

Tarrin Kael

Pyrosian Chronicles

Book 3

Demons Bane

[ToC](#) [LastRead](#) [1](#)

Chapter 1

It was a place of unending continuity.

The clouds in the sky high above did not move. The sun, near its zenith and glowing with golden yellow light, remained fixed in place, as if some unimaginable force had locked it in place. The air had been the same temperature since he had arrived. It was as if the world had been trapped into a singular moment, where time stood still, but still marched onward. The land was the same as it had been, the same as it always would be.

But not everything was locked into this eternal moment. The wind did blow from time to time, a gentle breeze that smelled of flowers and wheat as it feathered across the fields with delicate softness, never more than a slight disturbance of the air. The plants in the ground did grow, but instead of growing at what would be a normal pace, they instead reached their full size within days of being planted, as if for them, time was accelerated. There were no animals in this place of strange extremes, of discordant time, but there were inhabitants. They were from other places, other dimensions, all of them, and they had changed the original look of this place. Where there had been grassy fields, there were now neat villages, modest farms, towns, cities, and great metropolis, depending on where one was within this place. But despite the sky, the wind, the plants, and the people, what most stood out to one visiting this place was the silence. There was a vast silence to this land, to this place, as if sound could not travel more than a stone's throw. Sounds near to the ears were loud and distinct, but when there were no sounds nearby, there was nothing but silence. There were no birds, no animals making sounds beyond the buildings. There was no sound of wind blowing across the fields, even when the wind was blowing, for it never blew hard enough to make more than a whisper of sound to the ear.

Silence. To some, it was a comfort. To others, it was a curse. It was a lack of sound, a lack of distraction that caused the mind to focus more on what was within than the stimulus of senses without, giving this place a somber feel, a sense of soberness and of reflection that seemed to permeate the land, the air, the very fabric of this reality, even paint its color of silence into those who were visiting. Those visiting this place never yelled, never raised their voices, as if they feared to break that silence. A low tone carried a goodly ways, and when in close proximity, a soft voice, barely more than a whisper, was clearly audible.

This place was called Crossroads, or the Nexus, the center of all things, but its true name was the plane of Concordant Opposition, and though it was a place where some people lived, it was home to no one. It was an Outer Plane, a dimension of reality above that of the Material Plane, the plane of mortals and mortality, one of the myriad dimensions where the Upper Beings made their homes. They all originated from other planes of existence—The Seven Heavens, the Twin Paradises, Arcadia, Nirvana, Limbo, Gladsheim, Tarterus, Hades, even the Abyss and the Nine Hells, but for reasons which were their own, they had come here, to Crossroads. Crossroads was a place of neutrality in all things, where a Demon and a Deva could pass one another in the street and not immediately erupt into combat, for the One Law was imposed upon this plane, and that rule was that in this place, violence was prohibited. That rule was enforced by the Deva themselves, who would appear to stop any sort of brawling, combat, or other violence. The Deva were mysterious beings, quiet, unswerving, and immensely powerful, the direct servants of the God of Gods, the Creator of All. Given that the Deva often ended any violence by doing violence upon the rule breakers, such transgressions were rare. Even the gods visiting Crossroads had the wisdom and sense to give the Deva a wide berth, for in this place, in this plane, their power was paramount.

It seemed odd that Demons would be permitted in this place, for their ultimate goal was to overthrow the God of Gods and conquer the totality of all, but they were here. Very few of them were here, because nobody would have anything to do with them and they were watched so closely that they could not engage in any kind of subterfuge or connivance, but there were some few here.

Demons weren't the only unusual visitors to this place. Gods visited as well, projecting their consciousness into this dimension to conduct business, or meet other gods in a neutral site, or whatever it was gods did. Those gods who were daring or arrogant in their power visited this place in person rather than sending a projection or Avatar, risking their true selves...for though the One Law prohibited violence, that didn't mean that it didn't happen. The Deva took time to reach a fight to break it up, and people could be killed before they could arrive to intervene. A god who visited in person and found himself beset by enemies may find himself fighting for his very life, desperately stalling for time until the Deva could arrive and end the hostilities. Lesser Demons were also seen here and there on the streets of the larger cities, messengers and lackeys doing the bidding of their more powerful masters. Other denizens of the Outer Planes, from the Slaadi of Limbo to the Eirhelar, the warrior spirits who followed the gods of the light of goodness, could be seen in those cities, but as one got further and further from the center of this plane, the lesser and lesser they were seen. Once one passed the Ring, the distance of one thousand longspans from the Core, the center of the plane, the only denizens of this place that could be found were the archons, who farmed this plane for food that was easy to grow and easy to transport to other planes. The archons were the most numerous of the creatures who were from the Outer Planes, humanoid beings that looked just human enough to be mistaken from them, but who were not. Many had features which were decidedly non-human, from exotic hair colors, or glowing eyes, even to unusual skin color. The archons were the "humans" of the Outer Planes, industrious, sincere, and could be found nearly everywhere in the upper planes. Where the archons were the common citizens of the upper planes, the Demons were the common citizens of the lower planes...but the Demons were not the *only* creatures of those planes. The Demons originated from the Abyss, and the other lower planes had their own nefarious races. From the Hordlings and Daemons of Hades to the Devils of the Nine Hells, from the Gehreleths of Tarterus to the Wailing Ones of Pandemonium, they were all dark products of planes which represented the dark and evil nature of the universe. But the Demons were the most numerous, and the most dangerous.

But the most unique visitor to this plane could not be found in the teeming throngs of the great cities where all manner of things were bought and sold and where intrigue and deception ruled. He could be found on a small farm far from the center of population, far from the Ring, far from everything. His name was Tarrin Kael, and he was the most unusual and unique being in Crossroads. As beings visiting Crossroads went, he didn't look *too* unusual. In this place where some could form bodies that could look like anything one could imagine, Tarrin Kael didn't stand out. His appearance made it clear he was no archon, for his body was a creation of a mind, and it was not normal. His chosen form was tall, greatly tall, sleek, and athletic. Highly toned muscle rippled beneath tanned skin as the body moved, as the form hunkered down and sat on its ankles on the top of a barn, reaching down and picking up a plain looking staff. The form's arms were covered with black fur up to the elbow, and the legs were covered in fur up to the knee. The hands were huge, oversized for the body, with thick fingers, and the feet were more of a cross between a cat's paw and a human's foot than a foot, very wide across the ball and with thick, developed toes tipped with claws that wouldn't completely retract into the toes. The form had a very long, elegant tail that swished behind it as it stood back up, a tail longer than its leg, and a pair of black-furred cat's ears poking up through a thick mass of blond hair that was done in a heavy braid that dangled down to the figure's thigh.

This was the chosen form of Tarrin Kael, a Were-cat who was once a god, and a man who was currently dead. The form was a body of his own creation, formed by his own mind and will when his soul traversed from the mortal plane into the Astral, a physical shell containing a soul which was the divine soul of a god. The ability to form a new body that was something other than what body he possessed in life was one of the aspects of the power of a god's soul, something a mortal soul could not accomplish. It was about the last power that the soul of Tarrin Kael had left, for he had sacrificed all of his godly power, had given up that might in order to trick a Demon Lord. The new body of Tarrin Kael was a physical projection of everything

Tarrin Kael wished it to be; agile, quick, powerful, possessing of all of the Were-cat powers he had enjoyed when he lived, but suffering from the same weaknesses. It was beyond his power to create for himself an invulnerable physical shell, and so he had been forced to fall back on the form he had once possessed, a form with protections, but paid for those protections with weaknesses. His rugged physical form could not be harmed by that which was not magic, but was vulnerable to silver, the natural forces, and to unworked weapons of raw nature.

It was an old friend, this body. He had had the chance to create a new form in any shape he pleased, even that of a human, but he preferred this, his chosen existence, with all the weaknesses and shortcomings included with it. In the trials to come, he would need the feeling of continuity, the feeling of intimacy he had with this form, with its power, with its abilities...and with its *power*.

This form was an exact duplicate of the mortal form which he had once possessed...up to a point. This created body had some slight modifications over his old mortal form to better allow him to carry out his task. Tarrin Kael was here to kill a god, and he would be at a major disadvantage while doing so, so he had taken steps. Most of the time, Tarrin Kael's plans weren't what one would call thought-out; he would develop a good idea and then charge off with it without thinking it completely through, and it often left him in hot water halfway through one of his plans and forced to improvise to carry it out. Planning often wasn't one of his strong points, nor was it really the strong point of any Were-cat. The breed as a whole was based in its senses and had little concept of the idea of the future, living in the moment. That made them impulsive and rash. But sometimes, when things were serious, Tarrin Kael had the ability—a *very* un-Were-cat ability—to consider many courses of action and make an intricate, detailed, and thorough plan of action. Tarrin's presence here in Crossroads was a direct result of one of those intricate plans. Having sacrificed his mortal life in Pyrosia to deny the Demons invading that dimension their magic, now he had come here, to Crossroads, to begin the second phase of his plan.

Tarrin Kael was here to kill a god.

But that wasn't the ultimate objective. His ultimate objective was to banish the Demon Lord in Pyrosia back to the Abyss, but the creature was of such power that it was impossible to kill him in a direct confrontation. Only an Elder God had the kind of power it would take to kill a Demon Lord when he was surrounded by an army of Demons, and there was no Elder God in Pyrosia. If the Demon Lord was alone, perhaps, with its magic sealed away, Tarrin might be able to kill it in a one on one battle. But that wasn't the case. Given its raw power and the might of its army, Tarrin had elected to battle the Demon Lord *indirectly*, by going after what kept it anchored in the material plane.

There were three ways to send a Demon back to the Abyss. One could destroy the Demon's physical shell. One could banish the Demon using magic. Or one could kill the person who had summoned the Demon to the material plane in the first place.

Despite the Demon Lord's mighty stature and incredible power, it too fell into these restrictions. It was summoned to Pyrosia by the One, and that meant that its continued existence in Pyrosia depended on the life of the one who summoned it. By going after the One and killing him, Tarrin could send the Demon Lord back to the Abyss without ever having to confront him directly.

But the One would be no pushover. Despite losing his icon in Pyrosia and suffering a major backlash from it, the One was *still* a god, and Tarrin would be forced to face him in his home plane. That was a *daunting* proposition. In his home plane, the One would be able to use his true power, would be able to use the plane itself to defend himself from his brash adversary. The One would be a staggeringly difficult opponent to kill, the strongest opponent Tarrin Kael had ever faced.

But he was *still* a more attractive target than the Demon Lord. On the material plane, the Demon Lord was nigh invulnerable. All things measured, going after the One had a much better chance of success than trying

to destroy the Demon Lord in Pyrosia.

Tarrin stood up and looked over the large tract of farmland, watching the archons methodically place seed in neatly plowed rows of earth. There was no doubt in his mind that he'd have a better chance against the One than against the Demon Lord. Had Tarrin decided to face the Demon Lord, he wouldn't have been able to seal his magic and rewrite the rules of magic in Pyrosia, and that would have been a power beyond his ability to defeat. At least this way, the Demon Lord's power was crippled, forcing him to rely on his army and his enslaved Wizards and other magic-users to protect him from the vengeful wrath of Dolanna, who *was* in a position to do him harm now. Dolanna probably wouldn't be able to kill the Demon Lord, but Tarrin was sure that she could put some serious hurt on him, lay waste to his army, knock down a few mountains...it was all possible. Dolanna was the living will of the Weave now, and it would obey her will.

Or at least it would when she learned how to control it.

That would be the key of things back on Pyrosia. The Demon Lord will seek to reorganize his army as quickly as possible, kill Tarrin's shadow, and then march on Pyros and attempt to destroy the Weave and kill Dolanna before she gained enough command over the Weave to use it against his army. Dolanna would be working as hard as possible on learning to control that almost limitless power, try to gain enough mastery of it to wield it as a weapon when the Demon Lord marched on Pyros on his mission to destroy her. It was a race that Tarrin sensed would ultimately lead to a battle on the slopes of the volcano of Pyros.

That was what Tarrin needed to prevent, but it wouldn't be easy. He would have to find a single being in the almost unfathomable expanse of the multiverse, travel to whatever plane the One called home, find him *within* that plane, then figure out some way to literally invade his home and kill him in the seat of his power. It would be extremely difficult just to *find* the One. And when he did, then he'd have to battle a god in his home plane and try to kill him...and do it with no power of his own.

That was what made Tarrin unique. He was a god with no power, a god in name only. All of his power was put into his sword, and now the sword was broken. He had no divine abilities outside of the rather unique capabilities he had put into his body when he created it. But that didn't mean that Tarrin Kael didn't have power at his disposal. On the contrary, he had at his clawed fingertips access to incredible power...it just wasn't *his*.

Tarrin Kael was a legend in his home of Sennadar. He was one of the most feared fighters in the land, with awesome physical abilities tailor-made for combat and extensive training given to him by some of the most skilled fighters alive. From the heavy brawling tactics of the Ungardt to the lightning-fast speed of the Selani, Tarrin had been trained by the best, and was among the very best.

But it wasn't his skill as a warrior that had made him so legendary back home. Tarrin Kael was probably the singularly most powerful wielder of magic on Sennadar. He was a Sorcerer, wielder of the magic of the Weave, the power of the Elder Goddess Niami. He was a Druid, able to tap into the natural forces of the land to power spells. He was a Wizard, studying that ancient arcane method of drawing power from an unknown place and shaping it into magical effects. And he was a Priest, able to call directly on the power of his Goddess to power spells cast more by his faith than by his words.

And that was the power he would wield in *this* world. There was no Weave here in this outer plane, so he could not use Sorcery. The All of this dimension would fry him to ashes if he even *thought* about touching it, so he could not use his Druidic abilities. But he *could* use Wizard and Priest magic. That was one of the reasons why he had spent so much time studying them before leaving. He'd needed that vast knowledge of magic to help him shape the Weave, to understand how those forces worked to help guide how they would act in a world holding the Weave, but that studying helped him now just as much as it had then, because now he had come to Crossroads armed with all that knowledge. Tarrin was a monster in a physical battle, but he was a nightmare when fighting spell to spell. That was the power he had brought into this land, and that

power would serve him well...because here, outside of Sennadar and beyond the mortal realm, Tarrin would suffer *no* restriction over the access of his Priest magic. He had been forbidden to use it on Sennadar, he had been unable to use it on Pyrosia. Here, in this place, he was one of the favored sons of the Goddess, one of her highest ranking Priests...and the power that came with that position was finally at his fingertips.

He would not fight the One with his own power. He would fight the One with the power of *his* Goddess. He was a god, but he was a god who was devoted to another god, and against *that* power, the One could not stand.

There were rules, of course, rules that he had to follow even here. The first rule of Priest magic was that he would be virtually incapable of using anything more than minor devotions without the holy symbol of his Goddess. That was something he couldn't create with his own power, like had created his staff and his clothes. The holy symbol of a god carried its own power, and it was beyond any god to create a true holy symbol of another god. That was why his shoulders were smooth, why the brands of Fara'Nae were not upon him. He could not duplicate them, even in image, because they were holy to her.

But he wasn't quite ready to address that step yet. He could create another *shaeram*, the spell was a simple one, but the instant he did, Niami would know exactly where he was. And he had no doubt she'd be standing in front of him about two heartbeats after he cast the spell. He didn't want to do that yet, because no doubt she'd give him the rough side of her tongue for about six or seven years. That, and she'd probably demand to know what he was up to, and he wasn't quite ready to tell her yet. He wanted a concrete plan of action in place before he started talking to her, so she'd know what was going on. If he contacted her without knowing what he was going to do, she might try to derail him...or worse. He honestly had no idea how she was going to react when she found out where he was, and what he was doing. This was an entirely new game with a completely different set of rules.

Tarrin watched the archons toiling in the fields, planting seeds that would be fully grown plants and ready for harvest in just a matter of days. Medjren wasn't among them, for he was in the inn a few buildings back getting ready to cater to the needs of those out in the fields. Medjren had been a very handy fellow, and Tarrin was glad he'd been honest with him. Though he had no powers, had no stature, Medjren was *wise*, and he understood this alien place. He'd been very useful to Tarrin simply by explaining how things worked here to him. Thanks to the innkeeper, Tarrin knew some of the basics of Crossroads, and had started formulating the framework of a plan regarding the first step; finding the One. Tarrin could never hope to find the One himself, but he could find someone who *could* do such a thing. That meant that Tarrin had to track down a sage, or track down someone who had personal knowledge of the One. Either way, Tarrin's needs dictated that he had to leave this sleepy little hamlet and travel towards the center of Crossroads, travel to the grand megalopolis on what most considered the north side of the Core, a vast, grand city which extended nearly a thousand longspans in one form or another from the Core to the Ring. It was a city larger than some kingdoms, a city with no ruler, a city with no law beyond that which was enforced by the Deva, a city where the closer one went to the Core, the less that magic would function. No magic functioned at all next to the boundary that marked the closest any being could get to what Medjren described as a pillar of light that marked the center of the plane, and it was in that area where many who had made enemies of powerful magic-users dwelled. Most activity took place in a large ring nearly a thousand longspans from that border, where most magic functioned and where people had ready access to the gate stones of the Ring. Most gods preferred an area closer to the Core where mortal magic did not function to interact with one another, but a god's divine powers did...which gave them a huge advantage. The area right by the boundary was known as the Councillar, a section of the City set aside for negotiations between mortals and between gods, a place where the absolute lack of magic ensured that all negotiations would be above-board. The only powers that functioned in that area were the powers of only *one* type of Deva, the strongest of all Deva, creatures called *Solars*.

The Deva were said to be the direct servants of the God of Gods, but nobody really knew, not even the gods themselves. The Deva were an enigmatic, mysterious breed, silent to a being, carrying out instructions that

only they knew, instructions that sometimes seemed to make no sense. They served some gods as messengers, servants, and sometimes as foot soldiers, but their loyalty was their own, and they had been known to walk out on a master in the middle of a battle. All of them, in unison. Medjren told him that most sages speculate that the Deva served the gods of good to help keep the balance of power between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The creatures of the lower planes were almost limitless in number and highly motivated to spread their darkness through the cosmos, where the creatures of the upper planes were both less numerous and less aggressive in spreading their ethos through the multiverse. They were a rare sight, even in the City, and then it was usually because a violent act had attracted them and caused them to arrive to mete out punishment for those violating the One Law.

That was where Tarrin needed to go. Somewhere in that teeming megalopolis, where Demons rubbed shoulders with Deva under the enforced rule of peace, Tarrin would find someone who either had the information he sought, or had a way to acquire it.

The city itself had no name. It was simply *the city*. All other cities and towns and villages in this place had a name, and they were always referred to by their names.

It would be a long journey. The City was on the far side of the Core, which meant that Tarrin would have to travel a circuitous route in order to reach it. It would be a journey of over two thousand leagues, a journey that would take months on foot...if Tarrin intended to travel on foot. Tarrin surmised that it would take him about twenty days to reach the City, and once there, there was no telling how long it would take for him to locate someone that could help him find the One. And there was little doubt in Tarrin's mind that the One could possibly discover that Tarrin was here, in Crossroads, searching him out, intending to continue the fight that had ended with Tarrin's victory in Pyrosia. The One was in league with Demons, and Demons were countless in number and could be anywhere...and they would indeed be in the City. There was no law against the creatures of the lower planes coming to this place, so long as they did not violate the One Law. He would have to move carefully when he got there, try to find out what he needed to know without it becoming common enough knowledge that it got back to the One and warned him of Tarrin's intentions.

With an effortless vault, Tarrin soared through the air and landed on the bare dirt near the barn, then drew himself up to his full height and looked out over the field one last time before turning to go back to the inn. He'd been here for a few days, speaking with Medjren to learn the basics of this place, getting to know the archons of this village, and preparing himself for the task to come. He walked with a elegant, deceptive slowness, looking as if his steps were in slow motion, but he actually traversed huge swaths of land with every stride of his long legs. He was more than head and shoulders taller than all the archons of the village; the tallest only came up to his chest. He was at the door of the Whispering Brook Inn, so named for the tiny stream that gurgled merrily on the far side of the building. He ducked as he slid in through the small door, then rose back up and padded across the large common room. Gyama, his glowing-eyed daughter, gave him a slight smile as he stalked past her, as she set tables in preparation for the coming customers. Imjis, his dark-haired daughter, scurried past him quickly, carrying a large tray of mugs that Cryqua and Thorzi had washed in the back. Sizji and Prikim were cooking in the back, from the smell of it. Medjren had six daughters that helped him run the inn, and though they were all simple people, Tarrin had found them to be wise and intelligent. Medjren had taught his daughters well. He sat down at the bar quietly and set his staff against the edge as Medjren came out from the back, through a door that opened behind the bar. "Ah, hello, Tarrin. Did you finish fixing that barn for Korizkith?"

Tarrin nodded, reaching down to his belt and then bringing up a small pouch filled with *krin*. "I think he paid me double what he'd have paid someone else," he said.

"How much?"

"A hundred *krin*."

Medjren chuckled. “No doubt it was the novelty of having a god fix his barn roof,” he said.

“Just out of curiosity, since it doesn’t rain here, why have a roof?” he asked.

“It *does* rain here, Tarrin,” Medjren said absently. “In fact, everything you see around you will change in time.”

“Huh? You told me that it’s like the world trapped in the moment.”

“It is. But it also changes,” he answered. “Eventually, the nature of the plane will shift, and everything will change. For the last few years, it’s been the way you see it now. But before that, everything was a murky swamp, and this was an island surrounded by fens. And before that, it was a desert, and this was an oasis. The buildings change their appearance as well, but not their layout. The only things that remain constant are our location and the life-sustaining nature of this location. No matter how the plane appears, there will always be Whispering Brook, and there will always be farms.”

“Huh,” Tarrin mused, pondering how an entire dimension could so radically alter its appearance. “How often does the plane shift?”

“It’s random,” he answered. “Once, the plane shifted twice in a two hour period, and the plane was a desert for over six hundred years. But on the average, the plane stays one way around ten years or so. But that’s no guarantee it’ll stay the way it is,” he chuckled.

“Still, that just boggles my mind,” Tarrin said in wonder. “An *entire plane* that changes. I wonder why it does it.”

“No one knows,” Medjren shrugged. “If there’s an intelligence at work, it’s quite beyond us bloods. The gods pretend that they know, but I don’t think they really do either. Odds are, you’ll finish your business here and be on your way before the plane shifts its nature again.” He glanced at the pouch, which was now quite full of chiming discs of solid energy which was what passed as currency. “I take it you have enough now to get started on your task?”

“I think so,” he answered. “If it’s not enough, I’ll just steal what I need.”

Medjren laughed. “You make it sound that easy.”

“It will be,” he said absently.

“You need to be careful, my friend. If you violate the One Law, you’ll earn much more trouble than you expect. The Deva are not to be taken lightly. Their usual method of breaking up fights is to kill all the combatants, and they don’t care who started it. And they won’t give you any special consideration because you’re a god, Tarrin. They’ll attack you just as quickly as they would any blood, fiend, spirit, or mortal.”

“I’m not afraid of the Deva, Medjren,” he said bluntly. “If anything, the threat of their intervention will keep whoever I’m aggravating from taking it to that level.”

Medjren gave him a surprised look, then laughed delightedly. “By the Beyond, Tarrin, you really are crazy!” he exclaimed.

“Sometimes crazy works,” Tarrin said with a shrug. “And I’m not going to do what I need to do by hiding in corners. I’m going after a god, Medjren, on his home plane. Doesn’t that kind of earmark me as crazy right off the bat?”

Medjren laughed a long moment. “At least *one* of us said it,” he told Tarrin honestly.

“Truth is truth. I know I’m a little crazy, but it works for me.”

“I truly hope it does. When did you plan to leave?”

“After I eat,” he answered. “It’s going to take me quite a while to get there.”

“I’m sure if you waited a few days, I could send word out that you need a lift,” he offered. “A Wizard in the City will transport out here to come get you for the right fee.”

“No, I’d rather get there on my own,” he said. “This may sound weird, but I need to burn a little time. I want the One to start getting busy on his attempts to recover from what I did to him. If I go right after him, he’s going to pay more attention to me than himself. I want him to get distracted, so I’m going to let a little time go by before I start looking for him.”

“Won’t giving him time to recover work against you?”

He shook his head. “He won’t start losing power until his worshippers either start dying or stop believing in him. If anything, letting time go by favors *me*, but I can’t let too much time go by because of the Demon Lord running amok on Pyrosia. Right now, restoring his icon will be at the top of his list. That can take years, so he needs to get to work on it quickly. I want to give him enough time to start.”

“Then come after him while he’s distracted. Clever.”

“Thank you,” Tarrin nodded.

“Well, if this is to be your last meal with us, then I should make it a good one. And a free one,” he smiled.

“I won’t say no,” he said. “Ksazdreg finished that satchel I wanted yesterday, so I’m ready now.”

“He does good work,” Medjren nodded.

“Yes, it’s a really good satchel,” he agreed. “At first I thought it was leather, but now I’m not so sure.”

“It’s *gorta* hide,” he answered. “It’s supple, thin, and ridiculously tough. He has to use special enchanted needles to sew it together, because the hides are so strong that he’d break a normal needle trying to push it through the hide. If *gorta* hide wasn’t so common, it would probably be expensive. But there are *gorta* by the horde in the Beastlands, so it’s probably the most common hide you can find in the market. They’re so thick there that if you threw a rock, odds are you’d hit one.”

Medjren treated him to a meal of a thick stew and some of his daughter’s special fresh-baked bread that was sweet tasting from the spices she added to the dough. Tarrin ate it in relative peace and quiet, for the farmers had not yet finished their day’s chores and reached the inn, and it gave Tarrin a little time to rest and relax before the journey ahead of him. But he didn’t linger or dawdle, eating his meal with quiet efficiency, then pushing the bowl and plate away and standing up. “Well, it’s time for me to go, Medjren. I’d like to thank you for all your help.”

“Any time, my friend,” he said warmly. “If you need me, any Windtalker can send a message here. The Windtalkers are very discreet, so don’t worry about the message’s contents becoming common knowledge.” Windtalkers were archon Wizards who used a special spell they had created to put messages into the wind. *That* was where the wind came from here...it wasn’t natural, it was the result of a Wind Whisper spell,

carrying a message here or there, wherever it was meant to go. Many archon Wizards used that jealously guarded spell as their means of making a living, acting as a relay of messages within Crossroads. Those were the Windtalkers, who had taken an oath of secrecy and integrity. Always deliver a message you were paid to deliver, and never reveal the contents of that message. Many used magic on themselves afterwards to make themselves forget the message.

“I’ll remember. Thanks, Medjren,” he said, reaching over the bar and shaking the archon’s hand.

“Be well, my friend, and good luck.”

“Be well, Medjren.”

Tarrin picked up his staff and left the inn, and went to the tailor Ksazdreg to pick up his satchel. It wasn’t very large and looked like a normal pack, complete with shoulder straps. But the pack had four sets of buckles on its sides and two on the top, and long straps were tucked into the pack itself, which Tarrin withdrew. It also had a double-layered back with four slots cut into it at symmetrical points, cut at angles. He nodded to the old archon and thanked him again, then picked up the things he’d bought while in the village that he would need; food, water, a small one person tent, a bedroll, some dry rations, and two waterskins. He packed them carefully into the pack, affixed the straps to the buckles, then went outside and trudged well out from the village, along the road leading towards the Ring.

Once he was a safe distance away, he stopped and set his staff on the ground, gripped the pack with both paws, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

Without sound, Tarrin’s wings, wing he had sacrificed just before he died, flowed from his back, slicing his vest neatly as they bloomed out to their full size, their full form.

Tarrin had sacrificed his wings to unify his power into the sword, but here, where he had had the chance to create a body of his own choosing, it was a simple matter to give them back to himself. His wings had always been a representation of his power as a god, and though he’d given up most of it, his divine soul still had a little of that power. His wings defined his power, and in this alien place and inhabiting a body of his own creation, he was able to use what little power he had remaining to design them into his new form. They were perfect replicas of the wings he had once had...up to a point. They were made of living fire, fluid and weightless, able to change form at a thought, but they had none of the other powers his old wings possessed. These wings were different, though. They weren’t the representation of his power, they were the creations of his power. They were the first of the three powers he had been able to grant himself, and they, like his original wings, granted him the power of flight.

Tarrin rifled through his pack and pulled out a tiny piece of amethyst, then chanted in the language of magic for a moment. The amethyst disappeared, and in his waiting paw wavered into being a visor just like the one he’d had, a Selani creation meant to protect the eyes from blowing sand and bright light, a violet-shaded construction of crystal worn over the eyes. When flying long distances, he’d learned from experience, these visors were extremely useful. The Aeradalla used them as well, because long flights through dry air was very hard on the eyes with the wind constantly blowing into them. This visor was an exact duplicate of his old one, the one that Allia had made for him. That was the nature of the spell, it created a duplicate of an object owned by the caster. Tarrin then reached into his belt pouch and produced a small, glittering diamond. This diamond had cost him more than three quarters of the *krin* he had earned in the days working in the village, but it had been worth it.

Chanting again in the discordant language of magic, Tarrin set the diamond on the ground and made a long series of intricate, exacting gestures, his words clear and strong and confident as he chanted the words to one of the strongest spells he knew, one he had memorized before he died, a spell that he had retained in his memory despite that death.

At the completion of the spell, Tarrin clapped his paws together sharply. The diamond glowed with a bright light, and then vanished. In its place rested a tiny leather-bound book, small and unassuming...but that book would be absolutely vital to him now.

It was his spellbook, and within its pages were the combined spell libraries of three Wizards...and one of them was one of the most brilliant of his day. And here, in this place, the spells scribed onto those pages would be his greatest weapons and most stalwart defenses. Unable to use Sorcery, and unwilling at the moment to use Priest magic because of the fear of the possibility that Niami might interfere, his training and abilities in Arcane magic, the magic of Wizardry, would be his most potent power.

Tarrin reached down and picked up his Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook, one of his most prized possessions. He opened it and leafed through it quickly, and found everything to be exactly as he left it. There were three sections to the book; those spells penned in his own writing and the writing of the Gnomes, who had placed into his book several spells when they gave it to him, those penned in Kimmie's hand, and those penned by Kimmie and Phandebrass in the back of the book, which were the spells they had scribed into his book both to give him access to them for study and to provide another copy should some kind of disaster befall their own books. That forward thinking had actually saved them, for Kimmie and Phandebrass had been forced to use his book after losing their own books. The book had exactly one thousand pages within it, and because that tiny book was the repository of *every spell* that all three of them had collected over the years, it was almost full. There were only about ninety empty pages left in it, at the very back of the book. After a quick inspection, Tarrin nodded and placed the tiny book in the same belt pouch from which he'd taken the diamond, a belt pouch he'd already protected using several Wizard spells, to prevent theft or meddling.

Perfect.

Tarrin put the visor over his eyes, adjusting it slightly with a paw, then knelt down and started getting ready. He pushed his staff through the slotted flap in the back of the custom tailor-made pack, a carrying sling made just for it. He then buckled on the two long straps, a special sling so he could carry the pack under his wings, low on his back. He pulled out one waterskin and tied it to his belt, then pulled a small bag from the pack and filled it with bread and cheese, some of the fare from Medjren's own kitchen. It seemed that even here, in this fantastic place so far from home, some things seemed uniform through the multiverse. Tarrin suspected that there was bread and cheese in some form or another in every dimension of existence.

Despite being dead, Tarrin had formed a material body out here in the outer planes, and that body would need to eat and drink.

He tied the two straps of the pack together near the top and again near the buckles, then pulled the backpack around behind him and settled it over his shoulders. The tied section of straps let the paired cord run between his wings and down to the buckles. Even though Tarrin didn't need to flap his wings to fly, he still didn't want the straps fouling his range of motion. He flapped his wings a few times to make sure they didn't impede his wings, then knelt and shortened the straps to get the pack off the base of his tail. He couldn't get it completely off his tail, but he managed to find a happy medium with the top of the pack brushing the base of his wings and the base of the pack pushing slightly on the top of his tail.

He stood up and twisted this way and that, and was satisfied. The staff didn't catch his wings, the pack wasn't in the way, and he could easily reach food and water without having to land to dig them out of his pack.

He was ready.

He spread his fiery wings and launched himself into the air, gaining altitude with elegant speed and grace. It took him only a moment to get about a thousand spans off the ground, and once he got to that altitude, he turned and started out towards what he considered the north, starting his journey to the City, beginning the

first leg of a dangerous journey whose paths were uncertain and whose completion was in doubt. Once he got there, he honestly had no idea what he would do next. He was winging it on this adventure, forced to play things as they came because he yet again got ahead of himself by finding a good plan, then rushing into it before completely thinking it through. Now he had to pay for his impatience, because he'd be at a dead end once he got the sprawling megalopolis which was the City. Sure, he had an idea of what to do, he had the framework of a plan, but it wasn't concrete, it wasn't something he felt completely comfortable about. He'd have to find *some* sage or *some* being that had information he needed...and he had no idea *who*. He'd have to ask around, search carefully, try to find someone that could help him without it becoming common enough knowledge what he was doing that word got back to the One and caused him to react. In Pyrosia he was powerless, but in this place, on this plane, he still could use his power. He needed no icon to exercise his powers here...there was only the threat of the One Law, the threat of retaliation by the Deva should he attack Tarrin in Crossroads.

And if he sent a projection of his consciousness, that really wasn't much of a threat. That told Tarrin why feuding gods preferred to meet near the boundary of the Core to negotiate, a place where their powers wouldn't function. If a god got into a fight and a Deva destroyed his mental projection, it meant very little. Maybe give them a headache Tarrin supposed, he had no idea what kind of backlash a god would suffer from having a mental projection "killed" in a battle.

In any event, there was no turning back now. He'd sacrificed his mortal life to get here, and he couldn't go back. He was committed to this course of action...but he still believed that it was the best one. He was facing a daunting, almost impossible task, but trying to fight the Demon Lord on Pyrosia was *completely* impossible. This plan of action had the best chance of success.

It would just be dangerous.

It hadn't quite been what Keritanima had expected to see.

Her first view of this world of Pyrosia was a dark, murky apple grove, seen from a low-pulled hood in the dead of night and through a pounding, heavy rain. The air was hot, thick, and heavy, and the area smelled of apples and Were-cats. It was obviously an overgrown orchard, with heavily grown trees, but the systematic layout of the place told her that this place had once been planted, that the trees placed deliberately in neat rows before they had been abandoned to grow on their own. Saplings and smaller trees interrupted the precise, orderly array of the larger trees, making the place look less engineered and more natural...but she could see the truth of this place with but one glance. Any trained eye could.

She also rode her Pegasus through the gate and found herself looking directly at Jasana and Triana, who stood in the rain, but were perfectly dry, shielded from it by an umbrella of Sorcery used by the daughter of Tarrin Kael. They were here to meet her, and they were here to take her to a place called Pyros.

It had been three days since Jasana and her grandmother had come to this alien world, only three days. But in those three days, they had managed to get almost halfway to the ruins of what was once the capitol of the empire ruled by the One, and what was more, Jasana had managed to ground herself to the grove and to their forward position. Jasana and Triana had come back for them, and now that they were here, she would Teleport them to that point halfway to Pyros and shave three days off of that airborne journey. They'd been sent early because this Weave that Tarrin had created needed the presence of a *sui'kun* to stabilize it, and that *sui'kun* was Jasana.

Keritanima could sense this weave, and she was amazed at the feel of it. It was *complete*. It didn't have the same feel as the Weave of Sennadar, though. It was more...sterile. She realized that that was because the touch of the Goddess wasn't in this weave, that gentle touch that seemed to be everywhere and reassured

every Sorcerer at all times that they were just a touch away from their Goddess. This weave wasn't as strong as the one she knew, it would take her almost double the time to draw the power to use her Sorcery, but it was complete and whole.

Keritanima advanced, urging her mount forward, then reached down and took Jasana's paw in her slender hand. "I'm glad you're here," Keritanima told her. "I see you managed to ground in time."

"Yeah," she answered. "Where are the others?"

"They're coming," she assured her niece. "I had to fight with Binter for the right to come in first," she giggled.

"Binter is coming?" Jasana said in surprise.

"When would he *not* go with Kerri, you nit?" Triana snorted derisively.

Binter appeared behind the Queen of Wikuna, sporting his massive warhammer and his black, emotionless eyes scanning the area with practiced thoroughness. He was on foot, leading a brown Pegasus that was significantly larger than the others, having been magically grown to make it large and strong enough to bear the Vendari. The monstrous Vendari approached the others as another winged Pegasus came through the gate, carrying the sleek, lithe Allia.

"Aunt Allia!" Jasana exclaimed happily, waving to her.

"Hello, kitling," Allia smiled as she rather harshly tried to urge her mount forward. It was clear to anyone looking that Allia was not comfortable on the back of the Pegasus, and had little training in the art of riding a horse...or a Pegasus. Then again, that was to be expected, since the average Selani could run a horse to death. They were runners, the Selani, more comfortable on their own feet than riding a beast of burden. In all the time Keritanima had known her, she could count the number of times she'd ridden a horse on one hand.

"Mother sent you to keep me out of trouble, didn't she?" Jasana asked suspiciously.

"No force in Sennadar could manage that, my kitling," Allia said with a serious look, but made Jasana giggle anyway.

Behind Allia's white Pegasus, a dark brown Pegasus appeared, carrying a heavily armed Knight. Even with the helmet on, Keritanima could see that the two Were-cats recognized this Knight. He was Ulger. Behind Ulger came a black Pegasus, carrying a Wikuni wearing a chain hauberk, a powerful leopard Wikuni that was heavily built and carrying a nasty double-headed battle axe in a sling on his belt and a shield strapped to his back. This was Skairn, one of the best of the best among the Royal Marines, who had barged into the Tower after learning of what the Queen was going to do and literally begged her to allow him to represent the honor of the Marines in this expedition. Keritanima knew of this particular Marine. He was brilliant, an amazing fighter, and a tactical master of the various arts of war. He was one of the few Marines who still practiced with bows, despite the fact that muskets and crossbows were the only official ballistic weapons used by the army, because he always wanted to be ready for whatever may come. But, he was also something of a discipline problem, whose commendations was balanced almost perfectly by the number of reprimands he had received, and that was the reason why he was still a private. Every time he earned a promotion, he would lose it after yet another court-martial. He disobeyed orders quite a bit and had a serious attitude problem with his commanding officers, but the one thing that every Admiral and General told her when she considered his request was that he was *fanatically* loyal to the throne. There would be *no* disobedience if those orders issued forth from the Queen herself. The final answer, however, came from Binter, who told her in his quiet way that Skairn would be an asset on this mission.

Praise from Binter was the highest form of praise there was.

Keritanima had to admit, Skairn was a handsome Wikuni. He was a leopard Wikuni, with tan fur mottled with dark spots, and a wide, powerful muzzle and piercing green eyes. His left ear had a nick missing out of it high on the outside, a visible indication that Skairn was a Wikuni of war, not of trading. He was heavily built, but just like the leopard he resembled, he moved with elegant grace and sinuous precision. And he was *monstrously* strong, almost unbelievably strong. It had boggled her mind when she had first taken his hand in greeting, the muscles of his hand were so hard, so toned that it was like he was made of living stone.

“This is all of my team. Kimmie should be next, with her team.”

Kimmie was indeed the next to come through the gate. She pranced her Pegasus forward as two more came through, carrying her daughters, Tara and Rina, both looking wildly excited.

“Tara and Rina?” Jasana asked in surprise.

“Mother said they should come,” Keritanima replied. “I don’t understand why, but Kimmie wasn’t about to disobey. The mood Mother’s been in since—since, you know, nobody in their right minds would gainsay her.”

The next Pegasus that came through was sporting Mist, who came quickly behind Rina, and whose eyes remained locked on the two teenage Were-cats. Jasana giggled when she recognized her, then nodded. “Ohhhh, *that’s* why they’re here,” she said with a grin.

“Mist is here for the same reason I am,” Triana said in a gruff tone. “To keep control of the children.”

Jasana glared a short moment at her grandmother, but that defiant look died quickly under that withering amber stare.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to see Eron next,” Jasana said.

“No one can find him,” Keritanima said, in a slightly worried tone. “Mist doesn’t think much of it, but it worries me. We couldn’t even find him with Sorcery. It’s like he’s vanished from the face of Sennadar.”

The next Pegasus to come through was carrying what Keritanima considered to be one of the more curious additions to this mission, and that was the slender, regal, dark-skinned Ianelle, wearing a plain—almost severely plain—plain white robe that was well tailored for her attractive body. She wore no jewelry outside of her *shaeram*, not even combs in her long white hair. The Sha’Kar was something of an enigma to Keritanima, a pacifist who had a streak of steel in her, as if her pacifism was in name only. She was a hard woman, but she was also kind and giving and very loyal to the Goddess and the Towers. She was the paramount Sorcerer, having devoted her entire life to the Tower and the *katzh-dashi*, one of the most well trained in the old ways. Ianelle was powerful, but that power was always tempered in wisdom and restraint. Needless to say, Ianelle got along quite famously with Triana. The two of them were of an age.

Behind Ianelle came what Keritanima considered to be the strangest choice of all when it came to assembling these teams to recover the pieces of Tarrin’s sword...Sevren. Sevren was a tall, slender man with thick brown hair tied back in a simple tail and wearing wire-framed spectacles over eyes that had trouble seeing without them. The face behind those spectacles was a bit long, but still somewhat handsome in the human way, with a strong jaw, narrow nose, and high cheekbones. The half-circle lensed spectacles perched on his nose seemed to enhance his appearance, not dominate it. He wore a simple robe of a pleasing brown color, not far from the color of his hair.

Keritanima still didn't quite understand Mother's choice of Sevren. He was a scholar, not a field Sorcerer. He hadn't set foot outside of the Tower since he was sent to a Citadel for a rotation of guarding the border. Sure, he was a nice enough fellow, and his friendship with Tarrin was well known, but Keritanima simply felt that there had to be other Sorcerers who were better qualified for this. He was *da'shar*, but only just...there were many more Sorcerers stronger than him, Sorcerers with more experience out in the world.

But she wasn't crazy enough to gainsay Mother right now. Mother said Severn goes, so Severn goes.

She did like him though. He was a bit quiet, but he had a fast mind and an honest curiosity about things. He was much like Phandebrass, endlessly curious about the world, but Sevren's curiosity wasn't as unbridled or consuming as that flaky Wizard's. Sevren was a thinker, a philosopher, and a researcher...she wasn't sure how those attributes were going to help out here in the world, where Sevren might be called upon to fight. But perhaps Mother saw in him something that she couldn't, and she would trust the Goddess' judgment.

Behind Sevren came, in quick succession, two black Pegasi bearing armored men, wearing the armor of the Knights. These two were again, curious choices. They were Kord and Orin, brothers who had been Knights for only five years. They were half Ungardt, much like Tarrin, physically imposing and powerful. They had an Ungardt father and a Sulasian noblewoman mother. They were only five years in the spurs, young as Knights went, but they were supposed to be *very* good. They would be the personal Knights of Ianelle and Sevren during this excursion. Keritanima had only just met them this morning, but they seemed nice enough, maybe a little irreverent. Typical children...and Keritanima adhered quite strictly to that concept, even though Kord, the older of the two, was only three years younger than she was.

The last to step through the portal was another Vendari. This was Szath, who had served Keritanima as a bodyguard in the past. He was what all Vendari wanted to be: almost mind-bogglingly huge and powerful, an almost overpowering warrior...and not too bright. Szath was as dumb as a box of rocks, but he knew how to fight...Kikkalli's sails, did that Vendari know how to fight. But unfortunately, that was *all* he knew how to do. Szath would go with Kimmie and serve as a protector to Tara and Rina—something that Keritanima had absolutely demanded, given that Tara and Rina were *her* nieces—and he'd do what any good Vendari would do. He had been ordered to obey Kimmie as if she were Keritanima, and to protect the party. Though he was stupid, Szath was loyal and courageous. As long as Kimmie watched out for him, Keritanima felt that he'd do just fine with them. He stood there with the reins of his magically enlarged Pegasus in a scarred, humongous hand and with his huge mace in the other, with a vacant look on his scaled, boxy face, waiting patiently to be told what to do next.

"That's all of us, Jasana," Keritanima told her.

The Vendari nodded, and clumsily managed to climb aboard his mount.

"Quite a few," Jasana smiled. "When are Haley and Kang coming?"

"Three days," Keritanima answered. "The Sorcerers here have to ground to here and to Pyros to So we have two to get to Pyros, so we can ground there."

Jasana snorted. "I can ground anywhere in three hours," she said dismissively.

"Have you talked to Dolanna?"

She nodded, but Triana answered. "Dolanna needs the charm, Kerri. Did you bring it?"

Keritanima reached into her bodice and produced a golden inlay in the shape of a *shaeram*. "Right here," she answered. "I hope she's getting along well enough."

“Not well at all,” Triana told her. “She can’t sleep more than a few minutes or the Weave starts to destabilize. She hasn’t been very coherent since yesterday. She spends all her time either napping or in a daze. We need to get that charm to her quickly.”

“Well, then we’re going to need to split up,” Keritanima said decisively. “The Sorcerers among us have to ground here...Mother’s orders,” she told Jasana, who gave him a strange look. “Until Dolanna can start guiding us to the pieces of the sword, our job is to help set up the defense of Pyros, and that means we have to ground here, ground there, then ferry men from here to there. So, the Sorcerers and enough support to protect us stays here while a group flies ahead to Pyros to get the charm to Dolanna quickly, Jasana grounds there, then she Teleports back to get us.”

“A good plan,” Kimmie nodded. “So, who’s staying and who’s going?”

“The fewer there are, the faster they can go,” Keritanima said. “But there *are* Demons running around out there, so we have to make sure of the safety of the group. Kimmie, you and Ulger go with Jasana and Triana, and the rest of us will wait here. I’m fairly sure that the four of you can defend yourselves against nearly any Demon on the way to Pyros.”

“I cannot Teleport, sister,” Allia said. “I can go with our niece.”

“No, *deshaida*, we’ll need you here in case we’re attacked. You’re not all that good on a Pegasus anyway, and they’ll have to go fast. Sorry, but truth is truth, as Tarrin says,” she said quickly.

“There is no insult in truth, sister,” Allia nodded in an austere manner.

“That’s why I’m not sending one of the Vendari either,” she grunted. “Ulger at least has lots of practice on these beasts.”

“Aye, I can fight on the back of Goldie,” Ulger agreed, patting his honey-colored Pegasus on the neck.

“Seems like a plan,” Jasana said. “Ulger, Kimmie, come over here, we need to get moving,” Jasana announced.

Kimmie turned to her daughters. “You two obey your grandmother,” she ordered. “If I hear from Mist of any kind of trouble, you’ll wish you were back at the Tower. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, mother,” they said in perfect unison.

“It creeps me out when they do that,” Ulger whispered conspiratorially to Keritanima as he passed her.

“They’re not going to sit around idle, Kimmie,” Keritanima promised. “One of the things we need to do is prepare this area for the coming army, so we have *lots* to do. This area needs to be fortified, because Haley and his force is coming through the gate tomorrow, and behind them is coming the army. We’re going to need fortifications, storage buildings, mess halls, latrines, everything a large base needs to host soldiers.

“But, we’re all going to Pyros,” Rina protested.

“Yes, and the supply lines will come through *here*,” Ulger told her. “Even after the army moves, there’s going to be a force here defending the gate to Sennadar to protect our supply lines. Kerri’s right about fortifying this place.”

“You will address her as *Queen Keritanima*, or her Majesty,” Skairn suddenly erupted, banging his fist on his

mailed leg.

“Put a muzzle on it, Skairn,” Keritanima snapped.

“B-But, your Majesty, addressing you like that disrespects your station!”

“He’s also a friend of mine, and my friends may call me that,” she told him sharply.

“That seemed, harsh,” Jasana noted to Kimmie in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

“Skairn seems to have an attitude problem,” Kimmie responded in the same way. “That’s not the first time he’s jumped on someone for some kind of imagined insult to Kerri. He’s also as arrogant as sin. I get the feeling that someone’s going to have to step on him before it’s all said and done.”

“I’m sure one of us will step on him before long,” Triana noted in the manner of the Cat.

Jasana giggled audibly, which drew several curious looks. She just shrugged and looked to Keritanima, who simply smiled and tapped her *shaeram* meaningfully.

“Is everyone ready that’s going?” Jasana announced as the others backed away from the four of them.

“Aye, let’s get going,” Ulger answered.

“I’m ready,” Kimmie stated. “You two mind Mist,” Kimmie warned her daughters.

“We will,” they answered in unison.

“We can speak using our *shaerams*, Aunt Kerri,” Jasana told her as she reached out and took command of the alien Weave. “Oh yeah, Dolanna told me to tell you not to try to bridge or enter this Weave until she has the charm, because it’s not entirely stable.”

“Well thank you *so* much for remembering that,” Keritanima said sharply, giving Jasana a narrow-eyed look.

Jasana gave her an impish grin, and then the four of them and their mounts vanished.

“Alright then, let’s get to work,” Keritanima said crisply, turning to look at the others. “Sevren, you and Ianelle are in charge of the layout. We need a place for tents, storage areas, and cordoned areas where bound Sorcerers can Teleport without having to worry about killing anyone.

“Outside the orchard I hope,” Sevren said mildly.

“Of course, we need lots of room for this,” Keritanima told him. “Kord, Orin, stay close to the *katzh-dashi* while they inspect the area. If they split up, both of you stay with Sevren.”

“Aye, Majesty,” Kord acknowledged.

“Allia, Skairn, you’re on aerial reconnaissance.”

“As you command, your Majesty,” he said, saluting her.

“Can it,” she said sourly. “Mist, could you scout on the ground?”

“I’ll take the cubs with me, they need some practice,” Mist grunted, looking at Tara and Rina.

“It sounds fun,” Rina said excitedly. “Think of the alien plants and animals!”

“Just keep your mind on what you’re doing,” Keritanima told them. “This isn’t a game. There are Demons out there, and even if they don’t have their magic, they’re still powerful creatures. Spend too much time chasing butterflies, and you might get your head ripped off before you even realize what happened.”

Rina paled a little at that, then nodded. Tara simply flexed her claws expectantly.

“Binter, you’re with me. We need to work out how we’re going to fortify the area, so we’ll need to survey the terrain.”

Binter nodded silently.

“Szath, stay with Ianelle and protect her. She and Sevren might have to split up, so there needs to be some extra protection out there.”

“Which is Ianelle, Your Majesty?” he asked in his agonizingly slow manner, as if he had to think of every word he spoke before he spoke it.

“I am, Szath,” Ianelle announced. “I would enjoy having you accompany me.”

Szath walked over to Ianelle’s Pegasus and waited silently.

“Alright, listen,” she announced. “If you’re not scouting, stay within sight of the apple orchard, and keep alert. Remember, the locals here should be considered hostile, even the humans...it pains me to say it, but nobody who sees us can live, unless they can convince us that they’re part of the Shadows. Any human could be a follower of the One, and that makes him a potential spy for the Demons. The only ones you shouldn’t attack on sight are Dwarves and Elara. Is that understood?”

They all nodded or acknowledged her.

“Good. Now, we don’t have much time, and we have lots to do. We need to have the camp laid out and started before Jasana and the others get to Pyros, and we at least need some plans drawn up before Haley gets here with his advance force. So, let’s get to work.”

Keritanima watched as everyone started moving quickly and efficiently to perform their assigned tasks. Keritanima was a bit worried about this, about engaging Demons in a war on an alien world. This really didn’t concern her or her people. She’d committed a *sizable* portion of her army to this, both Wikuni and Vendari...but she couldn’t say no to the Goddess. That had created some real friction between her and Parliament, that she was putting so many Wikuni lives at risk over something that had absolutely nothing to do with Wikuna. Or, at least, it had caused friction *before* the Priests of Kikkalli had chimed in and stated that the leader of the Wikuni gods gave Keritanima her blessing. There was still some friction, and justified friction at that, but neither Keritanima nor Parliament really had any choice. She wasn’t about to look the Goddess in the eye and tell her no. *Hell* no, not with as intense as she’d been since her brother—

She didn’t even like to think about that. Tarrin was dead. Some small part of herself felt really, really good about bringing her army here and beating the snot out of these people who had, by their acts and their beliefs, brought about a god who had ultimately caused the death of her brother, but it was the vindictive brat in her, and nothing more. But, she couldn’t deny this, this...*feeling*. It told her that Tarrin was still going, that he was out there, somewhere, doing exactly what the Goddess had hinted, that he was still out there fighting.

She didn't know how or why she had that feeling, but she did, and that was what kept her going.

Tarrin just couldn't be gone. He meant too much to her, too much to too many people for it all to end in this alien world. She couldn't even imagine living in a world where he wasn't there. Tarrin was one of the three parts of the hub around which her entire life revolved, and to lose him would mean she would lose her center, and the wheel of her life would spin out of control and destroy itself. She wouldn't even allow herself to consider the possibility that he had died here, that his soul had been destroyed while trapped on this material plane without the protection of his body to save it from the destructive nature of a mortal plane on a divine soul. Tarrin *was* out there, somewhere, continuing his self-appointed mission. She was sure of it. She believed it with all her heart.

And so long as she believed, she could keep going.

It was raining.

It rained quite often in the pristine valley that most called Haven, for it was nestled in the crook where two mighty mountain ranges converged, which trapped the storms in the valley. The valley thrived from the steady rainfall, which made it the lush, verdant paradise which had made it the subject of many a rumor and story. A pristine grassy plain rose up from the reef-protected beach, rising up to a gentle rolling foothill covered in temperate forest. On one of the higher hills, a hill with a flat top, rested the manor of Spyder, the Guardian, and housed the only working two-way gate in and out of Sennadar. The manor had been there for over ten thousand years, as had its occupant, a fixture that seemed just as permanent to the denizens of the region as the mountains themselves. They all knew of Haven by story or by history, a forbidden land that was almost inaccessible, and was the domain of a solitary, legendary woman who guarded her private domain vigilantly and jealously. Many a tale had been told of people who had shown up in Zaradar or Mebadar naked and without memory of what had happened to them...and those were the ones who returned at all. There were many more stories of men who had set out to explore the forbidden lands of Haven and never returned.

It was all part of the legend of the woman known as Spyder. It wasn't her real name, of course, but it served her well. She was reputed to be the mortal servant of the gods, who performed tasks in the mortal world for them, and it was also rumored also served as an assassin for the gods, punishing those mortals who had so offended the gods that their deaths had become necessary.

It was all true. And it was all false.

In her capacity of the Guardian, she indeed served all the gods, by protecting the gateway into Sennadar from invasion by any and all extra-planar entities. It was her duty—and sometimes her curse—to protect Sennadar from outside, to act as the first line of defense against those who were curious, those who were seeking the mythical power of the plane, and those who had just had bad luck. For ten thousand years, she had stood silent vigil over the gate in the basement of her manor, ten thousand years of quiet, faithful adherence to her task. There were sacrifices she had made to perform this duty, but there had been rewards as well.

As the first of the *sui'kun* and the eldest child of the Goddess, however, she served in all those roles that most legends had attributed to her, most of them dark and sinister. In the name of Niami, she had done her share of spying, stealing, raiding, looting, and murdering. It would probably shock most of the *katzh-dashi* to know what their seemingly saintly goddess-mother did under the table, but it had all been necessary, of course. At least in that regard, Spyder never had any reservations, for she knew that though she was doing something that wouldn't be considered legal by most human societies, it was necessary to either protect the *katzh-dashi* or advance their cause.

Spyder was one of the few mortals who had seen the dark side of the Goddess, but it didn't shake her faith in the slightest. Spyder was Urzani, an ancient race of whom she was the last surviving member, and her Urzani heritage actually saw Niami's duplicitous nature as a positive trait. Had she been nothing but the sweet and gentle goddess she showed to the *katzh-dashi*, Spyder would probably begin to doubt her. The dark, cynical part of Spyder that had been the root of her Urzani upbringing wouldn't accept a god or goddess that didn't also demonstrate a dark edge. Niami's skullduggery behind the backs of the *katzh-dashi* only made Spyder that much more faithful to her, for it showed that she was a *complete* god, possessed of both mercy and spite, kindness and dishonesty, compassion and manipulation. A god that only showed one side would be hiding something in the eyes of Spyder.

In a way, she suspected that that was what drew Tarrin to her as well. She and him were of a mind about many things.

That was her new mission, of course. It was now the mission of the entirety of the *katzh-dashi* and every mortal over which Niami could exert the smallest amount of influence. It was what had brought her down to her basement, to the gate chamber, to be standing in the presence of a being that could only be called a soldier of the light, a tall, golden-skinned female humanoid of exceedingly handsome features and with large, golden-feathered wings, wearing a simple sleeveless tabard and carrying nothing but a heavy spiked mace, hanging from a wide belt that slung at an angle over her ample hips. She looked much like an Aeradalla, but she was no Aeradalla.

She was a Deva.

The Deva were part of a mythical group of beings that most simply referred to by the title of this entity, Deva. Their more ancient name was *Aasimon*, though it was almost never used. The Deva, the Agathinon, the Planetars and Solars, they were all simply called Deva. These beings were known through the outer planes as servants of the gods aligned with the causes of good, acting as messengers, soldiers, spies, emissaries, and diplomats. But what most didn't know was that the Deva served the gods of good only at the behest of *Him*, of the God of Gods, of He who had created all. *He* was their true master, and they served no other god without His direct blessing...and their loyalty to Him was never superseded. It had been known to happen in the past that all of the Deva serving a particular god of goodness to abandon their master en masse, all at the command of their Master. No Deva performed any action without the blessing of the God of Gods. Her presence in this room at this very moment was because He had deigned to allow her to come.

Spyder knew this particular Deva. Her name was Ch'Belle, and she was of a pleasant enough demeanor that Spyder would call her a passing friend. Spyder personally had a dislike for most Deva, for they were almost stern in their beliefs and most had no sense of humor whatsoever. She had appeared often in the gateway over the centuries, simply appearing and then asking a simple question: "Is all well upon Sennadar?" Once Spyder gave her an answer, she would bow and leave. Other Deva had come to ask that question, but Ch'Belle was the only one who had accepted an offer of tea on one morning when Spyder was feeling particularly pensive. Ch'Belle was one of only four Deva with which Spyder had conversed with any length over the centuries, and Spyder rather liked her. She had that same regal, austere manner as other Deva, but at least she had a sense of humor, and seemed a little less distant than most of her brethren.

"One is curious as to why you sent a summons for me, Spyder of the Gate," Ch'Belle announced in a powerful yet beautiful voice, almost as soon as she arrived within the gate chamber. "It was a shock amongst the Celestial Stewards. Never before have you initiated contact with us."

"The conditions are both unique and pressing, Ch'Belle," Spyder answered, reaching up and pushing her hood from her head, exposing her face so Ch'Belle could see her clearly. "I sent for you to ask a question or two at the behest of she whom I serve."

"Niami?" Ch'Belle asked.

Spyder nodded.

Ch'Belle seemed to look over Spyder's head for a brief moment, her eyes distant. Spyder had come to understand that when a Deva did that, they were communing with *Him*. She had no doubt that Ch'Belle was asking permission to answer those questions.

"He lives, my friend," she announced immediately. "He soars above the earth of Crossroads, making his way to the City."

"That was to be my first question, yes," she said with a slight smile.

"Niami must not interfere," Ch'Belle ordered sternly. "She must obey the strictures."

"I can pass that warning along, Ch'Belle," Spyder told her.

"It goes beyond that," Ch'Belle said sternly. "He might break the One Law of Crossroads, Spyder. She cannot intervene. If he breaks the law, he must be held accountable as all others, including the gods. If he invokes our response, she cannot intervene. For a Prime God to challenge the authority of the Deva in Crossroads is an intolerable situation. To do such a thing would cause an, unpleasant, reaction. Is this understood to you?" she asked, looking past Spyder's shoulder.

"Certainly," the image of Niami said lightly, her face beaming in a way that told Spyder that the news that Tarrin's soul had reached the plane of Concordant Opposition made her happy enough not to care about the veiled threat that Ch'Belle had just delivered. "My kitten can take care of himself, Deva. I just needed to know that he was safe and well."

"He is well. Safe is a relative concept, goddess. The Demons know he is there, and Gruz moves to intercept him and exact vengeance for what happened in the mortal plane. Gruz is rightly furious at your protegé", Niami."

"If my kitten is good at one thing, Deva, it's making people mad," she said irreverently.

"Then the Celestial Stewards have your oath that you will not interfere if it comes that we must exact punishment for breaking the One Law?" she asked directly, staring at the projection's eyes.

"I so vow," she said in a stately manner, then she chuckled. "I'm not worried at all, Deva. I'm sure that my kitten has learned about this rule, and has already taken it into account. Even if he breaks the One Law, I don't think you'll have the chance to do anything about it. My kitten was ever the clever one. I don't think you can *catch* him, and even if you do, I'm not sure your brethren will be quite ready to deal with him. Make no mistake, Ch'Belle. Tarrin *will* fight you if you challenge him, and he's more than capable of killing just about anyone, *including* a Deva. He's not afraid of *anything*, and don't for a second think that he won't try to kill you if you attack him."

"How we perform our tasks is not your concern, goddess," Ch'Belle told her in an emotionless voice.

"Are the Deva aware of his intent?" Spyder asked curiously.

"Nay, we know only what has become common knowledge within Crossroads as divined by the Augers and passed among the Windtalkers. What is common knowledge is that the Mortal God has come to Crossroads, and he makes his way to the City."

"Mortal God? That's what they're calling him?" Niami asked curiously.

“It is a fitting title,” she smiled. “His intentions are his own, but I’m sure they will become clear over time.”

“Odd that his appearance in Crossroads was enough for the Deva to take notice,” she said pointedly, looking the Deva in the eyes. “And that the Deva know what the Demons are up to.”

“The Mortal God is a wild card, Prime Goddess,” Ch’Belle told her. “He is unique, and his powers are outside the bounds of the rules of others. The Deva have kept careful track of him since the day he left Prime Sennadar and entered the other material plane. As to the Demons, well, we *always* keep tabs on their activities. Anything that so incites the Demons to action as the Mortal God would quickly draw our eye.”

“I’m not sure what he’s up to, but heading to the City is a logical first step for just about anything,” Niami said, pursing her lips in thought. “It’s a good thing that’s where Tsukatta and Julia are going. I’ll have to pass word to Julia that Tarrin’s on his way.”

“Are you sure that they can find him? The City is larger than all of Sulasia, Mother,” Spyder said.

“They won’t let me down,” she said confidently. “Tsukatta is a very experienced worldwalker, and he’s been to the City many times.”

“By your leave, Guardian, I must go. I have other duties to attend,” Ch’Belle announced.

“Yes, yes, thank you for coming, Ch’Belle,” Niami told her.

“I thank you for answering my summons,” Spyder said with a short bow. “It is good to know that when I have need of the Deva, that I will be answered.”

“When the Guardian of a Prime sends a summons, it would certainly be answered,” Ch’Belle smiled. “Be well.”

She put a hand over her mace and turned, then stepped back through the gate.

“Interesting,” Niami mused aloud. “The Deva have some kind of interest in my kitten. I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“Mother, if I may ask, why does she call us a ‘Prime?’ It seemed that she had meaning beyond that this is the prime material plane.”

“Sennadar is one of the seven prime material planes closest to the Core,” she answered. “It’s hard to explain, daughter, but in the multiverse, with the limitless planes and alternate material planes, there *is* a definite center to everything. Well, Sennadar is very close to that center, one of seven material planes that is, while all the others are much further out. There’s a *big* gap in distance between the seven Primes and the next closest material plane in relation to the Core. That proximity is why our magic is so strong, and why I have special rules I have to follow in the Outer Planes. I’m what’s called a *Prime god*, a god from a Prime world. I have more restrictions on me than other gods, because of my power.”

“It sounds as if it garners great respect.”

“Fear is more like it,” she answered evenly. “I’m fully restricted to the Outer plane I call home,” she explained. “Other gods may move between planes freely, but we’re not allowed. I can send projections, surely, but those projections aren’t nearly as powerful as the *real* me. The only time I’m allowed to leave my home plane is to visit the realm of Ayise in *her* home plane, and nowhere else. All the Elder Gods can visit Ayise, so we can meet and talk in person rather than through projections.”

“I did not know that.”

“We don’t like to talk about our liabilities, you know,” she smiled. “We have tremendous power, daughter, the Elder Gods do, far beyond other *Elder Gods* of other planes, but that power comes at a price.”

“Power always does, even if you cannot see the cost.”

“Well said,” she nodded. “Well, if Tarrin is in Crossroads, I should start looking for him there. I might find him before Julia does, but I’m not sure. If I do find him, I think I’ll have to keep my distance. I get a strange feeling that he’s hiding from me.”

“Why is that, Mother?”

“He’s *still* one of my children, daughter,” she said. “All he has to do is pray and I’ll hear it, and that will let me lock right in on his location. He could even use Priest magic if he thought about it,” she added. “But he hasn’t done it. Since I *know* he’s not so dense as to not know he can still talk to me, that can only lead me to believe that he doesn’t want me to know what he’s doing, or he doesn’t want me to interfere. That also leads me to believe that he’s got mischief on his mind, something he doesn’t want me caught up in.”

“He almost always does,” Spyder said with a slight smile.

She laughed. “True enough, but *mischief* takes on a whole new meaning in Crossroads, daughter. I get the feeling he’s going to run afoul of the Deva before it’s said and done. I feel sorry for them,” she chuckled. “They have *no* idea what they’ll be getting into when they show up to enforce the law against violence. My kitten will *not* take kindly to them interfering in his business.”

“Deva are formidable, Mother,” Spyder reminded her gently.

“Yes, they are, daughter, but like I told the Deva, they have to *catch* him before they can do anything about him, and even if they do, then they have to deal with the ramifications of that success. I’d pay money to be there when they finally corner him, just to see what they try to do.”

“I wondered why you gave Ch’Belle that warning,” she asked. “Does that not put Tarrin at a disadvantage?”

“Quite the contrary,” she replied. “Now, the Deva are going to *respect* Tarrin. Before that, I have no doubt that they’d just rush in and try to kill him for violating the One Law, and then lose several of their number for their trouble. This prevents any nasty crusades against Tarrin in Crossroads. I *want* the Deva to be afraid when they approach Tarrin to punish him for violating the One Law. I *want* them to fully appreciate that he *will* fight, that he has absolutely no fear of them. That way they afford him the respect he deserves, and maybe they save a few Deva’s lives. They may hesitate before attacking him, and that moment might be all he needs to get away.”

“Ah. I understand. What do you think he is doing, Mother?”

“I have no idea,” she answered honestly. “But I’ll tell you one thing, daughter. It’s not over. Not by a long shot. You know how vengeful he is. I have no doubt that he’s in Crossroads to get at the Demon Lord somehow, or maybe the One. But I don’t think he’s insane enough to do what I think he might be trying to do.”

“What is that, Mother?”

“Attack the Demon Lord in the Abyss to force him to leave Pyrosia,” she answered. “He’s on Pyrosia

physically, but all Demons of any stature keep their souls in a vessel and have it somewhere safe. Tarrin might think he can invade the Abyss and find that soul vessel and destroy it, or at least threaten to in order to force the Demon Lord to leave Pyrosia. I know how my kitten thinks, and something like that would certainly be in line with his methodology. Tarrin has never run from any fight, and losing just makes him furious. He's in Crossroads to continue his fight with the Demon Lord, following whatever plan he made before he died on Pyrosia."

"I do not think he'd be that crazy, Mother," Spyder said. "He may lose his head from time to time, but I am positive he understands how impossible that would be."

"You don't know Tarrin, Spyder. The implausibility of an act never crosses his mind. If he didn't do something because people told him it was impossible, he wouldn't be where he is today. In a way, his refusal to admit the impossible is one of his strengths, because he *finds* a way to do the impossible."

"Point taken," Spyder said mildly, drawing up her hood gracefully.

"But trying to destroy the Demon Lord in the Abyss *would* be impossible," she grunted. "A Demon Lord is a god in the Abyss, and can command the power of a god in the material plane. The only chance he'd have would be to find and destroy the soul vessel without alerting the Demon Lord, but that isn't going to happen. A Demon Lord would have that soul vessel too well guarded, and Tarrin's divine aura would shine like the sun in the Abyss, making it absolutely impossible for him to hide."

"And maybe that is why he is hiding from you, Mother," Spyder reasoned. "So you cannot stop him."

"Headstrong fool," Niami snorted. "When Julia finds him and tells me where he is, me and that child of mine are going to have a long talk."

"Yet another reason he hides from you," Spyder said in a measured manner, but with a slight hint of amusement.

"No wonder you put your hood up," Niami said dangerously, giving her daughter a narrow-eyed look.

"I am headstrong, but no fool, Mother," she added.

Niami laughed. "The only thing I can see is that he's somehow trying to bluff the Demon Lord into returning to the Abyss, but I seriously doubt that'll happen. That Demon Lord won't give up his prize unless Tarrin is standing at the gates of his castle, and he won't get that close. Not even my kitten's legendary resourcefulness will get him that close, I'm afraid."

"I just hope that Tarrin knows what he is doing," Spyder said seriously. "It would grieve me to lose the first Sorcerer in an age I considered an equal. And a friend," she added.

"That's not going to happen, Spyder," Niami said in a soft tone, but fierce determination flowed through her choral voice. "Because I won't *allow* it."

Spyder glanced at her mentor, her friend, and her goddess, and she nodded soberly.

"I report, Sh'Keel," Ch'Belle stated in a submissive tone, bowing elegantly before a mighty figure with golden skin and black-feathered wings. Though neither were standing in the limitless gray void that was the Astral, the move was not lost on the towering figure dressed in a vibrant red vest, baggy, flaring pantaloons,

and black boots. A mighty compound bow was slung over a shoulder, and a quiver hung between those mighty black-feathered wings.

This was a Solar. This was the most powerful breed of the Deva, beings of such might and power that they were almost as gods themselves, beings that the gods feared for their power. They were an enigma to the gods. They were of immense power, but had no ambition to use it except in the act of serving others. Sometimes Solar served this god or that god, but never for long, and usually only to accomplish certain key tasks. When not in the service of gods, they worked on their own, commanding Deva both in the service of gods and those who were not, working on some grand, mysterious, unknown goal, something so abstract that only the Deva really understood what they were doing...and of course, they never explained what they were about. They were the commanders of the Deva, the generals, the tacticians, those who directed activities in the field when so instructed by their master. In this matter, this Solar had been given authority. He was well suited for this task, Ch'Belle felt. He was one of the oldest and wisest of the Solar, and he had served their Master unswervingly for longer than most Deva had the capability to remember. It was considered an honor and a privilege among the Deva to serve under the command of Sh'Keel. It was rumored that Sh'Keel was one of the *First* of the Deva. But those of the First never revealed that status, part of the custom and culture of humility and service that marked the base mentality of the Deva.

Report.

In the briefest of moments, the Deva relayed the entirety of her encounter with the Prime Guardian through telepathic communion, including her own observations and conclusions. She completed her report with the feeling that the Prime Goddess Niami did not know what was going on. "They do not know, sir," she said aloud.

You have done well, Ch'Belle.

Ch'Belle absolutely beamed, bowing to him again very deeply.

The mighty figure gave her a slight smile.

"What are your orders, Commander?" she asked.

Return to Crossroads, the figure ordered telepathically. I want you to locate the two the Prime Goddess has sent to locate the Mortal God. Find them but do not make contact with them. Observe them. If the Demons or others attempt to block them or attack them, render unto them that aid which you think is appropriate. I will make it known among the Deva that those two are under special protection, that they are not to be killed if they violate the One Law, only chastised. You are responsible for their well being, Ch'Belle.

"I will protect them, Commander," she said with another bow. "To whom do I report in Crossroads?"

Report the movements of the pair and other unimportant information to Planetar To'Par. Any important communication or news of any attack on the pair or unusual Demon activity near them should be brought directly to me.

"I understand, Commander."

You are dismissed. Begin your next assignment.

"At once, Commander," she said with a final bow, then turned, spread her golden wings, and immediately vanished from sight, moving at such speed through the great emptiness of the Astral towards the nearest color pool to Crossroads that it nearly appeared that she had vanished.

The mighty Solar hung in the void for a moment in quiet contemplation, then also disappeared.

The vast expanses of the Astral seemed utterly empty. There was nothing but gray no matter which way one looked, an eternal emptiness without sound, without scent, with nothing but a faint grayish radiance that seemed to emanate from the plane itself, rendering all things within visible from vast distances...but those distances were almost unimaginable between objects within a limitless plane of eternal emptiness.

There was nothing here. There was no matter, except that which had been drawn into the Astral by accident or by design. There was no gravity, but without ground to stand upon, gravity wasn't necessary. There was no air, but also, there was no *time* in this place. Certainly time seemed to pass, but it was *subjective* time, a feeling that time was moving when it in fact was not, the effect of the conscious mind in the plane, a conscious mind that craved linear continuity and thus enforced that concept on the area around him. And since there was no real time, there was no need to breathe, no need to eat, no need to sleep.

The timeless nature of the Astral did make it a home to some who feared the coming of death, retreating to a place where time did not flow, and so they did not age. There were other residents of this vast emptiness, as well as countless travelers moving between the material and the outer planes...but the endless nature of the plane made encounters between beings in the Astral very, very rare.

Two such travelers seemed to hang in the empty void, but in actuality they were moving at great speeds. One was hanging in the void in a vertical posture, though her feet were pointed down, and the other sat cross-legged in the emptiness, hands in his lap and with his eyes closed. The standing figure was Julia, a Were-cat, wearing leather trousers whose legs were shredded from her claws and a simple undyed buckskin shirt, under which she wore a white linen shirt to keep the leather from rubbing against her skin. She looked distinctly uncomfortable, her expression strained and her body rigid. The sitting figure was Tsukatta, a Worldwalker, a human from another material plane who wandered the multiverse seeking out new challenges to test his ability. He was completely at ease, in a peaceful position as he guided them to the nearest color pool that would take them to Crossroads by the force of his mind alone, which was the only method of travel available in this plane. He wore wicker armor of an unusual design, dyed red, and his flared helmet with the antennae-like *V* adornment on the front rested on his back, hanging over his shoulder by its chinstrap. That gruesome face-like mask that he wore affixed to that helmet was, thankfully, in a small sack tied to his belt. Two slender *katana* were in their scabbards, tucked into a sash around his waist, and a third, much smaller weapon was tucked in on the other side. He carried nothing else but a small backpack that was in his lap instead of on his back.

"I hate this place," Julia growled. "It feels, feels, *dead*."

"Those are your heightened senses finding nothing to sense," the human warrior responded in a reposed voice, almost as if he were singing the words. "Be patient, friend Julia. We are not long from reaching Crossroads. Do you remember what I have told you of the place?"

"Yes," she answered. "That it's a great city almost as large as the entire West, and I'll see all kinds of creatures there."

"And what is the one and only law of the City?" he prompted.

"Do no violence," she repeated immediately. "To attack another is to invite the wrath of the Deva upon you," she quoted his words directly. "But I don't understand. What happens if someone steals?"

"That is not violence," Tsukatta replied. "So theft of another's property carries no punishment, outside of that punishment which the victim can exact against the thief on his own."

“Then how do people protect what’s theirs if they can’t fight to defend it?”

“There are many ways to protect things in the City,” he replied. “Doing violence upon a *thing* carries the same penalty as doing violence upon a *person*.”

“I—ah,” she said with a nod. “So, someone breaking down a door to get into someone’s house would attract the Deva.”

“Yes. So, a locked door is all the barrier one needs against a thief.”

“Now that makes more sense,” she said with a nod. “I can’t wait to get out of here,” she growled.

“It will not be long, Julia. We know he is not in the Astral, so the best place to begin is in the City.”

“It’s good that’s where you’re going, because that’s where you need to go,” a disembodied voice came to them, the voice of the Goddess. *“I have confirmation from a reliable source that Tarrin is in Crossroads at this moment.”*

“Yes!” Julia sighed explosively.

“So, go on to the City as you planned. Julia can find Tarrin in Crossroads.” As quickly as her presence touched them, it was gone, leaving them alone once more.

“I still cannot understand how you will do that, Julia,” Tsukatta said, opening his eyes and looking at her.

“He’s my father, Tsukatta,” she said simply. “Just get me in the same dimension as him, and I can point right to him. And I can guarantee that the instant I set foot in the City, he’s going to know I’m there. We might not have to do anything. He might come to *us*.”

“But *how* is the question I would ask.”

“From my end, Mother set it up,” she answered. “Mother used magic so I could find those who once held my bond. But my father *did* once have my bond, and he’s just like Triana. Even though he doesn’t have it anymore, I can guarantee that there’s enough of an echo of it still in him to respond when I’m in the same dimension as him. He’ll feel it when I arrive, I *know* he will. I’ll be able to point in the direction he’s in and tell you how far away he is, just as if I held *his* bond, and he’ll be able to do the same. We just need to find some way to communicate with him over the distance, and if we can’t, we can just move towards him. He’ll feel me coming directly towards him, realize that I can find him, and then he should come to us.”

“A Windtalker might be able to help us with that,” Tsukatta reasoned aloud. “They can send messages anywhere within Crossroads. But it will take a master Windtalker to send a message to a *place* instead of a *person*.”

“This Windtalker would be sending it to Father,” Julia said.

“No, the Windtalker would be sending it to the *place* where Tarrin-san is located,” Tsukatta corrected. “That’s how Windtalkers send messages to people who do not share their ability. And it takes a well-practiced Windtalker to send a message to those without the skill.”

“Ah, I get it.”

“I just hope we find Tarrin-san quickly. He will not need us, but I know he will be happy to hear the news we

bring.”

“You don’t think he’ll need help?”

Tsukatta shook his head. “He is a *god*, Julia. Even without most of his power, that is still a fact that cannot be overlooked. I know Tarrin-*san*, Julia, I know him well. He knows what he is, and he will know what to do with it. Just be warned, young one, the Tarrin-*san* we find in Crossroads may not look the same as the one we left in Pyrosia. Without a mortal body, how he appears in the outer planes is purely his own fancy. He could look like anything he desires.”

“Then I know exactly what he’ll look like,” she said confidently. “You may know him a friend, Tsukatta, but he’s *my* father. I know him better in some ways than you.”

“We will see in time,” Tsukatta said with a smile. “I have my own thought about how we will appear.”

“Well, let’s make some sport of it,” Julia said eagerly. “How much gold you have on you, Tsukatta?”

“A wager? I accept,” he said grandly. “Whoever is closest wins?”

“Deal. How much are you willing to lose?”

“Oh no, I do not bet for money,” he said. “Loser cooks for a month.”

“Oh, you are *so* on,” she said immediately.

Everything was just so...*weird*.

Zyri could accept that they were in a different world—a different *world!!!*—than before. She could accept that everything was new, was exciting, that all the people were strange, that she didn’t know where anything was or where to go. She could accept that she was now surrounded by people with strange magical powers. What she couldn’t really fathom was how she was part of a *family*.

Just thinking of that word made her shiver a little. She was part of a *family*. True, her adopted mother and father weren’t there and she felt a little lonely, but they weren’t the whole family. Since Tarrin and Mist were gone, she was now under the watchful eye of her adopted aunt, Jenna Kael. Jenna was *funny*, and she was nice, and she was so smart, and she ruled this place they called the Tower with wisdom and fairness. She was almost intimidating that way, because as the Keeper, she bossed everyone around and made sure everything got done. But she was also Zyri and Jal’s new aunt, and she was open and welcoming, accepting the two of them without hesitation.

It was almost enough to make an orphan think she was dreaming. She had an aunt now, and what was more, she had *grandparents* too! Meeting Eron and Elke Kael had been really strange. Her grandfather, Eron, he was nice and had a warm smile and didn’t talk much, and her grandmother, Elke Kael...she wasn’t like any woman that Zyri had ever seen before. She was taller than all the men, and she was *really* bossy and pushy. Zyri had never seen *any* woman outside of Mist talk to a man like the way Elke Kael did. She was so big...if the man didn’t like it, there wasn’t anything he could do! At first she thought that was why Eron was quiet, that Elke might smack him for speaking out of line, but she realized that Elke wasn’t like that, and Eron was quiet because that was his way. It was a little scary with them at first, because Zyri was very intimidated by Elke Kael, but she’d shaken that off pretty fast. Eron and Elke Kael had spent a long afternoon with her and Jal, had talked to them, taken them to meet a family in the city and introduced her to a girl about her age

named Janette. By sunset, she found herself sitting in Elke Kael's lap, with the tall, tall, woman braiding her hair and fussing over her like she was her own daughter.

Then there was...*her*. Sapphire. By the One, she'd never been so frightened in her whole life. They'd warned her before meeting her that Sapphire was a dragon. A dragon! Then she came in looking like a human woman, except for her predatory eyes. All she could do was gape up at the woman in mute shock, all she could think of was that this woman was really a titanic beast so big that she wouldn't fit in the largest barn!

Sapphire, at least, seemed to take it well enough. She gave Zyri and Jal a very thorough inspection, one that made Zyri irrationally think that she was inspecting them to see if they were edible, then declared that they were acceptable. That just made Zyri more frightened, and she almost backed away when Sapphire leaned down and reached a hand to her, smiling at her. "There is no need to be afraid of me, little one," she had said in a surprisingly gentle voice, a voice that still rang in Zyri's ears even after three days. "You are the daughter of my little one. He is clan, and you are clan now too."

She remembered being almost unable to speak. How was she supposed to make conversation with, with a *dragon*!

Jal saved the day. He reached out and took Sapphire's hand with a shy smile, and Sapphire seemed quite pleased.

Things had gone so fast. After spending their first night in their new house near a village called Aldreth, they had been brought to this big city using magic, and brought to this place they called the Tower. Telven had been dragged down to where the Knights trained and put to work, and she and Jal had been moved in with Jenna. Not in little rooms out of the way, but living right in the same apartment with Jenna! Like a *family*! Forge came too, and the big dog-like creature seemed quite happy with the place. Zyri was too, and so was Jal. She had her *own room*, with a nice bed and furniture and everything! A whole room, all to herself! And there were even *servants*! They cleaned everything, and helped her with her clothes, and would fetch things if she needed them. That was just *too* strange, so strange she couldn't bring herself to ask the servants to do anything for her. She just let them clean her room. It was here in the Tower that she'd met her new grandparents and Sapphire, and where they settled in as Jal's teachers were quartered in the Tower, and Master Phandebrass got to work down in the library doing something, and that Elara woman Kyrienna helping him with it. She'd met her new sisters, Jasana, Tara, and Rina before they left for her old world, though she's been a little scared of them. Especially Tara, who didn't seem to like her very much. She got to meet Allia and Keritanima—Aunt Kerri, she liked to be called Aunt Kerri—before they left too, and she'd felt *really* comfortable with them. Aunt Allia was quiet, but she was very nice, and Aunt Kerri was like a little girl herself, the way she carried on and joked. It really made Zyri feel comfortable with them. There was that one episode where she just *had* to touch Aunt Kerri's tail, but even that didn't seem to bother her Wikuni aunt. They all came to meet her, coming to the apartment that Jenna shared with them, coming to their home.

Home. For a girl who had been living on the streets, the idea of home was almost a dream too amazing to believe...but it was true. Though this wasn't the house in Aldreth, though Master Tarrin and Mistress Mist weren't with her, for now, this was her home. Her *home*. She had a place now, Jal had a place now, there were people around them that were part of her family, and though she didn't know them, she already liked them. She really liked Jenna, and she felt so safe and comfortable around Eron and Elke. She had taken up a position within her adopted father's rather unusual family, had become another of his daughters, and had been welcomed by the rest of the family.

But most of the rest of the family was gone now, gone back to Pyrosia to help deal with the Demons. There was just her and Jal, and Jenna, and Telven who was cleaning stables down at the Knight school. She went to see Master Azakar and found him under the care of the Sorcerers and some robed men that Jenna had said were Priests of Karas, still recovering from the terrible wounds he'd suffered at the battle in the Dwarven lands, but he wasn't so injured that he didn't drag himself out of bed and go order Telven around. The big

Knight had made her brother his own personal mission, and he rode poor Telven relentlessly, even when he was so weak he could barely stand.

She was on her way to see Master Azakar again, taking him a book from the big library, when she ran into someone on the grounds. At first she thought it was her father, but when he got closer she realized that though he was a male Were-cat, it wasn't her father. He was tall, but nowhere near as tall as her father. He had black fur and blond hair, dressed in a ragged pair of raw leather pants and a simple black shirt. He was carrying a worn-out walking staff in his hand, made of some black wood she'd never seen before. She stopped in front of him and gawked, and he smiled down at her. That close to him, she could see her father in that face...he had the same facial structure. This Were-cat had to be related to her father somehow. "I hear you're my little sister now," he said. "Hi. My name's Eron." He extended his big hand to her.

"Bu-But that's my grandfather's name," she stammered.

"Yeah, my mother named me after my grandfather," he grinned. "You're Zyri, right?"

She nodded silently as he knelt down, coming eye to eye with her. "It's nice to meet you," he said with an earnest smile.

She took his huge hand tentatively, and was amazed at how rock hard it was. By the One's sword, this Were-cat was *strong*!

"They still looking for me?" he asked.

"I, um, I don't know," she answered. "I mean, it's nice to meet you and all, but they haven't said much. I'm still kinda lost and all," she admitted in a meek voice.

He laughed lightly. "It's no big thing, sis," he told her. "I just can't let 'em find me yet, that's all."

"What? Why not?"

"It's not time yet," he answered. "I just wanted to come meet my new sister and brother, so I came out."

"Why do you have to hide? Did you make father angry? I know he has a temper and all, but—"

"No, it's nothing like that," he said with an earnest smile. "I'm just waiting, that's all. For when father needs me. When it's time, I'll let them find me, and then I'll go help father."

"I, I don't understand," she said helplessly.

"I don't really understand all of it myself, I just do what I'm told," he told her, laying his staff on the ground, then fishing in a belt pouch. "I see you're wearing father's *shaeram*," he said.

"Yeah, he gave it to me before he sent me here," she answered, reaching up and grabbing it in her hand.

"You're a Sorcerer. I can smell it on you."

"Smell? Aren't you a Sorcerer too?"

He laughed ruefully, scrubbing the back of his head with his clawed hand. "No, not me," he admitted. "I'm the black sheep of the family. I'm the only child that's not a Sorcerer, or a Druid, or anything like that. I'm just Eron."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with that," she said sincerely. "Up until a few days ago, I was just Zyri. I think sometimes I'd rather like to be 'just Zyri' again."

"You're wiser than I thought for a girl your age," he said with a gentle smile. "But hey, you're in the right family. You'll find lots of Sorcerers around to give you advice, even when you don't want it."

Zyri giggled in spite of herself.

He pulled a small bone whistle out of his pouch and offered it to her. "Here."

"What's this?"

"It's a whistle," he answered. "When you blow on it, it makes a sound," he winked.

She gave him a slightly offended look. "I know what a whistle is," she said, a bit tartly. "What are you giving it to me for?"

"I can't take care of Sandy for a while," he said with a frown. "She's getting a little old, and I can't keep dragging her around with me for a while, because I'll be moving around a lot more than normal. She also hasn't been feeling very well. She just got over being sick not too long ago, and it's a real strain on her to travel with me right now. I really hate to say it, but she needs a nice quiet place and a home that doesn't change every day, a nice place where she can rest and recover, and where I won't have to worry about her. If it's not much trouble, could you watch her for me?"

"Who is Sandy?"

"Blow the whistle and see," he grinned.

She gave him a look, then did so. It made a high-pitched keen, and after just a second, a medium-sized dog-like animal approached, appearing around the corner of a building. It had a brownish-tan coat that changed to a mellow brown on the back, and the muzzle was sharper than any dog she'd seen. The animal padded up to them and sat down, its tail swishing back and forth. "This is Sandy," Eron introduced. "She's a desert fox. She's been my friend for a long time."

"Hi," Zyri said, reaching her hand out to the animal. The fox sniffed at her fingers, then licked them, which made Zyri giggle.

"So, could you keep her for me for a while? Until everything gets back to normal?"

"I, um...sure," she finally said.

"Hear that, Sandy?" he told the animal. "You're going to stay with her for a while, until I get back."

Sandy whined.

"Don't argue," he chided. "You need to rest a while, and I really can't take you with me. Forge is going to be there," he said. "He's staying with Jenna. You can visit him."

Sandy's ears perked up, and she gave a strange *yip* sound.

"Good. Now, you behave, young lady," Eron ordered in a stern voice. "Obey Zyri."

Sandy gave another *yip*.

“You can talk to her?” Zyri gasped.

“Well, it’s more like she understands what I want to say,” he replied. “She’s a very smart fox, and we’ve been friends a long time. Thanks a lot, Zyri. I couldn’t leave Sandy with just anyone, and all my other sisters went to Pyrosia. We may have never met, but I know our father would never bring anyone into the family that I couldn’t trust. I’m glad you’re here to help.”

“Well, we’re family now, aren’t we?” she said, getting a little thrill over using that word. “Isn’t that what families do?”

“That’s exactly what families do,” he agreed, picking up his staff and standing back up. Zyri put the whistle in her belt pouch, then patted Sandy on the head gently. Sandy nuzzled her hand, then sat down in front of her. “Jenna knows what Sandy likes and doesn’t like, so if you have any questions, just ask her.”

“Why didn’t you bring Sandy to Jenna?”

“Jenna’s one of those people who can’t know where I am,” he said with a little discomfort. She could tell he didn’t much like the idea. It made her wonder what he was doing, but her manners told her that it wasn’t her place to ask. “Well, I’d better get going before Aunt Jenna finds out I’m here. It was nice to meet you, Zyri.”

“You too, Eron. Um, aren’t they going to know you were here when they see Sandy?” she asked.

“I’ll be long gone before they can find me,” he grinned. “They know I’m *somewhere*, they just don’t know exactly where.”

“Oh, I get it. Well, I hope you come back soon. I’m sure Sandy’s going to miss you.”

Sandy barked in agreement.

“If I know father, it won’t be long at all. See you soon, Zyri,” he told her, turning his back to her. He then started walking off, his walking stick making a *tak-tak* sound on the cobblestones of the pathway as he walked away.

Sandy gave only a single low whine as he left, then she looked up at Zyri expectantly. “Um, well, Sandy, let’s take this book to Master Azakar, then take you home, I guess,” she told her new responsibility, looking down at her. “Forge is there. You know Forge, right?”

Sandy gave an excited *yip*, and stood up.

“Yeah, I like him too,” she said with a giggle as she continued down the path in the same direction that Eron had gone.

And then she realized he wasn’t ahead of her, that the *tak-tak* sound of his staff clattering on the cobblestones had stopped. Eron had disappeared.

She looked around. There were no buildings in that direction, just that smith’s shed where Sandy had been, but that was off to the left, and Eron had gone straight. She’d only looked away for a second, but in that one second, Eron had managed to vanish from sight. Where did he vanish to?

She laughed nervously. Boy, when Eron said he was going to hide from Aunt Jenna, he certainly wasn’t

kidding!

Chapter 2

It had rained.

This in itself wouldn't be much of a deal in most places, but here, in Crossroads, Tarrin understood that it was a *big* deal, because it meant that the nature of the plane had shifted.

What had before been an expanse of fertile grassland suddenly became sharp hills covered in thick forest. What had been a clear, cloudless sky became a dark, foreboding deck of thick clouds that poured rain down upon the land beneath. What had been an endless summer day, warm and bright, was now a dark and rainy night, and the air was decidedly cool.

It had happened nine days ago. Tarrin had been in the air at the time, and it had almost startled him out of the sky. The air turned gray, the ground below turned gray, and then he was suddenly surrounded by thick fog. The fog was *not* clouds. It was a thick soup of pure gray, as if the air itself had taken on color, and then he felt the air shift violently around him. He was carried with that shift, so it did him no harm, but he was jumbled around a bit before it was over.

When it did clear, the gray faded away to be replaced by clouds, and then the rain began to fall. There was no thunder with this rain, it was just rain, and clouds that completely extended from horizon to horizon in every direction.

It had rained for six days—at least he'd call them days, since the light never changed--and during that time Tarrin spent his time on the ground in his tent, and his time in the air above the clouds, looking up at a black, empty sky that only had a single object in it, and that was a large yellow moon. There were no stars, no Skybands, no other moons, just that one featureless moon, with no craters, no discerning marks, looking like nothing but a flat plate hung in the sky.

Tarrin spent those six days both pondering his problem of how to get the information he needed, and also what to do about a wrinkle that had shown up in his plan.

Jula.

She was here, in Crossroads, and he had no doubt whatsoever that Niami had sent her here to find him. She was some distance away, to the north of him, and she had kept in a consistent area in the time he'd been keeping track of her. He wondered exactly what Niami had sent her to do. There wasn't much she could do by herself to help him, so he figured she was either there to find him and relay a message, or she was bringing him something. Either way, he hadn't decided what to do about her yet. If he went to her, then Niami would know where he was, and she could use that to make contact with him. That, he wasn't sure he wanted quite yet. Without a solid plan of action, she was sure to meddle, and she might not want him to do what he was planning to do. He loved her, but he knew for a fact that she could be an absolute nightmare of a nagger, and there was also the issue of her rightful belief that as his goddess, she should be able to tell him what to do.

That couldn't happen this time. He didn't want to get anyone else involved in this, because if he ran afoul of the Deva or the Demons, he didn't want them going after anyone but him. This was his problem, it

was his mess, and now he had to fix it. And he'd be damned if his problem caused anyone else any more grief. He'd already disrupted the lives of the Dura and the Elara and put the world of Pyrosia at war on a grand scale. Yes, it was a good thing in a way, yes, it needed to be done to rid Pyrosia of the taint of the One, but that didn't change the fact that he had done it by putting a Demon Lord on Pyrosia with an army of Demons to help him conquer the world.

An army that dwindled by the day. His shadow was still alive, and through it he kept track of its progress. The shadow was an independent entity, apart from him and possessed of its own crude sentience and purpose, but it *was* his creation. He could sense its condition and its current activity, but he could not in any way control it. It still lived, still hunted Demons, but it had been forced to go into hiding after the Demon Lord set a horde of *cambisi* and the human soldiers still obeying the Demon Lord's orders on it, armed with weapons that could do it harm. It now skulked in the shadows, seeking out the scouts of the Demon Lord's army, finding lone or isolated Demons and killing them whenever it could manage it. Each kill caused the shadow's powers to strengthen, never more than a minute amount, but those tiny gains in power would add up as the number of the shadow's victims increased.

The rain ended after six days. Six days, and then the nature of the plane shifted once again. This time, though, Tarrin was on the ground, and he got to experience it from that perspective. Everything went gray, and he could feel the very land itself beneath him buck and change, but it wasn't heavily violent. It was like a moderate earthquake, startling him out of a doze as the ground beneath him shifted and rocked, and then, to his shock, the ground transformed into water and he fell into it!

He surfaced, spluttering and astounded, to see that the dark, forested foothills were now an *ocean*!

Water, everywhere he could see, in every direction!

He had never *dreamed* that the nature of the plane could allow it to become an endless sea!

The water was warm and salty, like the oceans of home. It stretched out in every direction, an endless blanket of blue covering the surface, and there was a constant, gentle warm wind that blew in a consistent direction, a wind that never changed its velocity or its direction. The sky was again daytime, with the occasional cloud and a sun that hung as if it were mid-morning, but he looked to the west and saw *another* sun, resting in a position of late afternoon. *Two* suns? That seemed unnatural!

But then again, in this place, he realized, *anything* was possible.

But it wasn't *completely* endless. After fishing his tent out of the water and getting high enough into the air, he saw that there were islands here and there in the sea. Like Medjren's home village, those had to be consistent safe points, like the way he'd explained it. Medjren said that no matter how the plane looked, his village was always a safe place, the buildings were always there, and there was always someplace to farm. So, Tarrin guessed that the village was an island now, surrounded by water and with a little stream running through it, just like it did when he was there.

Tarrin had wondered idly how many people had drowned in that sea when the plane shifted in its nature.

It was about then he realized how dangerous it could be to live here.

He had been forced to land to rest on the islands that broke the continuity of the endless sea—and cursing himself for reproducing his human form so completely it required food, water, and rest when he could have designed himself without those flaws—as he continued to make his way to the City. He moved with steadiness, but not haste, giving the One that time he felt he would need to become distracted with the task of rebuilding his icon, and putting Tarrin out of his mind. It gave Tarrin enough time to think about what he had to do, and be ready to start acting on it by the time he got to the City.

And he was there.

He saw it on the horizon at first, and he thought it was a vast island, or maybe a continent. It was, actually, but as he got closer and closer, he saw white and gray and red instead of green, and he understood that he had reached the edge of the legendary City. It stretched from horizon to horizon, and as he got closer and closer, he saw that it extended as far as he could see before him. This megalopolis was larger than all the West, he'd been told, a single city into which could easily be placed the Twelve Kingdoms of the West, and with plenty of room to spare. The place looked...*bleak*. There was no other way to describe it. The buildings were dark gray and monolithic in appearance, with high, narrow windows and gray slate covering the roofs. The streets he could see were lined by tall buildings, making them seem like canyons. There was little color below except for the occasional bunting on a windowsill or shutters, and the rare red or white tiled roof, or a larger building with a flat stone roof.

But these citizens were industrious, and quick to adapt to the superfluous nature of their home. Despite there not being a sea there a few days ago, he saw that some quays had already been constructed, haphazard in nature to be sure, extending out from the edge of the and reaching shaky fingers out into the sea. There were no boats that he could see, but he had no doubt that there were already some out on the water, hastily constructed using magic of some sort.

As he got closer and closer, he saw that he was not the only creature in the air. Other winged beings were soaring over the City, and to his surprise, he saw that some of them were Demons. A winged Succubus passed near to him as he flew over the edge of the City, when the surface below ceased being water and became gray stone, and she looked right at him with a strange hunger in her eyes. He saw beings with feathered wings, Gehreleths from Tarterus with their reptilian bodies and bat-like wings, and any number of winged steeds bearing riders, from Pegasi much like the ones he'd made from the horses to wyvern-looking reptilian creatures to huge feather-winged snakes to this one thing that looked like nothing but a cloud holding a beautiful white-robed human female atop it, sitting sedately on its surface as it ferried her to her destination. She gave him a surprised look as he crossed her path, then smiled and *winked* at him, blowing a kiss as she passed.

Wizards!

The sense of Jula was closer now, and he knew that she was definitely somewhere in this mind-bogglingly large City. But, given how huge this place was, the chance she would find was quite remote. He had time to consider what to do about her without having to worry.

What was Niami thinking, sending his daughter here! She had no idea what was going on, her Sorcery wouldn't work here, and she was a stranger in a strange land with nothing but her Were abilities...and in this place, they didn't mean half as much as they did back home! She was in terrible danger here! What on Sennadar could be so important that she'd put Jula at so much risk, and risk drawing his wrath if she came to harm? He would *skin* Niami if Jula got hurt after she sent his daughter here for only she knew what reason!

It would be easy enough to find out why she was here, but that would alert Niami to him, and he didn't want her to interfere. Not until he had no choice but to call on her...he didn't want her to meddle, and he also didn't want her to get involved.

He descended suddenly, his eye catching a large open square filled with stalls set up in a random manner. He turned in the air, bringing his feet down as people looked up and pointed at him, then they scrambled out of his way when they realized he meant to land, no matter what was under him. He was not steering towards an open area. Most of those under him were Archons, the "mortals" of the outer planes, the most populous race of all within Crossroads, but they were by no means the only beings below him. He saw quite a few humans—hard to discern from the archons aside from the sense of them—scattered among the outer planar denizens, as well as a small handful of other creatures. There was a large insectoid creature with

four arms and four legs, with a black carapace that made it look like an ant. There was a red-skinned creature with the head and lower legs of a bull and the body of a man, a creature that Tarrin would most closely call a Minotaur, but really looked nothing like the ones he'd seen. He saw a frog-like Slaad, a creature from Limbo, and also spied a creature that looked like a bipedal elephant, twelve spans tall and with an oversized head, wearing some kind of blue military uniform and a monacle over its left eye.

And there was the Demon.

It was called a *nabassu*, one of the strongest of what they called the Untrue. There were only six types of what Demons considered "true" Demons: *vrock*, *hezrou*, *glabrezu*, *nalfeshnee*, *marilith*, and *balor*. There were many other kinds, but they were not "true," they were not of the noble stock. But that did not in any way make them weak. *Nabassu* were extremely powerful, and though not physically or magically powerful, a Succubus was a force to be reckoned with, wielding her own unique power of control and subversion. *Chasme* and *babau* were also considered "greater" Demons, the strongest types of the untrue.

It was long and gangly, with hugely oversized hand and feet, tipped with claws. Its body was covered with black, scaly skin, and its eyes glowed red. Its face was a horrid caricature of a human face, with long cheeks, a narrow chin, and a mouth filled with irregular fang-like teeth, complete with two huge tusks that jutted up from its bottom jaw. It glared at him as he descended, but then it seemed to taste fear and retreated from the square once it met Tarrin's eyes and saw the pure hate burning within them.

From what he remembered from his long talks with Medjren, the outlying areas of the City were poor, those on the edges of the city, those furthest from the Core except for those sections of the City that abutted one of the portal stones known as the Ring (Medjren said that the City was so huge that it encompassed *three* of those stones within its boundary, and those stones were a hundred longspans apart!), those filled with the lowest class of people. And this market certainly reflected that. It was filled with archons and other creatures wearing what Tarrin would consider to be modest clothing of sturdy design, but a denizen of this place would consider crude...for it was much similar to what Medjren and the farmers wore, and they were humble people of modest means. These people were of modest means, even the merchants, peddling their paltry wares on the counters of stalls placed haphazardly within the open area of the square. They were small time merchants selling to the bottom rung of the society of this unimaginably vast megalopolis.

Perhaps their luck would change. Given that this part of the City now abutted a brand new sea, maybe they would see prosperity when goods started flowing through here on the way to settlements out on those islands.

Tarrin alighted lightly as the entire square watched. Good. He wanted their complete attention.

"You," Tarrin called, pointing at the closest archon that stood behind a stall, with an array of jewelry on the table before him. "Where is the most learned sage you know of?"

"I—I know of no such person, my Lord," the turban-wearing archon stammered.

"Fine. You, where can I find the most learned sage in this area?" he said, turning and pointing at another street merchant.

