demons head-on, decapitating a *vrock* an instant after deftly parrying its halberd, and the others fell on the Demons instants later. Haley, in his hybrid form, drove his rapier through the heart of a *hezrou* with a deft and subtle thrust, slithering around the swipes of its clawed webbed hands with graceful ease. Camara Tal and the Elementals met their charge stoically, sword and arms and tendrils striking at the Demonic foes with lightning speed, even as Demon after Demon twisted and fell as Bragg used his axe to chop them down at the knees. The Demons were halted in their rush forward, forced to fight, and fight they did. Camara Tal was surrounded by four *cambion*, her sword and shield blurring in the murky light as she frantically defended herself from their lethal weapons, but the Water Elemental swept all four into the darkness of death with a pair of lashing tentacles of ice, so sharp and striking with such force that it sheared through their heavy metal armor. Haley danced around the head and haft of a *vrock*'s poleaxe, stabbing the much taller vulture Demon in the leg, and again in the lower hip, but he yowled in pain when a *hezrou* slipped up from behind and ripped its claws through his back. The Werewolf sagged to one knee as Bragg chopped down the attacker, then the Earth Elemental grabbed hold of him and dragged him backwards, towards the magicians, towards safety. The Dura converged on the Demons again to support their generals, and the charge of the Demons was slowed, and then halted, with Kang, Bragg, Camara Tal, and Tarrin's Elementals holding them at bay. They only had to hold them long enough for the magicians to take notice of the assault and intercept them, and that was exactly what they did. Phandebrass' voice was audible over the din of the battle and the pounding rain, and when he completed his spell, dozens of small, fiery little missiles issued forth from his hands and streaked across the battlefield. They weaved and bobbed and danced around anything in their path, leaving glowing trails behind them, and then they slammed home into the Demons, again and again and again, each missile evading all others and unerringly striking that one target it had been created to attack. Those missiles burned through armor, burned through hide, burned through feathers and drove deep into flesh, causing the Demons to squeal or squawk or scream in intense pain...for they had no intrinsic defense or immunity from the white-haired Wizard's magical missiles. Phandebrass' magical attack withered the Demonic combatants to but a handful that were still mobile enough to fight, and those few were quickly swarmed over by the Dura, Amazon, and Elementals.

The pounding rain's drum on the ground and on armor was split by a screeching cry, which caused all eyes to look upon it. The shadow dragon appeared over the valley wall, hard to see in the rain, but those glowing red eyes did not give doubt as to what it was. It rose into the air and turned, then it became apparent that it was coming towards the armies. It was apparent even from that distance that the creature was seriously wounded, its wings torn and tattered, blood visible along its night-colored scales, but it was

obviously strong enough to fly, and it flew with a steady deliberance, a seeming nonchalance, that made it seem that it was confident that the skies belonged to it and to it alone. It screeched again, a cry of triumph, as it turned to approach the armies below, silhouetted briefly by a brilliant cascade of lightning.

And the blue dragon was nowhere to be seen.

Now you will taste defeat! Shaz'Baket's telepathic communication boomed from her, audible to all around her as she rejoiced her impending victory. *Your god has failed you, mortals, and now your souls belong to me!*

"Could it be?" Kimmie asked in fearful disbelief between spells, as she dug a single emerald from the pouch at her belt, preparing to cast another spell. They had been locked in magical combat with the enslaved Wizards of their enemies for long moments, until Neh had grown tired of it and had used one of her rarest spells to cause a prism of colors to erupt around the magicians of the Duran forces, a spell that suddenly caused every spell cast at them to reflect back upon the caster. The spell only lasted for a few seconds, and sent Neh spiralling into unconsciousness, but it was enough, for Phandebrass struck at that same instant, again casting the Meteor Strike spell to virtually vaporize the opposition, leaving nothing behind but a smoking crater.

After they were dispatched, the magicians found themselves facing a line that was about to buckle all up and down its length, and not just that one area to the side where the Demoness had punched through. They were forced to not help Tsukatta and the others, but use their magic all along the rest of the line to help prevent it from shattering and having the forces of the One completely overwhelm their entire line. They had to have faith that Binter, Sisska, Tsukatta, Ulger, Azakar, and Var and Denai could bolster the others and hold the breach against that sudden onslaught of Demonic adversaries, for all of their magic had to be devoted to keeping the Duran lines from folding. That one moment where Phandebrass had turned his attention to the Demons attacking from the opposite direction caused the Duran lines on the west side to sag visibly, as the endless numbers of the humans pressed in on the Dura and pushed them back. The only place where the line was strong, where they did not buckle, did not fall back, was where Darax stood, the Axe of the Dwarven King flashing in the dim light and the flashes of lightning, chanting one of the most ancient war songs of his people as the human forces that crashed against him were sent crumpling to the earth with every swing of his axe. Other Dwarves began chanting that song as well, taking strength and courage from their young king as he stood at the very center of the line, willing to be the rock to which his people could anchor themselves...and anchor themselves they did. The ruler of the Dura was once again assisted by the four magical creations of the winged furry one, the Were-cat Tarrin, who had been left by the Vendari Binter and told to fight at the side of the king, to protect him and do battle with their enemies. Those four magical creations had returned from helping stave off the Demons' attack on the magicians, and again fought at the king's left and right, felling foes with each strike, obeying the commands of the king even as he uttered them between words of his song. The line bowed in to both sides of them, threatening to break and leave Darax surrounded, but then the magicians of the Shadows used what little magic they had left to assist their allies. Explosive balls of fire, lethal rains of acid and ice rained down on the forces of the One even as the earth itself rose up

to do battle, faltering the charge of the armies of the One, but only for a moment, as the endless sea of humans behind surged ahead to take their places.

And then the shadow dragon appeared.

“Do not count Tarrin out so quickly, dear one!” Dolanna shouted as she used up the very last of her reserves of Sorcery, incinerating a large group of human soldiers in a withering blast of fire. She then drew a small dagger from her belt, her utility dagger, meaning to join in hand to hand combat if it was necessary. She knew, they all knew, that there was no retreat from this battle. It was victory or death.

Kimmie chanted another spell, throwing her emerald to the ground, and the earth before the Dwarven king suddenly became as glass, the earth turned to crystal, crystal that was both slicker than wet ice and whose every edge along the contours of the shattered landscape was razor sharp. Humans slipped and fell on that crystal, slid forwards or backwards up the inclines, and were sheared to the bone by the lethal edges along the changes in gradient.

“I never do, friend, but this doesn’t look good!” Kimmie called urgently as she took up her last spell component, a cat’s eye agate, as the shadow dragon landed on the valley wall on the far side of where Shaz’Baket had breached the lines, south of where the other Demons had erupted from the valley wall and had tried to reach the magicians. It screeched once again, an eerie cry that made all the hair on Kimmie’s neck stand straight out, and it was a horrifying sight. Its scales blended in with the shadows of the rain, making its form hard to see, but the bloody wounds on its flanks and in its wings were more than visible, as were the glowing red eyes, eyes that froze Kimmie’s blood, eyes that transfixed the entire battle below. Human, Dura, even Vendari and Selani and Demon alike all looked up at the ominous creature as it screeched that high-pitched keen, and it drew in its breath meaningfully. Dolanna put her hand up in reflex as every magician who still had any magic left began casting their spells to protect themselves. There was a sudden collective shout from both armies, a shout of fear from the Dura and their allies, a shout of victory from the armies of the One.

But there was one more voice that rose over that, a voice that caused Dolanna to look in that direction. It was a female voice, and the diminutive Sorceress saw that it belonged to the Demoness, Shaz’Baket. She was staring at the shadow dragon in shock, and that voice cried out over the din in a single word.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The shadow dragon’s neck lanced forward, and it unleashed its breath weapon, a blast of what could only be called liquid darkness, an enveloping cloud of clinging shadow that blasted forth. It did not blast down upon the Dura.

It blasted down upon the *humans*.

That cloud of inky blackness billowed forth over the armies of the One, far enough away from the Dura that its edges did not touch them, spreading out and sucking the very warmth out of any flesh it touched, clinging to them, invading them, draining away their warmth and their strength. Within the cloud, the forces of the One shrieked in mindless agony, the agony of the cold of the grave, of Death Himself coming for them, and then they died in mid-scream, their very souls frozen within them and falling away into the chasm of eternity.

Dolanna laughed with great delight. “Never count him out, dear one!” she cried exultantly. “That dragon is *Tarrin*!”

It was indeed Tarrin. The shadow dragon had been a dangerous and competent adversary, but it was not capable of defeating a creature like Tarrin, who had the ability to change, and could rely on tremendous reserves of hidden power. Tarrin had chased it down into that cloud of shadow it created to provide it with what it needed to fight Tarrin, had faced it in its own element by changing into one of its own kind. Shadow dragon had fought shadow dragon in that valley, within the shadows, even in that alternate reality which was the Shadow Plane. The use of the shadow dragon's own form had nullified its greatest advantage, that lethal breath weapon. Dragons were immune to the effects of their own breath weapons.

Robbed of its ability to use stealth and its lethal breath weapon, the shadow dragon had turned to face him head on, with claws and magic. This shadow dragon was old, intelligent, and it—no, she, it was a she—was well versed in the arts of arcane Wizard magic. They had battled one another with teeth and claws, with spells of Wizard magic, and with cunning and guile. Their battle had begun in the mortal realm, but had ranged into the realm of Shadow, a quasi-state of existence that paralleled the real world, existing within it and apart from it at the same time. As a shadow dragon, Tarrin had instinctual knowledge of this place and how it operated, so he had no trouble battling the opponent within this realm. She had moved to that state of existence where her greater experience would be an advantage, and it had been to her. Though he had knowledge of that dark, mysterious place through his dragon blood, she had been there many times and knew the nuances of the place better than he. It was there that they had battled, resorting to teeth and claws after both had used spells of protection to stop their adversary from using magic against them, a type of combat that Tarrin was much better at than the female. He had beaten her, but had not killed her. By becoming a shadow dragon, facing the female in her own form, she had surrendered to him in an ancient rite of her breed rather than face death in his jaws.

By rote and custom of shadow dragon society, Tarrin had earned a single service from his vanquished foe. Tarrin exacted that service from her by forcing her to swear never to work with the Demons again under any circumstance, an oath that would force her to move her lair from the Abyss and to a new location. He had released her and returned to the physical world after that to come and lay a nasty shock on the armies of Shaz'Baket. Demons could see him for what he was no matter what shape he wore, but that was a function of *sight*, and distance and the heavy rain would conceal his true nature from them long enough to get into position to do something.

Goddess, he would go to his grave with the sweet memory of the look on that bitch Shaz'Baket's face when she looked up at him and saw the truth.

As the dark cloud of Tarrin's breath weapon evaporated, the carnage it left behind was absolutely ghastly. Hundreds and hundreds of the soldiers of the One lay on the tortured ground, their skin a ghostly white, limbs frozen in erratic postures as they clawed at the air itself in their death throes, and then the cold of the darkness locked their corpses into that position. The mad charge of the human armies, which had been absolutely unstoppable, suddenly began to waver, and then it ceased. Those who had been close to that breath weapon had turned to flee in panic, and even more began to turn and flee when they saw the shadow dragon, saw it attack its own forces, saw that *one of their most powerful allies had turned against them*. Demon or no Demon, competence or no

competence, those Demons were not there now to protect the human forces from its own dragon, and the awesome size and power of the dragon and the fear it inspired had done its work on the humans who beheld it and realized that they now had to fight it. More and more humans turned back into the press of their own forces, causing the entire charge to get jumbled up within itself, halting the charge as those men behind who had not seen the attack and did not know what was going on were tangled up with the ones who knew the truth, those struck with the terrified panic that a dragon could instill in a biped, a panic so powerful that it gave those men stricken with it the frenzied strength to push against the charge of their own army.

That massive head whipped around, neck extending it over the magicians on their raised platform, and those glowing red eyes glared balefully directly at Shaz'Baket. *Now you are mine, bitch*, his thought issued from within his mind, using another innate ability of a shadow dragon, the ability to project thought. It wasn't true telepathy in the manner of the Demons, for a shadow dragon could only make their thoughts heard, not hear the thoughts of others in return. Those eyes closed, and the dragon's form seemed to waver in the darkness and the rain, until it was apparent that it was no longer there. But the Demons all turned their heads in unison, turning to look over their own shoulders, as those glowing red eyes appeared on the side of the hill directly over them. Those eyes took in the entire sight, and burned with sudden rage when they saw the form of Azakar laying on the ground, blood smearing a hole in the side of his breastplate, his eyes closed and his body inert. He gave out a screeching howl of outrage, fury, and loss, and those eyes suddenly burned like coals stoking the eternal fires of the Nine Hells. The look that it put down on the Demons was enough to make a Demon, even a mighty *balor*, feel fear.

And to fear was to flee. All of the survivors except Shaz'Baket took hold of the Xorn which lurked by the valley wall, and demanded that they take them back into the earth, out of the reach of the deadly creature above. The Xorn obeyed, merging with the earth and rock and carrying the Demons away, drawing them into the earth. But that was not far enough to escape Tarrin's wrath. A single paw in the hillside was all the touch he needed as he wove a spell of sorcery into the Earth, weaves of Earth and Divine, infusing them into the earth and rock, weaving it, then snapping it down and releasing it. The spell picked up those barrels of gunpowder and pulled them through the earth swiftly, so swiftly that it created a furrow in the ground, until they were directly before the Xorn and their Demonic passengers. They paused just a second when they sensed the objects, and that turned out to be fatal. Tarrin touched those kegs with his power and caused them to explode, sending a muffled *WHOOMPH* through the air and a shudder in the ground around them. The shockwave shattered the rock bodies of the Xorn, killing them, and their destruction caused those Demons who had been relying on their power to become fused with the earth and rock through which they had been moving, killing them instantly.

And there was only the *marilith* left. She glared up at Tarrin with defiance, not fear, her six bloody weapons still in her six hands. Those six arms then moved with perfect harmony, causing her to strike the bracers adorning the wrists of her two highest arms together, which triggered a magical effect. A pool of magical energy appeared beneath her snake-like lower body, and gravity asserted itself upon her, causing her to fall through the magical hole and out of sight.

Tarrin sensed her some distance away, behind her armies. She was beyond the Ward that prevented teleportation, but she did not flee, she did not teleport away. Despite losing her shadow dragon, despite losing her Wizards, despite losing the rest of her Demons, she was not fleeing, she was not giving up. She obviously thought she still had a weapon at her disposal capable of countering Tarrin's power—

His power. Of course! She was trying to make him use his divine power, the one thing he had come into this battle determined not to do! She was trying to make him use it, so she could tell the Demon Lord how strong he was, how much he'd healed! She hadn't retreated because *she had not succeeded in that mission!* She would remain on the field, keep coming at him until she forced him to use his power, so the Demon Lord could see how strong he was!

Her presence on the battlefield suddenly made perfect sense. She wasn't here to destroy the Dura, she wasn't here to lead the armies of the One...she was here to test Tarrin's power. The Demon Lord didn't care about the human soldiers, because they were all going to die anyway once he killed the One and started the destruction of Pyrosia. He was probably willing to sacrifice a few Demons to the cause as long as it forced Tarrin to reveal his power, to let the Demon Lord see how strong he was.

Actually, once he thought about it, maybe she *had* completed her mission. Tarrin had not used his divine powers outside of his ability to shapeshift. He had used Sorcery, Wizardry, and had taken the form of the shadow dragon to gain access to its powers and use it to surprise Shaz'Baket. He had beaten her without having to fall back on that power, and now she had nothing left dangerous enough to make him reveal that power to her. She could construe his actions to mean that either he did not have that power and simply managed to fight it out and win with what power he had, or she hadn't worked hard enough to force him into a situation where he was required to use it.

What she would do next would tell him which conclusion she made.

He looked down, and saw Ulger and Sisska attending to Azakar. The wound was deep, almost all the way through him, but he was still alive. They quickly assessed the situation, then Sisska took him up in her powerful arms and carried him off the field. He looked past them, to the Dwarven army, and saw that Kang and Bragg were forming them up to charge the disorganized front ranks of the enemy. He saw immediately what they intended, and saw that it was a dangerous gamble. The humans still outnumbered them five to one, and if they were so packed into the valley that those in the front literally had nowhere to go. They'd fight because they had no choice, not with the reserves still trying to push into the valley from behind. What they needed was something so terrifying, so powerful, that it would panic the entire army and allow the Dura to charge the army while it was trying to flee. Tarrin's dragon form certainly would fill that role. After he got them panicked, he could simply fly over them and cut them off from behind, then the Dura could use Tarrin as a chopping block to grind them into dogmeat. Tarrin had to move quickly to wipe out the armies of the One, to keep Shaz'Baket from coming up with some plan that would force him to reveal his power, if she intended to try again.

"We will see to him, Tarrin," Binter called. "He honored himself this day, and even now Sisska seeks out the Priests of the Dura so they can use enough healing magic to sustain him until Miranda can make him well. You have much left to do. Do not dawdle here when you are needed elsewhere, it is a stain on your honor."

Tarrin nodded. If Binter said it was going to happen, it was going to happen. *Take good care of him, he's as much family to me as you are. I'll go make sure they don't try to hurt him again.*

"Fight with honor," Binter said, saluting him with his bloody warhammer, then he rushed off to assist his mate.

With a furious screech, the shadow dragon which was Tarrin Kael flared his battle-torn wings and launched into the air, soaring over the armies of the Dura and landing quickly in the no-man's land between the Dwarves and the human army, a void created with his own breath weapon. His massive paws crushed the cold bodies of the dead as he landed between the two armies, and he snapped out his wings and screeched a keening cry of challenge at the armies of the One, a high-pitched cry that made everyone who heard it cringe. *Your Demon bitch of a general has nothing left to save you from me!* he sent his thought out towards them, even as he started drawing in his breath, even as a dark, ominous mist began to billow out from between his scales, as Tarrin called on the shadow dragon's innate ability to create deep shadow, a move that would put him into shadow and give him the ability to use some of his other powers, as well as conceal the actions of the Dwarven army behind him. *Now join the ones I stand upon in the cold of death!*

A jagged flash of lightning illuminated the shadow dragon in brilliant light for an instant, just as it snapped its head forward, just as the first tendrils of its inky breath weapon began to billow from its mouth. It was an image of unmitigated terror for those humans before it, those humans who had nowhere to go, those who were looking into the maw of Death. But the instant passed, and a powerful jet of inky blackness blasted forth from the dragon's maw, quickly billowing out into a fast-moving cloud of soul-numbing, strength-sapping cold. The inky cloud enveloped another large swath of the armies of the One, and all whom it touched had the very strength sucked out of them by the icy cold of shadow, had the warmth of body and soul consumed by the hunger of the darkness and the cold. Everyone within the cloud of darkness shrieked in mindless agony, and then those shrieks ended with horrid finality as those who screamed died before they could run out of breath.

Tarrin realized as the cloud evaporated, and as the rain finally began to stop, that he had stumbled across what was probably the best shape he could have used to inspire terror. Dragons could create fear and panic because of their size, but there was just something about a shadow dragon that took it one step further. Golds and blues and reds looked both frightening and *majestic*. A shadow dragon looked frightening and *evil*...and that was a much more effective combination when one wanted to incite terror.

The results certainly could not be disputed. The humans in the armor began to scream in fear and horror, and more and more began to turn and push against those trying to move forward, who themselves stopped and turned to flee as Tarrin began ambling forward on his huge paws, as his form shed off dark shadows as he moved, concealing that behind him and partially hiding his form, letting their imaginations create much more terror than seeing him completely ever could have. The officers in that jumbled mass had tried to shout orders at first, but they too lost their nerve and turned to flee when they got a good look at the windrows of the dead, all slaughtered by a single attack, a carpet of white-skinned corpses locked in hideously agonized positions, as if they were frozen in the instant of the most horribly painful event in their lives. A carpet upon which the

dragon tread with a terrifying, measured, almost stately pace forward, letting them look at him, letting them see him coming, letting them see the dead and the shadowy mist emanating from his form, letting them associate that dark cloud with the killing breath weapon, even though it was actually nothing but harmless shadow. To fall into that dark shadow would mean death, and that shadow advanced on them.

One more teeth-jarring draconic shriek just about did it. Tarrin flared out his wings and keened that high-pitched cry one more time, which caused the shadow-creating mist around him billow out to surround him as it emanated from his wings. The entire advancing army saw that because he was now standing atop the rampart, was easily visible for everyone in the valley for he stood upon the highest point on the valley floor. They saw it, and even those who didn't yet know about what he could do remembered his voice in their head promising the cold of death, and as they saw him and heard his shrieking keen, they were stricken by terror. Those who had witnessed the carnage of his breath weapon were gripped by total and utter panic, and that caused the army to stop its forward advance. The reserves stopped trying to come forward, and then, as the shadow dragon sucked in its breath and started forward with a fast gait, obviously moving to attack the human army, they turned and fled. Those closest to him were so driven by panic that they trampled men under them, tried to climb over the backs of those in front, even used their weapons to slaughter the men that stood between them and safety.

Tarrin thrust himself into the air even as Kang called for the Dura to charge, getting out of their way. He meant to fly over the army and attack it from behind, but he spied Shaz'Baket atop a small hill south of the valley, and instead changed course to intercept her, to kill her before she could cook up something else. He traversed that distance quickly, landed at the base of the hill and immediately started charging up it, his red eyes glowing so brightly they actually stained the rest of his face and the top of his muzzle with reddish light. But he skidded to a stop when she presented a new weapon, an ornate two-handed sword with runes that were etched into the blade, runes that glowed with a blue light, and even from that distance he could sense the power of that weapon. It was an Artifact of some kind, probably a lost relic from another world and another time, but this artifact's primary power dealt with one thing and one thing only, a power he could almost feel trying to press against him.

That sword killed dragons.

I see you've lost little of your ability to surprise, Shaz'Baket remarked with strange calm, and as you can see, neither have I. Want to try yourself against this, Tarrin Kael?

Tarrin's dragon body dissolved into flame, and then it burst forth in all directions and evaporated, leaving behind the armored form of Tarrin's natural shape. He dropped to the ground lightly, holding his burning sword low in one hand, his wings flared out behind him. "Bring it on," he hissed, his eyes exploding from within with that unholy greenish aura, which illuminated the entire visor from within.

Shaz'Baket's face took on a surprised look, but that surprise faded into resentment as Tarrin's armored feet left the ground, and he lanced forward with his sword in both paws, the blade trailing angry red fire as he charged at the Demoness. She twisted around herself quickly, coiling her body to receive his charge, presenting her five weapons and waiting for him to reach her. Her look turned to surprise when Tarrin's wings splintered into uncountable numbers of whip-like tendrils that flared out behind him like a giant fan,

promising swift and lethal retaliation if she tried to teleport out of his path and appear anywhere near him, forcing her to either meet his charge or flee.

She met his charge, much to his surprise. Her runed two handed sword locked with his burning weapon confidently, and three swords and an axe also clashed with that fiery blade as Shaz'Baket stood against his high-velocity assault, her snake body sliding across the muddy ground as four weapons pushed against one. Tarrin's helmeted head pressed down, until the dragon-snout protrusion over his head was over the Demoness' bangs, as his entire visor glowed from within with the green aura of his fury and glared down upon her with vengeful spite. That face vanished instantly, however, when the numerous whips that had once been Tarrin's wings lashed forth from behind him, trying to carve her into tiny pieces, coming at her with so many different weapons that she had absolutely no way to defend herself.

He stumbled forward when her opposing force vanished, as she teleported away, and his wings reformed into their normal state even as he turned towards the sound of her voice. *Veshak!* she shouted, thrusting one of her arms at him. The ornate steel cuff on her wrist suddenly glowed with bright white light, and a jagged bolt of lightning lashed out at him. Tarrin thrust his sword out flat first and braced the blade against his other paw just as the lightning reached him. It struck the fire of his blade and magic attacked magic, as the fire of the sword, the magic of his divine nature, turned that magical spell aside, causing the bolt to split into two and arc to either side of him.

Voshen sumdachera krethandi! Tarrin retaliated, making a single gesture with his free paw, then causing a handful of sparkling dust to appear in his paw by summoning it from the *elsewhere*. He threw that dust into the air, and it glittered in the light of the sun as it started peeking through breaks in the clouds. One of those sunbeams illuminated Tarrin for a moment, just as the dust was released, creating a dancing whirlwind of sparkling magic to surround his armored body. The whirlwind became a sphere, whose boundaries were visible for the briefest of moments before winking out, a sphere that completely covered Tarrin's armored form.

"If you want to fight, bitch, let's *fight*," he growled in a cold, ominously calm tone, raising his burning sword and pointing its tip at her.

Shaz'Baket gave him an eerie, malicious smile. *Oh, no, Were-cat, I won't fall into that trap. I know fully well you can use your divine power inside that shell.*

"That's too bad, because now the only way to kill me is to come inside. Come in and play, bitch," Tarrin hissed, taking his sword in both paws and holding it low before him, snapping out his wings in an instinctive need to display threat.

He charged forward with a mindless scream of utter hate before she could decide, and slammed into the Demoness with his sword already slashing. Shaz'Baket parried a savage series of brutally powerful chops, as the Were-cat hacked wildly at his foe, his form losing its usual fighting edge as he seemed to fighting to keep in control of himself. He left himself open with every blow, but the raw power behind them pushed the Demoness out of position and prevented her from retaliating. The weapons that intercepted his sword were slammed back, jarred aside, as she strove to match the inhuman strength the Were-cat was unleashing into every blow, using both paws on his sword to swing as hard as he possibly could. She caught his sword as he delivered a vicious overhanded chop between a sword and axe and pinioned it to the side, then tried to stab him in the exposed flank. Her serrated sword bounced off his armor, but the axe she

slammed into his lower back managed to drive through, cleaving a rend in the back of his armor. The half-moon blade that pulled away threw an arcing trail of blood along its path. The Were-cat did not even flinch, totally ignoring the injury she had inflicted as he used his size and strength to push her off his weapon, throwing her to the side, and she had to slither low and almost dive aside as he tried to chop her humanoid torso right off her snake body. He put so much into it that he spun around with the weapon, and she lunged in as she saw his exposed back, only pausing to ensure that he wasn't going to try to strike at her with his wings. But when he finished coming around, she realized too late that that glint she saw in the sunlight was the shinguard of his armor, and that his armor-shod foot was whistling through the air and screaming right towards her head. She slithered backwards just as it almost ripped her jaw off, then parried aside the flaming sword as it came around after his foot. She lunged forward and began a complicated series of slashes and thrusts with her four one-handed weapons, forcing the Were-cat into a defensive posture, then knocked his sword high with her two-handed weapon and again buried her axe in his side, again drawing blood as it pulled free of the rend in his armor, but a dozen angry spikes of solid fire erupted from the inner slope of his wing as she pulled back her axe. She managed to slide aside of most of them, but one of them managed to impale itself through the upper slope of her breast...a flesh wound, minor, but having him impale her in a sensitive area like that made it sting like all fury. Those spikes became whips, and they suddenly flailed at her like an angry displacer beast. She used her weapons and her mobility coolly and efficiently, presenting edges to those whips to cut them as they tried to lash at her, but her weapons could not shear through the solid fire. The edges *did* seem to draw blood in some way, for the Were-cat hissed and retracted those whips quickly after they had met her blades. He tried to take her head off with a wide slash, but she ducked under it, then ducked again when he tried with a backswing, but she ducked right into his foot. It slammed into her cheek and snapped her head aside, but she had the presence of mind to hook that foot with the blade of her axe and yank, dragging him off his feet, then sweep up and over him. She quickly reversed her two handed sword and tried to impale him, pin him to the ground, but the Were-cat's long and flexible leg whipped up and struck her in the wrists, preventing her from delivering that blow. Her three swords slashed several deep furrows in the armor of his legs and hips but did not penetrate, but a sudden lancing pain on her back, just below where the scales of her snake body began, which made her cry out and backpedal furiously, giving the Were-cat enough room to get up. She caught a flash of blue, and then felt the pain again in her shoulder, then whirled and found herself looking at an exceedingly tiny little female with blue skin and chitinous, multicolored wings, holding what looked like a rapier, but really looked like a sharpened steel knitting needle...stained with her black blood.

"About time we got rid of this pain in our butts, Tarrin!" the Faerie, Sarraya, said impudently, grinning at the Demoness. She looked past Shaz'Baket meaningfully, which made the Demoness reflexively teleport ten spans behind herself and a little to the right.

A good thing too, for another figure appeared, that of a small gold winged lizard. It unleashed a blast of some kind of greenish gas right where her head would have been, but then flew through its own attack and landed on the Were-cat's shoulder, hissing threatening in her direction.

The Faerie held up her rapier and waved it in circles, then pointed it at the Demoness. "Let's get 'er!" she said with exuberance, and she streaked forward with an angry buzzing of her wings.

The Were-cat rushed forward as the gold drake jumped from his shoulder and flew out wide, and the Faerie flew out wide to the opposite side. The two little ones were nothing but an annoyance, but if they could distract her at the right time, it would give the Were-cat the opportunity to take her head off...or separate her human half from her snake half, so she afforded both of them enough attention to prevent that. She parried a savage series of heavy blows from the Were-cat, then smacked the Faerie away with an elbow, unable to bring her axe to bear against her at that angle, then took a slash at the agile drake as it tried to get in her face and deliver its breath weapon at point blank range. She parried another blow, then cried out in surprise when her entire field of vision was covered in fire! The little drake had breathed fire from a distance and directed it right at her head! The fire could do her no harm, but it made her lose sight of that dangerous Were-cat for an instant...and that would be long enough for him to kill her!

She teleported again, this time twenty spans to the left, oriented so she would be facing him, and found herself looking eye to eye with a Water Elemental!

She just barely managed to parry aside two strikes at her with jagged lances of ice that were attached to the creature's amorphous form, then sheared two swords and the two-handed weapon through its liquid body. The weapons could do no harm, but the magic imbued into them *could*. The slashes caused anomalies along the creature's watery skin, jagged furrows that marked the injury those weapons had done to the integrity of its form. She tried to stab it through with her two-handed sword, but its amorphous body simply split in two and caused the weapon to pass through the void harmlessly. The Demoness backed away from the Water Elemental as the Were-cat reached her once more, and she found herself furiously working to keep his burning sword and the icy spears of the Elemental away from her, even as she kept her mind on the locations of both the Faerie and the drake. The Water Elemental was very careful not to get too close to the Were-cat, that telepathic communion they shared allowing him to guide its movements to keep it from crossing into the anti-magic shell and being disrupted. Shaz'Baket's only area of protection from them both was literally breast to breastplate with the Were-cat, keeping herself completely inside his anti-magic shell...so long as she exploited that shell, she was protected from the Elemental. Tarrin and the Demoness fought face to face for a long moment, inside the sweep of his burning sword and her runed sword, but not inside the reach of her swords and axe, or his arms and legs. The Were-cat fell back on his old style of parrying with the heavy metal of his forearm greaves, using them as shields against her swords, trying to back up to get both room to use his burning sword and to push her out of his shell and allow the Elemental to attack, but she kept as close to him as possible, used his own shell to protect herself against his Elemental.

She enacted one of her base magical powers while outside of the anti-magic shell, as the Were-cat backed off quickly to give his Elemental a chance to strike at her, creating a huge cloud of lethal, poisonous gas to form around her body. The cloud vanished as soon as it touched the anti-magic shell, but it did force the Faerie to retreat with a squeak of surprise, coughing and gagging uncontrollably as she breathed in some of the fumes before managing to get out of it. To her surprise, though, the drake charged right through

it, over the Were-cat's head, and right into her face! She cried out in pain with sharp little teeth and sharp little claws savaged her, drawing black blood, almost ripping out one eye, forcing her to teleport away one more time because she had lost sight of the Were-cat. She was right over the Faerie, who was on the ground on her hands and knees, coughing and vomiting, and she could not resist this opportunity. She raised her axe and prepared to cut that annoying bug in half, right between her wings—

—but the ground literally *swallowed* the sprite! Her form sank into the earth so quickly it made her flinch, and she quickly realized that the Earth Elemental had also reached the battle, for it had pulled the Faerie into the ground to save her from death! The Water Elemental charged at her again, but this time she had enough separation and the presence of mind to respond. She enacted another of her base powers, disrupting the matrix of magical energy of the Water Elemental's form.

The attack worked. It unravelled the magic holding the body together and holding the spirit of the creature in the material plane. With a wet splash of all the water of its form falling to the soggy earth, the Water Elemental was dispelled, and was taken out of the battle.

She paid for it. She howled in pain when a crossbow quarrel buried itself to the vanes in her left shoulder, fired from almost directly above. She looked up and saw that damned Aeradalla already halfway done reloading her deadly crossbow, a foot on the brace and pulling in a weird jerk that almost made her somersault in the air, and before she was righted she already had the next quarrel down in the crossbow.

Shaz'Baket turned her head curiously, and Tarrin himself thought he heard, just on the edges of his consciousness, a voice that dripped with a dark evil so powerful that it made Tarrin's soul shiver to listen to it. *Enough. I have seen all I need to see. Return.*

Shaz'Baket immediately vanished, reappearing some thousand spans away, still within his sight but too far away to get to her before she could vanish once again. *Consider yourself lucky, Were-cat, she sneered through her telepathic gift, one of her hands on her injured shoulder. My Master calls to me, and I obey. Had I been allowed to finish our fight, you'd be laying dead on the ground.*

Paint your picture however it makes you happiest to avoid the truth, witch, he countered. The simple fact is, if I get my paws on you I'll rip you in half, and you know it. Even without my divine power, you are no match for me, and you know it. You just don't want to fight me, because you know you'll lose. Run away, little girl, run back to your master and tell him how miserably you failed.

Oh, I haven't failed, she purred in his mind. In fact, I have succeeded in my mission, succeeded more than you will ever know. The Dura mean nothing in the grand scheme of things, and we both know it. I was here for an entirely different reason, Were-cat, and I have performed my task. We'll see one another one more time, Tarrin Kael. Know that that will be the last day that you see.

And then she vanished once more, and Tarrin sensed that she was far and away from him.

She had fled.

Tarrin lowered his sword, causing the helmet to pull back and vanish, freeing his ears and his braid. His eyes still glowed green, but that glow faded away...and he *smiled*.

Of course. She was here to assess his condition, to force him to use his divine power. That was what this entire battle was about. She had brought a vastly superior army, had

brought Demons, then had deployed them and used them specifically to try to make Tarrin use his power. Everything, even that little personal confrontation at the end, it was all just to make him reveal his power...and it had failed. Faced with one of his most hated foes, one that could incite rage in him just with her presence, he had not resorted to his divine power and blasted her to the moon with it. He had tried to fight her weapon to weapon...and he would bet his braid that they had assumed that since he *hadn't* used that power, that meant that he *couldn't*. Tarrin was never one to hold back when he was angry. He was infamous for his displays of destructive force when in a fury.

Tarrin smiled, because he had managed to get through this without showing that power. Shaz'Baket was right, this battle hadn't been about the Dura...but they had *still* won. Tarrin could have annihilated the entire army at any time using his divine power, but he did not. He held back, let the Dura fight this battle, let them see the Demons and fight them and know that they could win, and that confidence would serve them well in future conflicts.

Ariana landed lightly beside him. "Is your Elemental—"

"She's fine," he said as the Earth Elemental rose from the ground, cradling Sarraya in its clublike hands. She was still coughing, and her complexion looked a little peakid, but she gave him a weak smile. "She can't be hurt in this world in any way. The Demoness just dispelled her and sent her back to her home." Sarraya gave him a thumb up, then she flopped back down into the Elemental's hand. Fireflash landed on his shoulder and looked down at the Faerie, then nuzzled Tarrin's neck and cheek affectionately. Tarrin banished his anti-magic shell with but a thought, ending it, then chanted a soft spell, a Priest spell, and felt that strange surge and wild rush flow through him as power was called from the immortal soul within and channelled into the physical world. The spell was a simple one, one any acolyte was taught, a spell that purged venoms and toxins from the system of the recipient. His finger began to glow with a soft, gentle light, and he touched it to Sarraya's stomach lightly. Her peakid complexion faded almost immediately, and she took a deep, cleansing breath. "Your arrival was timely."