"Well, my Lord, I'm sure I could locate what you desire," the tall, narrow-faced female with hair that actually glowed with a soft white light, said in an acquisitive manner, tapping the fingertips of her long fingers together before her. "For the most modest of fees, of course."

He was upon her in three steps. She looked up at him with that hawkish expression, but it turned to shock and fear when his arm snapped forward and grabbed her by the front of her baggy tunic, then hauled her off her feet and over the stall table holding many assorted crystals of varying shapes and sizes and colors,

bringing her nose to nose with him. “That was *not* an offer to bargain,” he said in a dangerously low, seething tone.

“Are you mad?” she gasped. “You’ll bring the Deva down on us!”

“That’s not going to be an issue for you, since you’ll be dead long before they get here,” he hissed. “Now, either tell me what I want to know, or I’ll give them more than enough reason to come after me.”

“Jemrik!” she squealed in fear. “Jemrik the Wise! He lives in the Korkara neighborhood, twenty leagues that way!” she said hastily, pointing to what he would call the northwest. “He’s part of the Sage’s Council! If he doesn’t know what you need, he can tell you who might!”

Tarrin narrowed his eyes, looking into her fearful eyes for a long moment, then set her lightly on her feet. “Thank you,” he said in a surprisingly mild and agreeable manner. He then turned, spread his wings, and again took to the air.

“Gods. Such an arrogant lot,” he heard someone sniff disdainfully as he quickly left them behind.

Tarrin ignored that. The direct approach, he had learned long ago, almost always got right to the point. And Were-cats were not creatures possessed of much patience with those who were standing between them and a goal.

It didn’t take Tarrin long to travel twenty leagues. He landed again in this City near a statue that had to be a hundred spans high, with a brass plaque at the base labeled *Korkara the Just*, scribed in what he would call Sulasian, but he knew actually wasn’t. The Tongues spell he had placed on himself some time past allowed him to read the plaque and understand anyone, for it was the Wizard version of the spell placed on the golden charm he occasionally used. He would hear and see Sulasian, while all who heard him would hear their own native language.

“You!” Tarrin called, pointing at an archon resting atop a litter that floated of its own volition, a male wearing a gem-studded robe and holding a pink feather fan in his hand as he reclined on his lushly pillowed self-mobile conveyance. “I seek Jemrik the Wise. Where can I find him?”

“Why should I answer one so rude?” he said scornfully, fanning himself with a fan made of exotic pink feathers.

“Because I’ll be wearing a necklace of your entrails if you don’t,” Tarrin said in a vicious tone, extending his claws as he stalked towards the fop menacingly.

“You wouldn’t *dare* bring the wrath of the Deva upon yourself!” he gasped.

“Try me.”

“I-I-I don’t know where he is, but I think that Memerime would know,” he stammered. “Meremime knows *everything*!”

“Where do I find this Meremime?” Tarrin demanded, coming to a stop within reach of his magical self-moving litter.

“Meremime runs the Salty Siren, a tavern on the Krut,” he gibbered. “Go that way and count twelve streets, and turn left at the twelfth. Count two streets and you’ll see it on the right side of the street. It has a statue of a siren outside.”

Tarrin looked him over carefully, deciding if he was being deceptive, but decided that he was suitably terrified to speak the truth. “Thank you,” he said curtly, turning and stalking away even as he retracted his wings, as skin grew over the pools of living fire in his back, and his vest mended itself whole.

It didn’t take him long to find this tavern, mainly because of the garish, fifteen span high statue of a naked female of attractive features and foam-blue skin and hair outside the blue-painted building. Tarrin ducked in through the doorless entry, moving into a surprisingly large and open common room that had plenty of light. The place was oval in shape inside, with the bar curving across the back of the room facing the door and with booths lining the walls not taken up by the bar. The floor was depressed, lower than the street outside, set apart from the entry by two steps tiled with shells and bits of coral, a floor that was covered with white sand. The walls were decorated with fishing nets, shells, skeletons of aquatic creatures, harpoons, sextants, a ship’s steering wheel, and other objects and weapons that one would associate with the sea, sailing, fishing, and aquatic life. There were two staircases flanking the open entryway, which he passed as he stepped into the common room and down the two steps that formed the sunken floor.

Meremime, to his surprise, was a Siren. He knew because there was a Siren behind the bar, someone called her name, and she responded. Sirens were ocean-dwelling females whose voices could ensnare the minds of the men who heard them, and they existed on his own world. This Siren looked much like the Siren that Haley had singing at his festhall, with chalky blue skin, like the foam of the sea in the morning, and bone white hair that was long and thick and very straight. She was very pretty, but she didn’t look like a young woman. Hers was instead the handsomeness of a mature woman, much like the handsome looks of Triana, beautiful without a doubt but in the way of a *woman*, not of a *girl*. She had a slightly narrow face with almost overly large green eyes, strong cheeks, a narrow nose that seemed just a tad sharp, and large, pouty lips crowning a very sharp chin.

Tarrin came straight to the bar, coming between two archons sitting at stools, one of which gazed upon her with almost puppy-like adoration, and put his paws atop it before him widely and leaned down.

“Welcome to my tavern, my Lord,” she said grandly. “We don’t get many gods here. May I get you something?”

“How does everyone know I’m—I’m what I am?” he asked testily, almost before he realized he said it.

“Why, it’s just your commanding presence, my Lord,” she said with an amused smile. “I’m a mortal, I can’t really tell for sure, but the archons and other natural-born outer planars tell me that gods have a glowing aura around them that they can see. But I know a god’s swagger when I see it,” she winked.

Despite himself, he chuckled. “It’s an efficient way to keep attention,” he told her. “You are Meremime, yes?”

“I’m Meremime,” she said with a little curtsy. “What service can I provide to you, my Lord? Given your divinity, I dare say you didn’t come here for the wine.”

“I’m looking for a sage,” he told her. “A sage that’s supposed to live in this vicinity.”

“You must be looking for Jemrik,” she said, clicking her tongue shortly. “Yes, he lives near here. But what would a god need of an archon sage?”

“That’s my business, isn’t it?” he asked pointedly.

“Well—yes, yes of course, my Lord,” she said, bowing her head slightly.

“Well? Where is he?”

“Certainly my Lord doesn’t expect a businesswoman like myself to part freely with what can be bought from another?” she said mildly.

“I’ve already made an *example* out of the last person that tried to sell me information,” he said in a quiet, ominous tone, narrowing his eyes. “Words are free, Siren. They cost you nothing to make, but they might cost you a *great* deal if you don’t.”

“I highly doubt that. Not even gods wish to bring the wrath of the Deva.”

“Are you willing to take that risk?” Tarrin asked in a dangerous whisper.

She gave him a look, then chuckled ruefully. “Clever, my Lord. Very clever. Using the threat of violence as a *bargaining* position! Most of these *kapchah* don’t have the guts to even consider such a ploy. Very well, since your bartering method is both unique and amusing, I’ll tell you what you wish to know. But only *after* you buy a drink,” she said, reaching under the bar and producing a sturdy earthenware mug, then taking a crude jug from the counter behind the bar and filling the mug with a strangely sweet-smelling amber liquid. “One mug of *kuquo* for what you wish to know. This way you’re not buying words, you’re simply buying a drink. The words we can share over your drink.”

Tarrin gave her a respectful smile. “You’re braver than most.”

“Cowards end up poor,” she said simply.

“And of course, this is the most expensive drink you can pour on such short notice.”

“Certainly. I could get some Elysium Wine, but those are in the cellar. A mug of *kuquo* usually costs a patron twenty krin, but for you, I’d be willing to allow you sample the brewing skills of the Slaad of Limbo for a mere fifteen krin.”

“Done,” he said, reaching into his belt pouch, counting out fifteen krin, and slapping them down on the bar. “If only because you amuse me.”

She scooped up the strange milky-white bits of what Tarrin would call ceramic smoothly. “Jemrik the Wise rents an apartment over a baker’s shop fifteen streets from the statue of Korkara, my Lord,” she told him. “Stand with your back to Korkara’s back and count fifteen streets, then look for a baker’s shop on the left. There’s a staircase on the side of the building that leads to his apartment.”

“Thank you,” he said immediately. “And good day.”

“But what about your drink!” she protested.

“Drink something made by creatures that personify chaos? I’m not *that* crazy,” he snorted, then stalked back towards the door.

Meremime laughed brightly. “You *are* clever, my Lord!” she complemented him as he reached the entry, then left her establishment.

Tarrin wasted no time finding the apartment of Jemrik the Wise. Meremime’s directions were exact, and he was standing on the very narrow landing facing the door of his second floor apartment mere moments after leaving the Salty Siren. The baker’s shop was small but well-maintained, with a neat exterior and a well

manicured row of little white flowers in a box hanging from a first floor window on the opposite side of the building from the stairwell. The door to Jemrik's apartment was rattier-looking than what was below, leading Tarrin to suspect that Jemrik wasn't as fanatical about the appearance of his apartment as the bakers below were with the appearance of their shop. He knocked once, quite smartly, and he heard a commotion within almost immediately. "Hold on, hold on!" came an irascible voice from within. Tarrin heard soft footsteps beyond the door, then the sound of the lock and latch being undone...and then the door opened.

Jemrik the Wise was something of a surprise to Tarrin. He was an archon, but he couldn't be more than thirty years old. He had green hair that was long and flowing, billowing down over the shoulders of his red waistcoat, and red-irised eyes glared up at him. He wore a wide leather belt, which held up a pair of matching red trousers, but curiously, Jemrik was barefoot. He was rather thin and weedy-looking, and he was rather short, only coming up to Tarrin's chest. His face was not very attractive, with a wide, squarish face set on a head that seemed just a tad too large for his body, a wide, squashed nose, eyes that were a bit too far apart, and thin lips concealing teeth that were slightly yellowed and with the left front tooth missing. Jemrik looked like a young man, but the way he carried himself and the set of his eyes led Tarrin to believe that he was much older than he looked.

"And what do ye want?" he demanded in an irritated manner, not even bothering to look up from the book in his hand for much more than the briefest of glances. "I have work to do, and I have no time for new commissions right now. The Council should have told you that before sending you here."

"You are Jemrik the Wise?" Tarrin asked steadily.

"Aye, I'm Jemrik. Goodbye."

And with that, he slammed the door in Tarrin's face.

Tarrin was slightly taken aback. He wasn't used to being ignored. It was almost refreshing...or it would have been if he wasn't in such a hurry and on important business. Tarrin knocked on the door again, louder this time, which drew an immediate exasperated huff beyond the door. "I told ye I don't have time for new commissions!" he shouted through the door. "Go back to the Council and tell them to recommend someone else! Why in the Core do they keep sending them here?" he demanded loudly to himself.

"I wasn't sent by the Council," Tarrin stated. "And you *will* answer my questions, if you can. If you're not up to it, *then* you can refer me to your council, so I can find a sage that *can*."

"Balderdash!" he shouted through the door. "I'll not rise up to such transparent bait, godling! Go find someone that can tell you where the Council meets, because ye ain't doing nothing but wasting my time!"

The sage Jemrik turned around within the common room of his tiny apartment, a place filled with stacks and stacks of old books piled haphazardly over all the old, mismatched furniture, then he gasped and staggered backwards when his nose poked into the chest of Tarrin Kael. "How did ye--!" he spluttered, then he seemed to regain himself. "Using magic to get past my door won't change my answer! Now kindly get out of my house before I have ye thrown out!"

"I don't recall telling you that you had a choice," Tarrin growled at him in a deep, dangerous voice. "I have no time to waste on cantankerous archons. You *will* answer my questions to the best of your ability, and once you do, I'll be out of your hair and on my way. The longer you fight me over that inescapable fact, the longer you keep yourself from your other work."

Jemrik gave him a hot look, then sighed and chuckled ruefully. "Well, if ye could somehow get past a door I enchanted myself to prevent magical intrusion, then I don't think I'll have much luck keeping ye out," he admitted. "How *did* ye do that? The aura about ye is hollow, hinting that ye are a god in title only, yet ye

did something that not even some gods could have managed.”

“I understand how magic works better than most,” he said dismissively. “Sit. This should take about ten minutes, so you may as well be comfortable.”

“Alright then,” he said, looking behind him. He sat down on a tall stack of very thick and heavy books, and Tarrin immediately seated himself sedately on the floor, wrapping his tail around his legs to keep it out of mischief. “What’s so important that ye are willing to disrupt my research?”

“I need to get some very, obscure information,” he answered.

“What is this information?”

“The location of the realm of a single god out in the multiverse,” he answered. “Or, at the very least, what plane his realm is in.”

Jemrik whistled. “Ye’re talking about hard information to find,” he agreed. “It can be done, not even gods can conceal their home realms completely, but it would be neither easy nor cheap. The sage would have to do some intense research to try to find the location of a single god’s realm in all the multiverse. What is this god’s name?”

“He never uses it. He uses a nickname.”

“Ugh, that’d make it much harder. What is this nickname?”

“He calls himself the One,” Tarrin told him with deliberation. Now Tarrin knew that he was committed to this course of action, for he had spoken the assumed name of his prey.

“Ain’t never heard of it. Is this god an Elder God or somehow notable or notorious? Is he worshipped in more than one of the dimensions of the material plane?”

“No, I don’t think so, and I doubt it,” he answered. “The god practices xenophobia with his followers in the mortal plane, so it’s no stretch to think that he operates the same way in his realm. I don’t think he has any followers outside of that one material world either.”

“Well, my Lord, ye be talking the price tag up higher and higher for a sage to find this information,” he said honestly. “I’m no expert on multiplanar theology, mind ye, but I can tell ye that it won’t be cheap or easy to find this information. Speaking as a sage with general knowledge of how sages work, ye understand.”

“What *is* your field of study? If you don’t mind me asking?”

Jemrik’s face brightened somewhat. “Why, I study planar thaumatology, the study of magic, my Lord. I concentrate on the effect of planar influence on magic,” he answered.

“Thaumatology? Is that some kind of strange Crossroads name for what a Wizard does?”

“Well, I *can* cast spells,” he said modestly, “but I’m not *just* a Wizard. I study the effect of outer planar physics and divine influence on the forces of magic. Most Wizards in Crossroads know, for example, that most spells from the Divination school don’t work here. Well, I study *why*, approaching the problem from both the realm of magical and divine influence and the realm of pure physics.”

“Ah, I see,” Tarrin said with a nod. “So, you specialize in the effect of the Outer planes on Wizard magic?”

“both Wizard and Priest magic, and I study some of the lesser known magical abilities,” he answered. “For example, there’s a type of magic called Runic from one of the material planes, where spells are cast by throwing stone tablets or pieces of parchment with spell runes inscribed on them. There’s also a branch of magic from another called Spell dancers, people who cast spells based loosely on Wizard magic only by dancing and using somatics.”

“I’ve never heard of those.”

“I’d be surprised if ye had, because ye won’t find them out here. Their magic doesn’t work out here, only in their home planes. Only true Wizard and Priest magic work out here.”

“I don’t see why. I mean, if these Spell dancers cast Wizard-based magic, it should work out here.”

“It works on their home world because their gods made rules that aren’t the same as everywhere else,” he explained. “If the gods make the rules different, then the magic that evolves in that world will be unique, and won’t work anywhere else. They change some of the rules to give magic a boost, I believe...it’s one of my postulations. And some of those native magics can be damn strong. There’s one type of magic that’s called Sorcery that’s practiced in the Forbidden Prime, and it’s said that some of the people who use that magic are so powerful that they could stand on equal footing to some *gods*,” he said in a reverent tone.

Tarrin was a bit surprised that this sage would know about Sorcery, but then he remembered his talks with Spyder and Niami. Sennadar and its magic was *well* known beyond the borders of their material plane, because Sennadar was one of those material planes closest to the Core, it was what Jemrik had just called the Forbidden Prime.

“Yes, Sorcery *can* rival the power of some gods,” he said with light amusement. “Depending on who’s using it.”

“Ye’ve read about Sorcery?” Jemrik asked. “Ye said ye knew more about magic than most. Are ye a god of magic perchance, or just a god with an interest in exotic and alien magic forms?”

“I’ve had contact with certain gods and mortals who have intimate knowledge of that particular dimension,” he said carefully.

“But it’s *forbidden*!” he gasped. “To both man and god! It has been for some five thousand years, since the gods of that world closed all the gates after the Demon invasion and hid the Astral gateway!”

“Only if you try to *invade*, like the Demons did. I know someone who knows someone who managed to strike up friendly conversation with the Guardian of that forbidden world, and that someone passed on to me what I know about it.”

Well, it was *technically* true. That someone happened to be himself.

“Oh, hellfire, if only I didn’t have all this work, I’d love to grill ye about what ye know of Sorcery, my Lord,” he said with a rueful sigh. “Anyway, since ye seem to be a kindred spirit in some things, let’s get back to yer problem. I can’t tell ye what ye need to know, and I wouldn’t know where to start. It ain’t my field of study. What ye need to do is go to the Sage’s Council. They’re an association of sages of all kinds, and even a few gods,” he said with an air of self-importance. “If someone in the council headquarters proper can’t help ye, they can get ye the name of a sage that can.”

“That sounds like my best bet. Where can I find this council?”

“They’re headquartered in the Bessamy neighborhood,” he answered. “It’s a fairly long clip from here, my Lord, some two hundred leagues, thirty degrees left of the Core. They meet in the Hall of Knowledge, it’s just off Bessamy Square. Big building with a roof that has two open books carved into the stone roof, ye can’t miss it.”

“I don’t know where that is, but I think I can find it,” he said, mentally filing that information away.

“Yer best bet is to hire someone to take you,” Jemrik told him. “It’s too far to walk or take a carriage, so ye’re best off hiring a flying carriage or a flying mount to get ye there. I recommend Porquat’s, they have a fine stable of winged serpents that can fly you almost anywhere in the City. I don’t take anything but a Porquat serpent, I’ve had nothing but good experiences using them.”

“A flying taxi service, eh? Clever,” Tarrin mused with a nod. It *was* a fairly good idea. He’d bet that this Porquat made a killing.

“When ye’re dealing with a place this big, my Lord, ye *need* a flying service to get ye around,” Jemrik said simply. “Ye can take yer pick of which kind of flying mount ye want, from Porquat’s flying service of flying serpents ye have to handle yerself, to grand coaches pulled by teams of kirin. When I first came here, I almost fell off my first mount, a griffon I hired to fly me from the Bessamy neighborhood to the Robrath neighborhood,” he laughed. “Ye can always tell the residents from the visitors here by seeing how well they sit a flying mount. Residents are much better at it than visitors.”

“Yes, I could see that,” Tarrin agreed. “Anyone who’s been here any amount of time probably had to hire a flying mount at some point.”

“Oh, I’m sure there are some peasant archons who’ve never left their neighborhood, but more than less have flown somewhere. I know that as a god maybe flying on a flying serpent ain’t all that grand for yer reputation among the other gods, but if ye’ve never sat a flying mount, then one of Porquat’s serpents is best for ye to start with. They’re mild-natured and they don’t buck or sway at all. Very smooth flight, every time.” He chuckled. “But, yer manner and the fact that ye be sitting on my floor hints to me that yer not like most gods. If ye don’t mind me being so bold, my Lord,” he added quickly.

“The fact that you slammed your door in my face tells me you’re not like most archons,” Tarrin replied with a smile.

Jemrik winced. “I’m sorry about that, my Lord. I didn’t really even look at ye. I didn’t realize ye were a god til you managed to slip through my defensive spells and accost me in here. Er, how *did* ye do that? I know ye couldn’t have teleported through the door, anyone who’s lived here any time at all knows that that’s the first thing ye do when laying down yer protections, because of those those damned thieving Demons and their ability to teleport around at will. Did my protective spells fade or something?”

“No, your defensive spells were impeccably placed, and they’re still going strong,” Tarrin told him with complete honesty. “You’d have stopped just about anyone but me, probably even quite a few gods.”

“But, but how did ye do it?”

“I know a trick,” he said lightly. “It’s a very rare and relatively unknown trick. But it’s *damn* effective.”

“I can see that,” he laughed. “So ye *are* a god of magic then?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then how did ye come to learn this trick so rare and unknown that even gods don’t know about it?”

“My mother taught me,” he said with a slight smile.

“I’ll take that as the best answer I’m gonna get and bid ye farewell,” Jemrik laughed. “I do have too damn much work to do, and speaking with ye has put me behind. I really need to get back at it.”

“Yes, and I need to get to this Sage’s Council as fast as I can. I don’t have much time.”

“Porquat’s is—“

“I have my own way of getting there, Jemrik,” Tarrin interrupted him. “I don’t need a flying mount.”

“Ah, one of yer god powers no doubt, my Lord,” Jemrik shrugged. “Most gods make sure they manifest here with the ability to fly, or teleport, or both. If ye don’t think I’m too bold, I have to say that yer much more mellow than I first thought, my Lord.”

Tarrin laughed. “As long as I’m getting my own way, I’m a very agreeable person,” he admitted.

“Ain’t it that way with everyone?” Jemrik said philosophically.

The Bessamy neighborhood took its name from a large statue of some kind of large, ugly, foreboding giant-looking creature that was female. The statue, sculpted from solid obsidian, showed this Bessamy creature sitting on a rough rock, reading from a large book in one hand as the other held a staff tipped with a ring holding a crystal to the side. This Bessamy was some kind of magic-user from the look of her robes, though she certainly wasn’t all that much to look at. Then again, appearance wasn’t always everything.

It was during the flight over to this place that Tarrin understood how they found things. Statues like that of Bessamy and Korkara were all over the place, about every fifty streets or so, and each neighborhood took the name of the nearest statue to it. Everything around this statue was the Bessamy neighborhood until another statue was closer.

It was also during the flight over that Tarrin got a feeling for just how many things could fly in this place. He’d never felt crowded in the air, but he certainly did so while he came here. Because he was traveling a distance, he gained quite a bit of altitude so he could take in this endless megalopolis from a panoramic height, but his view of the streets below almost always included some kind of flying creature or device. Flying mounts, carriages or sleds pulled by flying creatures, and even devices that flew under their own power were quite common...almost *too* common. A gift that was so rare that it truly set him apart from most was...*normal* in this place. He’d never before seen so many flying creatures and devices in one place, not even at Amyr Dimeon. The Pegasi and winged serpents and the occasional being flying without any visible means using magic of some kind, he could get used to, but the flying carpets, broomsticks, solid clouds, winged carriages, even a flying wardrobe...well, those were just *weird*. He wasn’t used to seeing magical objects like that. Sure, he owned quite a few of his own, but Tarrin was a huge exception rather than the rule. The Breaking had destroyed almost all of the magical objects...the average citizen of Sennadar would go so long that he would have his grandchildren die of old age before his descendants saw a magical object. And yet that same common citizen could cast his own spells, at the very least a cantrip or two...life was funny sometimes. Then again, now that the Weave was whole, it was only a matter of time before magical objects became more common, as the Wizards, Priests, and Sorcerers began to create more and more of them.

The citizens of the City had not missed the fact that so many were in the air. There were signs and pictures painted or etched into the roofs of the buildings below, advertising what that place was. It seemed a bit strange to Tarrin, but it also made a kind of sense, and it also helped those in the air navigate by using certain buildings as signposts. It also made him understand the way they gave directions here. They didn't say *go down twelve streets and it's on your left*, they said *count twelve streets and it will be on the left side*, and they said that because one might not be on the ground to *go* those twelve streets. They might be airborne, and from the air, they would count twelve streets as they flew overhead, and the building might not *be* on the counter's left if he wasn't directly over the street, but it *would* be on the left side of the street.

He was glad he caught that. He'd thought it was a weird glitch in how his Tongues spell was translating the language until he actually pondered it.

The building housing the Sage's Council was indeed impossible to miss, because it was right beside the grassy square holding the statue of Bessamy, it was the size of the Imperial Library in Dala Yar Arak, and it had an open book sculpted into the gray stone on both sides of the peaked roof. It had a large campus that was enclosed by an ornate iron fence, with lush grass, many trees, and gardens on the far side. Tarrin landed inside that fence, landing on a gravel pathway that led from large gates to what looked like the main entrance, two sets of double doors standing side by side at the top of a stone staircase carved from what looked like marble. He withdrew his wings even as his feet touched the gravel, flowing inward and pulling back until they vanished into his back, and again his skin and the leather of his vest mended themselves silently, concealing any trace of them. He started up the stairs as two white-robed elderly male archons exited from the doors above and started down the steps. Both of them looked at him curiously as they passed, turning to look over their shoulders after he was passed. Tarrin paid them no mind at all, reaching the doors through which those two archons had exited. The doors opened of their own volition even as he reached for the handle, swinging inward to reveal a magnificent receiving hall filled with fluted marble columns in two rows that marched down the length of the hall and tiles on the floor laid out like a chessboard, alternating black and white tiles. The walls that he could see behind the columns were so laden with paintings and tapestries that the wall behind them was almost invisible, and those walls rose up to a buttress holding up a balcony that ringed the hall, and then rose even higher to a marvelous curved ceiling that was covered with iridescent tiles that reflected every flicker of light and sent it back down in rainbow hues. There was a huge stone desk sitting squarely in the middle of the gallery between the second pair of white columns. Two staircases flanked a single set of massive gold-gilded double doors at the far end of the hall, beyond the desk and its lone occupant, a thin, female wizened archon with glowing white eyes, gray hair, wrinkled, withered features, and a hostile demeanor that told Tarrin that this old woman might be a problem. She sat behind her huge desk and sat rigidly erect, though her head was bowed and looking down a book laying open on the immaculately clean and totally bare desk before her, devoid of anything other than that single book.

"You don't have an appointment," she stated imperiously as he approached the desk, without looking up.

"No, I don't," Tarrin affirmed. "I only just arrived here."

"Obviously, or you'd have made an appointment," she sniffed. "Come back when you have one."

"How does one make an appointment?" Tarrin asked curiously. He had a feeling he knew what she was going to say, but he wanted confirmation.

"You make an appointment with the sage, of course," she said as if he were stupid.

"But I don't know which sage to talk to," he said mildly. "How does one talk to a sage without an appointment, when one has to talk to a sage to get an appointment?"

She glanced up at him in irritation. "If you don't have an appointment, I can't let you in," she told him

gratingly.

“Fine then,” he said, his suspicions confirmed. “I have an appointment.”

“You’re not on the calendar.”

“*Vizhous*,” Tarrin said quietly, then he put his palm on the desk meaningfully. The magic of the spell saturated the stone of the desk, and then transformed it.

The woman gasped as her elbows stopped resting on cool stone and instead rested on cold ice. “Jehrash!” she exclaimed. “I’ll call the Deva on you for destroying my desk, you miscreant! I won’t stand for this!”

“I’m not paying you anything to see a sage,” Tarrin said in a low, serious tone. “So, you have a choice. You let me by and I change your desk back, or you continue being a bitch. Then you can sit here and watch your desk melt.”

“You’ve destroyed my desk!” she shouted at him. “The Deva will come, and then you’ll be leaving without seeing anything but your own entrails!”

“I didn’t destroy anything,” he said in a conversational tone, standing erect and crossing his arms before him. “I simply changed your desk into ice. That your desk will melt isn’t any overt act, it’s just ice doing what ice does when it’s not in a cold place. Now, I *could* fix it so there are some sword blades sticking up from the seat of your chair while I’m at it,” he said in an offhanded manner, uncrossing his arms meaningfully.

She literally jumped out of her chair.

“Now, I have an appointment, don’t I?” he asked in a deliberate, frosty tone, putting his paws on the ice that was once a desk and leaning over it, putting him all but nose to nose with her. The ice steamed and hissed when it made contact with his paws, and he quickly melted deep divots into the top of it.

“Y-Yes, but the council is in session right now,” she said fearfully.

“Fine, that puts them all where I can get my paws on them,” he said, rising back up and stepping around the desk.

“Wait!” she called, a bit helplessly.

He glanced back, snorted slightly, then lifted a paw up over his shoulder and snapped his fingers. The ice transformed back into stone, complete with the two depressions in the top that perfectly matched his pawprints.

The council room of the Sage’s Council was beyond the doors and through a richly appointed antechamber, obviously where important people would sit and wait for an audience, through a truly elaborate set of gold-gilded doors on the far side of the antechamber, sculpted to resemble a large number of bearded men sitting around a table. Tarrin left his staff and pack by that door and opened it without delay. What was beyond that door wasn’t far from the relief on the door, for the large room beyond had a raised far side, with four steps that formed rings leading up to the center area. The floor was carpeted over completely with rich red carpeting, which muffled the sounds of the feet scuffling along it. There were rows of chairs facing that round raised area in the back, many rows of chairs, with many of them filled. The dais across the room held a large long table which had thirteen people sitting behind it. Five of them were archons, one was a human,

two looked to be Elara—or elves, they were called elves on other worlds—and the last one was some kind of bird-man creature with black feathers and a hawk’s beak. The archon that sat in the center of the table, with a gold-inlaid lectern sitting before him upon which rested an ivory-headed gavel, was adorned in a scarlet robe with a gold patch sewn over the right side of the chest, a patch depicting an open book with a lit candle behind it. In fact, all of them, even those sitting on the chairs on the main floor, wore the exact same kind of robe, but the patches they wore were either copper or silver. The one in the middle with the gold badge had to be the one in authority. He had hair the color of lightning, a blue-tinged silver-white, and his features made him appear to be middle aged and just scraping the edges of old age. His features were drawn and a bit sallow and his eyes seemed to have a permanent squint, the mark of a man who spent all of his time inside peering at books by weak light.

“—can definitely work with that schedule, Mazrath,” the leading arcon was saying as Tarrin burst into the council chamber. “Will you have your first draft complete?”

“I should, your Eminence,” someone on the floor said, standing up to address the gold-badged fellow, then returning to his seat.

“Very well. Now, since it’s apparent that your abrupt entry into our chambers during a session decries a lack of manners, we should address the reason you have interrupted our deliberations,” the leader said in a slightly forceful tone, looking directly at Tarrin.

“Good. I’d hate to have to do something to get your attention,” Tarrin called in a loud, direct manner as he started filing past the back rows of seats, as every eye turned to look at him. “I seek information.”

That created a few whispers, rather unsettled ones. “Pardon my boldness, my Lord, but why would a god seek the counsel of bloods and mortals?”

“My reasons are none of your business,” Tarrin said as he marched up to the dais holding the long table. “And before we start drifting off course, let’s put it on the floor right now. I need the services of a sage with a background in both planar geography and obscure theology, dealing with little-known gods. I seek the location of the domain of a single god, worshipped in a single prime material plane. Who here,” Tarrin said, turning to face the audience of sages, “can answer that question, or know of a sage that can?”

There was some nervous rumbling in the hall, and Tarrin could sense that there was a tinge of *fear*. Fear? Over what? Over answering a question? That made little sense. It made more sense that they were afraid of him. That, he was used to.

“Well? I’m waiting.”

“My Lord, I think you can see that none here are either willing or able to hire into your service,” the lead sage said with polite force. “And you are disrupting our meeting. If you would be so kind as to remove yourself from the building, we can continue our meeting. After the meeting, I would be glad to personally send out a contract to our association and see if someone within the Sage’s Council is willing to contract to you to research your question, but it will take time for my contract to reach some of the more distant sages and get a reply. So, if you would be so kind as to return in four cycles, I will gladly meet with you and give you the results, as well as the names and going rates of fees of any sages willing to contract to you. Is this agreeable?”

“That is more than acceptable,” Tarrin said immediately, turning around to look at the lead archon. That was more or less *exactly* what he was hoping to get out of this. “Seeing as how I need to wait nearby, can someone recommend a good inn?”

That caused the archon to smile slightly. “A god seeking an inn? You certainly do like to play the role of blood, my Lord. But if it’s an inn you seek, then the grandest and most luxurious—“

“No,” Tarrin said, slashing his paw before him. “Just a plain old average inn.”

“Well, then, the Gzargmoth is close to here. Return to the square and walk away from the face of the statue and count five streets. You’ll see it on your left.”

“Thank you. I’ll return in four cycles.”

“I will be happy to receive you at that time, my Lord,” he said with a short bow.

Tarrin turned and stalked back out as eyes watched him, and more muttered whisperings tickled at Tarrin’s ears, too low for him to make them out. He retrieved his pack and staff and marched back out into the entry hall, and as he started approaching the desk of the old archon woman who’d impeded him, he started getting a faint scent that was making his ears try to lay back. There was the faintest of faint scent of Demon in the air, and it wasn’t there when he came in. This was fresh. Tarrin slowed down, taking slow, deliberate steps towards the old woman, and the scent became stronger, that smell of absolute corruption and *evil* that made a Demon absolutely unable to hide, no matter how they looked. This scent was fresh, very fresh, and it was pure. That meant that it was a Demon of some power, though he didn’t know what kind yet...the scents of the various Demons were very hard to discern from one another. His deliberate plod became a light-footed padding of utter silence as he slinked past the old woman, who was trying to come up with some way to remove the pawprints from her desk. As he got closer and closer to the door, the scent became stronger, and he began to discriminate aspects the ghastly stench and break it down.

Not Demon. *Demons*.

He could pick out five distinct scents now, and two he could identify as *vrock*. They were very fresh. These Demons didn’t come into the council building, but they *did* come up to the door, and then they left.

Almost immediately, the paranoid part of Tarrin’s mind concluded that the Demons knew he was here, and they had come looking for him. Demons, like Tarrin himself, probably had little fear of the One Law, given the Demons could simply teleport away the instant the Deva arrived. So his paranoid half had little doubt that the Demons he was now scenting had no qualms about starting a fight. But the more rational part of his mind could not answer one question; how did they know he was here? Did this even involve him? Had they approached to seek a sage and sensed the presence of a god, and then retreated?

Either scenario was entirely possible. Those Demons had either come for him, or they had come to find a sage, and they sensed Tarrin’s divine aura and retreated. Either conclusion had merit to back it up.

That meant that there was only one way to find out. If they were here to set a trap, then it was best that he simply go out there and spring it. If nothing happened, if he reached this inn called Gzargmoth without incident, then the Demons had been there on business that had nothing to do with him.

Either way worked for him.

With pack shouldered and staff held lightly in paw, the imposing figure of Tarrin Kael exited the headquarters of the Sage’s Council with a light, relaxed stride and a distracted demeanor. His staff made a *tak-tak-tak* sound as its butt struck the stones of the steps, then a crunching sound as it was pressed down into the gravel of the pathway from the gate to the stairs. His eyes didn’t scan the grounds and the skies, fixed firmly on the ground as pondering important matters while walking...and not paying all that much attention. He almost walked into the gate, pausing to push the wrought iron open, then padded through and onto a cobblestone street ringing the square holding the statue of Bessamy, passing by two archons and a human armor-wearing adventurer who were locked in deep conversation.

The human glanced back to look at the exotic furry creature, and he was the only one to see what happened. A huge Demon simply *appeared* in the air directly over and behind that strange furry man-creature, a creature the grizzled adventurer mecermary recognized from his years of traveling the planes as a *vrock*, a vulture-Demon that was fond of using a glaive. That glaive was indeed present in its taloned hands, a glaive whose blade pulsed with a dark, unholy aura that marked the weapon as intensely magical, held over its head as gravity took hold of it and caused it to fall to the ground. With a screech, the *vrock* whipped that evil-looking polearm over its head, bringing the blade down directly between the furry creature's cat-like ears.

When it made contact, the furry creature's entire form seemed to disrupt, and then it *exploded* in a puff of glowing dust.

The *vrock* landed on the cobblestones with a cloud of glowing dust all around it, as the archons with the human cried out in alarm and called on him to run away before the Deva came and killed *everyone* in close proximity to this sudden act of violence, but the human couldn't look away from the look of shock in the *vrock*'s beady little red eyes.

"Surprise," came a calm voice, called loudly. The human whipped his head to the side, and he saw that same creature near the gates of the headquarters of the Sage's Council. It ran at amazing speed right towards the *vrock*, holding a staff in one of his huge hands. The human was absolutely amazed...never in his life had he seen something move so unbelievably fast! It was upon them in the blink of an eye, and it struck that *vrock* right across the hooked beak the instant it was within range. The *vrock* gave out a squeal of pain as it was literally swept into the air by the tremendous power of that blow, as black Demon blood and pieces of grayish-brown beak horn went flying in the arc of the staff's swing. The *vrock* tumbled in the air, and the crashed in a *floomp* of breaking bone and bloodstained feathers billowing into the air.

"Let's get out of here!" one of his archon friends screamed immediately.

"How did that god fool the Demon?" the other called even as he ran. "I thought they could see the true nature of each other! It shouldn't have attacked that decoy!"

The human didn't bother to even think about the answer. He was too busy running for his life.

With speed impossible for any mortal being, speed generated by a Wizard spell that allowed Tarrin to move with unnatural rapidity, a much weaker version of the Druid spell Tarrin knew, Tarrin closed on the still-sliding Demon, who was rolling over and over on his shattered wings and broken beak. It hadn't even come to a stop before it was struck once more, struck with a savage overhanded blow that crushed its skull and killed it almost instantly. The body began to dissolve into that grisly black ichor even before it came to a complete stop on the cobblestones. Before the body completely became a congealed mass, Tarrin drove his paw into it, spraying his arms and chest with foul-smelling ichor. It reached deeply into the acidic mass, and then found what it was looking for.

The Demon had fallen for the second of Tarrin's three powers he had managed to impart upon himself, the power of creating duplicates of himself so complete, so real, that it even gave off the divine aura. It was a doppelganger, a solid Illusion that could fool even the eyes of a god. Jemrik the Wise hadn't been talking to Tarrin, he had been talking to a created doppelganger, which Tarrin had caused to appear on the far side of the door, and through which Tarrin had been able to see and hear and smell and even taste. It was more of an extension of self with mass and with solid form than a simple magical trick, a second body that he could completely control. Tarrin had even worked it so he could *become* the doppelganger, exchanging his true self with the duplicate and literally swapping locations. It was a clever and creative means to enact the ability to teleport without having to resort to using a magical spell, mainly because Tarrin could cause a duplicate to appear a good distance away from himself.

Tarrin sensed more than saw another Demon reveal itself, appearing directly behind him, because of the horrific stench of its body, even over and above the way Demons already smelled, a smell that would have overwhelmed the Were-cat had he not had so much practice blocking out smells from his mind. He ripped the object he'd snared with his paw out of the dissolving body of the *vrock*, then hooked the *vrock's* glaive with his tail and pulled it along with him as he slid to the side, as a *hezrou*, a frog-like Demon with a wide head and gaping mouth filled with rows of small, razor-sharp teeth, materialized behind him and tried to impale him with a three-tined trident. He struck the underside of the trident with his staff and knocked it high as he spun adroitly aside, grabbed the haft of the glaive with his left paw as he curled it upwards with his tail, then whipped it around the far side of his body. The pulsating steel blade left a wispy trail of glowing evil behind it, cleaving a black arc through the air as the *hezrou* managed to regain its balance and slither away from the surprise attack, scrambling back until the tip of the glaive just *barely* managed to ghost across the skin of the beast's warty chest. It was a feat that Tarrin grudgingly admitted was quite impressive. This squat, frog-like creature had a thick body and torso, but it just proved that it could move with fluid grace and precision when necessity demanded it.

Tarrin tossed his staff aside and took up the glaive in the end grip, then lowered it menacingly at the Demon as it skittered to a halt and brought up its own weapon.

"I'm sure your three friends are just waiting for me to get too busy with you to notice them," Tarrin hissed, his eyes exploding from within with the unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger.

We all have our little surprises, the Demon's voice touched his mind, tinged with both nonchalance and amusement. Its confidence about this fight was so absolute that it didn't see this as a fight for survival, but as a game.

"This is for keeps, Demon," Tarrin said with an evil, sadistic half-smile. "You think that formed body is going to protect you? Think again. You lose to me, you lose more than a body. You lose your *soul*." Tarrin took the spoor-covered hand from the glaive and held it out, showing the Demon a simple obsidian amulet with unspeakably evil words etched into its round border in a language so ancient and evil that no mortal was ever meant to peruse even a single glyph of that damned tongue. The round obsidian amulet was suspended from a golden chain, which was dripping with sizzling Demoniac spoor. "Recognize this?"

The creature's look of arrogance melted from its face, and then its eyes widened. *No!* it protested. *It is impossible!*

"I learned a long time ago that *possible* and *impossible* are simply illusions for those who can't comprehend the true nature of things," he said with a dark glare. "I will reach into your guts and take *this*—" he held out the amulet—"no matter where or how carefully you have it hidden or guarded. Now you get to know what it feels like to be *mortal*, Demon," he hissed. "In this fight, you *can* die."

It is impossible! Impossible! the Demon protested over and over again, taking a shaky step backward, its eyes locked in terror at the ichor-smeared soul amulet that Tarrin held before him, the object that encased the soul of the *vrock* he had just slain, an object that he had reached into the Demon's body, reached across dimensions, and ripped from its secure hiding place.

With a deft flick of the paw and wrist, the soul amulet's chain was wrapped securely around Tarrin's wrist, the obsidian amulet dangling. Tarrin wanted to leave it out, to let that Demon see it and know that in this fight, it was not invulnerable, invincible. If it lost, it lost *everything*. Now the Demons were on the same footing as Tarrin, who put everything on the line in every battle. Now, the Demons would know what it was like to fight when one's very existence was on the line.

He *knew* that he might have to face Demons or other extra-dimensional foes in his search for the One, maybe even face the Demon Lord's minions if they moved to defend the One, and this power, the last of the

three powers he had managed to give himself, would work on *any* creature whose soul was not joined to the body. He could reach into any creature and grasp the container holding the true soul of any opponent, be it mortal or Demon or even *god*, and if it was small enough, he could yank it back into whatever plane of existence in which his material form was currently located.

This was the great balancer. Now, any creature who could keep its soul safely in one dimension and assault Tarrin with endless creations or projections would face the terrifying prospect of facing a foe that could *take* the object holding that soul...but only if it was small enough for him to pick up and move, and could not be larger than the created body or projection through which Tarrin was reaching, using the link between soul and created form as a gateway to seize the soul container. If the soul was within an object larger than the created form through which Tarrin was reaching, or within a living body, he couldn't pull it through. But something like a Demon's soul amulet, that was child's play.

The Demon looked too horrified to even *think* of advancing on Tarrin, its eyes locked on the amulet wrapped around his wrist. Tarrin put his spoor-covered paw back on the glaive and lowered it at the *hezrou*, even as he felt the duration of his speed-increasing spell end, and his magically enhanced quickness faded. But against this foe, he wouldn't need it. Tarrin was more than a match for most Demons in a physical battle. *Hezrou* weren't very powerful when compared to the other True Demons. It would take a *marilith* or a *balor* to worry Tarrin enough to think he still needed his haste spell. "Let's get on with it!" he growled, rushing forward with the glaive held professionally low and to the side, ready to strike the instant he was in range.

Tarrin had never fought with a glaive before, but he had practiced with the many polearms the Knights kept in the armory, and it wasn't much different from a Shacèan guisarme. With one swing, an attempt to decapitate the *hezrou* that met nothing but empty air as the creature displayed again that unseemly speed and agility he had noticed before, he became completely aware of the top-heavy nature of the weapon and immediately adjusted his grip and his stance to compensate for the weight imbalance. The shaft of the glaive was a bit too long for him, since the *vrock* was about a span taller than him, but two words spoken in the language of magic caused the weapon to magically shrink until it was perfect for him, spoken even as he deflected a frenzied series of stabs from the business end of the *hezrou*'s trident. The glaive was a polearm, meant to deal blows using the bladed end of the weapon, but most wizened polearm users fully understood that the shaft of the weapon could be as much a weapon as the blade at the end. For a master of the staff, fighting using a more centered grip which sacrificed some power in exchange for the ability to use the entire weapon's shaft both offensively and defensively was only natural. The Demon learned quickly that Tarrin knew how to wield his stolen weapon as he rushed in with wild eyes, his trident whipping back and forth as he used the entire length of the weapon, striking at Tarrin with both the barbed triple points of the head and the weighted butt end. The metallic shafts of both weapons chimed in staccato rhythm as the *hezrou* tried to overwhelm Tarrin quickly, but found itself facing an opponent he was not going to easily kill in a battle of weapons. Tarrin didn't retaliate as it bashed itself against his defenses, getting a more intimate feel for the glaive, feeling its subtleties and the whisper of its balance in his paws, until he felt completely confident to answer the Demon's assault.

And when he did answer, it was with tremendous force. The Demon staggered back as the Were-cat all but exploded on it, the glaive whirring and whistling through the still air as it moved with unbelievable speed and a precision that any adept of the fighting arts would know to be true mastery. The barest shiver of the glaive's movements and precision were completely under the control of the Were-cat, as massive paws shifted the weapon with the faintest of movements that translated into subtle but powerful movements of the weapon. It was always just fast enough, always just in the right place, always just able to recover no matter what Tarrin did or what the Demon did in order to knock him out of his defense. The Demon backed up several paces as it struggled to defend itself from the powerless god's whirlwind assault, handling the stolen weapon as if he had owned it and used it all his life.

It gave up trying to fight Tarrin weapon to weapon. It made a pushing motion with the trident, and a

bright gout of flame erupted from the Demon and billowed towards Tarrin with tremendous speed. The Were-cat rushed right into it without batting an eye, for Tarrin was a god of fire, and it would do him no harm.

“Stupid,” Tarrin growled as he charged through the flames, but found his opponent slightly to the side. It had used the fire not to harm, but to block vision. The Were-cat had no trouble parrying the creature’s surprise attack, striking downward on the thrusting trident and driving the tines into the cobblestones at his feet rather than through his lower side, as the Demon had aimed it. Before the *hezrou* could recover its weapon, the Were-cat hopped over the trident head at his feet, spun with blurring speed in the air, and planted his clawed foot directly against the froglike Demon’s wide head as his body whipped around. Three lines of black blood flew as the Demon was snapped to the side and Tarrin’s foot claws ripped three black lines across the side of its maw, doggedly keeping possession of its trident as it fell, turning over in the air as Tarrin landed lightly on both feet and one paw as the other held the glaive out wide and away from his body. The Were-cat spun again and whipped the glaive up and over his head, then took it up with both paws as it came screaming over his head and arcing downwards, directly at the Demon’s neck. It managed to roll aside with desperate speed, and it felt the wind of the glaive’s blade against its head and neck as it cleaved into the cobblestones of the street upon which the Demon had been laying a split-second before. It curled up into a ball and rolled in a twisting motion until it had its feet under it, then it was up once more and backing away as the Were-cat charged it. It parried a lightning-fast series of powerful, jarring blows, each one making the trident shudder and the arms recoil as the Demon felt the power of Tarrin Kael’s created form, a tremendous physical strength that the Demon found was greater than its own. A swarm of tiny biting insects suddenly appeared around both combatants, summoned by the Demon’s magical power, but Tarrin drove the butt of the glaive into the ground and spoke three words of the language of magic in a powerful, clear voice. A shimmering wind of air and magic pulsed away from the Were-cat’s body, which killed the insects. He immediately turned on the Demon and pointed the head of the glaive at it and shouted in the language of magic, uttering a single word of such power that the word was the spell itself. It was one of the Power Words, and this one was the word of *stun*.

All who could hear the uttering of that word except for Tarrin was affected. The magic assaulted their minds as if someone had struck them a heavy blow on the head. The *hezrou* staggered backwards in a woozy manner, but it was already shaking its head side to side to clear the effects of the spell. Demons had a powerful resistance to magic, and this one was shaking off the effects of the spell much quicker than a mortal could. But that moment of stunned incoherence was all Tarrin needed. He threw the glaive into the air and immediately started to chant again in the language of magic, making precise gestures with both of his paws even as the glaive spun into the air over his head, reached the apex of its ascent, and then began to tumble back towards the ground. The Were-cat completed the spell just as the glaive returned to the ground, and the Were-cat snapped it out of the air with one paw, levelled the bladed head at the *hezrou*, and completed the incantation.

A jagged bolt of brilliant white lightning erupted from the tip of the weapon and lanced across the empty space, then struck the Demon fully in the chest. The monster’s powerful resistance to magic took a great deal of the edge off the magical attack, but it still cried out in pain as its slimy, warty skin was assaulted by magical lightning, sparks and motes dancing around its form. It trembled in pain as the magical charge of lightning dissipated, and it saw the Were-cat rushing it once more as the haze of pain cleared from its large black eyes.

The *hezrou*’s eyes were wild and its movements almost jerky from the aftereffects of the lightning bolt as it evaded a vicious swipe with the bladed end of the glaive, one that came within a whisker of taking its head off, then raised its trident to block as Tarrin tried to slam the butt end of the glaive into its hip. Tarrin leaned into the blow and the *hezrou* pushed back, which locked their weapons against one another as they struggled to wrench the other just enough to knock the adversary off balance and take advantage. Tarrin was taller and stronger than his foe, but the *hezrou* was adept at using its thick body as an anchor to prevent Tarrin from exploiting his leverage, adjusting itself to prevent itself from being pinioned.

“How does it feel to be just as vulnerable as I am?” Tarrin hissed when their faces were only a span apart. “How does it feel to know that I can kill you?”

You will never defeat me! it replied in its telepathic manner, but its thoughts were nearly hysterical. It was absolutely *terrified*, but it did continue to fight, it did not run away. For that, and only for that, Tarrin could find respect for this particular Demon.

“Too bad you’re just as stupid as every other creature that tries to lock me,” Tarrin growled from his throat, as he brought his tail into the battle. It whipped up from between his legs and slapped across the left arm of the *hezrou*, just inside the crook of the elbow. Tarrin’s tail was his weakest limb, nowhere as powerful as his arms or legs, but it was strong enough. His tail jarred the Demon’s arm, and Tarrin immediately shifted his power against that side, which caused its elbow to unlock and its arm to collapse. Tarrin swept the Demon off its feet and out from in front of him by powering through its sudden collapse with the butt end of the glaive. It hit the ground and rolled, then slid several spans on its back. It gave a croaking hiss and managed to get its trident up just in the nick of time to block the blade of the glaive, stopping the pulsing blade just a finger’s width from the tip of its pointed snout. The Demon then vanished silently and instantly, which caused Tarrin to immediately react. He dipped a shoulder and rolled forward, then raised the butt of the glaive just in time to knock the *hezrou*’s trident high and to the side from a kneeling position. Just like every other Demon he had ever battled, this one attempted to teleport behind him and attack his back. The strike was heavy enough to jar the Demon out of balance, and as it struggled to recover, Tarrin rose up on one foot and reversed the glaive, swinging the weapon in a wide, graceful arc so fast that the dark-exuding blade left a solid arc of darkness in its wake as it screamed back towards the Demon. The arc was underhanded as Tarrin swept the weapon up with him as he rose on his single foot, and the blade sliced effortlessly into the *hezrou*’s warty abdomen, just over its right hip. Black blood fountained from its maw and from the wound as the blade sheared all the way through its torso in a diagonal slash, from right hip to left shoulder, lifting it from its feet as its trident spun lazily from its hands and into the air.

Its body stopped flying backwards instantly as Tarrin took his right paw off the shaft of the glaive, his body lunged into the air after the Demon, and then his right paw plunged into the chest of the mortally wounded Demon. Its upward trajectory stopped and reversed when Tarrin dropped his feet back to the ground, pulled along with it, and then slammed forcefully into the cobblestones of the street. It managed only a single hysterical scream of terror and agony as Tarrin’s paw clasped around what it sought, and then the Were-cat ripped its paw out of the Demon’s chest, tearing away an octagonal black steel amulet inscribed with words of utter evil and hanging from a brass chain. Tarrin held the amulet over the Demon’s head as he rested the glaive on his shoulder, presenting it to the Demon as the animating force that had given its body life began to fade.

“And now you are mine,” Tarrin hissed, just as the *hezrou*’s eyes became blank, and the created body died. It dissolved quickly into that acidic spoor, bubbling and burning into the stones of the street. Tarrin turned and raised both paws, the glaive, and both amulets towards the sky, where he *knew* the other three Demons were watching, but were too afraid to appear and engage after realizing that the Were-cat could tear their soul amulets from their created bodies. “That’s two!” he shouted towards the buildings. “Take this warning back to the Abyss and back to your masters, you cowards! Any who faces me puts *this* on the table!”

He thrust the wet, slimy, smoking amulet that held the *hezrou*’s soul into the air before him.

“When you fight me, you play *for keeps*!” he screamed, just as he sensed a sudden appearance of beings of impressive power. The Deva, who had been attracted by the initiation of violence within Crossroads, were starting to arrive to mete out punishment for violating the One Law. He could sense four of them, four Deva, four figures of justice coming to smite the lawbreakers without discrimination over who started it. In Crossroads, anyone who did violence was guilty, no matter what reason the violator had to commit violence, even in self defense. He saw them then, four golden-skinned human-looking creatures with gold-feathered

wings, descending from the sky with amazing speed. Each of them carried a heavy club and a triangular shield strapped to the off arm. They lanced towards him arrow-straight, weapons in hand and ready to attack.

Though he could have killed all four of them—at least he was confident that he could—he wasn't ready to start fighting the Deva, not until he got what he needed from the Sage's Council and was ready to leave Crossroads. No, right now, escape was the wisest course of action. With only a gesture, Tarrin beckoned to his staff, and it rose up from the ground and soared through the air and into his waiting paw. He almost tossed the glaive aside, but then thought twice about it. It was a well-made weapon, well balanced, and it carried a strong magical aura. It was a weapon of evil, but its evil could in no way find in itself the ability to affect a being like Tarrin Kael. In the hands of a god, the corrupting power of a Demon's weapon mean *nothing*.

He decided to keep it. So long as he didn't destroy the soul medallion of the *vrock*, the glaive wouldn't be destroyed. It might prove useful later on, if he needed a secondary weapon or needed to give a duplicate a weapon in combat. He'd taken up the glaive because he wanted to leave his staff out for a doppelganger to use as a weapon if the fight drug on and he needed to kill the Demon quickly, or its allies joined the battle and he needed to even the odds, or the Deva arrived, but it turned out to be unnecessary. Tarrin could create a doppelganger of himself holding a staff, but it wasn't *that* staff. The staff of a duplicate would have shattered on the first blow, and destroyed the doppelganger along with it. The doppelgangers could be disrupted with only one hit, and couldn't even make physical contact with the adversary or they would disrupt...but one had to *hit* it first, and the duplicates were just as agile and fast as the original. And if a duplicate was holding a weapon or object that was not created with it, that weapon was just as dangerous to a doppelganger's opponent as any weapon held by the real Tarrin. He spoke the same two words of magic, a Wizard's spell of shrinking, and caused the glaive to become the size of a serving knife. He dropped it into his belt pouch and turned, then scooped up the *hezrou*'s trident with his free paw as he darted towards the nearest buildings, even as the Deva dove towards him. He'd have to use magic to recover his pack, but for now, he was confident nobody in the council building would bother it. Right now he had more pressing problems. And one of them was swooping down on him.

The lead Deva angled himself to land in front of the escaping doer of violence, and even managed to accomplish that task, landing squarely in front of the offending deity, but his mind swam in confusion when the god's form wavered, and then *five* gods split from that single point and each rushed off in a different direction!

Five! And they were *real*! The god had split himself into five identical entities, and each now ran off in a different direction! The lead Deva was so confused and shocked that he stood there for a critical second trying to decide what to do, which entity to pick out and attack, and that one second was all the god needed to make good his escape. Two of those gods reached the buildings and vanished around corners, even as the Deva's three companions attacked the two gods running back towards the statue and the one running towards the headquarters of the Sage's Council. Each of those gods simply exploded into a puff of glowing dust when struck by the cudgel of a Deva, showing that it was nothing more than an elaborate trick, one of exceptionally sophisticated magic, so complete that they even radiated the divine aura.

One of the companion Deva marched up to the leader, her face slightly amused. "I'm glad I don't have to give this report," she said with complete sincerity. "Though I'm sure the Planetar will assign no blame. That is the first time I have ever encountered a deception so complete that it even radiated the power and aura of a god. I couldn't tell any of them apart from one another. I'm not even sure the *real* god was even here. Maybe all five were simple decoys to hide him escaping the area, maybe even this plane."

"We must inform the Planetar at once," he said with a look of grim resolve. "He brought his true self here, that was his true self fighting those Demons, that is unusual, and somewhat reckless. Something is not right here, and it needs to be reported. Take the element and fan out to question witnesses while I report to the Planetar. We need to find out what started this violence."

“As you command,” she said with a salute, putting her closed right fist to her left shoulder. The lead Deva nodded, and then vanished in the blink of an eye.

The Deva weren’t the only ones who had critical information to report. The three remaining Demons vanished from Crossroads to report to their master, the Demon Lord Gruz, in person, to tell him of this terrifying new twist surrounding the supposedly powerless shell of a god they had been sent to kill.

A god that was not nearly as powerless as they were led to believe.

The Gzargmoth was a simple, spartan affair, with no tavern within its building. It was an inn and an inn only; it did not even provide meals for its guests. The lack of meals and a tavern certainly would cut into the profits of any normal inn, but this was not a normal inn, and it was not run by a normal innkeeper. The innkeeper of the Gzargmoth was a creature that, at first, Tarrin nearly mistook as a *marilith*, but he realized quickly was actually a creature he would call a snake Lamia, one of the *fae-da’kii*. It wasn’t actually a Lamia though, but it looked like one. It was a creature with the bottom body of a snake and the top body of a humanoid woman, but with four arms. That upper body looked quite human-like, until one looked very closely and saw that her skin was colored in very fine scales that matched the pale coloring of a Draconian human. Like Tarrin’s cat’s eyes, her orange-red eyes held vertically slitted pupils, and her tongue was narrow and forked, like a snake’s, which tended to flicker out from between a pair of very long and quite venomous fangs. At first glance, he had an irrational urge to attack her, thinking that she was Shaz’Baket. Her midnight blue hair almost looked black, and from the back a russet-snake body holding a human female form was easy to mistake as that most-hated Demoness. But she wasn’t a *marilith*; a *marilith* had six arms, and a snake Lamia, which also appeared as a woman’s torso on a snake’s body, only had two. After introducing himself to her, he found out that her name was Szizazz, and she was a creature called a *gzamit*. Tarrin had no idea what that was, or where she came from. But the Gzargmoth—which meant *resting place* in her native language—had been her place of business since a magical accident sent her careening from her own world and into the Astral. At first she sought a way home, but when she reached the City and found the peace that existed here, a peace that did not exist in her own war-torn world, she decided to stay. And had done quite well for herself.

Szizazz believed in simplicity in all things. Her rooms held only a bed, a nightstand, a chair under the window, and a single bureau, simple, no-nonsense furniture that was sturdy, clean, and well-maintained. She did not serve meals. She did not even keep drinking water in her inn. She did not clean the rooms when someone was occupying one, not even to change the bedding. The room’s occupant was responsible for all of it. In exchange for these frugal conditions, Szizazz charged a very modest three *krin* per night. Her inn was a place for sleeping, and that was exactly how she operated it. The only bow to the idea that someone may not be sleeping within her inn was the receiving room into which the front door opened, which held eight simple, sturdy, uncushioned chairs lined along the walls, four to a side.

All in all, Tarrin rather liked the place. There was only three other guests, two archons and a hulking bipedal...*thing* that was covered in a black exoskeleton and had four large compound eyes set over a pair of large mandibles, so it wasn’t crowded. Szizazz wasn’t chatty and she had absolutely no curiosity whatsoever about who rented her rooms. She didn’t bat an eye when one of the archons staying in the inn betrayed his divinity with a gasp and a point and an exclamation that Szizazz was taking *krin* from a god. To Szizazz, there were only two kinds of sentient beings in the multiverse: guests and not-guests.

And that was it.

He was also quite impressed when a Deva came to the inn and asked directly about Tarrin, describing him as being involved in an incident of violence. Szizazz looked the golden-haired, handsome winged male square in the eye and told him in an indifferent manner that she had absolutely no care for what happened beyond the walls of her inn. The only bow to curiosity he saw out of her came after he left. She slithered up the ramp to the second floor—her inn had no stairs—and confronted him in the hallway.

“Did you do as he said?” she asked in a dusty, raspy voice.

“They attacked me first,” he answered her honestly. “All I did was defend myself. And only a smart man runs when the Deva arrive, no matter who started it. They don’t ask any questions before they start hitting people.”

She nodded as if that was all she needed to hear, then slithered past him and towards the ramp to the third floor, where she had her private apartment.

And with that, Tarrin was completely confident that Szizazz would keep his presence in her inn to herself. It also told him that he needed to lay low until four cycles went by and he could return to the Sage’s Council.

It would have been that easy, just sit in his room and live off the stores he’d packed away in the pack he magically retrieved from the Sage’s Council headquarters not long after the fight with the Demons, but he quite honestly forgot about one minor complication that threw that entire plan out of whack.

Jula.

He’d felt her moving around for days as he flew towards the City, moving near, and then stopping, and then moving near, and then stopping. But after taking a nap after the battle with the Demons, he awoke and sensed her within a longspan of him, and moving towards him. At first he was confused, then he was mystified at how she had managed to get so close to him without knowing where he was.

Then he realized that she *had* to know where he was. There was no way that random chance had any part of her coming right at him, given how unimaginably huge this City was. She *had* to know where he was...there was no other way she could be so close to him.

That suspicion was confirmed when he sensed her within twenty paces of him, literally right outside the inn. He felt her stop, felt her hover there for a moment, and then felt her approach again. He opened the door to his room just in time to hear a strong, sharp knock on the main door on the first floor. Szizazz slithered elegantly past him and down the ramp—his was the first room on the right when one came up the ramp—and moved straight to the door.

“How may I serve?” she asked in her sibilant, reptilian voice.

“Umm, is my father here?” came the reply, and it was unmistakably Jula. “Well, he might not very well look like me,” she laughed nervously. “Tarrin Kael. Is Tarrin Kael here?”

“The names of those who stay in my inn are not the concern of those outside,” Szizazz stated indifferently. “Nor are they mine. I could not tell you the names of any of my guests.”

“It’s alright, Szizazz,” Tarrin called from the door to his room. “She *is* my daughter.”

“Father!” came an exuberant squeal, and Jula appeared, rushing past Szizazz, running up the ramp towards him. She looked exactly as he recalled, though she looked drawn and tired and her scent was a little strained. She crushed him in a powerful hug, clinging to him like a frightened child, and all he could do was pat her on the back and hope she calmed down before she collapsed his lungs. Tsukatta’s scent was all over her; why was he here too? No, wait, it only made sense. Tsukatta was an experienced interplanar traveler, he would no doubt have knowledge of the City and its peculiarities. Tsukatta had brought Jula here, and helped her find him.

“You can let go now Julia,” he wheezed, pushing at her shoulders.

“Oh Father, I know they said you were dead, but—“ she sobbed, looking up at him. “You look different. You smell different too.”

“I *am* dead,” he told her bluntly. “Or my body is, or whatever you want to call it. Is Tsukatta with you?”

“Waiting outside,” she sniffled.

“Szizazz, would you please allow the human mortal who’s waiting outside to come in?” he called down to her.

She nodded once, then turned to the door. “Mortal,” she called. “Enter.”

Tsukatta appeared down the ramp as Szizazz slithered backwards a little to make room for him. He bowed deeply and gracefully to her, then removed his two katanas from his sash and offered them to her. “It is quite impolite in my society to enter the house of another bearing arms,” he told her. “It is custom to surrender to the master or mistress of the house one’s weapons. Please do me the honor of watching my weapons, and know I bring no malice or violence to your house.”

“You may keep your weapons,” she said with a negligent wave of one of her four hands. She slithered up the ramp towards Tarrin.

“Thanks, Szizazz,” he told her with a nod. “I appreciate it.”

“It is nothing,” she shrugged, then continued down the hall towards the ramp to her private apartment.

“Wh-What is she?” Julia whispered.

“I really can’t pronounce it,” Tarrin told her. “But she’s a friend.”

“She doesn’t act like it,” his daughter whispered, a bit tartly.

“You’ll get used to her. I kind of like her,” Tarrin chuckled. “Please come up, Tsukatta. Come in.”

Julia and Tsukatta entered his room. Tarrin sat on the bed, and Julia sat right beside him, keeping her arm around him. Tsukatta placed his swords on top of the open bureau’s top shelf, then seated himself in the chair. “Alright, who sent you here?” Tarrin demanded.

“The Goddess,” Julia answered immediately. “She doesn’t know where you are or if you’re alright. She sent us to find you.”

“I figured as much,” he grunted. “She can’t keep her nose out of anything.”

“*Father!*” Julia gasped. “What a thing to say!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Tarrin retorted. “Niami’s a born busybody.”

Julia flushed, but said nothing.

“I’ve been keeping myself out of her sight for a reason, I should have known she’d take steps,” he

grunted. “Not that I’m not happy to see you two,” he added quickly. “I just wish it’d been for some other reason than the Goddess trying to hunt me down.”

“It is the task she set for us,” Tsukatta told him. “And also to bring you that which you left behind.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve got an amulet for you, Father,” Julia told him, looking up at him. “And I have your Cat’s Claws.”

“I gave those to Jal.”

“Jal has what *looks* like the Cat’s Claws,” Julia told him. “Mother filched them and replaced them with copies, so Jal didn’t think they were stolen and think he failed in his task to protect them.”

“Take them back.”

“What?”

“I gave those to Jal for a reason,” he told her bluntly. “Take them back to him. I don’t need them here. I can’t use them here. Put them back and do it so he doesn’t know it was done.”

“But Father—”

“Are you disobeying me, daughter?” Tarrin asked in a flinty tone.

“No, no, of course not. I just don’t understand.”

“The Cat’s Claws won’t *work* here, Julia,” he told her. “Besides, they’re creations of Niami, and I won’t use them here. I can’t use anything here that can be traced back to her.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve already been attacked by Demons once,” he told her. “I have no doubt that I’m going to get into a squabble with the Deva because of the Demons. They’re going to show up while I’m fighting a Demon and attack me, and that’s going to be just about it. I’ll fight the Deva, and once I start doing that, nobody can be connected to me in any way or the Deva might come after *them*. I don’t want Niami interfering, I don’t want anyone to have any reason to go after anyone but *me*. If Mother tries to help, she might get in trouble, and I *know* she’ll try to help. She can’t resist, no matter how against the rules it is. So, I don’t want the Cat’s Claws, I don’t want the amulet, and I don’t want Mother sticking her nose in Crossroads. I’m not going to give her the *chance* to get herself in trouble. She’s in enough trouble with her parents and the other Elder Gods because of me, I’m not going to heap trouble on her here.”

“She’s not going to like it when I tell her that,” Julia told him.

“Oh, I have no doubt she heard every word of it,” Tarrin snorted. “She may not be able to find me in Crossroads, but she knows *exactly* where *you* are, and I have no doubt she’s keeping a finger on you. Any Sorcerer can be the eyes and ears of Mother, Julia, you know that. She heard every word I said.”

“*You’re being foolish, Tarrin,*” came Niami’s spectral voice, emanating from the empty air before him. “*Both in thinking that I’m that headstrong, and that I can’t be of help to you.*”

“Stay out of this, Mother,” Tarrin warned flatly. “There’s going to come a time when I *will* need your

help. But not here, not now. Just stay away for now.”

“Kitten, at least tell me what you have planned,” she said in a nearly pleading voice.

“So you can meddle? No,” he answered directly.

“Kitten! I do not meddle!” she protested indignantly.

“Yes, you do,” he responded evenly. “I have no doubt that if I tell you what I’m up to, I’m going to find your footprints all over Crossroads.”

“Oh please,” she huffed. *“I told you before, kitten, you’re an adult now. You chose this path yourself, without me, and as much as I hate what you’ve done, I’m going to respect your decisions and support you now in whatever you do. If you tell me not to interfere, I’m not going to interfere. I just want to know what you’re doing, so I can have some piece of mind, and prepare for any eventualities that might come up when you do finally call on me. And I’m worried about you, my kitten. If I knew what you were doing, if I could at least sense you or know where you were, I wouldn’t be so worried about you.”*

“Don’t interfere, Mother,” he ordered in an even voice.

“I won’t interfere,” she answered. *“Now tell me what you’re doing.”*

“I’m not going to do that either,” he told her with a slight sigh. “I don’t like keeping you in the dark, Mother, but you *can’t* know what I’m doing. I’m saving you from yourself. You can yell and scream at me all you want, but I won’t change my mind, and I honestly believe I’m doing the right thing.”

“Kitten, you will be in so much trouble when I get you home,” she warned openly.

“Fine. Spank me all you want when I get home, but it’s not going to change my mind. I’m doing what I’m doing because I love you, and you can’t make me change my mind about it, no matter how hard you try.”

There was a startled silence. *“Well, you’re right, I can’t argue too much about your reasons. But we’re still going to have a long talk about this little thing called obedience, Tarrin. God or no god, you are still my son, and I’m very put out with you right now for not obeying me.”*

“I can’t be an adult when it suits you and a child when it doesn’t,” Tarrin told her. “If you’re going to treat me like an adult, then start right now by *trusting me*.”

There was another protracted pause, and then a strange growling cry. *“I hate that!”* she cried.

“What, Mother?” Julia asked.

“Do you know how embarrassing it is to lose a battle of logic with a male?” she fumed.

“That’s because you’re not thinking very rationally about this, Mother,” Tarrin chuckled. “Stop thinking with your heart and think with your head. You know I have a point. And you know that right now, it’s best for both of us to leave me alone and let me do what I need to do here. Later on I’ll need your help, but not yet. For now, just watch over Dolanna and make sure she’s going to be alright.”

“As much as I hate it, I’ll play this game by your rules, kitten,” she finally agreed. *“And you’re right to worry. I’m not sure things are going well on Pyrosia.”*

“What’s wrong?”

“Numbers, kitten, numbers. Ariana is there now, and she scouted a huge army marching towards the ruins of Dengal. The Demons have pulled back to the peninsula to the east, and the human armies are moving in that direction. But that does mean that the Dwarves are marching down out of the mountains unopposed. Instead of trying to ambush the Dwarves, the Demon Lord is concentrating his forces. He knows as much as we do that the key to everything is Pyros. He’s consolidating his forces to attack Dolanna.”

“That shouldn’t be an issue, Mother. Has Kang got there with his army yet?”

“It’s ferrying through the gateway now, moving into a staging area outside of it. Jasana just got to Pyros a couple of days ago, and she teleported Keritanima, Ianelle, and a gaggle of advance Sorcerers I sent straight there. As soon as they ground, they’re going to start pulling the army over to Pyros directly. But that’s not everything that’s going on, kitten. You need to know.”

Tarrin listened silently as the Goddess explained the state of Pyrosia to him in succinct detail, focusing on the two teams that were going to track down the pieces of his sword, and the importance of the sword itself. “I’m not sure you’re going to find them.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I managed to fling them a *long* way,” he answered. “And I threw them in opposite directions.”

“You separated them on purpose?”

“Of course I did,” he answered. “I *knew* that all it would take to restore it would be to put it back together, Mother. I didn’t want that kind of power laying around where anyone could get their hands on it when I’m not there. I didn’t think anyone else could use it, but I also didn’t want someone finding the pieces, putting it together, and getting killed either.”

“Do you know where you put them?”

“No, I was a bit busy,” he answered. “I just know I managed to throw them a *long* way. I’m sure they went at least a thousand leagues before they landed. I didn’t want to take any chances that one person might be able to find both pieces.”

“Kitten, you just made things very difficult for us,” she told him, a bit accusingly.

“Just ignore the pieces, Mother. What matters more right now is protecting Pyros.”

“Kitten, the people I’m sending includes a Sorcerer for each group. They’re only going to be a spell away from Pyros at all times. If Dolanna needs them, they’ll return. Until then, they’re going to work on locating those two pieces.”

“Who are you sending?”

“Jasana and Keritanima,” she answered.

“Leave Jasana at Pyros, Mother,” Tarrin told her. “Send someone else. She’s the strongest Sorcerer alive right now, and as soon as I send Julia home, she can Circle with Julia for more power.”

“Tarrin, kitten, get over this idea that they have to be right there to defend Pyros,” Niami said with a little exasperation. *“Dolanna can recall them in a matter of seconds. Because they might have to fight over those sword pieces, I want my strongest and most capable out there hunting them down.”*

“I think you’re being silly, Mother,” Tarrin told her honestly. “The only thing that matters here is holding Pyros until I deal with the Demon Lord. That’s it. Just hold Pyros, and eventually, the problem will be gone.”

“You overlook the fact that the Demon Lord knows about the sword, kitten,” she told him patiently. *“He will try to recover it. If he can recover it and restore it, he can bend it to his will and use it against Pyros. Do you really want to see Pyros destroyed by a weapon of your own creation? This isn’t about me or how I feel, this is about cold, hard, logic. I’m certainly not trying to recover the sword to restore you. That is low on the list of priorities. We have to keep that sword out of the Demon Lord’s hands. The only way to do that is to get to the pieces first. This isn’t about getting the sword to use it, it’s about getting the sword to keep someone else from using it.”*

“Ah. I hadn’t considered that,” he admitted.

“I rather thought you hadn’t,” she said, rather smugly.

“But I bet that Jasana *could* use it,” Tarrin mused. “She’s my daughter, and the sword would recognize her. She might even be able to kill the Demon Lord with it,” he speculated thoughtfully.

“Let’s not get too far afield here, kitten,” Niami interrupted his pondering. *“Keeping things simple is what’s best at this time. Besides, for Jasana to use the sword against the Demon Lord, she’d be putting it in a position where the Demon Lord might be able to take it from her, and I won’t risk that for any reason.”*

“True. Tsukatta.”

“Yes, my friend?” he answered politely.

“Can you take Julia back to the portal to Sennadar?”

“Easily.”

“Good. I want you to take her home. When she gets there, she can go to Pyrosia and help protect Dolanna.”

“No,” Julia said flatly.

“What?” Tarrin said in surprise.

“I said no, Father,” she said defiantly. “I’m not leaving you here alone. You may need me.”

“Listen to me, cub,” he said, not in an angry tone, not in a hostile manner. He took hold of her shoulders and made her look him in the eyes. “There is no room for another in what I’m doing here. And there’s certainly not room for a mortal who lost her magical powers. You would stand no chance if you brought the wrath of the Deva down on you.”

“But you won’t either,” she retorted.

“Leave my problems with me, cub,” he told her. “To put it bluntly, you are no use to me here. Go

where you *can* be useful, cub. Dolanna's going to need your help. Out here, all you're going to do is get yourself killed. This is no place for you. This is no place for a *mortal*."

"But—"

He put his finger over her lips, silencing her. "Do you trust me, Julia?"

She gave him a stricken look, and nodded after a long moment.

"Then obey me. Believe me, I'd love to have you here with me, but right now that's just not possible. I need you in Pyrosia right now. Dolanna matters more at this moment than I do. Just leave me to do what I'm doing and be with Dolanna. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded sullenly.

"Good. Dolanna's life is your personal responsibility, Julia. No matter what happens, she cannot die. If she dies, then we lose *everything*. She's more important right now than anything else, even *me*."

"How can she be more important? Even if she somehow died, any Weavespinner could take her place."

"Yes, cub, another Weavespinner could stand within the Heart and maintain the Weave, but it doesn't change the simple fact that right now, Dolanna is the most important person involved in all of this, even over Niami, even over me. And I'll tell you this right now, something I haven't told anyone else, something you can't tell anyone else, not even Dolanna herself. She and I are joined. She *is* my power."

"I don't understand."

"Cub, when I died and moved my soul out here, I lost all of my power. As a god of the Firestaff, I have no power at all, it's all locked inside my sword. I surrendered *all* of that power when I put it in the sword, and then broke it. But I *do* have some minor abilities, things I was able to give myself when I catapulted myself into the Astral over and above the basic aspects of my being based on who and what I am. Without her, I'd just be a soul trapped in a body that's immune to fire...and that's *it*. The only reason I have this power is because there's someone in the material plane who believes in me so strongly that it's become true faith."

"Dolanna!" the Goddess gasped.

"Cub, Dolanna's more than my friend. She's my *Priest*. If she dies, I lose the *only* mortal whose true faith is giving me what little power I have, and without that, I'll die quickly. Without that power, I'll have no defense against the enemies I'll have to face. Without it, I'd be dead already. I've already been attacked, and if I hadn't have had the powers that Dolanna's faith gives me, I'd be dead. Even she doesn't know what she's doing, what she's become. That's why she's the most important person in all of Pyrosia at this moment. If she dies, then I'll die with her. That's why her protection matters more than *anything*."

"How did you do it, kitten?" Niami asked, in sincere shock. "*For her to grant you power as a follower, it requires giving as well as receiving! And you can't do that! The power of the Firestaff cannot give itself to others, and neither can you!*"

"Oh, I can't *now*. But I gave her something when I was alive that had *nothing* to do with my power as a child of the Firestaff, something very special, and it was enough. Her faith in me is true, or I wouldn't have the power that I do. The power is weak, most gods and Demons would consider it pitiful, but I knew how to apply it for maximum effect."

“How so, kitten?” Niami asked curiously.

Tarrin reached into his belt pouch and produced two black amulets. He held them up to the empty air before him, where he knew that the true spirit of Niami looked on, though he couldn't see or sense her.

“Brilliant!” she cried out gleefully. *“Absolutely brilliant! Kitten, I could kiss you!”*

“What are those, Father?”

“They are the soul amulets of Demons, *Jula-san*,” Tsukatta said with reverence in his voice. “How did you get them, Tarrin-*san*?”

“One of the little tricks I can do thanks to Dolanna. These are from the two Demons that attacked me just hours ago. Now, the Demons know that anyone they send against me is risking more than a century of exile from Crossroads. Now they will face me knowing that if they lose, they lose *this*. And Demons don't *like* fighting when their own lives are at stake.”

“Kitten, you are a genius!” Niami literally gushed. *“They'll be absolutely terrified of you!”*

“That was the idea, Mother,” he said modestly. “Cub, without Dolanna, I'm nothing but a shell of a god with no power and no defense, and without that power, I'll fail in what I'm trying to do out here. That's why she's so important. That's why she has to be protected at all costs, even if it means losing the Weave on Pyrosia. She's the most important living thing on Pyrosia. That's why I want you there with her, Jula. I want you to be to Dolanna what Binter and Sisska are to Kerri. Can you do this for me, cub?”

“I, I can, Father,” she told him, looking up at him with her lucent green eyes.

“And you can't tell her the truth, cub. *Ever*. Do you understand?”

“Why not?”

“Because that faith has to be pure. If you tell her she's empowering me, she'll have a moral crisis. She is a true daughter of *Niami*, Jula. How would you react if you were told you were suddenly the daughter of Bekir?”

“I'd be confused,” she answered.

“And so will she. Faith isn't a conscious thing, cub, and if you make her aware of that faith, then she'll begin to doubt it. Besides, She does *not* need that kind of added chaos in her life right now,” he told her intensely. “She already has her hands full with the task I dropped in her lap.”

Tsukatta stood and put his hands together in front of him. “If she is that important, Tarrin-*san*, then do me the honor of allowing me to stand by her side and defend her from harm,” Tsukatta said in a serious tone, bowing to him and remaining in his bow. “By the holy thunder of Raiden, I swear that I will do everything in my power to ensure she will not come to harm.”

“I wasn't going to ask that of you, my friend, but I won't deny any help, especially from someone like you. I know that with you, Jula, and Haley watching over Dolanna, she'll be just fine.”

“Now that I understand things a little better, I'll do what I can as well, kitten,” Niami told him. *“Tsukatta will bring Jula back to Sennadar immediately, and I'll have both of them in Pyros as fast as I can get them there. Since I can't convince you to let me help you directly, I'll do what I can for you. Oh, and I*

must say, kitten, that your cunning impresses even me. Never in my wildest dreams did I even consider what you have done with Dolanna."

"I didn't entirely plan that, Mother. I'd never play with Dolanna like that. I'm not *using* her. What we share is special and I treasure it, but it has nothing to do with what I'm doing here. I don't really know why this faith in me bloomed in her, but I'm not going to turn away from it now, when it's literally what is keeping me alive. And I wouldn't turn away from her in any way, *ever*. I'm accepting the gift she's given me with gratitude, and I intend to do it justice by using it to do what needs to be done."

"And that, my kitten, is why her faith empowers you," Niami told him with complete honesty. *"Now then, Julia, Tsukatta, return to Sennadar at once,"* she ordered. *"And remember that what you've heard here today will never leave this room. Never discuss it, even with one another. Is that understood?"*

"Yes, Mother," Julia said with a nod.

"It shall be as you command," Tsukatta said with another bow.

"Kitten. Tarrin. I won't interfere without your explicit permission, I promise you, no matter how tempted I am to try. I won't initiate any contact with you. But now that I know where you are, I will be keeping an eye on you from a discreet distance. And if you need to contact me, you just need to call my name."

"I could do that anyway, Mother. I may be a god, but I'm *still* a Priest. I'm *your* Priest. I can use those powers here, and I can use *all* of them."

"I'm glad you remembered that," she said winsomely. *"Just promise you won't give me any heart attacks."*

"I can't do that, Mother," he chuckled. "If you feel a heart attack coming, just stop looking."

"So easy to say, so hard to do," she said with a rueful little giggle. *"Do you need anything? Krin? Support? I can have friends have friends get what you need without directly involving myself."*

"No, Mother. I have to do this on my own. It's important. You'll understand when it's over."

"I'll have to trust you, kitten."

"I appreciate it, Mother."

Tarrin stood up, which prompted Julia to do the same. He embraced his daughter wordlessly, and felt her dig her claws into his back, her fingers trembling. She knew that he was about to kick her out of the room. "You take care of yourself, cub," he told her. "And tell everyone that I'm alright, and I miss them. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"I will, Father. I'm worried about you."

"Don't worry about me, cub. Worry about Dolanna. As long as you protect her, I'll be just fine."

"I'll do my best."

"That's all I could ask for." He pushed Julia out to arm's length, then clasped Tsukatta's hand firmly. "I wanted to say thanks for everything you've done for us, Tsukatta. I know that you didn't have to do any of

it. This really isn't your fight."

"You are my friend, Tarrin-*san*," he said with elegant simplicity. "A man is nothing but the ties with friends and family that he creates as he lives, and the honor of name and deed that he makes for himself. I would dishonor our friendship by doing anything less. I know you would do the same for me."

"I would, my friend," he declared with steady eyes. "I would indeed."

Chapter 3

Money.

It was a hard thing to admit, but despite ascending into this mystical realm where gods dwelled and material things shouldn't matter, his biggest issue was now money.

This was something of a novel situation for Tarrin. Always before, he knew he could always get by with his hunting skills, and if it came down to him needing something, he could simply use magic to get it. But this was something that was new to him, and something of a serious inconvenience.

Simply put, Tarrin needed money. Lots of it. And he needed it soon. The sage that found the answer to his question was going to demand a large sum of krin. Tarrin knew this, he understood it, and his idea around this had been typical of his style of plan-making; deal with it when the issue came up. This was nothing new for Tarrin, whose plans often had shortcomings that forced him to make them up by the seat of his trousers. His ideas when he came to this juncture were basicly to steal what he needed from another. He hadn't really thought more of it than that, trusting on his ability to take what he needed when he needed it.

Krin itself was an unusual currency in that it wasn't made of a precious metal or rare gem... it was solid energy. Krin coins were the result of a being or creature investing some of its own energy into a solid form, and they could be created by anyone who knew the proper spells. Wizard magic could create krin coins, transforming magical energy into the solid, ceramic-feeling milky white discs. And Tarrin had also discovered that krin could be consumed by certain outer-planar creatures like food, and that there were some specialized Wizard spells that drew on the power of krin to cause them to work. Gods as well could convert the energy within krin into magical effects, though their limitless, inexhaustible power made this irrelevant.

Another curious aspect of the krin was that the coins weren't *permanent*. The life cycle of a krin coin was only about five years, according to Szizazz. They became unstable as time passed, their surfaces began to pit and tarnish, and then the coin broke down and evaporated, reverting back into the energy that had been used to create it. The value of a coin about to break down was no less, however. In fact, there were certain merchants and vendors who made a business out of buying unstable coins and selling them to those who consumed them as food.

Tarrin found the idea of krin to be mystifying. It was a form of money that could be created in unlimited amounts, it was not permanent like gold, but its value never lessened because creatures and beings destroyed them to unlock the energy they contained. The idea of edible money was rather amusing to him. Because of that odd relationship, krin had evolved into the most common form of currency within the outer planes, with only the trafficking in entrapped souls among the denizens of the lower planes anywhere near as popular.

Jemrik the Wise devoted his life to the study of the effect of the outer planes on magical forces, and it was a worthwhile field of study. Here in Crossroads, not all Wizard spells functioned, and some didn't function normally. Spells from the Divination school of magic didn't work at all, for example, and creatures not native to the outer planes could not utilize magic from the Conjuraction school within Crossroads. The Demon Tarrin had fought had managed to summon up a swarm of venomous insects using its magic, but Tarrin would not be able to do the same thing, even if he had the proper spell. But some enterprising Wizard had managed to

figure out a way to allow a Wizard to cast a special version of some Conjunction school spells by using the energy within krin as part of the power, using them as a material component. Those spells were only spells that conjured forth denizens of the outer planes, but it was more than what a Wizard would usually be able to do.

The spell to create krin was not something that was within Tarrin's spellbooks, but Szizazz had it. She shared it with him willingly after she found out he was a Wizard, for she was a Wizard as well. She traded it to him for a spell out of his own book. The spell to create krin was a very simple spell, one of the first that any neophyte Wizard could learn after he progressed beyond cantrips, but the problem was, it only created *one* krin at a time. She told him that she knew that there was another, stronger spell that created more than one krin at a time, but she didn't have that one.

So, he found himself facing a dilemma. He could try to create the krin himself using Wizard spells, by trying to locate that other spell that Szizazz didn't have and hoping that it could produce enough krin to satisfy his needs, or he could fall back on his original plan and simply steal what he needed.

Stealing wasn't something that worried Tarrin's morality all that much. His Were mentality made stealing acceptable, based on his concepts of power. Anyone who couldn't protect what was theirs had no right to keep claim to it. If Tarrin could beat the defenses of someone and steal their krin, too bad for them. Usually, however, he wouldn't resort to theft. If he wanted something, he'd just *take* it from them. Here, where he couldn't resort to violence without bringing the Deva, he'd have to fall back on the arts of stealth and deception.

One thing that Szizazz's spell was useful for was living expenses. As advanced as Tarrin was in Wizard magic, he could cast her little krin-creating spell an impressive number of times before it exhausted him, which let him afford some of the nicer things to be had around her frugal inn. He could buy any food he wanted, some little niceties for his room, and he managed to restock all his material components.

In fact, Tarrin's ability to cast her spell repeatedly mystified Szizazz, and caused her to pull him aside in the receiving room the day after she gave him the spell, the day after Jula and Tsukatta left him to return to Sennadar. She grilled him about how he was managing it. "I do not see how you accomplish this," she told him quite seriously. "You should have forgotten the spell after so many castings."

"Forgotten? I can keep a spell memorized for months, Szizazz. Can't you?"

"Of course I can, at least until I begin to use it. The spell wipes itself from my memory after casting it. If I want to cast the same spell more than once, I have to make a special effort to memorize it in a slightly different manner, using one of the Giyoshan Mnemonics, so I have the same spell memorized twice."

"Really? Huh," Tarrin mused. "I guess even Wizard magic works differently where I came from. What surprises me is that it *still* works differently for me, even when I'm not home."

"That should be impossible, but you are a god. Perhaps that allows you to bend the rules of Wizard magic. How does it work in your world?"

"Wizards don't lose the memory of the spell after only one casting," he told her. "It does fade from memory, but that's after a few days for the average Wizard. The mark of a veteran Wizard is how many times he can cast spells before he gets tired, and how long he can remember a spell."

"The mark of a learned Wizard for us is how many spells a Wizard can remember at one time," she told him. "And after we cast a spell, it fades from our memory, so we must choose which spells we want to memorize."

"That's almost backwards from how it works on my world. Wizards can memorize every spell they have and cast any of them at any time, until they get exhausted and can't cast any more. Priests do it the same way, more or less, but nothing forces them to forget their spells. They remember them at all times, and can cast any spell they know at any time, until they get tired."

"Magic is *very* different in your world."

"I know. I just never heard of how it works in other worlds."

"That you can bring your own version of Wizard magic into Crossroads must be because of your divine nature. Usually, any unusual form of magic in a material plane won't work outside of that material plane."

"I remember a sage telling me something like that not long ago," he mused. "That's probably it. That, or it's because I'm a *Mi'Shara*."

Szizazz gave him a wild look. "Where did you come to know that word?" she asked.

"Why, what does it mean to you?"

"A *Mishara* is a word that was used to describe an ancient foe of the Deva, before they were all destroyed. It meant *dream killer*, for those who sought the eternal dreamless sleep of annihilation. They were the mortals and gods who had embraced the cause of Entropy and sought to unmake the multiverse. But the Deva and the gods joined together and destroyed them. What does this word mean in your world?"

"It's a term for referring to a certain type of magic-user," he answered her. "We're very rare. There are two of us on my world, me and one other. But I don't think it's the same word, you pronounced it a little differently," he chuckled. "I guess it's one of those coincidences. After all, with all those languages out there, it's only logical to think that some of them are going to have similar sounding words."

"Yes, you certainly do not look like an agent of Entropy to me," she said, looking him up and down, quite seriously, as if assessing that very statement. "I know that you are unique among the gods from what you told me of how you came to be here, but even that would not be enough to make me believe you seek to unmake all."

He laughed. "No, I'm not quite that fanatical," he told her. "I'm not out to unmake the multiverse, just kill one person. Now then, I have some business to attend to, Szizazz, so I hope you'll excuse me."

"Certainly. May we meet again on your return and trade more spells?"

"Sure. I just hope you can cast them, since they're from my world, and my world's magic works differently."

"The way your Wizards use magic is different, but the spells are not," she told him confidently. "Besides, I've already used the spell you gave me in trade for the spell to create krin. I know for a fact that I can use your spells."

Tarrin did find the Sage's Council to be useful for one thing outside of what he needed of them, and that was that there were many Wizards that were a part of it. He had already managed to corral one of them in the entry hall and, after a quick word, got him to reveal the locations of several magical shops within the neighborhood. That was how he had managed to restock the material components he needed. Such places, however, didn't sell *spells*. Virtually no place did. Spells were a precious commodity, and no merchant in his right mind would leave something that valuable out where it could be stolen. Wizards guarded their spells jealously, and only gave them up if they received something of equal or greater value in the exchange... such

as another spell that they don't know. Tarrin had to track down quite a few sages in the halls and ask about the krin spell Szizazz mentioned, until he finally found a sage who had the spell and was willing to make a trade. That sage, an exceedingly tiny, portly fellow that only came up to Tarrin's shin and reminded Tarrin vaguely of the Gnomes of Gnomlin, turned out to be quite a good Wizard. He traded Tarrin his spell to create multiple krin coins for one of Phandebrass' battle spells, one that created a powerful jet of acid.

In all, Tarrin considered it a good trade.

It took him about three hours to scribe the spell into his spellbook, and then he shared that spell with Szizazz. He rather liked her, and Tarrin was one that liked to see his friends improve their lots. Szizazz certainly had no want for krin, but now she could create more krin faster if she ever had a need for it.

The spell was unusual. It didn't create a *set* amount of krin when it was cast. Instead, it drew directly on the power of the Wizard and created as many coins as possible depending on how much energy the Wizard could channel, and how many spells the Wizard had memorized. The spell warned that upon its casting, *all* other spells would be wiped from the memory of the Wizard, and the Wizard would be physically drained and require immediate rest.

Tarrin's use of the that spell was... momentous.

It needs to be stated that Tarrin had absolutely no inkling that the spell would behave any differently for him than it would for any other Wizard. Szizazz had cast the spell first, before him, and she had had no problem using it. She had used the spell to summon forth a sizable sum of krin, a testament to her abilities as a Wizard.

But Tarrin's use of the spell produced a much different result. After casting it and burning the required block of rare, special incense that created a thick hazy fog over him, then sacrificing a drop of his own blood, dripping it onto a flawless uncut ruby which vanished into a thick red mist at the completion of the incantation that rose up into the smoke of the incense to create a thick, compact cloud of misty red fog that then raised itself to the ceiling, the spell created his krin. They appeared from that misty red cloud that rose high into the air, near the ceiling, over where the ruby had been. Coins appeared and poured onto the table in a series of staccato chiming *clinks*.

And they kept coming.

And they kept coming.

And they kept coming.

At first, Tarrin didn't think too much of it. After all, he was a more accomplished Wizard than Szizazz, so it was only logical that his spell would create more coins. But then, when the coins were ankle deep in the room, he began to suspect that something might be wrong. By the time they were knee deep, he *knew* there was something wrong, for he realized that he felt in no way tired, the spell had not drained him of his energy, nor had it wiped from his memory the other spells he had memorized. He thought through the problem furiously as the coins continued to pour merrily from the magical red fog hovering against the ceiling. By the time he decided to risk an attempt to dispel the magic creating the coins, they were waist deep, and had broken the window and began to pour out onto the street below. He cast that spell quickly, as a silvery ray of magical light erupted from his open paw and struck the red fog, but it did nothing, and the coins continued to pour. He thought through the problem again, and realized that the magic he was using was too weak to counter a spell of that power. He tried a different spell that dispelled magic, a much stronger one, one that created a conical volume of complete anti-magic. The spell had to be centered on a living being, so he attached it to himself.

It was a good idea. He just didn't factor into his equation a simple fact.

Krin were coins made of solid energy, and had *magical* properties.

The krin that came into contact with Tarrin's anti-magic shell became unstable. He realized he made a mistake when all the coins up against him, now up to his chest, began to get hot and vibrate in an ominous manner. Before he had a chance to flee the room, the krin coins began to explode in a sudden cascade of miniature explosions, each one setting off the last. The explosions weren't destructive, did him no harm, but the loud *pops* of krin breaking down and reverting to energy were loud and painful to his ears, and they stung something fierce when the ones against his skin disrupted and exploded.

It took him a few moments to recover his wits enough to get a handle on the situation, by jumping up onto the top of the coins, then rising up enough to get the red cloud into the area affected by his anti-magic shell. The red cloud shuddered visibly, the coins stopped falling out of it, then it disincorporated itself into an expanding pall of thin, acrid smelling red smoke.

By the time it was over, Tarrin had a series of reddish circular welts all over his body, and he was kneeling on a pile of coins that was nearly six spans deep. He was still under the effect of the anti-magic shell, however, and he could feel the coins under his feet begin to vibrate and heat up. He'd stopped the coins, but he was still a danger to the ones that were already here. He turned and dove for the open window, sliding on the coins, then he erupted in a sudden explosion of krin from the window and out over the street. Citizens who were scrambling under his window the scoop of the rain of coins looked up when he came flying out of it, then scrambled in every direction as he landed heavily on the street on his paws and feet. The coins under him rattled on the cobblestones, then exploded in little puffs. The coins flowing from the window of his room slowed to a tinkling trickle, and then ceased.

Blowing out his breath, Tarrin looked around at, just relieved that it was over, then he laughed helplessly.

"Not often you see that."

Tarrin stood up quickly and looked across the cobbled street, and found himself looking at a very small building made of white stone blocks. It had a simple porch with a roof and slender fluted columns holding it up, anchored to the corners of the roof and two columns flanking the three steps from the street to the porch floor. On that porch were two old rocking chairs. One was empty, with only a knitted cover thrown over the back. The other chair was occupied by a withered, ancient old woman with thin white hair, a face that looked like tanned leather with sunken cheeks and a mouth that only had three teeth in it, and sparkling chestnut brown eyes that seemed alive and vibrant despite her advanced years. She wore a simple brown wool peasant dress, and her gnarled hands worked a pair of knitting needles with surprising dexterity.

Tarrin gaped at her. He *knew* this woman!

"Well, you're taller," she noted in a gruff voice. "You look meaner too. Offended any Dargu lately?"

"Mother Wynn!" Tarrin exclaimed in shock, staring at her as his mind swam with the absolute impossibility of what was confronting him. But she -- there was no way she could still be alive! And even if she was, what in the furies was she doing *here*?

"Well, it's nice to be remembered," she said calmly, looking at her knitting. "Chair's empty, dearie. You're not covered in mud, are you?"

"How are you here?" he demanded.

"Manners," she said in her gravelly voice. "And don't keep an old woman waiting."

Without thought, he staggered across the street, up the steps of her porch, and sat down in the empty chair. "I don't understand," he floundered.

"I reckon you wouldn't," she told him calmly as she deftly completed another row, and began another. "Done got yourself in a right mess, didn't you? I expected more out of you."

"How -- "

"Don't even ask," she cut him off. "Now, how are you going to fix it?"

"Mother Wynn -- "

"I'm waiting, boy," she demanded, starting another row.

"How did you get here?"

"Don't make me fetch Ian, boy," she warned. "Now answer an old woman's question. How are you going to fix it?"

"Fix the mess? Which one are you talking about?" he asked.

She cackled. "Now I remember why I like you, boy. The mess you made."

"The Demon Lord? I -- "

"No, boy, that's just a drop in the bucket. This," she said, poking him in the arm with a knitting needle. "It wasn't entirely pleasant, "is the mess I'm talking about. What you've done to yourself can't stand, boy."

"I can fix it, once I get everything done. With Mother's help, anyway."

"Boy, you're just being stubborn on purpose," she grunted, poking his belt with her needle. "You know what'll happen if you use those."

"The amulets? What do you mean?"

She grunted. "Well, you're denser than I thought. You go to all the trouble of giving yourself the power to *take* them, but you don't even fully understand *that*. They're more than trinkets, boy. You own them, so -- "

Tarrin sucked in his breath. "So I can *use* them!" he realized. All the innate powers of those Demons were his to command, including their ability to *teleport*! Those were powers that were within the very essence of Demons, and *he owned two of those very essences*! Just by commanding the amulets, he could access the innate magical powers of the two Demons he had killed and use them for his *own* ends!

"And the more you use them, the more you become like *them*," she warned. "Not even a god is immune from that kind of corruption, boy. The Abyss has enough Bodaks in it as it is."

"Bodak?"

"A being corrupted by the taint of the Demons to the point they become one themselves," she told him. "And just being who you are is no defense. There's been more than one god corrupted and destroyed by the

Demons. The One should be thanking you, boy, you saved him from that fate."

"How do you know that? You can't be who you look like."

"Oh, I *am* who you think I am, boy," she told him with a hard look. "I *am* Mother Wynn. Me being here seems impossible to you because you lack the ability to understand the true nature of things. Or maybe you just don't *want* to understand."

"But -- "

"But what? Oh, and one more thing, boy. It won't work."

"What?"

"If you wouldn't be so determined to be a stubborn mule, Niami would tell you so. Well, since you won't let her give you any advice, then take it from me. It won't work."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, completely confused.

"That pitiful excuse for a plan, boy. If you'd stop to think about it, you'd realize it. But there is a way to pull it off, boy. You're just not approaching the problem the right way."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to. Turn that creative mind of yours about these words, and then let that infamous bent for cunning take hold of them. You're never going to match the One power for power, boy. After all, he's a full god, and you're just a mortal with a whisper of divine power in you, just barely enough for you to hold that form together. That's an important difference, boy, and it has much more to do with *power*. The way you are now, you can never hope to beat the One, no matter how hard you try. Not only can you never hope to match his power, but trying to kill a god in his home plane is something akin to impossible. But, you made the right choice in coming here to face him. Boy, if you want to stop the Demon Lord, you first have to face the One. What you have to decide is how you're going to survive that encounter. So you need to think about that.

"Now then, I've said what I needed to say. You've been warned about those amulets, boy. I suggest you never use them unless you have absolutely no other choice. Every time you call on their power, you surrender part of yourself to their evil, and not even you are immune. There's no way to reverse it either, unless you dip your hand into the power that is their opposite. But that too would certainly bring its own dangers. The power of righteousness would corrupt you as surely as the power of the Demons. Now, I've said all I intend to say, and I have this knitting to finish. So scat."

Tarrin looked down at his paws, then looked over to her, to ask her what she meant.

But she was gone.

And she left him utterly confused.

Heavy thoughts.

For days after his bizarre encounter with what he could only call Mother Wynn, he was all but lost in deep contemplation. The old woman had said little, but those words had carried with them a tremendous meaning

to him, on many levels. He sat in his room, a room that had been repaired and was now empty of krin... but that krin was still with him. Szizazz had procured for him a curious little item called a *portable hole*, a blanket-sized section of cloth spun from the silk of creatures called *phase spiders*. These spiders had a natural ability to shift themselves out of phase with reality, shifting into some other state of being... it was almost exactly like the druid spell that Triana used to walk through walls and other solid objects. Some enterprising Wizard had managed to discover how to enchant that silk-spun cloth in such a way that it triggered its phasing ability and made it stable. The result was a paper-thin, ten span square length of cloth that held within itself a vast extradimensional space, the size of a small room. The interior expanse of this portable hole *was larger than the room Szizazz rented to him*. That portable hole was now in his magically protected belt pouch, folded down so many times that it was no larger *or thicker* than a handkerchief, and also folded in a manner so that Tarrin could open it by unfolding it only twice and open a space wide enough into which he could stick his paw. The Wizard who had fashioned the device -- indeed, making the devices was his main staple of income to fund his magical research -- had taught Szizazz how to do this, and she had trained Tarrin. Everything within this portable hole had a location, and by folding the hole in that specific manner, it allowed him to access certain things placed next to that opening that he might need, such as a large sack of krin, for example.

Tarrin considered Mother Wynn's words, over and over and over, even going so far as to ponder every single word she spoke in and of itself. He had no doubt that she had hinted at much more information that she had given, much like the way Niami had hinted at this or that to fire his curiosity, make him think.

That in itself was another mystery. Just *who was* Mother Wynn? There was no doubt to him that it really couldn't be the original Mother Wynn, but everything about her screamed at him that it *was*. She even had the right *scent*, for Niami's sake! That woman was, from the roots of her hair to her toenails, Mother Wynn. Yet that in and of itself was a scenario that would be a hair's breadth from absolute impossibility. By now, Mother Wynn was dead. He hadn't even really thought of her since his first and only meeting with her.

He thought. And he thought. And he thought more. He ignored time. He forgot to eat or sleep. He simply sat on his bed crosslegged, tail wrapped around his legs, elbow on his leg and chin propped in his paw, and he did nothing but ponder her words, the meaning of her words, the words that she used, and the guesses and conclusions that he could draw from them.

Two things became clear to him after a lengthy consideration. First, that the warning she had brought to him about the amulets was so dire that it demanded she be blatant about it. They really could be that dangerous. They were like the Firestaff or the crown that powered the magic of Amyr Dimeon, artifacts of such power that the very power itself was detrimental to the mortals around them. Both of those artifacts had an aura of corruption about them, a subtle effect of their magic that caused people to covet that power, to desire possessing it. Tarrin had always been very careful to keep the Firestaff in the *elsewhere*, to shield those around him from the power of that corrupting effect. The Crown of Amyr Dimeon was in a ziggurat that was off-limits to the Aeradalla by law, and Aeradalla were law-abiding enough to accept that law without argument... which isolated them from its power. The power of the amulets wasn't quite like the power of those artifacts, but was equally dangerous. By using their power, by commanding them, Tarrin was exposing himself to their evil, was lowering his defenses, and that power would enter him and begin to try to taint him from within. If the power of their evil became too strong within him, he would become a Demon himself, what Mother Wynn had called a Bodak. That meant that the use of the power of the amulets would literally only be used when his life depended on it. Using them the way he was now, as nothing but anchors which prevented the Demonic weapons that the two Demons had possessed from melting into nothingness like the rest of them had, was passive in nature and didn't expose him to their corrupting evil.

The second thing he had reasoned out was that whoever Mother Wynn was, she had to be something truly beyond his comprehension, because she knew what he had told no one else. And she had flatly stated to him that *he was wrong*. According to her, his plan to kill the One just plain would not work, no matter how hard he tried. Always before, when faced with overwhelming odds, he simply kept going, kept at it, finding a way

to win. In a way, he refused to admit the possibility that he *couldn't* do something, and that determination had allowed him to overcome tremendous adversaries. His dogged refusal to admit defeat had helped him defeat Val, had allowed him to fight the One toe to toe to a draw, and had allowed him to trick the Demon Lord and destroy the One's icon, setting up the more equivocal situation that existed on Pyrosia now, where the odds were much more even.

Yet now, she had told him, no amount of cunning, connivery, trickery, bravery, or dogged determination was going to make his plan work. Mother Wynn had told him bluntly that he could never hope to fight the One and kill him.

She also told him that he *did* have to carry through and face the One, but facing the One was not what was going to banish the Demon Lord from Pyrosia and save that world from the Demons.

That was what she had said directly. What she said *indirectly* was almost as important.

She hinted that he had started on the right path if he wanted to be victorious. She told him that coming here was the right course. That told him that what he did in Pyrosia was the right move, using Niami's help to rewrite the rules of magic on Pyrosia to strip the Demons of their overwhelming advantage.

She hinted that there technically *was* a way to use the amulets of the Demons without permanent harm, but that was almost as dangerous as using the amulets in the first place. Dipping into the power which was their opposite, she had said, but that power would corrupt just as surely as the power of the Demons. So, perhaps it was best to just ignore that.

And the most important thing she had said, an indirect hint as to what he should do... she had said he had no chance to get rid of the Demon Lord *as he was*.

After days of contemplation, without even eating or drinking, he realized that he needed to know more, to understand more.

And that took him back to the Sage's Council.

He again accosted the clerk that sat outside the main chambers, who squeaked in fear and seemed to want to throw herself over her desk to protect it from him, demanding this time not an audience with a sage, but the location of and access to the main library the sages used. She flared up as if to deny his request out of reflex, but a single clawed finger held up and before her quelled her innate need to be as inconvenient to him as possible. The determined, stony look in his eyes must have assured her in her own mind that he was very, very serious about getting what he wanted, no matter what he had to do to her furniture, so she grudgingly acquiesced and directed him back down the hall and through a pair of double doors to the right of the main entry, which led down a long curved passageway and into a truly magnificent library. There were *floors* of books, the compiled knowledge of not just men and other beings from one world, but beings from *many* worlds.

It was exactly what he needed.

After a meal, he set himself to work. He demanded much of the librarians of that magnificent library, sorely testing their knowledge of the books within their library and the locations of them. He also drove them and all the sages who were there researching crazy by demanding what he wanted when he wanted it... not after a librarian was done helping someone else. The librarians seemed to want to object, at least until he plopped down a sack holding a thousand krin on the book cart of the librarian who had brought him a book he wanted. They were very quick to assist him after that, for he paid them outrageous, almost ridiculous sums of money for their assistance, every time they assisted him.

He knew that though he was a god, he had a mortal's mind, so he began with what the sages understood of the gods. What they did, why they were there, everything from history to philosophy, trying to form a foundation of understanding on which to base everything else. After that, he delved into pure history, reading an abridged version of the history of the multiverse, filled only with the significant events that had transpired. He read book after book after book, moving from the gods to the Deva, trying to understand what they were and their purpose. Then he read some theoretical theology, as sages debated the God of Gods, what it was, what it did, what purpose it worked towards -- if it indeed worked towards any purpose at all -- trying to understand how that fit in with everything else.

After that, he started researching more about the gods, getting more and more specific. He read about theological politics, how gods interacted with one another. Then he moved into some sage's research about how gods and mortals existed, a book of his personal contemplations and observations and theories that, given Tarrin's more intimate understanding of the subject that most, realized weren't far off the mark.

He read, and read, and read. He refused to sleep, refused to eat or drink except when absolutely necessary, he spent his every waking moment in the library day after day, as he struggled to come to an understanding of things that would help him understand what Mother Wynn said, and plan accordingly.

"I think this is the book you asked for, my Lord," a voice called to him after some number of days that he really couldn't recall, days spent in utter devotion to his mission to understand more, to learn what he needed to learn to connect the dots that Mother Wynn had laid out, but had laid out so far apart that he couldn't make the connections. He looked up at saw himself looking at a young, swarthy-skinned woman with a slightly flat chest, wearing a simple woolen peasant dress, her long, straight black hair pulled back from her face by a kerchief folded down into a long strap tied into her hair. He hadn't remembered asking for another book, but the mental state he was in, so distracted and interspective, he really wouldn't be surprised if he had asked for it.

She seemed hauntingly familiar to him. Her face and her scent... he wasn't sure, but he thought he'd met this woman some time before, but he couldn't quite pin it down. Then again, he was very tired, and he was starting to feel like Phandebrass with his head so full of what he'd been reading that he was having trouble separating it from the rest of the world. She handed him a simple leather-bound tome, a tome with no title. She then smiled at him and winked, then scurried off between a pair of bookshelves and out of sight.

Tarrin soon forgot about the girl as he opened the book she had given him, and began to read. The book was a book of history, and the more he read, the more he understood that this was *exactly* the book that he needed to read. He read page after page, and the more he read, the more he understood. The lessons of the past, reaching out across the marches of time to educate those of the present, to teach him their wisdom, and to ensure that he did not make the same mistakes that had been made in the past. Every word was like fire in his brain, and every word became burned into his memory as if it had always been there. He consumed page after page, chapter after chapter, reading about the past and understanding how it applied to the future.

When he closed the book and laid it carefully on the desk, he understood. He understood the warnings of Mother Wynn, and he understood what had to be done. He understood the mistakes he had made, and now understood what he had to do to correct his path and get back on the right track. He didn't just understand his own situation, he now understood who he was, and just what it meant.

He *understood*.

A new plan began to form in his mind, a plan that would rely on those warnings, and guided by the wisdom set forth in the book laying before him. He would indeed have to fight the One, and she had been right. How he handled that battle would decide the outcome of everything else. It was a battle that he could not win... but he couldn't allow the One to know that he understood that reality. It was a battle that he had to survive, however, and Mother Wynn was right. How he faced the One would cause his plan to either succeed or fail.

But that was not a battle he was prepared to fight just yet. There were some other things that had to be done first, some loose ends to tie up, and certain items that had to be acquired before he could challenge the One. And there were also some plans to set in motion that would come to fruition *after* that battle, plans he would have to rely upon after it was done.

For right now, waiting to hear from the Sage's Council was still his main priority. The knowledge of the One's home plane and the location of his realm was very important information, information that he would need once he was prepared to face the One.

Two things had to be done, however, but both would have to wait until he had what he needed from the Sages.

The first thing he had to do was procure a certain magical object that could only be found in the possession of a Solar. Given also that no Solar would hand that object over willingly, it meant that he would have to permanently run himself afoul of the Deva by fighting a Solar over that object. This would *not* be easy. Solar were probably the most powerful beings in the multiverse that couldn't be called a god. Solar were more powerful than some gods. Fighting one would be almost as hard as facing the One, but in that, at least, he had a reasonable chance. Solar *were not* gods. They were immensely powerful and formidable, but they weren't invulnerable, and Tarrin was no pushover in combat himself. This was something he decided would be best to do after his business in Crossroads was complete, where he wouldn't be under the eyes of so many Deva... for there was no doubt that the entirety of the Deva would kill him on sight after he stripped what he needed from a Solar.

The other thing he had to do was return to Sennadar, but it wouldn't be as easy as just walking through the gate and proclaiming that he was home. He had no doubt that the Elder Gods would resist his return to his home world, and would order Spyder to block him from entering his own home. And that meant that he would have to fight and defeat one of the most powerful and skilled users of both magic and steel that had ever lived, the nigh-invincible Urzani Sorceress, Spyder.

Both of these errands weren't going to be easy... but what he had to do wouldn't be easy either. But, he felt that if he could accomplish both tasks, then he could see this through to the end. If he could best a Solar and Spyder in combat, then he'd be able to survive a battle with the One and then carry through to ultimate victory.

And oh, the sweet, ironic justice of this plan. Just thinking about it made him giggle like a little boy. And it gave him a feeling of, of *hope*, something he hadn't felt in a while. After removing the Demon Lord from Pyrosia, there wasn't much for him to look forward to. The Elder Gods would deny him entry to his own home, and he would be stranded, a refugee in a world that was not his, and still existing in a state that would make him feel as if he did not belong.

But at least if this plan worked, he had a reason to feel hopeful that things would indeed work out for the best, and even if he wouldn't be happy, at least he would be content.

He put a paw over the book, then breathed out a deep, cleansing breath. "Mother."

"*What is it, kitten?*" her disembodied voice drifted to him immediately. He could count on her to keep an eye on him, even if he absolutely forbade her from interfering.

"I need you to do something for me."

"*What do you need?*"

"I need you to be ready to tell Dolanna what she's doing. I need her to understand."

"Kitten, if her faith in you becomes questioned, you will lose your power!"

"That's *exactly* what has to happen, Mother, but only at the right time."

"Kitten, you're being crazy!"

"Crazy like a fox, Mother," he said, tapping his fingertips together over the book. "Crazy like a fox."

"So, perhaps my kitten is starting to understand," she said with a gentle voice, filled with sly amusement.

"Yes, Mother, I understand. Completely.

"Well, since things have changed, perhaps you can explain to me what you intend to do?"

"Let me leave here. Would you walk with me, Mother?"

Immediately, Niami appeared beside the table where he was sitting. She looked exactly as she always looked, with her multicolored hair and her gown made of spun starshine. Tarrin stood up and offered his arm to her, which she took with a gentle smile. They walked together out of the building and out the gate of the compound, then walked aimlessly along the streets. Tarrin explained his plan to her in great detail, going over everything that had to be done.

"Goodness, kitten, you *do* understand," she said with an approving nod. "What you intend isn't going to be easy, it's actually a little crazy and it's going to get you into a *whole* lot of trouble, but it *will* work. I'm just glad you finally understand. Now, things are going to be much easier."

"I'm glad you approve, Mother," he said honestly. "I know it's not an easy thing I'm asking for about Dolanna, but can you do it?"

"Yes, kitten, I can do it. I know Dolanna's mind, I know how to say it so that you get what you need without it doing her any harm."

"Perfect. Mother, I need to make sure of something."

"What is that?"

"You promised not to interfere. I need you to honor that, even when I come into conflict with the other Elder Gods. Will you promise me that no matter what happens, no matter what I do, that you won't raise your hand against me?"

"I know what you have planned, kitten, and I'm *very* glad you told me. I could try to explain things to my parents, but they probably won't listen to me..if I could even tell them about *this*. When it comes to you and me, they think I've lost my mind, and won't even listen to me anymore. They think you're a bad influence on me," she said with a giggle.

"I think I have been. Really, Mother, holding Sennadar hostage? Wasn't that a bit extreme?"

"It certainly got their attention," she laughed. "Don't worry, kitten, they'll get over it. And after everything's said and done, maybe they'll respect me a little more now that they understand how serious I can be. I can't make the road any smoother for you in that department, but I can at least promise you that I won't actively

interfere or try to oppose you."

"That's all I need, Mother. I can deal with the other parts myself. How are things in Pyrosia?" he asked, if only because he couldn't stand not knowing.

"Quite well, despite a few setbacks," she answered. "Haley and Darvon are at Pyros now, and they're already rebuilding the city using the Sorcerers and some Elara magicians that have come down off their moon. Your shadow is still out there, and it's growing stronger and stronger. The Demon Lord hasn't managed to kill it yet, and it's starting to become very strong. It's done its job, because it's pinned all the Demons in together in a city near the east coast. The Demon Lord can't really send any of them out, because only about half of them manage to come back. Kimmie, Mist, your daughters, and their help have already left Pyros, but it's going to be very slow for them. The Demon Lord has already struck the first blow. He sent several thousand winged Demons to attack Pyros, sending them by air, the only way he has to get forces out and past your shadow without losing a large chunk of them."

Tarrin grunted. "What happened?"

"Dolanna demonstrated that she's getting the hang of it," Niami said smugly. "She raised a Ward over most of the city that stopped the Demons cold. You would have been proud of her, kitten, that Ward protected a *huge* area. But unfortunately, it wasn't huge enough. She may be the guiding force of the Weave there, but she's still only a mortal -- and not even a Weavespinner -- and she has limits on how much power she can command. She couldn't cover the stables, and the Demons attacked it before they were driven off. I hate to say it, kitten, but almost all the Pegasi and most of the horses were killed."

Tarrin swore. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough. Only six Pegasi survived, and only about twenty horses. The horses can be replaced, but the Pegasi are another matter. Your mates and children were going to use the Pegasi to sally out to recover the shards quickly, but they can't do that now. Phandebrass and that Elara Wizard Kyrienna are almost done creating magical devices that can locate the shards of your sword. They've already completed one, and Mist and Kimmie are using it, following its directions. Triana and Jasana are waiting for the Wizards to complete the second, and I'm also having them create one more, in case one is lost or destroyed. You know how good Phandebrass is, but this Elara woman is *exceptional*. Outside of Phandebrass, she's the best Wizard I've ever seen. The two of them are funny to watch," she laughed. "Kyrienna is trying to prove she's a better Wizard than him, but Phandebrass is utterly oblivious to her competitive posturing, and it's driving her crazy. It's even worse because he *is* a better Wizard than she is."

Tarrin smiled. "I can imagine."

"All things being equal, I think we still have the advantage in time. The Demon Lord has a large force of humans still answering his command, but he's using almost half of them right now to help find and kill your shadow, since they're not vulnerable to it. What he has left that's not committed is about the same size of Bragg's army, but it's spread out to try to keep control of the eastern cities. From what I've seen in the scouting reports, it looks like the Demon Lord -- well, Shaz'Baket, actually, she's probably running that operation -- is trying to keep control of the eastern marches of the continent and discourage Bragg from trying to invade, and use that time to conscript more soldiers from the cities to use in their march towards Pyros. From the way it looks, once the Demons have enough of a human army to reinforce them, and they've dealt with your shadow, they'll march out of their strongholds and come after Dolanna. Until then, they have every flying Demon that wasn't killed at Pyros out hunting for the shards of your sword, and they're also keeping an eye on Bragg's forces. Any time he moves towards one city, human forces march from other cities to reinforce it with enough men to make taking it too costly to consider. They're making Bragg very angry by using flying Demons, but he certainly doesn't seem to mind the detailed reconnaissance the Elara are giving him."

"They have flying animals on Elara?"

"No, kitten, they use magic to simply look down from their moon and see what's going on down on the planet," she answered. "As long as there's no clouds or trees blocking their view, they can see everything. And because of the distances involved, no countermagic the Demons can use can stop them. All they can do is try to conceal their movements as best they can and use cover to hide their numbers."

"Clever," Tarrin said appreciatively.

"They've finally convinced Bragg to pull back to Pyros," she told him. "Kang had to do it himself. Bragg could smell them retreating, and Bragg's not the kind of Dwarf to just let that go unchallenged. So his Dwarves are marching towards Pyros now, and the Elara have also sent some troops, and some of their magicians. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that the Elara are descendents of the Urzani, but in some respects, they're like the past resurrected."

"How so?" he asked with genuine curiosity. The Urzani were a tantalizing mystery to him, for Spyder almost never spoke of that distant past.

"Their culture is almost exactly the same," she answered, making a sour face. "The Urzani had a system of social castes; laborer, soldier, artisan, magician, noble. The Elara society maintains their caste system, but it's much more rigid. In the Urzani system, a laborer could rise to a better caste by working hard to become an artisan, or entering the army and becoming a soldier, or having enough magical aptitude to learn Wizard magic, or entering the priesthood. The Elara have institutionalized their castes. If you're born into the laborer caste, you'll always be a laborer. The soldier castes of the Elara almost look like a different species, since they've bred physical traits into themselves. The soldier Elara are larger and stronger than the rest of their race. The only Elara allowed to learn magic are the magician caste and the noble caste. Those with the natural aptitude for their elemental magic learn that, those that don't become Wizards or Priests. I tell you this, kitten, everything that caused the Urzani to fly apart is seething just under the surface of the Elara's so-called perfect society. One of them that came down, a girl named Myn, she's the perfect example of that wrongness. The girl's an incredibly gifted Wizard, not many rungs under Phandebrass and Kyrienna, but she was born into the laborer caste. She defied Elara law and learned magic, pretending to be of the magician caste, until she was found out. They would have executed her if not for the fact that she's so strong, strong enough to be a Gatemaster, so they instead did what the Urzani used to do with their condemned prisoners."

"What?"

"They tattooed her," she answered. "They would tattoo a mask over the eyes and upper cheeks of the condemned, so if by some miracle they escaped, that tattoo would serve as a marker that one was dealing with someone sentenced to death. It was called Death's Black Mask, since black ink was about the only ink that would show on a brown-skinned Urzani. Myn has just such a tattoo, though hers is blue, and she's a pariah among the Elara. They won't even look at her, they turn their backs to her whenever she comes near them. I felt so sorry for her, I ordered Dolanna to send her out with Kimmie. Kimmie will sort her out. She's very good for that."

"Huh," Tarrin grunted. "I never really talked much to Lorak or Neh. They never wanted to talk about Elara or their people."

"That's because I think they knew it would offend you," she answered. "Dolanna and the others warned them about you, and hearing about how they keep much of their population in a state that's just a small step above slavery would have set you off."

"Yes it would have," he said with a grim expression.

"It's unfortunate that the one trait that I was glad to see fall from the Urzani lives on in the Elara, the need to subjugate others to their will, the need to control. The Elara had no one else to control, so they turned on their own. The Elara society is a society of rigid rules and customs, where the higher castes oppress the lower castes."

"I remember how offended the Elara were when I told them they were probably descendents of the Urzani, or the parent race," he said. "Now I see where some of it came from."

"Yes, kitten. That Urzani arrogance is still deeply seated in them."

"I still get a warm feeling when I remember the look on Lorak's face when I started speaking their language," he chuckled. "How are the children?"

"Zyri and Jal are very happy," she answered. "Jenna is being a good surrogate while you're away, and both of them are starting to settle in. Shara's been replaced by an Elara Water adept named Tem, and his training is starting to come along nicely. Zyri still hasn't manifested her power, but she's in the Novitiate now, and quite the center of attention because Jenna won't let her live in the dormitories. She and Jal live in Jenna's apartment. Everyone knows that she's your adopted daughter and the niece of the Keeper. Telven's really hating working for the Knights, but they're starting to wear him down. Azakar's overseeing his, ah, education personally while he recovers from his wounds. But despite it all, he's fascinated by the Knights. I get a strange feeling that he's going to end up with spurs before all is said and done."

"I hope Zak can make something of him," he grunted. They walked past a small tavern, and Tarrin gave a cool glance at the two Archons who stood in the doorway gawking, watching them go past. Tarrin himself may not be very noteworthy, just a minor godling as they saw things, but Niami was *not* just the casual visitor. She was an Elder God from one of the most powerful Prime Material planes, a being of almost incomprehensible power. Her presence here was what they were gawking at... and for once, Tarrin felt relieved that all the attention wasn't focused on *him*. "I really can't tell you when I'm going to show up in Sennadar, Mother," he told her. "Right now I'm waiting on the leader of the Sages to get back to me."

"For what, kitten?"

"For part of the old plan that's part of the new plan," he answered. "I *still* have to face the One, Mother, and face him in his home realm. I won't be able to kill him, but I *have* to try... and I have to make sure that I survive that fight. If I don't, nothing else is going to work."

"I don't like the idea of that," she sighed. "And I'm *very* glad you decided not to try to kill the One. I would have told you immediately that it would be absolutely impossible."

"And I would have ignored you," he told her evenly. "Then I would have spent so much time trying to prevent your meddling that I wouldn't get anything else done."

"And that would have been the point of my meddling," she said with a sly smile and a glance at him. "You may try to ignore me, I may not outright order you like I do others, and I give you *way* more latitude than I give any of my other children, kitten, but in the end you *will* do as I say. I would have found out what you were up to after watching what you were doing, and then I'd have put a hand in, promise or no promise. My promise to stay out of it means nothing if I know you're all but committing suicide."

"Sometimes, I hate you, Mother."

"Then I'm doing my job," she answered. "Sometimes, a parent has to put her foot down, kitten. You know all about that, though, don't you?" she laughed. "Jasana is more than a handful. Honestly, I don't see why you

and Jesmind don't have white hair by now."

"I'm not sure either," he admitted. "Anyway, there are a few things I have to do before I can come to Sennadar. Just *please*, stay out of it. I can deal with it myself."

"This is something I really can't help you with anyway, kitten," she answered his request with honesty. "All I can say is be careful, and know that when you leave Crossroads, I'm not going to be able to help you at *all*. I won't even be able to speak to you. What you intend to do is going to make you a criminal in the eyes of *everyone*. I'll help you as much as I can until you pass that point of no return, but once you cross over that line, I can do no more for you. To do so would threaten the Balance, and I can't do that. Once you commit to that course of action, there will be no turning back. You will be an enemy to the gods, the Deva, the Demons... just about *everyone*. I can only strongly suggest that you fully understand and appreciate what that is going to mean."

"Yes, Mother, I appreciate that. I know what I'm going to do, and what the consequences are going to be."

"I'm glad you fully understand. But I won't oppose you, either. You won't have anything to fear from me in that regard. Refusing to actively oppose you does *not* threaten the Balance, because I understand what your ultimate objective is. In this case, the end really will justify the means."

"That's all I need, Mother. That and you assuring everyone that I haven't gone mental."

She laughed. "I won't be able to help there, kitten. They already believe that you're mental."

"Well, they may be right," he admitted with a short nod. "And don't worry about me, Mother. I can handle doing this on my own."

"I have every faith in you." She stopped, pulling on his paw to make him stop walking. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you now, kitten. I want you to be careful, and know that I will not oppose you. I just wish I could warn Spyder of what's coming," she sighed.

"You know we can't," he told her. "If Spyder knew I was coming back, then others would find out, and that would jeopardize everything."

"I know. But at least I can be there to assure her that you forgive her after it's over."

"You talk like I won't have any problem waltzing right by her," he snorted. "Mother, Spyder will be the biggest challenge I've ever had to face. I'm not sure I *can* beat her."

"You can, kitten, so long as you remember who you are," she told him, reaching up and patting him on the cheek. "Always keep that in mind, Tarrin. No one can stand against you."

"Well, I wouldn't say that," he chuckled.

"I would," she smiled. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and it left his cheek tingling with lingering power. "Be *very* careful, my kitten. This is the most dangerous road you've ever tried to walk. I know it's going to be difficult for you, but just keep your eyes on that destination. That will make it all worth it."

"I know it will," he told her, taking her hand, then lightly kissing the back of it. "I want you to be careful too, Mother. What you're sitting on could get you in as much trouble as me."

"Oh, I know that, kitten, believe me. I'm just glad that you understand. That you *finally* understand. You truly have grown up, my son.

"I'm glad you approve."

"Oh, certainly. I really need to go now. Be well, Tarrin Kael. And good luck."

"I'll see you soon, Mother."

"I'm sure you will," she said with a sly smile, and then she simply vanished.

Tarrin sighed, turning to look back down the street where they had walked. At least *someone* understood what he was going to do, and wouldn't think he'd gone completely insane.

But it wasn't insanity. It was cold, calculated, methodical intent. He understood completely what was coming. The instant he opposed a Solar, he was a marked man in the eyes of the Deva. They would hunt him down. But it was more than that, actually. They would oppose him no matter what when they discovered the truth, discovered his dark secret.

Mi'Shara... it really *was* a literal term.

He, and Spyder, they were both Entropic beings.

They were *Mi'Shara*. They were mortal beings who could, in time of great need, exceed their mortal restrictions and bring to bear power far beyond anything a mortal could wield. In effect, they could counteract the very rules of reality and manipulate the universe itself. They were aberrations, *abominations* some would call them, but according to that book, even the Entropics had a place in the vast design which was that which was created by the God of Gods. They weren't Entropic Entities, which was what most would imagine when one mentioned an Entropic, those vast, plane-sized sentient disruptions in the Astral, forces of such power and concern that Demon and Deva would band together and work as one to destroy the Entropic. Instead, they were mortal beings who had been born with the innate power of Entropy within them. The closest thing that history had to call beings aligned with Entropy was the word *mishara*, or the Dream Killers, mortal and divine agents of Entropy working to unmake all... but that wasn't precisely what he and Spyder really were. They weren't beings working to destroy everything. They were *Mi'Shara*.

And Tarrin finally *understood what that meant*. Something that not even Spyder, with her ten millenia of life and experience, had come to comprehend. It was such a simple truth, but sometimes, the simplest of things were the hardest to understand.

And he had to fight her. His mind shuddered away at the unimaginable potential for disaster implicit within that single thought. Given what they were capable of doing -- no wonder the Elder Gods were so terrified of him. In that battle, he had to make sure to bring Spyder down before she lost her temper, and be very careful not to overwhelm her in power and cause her to attempt to exercise her power as a *Mi'Shara* in order to combat him. If he was forced to react in kind, it would be almost as bad as two gods warring in the mortal realm. The kind of power that both he and Spyder could channel into the material world could devastate large swaths of his homeworld.

He also would not under any circumstances, either intentionally or even accidentally, kill her. She was his friend, and she was more. She was one of his sister *sui'kun*, and they were bound together as *Mi'Shara*. He had to exercise the utmost caution so that he didn't permanently hurt her, even as he fought against her.

He went over what had to be done in his mind. It was quite the laundry list of errands, starting with the Sages

and ending with the destruction of the Demon Lord. Once he knew where the One was hiding, he could go find a Solar and take what he needed, then he'd be ready to face the biggest challenge in his life.

Not Jegojah, not Kravon, not Val, not Stragos Bane, not the One, not a Demon Lord, not even the Solar, but someone that would make them all look like children in comparison.

Spyder.

If he could best Spyder and gain entry into Sennadar, then everything else would be relatively easy. The battle with the One wouldn't be that hard, because all he had to do was *survive* that fight, where he had to *defeat* Spyder, and do it in such a way that he didn't hurt her and also didn't cause her to use her power as a *Mi'Shara* against *him*.

Once he won access to Sennadar, there were several things he had to do there, and probably do them while dodging the wrath of the Elder Gods. He had to go to the Tower in Suld, he had to return to his home in Aldreth, and he had to destroy the spelltrap he'd made so long ago... just do it in a way that didn't damage the statuette itself. He was *very* fond of that black metal sculpture, he'd rather not lose it.

Once all of that was done, the only thing left would be to face the One, survive the battle, and then destroy the Demon Lord.

Easy, easy.

But it would be worth all the aggravation. If everything worked the way he hoped, he would be able to go home, and there wasn't a *damn* thing the Elder Gods could do to stop him.

He blew out his breath and turned back towards the Sage's Council headquarters. He wanted to read a little more, and finalize his plans with a little more methodical thought and contemplation. He also wanted to check in with the head of the order and find out how many of his requests had come back declining the job, and how many had yet to reply.

There was much to do.

Sitting in her chair, Mother Wynn watched the people go by, as her nimble hands, unfettered by age, continued to knit her yarn into neat, precise rows. She took no notice of any of the mortals or Archons that passed, didn't even raise an eyebrow when a hulking, menacing *balor* shambled by her porch, even as everyone else scrambled to get out of the Demon's way. For her, the entire world was nothing more than completing her line, and then starting another.

She took no notice of anyone, and no one took notice of her. She didn't look up regardless of who passed by her porch, nor did she look up when someone came up to her porch and sat down in her spare chair. It was a small, young woman with dark skin, radiant brown eyes, and straight black hair, wearing a simple peasant dress of dark wool. She was an attractive young lady, if a bit flat-chested and narrow through the hips, making her look slightly younger than she actually was.

Mother Wynn said nothing, neither acknowledging the girl or looking at her. Both were quiet for many moments, until Mother Wynn finally broke the silence.

"Did you get the book back?" she asked.

"Right here," the girl answered, reaching into midair and closing her hand over nothingness. But that nothingness suddenly became an old, old leather-bound book, a book whose title was embossed in gold letters along its spine:

The Blood War of Sennadar; a Study of How One Event Can Affect the Multiverse.

"I don't think he recognized me," she said.

"You sound disappointed."

"I guess I am, a little. He remembered *you*."

"I didn't try to talk to him when he was nose-deep in a mystery."

"Well, yeah, I guess you're right. Think he would have recognized me if not for that?"

"Most likely. The boy's sharp, and he has a long memory."

"I'll say. After he read the book, he homed right in on the truth like a raptor drawing a bead on a rabbit."

"He's not a *Mi'Shara* for nothing, girl. The truth resonates in him like a forgotten memory. All he needed was a little nudging."

"I hope he got off to a good start."

"He did," she answered evenly. "He's heeded the warnings, and knows what has to be done. He's already talked to Niami. Once the Sages get back to him, he'll get his ball rolling."

"And that's when the fur's going to fly," the girl said with an indelicate grunt.

"Has to be done, girl, has to be done," Mother Wynn told her calmly. "Things have to move forward. Sometimes when you jar the cart, something falls out and breaks."

"I know, it's just... I don't like *chaos*."

"Sometimes you have to create a little chaos in order to make a little law," Mother Wynn shrugged. "They'll all get over it eventually."

"I know. How do you think it's going to turn out?"

"Who knows?" she shrugged again. "You know that the future's not set."

"Well, what do *you* think is going to happen?"

"Me personally? Well, I don't think there's ever been anyone born with more *brath* than that boy. He'll prevail, just because he won't accept anything less. He's too stubborn to do anything other than prevail."

The girl giggled. "I think you're right. You know something?"

"What, girl?"

"I hope he wins."

"That's what we're here for, girl, to help that come about."

If the girl replied to that, no one knew, for she was gone. As was Mother Wynn.

As well as the porch, and the house to which it had been attached, and the very memory that they had ever been there at all. They had all vanished, leaving nothing but a narrow street behind, and not one soul within Crossroads except Tarrin Kael had any memory that the house, the girl, or Mother Wynn had ever existed.

Chapter 4

Despite all the weighty matters at hand, Tarrin Kael knew that sometimes, one just had to put it all on the top shelf and worry about it later.

His plan had been the only thing on his mind for some time, but now that everything was more or less worked through, and a couple of the little bugs were recognized and corrected. So, to avoid nitpicking himself to oblivion, he knew when it was time to step back and just let it sit.

That meant that he had to occupy himself with other matters...and there weren't many other matters into which he could get involved, given that he was trying to keep a low profile. He ended up spending most of that time talking to Szizazz or stalking the stacks of the large library in the Sage's Council, searching for more information about Demons and Deva, more about the Deva than the Demons, trying to learn more about those who were his enemies, and were soon to become his enemies.

And in this he found something of a curiosity. It turned out to him that the Demons were much more researched and documented than the Deva, and this was a darkly amusing irony to him. The sages and wise men had spent much time and effort studying the beings that were dark and dangerous and potential enemies, but spent virtually no effort studying the mysterious Deva. What made it odd to him was that these men knew more about their *enemies* than their *allies*. Demons were heavily researched, entire bookshelves in the library devoted to the subject and written by sages who, often at risk to life, limb, and soul, had laboriously penetrated the veil of secrecy of the Demonic culture and learned...where the Deva barely had a shelf of books devoted to them.

But that little bit of information was useful to him. Mainly those few books on the subject glossed over the powers of the various Deva and attempted to penetrate the wall of silence of the Deva concerning who they were and what they did, and had no success.

And that was probably why the Demons were so much more well known. Demons would, with enough incentive, reveal their secrets, where the Deva would not. They were united in their silence.

But the books had enough in them, as Tarrin was able to study the powers and abilities of the various Deva, from the warrior Agathinon to the almost godlike Solar. And of course, much like anything else with the Deva, the researchers had never managed to get the Deva themselves to talk about it...their findings were the results of laborious research of watching the various Deva in *action*, where there was no way to hide what they were doing. But it was enough for him. He had no doubt that the various Deva had more abilities than what the books attributed to them, but the observations recorded in those books was enough to give Tarrin a foundation of understanding in the Agathinon, Deva, Planetars, and Solars to understand the nature of their abilities and the best ways to go about combatting them.

He just had to be careful. He was in a vulnerable position here, and he knew it. The Deva were *not* the Demons in how he could deal with them. They were united as a whole, and when he started opposing them, they would be much more dangerous to him because of that unity...and this was their home ground, as it were. Certainly, the first thing he had to do after earning their wrath was get out of Crossroads, and *stay* out. He couldn't come back here after he took what he needed from a Solar.

After doing all that reading and deciding it was time to take a break, he spent much of his time getting to know Szizazz. The four-armed creature who looked so much like a *marilith* was an interesting female, in both her personality and her history. It took him a while to get her to actually talk to him, and he found her personality decidedly *reptilian*. She was a cold, unemotional woman, devoted to the concepts of knowledge and logic and shunning emotional outbursts as a useless waste of energy. Her race, whose names were literally unpronounceable to him, were not like her, she told him. They were consumed by greed and hatred and fear, and warred with each other and everyone else. Szizazz was part of a very small minority of her people who saw the futility of these actions, but unlike others, he saw, she had so utterly rejected the actions of her people that it also caused her to reject the emotions that caused them to act the way they did. Her status as a Wizard meant that for her, life would be nothing but one endless war until she was killed on the battlefield. When a magical accident propelled her here, to Crossroads, she saw no reason to return to a life she did not want to lead.

But Tarrin liked her, despite her cold nature. She was intelligent and wise, and she was loyal. That seemed odd to him, but it was an extension of her some of the customs she had yet to shed from her past life, one of the customs of her people. Guests welcomed into her home were afforded respect and protection as if they were family, until they did something that caused her to withdraw that hospitality. She insulated herself from potential problems by being very selective over who she allowed to rent a room within her inn. Only those she felt were worth her hospitality were permitted to come under her roof.

He had shared spells with her, and had told her about his homeworld, and had even taught her how to play chess, after using magic to create a board. He did these things because he found that he just needed someone to talk to, he needed a *friend*, and he felt he could trust Szizazz. He'd even revealed at least the main framework of the events that had brought him to Crossroads, and his plans to correct his mistakes and return to Pyrosia.

"So, that is why the krin spell became uncontrollable," she mused as she held a knight in one of her four hands, studying its form with her cold orange-red eyes. "It reacted to your divine nature. It is designed to drain the power of the Wizard and transform it into krin, but your power is potentially *limitless*. What the spell drained was immediately replaced, so the spell never found its terminus because it never ran out of power to siphon."

"Ah, I see," he said with a nod. "That certainly explains what went wrong. I never thought of that when I cast it."

"Obviously," she sniffed, setting the knight down in a new position. "And that is how gods make krin in infinite amounts. Check."

"Most likely," he agreed, studying the board and resisting the urge to frown. Szizazz had picked up this game entirely too fast for his liking.

"Do you feel that your allies on Pyrosia will endure until you are able to return?"

"They should," he said, moving his king out of danger. "If Dolanna can get a handle on the power she has at her disposal, Pyros will be a very hard target for the Demon Lord to conquer...and he can't do anything there without taking Pyros first. Dolanna's the lynchpin of everything there. So long as she's in Pyros, she controls *all* magic in Pyrosia, and that's a threat that the Demon Lord can't leave unchallenged.

"How does a mortal do this?"

"Well, because she's just a focus for a guiding power," he answered. "Dolanna maintains the integrity of the Weave I built there, but the one who's doing the actual controlling is my Goddess. She doesn't do it by doing anything conscious. All it requires is her physical presence. A Weave cannot exist without

Sorcerers and a coherent force holding it in place. My Goddess *can't* provide that coherent force because it's not Sennadar, but Dolanna *can*. So, my Goddess is the sentient force behind the laws of magic that the Weave enforce on Pyrosia, but Dolanna is the focus of coherent will keeping it in place. In a way, Dolanna is a living icon for my Goddess, giving her a window into Pyrosia."

"It sounds stressful for her. A mortal was never meant to control such power."

"Dolanna's resilient, and it's not as hard as it sounds for her," he answered. "She doesn't have to *control* that power, Szizazz, she just has to be the *will* of the Weave. She has to actively keep the Weave stable, but it doesn't require her to understand every secret of magic to keep it up. That's what my Goddess does. Dolanna just provides the conscious will to hold it in place. In time, she's going to learn how to control that power much more comprehensively, and that's when she's going to be dangerous to the Demon Lord. That's why he has to kill her as fast as possible, because if he gives her time to understand how to control that power, she can lash out from Pyros and decimate his entire army, no matter where it is."

"Truly, magic is much different in your world than in mine. In my home dimension, no magic-user could ever perform such a feat."

"I guess it is," he agreed. "Too bad you weren't born there, Szizazz. I think you'd have liked it."

She sniffed. "Then I would not be who I am. And I am content with who I am."

"True," he agreed. "But I'd love to have you come visit someday."

"You said the world is closed."

"It is, but when I finally get back home, I'm going to assert some authority. I'm sure I can swing getting you through the gate and in for a visit."

"You are going to bully gods," she remarked.

"I've done it before," he said with nonchalance. "They'll want no part of me after I get home, because I'll be *very* unhappy over how they tried to keep me out. And by then, they're not going to have any bloody way to deny me my home. Ayise will give in, or I'll get nasty."

She gave him a cool but amused look.

"What?"

"I find it amusing to hear you speak so," she told him. "I think you are the first person I have ever met who sees gods as nothing but a minor inconvenience."

"Well, *technically*, I'm also a god," he chuckled.

"In name only."

"Well, yeah, but let's not quibble over little things," he said flippantly. "I was able to bully gods long before *this* happened," he said, jerking his thumb over his back to point at his wings, which flowed from his back to display themselves for Szizazz's benefit.

"A strange world you live in, Tarrin Kael," she told him, her expression still dryly amused. "I would not be happy living in a world with such power. It trivializes what is important."

"It's not always fun, believe me," he told her. "Sometimes, I'd much rather be the kid I used to be, when I didn't have any magic, and where my whole world was nothing more than my parents' farm and the surrounding territory. And I certainly agree with you, Szizazz. Sometimes I look at how things have turned out, and I wonder just how in the nine hells it came to this. Here I am, a bloody *god*, fighting against a Demon Lord. You know, ten years ago, I *was* that kid whose entire world was a farm and a stretch of forest. I'm just a farmboy from Aldreth. What in Sennadar am I doing out *here*?"

She gave him a strange look. "Perhaps, that is *exactly* why it is you who are here," she told him. "Because you *are* that farmboy from Aldreth, and not a *god*." She leaned her cheek against the palm of her hand, elbow on the table between them, as two of her other hands clasped before her and the fourth reached down to the board to move. "Check."

He frowned again. "I understand what you're saying. That's how I got into this mess in the first place," he told her. "I was chosen to go after the Firestaff because I *didn't* want to use it. My Were-cat mentality doesn't make me seek out power like humans do. I could be trusted with that kind of power, because it wasn't what I was after. But in the end, I used it anyway. Strange world we live in sometimes," he sighed.

"Why did you use it?"

"Because it had to be done," he told her, then he glossed over the situation with Val. "Me using it was half out of revenge for what he did to me and my family, and half because the world just wasn't big enough for him and the Elder Gods. Part of me really enjoyed killing him, though, I can't deny it, it wasn't completely about duty. He harmed my family, and that's something you don't do if you want to live. I can be quite vindictive sometimes," he admitted.

She gave a low, undulating hiss, which was her form of laughter. "It certainly seems so," she told him. "Do you regret doing it?"

"No," he said after a moment's thought, blocking her attack with his rook. "Even though it did this to me. This is the result of it, but the act itself, well, I'd do that again. This is the burden I bear for it. I've had to learn to live with being what I am, and it caused me a lot of problems early on. I've never been very comfortable with being a god. It's just not *me*, you know?"

"And does it cause problems now?"

"I guess it does. It's not what I want to be. It's not who I am. I've learned how to use it, but if I could have things my way, I'd gladly give it up, in a heartbeat."

"You are wise, Tarrin Kael," she told him.

"I don't think so," he chuckled. "I think if I'd been given the *mind* of a god instead of keeping my mortal mind, I'd be singing a different song."

"Then you are *truly* wise," she told him, one of her four hands moving over the board as she took his rook. "When I use the spell that changes my shape and gives me legs, I feel decidedly like I am not who I should be, even though when I am in that form, things are much easier for me. Despite knowing that this place is not designed for someone like me, I cling to my natural form, because it is who I am. You understand the truth of being who you are, and being faithful to it, Tarrin Kael. They truly chose wisely when they chose you to bear the burden of the Firestaff. Check."

"Legs, eh?" he said, giving her a slight smile. "I've never seen you like that."

"I have no reason to use it within the bounds of my own home, Tarrin," she told him.

"You're going to have to show me some day."

"Perhaps," she told him. "If I were not a proper maiden, I would almost think you were making an improper invitation."

He laughed. "No, Szizazz, I like to stay within my own species. But you *are* a handsome woman to me...at least from the waist up."

"For some strange reason, that pleases me. Though I have no idea why."

"Girls like to hear that they're pretty," he told her with a grin. "Even four-armed snake girls."

"You are indeed a dangerous man, Tarrin Kael," she told him with a clever little smile. "I think you are trying to distract me from defeating you in our game."

"I'm not that petty," he laughed. "You've pretty much well got this game wrapped up. I need to start teaching people who aren't smarter than me," he mused aloud. "And you just learned!"

"This game is war, my friend, and if there is one thing I understand, it is war."

"I guess you would," he told her with a hint of compassion in his voice. "Well, I'm going to resign this game, Szizazz. You more or less have me in four moves."

"A wise person knows when to admit defeat with dignity," she said simply. "I would return to my apartment, Tarrin, to rest and to take a meal." The door of the inn opened, and that hulking insectoid creature who was staying at the inn entered. It nodded silently to Szizazz, and she nodded in return as it shuffled past and up the ramp towards its room.

"Oh, there was something I wanted to give you," he told her as she slithered backwards, away from the table. He went up with her as she slid up the ramp, then she paused as he opened the door to his room and entered. He came out holding a small crystal bell. "This is for you," he told her.

"A spell of some kind?" she asked as she looked at it.

"The bell itself, no, but there is a spell on it, one taught to me by an old friend," he told her. "If you ring the bell, I'll be able to speak to you for a short time, regardless of distance. I don't think it will work if I leave Crossroads, though. My friend knows a spell that can do that, but she never taught it to me."

"A nice gesture, my friend," she told him. "And it is a lovely gift. But fear not, I know a spell that will allow me to contact those in other planes. Do you plan to leave soon?"

"Well, you know that I'll be leaving when I get what I need from the sages," he said as he escorted her towards the ramp to the third floor, which was her personal apartment. "Since I don't know when that'll be, and it's certain that I'll never be back here once I leave Crossroads, I decided it best to just give it to you now, instead of trying to wait until I leave."

"Ah. Well, I appreciate your thoughtfulness. When you do leave, I would much like the chance to keep in touch with you. You are truly a friend."

"I appreciate that," he told her. "I guess I'll go back down to the Sage's Council and see if they have

anything for me yet.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I need some,” he grunted.

He had no luck with the Sages that day, or the next, or the next. But there was little that he could do except wait, and check in regularly with the receptionist—who was still terrified of him—and wait until the day she told him that they had information for him.

But at long last, after many days of waiting, the stodgy receptionist *finally* told him, in a quavering voice when he appeared, that the leader of the Sage’s Council had left word that he wished to speak with Tarrin.

He passed through the large council chambers where the sages met, and was directed to a surprisingly small office in the back, filled with books, and books, and more books, and a single small desk in the back, upon which sat a simple lamp that glowed with a soft white light, obviously magical in nature. The lead sage of the Council sat behind that desk, scribbling on a piece of parchment with a quill pen. His lightning-colored hair was different than the last time he’d seen him, much shorter, and neatly trimmed. “Come in, please,” he said without looking up.

Tarrin nodded to the receptionist and stepped inside, and found that there were no chairs in this man’s office aside from the man’s own, leaving Tarrin to stand. But this didn’t overly bother him.

“I apologize for the delay,” he said. “Some of our brethren weren’t exactly punctual in returning an answer to my query.”

“And what did they tell you?”

“You have...a bad reputation, my Lord,” he said bluntly. “I had no idea of who you were until one of the sages replied with a detailed exposé concerning you.” He raised a piece of paper. “According to him, you are a renegade entity who has earned the wrath of both Demons and Gods, and whose appearance within Crossroads immediately put the Deva on alert. He responds that he will have nothing to do with you or your contract. Pity, he was probably your best option to get your question answered.

“But, it seems that there is at least *one* sage out there who isn’t too concerned with your, ah, past. That might be because he himself is something of a renegade, and there are any number of individuals who would very much like to catch him out where they can get their hands on him, One Rule or no One Rule. The reason it took so long for his reply to reach us is because this sage lives within the area where no power of any kind functions, near the boundary that marks the closest any may come to the Core. This missive had to travel by mundane channels to reach me, and so it has reached me last.”

“Renegade?”

“This sage has written several articles and journals defaming the gods,” he said directly. “He denounces them and considers them false beings who seek nothing but to steal the souls of mortal man. His ideals are... radical. There are any number of mortals, archons, and gods alike that would like to send this fellow to whatever force holds sway over his soul. And thus, he lives in an area where no magic functions, to protect himself from his critics.”

“It sounds like he’s a real firebrand.”

“He is a crackpot and a maniac,” the lead sage said evenly. “But, he is also an expert in the fields of

theology and planar geography. He has the background to answer the questions you posed to me. I would send you to any sage but him, if not for the fact that he is the *only* sage who has agreed to take your contract.”

“As long as he does what I need him to do, I don’t care about his views,” Tarrin said.

“Very well,” the lead sage said with a nod. “His name is Rolteford. He lives literally within sight of the Boundary, in a large compound where he grows his own food. To my knowledge, he has not left the walls of his home in over a century. How he conducts his research when he never leaves his home and cannot use magic is quite beyond me, but that is a problem for *you* to handle, not me. His address is the Gojoris neighborhood. Here, I have a map for you,” he said, grabbing a rolled parchment from his desk and extending it towards him. “Because you cannot use magic within one hundred miles of the Core, this means you must use natural transportation to traverse the twenty miles between that boundary and Rolteford’s compound. I suggest you hire a winged mount to take you there. You can ride a winged mount?”

“I can manage,” Tarrin said. He advanced to take the map, but when he got close to the lead sage, he detected...nervousness. This usually wouldn’t stand out too much to Tarrin, he often had that effect on people, but the man’s outwardly calm demeanor seemed to clash with his scent. The man wasn’t lying to him, but he was nervous about something.

“A word of warning,” he said in a measured tone. “Rolteford is...erratic. Just because he is expecting you and you are going to hire him, do not let your guard down around this man. He might attack you without provocation, or warning. Approach his manor with caution, as he may have his compound trapped. Do your business with him quickly and then take your leave of him, then return when he is finished with your task.”

Ah. Perhaps that was why he was nervous. He was sending someone whose temper was probably well documented on that paper on his desk to someone that might attack him out of some kind of paranoid impulse. If Tarrin were in his shoes, he’d be nervous about that too.

“I can handle a single human,” Tarrin said dismissively.

“As you say, but do remember that I warned you.”

“Yes, you warned me. And thank you for that warning.”

“Very well. Our business here is concluded. And, as you no longer have reason to come here, I would much prefer that this be our last meeting.”

Tarrin gave him a cool look. “I usually *educate* people who use veiled threats with me, mortal,” he said in a flat tone, his ears twitching. “But I’ll forego it, if only because you’ve helped me. But don’t *ever* do it again,” he warned as he turned and stalked towards the door.

“I will have no reason to do so,” he stated.

“You’d better pray you don’t,” Tarrin growled as he left the man’s small office.

Tarrin put the man out of his mind as he unrolled the map and paced through the halls of the Sage’s Council and studied it. This man Rolteford’s manor literally *was* within sight of the Boundary, sitting across from the large paved plaza that marked the final expanse of land where anyone could tread before they reached that point where one could simply approach no further. From what he remembered reading, it was like a wind without wind, an invisible giant hand, a force that pressed against one as one neared that boundary, until the force became so overwhelming that it flung the approacher away. According to writings

and legend, only a Solar could pass beyond that boundary, and only the magical powers of a Solar would work that close to the Core. Not even the powers of the other Deva would function in that close proximity to the Core, not even the powers of a god.

Tarrin would need a mundane, non-magical winged animal to fly him the final leg of the journey. Tarrin's wings were a creation of his divine power, and their power too would fail when he got within one hundred longspans of the Core, though the wings themselves would not disappear, as they were considered a part of him and would not disappear any more than his arms or legs would...but they *would* be trapped in whatever shape they held when he crossed into that area where no power functioned. The boundary was, according to this map, eighty longspans from the Core itself. That left Tarrin with twenty longspans of territory to traverse without any kind of magical means.

That would be no real problem.

Luckily for Tarrin, he saw that the Gorojis neighborhood was almost a straight line from where he was now, on the same side of the Core. That meant that he wouldn't have to circumnavigate the Core the way he did when he first came to the City.

Returning to the Gzargmoth, Tarrin prepared for the journey, which basically amounted to leaving everything of magical power behind, including his staff. It was a direct creation of his power, and it would disappear if it was taken beyond the boundary and into the place where no power worked. His magically protected belt pouch, the weapons and amulets he'd taken from the Demons, his Portable Hole, they all had to remain behind. But he wasn't about to leave those things just laying around, either. He put everything within the Portable Hole except for an amount of krin he felt he'd need to buy what he needed for the journey, then hid it by using magic to separate the fibers of his blanket and then sliding the Portable Hole between them, literally making the piece of magical cloth vanish into the weaving of the blanket. A few well-placed spells of non-detection, which were themselves undetectable, ensured that the device would not be found. And the finishing touch was a powerful defensive spell on the room itself, something that not even Szizazz could counteract, a powerful and deadly magical protection that would attack anyone that came into the room.

But he certainly had no intention of going out there unarmed.

After warning Szizazz that he might be gone for a couple of days and telling her that the sages had finally come through, he went out into the City and bought two things that he felt he might need. He had to look around for quite a while to find exactly what he was after, but it was worth the effort.

The first thing he needed was, obviously, a new staff. He looked high and low until he found exactly what he was looking for, a staff of the perfect height and weight, and while not magical, was made of a wood that seemed exceptionally tough and resilient, almost as tough as his old Ironwood staff...but not quite. It *had* to be very strong, because Tarrin's strength would shatter a staff made of normal wood if he struck something with it using all his power. That strength was a function of how he built this new body; it was *not* magical. That strength required him to be very careful about the weapons he used.

Because he would be forced to enter a manor that, according to the map, included enough open land for this man to grow his own food, that meant that he needed some way to strike at this potential maniac from a distance if the need arose. So, he went shopping for a bow. Again, his special condition demanded that he find the right bow. He looked for nearly three hours, until he found what he was looking for in an open market. It was a bow made of what looked like jet black wood, but was actually some kind of pliable mineral, almost like stone that would bend, but not break. It was strong, the merchant declared somewhat boisterously that it was absolutely unbreakable, made from the Living Stone of Gladsheim, and he also claimed that the bowstring was also unbreakable.

This was what Tarrin needed. Tarrin's claws could potentially snag a bowstring when he shot it, and the sharp tips would slice a bowstring in half with no effort.

Testing proved, at least tentatively, the tiny green-skinned little biped's claim that the bowstring was unbreakable. Tarrin actively tried to slash it apart with his claws, both with the bow at rest and with it fully drawn. It wasn't made of string or fiber, it too was made of the same dark pliable mineral as the bow. In fact, after studying the bow, he saw that the string was actually part of the bow.

The bow's balance wasn't that good. It wasn't crafted by the hand of a master, but as bows went, it was tolerable. But the special qualities of the bow were exactly what he needed, and a little magic here and there could correct the imperfections of the bow and make him comfortable with it.

He paid the little man his asking price without even bothering to haggle, then procured two quivers full of adequate quality arrows. He then used a Wizard spell that shaped stone to buff out some of the burrs and imperfections of the bow and fix its balance problem. Once he had the bow in a suitable condition, he shouldered it and bought food, water, and a saddlepack, then went off to find himself a mount.

It didn't take him long to find what he wanted. There were any number of services that rented out flying mounts to take people places within the City...a flying taxi service. There were also any number of different species of flying creatures to choose from, from winged serpents to griffons to hippogriffs to giant insects to giant birds, but Tarrin found himself not a rented mount, but a mount in a stable that was being offered for sale.

It resembled a Pegasus, but it was *not* a Pegasus. It was black as pitch, from the mane on its neck to the feathers of its wings, and it had glowing red eyes, just like a Hellhound. In fact, a lick of flame flared from its mouth as it whinnied in a threatening manner as Tarrin approached it, and twin puffs of smoke issued from its nostrils. It was a *big* animal, more proportional to serve someone of Tarrin's height as a mount than someone of human size.

"*Please* tell me ye're thinking of buying her," a voice called. The black Pegasus narrowed its eyes and snorted, fixing an ugly glare on someone behind Tarrin. He turned to see himself looking at a Modron.

A Modron was a rather unique creature that originated from Nirvana. They were a race of creatures that resembled solid three dimensional shapes...the more sides a Modron had, the lower its rank within their society. They supposedly represented the perfection of law, a perfectly regimented society that existed for no other reason than to obey the laws of Primus, their leader. This creature resembled a ball of some kind, a dark gray color, and after Tarrin counted his sides, he saw that he was an eight-sided Modron, among the middle ranks within their society. This creature literally resembled a die with arms and legs, its eyes, nose, and mouth resting within its central mass. It was diminutive, only coming up to Tarrin's thigh.

"Strange to see a Modron here," Tarrin said in surprise.

"Spare me, please," it snorted. "So, old Fury has your eye, does she? I'll sell her to you for ten krin."

"Ten, eh? Sounds like a steep price for a Modron desperate to get rid of an animal," Tarrin noted.

"Well, she didn't try to jump her gate and pound ye into the yard, so she obviously likes ye. That at least gives ye a sporting chance with her. Most people can't get even half as close as ye are without her going after 'em. Worst investment I ever made, buying that brute."

The animal gave the Modron a nasty, narrow-eyed glare.

“What is she?”

“She’s a Firewing Pegasus,” it answered. “They come from Gehenna. Some people call her kind Nightmares, but that’s not really right. Nightmares don’t have wings. She’s got an evil temper, but she’s a solid mount if you can get her to obey you, she can fly long distances and carry very heavy loads, and she can breathe fire.”

“Gehenna?”

“She ain’t one of the Tainted,” he said quickly. “She’s an animal, milord, one of the natural creatures from that hellish place. Sure, she’s got a bit of evil in her, but that’s her natural disposition. Her kind of evil is just damned contrariness.”

“Breathe fire, you say? Is she immune to it as well?”

“Aye, milord. Fire can’t hurt her.”

That was *perfect*. Tarrin was a being of fire, she was a being of fire, and it meant he could unleash some of his more destructive Wizard spells without any fear of doing her harm. He also realized that this animal would be of great use to him later on, after his plan was well into motion. Besides, Jenna would *love* it.

“I’ll take her. Ten krin. And I’ll buy whatever tack and harness you have that’ll fit her.”

“Sold! Thank Primus!” it exclaimed.

Tarrin advanced on the black animal. It gave him an odd look, then it snorted aggressively, lowered its head, and unleashed a blast of flame directly at him. Tarrin simply walked through it nonplussed, which surprised the evil-tempered creature. It gave him a startled look, but that expression became mean when Tarrin stared it right in the eyes. She snorted again, blowing smoke from her nostrils, then reared back and clamped her teeth down on his paw and forearm.

Her teeth were *not* blunt. They were very sharp, very hard, and the animal had incredible power in her bite. But Tarrin didn’t even flinch, even when her powerful jaws snapped one of the bones in his arm.

“Are you about done?” he asked levelly, directly addressing her as a Druid would any animal he wished to understand him. “Mind you, if you take that paw off, I’m going to take something off of *you*. And mine grows back. Does yours?”

The animal blinked, and immediately released his arm.

“She understands ye!” the Modron gasped.

“Of course she does,” Tarrin snorted, absently rubbing his arm as it healed itself. “Now then, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to buy you. You’re going to serve me as a mount. You’re going to behave yourself and obey my orders, and in return I’ll take good care of you. When we’re done here, I’m going to use magic to send you to my home where my sister will care for you. She’ll absolutely *adore* you. You’ll have no want of attention and care. You can have that, or you can stay in this stall by yourself. It’s your choice.”

That struck a chord with the animal. It gave him a deliberate stare, then gave a mollifying whinny.

“Well, milord, she don’t eat grain and hay like a horse might. She eats wood and coal and drinks oil, to

fuel the fire of her furnace. She can eat anything that burns if you're strapped for food, including letting her graze on grass and twigs, but she likes coal the best," the Modron explained as Tarrin unlatched her stable door, then stepped inside. She was a tall animal, as big as Azakar's Ro, but not as heavily built. She was sleek and graceful, but Tarrin knew that, like any flying animal, she was deceptively powerful, her muscles highly toned. Flying was *very* hard work. Her hooves, he saw, were black and shiny, and looked like stone. He picked up one of her feet, and found that those hooves were harder than steel, and were very sharp on the leading edge.

"You're one well armed little girl, Fury," Tarrin noted as he released her foot. "That explains the strength of her bite, if she eats coal and wood," he said to the Modron.

"Aye, milord, those jaws of hers can snap branches and pulverize coal."

"They also didn't do bad on my arm," he mused as he patted her flank. He came up to her head and urged her to open her mouth, revealing a set of shiny obsidian-colored teeth, all of them sharp, including an impressive set of fanged canines, stained with his blood. "No damage done," he told her, "to my arm or your teeth. You have a saddle and tack for her?"

"Aye, milord, but I've got them stored in the loft. She won't let nobody put them on her."

"Go get them."

"Aye."

She may not have let anyone else put on her saddle and bridle, but she wasn't dumb enough to object when Tarrin did so. He saddled her and put on her bridle, then noted that he needed to buy a pair of saddlebags. He adjusted the straps until they were snug enough to hold the saddle securely but not uncomfortable to her, and she fidgeted in place as he did so. While he did so, the Modron explained how she was trained to obey commands while in flight, at least admitting that that was how he was *told* she was trained, given she wouldn't allow anyone to ride her. "Don't like saddles, do you?" he asked her.

She gave a derisive whinny.

"I'd agree with you if I were in your position, but I'm afraid I'm going to need it. Don't worry, you won't have to wear it for too long."

She gave a short snort

"Well, that's about it," Tarrin noted as he stowed his bow and staff in the saddleskirt, on either side of the saddle. He urged her to move her wing, then he mounted her in an easy motion and immediately tied himself into the saddle. "All things considered, Modron, I think I got the better end of the deal," he said with a slight smile.

"I'd disagree with ye. I'd have paid ye to take that evil brute off my hands. The money I'll save on coal alone makes it worth selling her for a song."

"Your loss," Tarrin told him.

"So ye think," the Modron said dismissively. "Given she's attacked every single person who's looked into buying her, I thought I'd *never* get rid of her. She even attacked ye."

"That just means I like her more," Tarrin chuckled. "How did you manage to keep her for so long

without the Deva coming?”

“Well, near as I can figure it, milord, her attacking people don’t really attract their attention because she’s an animal, not a person doing it with evil intent, ye know. That, or they won’t attack an animal that don’t really know no better, or they won’t kill an animal just acting out of instinct. She’s gone after plenty of people, but the Deva ain’t never once come. Take yer pick as to which reason sounds best to ye that they don’t.”

“That does make a kind of sense,” he said. “If they won’t come after an animal just reacting out of instinct. Well, thanks for the mount, Modron. I appreciate it.”

“Good journey, milord.”

“Have a good day,” Tarrin mirrored as he urged Fury out of the stall, then snapped the reins and sent her into the air.

He enjoyed only a short flight with her, getting a feel for her capabilities as a flier...and he was impressed. She was very strong in the air, both faster than a Pegasus and able to turn much sharper, even at higher speeds. She seemed to enjoy the demands he placed on her, almost showing off for his benefit, until he brought her back to the ground, dismounted, and led her by her reins as he returned to the same open-air market where he’d bought his bow.

He left her at a post at the edge of the market, but did not tie her to it. “Now listen,” he told her sternly. “I’d like you to wait right here for me while I buy your food. No biting, no kicking, no stomping, no breathing fire. Just leave the people alone *unless they touch you*. If someone touches you, then by all means, defend yourself. But no scenes, Fury. If you attack someone, you might attract a Deva.”

She nickered in understanding, then levelled a flat stare at an archon that had paused to gape at her, who then scurried away fearfully.

“That’s my girl,” Tarrin chuckled, patting her neck fondly.

He bought two more saddle bags, and filled both of them with coal. He also bought a small cask of oil for her to drink, then finished up the shopping he needed by buying a single large emerald of fine quality, a component for a spell that would eventually send Fury to Pyrosia, where she would stay in the care of those at Pyros until he could get her back to Sennadar and to Jenna. He would have definite use for her later; in fact, she filled a small hole in his plan that he’d been planning to address when he reached that point.

He returned to Fury and found her standing where he left her, giving all those around her dangerous gazes. He tied on the new saddlebags and cask, then mounted her with graceful ease and took the reins. He could easily have flown alongside her, but he wanted to get a feel for what it was like to ride a flying mount instead of flying himself, something he’d not really done very much.

“All right, let’s go, Fury,” he told her, urging her to take off.

It was almost surreal.

This close to the Core, which he could now *see*, a distant pillar of soft, rotating light in the sky, almost resembling golden water illuminated from within pouring up into the heavens in a spiralling pattern, he could feel its effect on him. It was exactly as it had been described in the books he’d read, almost like a wind without wind, a gentle force that seemed to try to push him away. But that was not all that he felt.

The sensation of passing beyond the final boundary between the area where the powers of gods worked and where they didn't was dramatic within him. He'd felt the systematic and continuous *draining* of something inside him, feeling it retreat like the tide away from the center of him. It was still there, still a part of him, but it was beyond his reach. The same thing happened when he passed into this area, where no power functioned at all, a strange disassociation of self when his divine abilities retreated from him, but it was much more profound. He felt...*incomplete* now, almost as if a part of himself had been stopped at that invisible line where his divine powers ceased to work, and now he was separated from himself. The oppressive force exerted by the Core affected his mind as well as his body, feeling like he was trying to think through a layer of damp wool.

It was the Core, he knew it. The Core was the force pushing the magic away, and now, this close to it, it had pushed away his own divine powers to such a point that he could no longer use them. It felt like it was pushing against his very soul. And it made him feel...*vulnerable*. This was not a feeling which Tarrin Kael often experienced, and he did not like it one bit.

But what he felt within was only half of the surreal nature of what was before him.

Below were, literally, palaces of such extravagant opulence that they made the Imperial Palace in Dala Yar Arak look like a hovel. Streets were paved in precious metals like gold and platinum, gems glittered on almost every wall and column, and the architecture was both fantastic and absolutely breathtaking. This was a place that would make a mortal's knees tremble, and fill him with artistic glory for the rest of his life. It was *that beautiful*.

And it was *deserted*.

That was what made it so surreal. All this beauty, all this stunning opulence and grace and breathtaking perfection, and there was *no one here*.

The stunning streets below were empty. The fluted balconies were graced with nothing but furniture. The elegant bridging walkways between stunning towers were deserted. There was no one here to partake of the wondrous perfection that stretched out below him.

Perhaps...perhaps, Tarrin pondered, this was why this mad sage Rolteford lived here. Who wouldn't want to live surrounded by such amazing beauty and wonder? The only thing that it would cost one would be access to magical power...and for many, that was not much of a sacrifice.

That thought caught in his mind, and nagged at him just a little. Why *didn't* people live here? After all, it was empty, deserted. All these wondrous buildings were already here, just begging for someone to simply move in and take up residence.

At least, he wondered that until he looked up.

The Core. Of course. The weight of its unseen push against his soul was a tangible thing. Despite all this opulent wonder, who would want to live with that constant pressure being exerted against one's soul?

Besides, just looking at it, it made him feel...*insignificant*. That was really the only way he could describe it. The Core was a thing of beauty, but it was also a palpable force that made him feel exactly like what he was...not a mortal, not a god, not worthy to look upon it.

That was why virtually no one lived here. And it made him wonder...did Rolteford move to this place because he was mad, or did this place cause his madness? Either was a distinct possibility. Feeling that inexorable pressure on his soul every second, every day...it certainly could drive someone mad.

He consulted his map again, and recognized one of the landmark buildings on the map, a gleaming silver obelisk so unimaginably tall that it seemed to defy rational thought, clawing *thousands* of spans into the sky. Fury flew past it at such a height that the smaller buildings below looked like dollhouses that Jasana once owned, and they weren't even halfway up its length!

They flew on for several more moments, and then Rolteford's compound came into view...and it was a stark, glaring difference from the amazing elegance that surrounded it. The walls of Rolteford's compound were squat and *ugly*, made of rough stone and topped by rows and rows of barbed metal stakes. Within those walls were a surprisingly large expanse of farmland, done in neat rows, and a simple cottage that didn't look like it could be more than two rooms sat in the exact center. Smoke wafted from the chimney of that simple slate-roofed stone house.

It was...amazing. From the way it looked, Rolteford's compound *pre-dated* the awe-inspiring artistic perfection that surrounded it, looking very much like a cannon in a ballroom, as Kerri might say. That rough-walled compound looked almost laughably out of place.

Fury circled the compound three times as they descended, and Tarrin used that time to look over the place. It was nearly a quarter of a longspan from the front gate to the cottage, along a simple cobblestone path that ran between two fields of beans. He saw no obvious mechanical devices that might be traps on the front gate—they *had* to be mechanical, since magic wouldn't work here. There was a bell on the gate, attached to a rope that hung from the gatehouse roof on the outside. The whole place looked decidedly *domestic*, just a hermit living a life of isolation...but a hermit that had a violent disposition and a touch of madness.

Fury landed lightly near the gate, and trotted to a stop close to it. It was unpainted, a simple bare wooden gate that had no lock on it, with a bellpull to warn the occupant that a visitor had arrived. There was not even a window on the gate so the occupant could look out to see who was paying a call.

That seemed...illogical. If this man was paranoid, why would he not even have a way to see who was at his gate? For that matter, why have a gate that one couldn't *lock*?

Could it be trapped? The lead Sage warned him of that possibility. Tarrin dismounted and pulled both his bow and his staff out of the saddleskirts, slung a quiver over his shoulder, then shouldered his bow across his torso and approached the gate. His soft padded feet almost seemed to echo loudly in the utter silence of this place, and the bellpull rope made a loud creaking sound. That silence was shattered when he pulled the rope, causing the bell behind the wall to toll, a harmonic and sweet chime that seemed to echo in this place of utterly still air and nearly oppressive silence.

Of its own behest, the gate opened, swinging away from him on surprisingly silent hinges. There was no magic involved, and this man Rolteford was nowhere near the gate...and yet the door opened. Tarrin stepped up to the gate, perplexed, then slowly stepped through. He looked around at the gate door's frame, and saw a small spring and pulley, with a small, fine chain attached to the end and going down into the ground.

Clever! The man had rigged up some kind of mechanical device that allowed him to open the gate from his cottage, nearly a quarter of a longspan away!

Now *this* was more what Tarrin was expecting. Obviously, this Rolteford was a mechanical genius, on a level with the Tellurians and Wikuni. No doubt that the man had other mechanical gadgets, and there was little doubt in his mind that some of them might be seeded on the path or the fields before him.

Tarrin motioned for Fury to stay where she was, and then he started towards the cottage on silent, cautious feet. He paid attention to the cobblestones before him, looking for anything that might be amiss, a

loose stone, a tiny switch or button, a faint tripwire that might signal the presence of a trap of some kind. His nose tested the scents that reached it, searching for the scents of metal, anything that might be out of place in this place of beans and earth and cobblestones...but it wasn't easy. The air was dead calm, almost thick, and it didn't carry scents like air would anywhere else. He could barely scent the beans to either side of him, the only smell that was prominent within his nose were the scents of himself and what he carried and the stone beneath his feet.

He moved cautiously yet steadily, until he was nearly halfway to the house. Fury gave a whinny behind him, which caused him to turn around. The black-coated animal seemed agitated for some reason, braying and whinnying, stomping the ground as it pranced in place. Then it turned, spread its wings, and then vaulted into the sky.

"Fury!" Tarrin shouted, shaking a fist at the pegasus. "Fury, come back here! Come—"

He stopped dead, eyes narrowing, looking past his traitorous mount. There was...something up there. Very high, very faint, but he could see it.

Demon!

It was a single lone winged Demon, a *vrock*, glaive in its hands as it soared a drastically high altitude above the ground, so high up that it was barely a speck in the sky. That was what spooked Fury! Being from Gehenna, a lower plane, of course she would fear Demons!

Tarrin immediately dropped to the cobblestones, testing the stones for faint traces of scent. Not only was there no trace of any scent of Roldeford, there was no trace of *any* scent of *any* kind, as if the stones had been scoured clean. It was *too* clean.

Things weren't adding up here. There was *no* reason he should see a Demon this close to the Core...it had no reason to be here. Only gods came to this place, to meet and discuss points of contention in a neutral atmosphere. It had no reason to come here.

No. Wait. It *did* have a reason to be here...because *Tarrin was here*.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he should have realized that he should *be able to scent Rolteford on the stones and the gate before starting in!*

Damn the Core, and its dulling effect on his mind and his senses!

This was no interview to hire a sage!

It was a trap!

Turning, Tarrin bolted for the gate. Damn that animal, flying off and leaving him! Unless she got over her panic and returned, he was looking at running twenty longspans to get to where he could use his own power to fly out of here! He raced along the cobblestones, abandoning caution, and then hurtled through the gate and out into the vast paved area between Rolteford's humble compound and the nearest opulent palace. But he skidded to a stop when he saw what was outside of his view before, hidden by the walls of the compound.

There had to be a *hundred* Demons, from half-blood *Cambisi* to no less than *three balor*, moving quickly but very carefully and quietly, so as to sneak up on him, coming towards the compound from those very same opulent palaces he thought had been empty before he landed!

Tarrin stood, momentarily gripped in a moment of indecisive panic. He couldn't fight his way through that many, but he couldn't run away from them, because the Boundary was little more than a stone's throw in the opposite direction!

Damn them! And *damn* that sage for setting this trap up! And he'd fallen for it so cleanly...if he weren't in so much trouble, he would beat himself for being such an idiot.

No wonder Fury fled...in a moment of clarity, he found he couldn't fault his treacherous mount for running away, not with *that* coming towards her.

Tarrin pondered furiously for precious seconds, watching as that horde of Demons abandoned stealth and charged after seeing him appear in the doorway. A sound behind him made him glance back, and he saw a *marilith* and a winged *vrock* appear from the cottage at the center of Rolteford's compound, clamping the jaws of the trap shut by promising a fight if he retreated back into the compound...but that itself would be suicide.

Or would it?

He couldn't run away. He couldn't go through them. That left escape running laterally, and hoping that he could run faster than they could cut him off before turning back away from the Core and outflanking them. If he bolted straight ahead, running across their field of vision, they'd see him and be able to cut him off. But if he ran back into the compound, the walls of the compound would hide him from their eyes and they'd have to respect the possibility that he might go in *any* direction, which would spread them out and give him a chance to break through if he couldn't outrun them. And least there were only two of them inside the compound that he could see, which was *much* better odds. The *marilith*'s snake body would hamper her ability to chase him, they weren't very fast on the ground, but the *vrock* would be highly mobile. That would restrict the *vrock* in its pursuit, because he'd guarantee that the *marilith* was smart enough to order the lesser-stature Demon to remain with her, so they would have a better chance bringing him down.

Making up his mind quickly, Tarrin turned and darted back into the compound, grabbed the gate, and then slammed it shut. He looked back and saw the *marilith* and *vrock* moving towards him, and to his chagrin, yet another *balor* squeezed from that small cottage and started towards him. In a smooth, graceful motion, Tarrin dropped his staff into the curl of his tail, wrapped it up, then rushed forward even as he pulled the bow from over his shoulder. He ran forward even as he nocked the first arrow, then had to slide to a stop and raise it as the *vrock* took off from the ground and charged at him, its glaive presented and ready to try to spear him as it passed. It gave a cruel, gawking cry, and looked right into Tarrin's eyes as he loosed the arrow.

Tarrin's skill as an archer had not diminished a whit. The arrow slammed into the *vrock* right between the eyes, and to the Demon's shock and dismay, the arrow was *not* turned aside. The materials from which the arrows were made were from *Gladsheim*, they were *not* made in Crossroads of materials native to Crossroads, and so the Demon's invulnerability did not protect it from them. The Demon crashed to the ground, rolling and sliding in a cloud of dust, fragments of bean plants, feathers, and black blood, and then slid to a motionless stop, its body already starting to dissolve into that foul black ichor.

Tarrin ran by the congealed mass of the dead *vrock* without so much as a glance, already nocking another arrow even as he picked up speed. The two mighty Demons near the house seemed to understand that Tarrin was a *real* threat, given he could conceivably kill them before he got anywhere near them, and both moved to retreat behind the cottage wall, to break his line of sight and not present a target. He continued rushing forward, mindful of that lone flyer he saw high in the sky...it would be the perfect opportunity for it to swoop down on him from that dizzying height while his attention was fixed elsewhere and there were no other Demons around him to get in the way. He raced along the cobblestones of the pathway, nocked bow held low as his mind raced, pondering where those two would be hiding behind the

cottage, how best to attack them. The *balor* would only want to attack him, but the *marilith*, that was the one to watch. That was the one that would be the true danger. Of all the Demons around, she was the one that would see this as a coordinated effort to kill him, not a collection of Demons all trying to be the one to bring him down and earn favor from their Demon Lord master.

He couldn't see them on either side as he charged closer and closer to the house, but then he realized that they couldn't see him, either. They would simply wait to see which side he went around, and try to catch him on the far side.

But there were more ways to go.

With a short vault, Tarrin soared off the ground and landed on the slate roof, then charged up the slanted slope. He took firm grip of the bowstring in his free paw, then vaulted off the apex of the roof, soaring thirty spans into the air, so high that he could see all four sides of the house under him. He looked down from his jump and saw the two Demons behind the house, as the *balor* was flexing his wings and preparing to launch himself into the air to come over the roof at him...the *balor* had the same idea as him, but Tarrin had been the quicker to implement it. Both Demons looked up at him in surprise.

Tarrin had never fired a bow while in the air like this before, where he had no stabilizing force. But his natural agility and ability to orient himself to the ground helped immensely as he aimed down the shaft of his arrow first at the *marilith*, but then he realized that the winged *balor* was the more dangerous of the two in the short term because its ability to fly was probably faster than his ability to run. He loosed his arrow at the *balor*; it was an awkward shot, without the true power he could have put into the missile, but his aim wasn't off by a terrible amount. He'd been aiming for the center mass of the Demon, the middle chest, and the arrow struck it high in the left shoulder. It wasn't a killing shot, but it did make the Demon roar in pain, staggering back and clutching at the arrow protruding from its hide with its right hand as its left dropped its long nine-tailed whip to the ground. He let go of the bow when he landed and rolled with the force of the impact, and his staff was swept up into a waiting paw by his tail as he suddenly turned on those two Demons with equal measures of hate and fury in his glowing green eyes.

With a shriek of hatred, Tarrin crashed directly into the injured shoulder of the *balor* as it tried to turn and get its jagged-bladed sword into a position to defend, and he used the winged Demon as a shield to keep the six-armed *marilith* out of reach of him. Tarrin slammed the staff into that wounded shoulder as the larger Demon caused him to rebound off of it, then hooked the back of its ankle with his shin and pinioned it, executing an Ungardt takedown. Before it even finished hitting the ground, the *marilith* was on him, her three swords, rapier, and two axes whirling in a dazzling dance of black steel death. Tarrin managed to turn aside uncountable thrusts, slashes, and jabs of those weapons, pushing Tarrin back as the Demoness did something that Tarrin found almost unthinkable in a Demon; she was covering for the *balor*, giving it time to recover while keeping Tarrin off of it.

He'd been right. The *marilith* truly was the most dangerous Demon in the pack, and not because of her martial skill.

In a stunning display of dexterity, Tarrin parried over thirty attacks in less than two seconds, the ends of his staff almost looking as if nothing joined them together in the middle as it whirled and blurred, defeating an amazingly complex and invariably deadly attack routine the *marilith* unleashed against him. Were he not trained by some of the best warriors alive, it would have killed him. This Demoness was not Shaz'Baket; she was *better* than Shaz'Baket. Tarrin gave more ground as he furiously defended himself from her onslaught, watching her movements with a trained eye, looking for a hole in her almost smooth and endless array of complicated thrusts and shallow slashes. It took inhuman coordination to flawlessly wield six weapons in perfect harmony, and though a *marilith* had that kind of mental capability, even they were prone to slight pauses in their attacks as they transitioned from one attack to the next, as they got their six weapons into the proper positions.

He saw his opening. He stopped giving ground and pressed in as she paused for the slightest of instants to reset one of her axes, and she shifted into a defensive posture smoothly and effectively. She parried a quick series of attacks in a high-low sequence, then bit at a feinted high jab at her face. She slithered to the side and tried to skewer him from the flank as he turned into the feint, but that only put her where he wanted her to go. The end of his staff swept the rapier out of his path, and then his foot came up just behind the staff and planted itself squarely in her the side, just under her breasts and almost into the juncture of her middle left arm and her ribs. The breath wooshed out of her as he felt bones snap under his foot, and then he slammed the butt of his staff on the ground and used his foot on her as leverage to lift himself into the air, vaulting off the staff. He whipped his body around, just over the axe that tried to cleave itself into his hip, and bones of his ankle and lower shin impacted the side of the *martilith*'s pretty little face. She went flying away from him as he spun in the air in the same direction as the force of his kick, just as the *balor* had pulled the arrow out of its shoulder, regained its whip, and had started rushing for him. But Tarrin was ready for it. Tarrin landed already facing the *balor*, and instead of bringing his staff up to defend, he instead rushed forward with the staff held low and away in his left paw. The nine-tailed whip lashed out at him, trying to entangle him, but the Were-cat melted out of the way, then brought his staff up and around as the Demon simply released the whip instead of trying to recoil it and took its jagged-bladed sword in both of its mighty hands to meet the smaller Were-cat's charge. It decided to move into a defensive posture as Tarrin charged it recklessly, readying to parry aside his staff as he charged towards it. Tarrin brought the staff into the end-grip and narrowed his eyes, laid back his ears, and surged ahead with shocking speed.

The *balor* was almost stunned with shock when, instead of attacking with his staff or trying to knock the Demon into an awkward position, Tarrin instead vaulted himself high into the air well before the Demon could reach him with its jagged-bladed sword. It realized that Tarrin could not in any way strike at it from so high up almost immediately, and Tarrin could see the methodical calculating behind its eyes as it tried to guess where the Were-cat would land, so it could be there with its sword.

Tarrin's back coiled like a spring even as he turned over in the air, and then exploded into motion, uncoiling as Tarrin came head over heels. His body had been blocking what he'd been doing, and the Demon didn't realize it until it was too late.

Tarrin's staff sizzled down towards the Demon with horrific speed, thrown with such force from the airborne Were-cat that it caused his body to rotate in the opposite direction and literally stopped his forward momentum.

Just as it had done to Jegojah so long ago, the move completely took the Demon by surprise. It could not react fast enough to evade or block, it almost seemed to stand there in disbelief as the blunt end of Tarrin's staff impacted it high in the chest at a sharp downward angle, plunged into its red-skinned flesh, and then erupted from its lower back, just over the muscle of its buttock, and then drove into the ground beneath it with an audible *thok*. Tarrin had thrown his staff like a spear, and while his ability to aim an arrow had not been very good, his ability to aim his staff had been deadly accurate and right on the mark.

The *balor* shuddered horribly on its impaling pole, black blood erupting from its mouth as its jagged-bladed sword fell from nerveless fingers, even as the staff continued to vibrate from the impact of being driven into the ground. Tarrin landed lightly on two feet and a paw, then he had to roll aside as the *marilith* slithered up behind him with surprising speed and tried to brain him with her axe.

"You have no weapon now," it purred aloud, in a dreadfully eager voice, raising its six weapons into an attacking posture.

"Can't use your telepathy here, eh?" Tarrin answered in a low, growling tone. "That means that you can't command the minions the way you'll need to. And here I thought you were the dangerous one," he said with a hiss. He spread his feet and held his paws up for her to see, then extended his claws slowly, letting her see them. He then held his paws out wide and low, in that slouching stance he used when fighting unarmed.

“Come get me, little girl. If you can.”

She gave an infuriated cry that drowned out the gurgling of the *balor* as it struggled feebly to free itself of its impaling stake, then rushed forward with strong undulations of that long, dangerous snake body. From the onset, she tried to end it quickly, probably understanding that Tarrin Kael was no easy kill, even unarmed. She charged at him for everything she was worth, swinging her weapons with all the speed and power and grace and precision that she could bring to bear. But, freed of the burden of his staff, Tarrin’s paws and elbows and knees and feet proved just as effective as his staff had been in blocking attacks, provided the attack was anywhere near him in the first place. He moved with incredible grace and agility, silthering, sliding, ghosting, almost gliding along the ground in a display of terrible beauty, showing the Demoness the wondrous awe that was the Dance. His movements were almost perfectly synchronized with her own, as if two bodies were controlled by one mind that sought to dazzle the onlooker with displays of precision, of how close a weapon could come to Tarrin without finding him. Tarrin was one with the ground, one with the Demoness, one with his body, one with his soul as he performed the Dance with absolute perfection. He was a blade of grass in the wind, swaying, bending, absorbing but not breaking. He was the *inu*, his movements fast and precise, lightning speed tempered by exacting precision. He was the *kajat*, power, strength, the guile of slow movements and the shock of the burst of speed. He was the water, a great force of flowing symmetry, deceptive in its graceful power. He was the desert stone, unyielding, resilient, the only force in the desert which could part the winds.

In that fleeting moment, as both combatants moved with a speed that almost defied rational comprehension, did he *truly* understand the Dance, did he truly become one with the warrior within, in an almost religious experience that brought him to understand the very soul of the people for whom the Dance was an intricate part of life. In that moment, *he was Selani*.

That which was easily avoided, was avoided. That which could not be avoided, was blocked, with paw or foot or knee against the haft of the weapon or the wrist, or blocking against the inside of the forearm or the elbow. That which could not be blocked, was deflected, with lightning-fast strikes of paw or foot against the flat of the blade.

Even with six swords, the *marilith* could not wound him. After that furious exchange, after the *marilith* backed off a split second to recover her wits after having been foiled, she could see that she had done little more than nick him. He was bleeding from several cuts and gashes on his arms or legs, from where he had literally batted aside her weapons using his *bare hands*, but not so perfectly done that the edges of those weapons didn’t bite into his arms, legs, and feet.

She rushed right back in, trying to kill him with a coordinated attack of all six of her weapons that would be absolutely impossible to prevent, but the Were-cat *vanished*. She surged forward after making no contact with her foe, her mind racing as it tried to wrap itself around the fact that one second he was there, and suddenly he was gone, out of her line of sight, in an area where it was absolutely impossible to use any kind of power, not even her own natural telepathy. Only at the last instant did she sense him, realized that somehow he had slipped to the side of her in a way that she did not see. She turned to face him—

--and turned her head just in time to see his open paw, claws out and leading, racing towards her nose.

She gave a wailing cry as those claws ripped across her face, cutting four deep lacerations into her handsome yet alluringly wicked visage, and one of his claws slashed directly across her right eye, blinding her. Only her flinch and the bridge of her nose, sheared through, saved her left eye from the same fate. She slithered backwards, her snake body and tail thrashing wildly as she put the backs of her upper hands against her torn face, screaming horribly in pain and fury. At first she couldn’t understand why she was still alive, why he didn’t finish her in her throes of agony, until she cleared enough blood away to see with her remaining eye.

The Were-cat was already at the *balor*, kicking it down from its stake to retrieve its staff from its impaled body. In the distance, she heard the screaming of the other Demons, who were now inside the compound and charging towards the cottage.

Tarrin managed to get his staff out of the dying Demon, then turned and raced away, not even slowing down when he leaned down and scooped up his bow. He'd run out of time, and simply had no more time to play with the *marilith*. But, since she couldn't use her telepathy here, it meant that she could *not* coordinate any pursuit once the Demons got out of her sight...and he'd done his best to make sure her sight wasn't going to be very much use. He knew for certain he got one of her eyes, but wasn't sure he got the other one...but no matter. Now that she was wounded, and her snake body would make getting over the wall very hard unless she used the gate, she was effectively out of the battle.

And Tarrin had no intention of making it that easy for her.

Besides, there was another clock ticking in his mind, and that was the clock that would herald the arrival of the Deva. Once they entered the fray, then all bets were off. It would be very hard for Tarrin to escape, since *all* of them could fly, and they could easily chase him down.

He streaked across the back side of the compound's fields, his feet a blur as he ran with all the speed he could muster. He knew there were Demons outside the walls, moving to surround the compound and seal off his escape, but he was gambling that not many of them could run as fast as he could. He slowed down only to sling his bow back over his chest, then stripped the black blood from his staff as best he could with one paw and slung the spoor in his paw aside, making it less slippery. A single glance back showed him that the *balor* was slumped on the ground, dissolving away in death, and the *marilith* had her head in his direction, looking at him with her one good eye that peered from a slashed and battered face. A large number of howling Demons came rushing around the cottage, in hot pursuit of him and he fled away from them. Thank the Goddess for their screaming and yowling, that had been what warned him of their arrival and caused him to turn away from finishing off the *marilith* and running.

Lucky for her.

He heard the rustling of feathers, and instinctively realized that a *vrock* was diving at him from high above. He never looked up, fixing his ears on that faint sound, which told him exactly how far away it was. He simply allowed it to continue diving at him, until it was a split second from reaching him, diving at him from behind.

With a burst from his legs, he jumped up. His jump was not very high, but it was more than high enough to get him out of the path of the startled Demon, who swooped in with its glaive leading, impaling the empty space where he had just been. That glaive's head struck the ground instead, and was instantly ripped out of the Demon's clawed hands. That impact jarred the Demon up, but another impact nearly drove it into the neatly furrowed bean field, when Tarrin slammed into it from above.

Tarrin landed heavily on its back, and instead of simply killing it, he instead drove the claws of his feet into its legs and started flailing at the back of its head and shoulders with his claws, pressing down on its back and its wings to prevent it from sweeping its wings to gain altitude. It squealed in pain and almost plowed headfirst into the ground, but somehow managed to pull out in time. For almost endless seconds, the winged vulture-Demon raced at high speeds mere fingers above the ground, trying to dislodge the Were-cat that was shredding skin and flesh both on its head and shoulders and along the backs of its legs, then he snaked the staff under its chin—almost losing it when it bounced off a high furrow in the field—and then yanked it upwards to choke the *vrock* using the staff's middle. It couldn't turn over in the air so close to the ground, and found trying to muster enough concentration to pull up almost impossible with the wild Were-cat doing its damndest to drive it into the ground. Through an act of supreme willpower, the Demon managed to pull up, partially assisted by Tarrin's relentless upward pressure of his staff against its throat, managing to

gain altitude even as the far compound wall hurtled towards them at shocking speeds.

Which was exactly what Tarrin wanted.

Digging his foot claws into the Demon's thighs, he let go of the staff with one paw and sank the claws of his free paw into its back, just over its wings, and watched that approaching wall with intense concentration. The Demon had pulled up enough to clear the wall, and from the feel of it beneath him, it was going to try to flip over and rake Tarrin off using the spikes mounted into the top of the wall. It had to know what Tarrin intended to do; in fact, it started turning over to prevent him from kicking off the Demon and driving it into the wall as he sailed over the top, so any attempt to kick off would just push the Demon to the side instead of down.

That would have worked too...if that was what Tarrin intended.

With a single blow, Tarrin slammed the back of the *vrock*'s head with his staff at that critical instant when the Demon's control of its trajectory no longer mattered, but before it could complete its roll to present Tarrin's back to the tips of the spikes lining the top of the wall. The blow was awkward and off balance, but it had more than enough force to do what it was supposed to do, and that was stun the Demon for that critical instant to prevent it from getting the advantage. Tarrin did indeed kick off the Demon, pushing away and slightly at an angle, which pushed the winged Demon down *just enough*.

Tarrin hurtled over the wall with terrific speed, almost feeling like he was flying himself. He sailed out and over and found himself looking down at about ten Demons within what he considered to be close enough to attack him when he landed, most of them *cambisi* but with one *glabrezu* and one *nabassu* with them to retain control and keep them from running away. There were many more Demons both to his left and his right, and several more were running towards the compound from the opulent palaces between Tarrin and his escape.

The Demon slammed into that row of spikes head first...and the spikes did not budge. The *vrock* was literally ripped to pieces as its horizontal speed crushed it into those spike, and caused it to continue onward even though the spikes would not give way. Bits and pieces of the Demon sailed out over the wall to rain down on the Demons below, as well as a copious amount of black blood, as the remainder of the body rebounded off the spikes and then dropped into the beanfield at the base of the wall.

They were stunned. They looked up at him in amazement, watching him catapult over their heads, except for one that Tarrin gauged would be within striking distance the instant that he landed...a landing that would require him to roll through. There was no way he could come down on his feet and just keep going, he was going way too fast. It was a *cambion*, a blue-skinned, yellow-eyed male halfbreed, who had not yet thought of bringing up his sword and shield and readying to attack him. Tarrin reared back with his staff in both paws, and that action seemed to jar the *cambion* back into the proper frame of mind. He raised his shield and sword and backed up to try to intercept the Were-cat after he hit the ground and rolled, when he would be defenseless, but the *cambion* was not familiar with Tarrin Kael's intimate understanding of his weapon.

Tarrin used his staff as a push-off from the ground in a lightning-fast strike of staff to paving stone, causing him to bounce back up like a stone skipping across a pond. He turned in the air and presented both feet to the *cambion*, who was so surprised by this unconventional trick that put the Were-cat on a direct collision course with him that he was rendered immobile for a split second, then thought to try to raise his shield in defense at the last instant.

But it was too late.

The impact was so tremendous that the *cambion*'s sword and shield literally remained behind as the rest

of him, as well as Tarrin, were driven in Tarrin's direction of momentum. The Were-cat landed on top of the *cambion* feet first, and used him to cushion the sliding impact with the paved street beneath him. Sparks flew from the *cambion*'s armor as it slid along the stones for a brief moment, leaving behind a trail of glowing motes and a wide streak of black blood, until the edge of the halfbreed's breastplate caught on an edge between two paving stones and caused his body to flip upwards into the air.

And it left the *cambion*'s head behind.

Tarrin rolled through the landing, tumbling with the headless body of his foe, feeling pinches and bites when the unyielding bow slung across his chest caught on the stones in uncomfortable ways, using the corpse to the best effect to shield himself from the stones. When he'd slowed down enough to recover his own feet, he pushed off the corpse and aligned himself, then hit the ground at a dead run, racing away from the startled Demons who had just witnessed something that they had never seen before.

Tarrin didn't pay the amazing stunt any mind. All his little tricks would be for nothing if he got himself killed.

There were four Demons in front of him, between him and the relative safety of the nearest building. Once he got out of this large open square and found cover, he knew he'd have a much better chance of making it. And he *had* to find cover before the Deva got here and started attacking *everyone*. Right now, getting past the *babau* and three *nabassu* in front of him was the only thing on his mind, and doing it before the Demons behind him could catch up and surround him. The three *nabassu* would fight with nothing but their clawed hands, but the *babau* had a barbed harpoon-like spear that it brandished as it rushed towards him, its skeletal frame moving with speed and grace, unlike the cumbersome *nabassu*.

Tarrin engaged them at full speed. The first to reach him was a *nabassu*, but he simply ducked under its heavy swing of its huge clawed hand and passed it by. He whipped his staff around and struck the inside forearm of the next *nabassu* to try to rake him, driving it out wide, then again rushed by the Demon as he kept his eyes on the *babau*. He turned slightly to evade the third *nabassu*, who turned in its shambling manner to try to keep up with the faster, more nimble adversary. He raised his staff as the *nabassu* behind spread their wings and prepared to launch into the air after him, as he and the *babau* raced towards each other on a collision course.

The *babau* tried to spear him as he came within reach, but the Were-cat simply slithered to the side without slowing down a bit, lowered his shoulders, and then slammed into the small, skeletal Demon. Tarrin's size and weight bulled his smaller opponent along with him. It tried to claw at him with its small but wickedly sharp claws, but Tarrin's paw clasped around one of the *babau*'s wrists, and then yanked it aside like it was a rag doll. He turned in his run and flung the Demon at the nearest *nabassu* like a missile, but the winged Demon showed surprising agility as it used its wings to hop over the spinning *babau*, who then crashed to the ground with loud curses. He rushed away from them as the winged Demons took to the air to give chase, but he didn't slow down, keeping his course directly towards the nearest of those opulent buildings, a building that, to his dismay, the Demons were trying to cut off from him. A large throng of Demons, ones that had been in that initial press that caused him to rush back into the compound, were racing up from the flank, and two more Demons had appeared on the avenue between the building he faced and the one on the far side of the flanking Demons.

He was about to change his direction away from that large throng, feeling that taking on two Demons while outrunning three flying *nabassu* was better, but a sudden series of movements over the building before him caught his attention, as well as the attention of the Demons behind him.

It was Fury.

There was neither the room nor the time for him to mount her and make his escape. As much as he was

glad to see her, right now was *not* the time for her to try to return to him.

Tarrin gave a shrill, keening whistle, then put his ears back and ran at a full sprint towards the building ahead. She looked down, then turned and dove towards him as no less than twenty winged Demons of various types dove after her. He waved her off frantically, and she seemed to comprehend his instructions and pulled out, then disappeared again as she circled behind a building with that group of flying Demons hot on her tail.

The staff in his hand started getting hot. Tarrin glanced down at it, and saw that the black blood that had been smeared all over it from the *balor* had damaged it, damaged it beyond repair, pitting the surface with multiple smoking holes. It would shatter the first time he used it, but at least he could allow it to perform one more service for him before he abandoned it. He sprinted ahead as fast as he could go, as the Demons on his right flank kept getting closer and closer and closer, threatening to cut him off before he could reach the wall. They were five hundred spans out, four hundred, three hundred. The two Demons on the other side were now running towards him, a *hezrou* and a *nalfeshnee*, but the large pack was closer than them; they would not reach him in time. Two hundred spans. One hundred spans, and he was about two hundred spans from the edge of the building.

In one fluent motion, Tarrin dipped his shoulder, then whipped his dying staff away from him in a wide backpawed swipe. It spun away from him with a shrill whistle, spinning so fast it almost looked like a brown-gray disk, soaring towards the pack of Demons in a low arcing lob. It wouldn't come anywhere near their heads...but he wasn't aiming at their heads.

The lead Demons in that throng could see where it was going. They jumped as the staff's spinning length swept under them at ankle height, and they cleared it. But the Demons *behind* didn't get as good a look, and didn't react in time to avoid the staff themselves. It caught three of them right at the feet, spilling them to the ground in a tangled heap, and the Demons behind *them* also crashed to the ground when they tripped over the bodies of their comrades. And Demons behind them tripped as well, creating a chain reaction of falling, cursing Demons and effectively slowing down a sizable number of them.

The Demons in the lead had lost precious seconds by jumping over his staff, and he made them pay for it. He managed to ghost just out of reach of the lead *hezrou's* spear, and they lost speed when they turned to keep up pursuit. Tarrin careened directly towards the wall of a massive mother-of-pearl sheathed palace, then vaulted high into the air, aiming at a balcony on the second level. He almost didn't make it, grabbing it with his claws and literally hauling himself up and over before his momentum caused the rest of his body to crash into the railing. He somersaulted over the rail, then rolled through a bumpy landing and into the building itself, where only the winged Demons could now follow behind quickly.

He didn't even dare to look around at the wondrous perfection within the building, for he was too busy running blindly through the structure, searching frantically for another chamber with a window on the far side. The sounds behind him told him that several winged Demons were now on his level, having flown in the same doorway he'd used to get in, and there were sounds and vibrations in the floor that told him that other Demons were on the first level, seeking a stairwell that would bring them up to him. He moved quickly and recklessly through the halls and chambers of the palace, at least until a faint flash as he came through a door caused him to dive forward, passing under a sword blade that almost took off his head. He rolled through and back to his feet to find himself squaring off against an *alu*, wielding two sabers in her hands and with a twisted sneer on her face. She charged forward confidently, and forced Tarrin to back up and evade her as he recovered his balance. But her forward charge instantly became a shuffle-footed retreat when Tarrin was again stable and had turned on her like a rabid wolf, striking her wrist with so much force that it almost jarred the saber from her hand. She twisted to avoid his other clawed paw, but then she gave out a *whauff!* when his foot slammed into her belly. It would have sent her flying through the very door through which he had come, had Tarrin not gotten a firm grip on her wrist before kicking her. The violent impact broke her arm and quite a few of her ribs, and black blood erupted from her mouth as she crashed to the

ground. She moved to slide away, but her motion instantly stopped when the Were-cat took up one of her fallen sabers and drove it through the back of her head in one smooth motion, pinning her to the floor. He scooped up the other saber as a *nabassu* came roaring through that doorway, ripping out a section of the doorframe as it clawed at him even before getting into the room. Tarrin met it head-on, ducking under its other clawed hand, then catching the first as it swung at him again. The Demon's hand made a loud *smack* when it struck his open palm, and its red eyes widened in shock when its great strength met something even stronger than it was.

"Don't look so surprised," Tarrin said with a snarl. It swiped at him again with its other clawed hand, but Tarrin slipped aside and stabbed at its flank with the saber in his other paw. It slipped aside with surprising agility, making room for a second *nabassu* to shamle into the chamber. Tarrin evaded a fast array of clawed hands as both of them tried to maul him, making one howl in pain when the saber cut a deep line of black blood across its tricep and bicep, then that howl of pain became a shuddering gurgle when the Were-cat spun, hooked the saber impaled through the head of the Demoness with his free paw, then spun around and buried to the hilt in the *nabassu's* gut. Tarrin used pure power to wrench the mortally wounded Demon into the path of his companion, shielding him from its clawed hands.

He gave out a hiss when a hot line of pain slashed across his back. He staggered forward under the force of an impact and felt blood flowing from his back and side, but also felt the stinging in a diagonal along his back from his bow. The unbreakable bow and his quiver had absorbed a portion of that impact, and had saved him from a mortal wound, but did destroy all the arrows he had in his quiver. He almost didn't live to assess his injury or figure out who had hit him, for the first *nabassu* had gotten clear of its dead cousin and almost took his head off with one of those massive clawed hands. He just barely managed to slither aside in time, and then sent that clawed paw sailing away from the stump to which it had been attached instants before with a powerful underhanded swipe of the saber in his left paw. He glimpsed a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye and backpedalled furiously, just in time to evade the blade of a glaive being wielded by a *vrock*, that was pressing into the room from a doorway he hadn't noticed earlier.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you," Tarrin told the *vrock* in a dead voice, turning and sliding under a whistling blow of the *nabassu's* hand. It charged in to bite him with its tusked maw, but he struck it with the flat of his right palm right in the chest, with so much power that it shattered every rib that was attached to its sternum. He reversed direction in an instant, startling the vulture-headed Demon with the blazing speed of his sudden attack. The Demon managed to get his glaive up in time, but it then moved frantically to parry aside the saber that Tarrin threw directly at its head with the blade of its glaive. And that left it open for that one instant the fast Were-cat needed.

He grabbed hold of its glaive with both paws, and then wrenched it down and to the side. It managed to keep hold of its weapon, and tried to pull Tarrin around itself. A short and brutal struggle ensued as the stronger Were-cat tried to rip the weapon out of the taller Demon's hands, as the Demon used its height advantage to pin the Were-cat down and prevent him from using his full power. His ears twitched as he heard sounds from behind him, as more Demons charged towards the room using the door through which he had come.

"Mine," Tarrin hissed as he suddenly reversed direction, pulling the Demon down with him as he rolled to the floor. The Demon, who had been pushing down with all its might, had no leverage to stay on its feet, and was carried along with the Were-cat. Tarrin put a foot in its belly and kicked it over his head even as he torqued the glaive to loosen its grip on the weapon. It did indeed let go, and gave a keening shriek as it somersaulted head-over-heels into the doorway, crashing into the *nalfeshnee* that Tarrin had seen on the ground moments before, who was in the act of charging through the door.

Before those two could untangle themselves, more Demons poured into the doorway, a large number of smaller *cambisi*, five Cambions and an Alu. They charged forward immediately, weapons raised, but the Were-cat whirled the glaive in his paw into an end-grip, holding it lightly and confidently, prepared to meet

their charge.