"I saw what was going on. I was just waiting for a clean shot," she said with a smile, shouldering her crossbow.

Tarrin looked towards the valley, where the battle still raged between the Dura and the forces of the One, who sought to try to salvage this disaster and use their superior numbers to win. "I guess we'd better go clean that up," Tarrin grunted.

"You like my sword, Tarrin?" Sarraya asked, recovering from her poisoning completely. She stood up in the Elemental's hand and showed it to him. "A Dwarf made it for me! Isn't it nice?"

"You enjoyed stabbing her in the butt, didn't you?" Tarrin asked her, which made Sarraya howl with laughter.

"You bet I did!" she agreed.

"Ariana, take Sarraya back to the Iron Mountain. She needs to rest a little while, and then she'll be fine. Fireflash, go with her. You did what you needed to do, little one. I'm proud of you, but I'd like you to get somewhere safe now. You can return home, my friend," he told the Earth Elemental. "I won't need your service anymore, but if you'd like to stay, you're more than welcome to do so."

It told him quite austere that it would be happy to remain.

“Alright then,” he said, causing his armor to again become liquid, moldable. It retreated away from him like water, flowing back down to his wrists, until they were again the black metal bracers everyone was used to seeing. “Let’s go finish this.”

Fireflash jumped from his shoulder as the Were-cat launched into the air, his body dissolving into flame. That flame grew, expanded, twisted and stretched until it was in the shape of a massive, mighty dragon. The flames flared brightly for a moment, and then blew away, leaving behind flesh and blood and bone. The ominous, red-eyed, night-scaled shadow dragon became visible behind that evaporating flame, all of its wounds gone, whole and well as its powerful wings thrust it through the air. It gave out that keening, high-pitched cry, a cry that generated fear in those who heard it as it soared low to the ground, wings blasting powerful gusts of air as they carried it towards the raging battle being fought in the mouth of the valley between the forces of the One and the forces of the Dura.

That battle that would end in just a few moments, just as soon as he got there and eradicated the reserves, killed any human that wasn’t so close to the front lines that he couldn’t risk using his deadly strength-draining breath weapon.

This battle was over, and the Dura had won.

This battle was over, and Tarrin had won.

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Chapter 16

The Dura celebrated their victory well into the night. The drinking and laughing and dancing and music emanated from every nook and cranny of the Iron Mountain, shaking it to its roots with the unbridled celebration. Dwarves fought hard, worked hard, and those who were visiting their mountain fortress discovered that they played just as hard. The victory party swept just about everyone up into it, and the raucous celebration extended well into the night.

Of course, everyone celebrated in their own way. Phandebrass spent that celebration studying Dwarves at play, and almost got himself brained by asking so many questions. Sarraya spent it with an absolute orgy of pranking, taking advantage of inebriated Dwarves to vent her need to be obnoxious after days of having to be quite serious. Ulger and Kang spent that celebration quietly sitting at Azakar's bedside, who had been healed by Miranda, and was now sleeping to recover his strength. Dolanna too spent her celebration quietly watching over Haley, who slept off his own healing.

Tarrin spent that celebration sleeping.

After checking in on Azakar and Haley, Tarrin extricated himself from the Dwarves, having particular trouble getting away from Darax, and retreated to his rooms, where he ensured Mist that he was well, greeted the children, then went straight to his room and went to sleep. And he would not wake up. Miranda was summoned after Mist and Kimmie tried to wake him but failed, but the Wikuni simply patted them on the shoulders and told them that it was nothing serious. He *had* just expended a tremendous amount of energy, and hadn't slept for two days, and he simply needed to rest.

The celebration extended into the next morning, and then slowly began to wind down...mainly because a majority of the Dwarves had drank themselves into unconsciousness. That heralded a quiet period in the mountain, as the Dwarves slept off their excesses, then a slow return to normalcy as the Dura picked themselves up off the floors and started cleaning up.

Camara Tal came to Tarrin's rooms at sunset the day after the battle and found an odd sight, at least to her. Kimmie was sitting at a table reading one of her spellbooks, sipping from a mug that Mist had filled from a teapot...and just seeing two people in Tarrin's room was odd, for it was usually all but a crossroads of comings and goings of Tarrin's friends and family. Camara Tal had never looked in on Tarrin's rooms and only seen just Mist and Kimmie. "Mist," Camara Tal called. "Where is everyone?"

She pointed to the door to their bedroom wordlessly. Curious, Camara Tal brushed her long black hair from her face, stepped around the table and to the door, then opened it.

Inside, she found a sight that only someone who was close to the Were-cats wouldn't find strange. Tarrin was asleep, laying on his side and stretched out on a bed that had obviously been magically stretched for him and Mist. Zyri and Jal were laying on the

bed with him. Jal awake down by Tarrin's feet, gently yet carefully playing with the shaggy fetlock on Tarrin's ankle, while Zyri slept underneath the Were-cat's massive paw, draped protectively over the young girl who was using his other arm as a pillow, the paw of which dangled over the bed. Tarrin's wings were still out, and one was laying over his side like a blanket. Forge and Ember were curled up with each other and sleeping on the floor immediately under Tarrin's arm, and Fireflash dozed atop the wing draped over Tarrin's side.

Camara smiled in spite of herself. When he was asleep, when he allowed his features to soften, Tarrin Kael was one strikingly handsome fellow, Were-cat or not. When he was asleep, he looked very much like what he was, a young man who had so many burdens placed upon him that sleep was his only refuge from his worries. When he was asleep, he didn't look anything like what most people imagined him to be, for he looked quite gentle, and cute in an obnoxious, fuzzy, cat-like kind of way.

"Well, I see the kids are taking advantage," she chuckled. Jal looked up at her, and he blushed a little before waving. "Has he woke up at all?"

Mist came up beside her, shaking her head. "I think the battle really wore him out."

"I hope you didn't mind staying behind to babysit," the Amazon said.

"Someone needed to stay here, and I didn't mind," she assured her. "I was here to protect our cubs. Neither of us wanted them left alone."

"*Our* cubs?" Camara asked, then she laughed quietly, so as not to wake Tarrin. "I hope you can tolerate having two humans running around, Mist."

"They're growing on me, Camara," Mist admitted. "They need someone in their lives right now, and I won't mind being one of the things they need. I'll have to learn how humans bring up cubs, though. I won't raise them in our culture and then set them loose in the human world. It's not seemly."

"I'm sure Tarrin knows all about that."

"I'm counting on that," she agreed. "Sometimes I forget he wasn't born Were."

"I think we all do. They're going to love Tarrin's house," she chuckled.

"I'm worried more about how well they get along with the other parts of the family. I still haven't quite figured out how we're going to introduce them to Sapphire."

Camara Tal put her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound of her laughter. "Neme's breastplate, I forgot about that. Well, I'm sure as long as you go slow, they'll adapt. After all, they got used to us."

"Children adapt faster than adults," Kimmie noted from the table. "Did you come for your lesson, Camara?"

"Yah, but it seems it's cancelled today," she grunted, looking at Tarrin. "He's in no condition to learn right now."

"What have you been teaching him?"

"Priest magic," she answered. "*All* of it, including those spells he can't cast. He specifically asked for those."

"Why does he want to learn it? Has he told you?"

"He's told me what he wanted me to hear, yeah," she grunted. "He said it's so he can recognize anything that this One might cast and have an edge. I think he has another reason, though."

"What?"

"I'm not sure yet," she answered.

"He's been studying every spell in his spellbook too," Kimmie related to them.

"Yah, and that has something to do with what he's learning from me," Camara Tal said with a frown. "Sometimes during our lessons, he starts spouting that gibberish you Wizards use to cast spells."

Mist snorted. "He's trying to learn the *languages*, fool females," she said gratingly. "He told me that a while ago. He's trying to understand the *languages* of those two magicks."

"Is he nuts?" Camara Tal exclaimed in a harsh whisper. "No mortal can comprehend the language of the gods!"

"And if he thinks he can make any sense out of the language of magic, I'm afraid I didn't teach him half as well as I thought I did," Kimmie said with pursed lips. "The language makes absolutely no sense at all. Wizards have literally driven themselves insane trying to comprehend it."

"Be that as it may, he's still trying," Mist told them.

"Why?" both asked.

"He thinks that the closer he is to understanding the languages, the more power and control he'll have over the *magic*. I didn't really understand his explanation, it was way over my head. My mate is much smarter than me," she admitted honestly.

"Actually, that's not a bad approach," Kimmie speculated after a moment of thought. "In a way, he's right. If you can understand the language of magic, maybe that would give you more definite control of the power. After all, the words *shape* the magic. The more control you have over the words, the more control you have over the magic."

"I don't understand, but then again, I've never much been interested in it," Mist said.

"Language is a metaphor," Miranda said from behind them. They turned to look at her as she stepped into Tarrin and Mist's apartment. "It's a metaphor for the way one thinks. In a way, it's a metaphor for who a people are. The language of the gods, and the language of magic, they're just metaphors for what the magic *is*, and who the gods *are*. Understand the metaphor, and you understand the meaning behind it."

"But what difference does that make?" Mist asked.

"Knowledge is *power*, my friend," Miranda told her. "Probably the greatest power that we puny mortals could ever wield."

"Metaphor. I hear that word over and over. Tarrin once told me that his wings were just a metaphor. That, in a way, they didn't really exist."

"They are. They're an expression of something beyond this world trapped within the confines of this world. Tarrin deals with that power by using metaphor to comprehend it. What he thinks of as, say, moving his wing, it's just a metaphor for what he's *really* doing. It's something that even he doesn't completely understand. After all, he *can't*. His mind is mortal, and it's controlling power it can't comprehend."

"If it's beyond our understanding, how do you understand it?" Kimmie asked.

"I don't, really," Miranda said with a wink and a grin. "My mother explained it to me as best she could, but remember, it's like a parent trying to explain something complicated to a toddler. No matter how patient they are, you're just trying to explain something that the child can't understand. So she dumbs it down for me." She motioned at Tarrin. "Tarrin has the same problem. He's trying to touch on power beyond his comprehension. He's managed to learn a few tricks, but he's capable of much, *much* more. He could have destroyed the entire invading army by himself, you know. *Easily*."

Locked in that unassuming, furry body is the power to destroy the world,” she said with a sigh. “And that’s why the Elder Gods refuse to let him come home.”

“Foolishness,” Mist snorted. “After everything he did, they should know to trust him by now.”

“But they don’t *know* him, Mist,” Miranda said seriously. “Only Niami does. The Elder Gods are like the Hierarchs, in a way. They’re aware of him, but they refuse to acknowledge him, because doing so is admitting that he’s there. All they see is his violent demeanor and the glaring fact that he *has* killed a god, and is *capable* of killing a god. They can’t see anything past that.”

“Then that’s what needs to be fixed,” Mist stated.

“No, Mist, what needs to be fixed isn’t their understanding of him, what needs to be fixed is their *fear* of him. They understand him well enough, they’re just so afraid of him that they won’t look at anything else.”

“And what can we do about that?”

“Nothing,” Camara Tal answered, looking at Tarrin. “There’s nothing we can do. The only one who can fix that is Tarrin.”

He knew they were there, but he couldn’t hear them.

Tarrin drifted in a dark void of dreamless sleep, but in other ways, he was completely aware and alert. He was aware and alert because in his unconscious state, he was much more susceptible to hearing the voices of the other gods of Pyrosia. They had waited a long time for him to reach this state, to be able to speak to him without shouting, and even then only be heard as whispers, as murmurs. When the mortal mind was asleep, when it shunted aside mortal conceptions and perceptions, it was more in tune with that world within a world which was the world in which the immortals moved, a world that the mortal mind could not comprehend, could not see, but came closer to touching when asleep. In his sleep, he became closer to the voices of the gods, and they were able to communicate clearly and lucidly with him.

In his sleep, he was able to talk to them, to explain what was going to happen. They did not like it. They thought that there had to be another way, but in the end, they couldn’t argue with the results of his intended plan. Even if he failed, the Demon Lord would be dealt with, one way or the other.

But there were other matters, ones that troubled him, and one of them lay under his paw. Asleep, more in tune with his own power, his touch on Zyri allowed him to sense that power that was inside of her, that power he sensed the very first time they touched, that power that he couldn’t understand. Well, he understood it now.

It was the touch of *Niami*.

Zyri was a *Sorcerer*.

The why of it was pretty straightforward, he realized after thinking it over. There were Sorcerers here long ago, and they managed to live for several hundred years. It was only expected that they would reproduce, and that introduced the hereditary power of Sorcery into the humans of Pyrosia. But, since the power that fueled that ability did not exist in this world, it had no expression...it remained dormant. Zyri could trace her lineage back to one of those *katzh-dashi* who had come to this world with the Dwarves, and that power had been passed down from parent to child for thousands of years, a hidden, sleeping power that had no way of expressing itself, so it continued to sleep.

No...it didn't. It was so clear to him now, and it struck him like someone hitting him in the head with a rock. That power didn't sleep...it *adapted*.

That was why he could feel it when they used their power. *That* was why it seemed so hauntingly familiar.

The powers of the Elementalists had their roots in *Sorcery*.

It was so clear to him now. The power of the Elementalist reached directly into the Elemental Planes...but that was something that Sorcery could also do. Sorcery was, by its very nature, *elemental* magic. Its spheres dealt with the four elements of nature and the three elements of intelligence. Earth, air, fire and water. The mind, the power of the gods, and the power which joined them all together. *Da'shar* could reach directly into the Elemental Planes and call forth the spirit of a denizen there, summon it to this world to aid him in a task. What the Elementalists did was somehow use their natural aptitude to reach directly back into that plane and draw forth its might to fuel their magic. It was *not* Sorcery, but Sorcery was the *root* of that power. The power had been changed by this world, had been changed by the marching of the years, by the steady evolution that came about as a race reproduced over time. Just as the Ungardt had become progressively taller and taller with each generation, the power of Sorcery changed from generation to generation as it continued to be passed down, but found no way to express itself. The touch of Niami was a vibrant thing, seeking release, seeking a way to make itself known. That was why Sorcerers had to be trained, because that power always found a way to show itself among those with it, and once released, it could never be bottled up again. The touch of Niami had adapted to the lack of her presence, had adapted to this world and had learned to reach directly into a place where it knew there to be power, a place it had the *power* to touch.

The Elementalists were the *descendants* of the Sorcerers, with different powers, but powers based upon the Sorcery that was brought into this world so many years ago. Similar enough for a Sorcerer to sense its use.

Zyri and Jal...brother and sister, one was a remnant of a lost people, the other the product of that people's desire to continue to live. They were the symbols of that power, the symbol of everything this world was, what it had been, and what it could be once again.

It was that feeling of a guiding force again, he was sure of it. Since he arrived, he'd had the feeling that he was being pushed, almost herded, led down a specific path by forces beyond his control and understanding. Zyri's secret played right into that suspicion...here she was, a Sorcerer, seemingly deliberately placed into his path as if he had been meant to find her, and then to take her in and take care of her. If not for the fact that the future was not set, he would almost be tempted to say that it was fate, or destiny...but those things didn't exist. The only future there was was the future of *possibility*, not of *certainty*. The actions of mortals were dynamic and changing, and those free-willed decisions shaped the future around them, causing it to change. Kikkalli was the only god on Sennadar who had the ability to look into those many possibilities and predict possible outcomes, in a way predicting the future, but even her readings were often incorrect because of the fickle nature of the mortals populating the world.

Was it *him*? He hadn't sensed the Sorcery within his own children, and now he hadn't understood the truth of Zyri until now. After all, he'd be *blind* not to see it, now that he was looking at her. Her power was *incredible*. She wasn't as strong as him, or

Jasana, but she would be a match for any Sorcerer on Sennadar. It was recessed, completely dormant inside of her...she had never come close to touching it, and from the feel of it, she was not ready. Was his inability to realize Zyri's power more about him than it was about her?

It was certainly possible.

But that was a matter for another time, and for another person. When Zyri went to Sennadar, Niami could sort her out. He would be too busy here to be able to deal with it.

He drifted back up into the layers of mortal consciousness, and then opened his eyes. Doing so reminded him that tomorrow, they would all be gone, back to Sennadar, and there would only be him and Dolanna left. This would be his last day with them—evening, actually—and he had to make it count. There were so many things left for him to do before they were gone, several loose ends to tie up, affairs to put into order before his friends and family went home...a home he didn't think he'd ever see again. Even if he survived this, the Elder Gods would not allow him to return...and he wasn't sure he was willing to attempt it, put his children in danger because of *him*.

Come what may, he knew deep within himself, he knew he would never see his home again. And as much as it pained him to admit it, it was the way things were, and there was nothing to be done about it.

He looked down on Zyrilen—Zyri, only her mother called her by her full name—and saw the truth of her for the first time. Behind that dark hair, that slim, slender face, that gangly frame that was halfway between girl and woman, there was...*power*. She was sleeping, and her small face, showing hints of the beauty she would possess when she matured, was reposed and peaceful. Gone was that ever-pursed little mouth, always worried over this or that, and the drawn brows as her clever little mind took everything in and analyzed it, leaving behind a young lady that was a closed flower, just waiting to open and display her beauty to the world.

She opened her eyes. Dark eyes looked into his own without expression, looked deeply into them, and within those brown eyes he saw everything that she was. He saw her determination to protect her brother, her devotion to him and Mist, who she now saw as her parents, her loyalty to family—even Telven, who had betrayed her—and her desperate need to be loved and protected, even as she tried to provide that same love and protection to her brother. She was a child trying to act the adult, but craving the very thing she tried to provide. He saw an intelligence in her that was exceptional, and a desire to make him and Mist proud of her.

And tomorrow...she would be gone. Gone to Sennadar, gone away from this place, gone to safety and under the watchful eyes of Niami.

Gone from him.

And she would be better off for it. What was coming...he wanted her far away from it.

She looked into his eyes, and spoke in a soft whisper that one word that never failed to please him most, the one word that defined him more than any other; more than Sorcerer, more than *sui'kun*, more than Were-cat, more than *Mi'Shara*...even more than *demigod*.

"Father."

With the gentlest of smiles, he took his massive paw from her, and tapped her lightly on the nose with his finger, which made her giggle reflexively as she flinched away.

“Tarrin,” Mist called as she moved into the room. She sat down on the edge of the bed and took his paw in hers as he sat up, dislodging both Zyri and Jal, as Fireflash deftly climbed up to his shoulder as he moved, then nuzzled his neck fondly after he was upright. He shivered his wings and pushed them back, then snaked his tail out from under him and hooked Jal with it, pulling him up against his side as Zyri hugged his waist on the other side. “Are you alright? You were asleep for a long time.”

“I’m fine,” he answered evenly, looking past her to Kimmie, Camara Tal, and Miranda. “How are Haley and Zak?”

“Haley’s up and about, but Zak’s not going anywhere soon,” Miranda answered. “He’s confined to his bed until we leave, and even then he won’t be out of it for long.”

“Did you heal him?”

She nodded. “That wound was mortal, Tarrin, and even my healing can only go so far. He’ll be weak as a kitten for at least a week. Five days,” she corrected quickly, with a cheeky grin. “When it’s time for us to go, we’ll drag him out of bed and help him through the gate, and then have a Sorcerer immediately Teleport him back to the Tower and tuck him safely back in bed.”

He nodded, stroking Fireflash’s scales as the drake continued to nuzzle him. “I have to contact Niami. Miranda, you have to get your mother’s attention. I have to talk to her.”

“Tomorrow at sunset, we leave,” Miranda told him. “I already managed to get in contact with my mother, and she relayed the messages. The Elder Gods will lower the barriers stopping Phandebrass from using his gate spell at sunset tomorrow, and they’ll only be down for five minutes. Phandebrass must cast the spell as soon as the sun’s lower edge touches the western hills, and everyone has to be through the gate before it disappears behind the horizon.”

“Well, it seems I don’t have to talk to her after all,” he chuckled. “Does he have the diamonds he needs?”

Miranda nodded. “Darax found suitable components, and Phandebrass has the spell memorized. We’re ready.”

He looked down at Jal’s beaming face, and patted his back fondly. “Alright cubs, I need to get up now. I have quite a few things to do, and time’s running short. You two need to go to bed.”

“Are you alright, Father?” Zyri asked.

“I’m fine, little bit.”

“Why were you asleep for so long?”

He snorted. “I was having something of an argument with the gods of this world,” he answered her. “When I’m asleep, they can speak clearly to me. I was asleep for so long because there were many things that we had to work out about what’s going to happen, and warn them about the possibilities if things go wrong. They’ll be ready for it.”

“That’s a conversation I’d love to have been able to overhear,” Kimmie chuckled. “What were they arguing about?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Kimmie,” Tarrin said, looking her directly in the eyes. “Nothing that really concerns me either.” He got up, produced his golden charm from the *elsewhere*, and deliberately affixed it to the back of his amulet. “Bed. Now,” he ordered the children, pointing towards the door. “I won’t be here tonight, Mist. I have things to do.”

“What do you need to do, my mate? We might be able to help,” she offered as she beckoned to the children.

“Nobody can help me with this,” he told her. He motioned to the fireplace, and caused a fire to blossom into being within it, which burned happily without fuel. He closed his paw around empty air, and his sword appeared in his paw, which immediately erupted into flame along its blade. His wings flared with light, as if responding to the fire of the blade, the flicks of flame that looked so much like feathers began to writhe and shimmer within his wings.

“What are you doing?” Kimmie asked.

“Preparing for the worst,” he answered cryptically.

“You’re not going to tell us, are you?” Camara Tal said accusingly.

“No.” He gestured to the fire, which caused it to expand in size and grow hotter, until the flames were disappearing into the chimney. “I’ll be back around noon tomorrow. Just get everyone ready to go, and I’ll see you then.” He gave them a glance, his eyes full of both concern and fear, and then he stepped into the fire in the grate and vanished. The fire quickly dwindled down to a weak ball of flame that hovered over the grate, but did not disappear.

“I, um, hope he realizes he just took Fireflash with him,” Kimmie said hesitantly. “Well, that was abrupt,” she announced in a more stable voice, clapping her paws, which made Forge and Ember look up at her. “Now what do we do?”

“We wait,” Mist shrugged. “Tarrin knows what he’s doing. We just wait for him to come home. Alright, cubs, off to bed with you.”

“If Father won’t be home til noon tomorrow, he won’t have time to say goodbye to everyone,” Zyri fretted.

“Something tells me he prefers it that way,” Miranda said quietly, looking at the flames in the fireplace, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and shaking her head, the large poof of hair that perpetually hung over her eyes bobbing with the motion.

“What troubles you, Miranda?” Camara Tal asked as Mist herded the children back into the common room.

“I, I don’t know,” she said. “I think I missed something here, but I’m not sure what it was. Something important.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something happened in this room, something *important*,” she said. “I can almost feel the last vestiges of it fading away. And I don’t know what it was, or what it means.” She blew out her breath. “And in my line of work, that could get me *so* fired.”

“By who?” Camara Tal chuckled. “Kerri, or your mother?”

“Both,” she answered with a wink. “I’ll have to think about it. Maybe it’ll come to me later tonight.”

“I’ll get you drunk. That always helps me remember.”

“Ah, no,” Miranda protested with a chuckle. “You might just be trying to get me drunk to have your way with me.”

“Pff, you’re too scrawny to be much fun,” Camara Tal retorted, which made Miranda laugh.

They all waited for noon like it was the stike of the bell that would herald the end of the world.

An hour before noon, they all started gathering in the apartment that Darax had set aside for Tarrin and Mist, even Azakar, who had convinced Miranda to allow him to rest on one of the couches in the common room. They talked and laughed as more and more people joined them, including some of the lesser known friends of Tarrin. They also took that rare opportunity to get to know Zyri and Jal, who sat near Mist as if she would protect them from all the attention. Zyri handled it better than Jal, who was an extremely shy child, who spent most of that time all but hiding under Mist's protective paw.

A half hour before noon, Darax arrived and politely included himself in the gathering, sporting bandages here and there and a nasty cut on his cheek that would turn into a rather striking scar. He showed no aftereffects of all the ale he'd drank the night before, his eyes bright and his demeanor animated, almost excited like a child. Darax's stand at the center of the line had been a suitably noble and heroic thing for a Dwarf to do, and had earned him a solid spot among the ranks of the most courageous of the Duran kings. There would be a statue of Dain Darax of the Dura out in the city one day, that was guaranteed.

At precisely noon, the fire in the grate swelled, and then roared to life. A silhouette appeared, wavering and indistinct in the flames, but it became quite apparent who it was after mere seconds. Fireflash burst from the fire first, lancing into the room and almost crashing into Binter's head, causing him to swerve around and circle the room before landing on Zyri's shoulder. The drake elicited quite a few looks and gasps, for his scales were awry, there was dirt and smoke and blood all over him, and he'd obviously been injured at some point. But he seemed quite energetic, almost bubbly, cooing and nuzzling Zyri's neck with wild abandon.

"What in the furies happened to you, Fireflash?" Mist demanded, but her tone was half-hearted, for every eye was locked on that image within the fire.

Tarrin Kael stepped out of the fire slowly, and from the appearance of his left foot, it was apparent that he was an absolute mess. As more and more of him became visible, it was more and more obvious. Blood, mud, dirt, smoke, ash, and things best left unidentified coated him like batter, and his clothes were shredded and all but hanging to him by bare threads.

"Tarrin!" Mist called in alarm. "What did you do?"

Tarrin gave her a penetrating look, his right arm still in the fire. "I had a loose end to attend to," he stated flatly, then he yanked his right arm out of the fire.

Along with it, trembling with terror, was a very clean, very unharmed, and very terrified Telven.

The boy crashed to the floor in front of the Were-cat and immediately started whimpering, crawling away from him. "*Telven!*" Zyri gasped, then she bolted from the couch and slid on her knees up to him, putting her hands on him, then hugging him fiercely. "Father, what did you do to him?" she asked him, looking over his shoulder and at Tarrin.

"Tell her, Telven," Tarrin said in a steely tone.

"He—he—he—he burned up Dengal!" Telven stammered in horror.

"Dengal?" Dolanna asked.

"What *used* to be Dengal," Tarrin growled. "Tell her. Tell her what they were about to do before I stopped them."

"They accused me of being a witch," he said in a tiny voice.

“Accused?” Tarrin said in a dangerous tone. “It turns out your brother here *is* a witch, little bit. He’s an Earth Adept.”

“I am *not* a witch!” he screamed suddenly, almost hysterically. “I am not Defiled! I walk the path of the light! All praise the One!”

Telven was about to say more, but Zyri slapped him across the mouth. She was *not* gentle. Telven’s head snapped to the side, and he looked at his sister in shock, as if she had just grown another head.

“Don’t even *say* that around me, Telven!” she said angrily. “Do you know what the One has done? Do you have any idea what kind of evil he’s brought into the world? It’s all been a lie, Telven! Everything we’ve been told is a lie! If there’s anything evil or Defiled on this world, it’s *the One*!”

“Dengal?” Dolanna asked Tarrin, glancing at the children.

“Gone,” he answered in a tightly controlled voice. “I burned it to the ground. Little bit, take him to Shara,” Tarrin told Zyri. “She’s an Earth Adept as well. She can *force* him to see the truth.”

“I am *not* a witch!” Telven screamed.

Zyri hit him again...but *hit* was a woeful understatement for what she did to him. Telven’s head rocked as Zyri flat-out punched him dead in the jaw, knocking him onto his back. “They *ARE NOT WITCHES*!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Don’t you *dare* call our father a witch ever again!”

“No, Zyri,” Tarrin said in a low voice, but a voice those who knew him knew very well...it was the voice of a Were-cat on the verge of an explosion. “I didn’t save Telven to bring him back. It’s all I can do right now not to rip his head off,” he said, holding up a trembling paw. “I saved him because I knew it would cause you pain if he died, and for no other reason. Shara and Lorak can find a place for him, as long as it’s nowhere near *me*.”

“I—Father, you don’t mean that, do you?”

“He means it, cub,” Mist said grimly. “I wouldn’t have that lying backstabber under my roof either. He’ll find no place with me.”

“Are we taking him back to Sennadar?” Kimmie asked hesitantly.

Tarrin considered it, fixing a baleful gaze on the dazed boy. “He can come.”

“Well, if it’s a place the boy needs, I know just where to put him,” Ulger spoke up. “The Academy’s always looking for scullery boys and stablehands. Maybe some good honest work will make him see the error of his ways. And of course, maybe some exposure to the truth will change his mindset.”

“And he’d be where Zyri could at least visit,” Azakar added. “Since she’ll be at your house, there’d be a way for her to get back and forth.”

“You wouldn’t object to that, would you Tarrin?” Ulger asked. “After all, you outrank me.”

“Actually, I think that’s a good idea,” Tarrin said with a nod. “Darvon can pound some sense into his thick skull, or kill him trying.”

“Who will train his abilities?” Dolanna asked.

“We could ask Shara,” Haley proposed.

“She’d probably accept, she would,” Phandebrass said. “I say, she’s talked a great deal about seeing Sennadar since I started describing it to her, she has.”

“Zyri, take him to Shara,” Tarrin commanded, pointing at Telven. “And tell her that she’d better pack. She *will* be going to Sennadar.”

“Lorak’s gonna object,” Ulger chuckled.

“He won’t object after I gut him,” Tarrin said in a tight voice. “All of you need to get ready to go,” he ordered.

“We’re ready already,” Camara Tal snorted. “We’re just waiting, and of course, we can’t leave without having some time with you.”

“Let me get cleaned up, and we’ll have the rest of the afternoon,” he told her.

Sometimes, the wild swings of mood in Tarrin surprised even those who knew him best.

After being one step from killing Telven in his apartment, it was as if he’d switched off all that aggression immediately after the boy was removed from the room, and he became warm and intimate. Miranda healed both him and Fireflash of their injuries, and after cleaning himself up and changing into new clothes, he did indeed give them all of his time and attention. Despite the shortness of time, he found a way to spend private, quiet time with every single one of them, even Kang. During those visits, he said his farewells, listened to stories, laughed, drank, joked, and reminisced. Every one of them that came away from this goodbye visit had a strange feeling, and they talked about it among themselves.

It was a strange feeling. They knew Tarrin well, they knew he was saying goodbye. All of them knew that he thought that what he had planned was probably going to kill him, and that he was saying goodbye in a way that made it feel like it was the last...just in case it was. But there was more to it. There was a sense of, *finality* in his tone, his words. It unsettled them, more than a little bit, because there seemed to be a sense about him that he held no hope of coming out of this alive, and what was more, that *he did not care*.

And that was the paradox. They saw him with Mist, with the children, and they saw a Were-cat who was very concerned for his future, yet he talked as if this would be the last day he would ever see them. He talked of things he had planned for the house, about how he wanted to breach the idea to open the Tower up to other orders to Jenna and the Goddess, that it might be a good idea to start a university dedicated to the study of Arcane magic on the Tower grounds, that having Wizards on the grounds solidly allied to the *katzh-dashi* would be a very, very wise thing to do. He talked of expanding Kimmie’s tower at his house, and of building a new barn on the north side of the meadow...then they would remember how he spoke, as if he would never see those places again. It confused them, made them unsettled, but they would not show that to Tarrin. Not now, not today, not during his last hours with them before they returned to Sennadar, and he and Dolanna remained behind to undertake their most dangerous task.

But it wasn’t all happiness and joy, it was also business. Tarrin sat in as Bragg and Kang went over the maps with Darax and Lorak, as they explained what they had in mind. They would march out of the Iron Mountain and head south, then meet the Elaran armies south of the mountains, on the plains north of Pyros. From there they would spread out in a two-pronged invasion designed to overtake and capture every large human city on Pyrosia. The Elara would go south and east, the Dura would go west and southwest. If Tarrin’s plan worked and the vast majority of the Demons were trapped in

the ruins of Pyros, they would only be facing human opposition and what few Demons might be among them. If Tarrin failed, then the Dura would abandon the Iron Mountain and take refuge on Elara, where they would join forces and defend the inhabited moon's gate for as long as they could, as the sages searched for a way to block the gate.

Either way, Tarrin and Dolanna would be trapped in Pyros, for it was their task to contain the Demons.

Dinner that evening was both joyous and somber, an odd mix of emotions for everyone involved. They had accepted Darax's invitation to a dinner in the main hall, as a farewell to his leaving people and a chance for him to say goodbye in his own way, and Tarrin accepted. The Dura picked to go to Sennadar and wait out the coming war were not happy to be leaving, and that put an unfriendly pall on the affair, but there was an excitement about the chance to visit the place where their people had come from, and they'd promised to seek out the lore of their ancestors and bring back as much information as they could. For this reason, many of the Dwarven sages and several Priests were also going, turning the excursion into a mission of recovering history as much as it was a way to sustain the Dwarven race in case of a cataclysm.

Tarrin sat at Darax's table throughout dinner and said very little, just kept his chin on his paws and stared into space, eating very little, with a thoughtful look on his face. He listened without comment as Darax retold the tale of the battle outside the Iron Mountain, as the young king rather modestly played down his own contributions as he lavished praise upon praise on the Shadows, Phandebrass, and Dolanna and Kimmie, and recited the tale as if the spirit of Dumathoin had risen from the depths under the mountain and imparted his strength into the Dura and their allies...and perhaps he was right. Darax had shown almost legendary courage and fortitude by holding the center of the line, resisting the push of the Demons like a rock that parted the sea's crashing waves. Maybe Dumathoin did grant the king of the Dura a little extra courage for that battle. There were some things that gods did without the knowledge of their mortal followers...and sometimes that was for the best.

After dinner, Tarrin found himself with a moment of quiet contemplation, standing on a balcony in Darax's palace that looked down over a bustling with the departing Dwarves, as they finalized their plans and those who were leaving went to go move their things outside, to where Phandebrass would create the gate that would send them to Sennadar. He envied them for the journey ahead of them, one that would begin with fear and anxiety, but would end in excitement as they traced the lineage of their ancestors and discovered the truth about the Duthak, about their glorious and rich history, and be amazed at how the world to which they were going would respect and honor them...the long-lost descendants of the Duthak, the race that saved the world by sacrificing themselves.

As she usually managed to do, Camara Tal found him. Him and the High Priestess of Neme had always had a rather complicated relationship. There was a closeness between them that existed on a different level than with his other friends. She understood him in ways that most others did not, not even his mates, understanding him on a level more akin to his sisters than his friends. Yet she kept a certain distance away from him, giving nothing more than what he wished from her, displaying a patience and understanding that came with the wisdom of being a god's highest ranking Priestess. Neme had chosen well when she called Camara Tal to her order, for the Amazon's greatest trait wasn't her skill,

or her intelligence, it was her *compassion*. Camara Tal was a nurturer, who made everyone around her live up to their utmost potential. It just wasn't very evident within her, hidden behind a gruff personality and rather arrogant social customs.

She leaned on the rail beside him, then nudged him with her hip. "Heavy thoughts?" she asked.

He leaned on the rail with her, glancing at her. "You know it," he answered. "Looking forward to going home?"

"I won't be there long," she answered. "Kang is raising an army to come back here and help the Dura and Elara. I'm going to be in it."

"Ah, yes, I remember him mentioning that. I'm not sure he's thought it through. For instance, how is he getting back home?"

"Miranda."

"I don't think she can move an entire army into the Astral, Camara. And did anyone ask her if she wanted to return?"

"He'll figure it out," she chuckled. "Kang doesn't want to leave things to Darax. He wants to help. I guess in his heart, he's a big softie." She sighed. "They have no idea, do they?"