From the initial blow, the Demons were in the hole. Tarrin's blow with the butt of the glaive sent a Cambion flying against the wall, and he reversed the weapon more than easily enough to catch a broadsword's blade on the blade of the glaive, sending a shower of sparks as he parried it out and wide, then whipped the weapon around to block an attempt to stab at him simultaneously from two Cambions. He blocked one and slipped out of the reach of the other, bobbed down, then swept the feet out from under both of them with a wide arcing kick of his foot along the ground, a spinning foot sweep that was a move common to both the Ways and the Dance. But where the Ways considered that an ending move, there was a continuing counter in the Dance, which he performed to perfection. He rose back up even as he spun, blocked the Alu's axe with his glaive, then spun through and planted the heel of his foot in the side of her head. She went flying off at an angle to his blow, spinning in the air like a top, then crashed into the far wall sideways and back first. Before she bounced off and crashed to the ground, Tarrin had already parried three impressively fast slashes of a bastard sword being wielded by the last of the *cambisi* that had flooded into the room. He took a single step back and parried another quick thrust, then turned and kicked the broadsword-wielding Cambion in the hip before he could deliver an overhanded chop of his weapon at Tarrin's exposed flank. One of the Cambions slipped up behind him, but Tarrin's tail lashed out at ankle level to anyone behind him, and he felt it bite as it impacted the halfbreed's feet. His tail was strong enough to sweep the Demon off his feet, crashing him to the floor to join his two cousins as they struggled to quickly regain their feet without leaving themselves open to being skewered by his whirling weapon. The bastard sword wielder rushed him again, but found his weapon parried easily, even had it kicked wide by one of the Were-cat's feet as it expertly struck the Cambion on the wrists, a foot that pulled back and then whipped forward with rapid staccato movements, kicking the Demon in the hip, in the side, and then in the chest in the blink of an eye. He twisted as the last Cambion on his feet tried to stab him in the back, absently decapitated one of the rising Cambions with the glaive as he spun away from the attack of the standing one. He parried an expert series of blows from the Cambion's longsword, then took one paw off the glaive and punched his claws into his own palm, producing an instant liberal flow of blood. He weaved under the longsword, turned, and flung a line of blood to his side, right into the face and eyes of the other Cambion that was trying to rise. It hissed in surprise and fear, getting to his feet and staggering backwards as he tried to clear the blood out of his eyes. The bastard sword wielding halfbreed surged in when he saw that the Were-cat only held the large weapon in one paw, but that one paw was more than strong enough to whip that weapon around like it was a twig. His yellow eyes widened in surprise when Tarrin systematically parried a hard array of slashes and chops using just one paw on the glaive, then he ducked under a high swipe that tried to strike him in the shoulder and neck. His tail came around his body, and the Cambion never saw that wrapped in the tip of it was the hilt of the sword that the dead Cambion had been wielding. It sucked in its breath in surprise when the blade of the weapon bit into his waist, finding a seam between the breastplate and codpiece. It barely penetrated at all, but it cinched up the Demon's armor and restricted movement. Tarrin immediately attacked it on that side, exploiting the restricted movement perfectly, forcing the Cambion to turn awkwardly to protect itself...and that was no protection. In a blazing sequence, Tarrin kicked the Demon in the side of the knee, shattering the joint, then whipped the glaive around and almost sliced it in half at the base of the ribcage, the glaive ripped so deeply into its breastplate. The body crumpled to the ground as Tarrin turned on the half-blinded Cambion, who raised his sword and shield even as his yellow eyes blinked furiously to clear the blinding blood out of them.

His first and only attempt to block the glaive with his shield was his last. Tarrin's raw power ripped the glaive right through the metal shield, shearing through and tearing into the upper arm holding the shield. The Cambion was no match for Tarrin's raw power, especially when he could set his feet and use both paws to maximize his leverage on the weapon he was using. The Cambion was knocked back by the power of the blow, and a fountain of black blood erupted from his mouth when Tarrin impaled him on the blade of the glaive, driving a portion of the blade into the wall behind the Demon. He yanked it back, freeing it of the wall, but the body was stuck on the end of the blade. He turned and slung the body in an arcing motion towards the door through which they had all come, where the *nafeshnee* and the *vrock* had finally untangled themselves and were coming through the door. The *vrock* knocked the body aside contemptuously, leaving

itself open to Tarrin's attack, but this Demon he did *not* want to kill. So long as it lived, Tarrin would continue to possess its weapon, and Tarrin much preferred the vulture Demon's glaive now that his staff had been destroyed.

But there were many ways to leave one alive.

The *vrock* charged him with a keening shriek, taloned hands leading as it sought to reclaim its weapon and kill the Were-cat with it. It seemed to understand that Tarrin couldn't outright kill it, or he'd have no weapon to fight the *nalfeshnee* coming up behind it. This wasn't entirely true, since Tarrin would confidently fight just about any Demon with nothing but his bare paws, but its only correct guess was that Tarrin didn't want to kill it, wanted to keep possession of its weapon. Tarrin took a paw off the weapon and readied to take the Demon's charge, then he jumped aside at the last instant, as the talons of the *vrock* passed so closely to his head that he could smell the detritus clinging to them. His paw lashed out and grabbed that taloned hand by the wrist, then he snapped that arm back and to the side in a savage, powerful jerk. Bones broke as the *vrock* was instantly redirected, being pulled around Tarrin's body as he spun towards the *nalfeshnee*, dragging the vulture Demon with him. The boar-headed Demon reached for him with heavy clawed hands, what looked like thick claws set on a gorilla's arms and hands, but the only thing it found itself grabbing was the *vrock*. Tarrin blocked the boar-headed Demon with the *vrock* once again, then kicked the vulture Demon so that his shin struck across both of the Demon's wings, shattering them. It squealed in pain as the impact drove it forward, into the *nalfeshnee*, but both of them tumbled to the ground when Tarrin used the glaive like a scythe, ripping it not through his two combatants, but instead aiming the blade directly at their ankles.

That sweeping blow took off both of the *vrock*'s feet, sheared through one of the *nalfeshnee*'s feet, and dug deeply into the lower ankle and upper foot of the other. Both of them crashed to the floor, howling in pain, but he didn't wait around for the other stunned *cambisi* to recover or for those two to try to get up on bloody stumps. He turned and raced through the second doorway, through which the *vrock* had originally come. He spotted light through a small corner, and then zigzagged his way through a series of chambers until he came to a large chamber with a window on the far side, a window that suddenly darkened as a hideous *chasme* appeared in it, its fly body taking up the volume of the window as it crawled through. It saw him and gave an eerie, eager droning cry, its wings buzzing as it launched itself through the window and right at him. He surged ahead wielding the *vrock*'s glaive, using the longer reach of the weapon to strike at the vile creature before that sharp proboscis on its head could reach him. The blade of the glaive split its ghastly head neatly in two, and then drove the body to the floor.

Tarrin wasted not an instant. He jumped over the body and pulled the glaive's head out with him as he did so, then hopped up to the window ledge and then vaulted out without even so much as looking to see how high he was. This was *not* the time for caution. Of course, stopping to look might have been wise, since a *nalfeshnee* was on a head-to-head trajectory with him, angling to fly into the window he had just jumped from. Tarrin reacted with swift certainty, raising the glaive to impale the boar-Demon, but its tiny wings managed to pull it out of harm's way in the nick of time. It did, however, lose control of its flight, and slammed headlong into the wall beside the window with a sickening *crunch*.

He hit the ground running, and to his eternal relief, he was in an open area and there were no Demons on foot anywhere near him. He whistled shrilly, then whistled again, keeping his eyes up and scanning the sky, watching for Fury. Now he'd have a chance to get in the saddle.

She appeared in front of him, and she still had about twenty winged Demons chasing her. Tarrin curled the glaive into his tail as he had done his staff, then pulled his bow off while he raced forward. "Come around, come around!" he shouted at the winged horse as it got close. "Line up behind me!"

There was a glint of light to his left. He looked to that side, and then up, and then he started cursing very loudly.

No wonder the Demons hadn't gotten to this side.

The Deva had arrived.

It was a single Deva, a female with golden skin and white feathered wings, wielding a scimitar and a shield. She spotted the Demons chasing Fury, then saw him on the ground, then gave out a blast of a small horn she had looped around her neck. Several more Deva appeared, swooping towards the Demons chasing after Fury. The horse banked away from the Deva frantically, and while one did turn to try to intercept her, one wielding a spear, the others engaged the Demons in an aerial collision. Two Demons and one Deva tumbled from the sky as the two groups passed one another, but the Deva had broke Fury free of her pursuers, and the lone Deva chasing after her had over banked and lost too much speed to keep up. The horse vanished from sight to his right, then appeared again behind him as she turned to fly up behind him. He kept an eye over his shoulder and sped up, then jumped up and back just as she came up from behind him. She reacted smoothly to this sudden act, slowing down just enough so he landed securely in the saddle.

"It's about time, Fury!" he admonished her hotly as he grabbed the glaive from his tail and jammed it under the saddleskirt, then uncapped the quiver hanging from the saddle and drew an arrow from it without tying himself in first. "Think you could have waited til I was in the saddle before bolting the first time? You almost got me killed!"

Fury gave him a hostile snort as she banked to avoid a *balor's* whip, but the mighty Demon failed to pursue when two Deva swooped in behind him, forcing him to break off. Tarrin turned in the saddle, drew his bow, aimed, and fired, all in one smooth motion. An arrow sizzled so close to a Deva's face that the fletching slithered through his eyebrows, then buried itself to the feathers in the neck of a *nabassu*. "Go! Back the way we came, fool horse, and *move!*" He nocked another arrow, then hastily drew his bow and loosed at a *vrock* that was screaming at them from above. The arrow drove into its shoulder, and caused it to spin in its dive and lose its trajectory to intercept them. Tarrin had to duck frantically to avoid a macehead from a Deva as the winged man tried to take his head off in a sidelong pass, then jammed the bow in the saddleskirt long enough to wisely tie himself down. Once he was done, he pulled the bow again and nocked another arrow, as Fury banked and climbed with the *balor* and four Deva hot on her tail. She levelled off and banked again, then banked back the way she came, which brought the pursuers into Tarrin's line of fire. They all scattered when he turned in the saddle and drew his bow, so he had to pick the target of nearest opportunity and loose on it. That was the *balor*. The arrow hit it in the upper thigh, which made it roar in pain, but did not deliver a fatal wound or hurt it enough to convince it to back off. The three Deva spun back into pursuit of the *balor* and Tarrin, and Tarrin nocked another arrow as he looked forward, and saw that unimaginably tall obelisk coming up on the right. He stood up in the stirrup as best he could with the restraining ropes around his waist, then used his unnatural range of motion to twist around so he could fire his bow at those directly behind him. The *balor* banked away sharply, and when the Deva saw him aiming at them, they did as well. One of them, not seeing the obelisk because she was too busy looking at Tarrin, banked the wrong way and slammed into the side of the obelisk, bounced off, and then spiralled down towards the ground. Two of the pursuing Deva broke off and dove after her to save her from a fatal impact with the ground, as the last remaining Deva and the *balor* continued to chase him.

"Fury, dive then pull up *fast!*" he ordered, locking his legs around her as she obeyed. She suddenly dove down, causing the two behind to mirror her, then she pulled up and almost stalled in the air as she arrested her forward momentum with a powerful thrust of her impressive wings. Tarrin grabbed the haft of the glaive with his free paw and yanked it out as the *balor* behind suddenly pulled up to avoid slamming into the back of the Firewing and causing both of them to crash into the ground. It didn't pull up enough, though. Tarrin slashed it with the glaive as it passed over their heads, ripping it from throat to crotch, and spilling everything that had been inside it out into the air after it went over them. The pieces of the *balor* dropped towards the ground as Fury banked away to avoid flying into that caustic mass. The Deva pulled away as Tarrin reseated his glaive, then wisely turned and fled when the Were-cat stood up in the stirrups, turned, and then levelled his deadly bow at anything and everything behind him. With no other targets to keep the Were-

cat occupied, the Deva understood he was *next*. Tarrin urged Fury to fly faster and faster, as his eyes scanned the skies, searing for any airborne combatant that was either chasing them or moving to intercept them. There were a few straggling winged forms far to his left, but they were not moving to intercept him. They instead were rushing in the direction from which he came, no doubt rushing to the aid of the outnumbered Deva back around the sage's compound.

He was clear of them.

Tarrin breathed heavily as the full impact of the narrow escape started to sink in. So close...that had been *too close*. His paws began to tremble. He'd come a hair's whisker from getting killed, any number of times. And now that the immediate fury was starting to fade, he was starting to feel the pain of his many wounds, including the rather nasty one delivered by the glaive he now had in his saddleskirt, which began to throb like crazy. The deepest run of it was low on his left side, where it had nearly nicked his rib. Outside of that one bad slash, though, he was remarkably unharmed, just minor nicks, cuts, and quite a few spectacular bruises. He blew out his breath as Fury picked up speed and altitude, fleeing away from the Core and leaving what could only be called a pitched battle behind them, as the Deva and the Demons who had come to kill Tarrin in their trap fought one another in and around Rolteford's compound.

"Let's go back to the Sage's Council, Fury," he told her in a vicious tone of voice. "I have a few people there I need to kill for sending me into this trap."

Fury whinnied with dreadful eagerness and banked slightly at his nudging, as he guided her towards the Sage's Council, where a certain sage was going to have a *lot* to answer for.

"How did it—ah," Szizazz began as Tarrin crashed the door of the Gzargmoth open and stalked in. He was wounded, with a thick congealed layer of blood running from his left side and down his leg. Black Demon blood, his own blood, dirt, dust, and grime clung to him all over, and he was holding the *vrock's* bloodstained glaive negligently in his paw. "What happened?"

"The Sage's Council sold me out," he said with an evil growl. "I'm about to go *discuss* that with them. I just need my things first. I don't think I'll have either the time or the chance to come back for my things."

"I would advise against such a thing," she warned. "The Deva will come in force."

"Let them," he said with a narrow-eyed glare at her, which made her flinch.

"I see. Very well. I will not debate it with you."

Tarrin stalked past her, then turned and levelled the glaive at the archon that had been sitting in the common room, who stared at him in shock. "If you're not here when I come back, You'll force me to chase you down. Do you *really* want to make me even madder than I am now, mortal?" he asked in a dreadful voice.

A dark spot appeared on the chair under the archon, which was more than reply enough that he would do no such thing.

Szizazz slithered after him as he returned to his room, pausing only to cancel the defensive spells protecting it. "Exactly what happened?" she asked.

He stalked in and grabbed the blanket. "They sent me into a trap," he said in a tight voice, vibrating with his fury, and very briefly related what happened to her.

“Unusual for them to involve themselves in affairs that are not their concern,” she said analytically. “The neutrality of the sages is well known. Knowledge is their only pursuit.”

“They’re about to learn a *very* hard lesson,” he seethed, pulling his belt pouch from the Portable Hole and tying it to his belt.

“Again, let me warn you that doing so will bring the wrath of the Deva upon you, and they will not let it slide,” she warned. “Know only that simply fleeing Crossroads will not be enough. They will chase you if you commit an atrocity.”

“Let them,” he answered her shortly. “I have no qualms about killing *them* either. Anyone who gets in my way won’t be there for long. The sooner they learn to stay out of my way, the fewer they’ll lose.”

She sighed. “Very well. I can only wish you fortune and success, Tarrin.”

“I appreciate that, Szizazz,” he said, hefting the glaive and turning to face her. “You have the bell. When things calm down, I’ll contact you, or you can contact me if you think it’s important. Be well.”

“Be well,” she said, slithering aside and allowing him to pace past her and out the door.

She heard him slam the door downstairs, then slithered over to look down from the window as he and a winged horse started marching down the avenue, towards the Sage’s Council. She sighed, closed her reptilian eyes, then rose back up. “Good luck to you, my friend,” she said to herself as she closed the curtains with her four arms.

“He won’t need luck,” a voice called from behind her. She turned to look, and found herself looking at a mortal human, a very young female with dark, swarthy skin and straight black hair, wearing a simple brown homespun dress. She looked almost boyish, with her flat chest and her narrow hips, but she had a face that a mortal human male would find...*cute*. “He’ll be fine.”

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Me? I’m no one,” she said with a gentle smile, stepping forward. “But I can’t let you roam free knowing what you know. You see, very soon, the Deva are going to be in a tizzy, and they’re going to be all over the place, asking everyone a bunch of hard questions about Tarrin, what he did, and what he’s going to be doing. The Deva would take you to task for not trying to stop him, or not alerting them about his intent to go slaughter all the sages in revenge for what they did to him. They might even seek to punish you. We can’t have that. Tarrin would have a fit if you were harmed because of him, so I’m here to make sure that doesn’t happen. We need to make sure you’re kept safe.”

“What are you about?” she asked, slithering back from the girl fearfully, but she moved with both casual grace and amazing speed, literally on top of her in an instant despite the fact that she never did anything more than walk towards her at a stately, serene pace. Two fingers of her small hand touched Szizazz on the temple, and that touch was all that was necessary.

In an instant, Szizazz’s memory of what Tarrin had told her vanished as if it had never been, replaced by a distinct and convincing memory of him telling her that he meant to seek the knowledge he needed elsewhere, and that the repeated attempts by the Demon Lord against him in Crossroads forced him to leave the plane. The memory of the girl also vanished, erased from her mind completely.

Szizazz blinked, and found herself staring at a young human mortal female, with swarthy brown skin and straight black hair, who stood near her patiently. She would be considered cute by human standards,

though her lack of female curves made her seem tomboyish. “Madam Szizazz? Are you well?”

“Who are you, young female? How did you come to be here?” she asked.

“The archon downstairs told me you were up here. I’d like to rent a room, if you don’t mind. Are you well? You looked quite unwell when I called from the doorway, and didn’t respond when I called.”

“I...I am well,” she said, blinking and putting a hand to her head. “A room? A room within the Gzargmoth is three krin per cycle. Your meals and maintaining your room are your own affair. I only provide a room for my guests.”

“That’s fine,” she answered. “Are you sure you’re alright, mistress?”

“Yes, yes, I am well,” she said, waving two of her hands negligently. “But your concern is appreciated. Return with me downstairs, and we will discuss your request in more suitable surroundings.”

Szizazz silthered forward, paying the situation no mind. She missed the young girl’s slight, knowing smile as she passed.

The grand entry doors to the Sage’s Council were smashed in, making a terrible squealing sound as they bent their hinges. The crotchety old receptionist, whose desk was a suitable distance from those doors to both impress upon the visitor the grand majesty and awe of the Sage’s Council and allow her to intercept the unworthy, squeaked in surprise and dove under her desk, then peered over it to see that frightful furry half-god stepping through the ruins of the wondrous front doors, with a massive red-eyed horse filing in behind it. Her eyes widened when she saw the look of absolute *fury* on the half-god’s face, his eyes all glowing green and making him look positively sinister. He stopped just inside the door, then settled the butt of a bloodstained weapon, a heavy one-edged blade fixed to the top of a stout pole, to the immaculately polished marble floor.

“D-Do you h-h-have an ap-p-pointment?” she said in a frightened voice.

“Fury,” the awe-inspiring figure said in a low, dangerous voice.

The horse nickered in response, looking at him.

“Go make an appointment.”

The horse nodded, then looked at the woman. Its glowing red eyes narrowed, and it almost seem to *grin* at her, a horribly malevolent expression that nearly made her wet herself. The sinister equine then brayed, a sound that almost sounded like a roar instead of a whinny, as fire erupted from a mouth filled with sharp, savage teeth.

The receptionist screamed in terror, then turned and fled back towards the main meeting chamber as the huge winged horse galloped at her with evil eyes, sparks flying from its hooves as those mineral-infused, sharp hooves struck the stone, leaving deep pits and gouges in its polished finish as it passed. Tarrin didn’t follow, he instead turned and threw a handful of white powder into the air, chanting in the language of Arcane magic, his words loud and forceful as they chanted the spell. It only required somatics from one hand, so he formed the necessary gestures with the paw not holding the glaive, until a ball of fire appeared in the palm of his paw. It boiled and writhed as he clenched his fist over it, reared back, and then hurled it side-armed down the side passage, a long passage that led to the main library. His aim was true and the strength of his arm was sufficient to carry the ball of fire all the way down the hall, streaking past two robed sages who had peeked into the archway leading to the library to see what the noise was about. Those two figures

were illuminated in silhouette when the ball of fire sizzled into the room, struck a bookshelf, and then detonated with thunderous force, unleashing a shockwave of fire and concussion that devastated the first floor of the library, and instantly set all wood and paper within the explosive radius ablaze.

He took up his captured weapon and charged towards the main audience chamber. Fury had caught up to the receptionist, and had quite deliberately let her continue running just ahead of her for a long moment. She then knocked the woman forward with her forehead, which made her tumble to the floor, and then galloped right over her, making sure to stomp her diamond-hard hooves into every available point of the woman's soft anatomy as she went over her. Tarrin passed both the receptionist and his evil-tempered mount, as the Firewing Pegasus turned and looked back at the woman as she continued to run, following her master. Her glowing red eyes looked decidedly disappointed when the woman moved, and looked ready to turn around and go finish the job. But she instead followed behind Tarrin as he reached the ornate double doors leading to the main audience chamber, and then galloped through as he shattered them by slashing them with his glaive and then blasting through the weakened doors. An explosion of splinters and twisted metal erupted into the room along with Tarrin, an empty room with its plush carpeting and many tables and chairs, but Tarrin's focus was on the door behind the dais at the far end of the room, where the lead sage's office was located.

"Burn it," Tarrin snarled to his mount as he jumped up onto the nearest table, and then hopped from table to table just as fast as if he were running on the ground. Fury slowed up, drew in her breath, then unleashed a tightly focused cone of fire at the nearest table, chairs, and rich red carpeting. All of them immediately began to burn after being subjected to the outer-planar animal's fiery breath. She turned her head and raked that cone of fire over everything she possibly could, setting a conflagration in the main audience chamber that not even magical attempts to extinguish could put out, for the fire was already too large and intense to contain.

The building was now doomed.

Tarrin reached the plain door leading to the cramped office. He drove his claws into it, cracking and splitting the wood, then ripped the door and the hinges attaching it to the doorframe out of the wall. He tossed them aside and found himself staring into the surprised and terrified eyes of the lead sage, who was already up and halfway to the door to find out what all the noise beyond was about. The men's eyes locked on Tarrin, who was illuminated from behind by the raging inferno that Fury had set in the audience chamber...but that light was not enough to dim the sinister green radiance that illuminated the Were-cat's eyes into two pools of absolute emerald *evil*.

"No!" he squealed in terror, backing up until he was sitting on the edge of his desk. He began to chant in the language of Arcane magic, but Tarrin was on him in an instant, paw around his throat and hefting him three spans off the ground, holding him up and at arm's length as the powerful grip he had on the man's neck squeezed the air out of his throat, causing his chanting to trail off into hoarse, rapid choking sounds.

"You set me up," Tarrin hissed at the man, his ears laying back as he brought the point of the glaive up and stuck it in the man's stomach deeply, causing the tip to punch through his robe and start sinking into his skin, causing a thin line of red blood to appear along the razor-sharp edge of the weapon, oozing slowly but steadily towards the haft. "You sent me into a trap, sage! But you *underestimated* me, didn't you?" he suddenly shouted. "And I'm here to pay you back for your treachery!"

"*tried....to-warn—tried—warn,*" the man wheezed, clutching at Tarrin's gripping paw with both hands, trying to pull the fingers apart enough for him to breathe. He sucked in a ragged breath when Tarrin relaxed his grip enough to let him breathe. "I tried to warn you!" he squealed in utter terror. "I didn't have to warn you about Rolteford! The Demons, they threatened to—I had no choice! But I tried to warn you, Master, I tried!"

Tarrin blinked. Yes, the man *did* warn him about Rolteford, and he'd seemed decidedly nervous. The sage didn't have to do that, but he did. Tarrin realized that the sage *did* truly try to warn him about the trap, making him cautious enough to go buy weapons to take with him when he met the man. The sage may have sent him into that trap, but he also gave Tarrin enough warning to be able to *survive* that trap. Had he not been warned, he would not have gone with the bow or the staff, and he might not have survived the encounter.

But it wasn't as if that knowledge would save him.

"You have two seconds to tell me what I want to know," Tarrin told him with flat eyes. "Who do I talk to to find the One? Who?" he demanded, pushing the glaive against his stomach with more force.

"Ahh!!!!!" he cried in pain. "No one I know can tell you! No one here can answer that!"

"Then you are *no use* to me," he hissed, and the glaive shuddered against the sage's stomach as the Were-cat shifted his grip and prepared to plunge it through his body.

"The Mortai!" he screamed. "The Mortai! They know *everything*!" he screamed frantically, struggling against the paw holding him up. "Find a Mortai and ask it, but it may not answer you! They don't always talk to everyone who brings them questions!"

"Where are these Mortai?" Tarrin demanded.

"They float like giant clouds over the forests of the Beastlands!" he said in a hysterical voice. "One of them might help you, but it's not a guarantee!"

Tarrin regarded him a long moment, then snorted. "That just bought you a fighting chance, mortal," Tarrin told him in an emotionless voice. The sage tried to scream when Tarrin's fist closed around his neck, crushing his windpipe *just enough*, but not killing him. He then grabbed up one of the hands clutching his paw, then the other, and then crushed those as well to the sound of shattering bone. The sage's eyes almost rolled back into his head as the pain of it assaulted him, but he managed to cling to consciousness. He gave a hoarse cry when Tarrin dropped him unceremoniously, as fire began creeping into the sage's personal office.

"We set fire to this building. I'm sure you can see the flames behind me. I was just going to kill you and let the fire burn your body, but you gave me a fighting chance, so now I'll give you one," Tarrin told him. "You sent me there with no magic, and now I've taken your magic from you. So, if you can get out of this building alive on your own wits before the fire kills you, then we're even. If you don't, then you don't. Whether or not you survive depends on you. But either way, mortal, remember this. *No* deal with a Demon *ever* turns out in any way that benefits *you*. You made a deal with the Demons, and it's cost you your precious library and your building, because you didn't count on the fact that I'm just as bad as they are. Just count your blessings that it didn't cost you your life...or your soul. What I've taken from you today is nothing compared to what *they* would take from you.

"Good luck, mortal. You'll need it. Come, Fury," he said, turning his back on the terrified archon, then he and the winged horse turned and stepped back into the flames, and were quickly gone from sight.

Tarrin paid the man no more mind as he pondered his words. Tarrin had never heard of a Mortai, but the man's terrified scent assured him that he was not lying...or at least he honestly believed what he was saying.

A Mortai. He wondered what it looked like. From the sound of it, *floating above the forests of the Beastlands* or so the sage had said, it must be some kind of winged creature, or had the ability to fly. He was

sure some of the denizens of that outer plane could give him the information he needed, though. The locals always did have the best information on local matters. The pair of them marched through the blazing audience chamber, then along the marble corridor leading to the ruined front doors. They stepped out just in time to see Deva circling down from above, attracted to the area by the fire and violence, and the receptionist as well. She was moaning and crawling towards the steps feebly, leaving a trail of blood behind her on the marble landing.

“Leave her,” Tarrin said, putting a paw out to stop Fury from prancing over and grinding her into the stone. “She earned her life by getting out. Right now, we’ve got to fly.” His wings flowed from his back and filled out to their full size, and for a moment, Fury looked at him with an expression of *indignance*. “You’ll fly faster without my weight,” he told her. “Don’t be jealous, girl,” he chuckled as he saw her continued look of *betrayal* on her equine features. “Now come on. Follow me, and avoid the Deva. We don’t want anything to do with them, at least not yet.”

She gave him a look.

“They have something I need,” he told her as his feet left the ground, and he produced his visor from his belt pouch and snugged it on over his eyes. “When I find out what I need to know from the Mortai, I’ll be back here to take it from them.”

Fury gave him a narrow-eyed, eager look as she spread her wings and started galloping towards the stairs, then soared into the air. She fell in line with her winged master, and together they ascended into the calm air of Crossroads and turned away from the Core, flying with great speed towards the Ring, and one of the stones there that would allow him to leave this plane of existence and enter the plane known as the Beastlands. There was a being there known as a Mortai, and it knew something that Tarrin wanted to know.

And he *would* find out.

Once he found out where the One was hiding, he would return here and confront a Solar, then he would have to return to Sennadar and face Spyder...but first things first. Nothing else could happen until he knew the location of the realm of the One. And now, despite the best efforts of the Demons to kill him, he now had a solid lead...and he was going to a place *where they could not follow*. The Beastlands was one of the *upper* planes, and as such, Demons could not enter. But that didn’t mean that they’d give up, he was certain of that. A Demon could not enter, but a denizen of the planes between the upper planes and the lower planes *could*, and some of them, like the Slaadi, would be more than willing to perform a service for a Demon for the right price. They wouldn’t be able to come after him themselves, but they could hire mercenaries to do that in their stead.

No, he hadn’t heard the last of the Demon Lord. It would take him time to arrange it, but there would be more attempts to stop him, more attempts to kill him. He would just have a sizable head start on the mercenaries that were hired to kill him.

Funny. He should have marched right in there and did that in the *first* place, threatened the lead Sage with certain death if he did not give him an answer, and give him one *now*...but he had decided to be nice, to not start a row that would put him on the bad side of the Deva. But, in a twist of irony, that was now now going to happen no matter what. He could have had what he needed without all this wasted time, and it might not have left the Sage’s Council a pillar of fire behind him.

Goddess, he was getting soft in his old age.

Chapter 5

The Happy Hunting Grounds were anything but that.

Tarrin had learned almost immediately that that name, though not the true name of this plane, was a deceptive misnomer.

All the animals in this pristine woodland paradise were *not* targets for a happy hunt. All of them, every single one, were larger, stronger, and *smarter* than the animals they resembled. Most of them could communicate in sentient languages, and some of them were sufficiently intelligent to use magic. These animals were extremely dangerous, a lesson Tarrin had learned within minutes of arriving within the plane, with a pack of Deva hot on Fury's tail.

Fury. Things would have gone much smoother had he sent her to Pyrosia sooner. After arriving in the Beastlands, all the animals of this place, sensing her presence within the plane, immediately moved to attack her. Tarrin had had his Firewing land and go into the forest to hide from the twenty Deva that had followed them through the portal and had been searching for them, and that just played right into the hands of the sentient animal denizens. The pair had found themselves besieged by a small army of furious animals, some of them throwing spells at the pair. It had taken quite a bit of work, and not a few messy fatalities, to force them to back off...but the commotion had attracted the attention of the Deva, and they had intercepted Tarrin before he could escape.

The shimmering crystal medallion secured by a platinum chain wrapped around his wrist was a clear testament to the outcome of that short, ugly fight.

Taking the amulet of a Deva had been...*terrifying*. Reaching into that Deva, he had almost felt like his paw had taken grip on something that could not be pulled through it, and then he felt a sudden massive resistance, as if something had grabbed hold of his paw and was trying to drag him into wherever it was that he had reached. His arm had sank into the male Deva's chest all the way up to the shoulder before a panicked reflex had caused him to tear free of whatever had taken hold of him and tear free the prize he had sought. It was not the same as it had been when he did it to the Demons, and in a way, he should have expected that. But where he had been reaching into the Abyss to take the soul of a Demon, he had been reaching into a place that no mortal or god had ever been or would ever go when he reached through the Deva and pulled forth its soul. He had reached into a place that existed beyond rational comprehension, a place outside the multiverse, a place that did not exist.

Just thinking about it made him look once again, and wonder what had happened in that place, because he had not come out of it unscathed.

The fur of his right arm, from the tips of his claws to his elbow, was now snowy white.

Tarrin wasn't exactly mortal or flesh and blood in a normal sense, so his fur didn't grow. But he could control its appearance, and yet this white fur resisted any attempt to change its color. Not even magic could undo what had been done. The white fur was permanent, a permanent mark, or scar, the consequence of reaching into a place beyond mortal ken and touching on something not even the gods had any business touching.

The amulet hanging from his wrist would be the only one he would take if he could manage it, because if he did that again, he might be able to break free, and be pulled in. And if that happened, he had no idea what would happen to him.

It did look strange, though. He put both paws down on the tree limb under him, the ground some hundred spans below, and though for a brief moment that it almost looked like one of Jesmind's paws had been stuck on his own arm.

After that ugly fight, where he had stripped one Deva of his soul and killed three others, he had fled with Fury. They had spent *days* in a desperate and dangerous game of cat and mouse both with the Deva and with the animal creatures of this plane, and there was nothing he could do to conceal them from their pursuers. That had been because of Fury. Her status as an animal native of Gehenna was like an unholy beacon in this plane, a disharmony in the land that they could all sense, and it kept causing them to come right at them. He'd lost count of how many animals he'd killed, but he actively avoided fights with the Deva every time they managed to catch up. He had come to the conclusion that it was going to be impossible to do what he needed to do here so long as Fury remained.

And so, she was now gone. Two days ago, he had found enough of a breathing space to memorize the spell he needed to send Fury to Pyrosia, and he had done so. Fury was now there, with Dolanna and the others, and he had every confidence that they would take very good care of her, and that Fury would be quite content to be among them. Fury's safe departure had allowed him to escape from both the Deva and the animals that roamed this plane, and had given him time to rest and recover from his encounter with the Deva.

He looked at his white right paw again, lifting it off the branch, then he closed his fist and looked at the glittering crystal of the amulet tied to his forearm by a platinum chain, looped through both ends of the medallion and affixed to his arm almost like a bracer.. He kept it tied to his forearm because the crystal made him *very* uncomfortable if he kept it anywhere else. It burned in an odd way, even through belt pouches and packs, and it did so in a way that he found painful. But for some reason, his white-furred right arm felt no discomfort when it touched that amulet, as if the nature of his right arm had been changed when he reached into that place where the Deva's soul had resided and allowed it to come to no harm when handling the crystal amulet.

Mother Wynn had hinted that the power he was meddling with would try to change him. He had managed to take the amulets of the Demons unscathed, but it was apparent that attacking Deva in the same way was an entirely different animal, and he had not gotten through it without their power affecting him in some way.

Worries for another day, he supposed.

One worry, one he'd been pondering for a while, was the Solar. Once he had the location of the One, he would have to tackle one of those mythically powerful beings in order to complete the next step of his plan. The problem was, quite simply, that he could not match up to a Solar on a direct level. Solar were staggeringly powerful creatures, possessed of powers and abilities that were just a small step under those of a god. A Solar could *be* a god with the power that it had. His fighting skills and his magic were just not going to be enough to face a Solar, not unless he was *very* careful. Add to that the status of a Solar as commanders of *hosts* of Deva, which they could call upon at any time to help them, and it got very messy very quickly. Even if he could match a Solar blow for blow, the Solar would simply summon its subordinates to help it if Tarrin proved to be a troublesome adversary.

What he needed for that Solar...was a *plan*.

Staring at his right arm, he realized that all the elements of a successful plan were already out on the field. All he had to do was set them up properly and then choose the right battleground, and he could get

what he needed from the Solar. It would be dangerous and risky, but the only way he was going to beat a Solar was by going for broke. Against such a powerful opponent, he had to be bold, daring, and take risks.

And be ruthless.

He had an idea of what to do, but he'd have to think about it more, flesh it out, work out the specifics. But after he managed that, then he had to come up with a plan for dealing with Spyder. That would be more problematic, because there were some very touchy issues around her. He still wasn't sure how he was going to manage Spyder, because the last thing he could do was get into a massive battle with her, but he knew that that was exactly what the Elder Gods were going to order her to do the instant he set foot in Sennadar. They would order her to fight him, and that was a fight that he did *not* want. He had to find a way to get around Spyder without a direct confrontation, or at least figure out a plan to go about minimizing the fighting between them. He didn't want to hurt her, and for the Goddess' sake, he did *not* want to provoke her into using the kind of power that he knew she possessed.

Fighting her might be inevitable, but in that fight, he had to be very, very careful to remain in a defensive posture at all times, to stall her, to just stay away from her until he could find a way to either get around her or neutralize her without doing any harm. Provoking Spyder would be the biggest mistake any being could ever make. She was one of the most powerful beings in the multiverse, more powerful than even she knew. There was *no way* he wanted to face her in her full glory. He had to do everything in his power to ensure that he did not push her over that threshold.

He'd be fighting with his paws tied, but he couldn't see any other way to do it. Stealth and deception would not work against Spyder, and she wouldn't disobey if the gods ordered her to try to evict him.

He'd have to put that particular problem on hold, though. He had more pressing problems to deal with, such as the three shadows that passed over him. They were Deva, two males and a female, soaring high over the canopy with their maces and swords in hand, searching for him. There were hundreds of them out there now, maybe even thousands, and they were all searching for him. He had no doubt why; his attack on the Deva days ago and the taking of the soul of one of them had incited this massive response. They were now determined to find him, to take back what he had stolen and most likely kill him. Where the Demons were terrified of him and would not face him anywhere he was in a position to take their amulets, the Deva were galvanized into response, acting in concert to track him down and deal with him. It was hard to tell time here because the sun never moved, creating an eternal day, but he was fairly certain that they'd been trying to find him for at least five days.

He guessed he should have been flattered that they were so determined, and they had brought in more than just the Deva. Though they were formidable in combat, the Deva—the *real* Deva and not another type of Aasimon, since all Aasimon were commonly referred to as Deva—didn't specialize in fighting. That was the job of the Agathinon, the Warriors of Truth, the militant arm of the Deva, and they were here as well. The Agathinon didn't have wings and could not fly, and they were why he was up in the trees. For every patrol of Deva that passed overhead, a patrol of Agathinon passed on the ground far below, searching for him. They would have been very hard to avoid if not for the fact that these trees were hundreds of spans tall, and the branches were so thick that he was completely concealed from the ground by branches and foliage as he was from the air. And since no magic could be used to track, trace, or locate him, it required them to use good old fashioned eyes and ears to find him. They were the ones that he did not want to get tangled up with. The Deva were good fighters, strong and intelligent, but the Agathinon were warriors by design. There were different levels of fighters among the mortals, from the common soldier to the Arakite Legionnaire to the Sulasian Ranger to the Wikuni Marine to the Ungardt to the Vendari to the Selani, and the Deva were no different. A Deva was a strong fighter, but they were much less skilled than the Agathinon, much akin to the Knights among the Deva. Staying away from the Agathinon was more important than finding a Mortai in the short run.

Getting into a fight with the Deva had been inevitable, and even necessary. It was the only way he was going to draw out a Solar and get it in a position where he could get what he needed from it. His original plan was to escalate the confrontations with them, to keep beating them until they had no choice but to send out a Solar to deal with him, but it was just bad luck that he'd been caught out in the open by the Deva and had been forced to fight. He hadn't wanted that, because now it was seriously hampering him. The Mortai were gigantic beings who floated on the wind, high above the ground, but Tarrin was trapped under the canopy by the searching Deva, forced to peek out here and there when the skies were clear of Deva to look for a Mortai as he travelled in random directions. If a Deva spotted him, a horde of Agathinon would be on him in moments, and he'd have one serious fight on his paws.

The only good thing about it all was that the indigenous animals seemed totally oblivious to him now that Fury had been sent to Pyrosia. Not only did they take no notice of him, they seemed completely unconcerned about him, as if he was just a part of the scenery. One owl-sized sparrow even landed on his shoulder as if he were a tree branch. It had startled him, but the animal took no notice of his flinch. It preened its wing for a moment, then took off again and disappeared into the forest. The other side of that good fortune was that it seemed that the intelligent animals weren't telling the Deva where he was, or they'd have come after him already.

So at least he had one small bit of good luck.

After making sure they had passed out of sight, he stood up on the branch and poked his head out from the canopy, exposing himself to the view of anything in the air. He looked around quickly, scanning the blue skies, then dropped back down out of sight after finding the skies empty. He drifted down among the stronger branches, sturdy limbs that intermeshed a hundred spans above the ground and served him just as well as solid ground served the Agathinon below, providing him with a fast and easy means of getting around, but one that hid him from both those above and those below. He knelt on the thick branch and then leaned over slightly and looked down, peering through the branches below and to the ground, where six Agathinon, with their blue-white skin, bald heads, and brilliant silver plate mail catching his eyes easily, even as the sound of their muffled clanking carried to his ears. They seemed to always move about in units of six, five soldiers and a squad leader, who was the one with the gold shoulder guards. Tarrin crept along the branch on all fours to keep them in sight as they marched below, the six of them scouting the area carefully with their eyes, trying to move quietly judging by the muffled sound of their armor. Much like any landbound creature, they almost never looked up, and certainly not up enough to see him.

He came to a stop and watched them march ahead, and they were quickly hidden by the branches of the trees, leaving him alone once more. He turned and vaulted from one branch to another some ten spans distant, deciding on a path perpendicular to the route of the Agathinon, but not that it really mattered. The Mortai were high in the sky, and he had no idea where they were or where they went. There was nothing he could really do but wander around aimlessly—

Or was there?

The animals of this place were intelligent. Though they had been hostile to him before, they were not hostile now, that hostility was only because of Fury. Since he couldn't easily find the Mortai, especially not with the Deva chasing him, and the animals of this place were neutral to both him and the Deva, perhaps maybe they knew where the Mortai could be found?

It certainly had possibilities. They hadn't revealed him to the Deva yet, so he guessed that they weren't going to do so. This was their native plane, and they might know something about the Mortai that he did not. Maybe one of them could point him in the right direction.

Finding an animal certainly was not difficult, as they were *everywhere*. Within five minutes, he had found his first potential informant, a squirrel the size of a large dog, but that animal either could not or would

not deign to speak with him. He moved on to try to communicate with an eagle-sized owl and a vulture-sized thrush, and again the animals would not speak to him. He quieted down and watched as another patrol of Agathinon passed underneath him, laying on the branch and watching them as they marched by. He slipped up onto his paws and feet and crept along the branch silently and watched them march away, then turned around—

—and found himself staring at a strange cat-like creature face to face, though the other face was upside down.

Tarrin was almost impossible to surprise, but this creature had done it. It was bipedal, almost human in appearance and shape, but his skin was covered in short gray fur, and his face looked more feline than human. He looked almost exactly like a cat Wikuni, except he had human ears. He wore a pair of ragged breeches that were black, and Tarrin noticed that this creature had no tail. He had short black hair that was wild and unkempt, though it was clean, and he moved with a sinuous grace that was much more feline than human. It was hanging from a branch overhead, secured by claws on hands and feet, dangling over his own branch.

Tarrin backed up quickly as the creature dropped to his branch, then he rose up on his feet and stared down at the smaller creature, covering over his surprise with a dark scowl. He too rose up onto his feet and looked up at him with unimpressed eyes. “They said the Mortal God had come to the Beastlands,” he said in a sibilant voice, almost like a purr. “It has taken me much time to find you. You are elusive.”

“Who are you?” Tarrin demanded.

He chuckled. “Were you still the mortal, you would know who I am,” he said simply. “But since you have lost the song of the Cat, then you would not know. I am Thraxi, one of the ten Cat Lords, master of cats and embodiment of the spirit of that which is feline.” He then bowed gracefully. “And you are Tarrin Kael, the Mortal God, who was once my kinsman, but who now only wears the shape of what he once was.”

“Cat Lord? I’ve never heard of you.”

“I would not expect you to know of my kind,” he said simply, taking a step back and then flopping into a cross-legged seated position on the branch. “Be seated, if you would, please.”

Tarrin felt no hostility at all from this creature, so he did as he asked and seated himself, wrapping his tail around his legs to keep it out of trouble.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Tarrin Kael. The Cat Lords do not involve themselves in matters that do not concern them, and you do not concern us. Even if you did, we wouldn’t turn against you, since you are one of us. That you wear the shape you once possessed in life tells me that you still consider yourself to be Were-cat, and still a part of our brotherhood, even if you’ve lost that part of yourself. That makes you kin, and the Cat Lords do not harm kin.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Tarrin said, and his senses seemed to agree with what this creature was saying. He felt oddly comfortable with this Thraxi, as if the echo of the mortal in him found an affinity with this being, much as he had had an affinity for Miranda.

“Ah, so that is why they are so determined to find you,” the creature said, reaching out and pointing at the crystal medallion tied to his right forearm. “I did not think that possible. But then again, given who you are, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“You seem to know a lot about me,” Tarrin said suspiciously.

"I know much about you," he replied easily. "The Deva have already come to me to ask if you had tried to make contact with me, and after they left, I became curious. So I made certain inquiries with certain beings, entities, and powers that had knowledge of you. A cat's curiosity must be satisfied," he said with a smile. "How did you do it?" he asked with eager eyes.

"Do what?"

"Take the soul of a Deva," he answered immediately. "I thought only the Deva could go Beyond, but obviously that is wrong, for you must have reached into the Beyond in order to take that medallion."

Tarrin clasped his right paw into a fist, holding up his arm and looking at it almost unconsciously. "It... was not pleasant," he answered truthfully. "It did this to me."

"To reach into a place that does not exist and expect it not to leave its mark on you is foolish," he said sagely.

Tarrin ignored that. "Why would they think I'd seek you out?"

"I am a Cat Lord," he said simply. "They seemed to think that you would search me out to gather information from me. You see, they know you came here for a reason, but they don't know what it is. They were hoping to find your reason for coming here and use it to try to find you."

"That was a good tactic," Tarrin noted aloud after thinking about it a moment.

"Yes, the Deva are not fools," Thraxi agreed. "Would you care to dine with me and my mate later? Arami would be overjoyed to meet you."

"I'm sorry, but I'm a little busy right now. And besides, I don't think you'd want the Deva to invite themselves. If they've talked to you, I wouldn't be surprised if they were keeping an eye on you."

"Oh they're trying," he said with a sly smile. "They're not doing very well, but they *are* trying."

The impish look on his face made him laugh in spite of himself. "I'm surprised you'd want to talk to me, if you knew anything about what's going on."

"Oh, I've heard. Blew up a building in Crossroads, rightly infuriated the Deva, and now you've attacked them and taken something that they value more than life itself."

"What?"

"That, of course," he said, pointing at the medallion. "Destroying a Deva simply banishes them back to where they came from, that's all. They're truly unkillable, because their souls are said to exist in that place where the God of Gods resides, a place that does not exist. As you know, the only way to truly kill a being of the Upper World is to kill them in their home plane, but you can't *get* to the home plane of the Deva. But you, you sly one, you attacked them in a way that *does* cause them permanent harm. You've taken one of their number hostage, and now they'll tear the multiverse apart to find you and get him back."

"Ah, that does explain why they're so determined," Tarrin mused, looking down at the ground. "I just thought it was because I was forced into a fight with some Deva and killed a few of them."

"Killing a Deva doesn't really do anything," Thraxi shrugged. "He'll just be back in one hundred years. But the one trapped in that medallion certainly won't be back. Not unless the other Deva can take it

from you and return it to that place where their souls are. And now they're trying to save one of their own, and that makes them very determined. The one thing you cannot fault the Deva over is their loyalty. They have lost a brother, and now they will do whatever it takes to recover him."

Tarrin was quiet a moment. In that moment, he had an epiphany of clarity, and understood in that moment *exactly* how he could use that information to his advantage.

"I'm surprised you're taking it so easily, Thraxi," he said. "I was told that if I ever attacked the Deva in this manner, then just about everyone would come after me as an enemy, not *just* the Deva. It certainly doesn't seem to bother you what I've done."

"It doesn't really personally concern me, Tarrin Kael," he shrugged. "How you treat *me* matters to me much more than how you treat others. You have been honest and polite, and so I will treat you the same. We are not enemies, and that is all that really concerns me. Your relations to others are irrelevant."

That certainly fit into a trait he would expect from a being that was part cat. Cats were very selfish. "Well, since you're here, I guess I should do what the Deva thought I was doing," Tarrin said to him. "I wasn't really planning on it, but you might be able to help me take care of my business here and be on my way."

"What do you need, kinsman?" he asked.

"Just simple information," he answered. "I have a question that needs to be answered, and I've been told that there's only one being that can give me the answer."

Thraxi's eyes brightened. "You come seeking a Mortai!" he exclaimed.

He nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"That is what the Deva suspect, since you had been so involved with the Sages of Crossroads, but they didn't know for sure. They didn't know if you'd found your answer and was here acting on it, or you were here seeking an answer to the question the Sages could not answer." He scratched at his hair vigorously for a moment. "Well, my kinsman, you're in the wrong plane to find a Mortai."

"But, I was told they only live here in the Beastlands," Tarrin said.

"Yes, but not in the Realm of Day," he answered. "They prefer the Realm of Sunset. You might sometimes see a Mortai here in the Realm of Day, but only once in a great while. If you want to find a Mortai quickly, then you need to go to the Realm of Sunset. Here," he said, pointing off to Tarrin's left and slightly behind him. "About two day's travel in that direction, you'll find a very large, old tree that has a hollow in its bole. That hollow is a boundary between the Realm of Day and the Realm of Sunset. Go into it, and you will come out of a similar tree in the Realm of Sunset. If you get lost, simply ask any animals you encounter for directions, and they'll get you back on the right track."

Tarrin turned to face that direction, and then looked back at the Cat Lord. "Two days' travel, you say? On foot or in the trees or by flying?"

"In the trees," he answered. "I rarely drop the forest floor. It's much more fun up here," he smiled.

"So, about forty longspans or so?"

"If I knew that measurement, I could answer," he said with a shrug.

“You look pretty healthy, so let’s go with fifty,” he said, rising to his feet and reaching into a belt pouch, and withdrawing a pinch of powdered iron. He chanted the words of Arcane magic, the discordant language of the Wizards, speaking the words of a rather simple spell. He spoke the Sulasian words for *fifty longspans* at the completion of his spell, and then tossed the powdered iron into the air. It shimmered for an instant, and then vanished. As soon as it did so, Tarrin had an innate sense of direction that would always point him to the spot he had named in the spell, and that spot was fifty longspans in the direction he faced when casting the spell.

“You know Wizard magic, eh?” Thraxi stated, then he laughed. “You are certainly full of surprises.”

“Thank you, and thank you for the information, Thraxi. You’ve helped me a great deal, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you now. The business I’m here to deal with is very important, and I need to complete it as quickly as I can. Now that I have a solid lead on where to go next, I need to get there quickly, before the Deva can figure out what I’m doing and try to cut me off.”

“Oh, I understand, Tarrin of the Were-cats. I wish you good fortune on your journey, and may your business be concluded to your satisfaction.”

“I’ll take all the blessings I can get, Thraxi,” Tarrin said seriously. “I think I’m going to need them.”

Thraxi’s laughter followed Tarrin as he made his way towards his magically targeted point, vaulting from branch to branch, leaving the Cat lord behind him...but he was hearing faint rustling in the branches ahead and to the sides. He was about to slow to a stop and investigate, but he heard a startled curse from behind him. It was Thraxi’s voice he heard, which made him turn around and vault onto a higher branch, which gave him a view back in that direction through a void in the canopy.

Thraxi the Cat Lord was vaulting through the branches with an Agathinon hot on his heels.

Tarrin resisted the impulse to surge forward to assist, but he saw quickly that Thraxi needed no assistance. The Agathinon, too encumbered by his plate armor to follow physically, was instead teleporting from branch to branch to try to get in front of the Cat Lord, his sword and shield at the ready. But Thraxi followed no predictable path, turning, dropping, and rising in the branches at whim, making it almost impossible for the blue-eyed warrior Deva to predict his movements. Thraxi always seemed to be where the Agathinon didn’t think he would be, forcing him to vanish from one place and appear in another, only to find that he had guessed incorrectly again. Thraxi evaded a sudden swipe of a sword as two more Agathinon appeared near where he landed and attacked him, floated between two branches, landed on a particularly thick branch, put his hands and feet on it, and then he simply wavered and vanished. Having tired of the game, Thraxi seemed to have taken his leave of them in a manner in which they could not follow.

Tarrin saw all three of those Agathinon immediately look right at where he was lurking within the foliage, and he knew then that he’d been discovered.

Turning and vaulting, Tarrin put almost twenty spans of air between him and the branch he’d been on, even as his mind feverishly considered all options. Landing and fighting them on the ground would give them the advantage; he was better off fighting them up here, in the trees, where his superior agility and their armor would combine to give him a tremendous advantage. However, Tarrin’s inclination for large weapons worked against him in this situation; this was not a battlefield where a staff or glaive or trident were going to be effective. The long weapons would snarl on the surrounding branches. That left him only two options... fight unarmed, or battle them using something small and lethal, like his Cat’s Claws.

As much as that idea appealed to him at the moment, he knew that it wasn’t an option. They’d be perfect for this kind of combat, but they were objects of Sorcery, and not only was he not sure they would even work out here in the outer planes, they were artifacts of the Goddess that would be tracked back to her,

and might get her in trouble if items of her creation were being used to slaughter Deva. Sorcery did not function here, and he was fuzzy on the possibility that objects created by Sorcery and utilizing Sorcery would work outside of the prime material plane.

But perhaps, there was a happy medium there. Tarrin didn't need the Cat's Claws themselves, but he did need one of the aspects of them that he had come to be quite proficient in using over the years.

Hooking a branch and pulling himself up, he immediately began chanting in the language of magic, casting a spell that would allow him to cast the next spell without the need of a material component. While his ears kept track of the sound around him, as Agathinon used their innate power to teleport to shift their positions around him to try to find him, using his voice to try to locate him, he then cast the spell of Vocate, which would allow him to cast five spells without the need to speak, only using somatic gestures and pure will. He dropped almost fifty spans in matter of seconds, using the branches around him to selectively break his fall to keep himself from going too fast, then landed lightly on a paw, foot, and knee on a particularly thick and heavy branch as wide as a wagon track, still nearly a hundred spans off the ground. The sounds around him distanced themselves quickly after he fell from that height, as they stopped to try to find the sound of his voice and use it to lead them to him.

The instant he was stable, he was on his feet and casting another spell, his paws making a fast series of exacting movements before him. Casting spells using Vocate required him to perform the somatics of a spell *twice*, once and then once again, causing it to take longer, but at least his voice was not giving away his position. He again cast the spell that freed him of the need to use a material component for his next spell, and then began casting that spell immediately. Tarrin removed two small rubies from his belt pouch and set them on the branch before him, and then cast the spell; though the spell required no component to cast, this particular spell *did* require the presence of gemstones...using the Materialis spell only freed him of the need to use a pinch of diamond dust, that he did not have. He cast the spell, a spell known as Polymorph. It was a spell that transformed one object into another object, within certain conditions. A material couldn't be changed outside its kingdom of existence, but could become almost anything within that same kingdom. A rock could not be changed into a fish, since one was a mineral and the other an animal, but a rock could be changed into a diamond, or steel, or into another kind of rock. Tarrin needed the gems because he intended to transform a mineral, and it required him to use a mineral. It was a more limited Wizard version of a Sorcerer's ability to Transmute, though Tarrin knew that there were much more powerful versions of the Polymorph spell in his spellbook. He just didn't have them memorized.

He performed the last gesture of the second set of somatics, which completed the spell, and the two rubies on the branch before him shimmered, and then began to glow with a bright light. The light flared suddenly, and then it waned into extinction. Where before there had been two rubies, now there were two plain bracers, made of a sleek black metal. Tarrin quickly reached down and picked them up, removed the amulet of the Deva's soul from his wrist, and slid the bracers over his paws. He then cast a simple spell to change their size, causing them to fit snugly. The bracers weren't solid, they were elegant twists and loops of pure Adamantite, forming a crosshatched spiral pattern that ran from the bottom of each bracer to the top, with a large circular hole in each one. He took the amulet of the Deva in his left paw, sucking his breath in at the touch of it in his unaltered paw, and affixed it to his right bracer. The amulet locked into the hole Tarrin had purposefully left for it perfectly. The hole on the other bracer wasn't entirely planned, for in his haste he had made both bracers identical, but the hole would serve a purpose nonetheless. Tarrin fished the soul amulet of one of the Demons he had killed out of his belt pouch and snapped it into place in the second bracer, more to fill the hole than anything else.

That left only a weapon. He didn't want to fight armored foes with his claws, especially not foes like Agathinon, but he had few options available to him. His first impulse was to call upon the sword Jenna made for him, but that sword was now in the possession of his shadow. It would have been perfect, given that the original weapon, unaltered, would have been the perfect length. He thought about using Wizard magic to take the sword of a former enemy, like Jegojah or Stragos Bane, but he wasn't sure if the spell would pull

that off. He had touched those swords, but they were not his, and it had been a long time ago. He couldn't call on the Goddess or Jenna for help either, to find him something suitable. That left him being creative, or being forced to use weapons not suited for the environment. Maybe—

—no, there was another option. He couldn't use magic to summon a powerful weapon to him, but that didn't mean that he didn't have the ability to create a suitable weapon on the spot, a weapon that, being a creation of magic, would carry within it the innate power to harm a Deva. He pulled out two more gemstones, a topaz and an amethyst, and again cast the spell of Polymorph, using up the last casting of his Vocate spell. He performed the somatics of the spell, and then repeated them to satisfy the demands of both the Polymorph and Vocate spells, and then watched as the two gemstones flared with sudden light.

The light brightened and elongated, then flashed brilliantly, and then faded away. In its wake two weapons exactly like his old sword appeared, smaller weapons meant for one paw only, both perfect duplicates of that sword. They were black metal blades, Adamantite, and as sharp as they could possibly be. But unlike his sword, these were more decorative. The hilts and crosspieces were like the sword Jenna gave him, appearing to be dragons, with the blades extending out of maws that seemed to bite the blades. These were of a size similar to the weapons Tsukatta used, weapons he called *katana*, though these weapons that Tarrin would use in one paw would be two-handed weapons for a smaller creature. These weapons had wirebound grips rather than leather, for Tarrin couldn't create leather using the spell, but that was a small price to pay. The weapons were literally tailor made just for him. They were light, almost unbreakable, and so sharp that the edges could not even be touched without drawing blood. They were not powerful magic weapons, but they were weapons created with properties that made them just as good.

They would work just fine.

Tarrin ran to the edge of the branch and vaulted high into the air, dancing among the branches with grace despite the fact that his paws were holding the swords, racing up and over and around branches, ghosting through clumps of leaves without making a whisper of sound. He could hear no fewer than seven Agathinon up in the branches, moving in random directions above and below him. He jumped up onto a heavy branch and skidded to a halt when an Agathinon wavered into being directly in front of him. The creature was tall and thin, with angled, almond shaped eyes that glowed with a soft bluish light, though he appeared to be human in all other ways. He wore plate armor that was burnished to a silvery sheen, gleaming in the dappled sunlight that managed to reach them through the foliage above, and he wielded a double-edged longsword and a circular shield with a sunburst design etched into the metal surface.

Surrender what you have stolen, the creature's voice echoed in his mind a mental voice full of outrage and determination.

Tarrin held up his white-furred right arm, displaying the crystal medallion locked within the Adamantite bracer defiantly, his eyes narrow and his expression utterly emotionless. "Come and take it."

So be it, the Deva stated, and it raised its weapon and rushed forward without hesitation. It brought its sword up to swing at him, a testing blow that any seasoned warrior would use at the initial engagement of combat, but it almost fell off the branch trying to stop itself when, instead of trying to evade the attack or parry with his sword, Tarrin instead presented that amulet-bearing bracer to the Agathinon's sword. Tarrin wasted no time taking advantage of the Agathinon's sudden reversal by slashing at its neck with his weapon.

The weapon did not penetrate the Agathinon's skin. The latent magic left over from the creation of the sword was not enough to allow it to do harm to the Deva.

However, much like his battles with the *Cambisi* years ago, Tarrin saw that the swords did lend themselves certain simple unavoidable characteristics that the Agathinon could not resist, such as physics. The raw power behind the blow, delivered at a downward angle against an off balance opponent, sent the

Agathinon flying off the branch and spiralling towards the ground some distance below. Though the Agathinon's sword could not in any way damage or destroy the crystalline amulet embedded in the bracer, the creature nonetheless did not even want to risk it in any way, and Tarrin had exploited that protective bent.

But that was only one Agathinon of many, and Tarrin knew that the Deva were telepathic and could teleport, so that meant that any second now there was going to be a swarm of them converging on his position, and he was armed with weapons that could only be used in defense until he could find the time to imbue them with magical power. He vaulted up twenty spans to another branch, even as several armored Agathinon appeared on the branch he had just vacated. They looked up almost in unison at the sound of the shuddering branch above, and Tarrin saw two of them appear in front of him, weapons raised, one behind the other. He ducked under the heavy blow of a thick-bladed sword and slammed his fist into the Deva's stomach, then drove him forward and into his companion. He knew that he couldn't remain vertical for more than a second, and pushed off the Deva even as he lunged downward. The *whoosh* of air over his head told him everything he needed to know, as an Agathinon had teleported in behind him and had tried to decapitate him with his broadsword. Tarrin's tail lashed out and swiped the feet out from under his surprise attacker as the two in front of him stumbled backwards, missed the narrowing branch, and then toppled over. The one behind slammed into the branch on his side, and his lower half slid off the branch. He let go of his weapon and scrambled to hold onto the branch, clawing at the bark, but Tarrin's tail reared up and then slammed down into his face, breaking his nose and dislodging him from his tenuous grip. He too fell towards the branches below, but another Agathinon simply appeared in his place, his sword and shield held at the ready. Tarrin had to twist aside to avoid being skewered, and then again, and then he gasped and rolled aside as another Agathinon popped into being just over his head and tried to stab him through the eye. Tarrin rolled over the edge of the branch, and both Agathinon lunged towards where he was falling, most likely to report to their comrades where he was going. He rolled off and into empty air, but then he vanished to the eyes of the Agathinon.

They never saw it coming. Tarrin's tail had hooked the narrow branch, and he swung around the bottom of the branch, twisted, then came back up and around the other side. He didn't have enough momentum to get back onto the branch, so he planted both swords into the narrow branch, which caused it to shudder. The Deva seemed to understand that something was wrong and started to whirl around to look behind them, but it was too late. Using the two swords as anchors, Tarrin used his arms to power up, brought his legs out and around as his entire body invested into his legs a broad sweeping circular motion. He let go of one sword and swung far out to the side as the nearer of the two Agathinon registered that he hadn't fallen down to the branches below, but it was too late for him now, for he didn't fathom what Tarrin was doing. His legs arced out and then back in with a powerful circular rotation, and his shin made punishing contact with the closer Deva right in the side, striking with so much force that it dented his steel breastplate. The Agathinon was sent flying into his companion, and their momentum carried them far out, blasting them off the branch and sending them hurtling out into empty space. Tarrin landed in a kneeling position on the narrow branch, pausing only to pull his swords free of the branch and preparing to vault up and away from his current position, but yet more Agathinon appeared, one in front and one behind. Tarrin slithered aside even as rose to his feet as the Agathinon behind tried to impale him, then parried aside the sword blow of the one in front of him with his sword. His legs bunched and then flexed, and the two Agathinon watched as he soared straight up and over their heads, arms down and holding his swords out and to the sides, pointed down. His target was a thicker, heavier branch some fifteen spans over them, which ran perpendicular to the branch upon which they were standing. The two Agathinon wavered and vanished, then appeared on the branch above, then turned to intercept the Were-cat on his ascent.

He never arrived.

Under the branch, Tarrin rotated in midair and then struck his feet into the base, driving his claws into the wood. Thrusting both swords through his belt behind him in a quick motion, he hung upside down on the branch as he heard the two Agathinon above him moving on the branch, looking over both sides, trying to figure out where he went. He powered himself up to where he could get his paws into contact with the

branch, and then hung there on the underside of the branch by his claws as the Agathinon seemed to be searching for him. When he heard them change positions, moving to get a better vantage point, Tarrin turned and scabbled along the underside of the branch towards the trunk, faster than a human could run, but making almost no sound, only the faint *skritch-skritch* of his claws digging into the bark. He reached the trunk, then climbed around to the far side of the trunk, away from the Deva, and then rushed upwards by literally jumping up the length of the trunk in surging springs, sending small bits and shavings of bark drifting to the ground far below with each lunge upwards. He wanted to be much higher, up where the branches were smaller and thinner, where a heavily armored Agathinon was going to have serious trouble moving, if his weight didn't break the branches first.

A flash of light to his left was the only warning he got. He pushed off from the trunk with all his might, and he saw a small swarm of small fiery darts of magical power rushing towards where he had been. The seven magical missiles turned effortlessly, homing in on him with unerring accuracy. "*Khizu Shodai!*" Tarrin commanded in the language of Arcane magic, which caused a glimmering shield of magical energy to appear in front of his outstretched paws, which his legs penetrated. He curled in his legs as those magic missiles streaked towards him, and then struck his magical shield, splaying angry reddish-orange light across its shimmering blue surface. The missiles struck the shield in rapid succession but did not penetrate, instead flattening themselves against the shield before vanishing.. That spell of shielding had been specifically created to counter the Magic Missile spell, a spell which created fiery darts of magical power that never missed their target. Tarrin laid out and rotated in the air, selected an appropriate branch, and then hooked it with his claws as he went past. He altered his downward trajectory into a horizontal one, then tucked and somersaulted, and then landed lightly on a branch not far below where he had been.

That spell required line of sight, so a Deva had to be able to see him, and that could only mean that any second now he was going to be confronted by an Agathinon. Tarrin quickly pulled the swords into his paws and turned sideways on the branch so the Deva could not teleport behind him without teleporting out into empty air. The Agathinon appeared to his right, between him and the trunk, his sabre and shield ready. Sparks flew as Tarrin fenced with the Agathinon for a brief moment, the sparks testament to the fury of the clash. This Agathinon was very fast, faster than the others, and he wielded his sabre with exacting precision and confidence. Tarrin's *katana* weaved complex patterns in the air before him as he worked against the Deva's single weapon and shield, each weapon moving in harmonious symbiosis with its mate as the Were-cat fended off the Deva's skillful attack, his sabre slicing curious and effective angles designed to knock Tarrin off balance and leave him open to taking an impact from the front of the Deva's shield. This Deva understood that a shield was not just a defensive tool, it was also a weapon, and this one was trying to use his shield to knock Tarrin off the branch, no doubt into the waiting clutches of many Agathinon who had appeared on the branches below to take advantage of his plummet, or to deny him any chance to land safely on any branch below him. But Tarrin's Ungardt training was still the foundation of his style, and that style caused him to attack his opponent's shield instead of his weapon, to batter it down, damage it, and also force the adversary to work while moving that shield around. Shields weighed *much* more than swords, and working the shield would tire out his opponent even as his relentless assault against it would weaken the shield itself.

The Deva seemed taken aback when Tarrin went after his shield, seeming to play right into his hands. But when he tried to slam the shield into his opponent, the Deva was shocked when the Were-cat simply melted away, despite the fact that the branch was so narrow that neither of them could move to the sides. Tarrin's *katana* slashed into the shield a multitude of times as the Deva tried to withdraw his shield, battering at it and pushing the Deva back. The Deva was even more shocked when the Were-cat suddenly vanished from in front of him, only the glimpse of a tail rising up and out of sight. The Deva looked up to see the Were-cat in the air, spinning lazily in the air while in a layout position, and spinning away from the Deva. The Agathinon moved to rush forward, but another Agathinon appeared on the branch before him, which would have been behind the Were-cat, and in that moment the Agathinon realized that the Were-cat would not have enough momentum to get behind the Agathinon that had just teleported onto the branch.

The Agathinon who had just appeared suddenly buckled as Tarrin landed on top of him, a foot on each shoulder, as the Were-cat's entire body seemed to hunch over that perch, until his elbows were on either side of the Agathinon's helmet. Those elbows suddenly cinched that helmet and *wrenched* it, twisting it askew and causing the metal helm to cover the eyes of the Deva, blinding him. The sabre-wielding Agathinon drew himself up short from his forward surge as the Were-cat slid his legs down the breastplate of the Agathinon on which he had landed, then he spun backwards and out of sight, only his shins and feet visible. It confused the Agathinon for just a split second, but by then it was too late to warn his companion or react. Those shins suddenly crossed over the victim's breastplate as the Were-cat's paws appeared behind and between the legs of the Agathinon, sword-holding fists punching in to give him traction, and then his entire body flexed. The Agathinon was suddenly yanked from being bowed forward to being whipped backwards in an arc that would carry him downwards. Instead of letting go and throwing his victim, the Were-cat kept his legs locked around the chest of his victim, carrying him in a powerful, swift arc.

The Agathinon in Tarrin's clutches impacted the branch head first, caught in the scissors of Tarrin's legs, and the Were-cat had used every ounce of his power to make that impact as punishing as possible. There was a loud *clang* as the Deva's head slammed into the branch, causing its entire length to shudder violently as the Deva's body collapsed around his head. His body literally bounced off the branch, but Tarrin's legs released him even as he was carried into the air along with the Deva's body. He twisted in the air and landed on a foot, knee, and fist as his victim's body spun wildly off to the side, and then dropped down and out of sight, only the occasional loud *clang* reaching them to inform them that the body was bouncing off the branches below on its trip to the ground.

The sabre-wielding Agathinon was so taken aback by this bizarre tactic that he almost missed the Were-cat lunging at him from that kneeling position so quickly that it seemed impossible. The air between Tarrin and the Agathinon was a blur of black metal, steel, and sparks as the Deva furiously worked to keep those swords away from him, as they continued to cut into, nick, bite, and otherwise batter the Deva's shield with almost obsessive determination. But the instant the Deva tried to pull back his shield and parry, those swords would seek out his head or neck, forcing him to continue to sacrifice the integrity of his shield, not even giving him an instant to recover from his defensive posture and regain any kind of footing against the Were-cat. Tarrin had already figured out that these Agathinon had no idea that his swords couldn't hurt them, so they were acting as if they *could*. Usually that was the best course of action. But in this case, Tarrin didn't *want* to connect with a Deva in a way that would allow them to see it and understand that his weapons could do no harm, it would rob him of an important advantage. The one he had hit before had been struck from behind, and the Agathinon he'd struck wouldn't have been able to really tell the difference between the blade and Tarrin's paw or arm, not when one was hit that hard.

Again, Tarrin sensed that this would be the perfect time for another Deva to appear behind him and try to take advantage of his focus on the one before him, and he reacted. He hopped back just a tiny bit even as an Agathinon appeared behind him, but he was so close to the Agathinon that there was barely a finger's width between the Agathinon's breastplate and Tarrin's back. The Agathinon staggered backwards when his vision was filled with nothing but Tarrin's braid, and that move proved to be foolish. Tarrin lifted one foot, tilted his hips, then raised one paw as he lowered the other to counter his momentum as he performed a standing split-kick. Tarrin's foot claws punched in under the Agathinon's helmet, snapping his head backwards with so much force that it would have ripped the head right off a human had he been kicked in that manner. Glittering red blood flew in a high arc from the Agathinon's chin and throat as he was picked up off the branch by the impact, but a foot that when straightened out was nearly two spans over the Agathinon's head. That Agathinon sailed backwards in a lazy arc, then slammed into the branch nearly ten spans behind Tarrin, landing on his shoulder. He flopped over onto his back, bounced off the branch, then slid over the side and disappeared into the gulf below.

The Deva before him seemed startled, and in that split second of inaction, Tarrin struck, he struck in the only manner he had available to him to permanently take these Agathinon out of action, he struck completely out of reflex, before he even thought about what he was doing. Tarrin's right paw released the sword,

causing it to spin out of his grip, and he lanced forward. The Agathinon tried to move to defend himself, but that split second of surprise was a fatal delay. Tarrin's paw lashed in between the Agathinon's shield and sword, struck his breastplate, and then penetrated into him. Tarrin's paw drove into the Deva, and then reached *through* him, *beyond* him, reaching through the dimensions and reaching into that place where the Agathinon's soul was kept.

Again, he felt...the *power*. His paw grabbed hold of what he sought, and it was like grabbing hold of pure energy, of solid fire, and caused intense tingles to coarse up his arm, and caused him physical pain. But Tarrin was committed now, and there was only one thing to do. He took a firm grip on the shuddering Agathinon's soul, put a foot on his hip, and then pulled with all his might. Again, he felt that powerful resistance, a sudden counterforce that grabbed his paw and wrist and pulled back, tried to pull him into the Deva's body. The Deva's sabre fell from a nerveless grip and feebly tried to grab the arm driven into him to prevent him from completing the grisly task, his glowing eyes wide with shock and fear, staring at him with mute supplication, almost *pleading*. In that moment, with his arm in that place where the Deva dwelled, he could almost hear a sudden cacophony of sound that was not sound, a resounding chorus of agony and dismay, as if thousands of voices rose up in unison and cried out in fear, in pain, and in anger. Tarrin felt that cry pierce his soul, and it filled with him with sudden nameless dread, so powerful that it chilled his very soul.

With strength born of desperation, Tarrin tore his arm free of the Deva, but it did not come out empty. A glimmering crystal amulet was clenched in the bloody paw, blood that turned to fine red dust and fell away from him even as the body before him seemed to shudder, fell to its knees, and then crumbled in on itself and decayed away to dust within the span of three heartbeats.

Tarrin had to resist a sudden panic. Such *power*! And such *fury*! In that moment he had heard the telepathic communion of the Deva, and they had felt the pain of their companion as Tarrin had ripped out his soul! The act of it left him suddenly weak and dizzy, as the strength he had been forced to exert to pull the amulet through bled away from him, causing him to sink to one knee. It would have been the perfect opportunity for the Deva to strike, but they too were momentarily stunned, for they had felt the pain of their brother, they had felt what it was like to have one's soul torn away, and it was not something from which any of them could quickly recover.

Shaking it off, he slowly stood up, as a sudden wind rustled the leaves above and below and pulled at his braid and tail. He held the amulet before him, looking down at the starburst design, and could only feel... cold. He had touched on the power beyond all comprehension, and though it still throbbed through his arm, the touch of it, the feel, was both exhilarating and terrifying. The power echoing through his arm made the rest of him feel cold. Without much thought, he beckoned to the sword he had cast aside, and it rose up from the abyss below and into his waiting paw, a paw already holding the amulet. He had nowhere to put the amulet, and he couldn't hold it anywhere but in his right paw, so he set down his other sword, gritted his teeth, and took the amulet in his left paw. It burned his paw, driving shooting pains up his arm, set both of them down, and then cast a fast spell, making four precise gestures. The amulet then shrank visibly, becoming smaller and smaller, until it was the size of a gold noble. He picked it up and then the sword, pressed the amulet against the base of the blade, and then cast another spell, a spell which made the metal of the sword tractable. He pushed the amulet into the metal until it was snugly secured, then ended the spell, which caused the sword's metal to become impervious once again. With the amulet embedded in the blade, it put the amulet in something that he could touch with either paw, and something he could quickly and easily discard if he found a desperate need to distract the Deva. He was fairly certain that if he threw the sword away, they would go after the sword and not him.

He had wasted too much time, so caught up in the need to put the amulet somewhere that he had ignored an obvious need to move. If he had shaken off the effect of what he had done, then the other Deva must have begun to recover as well, and they would be coming after him. He had to move, to change positions and get out of sight before that spellcaster realized that he had a clear view of him and could cast spells without

endangering any of the others. He turned and bolted down the branch, then vaulted twenty spans over a gulf to set a foot on a branch running sideways, then pushed off and soared through thirty spans of empty air to land on the very tip of a narrow branch that descended sharply down with numerous smaller branches jutting from it at odd angles. He navigated that branch expertly and then jumped up to another branch, pushed off the side, then landed on a branch on the far side of the trunk he had just circumnavigated. He didn't miss a step when he saw an Agathinon in front of him, hunched over on a wide but short branch, breathing heavily as he tried to recover from the pain of being telepathically linked to the one that had had his soul stripped from him. The Agathinon whipped his head up to look at Tarrin, and there was twisted on his face a look of utter *rage*. He took one look at the sword, with the crystal amulet affixed to the base of the blade, and he stood up and brandished his heavy spiked mace and shield.

"Come on," Tarrin hissed, his eyes flaring with the unholy greenish aura that marked his anger, ears laying back as he held his swords out and low, an extension of his usual slouching fighting stance. "I still have one more sword that needs decorating."

The sounds of weapons clashing marred the sound of the wind through the leaves as the infuriated Agathinon launched himself at Tarrin with almost suicidal furor. Tarrin turned aside the spiked mace with his swords again and again and again, taking a few steps back to absorb the full impact of the Deva's charge, his clawed feet navigating the uneven branch with light deftness. The Agathinon pressed with frenzied eyes, his spiked mace trying to rip Tarrin's face off with every blow, leaving himself almost enticingly open to Tarrin's swords...but those were openings he could not exploit, lest the fact that his weapons could do no harm to the Deva become known. He instead worked on stalling the Deva's charge with solid defense, strong parries and lightning-fast dodges without giving up any more ground to the Agathinon, until he had the Deva back on his heels instead of on the balls of his feet. The Deva was pushed back with several strong blows to his shield, threatening to overbalance him and send him careening to one side and off the branch. He nearly slipped on a knot in the narrow branch as he took a step backwards, but recovered before Tarrin could knock him completely off balance and deliver a kick.

Something struck him heavily from above and behind, and he cursed inwardly when he realized that more Deva had recovered. One had appeared over his head instead of behind him, and had landed atop him without any weapons in his hands. This one grappled with Tarrin, grabbing at his arms and trying to pull them down, to give his companion an opening to use his mace, but it was the hand reaching for the bracer and sword holding Deva amulets that was most frenzied, most desperate, as the Deva struggled to reach the captured souls of his brothers.

The Deva's body flinched, and then he fell forward in a cloud of glittering gold as the body of Tarrin Kael beneath simply exploded into a harmless cloud of dust. He landed heavily on the gnarled branch, his shoulders slid over the side, and then he toppled head over heels over the side of the branch. The mace-wielding Deva looked at the cloud of dust in mute shock, so much so that he didn't sense or see the looming shadow that rose up behind him. He was twice as surprised when Tarrin Kael's foot slammed into the back of his head, stunning him and sending him careening forward. He slammed heavily into the trunk of the massive tree, rebounded, his foot came down on empty air, and then he tumbled off the branch to begin the three hundred span fall to the forest floor below.

Tarrin glanced over the branch, his expression mildly amused. "Surprise," he said softly.

He sensed movement behind him, and whirled around, swords held ready. Before him was a blue-skinned humanoid with purple hair tied into a topknot but shaved on the sides, wearing black baggy trousers with a red sash. He wore an ornate breastplate similar to those of the Agathinon, and he wielded a scimitar and a round steel shield with a sunburst design enamelled upon it. Tarrin had seen pictures of these beings in Kimmie's spellbooks, it was a Djinn, a denizen of the Elemental plane of Air. But this was *not* a Djinn. The sense of this creature was *holy*, just as it was with the Deva...Tarrin wasn't much of a god, but he had enough divine power to be able to see through this false shape and see the truth within. This was an

Agathinon, utilizing some kind of magic to shapeshift into a form that could defy gravity.

Surprise, the Deva mirrored, brandishing his scimitar.

In an instant, Tarrin had lost the advantage. The airborne Deva, who could float, hover, and dart back and forth, harried Tarrin with his lone scimitar, then would slide back and out of reach any time it was worked out of an offensive position. Tarrin wasted long moments fighting the floating Deva in a running battle that went all the way down to the end of the branch, as he carefully tested out the Deva's ability to react, testing his reflexes. The Deva suddenly backed off, making Tarrin pause for a split second to try to understand this unusual maneuver. Why back off when he had the advantage?

He almost lost his head as another Deva roared in, himself wearing the form and shape of Djinn, arcing in out of nowhere and trying to decapitate the Were-cat with his longsword. Tarrin saw him at the last instant and ducked, then reversed his direction and launched himself off the branch in the wake of the hurtling Deva, using him as a shield. The Deva lanced down and under the branch, out of sight, and the Deva whom he'd been fighting gaped in astonishment as the Were-cat rose up over the form of the Deva who was flying down, leading not with his swords, but with his feet. Both feet impacted the Deva squarely in the chest at a downward angle, striking so hard that Tarrin was launched straight up after the impact even as the Deva was slammed downward. The Deva struck a branch crossways, right across the lower back, bowing around it in an unnatural manner. Tarrin drove both swords into the branch above him as the Deva slid off the branch below head first, slowly, then somersaulted down into the tangle of branches below, bouncing off them at odd angles on his way down.

Tarrin didn't have long to consider things. Another Deva posing as a Djinn raced in, and it was then that Tarrin understood that they were using magic to take an airborne form, *all* of them, because fighting him on the branches had proved to be difficult for them. Tarrin had to curl up and around the branch above him to get out of the path of the Deva's sabre, then he ducked another Deva, then had to jump clear as a third came at him from yet another angle.

Too much open space. They had too much room to fly. He didn't even glance, he simply vaulted up, pushed off a branch, then another, then another, rising higher and higher as he vaulted effortlessly from branch to branch, getting higher, where the branches beneath his feet became smaller, shorter, thinner, and their density thickened with every new branch he touched. At first it was a simple matter of adjusting himself to reach the next branch, but the higher he went, the more branches there were to choose from, and the less room with which to maneuver. He found himself slithering like a snake through the gaps in the branches as the Deva beneath gave chase, threading themselves through the holes and gaps at a faster speed than that which Tarrin could manage climbing, allowing them to slowly but steadily catch up.

They caught up to him in a small hollow in the maze of brown, and the Were-cat immediately established that in this area, they had no advantage. The branches to each side made it difficult for them to simply dart out of reach, for the multitude of branches about allowed the Were-cat to simply chase them as they backed off. Two of them engaged Tarrin in that small hollow in the branches, and they were quickly put on the defensive. The Were-cat was a whirlwind of explosive movements, falling on the pair like a Revenant in sight of his quarry, his two swords blurring in the confined space, seeking them out, forcing them to fence desperately to keep them away. They faced him fearlessly, until he drove his right sword into the branch to his side, released it, and then spread out his fingers of that white-furred paw, claws out, and drove it right towards the torso of the nearer Deva. That move, that action, caused instant panic in the two Deva, causing the one his paw attacked to hurtle backwards, slamming into several branches, breaking them in his desperate rush to avoid contact with that paw. The other one, instead of fleeing, charged ahead in a frantic attempt to kill him before he could turn that deadly paw against him, lancing his sword in to stab Tarrin in the side, right under his arm. Tarrin lunged backwards, his back hitting a crossing branch behind him, and he simply rolled over it as the Deva passed in front of him. The Deva turned in his trajectory with unnatural agility and drove his sword at the Were-cat in a broad stroke, but Tarrin rolled clear of its arc, his feet coming down on the

fork of the branch beneath. He pushed off from that foundation, the Deva's legs clearly in his vision as he exploded from under the branch. The Deva tried to rise up and over the branch to stab him on the other side, but all he saw were the Were-cat's feet disappearing under the branch.

Tarrin grabbed hold of the Deva by the foot, and yanked it along as he slid along the branch, turning on the branch and whipping the Deva along with him, slamming him against the branch with stunning force. Instead of letting go, Tarrin slammed him into a branch beside him as he regained his feet, slammed his head into a branch above them, then grabbed hold of that foot with both paws, spun in a circle, whipped the Deva behind him and then over his head, and then drove him directly towards his companion. His companion tried to catch him or break his fall, causing him to impact his companion with stunning force. Both of them were driven out of the cubby in an explosion of shattering branches and twigs, and Tarrin distinctly saw one grab the other, then both vanished in the blink of an eye.

"Can't teleport away without taking me with you as long as I have hold of you, can you Deva?" Tarrin asked absently to no one in an unholy voice, grabbing his sword and then climbing up into denser and denser foliage, where he had to twist and turn, where there was no room to fight unless one had the agility and suppleness of a Were-cat. He could see six of the Djinn-transformed Agathinon down under him, looking up, pointing, though they made no sounds. They were obviously debating how to get at him, or calling on aid from others, or both. But they didn't hesitate for long. In unison, all of them shimmered and blurred, their forms compacted, until he saw himself looking at six red-skinned, horned creatures wielding the weapons the Agathinon had been carrying them shrunk down as well.

Mephits! They were denizens of the Elemental planes, minor creatures, but some of them could innately fly, such as the Air and Fire mephits. Those were Fire mephits, and they were small, quick, and agile. They were perfect shapes for fighting in the terrain to which Tarrin had moved.

They moved in a group, showing Tarrin two things. First, that they were intelligent, very much so. They knew that it was dangerous, almost suicidal, to try to fight him one on one, not when all he had to do was touch one of them to drive his paw in and try to take their souls. Secondly, it showed him that they were adapting quickly to his tactics, learning, trying to exploit his decisions. He still was puzzled over one thing, though. Aside from one use of a very low-level wizard spell and their use of their ability to teleport, and this new shapechanging trick, they had not tried to use any magic at all. Why? Agathinon had innate magical powers, why weren't they using them? The only reason Tarrin could think of was that they were still trying to *stop* him instead of *kill* him. They were trying to take the soul amulets he'd taken away from him, and it seemed to him that they were unwilling to escalate the matter beyond a certain point. They didn't want to make him furious and cause him to attempt to destroy the amulets, that was the nearest thing he could figure. They had been trying to ambush him, and the one Deva who had actually managed to get through his defenses had not gone after him, he had instead tried to go after the amulet on his bracer. And he also realized that they had not yet really tried anything overtly lethal.

That had to be it. Ironic, that. They were in the same fix he was in with his looming fight with Spyder, unwilling to take it past a certain point, and struggling to come up with a way to achieve victory while remaining within the boundaries they had set for themselves.

Tarrin sucked in his breath, reflexively turning his head to look towards his right.

No, they'd been *waiting*.

Tarrin could feel it even at that great distance, an aura of *power*. There was a new Aasimon here, and it was *not* an Agathinon, or a Deva. This one was tremendously powerful, so powerful that the divine part of Tarrin's soul sensed its presence even from a distance.

It was a Planetar.

A Planetar, the captains and colonels of the ranks of the Deva. They were beings of tremendous power, with a stunning array of innate magical abilities, both offensive and defensive, that made them terrifying foes. They were the middle grade of Aasimon between the Deva and the Solar, field commanders who only appeared when things were seriously wrong.

For the Deva, this situation classified as *seriously wrong*. And so, they had summoned one of the heavy hitters of the Aasimon to help deal with the situation.

Tarrin gave a slow, inward little smile. Well, that proved that. Now he knew that if he aggravated the Deva enough, or posed enough of a threat, they would summon a stronger Deva to assist.

That was exactly what he wanted to know. And what was more, now everything he needed to know was in place for the time when he had to go after a Solar. His plan would work. He already had the *how* and *where* planned, the only issue had been *when*. And what he just learned settled the issue of *when*. He could tackle a Solar whenever he was ready to undertake that task.

The Agathinon, in their mephit forms, looked confident as they formed up some distance away, preparing to harry the Were-cat out of his sheltered cubby. No doubt they already had a plan in place for driving him out into a position where the Planetar could appear and attack, and he had little doubt that the Planetar was not going to be as careful or as meticulous as the Agathinon. That Planetar was here to fight, and that was exactly what he was going to bring to the table, not this careful, measured, restrained ballyhoo that the Agathinon were trying.

Now it was time to show them that *he* had been holding back as well. He hadn't even used a fraction of his ability in this little confrontation, testing his ability to face the Deva without his powers, which was going to be important later on. They had been holding back to protect the amulets of their brethren, but Tarrin had been holding back to ensure he could hold his own against Deva without using his powers. He had only been forced to fall back on his powers once, and that had been a reflex action. There were any number of ways he could have extricated that Agathinon off his back without resorting to his divine abilities.

And now he knew.

"*Ko jzi BAKH zheel!*" Tarrin intoned as he stood, then he stomped one foot on the branch, then another, completing the somatics of the Arcane spell. His legs were suddenly imbued with great power, amplifying his own muscles, and it caused him to launch from the branch beneath him with such force that it splintered the branch at the trunk, breaking it. Tarrin streaked upwards with his paws, wrists, and swords crossed before him to keep the slashing branches from hitting him in the face. Tarrin exploded from the green sea of foliage, like an emerald ocean of leaves that rolled like waves in the gentle warm wind, lancing upwards like a crossbow bolt, exposing himself to the view of the twelve winged Deva circling high above the canopy to search him out. As one, the twelve Deva, six pairs of them, banked and dove towards him, seeking to strike at him before he dropped back down into the foliage and vanished. Tarrin's upward momentum slowed, until he hung in midair for that split second where gravity overcame the power of his magically augmented jump.

Now it was time to demonstrate the other side of the equation to the Deva that would cause the Solar to come to him on ground of his own choosing, at a time of his own choosing.

In that instant of motionless, Tarrin closed his eyes and focused all his attention, all his willpower, inward. He became keenly aware of the feel of the Demonic amulet against his left forearm, felt the dark stain of evil that pulsed within it, and he felt the power that it contained. It was power that was *his to command*.

He reached out with his will and touched that power.

Instantly, he felt the dark taint of the Demon surge into him, try to go immediately into his soul to twist it, to transform him into a Bodak. However, the taint found in this prey a mind, a will, a force, so strong that it was stopped, turned aside, and then that power grabbed hold of it and commanded it, forced it to listen, demanded it to submit. The taint of Demon was taken aback at the raw force of will in this abomination, this being that was neither mortal nor god, a force of will so overwhelming that it was subjugated to that will before it could reach the soul.

With a squeal of fury and fear, the taint of Demon retreated from its attempt to taint Tarrin's soul and did as it was commanded. It called upon the innate power of the *vrock* whose soul Tarrin had stolen, wrapped Tarrin within that power, and then teleported him away.

And since the Deva could not track him, detect him, or locate him in any way, it meant that there was no way for them to know where he had gone, or even if he was still on the same plane of existence.

The Deva hurtling towards him saw the Were-cat open his eyes, smile evilly, then simply *vanish*. And even from that distance, they knew. They knew that the Mortal God had somehow commanded the powers of a Demon using the soul amulet he had taken.

And they knew then that he could do the same with the amulets he had taken from the Deva.

They realized that now, there was a being lurking in the multiverse that could command the powers of darkness and light, of chaos and law, of good and evil, a being holding in his hands the power of both the Demons and the Deva, and a power that would only grow as he took more and more amulets, gained access to more and more power.

And in that moment of awful clarity, they knew *fear*.

Directly over his marking point, Tarrin Kael wavered into existence, but it was neither a majestic nor triumphant appearance. His form appeared, and then immediately started plummeting towards the foliage canopy below as his mind swam in pain and shock, as the aftereffects of touching on the corruption of a Demon swam through his mind. He was only dimly aware that he was falling towards the ground as he struggled to recover his senses, tried to clear the dark *evil* that tried to take up a residence in his mind. For a long, torturous moment Tarrin struggled against the taint, until he managed to completely push it free of his mind, push it away from his soul, and regain his faculties enough to understand what was happening to him.

Wings erupting from his back, his power arrested his fall, slowed him down to where he could pick a thin area of vegetation and slip through. He ghosted down through the many branches, down hundreds of spans, until his feet made gentle contact with the mossy earth.

Goddess, what a *horrifying* sensation! In the moment he called on the power in the amulet, it opened a window into the mind, body, and soul of a Demon. In that fleeting instant, it was like *he* was a Demon, full of dark intent. It was like worms crawling through his soul, and it was *not* a sensation he would enjoy repetitively.

Putting a paw to his head, he banished the last vestiges of the sensation out of his mind, but he was fully aware of the feel that the taint itself was still there, still lurking within him like a toxic shadow. There was that feeling of lingering corruption, and then there was the burning in his left paw and arm. He looked down at it, and saw that his paw looked as it always did, with black fur and pads, but the claws of his paw were now blood red, where before they had always been beige.

Just like sticking his arm into the dimension of the Deva had changed it, touching the evil of a Demon had left a visible mark on him. He looked at his arm for long moments, turning it to and fro to ensure that the only change was the color of his claws. He then held up his white-furred arm with its golden claws and

compared it. One touched by the power of ultimate good, the other tainted by the power of ultimate evil. Just as Mother Wynn had warned, using the power of the amulet had opened himself to that power; even now he could feel the faint stirrings of that darkness inside him, trying to linger, trying to fester, but unable to find any purchase within his body, mind, or soul.

But, if Mother Wynn was right, he could protect himself from that taint, from becoming a Bodak, by calling on the power of the amulet of a Deva. By balancing his use of them, he could protect himself from both the taint of the Demons and the purity of the Deva.

Good and evil, law and chaos, all contained within the left and right arms of a powerless god with a mortal's mind. Such were the ironies that summed up the wry sense of humor of existence.

There were other things to do than stand there and fret over something over which he had no control, and he'd been taught long ago that if you couldn't do anything about it, leave it be and get on with the things you *could* do something about. He couldn't do anything about the invasion of the powers of the universe into his body, but he could go find a Mortai and find out where the One was hiding.

And that was exactly what he was going to do.

It took him only half an hour to track down an animal denizen of this plane, who was both polite and helpful, even taking him to where the boundary between the Realm of Day and the Realm of Twilight was located. The dog-sized rabbit wished him well and then bounded off, leaving him to stare at a dark hollow in a massive tree that had to be fifty spans across and reach four hundred spans into the sky, a deep bole that was dark within, its interior hidden. Tarrin grabbed the edge of the bole and put a foot on the lip, looking into it, testing the air. There was a curious dryness to the air in the bole, unnatural for a dark, enclosed space. He stepped into it and felt the darkness swallow him up, blocking out all light. There was no gravity, and he felt himself floating within that darkness for long seconds. He was beginning to get a little nervous and unsettled, but then light appeared before him, a tiny pinprick of light, but it grew rapidly before his eyes. He realized he was moving towards the light, and that light was the opening on the other side, the entry into the Realm of Twilight, the second layer of the planes of the Happy Hunting Grounds.

At first he thought he would catapult out of the hole, but its approach slowed, until he was drifting just outside it. Then gravity returned, and his feet came to rest on dry, soft wood. The light beyond the bole was reddish in hue, like the light of a sunset. He put his paw on the edge of the bole and stepped out, then took stock of his surroundings.

The tree holding the bole was massive, similar of dimension to the one on the other side, but this one opened to a large meadow where three elk-sized deer grazed contentedly. The sky was reddish in color but cloudless, and the hint of a sun showed just behind the treeline before him. He looked up at the tree holding the bole, and saw that too towered into the sky, nearly as tall as the Tower of Six Spires in Suld.

"Pardon me," Tarrin called to the three oversized deer in the meadow. "Would any of you know where I can find a Mortai?"

One of them raised its head, regarding him with huge brown eyes. "They float of their own whim," it replied in a husky yet feminine voice. "If those wings allow you to fly, then searching from the air is your best option. They are hard to see from the ground."

Tarrin glanced back absently. He hadn't realized that he'd not retracted his wings. "Thank you," he called, causing his feet to rise from the earth. His wings flared, and then he raced into the sky, leaving the three animals behind, their forms shrinking beneath him as he soared up over the canopy of the trees, higher and higher, until he was three thousand spans above the foliage below. From that high up, he could see the large red sun clearly, half of its circumference hidden behind the horizon. But much to his surprise, there

was *another* sun behind him, at the same position in the sky. One sun rising, the other sun setting...or maybe it was just the same sun, and the half he could not see in front of him was the half that he could see behind.

Out here, in the Outer Planes, virtually anything was possible.

Tarrin's eyes scanned the skies carefully, methodically, as he turned a very slow circle in his hover. His eyes strained to find any irregularity in the reddish-streaked skies, any hint of a cloud, any clue that he would find a Mortai. But there was nothing but clear red-stained sky, in every direction.

"You have strange wings," a voice called from behind and below him. Tarrin turned to look, and saw a hawk flapping towards him, a hawk that was five times the size of a normal one, a bird that looked almost too large to be able to fly.

"They're made by magic," he answered as it reached his height, and then circled around him. Tarrin turned in his hover so that he was always facing the huge sentient animal.

"It is seemly that you strive to create by magic that which you were denied in birth," the huge bird said sagely. "You are unusual. You have the smell of a god, but there is no power within you. The land does not bend to your presence, but I can feel your weight in the air. What are you?"

"I was once a god," Tarrin answered truthfully, "but I died and was restored to life as a mortal. My existence is what you might call unnatural. I am neither a mortal or a god."

"Ah," it said simply. "What brings you to the Beastlands? Are you seeking to correct the unnatural state of yourself?"

"In a way," he answered. "I come seeking the wisdom of a Mortai. Have you seen one?"

"No," it answered. "But I know that they find pleasure to float near the domain of a goddess named Breina. They find the winds that blow from the storms that cross her domain pleasant. If you seek a Mortai, approaching the domain of Breina and waiting for one to appear to take enjoyment from the winds would be wise."

"Thank you for that information. Could you tell me where the domain of Breina is?"

"Towards the sun I face," it answered when its beak lined up with one of the half-hidden suns. "It is a journey of much time, even for one who flies. But you must cross the domain of Grobarn the Hunter to reach it. Nothing that moves is safe within his domain, not even those who fly."

"I don't have that much time," Tarrin grunted. "I'll have to cheat. Thank you for your help, friend. You've saved me a great deal of time."

"Good luck to you," the hawk told him, then it banked and soared away from him.

Tarrin hovered in midair, then raised his right arm to look at the amulet. He had to use them in tandem, in balance, and he *could not* get to where he thought to use them when it was convenient. This was an emergency. He didn't have days to waste, and he certainly didn't want to cross the home domain of a hostile god. He would be massacred, in short order.

No, this was important enough.

Centering his thoughts, he focused his eyes on the crystalline amulet embedded in the twisted-strand bracer on his right wrist, idly noting the shaggy fetlocks peeking through the holes in the mesh, and then

reached out to that amulet. He already knew how they worked, what they did; Demons and Deva could teleport almost anywhere, as long as they knew where they were going. They didn't even really need to know where that place was. The description that the hawk gave him was enough location for him to get there.

Take me there, he thought, commanding the amulet. *To the nearest edge of the domain of Breina, at this height in the air.*

The amulet seemed to shiver, and then its power rushed into him, flowing up his changed arm and into his body. Just as the amulet of the Demon had done, it surged into him and directly tried to reach his soul, to transform it into something akin to itself, a noble being of power, goodness, and law, a loyal minion of the God of Gods. And just as the Demonic essence had discovered, Tarrin's powerful personality and his force of will was more than a match for this gentle, loving power...yet a power that sought to subvert his body and soul just as much as the Demon's power had. Where the Demonic power sought to corrupt out of evil, hatred, and greed, this sought to alter him to match its own nobility, seeking to change him in the innocent belief that he would be better off being a Deva. Tarrin resisted that powerful force, focused all his will into the task of forcing the soul within the amulet to obey.

And in the end, unable to reach his soul, unable to turn aside the indomitable will of the Were-cat, the amulet capitulated and did as it was commanded.

With a silvery waver, the body of Tarrin Kael vanished.

Instantaneously, Tarrin Kael appeared a great distance from his previous location, many days' travel, safely on the far side of the domain of Grobarn, and within sight of the domain of Breina. That boundary was visible below him, for the domain of Breina was a place of mists and fog, where the trees were more evergreen than hardwood, and there was a constant, steady cool wind blowing from the misty interior.

Tarrin didn't get the chance to enjoy that view, for he was trying to recover from the backlash of using the power of a Deva. Mother Wynn had been right; the power of the Deva was just as dangerous as the power of the Demons. It was just as invasive, just as dangerous, just as determined to transform him into a being that followed its own path. Given half a chance, it would change him, and that single use of the amulet did more than just change the color of his arm this time. He could feel the vestiges of that power lurking within him, even as he felt the taint of the Demon hiding inside, two separate powers that wanted to reach his soul and corrupt him, to change him, powers that seemed to be separate from each other, even unaware of each other. But two powers that were dangerous to him. He had to fight *both* of them off, for the Demonic taint sensed a moment of weakness and had struck at him, even as the power of the Deva tried to join with his soul and remake it in its own image.

But neither could reach its goal. Tarrin's iron will clamped down on both of them, driving them back, keeping them at bay, maintaining control.

Shivering, Tarrin blew out his breath and opened his eyes, and saw that touching on the power of a Deva directly had also left its mark on him. His right arm, which had been turned white when he reached through a Deva, now had golden claws, and the fur of his fetlock on his right wrist was now a brilliant, shimmering gold. And inside his mind, he felt the echo of the Deva's power lurking within, weak but determined, waiting for its chance to subvert his soul and transform him into a being of good.

Once both presences within him had been suitably cowed, Tarrin took stock of his location. The amulet had put him exactly where he needed to be, but there were no Mortai here. But that wasn't as important as the fact that he was now where he needed to be. He could simply find a place to camp and wait, even try to contact the local animals and see if they could tell him where a Mortai was, or could possibly tell him how to cause one of them to come.

He descended to the ground in a long, narrow meadow that directly abutted the conifers and cool air that was the personal domain of a god, flaring his wings and flapping them a few times before retracting them back into his back and out of sight. He padded over to a huge fallen tree, walking along the length of the ten span tall log, then he jumped up on top of it and looked up at the sky, looked at the abrupt wall of mist that hung over that line of evergreens across the meadow.

There was little to do now but wait.

Tarrin seated himself atop the log, legs crossed and tail wrapped around them to keep it out from underfoot, took out his spellbook, and began to read. After all, there was little else to do.

He spent two days sitting there—or at least he thought it was two days, it was hard to tell time here—waiting patiently for a Mortai to arrive, but had not seen one. He had not seen any indigenous animals, Deva, insects, anything living that was not a plant, in those two days. He would read the spells written in his book, but he always had an eye upward, both to look for Mortai and also to keep an eye out for either Deva or flying animals. He didn't want to have a Deva dive on him out of nowhere.

But sometimes it was hard to keep his attention focused on the spells in his book. The two alien presences that were now inside him were neither silent nor complacent. Both whispered to his soul, promising either joy or terror, the terror of joy or the joy of terror, and they ceaselessly tested the bounds of Tarrin's will, seeking a way to circumvent his powerful mind and reach their goal. Tarrin had such a practiced, disciplined mind, the product of being intimately in touch with the All, a force that could react to his emotions, that the two forces discovered fairly quickly that even when sleeping, Tarrin Kael's mind was a fortress protecting the soul housed within, a fortress that those two entities could not penetrate. Each certainly had its own method of working on his will. The essence of the Demon bounced randomly from cajoling whispers promising dark delights to enraged demands to plaintive wheedling to cunning lies. The essence of the Deva was much more straightforward in its intent, but was itself almost as treacherous as the Demon in its method. It shifted from gentle persuasion to the promise of both power and glory serving in the name of the God of Gods, sounding at times like a man trying to draft him into the military. The Deva never lied, but it did creatively omit certain truths, proudly boasting of what Tarrin could be if he accepted the Deva's power and allowed it to change him, without mentioning the price that came with that power. That price was to be subjugated to the will of the God of Gods, serving as one of his messengers, servants, and soldiers in their eternal struggle to keep the Demons in check and spread the glory of goodness throughout the multiverse.