"Who?"

She looked at him.

"Oh. No, I suppose not. There's no real way to tell them, Camara," he sighed, looking at his paws. "There was a time not long ago when I thought that just because I was different, that I could make it not matter. That I could go on living my life and ignore what I was, and that if I ignored it well enough, then everyone else would too, and they'd leave it be. But I was wrong. Niami is risking the wrath of her parents and the other Elder Gods for what she's doing, not to mention the damage she's doing to the orders of the Younger Gods. All of that chaos, and all because of *me*, and it's happening no matter how much I deny the truth."

"And what truth is that, Tarrin?"

"That I don't belong here," he answered tonelessly. "I don't belong anywhere anymore, Camara. I can't pretend to be something I'm not, but I can't be more than what I am. I'm stuck in the middle between two different worlds, and neither of them want me."

"I don't have any answer for that, old friend," she answered. "All I can really say is that you've never been one to just accept things. There's a place for you, Tarrin...maybe it's just a matter of *making* it."

"Are you suggesting I take on Ayise head to head?" he asked slyly.

"Even an Elder Goddess can be a stubborn ass," she said bluntly, which made Tarrin burst out laughing.

"If she heard you say that, she might strike you dead," he told her.

"Possibly, but sometimes that's what it takes to make someone see the truth." She looked up. "I hate seeing that ceiling. I want to see the stars, even if they are unfamiliar."

"You will soon," he told her. "How much more time til sunset? Three hours?"

"About that," she answered. "So...how long do you think it's going to take?"

"For what?"

“Until the Dura and Elara conquer Pyrosia, and they’re ready for you and Dolanna to release the Demons.”

“Knowing Bragg, not long,” he answered. “The forces of the One will be disorganized, and they’ll be easy marks. Bragg will trample them on his march across the continent.”

“That’s good. I must admit, the idea of you and Dolanna trapped inside with the Demons doesn’t sit well with me. In fact, it worries me.”

“We’ll be fine,” he said quietly. “The Demons won’t be able to touch us.”

“But it’s a *prison*,” she said grimly. “And I hate the idea of you and her being trapped inside.”

“It won’t be long, Camara.”

“Well, the idea that you’re not going to mind being imprisoned concerns me, Tarrin.”

“It bothers me a great deal,” he answered. “But it’s what has to be done. And it won’t be for long.”

“You seem sure of that.”

“I’m positive.”

“Ah. So, there’s the plan, then there’s *your* plan,” she said with a sly smile.

“And you expected something less?”

“No, I suppose not,” she chuckled.

“Their plan will work out quite well with mine,” he told her. “But if my plan works, they’ll have it easy.”

“Why, what will happen?”

“Something that won’t concern you,” he said crisply.

She chuckled. “Alright, alright, I get it.”

He was quiet a long moment. “There’s something I want you to do, Camara.”

“Anything, Tarrin.”

“When you get back home, have my sister get in contact with Spyder, and arrange a meeting. When you see her, I want you to give her this.”

Tarrin handed Camara Tal a tiny shard of crystal, the size of a child’s finger. Within it was a flaw, two tiny cracks that ran almost the entire length of the crystal’s octohedral form, like two pyramids stacked base to base.

“What is this, Tarrin?” she asked.

“Spyder knows what it is, and she’ll know what to do with it. It’s important, Camara. You have to get this to Spyder as quickly as you possibly can.”

“Why not have someone else do it?”

“Because they will take you seriously,” he answered. “If you say it’s important, then it’s important. You have to get that to Spyder within a day of getting back, Camara. My life, and Dolanna’s life, might depend on it.”

“I—*ohhhhhhhhhhh*,” Camara Tal breathed. “I think I get it. But you wouldn’t say if I did.”

He shook his head. “You never know who might hear when you’re talking,” he said pointedly. “And that might screw things up.”

“I understand,” she said, carefully putting the crystal in a small pouch on her belt. “I’ll have this in Spyder’s hand as fast as I can get it there, Tarrin. Trust me.”

“Trust in you is never misplaced, Camara,” he smiled, patting her hand with his massive paw. “By the way, don’t show that to anyone but Spyder.”

"I don't see why, but I'll do as you ask," she assured him.

"I have my reasons," he told her, glancing back into the room. "Oh yes, you'd better fireproof your room."

"Why?"

"Ember's going to be a mother," he said. "I'm sure that her pups aren't going to have much control of their breath weapons when they're born."

"What? *Forge!*" she growled accusingly, turning to stalk back into the room, but Tarrin put a paw on her arm.

"Stop posturing," he snorted. "Things will be just fine, and you know it. Besides, you expected to bring a male and a female together and not have something happen?"

She gave him a look, then laughed. "What in the furies am I going to do with a pack of Hellhounds?"

"Camara, they will line up for a chance to take one of your puppies," he told her evenly. "Everybody wants a Hellhound."

"Well, yes, but they're a big responsibility, so I'll have to pick carefully," she mentioned.

"That or we find a wild one, and give it to someone you don't like," he suggested.

Camara Tal gave him a surprised look, then burst out laughing. "That's an evil idea, Tarrin. I like it." She offered out her elbow to him meaningfully.

He put his paw in the crook of her arm just as an Amazon man would. "Just living up to my reputation, Camara dear," he said as she escorted him off the balcony.

The last two hours of his time with his family and friends was spent with the one person who deserved that company more than any other, Mist. They spent only a short amount of time in bed, sharing intimacy in a way that he couldn't with Jesmind and Kimmie, proving to him again that Mist was the most compatible with him of his three mates. She didn't make incessant demands. She didn't try to talk his ear off. She wasn't pushy or demanding. She knew that they had a short time, so she simply enjoyed that time they had without argument or complaint.

After their private intimacy, they opened their doors to those who were truly part of Tarrin's family. Kimmie, Zyri, and Jal returned to the apartment, and he shared a last quiet dinner with them, away from the others. It was a quiet dinner, but there was an underlying tension that made things not quite as pleasant as he'd have hoped.

"Umm, father," Zyri began. "Am I going to take care of Fireflash while you're here?"

Tarrin reached up and patted his drake fondly, who was on his shoulder. "Fireflash will be staying with me," he answered her calmly, to which the drake nodded. "I'm going to take Sarraya's amulet before we go, so he won't get sick. But, Forge is going to need someone to play with," he noted. "My other children are all gone from the house, and he'll be terribly bored and lonely without someone to pay attention to him. Think you two can handle taking care of him, cubs?"

Upon hearing his name, the Hellhound got up from where he was laying with Ember, and padded over to the table. The massive animal's head was almost on a level with Zyri's with her sitting in the chair, and he nudged the girl with his muzzle gently. She giggled and patted him on the head, which caused him to lick her face. That made her

burst out laughing. "His tongue is always so hot!" she noted as the animal went over to Jal.

"He breathes fire, cub," Mist told her. "You'd think it would be."

Jal hugged Forge around the neck, but the Hellhound pulled back quickly, making the boy gasp as the Hellhound dragged him out of his chair. He hung by the animal's neck for a moment before Forge dropped down and pinned the boy underneath him, then began licking his face and neck. Jal gave out squeals of laughter as he tried to protect his face with his hands, which did absolutely no good against the massive Hellhound.

"Well, it's good to see that Forge likes them," Kimmie noted. "You want me to leave him at your house, darling?"

"Please," he said with a nod. "The children will need him more than Tara and Rina. He'll help keep them distracted until I'm done here. They're going to have enough shocks as it is, they're going to need Forge to help keep them calmed down."

"I can imagine," Kimmie chuckled. "They have so many people to meet, and some of them will be very intimidating."

"How, how long do you expect this to take?" Kimmie asked, finally breaching the subject.

"Not long," he answered. "But how long I stay here is actually going to depend on Darax and Bragg. They have to finish off the armies of the One."

"Kang is coming back with an army," Kimmie told him. "The instant he gets back, he's going to start trying to raise one. He won't have to work very hard, given that there's already an army waiting...but he'll want one that's bigger. He really likes the Dura, he doesn't want them and the Elara to have to fight this war alone."

"Think he'll have much luck?" Mist asked.

She nodded. "All he has to do is tell Shiika he wants a few of the Legions, and she'll give them to him," she answered. "Shiika trusts Kang, probably more than anyone else, even over her own daughters. Besides, her army is so huge, she can give him three or four Legions and have plenty left over." She gave him a sly smile. "And I'm sure the Knights will join them, and probably the Ungardt, and I'm sure that Kerri will send a few divisions of Marines. If your time trapped in that Ward with the Demons is going to be set by how fast Bragg can take Pyrosia, then I'm sure that people back home will make that happen as fast as possible."

"The Demons won't be an issue," he said dismissively. "I'm more concerned about the One's armies. I'm just hoping they're not fanatics. I'm hoping that after I destroy the One's icon, many of them will give up."

"It's hard to say," Kimmie answered honestly. "These humans are harder to understand than most. At least the humans of Sennadar have some modicum of sense. That's lacking around here."

"They're just afraid, cub," Mist said. "That makes everyone strange, or make bad decisions." She looked at her paws. "Trust me, I know."

"I think we all do," Tarrin told her, reaching over and putting his paw on her shoulder. She looked over at him and smiled warmly, putting her paw over his.

"Well, hopefully that'll change soon," Tarrin said.

There was a knock at the door. It opened, and Dolanna poked her head through. "Dear one?"

"Yes, Dolanna?"

"It is time," she said simply.

He sighed. "Already?" he said wistfully. "I thought we had more time."

"I fear not, dear one," she said. "It is close to sunset."

"Alright," he said as he looked around the table, and saw the worry, saw the concern, saw the fear. "Well, let's go," he said, pushing away from the table and standing up.

"Come on, cubs," Mist called. "Make sure you have everything that's yours."

After a quick check of the apartment, the five of them left, and filed through the palace of Darax. When they reached the outside, ten of Darax's personal guards were waiting for them, and fell into step both in front and behind, clearing the way as throngs of Dwarves gathered on the streets to cheer and call out. It was something of a surprise to Tarrin, given how much many of the Dura still didn't like him. They lined the streets all the way through the city, right up until the front gates, and he and the children looked at them with both excitement and confusion. Tarrin looked around at the city one final time before leaving, marvelling at its construction, and admiring the Dwarves for both conceiving of it and building it. These were truly the descendants of the Duthak, in mind, body, and soul.

Outside, everyone was ready. They were gathered not far from the gates, a large throng behind the white-haired Wizard, who had several mystical symbols engraved into the ground and filled with powdered silver. It was a Concentric Circle, a device needed for several extremely powerful Wizard spells. The glyphs and symbols inscribed within the circle would determine its function, and from what Tarrin saw, this one was set up to open a gateway into another world. He remembered them from his exhaustive study of his spellbook. Behind Phandebrass was his friends, and behind them were the one hundred Dwarves that were going to go back to Sennadar, as well as three others. Shara was there, the Earth Adept, and to his surprise, Neh was there as well, holding onto a small bag and looking nervous. The third was an Elara he had never seen before, a tall, willowy female with almost decadently long platinum blond hair, hair done up in a long tail that nearly dragged the ground, amber eyes not much unlike Keritanima's, and a graceful demeanor. She wore a white dress with blue goring in the sleeves and a blue bodice, embroidered within that blue, with silver thread, was a relief of an animal he identified as a unicorn. He saw that she had little ivory earrings shaped like a unicorn's head in relief that hung from silver rings in her ears by the tips of their horns, and she had matching barettes in her hair, over each of her pointed ears, that had unicorns engraved in the onyx of the barettes.

But her striking appearance and fondness for unicorns was nothing compared to the aura of sheer *power* that radiated from this slender Elara. This was one of their most powerful spellcasters, of that there was absolutely no doubt.

"Master Tarrin," Neh said with a little bow. "May I present Kyrienna."

"It's nice to meet you," she said with a similar bow.

"I didn't know you were going, Neh," Tarrin said, more or less ignoring the woman.

"The King sent word that he wants two Wizards to go to the other world and study what Wizard magic your people have learned that we have not," she explained. "My cousin and I were lucky enough to receive the honor."

"I'm lucky that I just barely managed to make it in time," the blonde said. "I must say, I'm looking quite forward to this. The idea of visiting a forbidden world is exciting. This might be my only chance to see it."

“My cousin is a Worldwalker,” Neh said with excitement and respect.

“That means I visit other planes of existence, seeking out new magical lore,” she explained modestly. “Nezzi here always wanted to see what I do, so I put in a good word for her,” she said with a wink. “Now she gets to go see another world.”

“I didn’t realize your people did that,” Tarrin said. “Lorak never mentioned it.”

“That’s because what I do is frowned upon,” she smiled. “I’m *supposed* to be a Gatemaster. Any Wizard who can cast gate spells is supposed to serve the people by using that magic for our war against the One, but me and few others instead scour the multiverse searching for new magicks that might help us here. Many of our people think that what we do is a waste of time. I should be ferrying people back and forth from Pyrosia like a carriage driver, but I, how does Lorak say it, I ‘spend all of my time in vain and selfish pursuits instead of serving my people and my King in the manner to which I’m best suited.’” She looked to Neh. “Did that sound about right?” she asked.

“That sounds like Lorak,” Tarrin grunted.

“My cousin’s as good a Wizard as Phandebrass,” Neh said.

That made Tarrin look back at her. “Is that so?”

“I’ve heard much about this Phandebrass. I think I’m going to enjoy getting to know him,” she said, flexing her fingers in a manner that said that their meeting would be more *competition* than *conversation*.

Tarrin had to smile a little. Tarrin had the feeling that Phandebrass and Kyrienna were on a collision course...which might actually be a good thing.

“Speaking of this human, let’s go watch him work, Nezzi,” Kyrienna said, nudging Neh with her elbow.

“Nezzi?” Tarrin asked.

“She’s called me that since we were little girls,” she explained with a shy smile, before being dragged away.

“Something tells me that Phandebrass is going to have an interesting time of her,” Kimmie said, her finger on her cheek.

“She’s definitely more animated than other Elara,” Tarrin noted.

Mist snorted. “You mean she doesn’t have a steel rod stuck up her—“

“That’ll do, missy,” Tarrin warned, which made Kimmie burst into laughter.

Tarrin moved on with the others until he came to Binter, Sisska, and Tsukatta. The warriors were standing near Phandebrass as he read from a scroll he had prepared for the event. Tarrin took Binter’s massive hand in his paw, and clasped wrists with him. “It is nearly time,” the Vendari said. “Are you sure you do not wish for one of us to remain?”

“We’ll be fine, Binter,” he answered. “I absolutely guarantee that Dolanna will be coming home soon. Sooner than she thinks.”

“And of you?”

“If things work out right, I’ll be here a while longer,” he answered. “If I survive the initial encounter, then there won’t be any need for Dolanna, and she’ll come home. If I don’t...well, Dolanna will be here until Bragg completes his task. Either way, I have to stay here until the Demon Lord is dealt with. He’s my responsibility. I can’t leave until he’s gone.”

“You are only doing the honorable thing,” Binter said calmly. “It does your name justice.”

“That means a great deal to me, Binter.”

“Honor and Blood, Tarrin Kael.”

“Honor and Blood, Binter of the Vendari.”

“May Pythorras grant you conviction, Tarrin,” Sisska said, invoking the name of one of the Vendari gods.

“Thank you, Sisska. I might need his blessing before all is said and done.” He turned to Tsukatta. “I want you to do something for me, Tsukatta.”

“You have but to ask,” he said.

“I wouldn’t say that so quickly,” he said with a smile.

“You are my friend, Tarrin Kael,” he said simply. “If you have need of it, my life is yours, as is only proper.”

“Well, this won’t take quite that much,” he chuckled. “At my home is a sword that looks almost exactly like this one, just smaller,” he said, producing his sword from the *elsewhere* and presenting it. “Mist knows where I keep my weapons, she can show you. I want you to get that sword, get in touch with Spyder, and have her take you to Haven.”

“What do I do with it when I reach Haven?” he asked.

“Throw it into the gate,” he answered.

“I, I do not understand,” he said.

“I’m going to need it, Tsukatta. Put it in the Astral, and I can get at it. I can’t do that as long as it’s on Sennadar.”

“I understand. It will be as you ask, my friend, though I fail to see the need for it.”

“Trust me. There’s going to be a need for it.”

“Then it will be done,” he said with a bow.

“I can do that for you, darling,” Kimmie protested.

“You have children to see,” he told her. “Tsukatta will need to go to Haven to get home, so he can just do this for me along the way.”

“I’m not planning on going home quite yet, but I’ll still make sure it is done,” he said. “Since there will be other outworlders in Sennadar, I’m going to see if I can’t visit your world and see more than Lady Spyder’s gate chamber.”

“I’m sure you can sneak past,” Tarrin chuckled.

He went past them to where Haley stood with Ulger and Kang, near the litter that the Dwarves had used to bring out Azakar. The Mahuut Knight was still a little pale, dressed in a tunic and breeches, but his sword was beside him on the litter. He reached out his hand to Tarrin, who clasped it firmly. Tarrin and Azakar had often not seen eye to eye, but there had always been that core of mutual respect and understanding.

“So what does Miranda say?” he asked.

“Miranda says that he needs about three days in bed,” the mink Wikuni said from behind Haley. He stepped aside to allow her to reach the litter. “As long as he gets his rest, he’ll be breaking heads again in no time,” she said with a cheeky grin.

He ignored her, looking at the dark-skinned human. “How do you feel?”

“Tired,” he answered. “A little embarrassed that I’m causing so much trouble.”

“It’s never trouble to help a friend, Zak,” Tarrin told him. “I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“Telven is being sent to the Academy to work,” he said. “Make something of him.”

Azakar nodded gravely. “I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “I’ll take care of it, Tarrin. I promise.”

“We’ll make him a special project,” Ulger said, giving Tarrin an evil grin. “I might ask your little sister to arrange a *special meeting*, if you know what I mean,” he said with a chuckle.

“Yes, he might have trouble denying the existence of other gods if he’s staring one in the face,” Haley said slyly.

“Good.”

“Lad, I’m planning on coming back to help Bragg, with as many troops as I can put together in three days,” Kang told him. “Do you have a problem with this?”

“Not really, but how are you going to get home, Kang?” he asked pointedly. “Don’t depend on the Elder Gods granting another exemption.”

“I’ll work something out,” he said. “I wouldn’t return unless I could guarantee we could get back. But I’m sure I can get some kind of special arrangement. After all, we’re coming back to stop a Demon Lord, and it seems that even the Elder Gods understand how important that is, since they’re going to help you.”

“Well, all I can say is good luck,” Tarrin said with a nod.

He left them, then left his family behind to talk with Miranda, and approached Var, Denai, and Ariana alone. He took their hands in turn, then patted Denai on the shoulder. “Did you enjoy your visit here, *deshaida*?”

“We didn’t have as much time with you as we’d hoped,” she answered in Selani.

“But there are so many here, I relish what time I did have. Even if it’s for but a moment, time spent with blood is time spent well.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he apologized. “But I’ve been so busy—“

“We understand, my friend,” Var assured him. “You’ve got the responsibilities of a clan chief. Those duties are more important than personal needs.”

“Are you going back home?”

Denai shook her head. “Kang speaks of returning. If he does, we’ve decided to come.”

“You are clan, Tarrin, and you’ll need us. We will be there,” Var said simply.

“That means a great deal to me,” he said sincerely. “What about you, Ari?”

“Me? Oh, Andos will scream at me to come home, and I’ll ignore him, as usual,” she winked. “I’ll probably come back with the others.”

Tarrin chuckled, then picked up Denai as she gave him a crushing hug. “You be careful, *deshida*,” she ordered. “What you have planned, it will be dangerous. You must be careful.”

“I’m always careful, Denai,” he told her. “Even when it doesn’t look like it.”

Phandebrass’ voice called above the murmur of the crowd. “I say, everyone prepare to move! I’ll be casting in about three minutes!”

Tarrin moved to return to his family, but Haley stopped him. His eyes were haunted and grim, and his hand was actually trembling. “Tarrin,” he said. “Promise me you’ll watch over her. Promise me you’ll bring her home.”

“Haley, I swear to you here and now, that she will come home safely,” he told him with intense power in his voice, putting his paws on the Were-wolf’s shoulders. “And I promise you that everything will be alright. In fact, I swear to you that she will be *happy*.”

“I—“ he began, but he looked into Tarrin’s eyes, and saw...*something* behind them. Beyond them. “I...I see,” he said, putting his hands on Tarrin’s paws. “Then I leave her safety in your care, Tarrin.”

“I appreciate that,” Tarrin told him. “Now go say goodbye to her.”

“I will,” he nodded, clapping Tarrin on the shoulder, then moving quickly towards the small Sharadi, who stood talking with Koran and Camara Tal just behind Phandebrass, who was peering intensely at the sun, whose edge was threatening to touch the mountains below.

“Tarrin! Well, look at you two. Why don’t you kiss him, Haley?” Sarraya said with an evil grin, winking into view.

“It’s about time, Sarraya,” he said. “Where have you been?”

“Oh, just saying my goodbyes,” she said with exaggerated innocence.

“I’ll warn Darax,” Haley said mildly, then scurried off.

“Hey! I worked for *hours* on those!” Sarraya shouted after him.

“Drop it,” Tarrin told her. “Give me the amulet.”

“What? It’s *mine*, Tarrin!” she protested. “And I need it!”

“You won’t need it now,” he told her. “Fireflash is staying here, so he needs it more than you. Hand it over.”

“But, but, but I can’t come back—“ she started, then she saw his emotionless, ominous stare. “Alright, alright,” she growled indignantly, reaching for the cord around her neck.

“You’ll live. Without this, he *won’t*,” he told her, taking the amulet, then carefully putting it around Fireflash’s neck.

“But I wanted to come back,” she said poutingly. “I wanted to help you.”

“Little friend, you can help me a great deal at home,” he told her. “There’s something I want you to do for me. Something important.”

“Really? What?” she said in excitement.

“I want you to go to the gnomes of Gnomlin,” he told her. “When you get there, I want you to give them this.”

He handed her a tiny sliver of emerald that pulsed with an internal, magical light.

“Ooooh, what is it?” she said breathlessly, taking it from his paw. It fit almost perfectly into her hand.

“It’s something that’s going to make sure that Dolanna gets home,” he told her. “The gnomes will know what to do with it, and when they have to use it.”

“What will it do? I’ve just gotta know!” she said.

“It’s part of a Wizard spell,” he told her. “If Dolanna is in the Astral, it will allow them to retrieve her and cause her to enter the portal that leads to the gate chamber in Haven. They’ll know if she’s in the Astral, the gem will warn them. Then they can use it to complete the spell.”

“But, how am I going to get out there, Tarrin?” she asked.

“My friend, however you want. Just make sure you get it to the gnomes within three days. That’s important.”

“I’ll find a way, Tarrin,” she said with uncharacteristic seriousness, clutching the glowing shard to her chest. “You can count on me!”

"I know I can, Sarraya. I always have," he smiled, which made her zip up and hug his neck, then she flitted over and kissed his cheek. "Now, I have to go say goodbye to Mist."

"I understand. Good luck, and may all the gods watch over you, Tarrin."

"I'll miss you, bug," he told her.

He returned to his mate and his children, and he sighed. He wordlessly embraced Mist, feeling all of her love and all her devotion flow through her...and that was what it was all about. Family, friends, life and love, those were the things that mattered more than any other, and Tarrin was uniquely qualified to understand that. Everything that would ever matter could be summed up in the touch of his mate and the mother of his children.

That was *life*.

He hugged Kimmie fiercely, rocking her back and forth, then he knelt and held his paws out to Zyri and Jal. They rushed into his arms and he held them for a long, long moment, and he savored that feeling, desperately wishing that his other children could be there...but they couldn't. And that, too, was life.

He pushed them out to arm's length, looking them in the eyes by turn. "Now, you two have to be very good," he told them. "Stay very close to Mist. My life is very unusual, and some of my friends can be...intimidating."

"Like the dragon?" Zyri asked.

"Like the dragon," he smiled. "But you'll love Sapphire, little bit. Just stay close to Mist, and listen to her. She'll explain everything, and she'll get you settled in. Forge, watch these two," he told the nearby Hellhound.

Forge nodded lucidly.

Tarrin called forth his sword from the *elsewhere*, and then his staff. He set them aside calmly, then reached for this left wrist. "Now, I can't very well let you go without giving you something," he told the children, removing the left bracer of his Cat's Claws. "Jal, these are for you. For what's coming, I'm not going to need them. It's your responsibility to watch these, and hold them for me until I come back for them. They're very important to me, Jal. My sister made them for me. I'd be heartbroken if I lost them, so I'm giving them to you so you can keep them safe." He removed the right bracer, and then handed them to the small boy with a serious look. Jal gawked at them, almost afraid to touch them, then snatched them up and held them to his chest with a fervent nod.

"Tarrin—" Kimmie said in shock, but he silenced her by slapping her leg with his tail.

"And you, Zyri, this, this is your burden," he said, reaching to his chest. He pulled gently, then held out his open paw to her.

In his paw laid his *shaeram*, the black chain unbroken.

"This is the symbol of my goddess, Zyri, and this necklace was a personal gift to me from her," he told her soberly. "I can't afford to lose this, and I'm not going to need it for what's coming, so I'm giving it to you, little bit. Make sure you don't lose it."

She looked at it like it was a live snake, then gingerly reached out for it.

"No, I don't think that'll be enough," he said, closing his paw around the amulet. He took the chain between two huge fingers, then spread it apart and reached over, then pushed the chain down around her head. She stood there in surprise as he put the *shaeram* around her neck, even more surprise when the chain shortened of its own

volition to allow it to fit her, then he pressed it against her breastbone with his paw. “There will come a time, child, when you’ll have one of these of your own. Inside of you is a gift, Zyrilen, a gift from my Goddess, and when you go to Sennadar, that gift will have a chance to be realized. But until you earn a *shaeram* of your own, I want you to wear this one. When you get your own, you can give mine back to me.”

“I, I don’t understand, Father,” she said in confusion.

“You’re a Sorcerer, little bit,” he told her. “And when you go to Sennadar, you’ll have a chance to explore the limits of that gift. This *shaeram* is your birthright, Zyri. And until you earn your own, I want you to wear mine. Oh, we do need to take this off,” he chuckled, removing the golden inlay from the back of the amulet. He handed it to Mist. “Make sure that gets back to Spyder, Mist. It doesn’t belong to me.”

“I, I’m a *Sorcerer*?” Zyri gasped.

He nodded. “And a bloody strong one,” he assured her. “When you get home, I want you to go to the Tower and learn all about your magic. But not immediately,” he smiled. “I want you to have time to settle in and get used to your new life. Then, and only when you’re ready, you should go and learn about your magic.” He put his paw on her shoulder, and one on Jal’s. “You can learn about your magic, and Jal can learn more about his magic from Shara—well, as much as she can teach him. After I’m done here, we’ll find a Water Adept and bring him home to train you.”

“I can’t believe I’m a Sorcerer,” Zyri breathed.

“How is that possible?” Kimmie asked him.

“Zyri is a descendent of the original Ancients,” Tarrin explained. “Their blood was introduced into this world, and it flows in her veins. The Adepts are *also* descendents of the Ancients,” he said, looking at Jal fondly. “Their powers are related to Sorcery, because their power originally *was* Sorcery. They’ve learned a way to adapt to this world, to use that power without the Weave, by tapping directly into the Elemental Planes. Jal and Zyri, they’re related by blood to the Sorcerers. They are the legacy of the Ancients,” he said, looking at them.

“That’s why you can feel it when they do their magic,” Kimmie reasoned.

He nodded. “Because their power is related to mine. It’s not the same, but it’s close enough. And that, little bit, is why you will have one of your own some day,” he told her, tapping his *shaeram*. “Just don’t get attached to that one. It’s mine, and I’ll want it back,” he winked.

“Oh, Father!” Zyri cried, burying herself in his arm.

He hugged the children for a long moment, then stood up and embraced Mist once more as Phandebrass began to chant loudly in the discordant language of magic. Tarrin looked up, and saw that the sun was now touching the upper edge of the mountains, and it was time for Phandebrass to begin.

“I’m afraid, my mate,” Mist said in the manner of the Cat, staring into his eyes. “I’m afraid I’m going to lose you.”

“You can never lose me so long as you don’t want to, Mist,” he answered. “I will always be here, no matter how much distance separates us, and so long as you never let go, I can never leave you.” He put his paw over her heart. “I love you, Mist.”

She reached up and put her paw on his cheek, and he closed his eyes and bowed his head. “Remember that, Mist,” he said aloud. “Remember.”

“I will,” she promised.

He leaned down a little and kissed her gently, sweetly, and then pushed her out to arm's length. "Phandebrass is almost done. It's time for you to go home, my mate."

Behind her, in front of Phandebrass, there was a sudden brilliant flash of light. That light was a spot of light before him, within the circle, which quickly expanded into a line, then rotated on itself to create a swirling gateway of brilliant blue-white energy. The gateway hummed and crackled very loudly with magical power, and the wind suddenly kicked up, blowing out of it. The smell of that air was humid and salty, and Tarrin realized he was smelling the salt air of Suld. The gateway had been opened onto the Tower grounds directly.

"Now is not the time to dawdle!" Phandebrass screamed over the sound. "We only have four minutes! Quickly, quickly!" He looked to Tarrin. "I say, be careful, lad, and good luck to you! I'll see you soon, I will!" he called with a wave, then he turned and rushed into the gateway. Immediately behind him, Neh and Kyrienna moved into the gateway, as did Camara Tal. Koran Tal stopped to give Tarrin a salute, then he too stepped into it and vanished. Sarraya zipped out of the crowd and vanished, and Ariana jogged through.

Anayi quickly stepped up to him. "I was looking for you, Tarrin. I wanted to say goodbye and good luck," she said, offering her hand.

He took it quickly. "Thank you. Go quickly, Anayi. There's not much time."

"I know. Be careful, Tarrin. You know what's ahead."

"I'm ready for it."

She nodded, then rushed past the children and up to the gate, then vanished into it.

"Go, Mist. Go now," Tarrin ordered. "Take care of the cubs."

"I will," she promised, hugging him one more time. He embraced Kimmie, and then hugged Zyri and Jal one last time, then pushed the children towards the gate. "Go," he ordered. "Go quickly."

Zyri's eyes were full of tears as she took Jal's hand, then turned and rushed towards the gateway. Mist was directly behind them. Without looking back, Mist herded the children into the gateway, and then they were gone. Kimmie glanced at Tarrin with her heart in her eyes and the gate, and then she too stepped into it and vanished.

Tarrin closed his eyes and bowed his head, missing any number of waves from friends, and missing as the Dura started herding the Pegasi through the gate and to Sennadar. His mates and his children were gone now. His friends were gone. There was only him and Dolanna now, and there was nothing left standing between him and his fateful confrontation with the One, and his meeting with the Demon Lord. There was fear there, and trepidation, and a grim knowledge of what had to be done...and what it was going to cost. What it would cost him, what it would cost this world...but there was no choice in the matter.

With deliberate slowness, he leaned down and picked up his staff and sword. He had given his children the Cat's Claws and his precious *shaeram*...and that was what needed to be done. They would be needed later, but they could not help him in what was coming.

Dolanna's scent washed through his nose. He looked to her, saw the sadness in her eyes, and he put a paw on her shoulder. They watched wordlessly as their friends and family filed through the gate one by one, until all that was left was Azakar being carried

in his litter by Ulger and Kang. They all saluted wordlessly towards Tarrin and Dolanna, and then they were gone.

Tarrin and Dolanna turned their backs on the gate, not watching as the Dura that were going hurried as quickly as they could through the gate. There was nothing more for them to see, no more reason to look.

"And now it is you and me," Dolanna sighed in Sharadi. "Are you ready, my dear one? For whatever might come?"

"I've been ready for a long time, Dolanna," he answered in Sharadi. "We'll be leaving in just a little bit."

"I saw that they've taken my Pegasus," she said. "Am I riding with you?"

"Yes," he answered. "We have a long way to go, so we have to get started. Are you ready?"

"Dear one, I am ready," she said, her voice clear that her words had multiple meanings.

He looked down at her and nodded. "I'm ready too."

"Dear one, your *shaeram*," she said, touching his bare chest meaningfully.

"I gave it to Zyri. I don't want to risk losing it. Or my Cat's Claws." He rubbed his bare wrists absently. "It's been so long, I'm surprised all the fur wasn't rubbed off my arms."

"But, how did you take it off?" she asked in surprise.

He gave her a slight smile. "Give me more credit than that, Dolanna," he chided.

She laughed. "I guess I should. Some day, you must explain how you did it." She put her hand on his forearm fondly, stroking the short, thick fur there. "Oh, my dear one," she sighed. "I'm afraid of what's coming."

"I am too, old friend," he told her, patting her hand with his paw gently. "I am too. But it's what we have to do. And I'd be lost if you weren't here to guide me."

She chuckled ruefully. "I stopped guiding you years ago, old friend."

"No, Dolanna," he told her as they walked away from the gateway. "You guide me every day. And now more than ever, I'm going to need your wisdom."

"It has been a long road, hasn't it?" she asked.

"Very long," he answered. "And there's much more road ahead of us."

"Ah, so he admits that he might live through this," she teased with a smile.

"I'll be the first to admit that anything is possible," he chuckled ruefully.

"You should. You've proved it time and time again," she smiled.

"Then let's hope I have one more left in me."

"Indeed."

To: [Title](#) [EoF](#)

Chapter 17

The night was cloudless and brilliant, with the blue and green moon Elara casting light down upon the land, shadowing the rolling hills of windswept grass in hues of sapphire and emerald. It was a windy night as air rushed before a storm system to the northwest, which skirted the high mountains. Sleepy villagers below slumbered in their rude mud-brick hovels, resting in preparation for another grueling day in fields that broke the graceful symmetry of the wild grasslands with rough rectangles of crops.

A dark shadow passed over those crops, then over the village. The villagers slept on in oblivious indifference, but the tiny Quasit that resided in the church in the center of the village quivered in terror as that shadow passed over. It knew what it was, and it had stern orders to report immediately if that shadow passed over its territory.

It had reason to be afraid. The shadow was cast by a titanic creature that was not natural to that world, a mighty beast with golden scales that soared effortlessly through the air high above on an arrow-straight course southeast, towards the tiny speck that might be visible on a clear day, a tiny speck which was the ever-present plume of ash that rose thousands and thousands of spans over the volcano at the ruins of Pyros. The shadow was cast by a gold dragon, which was the borrowed form which Tarrin Kael held both to intimidate and terrorize the opposition into not getting in his way, and a means by which to carry his mentor Dolanna.

She rode between his horns, tied to them by ropes around her slender waist as more straps secured her legs and stabilized her atop his head. In her arms was a tiny replica of the mighty dragon, a drake with golden scales that rested comfortably within the gentle arms of the small woman. She seemed to be dozing, with her eyes closed and her head bowed, but it was more to keep the wind out of her eyes than any need to rest.

"I'd give you my visor, but that's back in Sennadar now," Tarrin called to her in her native language, seeming to know what bothered her without being able to see. "So is my bow. I should have kept that."

"I'll be fine, dear one," she replied. Since the others had left, they communicated with each other exclusively in Sharadi. It had long been Tarrin's custom to speak to others in their native tongue, if he knew it...and odds were, he did. His aptitude for languages was almost legendary back home. "It's the wind more than anything else."

"I know, it's getting worse," he said. "Even as big as I am, I'm finding myself getting pushed by gusts. That storm over there is going to get really nasty." He nudged his head a bit to his right. "The Dura packed us a tent, didn't they?"

She reached behind herself, where a large pack was tied behind her, which she partially used as a backrest. She patted it a couple of times. "I'm sure they did," she answered. "They were quite thorough." She chuckled. "They packed a flint and steel."