This puzzled Tarrin. The Deva served the God of Gods, yet also openly campaigned in the name of good. But the God of Gods, the ultimate power, *had* to have in place a great Balance of forces, much like the Balance in his home. Good could not exist without evil, after all. Why were the chosen servants of the greatest god of all working directly in a manner that went against the Balance? It made little sense to him.

The time did let him finalize the next step of his plan after getting what he needed from the Mortai. It was a tricky problem. He had to take something from a Solar that the Solar would *never* surrender. And the instant he took it, the entirety of the Deva would come after him en masse...if they weren't doing it already in their crusade to recover the two soul amulets he'd stolen. A Solar was...well, a Solar was *obscenely* powerful. They possessed a truly stunning array of magical abilities, as well as lethal weapons and great intelligence. Fighting a Solar was literally the same as fighting a god...they were *that* powerful.

And in his current condition, Tarrin couldn't win that kind of fight.

So. If he couldn't take what he needed from a Solar by force, then he had to resort to cunning. The key to it all would be to bring the Solar to him, on ground of his own choosing, when he had the right pieces on the chessboard to make his move. The last question as to whether he could manage it was answered in the fight with the Agathinon, when they summoned the Planetar to assist them. That told Tarrin everything he

needed to know; it meant that when the time came, he could trick the Deva into summoning a Solar, bringing it to him. Once the Solar was there, it was going to be a matter of using deception and guile to steal what he wanted from it. Fighting a Solar head to head was, in his opinion, a last-option scenario. That was fight he would not survive unless he was either lucky or crazy...or maybe both.

Tarrin's plan was something he'd never done before, but it was something that he felt would work. It was simple, yet it also would operate independent of the Solar's own intelligence. Just by showing up, the Solar would fall into the trap, and would have no means by which to think himself out of it. Tarrin would make sure to take every other option away before the Solar was even on the field, trapping it into a single course of action that would give Tarrin his chance to take what he needed without resorting to a direct attack. It *would* be an attack, oh yes, but it would certainly not be done in a manner that would allow the Solar to strike back.

This wasn't going to be a fight. This was going to be an ambush.

That ambush was going to take place on Crossroads, the one place the Deva would never expect him to try a stunt like that, a place where their power was paramount. By tackling a Solar in Crossroads itself, Tarrin was both using their sense of supremacy against them, and pulling a stunt so crazy that they'd never see it coming until it was too late. Only a maniac would take on the Deva in Crossroads.

Tarrin was just that kind of maniac.

After that...Tarrin snorted aloud. He didn't even want to *think* about after that. Because after that, it would be time to go back to Sennadar, and that would mean that he would have to face Spyder. He would rather fight a Solar naked and with only a wooden spoon than face Spyder. In her way, she was ten times more dangerous than a Solar, if only because he could never, would never, do her harm. He had to fight one of his best friends, and defeat her without hurting her, when she sure as hellfire would be trying to hurt *him*.

That too would be the point of no return for him. When he went back home, when he did what he had to do there, he was locking himself into a course of action that would only have one outcome. It was something he didn't want to think about it, because it would be the end of the life he knew, and there would never be any chance of ever getting it back.

But it was what had to be done.

You must be able to make the choices that must be made.

How those words had haunted him over the years, how they had hurt him, but now more than ever they applied to him. This choice was the only choice there was, and yet it was something he approached only with great trepidation and resignation. But it had to be done.

This was his mess, and it was up to him to make things right. No matter what it cost him.

He...sensed something. A force, a presence, a sentience so powerful that it made his mind shudder away from it. It rushed upon him with shocking rapidity, and he felt that presence within sight of him. He stood up quickly, gesturing with his paw to cause his staff to appear in his grip, and his eyes cast their gaze across the meadow and locked upon a figure standing at the edge of the evergreens on the far side.

Breina.

She was a tall, striking figure of a woman, eight spans tall at least, and would stand eye to eye with him. Her skin was a pale blue, like ice, and her hair was a lovely azure blue. There was a gentle mist all

around her, clinging to her naked form like diaphanous silk that caressed her impressive curves, yet concealed nothing. Her face was both strong and lovely, with glowing blue eyes and shapely, elegantly pointed ears that poked through that wild mass of blue hair. But beyond any of that was both the sight and the sense of the titanic power housed within that lovely form. This was a god. In person. She was real, and this close to her, Tarrin could sense the mind-shattering power within her, so powerful that it made his knees weak.

Mother Wynn and Niami had been right. He'd been an idiot for ever thinking he could fight the One in his home domain and win.

One wonders why you lurk on the edge of one's domain, her mind touched him, a mind of endless, vast power.

Tarrin was momentarily awestruck, overwhelmed by her indescribable sense of power, far beyond anything he had ever felt. He could only lower his eyes humbly and ground the butt of his glaive in a non-threatening manner, wondering what wild impulse every gripped him to think that it was going to be any help at all against *that* if she decided to attack him.

"I, I come seeking the guidance of a Mortal," he said in his most respectful manner. "I meant no offense. I was told they sometimes come here to feel the wind coming from your domain, and so I'm waiting for one to arrive."

Ah. Yes, they do sometimes come to ride the winds blowing from one's domain. She paused a moment. You are the one the Deva seek. The Mortal God. Their voices scream out in fury on the winds, and they beseech one and all to tell them where you are. One can see why you enrage them so, given that you carry the souls of two Deva and two Demons with you.

He was dead. He just knew it. This Breina was going to either squash him like a bug, or call in the Deva and let them do it for her.

Don't fear, unique one, her voice washed over him. *The demands of the Deva are not one's concern. They do not serve one, nor does one wish their service. One is not concerned with the causes of good and evil. Approach one, Mortal God. One wishes to get a better look at you.*

Of their own volition, his feet started him moving forward. He padded across the meadow, up to the treeline, and stood before this magnificent female. There was sense of cool dampness about her, like the lingering fingers of a morning fog.

One is Deina, Mistress of the Dawn, bringer of that which renews, harbinger of the promise of the new day, she introduced herself, holding a blue-skinned hand out to him commandingly. Without thought, he took it and kissed the back of it, feeling the limitless power within her. *The rising of the sun and the renewal of the day are my domain, as is the promise of all things that a new day might bring.*

"My name is Tarrin, Mistress Deina," he told her with lowered eyes.

Your touch tells me all. One must admit, one admires your spunk, Mortal God. You make one feel ten thousand years younger with your mischievous ways.

Tarrin felt a moment of raw panic. If she knew—

Be at ease, her mind told him quickly.

“Um, if you don’t serve the cause of good, why—“

Why is one’s domain here, in this plane aligned with goodness? she asked. This is the Realm of Twilight to some, but others call it the Realm of Sunrise. Would you not think of a better place for a goddess of the dawn to reside but in a plane of eternal dawn?

He had to admit, she had an irrefutable argument there.

You seek a Mortai. One will summon one to speak with you.

Tarrin looked up at her. “I would be grateful, but why are you helping me?”

Because one has received something in return, she told him with an enigmatic smile.

“What?”

One has seen the state of your Pyrosia in your mind, and one sees...opportunity there. One has dispatched an avatar to that mortal realm, to try to establish one’s worship. One promises that one will not interfere in the plans you hold there, but neither is one inclined to assist you, she communicated to him with grave seriousness, making an oath to him that she could not break, the word of a god. *One’s intent is only to establish one’s worship in a new mortal plane, no more, no less. And when all is said and done and the Demon Lord is vanquished, one swears that one will not seek to take control, and will work to help rebuild and help the mortals recover. It is not one’s way to seek control, for the dawn lasts only a moment in the span of the day.*

Tarrin looked at her a long moment. She sent an avatar to Pyrosia? There really wasn’t anything he could do, because there was no controlling force on Pyrosia. This Deina could send an avatar there, and nobody could really stop her. There was no Elder God there to deny her. The only relief Tarrin saw out of this was that she promised not to interfere. For that, at least, he was grateful.

One has summoned a Mortai. It should arrive within the moment. One would suggest that you be polite and answer any questions the Mortai asks honestly. They are purveyors of knowledge, and rarely surrender knowledge without receiving knowledge in return. It will most likely seek to engage you in debate before giving you the answers you seek.

Good fortune to you, Tarrin Kael, the odd goddess told him, reaching out and touching her fingertips to his brow. *We will meet again.*

She gracefully walked back among her trees, and the mist quickly concealed her form, until she was hidden from his eyes, leaving Tarrin to stare at where she was in wonder, and confusion. He had *no* idea what just happened. Well, he did, but her actions were incredulous to him. She was sending an avatar to Pyrosia to try to convert mortals, when the entire world was at war with the Demons? And she wasn’t going to help him? But, it wasn’t like there was anything he could do to stop her. That was something only the Elder god of Pyrosia could do, but Pyrosia had no Elder god. There was no force there to stop her from entering or force her to leave except for the Demon Lord...and right now, the Demon Lord had *much* more to worry about than the avatar of a Lesser Goddess appearing on Pyrosia, an avatar that would quickly demonstrate no interest at all in opposing the Demons.

Tarrin learned one important lesson from this, though, and that was to *keep his bloody distance* from gods. To them, he was a mortal, and he had no defense against their powers. Just by touching him, that goddess, Breina, she had read everything in his mind, even his intent, and had seen what was going on in Pyrosia. It was just luck that she was only interested in establishing herself in a new plane, and was not

running there to smite the Demon Lord—which would devastate the world in the process—then pick up the pieces and rule, potentially putting a god worse than the One in control, one just as bad as he had been.

There was a shadow on the ground. Tarrin looked up and saw a cloud forming over his head, but it was more than just a cloud. It was large and billowing, a cumulus cloud with a flat bottom and knobbed, rounded protrusions reaching into the sky, but those folds and curves of the cloud held *faces*. Male, female, human, animal, faces of all kinds, facing all directions, their mouths moving but without sound that he could hear.

It was a Mortai.

Who hast summoned me? Tarrin heard in his ears, but it was a voice with a thousand languages murmuring in his brain, like hearing a thousand men speaking the same meaning in a thousand different tongues. Tarrin had to think a moment to puzzle out the voices who spoke words he could understand, and he was shocked to hear them speaking the languages that he knew. *All* of them. To hear so many words all saying the same thing, in different languages, confused him, forced him to stop and think, to isolate each word and work out how they were strung together when one considered that those languages didn't share common grammatical structure.

"Breina of the Dawn called you at my request," Tarrin shouted from the ground.

A multitude of eyes all looked down at him in eerie unison. *Ah, the Mortal God. Rise up to us and speak of the matter that brings you here.*

Without hesitation, Tarrin rose up from the ground, then streaked high into the air, until he passed the base of the titanic, amorphous, misty being with its many faces. He found himself nearly ten thousand spans off the ground when he reached what he felt was an acceptable altitude, when he was about halfway up the Mortai's height, where some faces looked up, some faces looked down, and the largest face on that side of the creature looked him eye to eye.

Tarrin swallowed shortly, mastering his unease at addressing so alien a being, then got down to business. "I seek rare information and was told that my only hope laid with the Mortai," he called loudly.

There is no need to shout, Mortal God. We are not offended, but we feel that it might strain thy voice to speak so for long. A conversational volume will suffice.

"I—thank you," he said with a nod, speaking in a normal tone. "I come seeking the location of a god," he told them frankly.

Ah, the many voices called. So, thou comes seeking to find the domain of the One.

"How did—"

We know of the events of Pyrosia, it said simply. That thou wouldst come in search of the One is but a logical conclusion. We would be curious as to why thou hast a deathwish. If thou besought Breina of the Dawn to summon us, then thou surely sees the folly of doing battle with a god beyond the mortal realm. Thou hast the spark of the divine within, but thou art mortal.

"My business with the One is my own," he answered. "But I assure you, I'm not going there to throw my life away. I have a plan."

Plans. Yes, the plans of Tarrin Kael are much lauded, both for their folly and for their brilliance. We have seen them, and we are both amused at thy logic and amazed at thy success.

That stung at Tarrin's pride not just a little bit.

Far be it from us to meddle in one of the famous plans of the Mortal God, it said with amusement. Thou seeks the domain of the One. Seek thou the One among the shattered battlegrounds of the first layer of Acheron, the Realm of Eternal War, where the One engages in endless conflict against his neighbors.

Tarrin blinked. "That, that's it? But, Mistress Deina said you'd demand something in return, that you'd want to debate."

Thou art a dangerous entity, Mortal God, the Mortai answered. Even now, the Deva scour the Beastlands in seach of thee to recover what thou hast stolen, and any caught providing thee with assistance will be punished most harshly. We would prefer not to embitter ourselves of the Deva, for we do not enjoy the same protections as Breina of the Dawn. She is immune from the wrath of the Deva. We are not. But, we understand thy haste and urgency, and the importance of thy task. We do not agree with thy method, but we do respect thy goal, and so we shall help thee. Thou art struggling to save a world. We would be amiss to hold thee back in this important task. Remember, Mortal God, seek thou thy enemy on the first layer of Acheron, the realm of eternal war. And know that he is waiting for you.

And with that, without another word, without any warning, the Mortai's gigantic misty form evaporated into the air, vanishing.

Tarrin blinked, and looked around, but the Mortai had vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. He dropped back to the ground, then clenched a fist and stared at the tip of his tail, which had meandered in front of him.

Acheron.

It was a plane of endless war, where titanic cubic blocks, the size of continents, floated in the void of the plane like islands. Each block was the domain of a god, and when those slowly drifting blocks impacted one another, the denizens of each block would boil forth to do war upon the inhabitants of the other block. The battle would rage ceaselessly for as long as the blocks were in contact, and then the blocks would drift away, separating the warring factions. It was a plane of war without end, for a soldier slain in battle simple reformed one day later, a place where beings battled one another for no reason other than the sake of the battle itself. Since no soldier could be killed, and no territory could be conquered, it made the motives for such conflict pointless. The only reason to fight was just for the sake of fighting, a vain and empty pursuit of a goal that could never be accomplished. It was a plane of evil, but evil tinged in the militant rigidity of the soldier, a plane that suited the mentality and personality of the One perfectly. In Acheron, he waged his endless battle to spread his supremacy until he was paramount...but in Acheron, he was but one power among many fighting a hopeless war that he could never win.

And the One was waiting for him.

So be it. It wasn't like the One didn't know that he was coming. And knowing Tarrin was coming was not going to change anything. After all, now he wasn't going there to *kill* the One. Oh, there would be a fight, of that there was no doubt, but Tarrin's goal wasn't to win the fight, his goal was to survive it.

It was something that truly didn't concern him that much. The One was not going to be half the obstacle that the Solar or Spyder were going to be, and those were the tasks that he now had to undertake.

Spyder would have to wait. For now, he had to tackle a Solar. And he already had a plan for that, a plan that would require him to return to Crossroads.

And once there, he would begin his campaign of terror, against both the Deva *and* the Demons. The instant his feet touched the ground of Crossroads, no Demon or Deva would be safe from him.

The Demons were targets for their soul amulets. He'd need one Demon for every Deva amulet he took, else the balance between good and evil would be tilted, and he would run the risk of being overwhelmed by whichever power gained too much sway over him.

And he was going to take a *lot* of them. He would become the hunter, stalking his prey, and then taking what he wanted from them. He would bring true fear to the Demons and Deva of Crossroads...and that would set up the conditions he needed to get the Solar they would send to stop him into his trap, where he could take what he needed without risking a direct confrontation, a confrontation he might not survive.

Oh no, he'd come too far to risk losing *now*. He would see this through to the end, and he was going to prevail, because he was just too damned stubborn to accept anything less.

Crossroads had always been a plane of enforced peace. Well, that was about to change, because the very beings who enforced that peace were about to become the targets of the one disrupting it.

Throwing a handful of emerald dust into the air, Tarrin chanted the words of the Wizard spell that created gateways. His words were strong and true, and the very air around him vibrated with the power of his voice as he used that powerful Arcane incantation, until a hole in the fabric of this reality formed before him, a scintillating gateway of glowing green smoke. It was a gateway back to the Realm of Day, and Tarrin had opened the gateway right back to the portal stone that would return him to Crossroads.

There was no time to waste, and with so many Deva hunting for him in the Beastlands, it was the perfect opportunity to get back to Crossroads and get himself settled in, prepare his battleground, and get ready to start killing off Demons and Deva until the time and the conditions were right to take on a Solar.

They would never know what hit them.

Chapter 6

It was called the Mytre neighborhood, and it was perfect.

It was located close to the Core, in that area where mortal magic and the innate powers of Outer Planes beings no longer worked, but the innate powers of a Solar still functioned, as far as one could get from the Core and still feel those effects, where the pressing nature of the Core was minimal against one's soul, and was a tolerable sensation. In fact, about one third of the Mytre neighborhood was on the other side of that mystical boundary, which would allow the powers of Deva and Demons and other Outer Planar beings to function. The architecture of the area was that of a dilapidated slum, with a maze of narrow, crooked streets piercing haphazard blocks of tightly packed, slightly run-down buildings that rose nearly four stories into the sky, with numerous side streets intersecting each twisting street many times in a short distance, creating a warped patchwork of streets and alleys that gave one a multitude of directions to run and the ability to quickly break line of sight with anyone even just a few paces behind. The result of this architecture was much like the badlands he remembered in the Desert of Swirling Sands, jagged canyons burrowed deep into the surrounding terrain, but in this case it was meandering alleys deep beneath buildings so close together they were like contiguous walls. From the air, it was almost impossible to see much more than a hundred spans of street before the twisting nature of the narrow avenues hid the street behind a building, and the narrow streets were not wide enough to allow a Deva to fly between the buildings.

This place was the ultimate place to hide. And Tarrin was not the first to come to understand this fact, for the Mytre neighborhood was populated—sparsely—with all manner of shady or suspicious beings, be them mortal or planar in origin. Mortals and Archons made up the vast majority of the population of this stretch of the City, but the occasional Demon was not an uncommon sight, no doubt engaging in nefarious deals with the less than savory residents of this section of Crossroads. It was a dark, dangerous place filled with dangerous people, a place where it was easy to hide and hard to be captured.

It would suit his needs perfectly.

In the three days since he had returned to Crossroads, Tarrin had been very busy. It had taken him nearly a day to find this place, and once he had, he had spent most of the rest of those two days carefully surveying the area, coming to know the knot of streets and alleys so that he would always know where he was within this warren of passages. Much as he had meticulously studied the arena and surrounding neighborhood of Mala Myrr in preparation for battling Jegojah, Tarrin carefully memorized the layout of the Mytre neighborhood in preparation for his upcoming campaign against the Deva, both the streets and the layouts of the buildings within this neighborhood.

Mytre would see no action from him until the very end. This was the place where he intended to confront a Solar, to exploit this neighborhood's unique geography to his utmost advantage in keeping away from the Solar after he attacked it...provided that assault was a success. Up until that time, he would be out in other parts of the City, randomly attacking Demons, then attacking the Deva that showed up in response to the perpetration of violence within the plane. He had a laundry list of things he had to do already laid out in his mind, how many Demons and Deva he would have to kill, how many amulets he would have to take, before he had things prepared for the Solar. One thing that had to happen before he could confront the Solar, however, was that he had to locate and attack a *balor* and take its soul amulet. The *balor* were the mightiest of all the Demons, with tremendous power and formidable magical abilities, and he would need the *threat* of

that power to draw out a Solar. The Deva now knew that he could use the powers of any Demon or Deva whose amulets he possessed...when he got his claws into a *balor* and took that power for his own, his threat to the Deva would increase by exponential degrees, and would set the stage for having a Solar arrive to deal with him.

Taking a *balor* would not be easy. They were *very* powerful creatures, and he had a healthy respect for them and their ability. Taking out a *balor* itself would require planning and preparation; that was not a fight he cared to engage in head-on. For such dangerous prey, ambush was the preferred method of attack.

Maybe he was getting soft, or maybe he was getting timid, but he'd come too far to risk losing now because he was thinking with the wrong brain. He had too many people depending on him.

Or maybe it was finally that the influence of the Cat was removed from his mind. Tarrin did tend to think like a Were-cat even now, despite no longer being one, but the influence of the Cat itself was no longer in his mind, no longer urging him into rash action without thinking things through, and it no longer prevented him from carefully weighing risks and taking a more prudent approach than what was normal for him. The mortal Tarrin probably *would* tackle a *balor* head-on, relying on luck and his own skills and abilities to carry him through to victory after throwing together the barest framework of a plan and charging into it headlong without even a moment's thought. The Mortal God Tarrin was much more cautious, because he had a *hell* of a lot more to lose than just his own life.

No matter what it was, *right now*, Tarrin understood that in his unique position, he was no match for some of the beings and creatures he now had to face, and no amount of bravado or Were arrogance was going to change those facts. The *balor*, the Solar, Spyder, the One, those were opponents that Tarrin dared not face head-on, else he would surely lose. Each of them were going to require a light touch, planning, subtlety, cunning, and above all else, prudence. Oh, to be sure, Tarrin was more than a match against some of them in a physical contest, but these fights were not going to be about who was best in a fight. These were going to be battles of magic and power, and those were weapons which Tarrin no longer possessed in the quantity he once did. Either he had to find a way to remove that magic from the playing field, or he had to strike in a manner such that his opponents could not bring that power to bear.

Removing magic from the playing field was definitely an option. There were twelve separate Wizard spells in his book that dealt with disrupting magic in operation or preventing magic from being used in the first place...and those spells *would* affect the innate powers of a Demon or a Deva. Despite them being natural powers, they were still *magical* effects, and as such were subject to the disrupting power of those spells. The spell he used most often was the Anti-Magic Shell, a spell placed over himself that totally rendered the area around him magic-dead. That was all well and good when they came to fight, but in the fights to come he needed to stop the magic of his prey to prevent easy escape, and the Anti-Magic Shell was a spell not well suited for this, due to its very limited range. He had to physically touch the recipient of the spell, and while that did have certain use, against the more powerful opponents, that wasn't as attractive an option.

There was one spell in his book that was more suited, but it too had a drawback. It was a spell that totally nullified all magic in a *very* large area, about the length of a Suld city block, but the spell only lasted about ten seconds, and the caster had to be *within* the area of effect when it was cast. This spell Tarrin could see being useful for the upcoming hunts, for he only had to be within one block of his prey and on the same street. After casting, he'd have ten seconds to close on his prey before the spell ended and his quarry could teleport away.

Between that spell and the use of the Anti-Magic Shell, Tarrin felt that he had the magic issue under control. Once he took magic off the field, Tarrin was more than a match for a vast majority of Demons and Deva. They were good, but they weren't as good as him.

There were also other ways to go about it, mainly by ambushing them in such a way that they never saw it coming. The soul amulet of the Agathinon he'd taken was going to be extremely handy, because Agathinon had the innate power to shapeshift, into any living form. *Any* living form. Tarrin had already tested it, and found that it was more than effective. The power of the Agathinon had allowed him to shapeshift into a *Demon*. He'd had the other powers of a Demon, even their telepathic ability, and had the *scent* of a Demon. It was a complete change, so complete, so effective that he'd walked right past a pair of Demons without them suspecting a thing. And of course, there were other ways to use the power to shapeshift. Tarrin had possessed that power himself when he was alive, he understood the versatility it could bring to someone...up to a point. No matter what form he took, his right arm always appeared as white, and his left arm always appeared as black. But, that wasn't something that completely ruined it.

He just wouldn't be using those swords again. After thinking back to that fight in the Happy Hunting Grounds, he'd realized that the swords hadn't been a very good idea. Certainly they did help him, but he'd been looking for small weapons to use in a confined space, and he'd already had them. After thinking back through the fight, now that his mind wasn't dominated by trying to find a Mortai, he realized that he'd *already* had those weapons available to him...himself. He had done harm to the Deva with his claws, while the swords had done absolutely nothing to them. With the bracers on his wrists to act like defensive shields, as he had used the manacles and the Cat's Claws, he already had all the weapons he needed in his Demonic glaive, his staff, and his own paws.

The swords hadn't been destroyed, though. Using magic, he had sent them on, sending them to Tsukatta. He used swords like that, odds are the warrior would either find use for them or just hang them up somewhere. He did take the amulets out of them first, however.

As far as holding the amulets went, the weapons had served a useful purpose, and Tarrin had had to come up with an alternate means of storing them. The Deva amulets still caused him distinct discomfort if he touched them with the wrong paws, so he solved that problem by shrinking the amulets and attaching them to the bracer on each wrist, Deva on his right bracer, Demon on the left. The amulets were the size of brass bits, and were attached to the *underside* of the bracers, so they couldn't fall off or be knocked off, and also so they were in direct contact with his arms. That would allow him to call on their power if he needed it.

And he would probably need it. The ability to teleport away was going to save his life when the time came.

And that time was now close at hand. Tarrin now knew the Mytre neighborhood better than most of those who lived there. He could navigate its streets with his eyes closed, and when the time came to face a Solar, he would have the advantage. Now came the time to bring that Solar to him, and that meant that it was time for them to see the full power and fury of an Entropic.

For the first time in recorded history, the megalopolis of the City would know *war*.

And it was true war, in all its gory, ghastly, graphic ugliness. The rules were set in the very first attack, and that was *there were no rules*. The citizens of the City, the *entire* City, knew that something very wrong had happened, even those as far from the scene of the attack as could be.

It had happened in the Brezka neighborhood, a quiet place with many warehouses, that was known a center of financial activity for the denizens of the Lower Planes. The warehouses usually held larva, the slug-like manifestations of the souls of evil humans, which were traded and used as currency among Demons, Devils, and Daemons just as krin was used among those on Crossroads. It was in this place that the evil denizens of the dark planes traded souls, information, and evil plots to further their own individual power, or the power of their kind.

It was there, on a corner between two warehouses, that it began. A dog-headed *glabrezu* and a pig-

headed *nalfeshnee* were concluding a deal out on that corner. They had no idea that they were being watched. They had no idea that they had been singled out. They had no idea.

It was said that Demons were possessed of such intelligence, senses, and telepathic awareness that they were impossible to surprise.

That was wrong.

They weren't surprised enough to not understand what was happening, but that was not enough to save them, because they never dreamed that the Were-cat *would* do what he was about to do, and that disbelief created a split second of indecision that doomed them. Tarrin simply *appeared* behind the *nalfeshnee* and struck, physically attacking the Demons within the protected sanctuary of Crossroads, doing that one thing that was so unbelievable to them that both Demons were taken aback, and that instant of hesitation spelled doom for the boar Demon. They could have teleported away with the speed of thought, but Tarrin's spell of haste allowed him to move with such blazing speed that he literally beat the Demon to the punch. Tarrin's left arm drove into it, drove through the boundaries and into the Abyss itself, and then he tore free its soul amulet from the black-blooded flesh of its created form on Crossroads. The *glabrezu* gave him a shocked look as the body of his business partner dissolved between itself and Tarrin, its eyes locked on the gore-covered amulet in Tarrin's left paw, gore that evaporated away.

"Surprise," Tarrin hissed, then the magically shrunk glaive slid down from under the bracer and into his paw and quickly and magically grew to its full size, even as he lunged over the bubbling corpse of the Demon at his feet, still moving with such accelerated speed that he moved like a living blur.

The Demon raised its pincer'd outer arms and struck at the Were-cat, who did not try to protect himself, only reached at him with that deadly left arm, still holding the amulet. It struck with that pincer'd arm, drove the tips into the body of the attacker, but that body simply exploded into a sudden cloud of golden, glittering dust.

It understood the nature of this deception, but Tarrin's magical speed advantage caused the Demon's instinctive reaction to be an instant too late. Its body stiffened as Tarrin's left paw drove into its back a split second before it could teleport itself to safety, and then those horrified eyes dissolved into hideous black ichor as Tarrin ripped the soul amulet from its body. Both bodies began to melt into acidic slime as Tarrin turned and chanted a simple spell to shrink down his two new prizes, then affixed them into their places on his bracer, taking up two new slots and opening more doorways. It was important to get as many *different* kinds of amulets as possible, for each Demon and Deva had its own unique powers and abilities. By taking amulets from many species of Demon and Deva, it gave him more and more powers to use.

The attack was sure to attract the attention of the Deva, but Tarrin didn't want them to think that this was just some run-of-the-mill instance where two Demons lost their heads and attacked each other in a bout of pique. Raising his paws, he chanted the most powerful and destructive Wizard spell he knew, a spell of tremendous power, the Meteor Strike spell. It took several long seconds to cast, but when he completed it, he pointed at the two warehouses before him and finished the spell. Swarms of fiery orbs rained down from the sky, slamming into the buildings with thunderous crashes, and then explosions as the burning missiles penetrated the roofs of the buildings and then detonated. The buildings immediately became burning pyres, raging conflagrations that sent red flames hundreds of spans into the sky.

That would get their attention.

Surging forward just as the spell of haste faded from him, returning his body to normal, Tarrin rushed directly into the raging inferno, and quickly vanished from sight.

And there he waited.

He didn't have to wait long. Four winged Deva swooped in and landed, three males and a female, with shields and heavy maces in hand and ready. They investigated the two black, smoking piles of acidic ooze that was what was left of the Demons, looked at the fire, then looked at the corpses once more.

The female gave a shocked gasp and looked down at the head of a glaive, a nimbus of unholy darkness surrounding the blood-streaked head, that suddenly extruded from her chest. Then she tottered forward and fell upon the Demonic corpses.

Deva were impossible to surprise, but to do what they never dreamed would be done was just as effective. They'd sensed him just at the last second, but just like the Demons, they never *dreamed* that he would actively attack Deva within the boundaries of Crossroads, where their power was supreme. But that moment of surprise was now gone forever, for he knew that never again would the Deva feel so arrogantly confident that Tarrin would not attack them here, that he would run instead of fight. Now they knew that Tarrin Kael, the Mortal God, had *no fear* of the Deva, not here, not in the Happy Hunting Grounds, not *anywhere*.

The other three quickly looked back, but the male on the right didn't react fast enough. Tarrin's glaive struck him dead in the left eye, shearing off the top of his head, and he flopped bonelessly to the ground as the top half of his skull sailed into the fire. The other two hastily raised their shields and backed off, their glowing gold eyes wild and afraid as they gazed upon the Mortal God, a bloodstreaked glaive in his paws and his eyes glowing green, narrow slits of pure evil that glared upon them like they were insects, the air around him shimmering slightly from the effect of an Anti-Magic Shell. He crooked his paw at them with his empty left paw. "Come enforce the peace of Crossroads," he said in a sinister low hiss.

It was apparent that they believed that with the Anti-Magic Shell surrounding him, it was impossible for him to escape, so they advanced on him with surprising confidence. Tarrin knew that all they really wanted to do was keep him occupied for the moment it was going to take more Deva to arrive, and Tarrin was more than willing to play that game, since that was upon which he was depending. He wanted them to think that they were keeping his attention while more of their companions Teleported into the area and then swarmed all over him. The Deva were not fools, they knew after the fights he'd had with them that he was more than a match for a pair of Deva in armed combat, when the Anti-Magic Shell took the power of magic off the table and forced both them and him to use nothing but the mundane weapons of a mortal. So, they were only nursing his desire for hand to paw combat to lure him into a trap.

But the trap was his.

Tarrin surged forward as if his feet never touched the earth and crashed upon the two Deva like a tidal wave, both ends of his staff whistling in the air as he immediately put the two male Deva on a shocked defensive. The first blow had caught the taller one completely off guard, sliding under his shield and striking him on the upper left thigh, slicing deep into flesh and almost hitting the bone. He then parried the other's mace, reversed his momentum even as he shifted into the end-grip, and weaved the tip of his glaive with blurring precision as he slapped the mace wide, struck the inside edge of the Deva's shield, and then drove the tip of his glaive into the opening to punch it into his armored belly, punching through armor and driving about a finger's length of blade into his midsection. The Deva's armor was compromised, but it had saved him from death. Before the struck Deva could even stagger back, the Were-cat twisted and brought up a foot, then whipped it into the face of the first one, slamming his ankle and lower shin into the cheek of the lamed Deva, driving all his weight onto his injured leg and pushing him off his vertical base. Tarrin continued the spin, turning with his momentum as his glaive screamed around his body, then dipped low and slashed the second Deva's feet right out from under him with the butt end even as he fell backwards from the impact of the weapon.

"Is this all the Deva have to offer?" Tarrin hissed scornfully as both Deva rolled quickly to their feet, both of them staggering backwards and away from each other with surprise showing in their eyes. He gave

them a scathing look, then shivered his tail and gave them time to collect themselves, allowing them to think that he was just that arrogant, even giving both of them a chance to use their Deva innate abilities to heal their wounds, when all he really wanted was to keep these two alive long enough for their help to reach the scene. "I heard you knew how to fight. It's so sad to see that reputation is nothing but hot air. Or is it just the Agathinon that do the fighting? At least *they* put up a good fight."

One of them narrowed his golden eyes, and then both charged him at some unspoken cue, probably telepathic. Tarrin turned and drove towards one of them, not allowing them to reach him at the same time. He swiped the Deva's mace out wide using his glaive's advantage in reach, ducked under his arm, then hooked his claws into the Deva's wrist as he went under his arm. He skidded to a stop behind the Deva, his claws pulling him into a jerky turn, then he torqued his shoulder and pushed off his planted foot, pulling the Deva along with him. The hooked Deva found himself pulled off his feet, and then hurtling through the air as the Were-cat used him as a living projectile, using an Ungardt hammer lock and flowing effortlessly into an arm throw, hurling the Deva over his bowed shoulder, hurling directly at his charging companion. To the Deva's credit, he managed to slip around his hurtling compatriot, raising his mace and shield as he got into striking distance. The Deva's mace was slapped aside by Tarrin's open paw, and then the Were-cat found himself slithering aside as the Deva tried to slam his shield into his face. He took up his glaive in both paws and defended himself from a surprisingly aggressive series of heavy blows from the Deva's mace, as the golden-eyed being swung that weapon with some impressive anger and control. This Deva acquitted himself quickly in Tarrin's mind in that he certainly knew how to use his weapon. He was very good. Tarrin parried a series of fast yet heavy blows from the mace with both ends of his glaive, the weapon whirling before him to keep the mace at bay as Tarrin protected himself, backing up a couple of steps, and then melting away as the Deva went to club him in the leg. The Deva overswung by the tiniest of fractions, but that was an eternity for someone with the speed and reflexes of Tarrin Kael. He struck like a viper, slashing his glaive's butt end into the inside forearm of the Deva, striking so hard that the mace was dislodged from his hand. It went spinning towards the growing fire as the Were-cat weaved to the side and whipped his glaive around and down in a tight circle, driving one of the Deva's feet out from under him. The Deva didn't even have time to cartwheel his arm or try to regain his balance, from the Were-cat's foot planted itself directly in the Deva's belly with so much force that the being was lifted off his feet. He unfurled his wings in a vain attempt to soften the impact with the ground, but he rolled over his wings and landed on the back of his neck, then rolled over onto his stomach. Tarrin wasted not an instant, turning and bending backwards at the waist deeply, catching the surprised Deva he'd thrown earlier off guard, who had regained his feet and rushed at them with his mace swinging for the back of Tarrin's head the instant he got within reach. Tarrin put one paw on the ground and scissored his legs up, catching the Deva's forearm between his shins, then he powered from that one-handed anchor to the side, pulling the Deva's arm back across his own body. A deft flex and twist of the legs snapped both bones in the Deva's arm in unison, then Tarrin's tail whipped around his legs and slapped the Deva squarely in the face, with sufficient force to snap his head to the side. The Deva was pulled to the ground by Tarrin's weight, and the Were-cat rolled over after releasing his broken arm and quickly regained his feet. The Deva tried to roll to his own feet, but Tarrin almost casually kicked him dead in the face, snapping his head back with so much force that one of the Deva's teeth flew ten spans high into the air. The Deva rolled on the ground, coming to a rest on his back, blood oozing from his mouth and nose, and quite unconscious.

Tarrin could almost sense the arrival of other Deva nearby, and he knew it was time to end this. It was time to send the message. Tarrin let go of his glaive with his right paw, and before the other Deva could react, he knelt down and plunged that white-furred appendage into the chest of the senseless Deva before him.

Again, it was so much harder than it was with Demons. Tarrin had to fight for control of what was in his paw, pull against the sudden force that sought to pull him in, but this time there was less fear, less trepidation. He knew what to expect. Using his purchase on the ground as leverage, he literally stood up to pull his arm free of the Deva. His paw erupted from the Deva's chest with the prize firmly gripped in blood-soaked fingers, blood that evaporated into fine dust even as the Were-cat returned to a vertical base. The

other Deva looked upon him with outrage and fear, then recoiled from the deadness in Tarrin's eyes, eyes that had not one shred of pity or remorse.

Without his mace, knowing that the Mortal God was invulnerable to any and all magical attacks so long as he was within the protection of the shell, seeing that the power of that Anti-Magic Shell did *not* stop Tarrin from using the innate divine powers imbued within his form, and seeing the amulet of his brother hanging from the Were-cat's paw, the Deva's form shimmered and vanished as it enacted its ability to teleport to remove itself from danger.

Clever fellow. He knew what was coming. It had been his intention to take his amulet, but he could work with only taking one...and besides, Tarrin had intended to take that amulet with an audience. Instead of displaying the amulet to the Deva who were now looking on as they rushed to the scene to assist, instead now the escaped Deva would spread word that Tarrin could take amulets while wrapped in the invulnerability of an Anti-Magic Shell, which was *exactly* what he wanted them to know. Either way, it worked for him.

Tarrin turned and walked back into the fire just as the shell around him winked out of existence; it was earlier than Tarrin thought, but then he realized he wasted more time than he'd planned fighting that one Deva, which caused the shell to expire earlier than he expected. He then cast a Wizard spell known as Fireflow, which was a spell that would allow him to control the flames in a limited manner. It was a weak shadow of the power he had once possessed as a divine being, a power now locked in the pieces of his sword back on Pyrosia, but it would be enough. In control of the flames, he directed them to jump over to the buildings on all four sides to set fire to the other buildings around them, and those fires took hold and began to burn with satisfactory enthusiasm. In just a couple of moments, before those Deva out there could ponder a suitable plan of attack to lure him out of the fire, the inferno was burning an entire city block, as Archons, mortals, Demons, Deva, and other beings scattered from the area, racing away from an aggressively expanding firestorm that leapt from building to building, structure to structure, quickly immolating a large swath of the neighborhood in an inferno.

The message had been sent. The City was at war, at war with the one being that the Deva could not easily stop. The message was about more than killing a few Deva and burning down a few buildings. It was a message that told the citizens of the City that they were now dealing with a being that the Deva could not stop, a being that actively hunted down and killed the very Deva that kept the peace within the confines of the City. They were dealing with a being that could systematically burn the City to the ground in a maniacal rampage of destruction, a being that the Deva had twice now failed to capture, kill, or stop. And the beings of Crossroads knew that there was only one force in the universe that the Deva couldn't stop by themselves.

An Entropic.

The citizens of the City now knew the terrible, frightening truth.

There was an Entropic loose in Crossroads, and it had declared war.

The Brezka neighborhood was only the first area of the City to taste the bitter medicine of Tarrin Kael. Cycle after cycle, rumors and reports flew through the City, some of them true, some of them not. The attacks were not mindless rampages. They were well planned, well executed, and the very Demons and Deva they targeted could not help but appreciate the precision and cunning of the attacks. They were not the work of a mindless, rampaging beast. They were the work of an intelligent, cunning hunter stalking a dangerous prey, a prey that could fight back.

No attack happened the same way. Not every attack was perpetrated against Demons, some were strikes at the Deva directly. Some were ambushes in the true sense of the word, where the Mortal God would strike out of nowhere, then either melt away like the shadows before the sun or wreak random destruction and

havoc through the neighborhood to lure in Deva, who were afraid to engage the Mortal God with numbers any less than ten. Some were daring frontal attacks, where the Mortal God would charge in with weapon in hand and attack his prey in a savage onslaught of offensive ferocity. Some were cunning acts of subterfuge or deception, where the Were-cat attacker would carefully maneuver himself into a position where he could strike at a target in such a way that the victim never saw it coming, or dismissed the Mortal God as a mortal or Archon or some other harmless creature.

Even the arrival of the Deva, in force, was an occurrence that would foster different reactions. Sometimes the Mortal God would run. Sometimes he would fight. Sometimes he would engage in wholesale destruction using powerful Wizard magic, leaving a neighborhood in ruins and forcing the Deva to either try to put out the fires or chase him down. Sometimes he would use Wizard magic to befuddle the senses, bringing down darkness or fog, sometimes cancelling all sound in a wide area, or creating a cacophony of magical noise that made it impossible to hear someone screaming right beside you. But the only true commonality that occurred after the Deva reached the scene of an attack was that the Mortal God managed to elude his Deva hunters, sometimes after killing a few of them before he made good his escape.

Not all attacks resulted in him taking an amulet. Quite a few of them were attacks designed simply to kill Demons, or kill Deva, or engage in destruction of buildings to frighten the citizenry and foment the spread of rumors. They were acts that seemed random, but were well planned and designed to conceal the true motives and patterns behind his attacks. The simple fact of the matter was, he didn't have room to carry a horde of amulets. All he needed were amulets from different *kinds* of Demons and Deva, one from each type, which would grant him the powers of that type of creature. He wanted no more than fifteen Demon amulets and fifteen Deva amulets, so he was being very selective in which amulets to take, and he knew he had to make sure to count the amulets he intended to take.

And he had to be very careful to keep the Deva off balance. If the Deva managed to puzzle out what he was doing, it might jeopardize everything. The Deva were *very* intelligent, adapting to his attacks and forcing him to constantly change his tactics to keep ahead of them. He gave them the respect they were due in that regard, and he didn't want them to work out his ultimate goal and move to deny it to him. Most of his random acts of destruction were nothing more than red herrings, to keep the Deva off balance and guessing, hiding his true intent behind a mask of wanton destruction.

After twenty days, after many attacks that took place all over the city, the citizens of the megalopolis were starting to look upon the Deva with new eyes, eyes that didn't see them as omnipotent figures that meted out justice with a heavy hand, but as harried, beaten entities who were very much in fear for their own existence. And they knew their own fear, because they knew that the being out there dealing out such punishment to the City and to the Deva was an *Entropic*, a terrifying bringer of destruction, chaos, and disorder. It was a being that was not supposed to exist outside of the Astral, but nevertheless had somehow managed to invade Crossroads, either assume or possess the form of the Mortal God, and who now wreaked havoc across the entire plane, a havoc so absolute that even the godlike Deva were worn to their last coil of rope.

The fear and nervous activity of the residents only helped Tarrin, for it stirred them up, made them unpredictable and jumpy, and it helped the Were-cat blend in with the frightened masses that much more. And they too helped him conceal the master plan behind his attacks.

And one part of that plan was now complete. After twenty days of ceaseless, unrelenting pressure, of daily attacks that destabilized whole sections of the City, undermining the reputation of the Deva, demoralizing them, terrorizing the Demons, and making both sides afraid to move about the city without large numbers for mutual protection, the attacks simply stopped. A cycle went by, then another, then another, and there was no hint of what had happened. But people weren't waiting around to find out, for a mass exodus from the City had begun, as throngs of archons, Demons, and mortals were fleeing for other planes, trying to get out of the battleground. Despite the unimaginable vastness of the City, everyone was

just convinced that *their* neighborhood would be the next one to suffer an attack. Those that remained couldn't help but talk, talk about the attacks, talk about Tarrin, and what mattered most, talk about the rumors and conjecture as to who Tarrin was after and who might be next.

The next phase of the plan involved a *balor*. For cycles, Tarrin skulked through the City, listening, searching, isolating Demons or their servants and grilling them for information using the shapeshifting powers of the Agathinon amulet as well as some spying spells in the spellbook to gather information. In that time, he isolated the *balor* that he would attack, a rather brash and arrogant one, even by Demonic standards, who was currently in the City because he had fallen out of favor in the Abyss. It was rumored that his actions had so infuriated the rest of Demon kind that it was here under exile, in *person*, and not just a projection or constructed body. This *balor*, who went by the name Krzak, was Tarrin's chosen target.

It took Tarrin fifteen cycles to find Krzak, invade his compound on the southwestern side of the Core, in the Furaga neighborhood, and come to learn the strength of his retinue of servant Demons and the power of his bodyguards. This Krzak had come to Crossroads with a very large retinue of the Demons that personally served it, and those Demons included a *marilith*. This was a surprise to Tarrin, because *marilith* were even rarer than *balor* outside of the Abyss, even though there were more of them. *Marilith* were the generals and tacticians of the Demons, probably the most intelligent of them all, and because of that they tended to stay where they were needed. Those forays into Krzak's compound taught Tarrin that the only way he was going to get at the *balor* was to lure him out, because his defenses were almost infallible within his walled fortress. This, no doubt, was because of his *marilith* subjugant and not because of his own brilliance. With that *marilith* supervising the defenses of her master, Krzak would be literally untouchable inside the black walls of his fortress compound.

That meant that it would have to be drawn out, separated from its bodyguards, and what was most important, removed from the protection of its *marilith* servant. Tarrin respected the *marilith's* mind ten times more than he respected the *balor's* raw power.

And now that he had a target, he needed a plan. This plan would have three goals. Firstly, Tarrin had to draw Krzak out of his fortress and onto a more favorable battleground. Secondly, he had to be separated from the *marilith*, else her tactical mind would devise a counter and foil Tarrin's plot. Thirdly, he had to be isolated from his army of protectors long enough for Tarrin to engage him and take his amulet.

This would not be easy. Krzak clearly was in enough fear of his life to never leave his obsidian citadel, its black walls made of volcanic black glass, and almost pretty in a gothic, eerie kind of way. Digging that Demon out of his fortress was going to be required. So, if he never left, then he had to be made to leave willingly. That wouldn't be accomplished by force, that was for sure...so Tarrin had to devise a means to cause Krzak to come out willingly. He had to accomplish this task in a manner that caused him to leave without his guards, and not to alert the *marilith* to his departure so as to cause her to follow. No, Krzak had to leave the citadel on his own, of his own free will, and not feel that he was in danger.

The problem was, no plan presented itself to Tarrin quickly, even after careful study of the citadel. So, Tarrin retreated back to the Mytre neighborhood to consider the problem further, go over the maps he'd drawn of the outer areas he could see, and ponder a way to make Krzak leave his safe citadel willingly. He hid there for four cycles, moving quietly and carefully, always keeping himself hidden, because now he was the enemy of the entire plane. The scoundrels and ne'er-do-wells that lurked the alleys and streets of the Mytre neighborhood that had once allowed him to pass in silence would now either run away, alert the Deva, or attack him outright themselves. Now he was the shadow lurking on the wall, observing those around him without making them aware of himself in return. He hid out in abandoned buildings and basements as he pored over his maps and racked his brain, trying to come up with some way to lure the Demon out of his citadel without raising any alarms, and take him on ground favorable to himself while offering Krzak the least chance to strike back.

That damned *marilith*. Without her, he could find a hole in their defenses, but there simply were none. Any attempt to lure the *balor* out would raise a big red flag with her. Tarrin respected and feared the Demoness' great intellect much more than the naked power of her stronger cousin, and it was her presence in that citadel that caused him to throw away plan after plan after plan.

That meant that he was going to have to fall back on more Tarrin-esque plans...make something up on the spot and go with it before thinking it through...then scramble like a manic Faerie once the plan fizzled out halfway through and forced him to improvise.

He could do that. Before embarking on this madness, it was his standard operating procedure. It was only coming here and being in a position of weakness and with so much to lose that made him get cautious. But if pulling the master plan out required him to get crazy, well....

Sometimes crazy works.

Now, if he was the Tarrin of old, how would he go about it? Simple. The Tarrin of notorious legend in the realm of plan making back on Sennadar would invade the citadel by stealth. Once inside, his objective would be to find and eliminate Krzak's *marilith* servant. Without her, Krzak would be a deer in the sights of a hunter. The *marilith* would not be as heavily guarded as Krzak, and would be an easier target to reach... but not necessarily an easier target to kill. Fighting her in her own lair, with its prepared defenses, would be the action of a maniac.

Tarrin had been known as somewhat maniacal back when he was a mortal, and to pull this off, the Mortal God needed to reach back into that mortal's infamous history and resurrect that brashness. It was going to be the only way to do this.

So, now he had a plan...such as it was. Go back into the obsidian citadel, find the *marilith*, and kill her. That was it.

That was the whole plan.

It was a plan that would have made the mortal Tarrin proud in its slapdash simplicity. There were no annoying details, no frivolous backup plans, no distracting "what ifs". Just invade the citadel by stealth, locate the *marilith*, and kill her. Everything else was going to be dealt with on the spot.

But if there was one thing the plan had going for it, it was sheer, unmitigated audacity. He had no doubt that Krzak and his minions would be flabbergasted that someone would actually try to invade their citadel and attack them directly.

Now that he had a plan, he had to carry it out. He emerged from a small void between two buildings that was covered by the roof of the taller one from above and blocked on the far side, a convenient hiding spot, and noticed immediately that something was amiss. The usual sparse crowd that would be visible along this stretch of crooked street was missing. Tarrin's careful study of the neighborhood had been very thorough, and included an understanding of the patterns of activity of those who either lived in this place or frequented it. There should have been denizens moving about along that alleyway, as well as the solitary Demon that stood guard on a small balcony overlooking a door at the end of the alley to his left side, but that Demon was not there.

That *immediately* raised Tarrin's hackles. The shady residents of this neighborhood were very wary, cautious creatures, much like the rogues and thieves back home, sensitive to danger and quick to run to ground when things were getting dicey. They wouldn't vanish like that, not without a reason. Without thought, Tarrin beckoned to his staff, and caused it to appear in his hand, then took a single step back into his little cul-de-sac and watched.

It was just a flash, but it was enough. A lone Deva flitted into view for a split second between the rooftops overhead, mace and shield in hand as it flew past. It was flying low and slow. It was looking for something.

They knew he was here. And the scoundrels that inhabited this area knew better than to be anywhere near here. They knew what was coming.

For that matter, so did Tarrin. If they knew where he was, then that meant that they were going to appear and arrive in force, swarm the area to locate him, then converge and attack with large numbers, the only way they could take him. They'd already got a healthy dose of his fighting prowess, and would not come at him without numbers to make sure of it.

Tarrin cursed silently and backed into his hiding spot. It was too soon! Damn those Deva! Tarrin could have lived with being found and attacked anywhere but *here*, where he intended to make his final move! Now his entire plan was in jeopardy, because he doubted he would be able to find a place quite like this, with its perfect mixture of topography and magical aspects that made it the prime locale to handle a Solar.

He knew that this was a possibility. Tarrin's unique nature made him nearly impossible to locate with magic, but the Deva were intelligent and they had eyes everywhere. It seemed that simple bad luck had revealed him to them, and now everything was out the window. He had to retreat from this place, back off and try to find another location to stage his confrontation with a Solar.

Tarrin shivered. Or *was* it?

That presence. He remembered feeling it once before...it was a Planetar. Just like in the Happy Hunting Grounds, he could sense the arrival of that powerful being. Just like before, there was a Planetar here, most likely to help them capture him. In this place, where mortal magic did not function yet the innate powers of extra-planar beings like Deva and Demons *did*, the Deva would feel that they would have a large advantage...it was one of the reasons he had selected this very spot, because they would *know* that he could not rely on his Wizard magic to escape from them. It had been his intention to use that very fact against them once he took what he needed from the Solar, baiting them into a false sense of his confinement to allow him to get away. That was why the Planetar was here, he realized, because the Deva knew where he was, and felt they had him at a disadvantage. They knew where he was, they had come in force, and one of their commanders, a Planetar, was on the scene to personally oversee the operation and direct the forces.

Tarrin's original intent was to take the soul of a *balor* and use the threat of that power to draw out a Planetar, and then attack *him* and force that Planetar, on pain of destruction, to summon a Solar to come to him. But if there was a Planetar already here....

It could work.

Quickly, Tarrin formed a plan, one not much unlike his idea to use against the *balor*'s citadel. He had to isolate that Planetar, split him away from the other Deva, and get him into a position where Tarrin could attack him with minimal threat to himself, for the Planetar was even more powerful than a *balor*. Attacking a being like that head to head was not the wise course of action. All he had to do was force that Planetar to summon forth a Solar, and that was it. That was all he needed, a face to face meeting with a Solar on ground that favored Tarrin more than his adversary.

But how to get at that Planetar. He wouldn't come down and engage Tarrin unless he felt that *he* was the one that had the advantage, that or Tarrin decimated his forces and forced him to take direct action. But since Deva could call other Deva, the idea that Tarrin could decimate the numbers of Deva and the Agathinon they would surely summon once they knew his location seemed remote. So, he had to trick the Planetar into a direct confrontation or find some way to strike at him from a position of utter surprise.

No, he wouldn't fight. To bring the Planetar closer to him, he would *run*. For in this place, with its maze of alleys and streets, one could run in a straight line that would actually go in a circle. To lure the Planetar out, Tarrin had to scatter and misdirect his forces, spread them out, get them chasing their own tails. Once he had them all in disarray and out of position, he could double back easily and strike at the Planetar from surprise, for the Planetar's sense of presence was something that was like a beacon to the Were-cat. Tarrin could point right at him, and use his sense of presence as an anchor from which to spread out his forces.

And his actions wouldn't seem out of place, given they believed that he had no effective means of easy escape from this place.

It *would* work.

So, all he had to do was start spreading out the Deva. And to do that, all he had to do was let them find him.

And find him, and find him, and find him. After all, they couldn't focus all their forces in one direction when he was going in *four*.

It was time, time to use the weak powers he'd manage to grant himself to their utmost, and cause the Deva to understand just how dangerous Tarrin Kael could be.

In the blink of an eye, there were four Tarrin Kael's occupying that narrow niche. Each of the simulacra nodded in understanding of what needed to be done, and each one hefted its staff in a meaningful way as the three fakes and the real Tarrin prepared to leave the niche and commence the operation.

"Let's go," Tarrin whispered, and then they began.

The Deva knew they had him.

But catching him proved to be just as difficult.

The Planetar overseeing this operation learned that very quickly. They knew what the Entropic was capable of doing, but knowing that information and seeing it in action, and summarily being forced to counter it, was another matter entirely. Tarrin Kael's ability to create duplicates of himself that were utterly indiscernable from the real thing was a known ability. They knew that he could only create a small number of these replicas, and that they could not fight or otherwise engage in contact with living things, else the magic of their creation would be disrupted and they would vanish in a gentle explosion of glittering dust.

This was what was known.

But it was impossible to tell the fakes from the original when none of them would fight.

The four of them had been sighted on a narrow, crooked street only moments ago, and the Planetar had sent in his forces, even as he sent word to the Demons that had agreed to cooperate in this venture that their prey was sighted, and the Demons surged into the area to corner their mark.

When it came to Entropics, Demons and Deva fought on the same side. There would *be no* universe to conquer and rule for the Demons if they allowed an Entropic to carry out its task to unmake all.

And in this operation, there were both Demons and Deva down in that maze of narrow, twisting streets,

hunting down the Entropic, the Mortal God, Tarrin Kael.

The initial sighting warned the Planetar that the Entropic knew they were there, knew that he was found, and the initial sighting of the four of them took on clarity of meaning when they reached an intersection, then split up. Each one went down a connecting street at that intersection while the fourth turned back and ran back the way it had come.

The Entropic was not going to fight. It was going to run.

This was what made the Planetar understand the nature of the game. They could not tell a fake from the real thing, and because of this, *all* of them had to be chased down, cornered, and engaged. And because they had no idea which was the real one, a sizable force had to be on hand to engage the Entropic once it was cornered. Each one of the four had to be treated like it *was* the real one, when there was actually only a one in four chance that they were dealing with the one that *could* fight back. The idea to use a bow from the air to destroy a duplicate and weed out the potential targets was an option that the Planetar had considered when he first saw them split up, but looking down at this overgrown warren of tall buildings and narrow, twisting streets, he understood the nature of the place and the Entropic's selection of this place as a hiding space. The buildings were too close together for a Deva to fly between them, and a street didn't go straight for more than a few hundred *kelams* before either turning or reaching an intersection. The buildings were so high that it would force an archer to be directly in line with the street below to have a shot, and the interconnected maze of uncountable side streets gave their quarry way too many ways to go to allow an archer to get ahead of him and try to shoot at him in a moment of opportunity. An archer that did manage to get into position would have no clear shot against a target that could reach a side street and duck out of the line of fire before an arrow could reach him.

The Planetar had to admire the cunning of this adversary for a moment. In selecting this place to hide, it had ensured that the Planetar would have to bring an army to contain him and corner him, an army that would be powerless where the Entropic would retain a portion of his own power, and that included his fearsome ability to steal the very souls of those who opposed him. No wonder he would come to this place, where the nature of the layout of the neighborhood and the imposing difficulties involved in fighting the Entropic in this place balanced the loss of his mortal magic, which made escape by spellcraft impossible. The proximity of the Core also prevented the use of the powers he had stolen when he took the souls of both Demon and Deva alike, though the distance from the Core caused the boundary that prevented the use of those powers to cross through this area, an invisible line of which everyone had to be *very* aware. If the Mortal God took one step over that line, he could Teleport away using the captured powers of the souls he had taken, but at the current time, he was located in the region where those powers did not function. In this place, only the power of a Solar and the powers of a god would function. Even the Planetar himself was powerless in this place, relying on his wings for flight and his weapons for defense. Unfortunately for all involved, the Entropic's unique background included powers which were divine in nature, and as such they would work in this place. That gave the Entropic a distinct advantage, and also required them to use caution. If someone chasing the *real* Entropic found himself alone, the Entropic might very well turn on him and try to take his soul. Down there, in that knot of intermeshed streets and alleys, the Entropic had an advantage, and the Planetar knew that he was smart enough to understand when to use that advantage.

The Planetar, M'Boh, fully respected the cunning of his opponent. This Mortal God, this Entropic, Tarrin Kael, he was not one to be taken lightly.

M'Boh's course of action was clear. At the current time, the Entropic was in an area where he could not use his captured souls' powers, and the Planetar had to make *sure* it stayed that way. The Planetar had already formed a picket at that boundary, a line of Agathinon that would stop the Entropic from getting into an area where he could exploit his captured powers and escape. The rest of his forces had been split into two groups. One group was sent down into that knot of streets to chase the images of the Entropic while the other half created a loose line that contained him in a certain area, a half-circle that would close inward inexorably

as the chasers harried the four potentials and tried to flush them into a position where a large force could arrive quickly to engage them in combat. One by one, those Entropics would be pinned down and engaged, and when they found the real one, the Planetar himself would make sure to be there so his sword could mete out the sweet justice the Entropic had coming to him.

Minutes passed by as the Planetar watched from high above the air, as his semicircle closed itself and Demons and Deva both scrambled through those narrow, twisting streets below, directing the forces on the ground using telepathic communion, even the Demons. M'Boh did his best to get forces in place to cut off those Entropics, but the twisting nature of the place contributed to the fact that the Entropic seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of the place. Not once did any of the four of him turn into a dead end alley or turn up a street that did not offer a quick means of escape. M'Boh realized then that the Entropic had a detailed knowledge of the neighborhood, and any attempt to trap him in a dead end alley was going to be in vain. More than once, one of those Entropic forms weaved along streets and alleys with agile speed and ended up circling the very forces that were trying to box it in, ignoring more than one opportunity to attack a lone Demon or Deva that had become separated from the others. M'Boh knew that they would not attack, even if they had a chance to strike without any fear of counterattack, because that act of attack would single out the real one from the fake one and allow them to surround and engage without having to chase down the other three.

Then, much to the Planetar's shock, the Entropic banished his three fake incarnations and revealed his true location. The lone Entropic form left, which was moving towards the *Core*, not towards the picket and freedom, then created three new duplicates, and those four incarnations again split up.

This puzzled M'Boh, until he understood the nature of the act. Now, all those Demons and Deva that had been pursuing his three false incarnations were woefully out of position, and the only forces M'Boh had in position to intercept the Entropic and his false images were the Deva forming the semicircular noose trying to trap him into a specific area and the forces that had been chasing that Entropic incarnation. Instead of having a sufficient force on hand to stop the Entropic from breaking through the line, now M'Boh had to sacrifice his picket to try to contain the four incarnations.

Damn clever!

And just how did the Entropic know what the Planetar was about? It was almost as if he could see all the Demons and Deva in the area, knew exactly where they all were, and was able to outmaneuver them with nearly ridiculous ease.

The amulets! Of course!

The Entropic had the souls of his brother Deva, and could use their powers...could that be allowing him to hear their telepathic communion? If he could, no wonder he knew exactly where all the Deva were...they were telling him!

The Planetar ordered telepathic silence at that point and descended so his shouted commands could be heard and relayed. The Entropic would not use the powers it had stolen against them.

The four of them zigzagged wildly for long moments, then mysteriously converged at a jagged intersection that was akin to the center of a spiderweb, a hub of nine streets that met at a single point, at the statue of Mytre which gave this region its name. Then, for some mysterious reason, they started crisscrossing the close-knit streets with their many interconnecting alleyways, doubling back on each other, twisting and weaving. Then all four entered a building that was close to the hub.

But only three came out.

M'Boh ordered a Deva lieutenant to take command of a unit of ten Deva to land and enter the building to find the fourth while he continued directing the effort to pin the three left to be engaged. The Planetar circled over the statue of Mytre in slow, lazy revolutions as he watched the three remaining basically circle the hub of the streets radiating out from the statue, seemingly unwilling to get too distant from the statue. This behavior made little sense to the Planetar, for it would only behoove the Entropic to spread his three images out and away from himself to force the Deva and Demons to maximize the manpower needed to contain them. As it was, M'Boh had more than enough forces on hand to corner each of the three visible manifestations, even enough to re-establish the semicircular containment as he marched the Agathinon up from their position at the line, but not very far, only enough to seal the edges of the semicircle.

This had a purpose. The Entropic had proven one thing to M'Boh, and that was that he was not stupid. He wouldn't make this kind of a basic error on purpose. For some reason, he *wanted* all the Deva bunched up in this area.

Maybe the other three were only a diversion, giving the fourth that had not left the building, the *real* one, a chance to escape the containment.

That had to be it.

M'Boh received the report from the Deva who had invaded the building. It was a large warehouse, and it was empty. There was no sign of the Entropic within.

The Planetar cursed. There was no way he could escape that building without being seen, which meant that one of the three remaining *had* to be the real one. But to what purpose? The Planetar could see no reason, no logic to that action. It only made things more difficult for the Entropic having so many Deva and Demons so close together, and now none of the three remaining had a hole or opening through which to escape. They were firmly withing the ring, and that ring was shrinking moment by moment.

Did he intend to fight? Would he now turn on the Deva and Demons stalking the streets of the spiderweb hub and abandon his game of deception using his manifestations?

Again, to what end? There would be no gain in such an action, not when the very act of attacking would reveal the true Entropic and allow the Planetar to concentrate his forces against him. No, there was something else going on here. The Planetar wasn't going to fall into that trap. The Entropic had a trick waiting for them, he was sure of it.

That building...it had to be the central focus of this impending trick. The fourth Entropic form had entered that building and had not left. Either the Entropic had escaped using some hidden passage or tunnel or sheltered cove protected from aerial view, he had dismissed that fake image in order to be able to create another at a later time...or he truly had never left the building, and was keeping the other three images nearby and close to each other to give the Deva a false sense of impending victory, to get them so interested in those three that they forgot all about that building and the fourth Entropic incarnation.

The tactical bent of the Planetar decided that that was what it had to be. The other three were a diversion. The building was what mattered here.

M'Boh landed on a rooftop some distance from the building and ordered another thirty Deva and Demons to surround and invade the building, to take it apart stone by stone if needs be to either find the fourth incarnation or find the means by which the incarnation might have escaped that building without being seen. If they could truly find nothing, then the Planetar had been in error and one of the three remaining was indeed the real Entropic. But he lost nothing to make sure, not with the other three contained within the tightening ring. They had nowhere to go, and it was only a matter of time until they were pinned down and engaged. The eleven span tall being, with his golden skin, glowing blue eyes, and bald pate cut quite the

figure on that rooftop, with his Deva scouts circling over his head, as he watched that building with narrowing eyes and waited for a report.

It was his Planetar senses that saved him from instant defeat. He became aware of a *presence*, and understood immediately that what he was sensing was unlike anything he had ever sensed before. And there was only one thing that could be.

The Entropic! He could sense him clearly, he was nearby, and he was getting closer and closer!

The Planetar raised his sword and looked around, but saw nothing. He looked up, but saw nothing, even as he sensed the Entropic close to him, very close...*too* close. Why could he not see him?

With widening eyes, the Planetar looked down, at the roof of the building upon which he stood.

Just as he understood, there was a sudden explosion of dust and flying chips of rock. The white-furred paw of the Entropic exploded through the roof just between the Planetar's legs, and before the being could react, that paw grabbed hold of the Planetar's armor-shod boot.

With a gasp, the Planetar was pulled *through* the roof in an explosion of dust and stone. He felt himself in freefall as the hand on his ankle yanked, and then the disappearing hole above suddenly covered over in strange fire. Fire was all around him, fire that did not burn. Then something kicked him in the back, hard, and the fire parted and vanished to reveal a small warehouse stacked with crate upon crate in neat rows. The Planetar landed on a stack of crates and whirled on his opponent, as the Entropic turned in the air and landed on another stack of boxes on both feet and a hand, the other hand holding a simple wooden staff.

He intended to, to *fight*! What foolishness! The Planetar cast out with his thoughts for his forces to converge on the building—

—and felt nothing from the others. Nothing at all!

The Planetar gave the Entropic a shocked look, then realized that there was no dust or stone falling from the hole in the roof. He glanced up and saw a whole, undamaged roof above.

How! How did the Entropic do it!? How did the Entropic move them to another place?

Amazing! The Planetar realized that everything up to that point had been nothing but a means by which to get the Planetar alone for a direct confrontation! The Entropic obviously meant to try to take his soul!

And the Planetar could feel that wherever they were now, it was a place on the *other* side of that line. In this place, the Planetar could use his innate powers.

A clever plan. It's unfortunate that you made only one error. You wanted to get me alone, but you will find that I am the only Deva that needs to be here to kill you, the Planetar cast out his thought in grim amusement, hefting his huge two-handed sword in both hands and pulling it into a guard position. *I am as far above the Agathinon and Deva as you are above the mortals. You are no match for me.*

"Maybe if I intended to kill you, I'd be concerned," the Entropic stated fearlessly, standing fully erect, his eyes glowing an evil green as they bored into the Planetar's own. "But I don't have to fight you, Planetar. I just have to touch you. And you can't stop that. You're not fast enough. I know you have an encyclopedic knowledge of me and my power, but think of only one thing, Deva. I got close enough to you to grab you before you could react. When I bring my *simulacrum* here and you find yourself trying to avoid being touched by a swarm of paws instead of just two, you're not going to last long."

The Planetar narrowed his glowing blue eyes and said nothing.

“But this is a fight we can both avoid. I’ll let you walk out of here untouched and unharmed. All you have to do is do one thing for me.”

I do not bargain with Entropics.

“Suit yourself,” Tarrin shrugged. “I would have rather avoided this fight. Trust me, sticking my paw into the place where your souls exist is *not* pleasant, and in your case, I’d have to leave my paw in there for quite a while. I don’t think either of us is going to enjoy that very much.”

With a blinking waver, three perfect replicas of Tarrin Kael appeared on each side of him. Instead of moving in perfect unison with the original, each one moved independently of the others. Each one did, however, set down its staff. “You don’t understand how my power works, Planetar,” the Entropic told him as the four moved to circle and surround the Planetar. “These *simulacrum* aren’t entirely fake.” Those words came from a *different* one. “They’re not real in the sense you and me are,” the words emanated from another one, “but at any time, I can shift my true self into one of the projections, effectively moving to another place. It’s how I brought you here. I surrounded you with myself, then moved myself to a projection. Since I completely encompassed you, you came along with me. That’s why we have all this nice time to ourselves and I don’t have to worry about any of your comrades crashing our party. Right now, we’re quite a distance away from where we were.”

The Planetar jumped backwards to another set of crates, then again, then again, and then abandoned dignity and rushed back to a wall, jumped down to the floor, then put his back to the wall. With crates near him on both sides, it narrowed the possible avenues to reach him to only one; a frontal attack. The images and the real Entropic appeared on the crate tops to each side of the Planetar, looking down. “You never really understood that power or how it works, did you? I’m sure you realize now just how hard it’d be to kill me for real. You’d have to simultaneously strike me *and* my projections, to prevent me from just moving to another one. And at any time, you have no idea which of these is the real me and which is a fake, even after I attack you.”

The Entropic was right. If he truly could simply move to an incarnation, then there was no way to really kill him unless one struck at every image of the Entropic at the same time. It was possible to kill the Entropic, but it would be very, *very* difficult. And the entire time they were trying, that Entropic was free to run around and do only what he knew what kind of damage. But what insanity would possess the Entropic to reveal the one way to destroy it for good?

“Of course, you’re thinking that I’m a fool for revealing that,” the Entropic said with an evil little smile gracing all of those incarnations. “But I wanted you to fully appreciate just how hard it’s going to be to get rid of me. But you can end it all, right here and now, Planetar. You can stop the attacks, the destruction, and the losses of your Deva brothers and sisters.”

I do not bargain with Entropics, he repeated, raising his sword.

“We’re not going to bargain. I’m going to *ask* you to do something. If you refuse, I’m going to *make* you do it. But understand here and now, Planetar, you *will* do it. It’ll be a lot less painful for both of us if you do it willingly. And if you run away, if you call for help, or you cause such a display that it causes all the other Deva to come here, I’ll go on a rampage that makes what you’ve seen from me so far look like nothing but a spat between two toddlers. I’ll set the entire City on fire and fix it so the Deva can’t so much as appear anywhere in Crossroads without being immediately attacked. You’ll have to bring every Deva you have here to try to kill me, and now that you know how hard I am to kill, you understand that you’ll lose a *lot* of Deva in the attempt. I will bring ruination to your precious Crossroads and shatter what remains of the reputation of the Deva among the other Outer Planar beings.”

The Planetar suppressed a gasp when he realized that the Entropic was being totally serious...and what was more, the Entropic could make good on that threat.

“Now, I’m going to *ask* you to summon a Solar. I’m not insane enough to want to fight one, but I do need to talk to one. If you refuse, I’m going to *make* you summon a Solar. Because now you understand what’s going to happen if you run away from me or trick me, and you know what’s going to happen if you try to fight me with the limitations I put on you. You’ll lose. I’m sure you’ll put up a magnificent fight, and you may even wound me, but you can’t fight all of us. One of us is going to get a paw on you, and when I do, that’s it. I’ll put my paw inside you and grab hold of your soul, and *force* you to do what you could have done voluntarily. It’s your move, Planetar. You can do whatever you want. You can call a Solar because I asked, you can call one because we both know I couldn’t fight both you and a Solar at the same time without losing, you can try to fight me, or you can run away and unleash me on Crossroads. Decide.”

The Planetar thought furiously. Flight was not an option here. If he infuriated the Entropic and caused him to go on his promised rampage, then it would irrevocably harm the reputation of the Deva in the Outer Planes, a reputation that they actually depended upon for much of the enforcement of law within Crossroads. Just the reputation of the Deva was enough to curtail foolishness in this place. If he fought the Entropic, he understood that even with all his powers and strength and skill, the Entropic was again right. Who would win a fight between them with the rules that were on the table was up in the air. The Planetar had much more power than the Entropic, but the Entropic wasn’t trying to *kill* him, was only trying to *touch* him. And the Planetar, alone, could not simultaneously attack all of the Entropic’s incarnations in such a way to prevent the Entropic from simply moving to a projection to escape injury, not with the threat of him abandoning the fight and going on a rampage hanging over the Planetar’s head. The Planetar actually had several innate powers that would strike at everything in an area, but the Entropic’s threat to go on a rampage if he did anything that attracted attention to where they were took most of them off the table. The only power that the Planetar could think to use that would affect all of the incarnations and not attract attention was the power of Symbol, which created a glyph that enacted magic on whoever read it. But the Symbol wasn’t foolproof, and he couldn’t risk that the Entropic would evade its power.

But the balance here was that if the Planetar could use his innate powers, then so could the Entropic use the powers it had stolen. At any time, in an instant, it could teleport away from this place. If it recognized the use of the Planetar’s Symbol, it could teleport away without being affected by it.

No. There was too much at stake here. If the Planetar failed, then the Entropic would go on his promised rampage and destroy what the Deva had labored for eons to create. It was just too risky to try to fight the Entropic without causing it to do what it threatened to do...and besides, if the Planetar did summon a Solar, well, the victory was all but assured. The Entropic itself was smart enough to understand how insane it would be to attack one of the great Solars. Calling a Solar to kill the Entropic was probably more than was necessary, but the Planetar saw that it would be the most efficient way and with the least chance of causing any damage.

And they might not get another chance to get this close to the Entropic.

It took no effort. All the Planetar had to do was call to a Solar and entreat that it come to him. That was all it took.

And that was what the Planetar did.

Tarrin had seen that moment of indecision race across the face of the Planetar, but then Tarrin felt the presence of a being that could only be called a titan among the Deva. Clearly, the Planetar had assessed the risk of battling Tarrin against his own ego of believing he could win, and saw that the risk was just too great.

Tarrin just had to smile. The Planetar had summoned a Solar, and Tarrin didn’t have to risk his hide

fighting it to make it do it.

The Solar appeared directly before the Planetar, and Tarrin had no doubt that the Solar already knew everything about what had happened here, and what the situation currently was. And he was a *majestic* creature! Twelve spans tall, golden skin, flowing golden hair, huge white feathered wings, wearing a loose fitting wrap-like red and yellow striped vest and a simple pair of baggy red pants that tied with straps around the ankles over a pair of bare feet. A bow and quiver were slung over one shoulder, and a large sword was in the Solar's hand. The Solar turned and looked up at Tarrin, seemingly looking right at the real Tarrin and ignoring the images, and those glowing blue eyes were adamant and unwavering. The creature had an aura of power about him that was almost a palpable thing, but Tarrin's exposure to his mother and the Goddess had steeled him against such things.

I am Sh'Keel, the Solar intoned mentally. Planetar M'Boh summoned me at your behest. A foolish, foolish action, Entropic. I am paramount among Deva. You have no hope against me.

"I'm not here to fight you, Solar," he said, banishing his three *simulacrum* and dropping down to the floor. "I'm here to make a deal with you."

The Deva do not bargain with Entropics.

"Ah, but you *will* bargain with me," Tarrin said, "because I have something no other Entropic has ever had. The souls of your Deva comrades."

He held up the bracer on his right wrist.

The Solar's eyes narrowed dangerously, but it said nothing.

"First things first, though," he said, putting his black furred paw over that bracer meaningfully. "To prevent any brilliant ideas, both of you, drop all your weapons. I want to *talk*, not *fight*. Put them all on the floor, and know that I'm ready to destroy what I have in my paw if either of you so much as twitch, or try to use your innate powers."

The Planetar looked to the Solar, and the Solar nodded. Both of them set their swords on the floor, and the Solar placed his bow on the floor as well.

"The quiver too," Tarrin called. "You're not going to try to stab me with any arrows."

The Solar unbuckled his quiver, then set it on the floor.

"Now then, I'll give all the souls I've taken back to you, Solar, both Deva and Demon. I don't really need them. Truth be told, I took them for no other reason than to get you where you are now. Everything I've done in Crossroads, all the fighting, all the destruction, it was all just for *this*."

With deliberate slowness, Tarrin took the bracer off his right wrist, and then the one off his left. He then set them on the floor and took a step back. "The souls of your brothers and sisters, and the souls of the Demons. Yours."

And what would you demand in return for them?

"Nothing. No conditions, no restrictions, no negotiations. You've already given me what I want. All I ask is that you return the souls of the Demons back to Abyss safely."

But we have given you nothing.

“What I want from you is not something you give. All I want from you is five seconds. In those five seconds, you will do nothing. You will not call for help, you will not try to stop me, and in return I promise I won’t attack either of you. You’ll give me a five second head start. After those five seconds, you can do whatever you please, which I’m fairly certain will involve chasing me down.”

The Solar nodded immediately. *I understand now what you intend, and just to prove to you how foolish you are, I will give you that five seconds. But you can’t even touch them, Entropic.*

“Your confidence in me overwhelms me, Solar,” Tarrin drawled. “So, you agree then? I can have five seconds?”

If only to try, you may, the Solar told him with a little amusement.

“Very well then. Before we begin, let me say that you’re the one that’s foolish, Solar. If there’s anything about me that you should have been warned about, it’s that I *find* ways to do the impossible. Get out your running shoes, Solar. You’re about to start chasing me. Five.”

Tarrin’s paw whipped under the waist of his trousers as he lunged forward.

“Four.”

He produced a long length of golden cord, weighted at both ends with a bit of metal. The Solar’s eyes widened when it saw that object. It was then, in that instant, that it understood just how Tarrin was going to do it.

It was rope made from a Deva’s hair.

“Three”

In a stunning motion of complex dexterity, Tarrin whipped the weighted end of that cord through the strap on the quiver, and between the bowstring and the wood of the bow. He grabbed the loose end to form a carrying sling that held both objects.

“Two.”

Tarrin’s wings, a facet of himself he had kept scrupulously hidden the entire time, exploded out from his back, even as he reached out to the side, and caused his staff to rise up and race to his open paw.

“One.”

Tarrin’s feet lifted from the floor, he turned, and then rocketed away from the Solar and Planetar with his prize. In that one remaining second, he plowed into the far wall, striking it with his staff and causing it to shatter in an explosion of brick and mortar that blew out into the street beyond, a street that marked the boundary where the Deva’s powers wouldn’t function. He catapulted through that hole, split into five separate incarnations, and vanished from sight in an instant, each one going in a different direction.

He was after your bow this entire time? the Planetar asked in astonishment.

I would say the bow and quiver both. Clearly, he believes he can find some way to make them work for him, the Solar responded, slightly impressed. *The use of a Deva’s hair was clever. My bow and quiver*

wouldn't strike out at the touch of another Deva, though they also won't work either. He did indeed find a way to touch them. It now makes sense why he went to these lengths.

How so, great Solar?

Clearly he understood what would happen when he took them. If he would have all of the Deva after him for taking the bow and quiver, why tiptoe around us up to that point? But that is another matter. Let us go about the task of reclaiming what he has taken, and ending the threat of him once and for all.

"No. You won't."

Both of them whirled around in total shock to find themselves looking down at a small, gnarled old woman, wearing a simple peasant dress and a shawl over her gray hair. The old woman raised a knobby hand, and both Planetar and Solar *shuddered*, and then moved no more. "That'll keep the two of you out of his hair for a few minutes," she told them, though she knew that couldn't hear her, or register anything. They were now trapped outside of time in a manner that would make them skip over the next few minutes. When they again rejoined time, it would be to them as if no time at all had passed.

With a grating cackle, the old woman then vanished, vanished so completely that even the memory of her was wiped from the Deva she had entrapped. Those Deva would come out of their stasis and believe that the Were-cat Tarrin Kael had fled from them just seconds before, when the reality was that he would have several minutes to make good his escape...and that time was all that he needed.

Tarrin expected a maniacal chase by every Deva in Crossroads the instant he left the warehouse with his prize, for them to appear in massive numbers and fall on him like Death Himself. They all knew what he now had, and they all knew that it absolutely could not be allowed to remain in the hands of anyone other than a Solar, no matter what it took.

The bow of a Solar wasn't all that amazing. It was, after all, simply a bow. But this bow was the only bow in existence that could fire the arrows from the quiver, and it was that quiver that every Deva in existence was going to be after him to get back.

The quiver of a Solar was probably the most deadly and lethal thing about the noble being, even over its magic, even over its nearly godlike powers, even over its great strength, even over its vast intelligence. The quiver of a Solar produced magic arrows that killed whatever they hit.

Period.

If the arrow struck, the target died. The arrow only had to make contact with the skin or flesh. The power of the bow that fired it would cause it to penetrate through armor, but once the arrowhead made contact with the natural being beneath, that being was dead.

The Deva knew that if Tarrin found a way to make the bow and quiver work for him, he could use it against the *Deva*, even use it to slay a Solar. Not even the mighty Solar were immune from the power of the quiver.

Tarrin had the bow and quiver now, having quickly stashed them in his Portable Hole while on the move to put them in a place where he didn't have to worry about them and also kept them out of trouble, and now he flew at ground level along the twisting, narrow streets, so fast that he kept brushing against walls and banging his elbows and knees on corners, using his detailed knowledge of the neighborhood to allow him to go faster than anyone else could possibly go in here. He had to return back to the area where Wizard magic would function, and it was some distance away from him, and he was currently not moving towards it, he

was moving parallel to his goal to remain in the area where the Deva couldn't use their innate abilities...well, all of them except that Solar. He would have to leave the warrens of the neighborhood soon, but he wanted to get as far as possible before he did so.

But there was no pursuit. None at all. Were they allowing him to escape? It made no sense! He saw no Deva at all. Were they hiding, waiting for him to run out of room down here and emerge from the buildings? Tarrin rose up and just barely peeked his head over the roof of a building and quickly looked around. In that fleeting glance, his confusion increased. No Deva at all! They *were not* pursuing him!

For the Goddess' sake, *why*? They knew what he had, they'd *never* let him simply get away with something like that!

It confused him so much he nearly failed to take advantage of the opportunity it represented, as bizarre as it was. He was far enough from where the Deva had been chasing him that they were out of sight. The Solar and Planetar, for some unfathomable reason, had not yet raised an alarm to call their forces to this area. That was a combination of facts that was too good to pass up.

Lancing out from between two buildings, the winged Were-cat emerged from the cover of the buildings and flew just over the rooftops, so close that his feet nearly banged on roof edges, then turned and moved arrow-straight away from the Core. The buildings beneath him blurred by in a surrealistic landscape, and the wind in his face was so strong that it stung his eyes. He moved at tremendous speed away from the scene of his attack.

Long, tense moments went by as Tarrin hurtled along the rooftops, as the Were-cat would rise up just enough to be able to look behind him without having to worry about plowing headlong into a slightly higher building, but there was no pursuit. That made absolutely no sense at all. Why was the Solar just letting him waltz away with something like *this*?

From behind him, there was a sudden, dreadful sense of *fury*. It could only come from something of tremendous power.

Tarrin had to chuckle. That was the Solar. So, clearly, the Deva *were* chasing him, but somehow, in some mysterious, unknown fashion, he had managed to get outside the area of their search. It had to be in those precious moments when the Solar didn't act. But why did he do it? He should have called every Deva in Crossroads to him the instant Tarrin vanished out of that hole. But for some reason, he did not. He had waited, and had waited too long, for now Tarrin had managed to evade the concentrated search. They hadn't started looking for him so far from where the attack had been, that was why there were no Deva out here.

Tarrin sensed the crossing of the border that marked the return of Wizard magic.

Success!

Tarrin pulled up and halted, sliding through the air to arrest his forward momentum. The instant he was stationary, he spoke a single word, the word of Contingency. The spell of Contingency allowed him to use a pre-determined spell at the utterance of a single word, already cast in advance. Wizards used Contingency as an escape mechanism in cases of dire need. Well, this was a case of dire need.

As soon as he spoke the word, a swirling magical gateway appeared before him, which was a gateway that would return him within reach of one of the portal stones. He moved through it quickly, and found himself hovering just in front of a portal stone, a large black obsidian obelisk standing upon a stone pedestal, surrounded by mortals, Archons, and other denizens of the Outer Planes. Some of them recognized him and turned to flee from him, but he ignored all of them. He put a single paw on the portal stone and willed that it transport him to another plane, willed that it move him to the vast expanses of the Astral, a place where the

Deva could not find him.

His time in Crossroads was now done. He had what he needed from here. Now, it was time to face the greatest challenge of his life. Now, he had to find some way to get past Spyder, if only for just long enough to do what he had to do in Sennadar. He still had no plan, no idea what he was going to do about Spyder, but he would have plenty of time in the journey to the hidden gate of Sennadar to consider it.

Tarrin appeared in a vast empty gulf of dull gray, the only physical object in sight in any direction. Without wasting a second, he fixed the dull gray color pool of the gate to Sennadar firmly in his mind, and willed to go there. There was no sensation of movement, but he knew that he was now moving towards that destination. It would take time to get there, and that time would be spent trying to fathom how to keep Spyder off of him without hurting her.

He'd find a way, he was confident of that. He always did.

The Blushing Mermaid was a seedy dive, a dilapidated, ramshackle tavern on the banks of the great river Merin, that split the city of Tor in two. It was a popular place, however, for though the building looked ready to fall over in a stiff breeze, the grizzled tavern owner, Gralt, sold drinks that weren't watered down and at a fair price.

The interior of the tavern was a ramshackle as its outside. The walls were unpainted, unadorned, made of bleached and faded wood that had been cannibalized from sailing vessels, the gaps between them sealed with tar. All the furniture was mismatched, and much of it was either partially broken or on the verge of collapse, the victims of being often used as weapons in the brawls that were rather commonplace in this particular tavern. It was so commonplace that the Torian Watch stationed a detachment of watchmen on the wharf outside the front door after dark, so they could quickly respond to any eruption of violence within. The interior of the place was a study in the many races that plied the Twenty Seas. There were Arakite sailors over in one area, and beside them sat a host of Wikuni merchantmen, whiling away some shore leave. A small band of Ungardt were being loud and raucous over in one corner, offending a large group of Torian sailors that were sitting nearby. There was a large group of Shacèan sailors near the bar, and the bar was populated with any number of people from other, smaller nations.

But there was one figure in the place that looked decidedly out of place. He looked almost like a Wikuni, but not really. He was an absolutely monstrous fellow, easily nine spans tall, with a human body, but with arms and legs covered in black fur, a long, delicate tail, and hand and feet that looked more animal than human. He had a human head, but had triangular animal ears poking out over blond hair and vertically slitted, feline green eyes. He was a very stocky figure, but his great height made that stockiness deceptive in appearance. He'd come in some time ago and had been quite content to sit at the bar and try several different ales and wines that Gralt had, and paid for them with Torian gold marks. And since he was a paying customer, that made him welcome in Gralt's tavern.

The other patrons in the tavern were curious about the fellow, but they kept their distance...at least as long as they were sober. One of them got drunk enough to cast manners to the wind, a young Ungardt man wearing a fur vest and a pair of raw buckskin leggings, and he approached the large non-human at the bar boldly. "What manner of creature are you, stranger?" he asked boldly, speaking in slightly broken Torian.

"I'm a Were-cat," the figure replied, looking at the crest on the axe in the Ungardt's belt. "You're from my clan. That makes us cousins."

"Clan?"

"My father's an Ungardt," the figure explained.

“Kael? You’re a Kael?” the Ungardt asked in surprise.

“Yup,” he answered with a nod.

“Ay! He’s one of Tarrin’s kids!” the Ungardt shouted to his companions in the corner. “What’s your name, cousin?”

“Eron.”

“I’m Goraad,” he returned, offering his hand. The Were-cat took it, clasping his wrist in the Ungardt greeting. “I never thought I’d meet a clansman in Tor that wasn’t from my own ship! Come, sit with us, cousin! We’ll drink and share stories!”

“I’d like that,” Eron said modestly.

“You *do* speak Ungardt, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” he answered in Ungardt.

“Good. A few of us don’t speak Sulasian. I didn’t want to have to translate back and forth.”

And so, the odd figure was absorbed by the Ungardt, sitting at their table. The other sailors nearby that could understand Ungardt heard the sailors tell the stranger stories about their journeys around the Sea of Storms and the Sea of Glass, about battles they’d fought with pirates and Zakkites, ports they’d visited, and women they’d had. Then, they asked the figure about his story.

“Oh, I’m wandering around,” he told them. “It’s something of a custom for us after we earn our adulthood. We’re supposed to roam around and learn things, and when I think I’ve roamed enough, I’ll go back to the Frontier and find a stretch of unclaimed territory and make it my own.”

“Roaming eh? Where have you been so far?”

“Well, I started in Suld,” he answered. “I went to Ultern and turned south, then passed through the northern marches of Shacè and started coming east. I’ve always wanted to see Tor, so I decided to pass through here on my way to Shoran’s Fork.”

“That’s no way to tell a story, kinsman! Details! We need details!” one of the Ungardt boomed with a hearty laugh.

The figure gave a sheepish smile, then started again, detailing much of his travels from Suld to Tor. “From here I’m going to Shoran’s Fork,” he told them. “I’m not sure where I want to go from there.”

“You need to watch yourself over in Arkis, cousin. The Arkisians are even stuffier and more full of themselves than these Torians,” one of the snorted. That caused a ripple of annoyance through the nearby Torians, some of which spoke Ungardt. “And they’re too cowardly to fight their own battles. They love to insult us, then run away and fetch the Watch when we go to do something about it.”

“I’ll be alright, cousin,” the figure, Eron, said mildly. “I’m not really afraid of the humans.”

“No reason to be afraid of the little races, cousin,” a gray-haired Ungardt grinned at him.

They all looked at the figure when his eyes became distant for a moment, and he turned to look towards

one of the walls. Then his expression became dark. “Cousin? What troubles you?” Goraad asked in concern.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. It’s just something I’ve been waiting for, that’s all. I’m afraid I’m going to have to go, cousins. My father needs me.”

“It’s important?” the one-eyed Ungardt said in sudden grim seriousness, and the figure nodded gravely. “Well, ye got an Ungardt ship to take you wherever you need to go, cousin. We can get you where you need to be fast.”

“I’ll be fine getting there on my own, but I really appreciate the offer,” he declined with a wave of his huge furry hand. “A ship can’t take me where I need to go, I’m afraid. After I’m done, I hope we can meet somewhere again. It’s nice talking to people who aren’t afraid of me.”

They all laughed, and the gray haired Ungardt stood up and raised a tankard. “To Eron Kael, may Dallstad’s axe sweep your path and give you safe journey!”

“I hope so,” Eron said, his expression somber.

Chapter 7

Myn was driving the twins absolutely *crazy*.

Rina, well, Kimmie could understand that. Her younger cub had a sweet innocence and kindness about her that would make someone like Myn the utter center of her attention, with her need to be her friend. Rina wanted to be Myn's friend, but it was a selfish impulse, not something of true compassion. Rina was interested in Myn because Rina had decided that Myn needed a friend, and that was that. Myn's feelings, or the reality of the situation, would not enter into Rina's mind in the slightest. Much like other Were-cats, Rina had decided on how things should be, and that was how things were going to be. And if anyone complained, well, that was their problem, since Rina obviously knew better than them. Typical Were-cat arrogance.

Tara, that was the surprise. At first, her curiosity about Myn went no further than her mask-like tattoo. Tattooing was an almost unknown thing on Sennadar, practiced only by certain Mahuut and Nyrian peoples, and something of a fad among seagoing men who plied the seas around the continent of Arathorn. She would stare at the tattoo endlessly, and Tara being Tara, the discomfort this caused Myn was irrelevant. In true Tara fashion, she had made no pretense about staring at the tattoo, getting right in Myn's face and staring right at it, even touching the dark blue skin, skin colored blue by the dye beneath it. Not even getting called down about her atrocious lack of manners had dissuaded her. Tara was mystified by the tattoo, but then after she learned *why* she had it, her interest in Myn became centered more in her history. Tara wanted to know what it had been like to be of the magician caste, and how she had managed to trick Elara society to rise from the laborer caste to become a Wizard. There was a story there lurking beneath that attractive tattooed face, and Tara had a weakness when it came to a good story.

Kimmie was certain that it was not a good one. She had watched the girl from a distance in the days since they had left Pyros, riding south, following the device that her mentor Phandebrass had fabricated to point them in the direction of the shard of Tarrin's sword they were tasked to recover. Something very bad had happened to the girl, something terribly traumatic. Myn reminded Kimmie almost perfectly of Azakar, or more to the point, how Azakar had been when she first came to know him. Back then he was almost militantly silent, as if he was afraid to speak, to draw attention to himself. Myn was much the same way. She never spoke unless someone spoke to her first, and when she did speak, she said as few words as possible without being evasive. That was the behavior of someone who did not want any attention, trying to blend into the background and be as invisible as possible. She always kept her head down, looking at the ground, and her long, almost sinfully thick and luxuriant blonde hair was almost always covering her face. Her hair could be absolutely lovely, but it was unwashed, stringy, and unkempt, but not so dirty or so dishevelled that it brought attention to herself. Her robes were much the same way, severely designed gray robes with a simple leather belt that had many pouches on it for her material components, neither completely clean nor conspicuously dirty, devoid of any decoration save the mask-like emblem that was dyed onto the back in dark blue, a blue the same shade as her tattoo.

The mark of her shame, Kimmie saw.

A tragic story, hers was. She'd been filled in before leaving Pyros. Myn was a brilliant Wizard, exceptionally powerful despite the fact that she was only a shade under thirty years old; barely more than a *child* in the eyes of the Elara. She could have been one of the brightest stars of her generation, if not for the

fact that she was of the laborer caste, which was the lowest caste in her society. The higher castes scornfully called them *korga*, one of the harshest-sounding words in their musical language that rather succinctly summed up how those other castes viewed the laborers. Loosely translated, *korga* meant *untouchable*, a reference to the fact that under Elaran law, they were not even allowed to *touch* a member of a higher caste. They had to wear gloves at all times, symbols of their status as laborers.

Slavery without ownership. That's what Kimmie called it. Arakite slaves had more rights than her caste.

Kimmie still hadn't managed to drag the details out of the girl, but she knew enough to understand the basic events. Myn had such a desire to learn magic that she had somehow managed to trick her way into being accepted into a Wizard school, and there she learned magic. She graduated, earned the rank of Wizard, and served her people for five years before they found out the truth of her. And it was only her awesome potential that saved her life. The penalty for an *untouchable* to violate the laws of caste was death, but the Elara were so desperate for Wizards of Myn's potential that they waived that death sentence...though sometimes Kimmie wondered if death wouldn't have been more humane. Instead of executing her, Myn was tattooed with that blue mask, a symbol of her shame, and put back into service to her people as a Wizard under the command of Elara who hated her for her deception. They had been her former colleagues, people who before that had called her friend, but after they found out who she really was, they felt revolted that she, a laborer, an *untouchable*, had dared to pretend to be their equal. It infuriated them and caused them to mistreat her terribly, but they didn't beat her or abuse her physically...instead they starved her of any kind of meaningful social contact, surrounding her with people who would not even acknowledge her. That didn't seem like too harsh a punishment until one understood how utterly alone she was now. No Elara of *any* caste would so much as look at her. She was *urimiuni*, The Invisible, a punishment of exile from social contact, and for someone like Myn, a young girl surrounded by those she had once called friend but who now scorned her, it had to be hell. Surrounded by people who would not even look at her, the only contact she had of any kind of social interaction the harsh commands of her handlers, who treated her like a trained dog. She was there to do one thing and one thing only, and that was cast spells. When they had no need of her, she did not exist.

There were many ways to abuse a person, and the way they deigned to abuse Myn was just as cruel as those who had put the scars on Azakar's back.

And in the paramount act of hatred for Myn's deception, they had made the tattoo absolutely impossible to remove. It was laid into her skin with magic, and the magic was infused and intertwined into her very body and soul. Any attempt to remove the tattoo would kill her.

She rode just behind Kimmie, head bowed, trying her best to ignore the bubbling chatter of Rina, her bare hands tightly gripping the reins and pulled tightly against her stomach. Kimmie had absolutely *forbade* her from wearing gloves, and Myn seemed utterly unable to keep her hands out where someone might touch her bare skin. Kimmie was in the middle of making her a new dress to replace that horrible robe, but Myn seemed unwilling to give up the garment, stating in a soft, quiet voice that to wear anything other than the robe would be breaking the law.

Not that that mattered. Kimmie too was a Were-cat, and she had many of the traits of her daughter. She would straighten Myn out, whether Myn wanted it or not.

The others either weren't all that worried about Myn, or understood that she wasn't the talkative type. Ianelle and Sevren, riding behind the slender Elara, rode in comfortable silence. The blond-haired Sha'Kar was looking off to the east, towards a low series of hills carpeted with trees, while Sevren rode with a book in one hand and the reins in the other, basically letting the horse follow along behind Myn as he read. Behind them were Kord and Orin, the blond-braided half-Ungardt brothers in their Knight's armor, both of them with faces sheened over with sweat from wearing the heavy armor in the muggy summer day. Tara rode

behind them, her face dark as she shot glares from between the Sorcerers towards her mother after being sent back to ride with Szath. That monstrous Vendari rode behind the Knights, leading the pack animals, following along behind the others as his black eyes kept a cautious eye out behind them.

Szath was...well, Kimmie could just say that he was a nice enough Vendari, but he had to be the slowest sentient being she'd ever met. He wasn't very intelligent. It sometimes took him a moment to puzzle out the meaning of the commands he was given, but Kimmie had to admit, once he understood what it was she wanted him to do, it got done. Sometimes it didn't get done immediately, especially if it required him to think about what to do, but he got it done, and he did it to the best of his ability. He considered hanging a tea kettle over a fire to be just as important a task as defending the host from danger, and he approached all things with total focus and attention to the task at hand. The only field where Szath's reactions were swift and sure were when he reacted to possible danger, or pointed out potential threats to the others. His mind was slow, but he had been trained in those areas, and they were things he understood and knew what to do when confronted with them. At first Kimmie thought he was going to be a liability, but after getting some experience with him, she quickly revised that opinion. So long as one remembered that he wasn't very smart, it was not hard at all for him to fit in with the others. He wasn't talkative or open—no Vendari really was—but he was polite, he was observant, and he was always careful. Ianelle was the one who gently guided him along, and the Sha'Kar had shown both patience with the Vendari and a curious kindness to him.

Mist loped in from ahead, having run ahead to scout a small thicket of trees that was dead ahead. She rejoined the host and motioned for them to stop. Kimmie reined in her horse, and the train came to a halt before the tall Were-cat. "There's no humans," she announced to them. "It has a stream running through the middle, it'd be a good place to camp for the night."

"That would be most agreeable to me," Ianelle said. "I still have not quite acclimated to riding this animal."

"We need to eat anyway," Kimmie reasoned. "I'd like something hot for dinner. Did you find a camp site, mother?"

Mist nodded. "A small clearing on the south side of the thicket," she answered. "There's a few deer roaming in there. I'll go on ahead and take one down, you can meet me at the site. Cubs!" Mist called.

"Yes, Grandmother?" they asked in unison.

"You're coming with me," she called back to them. "Both of you need some exercise."

"Aww," Rina growled, glancing at Myn. "Alright, Grandmother."

Rina's reluctance was overshadowed by Tara's enthusiasm, as she literally jumped off her horse and ran between Ianelle and Sevren, then grabbed Rina's foot and hiked it up and over the horse as she ran between Rina and Myn, nearly sending her head over heels of her horse. Rina managed to recover and land on her feet, giving her twin sister an ugly glare. Tara was about the only thing around that could sour Rina's usually sunny disposition. The two adolescent Were-cat females joined their towering grandmother in front of the host, as Tara used a rawhide thong to tie back her dark hair, and Rina absently scratched at the black fur on her arm as she waited.

"Come on, you two," Mist ordered.

The three of them hurried ahead, and Kimmie watched them rush towards the grove of trees with a quiet sigh of relief. The twins had been bored and fidgety, and Mist had had the perfect idea to take them ahead and have them help her hunt. Kimmie called for Kord and Orin to take the reins of the twins' horses, and she also motioned for Myn to advance and ride beside her as she started then forward again at a walk, giving her

bond-mother and daughters time to get in there and track down a deer before they arrived. The Elara rode beside her in total silence, her head down and her hands tucked in against her stomach.

“Are you having trouble with saddlesores, Myn?” she asked.

“No, Mistress,” she answered in her soft voice.

“Myn.”

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Look at me.”

Myn shyly turned her head towards Kimmie, then slowly raised her eyes, as if fighting against a strong impulse to keep her head down. “Keep going, girl, you’re almost there,” Kimmie noted, which made Kord and Orin chuckle behind her. Myn finally brought up her vibrant lavender eyes, stunningly beautiful eyes that both seemed to clash with her blond hair and pale skin and also accent them. Those purple eyes were surrounded by the dark blue of the mask that was tattooed into her skin, making them even more striking.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it? From now on, when you talk to me, I want you to look at me. I promise, I don’t bite.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Myn replied, her eyes moving down, and then she caught herself and raised them again.

“And don’t call me Mistress,” she snorted. “My name is Kimmie. When you call me Mistress, it makes me feel like a Shacèan courtesan.”

“Yes, M—Kimmie.”

“Someday you’ll have to explain how you know that, Miss Kimmie,” Kord said. Orin tried in vain to stifle a laugh.

“Boys,” Ianelle called sternly. “Behave.”

“Aye, Mistress Ianelle,” Orin said with a straight face, which caused Kimmie to suppress a grin.

Kord and Orin were surprisingly informal as Knights went. They certainly didn’t forget who was in charge, but they liked to banter, and they weren’t afraid to banter with the Were-cats, and both had a rather mischievous bent. In fact, they seemed to have no fear of the Were-cats whatsoever, not even Mist. They didn’t banter with Mist like they did with Kimmie and the twins, but they showed no fear of her, and always seemed perfectly at ease around her. This Kimmie saw as a good thing, both for them and for Mist. Their nonchalance about the Were-cats would go far towards having Mist accept them, because it showed a strength in them that Mist would respect. Though she wasn’t entirely comfortable around all these strangers, straining her composure to its limit, at least none of the strangers in the host were outwardly afraid of her. Ianelle was too unflappable to be afraid of Mist, Szath really wasn’t afraid of *anything*, and Sevren had a great deal of experience from his friendship with Tarrin. Sevren and Ianelle knew exactly what to say and do to appear non-threatening to Mist without appearing weak, and that was *exactly* how a stranger would go about trying to earn a feral Were-cat’s acceptance. Kord and Orin didn’t seem quite as measured or prepared as the Sorcerers were, but their free-wheeling responses, honesty, and friendly demeanor were quite disarming without appearing forced in any manner, and that was something that Mist would respond to in a positive manner. They were doing everything exactly right...whether that was by accident or they were trained

to do it was the question.