Tarrin chuckled lightly, a deep, rasping sound. "That was a bit compulsive," he agreed. "Did they pack the food I asked for?"

“Yes, a month’s worth of dry rations,” she answered. “I don’t understand why you asked for it, dear one. You yourself said it will only take us two days to get to Pyros.”

“It’s for afterward,” he told her. “Remember, whichever of us is trapped inside the Ward *will* have to live. The food is just in case.”

“Whichever of us? Not both?”

“No, not both of us,” he answered. “If I live through it, there won’t be a need for you. I’ll send you home. If I don’t make it, then there’ll just be you.”

“Dear one, if you don’t make it, I certainly won’t,” she said simply.

“You will,” he said adamantly.

“You seem certain of that.”

“I’m absolutely positive. Even if I die, they’ll never touch you.”

“Ah. No doubt part of the plan that you won’t tell me about,” she said lightly.

“Who says I have one?”

“Dear one, I know you too well. There’s something brewing underneath those ears. I can see it on your face.”

“You’re sure?”

“My dear one, you are *way* too calm,” she told him. “You only get like that when you have a plan of action. If you were approaching this without knowing exactly what you were going to do, you’d be diving on the villages below to vent your anger.”

“You already know the plan, Dolanna.”

“Yes, I know the plan. And I also know that if that plan was all the plan you had, there would be infernos rising into the skies behind us,” she said pointedly.

“You know me too well, Dolanna,” he admitted.

“Now, care to enlighten me?”

“Not here, not now,” he answered. “I have no doubt that the Demon Lord can hear every word we say, and I’d rather not give him any more advantages than he has already.”

“Why the subterfuge then?”

“It’s not subterfuge, my friend. It’s prudence. There’s no telling where the Demon Lord has eyes, not when he has Demons that can shapeshift just as easily and completely as I can.”

“That’s true, but there were any number of times when we were alone with family and friends.”

“And fight endlessly over it? No,” he grunted. “Just have faith in me, Dolanna. We’ve already won, they just don’t know it yet. They’ll find out when we arrive, though.”

“I have faith in you, dear one. I’ve seen you get out of too many situations like this to think you cannot do it again.”

“Thanks,” he said, adjusting his flight after a strong gust pushed him sideways. “I hope I can get past that before it soaks us. As big as I am, I’m sure to draw lightning if I get wet. That’s why you never see anything but a blue flying near a thunderstorm.”

“I’ll remember that,” she chuckled. “Are we going to land if it gets too close?”

“We can’t wait,” he answered. “We *must* get to Pyros by tomorrow night. The spells I’ve cast aren’t permanent.”

“What spells, dear one?”

“Several,” he answered. “They’re designed to get you home, and most of them are contingency spells in case I live through this and I’m not in a position or condition to send you home myself, but they’re not permanent. So I planned ahead.”

“You, planning ahead?” she asked lightly. “Much unlike you, dear one.”

“We all get senile as we get older,” he answered, which caused her to laugh.

The wind turned cold quickly, which caused Tarrin to immediately alter his course, turning his tail to the approaching stormfront. Massive wings thrust heavily against the air, which caused Dolanna to pull against her ropes as the dragon form suddenly accelerated. “Now we race,” Tarrin called.

Dolanna grabbed the ropes and pulled against them, taking the strain from her waist. “I am ready,” she called in reply.

“Burrow in, Fireflash,” Tarrin ordered as his wings tripled their beat, causing him to race before the stormfront, using the windwall as a tailwind to assist in propelling him forward. Fireflash secured himself in front of the Sorceress and held on with his claws gripping Tarrin’s scales as the dragon slowly but steadily pulled ahead of the advancing storm, using its own wind to help push him before it. Once he got enough distance, he angled gently away from the storm, and slowly started drifting back on course even as he continued to push further and further from the stormfront. He would still be under the front, but the storm that was coming was an isolated storm along the front, not a line of storms that ran the entire length of it.

Tarrin’s maneuvers got them away from the storm, but did not let them totally escape from the weather. The front overtook them from the northwest, moving southeast as they moved southwest, and Tarrin could not evade every storm along the line. He did his best to stay clear of the thunderstorms, but that required him to fly directly through several showers which thoroughly soaked his rider.

They flew through the afternoon, running in and out of rain showers, and then finally landed near sunset on the large grassy plain northeast of Pyros, and the plume of smoke rising from the volcano was now clearly visible in the clearing skies. Tarrin alighted in a flat area that was lower than the surrounding terrain, which had a small brook bubbling through it, and was a good five longspans from the nearest human settlement, a small village of rude mud huts to the southwest. Dolanna slid down to the ground, her dress clinging to her and her hair plastered to her head, and she quickly moved away from Tarrin so he could shapeshift back into his normal form.

“Ugh, I hate being wet,” she complained. “Start a fire, dear one, I need to dry out.”

Tarrin did so with but a thought, creating a ball of fire that hovered over the ground. Fireflash dropped to the ground and sat before it, letting the heat dry the dampness lingering on his scales as Dolanna rooted through the large pack that the Dura had made for them. She produced two collapsible tent poles, which she drove into the ground close to the fire, then tied a slender rope between them. That done, she boldly removed her dress and undergarments and hung them on that line, which surprised Tarrin just a little bit. Dolanna was a very modest woman in many regards, always dressing conservatively, and it had been the first time outside the baths that she had completely undressed before him in such a manner.

“That should do,” she remarked, kneeling down and pulling a blanket from the pack. Instead of wrapping it around her, she instead spread it on the ground and sat with her

legs folded under her, close enough to the fire that it cast her very pale skin with an almost reddish-orange glow.

"You're getting my bad habits, Dolanna," he noted absently as he pulled out a stewpot, preparing to cook.

She chuckled. "If it were anyone but you, perhaps I would feel self conscious," she admitted. "I've been wet all day, and I just want to feel like I'm dry for a moment before I get a blanket to wrap myself in."

"You do that in the baths too," he recalled. "Sit on the bench without a towel."

She nodded. "After bathing, I enjoy the feel of the air drying my skin, and after being wet all day, all I want is to feel *dry*. Besides, you always use the excuse that once you've seen it, what use is it to cover it up, so I guess I could use the same defense to enjoy a few moments of nudity," she chuckled. "And even if you did take interest in me in that manner, you could do nothing about it."

"Oh, I can now," he told her.

"What?"

He came over and knelt before her. She looked up at him curiously, and did nothing as he reached down and took her hand. But that curious look exploded into pain and fear when he opened his mouth, exposing his fangs, and sank them into her arm.

"*Tarrin!*" she gasped, clutching her bleeding arm to her chest in terror. "What have you done?"

"I bit you," he said calmly, going back to his stewpot. "And what do you feel?"

"I...I feel nothing," she said, touching the twin puncture wounds with her fingers.

"Pain, yes, but none of the usual warning signs that I've been infected."

"You're not infected," he told her. "In fact, you're utterly immune to Lycanthropy. I could chew your arm off, and it wouldn't do anything to you except maybe take off your arm."

"How did you do this?" she asked.

"I did it a while ago," he told her. "There was a Wizard spell in my book, one of Phandebrass' spells. It allows me to do almost anything with it. The catch is, it can only be cast *once* by any Wizard. The spell is gone from my book now, and I'll never be able to memorize it again, even if I find another copy. It's a spell called Wish. I used my single casting of the spell to render you immune to Lycanthropy."

"The *Wish* spell?" Dolanna gasped. "Tarrin, are you insane? Do you know how dangerous that spell is?"

"It's dangerous because it's granted by the gods, who can be opposed to the objective of the wish," he said. "And right now, where are the gods of this world?" he asked pointedly. "The request to fulfill the wish came to *me*, because I was the divine being in control of the domain where the user of the spell was. My domain happens to be wherever I am, and since I also cast the spell, that put the caster within *my domain*. So, I granted myself the wish exactly the way I intended it to be. You're immune to Lycanthropy, and you will be so for as long as you want. Your children will enjoy the same immunity, and they too will have the option to end the protection and become a Lycanthrope if that's what they *want*."

"But, but dear one, why do this? Why didn't you use that Wish to do something *important*?"

“Because you’re important to me, Dolanna, and your happiness matters to me very much,” he answered honestly, keeping his back to her as he carefully chopped up vegetables into the stewpot. “Haley loves you, Dolanna. He loves you deeply, and I know you have within yourself the potential to love him in return. I’m not saying you will, but what I am saying is that I want you to have *the chance* to see if Haley is the man for you. If he is, now his condition won’t stand in your way. If he’s not, well, the gift I gave you has any number of advantages, given your ties to my family. This way, you never have to worry about becoming infected. In fact, you’ll find your condition to have *many* advantages, once you learn how to use it.”

“Dear one, this is a gift you should have given to your sister or your parents, not me!” she protested.

“Who’s to say I didn’t?” he asked with a smile. “Carefully built into the conditions of the wish is a way for them to gain your immunity. Your condition is *infectious*, Dolanna, just like Lycanthropy, but it will *only* infect members of *my* family, and *only* those who don’t already have it. It will also affect Zyri and Jal, but it will *only* affect them if they’re in my house. Anyone blood related to me or to you, and Zyri and Jal, can be granted that immunity. All you have to do is introduce it into them the same way I’d pass Lycanthropy to another. Bite and draw blood, introduce your blood into their bodies, and so on, and you pass your immunity to them. That’s something I want you to do for me when you get home, Dolanna. Pass it on to my parents and sister, and then go to my house in Aldreth and pass it to Zyri and Jal, so they don’t have to be careful around my daughters anymore.”

Dolanna put a hand to her stomach. “Dear one...I, I don’t know what to say. This gift you’ve given me, it’s a treasure beyond words.” She looked down at her arm, and gasped. “My wounds are gone!”

“Like I said, you’ll find your condition to be *very* useful, Dolanna,” he chuckled. “I bit you, and that introduced *my* Were abilities into you, but only temporarily. I didn’t bite you hard, so they’ll fade relatively quickly. But, until they do, you have all of my powers as a Were-cat, and *none* of my weaknesses. You have my strength, my regeneration, my ability to speak to cats, and if you try very hard, you could even shapeshift. The more of my spittle or blood gets into you, the longer your borrowed powers would last. Oh, I suggest you carry around a vial of a Were-cat’s blood for emergencies, so you have those options. Jula saved herself by drinking my blood...you could do the same, but without the permanence of it. I’m not sure the idea of drinking blood like a vampire is very appealing to you, but the benefits shouldn’t be overlooked in an emergency.”

“Dear one! That is not possible!”

“Who’s to say what’s possible and what’s not?” he asked with a shrug. “Possibility is defined by the gods, and the gods aren’t here. That means that I can dictate the extent of possibility however I see fit when it regards a wish I tailor-made to fit you.”

Dolanna stared at his back a long moment, then broke down into tears. Tarrin managed to turn on his knee just quickly enough to catch her as she flung herself into his arms, weeping and embracing him with her temporary impressive—*very* impressive—strength. “Thank you, my dear one,” she sobbed. “You have given me a treasure beyond words.”

"I've given you less than what you deserve, Dolanna," he answered gently, putting a massive paw on her bare back. "Now, what would you like for dinner?"

She looked up at him, then laughed. "You'd think you'd have something more meaningful to say than that."

"You don't think dinner is meaningful?" he asked, which made her laugh again. "Oh, yes, just so you know, Dolanna. What you'll pass to my family and the cubs, and eventually to your own children, will only be the *immunity*. The ability to temporarily gain the powers of others who pass them to you is yours, and yours alone. I think it's important that you make that distinction before someone tries to get creative and ends up getting herself killed."

"I will be sure to make that distinction to Jenna," she said with an impish grin.

"The immunity is my gift to my family. The ability to gain the powers of another, if only for a short time, is my gift only for you. Think of it as payment for all those years you stuck with me, just a token of the esteem I have for you, Dolanna."

"I'm touched, my dear one," she said, reaching up and putting her hand on his cheek. "Touched beyond words."

He patted her bare back. "I'm glad you like it, Dolanna," he told her. "Now, I have to get back to dinner, and you need to put something on before we eat."

"Surely I don't offend you, dear one," she said with a slight smile.

"No, but I think this cool air is doing more than drying out your skin, going by what's poking me in the chest."

Dolanna looked down, then blushed rosily. "Yes, well, it's purely unintentional, believe me," she said delicately, putting her hands over her breasts unconsciously. "I guess it might be the air."

"That or you're just *really* excited about my gift," he noted with an ever-so-slight smile, which made her blush deeper.

"You could have been a gentleman and politely ignored it," she accused. "I would say nothing if certain parts of *you* were, ah, *poking*."

"Me? A gentleman? We have to get you back home before you completely lose your senses, woman," he scoffed, patting her deliberately on the backside as if to reinforce his statement, then letting go of her and wisely getting out of reach before she could react.

Not that it mattered. She got up, stalked over to where he left the stewpot, and slapped him quite deliberately on the back of the head. "Ow!" he complained, putting a paw over the stuck region.

"Why, I don't know what came over me," she said with utter insincerity. "I guess I must have lost my senses for a moment." She then put her hands on his shoulder, leaned down over his shoulder, and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, my dear one," she said playfully, "even if you are a crude, unmannered, lascivious boar."

"I love you too, Dolanna," he returned, reaching up over his head and patting her shoulder. "I think it's time to turn your dress around. The cotton is starting to smell a little scorched."

"Ah, thank you, dear one," she said, rushing over to turn her dress so the other side faced the fire. She dug into the packs and produced a long, thick robe, then pulled it on. It was a little too large for her, the sleeves dropping down over her hands, but it would serve its purpose. "Is that better, dear one? Goddess forbid I offend you with my nudity."

Tarrin laughed. “More like shock the eyes on high with your beauty,” he told her. “You’re a very well-proportioned female. Short, but we all have our flaws.”

She laughed. “I’ll take that as the compliment it was meant to be,” she told him, sitting back down on the blanket. “When do you see us arriving at Pyros?”

“Tomorrow afternoon,” he answered. “And we won’t waste any time. Before we even land, we’ll probably have to fight our way to where the One is holding his icon.”

“I thought you said that they wouldn’t interfere,” she said.

“The Demon Lord won’t, but there’s no doubt that he’ll throw some of his army at us as a token towards the One. But when I get there, he’ll step aside and give me a clear shot. After all, he has to keep up appearances until the last minute.”

“Or what?”

“Or the One will try to banish him. I seriously doubt he could do it—after all, Val couldn’t banish the Demon Lord he summoned that started the Blood War, and he wasn’t injured—but he’ll *try*. And that attempt would force the Demon Lord to take attention away from everything else and focus on the One. It could get ugly.”

“Explain it to me, dear one.”

“The One summoned the Demon Lord here by using his *name*,” Tarrin said pointedly. “It’s the *only* way to summon a Demon Lord into the mortal plane.”

“Ohhh, I understand. The One would attempt to use the Demon Lord’s name as a weapon.”

“Exactly. There are lots of really nasty things you can do to a Demon if you know its name, and being a Demon Lord wouldn’t make it any different. The Demon Lord can’t directly attack the One because of the pact that was made when he was summoned here, but his minions have no such restriction. So it would be a battle between the One and the Demons, to try to stop him from using the name of their master against him. It all hinges on the Demon Lord,” he said intently. “He’s the keystone of the arch. Kill him, and every Demon he’s summoned to this world is banished back to the Abyss.”

“But that’s impossible. You admitted as much, dear one.”

“You’re right. No god on this world has the power to destroy the Demon Lord. That wouldn’t banish all of them anyway, because they’ve been using human Priests to summon more Demons. Killing the Demon Lord would get rid of most of them, but not all. Anyway, if the One turns on the Demon Lord, he’ll have to risk a good piece of his army against him. Even injured, the One can do *massive* damage to the Demon Lord’s forces.”

“Banishment,” Dolanna realized.

Tarrin nodded. “Any god has the power to banish Demons,” he affirmed. “That’s why Priests can do it. They’re just invoking the power of the god they serve. But unlike a Priest, the One could banish a large swath of Demons in one blow, not singling out a Demon and banishing them one by one. The One could do what Miranda did back in the battle,” he elaborated. “Use his very presence as a weapon, the way she did. He could wipe out over three quarters of the Demon Lord’s forces if he has them all at Pyros...which he probably does. He’ll need them to kill the One when he’s ready to remove him from his path.”

“Could *you* banish Demons, dear one?” she asked pointedly.

“Yes and no,” he answered, wavering a paw before him. “I can cast the spell and banish one at a time, but I couldn’t banish a large group the way Miranda and the One could. I don’t have that kind of power. It’s way beyond me.”

“And *that* is why you are so certain that the Demon Lord will not oppose you,” she said, snapping her fingers.

He nodded. “Why risk his entire army killing the One when I can do it for him? And after the One is dead, he has very little to fear from me, because I can’t do what the One can do. The worst I can do is pin his forces inside a magical prison, and he’ll have plenty of time to find a way to break out of it if he doesn’t kill me before I can pull it off. Demon Lords are actually very patient and very smart. Letting me kill the One is in *his* best interest, and afterwards, well, I’m really not enough of a threat to take seriously. I’m strong enough to beat the One, but not strong enough to be a threat to *him*. In the big picture, in the Demon Lord’s eyes, I’m the best thing that could have come along. A rogue abomination so consumed by hatred that I’ll ignore the bigger threat just to settle a personal grudge. Someone strong enough to destroy the icon of the god that summoned him, too weak to be a direct threat, and too angry to do what’s right.”

“Which is nothing but a feint.”

“Not entirely,” Tarrin said. “The One hurt Kimmie. He *will* pay,” he seethed suddenly. “I will hurt him the only way that matters to him. I’ll take away his *power*. By the time he’s in a position to reform his icon, he’ll have no empire to return to. Bragg and Lorak will make sure of that, by destroying the One’s entire civilization, and hopefully introducing better, more gentle and compassionate gods to take the One’s place. He’ll be a forgotten god of a forgotten time, nothing but a cult, forever raging against what he is and remembering what he once was, how close he was to conquering this world, only to fall short and lose everything. And all because *he dared put his hands on Kimmie*,” he ended with an evil hiss.

“I, I see you have lost none of your sense of poetic justice,” she said carefully. “But will he not be able to simply summon the Demon Lord again?”

He shook his head. “Only a god of a certain stature has the power to summon a Demon Lord the way this one has been. A mortal could summon a Demon Lord, but it would just be a shadow. The One summoned the *real thing*.”

“I understand,” she nodded. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Where is this dinner you promised me?” she asked with a smile.

“At once, your Majesty,” he said dryly. “Tomorrow you’re going to be riding someone else, Dolanna. I can’t be trapped in dragon form.”

“Who?”

Tarrin pointed at Fireflash.

Dolanna laughed wryly. “I think he might find me just a bit too large, dear one,” she protested.

“Not when I’m done. Fireflash knows what’s going to happen. He’s already agreed to it.”

“Agreed to what?”

“To take my place as your mount,” he answered. “Tomorrow morning, I’m going to make him my size—well, my size as a dragon. He’ll literally be a dragon too. After all, the only real difference between him and a gold dragon is size.”

“Well, there are a few differences, dear one,” she protested mildly.

“True, but I can’t Transmute him into a dragon without destroying what he is and replacing it with what he’d become. That would alter his personality, change the very foundation of who and what he is. I won’t do that to him, and I wouldn’t do it even if he agreed to it. Fireflash is quite smart, as smart as any human, so he should do just fine.”

“I’m sure he will,” Dolanna agreed with a smile at the drake. “Will his breath weapons be intact?”

Tarrin nodded. “And *dragon* strength,” he added. “The only difference between him and me in that form will be the magic I can wield, but he can’t.”

“Ah. That should be more than enough, then.”

Fireflash pulled himself up into a sit. “Sssssssssaaaathe,” he hissed.

“He says you’ll be safe,” Tarrin translated.

“I understood him, dear one, and I have every confidence in him. I’m sure you’ll do quite well, my friend.” She looked to Tarrin. “When did you teach him Sharadi?”

“A while ago, when I realized that he’d need to understand it.”

“Clever.”

“Thank you.”

It didn’t take Tarrin long to finish cooking the simple stew, and they shared a quiet meal together, sitting on the blanket by the hovering ball of flame that he had created.

“Thank you for cooking, dear one,” she said, setting her bowl aside.

“You’re more than welcome,” he replied, pouring more into the bowl he’d set on the blanket for Fireflash. “I don’t get to cook much anymore. Mist thinks it’s some kind of scandal. She won’t let me cook if she’s not busy. She’ll let me *help*, but she won’t let me do it myself.”

Dolanna laughed. “That’s not like her.”

“Actually, it is. She’s a better cook, so she can’t fathom why I’d be doing the cooking when she’s better at it. Standard Were-cat mentality, just applied in a different manner, that’s all.”

“Ah, she’s asserting her cooking dominance,” Dolanna said with a slight smile.

“Something like that. I’ve learned quite a bit watching her. She’s *good*.”

“Yes, she is at that,” Dolanna agreed. “I wonder what she’s doing right now.”

“Odds are, she’s still at the Tower, introducing the cubs around, and giving them a chance to meet a few people before she takes them home,” he answered. “She’ll take them back home tomorrow, most likely.”

“I would think she’d immediately go home.”

“No, Zyri has to go back to the Tower, so Mist will use this as a chance for her to take a good impression of it back to Aldreth with her,” he answered. “Besides, Jenna’s there, and the cubs need to get to know my family. After she introduces them to family at the Tower, she’ll take them back to Aldreth to meet my parents, and settle them into the house.”

“I, wonder what Haley is doing,” she sighed.

Tarrin smiled inwardly. “Right now, probably going over the books, with his hands all over the city of Suld,” he answered. “You know Haley, Dolanna.”

She chuckled. “Yes, he has been out of the loop for a while. He must catch up with the goings-on, and get his networks back into proper order. He must get back on track to knowing more about the happenings of Suld than Jenna,” she chuckled.

“That’s a lofty goal,” Tarrin smiled.

“True. But a man has to have a goal to reach for, doesn’t he?” she asked.

“You know, you’re going to have to suspend some of those high-laced Sharadi morals if you’re going to work with Haley,” Tarrin said with a sly smile. “The man owns more brothels than theaters.”

“I have very few of those morals left, thanks to you and your sister,” she answered. “Besides, Sharadi aren’t quite as moralistic as you believe. It’s just that we’ve managed to bring dignity even to occupations such as prostitution,” she said loftily.

Tarrin chuckled. “Yes, yes, all that rigid tradition,” he said with a wave of his paw.

“Tradition is a good thing.”

“It is, but not when it blinds you to the changing nature of the world,” he answered. “That’s always been my biggest worry for the Sharadi, that they would wrap themselves so deeply in their customs and traditions that the world would change, and they’d be smothered by their refusal to change with it.”

“Alexis is a very progressive woman, dear one,” she assured him. “She’s made mention of that very thing, and she works to keep it from happening. She’s raising her successor by hand, so you can be sure that the next queen will be just as progressive as she.”

“Good.”

Dolanna pushed the sleeves of her robe up to her elbows. “Well, you cooked, so allow me to clean,” she offered.

“Knock yourself out, Dolanna,” he said, handing her his bowl.

Dolanna cleaned the dishes and the stewpot with water drawn from the brook. Dolanna washed the stewpot first, then used it to wash the bowls. She then put them away after drying. While she did that, Tarrin erected a single tent, finishing the last stake and rope as she finished the dishes. “Your palace, my Lady,” he said grandly, motioning towards it. “I put your bedroll inside.”

“My thanks, dear one,” she said with a smile. “Aren’t you putting up yours?”

“No, I’m going to sleep by the fire tonight,” he answered. “Let me put up a few Wards to make sure we can sleep safely, and then I think I’m going to go to sleep. I suggest you do the same. We’re leaving before dawn, and things should be settled by sunset tomorrow. One way or another.”

“As you wish, dear one. I will see you tomorrow. Sleep well.”

“Sleep well.”

Tarrin erected those Wards with a quick and almost absent efficiency, removed his clothes, then shapeshifted into his cat form and curled up beside Fireflash. The drake nuzzled his neck fondly, and then they laid down together, closed their eyes, and immediately went to sleep.

Dawn.

The dawn of the last day of the age of the One.

The wind was strong. The clouds raced across the sky with such speed that it would not normally be possible, as the low deck of clouds boiled and tore apart, only to be pushed back together again. The air was warm, unnaturally warm for so much cloud cover, and it was so charged with energy that it was heavy to breathe.

Tarrin stood against that strong wind like a mountain, unmoving, unmovable, his face into the wind as his braid whipped in the breeze behind him. The only parts of him that moved were the braid on his head and the flickering of the colors of his wings, which was but an illusion of the dancing of flame given that the wings themselves did not move at all. He wore his usual clothing, except that he had cast aside his shirt and wore only his black vest, leaving his arms and torso bare. The wind billowed out his vest, but he did not notice it. The wind pulled tightly on his braid, but he did not notice it. The wind caught his wings and threatened to blow him into the air, but he did not notice it. It was as if the wind did not exist, the sky did not exist, that the entire world did not exist. There was only Tarrin, the One, and the fact that by the setting of the sun, only one of them would be left on Pyrosia.

And, Goddess, would the Demon Lord have a major shock.

Today would reshape the face of this world, and this world knew it. That was why the weather was so bizarre. The *potential*, the mere *possibility* of what was coming was starting to directly affect the physical world, because both Tarrin and the One were actively preparing for it...as was the Demon Lord. Without the guiding force of an Elder God to maintain the Balance and keep the forces of nature working smoothly, those forces were much more sensitive to such supernatural forces as two beings with divine powers preparing to do battle. They were directly upsetting nature, and it was starting to show.

Today would change everything. Today would reshape the balance of power on this world. Today...today this world would be freed of the taint that was the One.

With but a gesture, he called his sword to him. It was warm in his paw, it tingled slightly...it knew what was coming. It knew everything. After all, it was a part of him. It was separate from him, with its own will, its own sentience, but it was still a part of him. It knew what was coming, and it knew what had to be done. It was...*excited* about it. It looked forward to this confrontation in a way Tarrin had thought almost a bit crazy. It *wanted* this confrontation. It *wanted* this fight. And it *wanted* to change the world by curing it of the dark infection that was the One.

Today...it would get that chance.

There was no fear in it, which surprised him a little bit. He had no fear at all, not of the One, not of the Demon Lord, not of his entire army. He had not been joking when he told Dolanna that they'd already won. They had. Their victory was an inevitability, an outcome so certain that it would be screaming in Kikkalli's ears if she were here. What was coming was not a struggle, but a culmination of events that could not be stopped, which would end with the same conclusion no matter what the One or the Demon Lord tried to do. They were trapped, ensnared in a trap so cunning, so subtle, so complete that they were pinned into a series of choices that were not choices, which would lead to their downfall. They had no choice in the matter, or Tarrin would claim total victory much faster. They would make all those choices to prolong the inevitable, to buy time to try to find a way out of that trap, but it would be for naught. He had them right where he wanted them, and they would do exactly as he knew they would do because they had no other choice...and it wouldn't be enough. Even if they killed him, it would not stop their defeat.

He was two moves from checkmate, as Keritanima would say.

The godlike intelligences of his adversaries was absolutely irrelevant. The beauty of his plan was that every part of it that set up this ending had been completely out of their control. They had had only one chance to stop it, and the Demon Lord had passed over that chance at the battle at Iron Mountain, when he called off Shaz'Baket and did not allow her to try to kill him. The Demon Lord had his own reasons for leaving Tarrin alive, and now that decision was going to come back to haunt him.

Oh, Tarrin understood that motivation, and that motivation had defeated the Demon Lord before Tarrin ever got within a league of him. That had been the event that had started the dominos, and now they would fall in a line until there were none left.

In Tarrin, the Demon Lord saw an opportunity so appealing that he could not pass it up. And that would cause his ultimate defeat.

Dolanna came up behind him, Fireflash perched on her shoulder. "Strange," she said simply. "The clouds look as if they were made of blood."

"Are you ready?" he asked without looking at her.

"For whatever comes, yes, dear one. I am ready. Should we pack the tent?"

"Leave it, just pack what you'll need for the flight there in a satchel and leave the rest. We can get it later."

"But, the food—"

"Don't worry about it," he said in a calm, serene manner, patting the blade of his sword against the palm of his paw. "All we'll need for today, is this. And my staff."

"If you say so, dear one," she said carefully. "Would you like some breakfast before we set out?"

"No. But you need to eat, Dolanna." He gestured with his free paw, and a large table simply *appeared* just beside her, heavily laden with all manner of foodstuffs."

She gasped. "Have you managed Druidic magic, dear one?"

He shook his head. "That's impossible, Dolanna. It's just a Wizard spell I cast before you woke up. It was just waiting for the trigger to complete it. Arcane magic is pretty thorough, old friend. You'd be surprised how much you can do with it."

"Ah. There's, something..." she said, looking up into the air, her eyes distant and her expression neutral.

"I know," he said, looking at her. "The weather's being affected by the One. It betrays his fear," he said with grim anticipation, the sword in his paw flaring for just a moment with reddish light before returning to normal. "He knows I'm close. He knows that this is the last day he'll ever see Pyrosia. He thinks the Demon Lord will protect him, but he knows deep in his soul that this will be his last day. So the weather betrays that knowledge, even as he denies it to himself."

"Then we should not keep him waiting," she said simply, seating herself at the table.

"My thoughts exactly," he nodded.

While Dolanna had a quick meal, Tarrin used Wizard magic to cause Fireflash to become the size of a dragon. It only took one spell, and a relatively simple spell at that, cast upon Fireflash over and over again. Each casting made him bigger, and bigger, and bigger, until he was finally the proper size. From down there, Tarrin could fully appreciate the fear that he inspired in his dragon form...he felt like an insect standing beside Fireflash. "Now remember, it's going to be a little different," he warned the drake. "Flying is going to be like flying carrying extra weight, but you're not, it's just your size. When you're this big, the dynamics are different. But it's nothing you should

have a problem with, little one, your instincts will let you figure it out.” He collected up the straps that would be used to lash Dolanna to him, and then his feet lifted from the ground as he floated up and over the drake’s head. He landed between his horns, and set to work tying on the straps that would keep Dolanna secure.

She was finished by the time he was done preparing Fireflash for her. He knelt atop the drake’s head and looked down as she smoothed her skirts, and for a moment he marvelled at how lovely she was. Hers was a beauty from within as much as it was without, the radiance of a woman who was certain of herself reinforcing very attractive features. Dolanna was a wonderful woman, and Haley had no idea how lucky he was that she even had interest in him. Only time would tell if Dolanna would find the same feelings for him that he had for her, but at least now...at least now she could *find out*. His gift to her was the only thing he could think of to give her that chance, and not only did it do that, it also ensured that she was *never* turned by accident. The *wish* he used was exceptionally complicated, but it worked, and it worked exactly as he meant it to work. It was set up into the wish that Dolanna could even cancel her immunity and allow herself to be infected. She didn’t know how yet, but in time, that knowledge would simply come to her. In fact, it would come to her in exactly one year.

She may decide never to bother, though. Dolanna’s immunity was absolute, but it was entirely possible for her to have children with Haley, and those children would be nearly as she was. They would be born human, immune to Lycanthropy but lack her unique ability to borrow the powers of a Were-kin that introduced the condition into her, but they would have the ability to cast aside that immunity and embrace Were...with all of the pitfalls that came with the condition. Besides, if she gave up her immunity and became Were, she’d lose her ability to take on the powers of a Were-kin who passed on the infection in all the usual ways.

Either way, he wanted her to have that one thing that had been denied to him...a *choice*.

Two whip-like tendrils extended from inside the slope of his wings, stretching down to where she was. They wrapped around her waist gently, and he waited until she took hold of them in her hands before lifting her up onto Fireflash’s head. He put his paws on her waist once she was safely up top, and she looked up at him curiously. “What is it, dear one?”

He drew the edge of his sword across the pad of his palm, causing blood to boil forth almost immediately. “Here,” he told her, holding his paw towards her. “Be ready, you probably won’t like the way it tastes.”

“What—ah. How long do I need to do this?”

“Until I tell you to stop,” he answered.

She grimaced, then nodded. “I understand the need for it, but it turns my stomach at the thought. I might vomit halfway through.”

“There won’t be any blood to throw up,” he told her. “You’ll absorb it the instant it hits your stomach. Just be strong, old friend. It won’t take long.”

“I certainly hope so,” she said, putting a hand on her stomach, then she blew out her breath and bent to the task before her...to drink his blood. She grabbed hold of his paw with both hands, and began.

To her credit, she didn’t vomit, though she did make any number of revolted faces throughout the entire ordeal. He forced her to drink his blood for well over five minutes,

building up a large reserve of its power within her, which would grant her his strength and regeneration for so long as that power lasted. There was no upper limit to the amount of power she could stockpile within herself, and he forced her to continue taking in his blood, building up that reserve, until he was satisfied that it would last well over three days. “That’s enough,” he said, pulling his paw away from her.

She shuddered violently, wiping at the blood on her mouth and chin with the back of one hand as the other went to her stomach once more. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she said queasily.

“Sit down,” he prompted, helping her to sit between Fireflash’s horns. A lone tendril reached from his wing and wrapped around the handle of a mug on the table, then pulled it up to them. He offered it to her, and she took it and drank deeply and noisily to get the taste of his blood out of her mouth.

“Ohhh, that was *vile*,” she complained, coughing a few times, and then pulling a kerchief from her sleeve to clean her mouth more thoroughly. “I did *not* enjoy that, not one bit.”

“Sorry, but now you’re much safer,” he told her.

“How long will it last?”

“Three days, at *least*,” he answered. “As long as it does, you’ll have my strength, my immunities, and all my Were powers.”

“I, I...good Goddess, do you smell like *that* to other Were-cats?” she asked, giving him a strange look.

“I see it’s kicking in,” he chuckled. “So, do I smell good or bad?”

“I—you smell like—“ she laughed helplessly. “You smell nothing like I would imagine, but exactly the way you should. And it’s actually a rather pleasant scent.”

He nodded. “And now you understand why I can never explain it to others.”

“I do indeed,” she nodded. “It’s like an entirely different world that was just opened up to me.” She breathed in the morning air. “There are so *many*.” She looked at him. “How do you tell them apart?”

“Practice,” he told her. “It’s all about knowing which scents belong to what.” He started tying her down using the straps he’d already placed. “When we get up higher, there won’t be as many. It should help keep you from getting too confused.”

“This will take some practice, that’s for sure,” she smiled. “I have a newfound respect for you, dear one.”

He tugged at the thongs, then knelt by her. She looked at him, and the smile slowly drained from her face. “It’s time to go, Dolanna,” he told her, his expression stony. “Fireflash already knows what to do, so just ride along with him.”

“Are we staying to the plan we made?”

He shook his head. “Not completely. But don’t worry, this won’t be hard for you, my friend. When we get there, Fireflash will keep himself and you well away from the One and the Demon Lord until you’re needed. Just defend yourself and Fireflash if you’re attacked. If you’re not, just wait until I start on the Demon Lord, and Fireflash will fly you in to do your part. *Do not* help me at any time except when you’re supposed to, even if it looks like I’m about to lose. Do you understand?”

“Then why am I there, dear one?” she asked, a little tartly.

“You are there to help me cage the Demon Lord, and *for no other reason*. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand, dear one, though I think you’re wrong.”

“Trust me, Dolanna, I don’t want you anywhere near when I fight the One. I can handle that without you, and I’m going to need you when it comes time to deal with the Demon Lord. And if I die in the process of trapping the Demon Lord, you’re going to be sort of necessary to maintain the cage. So, you getting yourself killed beforehand is going to cause problems...so just don’t do it. Alright?”

“Very well, dear one,” she said with a slight nod.

“Good. Are you ready to go?”

“If we don’t go soon, I’m going to start shaking,” she answered honestly, clenching a hand into a fist, and holding it close to her breast. “We need to go before my fear takes control. I’m terrified, my dear one.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Dolanna. We’ve won. All we’re doing is going to claim the prize.”