They entered the small wood, having to dismount and walk their horses along an old game trail, as Kimmie led them towards the southern end of the small grove. They found the clearing that Mist had mentioned within moments, a narrow strip of land nestled in the heavy curve of the deeply entrenched, meandering stream, which had cut nearly ten spans down into the earth, etching out a deep streambed. It was just wide enough to serve as a good camp, and the stream's deep trench on three sides made it very defensible. Szath, Kord, and Orin dismounted and started unpacking the tents just as Mist, Tara, and Rina stalked in from the west, Mist carrying a small deer over her shoulders. She gave Rina several disapproving looks as they entered the camp. "Next time, cub, don't use Sorcery to kill it," she said, giving the Were-cat another displeased glance. "That's not how Were-cats do things. Your father doesn't even use magic to make a kill. If it's good enough for him, it's good enough for you."

"Well, I didn't want it to get away," she protested.

"Yes, and it was running because you were about as quiet as a Wikuni cannon," she said flatly.

Rina flushed, her tail drooping. "I haven't had much time to practice, with me being in the Tower and all Grandmother. I'll try harder next time."

"Do that," she said coolly, dropping the carcass where Szath was busy digging a firepit. "Now dress this and get it ready to be roasted. I'm sure you remember how to do that?" she asked with a direct stare.

"Um, of course I do, Grandmother," Rina said with another flush.

Tara gave Rina a smug look. "Ow!" she barked when Mist slapped her on the back of the head with her huge paw, causing the cub to put both paws over the struck region. "What was that for?"

"For acting more like Sarraya than a proper Were-cat," she said in a grating tone. "Now help your sister get dinner ready."

The twins busied themselves with the task as the others quickly and efficiently got the camp ready. Tents were erected in a ring around the firepit, and the two Knights picketed the horses. But all activity stopped instantly when a screeching cry emanated over their grove of trees, an inhuman call that made the fur on Kimmie's arms stand up.

"Demon," Mist intoned in the manner of the Cat, looking up. "There. It's passing over us." She pointed to a break in the trees, where, for the briefest instant, a feather-winged Demon appeared, a tall, gangly creature with the head of a vulture and carrying a single-edged polearm. They were called *vrock*, and they were both the least powerful and the most numerous of the True Demons, the soldiers among them. But that was a relative comparison, for a *vrock* was an extremely powerful and dangerous adversary.

"Do you think it's looking for us?" Rina asked.

"There's no way to tell," Kimmie answered her daughter. "But I rather doubt it would be looking for us after giving away its position with that screech."

"Was it calling to its friends?"

"That's possible, cub," Kimmie said with an audible grunt. "I'm not sure if what Tarrin did stops their telepathy or not. My master would know, but I'm just not that smart."

The sound of the Demon's feathered wings trailed away to nothing, but no one moved for several moments, until they were sure that it wasn't circling back around. But after Mist seemed certain that it was gone, she motioned for the others to continue what they were doing, and they returned to the chores of setting camp. Szath started a fire in his expertly dug firepit, then took up some flour and started mixing it in a bowl.

"I didn't know you knew how to cook, Szath," Rina said to him as she quartered the deer carcass.

"I'm making *kota*," he told her in his slow manner, as if he had to think about every word he intended to say. "All Vendari know how to make *kota*. It's trail bread."

"What's in it?"

"This powder, and this powder, and then I have to pour this much water in it, and this much milk," he said after thinking a moment, then he pointed at a ladle he had put out with two bags and a large skin. "I must make it before the milk spoils."

"Can you teach me? I love to cook."

He looked at her with those black, expressionless eyes. "I can teach. But you have to finish your work. Work always comes first."

"This won't take us long," she told the Vendari with a smile.

After they finished getting the deer ready to be roasted, Rina knelt by Szath and listened quite attentively as he methodically explained how he was making his bread. She didn't seem to mind when she found out that it was made with rough oat flour and bone meal, but that combination made Ianelle give a slightly disgusted face. She glanced over at Myn when the Elara seated herself by the fire with her spellbook in her lap, studying it, but she didn't engage the reclusive woman, instead giving Szath all of her attention. The Vendari showed her how to mix the dough the ingredients created, then knead it and shape it into small oval loaves that were spitted on small metal rods and placed over the fire to bake. The Vendari stayed right there, watching the ten loaves with absolute attention, as if looking away would cause him to forget to turn them when the underside became brown. Tara and Rina helped Mist spit the deer and set it over the fire to be roasted, then Kimmie seated herself beside Myn with her spellbook in her lap. "Alright, girl, it's about time we did some crosschecking," she told the Elara firmly. "I'm sure that you have quite a few spells created by your people I don't have, and I *know* that I have quite a few you don't. My master is anything if not prolific when it comes to designing new spells."

"Assuming they don't blow up," Sevren said mildly, then he cleared his throat and offered Ianelle a small cushion to sit upon when Kimmie gave him an ugly glare.

"I'll have you know that Phandebrass is the best Wizard of this generation," Kimmie said defensively.

"I have never doubted his ability. It is his sanity that I find questionable," Ianelle said calmly as she placed the cushion on the ground, then seated herself. "Truth be told, I am quite fond of him. If you can hold his attention, he is a wonderful conversationalist, and he is quite engaging. And his ability astounds me. I have never known of any other Wizard who has successfully managed to study Necromancy without losing his soul."

Myn gasped, then flushed and lowered her eyes.

"What is it, Myn? You can speak your mind here."

“N-Necromancy,” she said in a quiet tone. “Your master studied Necromancy?”

“He didn’t master it, no, but he has studied it, as much as a Wizard can study Necromancy without permanent harm,” she answered seriously. “I see your people know of Necromancy.”

“Mother, what is Necromancy?” Tara asked. “I’ve never heard anyone talk about it.”

“It’s a good thing you haven’t, or I’d flay someone,” Kimmie snorted. “Necromancy is a very specific branch of Wizard magic that deals with death and the dead. I’m not talking about just killing someone, either, cub. Necromancy spells directly tap into the negative energy of death, decay, and pain. Just using it twists your soul and makes you evil, because you’re opening your soul to that negative energy. No spell in Necromancy can ever have a beneficial effect, cub, not even indirectly. The entire school of Magic is about spreading death, decay, and misery.”

Tara paled slightly. “It sounds scary.”

“It’s *very* scary,” Kimmie told her daughter. “If anyone ever told you about Necromancy, even your own father, I’d skin them.”

“How did Phandebrass do it without it hurting himself?”

“Because he knew where to stop,” she answered. “He knew where the line was, and he knew not to cross it. How much of Necromancy do your people know about?” Kimmie asked Myn.

“Very little,” she answered. “It is a field of study only recently discovered and brought back by the Worldwalkers, but what they have brought back is incomplete.”

“I’d imagine so,” Kimmie said with a frown. “Any of your Worldwalkers that mastered Necromancy would abandon his mission and be consumed by the evil of the magic.”

Myn nodded. “I could see that truth when I was given the first book.”

Kimmie stared at her a long moment. “They made you learn *Necromancy*?” she said with sudden heat.

“They care nothing for me, mistress Kimmie,” she said wanly. “They only care about the magic I can use. But I could see the truth of Necromancy when I started my studies, and like your master, I understood where the line was. I would not cross that line. And since it was a field of magic that *they* would dare not undertake, they didn’t know that I was holding back.”

“Clever girl,” Sevren said with a nod.

“I don’t see why you stay with them,” Tara snorted, crossing her arms.

“Where else would I go, Mistress Tara?” Myn asked in a small voice. “This is the first time I have ever been off Elara. I was trapped there. They also wouldn’t let me learn Gatekeeper magic, to keep me there. They knew the first thing I would do would be to escape this world if I could master a spell that would let me escape them. What else can I do?”

Tara was silent, but the dark scowl on her face betrayed her emotions.

“Well, we’ll just have to take care of that,” Kimmie said calmly. “I have that very spell in this book, the Gate spell your Worldwalkers use. They gave it to my master, and my master copied it in my spellbook. I

can't cast it, but I think *you* could. So, let me find it, and let's get it copied into *your* book. Oh, and I suggest you *always* keep it memorized. Just in case, you know," she said with a wink.

"You would do this for me?" Myn asked, incredulous.

"Of course we would," Kimmie said with a bright smile. "We *like* you, Myn, and we don't like what your people did to you. We had to swear to return you to the Elara, but we *never* said we wouldn't arm you with everything you need to get away from them once we do," she finished with a wink.

The act of arming Myn with a spell that would allow her to escape from her people had had a noticeable effect on her. In the two days since she was given a copy of the spell, and what was more important, was able to understand and memorize it, she became less timid. Though still quiet and withdrawn, she would engage in brief conversation with the others from time to time, and started asking small questions to Kimmie when she thought no one else was paying any attention to her. The only time she came anywhere close to shedding her shy demeanor was when she was teaching. Kimmie had absently noted, after helping Myn copy the Gate spell into her spellbook, that Myn's book had quite a few spells that Kimmie's didn't. And Myn, sensing the hidden question behind those words, offered to teach Kimmie, acting as her mentor in Phandebrass' stead while student was separated from teacher.

And it was during that first exchange that Kimmie understood why the Elara kept her alive. Myn wasn't just a great Wizard. That would be an insult to her. Myn was unique in that she understood the *texture* of magic on a level Kimmie had never seen before. Myn was not a magician, she was an *artist*, where every spell had textures, colors, and meanings that Kimmie had never noticed before. In just that first broaching conversation about Arcane magic, Kimmie had to completely redraw basic conclusions about the fundamental nature of magic. Phandebrass saw things in the magic that Kimmie could not, and probably never would, but his approach was from one of science and logic, trying to compartmentalize and rationalize to the smallest detail. Myn's approach was the artist's approach, where it was the *beauty* of the spell that mattered, not the exacting mechanics of the process. Phandebrass tried to analyze magic under a magnifying glass, but Myn stepped back and observed it as a whole. This different viewpoint and different approach shocked Kimmie at first, but after just one evening of conversation, she began to understand at least some of what made Myn's approach effective. Phandebrass had taught her to understand a spell in *minutae*, analyzing every syllable and inflection, but Myn's approach to spellcasting was much looser, almost dangerously loose...at least that was how it seemed at first. Myn's casting was loose, almost sounded slapdash, where not even the same spell was cast the same way twice. The words were the same, but the inflection, the intonation, the *texture* of the words varied, which went against almost everything that Phandebrass had taught her. But there was no arguing with the fact that though Myn's approach to magic was dramatically different than how Kimmie was trained, it was just as effective. She could induce more power into every spell she cast than any Wizard Kimmie had ever seen, except for her own master. Though Myn and Phandebrass had different approaches to Arcane magic, both of them could achieve a similar result, and it was then that Kimmie realized that she had the rare blessing to be tutored by two of the most powerful and learned Wizards alive.

In that first evening, Kimmie learned that the power of Arcane magic was not as exacting and demandingly precise as she had always been taught, but on the other hand, one had to sense the *mood* of the spell to be able to cast it without using those exacting formulas taught to her by Phandebrass. Myn's approach was much like what Kimmie understood of Sorcery, since she breathed life into every spell by putting a tiny bit of herself into them, by giving them more than exacting formulas...she gave them *emotion*. It was a radically different approach, because Myn considered Arcane magic to be a living thing, possessed of emotions, moods, and desires, where Phandebrass simply saw it as a natural force, like the weather.

The second evening of instruction was a more involved discussion about the nature of Arcane magic, as Myn taught Kimmie about the *mood* of the spell, a sense of the hidden emotion of the magic even as the words shaped it, a sense of understanding of how to change tone and inflection to enhance the spell by

feeling the heart of the magic she was shaping. They had stopped on a grassy plain by a large stream that had worn down into its streambed, and Kimmie was taking advantage of some private time with Myn as Kord and Orin were off doing the evening dishes, Mist and the cubs were bathing in the stream, and Ianelle and Sevren were out of the camp, studying an old ruin very close to the camp, with Szath accompanying them for their protection. Kimmie tried many times to cast a simple cantip using Myn's method of casting, but only managed fizzle after fizzle.

"I don't think I'll ever get this right," Kimmie fretted as her Dust cantrip fizzled out without accomplishing the task of sweeping the dust off a rock placed before the fire for the exercise.

"There is no *right* way, Mistress Kimmie," Myn said in a curious singsong voice, sitting demurely across the fire from Kimmie with her hands in her lap and her eyes closed. "Try again. Remember, try to feel the magic."

"But I always feel the magic."

"No, you feel it build around you, or flow through you. You do not *feel* the magic. When you can feel the mood of the magic, then you can adjust your casting to attune to the mood of the magic, and make it stronger."

"I guess that's why I'm having so much trouble," Kimmie stated. "It just seems to me that magic can't have emotions. It's just energy, after all, nothing more."

"Then that is your first task, Mistress Kimmie."

"What?"

"To find the soul of the magic, of course," she answered. "When you can detect the mood of the magic as you cast it, then you'll be ready to learn how to change your casting to match that mood, which makes it stronger."

"I'd rather just learn the spells I don't have," Kimmie laughed ruefully.

"I don't think you're being entirely serious with me, Mistress Kimmie," Myn said with a shy smile, her eyes still closed.

"It's just so different. It's nothing like how Phandebrass taught me, or anything I've ever studied."

"I know," she nodded. "It took me a long time to understand it."

"Is this what the Elara teach?"

"Some, depending on the master who apprentices you," she answered. "My master is the one that taught me. He was very old and very kind. He died the day after I earned my robe. Sometimes," she said, bowing her head, "sometimes I think he knew the truth of me. He was so wise, I don't think anything escaped him. I think he knew what I was, but he didn't care. He was like a father to me."

"Maybe he did, Myn. Maybe he saw what I see in you, and couldn't let such a jewel go without being polished."

"Mistress Kimmie?"

“Yes?”

“Is your mother really as dangerous as you say?”

“Usually she is,” she said, looking at the pale Elara. “Why?”

“Um, because Master Kord and Master Orin are about to make her very angry.”

“What? How?” she asked, standing up quickly.

Almost in answer to that question, there was an indignant *yowl* that erupted from near the stream, followed by the sound of running feet. Kimmie rushed towards that sound, and intercepted Kord and Orin, wearing nothing but leather trousers, running from a nearby large stream. Kimmie grabbed each one by the arm and yanked, surprising them and making them gasp, then pulled them towards the fire. “And just *what* are the two of you doing out there?” she demanded.

“Nothing, Mistress Kimmie, nothing at all,” Kord said easily.

“Nothing?” Kimmie asked archly as she got them to the fire.

“Nothing serious,” Orin told her with a slight smile. “Just settling a score.”

“What?”

From the far side of the fire, Mist appeared. She was naked from the waist up, and behind her stood an indignant Tara and Rina, both nude, and both with the wastewater from the supper dishes splattered all over them. Both of them had bits of bean and flecks of potato sticking to their hair, skin, and fur, and Rina looked especially outraged. Mist’s eyes were glowing in the darkness, two narrow green slits of evil that bored towards them like a beacon of death.

“Oh dear,” Kimmie gulped.

“*You two*,” she hissed, pointing at the smaller brothers. “Would you like to explain why you did that before I kill you?”

“Well, we weren’t aiming at *you*, Mistress Mist,” Kord told her in a surprisingly candid manner, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Mist *meant* it. “We got who we were after.”

“What?” Rina demanded. “Why would you throw that stuff at me for?”

“Well, we were aiming at Tara. She put mud in our boots this morning,” Orin told her. “We were just paying her back.”

“You were playing a *joke*?” Mist hissed dangerously, looking back at Tara, whose angry face suddenly became nervous.

“Well, yes,” Kord answered easily. “But not on *you*. We like you and all, but we don’t know you well enough to prank you, Mistress Mist.”

“At least not yet,” Orin added dryly.

It hung there for a long moment, as Kimmie tensed up, waiting for her bond-mother to charge through

that fire and rip the life out of the two Ungardt...but it never happened. “Did it occur to you that you could have thrown it at Tara when she was alone?” Mist told them gratingly.

Kimmie blinked. Mist *wasn't* going to kill them!

“Well, we didn’t get you at all, Mistress Mist. But we’re sorry, Rina. We didn’t mean to hit *you*. You moved the wrong way at the wrong time.”

Mist clenched her fists.

“We apologize, Mistress Mist. We’ll be more careful the next time we’re throwing dishwater at Tara and you’re nearby, we promise,” Orin said honestly.

The absurdity of that statement struck through the tension of the moment and caused Kimmie to try to contain a giggle, which turned into a sputtering high-pitched snort.

But that statement had a strange effect on Mist. Instead of making her angry, it caused her to assume a less rigid posture. “Go get the kettle before I skin both of you,” Mist growled at them, snapping her paw out and pointing back the way she came.

“Yes’m,” Kord said with a bob of his head, scurrying off to do her bidding. She fixed each of them with an unholy glare as they passed by her, but Orin slowed down and rather brazenly stared right at her bare breasts as he went by, the winked at her as he rushed after his brother.

Kimmie had to exhale a relieved sigh and put her paw on her chest. By the trees, she thought the Ungardt were dead men!

Mist looked at her bond-daughter, then turned on Tara and Rina. “And just *why* were you putting mud in their boots, cub?” she demanded.

“Because one of them stuck a snake in our tent last night,” she answered.

“And why would they do that?”

“Well, maybe because I, um, magentized their armor yesterday morning,” Rina admitted with a flush. “They couldn’t pull it apart to put it on.”

“That’s why they weren’t wearing it,” Kimmie mused aloud. “I thought it was because it was so hot yesterday.”

“So, you’re playing tricks on each other,” Mist grunted, giving them a narrow-eyed stare. “Fair enough. But keep *me* out of it.”

“And you will fix their armor *right now*, young lady,” Kimmie ordered, pointing at Rina. “They need that armor if we get into a fight.”

“Yes, mother,” Rina said with a nod, then she padded towards the tents to perform her assigned task.

“Go clean up,” Mist ordered Tara.

“Yes, grandmother,” she acknowledged, and went back the way she came.

“Mother, I’m surprised,” Kimmie said honestly as Mist came over to her. “I thought you were going to kill them.”

“Over that?” Mist snorted, crossing her arms beneath her bare breasts. “It’s not my concern, cub. If Tara and Rina want to play pranks on the humans, that’s their business. But I don’t think they’re going to like the box they’ve opened. Those two humans are devious. They’re going to give your cubs gray hair.”

Kimmie laughed, putting a fond paw on her bond-mother’s shoulder. “I’m just happy to see you’re not angry.”

“I was a little angry at first, but I have to admit, what they did took guts. I can respect that. And they won’t let this trip get boring, that’s for sure.”

“That’s the truth,” Kimmie laughed in agreement. “How did they get close enough to do that, anyway?”

“I knew they were coming, but I thought you told them to empty the dishwater, so I didn’t pay them much mind,” she answered. “I think your cubs need more training, though. They had no idea those two were there.”

“What is this I hear, mother? You dropping your guard around strangers?” Kimmie teased with a brilliant smile.

Mist actually looked *uncomfortable*. “Well, I’m not all that worried about those two,” she told her. “Two unarmed boys can’t do much to me.”

Kimmie just smiled at her, then hugged her so suddenly that Mist seemed taken aback. “I love you, mother!” she exclaimed.

Mist awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. “Well, I love you too, cub.”

Seeing Mist being so...unlike herself was a wonderful thing to Kimmie.

It wasn’t that she didn’t love her bond-mother, but the wounding that had turned her feral had always been the dominating aspect of her entire personality. The time she’d been with Tarrin had done much to soften that part of herself, but recent events had caused her to regress back into her feral tendencies. It was so shockingly wonderful to see her starting to at least relax a little around strangers...even if it was two overly brash Ungardt Knights. She certainly wasn’t quite so calm and relaxed around Sevren, Ianelle, and Szath.

Kimmie pondered on that most of the next day, as they continued moving south. Tara and Rina had been shoulder to shoulder all day, riding far from Kord and Orin, no doubt planning their revenge for the dishwater episode. The two Ungardt knights were riding at the front of the column that day because they had passed into grass covered, low, rolling hill country, and Mist could only range out so far. So the Knights were riding point with Kimmie just behind to direct them, and Szath rode in the rear to defend the back and the pack animals from any attacks from behind.

Kord and Orin were also something to ponder. Kimmie thought they were irreverent, but it went way beyond mere youthful bravado. Those two were absolutely *fearless*. They had looked Mist in the eyes when she was angry, and they didn’t even flinch. And oh, they knew that she was angry, and that she very well might lash out at them. They admitted as much to Kimmie that morning, but they simply shrugged it off like it was nothing. “Dolanna told us what to expect,” Kord had told her nonchalantly. “If we get Miss Mist that mad, it’s not like we can’t handle it.”

Kimmie almost gave Kord a tirade on the spot, but Orin cut her off. “Just let us deal with it, Miss Kimmie,” he told her. “Oh, and we’re sorry in advance.”

“For what?”

“For what we’re gonna do to your daughters,” he answered immediately and with an absolutely straight face.

Kimmie could only laugh at that. “You have my blessing,” she grinned. “Those two need to learn that they’re not quite as invincible as they think they are.”

So many things to ponder, both the absurd and the serious. There still had been no word from Dolanna or any of the Sorcerers about what was going on back at Pyros. When they left, Kang had been rebuilding parts of the city to house the army, and they’d also been working on fortifications that basically ringed the southern side of the volcano, enclosing the bluff where Dolanna was located on the volcano’s slope and the parts of the city being rebuilt. Dolanna had to be defended, and since an enemy could come from any direction, Kang took steps to make sure that even trying to come along the steep slopes of the volcano’s upper cone would be steps taken while trying to penetrate fortifications manned by defenders. Kang had designed a three layer scheme of defense around Dolanna, one ring around the city they rebuilt, and one ring around the bluff, and one ring around Dolanna.

And still no word about Tarrin. The last any had heard of him had been from Julia, who had arrived a while back with Tsukatta and related her meeting him in that alien dimension known as Crossroads. She had little to say, really, only that he was well and was working on some kind of plan to return to Pyrosia to drive away the Demon Lord, a plan he didn’t relate to his daughter. They’d started to get worried if he was alright, but then that fire-winged horse simply showed up, with a note around her neck telling everyone who she was and why she was there. That Tarrin would send that beast back here told them that he was still out there, still working on his plan, and it had reassured everyone.

That darn male and his need to collect exotic animals as pets. As if the house didn’t have enough, with a drake and a Hellhound, now they were going to have a Gehennan Pegasus in the stable. Next thing Kimmie knew, he was going to bring a Roc home.

And *Azur*, was Fireflash jealous of Fury! Gods above, he about had a fit when he found out that Fury was Tarrin’s personal horse!

Fury had rejected every single person’s attempt to befriend her to the point where they could ride her, even Jasana...and that had shocked the young Were-cat female to no end. She was more friendly with the Were-cats than she was with anyone else, probably because of Tarrin, and probably by now she was following Julia around, since Julia was the only Were-cat left in Pyros.

“Mother? What’s wrong?” Tara asked as the twins rode up to the front.

“What? Nothing, just thinking about your father,” she answered. “I wish someone would tell us how he is.”

“I don’t think anyone knows. Dolanna wouldn’t hold something like that back,” Rina said from her other side.

“What are you two doing up here?” Kimmie asked them, looking at one, then the other, fully aware that they were withing spitting distance of the Ungardt Knights.

“We wanted to know when we were stopping to eat,” Tara answered.

Kimmie looked up at the sky to see where the sun was, and again felt distinctly uncomfortable with *not* seeing the Skybands. She’d never get used to that! “I’m not sure, cub. Soon, I think.”

Mist appeared over the hill ahead, and she was moving in a way that immediately put Kimmie on edge. She was running at top speed, straight towards them, and there was a stiffness in her motions that told Kimmie that she was angry or afraid. “Hold on,” she told her children as the Were-cat raced towards them, then literally slid to a halt before the Knights.

“Stop!” she hissed in a low tone, “and be quiet!”

“What is it, Miss Mist?” Kord asked in a professional tone, reaching down to grab the shield slung from his saddle.

“There’s a bloody *army* about ten longspans ahead of us,” she answered in a low tone, motioning behind her, at a thin smudge visible just over the hill, that looked like a dim cloud. “It’s moving this way.”

“An army? Is it the Dwarves?” Kimmie asked.

“They wouldn’t be this far south,” Sevren noted.

She shook her head. “Humans, and I thought I saw something bigger than a human among them, so that means that they’re the Demon’s human forces. It’s *huge*.”

“How huge?”

“The column has to be a longspan wide,” she answered. “I have no idea how many are coming up behind, but there has to be tens of thousands.” She motioned to her right. “We need to move. Fast. Their scouts aren’t much but five minutes behind me.”

“Is there any chance of getting around them?” Sevren asked.

“Allow me,” Ianelle said confidently, spreading her arms out in a peculiar manner. Kimmie had noted that though Sorcery required no movements, some Sorcerers seemed the need to gesture when performing their magic. Ianelle certainly wasn’t one of those that did this habitually, but sometimes she did tend to gesture. She closed her eyes as she obviously wove together a spell, and was silent a moment as they all watched her.

“There are scouts arrayed in a staggered manner before us,” she said absently, turning her head slightly. “Several hundred of them, ranging several longspans to each side of the main host. There is—well, there’s more than I can count in that host. They go on to the range of my spell. There has to be several thousand within my range.”

“Any chance we can pull back and go around?” Kimmie asked.

“If we angle off, we might have to kill a few,” Mist grunted. “They’re going to be coming at us while we’re trying to circle them.”

“That would tell them we’re here,” Szath said slowly. “We must pull back without engaging their scouts and give ourselves enough space to execute a flanking maneuver.”

“Just backtracking might not be enough, if one of their scouts sees us from a distance,” Ianelle called. “I will Teleport us back to our campsite last night, Kimmie. We will lose some time, but it will give us enough space to go around them safely.”

“That’s a good idea,” Kimmie said as Mist nodded in agreement. “Szath, please pull the pack animals in. Everyone needs to be as close together as possible.”

“Yes, Miss Kimmie,” Szath answered.

“Circle with me please, Sevren,” Ianelle said to the thin Sorcerer.

“I was about to suggest the very thing,” he told her.

“We should warn Pyros,” Orin said. “They need to know there’s another army coming from the south.”

Kimmie nodded. “That’s a given, Orin.”

Szath brought in the pack animals, and everyone crowded on their horses around Sevren and Ianelle. Kimmie watched as Tara and Rina stared intently at the two Sorcerers as they Circled, and then, once they were all as close together as possible, Teleported them quickly and safely back to the campsite near the riverbank, back in the safety of the small grove of trees that would hide them from scouting eyes. Ianelle immediately put her hand to her amulet. “Dolanna,” she called.

“I am here, Ianelle. What is it?” came Dolanna’s tinny-pitched response.

“Dolanna, there is a very large army coming towards Pyros from the south,” she said. “I did not get an accurate count, but it is in the tens of thousands, minimum.”

“Did you have any problems?”

“No, Mist scouted them out before their scouts found us, and we have Teleported back to our last campsite so that we may go around them safely.”

“Hold on.” Almost immediately, a swirling light appeared before Ianelle, then it coalesced and solidified into a highly detailed illusion of Dolanna. She looked haggard and drawn, with dark circles under her eyes, the burden of carrying the weight of the Weave. “There, that is much better,” she said absently. “I have just recently managed to master this trick.”

“You are progressing quite admirably in learning to master this Weave,” Ianelle said with an approving nod.

“If that I had more time,” she chuckled ruefully. “Please, someone show me a map. Kang wishes to know exactly where this army is located.”

“Hold on, Miss Dolanna,” Kord said, pulling up the flap of one of his saddlebags. “I’m the one who’s been keeping tabs on our location.” He dismounted and walked over to the projection, then knelt down and spread the map out on the ground. The image of Dolanna knelt down as well. “Alright, here’s Pyros,” he said, pointing at a large mark on the map. “We’ve been moving in a straight line, more or less, to the south. We crossed this river six days ago, and given how much ground we’ve been covering a day, that’s put us right about here.” He pointed at an area of hills marked on the map, not far from a mark that denoted a city or large town. “There’s a town, uh, Medos, about three days travel to the south-southwest of us. I’d bet that all these southern cities here on the map along the coast sent their soldiers to Medos, and now they’re

marching north.”

“Odd that there is no road between Pyros and Medos,” Dolanna said after looking at the map.

“Not a road, but this river here passes close to Pyros, and as you can see, Medos is built right at its mouth. I’d bet that they just ferry everything on barges between Medos and this town here, then send it to Pyros in wagons.”

We digress,” Dolanna said. “Exactly where is the army located now? Ianelle mentioned that she Teleported you back some distance from the army.”

“Well, I’d say about right here,” Kord told her, pointing at the map. “That’s about half a day’s travel south of where we are now. Right about there is where we were when we backtracked.”

“Strange that they would not march directly from Medos in a straight line,” Dolanna mused, seeming to look past Kord and at the ground behind him. “Why would they detour so far to the east? I see no major landmark or obstacle on this map that would cause them to swing so far to the east.”

“I’m not sure,” Kord grunted. “Unless they decided to run the army along this route so we’d be in their way, but that seems a bit silly to make a very large army march days out of its way just to intercept a handful of people.”

“I am sorry, Kord, I was speaking to Kang,” Dolanna told him. “He is sitting at a table before me with a map. I was trying to speak physically, but I think that I am too tied up in this projection to separate my physical actions from the actions my image produces. Can you bypass this army without detection?” she asked, looking to Kimmie.

Kimmie looked at Mist, who nodded. “We have enough room now to go wide and then swing back to the south. But we’ll have to move without a break until we’re behind them.”

“We can’t angle back and get tangled in their supply lines either,” Orin noted. “They’re gonna have patrols running back and forth along their supply route.”

Dolanna was silent a long moment. “Very well,” she said.

“How are the others doing?” Kimmie asked.

“The others are already on their way,” she told them, “and they’re moving at a much faster pace. Keritanima decided that moving on horseback would be too slow.”

“But all the Pegasi were killed,” Kimmie interrupted.

“You know Keritanima, Kimmie, that was naught but a minor inconvenience,” Dolanna chuckled. “She had one of the flying devices from her stores in Wikuna sent through the gate, and it was Teleported here five days ago. She affixed it to one of the riverboats in the town east of us, and they use that. They are already very close to the fragment. It landed in a region of rugged snowy mountains, and the geography is hindering their search.”

“That was damn clever,” Kord laughed. “I feel like I was put in the wrong team.”

“But then we wouldn’t have the twins to play with,” Orin said with a straight face, which produced a synchronous glare from Tara and Rina.

“Sounds like horses would’ve been impossible anyway,” Kimmie said.

“The reports she’s sent to me have not been encouraging,” Dolanna said. “The weather has been very bad, and the riverboat she used has been battered and damaged. Soon she fears it will be unusable, and they will be forced to strike out on horseback, over extremely rugged mountain terrain.”

“Hold on,” Ianelle said. “Dolanna, can Keritanima arrange to have *another* of those devices sent through the gate?”

“I—yes, that is quite clever, Ianelle,” Dolanna nodded. “We have enough Sorcerers at hand to Circle and produce enough power to Teleport an entire boat. Keritanima would have to instruct you on how to make it fly, and you would need a navigator.”

“We’re Ungardt, ma’am,” Kord told her with a wave of his armored hand. “Me and Orin can navigate a ship, no problem. We have a map, that’s all we need. We can even take turns, so we can keep it in the air all the time.”

“Then perhaps you are on the right team after all,” Dolanna winked. “I will have the arrangements made. Right now, I would have you move well out of the path of the approaching army, find a small pond or river, and ground there. I can have the device brought here in a matter of hours, but the process of attaching it to boat takes some time. It will take a few days, at least.”

“Alright then, we’ll move off to the west and find a pond or lake, then wait there,” Kimmie told Dolanna.

Dolanna nodded. “I will see to it immediately.”

“Well, Dolanna, why didn’t someone think of sending us a flying boat sooner?” Sevren asked curiously.

“Mayhaps because you did not report that you were having any difficulty until now,” she answered. “And I can assure you, my friends, right now it is so busy here that we are not going out of our way to make any extra work. Nobody is getting more than a few hours’ sleep a night. We are trying to fortify an entire city in a matter of rides, because the Demon Lord’s army is starting to congregate in the ruins of Dengal. We believe he might be preparing to march out and make his way to Pyros, despite Tarrin’s shadow.”

“That thing’s still alive?” Kimmie asked.

Dolanna nodded. “I can sense it now. It has gained much power, and seems to have digressed from its original mission of slaying Demons. It is as if it has taken on a sentience of its own.”

“What’s it doing?”

“It is quite, bizarre,” she told them. “The shadow seems to be hunting down only *certain* Demons to slay, and when not doing that, it is herding up groups of humans and forcing them to march north, towards the lands of the Dwarves. We do not understand its behavior, and what is more unusual, we do not understand why the humans are doing as the shadow commands. Those groups of humans continue in the direction they were set well after they are out of the shadow’s reach. It is even more unusual that the shadow seems quite particular about which humans it collects up and then forces to march away. I have reports of it invading Demon-held cities and wreaking havoc, but it does not hunt down and destroy Demons...it only finds these particular humans, effects their removal from the city, gathers them together, and then sends them all north. We cannot fathom what it is doing.”

“Which Demons is it killing?” Sevren asked.

“If it has some kind of plan or methodology about it, we do not understand it,” Dolanna answered. “It will engage a group of ten Demons, slay only one, and then flee from the rest. And it focuses on its target in deference to all others, ignoring anything but its intended victim. And it is not focusing on the stronger Demons, either. It will pass a *nalfeshnee* or *babau* by in order to slay a single lowly *manes* or *rutterkin*, then flee without doing any other harm.”

“That *is* unusual,” Sevren noted, tapping the rim of his spectacles with a fingertip. “Maybe it’s singling out the latent Sorcerers among the native population?”

“We considered that, but how would it know?”

“Dolanna, we’re dealing with a creation of Tarrin here. Val’s shadow had elements of Val’s personality in it, and the same is probably true for Tarrin’s creation. I would approach its behavior along the lines of *what would Tarrin do*. It’s entirely possible that it *does* know, and Tarrin would seek to remove all Sorcerers from the clutches of the enemy. They are the base of the Weave of this world...and that means that one way the Demon Lord could attack you is by slaughtering the lives the stars within the Heart of this Weave represent, attempting to weaken the support of this Weave to such an extent that it can’t support itself any longer. That would kill you, and when you die, so does this Weave. So, Tarrin’s shadow is doing nothing more than protecting *you*, Dolanna. And that is something that *Tarrin* would do.

“True, Sevren,” Dolanna chuckled.

“Now I see why Mother ordered him along,” Rina remarked to Tara.

“Let me see that map again,” Dolanna said, motioning not towards Kord, but off to her left. She bent down and looked over nothingness, and then her eyes narrowed. “Oh dear.”

“What is it, Dolanna?” Kimmie asked.

“I have been learning how this Weave works, Kimmie, and with that practice I have continued my efforts to locate the shards of the sword, as was commanded of me by Mother. I have improved on my ability to sense them. From the look of this map, you are going to *need* that boat, my dear one. The sense of the shard you seek is that it is a very great distance away, and from the look of this map and the distances upon it and the improved sense of direction I feel from my projection, which is closer to the shard, you are going to run out of land before you find it. I, I think Tarrin cast it into the sea.”

“If that’s so, we’re going to need a *seaworthy* boat,” Orin noted.

“I agree. I will have to find a way to enact that miracle,” she said sourly, then her eyes brightened. “No, I know exactly what to do. Dear ones, move out of the path of the army and ground yourself in a safe place. I will have Alexis’ flying galleon brought here.”

“How’s it going to fit through the gate?” Rina asked.

“I will find a way to make it so,” she said. “The galleon is seaworthy. Should you find yourself seeking the shard over open ocean, you are going to need a *ship*, not a *riverboat*. That ship will have to land, and you will require a ship that can handle the rough seas and unpredictable weather of the open ocean.”

“Aye, no argument from me on that,” Kord agreed.

“I will have Keritanima relay a command to board a Wikuni crew to man her,” Dolanna added. “If you must take a ship out into unknown waters, you would do well to have a Wikuni crew manning it.”

“Or Ungardt,” Kord and Orin said in unison.

“Ungardt do not have experience with galleons, where a Wikuni crew does,” Dolanna told them with a weary smile, the effort of projecting showing on the Illusion. “Time grows short, my dear ones, so follow my orders. Ianelle, contact me when you have found a suitable hiding place. Mind that your location does *not* require to have a body of water within it, only of sufficient open area to permit the appearance of the ship without any obstacles. The galleon can be Teleported to your grounding area while hovering in midair.”

“I would have to lead the Circle performing that Teleportation personally, Dolanna.”

“You will,” she nodded. “I will recall all of you before we Teleport the ship to that location, but I would have you hold fast at that location until the ship has arrived and is ready.”

“We can handle that, Dolanna,” Kimmie told her.

“Very well. I grow weary, my dear ones, and find need to end this. Please keep me informed. Be careful, and good luck to you.”

“You too, Dolanna,” Kimmie said, then Dolanna’s image wavered and vanished soundlessly.

“Well, who knew we’d be using a flying ship,” Kord laughed.

“Or that we’ll be going out over the ocean.”

“I wonder,” Tara grunted.

“What, sis?” Rina asked, looking at her twin.

“Well, when we find the shard, how are we going to *get* it? I mean, I don’t think we’re gonna be lucky enough to have it land on a little island. We’re gonna have to fish it off the bottom.”

Kimmie laughed. “I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

“I, I think I can find a spell that might help us in that,” Myn offered meekly.

“That’s a good place to start, then,” Kimmie told her, giving her a smile. “It’s something we can all think about while we’re moving west. Mother?”

“Get them set to move, boys,” Mist ordered the Knights as she moved away from them. “Give me five minutes, then start after me.”

“Aye, Miss Mist,” Kord nodded as he moved to remount his horse.

“I will rearrange the pack horses,” Szath said in his slow manner. “They are not ready to move.”

“May, may I help, Master Szath?” Myn asked, trying to look into Szath’s eyes, but not quite able to summon up enough courage. “I know little of horses.”

“You can help, Mistress Myn,” Szath said after a moment’s thought. “Take these reins, please.”

Kimmie smiled as Szath and Myn started repositioning the pack train to get them ready to move. It was good to see her at least trying to be more open. It was a very good sign.

Emptiness.

It stretched out in every direction. Nothing but an infinite void of featureless gray, uniform in every direction, endlessly stretching in all directions.

It was the Astral.

In the eternal vastness of the Astral, it was virtually impossible for anything, or anyone to be found, but there was one lone bit of solidity marring the perfect gray, a tiny speck of a humanoid form that floated effortlessly within the empty void. That figure, Tarrin Kael, was absolutely depending on that fact, that in the eternal expanse of this empty place, nothing could be found. Oh, one could go to where they wanted to go by willing to go there, but that didn't exactly work on sentient beings. Certainly, one could enter the Astral and will to go to Tarrin Kael, but it was a function of *location*. The pursuer would certainly be pulled in the direction *in which Tarrin had been located when the movement began*. It didn't take into account that the target of that destination was also in motion. His pursuer would get there and find nothing, because Tarrin had moved away. That was what he was depending upon now. The Deva could not track him, could not find him, and even if they could, they had no way to reach him. The Deva innate power of Teleportation also would work here, but not quite the way one would expect. A Deva could easily teleport to any location in the plane, but since none of the Deva had any idea where he was, they had no idea where to teleport *to*. The only chance they'd have is if they guessed where he was going...but none of them had the faintest idea what he intended to do. And he'd bet that the *last* thing any of them would expect would be for him to seek out a mortal plane.

Tarrin's condition was why. Tarrin was a soul without a body, and he was a god's soul at that. The body he constructed for himself was a function of the power of the Outer Planes, and would not go into a material plane. His body would vanish like smoke the instant he stepped out of a gate and put his feet on the earth of a material plane, leaving nothing but his soul. If he attempted to enter a mortal plane, the restrictions of that plane would tear his unprotected soul apart, and destroy him. Because of this, he had absolutely no reason to attempt to enter any material plane...and yet, that was exactly where he was going.

His vulnerability wasn't an issue for him. He already knew exactly what he had to do to protect his created form and the soul it contained, which was also a part of the overall—albeit shaky—plan for dealing with Spyder. On Sennadar, he would have no Sorcery, no Druidic power, only his Arcane magic and the fundamental aspects of his being to work with.

And that fundamental aspect was that he was a creation of the Firestaff.

That was about the entire plan. Enter the gate, summon the Firestaff, and use it to both protect his created body from the destructive ravages of a mortal plane, and find some way to get past Spyder without fighting her or hurting her. He really had no solid idea about how he was going to do that, but he'd think of something. Fighting someone like Spyder wasn't something one entered with a solid idea of what to do in the first place. Despite the fact that she was his friend and he knew her very well, she still kept many secrets, and he had absolutely no doubt that the majority of her fighting prowess was a mystery to him. He could only guess at her basic motivations based on what he knew of her.

That wasn't much, but it was enough for him to at least guess at her initial actions. She would not enter a fight with him willingly, that much he knew. But when she did, she would come after him with everything, because she knew how dangerous he could be...probably better than anyone else on Sennadar. She would try to either kill him or force him back through the gate with an overwhelming initial assault.

That was going to be the trick. Once he got past that, she would pull back and consider, because Spyder was not used to failing in any task. To be stymied in such a way would make her attempt to regroup and give him a few precious seconds to counterattack...if he intended to attack. Instead, he would use that time to erect more defenses. He *would not* fight her. He knew better, and besides, he would take no risk that he might hurt her, or push her into revealing her true power. When she came back after him again, then he'd just be going by the seat of his pants.

But he was good at that.

He was here. The dull gray gate of Sennadar stood before him, so perfectly matching the color of the surrounding void that it was almost undetectable for him, even when he hovered just in front of it.

There was one more thing to do. He could not enter Sennadar the way he was now. He had to be pure, untainted, a perfect and pristine creation of the Firestaff, and he also could carry no divine energies in with him. Those would interfere with what he intended to do. He had to be clean.

"Mother," he called into the void. "Now."

She did not respond. She did not need to. She had already agreed to do this for him.

It certainly didn't take long. He *felt* it. He felt the tenuous bond between him and Dolanna shudder, as the Goddess told her what she was doing, but in a way that didn't leave her traumatized. He had no doubt that Niami simply told her that she was exhibiting true faith in Tarrin, and though he had really appreciated it, it was time for her to stop, to remember that he was a *man*, not a *god*. And as she became aware of that faith, aware that she was giving faith to someone that was not Niami, that faith would cease. Instantly.

And it did. In the blink of an eye, the symbiotic relationship between Tarrin and Dolanna, mortal and god, was no more. And in that ending, all of the power that Tarrin gained through her faith ceased to be. The wings on his back shivered, then they turned gray, and then they evaporated like so much smoke, even as he felt a small part of himself wither away and then vanish as if it had never been.

It was done. Tarrin was now truly powerless, nothing but a shell of a god with no power, not even a body of his own.

It was time. He was ready.

With only a short pause, Tarrin floated into the dull gray color pool that linked his home world with the Astral. It flowed around him, surrounded him with strange tingle warmth as it touched him, then it dragged him in like a fisher reeling in a catch.

It was like no other sensation she had ever felt.

Spyder literally gasped when she felt a *violent* reaction in the ephemeral connection that the Elder Gods kept with her, staggering in her manor home, in her main library, putting a slender four-fingered hand on the nearby table and putting her other hand to her head. What *was* that? Even as she recovered from that painful sensation, she became aware that there was something in the gate, something coming into this world, something trapped in the subtle trap of Shellar's timescape that caused time to slow for that being, giving Spyder ample time to go to the gate chamber and be there to confront the invader.

Spyder! Go to the gate chamber immediately and stop him! Do not let him past you! the frenzied call of Ayise drove through her mind, almost painful in its forceful clarity.

“Who comes through the gate?” she called aloud.

It is Tarrin! came the response. *We will not permit him to return!*

“Tarrin? But he has died! He cannot enter the material plane, it would destroy his soul!”

He has found a way, came the heated, adamant response. *Do not dawdle, mortal! I command you to carry out your sworn tasks! What comes through that gate is no longer a native of this world. Now carry out your duty and defend Sennadar from an invader!*

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that,” came a calm, strangely sad voice from behind her.

Spyder whirled around in absolute shock. How could *anyone* penetrate her defenses and enter her manor, and do so without her knowledge!

She gasped and took a step back. She *knew* this invader!

It was Tarrin’s son, Eron!

She had seen him more than once, but to see him so close, it was almost...intimidating. He was tall, so very tall, wide-shouldered and strangely stocky, yet still looked lithe. That seemed a paradox on any being but this young Were-cat, who wore a simple undyed pair of leather breeches, a sleeveless buckskin shirt under a vest of black *plaxa* fiber, and carrying a simple reddish staff.

No, not a staff. It was the *Firestaff*! She recognized it as surely as she knew the back of her hand, but for some odd reason, she got no sense at all of its presence, almost as if it were hiding itself.

How did *Eron* come into possession of that most dangerous artifact, and how did he not go mad from the taint of its power?

“Eron!” Spyder gasped. “What do you do here?”

“I’m afraid I’m here to stop you, Spyder,” he told her solemnly. “I really don’t want to do it, but I don’t have much choice. I can’t let you hurt Father, and you *will* if I let you fight him. He won’t raise his paw against you, no matter what you do to him, and I’m afraid in the state he’s in now, he’d be no match for you.” He sighed and set the Firestaff on the floor gently. “Now, I’m going to ask you only once, Miss Spyder, and I’m going to ask nicely. *Please* stand aside. I don’t want to fight you, but I just can’t let you hurt my father.”

If he challenges your duty, remove him! Ayise commanded harshly.

“Child, you cannot fight me,” she told him evenly. “I know you. You are not a Sorcerer. You cannot withstand my power.”

“I know, I’m the only Kael cub that’s not a Sorcerer,” he said with a rueful little chuckle, extending his claws and starting to walk forward. “But that’s never stopped me before. Now, if you’re not going to stand aside, I’m afraid I’m going to have to make you. Please don’t be mad. I promise I won’t hurt you any more than I absolutely have to. You’re one of father’s best friends, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

Do not waste time on him! Ayise snapped. *Tarrin Kael is the greater danger, Guardian! He cannot be allowed to escape from the gate chamber!*

Spyder nodded to that unspoken command. That the boy would challenge her in her own home with no defense against her Sorcery said to her that he was either utterly foolish or insanely brave. But it was of no moment. He was no threat to her, and so she would deal with him in a manner that would do him no harm. She set her will against the Weave—

—and it was *not there*.

Spyder reeled in shock. The sense of the Weave was gone! She felt her cloak suddenly become *heavy*, and in that sensation she realized that some how, some way, *all* magic in the immediate area had been completely neutralized.

But there was more to it than that. She suddenly felt...*listless*. She felt as if a great weight had been placed on her mind, and she suddenly found it very hard to think, hard to reason. She had to fight through a blanket of mulling silence that had been laid over her mind in order to rationalize what was going on.

“Don’t look so surprised, Miss Spyder,” he said in a grim manner. “I may not be a Sorcerer, but that doesn’t mean I can’t protect myself from them. I know this little trick that makes it so magic doesn’t work anymore. I don’t know how I do it, but I can. And without your magic, Miss Spyder, you’re not quite so invincible.”

Never in her entire life had she been so surprised. The boy, was right! Not only did her Sorcery not function, but even the great power of her ancient magical cloak, which was *not* Sorcery, did not function either! Some how, some way, this child could completely neutralize all magic around him, no matter its type or source!

But that was impossible!

It was such a surprise, it was almost a palpable weight settling on her shoulders.

She had no time to consider the impossibility of her situation, for the young Were-cat was upon her. He moved with blinding speed, with grace and agility, a perfect control and containment of his vast, awesome physical power. Those huge clawed paws sought her out, but Spyder proved that she too was adept in the ways of fighting without magic. Much like a Selani that she resembled, she flowed away from the larger Were-cat with sinuous grace, evading paws that sought to grapple her as the Were-cat youth tried to grab hold of her. She slithered away from him, dancing out of his reach, then turned and kicked him in the side of the knee, a powerful downward strike that buckled his leg and sent him sprawling to one side. His tail lashed out as he fell and struck her across both ankles, sweeping her legs out from under her.

Both combatants landed awkwardly on the polished tiled floor of Spyder’s library. Eron landed on his side, but Spyder landed squarely on her stomach and chest, knocking the wind out of her. She rolled aside quickly and effortlessly and regained her feet as the Were-cat did the same. *Retreat from him!* Ayise commanded. *His power to stop magic has a limited range!*

Getting away from Eron Kael was not as easy as that. He was on her again in an instant, paws grabbing, feet and tail seeking to strike her legs out from under her. She evaded like any Selani warrior, proving that she too knew the Dance despite not being Selani, and found that any time she tried to open a cushion between them, the Were-cat would instantly close it. He continuously tried to grapple or overwhelm her, did not try to strike her in the face or head or chest, seeking to defeat her without doing her any permanent injury. He was obviously well trained, impeccably trained, but he did not have her thousands of years of experience. The only real threat he posed was his strange ability to stop magic from functioning around him. Truly, a fearsome and formidable power in a magic-rich world like Sennadar, but he did not have the training or skill to capitalize on his singularly most dangerous aspect.

Eron Kael would never best her in a physical fight.

She knew what he was trying to do, and that allowed her to predict his actions, and thereby engineer the means by which to defeat him. She continued to give ground to him, evaded his paws and feet and tail, kept from getting so close he could get a grip on her, until he made only one tiny mistake, reached just a fraction of a finger too far, spent a fraction of a second too much time recovering from his overextension. Spyder struck like a viper, grabbing hold of his wrist in a powerful grip, then pulling herself directly towards him. Eron tried to slide to the side, but Spyder's elbow slammed into the side of his cheek with stunning force, snapping his head to the side. Eron may know how to fight, but Spyder knew Were-cats, and knew how to fight one even without magic. She could do him no true harm with her hands and feet, but Eron Kael was just as vulnerable as any Were-cat was to a stunning blow to the head, one of the few things against which their Were regeneration and immunities could not protect. She spun around his side even as his body recoiled from her blow, kicked him hard in the back of the knee to collapse the joint, then spun around and delivered a savage spinning kick to the side of his head as he collapsed around his leg. He sprawled forward, falling into her table and breaking it under his weight, tumbling to the floor in a loud cacophony of breaking, splintering wood and stone.

He stayed down less than a heartbeat. He rolled right up from the ground without even slowing down, and regained his feet. He turned to face her, but instead of a furious expression, he was *grinning*. He grabbed his jaw in a paw and rotated it back and forth. "I shoulda known you'd be Selani trained," he chuckled.

But that one heartbeat of inactivity had the most curious effect on her. She felt even more listless, lethargic, and she had to shake herself to regain her center and her focus. She realized that she those last acts on her part had been slower than what was normal for her. She was slowing down, losing her concentration, and found it harder and harder to think with each passing moment.

"Stand aside," she told him in a calm, deadly voice, but it was a voice that was curiously heavy, had lost the usual exacting perfection of her intonation. "The next time I strike, it will be to kill. I know how to kill your kind, even without magic."

"I'm sure you do," he said evenly. "But see, I don't have to *beat* you, Miss Spyder. I just have to keep you here. You can't magic yourself away, you know better than to turn your back on me, and you can't outrun me. As long as I hold you here, my father can come and go safely. And that's all I'm here to do."

Spyder could not deny the simple logic of his statement. She couldn't disengage herself from him without either putting him down or forcing him to back off, and if she tried to flee him, she'd be leaving herself open. That meant that she had to either kill him or knock him out, and do it quickly. Very quickly. She suspected that Eron had some other ability, for she was having the hardest time trying to think...as if her thoughts were covered by wool. Something was wrong with her, something very wrong, and the more time passed, the worse it became.

Stop being a fool! Escape from him! He is more dangerous than you realize, and besides, he is not your primary concern, Tarrin is!

"Then perhaps you would *assist* me here," Spyder hissed in reply to that unspoken command, her words even more imperfect. "I cannot simply turn my back on one such as this without paying a heavy price."

We cannot directly interfere. Eron is a mortal, we cannot interfere between you and him.

"Then be silent!" she snapped as she rushed forward once more, finding her focus sharp and precise once more.

Eron was much more cautious now, since he was the one trying to stall. He continued to seek to grab hold of her, try to immobilize her and give his father all the time he needed, but he also did not fall into the same trap and give her an opening to exploit. He fought with no singular style or method, his was an amalgamation of many different fighting styles and training from many different teachers, melded together into a singularly unique style all his own that maximized his strengths and covered his weaknesses. But Spyder had thousands of years of fighting experience over this child, and was able to quickly penetrate his more cautious defenses despite the fact that his technique was unknown to her. He was strong, and he was fast, but he was by no long shadow even close to being as fast as she, even with her strange lethargy, and it was her speed that would bring her victory.

Spyder's Urzani heritage showed the world just where the Selani had earned their fighting traits.

For precious moments Spyder remained tied up by Tarrin Kael's surprising son, as she worked him with her blinding speed, probing, testing, searching, teasing, seeking out the gaps in his defenses she could use against him...which were, admittedly, very few. But as every moment passed, she found herself moving slower and slower, took longer and longer to analyze his technique, wasting precious time. He was being completely defensive now, not even trying to counter her, seeming to understand that she was preparing to come at him, and readying himself for it. He was covering his every weakness as best he could to force her to continue to study him, to waste precious time keeping her tied up with him and give Tarrin Kael a chance to enter Sennadar unchallenged. The air between them blew against their faces as lightning-fast hands and paws traded blocking blows between them, as feet and knees sought out vulnerable areas, as Spyder analyzed Eron's defensive movements and finally detected the weakness that would give her victory.

She struck immediately, not wasting any more time. She executed a dizzying series of feints with both hands, seeking out then pulling back at the last instant, throwing the larger but less experienced Were-cat out of balance as he struggled to protect himself against blows that did not come. The blazing speed of it confused him, as he tried to fathom if she was attacking or not, and that confusion caused a faint yet final lapse in his defense. She weaved around his paws, leaned back to avoid his paw as he tried to present it to her confusing hands to block her, then turned, rotated her hips, and then thrust her foot up towards his exposed side, aiming right at the base of his ribcage, seeking to shatter bone and leave him incapacitated and unable to continue combat.

The surprise was hers when he drove his elbow down even as her foot found its mark, seeking to defend his vulnerability, but he was too late. Bone shattered as Spyder's foot crushed the base of his ribs, but Eron's elbow hooked Spyder's ankle and twisted it awkwardly as he fell away, spraining her ankle. Both combatants fell to the rubble-strewn floor simultaneously, Eron hunched around his broken ribs as Spyder rolled to her feet and immediately staggered, feeling the pain of the twisted ankle taking her weight. Eron rolled over onto his paws and knees, then expelled a shocking amount of blood from his mouth. A fragment of bone must have punctured his lung. He heaved, his chest violently expanding and contracting, until he coughed, choked, gagged, then coughed once more, expelling a small pinkish object from his mouth.

A piece of his own rib.

He coughed out a large volume of blood, then struggled to his feet. He wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his black-furred paw, then faced her. "I'm sorry," he told her contritely. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"You force me to kill you, boy, and I do not wish to," she told him, her words very nearly slurred.

"No, you're not going to kill me," he told her. "I figure you don't have much longer. You're already moving slower, and you'd never have gotten your foot caught if you weren't so far gone."

"What are you about?"

"I remember the stories father told us, Miss Spyder. I've taken away your magic. I know what that means. I figure right now, it's just the adrenalin. But when that peters out, all those months and years you've been awake are going to crash into you like a tidal wave, the same way they did with father when you took over again. He slept for days after he took off the charm. I don't have to fight you, or even beat you. I just have to keep magic away from you long enough that you fall asleep."

Spyder's eyes widened as that stark truth hit her like a hammer. That was why she felt heavy, that was why she found it hard to think! It was the charm's effect stripped from her, and now the weight of all the time she had not slept was pressing down on her!

Goddess, the boy was right! If he could hold her without her magic long enough, she *would* succumb to the overwhelming desire to sleep! If he got hold of her and held her immobile, she would literally pass out!

She was much less stable now, with a sprained ankle. She favored that leg heavily as the Were-cat again rushed in with his paws open, knowing he now had an advantage with her hobbled, but even with a lame leg she was more than a match for the young Were-cat. She continued to evade his grasp, staying close to him but outside of his reach, avoiding his paws and his tail. But the moments were ticking away, and every second that passed made her feel heavier and heavier, every second was another second that Tarrin Kael had to come through the gate, find her not there, and escape the inner chamber and get out to where magic would function normally for him. She could predict Eron's movements, but her reactions were more and more sluggish, and she found it more and more difficult to focus herself on the fight. She had to finish this, deal with Eron immediately, or he was going to defeat her. She slithered backwards and blocked an attempt to grab her by the shoulder, then kicked up a piece of the table, a shard of one of the legs, a fragment that was long and sharp at one end. She snapped it from the air with her right hand, weaved herself around Eron's tail, then twisted and drove it towards his unprotected neck, seeking to separate his spine.

But too much time had gone by. She was just an instant too slow, too sluggish. The young Were-cat blocked the attack with his forearm, slapping the dagger of wood to the side with his paw, and his other paw grabbed hold of the hem of her cloak.

In an instant, she was smothered in powerful arms. They enveloped him even as she was pulled down, pulled into the Were-cat's lap as he plopped down right in the middle of the floor, holding the Urzani in his powerful arms in a firm yet gentle grip, allowing her to squirm and writhe all she wanted, but not allowing her to break free of his grasp.

"You must release me!" she said in a strangled tone when she found she could not escape. "You do not know what will happen!"

"I know enough to know that the Elder Gods are wrong about my father," he answered pleasantly. "He's not here to fight with them. He's actually trying to fix things."

"That is not the point, Eron! Your father has broken the most sacred of laws! The Deva will come for him! He cannot be here, or the Deva will pour into Sennadar and take this world apart stone by stone to find him!"

"That? Well, they'll get over it."

"They will *not* get over it!" she shouted. "Now release me!"

"No," he said calmly, pulling her head against his chest. "I trust my father, Spyder. He knows what he's doing. Now calm down. When this is over, you can come find me and tan my hide for interfering, but until then I'm going to keep you here."

The inactivity was like a hammer. In an instant, she was almost overwhelmingly tired, and found that she could barely hold a coherent thought together. “You do not understand!” she said, her voice heavy. “We cannot let Tarrin into Sennadar. He will die!”

“I’m sure he’s already thought of that,” he said dismissively. “Just relax, Miss Spyder. I’ll keep you nice and safe, don’t you worry. It’s not your problem anymore, just close your eyes and relax, and when you wake up, all of this will be over.”

“I cannot allow this,” she said unevenly, trying one more time to free herself, but her movements were weak and disjointed, and she literally felt herself spiralling down into the sweet oblivion that for millenia had been denied her. “You...do...not...understand...”

And she moved no more. Spyder had been conquered by the only thing on Sennadar that could defeat her...herself.

Eron Kael cradled her in his arms, a strange little smile on his face. “Don’t you worry about a thing, Miss Spyder,” he told the sleeping Urzani. “You just watch. Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

It was exactly as he remembered it...at least up to a point.

Tarrin exited the gate and put a paw down on the gray featureless stone of the floor of the gate chamber...a foot that immediately began to hiss and smoke, sending jagged pain through it. The room was large and without decoration or adornment, just heavy stone enclosing a glowing gateway and a single door leading out.

The room was *empty*.

Where was Spyder? He expected to see her standing there, standing between himself and the doorway, acting as the final barrier blocking his return to Sennadar, but she was nowhere to be seen. There was little scent of her in the room; all of her scent here was very old, as if she had not been here in some time.

The pain finally registered all up and down his leg as his fur began to smolder, as the mortal air and the matter which made it up began attacking the integrity of his very body, seeking to consume what had no defense against it in this mortal realm. He stepped completely out of the gateway and, careful not to take in a breath and intake that acidic air into his lungs, he reached out a paw and beckoned to the Firestaff.

It would not appear.

Tarrin blinked in surprise. It was *resisting*! It didn’t want to come to him! Frowning, narrowing his eyes, he didn’t beckon, he *demand*ed, forcing his will against the artifact and commanding it to come to him.

And it appeared.

That hold on it told him everything. The Firestaff *knew* what he intended, and it was resisting him with every ounce of power it contained. Tarrin was the Firestaff’s creation, but he was also its one and only weakness. Only a child of the Firestaff could compel the Firestaff to surrender its power in ways it was not originally intended to give. Just as Val’s shadow had used the Firestaff to power its divine abilities, Tarrin now drew from the power of the Firestaff to protect himself from the destructive nature of the mortal plane on his outer-planar body. A nimbus of soft light surrounded the Were-cat’s body, a barrier of protection that isolated him from the ravages of the material plane, and the smoking and burning away of his body instantly stopped.

Where was Spyder? She should *be* here! He was certain that the Elder Gods were *not* going to just let him waltz into Sennadar uncontested. They would have sent her. Why wasn't she here?

Was she alright? Concern for her overwhelmed his confusion, even as he moved for the door, then chuckled and stopped, remembering that only someone wearing the charm could make the door open from the inside.

Not a problem.

Raising the Firestaff before him, he commanded it to reproduce an effect of Druidic magic, instructing the device, step by step, on how to go about accomplishing this task. It was exactly like using Druidic magic, but instead of sending his images and intent to the All, he instead sent them to the Firestaff. The Firestaff wasn't as powerful as the All, not by a long shot, but it had sufficient power to accomplish the task he had forced upon it.

Tarrin stepped *through* the door as if it did not exist, using Triana's most clever trick of walking through solid objects.

Out in the hallway beyond, he knew that the last major obstacle had been overcome. Out here, he could use magic, not rely on the power of the Firestaff... a power, he realized, he could *not* rely upon. The Firestaff continued to resist, to rebel, and the artifact would try to kill him if it even saw the slightest of openings. But it would never get a chance, for in just a moment, he wouldn't need it anymore.

He rushed through the manor quickly, hurrying towards the wing where Niami had been keeping his mortal body, still worried and concerned. All in all, he was *very* glad that Spyder had not been there to try to stop him. He did not relish the idea of fighting his *sui 'kun* sister, and he'd known before coming here that there were no guarantees he was going to get past her. Even as a mortal he would not want to fight her, but the way he was now, all she really would have to do would be to separate him from the Firestaff, and he would either die or be forced to retreat back into the gate, back into the Astral. But there was little choice in the matter. To get the Demon Lord off of Pyrosia, he had to return here.

He came into the main library, and the most unusual of sights appeared before him. Across the room, sitting around the remains of a broken table, was *Eron*! He held someone in his arms, cradled against his chest gently. Eron turned his head and looked at him, and he *smiled*. "Father!" he called. "You're alright!"

"Eron?" he called in surprise. "What are you doing here, cub?"

"No!" he said, holding up a paw as Tarrin started towards him. "You can't come near me right now, Father. Stay over there."

"What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, but if you come close to me, you're going to get caught up in what I'm doing to keep Miss Spyder asleep."

"*Spyder*? That's Spyder?"

He nodded. "I took away her magic, and you know what happens when you lose the magic of the charm. She tried to fight it, but she couldn't stay awake for very long."

Tarrin gave Eron a wild look. Eron had *taken away* Spyder's magic? How did he do such a thing? It was impossible!

"I can do a trick, Father," he said with a shy smile, scrubbing the back of his head with his claws, in exactly the same manner Tarrin did so. "I learned a while ago that I can make magic around me stop. I don't know how I do it, but I can. As long as I keep Miss Spyder close to me, she's going to sleep. I'll keep her asleep until you do whatever it is you're here to do. I don't want the two of you fighting, you're in no condition to face Miss Spyder."

"I can't argue with that, cub," Tarrin laughed. So *that* was why she wasn't there! Eron had intercepted her! "How did you know to be here?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "It's like I just knew where I had to be, you know? I've known for a while that you'd need my help getting back in. I've just been waiting for when you needed me. A few days ago, I knew it was time, so I came here."

"How did you get here so fast?"

"Well, after you left for Pyrosia, the Firestaff appeared," he said. "I think the gods decided I should take care of it while you were in the other world. If I ask it the right way, it'll do magic for me. It doesn't like doing it, but it also can't say no when I ask that certain way. It brought me down here."

Eron could compel the Firestaff? That was impossible! Only a child of the Firestaff could command its power in that way, and Eron was most certainly not a child of the Firestaff!

It hit him like a Giant's fist. Goddess! Eron was a *Mi'Shara*!

All this time, Tarrin thought that Jasana had to be the strongest of his cubs...how could he have been so blind? How could he be so wrong? It wasn't Jasana that was the most powerful of his cubs, it was *Eron*... because Eron could do the impossible!

And it made complete sense to him now...what better power for a cub when that cub's father and sisters were all powerful magicians. Eron existed in Sennadar as a natural balance against his own family, there to stop them if something terrible happened and they went out of control. In this world of magicians that could change the face of the planet single-handedly, there needed to be someone there to put a stop to it, and do it without laying waste to vast tracts of geography.. And that someone was *Eron*.

"My cub," he said with exploding pride. "Is Spyder alright? Are you? I see some blood."

"We're fine," he said. "She sprained her ankle. All the blood is mine. By the trees, Father, this woman can *fight*, even without her magic. I don't think I could ever beat her if I hadn't have cheated and took away her magic. Aunt Allia's gonna tan my hide for getting so beat up by a single opponent. She almost killed me."

Tarrin laughed. "She's had a few thousand years to practice, cub."

"Don't I know it," he said with a sour face. "She kicked me in the ribs so hard I thought I was turned inside out. I'd hate to see her when she's not fighting to stay awake even as she's fighting me."

"Well, I'm *very* glad that you fixed it so I wouldn't have to either," he said.

"Just doing what I can, Father," he said with a gentle smile. "Now you need to go. I can keep Miss Spyder out of your hair. Go do what you need to do."

Tarrin nodded. "Keep Spyder asleep for at least an hour," he told his son. "After that hour, let her wake

up, and I suggest you get away from her very quickly. I'll try to convince Mother to keep her from coming after you, but I might not be able to do it."

"I'm not worried about it," he said, waving a paw negligently, a paw holding Spyder's amulet by its elegant chain. "If she isn't wearing this, she won't wake up when I leave."

Tarrin laughed. "You're something else, cub."

"I just listened when you told the stories about being Guardian," he smiled. "I knew her one and only weakness."

"We're going to have a long talk when I can, cub," he told him. "Until then, be careful. I'll see you soon."

"Good luck. I love you, Father."

"I love you too, cub."

Tarrin left Eron and Spyder behind, silent impressed by his carefree, good-natured cub. Eron...what a treasure. The gods had truly blessed him when Mist brought that boy into their lives. But he had something to do, and couldn't dwell on Eron anymore. He hurried up the stairs and down the passageway, until he found himself before the door holding what Niami had been keeping a secret. He opened it and found it just as it was when he peeked in here years ago. The replica of himself floating in a soft column of light, with his black cat statuette standing on a pedestal beside it.

Both of them were going to be vital to him now.

He advanced in quickly and picked up the statuette, then took the statuette and thrust it into the light and touched it to the mortal shell beyond. The statuette was a Soultrap, and was attuned to his soul, which allowed him to reach through it, reach through that contact and into the mortal form on the other side, acting as a bridge that was allowing the disembodied soul to access the powers and abilities lurking within the soulless shell.

In a sudden motion, the eyes of the shell opened, eyes that were blank and oblivious, eyes that did not see. But Tarrin could sense those eyes through the connection, even as he reached through the Soultrap and into that mortal form, touching on its innate abilities, the primary among them being the power of Sorcery.

By proxy, Tarrin wove a spell through his mortal form's power, snapped it down, and released it.

And Tarrin, body, Firestaff, and statuette vanished.

They appeared directly within the Heart of the Goddess, directly within the major Conduit that rose up from the floor at the center of the tallest tower in the Tower of Six Spires, and they wasted not an instant of time. It was in this moment that he would be most vulnerable, when the gods very well might decide to strike at him while he was busy, where they wouldn't fear him retaliating with the Firestaff.

He knew what had to be done. Reaching through the statuette and his mortal form, Tarrin caused his mortal form to open itself not to the Weave, but to the All. What Tarrin needed to do was something far beyond what Sorcery could accomplish. What he needed was a form of power that had no limits, no boundaries, and Druidic magic was the only force on Sennadar capable of such a thing. It had to be done here, in the Heart, within the major conduit, because he would need Sorcery to perform a portion of the task, and this was where Sorcery was strongest.

The All came into connection with that mortal shell, and found no will, no image, no intent within it. It was almost confused for a moment, but then sensed another will, another intent, another image, coming to it from outside the body, but part of the body nonetheless. The All turned to this strange, alien presence for its instruction. It saw a series of images and felt the intent behind them, each one building on the last, until the All understood what the will was trying to accomplish.

But the All did not begin the task. It seized the mortal body in contact with it and struck through the connection between body and soul, and then invaded the soul driving the body. It rushed into that soul with the intent to destroy it, but that soul *surrendered* to the All immediately, offering up its memories, its plans, its desires, its intent. The All looked into the mind behind the soul behind the body, and comprehended everything.

Ayise finally understood, for the first time. For the first time, Tarrin Kael had surrendered unto Ayise the totality of himself and allowed her to look inside him, to understand him, to know him, even as he did so to the All. Just as Niami *knew* her child, knew that despite his actions, he always had a noble intent, Ayise too *knew*. And in so knowing, she could find it in herself to look the other way this one time, not interfere, and allow the Mortal God to proceed as he saw fit.

After all, the All was naught by the physical extension of the power of Ayise in the mortal world. All Druids tapped into *her* power. In that surrender to the All, Tarrin Kael had also surrendered to Ayise. She knew what Tarrin had done, what he was doing, and *what he intended to do in the future*. And, finding solace and comfort in what he intended to do, she relented to allow it to come to pass, not blocking or hindering the All in any way.

It would be worth the risk of not trying to stop him if he succeeded.

The Druidic spell triggered. If Tarrin wasn't so busy, he would have sighed in relief. Getting past Ayise had been the last major obstacle, but as he suspected, she deigned to not interfere once she understood things the same way Niami did. It had required him to submit to her completely, allow her the opportunity to strike and kill him without resistance...but it had been worth that risk.

Druidic magic infused the Conduit, causing it to shimmer into visibility, as the Druidic spell literally *attacked* Tarrin's created form. It drove lances of power into every fiber of his soul, infusing it, filling him with the boundless power of the All itself. It was *not* pleasant. A ragged scream erupted from the soul as the power of the All saturated it with its own power, a power that no mortal could have channelled...at least no mortal who was not a *Mi'Shara*.

By using his mortal form and the boundless power it could handle, Tarrin attempted to do something that was impossible...become *mortal*.

And when that saturation was complete, when the All was completely mingled with the soul it touched, it began. It struck at the soul's alien nature, struck at what made it *divine*, and sought to transform it back into what it once was. The power tried to scour away the divine nature of Tarrin's soul and leave what remained behind mortal.

But it could not.

In that moment, Tarrin understood a fundamental truth. What Tarrin had done, what he had become, could *never* be undone. He had now, and forever would have, the soul of a god.

Unable to accomplish that feat, the soul and power instead sought to *divide* rather than *transform*. It swept through the entirety of himself, finding all things that were *mortal*, and separating it from all things *divine*. And this, he found, *was* possible. Though Tarrin had the soul of a god, that soul had been changed

from the soul of a mortal, and the echoes of that mortal soul still resounded within him. The All seized on those echoes and the bits and pieces of his divine soul that were not entirely divine, and then *separated* them.

One soul shuddered, then a fissure appeared within it. That fissure spread across the soul, and then completely severed it. The two halves drifted apart, sundered from one another.

One soul became two.

The part of him which was mortal was pulled inexorably into the Soultrap. That which remained, the power of the All attacked once again, enacting change. Though the divine soul could not be changed into a mortal soul, that divine soul could itself be transformed into something similar to itself. The taint of the Firestaff was stripped from it, forever destroying the link between Tarrin and that artifact.

Tarrin was no longer a child of the Firestaff. Instead, the power of Ayise seared through him, transforming him into one of *her* children. And being one of her children, Ayise and the Elder Gods had no reason to oppose him.

If only for a fleeting moment. The Soultrap passed on the mortal soul of Tarrin Kael into his mortal body at the behest of the All, and those empty eyes suddenly gained a spark of comprehension. They blinked, then focused through the bright light surrounding them, pupils contracting to slits, and then they focused on the divine half that had once been a part of him.

That divine half, stripped of its protection afforded by the Firestaff, exposed to the ravages of the mortal plane, dissolved away like smoke, and was gone.

But it was done. The parts of Tarrin Kael that had made him mortal were once again bound within a mortal body. Though his soul was but half a soul, it was still *Tarrin Kael*, and he was mortal once more.

The light vanished. All that remained was the nude form of Tarrin Kael kneeling within the conduit of the Heart, panting heavily to recover from the intense pain of the process. Beside him lay the Firestaff, glowing an angry red, a glob of melted, twisted black metal that smoked angrily on the cold stone floor, and a simple leather belt holding a belt pouch, the only non-divine garments that the former incarnation of Tarrin Kael had worn. Tarrin Kael stood up slowly, looking down at his arms, flexing his hands, and feeling the *normality* of it. He looked inside himself and found an emptiness there, a lack of the senses and powers that he had enjoyed as a divine being, and he knew they were gone. He felt the Cat again within his mind, that other half of himself that was both alien and not, was a fundamental aspect of his being that was as much a part of him as his arms and legs, and just as vital to him. He was once more a mortal, a true Were-cat, with all the advantages and limitations that the mortal form offered, and the limitations of a mortal mind and soul that would forever deny him the wonders of the multiverse that only a god could comprehend and appreciate.

But it was what he wanted.

Unable to change himself back into a mortal, Tarrin sacrificed half of himself to reclaim what was taken from him, his mortal soul, and his mortal life.

The wings were gone. They had been part of his divine form, and he had lost them. He felt...*crippled* without them, somehow. They had been divine, but he'd had them for so long, they had become a part of him, and he found that he truly missed them. He looked down at the black fur of his right arm, and then gasped as that black fur shimmered, and then all color drained from it, leaving it white as pristine snow.

So, the scar of reaching into the place that did not exist carried over even into his mortal form. An eternal reminder of what he had touched, though the memory of it wasn't exactly sharp. Because Tarrin was

now a mortal, and those things had happened when he was a god, the memory of them wasn't exact. It was "dumbed down" into a manner in which he could understand. He remembered the events that had taken place while he was out in the Outer Planes, but not the exact details of it. He remembered the Sages, and Szizass, and Fury, and remembered what he had done, but not with the usual clarity of his other memories. Those memories had belonged to that other half of himself, and he and that other half were now completely separate from one another. What he had of it were almost like half-formed recollections, as if they were part of a story that was told to him, with important facts but not extraneous details.

A good thing too, else he would have died when that other half of him dissolved away.

Blowing out his breath, he stood fully erect, and without much thought, Conjured new clothes for himself. He stepped from the Conduit, feeling the stone beneath his feet, letting the sweet smells of the Tower flow through his nose, and sensing it through the Weave an instant before Jenna appeared before him, Teleporting directly to his location.

"Tarrin!" she squealed. "How did you get here! What happened?" she asked even as she charged headlong into him and wrapping her arms around his middle, hugging him fiercely.

"Jenna," he said thickly. "I'm home, sister."

"But the Elder Gods—"

"Won't interfere with him ever again," the audible voice of the Goddess emanated from behind them. They turned and looked, and saw her standing within the Conduit, appearing as she always did, with her seven-striped hair, glowing amber eyes, and the gown of woven starlight clinging to her handsome form. She stepped out of the Conduit and wormed her way into their embrace, hugging both of them tenderly, gently. "You have done so well, my kitten," she told him proudly. "I'm going to kiss you."

And she did so, kissing him soundly on the cheek, causing his cheek to burn as the power of her seeped into him through that contact.

"Mother, what happened?" Jenna asked.

"Tarrin reclaimed his mortality," she answered before Tarrin could reply. "He's no longer a god. He is a mortal again. And since he's a mortal, the Elder Gods have no reason to oppose him now, do they?"

Jenna gave him a wild look. "That was *you* doing that? I felt something—it was like nothing I'd ever felt before!"

"I had to use Druidic magic, but I had to do it here," he told her. "Things didn't work exactly the way I thought they would, though."

No, kitten. How you did it is not something you should tell anyone. You used Druidic magic to become mortal again. Simply leave it at that.

Why, Mother?

Because they wouldn't understand, and that's not something that any mortal should know.

I don't understand, but I'll do as you want, Mother.

If only you obeyed me so quickly all the time, she told his mind with a rueful little chuckle.

“What do you mean?”

“It didn’t work quite as easily as I thought,” he hedged. “I had to improvise a little.”

“But it worked,” the Goddess said, taking Jenna’s hand and Tarrin’s white paw. “I see you look a little different,” she teased, holding up his white-furred arm.

“It’s a scar, a scar that even carried over from what I did,” he said absently, looking down at it. “I’m going to miss my wings, though,” he sighed.

“Dear kitten, if you want wings, well,” she said, suddenly grabbing hold of his paw in a vicelike grip. Her power flooded into him, and he felt it coalesce into him, focusing on his back. He *felt* her power alter him, Transmute him, rearranging the very structure of his being, doing it painlessly and quickly.

Wings of reddish fire erupted from his back and filled out to their full glory, then spread out majestically.

“There. You *do* look so much better with them,” she said, giving him a glorious smile. “You’ll find that they work just like your old ones, but all they can do is let you fly, though,” she grinned roguishly. “They won’t let you shapeshift or use the other powers they once gave you, but you can control their size, shape, and appearance like you could your old ones. But I think that’s enough,” she told him with a wink. Jenna gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me you could do *that*?” Jenna accused.

“To stop the petty request I’m about to get from a certain sister of Tarrin,” she answered with a mysterious smile. “If you want wings, Jenna, you must *earn* them. You haven’t quite managed it yet. But when you do, and if you want them, then I’ll happily give them to you.”

“Really?” she asked, almost girlishly.

“Really,” the Goddess told her, squeezing her hand gently.

Tarrin felt the wings, felt that they seemed to feel like his old ones...but not quite. There wasn’t that eagerness, that sense of *presence* that had been in his old ones. His old ones were like a second part of himself that was a little bit separate from him, but these wings...they were just *there*. They were limbs, like his arms and legs and tail, not semi-sentient extensions of a part of himself that could not be expressed in mortal terms. But, they did feel *right*. The Goddess had been right, so long ago, when she told him that in time, he’d feel right as rain to have his wings. And he did. The wings...they were a part of him, and to not have them, even for those few moments, felt like someone had cut off an arm. It was why he’d given them to himself in the Outer Planes, when he could have just given himself the power of flight without needing them...because they were a part of him, a part that even the Cat, which was now again one with him, fully understood and accepted. Though they were unknown and alien to the Cat, they were still a fundamental part of him, and the Cat felt *whole* with the wings there.

“Now, why don’t you get dressed, kitten?” the Goddess told him, but then let go of Jenna and waved her hand. The clothes that had been hung over his arm were now on him, a simple black leather vest and a pair of undyed leather breeches, clothes that he favored. “And I think you need to keep this close to you,” she said with another gesture. The leather belt and pouch appeared around his waist, in which was the Portable Hole that held what would make the Deva hunt him down. “There. That’s better,” she told him with a glorious smile.

“Thank you, Mother,” Tarrin told her. “I’m afraid I can’t stay long. I have some things I need to do.” He turned and held out his paw, and Summoned the Firestaff using Druidic magic. It resisted, resisted with

every fiber of its being, but it could not prevent it. Where before it was held thrall by a child of the Firestaff, now it was overwhelmed by the power of a *Mi'Shara*, who could exert such will against other objects that they could not resist his commands. Despite knowing what Tarrin intended to do, the Firestaff could not resist. "I have a promise to keep."

"What promise?" Jenna asked.

"I promised Ayise to get rid of this in exchange for her not interfering with me," he told his sister, holding up the Firestaff. "She could have stopped me any time, because Ayise controls the All. When I offered to get this thing out of the hair of the Elder Gods, she allowed me to do what I did. I'm going to take it out of Sennadar, and finally take that thorn out of their sides. It won't bother Sennadar ever again."

"Yes, that's about the *only* thing that Tarrin could have used to bargain with my mother," Niami laughed.

"That's the price I have to pay for getting my life back, but it's something that has to be done anyway," he shrugged. "There's also the matter of the Deva. I can't stay here long, or they'll know where I am and come after me. I don't want to put that kind of stress on Spyder or the Elder Gods, so I have to do what I need to do here fast and then move on. So, let's get down to business. I need to see my human cubs, sister. I need my things back from them."

"You have to go already? But you just got here, and you haven't told me what's going on!"

"It'll have to wait, sister," he told her gently. "Have Zyri and Jal summoned to your office," he ordered, even as he effortlessly wove a spell of Teleportation, snapped it down, and released it. The two of them appeared in Jenna's office, near her desk, and the Goddess simply appeared beside them instantaneously, so seamlessly that she still held Tarrin's paw in her own. Tarrin didn't have the power to affect Niami with his magic, but she had moved herself along with them, making it appear as if she was subject to Tarrin's spell.

Jenna put a hand to her amulet. "Zyri, are you alone?"

"*I'm with Mistress Lula, aunt Jenna,*" she answered.

"Step away from her please," she ordered.

"*Okay. Alright, I'm by myself.*"

Jenna wove a spell of Teleportation in a reversed manner. Instead of taking herself somewhere else, she instead brought something else to her. In this case, it was Zyrilin. The girl looked absolutely radiant. She was a bit taller than he remembered, and had started to fill out more noticeably...which was normal for a thirteen year old girl. She was wearing a Novitiate dress, and her dark hair had been done up in a single ponytail that shined with her health and vitality. Zyrilin blinked and looked around, then her eyes locked on Tarrin. "*Father!*" she squealed, and rushed towards him with her arms held out.

He knelt down and collected her up in his arms, taking in his scent, and feeling his love for this little girl blossom in him once more. She may not be one of his cubs, but she *was* one of his children, as much as Jasana or Eron or the twins. "Oh Father, you're home!" she cried, starting to weep immediately.

"Only for a little while," he told her, "but it's so good to see you, little bit! You look good! I see your aunt's been taking care of you."

"She's been very good to us, Father," she sniffled, hugging him even tighter.

“Jal,” Jenna called. “Please do me a favor and stand away from everyone else. When you’re ready, put your hand on your amulet.” She looked at Tarrin. “Since he won’t talk, I worked this out with him.”

“Where have you been, Father?” Zyri demanded as Jenna repeated the spell, and Jal appeared. He was wearing a simple livery doublet with a *shaeram* emblazoned on the front and a pair of sturdy leather trousers. Jal’s eyes lit up when he saw Tarrin, and rushed forward to embrace him. Tarrin collected the boy up in his other arm and then stood up, putting his cheek against Jal’s sandy hair as the boy hugged him about the neck.

“It’s good to see you, Jal,” he told the boy. “Have they been treating you well?”

Jal looked up at him and smiled radiantly.

“Good. Now I’m afraid I’m not home to stay yet, and I don’t have time to visit. I have to leave very quickly. I’m here because I need what I gave you two back. So, I need you to go back to your rooms and get my amulet and the Cat’s Claws and bring them back here, okay? I’m going to need them now.”

“I have your amulet right here, Father,” Zyri told him, pulling it out from under her dress. “I haven’t taken it off since you gave it to me.”

Jal pushed against him slightly. Tarrin knelt down and set him gently on the floor, and he waved his hand excitedly at Tarrin, then turned and rushed from the room. “I think he has to go get them,” Tarrin chuckled.

Zyri pulled the chain of his amulet over her head, then offered it to him. “Here, Father. I took good care of it. I even kept it polished for you.”

Tarrin looked at it, and saw that it was indeed highly polished, almost glossy. He chuckled and lowered his head to let her put it on him. “I see you did, little bit,” he affirmed as she put his amulet on him. It fell down around his neck and settled over his chest, and immediately felt both warm and cold, heavy and light, as the original magic that kept it from being taken from him re-established itself.

“And I think you need a replacement,” the Goddess told the girl easily, holding out her hand. A glittering crystal *shaeram* that looked to be made of perfectly cut diamond was in her hand, scintillating and refracting the light to produce dazzling rainbows of color whenever it moved, supported by a chain made not of metal, but of crystal. “I think this would suit you just fine, little one.”

“This is for me?” she gasped, looking at it. “It’s *beautiful*!”

“It’s your very own *shaeram*,” the Goddess told her with a nod.

Zyri looked up at the Goddess in the face, and then she turned absolutely *white*, gaping at Niami in utter awe. Clearly, she realized just who was in the room, so consumed she’d been with the fact that Tarrin was there.

“Don’t be like that, little bit,” Niami chided. “Here, let me put it on you.” She pulled the crystal chain from the girl’s hands and then settled it over her head, then patted it when it fell over her bodice. “There we are, right where it should be.”

“Th-Tha-Thank you, Mistress Goddess,” she said, clutching at Tarrin.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Niami asked with an absolutely radiant, disarming smile at the girl.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, Zyri. You’re one of my own children, and I’d love it if you would call me Mother.”

“Y-Yes, Mother,” she said meekly.

“That makes me *very* happy,” she beamed at the girl, flicking her gently on the tip of her nose just as Tarrin tended to do, which invariably made the girl giggle. “How has the Novitiate been?”

“I touched the Weave, Father!” she told Tarrin excitedly. “Mistress Lula and Aunt Jenna have been teaching me how to make magic!”

“Lula’s always good for teaching things that shouldn’t be taught,” the Goddess laughed.

“That’s why I put her with Lula when I’m busy,” Jenna chuckled.

“That’s wonderful news, little bit,” Tarrin told her, bouncing her a little in his arm. “How’s Jal been?”

“Much better now that he has a Water Adept training him,” Jenna answered. “He has complete control of his power now. They’re telling me that he’s a very strong Elementalist.”

“He’s still not talking?”

Jenna shook her head. “He *can*, he just *won’t*. There’s not much we can do but wait for him to talk on his own.”

“I know. How many of them are here?”

“Just Shara and Tem,” she answered. “It’s very hard to get people here. Shara’s been studying with us since Tem took her place. We’re trying to understand how their power works, and she’s been training to see if she can use Sorcery.”

“She *does* have the gift, kitten,” Niami told him. “All of them do, even Jal. It’s just that they’ve learned how to use it differently than you, and it’s changed a little in them, but not so much that it makes them completely separate. It’s entirely possible that Sorcerers could learn to use at least *some* of their Elemental abilities, and they might be able to learn *some* Sorcery.”

“Interesting. I thought it might be possible, but I wasn’t sure.”

“You were right. Sorcery and Elementalism are related, like Wizardry and Necromancy,” Niami told him. “Wizards can learn Necromancy, and Necromancers can use Wizard magic, since Necromancy is just a *branch* of Wizardry. What Shara’s trying to do is get in touch with the *entirety* of her power, while the Sorcerers working with her are trying to learn how she uses her power the way she does. A Sorcerer could never use full Elemental magic, and Elementarists could never be full Sorcerers because there *are* some differences, but there’s potential there that the two branches can learn to use each other’s magic.”

“Mother, while we’re waiting for Jal, tell me what’s going on over in Pyrosia,” he asked.

She nodded and briefly summarized what was going on. The fortification of Pyros, the dispatch of most of Tarrin’s family as units that were searching for the shards of his sword, and the known locations of the enemy armies. “Oh, since you’re here, explain why your shadow isn’t doing what you told it to do anymore,” she added, going over the behavior of his shadow.

Tarrin bowed his head, rubbing his lips with a white-furred finger. “I’m not really sure,” he said. “It’s in its nature to grow and expand on the limited abilities I gave it...it’s part of how I created it. Maybe it’s gotten smart enough to understand that there’s more ways to hurt the Demons than just killing them.”

“That’s entirely possible. I guess I should have Dolanna recall everyone to Pyros. With you a mortal, the sword’s more or less pointless now.”

“No, Mother, the sword still has power.”

“But you’re not a god anymore, kitten,” she protested.

“Right. But now it’s getting its power from *this*,” he said, holding up the Firestaff. “The Firestaff created that part of me, I created the sword, and now that that part of me is gone, the sword instead will become an outlet for the Firestaff. It’s still an artifact, it’s just changed who’s going to give it power. And since it’s unattached, it’s *still* going to give its power to whoever reassembles it. It’s still vital that we find it, to keep it out of the hands of anyone who would misuse that power. If anything, it’s even more dangerous now, because now I won’t even have a thread of connection to the sword or shred of control over it. I won’t know if it’s put back together, and I won’t be able to influence it if someone tries to use it.”

“That’s not a very pleasant thought,” the Goddess grunted.

“It does sound like I need to get things done in fifteen days, though,” he said. “From the sounds of those army locations, they’re going to try to converge on Pyros from the south and the east in about eighteen days.”

“Give or take, if this Demon Lord does this conventionally. He might have some kind of plan, though.”

“Or Shaz’Baket does,” Tarrin said with a slight snarl at that hated name.

“Or her. Oh, I should have Sapphire and some of her brood in Pyrosia in a few days. Sarraya’s made about nine amulets that will let them go over there.”

“Huh, I would have thought that with that Weave I built over there, they could go there without any protection.”

“No, the Weave is just a part of the total magic of our plane, kitten. It would probably allow them to survive longer, but it would still be a deadly place for them.”

“Alright then. How is she?”

“Impatient. I’d better tell her you visited. She’ll strangle you when you get back since you didn’t stop to talk to her, though.”

“She’ll understand. This is important.”

Jal ran back into the room as fast as his little legs would carry him, holding Tarrin’s black metal bracers in his arms. He skidded to a halt before Tarrin, and then held out the objects to Tarrin with a broad grin.

“That’s my boy,” Tarrin said with a smile, kneeling down, setting down Zyri gently, then taking the two black metal bracers. He put a foot on the Firestaff and pushed it to the floor, keeping it contact with it at all times, and then put the two bracers on his wrists, one at a time. “I see you took good care of them,” he said, extending the claws on both bracers, then retracting them.

Jal beamed.

He stood up after taking the Firestaff into his paw again, keeping it in contact with him at all times. If he let it go, even for an instant, it would seek to escape from him, and he couldn't allow that. "Now I'm afraid I have to go, cubs. My presence here is putting everyone in danger. I have to go and finish what I started, and I have to keep my promise to Ayise. But I'll be home very soon, I promise."

"How soon?"

"If all goes well, twenty days," he told her. "Give or take a day. I think you can wait that long."

Zyri smiled, and hugged him around the waist. He patted her on the back, then ruffled Jal's hair. "Step back now, cubs," he told them.

"You're not leaving without giving me a hug!" Jenna called, wrapping her arms around. He hugged her as best he could with one arm, then reached out and took the hand of the Goddess fondly.

"Tell Dolanna that I'll be in Pyrosia in a few days, if all goes well."

"We will. Where are you going now, brother?" Jenna asked.

"Acheron," he answered, his face turning grim. "I have an appointment with the One."

"I told you not to try that kitten," the Goddess told him.

"I'm not going to kill him, Mother," he said calmly, causing his wings to retract fully into his back, leaving only two long slits of living fire, and those quickly vanished under a layer of skin that grew over them...just as it had worked for his old wings. Mother certainly didn't miss anything. "I just have to deal with him."

"Deal with him? And just how will you deal with him?" she asked.

"The One has his own responsibility for this, Mother. I'm not going to let him just slide out of it. He's going to help fix it."

"Then why did you destroy his icon on Pyrosia if you want his help now? It's not going to make him very amenable."

"Oh, he's going to be *very* amenable, at least after we get the ugly fighting out of the way," Tarrin told her, flexing his claws in an unwholesome manner. "The One's going to do what I tell him to do. He'd fall all over himself to fix things and kick the Demons off Pyrosia before they kill all his worshippers and that kills him, but he's going to play by *my* rules. That's what I'm going to Acheron for, to discuss that with him. The hard way, if necessary."

"And that doesn't answer my question."

"He had to be punished for what he did to Kimmie," he said flatly. "That, and I didn't want him to have his full power. He would have been too arrogant and too strong to work with safely. I'm sure he would have turned on me the instant the Demon Lord was dead. This way, he's going to be working *for* us, not *with* us, because I'm going to make sure he has no cards to put on the table. He's going to be a big help to us, and Pyrosia will *need* him after the Demons are gone. But he's never going to have the same position he had before. If he wants to survive, he's going to do things *my* way."

The Goddess gave him a long look, then laughed richly. “My, you sound like a god,” she teased.

“I’m worse than a god, Mother,” Tarrin said in an ugly tone. “I’m a Were-cat.”

Niami burst into helpless laughter. “So well said,” she said with a glorious smile. “So, how are you going to stare down a god in his home plane?”

“With *this*,” he said, brandishing the Firestaff. “I’m not going to be there to fight, Mother. I’ll just need to protect myself until the One finally stops venting and starts listening to me. I’m sure he’ll want to take a piece out of me for what I did on Pyrosia, but in the end he’s going to listen to me.”

Niami smiled knowingly. “Good plan.”

“Thank you.”

“And what about....” she said, waving her hand meaningfully.

“Oh, I’m saving that,” he said. “I’ll use it if I have to, but I’d rather keep it where I have it. I think that they might be able to track me down if I take it out.”

“They probably can.”

He nodded. “I have to go now. Just keep things going for me until I can rejoin the others.”

“We will, I promise, brother,” Jenna told him.

“Be careful out there, Father,” Zyri said, hugging Jal absently. “Come home soon.”

“I will, little bit. Take care of each other, and when I see Mist, I’ll tell her you’re doing fine.” He looked to Niami. “Could you make sure Spyder isn’t on a warpath when she wakes up?”

Niami laughed. “I’ll take care of it.”

Tarrin nodded to her, and without another word, he wove a spell of Teleportation around himself, snapped it down, and released it. In the blink of an eye, he went from Jenna’s office to the little paved walkway just outside the Ward of Spyder’s mansion. He passed through it without hesitation and entered her manor, and sensed that Spyder was now up in the west wing, up in one of the bedrooms. Unable to resist checking on her and Eron, he went up to see them. He found them in one of the small guest chambers, with Eron sitting on a stool by a large bed, in which Spyder lay sleeping, the covers pulled up and tucked in around her thoughtfully. Eron stood up and turned to the door when Tarrin entered, and then he embraced his father in a fierce hug. “You look different, Father. What did you do?”

“I reclaimed my mortality, son,” he answered. “That’s why I had to come back, because this was the only place I could do it. I’m not a god anymore. I’m just a mortal again.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said with a grin. “So you’re off again?”

He nodded. “I have a few more things to take care of, and then I’ll return to Pyrosia and deal with the Demon Lord. How is she?”

“Sleeping,” he answered. “Could you heal her ankle please? She sprained it when we fought.”

“No problem, cub,” he said, stepping up and pulling back the quilt covering her. He put his white furred paw on her leather-clad leg and wove a spell of Healing, soothing strained ligaments and tendons and repairing the muscles in her ankle. “There we are. I suggest you make yourself scarce. You do *not* want to be here when she wakes up. Mother told me she’d warn Spyder off, but Spyder’s not the kind that takes defeat easily. She won’t be very happy with you, cub.”

“I’ll leave as soon as you do. It’s going to be a long, hard climb back over into Sharadar though.”

“That’s right, you can’t get out of here. Stand up, cub, I’ll Teleport you to Suld.”

“Thanks, Father,” he said with relief. “I’ll see you soon?”

“I hope to be back in about a month, if all goes well.”

“I’ll see you sooner than that, Father. Now that you’re done here, I’m going to go to Pyrosia and help over there. So I’ll see you when you get there.”

“I’ll see you in a few days then, cub,” he said, weaving the spell and releasing it. Eron’s form wavered and vanished silently, leaving Tarrin alone with the sleeping Spyder.

Who immediately opened her eyes.

“I am glad you decided to come see me before you left,” she said flintily, sitting up and looking at him with a cool expression.

“Don’t be mad at Eron, sister,” Tarrin told her. “It’s his way.”

“I am not angry. A little disappointed in myself, but not angry. Your son is quite clever, and more than I ever believed him to be.”

“I’m proud of him,” Tarrin said grandly. “Are you alright?”

“I am quite fine. Only my pride was wounded,” she said with a rueful chuckle. “How the mighty fall, in the most unexpected ways. I see you have again become mortal. I did not think that possible.”

“It almost wasn’t,” he admitted. “But it worked, and that’s what counts. I’m just glad I didn’t have to fight you,” he said with utter sincerity and a sigh of relief.

“Your son ensured that,” she said with a little smile. “I have never faced such a *polite* enemy, more worried about me than himself.”

“Like I said, it’s his way,” Tarrin chuckled. “Eron is very gentle. He’s nothing like his parents.”

“There was more. He seemed to know more than he should. He told me straightly that if I were to face you in the gate chamber, that you would lose to me, and you would die. And he knew exactly when you would be here.”

“Eron’s got his ways,” Tarrin said evasively.

“Very well, I will not press the issue. You are leaving?”

He nodded. “I have to finish what I started. And I have to keep a promise I made to Ayise in return for

her looking the other way.”

“The Firestaff?”

“I’m taking it from Sennadar, so it never bothers the Elder Gods again,” he told her.

“That is something she would consider a fair trade, if she would forgive me for presuming to know her mind.”

“Mother said much the same thing.”

“How will you accomplish this task, brother? It has foiled every attempt to remove it from here.”

“It can’t resist *me*,” Tarrin told her. “I’m a *Mi ’Shara*, sister. This is one aspect of who I am. The Firestaff can’t escape from me, not anymore. When I leave here, it will go with me, and there’s nothing it can do about it.”

The Firestaff suddenly pulsed with angry red light.

“As you can see, it knows,” Tarrin said. “I’m afraid I have to go, Spyder. I just wanted to make sure you were alright before I left.”

“I am quite fine, my brother,” she assured him, taking her amulet from the table by the bed. “But I believe that you owe me one battle, to find out what would have happened within the chamber of the gate.”

“When all this is said and done, sister, I’ll take you on anywhere you want,” he said with a bright smile.

“I look forward to it, Tarrin. Goddess keep you safe, and safe journey to you.”

“Be good,” he told her, turning towards the door.

He had accomplished a major step towards his ultimate goal. He was mortal once more, and again had the powers of a *Mi ’Shara*. The Firestaff could resist anyone but someone like him, who could reach outside the rules of the universe. And that power would let him take it from Sennadar, do what no one else could do, and finally remove the threat it posed to his home. Once and for all, the Firestaff, and the danger it posed, would no longer be Ayise’s problem.

It would be his.

And soon it would be Pyrosia’s.

But that was an issue for another time. Thanks to Eron, Tarrin had managed to sneak out of the most dangerous part of his plan, facing Spyder. His surprising son had removed the threat she posed to him without him ever having to even look at her. Now he had to rush to Acheron to beat some sense into the One and get him ready for his part of what was coming, and it all had to be ready before the armies of the Demon Lord reached Pyros.

But there was plenty of time. For the first time in a while, Tarrin felt that there was light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

Chapter 8

Mother *lied* to him.

It wasn't the first time she'd done it. Tarrin had quite a little list of the time when Niami had outright lied, misdirected, half-spoke, hinted, or carefully worded her answers or responses in a way that they meant something completely different from how it sounded. She'd done it again, though this time, he wasn't sure if she did it on purpose, or if she'd only given him half of an answer and wanted him to explore the rest of the answer for himself.

Tarrin flew through the Astral, wings outspread and bright, a beacon in the dull gray of the plane like a signal fire. He was the only solid object visible in any direction, but this was normal in the infinite expanses of this strange place, this unusual plane of nothingness that really served as nothing more than a means of travel between the Material planes and the outer planes. He felt the wings on his back, felt that they were nothing but creations, but also felt the presence of Niami within them...and that was the omission she'd left out. She told him all they would do was let him fly...well, that wasn't entirely true. He could feel her through them, and since he'd already experimented, he knew that through them, he could use Sorcery outside of Sennadar. His wings were a direct gateway between him and Niami, between him and the Weave, and just like back in Pyrosia, he could use his wings to reach back into his homeworld and draw on the power of the Weave. He wasn't sure why Niami didn't tell him that. Maybe she wanted it to be a surprise—she *loved* to surprise him like that, or maybe she didn't think it necessary enough to state. Either way, it was a welcome thing. There was going to come a time when he couldn't depend on his command of the Firestaff, and in that moment, he rather preferred to be able to fall back on the power of Sorcery.

He left too soon. He'd had more questions, more people he wanted to see, but he just didn't have any more time. He forgot to ask about Telven's power, and if Shara was training him. He forgot to talk to Niami and Jenna about the exact layout of the fortifications around Dolanna, for that was information that he was going to need to know later. He forgot to get in touch with Sapphire to find out exactly how many dragons were going to be going to Sennadar. He forgot so many things to ask, but he'd been in such a hurry.

Not that there was any more time. He had to get to Acheron quickly and get the One's cooperation. They were going to need him. Pyrosia *needed* him. It seemed so odd that Tarrin would be thinking that, that he was ready to accept the aid of someone like *that*, but...it was what needed to be done. And it wasn't the first time, he realized. He'd taken in Julia, and at first he had hated her. He did what he had to do, and helping Julia, in its own way, helped him as well. He was certain that he'd never see the One as anything other than a necessary ally, but the very fact that he *did* understand the need for the One and was even now hurtling to Acheron to discuss the issue with him told him how much he had changed since those days.

To *understand*...sometimes, it was more of a curse than a blessing. No wonder mortals had it so easy. They were blissfully unaware of the fundamental truths of reality. And though he was again a mortal, he still remembered, in that odd dreamlike quality like most of his memories from his time as a god's soul, and that knowledge made him different than the others. He was a mortal who understood, understood what mortals weren't really meant to know. It didn't make him any less of a mortal, but it did make him something more than the rest of them.

Not that that wasn't already true. He was the only living mortal in the multiverse that was once a god.

He was unique, different from all the others, and that history could not help but leave its marks upon him. The knowledge of truth was but one of those marks, as much as the white fur on his right arm was the scar of reaching into a place that nobody had any business touching, probably the only non-Deva in the multiverse to have touched that place that did not exist, if only for the briefest of moments.