“You say that just after warning me that you might die?” she asked archly.

“Even if I die, we’ve won,” he repeated in a simple tone, his expression neutral. “It’s unstoppable, even if I dropped dead right here and now. It would just take longer, and lots more people would die, that’s all. What we’re going to go do is minimize that collateral damage.”

A break in the racing clouds revealed the sun, blood red and low in the sky, illuminating the field in which Fireflash lay, waiting patiently for the call to begin. The light seemed to catch in his fiery wings, causing them to shine almost to the point where they were painfully bright. Dolanna winced away from them, felt him put his paw on her shoulder, then pull away. “It’s time, Fireflash,” he called. “Let’s go.”

Dolanna looked up at him, then shielded her eyes against the light reflecting off his wings, looking down at the top of Fireflash’s head.

Something seemed...odd. She looked up at him again, then looked down once more, just before Tarrin’s feet lifted away from the glittering golden scales, and pulled out of her line of vision. It gnawed at her for long moments, even as Fireflash’s head lurched, and the wind pressing against her face combined with the sudden push under her that told her that the magically grown drake was airborne and climbing higher into the sky. She puzzled over it again and again, until a glance down as Fireflash circled to catch a thermal caught her attention, and she managed to make the connection.

Below her was Fireflash’s shadow on the grassy plain, and that was what had been out of place.

Tarrin had cast no shadow.

Dolanna racked her brain, trying to think of what might have caused that phenomenon, for many long moments. She almost resorted to pounding her forehead with her fists to somehow jar the answer loose, until she finally understood.

She gasped, looking ahead to where Tarrin was, soaring in the sky well ahead of Fireflash, his wings a beacon of light now that the clouds had closed the hole through which the sun had shone for that brief moment, light that reached the ground without casting his shadow.

“Oh, dear one,” she sighed, gripping the thongs around her waist as Fireflash turned harder into a sudden gust, using it to push him higher into the sky, then he turned his nose to the southwest and surged ahead as the wind shifted behind them, pushing them along, even as the wind everywhere else blew in the opposite direction. She shook her head and

folded her hands in her lap as Fireflash picked up speed, hurtling towards their date with destiny.

“You are right, dear one,” she whispered, closing her eyes. “You have already won.”

Pyros.

City of Light. Bastion of the One, capitol city and seat of the Church of the One, the hub of a grand wheel which extended its control over the majority of the known world of Pyrosia.

Pyros.

City of the Damned, a blasted wasteland of lava flows choking the shattered remains of the once grand city, upon which tread the feet and hooves of a vast seething army of Demonkind. Not hundreds, not thousands, not tens of thousands.

Hundreds of thousands of Demons.

They formed a vast ring around a towering, steep-sloped volcano around which the city had been built, the volcano that had ultimately destroyed this once great city, entombing it and its population within a hellish flood of lava. Upon a plateau on the volcano slope, on its western side, stood the faint outline of the foundation of a once massive structure, what had once been the awe-inspiring main cathedral of the One, the center of the god’s power, now nothing but a shadow of its former glory. Standing on that foundation was the last piece of Pyros that remained standing, the alabaster statue of the One, shining and pristine in the ruddy light of the lava which continued to pour down the mountain on either side, a statue which was an icon of the One, the link between him and the world of Pyrosia. Though the statue did not look it, it was still damaged, still not working as it should, limiting the ability of the One to manifest his power within the material plane. Most of the damage had been repaired, but it was not whole.

Standing beside that statue was a creature out of the nightmares of the worst sort of evil monsters that could exist. It was so tall that the statue on its pedestal beside it only came up to its waist, a waist covered in leprous, sickly greenish fur. It stood on two legs that looked like a dog’s legs but ended with hooves instead of paws, and it had four arms. One set of arms were as they should be, but ended in long, wicked, stained bone blades that came to a sharp point, and a second set of arms protruded from the creature’s chest. The head set atop the huge body was a gruesome cross between a dog and a gorilla, with glowing red eyes and large ram’s horns protruding from its head. Two very long, thin, whiplike tails grew from the base of its spine, each ending with a barbed spur.

This creature was a Demon Lord. Its name was both the instrument of summoning and a weapon to use against it, but it preferred to be called *Gruz*, the Lord of the *Glabrezu*...which was a fitting title, for it resembled a four-armed, dog-headed *glabrezu* more than any other creature.

They stood upon that plateau with their eyes to the northeast. They could feel him coming. They knew he was on his way. And they were ready for him.

Oh, Gruz knew that this upstart half god half mortal had thought that he had it all figured out. He knew that this brash abomination thought that he’d fooled them all into thinking he had no power, that he came hurtling towards the One and Gruz himself with a towering confidence of victory so outrageous that Gruz had to be both amused and impressed by it...and perhaps just a little cautious of it. His loyal minion Shaz’Baket had described this half-godling quite well, and stressed that it wasn’t his power that made him

so dangerous, it was his cunning. This one was a fox, sly and devious, almost as cunning as a Demon, and had a demonstrated record of being both startlingly resourceful and amazingly lucky.

Gruz had a contempt for the weak limitation of this foe, but also was forced to admit that that contempt could cost him if he let it consume him. This half-god with his weakened power and his mortal intelligence was less than an insect to the might and mind of a Demon Lord, but Gruz was the first to realize that even an insect could have a poisonous sting that demanded respect. Shaz'Baket had been vehement in her warnings to her Master that this was one foe not to be taken lightly.

And he would not...at least as seriously as a Demon Lord could take a half-god. After all, no matter how cunning he was, how much power he had, he was *still* but a mortal, and thus could be killed with ease.

And when he died, that immortal, *divine* soul would be free of its shell, and ripe for the picking. With a god's soul adding to his power, Gruz could supplant *Morithindaris* and increase his power in the Abyss.

Yes, he would come with his plan and his assumptions, but in the end he would die on the end of one of Gruz's bone blades. Gruz would enjoy the challenge of this mortal who was once a god, see how clever he was, allow him to proceed with his plan and see how good it was, just for the sport of it. And when he'd taken his measure of this mortal with a god's soul, when he was no longer amusing, he would fall to the might of the Lord of the *Glabrezu*.

Then, this mortal's divine soul, and all of the power it contained, would be his.

They flew through the entire day, and in complete silence.

Fireflash soared on his massive wings behind Tarrin, who ghosted through the air as if it was where he was born and raised in the air. His wings shone like the sun under the thick clouds above, which were more ash than water, illuminating them in a way that made them look like blood boiling against a glass, trapped between seconds of the clock and frozen in time. Ahead of them, within view, was the volcano that marked the ruins of Pyros. They were within sight of their goal.

Everything was as Tarrin expected it to be. The ruins of the city and the surrounding land were literally *infested* with Demons...hundreds of thousands of them. It was the majority of the Demon Lord's army present on Pyrosia, waiting for the command to move. They did not have camps in the usual sense; Demons did not sleep, so there were no tents. They needed no light, so there were no fires. There were, however places for them to sit, and vast piles of bones and refuse that marked the remains of those that they had consumed. Demons did not need sleep, and they really didn't need to eat, but they enjoyed the act of it nonetheless...and those vast trash piles were filled with bones of every kind of animal that they could catch, in addition to the bones of humans. The Demons lounged about and waited for orders, entertaining themselves with games of intrigue, games involving terrorizing their future meals, and the occasional bloody altercation amongst themselves.

Beyond the horde of Demons, on the slope of the volcano itself, were where the Demon Lord and the icon of the One were located. He knew *exactly* where they were, even as they knew exactly where he was. They could not hide from one another. They'd felt him coming since he passed over the mountains, and he'd felt their presence as well.

That was where he was going, but he knew that it wouldn't be as simple as flying over the mobs of Demons below and simply landing there. No, they wouldn't allow that, and besides, a slow, inexorable walk through the middle of his forces would set the stage for the Demon Lord to make the next decision that would more tightly cinch the noose around his neck.

For better or for worse, come what may, it was now time. Tarrin had made all the proper preparations, had set things up exactly the way he wanted them arranged. There was no need to worry over it; everything was going to work just fine. There was no reason to worry, no reason to fret, and no reason to be afraid. No matter what happened, whether he lived or died, victory was already his.

There was fear before...but not now. And that was strangely odd. He looked down upon the seething horde of Demonkind, felt the raw power of the Demon Lord eclipsing the One ahead of him, and despite knowing he was no match for the power of the Demon Lord, he had absolutely no fear.

"Dolanna," he called, looking behind himself. "Now we part. Remember, do not help. When the time comes, Fireflash will know, and he will carry you to me. Until then, both of you just stay away; Fireflash, do *not* land. Understand?"

Fireflash gave a deep rumble of understanding, and Dolanna just looked at him with her heart in her eyes. "Be careful, dear one," she finally managed to say.

"I will," he said, suddenly dropping from the sky like a stone, as Fireflash banked away from the ruins of Pyros and started the other way. Tarrin hurtled downward, his expression unchanging as the ground raced towards him, until he spread his wings and arrested his descent. He slowed, then his feet gently touched the tortured earth, and he settled back to the ground.

He was nearly a half a longspan from the closest of the Demons, and they were already charging towards him. No doubt they had all tried to teleport on top of him, but found their power blocked by a powerful Ward which prevented it...but that was something to be expected, and the Demon Lord would not be surprised by this, had probably even warned his minions that it would be probable that they wouldn't be able to do it. The Ward wasn't even half that far out, but they had not even tried.

Tarrin put the blade of his sword in his left paw, looking down at the blackened blade, peering into the metal, looking into it, beyond it, through it, and seeing the truth of it. Odd, that it had been right there before his eyes the entire time, but he had never noticed...or perhaps it had been a simple case of him not wanting to see that truth, stubbornly refusing to accept it, refuse to even acknowledge that it existed.

No longer.

Closing his eyes, he held the sword out at arm's length. His wings erupted in brilliant, incandescent light, brighter than the noontime sun, and then they *dissolved*. His wings diffused into discordant flame, and that flame billowed out away from his back, and then was suddenly pulled around him, sucked into the metal of the blade of his sword, cascading around him to vanish into the blade, which began to glow with an angry red light. It continued until there was nothing left of his wings at all, until all of the fire that they had been was inside the sword.

It was more than simply cosmetic. The wings that had both graced him and cursed him for years were no more. Their flame, and the power that they represented, was now a part of the sword in his paws. The two long slits in his back were empty, were even now

healing over. He no longer possessed any of the powers that he had had while those wings were a part of him. He felt strangely weak, drained, *diminished*, but also in a way, he felt as if he had regained a part of himself that he had lost long ago.

He was once again mortal.

But he held in his paws a weapon that held all of that sacrificed power *in addition* to the power it had already possessed.

Where Tarrin could never become a god because he was mortal, and thus would forever have his power divided between him and the sword, he instead united that power into the sword itself.

He was again a mortal, but he still commanded the power that made him a god, because he commanded the sword. And where his mortal mind was limited, and thus was limited in how it could bring that power to bear, *the sword was not*.

He lowered the sword, which began to glow with an ominous reddish light. It was not fire, it was an aura of red light that emanated from the metal of the blade itself, casting an eerie pall over the scorched ground around him. That reddish light wavered, then shimmered, and then suddenly changed to a brilliant white light that was almost blinding to look upon. He started forward at a slow, measured, almost stately walk, even as the countless hordes of Demons charged towards him after appearing as close as his Ward would allow. They rushed forwards, getting closer and closer, teeth gnashing and claws clacking and voices calling in chilling tones of the expectation of pleasure at rending the flesh from his bones.

Until they came close enough.

The first Demons simply evaporated into a ghastly black smoke as the light from the sword touched them, as divine power lashed out at the Demons and eradicated them. Quite a few of them were disintegrated by the power of the sword before they could manage to skid to a halt and retreat, for the distance of Tarrin's Ward was *well* past the radius of the sword's ability to destroy Demons, cutting off their easiest means of retreat.

They all backed *way* off, and the Were-cat simply stood there a moment, as if to allow them to fully appreciate just what he had done, and how it would be virtually impossible for them to get close enough to do him harm. One of them, a half-breed Alu, cast a spell at him from the distance between them. The spell, a bolt of lightning, arced across the empty space of hundreds of spans, then the light of his sword overwhelmed the spell and caused it to simply vanish.

A foot lifted from the ground, and moved forward before coming to rest on hardened lava. That single step started Tarrin towards the volcano, first at a slow, stately pace, but a pace that got slightly faster with each step. A lumbering step became a walk, a walk became a gait, a gate became a stride, and that stride evolved into a run. Head low, sword held to the side of him, Tarrin raced along the shattered land in a direct line for the plateau where the One's icon rested, and the Demons scrambled to get out of his way. Many did not, vanishing into puffs of black smoke when the power of the sword touched them and destroyed them, until they began to part the way well in front of him. With unified action, many Demons began trying to create traps in his way, creating large walls of iron or steel, or using magic to excavate huge pits which were filled with spikes. It was a clever idea, but they discovered that their efforts were fruitless. As the Were-cat reached the traps, his body simply *passed through* the walls, or his feet tread across empty air as if it were solid ground, allowing him to traverse the pits.

They could not attack him directly, they could not attack him with magic, and they could not impede his progress as he charged towards the icon of the One. They all simply retreated well out of his path, as the Demon Lord obviously ordered his minions to simply step aside, for they could do nothing to stop him anyway.

The air got hotter and hotter as Tarrin rushed into the ruined city of Pyros, and became charged with more and more energy as he got nearer and nearer the One. He could feel the fear of the One grow moment by moment, as well as his distrust of the Demon Lord, who seemed to be doing nothing to try to stop him. And what was more, both the One and the Demon Lord could sense the feeling of complete and utter confidence that was within him, as well as his total lack of fear.

He raced through the ruins of Pyros, of buildings half buried under hardened lava flows, along streets covered with dozens of spans of black rock, raced over what was the grandest and most heavily populated city on Pyrosia, raced through a city he had personally destroyed. His feet tread over the unmarked, unknown graves of tens of thousands, those who had not managed to flee in time, those whom he had killed, but over which he felt no remorse. The blame for their deaths lay wholly on the One, who had trapped Tarrin into a duel in this city so his worshippers could watch him and bask in their glory, glory that became terror when the One nearly lost, and Tarrin's counterstroke caused the volcano to erupt.

And again, it was about to happen, but this time the onlookers would be Demons, watching a battle between man and god, a battle that would decide the fate of this world.

A battle that was utterly meaningless in that regard, whose only intent was to save as many lives as possible, on both sides. The humans that followed the One would be needed to fight the Demons, and would also need to be here to help rebuild this world and make it a place where the One was no longer welcome.

There was no fear, only excitement, expectation, as he started bounding up the ledge that led to the plateau where his adversaries waited. His feet touched the warm basalt for just instants as he seemed to float up the shard incline, bounding from footstep to footstep with his sword held low in his right paw and his left before him, fingers spread, even as he began to chant in the discordant language of Arcane magic, speaking the words of a spell. It was a spell that only required words, and they were recited with perfection despite the fact that he was moving at great speed. He rose higher and higher, closer and closer to the lip, continuing to chant his spell without interruption.

It was timed to be completed just as he crested the plateau, and his timing was utterly perfect. He spoke the last word of the spell just as his foot pushed away from the last. A billow of flame erupted from his left paw, even as he closed his eyes and whispered, "Very good, Tsukatta," as the other sword that he had asked the *samurai* to send into the Astral appeared in his paw.

Tarrin ascended from below, directly into the line of sight of both the icon of the One and the Demon Lord, who looked oddly like a *glabrezu* except for the sword-like bone spurs on the ends of his outer arms instead of pincers. As he cleared the ledge, both of them attacked him with raw, naked power, the might that beings of their kind could bring to bear.

Tarrin was inundated with magical power, a pair of coherent blasts of it at its primal state, nothing but unfocused magical power. It surrounded him, but did not touch him,

for the sword in his paws resisted that awesome might, caused it to part before him, leaving him safe.

He landed on the edge of the plateau, his face emotionless. They both stared at him for a long moment, but what was more, they stared in shock at the sword he held in his paws.

That close to it, they could fully assent the weapon, and they finally understood that it truly was *all of his power*, and power he could command. By sacrificing his power, he created something even stronger than the sum of Tarrin and Sword. Now there was only *the sword*, and its might was more than enough to stand against their attack.

He threw down the sword that he had called from the Astral and gripped his black-bladed sword in both paws, holding the leather-wrapped hilt, wrenching his paws around it to get a feel for its weight and balance. “You knew it would come to this,” Tarrin told them. “Even summoning that monster in front of you isn’t going to save you, One. I’m here for your head, and I won’t leave without it.”

“Brave words for a mortal who now faces *two* gods,” the One sneered, snapping his wings out involuntarily before folding them behind him again.

“I’m not afraid of gods,” he answered in a low, measured tone. “A shame our first meeting won’t be for very long, Demon Lord,” he told them towering monstrosity behind which the One stood, keeping it between him and the Were-cat who had nearly destroyed his icon the last time they met.

Oh, I’m sure I’ll become quite familiar with you, once I take that sword from you and then take your soul, it answered hungrily.

“You’ll be getting a much closer look at it, once it’s rammed down your throat,” Tarrin answered.

Are you that insane, half-breed? he asked in genuine amusement. *You would fight a god and a Demon Lord with nothing but a sword that holds what little power you once possessed and a mundane weapon pulled from the ether?*

“Oh, I’m not going to fight you, Demon,” Tarrin said, narrowing his eyes. “I’ll leave that task to my shadow. He’ll keep you busy until I’m done with the One. Come out, shadow,” Tarrin called. “Your sword is waiting for you.”

A spectral paw, like a Wraith’s version of a Were-cat’s paw, slowly appeared from within the rock. The dark fingers closed around the hilt of the sword, and then the form of the shadow, misty and indistinct, rose up from the rock, taking on a humanoid form. Two glowing green slits appeared where the head would be, forming the eyes, and that spectral image hefted the sword in both paws, holding it low and ready. The sword in its paws then slowly expanded, grew longer, the blade turned dark, until it was a perfect replica of the weapon in Tarrin’s grip.

The Demon Lord looked at this hazy silhouette, and its glowing red eyes narrowed, then widened in shock.

“That’s right, you can’t sense it at all, can you?” Tarrin asked. “Not even your much-venerated god-like powers can sense it, can they? I wouldn’t think so. After all, I made it just for you, Demon. I even named it in your honor. Demon Lord, meet Demon’s Bane. I’m sure you’ll be very *excited* to make his acquaintance momentarily.”

It is impossible! the Demon Lord erupted in obvious dismay. *How have you done this? It is not possible! You are no god, you are a mortal!*

“What goes on?” the One asked suspiciously.

It is a shadow! the Demon Lord exclaimed, its face both shocked and oddly amused.

A *shadow*. A magical construct, blessed with its own driving sentence, and powered by magic, the creation of a god that could actually outlive the god itself. Tarrin had had intimate experience with one of these constructs, because one had nearly killed him, it had forced his divine powers to reveal themselves. Tarrin understood the power that a shadow could possess...in some ways, they could be more powerful than the god who created it. This particular shadow had been created for one purpose, and one purpose alone.

To kill Demons.

And it had specific abilities that would allow it to pursue this task with haste and efficiency. These abilities were not overwhelmingly magical...in fact, they weren't very powerful at all. After all, they couldn't be, because its creator was not a true god. But for what this shadow was designed to do, those abilities would be absolutely devastating against the foes for which it had been created to destroy.

Tarrin wondered how Val would feel if he knew that his shadow had provided Tarrin with a tool to help save this world, by showing him how nasty they could be.

The Demon Lord smirked. *Cleverly done, half-breed. I didn't expect this of you, it will make my victory over you that much sweeter.* It raised one of the hands protruding from its chest and opened its palm towards them—

—and *nothing happened*.

Its face was a paragon of shock and dismay. It took a step back, then raised both its sword-ending arms, and again, nothing happened.

What is this? it demanded, its glowing red eyes widening.

“All your power and all your intelligence, and you forget the basics,” Tarrin said with an evil, slight smile. “This shadow inhibits the powers of any Demon in its proximity. It's part of his very nature. You may be a Demon Lord, you may have power equal to a god, but *your power is still based on your Demonic nature*, and because of that, *even you are subject to my shadow's ability to block a Demon's power.*” He pointed his sword at the Demon Lord. “There he is, Bane. Go get him.”

Without a word, without any sound, the hazy silhouette started walking forward, directly towards the Demon Lord.

That gruesome face was amazed and shocked, and then it laughed, a hideous sound. *Well done!* it complemented. *Shaz'Baket was not lying when she warned me not to underestimate you, half-breed. You are everything she described, and more. But you have made one fatal error. Do you think that I'd be afraid to enter a physical fight? You may have found a way to block my power, but I know how to use these!* he proclaimed, holding out his bone-blade ended arms.

“Then you are in for the shock of your life,” Tarrin whispered under his breath as he turned towards the One. He made no speeches, no declarations. He simply raised his sword and narrowed his eyes, then rushed forward.

The One looked uncertain. He had real fear of Tarrin, of his power, but his arrogance would not allow him to simply flee. His eyes were locked on that glowing sword for a long second, as he obviously was trying to estimate how much power it had, and how the Were-cat intended to use it. He seemed to decide, presenting his shield to Tarrin, which immediately burst forth with intense light, then released a volley of the One's magical power.

The Were-cat didn't bother to try to block it. He almost instantly lunged aside, never turning away from the One, sliding aside and allowing the burst of divine power to simply scream by his right side. The One backed away, turning his shield towards him again, desperately trying to keep the Were-cat from getting close enough to use that weapon. The One had learned the hard way in their last encounter that god or no god, Tarrin was a better fighter than him, and it was obvious that the Were-cat fully meant to exploit that advantage by making their battle a physical confrontation. As before, the One's greatest advantage remained only so long as he could stay away from the Were-cat.

With a thrust of his wings, the One rose away from the ground, and then grinned with malicious glee when he realized that the Were-cat was not following, understood that when Tarrin unified his power into the sword, he had sacrificed his ability to fly. Tarrin looked up at him with cold eyes, his expression like stone, even as the first howls of pain began to issue from the Demon Lord.

The shadow had gotten close enough, and now the Demon Lord understood the lethal nature of his adversary.

Tarrin and the One both spared a glance. The shadow, Demon's Bane, only came up to the Demon Lord's thigh, but that made absolutely no difference. It had its sword raised and was actively parrying one of the bone blades of the Demon Lord, and in that touch there was a raking, dancing arc of magical energy, erupting from the point of contact, pulling away, and then being sucked down into the darkness of the shadow itself. The hazy nature of the shadow seemed to fall away as that magical light was drawn into it, making its form more distinct, sharper, more *solid*. The shadow was feeding on the energy of the Demon Lord like a parasite, consuming it to fuel itself. Though the shadow could never consume a being of the Demon Lord's power, whose power was limitless, its draining touch would cause him intense pain. And every touch made the shadow stronger and stronger.

You, you, you bastard! his mental voice screamed with outrage. Then, for some unearthly reason, he *laughed!* *Clever and devious! You are more of a worthy opponent than I thought, half-breed!*

Now he understood the nature of this opponent. It could not be touched by a Demon, because the shadow consumed Demonic energy. Even a touch was enough, it allowed the shadow to drain away the energy that a Demon used to form a physical body within this mortal plane, and if it could keep that contact long enough, drain away *all* of that power and destroy the Demon's mortal form, "killing" it. And a Demon could not use its powers against it. The only way to stop it was to fight it and destroy it using weapons and magic that were not Demonic in origin, things the shadow could not feed upon.

Weapons that the Demon Lord did in fact possess.

Jumping back and away from the shadow, the Demon Lord began to chant in the language of magic, preparing to cast a Wizard spell.

Tarrin fixed his attention again on the One, leaving his shadow to keep the Demon Lord busy...that was its role in this fight. Lock the Demon Lord down, prevent him from aiding the One if in fact he did attempt to help the wounded god rather than simply let Tarrin destroy him...or simply to provide a convenient excuse for the Demon Lord *not* to help, by keeping all of his attention squarely on Tarrin's shadow. The One unleashed another volley of his power, which thundered down towards the ground-bound Were-cat,

but Tarrin simply swatted the attack aside with his sword, causing it to rage off into the clouds above. The Were-cat closed his eyes and laid the blade of his sword in his left paw, bowing his head as he entered into communion with the divine energies within his weapon. Now was the time to strike, while the Demon Lord was engaged with the shadow, while it was either deliberately or unintentionally leaving the One vulnerable. He had to strike *quickly*, he had to eliminate the One as fast as possible, before the Demon Lord took measure of the situation, stepped back to look at the situation with a longer eye and understood the *real* reason he had made the shadow, understood the shadow's true purpose, and tried to destroy it.

A nimbus formed around the Were-cat, a wispy aura of soft red light, a nimbus that curled away and evaporated like mist in the wind. The blade lost its brilliant white glow, and instead burst into flame, becoming so intense that the rock beneath the Were-cat began to glow red-hot, as the clothes on the Were-cat's body were instantly reduced to ash, leaving him nude. The nimbus around him became painfully bright, until it was as if the sun had come down to earth and rested on the side of the volcano.

Tarrin's form was lost in the brightness, nothing but a dark silhouette in the blazing light, until he opened his eyes. They blazed with the same light that surrounded him, blazed with the power of his sword.

Now it was time to see where the Demon Lord's true intentions lay.

Taking the sword in both paws, he turned on one foot, then brought it over his head, as if to cleave an imaginary foe before him in half. He whipped it over his head, trailing an arc of fire, and levelled the tip at the One. Fire erupted from the blade in a spiralling cone, twisting around itself, and it raced towards the One at speeds that defied imagination. The One raised his shield to deflect the attack.

The look on the face under that helmet was one of consternation when the spiral of fire separated into a multitude of small lances of flame, splitting in every direction like petals in an opened flower. They blossomed out, going out wide in every direction, then turned back towards the One. There was no earthly way that the One could stop them all with his shield.

Tarrin learned from experience, and he had intimate experience with the special properties of the One's shield.

The One was forced to race upwards, get all of the lances of flame in front of him, then he struck at them with his own power. But the lances all veered away as a raging blast of the One's divine power tried to inundate them, actively avoiding the One's attempt to destroy them. Like a horde of angry wasps, the lances of fire swarmed around the One's power, weaving and bobbing in a dizzyingly fast flicker of motion that was intended to confuse the onlooker. The One evaded again, this time going down, then formed a defensive barrier of power. The lances struck the barrier of his power and were nullified, in a chain of angry washes of flame against that magical defense.

But the lances were not the attack, they were nearly the diversion, the diversion intended to cause the One to turn that shield *away* from Tarrin.

With a roar of fury, Tarrin levelled the tip of his sword at the One, and the sword responded. It attacked the One with everything it had, all the power that it could muster. The very power that the gods of Sennadar had feared was loosed at the One, in an all-or-nothing attempt to destroy his icon, and destroy it *right now*.

The One turned, and saw it coming. He struggled to get his shield around in time, knowing that the barrier of divine power he had erected to stop the lances of fire would not be enough to stop *this*, not in his injured condition. “Help me!” he screamed, knowing that it was too late.

And the Demon Lord was there. It had already been moving towards the One, and managed to get between him and the Were-cat in time to intercept the attack. It struck the Demon Lord fully, pushed him back on his massive feet, but did him no harm. The power of the sword was not enough to do injury to this foe. The Demon Lord held his ground against that torrent of divine power, fixing Tarrin with a hideous grin of expectation, of anticipation. *And now you know you cannot do me harm.*

“And now I know where you stand,” Tarrin answered, taking one paw off his sword, and then closing his fist and whipping his paw to the side. “Next time, pick a better partner, One. Yours just killed you.”

“He protects me! He—*urk!*” the One gasped, as the black bladed sword of Tarrin’s shadow plunged itself into his back, directly between his wings. The black tip of the sword erupted from the chest of the One’s armor, as dancing motes of pure energy poured from the edges of the sword. The shadow took hold of its sword with both paws, then picked up the One by hefting the blade into the air. The One squirmed, dropping his own sword and grabbing the black blade, trying to pull himself off of it. His wings thrashed, tried to strike at the shadow, until he realized that the weapon was not of enough divine power to do the icon true harm. He calmed down, focused himself, gathered his divine power through his icon and prepared to destroy the shadow.

The Demon Lord looked back for an instant, and that instant was all Tarrin needed. He charged forward with his sword held lightly in his paw, then took it up in both paws as he neared his monstrous foe. The Demon Lord looked back to him, then raised his bone-bladed arms and prepared to meet Tarrin’s charge weapon to weapon. Just as the Demon Lord lunged, stabbing at him with both of its bladed arms, Tarrin vaulted into the air, higher, and higher, almost as if he were flying. He ascended over the Demon Lord’s chest, over his shoulders, until he was over its ugly head, looking down at him with his eyes blazing with the power of his sword, even as the Demon Lord continued lunging forward, carried by his own momentum.

With the lightest of touches, Tarrin’s foot came down on the back of the Demon Lord’s neck. The touch of it made his flesh creep, as he came into contact with pure, unadulterated *evil*. But that touch was only fleeting, as the Were-cat used the titanic body of the Demon Lord as nothing more than a stepping stone. He pushed off from the Demon Lord, his braid and tail whipping behind him in the wind as he hurtled towards the One, who had been distracted by his shadow for that one brief moment that Tarrin had needed.

The One looked back at the last instant, as Tarrin streaked down towards him with his sword pulsating with a hungry light. His eyes widened, and he brought up his shield, far faster than Tarrin expected. The sword struck the shield with a resounding *CLANG*, and a blinding flash of light erupted from that contact, as the power of the sword attacked the power of the One directly, a battle of powers that Tarrin could almost sense, the power of one god in direct conflict with another, but contained within the restraints of two mortal objects.

The power of the contact knocked Tarrin backwards. He slid across the ground on a foot and one knee, sparks flying around his sword and his right arm. The One was knocked back as well, sliding back to his sword, which he reached down and picked up quickly, even as Tarrin's shadow charged on silent, dark steps towards the One's back. The Demon Lord turned and raced back towards them, his blades glistening in the light emanating from Tarrin's sword and the One's shield.

So, that's the way the Demon Lord was going to play it. His intention was completely clear. That was fine by Tarrin.

The Demon Lord bore down on Tarrin as the One turned to face the shadow, trading targets by some unspoken communication. That was wise, given the shadow's ability to inflict pain on the Demon Lord, and siphon away his energy to make itself stronger. Tarrin turned the blade of his sword down even as he rose back on his feet, then drove it into the stone before him, sinking half the blade into the rock. The blade flashed with fire, and then the hilt began to glow with warm, soft white light. Tarrin spoke a single word of Arcane magic, and his staff, which rested with the pack a distance away from them, appeared in his paw. He took it into the center grip, set his feet, and met the charge of the Demon Lord squarely.

Bone blades whistled through the air, striking with immense force, but they found in the ordinary-looking staff an obstacle through which they could not slice. He turned aside both lightning-fast thrusts of those bladed spurs, then lunged directly forward and within the reach of the arms that grew from the Demon Lord's chest, arms ending with hands that had wickedly long claws on the fingertips. Those hands reached out from him, but he slid between them with the ease of a water skimmer sliding across the surface of a pond, then spun away from a strong downward stab from one of those bone blades. The Demon Lord bulled forwards, looking to smother under his much smaller adversary.

"*Mingen Doritae!*" Tarrin shouted. The tip of his staff began to glow with a bluish light, and when he struck that glowing tip against the stone, it caused a shockwave of seismic force. The Demon Lord staggered backwards as the One vaulted into the air to avoid it, but his attempt to get into the air was met with another squeal of pain as the shadow simply manifested itself above the icon's feathered wings, dropped onto his back, and pierced the tip of the blade into the back of the One's head. It again did no lasting damage, about as much damage as a mundane weapon could do to Tarrin, but there was no doubt that it had enough of a magical effect to cause considerable pain. "*Botthra Kotha Jhezeth!*" Tarrin called, causing a pinpoint of light to form over his free paw, which suddenly expanded into a ball of blue fire. He hurled that ball of fire directly at the Demon Lord, who himself chanted in the language of Arcane magic, the words of the spell that counteracted magic.

"*Vosha Kemuninae Gara—*" he began, and his staff began to pulse with a crackle of electrical energy. "*—Vordatathrasza Wokka Jekadi!*" He thrust the end of the staff at the Demon Lord, whose counterspell had destroyed his ball of Icefire, and a raging blast of lightning issued forth from the end of the staff.

"*Vishu!*" the Demon Lord snapped, holding out the two hands growing from his chest, forming a brilliant, scillinting shield of magical light. The lightning struck the scillinting shield and was absorbed into it, causing a storm of arcing lightning to dance across its surface before dissipating. The Demon Lord's eyes went to Tarrin, and then to his sword, driven into the stone just behind the Were-cat, and back to him. There was no

doubt that the Demon Lord was now considering how to claim that prize for himself...all he had to do was get past the Were-cat to get it. And the Were-cat had correctly deduced that the best way to do battle with the Demon Lord was through *magic*, not *weapons*. He was a Demon Lord, but he was still vulnerable to the power of Wizard magic, as were all creatures, great and small. The Demon Lord had a strong resistance to the effect of the magic, but that resistance only went so far when the spells were being cast by one such as Tarrin, one with a powerful affinity for magic and its use. Tarrin's advantage nullified the Demon Lord's defense, causing them to stand on even ground, and forcing the Demon Lord to use magic to protect himself from Tarrin's spells.

Tarrin chanted loudly and precisely in the language of Arcane magic, intoning the spell that would allow him to cast the next spell without using a material component. That done, he dropped his staff and began chanting once again, this time making several gestures with both paws. The Demon Lord's eyes widened when he heard the words, when he realized what spell that the Were-cat was going to cast, which caused him to charge forward to stop the Were-cat from completing that spell. They were the words from the Meteor Strike spell, a spell that could wreak devastation down on the battlefield, a spell so powerful that even the Demon Lord and the One would be subject to its might.

Tarrin continued his chanting surely and without hesitation, even as he watched the Demon Lord charge at him, staring down Death Himself in the face. The bone blades flashed in the ruddy light, getting closer and closer, but the sight of them did not break Tarrin's concentration. The Demon Lord fixed Tarrin with a hideous grin when he counted the steps even in mid run and realized he would reach the Were-cat before the spell was completed, he would interrupt the spell and prevent its use.

And yet the Were-cat stubbornly continued to cast it.

Just before the blades reached him, Tarrin broke the spell and shouted a single word, an arcane word of such power that the word itself was the spell. It was a Power Word, the word of *blind*, and Tarrin shouted it at the top of his lungs. All those who heard the uttering of the Power Word were struck by it and affected by its might. The Demon Lord staggered in his run as the spell struck him and caused nothing but darkness to cover his eyes, and the One too staggered backwards with his shield arm over his face, trying to use his divine power to clear the effect of the spell, and then reverting to chanting in the language of the gods to cast a spell that cured the effects of blindness and blinding spells. Tarrin stepped aside easily as the Demon Lord ambled past, his tail hooking his staff, flipping it up into his paw, and then he reared back and smashed the staff into the Demon Lord's ankle. The leg shuddered and hooked into the other leg, and the Demon Lord, with a howl of surprise, slammed into the stone and skidded several spans on his side.

Tarrin quickly chanted the spell that allowed him to cast the next spell without a material component, before the Demon Lord and the One cleared the effects of the Power Word. He made a single motion to his shadow, who then disengaged and rushed past him, then started running down the side of the volcano, quickly becoming hard to see in the growing haze and ruddy red light that infused the air. It raced out of sight, and in moments, the Demon Lord was beyond the shadow's ability to block its power.

Foolish move, the Demon Lord taunted. *Now you are mine*.

"No, now my shadow gets to eat your army, one Demon at a time," Tarrin retorted as the monstrous Demon Lord regained his hooved feet. "They can't sense him, and they'll never see him coming. One by one, your army will fall, until he's eaten *all of them*."

I have already warned them of your shadow.

“Warned?” Tarrin said, then he laughed scornfully as the One turned to face him, clearing himself of Tarrin’s spell. “Care to do a headcount, Demon? You’ve already lost a few.” He spread his feet and raised his staff in the center grip. “As long as I hold you here, he will chew your army up, until he’s killed enough to make you being here pointless. After all, after you recover from *destroying the One*, you won’t have enough Demons left to finish taking over this world, will you?”

You will not last long enough for it to matter.

“Even if you kill me, you can’t stop my shadow. It knows which Demons to avoid until it’s strong enough to kill them, and you can’t protect all of them forever. It will remain here, slowly eating away your army, until there’s nothing left. You may destroy me, kill the One, and destroy all life on this world, but my shadow will make sure that you will *never own* this world. Every Demon it consumes makes it stronger, and after it’s killed enough, it will be strong enough to destroy even *you*. In the end, you will have accomplished nothing but your own humbling return to the Abyss with only the souls of the mortals of this world. The true prize, the power of this plane, will be denied to you. I’ve already made sure of it. So go ahead, strike me down,” he said, throwing his staff down spitefully. “You have *already lost*. All that’s left for you now is venting your rage.”

You fail to see the second option, he almost purred. *I send enough Demons back to the Abyss to deny your shadow the chance to get that strong, and then I hunt it down and destroy it. Then I simply summon my army back.*

“And you lose time. And time’s an issue, isn’t it?” he asked, carefully gauging the distance to the One, who was now listening to this exchange with rapt attention. “And if I’m dead, the One has no reason to keep you here, does he? It would look a little odd to him if you refused to return to the Abyss after I’m gone.”

The Demon Lord’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Tarrin gestured, and his sword simply appeared in his paw. “After all, the only reason you’re here is to protect the One from me, and from my power. Without the threat of me, he has no reason to keep you here. Your entire plan for this world hinges on the threat I pose to the One. Everything that keeps you here is right here in my paw,” he said, holding his sword out for them to see. “Without this, you have no reason to be here.”

Tarrin took the sword’s blade in his left paw, and fixed the Demon Lord with a cold, brutal stare. “Alright then, Demon, start explaining.”

Tarrin took the blade in a firm grip, raised the sword to a level with his chest, and then struck it over his knee.

The sweet chiming *tang* echoed across the volcano’s plateau, as two sets of eyes stared in muted shock as Tarrin took his precious sword, containing all of his power that was his as a god, and *broke it*.

The blackened blade chimed like a bell as it snapped in two, and both pieces of it flared with sudden intense light, brighter than the sun, light that attracted every eye for longspans in every direction, light that lingered for a long, mute moment, as even the sound of the wind died away and left nothing but a bright, warm light that cast its brilliance over the combatants, the Demons, and the ruins that had once been Pyros. That light then began to wane, and then slowly faded away to darkness. There was no great

explosion of force, no earthquake, no titanic release of endless power. There was only light, and that light waned like the setting of the sun, until there was nothing left.

The two pieces of Tarrin's sword were dark and dull and no longer had any sense of the power that they had contained.

He cast them aside absently, and stood there, naked as the day he was born, defiantly glaring into the eyes of the Demon Lord. The two pieces of Tarrin's sword, the hilt and base of the blade, and the remainder of the blade, clattered across the rock of the volcano and then came to a halt, now nothing more than pieces of metal. The power that it contained was gone, faded away to nothing with the light that had illuminated the ruins of Pyros.

"Alright, Demon. Start talking, and you'd better talk *very* fast."

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! the Demon Lord raged in absolute fury, his eyes blasting forth with an unholy blaze of red light, light that wisped from his eye sockets as he understood what the Were-cat had done. With one act, with the breaking of that sword, he had forced the Demon Lord's hand, and who could not now complete his plan to his satisfaction. If he sent his Demons away to protect them from Tarrin's shadow, he wouldn't have the force on hand to defeat the One, and would have no viable reason to bring them back. If he attacked the One here and now, he would lose many of those Demons, and that shadow would still be out there to whittle away what force remained. Either way, the utter certainty of his conquest of this world was no longer guaranteed. He might still win whichever way he tried to play it, but now the outcome was not a given.

The Demon Lord knew at that moment that Tarrin Kael may die here and now, but it no longer mattered in the grand scheme of things.

He had *won*.

Damn you, half-breed! I will rip the soul from your body and torment it for all eternity! his thought thundered across the ruins, a pale shadow of the true fury and outrage that burned in the Demon Lord's being. He summoned his power, *all* of it, his hatred and fury fueling his desire to annihilate the Were-cat so thoroughly that nothing would remain. Tarrin put a single foot behind himself, as if to brace himself, and crouched down, his eyes narrow and his tail twitching as he watched the aura of power surround the Demon Lord. The hate was a tangible thing surrounding the hideous beast before him, pure hatred, pure malevolence, and it was all focused on him. It raised those bone-bladed arms, preparing to unleash its final blow as its power focused and prepared, and Tarrin quickly called out but four words in the language of Arcane magic.

"Kormarathan orichamalsi bete sinthoriacaritoridae!"

A blast of power raged from the Demon Lord, more power than Tarrin or the One combined could unleash, even if both were completely whole, an unimaginable release of pure power, Demonic in nature, but no less potent than that which could be unleashed by a god. It was as much power as the mortal world could bear without tearing the very fabric of reality, and its passage through the space between them caused that fabric to warp, to threaten to tear. It rampaged in a direct line towards the naked and exposed Were-cat, who had nothing to protect himself against that unimaginable attack.

The Were-cat made a single gesture with his left paw, then knelt and presented his forearm to that unadulterated blast. The air before him shimmered, wavered, then that

wavering took on color and form, becoming silvery in appearance, and then bright, and then it was nothing but a reflection of what was before it.

It was the One's shield.

Though Tarrin and that shield could never withstand that kind of power, the One's shield had its own special ability, and that was the ability to reflect magic and power. The One had used it against him, and now he would use it against them.

Within the raging torrent of the Demon Lord's power, Tarrin knelt behind the shield, braced by the ground, teeth gritted and tail sticking straight out as he struggled to hold the shield the way he was supposed to, the words of Azakar drifting through his mind.

Shield use is a game of angles, Tarrin. If you present a good angle to the attack, it glances off your shield and overextends your opponent, which lets you strike back before he can recover. A bad angle will push you out of position and give your opponent a free shot at you..

Tarrin kept his body rigid, presenting that good angle towards the attack of the Demon Lord, which sent it *right back at him*.

The Demon Lord didn't understand what had happened at first, because it couldn't see because of its own attack. It only knew that Tarrin had not been vaporized by his attack, because he could still sense him.

His eyes widened when he saw what was coming, when he realized that somehow, some way, the Were-cat had somehow turned that attack back on him, but it came so fast that he had no time to react.

The Demon Lord's form vanished within an avalanche of power, a portion of his own attack sent back at him. There was an audible roar, a roar of *pain*, and then the Demon Lord was picked up off his hooves and sent catapulting through the air, soaring out over the steep side of the volcano, somersaulting through the air limply as he tumbled towards the hellish landscape hundreds of spans below.

He had been right. Tarrin could not hurt the Demon Lord, not with the power he possessed...but the Demon Lord could hurt *himself*.

Far below, the Demon Lord landed with a thundering crash into the rock-choked ruins of Pyros. He tumbled limply as he continued down the gentle slope at the base of the volcano, shattering half-buried buildings in his rolling crash, until he came to a stop up against the remains of a large warehouse. His eyes were closed, and he did not move. He was not dead, but being subjected to his own attack had done serious damage to him.

The One stood there, eyes goggled, mouth agape, staring in mute shock at the shield that was now in his opponent's grasp, a shield that, so long as he held it, insured that the One would not try a similar attack. "H—H—How?" he stammered weakly. He was so surprised that he didn't even think to attack when the Were-cat threw aside the shield and squared off against him with nothing but his bare paws.

"Magic," he said as his eyes slowly drained of color, and the wispy nimbus of Magelight surrounded his paws. Tarrin no longer had the sword, no longer had that link back to Sennadar...but he no longer needed them.

The power to reach back into Sennadar had never been a part of the sword in the first place, it had been his all along, because of what he was. The sword merely served as a focus, as an amplifier that allowed him to use that ability more clearly. But now that he understood, now that he knew the truth, he no longer needed its help to do something that he had been born to do.

“Y—You would still fight?” the One asked incredulously. “I see the truth of the Demon now, outworlder. You have shown me my error in calling him here. I am no longer your enemy. We should unite and destroy him together.”

“There are no second chances,” Tarrin said as his entire body slowly limned over with Magelight, as Tarrin reached back, reached through to the Weave, and called to its power. “And I was never one to be merciful. I came here to kill you, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. The Demon Lord was nothing but an obstacle in my path. You are and always were my primary objective. I’ll deal with *him* after I destroy *you*.”

The One gasped, staring at him, then the eyes behind that visor hardened. He made a gesture towards Tarrin, and his shield floated up off the ground and rushed towards him. “Very well, *fool*,” he spat. “I was willing to join you against him, but if you wish to die here by *my* hand, so be it. Without your sword you are nothing but a mortal trickster.”

“You’re right, I’m mortal,” Tarrin said as his entire body shimmered with power, so much power that even the One took notice. The Magelight around him coalesced even as it pulled him off the ground, shimmering into the concave star which marked a *sui’kun* at the height of his power. United in a common interest with the Goddess, he was now her direct instrument, and the power of Sorcery poured into him across the dimensions, faster than it ever had when he had the sword, with utter clarity and motion, because he finally *understood*. “But I’m also something else, One. Something you should fear.”

“I fear no mortal!” he screamed, raising his sword.

“I am a *Mi’Shara*,” Tarrin hissed. “Now find out what that means for yourself!”

The rushing sound of huge wings preceded a blast of wind, just as a monstrous gold dragon soared into view as it flew around the cone of the volcano, flying into view. “Fireflash, *NOW!*” Tarrin screamed, and the drake-turned-dragon roared a mighty cry of understanding, and flew directly over the plateau. Tarrin reached up with both paws and unleashed a portion of his power straight up, aiming at the dragon itself. The One did not understand what he was doing, because he had no experience with the magic that Tarrin was using.

That outreach of power rose up, climbed into the sky, aimed directly at the dragon. But the dragon was not its target. It pierced the monstrous animal through the head, but did no harm, passing through its body to make contact with its intended target.

Dolanna.

The power struck her, and like a nail struck into a board by a hammer, it instantly stopped her in the air, capturing her within its light. The straps holding her to Fireflash snapped like threads, and the enlarged drake dove to keep clear of her, to make sure his spines and tail did not strike her as he continued on.

The power struck Dolanna, it ensnared her, and in a moment of clarity, a moment of unity, it joined her to him within the confines of a Circle.

Tarrin’s power joined with Dolanna’s, merged with it, even as her mind was touched by him, and his was touched in return. The Cat *did not* object to this intimate union with a mind not of its own type, accepting the connection to the petite Sharadi completely and without reservation, because it had been specifically conditioned by means of the divine power Tarrin had once possessed to make this exception, and *only this exception*, forcing the Cat to submit to the will of the Human and accept the touch of his oldest and one of his dearest friends, whose mind was human but whose blood sang the song of the Cat, making her seem just familiar enough for the Cat to accept her.

The earth literally shook as the influx of power that Tarrin had been drawing suddenly increased by an exponential degree. Tarrin and Dolanna were now more powerful than both of them combined, forming a whole *greater* than the sum of its parts, as Dolanna's power and her mind amplified the already impressive powers of the Were-cat to staggering degrees. When Tarrin was Circled with his daughters, he sometimes felt that there was nothing that they could not accomplish. That feeling was no less when he was joined to his human friend. Tarrin felt Dolanna's mind take up a connection to him, and thoughts passed as easily between them as either of them could breathe. In an instant, everything within Tarrin's mind was open to her, and she looked into them and understood what was about to happen, and what role she would play within it.

With the Demon Lord temporarily knocked out of the fight, Tarrin seized this chance to finish it.

The One gaped at the unified power before him, feeling it in the core of his being...and *fearing it*.

"It is *OVER*, One!" both Tarrin and Dolanna shouted in voices amplified by their power to such a degree that the very air vibrated with the power of it, their minds joined into one entity that spoke with two voices. Both Were-cat and human raised their arms to point their hands and paws at the One, who cried out in terror and raised his shield to fend off the oncoming attack. Blinding magical power lashed out from them, from both the ground and the air, but those waves of magical power were *not* aimed at the One. They went over his head, streaking off into the air.

This confused the One, lowering his shield as he looked at both of them, who looked at him as if were already dead. He was about to retaliate with his own power, but then something darkened the ground beneath him. He turned to look, and then his eyes widened even as he screamed in shock and terror.

Fireflash, his fangs glowing with magical power, infused with magical might by Tarrin and Dolanna, had circled the mountain, and was now diving at the One's icon with that maw wide open. He glanced back, and saw that Tarrin and Dolanna had their hands levelled at *him*, power building and ready to be released, creating a pinsir attack from both directions. Even with his shield, the One could not stop them *both*.

He had but an instant to act, and he managed to speak a word that would recall him to the altar of his church. It was a Priest spell, one of the stronger ones, and one that would indeed have worked...had the One not forgotten in his moment of panic that he was standing on the ground where that cathedral had once stood. The spell triggered and worked exactly as it was designed to work. The One's form vanished from view, just as the spell was designed.

And it reappeared not thirty spans to his left, causing him to appear at the point where the foot of his altar had once stood, *just as the spell was designed*.

The One looked around quickly to reorient himself, but he looked up just in time to look directly down Fireflash's throat, even as the drake's mouth filled with greenish gas. He was one of the first people in the history of either Sennadar or Pyrosia to see the tiny flicker of flame appear in the back of the enlarged drake's mouth that ignited the gas, and then the massive flex of muscle in the lungs that compressed the gas sacs with amazing force, creating a blasting wave of pressurized gas to travel up the neck, out of the throat, through the mouth to be ignited by that biochemical flame, and then erupt from the maw as a hellish inferno of concentrated fire. That fire touched the glowing fangs of the

drake's maw, which caused the fire to change color from red to silver, as the power of the spell of the Sorcerers interacted with the fire of the drake's breath weapon to produce a magical attack that *could do harm to the One's icon*.

From the other direction, Tarrin's power reached a crescendo, and he unleashed it against the One with everything he had. The totality of his combined power with Dolanna raged outward, and it was combined with all of Tarrin's magical aptitude in Wizardry. Everything that Tarrin was as a magician, all of his power, every bit of it was focused into a singular expression of utmost potential that far exceeded the boundaries of mortal magic. Tarrin was a *Mi'Shara*, a being blessed with the capacity, when the need was great enough, to exceed the limitations of his mortal form and utilize magic of such magnitude that usually only a god or other upper being was capable of wielding it. Tarrin drew on that part of himself, focusing all of his power into a single assault of raw, naked, unrefined magical power, an attack that drew on and used more magic than any mortal was ever meant to wield. An incandescent bolt of pure magic was unleashed upon the One's unprotected back, as he stood and looked down the throat of Death Himself.

The One's scream managed to overwhelm the blasting *WHOOSH* of the magically infused fire roaring from Fireflash's maw, but only for the briefest of moments. The armored, winged body of the One was engulfed in silver flame, vanishing from view behind a hellstorm of mercury-colored fire, his scream drowned out by the thundering roar of the breath weapon. The incandescent blast of magic unleashed by Tarrin and Dolanna plunged into the silver fire of the breath weapon, assaulting the One from behind, as the two attacks merged into a singular blast of unmitigated power that threatened to unravel the very fabric of reality. Combined, the three of them managed to unleash a power so great that not even a god could stand against it.

Fireflash's jaws locked as he expelled the entire contents of his gas sacs onto the One's icon, turning his head as he passed by to keep it on him, unleashing such hellish fury upon him that the hardened lava beneath the icon's feet literally exploded from the intense, overwhelming heat and magical onslaught that infused it. From the other side, the magical blast from Tarrin and Dolanna maintained its ferocity, becoming a vortex of magical power that caught up the silver fire from Fireflash within it, a vortex that attacked the icon of the One with such power that he could not stop the inevitable.

Within that spiralling, combined cascading torrent of silver fire and pure magic, the One's icon shuddered convulsively, and then the wings simply *melted away*. The form was frozen in place, locked in a posture of agonized shrieking as the fire and magic attacked the stone of the icon, burned it, melted it away, destroyed it. The form of the One's icon wavered within that vortex of lethal silver fire and pure magic, then its borders became indistinct even as it began to shrink, getting smaller and smaller, until it broke apart and vanished within the raging inferno.

Fireflash's fire ended when his gas sacs were depleted, and he continued to soar over the ledge and around the volcano again, flying out of sight, even as Tarrin and Dolanna ceased their magical assault. What he left behind was nothing more than a bubbling pool of liquified rock, upon the surface of which bobbed the sword and shield of the One. Those two items seemed to shudder reflexively, then their metal dimmed, and the sank slowly into the lava.

The One's icon was destroyed.

The very land itself seemed to shiver, and then the earth shook, earth that was no longer held under the dominion of the One. It shook as the shadow of the One was pulled away from the land, as his power and dominion were stripped away, even as the last vestiges of the One's scream of denial seemed to spiral away into some unfathomable abyss.

The One's power in this world was gone.

Far to the east, across the straits, illuminated with a ghostly radiance by the light of the moon and the stars, there was a barren wasteland that was known as Auromar. It was a desolate mire of earth and rock, a gloomy, depressing place of mud-crusts, hills, utter silence, and a cold, clinging mist that never burned away no matter how hot the sun was. It was a place where not even algae covered the muddy ground. Nothing grew here, nothing lived here, because of the curse of the One upon the land, a curse that trapped within the boundaries of the land the souls of those who had been condemned to exile there, cursed to an eternity of wandering the mortal plane with no rest, no release, earthbound spirits denied the opportunity to move on, and tormented by the one who had trapped them by denying them release from the pain and hollow emptiness of undeath. Those spirits roamed the land tirelessly, endlessly, seeking in vain an escape from the prison into which they had been placed. They were the souls of the original *katzh-dashi* who had come here thousands of years ago, the souls of their descendents, the souls of those Dwarves that had been captured, and the souls of all those whom the Priests of the One had branded as witches. They wandered endlessly, their touch killing anything that tried to grow or live on the continent, keeping it a desolate wasteland of earth, rock, and mud.

They were souls in torment, souls seeking release from this mortal plane, but trapped from finding their way by the curse of the One, forever trapped by a hand that blocked the doorway to the next world.

The souls all continued to roam, misty apparitions that blended with the thin fog so well that one would not see one until it was too late, searching, searching, searching for a way to circumvent the block that the One had placed over them that prevented them from escaping this world and finding their peace.

And then the earth shook.

The spirits of the dead felt the shaking of the earth in their souls, felt the power that kept them bound to the lands of Auromar shiver, then convulse, and then melt away like ice before the summer sun. They all felt the power of the One shrivel away, and then become no more.

With unearthly voices that could not be heard by mortal ears, the spirits trapped on the lands of Auromar rejoiced, even as they saw the hand of the One fall away from the passage to the next world. They did not know how, they did not know why, they only knew that the curse of the One was lifted, and there was nothing standing in their way anymore.

As one, every soul trapped on Auromar looked upwards, and used their innate ability to pass on into the next realm of existence. As one, every soul trapped on Auromar vanished, leaving behind nothing but the thin mist that eternally shrouded the continent.

Mist that began to evaporate with the warm night air.

It was done.

The icon of the One was destroyed, Tarrin's shadow was even now terrorizing the Demons, and through a stroke of luck, he had managed to temporarily knock the Demon Lord out of action.

There was only one thing left to do.

Tarrin looked out over the ruins of Pyros, looked to where the Demon Lord lay, who was even now in the act of getting up. Being struck by his own attack had taken it right out of him, and Tarrin knew that he was in no position to interfere in what was coming.

The destruction of the One was done. He could no longer interfere, and his presence had been scoured from the land. His Priests had lost all their power, and now there was only the Demons to worry about, but they were about to be removed from the chessboard.

There was only one thing left to do.

Tarrin looked up at the darkening sky. The sun had fully set now, and there was only the light of the magma in the volcano reflecting off the low deck of ash and clouds, still being whipped away by the wind. But the wind felt...different, somehow. The air smelled...different. He knew that what he was feeling, what he was sensing, was a land freed of the oppressive hand of a maniacal, xenophobic god. This land was again cleansed, was purified of the taint of the One which had darkened it. The land felt...*inviting* again, not ominous or threatening. It was a good start, but there was one task that remained to ensure that this world didn't become the bastion of the Demons.

There was only one thing left to do. And it was not what Dolanna thought they were going to do.

They were joined, and her mind was open to him, just as his was open to her. But their communion went deeper than the usual Circle, for neither of them bothered to hide anything from the other. Everything that Tarrin knew, everything he remembered, everything that he *was*, was left open to Dolanna to peruse at her leisure, exposing the entirety of himself to her. When she saw this complete access to him, she had reciprocated in an act of good faith, daring to lower the barriers to her deepest private self and allow him to know all of her, just as he had offered up all of himself.

He knew that she had looked into him and saw what their final task would entail. He could feel her surprise, her dismay, her fear, but he could also see that the logical part of her mind understood his planned course of action, and agreed that it would achieve the desired results.

Both immediate and long-term.

I do not wish it to be this way, my dear one, her thoughts mingled with his own.

It's the way it has to be, he answered. *It's the only real way to neutralize the Demons, and you know it. I've lost the sword, Dolanna. I had to break it to force the Demon Lord to reveal his true intentions. The power it once had is still there, it's just locked inside the pieces, and it can't be used until the sword is repaired. We needed the sword's power to pull this off, but it's gone. We have to change the plan, and this is the only way I can think of to do it. We have to eliminate the threat they pose more than the Demons themselves. Take that away from them, and they're nothing but glorified, overly ugly soldiers that the mortals can actually fight.*

I understand the need for it, but I don't have to like it, my dear one.

I understand completely, Dolanna. I don't like it either. I shouldn't have broken the sword, but I saw a chance, I gambled, and I took it. It's coming back to haunt me now,

but we can't change the past. At least we can use the chance that breaking the sword gave us to try to finish what we started, and this is the only way. Are you ready?

Ever one to grasp at straws, my dear one, she thought wanly, giving him a wry smile. But you're right, this could be the only way, so let us not dawdle and squander this opportunity. Let us do this. And let us pray that it works.

He looked down at her, saw the fear in her eyes. He reached out and put his paw on her cheek, then closed his eyes. He gently broke the connection with her, breaking the Circle, then waved her back. She nodded, tears in her eyes, turned and ran towards the slope of the volcano, getting clear of him.

There was only one thing left to do.

Breathing deeply, in and out, he prepared himself. He absently spoke a single word of Arcane magic that called his staff back to his paw, and he held onto it tightly with both paws, paws that were trembling with concentration and anxiety. He found his center, tuned out the world, became aware only of his own breathing and the dwindling footsteps of his friend and mentor, listening for them to take on the change of sound that heralded her arrival at the slope, which would give her enough space. She had to be close to him for this to work, but she couldn't be so close that she got caught up in it and got herself killed. Haley would never forgive him for that.

Stray thoughts drifted through his conscious. He wondered how Jesmind was doing, and how Jasana was doing in her training. He wondered how many hearts Eron had broken since earning his adulthood, and how Tara and Rina were progressing in their education in Sorcery. He wondered how much his nephews had grown in his absence, and how his sisters Allia and Keritanima were doing. He could almost smell the bread baking in his parent's house back in Aldreth, could almost hear their voices telling him to get in before he let all the heat out, could hear his father's laughter and his mother's commanding voice. He felt the deep pangs of homesickness, a home he had left to seek out the lost children of the Goddess and the last traces of the Dwarves, only to have the door shut in his face while he was gone and to be denied returning to where he belonged.

Oh, how he missed his home.

Dolanna's footsteps changed. It was time to begin.

Tarrin opened his eyes and looked down at his staff. It wasn't the original, but it had served him well since he had replaced the one that Shiika had destroyed, had served him faithfully even after it had been supplanted by the sword. He had never really liked that sword, a sword that was now broken, its two pieces laying on the plateau. This was the weapon for him, a weapon of elegance, a weapon that looked simple but was in fact deceptively powerful, a weapon that only killed when the wielder wished it to do so.

It was time for it to strike one more foe.

Tarrin shifted the staff into the end-grip, raised it over his head slowly, then reversed his momentum and drove the staff downward, plunging the tip into the hardened lava before his feet. It was a physical act that was but a metaphor for what Tarrin truly did.

Tarrin used that contact to feel the earth beneath him through the staff, to feel the power of this world, to feel the lurking energy that existed at the core of this plane of existence, the boundless, untamed, undirected energy that he would call the All. This was the energy that the Demon Lord was here to claim, to possess, the boundless energy of the All. This was the prize he sought.

He reached for that power without fear, without hesitation, for only through contact with that limitless power could Tarrin complete his task and ensure that the Demons could not conquer this world.

He formed his image and intent in his mind, and, mindful of the lack of sentience in the power of this world, he prepared a tightly ordered sequence of instructions to direct the power in its task, a step by step guide to help it perform this task efficiently.

Tarrin reached deep into himself, deep through his connection to the staff, deep into the core of this world, and he touched the All.

Nothing he had ever experienced prepared him for what he found there. The power of this world reacted to him with a haste and eagerness he did not expect, almost a craving to finally be used. It had no awareness, no sentience, no driving force, it was power in search of purpose, and in Tarrin it seized on the opportunity to serve a purpose, *any* purpose. The power of this world's All flooded into him, *all of it*, as the entirety of this world's energy sought to infuse Tarrin in one blinding instant of *need*.

In that touch, that initial touch, the truth of what happened on this world became apparent. It was all there, in the memory of the All.

The Elder God of this world was no more. He abandoned this world long ago, long before the One, long before the peoples of this world had left caves and harnessed the power of fire. He grew tired of the endless loneliness, but was too proud, too selfish to do what Ayise had done and create other gods to help, and to share company. He was a vain and petty entity, and when he saw no hope of anything better, he abandoned the sacred task placed upon him by the God of Gods, had abandoned his duty to watch over this world and help it grow. An Elder God was tied to his world by bonds that could not be broken, but this Elder God *did* find a way to escape the task set upon him. And when he did, he left this world behind, left it to fend for itself, left it to random chance and the workings of nature. The Elder God had been forced to abandon his power in order to escape his duty, and he had done so, leaving it behind, leaving it behind in the All. It had rested there, a power without sentience, power without purpose, without *need*, for thousands and thousands of years. And now, finally, someone had touched upon that power and gave it purpose, gave it direction. For the first time since the original Elder God abandoned this world, the power of the All, the power that the Elder God had left behind, was needed once again.

There was, no pain. The power flowing into him was absolutely indescribable, rising beyond the sensation of mere pain so quickly that there never was that sensation of pain. Tarrin was almost struck helpless by the power that raged through him, power that infused his mind, saw his image and his intent, but looking beyond that, digging into his mind to seek out more and more, raging through his memories, burning into his consciousness, seeking out all that he was in addition to the task laid out before it in his mind. In an instant, he was infused with more power than even the Demon Lord could bring to bear in this world, for he was directly in contact with the power that had created this universe, and that power obeyed his command. It obeyed because through him, it could see the dire straits this world was now in, and in his solution it saw hope.

And so, it carried out his command.

The earth shuddered. The wind stopped. The clouds of ash above them froze in mid-boil. All sound became muted, and there was the briefest of moments of nothing but pure, pristine silence.

And then there was a scream. It was a scream of effort, and of pain, as the Were-cat cried out and raised his paws to the sky. His body suddenly began to glow with an incandescent light, and that light raced up into the sky, piercing the clouds of fine ash and smoke and causing them to flinch away. The light also went down, down into the earth, extending through the earth and rock and into the molten core of the world, reaching down as it reached up to the very edges of the atmosphere.

Bits of earth and rock and debris were carried up into the light as a vortex of swirling wind formed around the Were-cat and the shaft of light, a powerful vacuum of wind that pulled everything small into it, so powerful that Dolanna had to grab hold of an irregular rocky outcropping to avoid being pulled into the light and blown high into the air. The base of the light was a tornado of blowing wind and ash and debris, debris that was pulled into the light and sent hurtling into the heavens.

That light, that power, should have killed him instantly, for it was a power far beyond that which any mortal would be able to wield. But Tarrin was more than an ordinary mortal. He was a *Mi'Shara*, a Chosen One, a mortal who had within him the unique ability to exceed his mortal restrictions when the need was great enough, reach beyond his own mortal limitation and wield power far beyond that which would be usable by a mere mortal. Many years ago, for the briefest of moments, the mundane, mortal Tarrin had been the match of a god.

And now, for the briefest of moments, Tarrin performed an act that only a god would have been able to perform...because the need was great enough.

That light, brilliant and bright, then broke apart, creating a column of multicolored light that extended from the top of the sky to the center of the world and beyond, a rotating column of the seven colors of the rainbow. It twisted and writhed, expanded and contracted, and then it burst forth with a multitude of tiny lines that races off in every direction. The lines racing off were seven individual strands of light, one for each of the seven colors, which braided and intertwined with themselves as they dwindled off into the distance.

Dolanna looked up with utter awe. She knew what he intended to do, but to *see* it, to see and know that he was *doing* it, she was dumbfounded.

Tarrin was building a Weave. And this was not a Weave that would occupy only the area within a prison designed to trap the Demon Lord and his minions. No, this was a Weave that would encompass the entirety of this world.

All over the world, the lines appeared. Soldiers of the One, villagers, Priests, the Dura, from one side of Pyrosia to the other, even peoples on distant lands who had never heard of the One, all of them looked up into the sky and wondered at the mystical event transpiring. They saw the rainbows of light race across the sky with such speed that it defied imagination, extending from horizon to horizon in the span of only a few heartbeats. Then more lines reached out from those first, going off in every direction, up, down, left, right, some descending into the earth, some going only a short distance to intersect with an existing line and join them together, growing more and more numerous with every passing moment. They began to fill the sky, they began to pepper the land as they descended into the earth, crisscrossing through the air in seemingly random patterns. They caused a panic wherever they penetrated the ground, causing people to flee from them, to escape this strange and unheard of event.

And then there were the *witches*.

All over Pyrosia, auras of light erupted into being around certain people. There was no plan, no logic to them, they seemed to appear around people at random, from homeless street urchins to the Priests of the One to the soldiers to craftsmen to nobles. They did not understand what was happening, even as a rainbow streamer of light would erupt from the nearest of those rainbow lines and strike them, causing them to freeze in place and their expressions to take on something approaching a perfect balance of fear and ecstasy. They did not know that they were the descendants of the original *katzh-dashi*, they did not know that the one thing that tied them all together was their shared blood, and the fact that the power of Sorcery lurked deep within them.

They did not know that it was by the beating of their hearts that they would support the creation that was forming around them.

A Weave could not exist without Sorcerers.

It only took a moment, a moment that was both brief and eternal. One moment. In one moment, the rainbow lines of light had managed to stretch across the entire world, until this Weave was as large as it could be and still be supported by the lives of the Sorcerers that existed in this world. It could be no larger than this, but it was large enough.

The Were-cat within the heart of the origin of this titanic magical creation jerked his paws down, *snapping* the major column of power in which he was located, which created a shuddering shockwave in it. the rainbow of light blazed with sudden white light as the seven flows were snapped into *strands*, as the Weavespinner within the center of this magical web performed the task that was both his duty and his responsibility. He was *sui'kun*, Weavespinner, a Sorcerer with the power to create new strands...and create them he did.

The massive column of light around him blazed with white radiance, and that radiance raced away in every direction, traveling up and down the rainbow lines, transforming them into feeders, strands, junctures, nodes, feathers, and Conduits. The major Conduit which formed the center of this vast web shimmered, and then began to pulse with the unified beating of the hearts that supported it. The guiding mind within that main Conduit then reached back, reached through the *aether*, reached across the dimensions to touch on another Weave, another power, another guiding force. It touched that other power, touched on a goddess that was immediately awestruck at what was reaching for her, but she did not reject that attempt to reach out. She reached back with her own hand, and those hands clasped somewhere between the boundaries of reality and oblivion, a place that even the gods could not completely comprehend, a place that did not actually exist, but existed despite its lack of existence.

It became the Heart, the center of power, and this new Weave immediately supplanted all other magicks and enforced a new set of rules and laws that governed the use of magic within this world. The power of the Goddess of Magic, the power of Niami, the creator of the laws of magic that existed on Sennadar were suddenly supplanted into Pyrosia, and the Weave of Pyrosia altered the very fabric of reality to change the rules by which magic would function within this dimension of existence.

All over the world of Pyrosia, the new creation that now enveloped the world glowed with a brilliant light, heralding for all to see the arrival of a new age, the beginning of a new time. For this was the Weave, this was the power of magic, and this was the new

law by which magic would function within the world of Pyrosia. It was a new rule of magical law that immediately denied the Demons access to any of their powers, rendering them powerless, with only the training that they had received in Arcane magic to fall back upon, as the stern hand of Niami reached from one world into another, and then closed the door of access between the Demons and the nefarious source of their power. It glowed and shimmered, and then that light slowly faded away, leaving behind the impression that it was gone...but it was still there, hidden from the eyes of the mundane, visible to those who had the special gift to sense it.

It was still there, and it would remain so until the end of all things.

From within the Heart, Niami had felt Tarrin reach out to her, reach out in a way that she did not think possible. She had reacted instantly to his plea, had reached out to him and touched him across the dimensions, had joined with him in a moment of unity, almost as if she had Circled with him. She could feel his pain, but even her godly mind was awed at what he was doing, at what he had done. He was creating an *entire Weave by himself*! She had given to him everything he needed, then felt him join his creation to her own in a way that allowed her to reach back through that connection, to establish the rules and laws of magic and Sorcery that existed on Sennadar, and to specifically deny the Demons on that world the ability to use their innate magical powers, as was her ability and right as the goddess that commanded the use of magic.

It had seemed so, so *easy*. Something on the other side of that connection was fueling this staggering power, and that was when Niami realized that Tarrin was using the power of the Elder God of that world, touching the All of Pyrosia and using it in a way that would be utterly impossible for any mortal to accomplish.

The connection flared, and for the briefest of moments, she was again in intimate communion with the mind of Tarrin Kael, with her kitten. All of his thoughts, his memories, his feelings, everything was open to her, and she absorbed the totality of him with the speed of thought that a god could manage.

And then the hand he had reached across existence pulled out of hers, and fell away into the dark oblivion of that place that existed but did not exist, falling back into the mortal reality of the plane of existence in which he currently resided. Niami's hand reached out, reached as deeply into that oblivion as it could reach, but it was not far enough to regain a hold on him.

Within the center of the hedge maze, blanketed with freshly fallen snow from a late spring snowstorm, there was a pristine fountain, atop which was a remarkably beautiful statue of a nude woman. That statue suddenly moved from its usual pose of arms out in welcome.

The statue fell to its knees atop its pedestal and buried its face in its hands.

And it wept.

The light faded. The blazing column of light which had been the Conduit of the new Weave of Pyrosia faded into invisibility for those eyes who did not have the gift to see it. Dolanna looked back towards the Conduit, could feel it shuddering, and in a moment of awful clarity, she realized that it was growing *unstable*. It was threatening to unravel, to tear itself apart, and it was creating a Weavequake that shook the entirety of this fragile

new creation, threatened to tear it apart. She looked to her friend, her dear friend Tarrin, and saw that he laid crumpled on the harsh rock, and that he was not moving.