More water under the bridge. No matter how different he was from the others, he had a place, and that was all that mattered. He had children to care for, he had women who loved him, he had family, he had friends, and he had a place in the societies of his race and his order. He had a *life*...and all of this, all the scheming, all the machinations, it was all to get that life back. The destruction of the Demon Lord and the saving of Pyrosia from his ravages were important, but in that strangely selfish way that marked Tarrin sometimes, those were just steps along the path of the ultimate objective, and that was to get his life back. Ayise relenting to allow him to reclaim his mortality had been a very big step along both paths, the destruction of the Demon Lord and him getting his place back. It was either lucky happenstance or careful planning that one act moved to further both plans, depending on how one looked at it.

It still felt a little weird. Niami's touch on him was back, and he was more aware of it than ever. It was a light finger in the back of his mind, that tenuous connection she used to keep with him at all times, but now he was more aware of it, more cognizant, able to feel it as a tangible thing. That touch on him allowed her to hear his every thought, allowed her to assense his condition. That touch wasn't coming through the wings, it was something she had built into this body when she created it, something that didn't require her active attention. The wings were a slightly different connection to her, a different thread leading back to the same source. Where the light touch on the back of his mind was very delicate, very gentle, very light, the connection between them fomented by the wings was very strong, almost like a rope that tied them together. Tarrin had always been a Priest of Niami, but these wings, they were more akin to the relationship between Miranda and Kikkalli.

In a way, the wings made him an Avatar of Niami, but not quite in the same way as other Avatars. Niami couldn't act directly through him like Kikkalli could through Miranda, but she could channel her power into him using the wings as a bridge. That was why he could use Sorcery now, and he was fairly sure that if the situation was desperate enough, she could channel her direct power through them and act directly in this world. He wasn't sure if the wings could withstand that kind of power, but it seemed theoretically possible.

It would certainly be useful. He could feel the Firestaff in his paw, its sentience thrashing and writhing against his mind, seeking to find a way to wriggle free of his grasp and flee from him, or maybe even use its power to strike at him, to kill him. The Firestaff knew what he was now, and it feared him like it feared nothing else in the multiverse. It knew, just as he knew, and it knew what he intended to do, and he knew that even though he could command the Firestaff, it was best if he didn't depend on it. He could use its power to challenge the Demon Lord directly, but if he tried that, he was running a terrible risk. The more powerful of a task he commanded of it, the stronger it resisted his command, and the more power he allowed it to call forth, which gave it more strength to fight against him. If he demanded too much of it, allowed it to call on too much of its own power that was usually locked away from itself, it could break free...and if it did that, it would either escape from him or turn on him. And if he was using it against something like a Demon Lord, well, that would be a fatal situation.

But the conditions that brought Tarrin into his situation was a shackle around the Firestaff, binding it to Tarrin's will, sealing it to him in a way that made it impossible for it to free itself from him, so long as he was careful not to overextend himself. It would rage and struggle, but so long as Tarrin's will remained strong, it was helpless against him.

That strange girl, the one that had given him that book in the library...he'd seen her somewhere before. He was sure of it. He knew that face. But it still escaped him, just where he had seen her before. Regardless, he needed to find her and kiss her for giving him that book. If not for that book and the information within, he would probably be dead now, and the Demon Lord would be ravaging Pyrosia.

Odd, that. Mother Wynn and that girl, two faces from his past—at least he was pretty sure the girl was from his past, even if he couldn't pin down exactly where he'd seen her—showing up out here, helping him. Just who were they? And who were they working for?

There was a speck of darkness disrupting the featureless gray of the Astral before him, and he knew before he could even make it out that it was the color pool that would lead him to Acheron. He tucked his wings just slightly and increased his speed, feeling a little better with his scheduling. He knew there wasn't much time, and though it seemed that his trip through the Astral had taken a long time, the reality was that it took little time at all. Time worked differently in this place. Though he'd been moving for many hours, maybe as much as two days, in reality only a half a day had passed back on Sennadar. Time moved slower here than in other places, though the *perception* of time here did not change.

The color pool raced upon him, and then he plunged through it after slowing down just before reaching it, for he didn't know what was on the other side and didn't want to hurtle into any physical objects. There was that strange tingling sensation as he passed through, and then the swirling color around him parted to reveal the plane of Acheron.

It was a bleak place. He appeared from the pool about twenty spans in the air over a perfectly flat plain of bare black rock with a lone conical mountain in the distance, a dark basalt that had the consistency of iron, with the color pool glowing dimly behind him. The sky was a kind of very dark red above him, like the color of the sky just after sunset, and there were several massive cubic blocks floating in the sky overhead. The light emanating from that featureless red sky was dim and weak, but was more than enough for him to see comfortably.

He remembered what he read of this place. Acheron was known as the Ironshod Battleground, a void of air-filled space that stretched on to infinity in every direction. It wasn't filled with worlds or planets, it was filled with vast, continent-sized cubic basalt blocks of various sizes, from as large as a Sennadar moon to as small as one of the Stormhaven Isles. They were six-sided black cubes that drifted in the void, and most of them were populated with the souls of the dead who had come to this place, though some were not. Unlike most Outer Planes, there were actually very few gods here; most of the souls inhabiting this plane were here of their own design, the souls of mortals who during the course of a war lost sight of the objective, became so consumed by war that war became an act unto itself. Those souls were known as the *spirit legions* here, a vast army of soldiers who fought solely for the sake of fighting. Whenever two blocks drifted together, the inhabitants of each block would do war upon the other block, a pointless, fruitless exercise of futility given that the spirit warriors could never truly die; when a spirit warrior was slain, he would return to life the next day. If one group conquered another block, all the warriors on that block joined that army and then waited until another block touched theirs, to boil forth and assault that one. Even if there was some way for one group to conquer all of Acheron, there was no allied group larger than the population of one block; spirit warriors on another block did not hold alliances to those on other blocks. If there were too many soldiers to fit on one block, they split into two groups, the blocks drifted apart, and then those two sides who had been allies now considered each other enemies. That aspect of their nature made theirs an eternal exercise in futility, for they could never conquer the entire plane, and thus their war would never end. This was the plane of endless war, a plane where wars were fought for the sake of war itself, and in a way, this place was a poignant lesson for those who fought for the sake of fighting.

A place of mindless futility.

Gravity in this place was subjective, he recalled reading. Each block had its own gravity, but once one left the block and got far enough away, its sphere of influence ended and one would be weightless, like in the Astral.

A bleak, uninviting place, isn't it? the voice of Niami touched him, reaching through the link she again held with him now that he was mortal.

“Not a place I’d like to come to again,” he agreed with a grim tone, looking around. He lifted the Firestaff and held it aloft. “Show me. Which direction is the One?”

The artifact struggled and raged, but again, it found itself no match for the power of the will of Tarrin Kael. It sullenly capitulated and caused a line of light to issue forth from its end, which pointed above and to the left and slightly behind him.

I’m surprised you use that thing in that manner.

“As long as it’s small, yes, I’ll use it,” he answered. “The bigger effect I try to make it do, the harder it resists. That’s why I can’t depend on it. If I try to use it to do something *major*, it might manage to break free, or delay at a critical moment.”

And you intend to use it to protect yourself from the One? she asked, then she laughed. *Well, I’ll trust you on this one, my kitten. I’ll just have the same faith in your luck that you do. But let me get on to why I’m talking to you. You need to be very careful here, kitten. You have not entered a Lower Plane. Kitten, Demons can travel freely through any Lower Plane, and the Firestaff is a beacon of power that they can feel from vast distances. Do not expect an easy journey to the One’s domain. I’m honestly surprised that you didn’t have to fight your way out of the color pool arrival area. Demons usually keep a sentry near a color pool to keep track of who is entering and leaving Lower Planes. There might be a Demon watching you right now, and that Demon can call in reinforcements.*

“I understand, Mother,” he said, bringing out a tendril of flame from each wing. He held the Firestaff up and grabbed it with both tendrils, then pulled it up and over his head, then settled it against the tops of the base of his wings, which freed up both paws. His wings grew over the Firestaff to hold it securely in place. “I can handle it.”

I dare say you can, but don’t forget that you have me, she told him. *You are my Priest, and though this is a Lower Plane, this is not the Abyss. You can banish Demons here just as you can on Sennadar. The Outer Planes have different rules for Priest magic, you can cast any spell I deign to grant you, outside of some minor rules regarding certain spells that have no bearing on your situation.*

“I remember the ritual formula Miranda used,” he told her.

There was a startled silence. *Tarrin! That’s very clever!* She complemented with a laugh. *That would work, but be warned, it will leave you weak and exhausted afterwards. But if you find yourself beset by an army, that would be a viable defense. Just don’t use it unless you see no other way.*

“Oh, I won’t, Mother,” he said, reaching into his magically reinforced belt pouch. He withdrew a piece of grayish cloth.

Kitten, is that wise?

“Like you said, Mother, the Demons have an advantage here,” he told her, unfolding it enough to open up the Portable Hole. He set it on the ground, unfolded it once more, and then reached inside. “Because of your forward thinking, I know that my amulet and Cat’s Claws work here. They’re getting their power through my wings. And since my amulet works, I want *this* literally at my fingertips if I need it. It won’t do me much good if I really need it, and I have to fish it out of the Portable Hole to get it.”

The touch of it was electric, tingling his paw as he took hold of the bow of the Solar, felt the power in it, and felt the touch of...*holiness*. This was a weapon crafted by the hand of the God of Gods Himself, and Tarrin could *feel* that lingering trace in it. With great reverence, he removed the bow from the Portable

Hole. It was a beautiful bow, a compound longbow made of some kind of white wood, with gold bands along the arch of the bow, and a crafted grip for the hand. It had been made for a thirteen span tall Solar, and Tarrin's oversized paw made it a perfect fit for him. It was the same size as an Aldreth longbow to him. The bowstring glittered like diamond, and it was clear it was made of some material he'd never seen before. But just to see it wasn't to fully appreciate the power lingering within that weapon. The touch of the God of Gods was on this weapon, a weapon blessed by Him, and he knew that he had to respect the bow, honor the hand that made it, and not abuse its power. Though he had gained the bow through treachery, he had to honor the ideals of the maker.

It's quite lovely, Niami intoned. Can you feel it?

"Yes, Mother," he said reverently. "I can feel it. I couldn't possibly not feel it. The power of the God of Gods lingers in this weapon."

That's why no one other than a Solar or you can touch that bow, kitten. The hand of the Overgod would strike down any who dared touch that weapon that wasn't a Solar. Your status as a mi'shara allows you to escape that fate.

Tarrin set the bow down on top of the edge of the Portable Hole, safe in the fact that nobody could run up and take it, then withdrew the quiver. There was a similar sensation in it, a lingering trace of the power of He who had made it. It had a full supply of arrows within, arrows that would instantly kill any who was struck by it. The quiver had no leather straps or belt. "Mother, could I impose on you?"

What do you need, kitten?

"A harness. I want the quiver to go here," he said, reaching over his shoulder and patting the area of his back between his wings. I'd Conjure one, but I wouldn't even think of trying something like that here."

She laughed lightly, and he felt her power surge through his wings. A double-crossed harness appeared in his paw, a leather harness with golden buckles on each of the two straps. "Perfect, thank you," he said, holding it out to look at it. He attached the quiver to the harness, then used his wings a third arm to seat the quiver snugly between his wings, at least after the Firestaff moved out and away to give him room, held between his wings away from his body. Claws slit his leather vest and the straps were passed through to allow him to buckle the harness against his chest without it getting in the way.

Once that was done, he sent the quiver into the *elsewhere*, but not the harness. He picked up the bow, felt that tremendous power, and was again awed and humbled by it. Was this how the Solar felt every time he took hold of this weapon? Then again, the Solar probably wasn't as intimidated as Tarrin was; he was almost afraid to use it, terrified that he might use it in a way that the God of Gods would deem to be wrong. But there was...something. He couldn't put a finger on it, but there was a sense of the feeling in the bow that it wasn't offended by him, that it seemed quite content to be in his possession. He wasn't quite sure why that was so, or if that was an aspect of him being a *mi'shara* or what. He had no doubt that He knew that Tarrin had the bow; after all, he was the God of Gods, and he was omniscient, and even if that wasn't enough, the Deva would have reported the incident to him by now. And since it was a foregone conclusion that He knew Tarrin had the bow, and had not either sent Deva to reclaim it or acted directly to recover it...maybe He wanted Tarrin to have it. Or perhaps he was just holding back to see what the Deva would do, testing them by giving them an unusual situation.

Or maybe Tarrin just needed to stop trying to fathom the mind of the greatest being in the entire multiverse and accept the situation with grace and humility. He had the bow, the God of Gods hadn't taken it from him, so it was time to use it. He'd gone through a lot of trouble to get it, and he was going to face some major punishment when all of this was over and he gave it back. So, in typical Were-cat fashion, it was time to live in the moment.

Tarrin had to free up his left paw space in the *elsewhere*, so it took a little juggling. Eventually, Tarrin had everything arranged. The bow of the Solar vanished from his left paw, sent comfortably into the *elsewhere*, ready a second's notice if he needed it. He took one more thing out of the Portable Hole, and that was the violet crystal visor he favored when flying. It really did help keep the wind off his eyes, but its tinting would be a problem out here. He touched on the power of Sorcery, setting his will not against the Weave, but against his wings, and called forth the power of Niami through them. He wove a spell of Earth and Divine, snapped it down, and released it into the visor, which leached away its violet tinting and left it clear...which was necessary here in this dimly lit place. He put it on, folded his Portable Hole back up, put it away, then reached up and took hold of the Firestaff as his wings brought it to his paw. "You can do one more thing for me, if you don't mind, Mother."

What is that, kitten?

"I was thinking about what you and Jenna told me," he said, his feet lifting from the bare, bleak rock by the power of his wings, and then he turned and soared in the direction the Firestaff had originally indicated, leaving the basalt cube upon which he had arrived behind him. "If most of the Demons that can fly have been killed, then it's just silly to ignore the air. It would be a major tactical advantage."

It seems years with those wings have given you a new outlook, she noted with an amused tilt.

"Actually, it was when I was able to shapeshift into a dragon," he told her. "Attacking from the air was a huge advantage. You told me that Kerri brought over a flying device to use on a riverboat so she could move fast to find a piece of my sword."

She did. She's still trying to find it, though. The shard is somewhere in the northern mountains, which are so high that they're covered with snow year round. Right now, Keritanima's fighting the weather to find the shard.

"Good, they work. Here's what I'd like you to do, Mother, if you would please. Get in touch with Kerri, and have her send down an order to have a large number of sailors on hand ready to take over manning some ships for me, and station them in Suld. And if you would, round up any of those silly War Sorcerers that are still on Sennadar that like to pretend they're soldiers, as well as enough Sorcerers to handle a short invasion. If they want to play war, I'm going to give them one. When I get back to Sennadar, we're declaring war on Zakkar."

Zakkar? Why Zakkar, kitten?

"Zakkite Skyships," he said calmly. "Flying ships are a major tactical advantage, and Zakkite ships are specifically designed for flying, unlike just sticking a flying device on a galleon or clipper. If I'm taking them into a battle, I want ships designed to handle the stresses of combat maneuvers. Round me up a force to capture Skyships, get some Wikuni to Suld to take over manning them, and tag every *da'shar* left in Sennadar and assign them to a ship so they can make it fly. Also, I have a special favor to ask."

Which is? I'm almost aflutter with anticipation, she told him with a wickedly amused tilt to her voice.

"I figure the best place I can find Skyships in a hurry is Zakkar's capitol," he began, "I remember reading that all their shipyards are there, as well as all their naval reserves. If I want ships, that would be the place to strike. But I can't Teleport there. What I'd like you to do is find either the *Star of Jerod* or the *Dancer*, pick it up, and drop it in the harbor at Zakkar. I can Teleport right to the deck."

My, that's quite clever, kitten, but you know I can't do something like that. However, I do know a Sorcerer that's been to Zakkar, and can land a Circle near the harbor. Would that be satisfactory?

“That would be more than satisfactory, Mother,” he said with a nod. “Also, if you would please, have Kerri send down a command to put the flying devices back on any Skyships the Wikuni captured and have sitting around that are airworthy, and have Jenna organize a way to move them to Suld.”

I’ll see to it, she told him.

“Once we get them there and set up, we can shrink them and Teleport them to the gate, then send them through.”

Jenna is going to kill you, kitten, she laughed. You know that you and her are the only two that can cast that spell that are on Sennadar. That’s sui’kun magic.

“I’ll help shrink them,” he protested. “We can load those ships with extra troops and get them moving. I think it’d only take them about five days to reach Pyros once we get them through. That gives us plenty of time to capture quite a few before we need to get them moving.”

Closer to seven days, but yes, we’d have time. That is certainly a clever idea, kitten. I’ll see to it that everything’s ready when you get back.

“I just hope I don’t have to go too far to find the One,” he grunted. “I know that just flying there may take me months, but I can’t think of any other way to get there quickly.”

Then it’s a good thing you talked to me, she noted. Kitten, you have access to Sorcery there. Think. You can Teleport.

“I know, but I can’t go anywhere here, Mother. I’ve never been here.”

Kitten, she chided. Think.

He pondered. Teleport. He wasn’t grounded anywhere here, so he couldn’t Teleport anywhere—

If he used *those* rules. The first conditional ruleset of Teleportation would certainly apply here, including the ability to Teleport to any location he could *see*! And in this place, with the blocks floating in the sky and plenty of space between them, he could Teleport to the horizon, Teleport to the very edge of the limits of his vision, jumping vast distances in the blink of an eye! And given his robustness when it came to Sorcery, he could Teleport in a chain for a very long time before he got tired, which would allow him to travel extreme distances before he had to rest.

“Alright, I feel stupid,” he admitted.

I’ll forgive you this time, she teased with a silvery laugh. After all, you’re still getting used to being a mortal again. All those silly rules and whatnot, she added.

“Be nice,” he grunted, which made her laugh. He looked to the very limits of his vision between two overhead blocks, the far, far distant horizon, then wove the spell of Teleportation. He felt the magical tendrils of the spell, invisible to any but his eyes, lance forth from his wings at a speed that defied rational explanation, reaching out to that other place that he could see. Those tendrils wrapped around that spot, encompassed him, and then transposed those two points. In the blink of an eye, Tarrin was a staggering distance away, still moving forward. After getting his bearings and refocusing on the new horizon, he did it again, then again, then again, jumping great distances in a short time. He then held the Firestaff out before himself and commanded it “show me.” It sent a stream of light before him, showing him the way to go, and he saw that he was generally on course. “I think I have the hang of it now, Mother. Thanks for reminding

me.”

Any time. Be careful out there, kitten. Come home safe.

“I will,” he assured her, and then he felt her retreat from him, a poignant sensation that told him that she was done speaking to him, that her attention was now elsewhere.

It was a fast and efficient means of travel, and the nature of it created a cushion of relative safety for him, given that he moved hundreds of longspans every moment in leaps and bounds...but *safe* was a relative concept in a place where Demons could freely enter.

For two days, Tarrin had jumped by leaps and bounds through Acheron, using his endurance to Teleport himself constantly for hours at a time, then stopping to rest for a while before continuing his journey. It was a tedious business...or at least he preferred it to be tedious. In two instances, it was not tedious. And those two little encounters taught him a valuable lesson about being more careful.

The first little episode had been just him not paying as much attention as he should. There indeed had been a Demon near the color pool watching him, and somehow, they had managed to figure out what he was doing. One of them, probably a *marilith* or a *nalfeshnee* or a *glabrezu*, one of the smarter ones, had actually managed to mathematically predict just where he was going to be using the distance he traveled every jump and how often he did it, taking into account detours he had to make around blocks. Tarrin had no idea how this Demon managed to figure it out, but its calculations were pretty darn accurate, because he Teleported literally into the middle of a swarm of Demons that had been waiting for him.

He came a hair's breadth from appearing *inside* a hovering *vrock*, which would have killed both of them instantly. Tarrin was startled for a split second, but seeing a *vrock*'s poleaxe coming right for his head woke him up very, very quickly. He just barely managed to slither to the side, and he spent a long and frenzied moment of chaotic evasion getting himself into a position where he could take stock of the situation and get a handle on what was going on. He used the weightless environment and his own innate flying ability to utmost advantage against the swarm of Demons, using superior maneuverability to dodge, evade, block, and parry weapons and claws with his Cat's Claws and the Firestaff, using it as a weapon. He dodged a multitude of attacks from every direction, even above and below, and things were so fast, so chaotic, he had no idea how many there were or what kinds. Tarrin defended himself until one of them used its innate magical powers to unleash a withering blast of cold at him, a cold that bit into him like a thousand little teeth as the cone of magical cold inundated him. Tarrin's wings responded to that cold by flaring with sudden light and heat, sending a surge of wonderful warmth through him, thawing frozen skin and tissue. The magical attack had hurt, had hurt a *lot*, but the fire of Tarrin's wings offset the freezing of his flesh and allowed him to keep fighting without being crippled or impaired. But Goddess did it sting.

That made him angry.

The ensuing melee made Tarrin feel like he was right at home again. In a blink of an eye, he was again attuned to his mortal form, performing the moves of the Dance with only slightly modification due to the fact that his feet did not rest on solid ground, that he was hovering weightless in a void. Even as he parried a hard chop of a glaive, he wove a Ward around himself that stopped all magic that was not Sorcery, then wove it against itself in such a way that it would remain until he removed it himself. He then turned on the *vrock* holding the glaive and ripped flesh and bone away with the claws of Cat's Claws, slithered up and aside to avoid the stabbing proboscis of a *chasme*, then struck it right across the face with the Firestaff as he held it in one paw, wielding it like a club, the reddish-black stone of the artifact shattering the creature's exoskeleton and sending greasy ichor flying off in a grisly arc from the mortally wounded Demon. He parried the pincers of a *glabrezu* with the Firestaff after taking it back in both paws but leaving the Cat's Claws out on his left paw, deflected the glaive of a *vrock* with the Cat's claws, ducked under the clawed swipe of a *nabassu*, then unleashed his wings against the *babau* that was trying to impale him from behind with his barbed harpoon.

Lances of solid fire erupted from the backs of his wings and sliced into the Demon like a hundred arrows, causing the Demon to gurgle its last just before the multitude of fiery spears *yanked* in every direction, ripping the Demon apart, leaving a grisly spray of black ichor in a wide arc behind the Were-cat. With an infuriated howl, Tarrin surged forward and smashed the Firestaff into the face of the *glabrezu*, shattering its ugly dog-like maw and sending it tumbling away into the void.

“Don’t you idiots ever *learn*?” Tarrin screamed as he twisted aside from another attempt to spear him with the glaive, then slashed his claws at the *vrock*’s face with his white-furred paw in a reflexive retaliatory swipe, a swipe that would cause no harm, but Tarrin’s reaction was instinctive, and his intent was to distract, not to injure. Tarrin aimed his paw at the Demon’s eyes to make it flinch and give him some time.

His claws did not simply scrape across its gnarled skin and beak. The claws penetrated Demon flesh and ripped a quartet of gaping tears in the Demon’s face, taking out both of its eyes. Black blood flew in an arc with his attack, and the Demon howled in agony and convulsed as it was driven backwards, driven into a tumbling spin by the force of Tarrin’s blow.

All of the Demons *stopped*. They gaped at him in shock. Despite Tarrin being a *mi’shara* and having magical constructions on his back, the simple fact that he was a *mortal* was a fact that could not be denied. As a mortal, Tarrin had no power to harm a Demon with his bare claws...and yet he *had*.

White fur...of course! The scar! It was the lingering remnant of what was done to him when he reached into the home dimension of the Deva, it was a power that was utter anathema to the Demons! Tarrin’s altered arm carried within it a lingering touch that was *holy*, and it was the bane of the unholy. The arm had no special power, but the scar itself was all the power it needed to deal such pain to the Demons who tasted its touch.

Tarrin held up that paw and showed it to the cadre of Demons that now gave him a cushion of space after his savage counterattack. “Is *this* what you want, Demons?” he raged at them. “Then *HERE!*”

Simultaneously, Tarrin altered the Ward, transforming it into an area of effect that prevented all but Priest magic and Sorcery, and then started chanting in the language of the gods, chanting the words of the spell of Banishment. The Demons recognized that spell immediately, shook off their surprise, and surged towards him in a harried attempt to disrupt that spell before he could complete it. However, none of them could match Tarrin’s effortless agility in that non-gravity void. Tarrin’s power of flight was innate and complete, giving him absolute mastery in that environment, moving with unmatched grace as he evaded their onslaught, sliding out of reach even as he continued to chant the words. They tried to reach him desperately, but they realized that it was not enough. They tried to Teleport away, and found their powers defeated.

“In the name of Niami, Goddess of magic, I abjure ye, creatures of darkness!” Tarrin’s voice boomed as he completed the spell and issued the spoken edict of command, words backed by the boundless power of Niami herself. They shattered the silence of Acheron like a Wikuni cannon. “Return to the pit that spawned ye, or face the wrath of my Goddess! *BEGONE!*” his voice cracked, and then his wings flared with blinding white light, brighter than the sun, like a blazing star in the featureless black sky of Acheron. The Demons shrieked in pain when that light touched them, burned them, pierced them, shattering the bodies they had made in Acheron and sending them hurtling back into the Abyss. Even the *glabrezu* that had been knocked back from the battle was destroyed, touched by the holy light that burned forth from Tarrin’s wings, as Niami used them as a gateway to unleash her holy might into Acheron to destroy the Demonic attackers.

Just like that, it was over. All the Demons were destroyed, exiled back to the Abyss, leaving Tarrin alone in the void, surrounded by smoldering black ichor, sizzling in the open void, forming clouds of acrid smoke that expanded in pearly spheres around the remains that decayed within them.

Tarrin looked down at his right arm, with its white fur and golden claws, and then he smiled maliciously.

Thank Niami for small favors. This scarred arm was good for something more than making him look asymmetrical. The lingering after-effect of reaching into the home dimension of the Deva gave it a shadow of that holy power, like a coating of water on his arm after reaching into a pond, and that power made his right arm a *magical weapon*, capable of dealing true injury to creatures that could only be harmed by magic.

Oh, was *this* an interesting and welcome little development.

“Now *I* am Demon’s Bane,” Tarrin whispered to himself, staring at his right arm. “Just like my shadow.”

It certainly seemed fitting, at least to him.

The skirmish with the Demons had been a slap in the face to keep him from getting too cozy out here. After all, this was more or less their backyard, and he couldn’t underestimate their cunning. Just because they were vicious, it did not mean they were stupid. He had to be more careful.

After that, he started varying the distance he traveled, and also occasionally made a Teleport jump laterally to mix things up and prevent them from predicting his movements with quite such accuracy.

The second incident was much more ominous than the first, and gave him a very small taste of what he might face when he stood before the One in all his terrible glory, for Tarrin wandered into the Realm of another god. And that god did not take kindly to Tarrin’s presence.

He had just completed a Teleport jump around one of the many blocks that floated in this place. He’d seen quite a few of them and paid them little mind, for the spirit legions on the blocks couldn’t reach him. He’d seen quite a few of them on their blocks, and saw that they looked up at him. He’d even gone around a few battles in progress where blocks had drifted together and were touching, which caused the armies on those blocks to boil forth and do war upon each other. This time, however, he had appeared very close to a block that had been hidden behind the other, close enough for the block’s gravity to take hold on him...and that block, *much* larger than most of the others, almost like a planet looming before him, was occupied by a god. Or gods, in this case.

The legions doing battle below him on that massive block were divided into two races that he could see, Waern and some strange race he’d never seen before, but looked like a strange kind of Bruga that was slightly larger than normal. The Waern were laying siege to a massive iron citadel near the edge of the block, which was being held by the Bruga-like creatures. Tarrin would have been curious, but his earlier scrape with the Demons had taught him to just stay away from everyone else.

That probably saved his life.

Just as he was snapping down and releasing a spell of Teleportation, he felt it. One of the gods down there had noticed him, and he could actually feel the sudden surge of power around him, even as he was moving between points, trapped in the execution of the spell that moved him to a new place. He felt that power try to reach into his magic and yank him back even as he appeared at his landing point, and it would have worked, had Tarrin not frantically raised up the Firestaff and commanded it to make it stop. The Firestaff surged with power, so much power that it found a sudden strength to resist him. Tarrin had to clamp down his will on the artifact and fight it for control, a struggle that lasted only an instant, but felt like an eternity. The Firestaff writhed against his will, trying to wriggle free of him, but it could not find enough room to get free. Tarrin’s paw clamped down on it in a vicelike grip even as his will smothered the resistance that calling its power had imparted into it, and it obeyed him. The power of the Firestaff smacked those magical hands reaching back through his spell, slapped them away and forced them to withdraw, which caused its hold on his magic to relent and the spell to end.

Tarrin could almost hear the howl of surprise, and it made him sincerely afraid...so afraid he immediately

Teleported again, then again, and once again, in random directions, just to move away from that spot and any kind of attempt by that god to track him down and exact vengeance. Then he again turned to his route to the One and Teleported several times in a matter of moments, motivated by fear to push himself too far too fast, and exhaust himself. By the time he was done, he was over a thousand longspans away, and he had to stop and rest.

That was a harsh lesson for him. He was only a mortal, no matter how much power he possessed, and a god could hang him out to dry if he got caught unawares...and maybe even if he was expecting it. He had little doubt that that god could have come after him, but Tarrin got the feeling that now that he was away from that god's domain, that god really didn't care about him anymore. It was his proximity that caused that action.

That encounter had him much more worried than the idea that he might be ambushed again by Demons, for he would have to confront a god...a god that would most certainly attack him the instant he realized that Tarrin was there. It caused Tarrin to slow down a little, to take that period of rest and use it to prepare himself for what he knew was coming. He had to be ready. He couldn't just blunder into the One's realm blindly and get attacked before he knew what was going on, or he was going to die.

He spent more time than he should have, but then again, hurrying was going to be pointless if he got slaughtered like so much livestock when he reached his destination. He went through the concentration exercises that Allia taught him to quell his doubts and fears and focus himself on the task at hand. He then spent some time attuned to the Firestaff to get a much better understanding of the feel of its power, so he could react *before* it tried to rebel and keep control of it.

That was not pleasant. The Firestaff had a personality of sorts, but it was utterly alien in nature to him. But that personality...it was everything that Tarrin would call *evil*. It reveled in destruction, it wanted nothing else, and its every moment was consumed in a single-minded desire to undo. Everything it did was to further the goal of destruction, to unmake what was made and return the multiverse to the chaos from whence it came.

It was then that Tarrin *understood* what he had always *known*. The Firestaff was an artifact of Entropy. Tarrin himself was a child of Entropy, but his Entropic aspect was much more controlled, much more refined, and it was only one part of a greater whole. Tarrin was Entropic because as a *mi'shara*, he might need to break the rules of the universe to complete his task, something that only an Entropic could accomplish. And in a way, his aspect of Entropy was necessary in order to preserve the greater good, for sometimes things happened that required someone that could break the rules to fix things. Tarrin was a mortal with Entropic qualities, but the Firestaff was a pure object of Entropy. It existed for the sole reason to destroy all that which was created, but it never acted directly. That was not its way. Its way was to grant power to others and allow them to destroy in its stead, exploiting the weakness in the results of Creation to cause the victim to destroy its own world in the throes of its newfound power. It sought to destroy by using Creation against itself, as if to prove the folly of Creation and the need to destroy it and return all to Entropy.

How close that had come to happening on Sennadar. Val had nearly destroyed the world when he became a god, and it was nearly destroyed when Tarrin used it to fight Val. If the Elder Gods had been forced to fight Val directly, they very well might have destroyed the world in the course of their battle...and going by what he was told, actually killing a god created by the Firestaff would be in and of itself an event that might destroy the world. From what he was told, it had taken the combined power of every god on Sennadar to contain the energy released when Tarrin destroyed both Val and himself.

Such a sinister method. Never acting directly, only acting through others, and allowing their weaknesses to do its work. The weak or the power-hungry would seek the power of the Firestaff, and they would get it. And then they would go mad with that power and bring about the end of all they knew. It made the Firestaff much more ominous than before, and Tarrin could see the efficiency of that approach. By keeping a "low

profile” of sorts to escape the direct attention of the gods of whatever world it was on, hiding its true power, it managed to remain where it was. Gods would see it as a danger, but not the kind of danger that would require direct action. Tarrin doubted that even Niami or Ayise knew just how powerful the Firestaff was. It had power greater than any god, beyond them, almost unlimited in scope. But its will and its personality made it impossible for anyone to command that power, to go against the Firestaff’s wishes.

Except for Tarrin.

Certainly, he couldn’t command that full power. To cause it to bring that much power to bear would give it the strength to break free of him, and it would certainly escape from him, or try to kill him...but it couldn’t kill him directly. Tarrin was immune to its power now, a protection he gained when he became a mortal again. However, it most certainly could try to kill him *indirectly*. It could not strike at him, it could only try to engineer a means by which to bring about his destruction. It couldn’t directly blast him with its power, but it could, for example, grab two of the many blocks in Acheron and crush him between them.

Tarrin’s immunity to the Firestaff and his ability to control it were laid out in that book that that woman had given him. Tarrin was the only weakness of the Firestaff. The only being in the multiverse that was forever immune to its direct power was a mortal who had been granted the power of the Firestaff, then rejected it and returned to what they once were. Tarrin could never use the Firestaff to become a god again, but on the other tack, the Firestaff could not lash out at him directly with its power and try to do him direct harm. It could affect him with some kinds of magical power, but never its own raw power used directly, and *only* if he specifically wished it to be so...such as when he used it to mimic Druidic magic. That fact was the aspect of him that gave him his immunity, and it was the fact that he was Entropic that allowed him to command it. The Firestaff could not ignore requests from one of its own. That was how Eron could compel it, because he too was a *mi’shara*. Someone gaining immunity to the Firestaff was supposed to be impossible, but Tarrin wagered that the Firestaff had never seen Tarrin coming. An Entropic artifact had used its power on an Entropic-touched mortal, a being capable of breaking the rules of reality. Tarrin had found a way to do the impossible and regain his mortality, and the instant he had done so, he had gained immunity from its power, while returning to the role of *mi’shara* by becoming mortal again had given him the ability to compel the Firestaff as a fellow Entropic. That was why he had to be careful...his ability to compel only went as far as his ability to throttle the Firestaff’s will, and that willpower got stronger as it channeled more and more of its own power to complete a task.

That was why it was trying to escape from him, because it knew that Tarrin would be ready if it tried to kill him, and wasting time trying to kill him only gave Tarrin the time he needed to regain his mastery of the artifact.

Knowing that was a boon to him now, for it was helping him establish a line that he knew he could not cross, or the Firestaff was going to get free of him. The time attuning himself to the Firestaff had been productive, though it certainly had not been very pleasant. Tarrin felt like he was holding a diseased snake carcass in his paw now, something that made his skin creep to touch, now that he knew the truth of it.

It would serve him well, though. The Firestaff was the trump card in this last hand of King’s Cross with the One, and if he did things right, he would be victorious, the Demon Lord would be destroyed, and the Firestaff would be neutralized.

He felt he was ready now. He was rested from his maniacal scramble away from the realm of that god. His fears were calmed, he had a better understanding of the Firestaff and had a better grasp of just how far he could go with it, and he was centered and focused on the task at hand.

He raised the Firestaff before himself. “Show me,” he commanded, and he felt the Firestaff rebel, resist that command, even as it moved to obey. But in this, as with every other contest between them, the Firestaff learned that the will of Tarrin Kael was like steel, and would not budge a finger. It could not resist that

irresistible force when it was applied to the Firestaff, and was compelled to obey. A stream of red light showed him the way.

Tarrin turned in that direction and ruffled his fiery wings slightly before bending to the task at hand. He had the feeling that he was close to the One now, and he had to make sure he remained vigilant and was ready.

For a bit over two days—as near as he could tell, since it was hard to keep track of time here—Tarrin had continued to move towards the One, staying focused on the task. But now he was hanging motionless in space, his face grim and his grip on the Firestaff white-knuckled...if one could see his knuckles under the fur on his paw.

He was here.

He could sense the One's power, now that he was looking for it. It was a palpable force before him, emanating from a continent-sized block that was on the horizon before him. That was where the One was, and that was where he was going. But for some reason, the One had not reacted to Tarrin yet. Tarrin was certain that he knew Tarrin was there. He was a god after all, and if Tarrin could sense him from this distance, it seemed impossible to him that the One could not do the same.

This was it. This was the last major obstacle. Tarrin steeled himself, purged his mind of doubt and fear and worry and focused on a singular fact; he had to survive long enough to make the One listen, to get the One to *talk*, and not to *fight*. Tarrin's grip on the Firestaff grew even tighter as he prepared himself, girded his will, prepared to test his ability to compel the Firestaff to its limit when he used it to protect himself from the One's assault. Tarrin opened himself to his wings as well, fully awakening the connection between himself and Niami through the wings, gathering up his power and filling himself with the power of Sorcery, so he would have it on hand and able to use it instantly if the situation demanded it. His wings flushed with brilliant white light, a visible indication that he was saturating himself with the power of Sorcery.

There was nothing else for him to do. He couldn't drag his feet, not now, not when time was an issue. He was ready, he was here...it was time to do this.

Tarrin Teleported to that block, ready for the fight of his life.

He appeared on the black stone block almost exactly in the middle, not far from a massive ivory citadel that rose so high into the sky that it looked like a vast mountain, on a flat plain of featureless black rock. The white stone of the citadel clashed with the black stone of the block, making it stand out like a cannon in a ballroom, as Keritanima might say. All around him, in neatly arranged camps, were countless hordes of spirit legions, the spirits of the dead who had worshipped the One, and who were now soldiers in his eternal army that sought to conquer and rule. They sat around fires that burned without fuel, with tents and buildings built around each fire like a cell of a massive organism, as they patiently waited for the next block to touch theirs, as they waited for the chance to engage in another war. They all looked solid, looked like normal humans, but there was a soft nimbus of weak light around them which betrayed their true natures...and there was the fact that their eyes were nothing but pools of red light, like the eyes of a Hellhound.

Tarrin snapped out his wings and held the Firestaff like a weapon, and was already in the act of weaving a spell of Sorcery that would blast them all out of his vicinity...but they did not move. They just looked at him. They turned from where they were sitting and standing, and they just looked. They did not rise up and draw weapons. They did not charge forward. They just stared at him.

It was then that he felt it, and saw it on their faces.

Despair.

They did not rise up to attack because they did not have the heart to do so. They were in despair because the One was in despair, and their sorrow was an apathy that even prevented them from rising up to attack their most hated adversary, the one that had dealt their god a stinging defeat on Pyrosia.

The sorrow was like a pall laying upon the land, and it pulsed forth from that ivory citadel, where the One was located. Why such a reaction, though? Tarrin expected rage, fury, expected to be fighting a running war the instant he arrived and then desperately fighting for his life against a god when the One arrived and went berserk when his most hated foe was in his grasp. But this? Despair? Woe? Sorrow? This was the *last* thing he expected.

“One!” Tarrin shouted, turning to the citadel. “I need to talk to you!”

In an instant, he found himself standing in a vast hall so large that nearly the entire city of Torrian could fit inside it. It was the throne hall of the One, within his vast citadel. Tarrin felt no exercise of power. He was just suddenly *there*, and it made him wary. This was a god exercising his true power in his home realm, and it was something beyond any mortal’s comprehension. He looked around in surprise, and then saw the One, sitting on a throne made of the skulls of his enemies...an armored, winged human who looked just as he remembered from his ghostly recollections of being a demigod, with the white feathered wings, the long blond hair, the handsome visage. He looked just as he had appeared with his icon. He was slumped forward, elbows on knees, and his face buried in his hands as he *wept*.

Did you come to gloat? Did you come to rub salt in my wounds, accursed one? the voice of the One spoke directly to his mind. *Well get it over with! Here I am! Mock me, degrade me, remind me of my failings, and remind me that I will soon lose all my precious children and will be no more!*

This was the absolute *last* thing that Tarrin had ever dreamed that he might be facing. The One had given up, had lost hope. Then again, things on Pyrosia were not good. He had unleashed a force into his homeworld that nobody could stop, and in a way, he had reason to feel despair. There truly was nothing there that could reasonably stop the Demon Lord from destroying Pyrosia, and his very existence was in dire jeopardy. But instead of losing himself to anger, the One had instead lost himself to remorse. Tarrin couldn’t fathom the mind of a god, for they were too far beyond him...but he *could* understand the emotions that the One was feeling, because mortals and gods shared those emotions. Niami had told him that, long ago, that emotion was the binding aspect between mortals and gods, the one thing that they had in common.

“Things aren’t written in stone quite yet, One,” Tarrin said cautiously, grounding the butt of the Firestaff on the alabaster floor. “That’s why I’m here. We’re going to fix things, you and me. We’re going to get rid of the Demon Lord.”

VILE CRUELTY! The one raged suddenly, his voice and anger so powerful that it gave Tarrin an instant, pounding headache, so powerful that he felt the strength leech out of his legs, which caused him to drop to his knees. The One stood and pointed a single finger at Tarrin, and his face was twisted in a mask of rage. *Your scorn or your laughter I could have endured, but not, not this! Not this! To toy with me so, for a mortal to make so audacious and punishing a declaration! I may come to be no more, but I will die with the sweet satisfaction of rending your soul from your body!*

Now *this* was what he expected, and that expectation saved his life. Tarrin managed to command the Firestaff to protect him, even as the full, naked power of the One, unfettered by the constraints of an icon or the limits of a material plane, blasted forth and sought to deal him injury in ways that he could not even comprehend.

But Tarrin did not have to comprehend that power to defend himself from it, for the Firestaff *could* comprehend that power. Tarrin commanded it to protect him from the One, and the Firestaff struggled for a split second, tried to break free...but Tarrin had specifically prepared for this moment, and it found itself

unable to wrest free of him, despite the sudden surge of power and the additional strength it gave to the artifact. The power of the Firestaff roared forth to form a protective sphere around the Were-cat, and the border of that sphere of protection suddenly erupted with clashes of red, white, and yellow light, as the power of the One found itself opposed by a power so vast, so infinite, that it rivaled his own. That opposing power did not attack. It only defended, protected the one within the center of that protection, offering forth only a barrier of resistance to the One's power, a passive defense against which the One's power raged in its full fury. The citadel itself began to shake as the power of the One conflicted with the power of the Firestaff, but where the One's power sought to destroy, the Firestaff's power only sought to protect...and the act of defense was always the most efficient means of use of power. *It takes more energy to attack than it does to defend, son*, Eron had told him so many times. *The defender always has the advantage. It's a universal truth, from a one on one contest to a battle between armies. It's always the same.*

It was a scary, scary moment. Tarrin felt the Firestaff grow stronger, and it began to fight him, resist, tried to break away and drop the circle of protection, which would have caused his instant death. Even as the One waged a battle of power against the Firestaff, the Firestaff waged a battle of wills against Tarrin. He felt it grow stronger and stronger, felt it rise up, felt it push back against him. Tarrin poured every iota of his strength into his battle, ignoring everything else. His entire world focused into a singular act, and that was exerting his will against the Firestaff, forcing it to obey him. Tarrin was so uncertain that he reacted out of reflex, calling on the power of Sorcery simultaneously and weaving a barrier of magic around himself as a last-gasp protection, should the Firestaff break free, pouring every mote of strength he had into it. It would be like paper before an avalanche, but at least Tarrin felt it might help.

For a terrible moment, it hung there, as the Firestaff was on the verge of overwhelming his will and breaking free, but in that same moment, the One reached the limits of his power, and could exert no more. With the plateau of power reached, the Firestaff could gain no more strength from drawing on more of its own power, and it found itself short by the thinnest of margins from breaking free of him. It could not overwhelm his will, and was thus forced to obey. The sphere of protection became adamant, impassable, and Tarrin knew in that moment, a moment of eternal relief for him, that he was safe.

The One's power could not breach the protection of the Firestaff. The One withdrew his power, his face genuinely shocked, as he seemed at a loss as to how exactly the Were-cat had done something that was absolutely impossible. A mortal had matched the power of a god in his home realm.

"Now that we've got that out of the way," Tarrin panted, leaning heavily on the Firestaff with both paws, his skin pale and his face drained from the effort, his wings leeches of their white with the expenditure of that stored power. "As you can see, I came prepared for this. I expected you to attack me. By the nexus, I don't blame you. If I were in that chair, I'd have attacked me too. So, since I've managed to stand up to everything you can throw at me, maybe you'll see that I'm not joking, and I'm not trying to add insult to injury. I'm here to *talk*, One, not to fight. So let's talk."

Tarrin struggled to regain his feet, as the One seated himself back on his throne and regarded the Were-cat with strange respect.

Your display has earned you one chance to explain yourself, he told Tarrin evenly. *For some reason, I cannot fathom your mind. I dare say it is because of what you hold in your hand. It even has the power to block me.* He motioned at the Firestaff. *So begin.*

Struggling back to his feet, Tarrin explained his idea, and what role the One would play in it. The glowing eyes of the One widened in surprise more than once, and his expression turned from somber to... intrigued by the time Tarrin was done. "I already have everything," Tarrin told him. "I've got it all set up, and all the pieces are nearly in place. I only have one more thing to do, and then it'll just be a matter of going to Pyros and dealing with him. Are you interested?"

I have little choice in the matter, he answered immediately. If I refuse, I risk my own destruction. I have little doubt you would not blink more than once over the idea of eradicating my memory from Pyrosia in retaliation should I refuse, which would end me. Even if you did nothing, by the time I have restored my icon, it might be too late for me to recover. In that way, we are similar. Both of us are capable of that.

“That’d be about right,” Tarrin said evenly. “Pyrosia can get along without you, One, and if you decide to just hang back and repair your icon and then try to come back and start it all over again, well, I’ll have to do something about that. But things will be easier if you’re there, and you can help fix things after it’s over, make Pyrosia better. But there’s going to be a few changes in doctrine,” he warned flatly. “You’re coming into this as a *helper*, not a *partner*. You’ve already been beaten. The loser doesn’t get to set the terms when the next game is played.”

The One bristled visibly, but then he sighed. *It is as you say. My hand was played, and it came up lacking. Now I must accept the loser’s lot, and salvage what I can out of a bad outcome. I will agree to certain changes in my direction of my children on Pyrosia. In exchange, you will permit them to flourish.*

“I’ll do what I can, but it’s not really up to me. After all, I *am* just a mortal. It’s going to be up to you and the other gods on Pyrosia to hammer out the exact details of that, though. Without an Elder God there, you all are going to have to work out a system that works for you. But that new system isn’t going to include any more crusades of racial genocide,” he said harshly. “You don’t have to *like* the Dura or the Elara or whoever’s left, but you *will* give them the space they need, and you *will* leave them alone.”

The One had a strange expression, then he laughed. *I will be a laughing stock, being dictated terms by a mere mortal. But you’re more than a mortal, Tarrin Kael of Prime Sennadar. I feel at least some sense of vindication that it is you doing this, and not some other mortal. Very well, on my word as a god, you have my support in your plan. We may not like each other, but we are no longer enemies, and I will not raise my hand against you or your family again. I will do my best to fulfill my part of the plan, and work in good faith with you and the other gods of Pyrosia. When the time comes, I will be there, and I will be ready. When will you fulfill your part of the bargain?*

That was what Tarrin wanted to hear. When a god gave his word like that, he would not break it. It was a fundamental tenet. Now that he had that promise, Tarrin was certain that the One would be an ally in this, not a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“When I can,” he answered. “It won’t be till after I get to Pyros, no matter what. That’s where the remains of your icon are. I need to be there to do it.” He snorted. “I might delay a little. There’s a chance that the battle will already be joined by the time I get there, though, and I might use that as a tactical surprise to throw the Demon Lord off.”

That is possible, and would be a good tactical move. But if you arrive before the battle, it is only helpful to our side to do it immediately.

Tarrin nodded. “If I get there before the battle, it will be done immediately.”

I, must thank you, he said hesitantly. Since my defeat by your hands, I have felt nothing but despair that my existence was at its end. But now, I feel that there is a chance, and it fills me with hope. Win or lose, I thank you for lifting that burden from my heart. If I am to die, I will do it fighting, not mourning my loss.

“It’s the Were-cat way,” Tarrin told him. “We never give up.”

That tenacity was my bane when I opposed you, but now it might be my hope for salvation, the One told him, and then he stood up, his expression one of newfound confidence. Time is short. I have things to do to prepare for the coming times, and you have more to do. I will send you back to the color pool to the Astral,

so you can save time on your journey.

“That would help,” he nodded.

So be it. Take this.

A small object appeared in the air before him, floating at about his shoulder level. It was a disc of platinum holding the holy symbol of the One. *That token is only carried by the highest-ranking of my Priests as a symbol of station. Show that to any of my Priests, and they will obey you utterly. You might have need of it to get their cooperation. As you know, you are the greatest enemy of the order, and they might not obey you if you give them orders,* he added with a wry audible chuckle.

“That might be useful,” he agreed, taking the disc, then putting it in his belt pouch. “Good luck, One.”

To you as well. May the Overgod speed you on your journey, for both our sakes.

The One waved his hand, and then Tarrin found himself again hovering in space, the color pool directly before him, where he had started several days before.

That went as he expected, and he was relieved it was over. The One had seen the potential in his plan, and had jumped at the chance to quickly regain a portion of his power in Pyrosia, before the faith of his followers began to waver and his power began to decline. Then again, the One was in a bad position. He had no icon on the only world where he was worshipped, the Demon Lord was going to destroy everything, which would kill him when all his worshippers were slaughtered. No wonder he was in despair. Tarrin knew that the One would jump all over a chance like this, even with the limitations that would come with it. It had just been about surviving long enough to make him listen, and that itself was a scary moment. He hadn’t come that close to dying in a *long* time. If the One had had just a smidgen more power, he would have lost control of the Firestaff, and it would have allowed the One to destroy him. But luckily for him, he had lived through that attack, and the fact that he survived made the One pause long enough to get over that anger

Odd, though, that the One couldn’t simply run his fingers through Tarrin’s mind, the way Breina of the Dawn had. He’d half expected the One to see it all there the instant he came close enough. He’d expected the attack to be one out of rage despite knowledge of the plan, but it seemed that so long as he had the Firestaff, no god but Niemi could see his thoughts.

He passed through the color pool without hesitation and was again in the featureless, infinite gray of the Astral. His wings opened and he hurtled away from the color pool, his destination being the invisible pool that led to Sennadar, going through what was to come in his mind. Now that he had the last of the hard tasks out of his way, he had only one small errand to run, and then it would be time to return to Pyrosia, and put an end to the Demon Lord. And now he would be coming at the Demon Lord with another ally on his side, one that would be in a position to attack the Demon Lord from *within* his ranks when the time came. Used at the right time, that could destroy the Demon Lord’s plans to take Pyros and kill Dolanna. That was the tactical moment that Tarrin had mentioned. If the One’s icon was restored at the right moment if the battle was already joined, then the humans in the Demon Lord’s army would turn on him, and create enough chaos to give Tarrin an opening to strike at the Demon Lord directly...because Tarrin had no doubt that the Demon Lord knew that Tarrin would be his greatest threat, and would do whatever it took to stay as far away from him as possible.

After all, all Tarrin had to do was get within range to use the Solar’s bow, and it would be over.

That was what it was for. That was why he worked so hard to get it. Not even the Demon Lord could withstand the power of the arrow fired from a Solar’s bow. If it struck, the Demon Lord would die. Nothing could stop that. No amount of power the Demon Lord possessed could protect him from that. The arrow

would kill anything it hit, and that included god-like beings like a Demon Lord. Without an Elder God on Pyrosia, the *only* option that Tarrin had to get rid of the Demon Lord was the bow. It was the only way. It was the only thing that could kill something like a Demon Lord that didn't involve an Elder God.

And Tarrin had no doubt that by now, the Demon Lord knew Tarrin had the bow. And that would make Tarrin the last thing on Pyrosia that the Demon Lord would want to see. When he knew that Tarrin was on Pyrosia, his entire strategy would become one of isolation, to keep Tarrin away from him while he tried to take Pyros and kill Dolanna, then use his unlocked power and try to kill Tarrin without having to face him when in a position where Tarrin had such an advantage. Tarrin was expecting it...he was *counting* on it. The plan to get skyships only worked off that basic idea, to put so many objects in the air that Tarrin could hide among them and get close enough to take his shot at the Demon Lord without being such a blatant target. Yes, they would be immense tactical advantage in a battle, but that was only an added bonus over the cover that Tarrin would get hiding among them while taking his shot at the Demon Lord from the air, where the range of his bow was immense.

"Mother," Tarrin called. "I'm done in Acheron, and the One is going to help us. Are the Sorcerers ready?"

Yes, they're ready, she answered. There's going to be more than Sorcerers, though.

"Who? Knights? I expected Knights to go along anyway."

No, kitten. The sashka got wind of your plan. I bet Keritanima was maybe a bit too descriptive when she sent the order about the flying devices, and the sashka is a close advisor to Rallix. As you know, there's quite a bit of history between the Vendari and the Zakkites. When the sashka heard of your plan to attack Zakkar, he demanded to be allowed to take part in that attack. And then the dakka, the ruler of the Vendari in Vendar, heard about it as well, and he too is demanding to be allowed to send troops to represent the honor of Vendar. So, kitten, you're going to have a sizable force of Vendari going with you. They want revenge for what the Zakkites have done to them, and a surprise attack on Zakkara itself would be a good start.

Tarrin laughed. "I'd be an idiot to say no, and it's not like they'd take no for an answer," he answered. "Having a Vendari strike force mixed in with the Knights just ensures that we'll have the complete run of the city. Are we going to be able to get that many there, though? I can't hang around there, Mother. We'll be moving almost as soon as I get back. If I stay in one place too long, the Deva are going to catch up with me. I don't see how they're going to get to Suld in time to go on the raid."

The Vendari are already here, she answered. Ten thousand of them, give or take. The Vendari gods directly moved them to the plain by Suld, which is almost unheard of. The Vendari gods never directly involve themselves like that, but I guess this was an important enough issue for them to do something like that. The thing is, kitten, they did it before they told us why they were there. It caused a little panic in the city. No one knew if they intended to attack, and no sane person on Sennadar doesn't start getting religious when he sees a force of ten thousand Vendari camped outside his city gates.

Tarrin had to chuckle. "I can imagine. I don't see how we're going to get them all to Zakkar, though.

We have that covered, kitten, thanks to one of the Elara. Kyrienna is going to open a gate after a initial strike force is Teleported in, she answered. I don't think you know her, kitten. She's one of the Elara Worldwalkers. She came with Shara and Neh. When the others returned to Pyrosia, she remained behind to research our world's Wizard magic and see what she could learn. She knows a spell that opens a sustained gateway between two points, that our people can use to get there without the need to Teleport. She was about to return to Pyrosia when this idea of yours came down, and she's volunteered to stay and help. Get her to Zakkara, and she can open a gateway that the rest of the assault force can use to get there. Oh,

you're going to have one more addition, she warned. Sarraya wants to go.

"I'd love to have her. She probably feels left out, since she can't go back to Pyrosia."

That's an understatement, Niami snorted. She feels like everyone forgot all about her, and she's been making her displeasure known. Her colony booted her out last ride because she got so snippy.

"They exiled her?" he gasped.

No, they just tossed her out for a while, she answered. They know she can survive a long time outside the colony, so they just want time away from her until she calms down. Seems she got so annoying that even the Faeries were getting short-tempered with her.

"Wow," Tarrin breathed. "Just...wow."

This will certainly calm her down some, Niami noted. She'll have a chance to be with you and feel like she's contributing somehow. By the way, if you didn't think that the Vendari were enough, Sapphire has decided to use the Zakkar attack as a practice run to get a feel for how the dragons are going to operate in a bipedal attack strategy, so you're going to have the clan there as well, and the four dragons that agreed to help. Tenshale, Sapphire's off-again on-again mate, two other dragons from Sapphire's territory, and Sandwing wanted to go, but he got supplanted by a friend of yours from Pyrosia.

"Pyrosia?"

That shadow dragon, she answered. She calls herself Nightshade. She showed up two days ago in the gate chamber and talked fast enough for Spyder to send for me. It seems that the Demons destroyed her den in the Abyss after you beat her in retaliation for her loss, and she's absolutely furious. She wants a piece of them now, and she decided that joining forces with us is a good way to go about getting revenge without opening herself to too much direct danger. She's a very sly one. I looked into her mind, kitten, and on this issue, she's absolutely trustworthy. Her desire for revenge is that great, and shadow dragons are very single-minded. Frankly, I'm amazed the Demons would do something like that, but their arrogance gets the better of their judgment sometimes. They had to know that they'd be making an eternal enemy out of her when they did it, but they did it anyway. So, I got my mother's permission to let her enter Sennadar. Sapphire seems to like her, but she gives everyone else the creeps.

Tarrin laughed. "I thought I'd seen the last of her. She was an amazing creature, and one of the toughest I've ever faced. She'd be an asset."

Oh, I totally agree, kitten, that's why I worked to have Ayise allow her in, she told him. So, we'll be attacking Zakkara with my children, Knights, Vendari, an Elara Worldwalker, a Faerie, and ten dragons. I think that's more than enough.

Tarrin laughed even harder. "I think it's overkill, given we're just there to capture some ships. I'm not sure there'll be much of the city left when we leave, though."

I dare say there won't. Once the Vendari are that close to the Zakkites, they're going to show them two thousand years of indignation and anger. The Zakkites are about to pay for their policy of trying to exterminate the Vendari from the face of Sennadar.

"I won't shed a tear," Tarrin snorted. "I should be back there in just a couple of hours. How are we doing time wise?"

We'll have enough time to raid Zakkar and still beat the armies to Pyros, she told him. We actually have a couple of days of breathing room, so we don't have to rush too much. We can't dawdle, but at least we have the time to make sure we got everything done right.

"That's a relief," he sighed.

How did it go with the One?

"More or less as I expected," he answered. "The One didn't attack me right away, though. He was lost in despair. He attacked me after I said something that angered him. I just *barely* managed to get through it, but at least now I know *exactly* how far I can push the Firestaff without losing control of it. Once we got the unpleasantness out of the way, he listened to me. He's with us. He didn't even squabble over the conditions. He knows his back's against the wall, and this is the only way to get back some of what he's lost."

That's good. Are you sure you can trust him?

"He gave his word, Mother."

Ah.

"I'm not all that happy with the idea of helping him, but in this how I feel doesn't matter as much as what needs doing," he grunted. "The One's promise basically covered everything, so I know he won't try to backtrack on us. He's in this to the end, because he knows this is his only chance to survive. I hate to say it, but we can trust him."

That's all we need. Would you like something to eat when you get here? You must be tired of eating out of your belt pouch.

"Actually, that sounds wonderful," he told her. "I don't have time for it, but I'd love to eat something fresh."

I'll take care of it for you, she promised. I think we can manage a quick meal at a table with your family there. I don't think that's too much of a risk.

"That does sound nice," he agreed.

Alright then, hurry back before it gets cold, she teased then she retreated enough to make it apparent to him she had nothing else to say.

Well, at least he had something to look forward to when he got home, other than immediately running off to another battle. To actually sit down and have a quiet meal with his family sounded absolutely wonderful. He would love to have one meal where he wasn't looking over his shoulder, and about the only place that could be done would be Sennadar. At least there, the Deva had to come through the portal and get past Spyder before they could get to him, so at least he'd have plenty of advance warning.

The trip back to Sennadar was quick and uneventful...at least until he got back to the Tower after a quick and warm greeting and conversation with Spyder. She gave him another of the golden charms to affix to his amulet, so he wouldn't have to worry about sleep, and he felt that it was a good idea to put it on and keep it on until after all of this was over. Time was short, and he couldn't waste any of it sleeping.

When he got back, he found himself all but confronted with three people who wanted to talk to him so

badly that they were willing to ignore his desire for a quiet dinner with his family. Two were understandable, but the third was unusual. The *sashka* and the *dakka*, the two rules of the Vendari, accosted him almost before he got out of the room he commonly used as a landing point for Teleportation, wanting his input about plans, tactics, and placement of troops on the Zakkar raid. “Gentlemen,” he told them respectfully. “I’m going to go eat dinner. When I get back, whatever you two and Lord General Darvon have worked out is what we’re going to do. If you want someone to plan this raid, do *not* look at me. Were-cats do not make good plans. I already have all the plan I need. We show up, take every ship we can get our paws on, and then leave. How refined you want to make that plan is your affair.”

Both of them looked at him in shock. “It will be as you say then, Keeper of Keepers,” the *sashka* told him with a nod. “We will work out a tactical battle plan with the Lord General. It will be ready for your approval by the end of your meal.”

“Fine, whatever works. And don’t call me that,” Tarrin told them as he walked away, wagging his tail at them as he did so.

“Who will command this operation during the attack?” the *dakka* called after him.

“Whichever of you has the most experience, I’d reckon,” Tarrin answered as he turned a corner and left them behind.

Tarrin forgot all about them as he went to where he could sense Jenna and his family were located, in a private dining room not far from the kitchens. His parents were there, as well as Sarraya, his human children, Tomas, Janine, Janette, and Sapphire. But in the hall near the dining room was a female he’d never seen before, standing in the middle of the passage, obviously waiting for someone. This woman was rather slim and willowy, with very long, arrow-straight hair of the darkest black. She wore a garment that appeared to be a robe, a simple wrap made of coal black material that clung to her and concealed, but her dark silhouette displayed a narrow-hipped, thin, athletic-seeming body. Tarrin wouldn’t have known who she was if not for her eyes, two pools of glowing red that made it abundantly clear that she was not as human as she looked.

“You are Tarrin, yes?” she asked in a strange accent.

“I am. You would be Nightshade?”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t think to recognize you like that. You look very odd as a biped. You were *very* handsome as a shadow dragon.”

“I guess I do at that, and I’ll trust your judgment on the matter,” he agreed mildly. “If you don’t mind, I’m in something of a hurry,” he said with a slight edge. He wouldn’t push too far—she *was* a dragon, after all—but he wanted it clear to her she was getting in his way.

“Of course. I just wanted to meet you again, and let you know that you have my complete cooperation in this. I mean to pay that bastard Gruz back for what he did to me. What his Demons destroyed in my den was irreplaceable. I worked *centuries* to collect many of those pieces, and many were one of a kind.”

“Gruz?”

“The Demon Lord. That’s how he calls himself in the Abyss. He did the one thing I can never forgive.”

“What did he do?”

“He destroyed my collection of *art*,” she seethed. “Thousands of pieces, some from dead civilizations

that is now lost forever! I could stand the loss of my hoard, and the loss of my collection of magical treasures, but Gruz will *pay* for destroying my art!”

Tarrin could tell that she was *really* upset about it. She had to be a fervent art collector and enthusiast for her to be more outraged by the loss of her art collection than the loss of her treasure and her magical artifacts. “Well, you’ll get your chance soon,” he told her. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d really like to go see my family.”

“Oh. Oh, of course. Sapphire is waiting for you, I shouldn’t be keeping you here.”

The way she said Sapphire’s name was...odd. There was something to it. Nightshade seemed in awe of Sapphire, and her tone was quite respectful, almost girlish. She stepped out of the way and nodded her head as he passed, which gave Tarrin a clear path to the dining room.

Almost instantly, all his cares were forgotten the instant he entered the room and saw his family. He was met by the door by his family, and spent many long moments hugging each one in turn, just happy to be back among them. Some he had seen just a few days before, like Jenna and his human children. Others, he hadn’t seen since leaving for Pyrosia, like his parents and Sapphire. It felt like coming full circle, and returning to where he was supposed to be...and he felt again the solid, unwavering feeling that everything he had done to get here had been worth it, no matter the consequences he might face. His family was his life. To live without them, it was not living.

But his full family wasn’t here. His sisters and mates, Triana and all his Were-cat children were in Pyrosia, continuing the fight. There would be time enough to see them later, but for now, he would take solace in the family that he could be with and just look forward to the chance to see the others.

Sapphire, naturally, was the first to start grilling him. “Whatever happened to you, little one?” she asked, touching the white fur on his arm curiously, then taking his arm in her hands and examining it. “There is a lingering trace of a power here I have never felt before.”

“Sapphire, let’s not worry about that until *after* I get to say hello to everyone,” Tarrin told her sharply, pulling his arm out of her grip—gently—then embracing her warmly. She patted him on the back and laughed lightly.

“I’m sorry, little one, but you’re important to me too, as you know, and this is something that got my attention.”

“I’ll explain it later,” he told her as he took Eron’s hand fondly, then gave him a critical look. “Father. You’re getting fat.”

“Well, I’ve been spending more time in the brewery lately,” he said with a glance at his wife, who gave him an imperious look. “Your mother certainly isn’t letting me forget it.”

“Your father’s going to lose it, quickly,” she told Tarrin, giving him a warm hug. “I’ll starve it off him. If he wants to sample his spirits and ales so much he starts getting fat from it, he can go without dinner.”

Eron winced.

“I said the same thing when I saw him,” Jenna said, adding to their father’s misery.

“You’re looking lovely today Janette,” he told the young adult, who was now a ravishing beauty of a young lady, with her lustrous dark eyes and her beautifully long, thick hair, done up in a braid of smaller

braids, with a gold chain woven through it. She wore her Novitiate dress, but a *shaeram* was proudly being displayed around her graceful neck, which was a technical violation of the rules...as well as an indication that *this* Novice was not your average, run-of-the-mill Novice. There were two Novices that wore *shaerams*, and that was a visible sign to those who might not know them that they were personal relatives of the Keeper, and had better be treated with respect.

Janette was not a little girl anymore. What stood before him was a young *woman*. Janette was eighteen now, and she was tall, she was beautiful, and she filled out her dress in very adult ways that would make almost any human male take notice of her. “I see Jenna’s been good to you.”

“Always, Tarrin, always,” she answered, kissing him on the cheek fearlessly. “I get away with much more than any other Novice.”

“She’s already learned how to abuse her connections. She’s going to be one dangerous merchant,” Jenna noted, which made the girl laugh.

“If you have it, use it,” Tomas said mildly.

“And a few of the young noblemen have taken notice of her, too,” Janine added as she hugged Tarrin. “There’s been a sudden procession of young aristocrats visiting Jenna’s office for the flimsiest of reasons, just so they can pass her in the hall. We might be hearing a wedding drum soon.”

“Mother!” Janette said, blushing a little. “I have to finish school first!”

“Posh, you’ll be out of the Novitiate soon.”

“I have to go through the Initiate too,” she reminded her gently.

“I’m sure we could work out some private tutoring. You *are* the Keeper’s niece, after all.”

“I *want* to go through the Initiate,” Janette protested. “I have some friends in here, mother, and I’d like to finish with them.”

“*She has a male friend she’d like to finish with,*” Jenna Whispered to Tarrin, using the Weave so no one else could hear them. “*His name is Urak. He’s a Tykarthian noble that just started the Novitiate last ride, and she has a crush on him. She’s been working really hard to finish the Novitiate and move up as quickly as she can.*”

“Really? *What’s he like?*” Tarrin Whispered in response.

“*Handsome, charming, witty, a typical Tykarthian nobleman,*” she answered. “*But he is very intelligent, he’s kind, he’s not intimidated by Janette’s family—meaning you and me—and he seems to have natural gift for mathematics. He can do numbers in his head that takes a sage an hour with a quill and parchment. Putting him in Janette’s office would make a Wikuni merchant start to sweat.*”

“*Well, if he measures up, we’re going to have to do something about it.*”

“*I’ve already started.*”

Tarrin gave Jenna a knowing grin. “*Urak...that’s an Ungardt name, not Tykarthian.*”

“*Yeah, he’s got an Ungardt grandfather. He’s a northern Tykarthian, it’s not unusual for there to be*

some mixed ancestry up there.”

“How is her power? How strong is she going to be?”

“You know, brother, I think someone cheated somewhere,” she answered. “When I first sensed her power, it seemed, well, normal. She was about even with most other Sorcerers...I wouldn’t have thought much about it. But here lately, it seems that every time I assense her, her power has changed. As it stands now, she’s going to be a head over most of the other katzh-dashi. Only the elder Sha’Kar are going to be over her. It’s like Mother is messing with her...I don’t think her Sorcery is entirely normal. Didn’t you say that you never sensed it in her until just a couple of years ago?”

He nodded. *“I thought it was just one of those things tied up with my condition, like not sensing it in the twins either. I don’t really know about Mother tampering with them though. I don’t know if that’s even possible.”*

“Well, she’s going to be strong. She has a great deal of innate potential, and she has access to all six spheres. Her access to the Fire sphere seems weaker than her other spheres, but it’s still enough for her to summon a Fire Elemental when she crosses over. She’s very strongly attuned to the Divine sphere, though. She could easily chair the Divine seat on the Council after she earns her amulet. She’s going to be a very versatile and very powerful Sorceress.”

“I don’t think you’re going to see her in the order, sister,” Tarrin warned her. “She has other plans.”

“Well, she can be in the order, get married, and still run her merchant company on the side,” Jenna Whispered with a sly smile. “I’ll make sure it happens. I’m not letting her get away.”

“Bully.”

“You bet I am. I’m a Kael, after all.”

Tarrin had to laugh at that, which earned him a few curious looks. No one else in the room could hear what was passing between the Kael siblings.

He did see that Janette didn’t seem all that intimidated by current company. She was talking with Sapphire animatedly, her hands fondly held within Sapphire’s own as the dragon renewed her relationship with the girl. Sapphire was the one part of Tarrin’s family that the others often had trouble dealing with, just because of who she was, but it seemed that Janette had no problems at all with dealing with his draconic friend. Then again, Janette always did have a fast mind, and she didn’t scare easily. She’d be a terror of a merchant.

“Well, you’re looking especially lovely today, little bit,” Tarrin told Zyri as he picked her up and hugged her. She giggled and put her small hands on his shoulders, then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

“Did your errand go well, father?” she asked.

“Well enough. I bought enough time to sit down and have dinner with the family, then I’m afraid some of us are going to have to go handle another errand.”

“Yah, Aunt Jenna told me. You and her and Aunt Sapphire are going to go beat up some people named the Zakkites. What did they do?”

Tarrin laughed. *“Well, they have something we need, and they’ve always been the enemies of our Tower in Sharadar, so we’re sure they won’t just hand them over. So, we’re going to go take them.”*

“Oh. Will it take long?”

“Not long at all, but after we’re done, I have to go back to Pyrosia, and finish up there. But when I come back home, it’ll be for good.”

“That’s good to hear. I miss you. Will Miss Mist be coming home too?”

He nodded. “Everyone will. And you’d better get used to the idea of calling her *mother*. If she hears you call her that, she might have something to say about it.”

“Well I didn’t want to call her that, you know, around other people,” she said in a whisper. “I don’t know if she would like it.”

“She’d love it,” he told her, tapping her on the nose and making her giggle. He collected up Jal and held the two of them a moment, just content to be near his adopted children and his family. “You should see her soon. We’ll probably leave here and go back to Aldreth for a while.”

“But, but what about my studies?” Zyri asked.

“I can bring you back every day, little bit,” he smiled. “You’ll spend your days here learning, and then come home at night.”

“Oh, that sounds really nice,” she said enthusiastically.

“Alright, let’s settle down, the food is on its way,” Jenna called. “We don’t have all night, you know!”

Everyone seated themselves around the table. Tarrin carefully wrapped a wing around the Firestaff and pulled it behind himself, making sure to keep in constant contact with it. Sapphire looked right at him, as soon as she was fully seated. “Alright, little one, explain that arm.”

Tarrin chuckled. “Well, it’s a scar,” he told her, then explained what happened. “When I reached into that place, it marked me, with this. It even carried over when I reclaimed my mortality. My fur turned white as soon as I became fully mortal.” He held up his arm to show them. “I learned earlier that it’s a power that’s proof against Demons. I can hurt them with my bare claws if I use this arm.”

“Why, by the Eternal Dragon, were you reaching into the nether plane to take the soul of a Deva?” she demanded, a bit crossly.

He then went on to explain what he’d been doing. “It was necessary, and it was *not* pleasant,” he said with a shudder. “I had to have something so valuable, so important to the Solar that he would be forced to agree to my terms. That was the only thing that would work. I had to conceal what I was doing, so I hid it among various random atrocities and general mayhem in the City, including taking the soul amulets of Demons and making it look like I was taking those amulets just to use the powers of the Demons and Deva. By the time I was ready to play my hand, I had them all so disorganized and uncertain that they never saw it coming. Given how smart the Deva are, that was absolutely necessary. If they even *considered* what I was intending to do, I’d have never managed it. They’d have put a stop to it.”

“Tarrin, there had to be a better way than that,” she told him, clucking her tongue. “You have angered the Deva, and they do not forget. Ever.”

“I’ll deal with that when the time comes, Sapphire,” he told her. “But there really was no other way. Without an Elder God on Pyrosia, the bow is the only thing in all of existence that has the power to kill the

Demon Lord, without reducing all of Pyrosia to ash, anyway. If I *asked* for the bow and they refused, well, then they'd be expecting me trying to *take* it. And I don't think I'd have managed to pull that off. The only reason I got away with it is because they never had an idea of exactly what I was doing. When I played my final hand, they weren't ready for it."

"But still," she began, but he cut her off with a wave of his white-furred paw.

"I knew there was going to be a price to pay when I started this, Sapphire," he told her. "I'll handle that when the time comes, when I have to give back the bow. I never intended to *keep* it. I'm sure I can threaten a reasonable compromise out of them, especially when I make it clear that I'll fight them to my last breath if they don't want to listen. I've already proved to them that I can be a very nasty opponent. And now with these on my back," he jerked a thumb at his wings, "they're going to take that *very* seriously."

"Why would they do that, Father?" Zyri asked.

"Because these wings give me the power to use Sorcery *anywhere*," he answered. "They can either accept my compromise, or I'll return to the City and wage a war on the Deva the likes of which they've never seen. If they thought I was bad before, they didn't even get a taste of what I'm capable of if I can use Sorcery. They can take my offer, or I'll destroy their reputation on Crossroads. I figure I can lay waste to at least a quarter of the City before they can stop me, because I was there long enough to ground in several places. They'll never pin me down, and that'll give me all the time I need to blow up a large tract of the City. Their reputation has already taken a major beating from when I was there before. If I go back and start it all over again, I can ruin them, and they know it. They'll eventually stop me, but not until after the damage is done. That gives me a *powerful* bargaining position."

"Well, that sounds somewhat ruthless," Tomas said with a chuckle.

"Father, Tarrin *is* ruthless," Janette said with a smile at Tarrin.

"Moderately ruthless, yes," Tarrin agreed evenly. "I haven't degenerated to the point where I use babies for kindling, but I still have a dark edge or two here and there. After a couple of decades in my line of work, it can't help but harden you."

"No doubt there," Tomas nodded. "But we do appreciate what you've done, son. I don't think I've ever told you that."

"Thanks for that, Tomas," Tarrin told him. "That makes it all worth it."

The meal arrived, and Tarrin spent a wonderful hour remembering just how good the cooks in the Tower were. After eating entirely too much for his own good, he lounged in his chair and watched and listened as his family talked among themselves, just taking it all in and reveling in a moment of fleeting *peace*. He wouldn't see much peace in the next fourteen days, so he knew he had to enjoy it now.

"So, how long do you think it's going to take to get everything ready in Pyrosia?" Elke asked curiously.

"Not long. Once we get the ships to Pyrosia, we can Teleport them straight to Pyros along with everyone else, then just hunker down behind the fortifications and wait. That or we can fly them there, so we can scout out what the Demon Lord is doing along the way, if Dolanna doesn't have any solid intelligence. I'm not sure the Aeradalla there are scouting out that far. Either way, we'll have more than enough time to get there before the enemy does."

"I wish I could go with you," Janette sighed.

“No,” Tarrin, Jenna, Tomas, Janine, Sapphire, Eron, and Elke all said in unison. Janette gave them a startled look, then laughed.

“I get the hint,” she told them. “I just feel sometimes like I’d like to see what all my famous relatives do.”

“Little mother, if I have my way, you’ll *never* see it,” Tarrin told her adamantly. “It’s not the place for you. Swindling unsuspecting Arakites and Wikuni is what you were meant to do.”

“Child, leave the unsavory business to those who have the temperament for it. Though you are a brave and wise young biped, the horrors of war are not a sight I’d ever wish your eyes to behold,” Sapphire told her gently, reaching over and putting a hand on her shoulder. “You are the future, young Janette. That is why your elders are willing to fight. It is for you.”

“Well said,” Tarrin nodded.

“Well, now that my position as the eternal child has been made clear to me,” Janette said with insincere melodrama, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. “I should go check the Book of Ages and see how many centuries it’ll be till I’m considered an adult.”

“Janette,” Janine said dangerously.

She laughed. “I’m just joking, mother,” she said with a bright smile.

“Now you see why I like her so much,” Zyri told Tarrin, leaning over to whisper to him. “She’s funny.”

“So do I,” Tarrin agreed.

“Oh, that reminds me, I have some news from the clan, Tarrin,” Elke said. “I’m afraid I’m going back to Dusgaard.”

Eron sighed.

“Dusgaard? What’s going on?”

“Uncle Borar’s ship went down off the Rainbow Point last month,” she told him. “That puts me next in line. I have to go back to Dusgaard for a while.”

“You’re going to be clan-queen?”

She shook her head. “No, I never wanted it. I’ll just be there long enough to set up Grevak, your cousin and my nephew. He’ll do just fine. He’s smart enough to handle the job, and he’s respected by the clan.”

“Sorry to hear about Borar.”

“He was a drunkard and an ass,” Elke snorted. “We all knew he wouldn’t live long. If he didn’t sail his ship off the face of Sennadar in a drunken haze, someone was going to kill him.”

The door opened, and Duncan bowed slightly to them before motioning with his hand. A tiny blue streak raced through that door, and then slammed into Tarrin’s neck. “Tarrin!” came Sarraya’s overjoyed squeal as she hugged his neck. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Sarraya,” he said warmly, putting his paw over her. “How have you been, you pain in the neck?”

“*Aggravated*,” she huffed.

“So I heard. Got kicked out by your colony and everything,” he noted.

“Well, not exiled, but they did throw me out for a while,” she admitted with a laugh. “My husband isn’t going to talk to me for a few months, that’s for sure. I was just so angry that I couldn’t do anything more. Why do you still have wings if you’re a mortal? And what happened to your arm?” she asked immediately.

“Mother gave me the wings, the arm is a scar from my time in Crossroads,” he told her as she sat down sedately on his shoulder.

“Well, I see the family’s all here,” she said, looking around. “You’re getting big, Janette. Not tall big, but *big*.” She held her hands out before her bosom in an exaggerated manner...which caused Tarrin to assess his little mother’s adult attributes. He had to admit, she filled out her Novitiate dress rather impressively.

“I’m eighteen, Sarraya,” she said with a slightly embarrassed laugh. “Humans *do* grow out a bit around this age. It’s been a while since you saw me.”

“Well, I’m sure the human males appreciate your growth spurt, seeing as how you get to show them off down in the baths without any clothes getting in the way,” Sarraya noted, which got her a hot look from Janine. “Just don’t stand next to Camara Tal. The boys won’t notice them at all compared to *hers*.”

Janette laughed earnestly. “Oh, they never look at me down there if there’s a Sha’Kar woman in the baths,” she told the Faerie boldly. “I’d have to stick them in a boy’s face to make him look at them. They’re all too busy gawking at the Sha’Kar.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous.”

“Grateful is more like it,” she said. “Getting used to being naked where boys could look at me was *not* easy. I think that’s the hardest part of the Novitiate to deal with. It’s the exact opposite of Sulasian custom.”

“I remember Tiella,” Tarrin said with an amused chuckle. “I think she almost died of embarrassment.”

“At least when the Sha’Kar are there, the boys aren’t looking at *us*. Which lets us look at the boys to our heart’s content without them noticing it,” she added with a naughty little smile.

“*Janette!*” Janine gasped. “What a terrible thing to say! That’s not how a proper lady behaves!”

“Mother, down in the baths, there’s no such thing as a proper lady,” she countered. “After all, everyone’s naked. Proper ladies don’t go around naked, do they?”

That made everyone laugh, and it made Tarrin appreciate just how mature Janette was now, and how bold she was. She was definitely a member of his family.

“Girl, you and me have *got* to talk,” Sarraya told her with a laugh. “I didn’t realize you got so worldly!”

“I’m an adult now, Sarraya,” Janette winked. “As much as some people in this room don’t want to admit it.”

“That’s enough of that, little miss,” Tomas warned.

“I *really* like her,” Zyri whispered to Tarrin again.

“She’s done some serious growing up since I was gone,” Tarrin whispered back.

“How were things with you, Sarraya?” Eron asked. “What is this about you being kicked out of your colony?”

“Let’s not talk about that,” she said, waving her hand negligently. “It’s rather embarrassing. I was a bad girl. Let’s leave it at that.”

“You’re *always* a bad girl,” Jenna said evenly, which made Sarraya laugh.

“Okay, I was badder than usual,” she corrected. “But I’m ready to go kick some Zakkar butt.”

“You’ll get your chance soon enough,” Tarrin told her. “I figure that Darvon and the others have a plan by now. We’ll wander down there and take a look at it, and then get moving. As much as I don’t want to leave here, I knew I couldn’t stay here long. We have things to do, and I have to be off Sennadar quickly.”

“Why is that, father?” Zyri asked.

“Because the Deva are looking for me,” he answered. “I don’t want to stress Spyder by making her repulse an army of outraged Deva. It’s best if I move on. I’ll save all the catching up for when it’s all over. I just wanted one dinner with the family that’s staying behind, to carry me through.”

“Spending days in Pyrosia just does the same thing, doesn’t it?” Eron asked.

He nodded. “But at least there, I’m not putting anyone I care for in danger by putting them between the Deva and me,” he answered. “And maybe, if they can *see* what I’m dealing with, they might be a little more lenient when it comes time to face them for what I did.”

“Well, there’s always hope, son,” he said with a nod.

Tarrin stood up, holding out his paw and depositing the Firestaff into it from where it had been entwined by his wings. “Unfortunately, it’s duty time,” he said. “It’s time for us to go.”

They all took turns embracing him one more time, giving him heartfelt farewells and little bits of advice and praise. He cherished every one of them, from Janette’s warm hug to Elke’s fearful, crushing embrace. He knew he’d see them again...it was just a question of when. And that knowledge made him content to leave them behind.

But he couldn’t drag it out forever. He parted with Tomas and Janine, Elke and Eron, Janette and his human cubs, leaving them in the dining room as he, Sapphire, Jenna, and Sarraya started towards the Academy, where Darvon and the Vendari were probably still debating the finer points of their strategy. “It is hard to leave family behind,” Sapphire noted. “I find myself worrying that Sandwing will not keep himself out of trouble while I’m away.”

“I know. We just have to trust them that they won’t get in too much trouble while we’re gone,” Tarrin told her. “And we *will* see them again.”

“That we will.”

That shadow dragon was waiting at the end of the hall for them. She bobbed a curtsy to Sapphire, which

surprised Tarrin, then fell into step with them. “I’ve talked to Tenshale, Madam Sapphire,” she began. “He’s with that biped Darvon and the two reptilians in a building across the compound.”

“I would expect no less. Tenshale is an old and learned dragon, and versed in military history. I find it no surprise he’d intrude himself on the planning session, both to inject his wisdom and observe the process of bipedal war strategy. He’s ever been fond of it.”

“Fond of bipedal war strategy?” Tarrin asked.

“Tenshale has the soul of a general,” Sapphire told him with a nod. “He loves to study old biped wars and analyze the battle strategies used. He has little actual experience in planning a war strategy like this, but Darvon and the Vendari kings will find his knowledge of history to be an asset as they draw up their battle plans.”

“Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it,” Sarraya said, quoting an old saying.

“Just so, Faerie,” Sapphire agreed.

Walking out onto the grounds was a surprise, for not all of the dragons were in human form. There were seven of them, lounging about on the wide lawns between the Towers and the outlying buildings. All of them were blues, and none of them were even half the size of Sapphire. These were her brood and those in her domain who had agreed to help. They all rose to a sitting position as Sapphire and the others approached, and Sapphire paused to greet them. All of Sapphire’s brood Tarrin knew, but Tarrin didn’t know the two dragons that had come to help. Both of them were larger than Sapphire’s children, denoting their age, but they were about half Sapphire’s size. “May I present Skyshadow and Mirage,” Sapphire introduced, pointing to the two dragons. Both were mature adults, one male and one female, the female, Mirage, having a rather nasty looking scar across her squared snout that ran from under her right eye down to her nose. “Two dragons from my domain. Skyshadow, Mirage, this is Tarrin, my adopted clan.”

“So this is the clan biped,” Mirage said, craning her neck down to get a nose full of Tarrin’s scent. “It’s nice to meet you, Tarrin. Sapphire thinks highly of you.”

“I think rather highly of her,” Tarrin responded.

“I’ve heard your name from the Selani,” Skyshadow said. “They afford you *tremendous* honor. That says much about you.”

“Well, that respect runs both ways,” Tarrin chuckled. “You’re looking a bit peakid Densheen,” Tarrin noted to Sapphire’s youngest female, who sat beside Mirage. Densheen was named for the luster of her blue scales, but her scales looked very dull, almost like she was pale and feeling unwell. She was considerably smaller than Mirage, about half her size, but that still made her quite titanic compared to humans.

“I’m about to molt,” she answered. “It’s been driving me quite batty. Do you know how much it itches?”

“I can imagine,” Tarrin laughed.

“I just hope I can get through this before it’s over.”

“There’s some bare rock near Pyros where you can rub most of it off.”

“Oh, that’s good to know,” she said brightly.

“Are we about to engage the Zakkites?” Mirage asked Sapphire.

“Soon,” she answered. “We’re going to go discuss it with Darvon now.”

“Why are we letting a biped dictate our movements?” she asked.

“Because that biped is specifically trained in the art of war, and has my full trust and support,” she answered, a bit tersely. “And you will address him as *Lord General* if you speak to him. He is a biped you will honor. Is that clear?”

“It is clear, Sapphire,” she said immediately and in a low tone.

Densheen rolled her eyes out of Mirage’s view, which made Tarrin stifle a laugh. Draconic arrogance was a common trait, but Sapphire’s brood had much more exposure to bipeds, because of Tarrin, and took them a bit more seriously than most other dragons, as well as being more amiable towards them.

They were taken to Darvon’s private study when they reached the Academy, where Darvon was looking a tad dwarfed by two Vendari and a tall human-looking fellow that was quite burly, wearing a simple blue robe, as they pored over a map laid out on a table before them. That was Tenshale in a magically assumed human form. Tarrin had never seen a Vendari, and was surprised. Where *sashka* and the Vendakan Vendari were uniform green in color, the *dakka* of Vendari was a mottled brown, his coloration pattern irregular, which would let him blend into his surroundings much better. He was just a bit smaller than the *sashka*, but towered over Darvon as if the elderly Lord General were a child.

“Tarrin lad,” Darvon said with a nod. “We’re almost done here. It’s not going to be very difficult an operation, so the planning didn’t take long.”

“The Lord General has an impressive mind,” the *dakka* said respectfully. “Now I understand the honor cousin *sashka* gives to Lord General Darvon and Field Marshall Kang of Yar Arak.”

“We’re glad he hasn’t retired yet, that’s for sure,” Tarrin chuckled as they filed into the room. “What did you come up with?”

“Well, it’ll be simple and easy,” Darvon said as they looked at the map. “This is where Jenna told me we’ll appear. As soon as we do, Keeper Jenna lays down a ward that defeats any Wizard magic cast from outside, which will defend the position from magical attack. The Vendari and Knights that go with the initial force set up a perimeter and give that Elaran time to set up her spell. At the same time, the dragons fan out and create chaos and terror in the city proper to delay an organized response to our invasion, which is something dragons are very good at. Once we get enough force in, we spread out along this street to cut the city in half, isolating the docks,” he said, tracing a street that ran parallel to the harbor. “We then push in both directions along that line, using Sorcery to defeat any magical counterattack. While we’re doing that, four dragons will focus their attention at the docks and create centralized chaos to prevent any ships from escaping. I think this needs to be dragons versed in magic, because those ships are going to have Wizards on them, so they’ll have to contend with spellcasters.”

“Leave that to me,” Nightshade said. “I can attack the ships without doing any damage to them, and my breath weapon isn’t destructive like a blue’s. My breath weapon only attacks the living,” she told Darvon, who was giving her a curious look. “It’s a cloud of strength-draining shadow. It won’t do any harm at all to the ships. It can *only* affect living things.”

“A good point,” Sapphire nodded. “Nightshade can kill the ship crews without damaging the ships, and she has certain powers and abilities that will allow her to strike at the entire harbor alone, with minimal risk

to her safety. Securing the ships should be her primary responsibility.”

“Alright then, Mistress Nightshade, that’s your duty,” Darvon told her. “Try to capture as many ships as you can. Don’t let any of them get away.”

“Nothing will get out of that harbor, Lord General,” she told him confidently. “I’ll take care of it.”

“We’ll be pushing towards the harbor while you engage the ships, to keep them from trying to overwhelm you. While the harbor force is securing the harbor, skirmish forces will be invading the city to do as much damage as possible, going up the main avenue and fanning out from there while the main force moves towards the Royal palace. Making the Zakkites rebuild Zakkara will give them something to do other than harass ships at sea.”

“There will not be a blade of grass standing when we leave the field,” the *dakka* said bluntly.

“I’m sure they’ll try to get back at us, but seeing as how Zakkar has been at war with the rest of the world for a thousand years, I’m not really worried that they’ll be able to really do anything about it.”

“So the dragons have free reign?” Sapphire asked.

Darvon nodded. “Yes ma’am,” he said. “Though destroying Zakkara isn’t what we’re really there to do, we may as well take as much advantage of the situation as we can. As long as we capture the ships intact, the rest of the city can burn, and destroying the Royal palace would throw the entire kingdom into disarray.”

“Very well, I will instruct the dragons that they may attack freely,” she told him. “How are we handling the civilians? Do you want the dragons to attack the populace?”

“The Knights don’t slaughter civilians as a matter of policy,” Darvon said. “Some will die in the attack, that’s unavoidable, but as long as they’re non-combatants, you know, women and children, just let them run away. We don’t chase down defenseless women and children and kill them. It’s not proper, and there’s no honor in it.”

“Spoken with true wisdom,” the *dakka* noted to the *sashka*, who nodded to his cousin.

“It is as if the Knights have read the Book of Wisdom,” the *sashka* added.

“Very well,” Sapphire nodded. “I’ll instruct the dragons to not attack anyone fleeing the city.”

“We’ll advance up this street towards the Royal palace, sending skirmishers off from the main force down the side streets” Darvon continued, referring to the map, tapping a fortress named *The Citadel of Night* on the map. “The dragons might want to soften up the Citadel for us, but they should be wary that it’s going to be heavily defended by Wizards and Priests. Taking shots at the main gate from the air would be good, but trying to land and assault the Citadel alone without a Sorcerer there to stop magic wouldn’t be a good idea. Not even dragons can stand up to the kind of defense they’re going to mount when the dragon is alone.”

“I will make the Citadel my responsibility,” Tenshale announced. “I’ll see to it that the Knights and Vendari can invade the Citadel with minimal delay when they reach it.”

“It will be the responsibility of both of us, old friend,” Sapphire told him. “I’m sure the two of us can guarantee the objective without risk of injury to either of us.”

“Alright, I’m sure it’s going to be in good hands, then, Master Tenshale, Mistress Sapphire,” Darvon nodded to him.

“Sapphire, I don’t want you two attacking that Citadel alone,” Jenna told her. “I can send a Sorcerer with each of you to protect you from the Wizards. That will let you be more aggressive in attacking the Citadel, and the Sorcerer can help break those defenses.”

“That would be useful,” Sapphire said. “Who will you send?”

“Me and Tarrin,” she said confidently. “You’re going to need Sorcerers capable of using considerable power without using a Circle, and you’re not going to find two stronger ones available right now. Either of us is more than capable of simultaneously attacking the Citadel while defending from hostile magic and arrows. And I’m sure that Sapphire and Tenshale will keep us perfectly safe,” she said, giving Darvon a steady look when he rose up and looked about ready to reject that idea. Darvon didn’t let Jenna roam outside the grounds without his presence. Darvon acted as her personal Knight because he didn’t trust her safety to anyone else, and he didn’t share that responsibility. “Don’t you trust our protection to the dragons, Darvon?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes coyly.

“Sometimes I hate you, young lady,” Darvon growled, which made Nightshade and Sapphire trade amused looks.

“Tenshale, would you do the honor of letting me go with you?” Jenna asked the robed male.

He laughed. “Now I see why you like them so much, Sapphire,” he told her. “Of course, young one. If your magic is half as sharp as your wit, you’ll be a wonderful partner.”

“You’ll find her an excellent Sorceress, old friend,” Sapphire told him, then put her hand on Tarrin’s elbow fondly. “That leaves me with my little one. I’ll make sure to keep him out of trouble, Jenna.”

“That’s not easy, Sapphire,” Jenna laughed.

“Then naturally, I’m suited for it,” she sniffed.

“Well, after we secure the Citadel, from there it’s just mopping up. We’ll organize transporting the ships back to Suld after we have the harbor and Citadel secured, when we can start devoting personnel to non-combat operations. We can sack the Citadel, eject the citizens hiding in basements, then burn the city to the ground once we have those two objectives secured. I foresee a twenty hour operation, maximum.”

“Sack? As in loot?” Nightshade asked.

Darvon nodded. “We’re going to burn it anyway, we may as well take anything useful or valuable. It’s the spoils of war.”

“An odd position for the Knights,” Tenshale mused.

“We’re pragmatists, Master Tenshale,” he said bluntly. “Individual Knights don’t keep what they take. They give it to the order, and sacking enemy vaults helps pay for these kinds of operations, as well as pay for our own daily maintenance. We don’t pillage individual houses, Master Tenshale. You won’t see Knights running from house to house taking every silver plate. We do, however, take the assets of the opposing kingdom. That’s why I said we would sack the *Citadel*, not the *city*. Public buildings are fair game for the Knights. But anything the Vendari or the dragons take, they are welcome to handle as their societies see fit.”

“Vendari do not as a matter of custom loot conquered territory,” the *dakka* said. “Our normal custom is to take items of worth and destroy them, or cast them into the sea, to forever deny them to the defeated foe. But I don’t find the practice dishonorable as you have laid it out. It is not an exercise in greed, it is the taking of a trophy. Besides, these are the Zakkites. Plundering their monies is fair revenge for the dishonor they have brought upon us, though no Vendari would touch a copper bit of it. It is tainted in our eyes because it is Zakkite gold.”

“Truly,” the *sashka* agreed. “The Vendakans would have no interest in the spoils, but I see nothing dishonorable in what you have said. The Knights and the dragons would put plundered monies to good use.”

The *dakka* nodded in agreement.

“The magical treasures of the Zakkites would be of interest to us,” Sapphire stated. “Specifically their spellbooks. Zakkites are well known for their Wizard magic, and we can copy their spells for our own use.”

“Then we’ll let you have the pick of it, Sapphire,” Jenna told her. “We can just take it all, bring it back here, then sort it out and distribute it to the interested parties.”

“That seems a reasonable approach,” she nodded. “But be assured that Mistress Kyrienna will also want a portion of it.”

“We’ll save some for Phandebrass as well,” Jenna said, tapping her chin with a single slender finger. “If we didn’t, he’d hate us for years.”

Sapphire laughed. “Most likely.”

“Well, that’s the plan, more or less. Anyone see any holes in it?”

“It seems sound,” Sapphire stated.

Tarrin nodded. “Sounds workable to me.”

“As long as you remember that no army element can advance beyond the protection of the *katzh-dashi*, it’s going to work fine,” Jenna said.

“How many Sorcerers are going?”

“Three hundred,” she answered. “Most of them are in Sharadar, though. That should be more than enough, since all they’re going to do is protect the army from Wizard and Priest magic. The dragons, me, and Tarrin are going to be the ones using offensive magic in this operation, aside from the Elementals.”

Darvon’s eyes lit up. “How many can use that spell?”

“About fifty,” she answered, “but most of us can summon more than one Elemental that’ll last long enough to be useful. Me and Tarrin can summon four, a few of them can summon three, and the others can manage one or two.”

“Why can’t they summon four?” Tenshale asked.

“Because the spell to summon an Elemental is demanding,” Tarrin answered. “And the longer the Elemental’s going to stay here, the more demanding it gets. We have to give it that energy when we summon it. Any Elemental summoned for this is going to have to remain for several hours, and most *da’shar* can’t

put that much power into four Elementals without fainting. Most of them could handle one or two. But that's going to be more than enough. Even if we only had fifty Elementals, that's a unit of unkillable, fearless soldiers that can be used to assault positions that would get hundreds of normal soldiers killed trying to breach it."

"That's what I was thinking," Darvon chuckled.

"I was going to have mine help batter down the Citadel defenses," Tarrin shrugged. "I've used them in battle before. Just one can be devastating."

"I remember the battle of Suld, lad, I remember how devastating they are. Well, I might have to revise this a little bit if I have that many Elementals on hand."

"Let's just go with what we have, and work them in during the fighting," Tarrin told him. "We're on a schedule here. Speaking of that, how quickly can we have the forces ready to go?"

"My Vendari can be assembled and ready in ten minutes. It would just be a matter of marching them in," the *dakka* stated.

"As are mine," the *sashka* said.

"I can have the Sorcerers assembled in about an hour," Jenna said.

"The Knights are already waiting at the chapterhouse. It'll take about a half hour to march them to the Tower," Darvon responded.

"And the dragons are already here," Tarrin said, looking at the nodding Sapphire. "Alright, let's go in three hours. That gives us time to filter the plan down to the officers, and get a little rest in. What time will it be in Zakkara then?"

"It's just a few hours before sunrise in Abrodar right now," Jenna mused, "and Zakkar is east of Abrodar...so when we go in three hours, it would be a little bit before noon in Zakkar. We'd be leaving here right around sunset."

"Then it sounds like we have a plan," Darvon said. "Does anyone have anything else to add?"

"Who will command the Sorcerers if Jenna's going to be busy helping us break the Citadel defenses?" Sapphire asked.

"Ahiriya," Jenna answered. "With Ianelle in Pyrosia, she's the ranking Council member. Leadership would fall to her."

"Anything else?" Darvon asked.

There was silence.

"Alright, then let's return to our forces and lay out the plan to the officers, while the Keeper assembles her Sorcerers."

"It won't take that long," Jenna laughed. "I'll have them here and briefed in plenty of time."

"Well, I think I'm going to go spend more time with my family," Tarrin announced. "You can just let me

know when you need me.”

“We’ll do that, lad,” Darvon told him. “And we won’t bother you until it’s time. You go catch up. Karas knows, you’ve earned it.”

Chapter 9

The plan was a simple one, and almost guaranteed victory for the forces of the *katzh-dashi* and their Vendari and dragon allies.

However, the first people Teleported into a market square near the harbor had a very loose concept of the idea of a plan when something shiny and distracting was dangled in front of their eyes.

Tarrin appeared within the market square just before noontime with Sarraya on his shoulder, as the civilians of Zakkara were conducting their daily business, buying and selling the goods and foodstuffs that would get them through the rest of the day. His part at this stage of the attack was a simple one; clear the square in preparation for the appearance of the Kyrienna and her advance team so she could cast her Gate spell. This was a task for which Tarrin was particularly suited, since he was the most powerful of the *sui'kun* and could fight hand to paw if needs be...as well as the unstated fact that Tarrin wouldn't particularly care if he caught up civilians in his clearing. It was clear to everyone that he was both not meant to be there, and he was not there as a friend. He appeared in a full suit of black armor, the armor of his Cat's Claws, his fiery wings flared behind him and brilliantly visible as they snapped out and the Were-cat set his will against the Weave. Those fiery wings flooded with brilliant white light, and many of them realized just who he was. The legends had spread even to the reclusive nation of Zakkar.

It was instant panic. The black-robed Zakkites scattered in every direction, screaming in terror, as those who didn't grasp what was about to happen were infected with the terror of those that did. They didn't get far, though, before a scouring wall of air slammed into them from behind, a ring of solid air that emanated from the Were-cat and spreading outward like a ripple in a pond, sweeping anything and everything out of the square, leaving nothing but the sand and stone of the ground behind.

Jenna, now, Tarrin called out into the Weave, taking up the Firestaff in both paws as he lifted from the ground, completing the first phase of the plan. It was at this point that he was supposed to wait for the others to arrive, Kyrienna and an advance element of Knights, Sorcerers, and three dragons to defend Kyrienna as she cast her spell, and after that he, Jenna, Sapphire, and Tenshale could assault the citadel of the Witch-King to tie up any kind of heavy magical counter-attack, but Tarrin sensed the great power there, a very impressive magical power, and decided that it was better if he went over there now and got them worried about him so they didn't try anything on those who would come through that gate and not have the same understanding he did.

"Oooh, feel that?" Sarraya gasped, looking towards the citadel.

"Yah, we'd better get there fast," he nodded. He turned and hurtled for the castle even as fifteen figures shimmered into existence in the swept square. The pale Kyrienna stood in the very center of that host, surrounded by four Knights, six Vendari, Jenna, and three dragons in human form.

"Tarrin!" Jenna shouted after him angrily as she saw him flying off.

Sapphire's draconic form was the first thing the defenders really saw, as she reverted to her normal form, and the sheer, raw panic of a dragon caused instant and unmitigated chaos in every part of the city that could see her...which was most of the city. Zakkara was built on a hillside overlooking a natural harbor, with a flat

plain near the water's edge, where the higher one lived, the more important one was. Virtually all of the city could either see Sapphire over the buildings or look down from the hillside and see her. At that point, the battle was basically over. The defenders, who had only just received magical reports that some kind of major disturbance involving a Sorcerer had happened at the harbor square, boiled out of their garrisons and saw a titanic blue dragon standing where they intended to go.

It was easy for Tarrin and those intimate with Sapphire could forget how terrifying she could be. But those who had never seen a live dragon before were in no way prepared for the sheer, overwhelming terror that seeing an angry dragon could invoke.

The defenders were panic-stricken and did not respond to the invaders. Officers who tried to bully soldiers took one look at Sapphire, and joined their troops in the flight as far away from her as they could get. Those who had had the fortitude to swallow down the fear had their wills broken when Sapphire roared, a sound that shook the entire city.