She understood what was happening. She got up and ran to him, plunging into the Conduit and falling to her knees beside him, and the instant she came within the boundaries of the Conduit, its shaking, its degeneration stopped.

There was no Goddess here. The Weave was stable, and would remain stable, only so long as there was a conscious guiding force present to keep its integrity. The instant Dolanna entered the Conduit, she became that guiding force, and it was by her will that the entire Weave remained stable. It took almost all of her concentration to keep the newborn Weave coherent, but she could spare enough attention to pull Tarrin around and onto his back and look down upon him.

His face was ashen, and his eye were closed, but there was the oddest expression on his face, an expression of satisfaction, and a slim, slight smile graced lips that were bluish in color. She touched his face, and found that his flesh was cold, unnaturally cold. She put two fingers to his neck, her heart twisting in her breast, dreading doing so because she already knew, deep in her heart, what she would find.

There was no pulse.

It had been too much for him to bear. Tarrin had succeeded in creating this new Weave, of rewriting the entire laws of magic that governed this world by creating a Weave, of bringing the presence of the Elder Gods of Sennadar into Pyrosia, and then reaching out to Niami to have her breathe life into it, to have her enact her rules of magic into it that would alter the way magic worked on this world. This Weave had been created by Tarrin, but since his mind was mortal and could not comprehend the truth of magic, he had reached out to his goddess and had *her* perform that final task.

But for him, it had been too much, even for the power of a *sui'kun*, of a *Mi'Shara*. The task he had tried to perform using the All had been too great, and there was only one penalty in Druidic magic when a Druid tried to perform magic beyond his ability.

The All of Pyrosia had done as he asked, but it had taken everything that Tarrin could give, and more. It was a testament to him that he had managed to complete the spell, to create this Weave, but the All had taken everything from him in order to complete the spell. Absolutely everything.

Tarrin Kael, her dear friend, was dead.

She began to weep, but there was a fierce pride within her as well. *No one* else could have accomplished what he had done here today. Not a god, not any other mortal. Tarrin had reached into the very fabric of this world and had altered it, and he had created a new Weave, a Weave that Dolanna could feel, could touch, could *use*, only so long as she remained within the Heart and provided the guiding force that kept it stable. And so long as the Weave remained, the Demons were denied their magic, as well as the Sorcerers regaining access to their own power. The Weave was hers to command, answering her call for its power, and she understood.

Tarrin was dead, and that was why the new Weave had threatened to unravel into nothingness. The sword was broken, and Tarrin had passed away. The plan had depended on either of them, but now both of them were gone, and there was no longer any link back to the Weave of Sennadar, no way for the Elder Gods of Sennadar to reach into this world and maintain the Weave, and no way for them to protect *her* from the

Demon Lord. There was nothing to hold the Weave together, no guiding sentience that would keep it from unravelling, except for *Dolanna*.

This was why he had needed her. He needed her take his place as the living will of this new Weave, should he fall during its creation, and remain so until some way was found to link this Weave back to the Weave of Sennadar, and allow the Goddess to reach into this world and take control of its Weave.

There was much to do. She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, and then gently laid Tarrin's head on the harsh, unforgiving stone. She placed his arms upon his chest in peaceful repose, and then stood up. She called upon the power of this new Weave to lift her into the air within it, bringing her higher and higher, and then she touched the Weave and felt it respond to her call. For now, she was its guiding force. She was the power within the Weave, she was the living extension of its power. She was the closest she would ever get, at that moment, to ever being a god.

Tarrin's shadow, the last remnant of him, was out there right now killing Demons. She had to help it in that task.

"I WILL NOT FAIL YOU, DEAR ONE!" her voice thundered across the ruins of Pyros. The Demons all looked towards where her voice had originated, and they could feel the entire magical creation around them began to become saturated with power, as the sentient force that now guided it prepared to strike. The Demon Lord looked to where the human was, and understood what the Were-cat had done almost immediately. He knew that staying at Pyros would be utter suicide, for the Sorcerer could annihilate his forces. It only took a fleeting test of this world to understand what he had done, and how he had changed things, by getting a god from another world to help him redefine the laws of magic in this realm. And so long as this Weave remained in existence, those laws would remain in effect, denying the Demons their innate magical abilities.

The Demon Lord knew that now it was time to flee, to save as many of his minions as possible. Things were not completely lost, not yet. The One was dead, removed from the field, as was the damned half-god. Both were dead. But this alteration of his world's magic had complicated issues, removing the ability of an easy victory. He could still conquer this world, but it would take much longer, and would require his Demons to slowly march across the land and capture it piece by piece.

And it would require the destruction of this new Weave, which meant that he would have to return here when he had a plan, when he was healed of the wounds he had inflicted upon himself because of that damned half-god's cunning trickery, and kill that lone female human that seemed to be holding it all together. He just knew that at the moment, with him wounded and with his forces denied their magical abilities, with that shadow out there biting away his army one Demon at a time and with that lone female that seemed to have complete control of this new magical matrix girding it and preparing to unleash it upon them, it was time to retreat. With the Demon Lord wounded by his own attack, he was in no condition to turn and try to destroy that mortal whose presence within the center of this magical creation kept the whole thing together. The power that he could feel the mortal gathering was awesome, and with the rules of magic rewritten, *she now had the power to do him real harm*. His invulnerabilities were wiped away when the rules were changed, because the body he had created in this realm had been made *before* that change, and thus had no innate defense against this change in the order

of magic. Her magical power, her *Sorcery*, it could kill him. And with him injured, he was not about to engage her in battle, because she was fully well and preparing to fight, and he was wounded and weakened.

There would be ample opportunity to fight another day. And that mortal had no protection against his might, even if she could command magic that could do him harm. All he had to do was pull back, heal, and then return and destroy her at his leisure.

The Demon Lord, Gruz, had to chuckle ruefully, however, as he used his telepathic ability to order a full retreat. By the Demon King, Shaz'Baket had not been lying. That half-god, half-mortal had been one dangerous, dangerous enemy. He could only thank the chaos that he was now dead, and no longer remained to continue making the Demon Lord's plans unravel like so much bad knitting.

The Demons turned and began to flee, but they did not get away cleanly. The righteous fury of Dolanna raged at them from the volcano, as she used the newborn Weave to lash out at the army. Sizzling, cascading bolts of lightning suddenly erupted from the clouds of ash above, causing savage explosions in whatever they touched. Rock, ruins, and Demons all detonated at the raking touches of those bolts of lightning, and they did not stop, they did not relent. They rained down upon the fleeing Demons with ferocious consistency, killing Demon after Demon, chasing them away from the slopes of the volcano and well out into the plains beyond.

Dolanna rained lightning down on them as long as she had the strength to do so, and then she dropped to her hands and knees beside the body of her friend, panting heavily. Fireflash landed not far from them, his huge body blocking the light of the volcano. His head descended down to sniff at Tarrin, and then he reared his head back and bellowed an ear-splitting keen, a howl of mourning and of loss.

"Do not leave me, Fireflash," Dolanna said weakly, in a small voice. "I do not wish to be alone. Please, do not leave me alone."

"Doranna," his voice called, a voice filled with sadness. "Ssstay. Prrroteehtht. Thharrih wannnted sssstay. Me ssstay, arrrwayths."

He lowered his head down to her, and she buried her face in the side of his jaw, weeping uncontrollably. Fireflash closed his eyes and allowed her to find comfort against him. He knew what his master would have wanted.

He would stay with Dolanna. He would hunt for her, bring her water, bring her anything she needed. He would be there for her, he would keep her company, he would entertain her, he would comfort her and help her in any way he could. He would defend her, and he would protect her for as long as she was forced to remain trapped within the prison that was the Heart, a prison without walls, without bars, without guards, and without boundaries, but a prison nonetheless.

He would not leave her. He would not abandon the friend of his master. Not ever. It was what Tarrin would have wanted him to do.

Chapter 18

She had cried herself out.

Dolanna knelt on the harsh, bare rock of the plateau, kneeling within the center of the Conduit which was the Heart of this new Weave, her arms hugging herself about the ribs as she looked down on the dark stone. The skies above were clearing of their pall of ash, and the sun was starting to rise, the dawning of a new day...the dawning of a new age. But there was little joy in it for her.

It seemed surreal. Never, never in her wildest dreams, did she believe that this could happen. Tarrin had always seemed...*indestructible*. He was such a towering figure, so strong, and always so powerful, so powerful, even against the most dangerous adversaries, even in the face of great odds. He always found a way to win, even when he was overmatched...it was one of his defining qualities, a cunning resourcefulness that was even more dangerous than his formidable magical powers, more of a weapon than his divine powers had ever been. Even when he died on Sennadar, destroying Val, that was a death by his own choice, a conscious decision. He had always been so *powerful*, an almost mythical figure, a titan that could withstand almost anything. It was almost unbelievable that he could be dead. He had faced so many obstacles, had overcome so much, only to die here? Only to die now, but one step away from returning home? It seemed, well, so *unfair*!

She almost didn't want to believe it. No, Tarrin knew that this might happen, he had to have known...and when Tarrin knew, Tarrin *planned*. He had saved himself after dying against Val because he knew that his death was coming, and he prepared. He *knew* that there was a very good chance of dying here, so he had to have prepared for it. But how? What did he do? What was she supposed to do? That was what had her so confused. He had never told her what to do in the event that she ended up here, and that was why she was in shock now...she hadn't expected it. She was here as insurance, nothing more. It had her so confused. He had to know that he might die, but she had been so surprised when he did.

His body was an example. She didn't know what to do with him. Should she bury him? Should she preserve his body? After all, it was unharmed. The power of Druidic magic drained the energy out of him, nothing more. If that energy replaced, the soul restored inside the body—

Soul. *Tarrin's soul*!

No! He had died within the mortal plane! That meant that his soul, released from his body, had nowhere to go! His soul was still divine, the soul of a god, and that meant that it could not exist trapped within the confines of a mortal plane without a body to protect it!

The *soultrap*! Did it work? Had it pulled his soul back into itself across the dimensions? It was still on Sennadar...would it still work, even now? Had his soul been

captured and protected? Or had it been torn apart, as a soul that existed in the higher dimensions been trapped within the confines of mortal comprehension, an environment in which it could not survive?

She was so confused. She didn't know what to do.

Calm down, daughter, a voice drifted to her from an unimaginable distance. You should know the kitten better than that.

"Mother!" she gasped, looking around. "Oh, Mother! What am I to do? I do not know what to do!"

First things first, my child, this stretches even the bounds of my power, and I can't do this for long. Is Tarrin's body there?

"Yes, Mother! Fireflash has gone back for our travel pack, but Tarrin—" she choked up. "I did not know what to do with his body. It is here."

Listen to me carefully, daughter. Destroy it.

"What?" she gasped.

You heard me. Destroy it immediately. It's interfering with what I am trying to do. Destroy it right now.

Confused she might be, but she was not about to disobey a direct command from her goddess. She touched on this new Weave, felt it respond to her call, and turned that power against the body of her oldest friend. The Weave struck at that mortal form, infusing it with its power. It couldn't destroy it by fire, for its immunity to fire remained even after death, so Dolanna ordered the Weave to strike the body with the power of the ages, causing it to decay into dust within the blink of an eye. The body wavered, and then it was gone, nothing but greyish dust on the rocky ground.

"It is done, Mother," she called, trying to suppress a sob.

Very good. Is that creation of his still there?

"The shadow? Mother, how did you know about it?"

I touched his mind just before he died, when he reached out to me. I saw everything in his mind, I know what he had planned, and what we have to do now.

"Really? Oh, Mother! Can we get him back?"

We...we'll have to see, she answered. He placed all of his power into the sword and then broke it both to force the hand of the Demon Lord, but also as a means to try to get my mother to permit him to come home. He was going to come home as a mortal and leave the sword behind, locked away from his power. But when he injured the Demon Lord, he saw a chance to deliver a crippling blow to his plans, and he took it. And, unfortunately, touching the All of that world was too much for him.

"But, but, he died in the mortal plane. His soul—"

I know, but his soul is intact. That's what's causing the problem. I can't find it. Something protected it when he died, it still exists, but I don't know what, and I don't know where. That's what I'm trying to do right now, find his soul. If I can find it, I can retrieve it, and we can work from there.

"So there is hope?"

Daughter, there is always hope, she answered. He didn't die on Sennadar, the twins of Death didn't lock away his soul. If I can find it, I can restore it into a new body, just as I did before. When Tarrin died, he knew that I had that ability. In a way, he's gambling that I can do it again.

"How will we recover his soul, Mother?"

Leave that to me, she said confidently. Now, answer my question, quickly. Is the shadow there?

“No, Mother, its gone after the Demons.”

I rather thought it would, that’s what it was meant to do, she said thoughtfully. What about his sword? Are the pieces still there?

She looked around, then remembered what had happened. “No, Mother,” she answered. “When Tarrin—when he created this new Weave, it created a tornado that picked everything up and cast it to the winds. I was nearly swept away.”

Damn, she growled. Listen carefully, daughter. You are in control of that Weave, and for right now, I can’t help you. You must master it. You need to find that shadow, and find the two pieces of Tarrin’s sword. You must find them quickly.

“Mother, what importance do they have?”

They mean everything, daughter, she said seriously. Tarrin’s power still exists. He placed it all within the sword, and then he broke it, trapping that power within it. When Tarrin died, his power didn’t fade away, because his soul still continues on. Remember, daughter, in some ways, he is a god, and his power will remain so long as his soul lives, even if his mortal body is dead. It lives on within the sword, and within that shadow. In a way, that shadow is now Tarrin, it is everything that he represented. The reason that Weave has not unravelled is because of the shadow. There is no sui’kun there, daughter. The shadow represents that power, and together, with you, it helps retain the Weave. You must find the shadow, child, find it quickly, and help it in any way you can. Do not let it be destroyed, under any circumstances. I’m sending a sui’kun to Pyrosia as quickly as I can manage to help take up the burden, and prevent that Weave from being destroyed if the shadow does fall.

“But, but how can I help it from here? I cannot leave this Conduit, Mother.”

Daughter, she chided, I thought you better than that. You are a Sorcerer, and you have a Weave. Use it.

Dolanna’s eyes widened, and she both chuckled and sniffled. “I am sorry, Mother. I am still not thinking clearly. I will find the shadow, and I will look for the pieces of the sword.”

Quickly, daughter. The shadow is important, but the sword means everything. With Tarrin dead, that means that the power within the sword no longer calls one man its master. Anyone who finds both pieces and joins them together is going to command that power. Anyone who gets both pieces will have all of Tarrin’s power at his command. And I’m positive that your Demon Lord even now has his minions searching for them, even as he runs away. You have to find them first, daughter. I’m arranging to send people from here to help, soldiers to fight the Demons, and Sorcerers and others to recover the sword.

I can’t stress it enough, daughter. Find the pieces of the sword. You must find the pieces of the sword, and you must do it as quickly as you can, but don’t become so engrossed in it that you allow the shadow to fall. You are now the eyes and the ears of your world, Dolanna. There is nothing that you cannot see, nothing that you cannot hear, if you only take the time to learn how it is done. There is no one on that world who can do this better than you. Make me proud, my daughter.

“I will not fail you, Mother.”

I know. Whenever I need someone I can depend on, you're always high up on my list, Dolanna. You are one of my very best, and I'm proud of you. That you can hold that Weave together and still be able to talk says everything that needs to be said.

Dolanna flushed, but said nothing.

Now bend yourself to your tasks, child, and I'll get started on mine. Expect to feel a sui'kun enter Pyrosia as soon as I can kick one in the rump and get him or her to the gate. Until one does, keep that shadow alive, no matter what it takes. Do you understand?

"I will make sure of it, Mother," she said.

Look for the sword as much as you can while protecting the shadow, and when a sui'kun gets there, your only mission is to find the pieces of the sword. We're going to need them. If we have any chance of recovering Tarrin and somehow restoring him, we must have that sword.

"I will start immediately, Mother."

Do me proud, daughter, the voice of the Goddess said, and then it retreated.

"I will make you proud of me, Mother," Dolanna whispered, wiping at her cheek. She looked around, heard nothing but the rush of the warm summer wind, and then she settled herself in a comfortable seat upon the hard, unforgiving ground.

Her mind was a whirlwind of fear, and doubt, but she brushed all that aside. She now had a mission, she now had something to do. What she was doing was important, and no one else could do it. She did not wish for this duty, did not want it, but she would carry it out to the best of her ability.

With the ease of a master of her craft, Dolanna's consciousness rose up into the Weave, joined with it, and began. There was much she had to learn, much she had to discover, for this was an alien Weave, it was *not* the Weave of the Goddess, and she had to use it in ways she had never tried before. She had to find the shadow, she had to find the two pieces of the sword, and she had to do it using nothing more than the Weave itself.

She would not fail her Goddess. And she would not fail Tarrin.

Haven. A small, verdant valley nestled between two towering mountain ranges and the Bay of Sharadar, a tiny belt of green clinging to the side of the mountains, protected from the rest of Arathorn by those mountains, and protected from ships landing by sea from the north by a dangerous reef that lurked just offshore. Nobody would come there anyway, for it was well known throughout the entire continent that the lands of Haven were cursed, they were haunted, that no one who set foot upon them ever returned.

This was the domain of Spyder, the Guardian, and it was the location of the only gate that opened into the world of Sennadar. Haven had been the domain of this enigmatic Urzani for thousands of years, as she carried out her solitary task of defending the gate against incursion from beyond, defending it against Demons, against the Avatars of gods, against hapless mortals, and against planar entities that had stumbled across the location of the gateway, one of the most elusive portals in the Astral. Not just anyone could find the gate of Sennadar. It could not be seen, it could not be located with magic, and it could not be tracked. Only those who had the fortune—or misfortune—of stumbling across it by random chance could find it, and only those who paid attention could find it again after being ejected by Spyder back into the Astral. Those rare few that did not heed

the warnings of the mortal guardian, by either arrogance or stupidity, did not live to return to the Astral a second time.

She had lived in the rather modest mansion built over the gate for millenia, and until recently, she had lived alone. But now she had company, she had guests. Two Were-cats had taken up residence with her, and all in all, she had not been entirely displeased by their presence. One of them was Triana, and the other Jasana. Jasana was here to continue her training, tutoring both under her grandmother in the arts of Druidic magic, and under Spyder in matters magical and martial.

Truth be told, Spyder was rather amused with Jasana. She had awesome potential, and she had tremendous intelligence. She was a gifted Sorcerer, in both power and ability. But, she was much like the child that she appeared to be to Spyder, but desperately tried to pretend she was not. She had a refreshing view of the world, and her youth and sincere enthusiasm was almost infectious. She was independent, she was stubborn, and she was almost arrogantly convinced that she was right almost all of the time, even when thousands of years of experience that represented the background of her teacher told her that she was wrong. Jasana was the future, she was a piece of clay to be molded, even when she resented such molding, and Spyder had taken sincere pleasure in her role as Jasana's mentor.

The time spent with Triana was equally enjoyable. Triana was wise, and had a respect for the years that Spyder had lived. In Triana, Spyder had a companion that understood her, someone that she could talk to about things that younger ones like Jasana could never understand. A solid friendship had developed between the two, based on mutual respect.

As it was spring in Suld, it was fall in Haven. The trees around the modest home of the most powerful mortal on Sennadar had begun to change colors, but the flowers still bloomed in the garden behind her manor. It was in this garden that Triana did most of her training with Jasana, favoring the outdoors, to bring her into closer touch with the forces of nature that, in their own way, fueled the power of the All. As this world thrived, so did the might of Ayise, the Allmother, which made the All that much stronger. For years, Triana had trained Jasana in the use of Druidic magic, but her ability to *use* Druidic magic was not very far along. This was because of the dangerous nature of the magic, and the need to thoroughly educate the girl about it *before* she actually used it. This was the one thing that drove Jasana crazy more than anything else. Jasana was not the kind that could sit patiently and learn. She learned by doing, she wanted to know *now*, wanted to do *now*. Tomorrow was just a misty, intangible thing to her, and this was her greatest failing. Jasana was a Were-cat, and her Were half greatly influenced this inability to plan for the future. Just about the only time Jasana showed any kind of ability to plan for the future was when she was denied what she wanted, and her cunning, manipulative nature came into the forefront.

Teaching Jasana patience was a monumental task, and a task that required both Spyder and Triana to perform it. And it was a task in which they had not quite succeeded yet.

They sat on a bench by Spyder's prized roses, as Jasana listened only half-heartedly as Triana explained the use of the Druidic spell that allowed communication over great distances, explained the theory of it to her. Jasana was more interested in the bee that

kept buzzing lightly over the tops of the red flowers, and then flitted to another bush, where white roses climbed up a trellis that covered the path back to the manor house.

“Owww!” Jasana complained, putting her paw to her head to cover the place just between her ears, where Triana had smacked her.

“I’m over *here*, girl,” Triana stated in that gruff voice. “Would you like a scar on your left to match the one on your right?”

The Were-cat put a paw to the side of her neck, where a trio of faint white lines ran along her skin. It was a reminder that not paying attention to Triana when she demanded that attention could be...*painful*. “I can’t believe you did that,” she sulked. “Jeri will think—“

“Jeri should be the last thing on your mind right now,” she warned with steely eyes.

Spyder, leaning on the trellis with her black cloak shimmering and flowing despite the lack of wind, could only inwardly smile. Triana certainly had ways of keeping one’s attention, and they were frightfully direct. She was about to leave them to their training and return to the library, but the arrival of a presence that all three of them could feel delayed her intention. That presence arrived quickly in the garden, and manifested itself behind the hedge wall.

The Goddess stepped out from behind that wall, and she looked as she always looked. She wore a shimmering gown that looked spun from starlight, and her eyes glowed with a strong amber radiance. Her hair was thick and lush and long, and it was colored in the seven colors of the rainbow, the seven colors of Sorcery.

“Mother,” Spyder said with a bow. “It is good of you to visit my home. May I make you comfortable?”

“It’ll have to wait, daughter,” she said seriously, putting her hand on the Urzani’s shoulder. “How ready is she, Triana?”

“Not nearly,” the matron replied honestly. “She might have been much further along, but she doesn’t want to *listen*.”

“You don’t want to *teach*,” Jasana muttered under her breath. “Owww!” she sucked in her breath when Triana slapped her across the back of the head. And she was not gentle.

“See?” Triana said with a telling sigh.

“I, see,” the Goddess said with a straight face.

“What troubles you, Mother?” Spyder asked.

“I could never hide anything from you, my daughter,” the Goddess sighed. “I’m afraid I bear bad tidings, my children. And I’m here to collect this one. I need her.”

She pointed at Jasana.

“Me? You need *me*, Mother?” Jasana asked with barely contained enthusiasm. “Yes! Um, er, what do you need me to do?”

“You, daughter, are going to go take the place of your father,” she said directly.

Jasana’s expression turned horrified.

“Tarrin?” Triana asked.

The Goddess shook her head. “He used Druidic magic in that other world, Triana, and he did something beyond his ability. You know what happens.”

Triana’s reaction was unusual. She simply put her elbows on her knees and leaned into her paws. She did not cry, she did not scream. She simply took a long, private moment.

“What do you mean? What happened to my father?” Jasana demanded.

“He is dead, girl,” Spyder announced flatly. “Were you to pay more attention to your teacher, you would have known that.”

“My, my father, dead? No,” she said in a weak voice, her paws beginning to tremble.

“No, girl,” the Goddess said quickly, reaching out and snatching up her paws into her hands. “Don’t do this to me, not now. You can’t break down. You have to get to that other world, and you have to get there *fast*. Dolanna’s there all by herself, and she needs your help.”

“B-But, my father—“

“Your *father* would beat you senseless if you let your emotions overwhelm your duty,” the Goddess said harshly, squeezing her paws. “And *your father* is a crafty, wily Were-cat who knows how to get himself out of bad situations. He cheated death once before, and he can do it again, but *not if you fall apart on me*. Do you understand?”

“I—“ she sniffled, then she winced when the Goddess squeezed her hands again.

“I said *do you understand?*”

“I, yes, Mother, I understand,” she said, on the verge of tears.

“Good,” she stated. “Spyder.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“How many friends do you have among the Deva?”

“Some, not many,” she answered.

“Think you can wrangle a favor?”

“I might, Mother. I can make no guarantees. What do you need?”

“When Tarrin died, I lost touch with his soul,” she answered. “I can’t find it. It’s beyond my ability to touch. All I know is that something is protecting it, or he found some way to move his soul into the Astral. Finding his soul is the first step to figuring out what to do. If Tarrin found some way to shift his soul into the Astral before he died, the Deva can find it.”

“I will ask about, Mother. As I said, I can make no promises. As you know, they answer only to *Him*. If they do this, it would be of their own volition, and they would ask *Him* for permission beforehand.”

“All I can ask is that you try, my daughter.”

“It will be ask you ask, Mother. I will see to it immediately, if you have no other tasks for me.”

“Later, but not at the moment.”

Spyder bowed to the Goddess, then turned and hurried off towards the manor house.

“Now,” the Goddess said, sitting down on a bench facing Triana. “Sit.”

Jasana did so, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I know you’ve talked to Koran Dar, and Haley. You know what was going on there, don’t you?” Jasana nodded to her. “Good. What you must understand is that what Tarrin did has changed everything in that other world,” she began. “He used his Druidic power to touch the All of that world, and he used it to build a Weave. A complete, entire Weave.”

Jasana gaped at her.

“The only thing holding that Weave together right now is your father’s forward thinking, and Dolanna. You have to get there quickly, daughter. You are *sui’kun*, and your presence is needed to give that Weave continuity. Dolanna can hold it together, but

she needs your presence there to form the foundation. If that Weave unravels, then the Demon Lord wins, and your father sacrificed himself for *nothing*. Can I make it any clearer to you?"

"N-No, Mother," she said shudderingly.

"Good. Now, when you get there, you have a task, daughter. Before Tarrin died, he placed all of his divine power into his sword, and then he *broke it*."

"B-Broke it? Why did he do that?"

"His reason for doing so at that particular moment was very sound, girl, trust me," she told her bluntly. "Since his soul survived his death, *and* his soul is that of a god, then—"

"Then that power *still exists*!" Triana gasped.

The Goddess nodded. "It's still there, trapped in the pieces of his sword. And because your father died, it no longer has a master. It's going to serve whoever finds those two fragments and joins them back together. It's power without direction, and it's going to obey whoever commands it. Your job, daughter, is to find those pieces. You have to find them quickly, and above all else, you *must keep them out of the hands of the Demons*. That matters more right now than anything else, even the possibility of recovering your father. If the Demons get hold of that power, they will use it against the mortals, and they will win. I'm not going to let my kitten's sacrifice be in vain. He died to give that world a chance to get rid of the Demons, and I'll be damned if I don't do everything in my power to honor that sacrifice."

"But, but won't that power obey father's will? I mean, if his soul is that of a god, and he found a way to protect his soul after he died, then doesn't that mean that he's still there?"

"If he was a *true* god, yes, daughter, you'd be right," the Goddess told her. "But he's *not* a god. Not that way. His soul is divine, but it's not in an Outer Plane, and he has no icon on that world to channel his power. In a way, that sword *was* his icon, the focus of his power in the mortal world."

"Well, if we put it back together, then that means he'll have control of it, right?" Jasana asked.

The Goddess smiled. "So much intuition, but so little wisdom," she announced. "Yes, if we restore the sword, then Tarrin will be aware of it, but the sword and Tarrin are *separate*. He'll be aware of the sword, but because he's not a true god, he won't have complete control over it. That kind of control required him to be in contact with it, for his soul to be *right there* to command it. If the sword was restored and Tarrin not there, then he'd only be dimly aware that the sword's power was restored, but have very little ability to direct it. The sword itself would command that power."

"Well, father wouldn't let any Demon use it."

"Yes, but you underestimate the power of a Demon Lord, girl. It can *force* obedience out of the sword. Any Demon that finds that sword is going to take it to its master, and *he* will be the one to use it. In fact, the Demon Lord could use the sword to capture Tarrin's soul."

"That's also why you want it," Triana reasoned.

The Goddess nodded. "I can use the sword to make direct contact with your father's soul, and then we'll work from there."

"You mean you'll bring him back?" she asked.

“I mean I’ll find out what he wants us to do,” she said firmly. “I won’t *force* anything upon my kitten, girl, never again. I forced him to become Were, and the pain I feel over that decision still haunts me. When he made this sacrifice, he did it willingly. He *chose* to die, and I will not now nor ever again counteract the wishes of my kitten over a matter that does not literally threaten the Balance. I won’t bring him back unless that’s what he *wants*. I want the sword so I can find his soul, so I can make sure that it’s safe. If he chooses to live again, and I’m fairly sure he will, I will do everything I can to see that it happens. But, in the unlikely event that he chooses not to live again, then I will use the sword to find his soul, then bring it to my realm in the Outer Planes, and bring him to his reward.”

“But—“

“There *are no buts*, daughter, not in this,” the Goddess said adamantly. “Do not even *think* to connive your way into what you want, girl,” she said with all of her divine authority levelled on the Were-cat youth. “You will do as I have commanded. *Exactly* as I have commanded. I want Tarrin back as much as you, but none of us, and I mean *none of us*, will go against his wishes in this matter. Remember the *last* time you did something like that? Well, I assure you that *my* punishment will make what you endured at the hands of your mother and grandmother seem like a reward by comparison.”

Jasana paled.

“I’m so glad you could grasp the situation so quickly,” she said with a flinty tone.

“I just don’t understand why he wouldn’t want to come back,” Jasana said in a small tone.

“You’re too quick to latch onto the negative, daughter,” she said with compassion.

“Dwell on the hope that he *will*, not the fear that he *won’t*.”

“I’ll try, Mother.”

“Good. Now, listen. I’m going to take you to the gate. I want you to go through, and when you’re through, I want you to *wait*. Dolanna needs your presence in that other world, but I also need to organize a search party to help you find the pieces of the sword. When you get through to the other world, I want you to immediately try to contact Dolanna. If you can, then I want you to wait at the gateway for others to arrive, but wait no longer than two days. Two,” she said, holding up two fingers to emphasize her command. “If no one comes through the gate after two days, then go try to find the sword pieces.

“If you can’t make initial contact with Dolanna, I want you to *immediately* go to the Heart on that world, because if Dolanna can’t contact you, then that means she might be in trouble and will need your help. I’m sure you’ll be able to find it. Once you get there, you’ll receive further instructions. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Mother.”

“Good. Now go pack.”

“Yes, Mother,” she said, looking up at her with trepidation, then rushing off to get ready.

Triana looked at the Goddess. “You know that promise not to meddle will last as long as she’s in your sight.”

“I know, but that’s the risk I’m taking. Besides, Jasana would be a convenient scapegoat if Tarrin were brought back against his wishes,” she added slyly.

Triana snorted, but it was with a wry smile. “What more to it is there, Mother?”

The Goddess quickly explained what she had learned. “He fears coming home, but it is all he wants to do,” she surmised. “He had the right idea when he broke the sword, but he didn’t think things through. He should have broken it *after* he trapped the Demon Lord in the Ward, as he originally planned. Instead, he threw his plan out the window and winged it. It worked, but this time it killed him.”

“He wouldn’t even have done that if there was no other choice. Does he have a plan?”

The Goddess smiled. “Ever to the point of the matter,” she said.

“I know my son.”

“You know him well. Yes, he had a plan, but his own part of it is complete. Now it’s up to us to finish it for him.”

“What’s the goal of this plan? If I may ask, Mother.”

“Simple, daughter,” she smiled. “Tarrin knows about a certain little secret I’ve been keeping. I was going to use it to circumvent my mother’s edict against him coming home, but now I’ll have to use it just to keep him alive.” She stood up. “Come with me, I’ll show you.”

Curious, Triana followed the Avatar of Niami along the garden path, and then into the manor house. They traveled up the main stairs, and then into the east wing. “Wait a minute,” Triana realized.

“Yes, that’s where we’re going,” she smiled. “The room that Spyder told you was off limits. It’s off limits because I told her to make it so. My secret is inside.”

“So, he peeked.”

The Goddess laughed. “You know Tarrin, Triana. Once he gets curious, nothing can get in his way, not even a closed door and a direct command by someone like Spyder.”

They reached the door quickly, and it opened at a mere gesture of the Goddess’ hand. Beyond the door was a large room, the only furnishing a single elegant wooden stand, upon which sat a small black metal sculpture of a cat, seated, with emeralds for eyes. There was a single window that was blocked by a heavy curtain. On the far side, beside the little stand, resting within a glowing circle of magical power that was on the floor that cast a bright light upwards, was *Tarrin Kael*. He was suspended in a magical light, his eyes closed, rotating within the light with deliberate slowness.

Triana gasped, rushing into the room. “Tarrin?”

“Just a body,” the Goddess said quickly. “A *shell*. When I rebuilt his body, I...made a duplicate. Just in case, you understand,” she said, rather quickly. “Spyder has been keeping it for me.”

Triana came up to the edge of the light, looking carefully at this image of her son. “Will this work, Mother?” she asked.

“Of course it will,” she scoffed. “It worked the first time, didn’t it? Once I get the sword, I can use it to summon Tarrin’s soul, and I can put it in this body. If that’s what he wants,” she added quickly, coming over and stroking the black metal of the statue fondly, lovingly. “This was the original soultrap, Triana, already primed and ready to capture his soul. I was ready, just in case.”

“I take it it didn’t work?”

She shook her head. “It can’t capture a soul that’s not in the same dimension, and it wouldn’t work now anyway,” she answered. “It only activates at the instant of *death*, and, well, Tarrin has already died. This was for the eventuality that my kitten got into a

fight with my mother. I didn't really expect to have to use it to restore him from being killed in that other world, but it *will* work. All we need is his soul." The Avatar picked up the statuette and cradled it, stroking its engraved sides as if it were a real cat. "So you see, Triana, I was ready for this, and Tarrin knew it. All he had to do was ensure that his soul survived his death, and he did. Now it's just a matter of finding him."

"A simple plan."

"Simplicity is always best," the Goddess stated. "It's also why I'm not going insane with mourning. I cried when he died, but that was just for the moment, of feeling him slip away from me. I won't cry again. After all, my kitten isn't lost to me...we just have to do some work to get him back, that's all. We just have to get the sword, and when my kitten is ready, I can restore him."

"Ready?" Triana asked.

She was quiet a moment. "I'm not sure, Triana, but something tells me that Tarrin means to do something. That's why I sent Spyder to see if the Deva can find his soul in the Astral. I have a sneaking suspicion that that's where he is. Call it a hunch. If he hasn't finished what he's doing before I have everything I need, we might have to wait."

"What could he possibly do?" she asked. "He's *dead*, for crying out loud."

"Death is only the beginning, Triana Du'Prae," the Goddess said in a mysterious voice. "And freed of his mortal form, his soul is the soul of a *god*. That means that he has formidable power in the Astral, and elsewhere, even without his sword."

"But, what could he possibly do?" she asked.

"More than you can imagine."

Triana gave her a slightly annoyed look. "So, that explains the warning to Jasana about meddling. Now, what of Dolanna? You said she was trapped there."

"Dolanna is holding the Weave Tarrin created together. She's doing *my* job there, providing the Weave its conscious direction. And she's doing a damn good job," she said proudly.

"I didn't think a mortal could do that."

"Yes, a mortal could do what she's doing," she answered. "She's not fueling it all by herself, she's just providing a binding force that prevents it from unravelling. The Demons are going to come after her, and they will come soon, after they find a way to stop Tarrin's shadow."

"Shadow? I think you need to explain some things to me, Mother."

"Yes, I do believe you're right. Walk with me, daughter, and I'll tell you everything I know. Then we'll take Jasana to the gate. She needs to get there with all due haste. I need to go to Suld anyway, I have to talk to Kang. He's going back to that world with an army, and I'm going to make sure he has a *big* one."

"How big?"

"Every soldier I can find big," she answered. "Call in every favor I have *big*. From what I saw in my kitten's mind, the Dwarves there and their allies might not have enough manpower to fight the Demons, because they're not trapped in the Ward as originally planned. So, they're going to need reinforcements, and I'm going to make sure they get them. Kang is going back to that other world in two days, and I'm sending with him an army more than capable of taking on the forces of the Demon Lord. And I'm ordering a *very* large contingent of Sorcerers to go as well. Tarrin killed himself to put a Weave on that world, so we may as well *use it*."

“We need to get in touch with Keritanima.”

“I’m one step ahead of you. I’m talking to her as we speak. And Allia, and Jenna, and Regent Alexis of Sharadar, and Empress Shiika, and King Andos, and King Arren of Sulasia, and Denrak Whiteaxe of Tarrin’s Ungardt clan, and the Hierarchs of the Heartwood, and I’m also currently talking *very* fast to my mother, because she disapproves of what I intend to do.”

Triana laughed. “You sound very overextended.”

“No, not just ten conversations,” she smiled. “One hundred would be a stretch. I can do ten in my sleep.”

“I think it best that I go with Jasana,” Triana announced. “I can keep her on a straight path.”

“You won’t have your Druidic powers,” the Goddess warned.

“Phaugh,” she snorted. “Anyone who *relies* on something will just get herself killed. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I can’t say that I’m not unhappy to hear that, Triana.” She turned her head slightly. “You’re going to have company.”

“What do you mean?”

“Allia is coming with you,” she answered. “And so is Keritanima. Oh my.”

“What?”

“It seems that Tara and Rina somehow found out, and now they’re demanding to go. They’re having quite a row about it with Kimmie.”

“That should be interesting,” Triana chuckled.

“This is going to take some ironing out,” the Goddess said. “I’ll take you and Jasana to the gate, and I’ll arrange to have supplies ready for you. I’m sure you remember my instructions to Jasana.”

“Of course.”

“Excellent. Just keep to them. If you can’t contact Dolanna, go to her. If you can, just wait for the others. They’ll be bringing further instructions. I hope to have them organized and along by tomorrow, I want them to be out of the area before Kang starts arriving with the army.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Mother.”

“Good. I know I can count on you, Triana. I’m very glad you’re going to go with Jasana.”

“Someone had better. That girl is a walking natural disaster,” Triana grunted. “She knows just enough to be dangerous, not enough to keep from being dangerous, and she’s arrogant enough to think that she *can’t* be dangerous.”

“That’s certainly true,” the Goddess said with a light smile. “Tell me what you want to take, Triana. I’ll have it packed for you. And I hope you won’t mind riding.”

“We’ll need pack horses,” she nodded.

“Not horses,” the Goddess said with a sly smile. “They brought home Pegasi. We’ll use those, they can travel great distances.”

“I heard. Sounds like a plan. I’ll just have to learn how to ride one.”

“It’s not that difficult,” she assured the Were-cat matron.

Within the confines of the Tower in Suld, another conference was taking place, in a council chamber down the hall from the Keeper’s office. It was a large chamber lit with

several glowglobes, and the large round table was filled all the way around, upon whose surface was laminated the emblem of the *katzh-dashi*, the *shaeram*, in full color. The Keeper, Jenna Kael, sat at what might be called the head of that table, with the triangle representing the power of Divine pointing directly at her, the triangle at the top of the *shaeram*. To her immediate right sat Ianelle, and to her left sat Mist. Also present there were most of those who had been in that other world: Camara and Koran Tal, Binter and Sisska, Haley, Ulger, and Azakar, and Miranda. Phandebrass and Kimmie sat opposite the Keeper at the table. Also present were Keritanima-Chan Eram, Queen of Wikuna, Ariana of the Aeradalla, Queen of her people, and Lord General Darvon, commander of the Knights of Karas. Holding a place of honor was the *Sashka*, the ruler of Vendaka, and beside him sat Anayi. Kang, Marshall of the Legions, sat to the *Sashka*'s right, and beside him was Tsukatta. Sarraya hovered by the Keeper's shoulder, and behind her stood both Tara and Rina, there by specific command, wearing Initiate blue. Hovering in the center of the table, floating in the air facing the Keeper, was an image, a spectral apparation. It was the Goddess, her image dressed as her material form would be dressed, and she had just rather tersely informed them of what had happened to Tarrin at Pyros.

She gave them a moment to absorb that, but she didn't give them any time to break down. Much as she had with Jasana, she immediately moved on, to try to divert them from that heavy news, and give them a reason not to grieve too much.

"Listen to me!" she barked. "Yes, Tarrin died. Accept it. But what he did before he died now demands our immediate action. And, if we move quickly enough, we can accomplish the tasks he laid out for us and still have a chance to get him back. I brought him back from the dead once before, if you don't recall. I *can do it again*, but *only* if you listen to me here and now, and pay attention!"

Keritanima sniffled. "Yes, you're right, Mother," she said. "You *did* bring him back from the dead. Do you really think you can do it again?"

"That's a stupid question, daughter, and I'm in no mood for stupid questions," she said with uncharacteristic harshness.

"Forgive me, Mother," she said meekly. There were few beings on Sennadar to which the Queen of Wikuna would submit...a goddess just happened to be one of them.

The Goddess fixed Keritanima with a long stare, then turned to another. "Kang."

"Yes, Mistress Goddess?" he asked with the most profound respect in his voice, and not a little disbelief. He was having trouble accepting the fact that he was directly speaking to a *god*.

"You were going back to that other world with whatever army you could raise, right?"

"That was my intent, Mistress Goddess," he nodded. "Bragg can accomplish his objective, but his numbers don't guarantee that victory. I was going to return and help as much as possible."

"Good. That's what we're here to do. Now listen to me carefully."

The Goddess meticulously went over everything that she knew with them, leaving no detail out. She explained the situation with the sword, the condition of Dolanna—which made Haley's face light up immediately—and the changing conditions concerning the Demons and the plan to defeat them. "Tarrin didn't trap them in a Ward, he instead used his power to deny them their magic on the entire world," she said. "This actually will

help more in the long run, but in the short run it means that that Demon Lord is running around with a sizable army at his disposal. They weren't trapped in Pyros as originally planned, and they could conceivably move north and hit Bragg from the flank when he comes out of the mountains. What the Demon Lord has to do right now is run, because if he hangs around Pyros, Dolanna can destroy him. He'll have to go back there and kill her, but he's not in a position to do that right now, not with him injured, her at full power, and Tarrin's shadow running amok on his troops. He has to pull back and regroup, find some way to get rid of the shadow, and then come back to Pyros and try to kill Dolanna and destroy the Weave. Right now, Dolanna is his main objective, but my clever kitten put something on his tail that he can't ignore, something that will prevent him from simply turning around and going back when he has a plan. He has to find a way to destroy the shadow *now*. He can't put it off. The more Demons that shadow kills, the stronger it becomes. Just like the shadow of Val, if it's left to grow, it can become strong enough to kill the Demon Lord. He must deal with that threat *immediately*. Tarrin's shadow will give us time to regroup and prepare, because right now, that shadow is at the top of the Demon Lord's list."

"Begging your pardon, Mistress Goddess, but how will this slow him down?" Kang asked.

"Oh, yes, I forgot. Silly of me, I supposed. The shadow blocks a Demon from using its innate magical powers, it can use the powers of any Demon that it kills and consumes, and they can only harm it with magic and weapons that are *not* Demonic in nature. Oh, and they can't sense it. It's like a ghost to them, a ghost that can kill. There are only a very few Demons that use weapons that aren't Demonic in origin, and the Demon Lord will be forced to transport as much of his army as he can to a safe place. It also can't afford to allow the shadow to kill any Demon with formidable powers. If the shadow somehow got its hands on a *marilith*, or a *balor*, it would absorb their powers and become a walking terror. The Demon Lord will pull his troops back, sacrifice those within the area of effect of the shadow's blocking ability, and try to find a way to get at Dolanna while it sends those Demons that *can* fight the shadow out to draw it out and try to kill it."

"Alus and Cambions," Anayi said aloud, then her face flushed greyish from her black blood.

"Yes, half-breed Demons that fight with mortal weapons," the Goddess nodded. "They're best suited for the task of trying to kill the shadow, because any Demon that fights with its claws or hands will be instantly destroyed. They'll have a very hard time of it, though. Its very touch means death to a Demon. They have to kill it without ever allowing it to touch them." She looked at Kang. "You have two days to prepare to return, Kang. Jenna, I want you to organize a supply train for the army, so they can operate. I want you to prepare to send at least half of the order to the other world, and I want you to plan to supply an army of at least half a million."

"Half a *million*?" Jenna gasped, then she flushed and nodded. Now was not the time to get on the bad side of the Goddess, and she knew it. "It will be as you command, Mother."

"Anayi."

"Y-Yes, Goddess?" she stammered.

"I want you to stay here. You can't go back to Pyros, because of the Demon Lord."

“I-I already knew that, Goddess,” she said.

“Good. You can help Jenna, she’s going to need it. Now, while the army gets ready, we need to send people ahead of them. I need three groups. One group is going to go straight to Pyros, to Dolanna, to help protect her and help her. Right now all she has is Fireflash to provide for her. She can’t leave the Heart, not even for a second, and she’s depending on the drake to bring her food and water. I trust Fireflash’s ability, but if something were to happen to him, Dolanna would be in serious trouble, so he needs help. *Now*. The other two groups are going to find the two pieces of Tarrin’s sword. Those are more important than anything else. The army is needed to help fight the Demons, but we have to find those pieces of the sword, and we have to find them *fast*. The power locked in them can be used against us if the Demons find them first and get them back to the Demon Lord. And without that sword, I can’t find and recover Tarrin’s soul. I *need* that sword.”

“I wish to be part of the group that returns to Dolanna,” Haley announced.

“You’re in charge of it,” the Goddess informed him. “I want that group to be large, because it might be called upon to fight. Every Pegasus not involved with finding the two pieces of the sword are going with you, Haley, and I want a backside in almost every saddle.”

Haley laughed in spite of himself, and Darvon cleared his throat. “That’s our duty, My Lady Goddess,” he stated. “Dolanna is a *katzh-dashi*, and it is our solemn duty to protect her. Those that go with Haley will be my Knights.”

“Fine. Darvon, Haley, work it out. Keritanima.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Pick a group and be ready to leave tomorrow. You’re going to join Jasana and Triana, who’s passing through the gate as we speak, and you’ll be going after one of those pieces. Make sure you have a good balance of magicians and warriors, and also remember that Triana and Jasana will be part of it.”

“*Me?* But, my kingdom—“

The Goddess fixed with with an unholy look.

Keritanima’s face fur puffed out immediately. “I’ll see to it, Mother,” she said in a mollifying tone.

“I’ll tell Triana you’re coming,” she said, turning. Kimmie.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Put together a party, you’re leading the other team.”

“Not without us,” Tara stated defiantly. “We’re going.”

“You’d better rethink that,” Kimmie said with sudden heat, jumping up to a stand and slamming her paws on the table. “You two—“

“Are going,” the Goddess stated. Kimmie gave the Goddess a look of surprising heat, but her ears folded back and she quickly regained her seat when the Goddess cast a baleful glare upon her. “They’ll be safe enough with you, Kimmie, with you there to keep an eye on them. Besides, something tells me that you’re going to need those two.”

“As you command, Mother,” Kimmie said obediently.

“So, build a party,” the Goddess ordered, as the twins held paws and jumped up and down in excitement. “Remember, a good mix of steel and magic. Mist, I want you to go with them. I don’t think the twins will be half as inclined to disobey if you’re there.”

“As you say, Mother,” Mist said with a nod, as the twins jumped just a little less joyously.

“Jasana will be with Kerri’s team, so Sorcery will be covered. Kimmie, you should pick at least one or two *trained* Sorcerers to go with you.”

“I’d be more than happy to be one of those Sorcerers, Mother,” Koran Tal announced.

“No, something tells me that Camara wants to go with Triana, so you’re going that way. I think Sevren would be a good choice, and maybe Ianelle.”

“I was thinking of Jula, Mother.”

“You can’t have Jula,” she announced. “I have something for her to do. Sevren crossed over last winter, he’s *da’shar*, and Ianelle’s skills in Sorcery are well documented. They’ll do fine.”

“Mother, Koran doesn’t *have* to go with me,” Camara Tal said. “He’s an adult, and I trust him. If he—“

“No, you two need to stay together,” the Goddess said. “But Forge and Ember have to stay behind. They can’t come close to the Demon Lord, or he’ll control them. They may be dogs, but they *are* part Demon. Jenna can watch them. They know her and like her, and she’ll take good care of them. Tsukatta.”

The *samurai* immediately stood and bowed. “Yes, my Lady Goddess?”

“I have...a special favor to ask of you. It will be very dangerous, but you’re the only one who can do it.”

“Danger does not concern me, my Lady Goddess. Tarrin is *my friend*, and among my people, friendship matters more than life. I will do whatever you ask.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she said with a smile. “Meet me tomorrow at sunrise in Jenna’s office. You and Jula are going to do something very, very important.”

Tsukatta bowed once again, then returned to his seat.

“Very well. I have no other orders to give out, so this conference is concluded. All of you know what to do, so get busy.”

With muted voices, they all got up and filed out. The image of the Goddess in the center of the table hovered there, watching...at least until Sarraya came flitting up to her, to look at her. “Umm, Madam Goddess, what can I do to help?” she asked. “I can’t go back to Pyrosia because Tarrin has my medallion, but I want to *do something*.”

The Goddess smiled. “Well, yours was the last offer of help I expected, Sarraya,” she said honestly. “Yes, there is something that you can do for me. Something that’s *very* important. In fact, you are the only one that can do it.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to make more of those medallions. As many as you can make in a month.”

“A month? Umm, I think I could make six. Maybe seven, I’m not sure. Will that be enough?”

“That should be fine.”

Her little blue face brightened. “At least I can go back!” she said with enthusiasm.

The Goddess shook her head. “They’re not for you, my dear. I’m sorry.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I can help, I really can!” she said. “I helped before, a lot!”

“Yes, you were a great help to Tarrin,” she agreed. “But, if I only have so many medallions, and we both know there’s a war coming, then it’s best we put those

medallions to the *best* use. You were a great deal of help, but you're not much good in a big battle, Sarraya. Not as much help as, say...a *dragon*."

"I—ohh. *Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh*," Sarraya said, an evil little smile spreading across her face. "By the trees, Goddess, that's an idea almost befitting a Faerie."

"I'm so glad you approve," she said dryly.

"Do you think Sapphire and her brood will help?"

"I know she will," she said confidently. She knew so because a different projection of the Goddess was in the lair of Sapphire in the Desert of Swirling Sands at that very moment, securing that promise. "Now, you have lots of work to do, and you don't have much time. I think you'd better get started."

"I'll do my best," she said gushingly.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," the Goddess said gravely.

The wind that blew through the gorge was cold, almost bitterly cold, carrying the sting of blowing ice. Though it was spring in Sulasia, here in the mountains, it was still winter. Snow still covered the ground, and though it was clear, there was an icy wind blowing through the pass that made being there distinctly uncomfortable.

Not that the three beings there would care all that much. Two of them were partially covered in fur, and the third was a divine being.

As the three Pegasi fidgeted, Triana and Jasana found themselves looking at the blue swirling energy that was the gate that led to that other world...that world where the One had ruled, where Tarrin had fought him, and where he had sacrificed his life to stop a mad god and a Demon Lord.

Everything was prepared. The Pegasi were ready, and the pack animal carried enough provisions to last the two of them for quite a while. Triana was calm and unruffled, even despite the fact that she was about to leave the world she knew, a world where her power was uncontested, leaving for a world where her Druidic magic would not function. Jasana was excited, almost to the point where she couldn't think straight. For her, this wasn't just a chance to help her father, it was something to *do*, something better than sitting around day after day and listen to her grandmother prattle on about things she already knew about. It was also a chance to get out and *use* her power...she loved her power so much, any chance to use it was a good thing. And to get to use her power in a mission to save her father? There could be nothing better in all the world. This, this was a day she had *dreamed* about.

"Remember, children, your first order of business is to contact Dolanna. If you do, and if she's alright, remain at the gateway and wait for the others. If she needs you at the Heart, or if you don't make contact with her, go there immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Triana answered.

"I'll send any further instructions in with the others. Remember, Dolanna is the one that will be guiding you to the pieces of the sword. Be careful, and keep your eyes open. Remember, there are Demons running loose in that world, so watch yourself."

"We'll be careful, Mother," Jasana told her.

"You'd better," she warned, then she held her hand out. Jasana took it, and the young female was a bit surprised when the Goddess pulled her close, put her hands on the girl's shoulders, then kissed her on the forehead. "This is not a game, daughter," she said

seriously, looking down into her eyes. "I want you to be careful. I've already lost one of my children, please don't have me lose any more. Do you understand?"

Jasana looked up into her glowing amber eyes, and nodded silently.

"Good. Now, be careful, good luck, and know that I love you."

"I love you too, Mother," she answered. The Goddess let her go, and she collected up the reins of her Pegasus. She gave the Goddess a long, sober look, then she boldly stepped into the gate.

"I'll keep her under control," Triana promised after the Pegasus vanished into the swirling energy.

"Just be careful, my friend," she warned. "Keritanima is bringing a group with her to help."

"The mouse?"

The Goddess nodded. "You won't find a better person to lead this mission, Triana. She's very clever. *Please* remember that she's the one in command."

Triana actually laughed. "I'll do my best to control my impulses," she promised.

"Control, yes. Quash, no. She could benefit from your wisdom, my friend. She can be erratic at times."

"I'll keep her feet on the ground," she said with a nod. "Who's leading the other group?"

"Kimmie," she answered.

"Good choice."

"Yes, I thought so as well," she said with a slight smile. "She's very unassuming, but she's got a fast mind and she doesn't panic. Those are good qualities." She put her hand on Triana's shoulder. "Good luck to you, daughter."

"We won't fail you, Mother," Triana told her.

"Coming from you, Triana, that makes me feel *very* secure," she said. "Now, you'd better go, before Jasana decides to go fly off somewhere before you can arrive."

Triana chuckled humorlessly. "She'd do it," she grunted, tugging on the reins of the Pegasi. "We'll be back soon, Mother, I promise."

She watched the Were-cat matron disappear into the gate, and the Pegasi soon after. She stood there for a long moment, her hands clasped and lowered, and then she sighed. "I know you will, my daughter," she said.

There were other things for her to do but stand there and look at the gate, as other manifestations of herself went about the complicated business of assembling an army, organizing the recovery parties, helping Darvon and the Knights prepare their defense detachment that would go to Pyros and defend Triana, and many other things, but she couldn't help it. She had already sent one child through that gate, who had also promised that he would be right back...and he had died. How many children would she send through that gate, who would only return to her as souls that arrived in her domain in the Outer Planes? There was no telling, and that unsettled her, unsettled her a great deal. Her children were more than her worshippers, they were more than mere mortals under her control. They were *her children*, and she felt a personal responsibility to each and every one of them to nurture them, to protect them, to help them grow, to help them become better. But there was also a time when any mother was faced with that moment when she knew she had to let go.

It was time to let go of Tarrin. After all, he was no longer a child. It was time to let him go, let him do what he was going to do, and do it without her guidance and supervision. He would be alright. She was sure that he would be alright. And when he was ready, when they had his sword, she could call his soul back and give him new life, and she would be *damned* if her mother resisted in any way. If she so much as even *thought* about saying no, well, then by the God of Gods, there wouldn't be so much as a cantrip or a acolyte's devotion cast anywhere on Sennadar ever again. Niami had viable weapons to use against her mother, and she fully intended to bring out the entire arsenal and array it about in plain view of her mother, drawing a line in the sand and just *daring* Ayise to try to cross it.

But just because she had to let go, it didn't mean that she wasn't going to continue to help. After all, that was a mother's prerogative.

She turned her back on the gateway, then began to walk away. A gust of wind blew a misty blast of blowing snow, which hid her form behind its misty wall, and when that gust of snowy wind passed by, she was gone.

It was time to let go of Tarrin, to release him to his own devices, and do what every mother did when that time came.

Hope and pray that her child would be alright.

Come what may.

To: [Title](#) [EoF](#)

Epilogue

It was a place that didn't actually exist.

Some called it the Core. Others referred to it as the Nexus. Still others called it the Crossroads.

Its formal name was Concordant Opposition.

This, this was the crossroads of the Outer Planes, even more so than the Astral. Where a being could travel from the material planes to the Outer Planes using the Astral, they could travel from plane to plane without ever entering the Astral here. Every Outer Plane had a gate here, opening somewhere within the plane. If someone wanted to go anywhere in the Outer Planes, this was the place to go.

It was a place that would be very, very deceptive to any mortal who had visited for the first time...and mortals *did* visit this place. The air was sweet and fresh, the sky blue, the sun yellow, the clouds fluffy and white and hanging lazily in the sky. But when one looked closer, when one studied closely, one would see that the sun never moved, that the clouds never moved. It was a place that looked like any number of material planes, but it *was not* a material plane. Many of the Outer Planes had a feel, would remind one of a mortal world. Many had forests, and grasslands, and oceans, and mountains, and denizens, though those denizens would look quite strange to a mortal. But many were utterly alien to a mortal, like the pearl-worlds of Tarterus with their bridges joining them together, or the gray waste of Hades, or the endless mountain slopes of Gehenna, or the interlocked discs which formed the clockwork which powered the plane of Nirvana, or the unbridled geographical chaos which was Limbo, where even the land itself was chaos personified.

Those planes were the homes of beings with powers beyond mortal comprehension. They were the abodes of gods, the domains of Demons and Devils, they were the homes of those creatures who were born and raised in the Outer Planes, and saw all of this, saw what a mortal would see as fantastic, as merely *normal*.

Every dimension in the Outer Planes had its indigenous population, all except one. This plane, this world, it was devoid of sentient life, but it was very much populated. The Crossroads was very much like a trade city on a mortal world, where the denizens of both the Outer Planes and the material planes could be found, buying and selling, trading and bartering, engaging in trade and commerce where *absolutely anything* could be found for sale...for a price. And just like any trade city, it had certain districts which separated the rich from the poor, where the goods being traded were either rare or common. Generally speaking, the closer one was to the center of the plane, which was rumored to be the pathway which led to that place where the God of Gods made his home, the more important and richer one was. The cities near the center of the plane were grand, extravagant places, rich beyond rich, where the most powerful and important beings in the Outer Planes dwelled. It was where Elder Gods of the material planes might come

and stay when they sent a projection here, or where the mightiest of the citizens of the Outer Planes resided, a place where one would never find a *mortal*. As one got further and further away, the quality and richness of the cities slowly eroded, and mortals who had come from the material planes would become more commonplace, more visible. Grand cities gave way to large cities, which gave way to neatly kept towns, which gave way to small, tidy hamlets, which gave way to rustic villages.

This particular section of the Crossroads, far from the center of the plane, was nothing but a small settlement built up around a brook that bisected the well-maintained dirt road, a few buildings and an inn. It had a permanent population, several dozen human-like beings from the Outer Planes called *archons*. Archons were the “humans” of the Outer Planes, the most numerous of the indigenous peoples except for Demons, who were actually alive. They were born, they lived, and they died, all within the bounds of these upper dimensions. Many of them looked rather fantastic, with strange colored skin or glowing eyes, but some of them looked so normal that they could walk down a street in any human-dominated material plane and draw no attention to themselves. Some actually followed gods who made their homes within their home planes, some did not. Many moved to other planes to find more room, or find better conditions, such as the ones who had moved here. Most of these archons were originally from Arcadia, but had moved here to the vast open lands of the Crossroads, where they could grow their crops without the magic of the plane endlessly growing over the land they meticulously cleared with thick forest. This was a small, reclusive settlement, far from the nearest gateway, which rarely saw a strange face.

The inn’s common room was almost empty at this time...since there was no night here, the locals kept their own time, which often differed from settlement to settlement. In this particular settlement, it was considered to be midday, and many were out tending their crops. They farmed to feed themselves, and would trade the extra for those things they couldn’t get for themselves, be it either by craft or by magic. There was only the innkeeper and his two daughters, preparing for the afternoon surge as farmers finished their tasks and sought a hot meal and an enjoyable evening with friends and neighbors, and no visitors. There were rarely visitors, not at this time of the season. They would have some wandering merchants as guests when harvest time came, but not right now. They cooked the meals they would offer later that day, prepared their drinks, cleaned tables, and prepared fires.

Then there was someone in the doorway. The dark-haired innkeeper looked up, as did his two daughters, one of which had glowing white eyes instead of what would be considered the human norm, betraying her archon heritage. They looked at this stranger, and immediately realized two things. First, they saw that this was no archon, this was a *god*...which was very, very strange. Gods never came here. This was what they called a *mundane* place, where living beings—not even archons were called *mortal*, they were spared that insult—did what living beings did and basically stayed out of the gods’ way. This particular god was not a very strong one, barely stronger than a mortal, or the more powerful archons...just a minor godling. He was probably a sycophant, a servant of a greater god, with just enough of a following to be considered a god himself. Despite that, though, it meant that his was a power to respect. The second strange thing they saw was that this god was *really here*. This was no projection of power...this god did not send a projection of himself, he had come in person...which was *extremely unusual*. He stood

before them, and if someone ran a sword through him, he would be *dead*. That was why it was so unusual. This minor godling took an awful risk by coming here in person. The body he had built for himself when he entered the plane was a permanent creation, and he would occupy it from that moment forward.

It was certainly an odd form. Most gods of the mortal realms went for two extremes: human-like or utterly non-human. This creation was close to being human, but not quite. It was a very tall body, human mostly, but with oversized hands that were covered in black fur, fur all the way up to the elbows, and strange oversized feet that looked more like an animal's paw than a human foot, also covered in black fur. His head was capped with triangular ears, and ominous green eyes with vertically slitted pupils. The creature was wearing a simple black vest that left its tanned torso bare, black trousers, and he carried a simple wooden staff.

He padded in on silent feet, and the innkeeper waved his arm. "Welcome to the Whispering Brook Inn," he said grandly. "It's not often we get visitors, and certainly not one of your stature, your Lordship. Might we offer you something? Ale? Food?"

The intimidating fellow came in and sat at the bar, setting his staff against the bar beside him. "Thank you. I've walked a long way," he said. "I'm not entirely sure where I am, or where I'm going."

The innkeeper looked at his glowing-eyed daughter curiously, but she only shrugged.

"Well, you're quite a long ways from the center, my Lord," he said. "Have you somehow become lost? Should we have one of our windcallers send a message into the cities to have someone come get you?"

"No," he said, holding up a large hand, with long, wicked claws recessed into the fingertips. "I'd rather not have others know I'm here."

"Ah. What would please you, my Lord?"

"*Please* don't call me that," he said. "My name is Tarrin."

"Well, we, don't get very many gods in this region, my—Tarrin," he said with a smile. "And certainly not in *person*. I must say, you're an overly brave individual. The risk you take, just like us bloods, it's impressive."

"Bloods?"

"A term the extra-dimensionals use for us," he chuckled. "We have flesh and blood, so they call us *bloods*. Most gods simply project their consciousness into this dimension, but you've come in person. With all due respect, Tarrin, that's quite bold."

"I, I don't have much choice," he chuckled. "Though I find your respect for my bravery flattering."

"If you don't mind my asking, why come here in person?"

"Because I can't do what you were talking about. Project, you called it. I can't do that."

"Interesting. You have the feel of a god, but if you can't project...." He shrugged. "Interesting."

"I'm rather unique," Tarrin said mildly, as the innkeeper set a plate of strange bluish vegetables before him. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you use for money here," he warned. "And if I did, I don't have any."

"My, you're certainly a curious one," the innkeeper smiled, producing a simple silver disc. "This is what we use for money here, my good fellow. The *krin*."

The strange creature looked very closely at the silver disc. "It's...not metal."

"No, it's solid energy," he replied.

"Nice. Well, I don't have any."

"Well, you seem an honest sort, and never let it be said that Medjren Kthraska was one to turn aside a hand held out in honest need." He pushed the plate towards the furry creature. "Eat. If you need a place to sleep this cycle, then you're welcome to stay. I'm sure that we can find a chore here and there to help you work off a cycle's rest in a room that would otherwise stand empty."

"I appreciate your kindness, Medjren," the creature, Tarrin, said gratefully. "I may have to stay a couple of days—cycles," he corrected. "I have to get ready to move on. I don't have much time."

"If you don't mind my asking, what are you doing?" he asked.

The creature looked him in the eyes. "I've come to kill a god," he said with utter sincerity. "And I don't have much time. I have to kill him before what he's done causes a catastrophe."

"My. That sounds...serious," he said slowly.

"It is. It was serious enough for me to come here, and trust me, I did something *big* to get myself here. He knows I'm coming, so I have to be careful."

"Well, then the first thing I suggest is that you don't tell people what you're going to do," he said with a smile and a wink.

Tarrin laughed. "Well, you deserved the truth, it's the least I could give you for your kindness."

Medjren laughed. "I appreciate that, Tarrin."

"I came here first, because I can get to where he is from here," he explained. "But first I have to find out where he is. When I do, I'll go to his home plane, track him down, and kill him."

"A very dangerous proposition. Fighting a god in his home plane is not very smart, if you don't mind an honest opinion. You'll be fighting him in a place where he can control the very plane itself."

"I know, but I have little choice," he sighed. "I know I won't be able lure him out into a neutral area, so my only option is to kill him in his home territory. But I'm a hunter. It's part of my nature. I can find him, then stalk him, and then I'll kill him."

"And then?"

"And then the damage he did will be undone, and I can go home," he said simply.

"At least if my mother is on her toes, anyway."

"You make it sound simple."

"Anything can be simple, if you approach it the right way," he said, finishing the blue vegetables. "That was pretty good. Now, what can I do for you to work off that meal? I feel the need to go do something."

"For now, nothing. Sit. Rest. You are my guest. Later, when the farmers come, I'll have work for you to do, but for now, let the weariness of the road leave your feet and enjoy my hospitality."

"I appreciate that, Medjren," he said with a nod.

Tarrin turned in the stool and leaned an elbow on the bar. Odd, that this place would seem so much like home...it was almost, bizarre. But there were many differences, like the feel of this place, the scents of these human-looking creatures, and the very feel of the land itself. This place was...*pristine*. There was no other word to describe it.

Not that he was here to sightsee. He had come for one reason, and for one reason only. Somewhere, somewhere out there in the multiverse, the One was trying to recover from the dreadful damage Tarrin had done to him. He had lost his icon, and even now was suffering the backlash of that loss. Very soon he would start laboring to create another, with the hope that Tarrin succeeded in destroying the Demons and driving them away. By the time he completed a new icon, Tarrin may very well be gone, and the One could rebuild his empire and pick up where he left off. Tarrin had done major damage to him and to his plans, but with luck and effort, he could rebuild.

But his existence itself was now the very problem. And Tarrin had literally sacrificed himself to come here, to reach this place of gods and extra-dimensional creatures, to be able to fight the One once more, and not just the One's *icon*.

There were three ways to banish a Demon. Destroy its physical form, banish it using the power of a god, or *kill the one who had summoned it*.

Tarrin could not destroy the Demon Lord's physical form. Tarrin could not have a god banish it, for it was too powerful. So, his only option, the only option left, was to kill the one who had summoned him. The One had summoned the Demon Lord to Pyrosia, and even though Tarrin had destroyed the One's icon, the One still lived. He had come here to finish the job, to kill the One, and in the instant of his death, the Demon Lord would be banished back to the Abyss, as would every Demon that the Demon Lord had himself summoned.

It was a very simple tactic: crush the head of the snake. And the head of this snake was the one attached to the One's shoulders.

Unfortunately, it had required a rather drastic action from him. He knew he wouldn't have been able to come here as a mortal, everything he'd read had warned him. As a mortal, there were many places he wouldn't have been able to go, and some of the gates in this dimension *only* worked for a god or a denizen of the Outer Planes...they simply wouldn't *work* if he came as a Were-cat. So he had been forced to abandon his physical shell, use the All of Pyrosia to catapult his soul into the Astral in the instant of his death, and then come here, to Concordant Opposition, and form a new body, almost exactly the same way that Demons formed physical bodies in the material plane. But this body was more or less permanent, and within it he faced the same perils he would face as a mortal. He lived within this body, but he could also *die* inside of it. And out here, the physical form was only an expression of the soul within. Killing the body would kill the soul, and his death would be *irrevocable*. His very soul would be slain, and he would be dead beyond any definition or concept of *dead*.

That was the risk he was taking. But then again, that was the risk he took in the mortal plane as well, so it wasn't a risk to which he was not accustomed, and the risk was worth it. If this worked, he could banish the Demon Lord from Pyrosia without having to directly confront him.

He hadn't lied when he told the One that he would kill him. He *meant it*. He meant it to the point where he had cast aside his mortal form and his mundane life, and had come here, to the Outer Planes, where he would track down the One, go to him, and then destroy him.

And when he did, the Demons would be banished from Pyrosia, and the duty he had to correct that grievous mistake on his part would be completed.

It had to be done quickly. The shadow Tarrin had left on Pyrosia would help slow the Demon Lord down, distract him, harass him. And if it managed to live long enough, and if Tarrin failed against the One, it could complete his mission by growing strong enough to face the Demon Lord and then destroy him. But Tarrin wasn't going to depend on that. The shadow had the ability, but right now it was very weak, and the Demon Lord would make destroying it a priority. If it managed to survive long enough to pose a direct threat to the One, it would take a lot of luck.

And while that was happening, the Demon Lord had free reign to move around on Pyrosia, and move his armies. That army that Kang was going to bring to Pyrosia now really, really mattered, because his army would help Bragg and prevent the Demon Lord from taking out the Duran general and his army before he was in a position to do his part.

Tarrin looked at the two creatures—archons, they were called archons—tending to the tables, and inwardly smiled. This was not what he expected to see when he arrived in the mystical, mythical, Outer Planes...two barmaids preparing for the afternoon business. It was a definite surprise. My, the stories he would have to tell when he finally went home, after the Goddess took that duplicate of him she was hiding in a closet in Haven and brought him back. He wasn't sure how he was going to get his soul back to Sennadar, but he'd find a way...or she would

If all else failed, he'd just go *find* her, he supposed. She *was* a god, after all, and that meant that she had a realm out here in the Outer Planes as well, a place where her true self dwelled. All he had to do was find her, and she could take care of it.

He had faith in her.

He closed his eyes, lacing his fingers together before him. He had a long and dangerous road ahead, but he was confident that things would work out for the best. He would find and destroy the One, he would banish the Demon Lord by killing the one who summoned him, and then the Goddess would find a way to bring him home. It wouldn't be easy, and there was no telling what wonders and horrors he would encounter on his dangerous path, but he was willing to endure the trials and face those challenges. He would face them because he had a *duty* to uphold. The Demon Lord was his responsibility, it was *his* problem. And he would do whatever it took in order to correct that problem. No matter what it took, no matter what he had to do, he would get that Demon Lord off of Pyrosia. It was his duty. It was his burden. It was his *responsibility*. And if there was one thing that Tarrin Kael could *never* do, it was turn his back on something that was his responsibility. He would pursue the One to the ends of the universe, to the end of time, to the very edge of oblivion itself, until the One was dead, the Demon Lord was banished from Pyrosia, and his duty was carried out.

Honor and Blood. Duty was honor, and the cost of that honor was blood.

He would carry out his duty, no matter what it took.

It was just that simple.

*Thus ends Book 2 of
The Pyrosian Chronicles.
In Book 3, Demon's Bane, the
forces of Pyrosia and their*

*allies from Sennadar struggle
against the forces of the Demon Lord,
while Tarrin stalks the pathways
of the Outer Planes in a deadly
mission to find and destroy
the One, and to save Pyrosia from
the ravages of a new Blood War.*

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