The only ones who could resist the fear of the dragons were the War Wizards, and *Zakkirum*, the Wizards who ruled the empire. Where their soldiers fled, the Wizards responded, quickly assembling in their towers to prepare to counter this sudden invasion of the capitol.

The Elara Wizard moved quickly and efficiently to cast her spell, which was completed before Jenna had summoned her second Elemental. A very large vertical whirlpool of reddish magic, nearly thirty spans across, appeared before her, then it solidified to show a red-tinted view of the chapterhouse training ground in Suld, where the other attackers were stationed and waiting; she was unable to open a gate back into the Tower grounds. As soon as it stabilized, Vendari, Knights, and Sorcerers boiled forth in a column eight across.

The second dragon to revert to her dragon form was Nightshade. The shadow dragon glittered in the morning sun, then her piercing, high-pitched keening cry spread even more terror through the city as the smaller dragon raced for the harbor, a harbor where ships were already either lifting from the water to do battle, or were turning to flee. The shadow dragon was over the water in seconds, bearing down on the closest ship, trailing shadow behind her like a wake through water, solid shadow that did not evaporate, but did drift on the sea breeze like fog. She was the first to attack, unleashing her breath weapon on a ship that was just starting to lift up from the water. Even in the market square, they heard the agonized screams of those caught in the weapon's effect, as every iota of strength and warmth were sucked out of them. Those screams were cut brutally short as the cone of shadow enveloped the ship. The ship lurched and then fell back towards the water, eddies of shadow swirling around it as it dropped from the inky cloud of darkness. The next ship saw her coming, and responded out of sheer desperation. Lances of lightning, streaks of fire, and blazing missiles of pure magic erupted from the next ship and sizzled towards the slender dragon, but shadow billowed out from the dragon and enveloped her even as she flew towards them, causing those magical attacks to hurtle into that inky cloud and leaving their success a matter of uncertainty. They looked around for a moment, unable to see her or hear her, but then she exploded from the cloud of darkness low and close to the water, ignoring the ship as it turned to give the Wizards an arc of fire, instead banking around the three towers that enclosed the large harbor off from the open sea, spreading her wake of darkness over the towers, then circling around the wharfs, spreading more and more of her darkness. The ships still at the docks tried to attack her with magic from the decks, but their attacks punched into that aura of darkness around her and left it up in the air as to whether they struck her or not.

As soon as the dragon flew a complete circuit around the harbor, creating a ring of shadow that enclosed it, suddenly the entire harbor descended into inky darkness, as the dragon enacted its powers to swallow an area surrounded by its shadow into darkness.

From that darkness, there were only the screams of the victims. The men on the ships could not see to navigate, and could not see the dragon to try to repel her as she attacked the ships, one by one, with her

deadly breath weapon, eradicating the crews while leaving the ships unharmed. Nightshade systematically killed every living thing on every ship, securing them for the *katzh-dashi*.

The Knights and Vendari, with the *katzh-dashi* interspersed into their formations to defend against the Zakkite magic, erupted out of the market square like a plague of locusts, swarming under anything and anyone in their way. Terrified civilians were captured, but anyone wearing the livery of the Zakkites or carrying a weapon was slaughtered without mercy or quarter. The defenders could not mount any kind of organized resistance, because there were now nine blue dragons in the air over the city, screeching and roaring, inducing panic in the city below. Waves of mounted Knights and Vendari charged towards the harbor as a second force started up the main avenue leading to the Citadel of Night, at the top of the hill overlooking the harbor, a citadel of black stone and multiple towers that, even now, was embroiled in its own battle for survival, for it was under siege from the Were-cat Sorcerer, Tarrin Kael.

What Tarrin had felt was powerful, powerful magic. There was an artifact of some sort there, like the crown in Amyr Dimeon, a magical relic of great power that had immediately gotten both his and Sarraya's attention. Tarrin was hovering outside the outer wall, watching the frenzied movements of defenders within, trying to puzzle out where it was and how it was doing what it was doing.

It was creating some kind of Druidic-based field of power that actively disrupted Sorcery.

That was Zakkara's counter to the threat of the *katzh-dashi*, he realized. They owned that ancient relic, probably a remnant from the Age of Power, that sought to prevent the use of Sorcery within the citadel. It was unanticipated, that was for sure. Tarrin had never heard of an *object* that could utilize Druidic magic. But it was certainly in there, and that was what it was doing, and even from that distance he could feel it *reaching* for him, in a peculiar way, as if to wrap a spectral hand around him and muffle his powers of Sorcery. And it was most definitely Druidic in origin. It was why both he and Sarraya could sense it, since they were both Druids.

"Can you find it?" Sarraya asked.

"No," he answered. "You?"

"No, we're either too far away or it's hiding itself," she answered. "I don't think we can stop it either."

"I wouldn't know where to start, and I'm not about to monkey around with unknown Druidic magic."

"We're going to need the dragons to get in," Sarraya reasoned. "Maybe Sapphire can figure it out, she's better than us at Druidic magic."

"Yah, let's go back to them."

As the Knights and Vendari below started systematically laying waste to the city, going slow enough to allow those who wished to escape to get away, Tarrin circled around and came up behind and between Tenshale and Sapphire. "How dare you go off on your own like that, Tarrin!" Jenna snapped.

"Calmly, little one, I can sense why he did," Sapphire called across to Tenshale, where Jenna rode on the massive dragon's head. "What did you sense?"

"We can't figure out where it is," Sarraya shouted to her. "Neither of us."

"It's strong enough to stop both of us," Tarrin called. "Even from well above the castle walls, I could feel it trying to muzzle me."

“What is it?” Jenna asked.

“There’s a device of some kind within the citadel that actively stops Sorcery,” Sapphire answered her. “It’s *Druidic* in nature. I have never sensed its like before. I wish to study it after this, my little one.”

“It’s yours first, Sapphire,” Tarrin told him. “But this means me and Jenna can’t punch through, and I’m wary of using Druidic magic around it.”

“Agreed. We will do this the old fashioned way. Tenshale, let us batter down the gates by main force. Jenna, Tarrin, protect us while we take care of this.”

“Then let us put all this bulk to good use,” Tenshale said with a chuckle. “Hang on, little Jenna, because we dive to attack!”

Tarrin landed on Sapphire’s head, between her horns, and held on as she too dropped into a dive, raising his paws and weaving a Ward that would stop any and all Wizard magic from penetrating. Tenshale, the smaller of the two, pulled up and raked the main wall with his power, his intertwined lightning bolts blasting into the wall...but his breath weapon rebounded off the wall and struck the street before it, sending a shower of rocky debris and dirt into the air. Sapphire gave out a keening roar that the other blues would know would be a call to assist her, then she too unleashed her breath weapon as they dove, striking the hammered gold covering the massive doors isolating the citadel from the rest of the city. It too was reflected away harmlessly, which made Sapphire nod.

“The defenses of the Zakkites are both thorough and strong,” she noted to Tarrin and Sarraya. “But let’s see how they stand up to brute force! Call forth your Elementals, my little one! Jenna! Order your Elementals to attend us immediately!”

Tarrin wove the spells to call forth his Elementals, one after another, with speed and efficiency. In mere moments, all four stood or hovered near where Sapphire had landed, on the street just in front of the door. All four had fighting forms. The Air and Water Elementals were amorphous masses, able to change shape as needed, and the Earth Elemental was in its usual bipedal, long-armed, no-head form. The Fire Elemental had taken on the form of a small dragon, a burning miniature replica of the behemoths that shadowed it from the sun. “Tarrin, Jenna,” Sapphire called out, speaking the dragon language, “Hold your Elementals fast here until the gate is breached, then send them in to engage the enemy forces! Defend me, my little one!”

Sapphire lumbered towards the gate, and a veritable sheet of arrow, ballista, and catapult fire accompanied a barrage of magical spells that roared towards them. Tarrin’s task was to protect Sapphire, and he did so, his Ward stopping all the magical attacks while he used Sorcery, a wall of air, to physically shield them from the missiles. But for every step Sapphire took towards the wall, he felt that device within start to interfere with his ability to use Sorcery, trying to smother his power under a blanket. He abandoned Sorcery and reverted to Druidic magic, using a spell that Triana had taught him, repelling the rock and wood from which the missiles and catapult stones were made while his Ward continued to protect against the magic. Because of the Were-cat riding with her, Sapphire reached the front gates untouched, and the Zakkites screamed in fear and started fleeing the gatehouse as she reared back, then ripped her massive paw into the beaten gold of the gate.

The contact of dragon with gold created an intense blast of light and sound, as Sapphire’s attack triggered another defensive spell on the gate, but Tarrin’s Ward stopped it...if only just. He felt the Ward take all that magical power and shudder, already weakened from the device within. His Ward unraveled from the onslaught, but not before Sapphire tore one of the gates off its hinges, sending the gold-plated door crashing into the bailey beyond. Immediately, eight Elementals surged forward under the dragon as she clawed down the other door, as her tiny rider defended her from the assault from above.

Of course, Tarrin realized that Sapphire could have simply protected herself, but he got the feeling that she was feeling things out, seeing how a dragon without her magical powers and a Sorcerer could work as a unit.

With a terrible screeching of tearing stone, Sapphire tore the gatehouse asunder, which collapsed parts of the walls on both sides, sending catapults, rocky debris, defenders, and Wizards plummeting to the ground below, a veritable rain through which the eight Elementals charged as they raced towards the breached gatehouse. Over their heads, Sapphire unleashed a devastating blast of her breath weapon across the bailey, electrocuting hundreds of soldiers, but ten of them stood unmoved by the attack, what looked like animated, fifteen span tall statues.

They were called Golems, and they were one of the pinnacles of Wizard magic. They were virtually invulnerable, immune to virtually every kind of magic except Sorcery, but in this place, with that artifact, that weakness was covered. The only way to defeat one was to literally tear it apart, but they could only be harmed by certain kinds of weapons, and those weapons had to carry a significant magical enchantment.

They were in the way, and he had bigger things to do.

Raising the Firestaff over his head, he called on its power, which made it blaze forth with bright light, then he pointed the tip at them. A raging cone of magical fire erupted from the Firestaff and blasted into the golems, unleashing such magical fire on them that the stones under their feet turned instantly red hot and melted. The ten golems moved to advance, but their movements were suddenly fast and lucid, as their joints became fluid from melting rock, but then globs and pieces of them started dripping off, carried away by the force of the fire. Before the golems could take three steps, they were rendered virtually liquid, melted by the power of the Firestaff. When the fire ceased, all that was left was an unrecognizable series of molten lumps.

Sapphire ambled into the bailey with surprising speed, with Tenshale and Jenna right behind her. The two dragons did not advance, they simply held the bailey and the front gate, using their breath weapons and their tails and claws to lash out at any biped stupid enough to expose themselves. "I'll go try to find that thing, Tarrin," Sarraya piped as she rose up from his shoulder.

"Sarraya, that's crazy! Stay here!"

"They'll never see me," she winked at him as she wavered into invisibility.

"Let her go, little one. She just might do as she boasts."

"You bet I will!" she called as the sound of her wings faded.

"We can give her time by keeping the defenders busy, and it won't stay quiet for long," Sapphire called as Tenshale swiped a small building into rubble with his tail. "They will have more magical defenders than those golems." She paused to chant in the language of magic, sending a cascading sheet of greenish slime spraying from her massive paw. The slime sprayed over a doorway into the main keep, and wherever that green liquid struck, it began to sizzle and burn, eating away anything it touched. The doorway, as well as much of the polished black granite that framed it, melted away in a savage hiss of acid.

They did. Appearing high from one of the towers was a winged Demon, a *vrock*. It screeched and held its glaive in both hands as it took the air. But, strangely, the Demon did not attack. It instead turned southwest, escaping from the citadel, fleeing for the open ocean. It flew out over the city, then passed it, but as soon as it came over the cloud of shadow engulfing the harbor, it got a nasty shock. Nightshade erupted from that shadow with a furious cry, flying straight up at almost impossible speed, so fast the Demons seemed sincerely surprised she was there. It tried to bank away from the dragon, but the dragon simply turned with it.

Even from so far away, Tarrin heard Nightshade's jaws snap shut on the *vrock*, sending a single severed arm and glaive spiraling down into the cloud below as the rest of the creature vanished into her mouth. The shadow dragon then dropped back down into the cloud herself, like a lurking shark just waiting for another meal to pass close enough to her to lunge for it.

"Why didn't it Teleport?" Jenna asked.

"That was no *vrock*, it was a magical spell to make one look like one," Sapphire answered. "One of the Wizards tried to fly away."

"I'd hazard a guess that the Witch-King has already made his escape. Even he must see the inevitable, with Vendari running through his city and two dragons holding his outer bailey," Tenshale noted.

"*Keeper, we're about ten minutes from the citadel,*" came a Whisper in the Weave, done so by a Sha'Kar Tarrin didn't know. "*Do you wish us to go faster?*"

"Don't go faster than you need to," she answered aloud. "We have things under control here."

"Those were rash words, little one," Tenshale said grimly as a vortex of magical energy began to form near the citadel keep. "Sapphire—"

"I have seen this spell before," she said calmly. "Tarrin, do you know Abrogad's Disjunction?"

"I do," he answered.

"Cast it with me," she ordered. "That is Misraj's Calamity, I don't think we want to taste that spell when it completely forms. It causes shifts in luck that kill."

In unison, Tarrin and Sapphire chanted the Wizard spell known as Abrogad's Disjunction, a powerful spell that eradicated other Wizard spells. It was a defensive spell, but it did not cast quickly, which made it less useful for use in combat. There were weaker versions of the spell used for that. Simultaneously, he ordered his Elementals to enter the keep and cause chaos, specifically to kill anyone who looked like a Wizard.

It was the beginning of a standoff of sorts that lasted several moments. Tenshale and Jenna stayed back and out of the way as Tarrin and Sapphire countered spell after spell hurled at them from within the citadel keep. Those within weren't about to throw soldiers away in a confrontation with dragons, but their attempts to repel or drive away the dragons using magic were failing because there were two very proficient Wizards facing them. Jenna sent her Elementals into the keep as well as Tarrin and Sapphire defended the bailey with Wizard magic, but every moment that went by annoyed him. He could smash the citadel with the Firestaff in seconds, but Sarraya was in there, and he couldn't risk harming her. And, he had to admit, he *really* wanted to capture the artifact that was disrupting Sorcery, to see how it was made. A non-living object using Druidic magic? Even Triana would be surprised at that.

"Nightshade has the harbor completely secured," Tenshale called as a keening cry scraped across the city, one of Nightshade's roars which was a pre-arranged signal. "How go the Vendari?"

"They have nearly half the city captured," Jenna answered as smoke started rising up from the city below, then she gasped. "Something destroyed one of my Elementals!"

"I think it's coming out," Tenshale called as Tarrin and Sapphire both looked up, sensing a magical presence. On a balcony above them was another golem, this one made of iron, twenty spans tall and built to

look like a burly armored human warrior, carrying a sword and a shield. It jumped off the balcony and dropped sixty spans to the ground, shattering the paving stones and making the ground shake when it landed. Tarrin raised the Firestaff and came up off Sapphire's head, but she batted him with her snout.

"No, little one! Fire makes iron golems stronger! Use cold!"

The iron golem advanced on the dragon fearlessly, but Tarrin swooped down and hovered fingers above the ground, chanting the formula for the spell known as Cone of Cold. He completed the spell and presented his open palm of his snow-white paw to the golem, and then a pale bluish arc of magical light erupted from his open paw, causing the rocks it touched to frost over and split from the intense cold. The wave of light bathed the golem in a cold so intense that only magic could produce it, making its silvered surface rime over in thick frost. The golem continued to advance, flakes of frost falling away from its legs and arms, but its movements became slower and slower, until it finally stopped moving completely.

"Now, Tenshale!" Sapphire barked just before she began to chant again in the language of magic. The male blue advanced around Sapphire and turned slightly, bringing his tail to bear. Instead of lashing the golem with that deadly tail, instead the very tip wrapped around the immobile metal arms, hooking it securely, then the dragon took a single step to the side with his back legs and snapped that tail like a whip, hurling the iron golem over the wall and far out into the city.

"Why do that?" Jenna asked curiously.

"Iron golems cannot be destroyed by magic," Sapphire answered. "At least none we can currently bring to bear. They can only be immobilized using cold magic. By the time it thaws out and gets back here, we will be long gone."

"I do hope that doesn't land on anyone we care about," Tenshale noted absently.

The magical attacks ceased when a column of warriors poured into the breach Sapphire created. They were Vendari and Knights, led by the *sashka*, *dakka*, and Darvon. "Ho, Tarrin! Are we ready to invade the keep?"

"Aye, Lord General!" Tarrin shouted. "There's quite a few Wizards in there, though, so be ready!"

Tenshale took a step over to give them room to pour into the keep, but Sapphire took her human form and settled her dress on her shoulders calmly. "You will need Wizards in there, your Sorcerers cannot help you," she announced, then she gave a strange whistle. Moments later, Densheen swooped in and landed. "Assist Tenshale in holding the bailey," she ordered her daughter.

"As you wish, mother," she nodded. "The dragons have the citizenry in complete disarray, Lord General," she reported to him. "They are harassing any concentration of bipeds they see, but only attacking ones wearing uniforms or carrying weapons."

"Aye, lady dragon, we could see it, and a wonderful job you're doing," Darvon told her, getting down off his charger and clapping his visor down. "Now let's go finish this."

"Come, Tarrin, let us keep them out of trouble," Sapphire ordered as the Vendari kings and Darvon led the column towards the destroyed front doors of the Citadel of Night.

"Yes, Sapphire."

The clearing of the castle was quick and efficient, and much less dangerous than Tarrin would have

expected. When the Vendari started charging into the keep, the defenders within activated every magical defense they had and then fled. These magical traps and magical constructs would have decimated the Knights or a mundane army, but the Vendari proved to be just as resistant to them as they were to the spells the Zakkite War Wizards cast in battle. Vendari would spring those traps with almost no injury to themselves, and that protected the Knights behind them. The defending Wizards could see the Vendari coming, and knew that their magic would not stop them, so instead of fighting, they fled, leaving the defense of the keep to the guards and soldiers.

That wasn't to say that it was easy. Fanatical resistance met them in every hallway as the invaders battled the Royal Guards, who would not retreat and would not surrender. They fought to the last breath, to the last man, defending the home of their king with fanatical devotion, a devotion that the Vendari found highly respectful and honorable. Vendari and Knights fought for every span of hallway they controlled, but despite their suicidal zealotry, the defenders were not as well trained as their attackers. They were swept from the keep in about two hours of savage fighting, and were killed to the last man.

Two hours. It had taken the host about twenty minutes to reach the keep, and while the invading force was taking it, the rest of the army was taking Zakkara. By the time the last defender was killed within the citadel, the rest of the city was solidly held by the invaders. Once the last defender was conquered, the Knights started clearing out the vaults of a king's ransom in gold and treasure, money that would cover the expenses of the Knights for *years*, and Tarrin, Sapphire, and Jenna followed an ecstatic Sarraya down into the bowels of the keep, deep underground.

"I followed a rather important looking guy down here," the Faerie said breathlessly as they walked along a dark stone passage that had been hidden behind a secret door and a magical spell. "He was carrying a big satchel full of books. I thought those might be the spellbooks that Sapphire wanted, so I kept with him. Well, he came to here and the wall just vanished," she said, pointing at a stretch of bare wall. "He stepped through, and I followed him in. There was a big library in there, and a ruby the size of a man's head! *That* is what we're looking for, Tarrin! We just have to figure out how to turn the wall back. From the other side, it just looks like an empty archway, that's how I got back out. I told you I'd find it!"

"What happened to the man you were following?"

She slashed her hand across her neck. "*Kkk-k-k-thk*," she sounded. "I killed him."

"How did you do that?" Jenna asked. "Didn't you say you couldn't use your magic in here?"

She grinned at Jenna evilly. "I may be a little thing, but that doesn't mean I don't know how to kill a human without magic," she told her smugly.

Tarrin raised the Firestaff before him and touched it to the wall, commanding it to open the chamber beyond. The wall shuddered, and then the blocks vanished, revealing an archway holding a small library lit only by a shimmering ruby sitting on an ornate golden stand. There was a still figure laying in front of it. Many of the shelves were bare, and bags and books were laying all over the floor. It was very clear that others had been there, and they had cleared the room out as quickly as possible. They already knew that the Witch-King had somehow escaped, and it was obvious that he had taken some of his treasures with him when he did so.

"Looks like a lot is missing," Jenna said, noting the look of the room, as if it had been cleaned out in a hurry. "When the Witch-King escaped, he must have had them take most of their big treasures. But they couldn't take the ruby," she noted. "If they did, then it would let me and Tarrin rip this place to the foundation. They were stuck. They had to leave it in place to protect the keep from us long enough for him to escape."

“I bet that’s why that man was here, to take it once the king escaped,” Tarrin noted as they came in. “But Sarraya got him.”

“You bet I did!” she declared as Tarrin kicked the body over. Jenna flinched when the body’s head bent at an unnatural angle.

“Eww, Sarraya, what did you do?”

“I broke his neck,” she answered casually.

“How on Sennadar did you do that?”

“I’ll show you someday,” she winked in reply.

“Stop being so boastful,” Sapphire chided. “She tripped him, and he struck his head on the edge of this desk,” she answered, pointing at a bloodstain on the corner of the desk.

“Well, it worked,” Jenna chuckled. “Let’s take what we can that’s useful and then burn this place to the ground.”

It took them about seven hours to get things done. The mysterious ruby and quite a few spellbooks and other magical objects the fleeing Zakkites left behind in their haste were packed away to be taken back. While that was being done, the dragons chased just about everyone out of the city, and the Vendari and Knights killed the last pockets of armed resistance. Everything being kept was carried to the harbor, where the Vendari, Knights, and the Sorcerers cleared all the dead bodies out of the ships and stowed away the spoils, then gathered the ships together so they could be transported out. In all, they captured ninety-one usable ships, all of the skyships. Adding those ships to the nineteen skyships and modified ships the Wikuni had provided, which they still had to pick up in Wikuna, they would have an even one hundred ten ships to take with them to Pyrosia.

Once everything of value was taken from the citadel, Jenna and Tarrin destroyed the Citadel of Night by sinking it into the earth with powerful Earth weaves, triggering an earthquake to shatter the black fortress, then opening a chasm to tumbled its jagged remains into the earth, to forever wipe it off the face of Sennadar.

An hour after sunset, they were ready to leave. The army set fire to the distant sectors of the city and warned the civilians to seek safety elsewhere, and then Kyrienna, who had held fast in the square for the duration of the battle in case they had to retreat, opened another gate and allowed the Vendari and Knights to return to Suld. In the long moments it took them to march through, Jenna led a Circle of all the *katzh-dashi* except for Tarrin, a Circle of staggering power, and using that power, she Teleported all ninety-one ships to the open sea in a cordoned area just to the north of the harbor of Suld in a single spell. By the time the last four stood at the gate and returned to Suld, Darvon, Kyrienna, and the two Vendari kings, the entire city of Zakkara was on fire, the Citadel of Night was nothing but a gaping wound in the earth, and the capital city of the Zakkite Empire was no more.

Wikuni ships towed the Zakkite skyships into the harbor at Suld, as Tarrin and Jenna stood on the deck of the lead ship with Sapphire, watching the city of Suld get closer and closer. “Well, that’s done. Once Rallix gets those other ships ready, we’ll be ready to shrink them and send them to Pyrosia. Ugh,” she grunted. “That’s going to be ugly. When are we sending them through?”

“Tomorrow. I’d do it tonight, but we all need some rest, and I’d like at least one more night with the family before I go. I want to be in Pyros in five days. Something tells me I need to be there as soon as possible.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling,” he said, flexing the fingers of his white-furred arm. “I’ll get started on shrinking the ships as soon as they tow them into the harbor. It’s not going to be easy though. I didn’t expect to get so many.”

“It shouldn’t take that long. Once I gather up enough for a good circle, I can shrink them in twos and threes. I’m glad I fingered nearly two hundred *da’shar* for this, so we have plenty. I’m just not too happy about sending so many Sorcerers to Pyrosia. It almost makes me worry that so many gone will stress the Weave.”

“No, it should be alright. Kerri’s star is still in the Heart, even if she’s not here. I’m sure it makes it different, but the simple fact that they’re alive should count for something.”

Sapphire and Tenshale approached them wearing a human form, Sarraya riding on the male’s shoulder. “My little ones,” she said in greeting. “A most eventful and effective day, was it not?”

“It was a rout,” Tarrin said. “Are the dragons ready to go to Pyrosia, Sapphire?”

“We are,” she answered.

“I still wish I could go,” Sarraya sulked.

“Maybe the next time, Faerie,” Sapphire said. “After all, the amulets you made will still be here.”

“But I’m going to *miss* everything!” she whined. “I wanted to be there!”

“Well, you could theoretically go, but you’d have to stay very close to a dragon at all times,” Tenshale noted. “But that would be very, very hard. It wouldn’t be worth the risk. Just one little slip of bad luck and you’d be in mortal jeopardy.”

“I know,” she sighed. “It’s just not fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” Tarrin told her as she flitted over and landed on his shoulder.

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow,” Tarrin told her. “The sooner the better. As soon as we get the boats shrunk and the Wikuni sorted out that are going to man the ships, we’ll be ready. Darvon already has the Knights organized.”

“Are any of the Vendari going?” Tenshale asked.

“Some of the Vendakan Vendari are,” Tarrin answered. “Ten Vendari for every ship we take, I think was what they agreed to, and another thousand to reinforce the city. That was already arranged with the *sashka*. I don’t know about the *dakka*’s troops. He might, though, as a gesture since we let him burn Zakkara to the ground. Vendari take honor seriously, and we just let them strike a crippling blow to their oldest enemies.”

“I will speak with him when we arrive. He’s an amiable sort,” Tenshale told him. “I won’t demand it, but I can hint that his offer wouldn’t be rejected.”

“Tenshale, from a dragon, that’s as good as an ultimatum,” Tarrin snorted.

“Usually it is, but the *dakka* isn’t afraid of us,” Tenshale laughed. “Vendari don’t scare easily.”

“Well, space is a concern too,” Tarrin said. “We can only put so many men on one ship and not get in the crew’s way, What did Rallix say, Jenna?”

“He said we could only put about fifty people on each ship,” she prompted. “Given that we’ll have a crew of ten Wikuni and at least five Sorcerers on every ship, that’s only room for thirty-five soldiers to repel boarders if there are any flying Demons left to attack them. Ten Vendari would probably be more than enough, but if it was me, I’d rather have an overwhelming complement on board to protect the ships.”

“It’s the ships that really matter,” Tarrin told her with an agreeing nod. “With most of the flying Demons dead, it gives us a way to strike at the enemy army without being hit back. A hundred Sorcerers raining spells down on an enemy army from above, with no way to stop them, can cripple the enemy. And that doesn’t even count the damage the dragons can do, which will be *much* more significant.”

“Truly,” Sapphire nodded as the skyship neared the dock. “How long will it take to get to Pyros?”

“Five seconds,” Tarrin answered. “They have Sorcerers there who are already grounded to both the city and the grove. I’m grounded in Pyros myself, so I just have to ground at the grove and I can shuffle things back and forth. When we get there, I’ll have all the ships Teleported to Pyros if it’s clear, as well as the soldiers that won’t be on the ship. If it’s not, or it’s better for us to fly, it’d take five days to get there the hard way.”

“Why would it not be better?” Tenshale asked.

“It depends on where the enemy army is,” Tarrin answered as ropes were thrown to the skyship. “If they’re almost on Pyros, or if they’re far away, we’ll Teleport there. But, if they’re about five days out, we’ll fly there so we can come up behind them without any scouts seeing the ships.”

“Attacking by surprise,” Tenshale nodded. “And if the army is five days out, it would be prudent to believe they already have scouts at Pyros that would see the ships take off and move towards the approaching army.”

“Yes. I’m hoping all this is a moot point, though,” Tarrin answered. “Right now, we have a huge advantage. I can turn all the humans against the Demon Lord, so he won’t be able to use them to attack Pyros. But, that just reduces the enemy army from several million to however many Demons the Demon Lord has there now. That number is probably going to be big. Even without the humans, the Demon Lord will still have enough Demons to attack Pyros, but the Pyrosians turning on the Demon Lord swings the balance in our favor. And there’s also the fact that the Demon Lord is dead the instant I get within bowshot of it,” Tarrin added. “Once Gruz is dead, every Demon it summoned to Pyrosia will be banished back to the Abyss. That won’t be all of them, but it should be most of them. Either way, it *will* be enough of them to make however many is left not matter. If it’s leading the battle itself, I can end it all with one shot.”

“And if he is not?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered with a shrug. “Because of the threat of Dolanna, it can’t expose itself to her. If it shows its ugly face, she can blow it off its head. Dolanna *can* kill the Demon Lord if she can get a shot at it. It’s not immune to Sorcery. It would *not* be easy for her, though. She’d have to have full command of that Weave to do it. But still, that’s a threat the Demon Lord can’t ignore. So, I don’t expect to see it leading the charge on Pyros. But, I don’t see it being very far from Pyros either. It will want to be nearby, so it can get quick information. So, what I’m guessing is that the Demon Lord will be hiding a day or so away from Pyros, close enough to have fast news, but not so close that Dolanna can sense it and kill it. If not that close, it will probably be holed up in one of the cities on the east coast. Either way, once I’m sure Pyros will be

safe, I'm going to go hunt it down and kill it."

"Why not simply kill it from a distance, much as Dolanna could?"

"Because it's not guaranteed," he answered. "This *is* a Demon Lord, Sapphire. I could take Dolanna's place in the Weave and hunt it down and try to kill it that way, but I could fail, and the attempt could kill me. It's entirely possible," he admitted. "That's why it's so dangerous. If Dolanna tries, it might kill her, and she knows it. The amount of power it would take to kill a Demon Lord would make it dangerous to try, because of the stress it would put on my her body, or mine. I'd have a much better chance of pulling it off than Dolanna, but I've come too far to gamble on a *maybe* at this point. That's why I got the bow. It's *guaranteed*. If I hit it, it's dead. It's much better than putting my tail out there for something to bite off, or Dolanna risking her neck. If I didn't have the bow, I'd probably do it that way, but at this point, I'll take the easy way."

"For the first time ever," Jenna chuckled.

"I have too much to lose now," Tarrin said as the gangplank was lowered, and they started off the ship. Jenna barked strong orders for dock workers to start unloading the ships, and to have everything within taken to the Tower. "Before, I didn't care if I lived or not. I care now."

"That's a good thing to hear, my little one," Sapphire said with a gentle smile, patting his white-furred arm. "I'm much too fond of you to lose you now."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Tarrin waited uneasily, pacing back and forth on the dock as the workers unloaded it, and more Zakkite skyships were being pulled into the harbor by the Wikuni clippers. Tarrin's presence made that a very fast operation. They struggled under the weight of the boxes and chests, and more than one realized he was carrying gold, more gold than they'd ever seen before. There was no doubt a few ideas of running with that treasure, but the presence of the dangerous Were-cat, and the calming presence of Jenna, acted in concert to quell those thieving impulses. They were too afraid of Tarrin and too afraid to disappoint Jenna, the jewel of Suld, to try to steal it. Even those few that could look past those two saw any shred of a chance fade when a column of Knights rode up to the docks, escorting a long line of wagons, and dismounted. They were led by Darvon, who sent the Knights in with the workers to help empty the ships as quickly as possible.

It took them about half an hour to unload the ship, and then everyone was cleared off of it. Once it was clear, the Were-cat stepped up to the edge of the dock, and the dock workers got to see a *sui'kun* performing magic beyond any but others of his tiny circle. His entire body limned over in Magelight, Tarrin wove the complicated spell of all seven spheres, sending it to cover and infuse the ship, until ghostly light clung to every exposed part of the ship like illuminating water. The ship shuddered, and then so fast it made most onlookers flinch, the ship seemed to vanish.

It didn't vanish, however. Enclosed in a glowing aura of light was the ship, only a ship that was the size of a large dog. The tiny ship rose up over the dock and then hovered in the air, then it quickly floated over and deposited itself carefully into the back of one of the wagons the Knights brought.

"Take it to the Tower," Tarrin told the driver, one of the cadets, as the light began to fade. "When you get there, place it on the sand in the training field of the Knights, and have it guarded. Just don't be rough with it."

"Aye, sir Knight," the cadet answered with a nod.

Tarrin looked around, and saw the reality that this was going to take a while. “Jenna,” he called. “Go to Wikuna and pick up the other ships and the Wikuni crews. I’ll stay here and work on this.”

“Alone? It’ll take all night!”

“It’s going to take all night no matter what,” he told her evenly. “I don’t need to sleep, so it’ll be fine. We need those other ships here, and one of us has to stay.”

She nodded. “I’ll go take care of it then, brother,” she told him.

“I will stay with you, my little one,” Sapphire told him.

“Me too! I can’t let you get bored,” Sarraya said, patting him on the shoulder.

He was about to make a dark comment about Sarraya’s concept of alleviating boredom when he felt a strong shiver ghost through the Weave, felt an odd tingling in his right arm, and he cursed. Not now! It was too soon! He wasn’t finished here!

A Solar had come through the gate!

He had no time. Any second now, that Solar was going to cast out and sense him, and then Spyder would be placed in the very ugly, very dangerous situation of being forced to repel one of the most powerful beings in the multiverse. That was a fight he would lean towards his Urzani sister, but it was no guarantee she would win. So fast it made Sarraya squeak in surprise, Tarrin slapped her off his shoulder, and then wove a spell of Teleportation so fast that even Jenna couldn’t make out what he was doing until he was gone. *Mother, you have to explain it to them!* he called out desperately as he appeared in a narrow, deep gorge high in the mountains, as a bitterly cold wind slashed across his face. Not far, down the ravine, was the gate to Pyrosia. He’d grounded here years ago just before they entered Pyrosia to search for Kimmie and the lost *katzh-dashi*, and that grounding point served him well now, for he only had seconds before Spyder’s life would be in great danger because of him.

Kitten, go! Niami said urgently. There is more than just the Solar! Do not make Spyder fight!

I’m going! he answered as he took to the air and raced towards the pool of light just paces away. He was fairly sure they knew he was on Sennadar, but in just a second, they would realize that he used one of the gates within Sennadar to flee to another world, another material plane, and they would have to start the search for him anew. They knew he could be absolutely anywhere. A material plane had thousands of such gates, and they would have no idea where to look.

In a second, he was within the gate. He was surrounded by blue, and then he felt a sudden *resistance*. The last time he used the gate it was fluid, fast, effortless, almost fascinating with the colors and the sensations. But this time it was as if someone had tied a rope to his tail and was pulling on it, trying to prevent him from leaving, even as he felt a force ahead try to push him back the way he came. Tarrin felt himself stopped within the nether between worlds, and found that he had to *force* himself forward by main will, using the same techniques he’d learned to move in the Astral to propel himself forward in this non-space.

Just as the Firestaff, the gate could not resist the indomitable will of Tarrin Kael. He was again moving forward, and then, as if the rope tied to his tail had been broken, he catapulted forward and found himself through and to the other side.

He was in the apple orchard once again. The receiving point of the gate from Sennadar was before him,

but it was a place that was radically different from what he remembered. Many of the trees had been cut down in an avenue of sorts leading straight out from the gate, and buildings had been erected at the end of that avenue, all of it lit by torches and campfires in the muggy summer night. Knights stood guard at either side of the gateway, and many more soldiers were milling around down among those buildings. This was the element of the Sennadar forces that were tasked with defending the gateway, so those coming through didn't find themselves besieged by an enemy army.

He had to pause a moment and wonder what had happened there. Why did the gate try to stop him? He had no idea. Then again, the anger and frustration of being thwarted was still hot in his mind, and it quickly overwhelmed his surprise and curiosity.

Those Knights recognized Tarrin, but were surprised when the Were-cat began to swear sulfurously, so caught up in his rant of venting anger that he didn't really seem to be paying attention.

So close! He'd only needed one more day, damn them! Why did they have to show up now? Now things would be delayed, because poor Jenna would have to get the ships ready all by herself. It threw everything off kilter!

He took a few deep breaths and calmed down, and began to hear the cacophony that greeted him. Several voices were calling out into this Weave, a Weave *he* had made, calling out to him. Almost immediately, a wavering Illusion of Dolanna appeared before him, her eyes bright and a beautiful smile gracing her lips. "Tarrin! Dear one, it is so good to finally see you!" she called brightly in Sharadi.

"It was earlier than I intended," he growled. "I was in the middle of something important when the Deva arrived on Sennadar. I had to leave *fast*, or Spyder would have found herself trying to hold back an army of Deva all by herself. How—"

He stopped. He could *feel* them out there. Two of them. Even from that staggering distance, he could point right at both of the shards of his sword, for though the god who had once wielded it was gone, and he no longer had any dominion over them, the simple fact that he created it was enough for Tarrin to be able to sense the two pieces of his sword, an artifact that was crafted by his own paw. He'd thought that he'd have no contact with them at all, but he was clearly wrong.

One of the shards was moving. The other was stationary. He could sense it clearly.

"Did they find the pieces of my sword?"

"I haven't received word of it," she told him. "Kimmie's group is trying to come up with some way of getting their shard off the seafloor, while Keritanima's group is digging through snowbanks to find theirs. They found the place where the shard is, but it's *under* them. It's been dangerous for them. Already they've had to contend with two avalanches."

"One of the pieces is moving," Tarrin told her. "Someone has it. It's not stationary." He turned, and pointed. "That one."

"Kimmie's shard," Dolanna noted as another Illusion spun itself into existence before him. It was Jasana. Tarrin felt a wave of warmth flow through him at the sight of his daughter.

"Father!" she said brightly. "I can't believe it! You're here!"

"Quiet a second, cub," he said, holding a paw up to her. "It's definitely moving, Dolanna. Do you think Kimmie has it?"

“Kimmie,” Dolanna called aloud. “Kimmie.”

“Mmph, what is it, Dolanna?” her voice called sleepily from empty air.

“Kimmie, your shard is in motion. Do you have it?”

“No, it’s the middle of the night, we don’t try in the dark because it’s dangerous. Hold on, let me check.”

“Father, what’s going on?” Jasana asked as Tarrin tuned out the other voices, Jula and Keritanima, trying to call to him through the Weave. Neither of them had thought to try to project to him yet.

“One of the shards of the sword is moving, child,” Dolanna answered. “We are checking to see if Kimmie has it, but I do not think she does.”

“It’s moving,” Kimmie called. *“It’s moving fast. It’s moving northeast. We don’t have it, Dolanna. Could a fish have it?”*

Tarrin shrugged. “I do not believe so, but it would be possible, I suppose. Rouse the others and follow it. Try to scry to find out what is going on.”

“Alright. Give me a little bit, and I’ll contact you and tell you what’s going on.”

“Good, now pay attention to me!” Jasana demanded, her image floating over and putting a spectral paw up to him. “What happened to your fur, father?” she asked curiously as he passed his white-furred paw through hers.

“Long story,” he told her, smiling gently. “How goes it, cub?”

“Slow and cold,” she answered. “The shard’s buried under us. After a ride-long blizzard, the weather finally broke this morning, and we’ve been able to search for it. We found the spot about two hours after we could see more than five spans in front of us,” she laughed. “We had to dig out from two avalanches when we tried to clear the snow, then I got tired of it and melted all the snow around us and above us so it won’t happen again. But once we did that, we found out that it’s buried straight down. I sounded through there with Earth weaves and managed to find it, and it’s in a bad spot. Somehow it went *through* solid rock, and it’s embedded deep in the bones of the mountain. I decided to rest a little, so tomorrow morning, me and Kerri were going to use Sorcery to dig it out.”

“Cub, do it now,” Tarrin told her. “Right now. I think someone else managed to get the other shard. I want that shard in your paws in ten minutes. I don’t want anyone to have both pieces but us.”

“I’ll do it right now, father,” she told him with a nod. “See you in a bit.” Her Illusion faded, and seconds later, the faint voice of Keritanima also faded, as Jasana told her what was going on.

“Dolanna, I’m coming to Pyros,” he told her. “I’d rather not Teleport blind, since I’m sure you’ve done a lot of work there. Can you send someone for me?”

“There should be a Sha’Kar there already who can bring you to Pyros, dear one,” she told him with a smile. “Guard,” she called, looking past him.

“Aye, my Lady, I’ll take him there.”

“Zorik?” Tarrin asked in surprise.

“Aye, Sir Knight,” the young man laughed. “I’m glad you remember me.”

“They gave you spurs?”

“I’m sure it’s a travesty for the order, but yes, I earned my spurs two months ago,” he answered. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to the Sha’Kar. He can get you to Pyros quick.”

Tarrin felt...uneasy. That was the only way to say it. He knew that it was because of the sudden need to flee, but it was more than that. He stopped along the path the encampment and hugged himself, looking up at the night sky, reaching out with his senses. Something was...wrong. Different. He couldn’t quite explain it. The last time he came to this world, he felt a sense of welcome from this world. But now, this time, as a mortal, this world felt...he didn’t know. Foreboding. Apprehensive.

Of course. The Firestaff, it was in his left paw. No wonder the very world itself recoiled from that artifact, given what it was. The Firestaff was a destroyer, an object of Entropy that sought to unmake that which was made, and the very fabric of this world *feared* its presence.

And he had little doubt that the world of Pyrosia did not want the Firestaff here.

And then it clicked in his mind. Tarrin had brought the Firestaff through the gate to another world, forcing it to do the one thing not even the gods of Sennadar could force it to do. That had been the resistance. It was the Firestaff, trying to prevent him from taking it from Sennadar, taking it from a world that, should the Firestaff destroy it, would cause tremendous damage to the multiverse. Sennadar was a Prime, one of the material planes close to the center. The loss of a Prime would cause great damage to the order of the multiverse. And as the Firestaff tried to hold him back, the very world of Pyrosia itself could sense what horror was coming through the gate, and sought to stop it from coming to pass.

It hadn’t been quite so resistant when he went into the Astral, he recalled. But then again, it knew that now that it was in Pyrosia, it would never leave this plane. It was a condemned man who had climbed the gallows, and stared at the noose that would take his life. That was why it was so much more resistant. It knew the end was coming. It knew that it was here, in Pyrosia, where Tarrin would destroy it. But it was helpless to prevent it, it could not break free of the indomitable will of Tarrin Kael.

Without thinking about it, because he was so harried, so consumed with the need to escape, that important marker had passed him by. He had upheld his word to Niami, and removed the Firestaff from Sennadar. It would never threaten his homeworld again, but the dark part of the bargain was that he had brought it to a new world, a world that was now in danger. Even now, he knew, the Firestaff was realigning itself to this place, resetting its triggering day to coincide with some noteworthy astronomical or geological event that would take place here, a significant day, but a day that would still be five thousand or so years in the future.

Beginning the cycle again.

“Sir Knight?” Zorik asked, looking back to him.

“Nothing. Nothing,” Tarrin said, shivering his tail. “Let’s go.”

The Sha’Kar male to which Tarrin was led was a small, thin, blonde-haired man that was decidedly old for a Sha’Kar. He was obviously one of their elders, of an age with Ianelle, alive back during the Age of Power. He bowed to Tarrin as he came out of a tent. “Honored one, you must go to Pyros at once!” he said in flawless Sulasian.

“That’s why we’re here, Sevin,” Zorik chuckled. “Could you take him there?”

“At once, at once!” he said, motioning towards him. “Please attend me, honored one,” he said in Sha’Kar. “I will Teleport us to Pyros immediately.”

And he did. Zorik had to shuffle back quickly as the Sha’Kar began the spell before Tarrin had even reached him. In a shimmer of changing terrain, they were transported from the grove to Pyros in the blink of an eye.

Goddess, had they been busy! In the light of the stars and torches and campfires, he found himself looking at a place much different from the blasted wasteland he remembered. The volcano behind them still smoked and smoldered, still erupting from Tarrin’s awakening of it, but the lava that had buried Pyros now formed a foundation for a new military encampment, complete with a wall, breastwork fortifications, siege engines, and thousands and thousands of soldiers. Many of those soldiers were Knights, but he also saw Wikuni, Arakite Legions, Vendari, some Ungardt, Elaran soldiers, and quite a few humans in piecemeal armor that had to be natives of Pyrosia, recruited to defend Pyros after the defeat of the One. They had built three separate walls, each one forming a layer of defense, using the volcano as an anchor. Between those walls were trenches, barbicans, palisades, and fortified platforms for siege engines, making any attempt to reach Dolanna by ground a nearly impossible proposition. She was there, just up the slope, on the plateau where the cathedral of the One once stood, just a short walk away...but even that short walk would require him to pass through two separate heavily fortified positions along the only road that granted easy access to that plateau. From where he was, it was a short walk. For an invader, it would be almost impossible, for he would have to go through a wall of steel and get past some of the most powerful spellcasters on Pyrosia to reach that ultimate goal.

“Wow,” Tarrin breathed, looking around. “Quite a change.”

“Marshall Kang has been busy,” The Sha’Kar, Sevin, said with a nod. “I will return to the grove now, honored one. There is your escort now.”

The fortifications ahead opened, and none other than Julia was racing towards him, laughing, already reaching out to him. Eron was coming up behind her, but he wasn’t running. He opened his arms to her, and she charged into his embrace, knocking him back a step. “Father!” she said joyfully. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Julia,” he said warmly. “I see you’ve been busy around here.”

She laughed, pushing out to look up at him. “Yes, we’ve been very busy. But not as busy as you’ve been, I see,” she noted, reaching down and picking at the snow-white fur on his right arm. “I swear, father, every time you come home from these trips, you always have something different. First it was these,” she said, tugging at his fetlocks. “Then it was the wings, now this.”

Tarrin laughed lightly, patting her on the shoulder. “I guess I’m looking for that look that’s just *me*,” he joked.

“Well, stop it,” she told him. “You’re just fine as is.”

Eron reached them, and clapped his father on the back. “I didn’t expect to see you here so soon, father,” he said.

“The Deva caught up with me, so I had to leave earlier than I planned. How long have you been here?”

“Two days,” he answered. “I haven’t really figured out what I’m supposed to be doing, though. Dolanna just tells me to do what I can, but nobody wants to give me any orders.”

Tarrin chuckled. “They know better than to order a Were-cat around, cub.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he laughed, scrubbing the back of his head with his claws, a trait he got from his father. “So I’ve just been staying close to Dolanna.”

“Good plan.”

“I’ve really enjoyed it,” Jula said. “I haven’t seen Eron in a while, so it was good to catch up. I’ve missed him.”

“Yah,” Eron nodded.

“Well, we can’t stand here and chat while they’re waiting for us.” She took his paw and started pulling him as she stepped back. “Come on, Dolanna’s waiting to see you.”

Jula and Eron walked with him up the steep roadway, past a heavily defended barricade at the base of the slope bristling with Elaran soldiers, Knights, and even a few Vendari. Tarrin had to stop and look at these Elarans, for he had never seen any from their soldier caste. They were...different. Lorak was thin and willowy, tall but not overly so. The pair of Elaran soldiers before him were more than a span taller than Lorak, muscular, but moved with a sinuous grace. These two wore elaborate plate cuirasses with chain sleeves protecting their arms and plate and chain greaves, and helmets with swans engraved over the eyes, wings rising up from the helms to form ornamental decorations. Much to his surprise, one of these soldiers was male, and the other was female. Just like the Sha’Kar and Selani, the Elara, another descendent of the Urzani line, did not differentiate very much between the sexes. In their society, females also acted as soldiers, where in most human societies they did not...with a few exceptions. Both the male and female put a fist over their hearts and bowed to him as they passed, and the Knights saluted, then waved. Tarrin knew two of them by name, and called out to them as they went by.

They moved through a similar heavily manned fortification at the top, and the plateau was in view. They’d built a heavy wall around the edge of the plateau, the last line of defense, that was nearly thirty spans high and looked to be raised from the native volcanic rock with Sorcery, raised up from the very edge of the plateau so there was no room, forcing any ground assault to come up that road. It was a grim, foreboding black wall, the top of which manned with patrolling soldiers, and several Elaran spellcasters and Sorcerers. The gate inside was not on the same side as the road leading up. That was odd, but it was a sensible defensive decision, forcing any invader to either try to go through the wall, or go down a very narrow thoroughway between the wall and the steep volcanic slope to reach that gate, which allowed the defenders to rain death down on the invaders the entire time. They went behind the wall and walked that path, making Tarrin feel like he was in a box canyon, and then came through the gate and into the center off all the defenses of Pyros, all of which were designed to protect one woman.

On a raised platform surrounded by tables and shelves, covered over by a sturdy canvas tent with the sides rolled up, was Dolanna. Since she couldn’t move from her place, they had instead built the command center around her. Men and women, human, Elaran, Wikuni, and Vendari, all milled about within this command center, going over reports on pieces of parchment, speaking to the commanders, or attending them. All activity stopped when Tarrin entered the walled compound, and Dolanna turned and gave him a warm smile of welcome.

They gathered around him and walked with him as he crossed the compound and alighted the platform built to accommodate those attending Dolanna, many of them wearing either nightclothes or simple robes; it was around midnight, and some of them had been asleep when he arrived, but awakened in the loud

announcement he had arrived. Kang was there, as well as Tsukatta and Haley, and a bevy of Knights and several Selani and Vendari, the cream of the crop, the strongest of the fighters, placed to make any final push to reach Dolanna as dangerous as possible. It surprised him to see Selani here, but in a way, it was not. Every Selani face was a face Tarrin knew personally; they were all from Allia's tribe. Allia was here, and her presence here probably spurred many from her tribe to come as well and help the daughter of the clan chief. One face in particular surprised him, the *shaman* of her tribe who had been so militantly opposed to Allyn. She was here, carrying a spear and shield, standing silent guard over Dolanna near the raised circular platform built around the Heart of the Pyrosian Weave.

Many old faces, and for a moment, he was glad to be among friends and family again. But they stepped back and let him step up to Dolanna alone, who just smiled from her prison. She held out her hand to him, and he boldly stepped into the Heart, into the Weave of his own making, his last act as the mortal god, and felt it welcome him. He took Dolanna's hand in his paw and just reveled in the reunion, rejoined with one of his oldest, dearest friends, a friend so devoted to him that she had thought of him as a god to such a degree that it granted him powers beyond himself. Just as the connections between Tarrin and his children, or his sisters, or his family could never be broken, the connections between him and Dolanna were just as deep, just as important to him.

"Together again, my dear one," she said in a gentle voice, her face brightened by a loving smile.

"Just as it should be," he told her.

"Is that the Firestaff?"

He hefted it in his left paw and nodded. "I can't let go of it, Dolanna. Not even for a second. If I do, it'll get away from me. And I don't want it loose on this world."

"How did you get it through the gate?"

"It can't deny me, old friend. I can force it where no one else can, since I was once its creation. It can't control me anymore."

"I see. Do you intend to use it here?"

"Only if there's no other way. The Firestaff resists me, Dolanna. It knows what I intend to do, and it's trying to break free of me. If I use it, I'm calling forth power that it uses to try to break free of me."

"I, I believe I understand. And what do you intend to do with it?"

"Destroy it," he said bluntly. The Firestaff writhed in his paw at that statement. "But I can't do that yet. I have to take care of Gruz first. I might have need of the Firestaff before it's all said and done. I'd be a fool to destroy it until then."

"Wise."

Tarrin brought out his wings, and passed the Firestaff up into their living fire, then put both paws on Dolanna. She looked up in surprise, then laughed. "How do you still have those?"

"A gift from Mother," he answered. "She took exception to the loss of the old ones. Where's Fireflash?"

"He's flying a patrol. Phandebrass, Azakar, Camara, and Koran Tal are riding him."

“He’s *letting* Phandebrass ride him? And Camara and Phandebrass aren’t trying to kill each other?”

Dolanna laughed. “Yes, he is, and those two are actually fond of each other, they just enjoy arguing. Phandebrass is testing some spells the Elara gave him that gives him night vision. I will recall them, dear one. I’m sure Fireflash very much wants to see you.”

“*Father, father, we have the shard!*” Jasana’s voice called through the Weave. “*We have it!*”

“Jasana, come back to Pyros,” Tarrin called aloud. “Right now. Ianelle. Ianelle.”

“*Honored one,*” she called in reply. “*The shard is moving, and moving quickly. Kord and Orin are trying to follow it, but it outpaces us. I fear something has it, something that can swim faster than we can sail.*” There was a pause. “*Min has scryed the issue. Oh dear. Honored one, a Demon has the shard!*”

“It must be a *hezrou*,” Tarrin grunted. “No matter. Ianelle, leave it. We have the other shard. Without both, it does them no good. Listen to me. Can you muster enough to Teleport the entire ship back here?”

“*No, honored one, it’s too large.*”

He grunted. “Alright. Break the flying device off the ship and Teleport back here with it. Just leave the ship.”

“*Kord and Orin will be very displeased.*”

“I know, Ungardt are very attached to their ships. Just tell them to get over it. This is important.”

“*It will be done immediately, honored one.*”

“Speaking of issues, I’m glad you’re here, dear one,” Dolanna told him. “Reports from the Elaran watchers place a massive army of Demons and humans about ten days out from Pyros, marching both from the east and the south. They have not seen the Demon Lord, but it is entirely possible that he is hiding among the hosts. Though your counter strips him of his Demonic powers, he still is vastly intelligent, and possibly a Wizard as well. And he has that *marilith* leading his armies,” she noted. “The Dura are on a forced march for Pyros, and will arrive in three days. The Elarans are bringing most of their army here. They understand that holding Pyros is critical to saving this world. But, unfortunately, the reports of what we face are not good. They number in the hundreds of thousands. Thousands and thousands of Demons pushing every able-bodied human they could get their hands on ahead of them. Kang admits that should both armies attack at the same time, we would most likely fall.”

“Well, that’s going to change in just a few minutes,” he said. “I’ve already made arrangements to deal with it. As soon as Jasana and the twins get here, we’ll take care of that.”

“What arrangement did you make?”

He smiled at her. “I went to Acheron to confront the One, old friend. The One has agreed to take command of his people in the Demon armies and fight against him. Without the humans, it won’t be as one-sided.”

She gave him a bright smile. “That was very clever, dear one. How will he do this while exiled from Pyrosia?”

“That’s something I’ll take care of as soon as the girls get here. I need all my daughters here to fix it.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I have to restore his icon,” he answered. “I can do it, but I’m going to need a Circle. It’s going to take all four of my daughters to do it.”

She gave him a look, then laughed. “Clever, my dear one!”

“I wasn’t supposed to be here yet,” he grunted. “But the Deva appeared on Sennadar. I had to escape, literally in the middle of a sentence. I’m sure Jenna is cursing me out right now, I just left her with a mess of hard work.”

“No doubt she will forgive you when she hears of it,” Dolanna smiled. They both looked towards Julia, who in turn turned and looked behind her. They all felt it. “Jasana is here. Go greet the others, dear one. I won’t dominate your time. Besides, there are others here who wish to say hello, and I have to recall Fireflash and the others.”

He nodded and left the Heart as he took the Firestaff back into his left paw and withdrew his wings, then waded into a sea of reaching hands that sought to welcome him. He took Julia under his arm as he shook hands with Kang, then clapped Haley on the back. Tsukatta bowed to him, then laughed and slapped him lightly on the shoulder, as they all fell into step with him. “Jasana is here, father,” Julia told him. “Did you call her?”

He nodded. “She has their piece, but Kimmie’s group lost theirs to a sea Demon,” he told them. “I can’t blame them, really, it’s not easy to get something off the bottom of the sea. I called them back as well. The sword will have to wait. There are more important things to do now.”

“And as long as we have one piece, nobody can put it back together,” Haley reasoned.

Tarrin nodded.

“I have to ask, Tarrin. What happened to your arm?”

He sighed, then laughed ruefully. “I’ll be glad once everyone knows, because I’m getting tired of telling the same story over and over,” he said. “The short explanation is that this is what happens when you stick your arm in a place you have no business putting it.”

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

He was about to comment on that, but a group of people appeared at the gates of the inner compound, and Tarrin immediately recognized them. Julia barely had time to get out of the way before Jasana slammed into him, staggering him back a step. He put an arm around his daughter as she dug her claws into his back, a thousand memories of his lovable yet difficult daughter flooding through him.

“Have you been behaving yourself, young lady?” he asked immediately.

“Father!” she said in a scandalized tone. “We haven’t seen each other since you came here, and that’s the first thing you ask? Besides, how could I do anything but with Triana and my aunts there?” she added with an impish grin.

“I know you, cub, it shouldn’t be any surprise I ask that first,” he chuckled, reaching around her and taking Triana’s paw. “How did it go, mother?”

“It was cold,” she said as Keritanima and Allia hurried up to him. “Aside from that, it wasn’t all that bad. I almost killed the Wikuni’s soldier a few times.”

“Who?”

“That leopard,” Triana said, nudging her head at a leopard Wikuni who carried a wicked-looking battle axe, and was talking with Kang nearby.

“He’s an arrogant ass,” Jasana said, rolling her eyes.

He embraced Keritanima and Allia in turn, then had his paw swallowed up by Binter’s massive hand. “Where is Sisska?”

“She and Miranda are here, somewhere,” Binter said. “Miranda must be sleeping. Sisska would not leave her.”

“Ah. Did you bring back the boat you were using?” he asked.

“I did,” Jasana said, rather smugly. “Aunt Kerri couldn’t Teleport it.”

“Watch it, little missy,” Keritanima said, which made Jasana giggle. “How did everything go, brother?”

“Well enough,” he answered. “I managed to finish almost everything, but the Deva showed up before I could finish with the skyships. Jenna has to finish that now. But, there’s things we have to do over here to get ready for them.”

“What?” Jasana asked.

“Well, the main thing we’re going to do over here is fix it so they can land. They need somewhere to land,” Tarrin answered. “We need to talk to Kang and find out where it’s best to put in a shallow lake, so the skyships can land. If we can’t set them down, they won’t do us much good.”

“Sounds like you’re going to do some serious Sorcery, father,” Jasana noted.

“*We* are. There’s something else that has to be done, and it’s going to take a Circle of me and all three of your sisters to do it.”

“Now that *does* sound serious,” Keritanima said soberly.

“*Deshida*, what did you do to yourself now?” Allia asked, plucking at his white fur.

Tarrin laughed. “Long story. The short of it is, this is what happens when someone who’s not a Deva sticks his arm into the place where Deva live. Reaching into that place turned my fur white.”

“It did more than that, father,” Jasana told him. “I can feel something in it. An echo of a holy power.”

He nodded. “Something of a side effect, but it is handy,” he affirmed. “It lets me hurt Demons with my bare claws.”

“It looks funny,” Jasana said critically. “You look like Zerith.”

Zerith was a male Were-cat Tarrin had never met, who, he’d heard, had calico markings on his fur. His

fur was an asymmetrical jumble of spots and patches of different colors. “Well, not that bad, but it took me a while to get used to it.” He glanced at them. “Which one of you has it?”

Binter stepped forward and presented to him one half of his sword. It was the hilt half, with the hilt and about two spans of blade. “Good, let’s take it to Dolanna. I want her to watch over it.”

“You said that Kimmie couldn’t get her piece?” Keritanima asked as they started walking towards the compound.

He shook his head. “It was at the bottom of the ocean. Before they could figure out how to get to it, a *hezrou* found it.”

“That’s not good.”

“Actually, it’s just fine,” Tarrin said. “Where do you think that *hezrou* is taking that shard?”

“Straight to the Demon Lord,” Keritanima answered. Then she blinked. “Can you find the shard?”

“I can point right at it,” he nodded. “All that *hezrou* is doing is taking something I can track back to someone who’s hiding from me. As long as we have this piece, then it’s nothing but a good thing that the Demons have the other half. They can’t put it back together without both pieces, and I can use the other piece to find the Demon Lord when it’s time to go kill him.”

“When will that be?”

“As soon as I’m positive Pyros is safe. Not until after we repel the army coming,” he said.

“But, *deshida*, should you find and kill the Demon Lord, there will be no battle,” Allia told him.

“I know that, sister, but the Demon carrying the shard can’t Teleport. It has to *run* the shard back to the Demon Lord. I won’t go anywhere until I sense that it stops moving, and I’m going to hazard a guess that it’s going to take the Demon several days to get it back to its master. I’m going to be here for a while. And since I’m going to be here that long, I probably wouldn’t be able to find and kill the Demon Lord before the army attacks. I’ll give up a couple of days to be here to help in that battle.”

“Ah. I did not consider that.”

“It’s something of a lucky windfall,” he said. “I have to recover the other shard, but for right now, since the Demon Lord knows I’m here, it’s only in my favor that the Demons have it. They won’t take it anywhere but straight to Gruz, and that gives me an easy way to track him down.”

“Gruz?”

“The name of the Demon Lord. Nightshade told me.”

“Who is Nightshade?” Keritanima asked.

“A shadow dragon,” he said. “The same one that fought against me at the Iron Mountain. The Demons went after her for her failure to kill me, and they made her so angry that now she’s helping us. You know how spiteful dragons can be. She’s been a *huge* help already.”

“It sounds like we’re out of the loop,” Keritanima laughed. “You have to tell us what’s going on, brother!”

“I’ll get that out of the way when Kimmie and her group are here,” he said. “I just hope Mist is alright.”

“She’s fine. She’s waiting to pick back up where you left off,” Triana told him.

“So am I,” he said immediately. “I’ve missed having my family around me. It’s very lonely out there.”

“Well, welcome back, Tarrin,” Keritanima said, patting his arm. “With the Goddess’ favor, we’ll all be back home and back to normal soon. Did you see Rallix and Faalken?”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t there long enough to really visit. I managed to see who was at the Tower, and that’s about it, and my parents. I’ve been on a very short schedule here, and we didn’t have time to recall everyone from all over Sennadar.”

“I can imagine. Has Dolanna brought you up to speed on our situation?”

He nodded. “It’s not a problem,” he said dismissively. “Part of what we’re going to do here is going to fix that. When we’re done, the Demon Lord won’t have the humans when he gets here.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Simple, Kerri. I went to Acheron to enlist the One’s help. I’m here to restore his icon. That’s why I need my daughters for a Circle. When we do that, the One can order them to break away from the Demons, and all the Priests of his who summoned Demons can banish them back. It won’t be easy, but the simple fact is that when the armies get here, the humans won’t be fighting for the Demons willingly. I’m sure there’s going to be some that couldn’t get away, but when they get here, we can work with that to take them out of the equation without having to slaughter them all.”

Triana whistled, and Allia gave him a surprised look. “After all he did?” she asked.

“This is more important than his past crimes, sister,” he said. “Pyrosia *needs* the One, both right now and after this is done. It needs stability, and it’s going to need his influence to prevent chaos and war. Be assured he won’t go back to where he left off, *deshida*. We already had that little discussion. He comes into this as a subject, not a partner. He already has his rules and his conditions, and he *will* abide by them. He swore on it. So, the Elara and the Dura don’t have to fear that there will just be a return to the old war when we go home. There’s going to be some borders drawn up that everyone had *better* honor, the One already swore to change his doctrine to remove the xenophobia from his teachings, and everyone’s going to behave.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Pretty clever, cub,” Triana said with a nod.

“If you were going to use the One, why did you destroy his icon?” Jula asked curiously.

“To remove him from a position of power, and besides, when I destroyed his icon, I really didn’t care,” he said honestly. “I was furious. I just wanted to punish him for everything he did to me, and to Kimmie. After that, when I went to the Outer Planes, my first plan was to kill him, but then I realized that was basically impossible, so I changed things. You know how I make plans.”

“You don’t,” Keritanima laughed.

“Deal with it,” Tarrin grinned, poking his sister with a finger.

Tarrin heard it, as did everyone else; a magnified voice shouting across Pyros, waking everyone up. “Father, we’re here!” Tara’s voice boomed across the lava fields.

“I’m gonna strangle that cub,” Triana growled, but Tarrin laughed.

“Leave her be, mother.”

It was another round of reunions as Kimmie’s group reached the central compound. Tarrin swallowed up his twin daughters in a loving embrace, hugged Kimmie gently, then patted Sevren and Ianelle on the shoulders fondly. Mist wriggled under his arm and stayed there, but he knew she’d be much more animated and talkative when they were alone. The little Elaran Wizard, Myn, hovered near Szath, who nodded to him gravely. It got even more crowded when Miranda, wearing a nightshirt, came running through the gates and hugged Tarrin fiercely. “When did you get back?” she demanded.

“Just now. Did Tara wake you up?”

“I’m glad she did!” Miranda laughed. “It’s so good to see you!”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Keritanima accused, which made Miranda laugh and embrace her friend, and Tarrin took Sisska’s huge hand in greeting.

It had been a long time since they had all been together, so a long moment was taken as friends greeted friends, brothers and sisters renewed their bonds, and the inner circle of Tarrin Kael reaffirmed itself. Not everyone was there, to be sure, but enough were to make it feel like more than the grave occasion which had brought them all together. Tarrin pulled the group to the center of the compound, and they continued their reunion in the presence of Dolanna, so she could be a part of it. It grew even larger when a great roar shook the ruined city, and Fireflash appeared around the volcano. He landed in a wide area outside the inner compound, and after a moment, giving his passengers a chance to disembark, Tarrin cancelled the spell that made him the size of a dragon. The huge gold creature vanished from behind the wall, and then a gold drake flew up and over the wall, and flew straight to his chest. He nuzzled Fireflash in greeting, and the excited drake jumped up onto his shoulder, and all but writhed in excitement that he was back where he belonged.

“It’s good to see you too, my little friend,” Tarrin told him, scratching him under the chin, which made him quiver in delight. “Did you guard Dolanna well?”

“I ssstayed with her alwaysss,” he hissed.

“I see they haven’t taught you,” he said critically.

“Thheyyy teacssh, jussst haaard to ssspeak biped tongue,” he sounded.

“Sometimes I agree with you,” Tarrin laughed. “You’re getting better though.”

“I’ve practissssed.”

“I can tell.”

“Tarrin! Tarrin Kael, it’s about time you got here!” Camara Tal boomed as she rushed into the compound, with Phandebrass, Koran Tal, and Azakar behind her. He greeted each one in turn, hugging Camara Tal, grasping the forearm of Azakar in the Knight’s handshake, clapping Koran Tal on the shoulder, and shaking hands with an excited Phandebrass, who had already produced a book and tried to pluck a few white hairs off of Tarrin’s right arm.

“I say, lad, what happened to your arm?”

Tarrin laughed. “Now that everyone’s here, I can get the explanation out of the way. I got this when I reached my arm into the place where the Deva live. It’s a place no mortal was ever meant to go, so it scarred me by turning my fur white.”

“Why in Neme’s name were you putting your hand in there?” Camara Tal asked.

“It was necessary,” he said evenly.

“Father, father, did you meet Myn?” Rina asked, dragging the slender Elaran over. “Myn, this is our father, Tarrin. Tarrin, this is Myn. She’s an Elaran Wizard. We *really* like her.”

“Master Kael,” she said in a soft, whisper-like voice, curtsying to him.

“Don’t be a nit, Myn!” Tara barked. “We told you father doesn’t like that!”

“We’re keeping her,” Rina said with a grin at her father. “Her people were really mean to her, and we’re not letting her go back. We’re taking her back home to Sennadar.”

Tarrin raised her face with a single finger under her chin, and saw the tattooed mask over her eyes. It was a construction of magic, and from the look of it, it was a very unfriendly, hostile magic. It was infused into the very essence of her, interwoven through her body and mind; he could see that any attempt to remove it would kill her.

Any normal spellcaster, maybe.

Reaching back for the Conduit behind him, Tarrin touched the Weave and put his paw over her forehead. There was no spell for this, but he didn’t need one. He knew exactly what to do. He wove a mind-shatteringly complicated tangle of flows into her, snapped it down, and released it. In a heartbeat, that magic was surrounded by his Sorcery and annihilated, scouring it out of her, removing the controls they had over her, without doing her any harm. The killing triggers in the magic were simply bypassed and sealed off, leaving them where they were, but making it absolutely impossible for them to ever work. Tarrin had left the bear trap in place in her mind, but had broken the trigger that would make it go off so it would never do her harm. She gasped as the shock of it swept through her, as her body reacted to the removal of that magic, and she almost fainted.

When Tarrin removed his paw, the dark blue mask-like tattoo remained, but the magic that had been behind it was no more.

“You can remove the tattoo if you want,” he told her. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted to keep it. I think it makes you look very handsome,” he told her.

Myn began trembling violently, then she broke down into tears and threw her arms around him. “You freed me!” she choked.

“Of course I did,” he told her gently. “Did you think I’d let any friend of my daughter go around with something like that on her? We take care of our own, girl, and if my daughters say you’re one of us, then you’re one of us.”

Rina collected Myn and soothed her, giving her father a warm look. “I was hoping you could do that, father,” she said. “No one else could take it out of her safely.”

“I have a little more experience,” he said dryly. “But let’s put that aside right now. Rina, give Myn over to Kimmie. I need you, Tara, Jasana, and Julia to do something. Just be warned, it won’t be easy.”

“Any time you need us, father,” Tara said simply.

His four daughters came up to him, and he pushed Mist off with a warm look. “Everyone needs to back off. Dolanna, we’re going to be joining you,” he told her.

“I will do my best to stay clear of your work,” she assured him.

“Actually, you can help us.”

“I will do what I can,” she told him. “But I do not see what I can do.”

“Pft,” he snorted, stepping up into the Heart. “You forget the gift I gave you,” he told her. He held his arm up and poked a golden claw into the pad of his left palm. “I’m afraid it’s time for that part you don’t like, my friend. You need to drink enough to make it last a while. I don’t want it wearing off in the middle of it. I’m really not sure what would happen.”

“I truly detest the taste of your blood, dear one. I hope you know this.”

There was instant clamor, and Haley had to be restrained from charging in. “You didn’t tell them?” he asked.

She laughed. “Dear one, with all that has gone on, I must admit it slipped my mind,” she admitted. “Haley, it is alright. He cannot infect me,” she called. “Tarrin gave me a gift that makes me immune to his condition, and will temporarily grant me the powers of a Were-cat if I am bitten or ingest his blood, which we will use to bring me into his Circle. I am in no danger.”

“Wow, how did he do that?” Haley asked as Azakar released him.

“It wasn’t easy, I’ll bet,” Triana grunted. “Now I’m curious.”

He nodded. “I’m not entirely positive it’ll work, but hey, we can always test it out and see.”

Dolanna gave him a sour look, then bent to the task of drinking his blood. He had her take in a goodly amount, that would give her Were-cat abilities for a good hour, and then nodded and pulled his paw away. “Alright, cubs, let’s get started. “I’ll initiate the Circle. And no pushing,” he said, looking at Jasana.

“I can behave,” she snorted.

“We’ll see.”

Tarrin formed the Circle with Jasana first, feeling his daughter take up a place in his mind and soul, and he felt their individual powers merge into a single power that was almost godlike in its raw power. Tarrin and Jasana had the most raw power of all the Sorcerers, and when they Circled, they formed a singular power unrivalled in the world. Julia was inducted next, and Tarrin felt almost euphoric from the power of it. But then Tara and Rina were brought into the Circle, and their power swelled to even greater degrees, leaving Tarrin almost feeling like he did when he was the Mortal God, a feeling of unrestrained might. Once the Circle was stable, Tarrin reached out to Dolanna tentatively. He wasn’t sure if this would work, but it was worth a try.

He felt her accept his offer, and for a moment, the singular Cat-influenced entity seemed to repel this strange invader. But then it felt something...familiar about this new addition, and found it non-threatening. Dolanna joined the Circle, expanding their power even further.

Tarrin was quite surprised. The Cat did not object to Dolanna, and it had *nothing* to do with the fact that she'd taken Were-cat blood. She could Circle with *any* Lycanthropic Sorcerer, without taking their blood. The gift he gave her caused the Were in her companion to see her as non-threatening.

We have to shield Tara and Rina, Tarrin thought, but it was a thought all of them could hear. *They aren't da'shar. So you two need to be careful, and warn me if you feel pushed. I don't want you crossing over on this world. I'm honestly not sure what would happen, and I'm not risking your lives.*

We'll watch, they thought in unison.

"Kang," Tarrin called aloud. "I have one hundred and ten Skyships coming, and they need water to land in. Where can we build a shallow lake?"

"Well, Tarrin, truth be told, why put in a lake when they're going to do nothing but fly? Give me a map!" he barked. Kang rushed up to the table set by the Heart, so Dolanna could look at things, and unrolled a map a Selani handed him. He spread it out, and Tarrin could see it was a map of Pyros. "If all we need to do is land them, then we can use this area here. Dig a moat here, run it up in this direction," eh said, tracing a finger along the open area between the second and third walls. "We can berth them there in the moat, and the moat itself can be added as another obstacle any defender has to navigate to get here. That way we fulfill a need and get something tangible out of it once the ships take to the air."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin nodded in agreement. "Clever, Kang."

"Her Imperial Majesty doesn't keep idiots on her military payroll, Tarrin," Kang smiled.

"Alright then, I suggest everyone back up some."

They began. First, they attended the moat. From the Heart, they used Earth weaves and excavated a forty span deep, seventy span wide trench between the inner and middle walls, then stretched it all the way across, starting it at the base of the south wall and ending it at the base of the north wall. After that was done, the deep trench walls were fortified so they wouldn't collapse, and then the entire structure was filled with water.

Then came the hard part. Tarrin pulled on all his daughters and Dolanna deeply, pushing them to their limits, but working around Tara and Rina. He demanded only what he felt safe from them. When the Circle became a visible thing, and aura of awe-inspiring power that surrounded the six of them, they bent to the task at hand. The faint traces of the One's icon were detected, collected and brought together, and then Tarrin used the full power of the Weave he had put on this world to urge those pieces to fuse and grow. He felt the One, on his distant plane, sense the activity and move to join the effort, using his own power to assist, infusing what Tarrin was doing with his divine power. More and more pieces of the icon were located and pulled in, and before them, a pebble of glowing rock began to expand, get bigger and bigger. The One used the power that Tarrin's Circle infused into the remains of the icon to repair it, calling forth that which could be recovered, but creating new material once all available material was collected.

The amount of power it took was staggering. Tarrin had trouble shielding his twin daughters from the full brunt of it as the One poured more and more power into it, which required the Circle to match that power. But, the efforts showed visible results, as the floating glob of white stone grew, expanded, began to take on both a vague form and a presence. It grew, and grew, and grew, and the Conduit the Circle was within exploded into a pillar of light that reached into the sky as the power the Circle channeled reached a

level beyond that which any but the Circle of Were-cats could have produced.

The ground began to shiver and tremble as a cataclysmic amount of power was focused into the material plane, but only half of it came from within. The other half came from beyond, and the floating section of pristine white stone grew ten spans tall and took on a humanoid form. Tarrin and Jasana began to sweat, Julia and Dolanna started to tremble, and Tara and Rina dropped to their knees as the Circle brought to bear enough power to help the One complete the task, in seconds instead of years.

The light dimmed, and when it was over, a twelve span tall statue rested near the platform by the Heart. It was a human-looking male with feathered wings and plate armor, carrying a sword and a kite shield. It was the icon of the One, and it was whole.

With an explosive release of breath, Tarrin released them from the demand for power, and broke the Circle. Julia and Dolanna dropped to their hands and knees by Tara and Rina, both of which were laying flat on their backs, panting heavily. Jasana put her paws on her knees, her tail dragging the ground as she panted to recover herself. Tarrin was exhausted, but he wouldn't allow himself to look weak in the presence of the One. He was an ally in this, but that didn't mean Tarrin either liked or entirely trusted him. Kimmie, Mist, and Triana helped the twins and Julia to their feet, as Tarrin pulled Dolanna back up by her hand, and kept an arm around her to keep her steady until she felt well enough to stand. The rejuvenating aura of the Conduit made that recovery quickly, as the power of the Weave helped them regain their strength while they stood within its strongest point.

"It is done," the One stated, his wings flexing as he settled his shield on his arm. "The icon is whole. I am even now making contact with my faithful. I will instruct those not in the army to gather for war. Those in the army, I will tell to escape when it seems they can flee safely. Soon the Demon Lord will sense my presence, and then he will know that he cannot command my children in my stead. I dare say he will start killing them once he knows he cannot speak in my name to beguile them into obedience."

"Can't you just dismiss the Demon Lord? After all, *you* summoned him here," Haley asked, a bit harshly.

"Nay, I cannot dismiss such as he as simply as a Wizard can dismiss a summoned minion," he answered. "Even before this, it would have required an exercise in might. At my full strength, it would not have been assured, but it would have been very likely for me to succeed. Now, in my weakened state, with many of my faithful dead and many more doubtful and uncertain with my defeat, I lack the strength to force him from this plane."

"It wouldn't have been that easy anyway," Tarrin stated. "Gruz has a foothold in this plane now. It's been here too long. It would take the Elder God of this world to drive it out. And there isn't one."

"I think I would disagree with that assessment, but we can both accede that at this point, simply trying to banish the Demon Lord will not work."

Tarrin nodded. "Do any of your Priests know where he is right now?"

"I will check." He was quiet a moment. "My children in Verix state he is there. It is a fortified city on the east coast, near the mountains, and he has kept back many of his minions to guard him."

"He didn't march with the army," Kang grunted.

"He must really be afraid of Dolanna," Camara Tal noted to the Arakite general.

“No matter. We’ll smash this army and then march on Verix and finish the job,” Tarrin snorted.

“The army is vast, even without my children. Tens of thousands of Demons. Some can be banished, for they were summoned by my Priests, but those that remain will still be a threat, even without their magic.”

Tarrin waved his paw absently. “It won’t matter. They’re here to kill Dolanna to destroy the Weave, and they’ll never manage it.” He urged Dolanna forward a little with his paw, then, much to her shock, he forcefully pushed her from the Heart. She staggered out of the Conduit and nearly fell, had Haley not caught her.

When Dolanna left the Conduit, it shuddered, for there was no active will holding it in place, giving it conscious direction. Tarrin asserted himself, calling out to the Heart, and felt it respond. Upon him fell the heavy weight of maintaining the integrity of the Weave, like a anvil placed on each shoulder, and he found he had to concentrate actively on keeping the Weave whole at all times. Good Goddess, this was what Dolanna had to do every waking second, and still manage to function to assist the others? His respect for his mentor reached untold heights in that moment.

“Now they have to kill *me*,” he said with a sudden hiss. “And I’d like to see them pull off that miracle.”

“Dear one!” Dolanna protested. “It is my duty!”

“No, Dolanna, it was supposed to be mine. It’s my burden to bear, not yours. I can’t thank you enough for being there to shoulder it for me while I was gone, but I’m here now, and I’ll take it from here. You can have it back once the battle is over, and I go hunt down the Demon Lord. But since he’s not coming to this battle, my place is here.”

“But dear one, I have more experience. I can be of greater help functioning as the Heart.”

“I know you could, old friend, but this is something I have to do,” he said, shooing all his daughters out of the Heart. “If Gruz wants to destroy the Weave, he’ll have to kill me to do it. And to get to me, he’ll have to go through *you*, while I strike at him with impunity behind my walls. I *made* this Weave, Dolanna. Trust me, I know how it works, and it won’t take me long to get a handle on it. One.”

“Yes?”

“Speak with Kang. Understand our plans of defense, and march anyone you can get here in ten days here as fast as you can. Every soldier between the Demons and me matters.”

“I will endeavor to assist in any way possible,” he said simply. “My own survival is at stake here, along with yours. We are united in a common interest. You can be assured of my complete and total support by any means at my disposal.”

“Then get to work on it. I need a little time to attune myself to this Weave, so everyone just back off a little while. We’ll talk and reminisce when I’m done.”

Fireflash landed on his shoulder and chirped demandingly.

Tarrin chuckled. “Alright, you can stay, my little friend, just try not to disturb me.”

“Prrrotehct,” Fireflash hissed adamantly. “I willll prrrrotehct.”

“And I’m sure you’ll do a wonderful job,” he said, reaching up with his tail and stroking it over

Fireflash's head and neck.

And just like that, they were all dismissed. Some of them, mainly his daughters, looked a little flabbergasted at their rude dismissal, but they also knew their father. Though being with his family mattered, there was a much more important issue at the moment, and they didn't have very long to get ready for it. So right now, that was the most important thing.

And for a Were-cat, *right now* was all that mattered.

Chapter 10

Things simply did not add up.

Both armies together, added to the forces at Verix, did not equal the army he'd seen here at Pyros when he destroyed the One's icon. When he was here before, there were hundreds of thousands of Demons. Even taking into account the ones that his shadow may have killed and the ones summoned by the One's Priests, which could be banished back to the Abyss, there were still at least a hundred thousand Demons missing.

That was a huge, huge worry. One didn't just simply discount a hundred thousand Demons. They had to be somewhere on this world, and he'd better find them, and find them *fast*.

And it wasn't as if they could easily hide from him. It took him only two days to attune himself to his own creation, and another two days to understand how to use it. In just four days, he exceeded Dolanna's ability to use the Weave. In a way, the Weave *helped* him, and in another way, who he was made it easier.

This Weave lacked conscious direction, lacked will, which was why someone had to supply that will to it. But, it did have a kind of unformed awareness, a spark of elemental consciousness, something he recognized very quickly. This Weave *recognized* him, and because of that recognition, it seemed to try to assist as he sought to learn how to take control of it. Just as the voices and memories of the Weave back home were drawn to him, this Weave's infantile awareness seemed drawn to him, seemed eager to help him learn about itself. After those first two days of coming to a full understanding of the limits and abilities of his creation, and teaching himself how to divide his attention between exerting the force of will to maintain its integrity and focusing on other tasks, it had actually helped him understand the limits under which he would have to work while using this Weave, and the amount of power available to him.

It wasn't like home, that was for sure. The Weave there was the direct extension of Niami, and in a way, it was as powerful as she was. A *sui'kun* using the Weave in a way Niami approved could access *all* that power, giving a mortal power of a standing with a god. Here, this Weave lacked that incredible threshold. It was much weaker, only as powerful as Tarrin had been when he created it, so its power was little more than what he could exercise on his own, using his wings. But, the main difference was that this power was inexhaustible, neverending, and its coverage of the entire world meant that he had a virtually planetary range with his magic.

He had already started using that range. He had already begun harassing and aggravating the two armies marching on Pyros, forcing them to bog down and no doubt infuriating Shaz'Baket, who marched with the army approaching from the east. He wanted to start blasting them apart, but both armies were still filled with humans, and those humans were potential soldiers for *his* side, so he instead opted to harass and slow them down rather than start killing them. He had inundated both armies in a constant, pounding rain and heavy, soup-thick fog that moved with them, using one of the most powerful options at his disposal; the ability to alter and control the weather. The rain was so heavy and the fog so thick that the armies couldn't see ten spans ahead of them, a rain that saturated dry ground in moments, and a fog that would make it very hard for the Demons to see when the humans started fleeing. The One had told him that if he could give the humans a way to escape from those armies alive, they would. So, Tarrin killed two birds with one stone and both supplied them that cover while harassing the Demons. When the humans were gone, Tarrin would begin the wholesale attacks on those armies, to cripple and weaken them before they ever got within sight of

Pyros.

But still...he wasn't sure if it was going to be enough. Shaz'Baket was not stupid. He'd faced her before, and though he hated her, he respected her brilliant mind. He knew she would understand that any army she marched on Pyros would do so under constant assault from Dolanna, paying for every step closer to Pyros in blood. That was why those missing Demons concerned him. He was sure that Shaz'Baket had worked out some way to march in with a smaller force and then bring the rest of the army directly to the battlefield. Kyrienna's Gate spell showed him that it could be done with Wizard magic, but Shaz'Baket had to know that she wouldn't be able to use any kind of magic once she got here, when Dolanna could disrupt any magic except for Druidic magic, which did not exist here. So...how was she going to do it? If he could figure that out, he could stop it, and basically crush the smaller army that would get here with little trouble.

But that was the problem. Tarrin couldn't see how she was going to do it. Without magic, it seemed impossible. He would sense it if they approached from underground, or the air. Besides, if they got physically close, he'd sense it no matter what.

But, she had to have a way. She was too smart. She knew she didn't have enough troops in the armies he could see to guarantee a victory, so those missing Demons had to be part of her plan. And he knew that she wouldn't depend on the humans in her army, wouldn't give them the same weight of value she gave her Demons. For her, most likely, those humans were just expendable fodder to throw at the most heavily guarded positions to weaken them for the Demons that marched in behind the humans. So, it kept circling back to that one question. How was she going to pull off the impossible?

It ate at him, causing him to spend long hours in a circular train of thought, spend long hours in debate with Kang, Dolanna, Lorak, Camara Tal, Phandebrass, and High Commander Zebri, a female Elaran of the soldier caste, a very tall, very muscular, very intimidating woman with straight brown hair cut short, just under her ears, all hair below her ears shaved off, and a scar over her right eye. Zebri was the general of the Elaran armies here, a leader of her caste in the same way that Lorak was a very high ranking member of the magician caste, and she was a woman Tarrin learned quickly one had better take seriously. She had no sense of humor at all, and her entire life revolved around war. It bothered him a little; this Zebri was a soul that Tarrin fully expected to see fighting the endless, mindless wars on the ironshod blocks of Acheron after she died.

Seeing Lorak and Zebri standing side by side made him wonder how in the world they could be of the same race.

Nobody else could come up with a way she was going to do it either, leaving Tarrin to endlessly ponder on it, distracting him as he taught himself how to use this Weave.

That, he discovered, was not hard at all. In just one day, Tarrin had mastered this Weave to a degree that put him equal to Dolanna, for there was one critical difference between them; Tarrin *created* this Weave. Though his memories of his time as a god were hazy and incomplete, two things converged to give him enough knowledge to quickly learn how to use the power available to him. Firstly, he retained enough of his memory of that moment to understand, and secondly, that moment still echoed in the Weave as a memory, a memory that sought him out to show him those things he had forgotten. Just as the Weave of Sennadar, this Weave too absorbed the experiences and knowledge of those in contact with it, forming echoes in the Weave that a Sorcerer like Tarrin could call to him. Between what he already knew and what the Weave here supplied to him, he was able to very quickly gain a mastery of the power of this Weave over the second day, master his own creation.

Even though he did not sleep, because of the charm, he was never really alone. In turns, he spent time with all his children, his family, and his friends, as they came to keep him company at all times of the day and night. He caught up with his daughters, hearing about their time here as they searched for the shards. He

saw that Tara and Rina seemed even more mature now, more like adults and less like children, and Jasana was even more smug and arrogant...though not abrasively so. Jasana was one of the most powerful magicians alive, anywhere, and she knew it. That distinction made her more arrogant than her brother and sisters, but, in a way, he couldn't wait to see it when Eron brought her down a peg and showed her that her cherished power was nothing to him. His only son was still modest and amiable, so much different from his parents. He got to hear about how much of a pain Jasana was from Triana, Keritanima, and Allia, from her overbearing to her need to establish her dominance when in company. Those were pattern Were-cat traits, but what concerned Tarrin more than anything else was that she seemed to want to try to dominate his sisters. That would be a *cataclysmic* mistake. Keritanima and Allia may not have her power, but they wielded a different kind of power that Jasana seemed to not be taking into account; the power to complain to Tarrin about her. Tarrin *was* stronger than his daughter, and she'd better learn that just because Were saw her as an adult, she was still the child in certain ways within Tarrin's inner circle.

He also met Skairn, the leopard Wikuni that had gone with Keritanima. He was quite arrogant as Wikuni went, but his obedience to Keritanima was unquestioned and absolute, and that he could respect. He spent most of his time hovering near Kang, learning from the Arakite tactician the secrets of good military command.

It was also a good chance to catch up with Haley. The Were-wolf seemed to fully understand what Tarrin had done, and couldn't thank him enough. But, after that first apology, Tarrin couldn't go without giving Haley a friendly warning. "Haley, I want you to understand one thing," he had cautioned him. "Dolanna *did not* ask for what I gave her. I gave it to her on my own. It wasn't a declaration for you to give her a ring. I gave her what I gave her so she could make up her own mind. So, I suggest you tread very carefully."

"Tarrin, that you gave us a *chance* to see if it can work is all I care about," he said immediately and honestly. "I know Dolanna doesn't feel the same way for me I do for her, but now she can find out if it's because of what I am, or because of how she feels. No matter what happens, I'll always be in debt to you because of it."

And for Haley, that was that. It was nice to see him walking with her around the inner compound, her hands behind her as they talked about this or that. There was no tension on her face at all, no masked concern about getting too close, doing the wrong thing. Humans always had to have those things there when dealing with Were-kin, and despite her years of extensive experience, it was something that Dolanna had shared. But now, she was totally at ease, and the body language she gave off was...promising. Dolanna had always liked Haley, considered him one of her best friends. And perhaps, she'd always known his true feelings for her. But now, seeing them together, Tarrin didn't see a Were-wolf and a human, he saw a male and a female, and the male wasn't trying to push or impress the female. Haley knew Dolanna, knew her well, as did Tarrin. They both knew that the best way to go about winning her affection was to quietly declare intent, then let her make up her own mind. That was exactly what Haley was doing. No doubt they'd already had a long talk about how he felt about her, and now he was simply being Haley, patiently waiting for her to find her own feelings, be them favorable or not.

From what Tarrin could see, things were looking good for Haley. They were looking very good.

Skairn and Zebri were both rather arrogant, but one of the more satisfying moments for Tarrin was when those two got their first taste of *true* arrogance, when the dragons arrived. They reached Pyros three days after Tarrin, all ten of them with a very large complement of soldiers and Sorcerers, and the first wave of skyships that Tarrin had to grow back out to their full size. They were having a staff meeting that Skairn had managed to infiltrate to observe when Sapphire, Tenshale, and Nightshade were led into the compound, all three in human form. The meeting was cut off when she stepped up and stepped into the Heart, taking Tarrin's paws in her hands in greeting. "I apologize for the delay, my little one," she told him. "Jenna asked me to wait."

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Tarrin answered. “How many came?”

“All ten,” Tenshale replied. “As well as a force of six thousand soldiers, members of a Selani clan, and a force of Sorcerers. This world feels...bare,” he noted.

“Truly,” Sapphire nodded, looking around. “I see some old faces in this ensemble,” she noted, looking at them. “And some new. Kang, you are getting bristly.”

“My Lady Dragon,” Kang said with a short bow to her, and a chuckle. “I haven’t had time to shave today.”

“What must one do to have you speak in an intelligible tongue?” Zebri complained in Penali.

“Firstly you can request *nicely* for one to speak your words,” Sapphire retorted in flawless Penali. “But I’ve been told this is a language you can comprehend, with certain dialectal differences,” she added, switching to Sha’Kar.

“Just use Penali, Sapphire,” Tarrin told her. “The Elara have some...issues, with Sha’Kar.”

“It keeps reminding them they’re not the highest form of life in existence,” Jasana giggled.

“I still cannot accept that the Elara originate from your world,” Zebri said stubbornly.

“Reality is a harsh mistress,” Sapphire told her bluntly. “The Dura are from our world, the Orcs are from our world, the Elementalists are from our world, and many of the humans here are probably descended from humans from our world. That your ancestors could be from our world is not just possible, but probable. To cling to a false belief out of arrogant pride is both ridiculous and childish.”

“You would do well to remember that I am no child,” Zebri warned.

“Have you explained what a *dragon* is to them yet?” Tarrin whispered to Kang.

“I did, but they didn’t believe me,” he answered behind his hand. “I figured they’d figure it out when they got here.”

“What I would do well to remember is that to me, you are *insignificant*, biped,” Sapphire snapped, drawing herself up in a rigid, imperial stance.

“Sapphire, let’s not start a war here and now,” Tarrin warned. “Zebri has no idea just what you are.”

“Then we should show her,” Nightshade said, stepping well back from the platform and ending the spell keeping her in the human shape. To Zebri’s shock, Nightshade got bigger, and bigger, and *bigger*, until she took up almost the entirety of the inner compound, her shoulders not far from the base of her own tail as she coiled around the inside wall, then snaked her night-colored scaled head down to put her snout within arm’s reach of Zebri. The tall Elaran just gaped at her in awe. “Mind that I am *small* compared to Mistress Sapphire,” Nightshade told her in a calm, measured voice. “Mistress Sapphire could not even take her proper shape within this compound, or she would knock down the walls. So, biped, would you like to rephrase that last comment into something *much* more respectful?”

“What kind of mad magic is this?” Zebri breathed. “A being of such size is impossible!”

“Actually, Sapphire is about twice as big as Nightshade,” Tarrin noted evenly. “And you’d better start

thinking about an apology, or you might get stepped on. Literally.”

“I, I beg pardon, Lady Dragon,” Zebri said fearfully, bowing to Sapphire.

The blue dragon sniffed haughtily.

“We brought thirty ships for you to restore, Tarrin,” Tenshale told him quickly, changing the subject. “Wikuni crews and the Sorcerers assigned to each ship were also brought.”

“I can start on—Jasana!” Tarrin snapped harshly when his daughter jumped boldly up and onto the back of Nightshade’s neck, patting her scales. “That’s rude!”

“I don’t mind, Lord Tarrin,” Nightshade said demurely. “Would you like to go on a flight, Jasana? I’ve been given a task to perform, and it requires me to fly.”

“Would I!” Jasana gushed. “Let’s go!”

Triana looked about ready to call Jasana down, but Tarrin cut her off with a paw. “Just be back before sunset,” Tarrin told her.

“Certainly. I’ll report on the geography of the region when I return, Mistress.”

“Very well,” Sapphire told her.

Nightshade blew quite a few maps and papers around when she took off from the compound and quickly soared off to the south. “Milar’s staff, but that creature is *huge*,” Zebri noted in Elaran to Lorak, who was sitting beside her.

“I’d suggest we postpone this conference until Lady Sapphire and Master Tenshale are settled in and ready to join us,” Kang offered. “No doubt they need to be brought up to date on our current situation and readiness.”

“Yes, yes, it is perfectly fine with me, Kang,” Sapphire nodded.

Tenshale stepped towards Kang. “I need to see to the dispensation of the other dragons, and that will require you. As you know, only four of us can take the human shape.”

“Where are the others?” Kang asked.

“Waiting down at the receiving area,” he answered. “We had Kyrienna shrink them temporarily so they wouldn’t flatten the place. Besides, it was the only way to get them through the gate.”

“Then let’s go find them a good place to take their rightful size where they don’t trample anything.”

“Very good. And while we’re on our way, you can explain something that Lord General Darvon was talking about, concerning a tactic used in the War of Roses.”

Tenshale and Kang left the compound, already deep in conversation, and with Skairn following them just close enough to overhear every word they said.

“That male,” Sapphire sighed. “Sometimes I believe he was born with too many legs.”

“But you love him anyway,” Tarrin chuckled.

“The Eternal dragon help me, but I do,” she admitted. “Now, come say hello, my old friends,” she said, reaching a hand out to Keritanima, Triana, and Allia, who were all sitting next to each other.

The council broke up and became a reunion of sorts, as Sapphire caught up with the others, and was introduced to Zebri, Lorak, Kord, Orin, and Szath. Tarrin almost got knocked out of the Conduit when Fury charged in, nuzzling him and nickering to the hissing protests of Fireflash, who was just a bit jealous of the Firewing. But everything was fine when Tarrin scratched him between the horns, then deliberately took Fireflash off his shoulder and put him on top of Fury’s head. “Where have you been?” Tarrin demanded of her.

Fury whinnied derisively.

“She comes and goes as she pleases,” Dolanna told him. “Jasana was crushed when she found out that Fury does not hold her in high regard. She will only let Julia near her, but allows no one to ride her.”

“Fury,” Tarrin said disapprovingly. “I told you to be nice.”

She snorted, smoke billowing from her nostrils. She nudged her nose under his arm then pushed her flank towards him.

“I can’t, Fury. I’m in Dolanna’s place. I have to stay here. But, I tell you what,” he said, leaning close to her ear. “You could give Jasana a *ride* later,” he told her.

She backed up and regarded him with her glowing red eyes in surprise, then she narrowed those eyes, put her ears back, and brayed softly, nodding her head.

“Tharrin, meannn to Jassahna,” Fireflash accused, then he hissed in draconic laughter.

“It’s good for her. It teaches her that she’s not at the top of the food chain,” he said.

Jasana was, well...Jasana. His eldest cub was an adult now, but he could still see the cub in her, a cub desperately trying to prove herself, to find her own place in the sun compared to the long shadows cast by her father and grandmother. She was a young woman, barely more than a child, with enormous power, but lacking the wisdom to fully comprehend it. In some ways, she was still a very, very dangerous girl, but he knew that only time and experience would show her the path she needed to follow. He didn’t treat her much differently from his other cubs, but he had to admit, sometimes it was fun to mess with her.

Fury did that...Goddess, did she. After Jasana returned from the flight Nightshade gave her, Fury cozied up to her and lured her into riding her, then gave her the wildest ride of her life. Jasana was so startled, so worried about keeping her seat on the Firewing Pegasus’ bare back, that she didn’t consider using Sorcery to simply let go and get back down to the ground safely. Jasana gave him several glares when they got back, but said nothing.

The inclusion of Sapphire and Tenshale in the council did nothing to help answer the question of the missing Demons. They too couldn’t think of where they might be or how Shaz’Baket was going to pull off the impossible with the numbers they could see.

“Were she a human, I’d say she was being a maniac to march on Pyros with these forces,” Tenshale noted to Tarrin after going over the reports, as he and the old male talked privately. “Not with what’s here. She knows we’re heavily dug in here, and that we have a huge advantage with the Heart being here to power

the Sorcerers. Even if we count all the humans as enemy forces, it's still not enough. I would expect to see an army three times this size to guarantee a victory."

"And that's the problem," Tarrin said. "I don't see how she's going to do it."

"She's a *marilith*, Tarrin. They are very clever. There's no doubt she has a plan, and it's something that we've overlooked."

That was no lie. Tarrin couldn't stop thinking about it, even when he was spending private time with friends, family, and Mist. Though he was restricted to one place that was open and exposed, privacy was simply a matter of erecting a Ward. Wards were raised and lowered whenever he wanted private time, and it became a common sight to see a black dome around the Conduit's base, usually when he was with Mist. Despite his imprisonment, Mist didn't see that as any real barrier to resuming their relationship as mates... and neither did Tarrin really. Mist became a fixture in the inner compound, never far from Tarrin's side, and he found her presence quite comforting. With her around, he could take a moment to relax and focus on why he'd done everything he'd done to get to where he was, be with his family again. She wouldn't allow him to obsess over the maddening problem, and that was exactly what he needed. When one lost sight of what one was fighting for, it clouded the mind and made it harder to achieve the objective.

In those moments, it was quite good. He caught up with his children, hearing all about their efforts to find the shards of his sword, and heard from Eron about his time hiding on Sennadar. Jasana and the twins were quite shocked when they heard about what Eron did, that he'd managed to defeat Spyder, and that shock turned to absolute disbelief when he demonstrated how he did it—well away from Tarrin and the Heart, of course. Tarrin had wanted to be there when Jasana found out Eron could disrupt her magic, and it was worth it. The play of emotions over her face was priceless. He saw that Tara and Rina had matured even more in their time here, becoming smarter, more cautious, less the cubs and more the adults, but that was only natural. They were almost old enough that Kimmie would release them; for that matter, were they still at home, Tarrin had no doubt that they'd be preparing for that even now. But he saw that as soon as they got home, Kimmie would take them to the Hierarchs. They were old enough, and with the experience they'd received here, they now had the maturity to be adult Were-cats in the society of *Fae-da'Nar*.

Of course, there was time to catch up with others, and learn more about those he didn't know. One such conversation with Nightshade revealed much about her and her behavior, when he asked why she was so... infatuated, with Sapphire. "Oh, Tarrin, you don't understand at all," she told him. "Mistress Sapphire and Master Tenshale are *royalty* among dragons. They're dragons from one the fabled realms, the worlds the Eternal Dragon blessed herself. Dragons from your world are an order of magnitude more powerful than dragons from other worlds, so powerful that they can't even survive on worlds not very rich in magical energies. Such blessed individuals are treated with the utmost respect by all other dragons."

"You don't seem all that impressed by the other dragons," he noted with a dry smile.

"They're children, basically," she shrugged. "They may have enormous power, but they don't have the wisdom or experience to use it properly. Mistress Sapphire and Master Tenshale are *very* old. Even if they weren't blessed, that age would afford them tremendous respect."

"So, that's it."

"Yes. And if I serve Mistress Sapphire faithfully enough, maybe I can earn the privilege of making my new den on Sennadar," she said dreamily.

"Well, Sapphire doesn't really have a say in that, but I do," he told her, crossing his arms. "I'll tell you what. If we win and both of us live through this, I'll see to it that you're allowed to stay on Sennadar."

“You can do that?”

“I have some pull with people who can,” he answered. “As long as you don’t cause any trouble.”

“Really, Tarrin, what trouble could I cause? I’m a baby compared to most other dragons from your world.”

“I’m not talking about the dragons.”

“Posh, as if I’d get the peoples of Sennadar angry with me,” she snorted. “I’ve seen the power of the bipeds of your world, Tarrin. I’d be a fool for angering them enough for them to send someone like a Sorcerer to deal with me. After the destruction of my last den, I just want a nice quiet place where I can start another art collection. And I’ve heard there are many ruins about Sennadar where one can find some excellent pieces from lost civilizations.”

“As long as you don’t kill anyone for the art, you’ll be alright,” he told her.

“I wouldn’t do that. I might damage the art.”

Nightshade was...interesting. She wasn’t a nice girl, much like Shiika, but when one understood her and her personality, it was easy to deal with her, and Tarrin found himself taking a liking to her.

Another new face that Tarrin seemed to be warming to was Skairn. Triana couldn’t stand him and Jasana wanted to turn him into a radish, but they didn’t see him quite the way Tarrin did. Skairn was, oddly enough, more like Phandebrass than anyone else. He was devoted to the art of war utterly, but it wasn’t the way Zebri was, since Skairn didn’t seek to do war for the sake of fighting. Skairn was fanatically devoted to the throne, and all of his efforts were centered around the idea of being there to help defend Wikuna and the Queen whenever it was needed. That was an understandable motivation, and many officers and generals shared Skairn’s need to protect. But Skairn’s arrogance came from his belief that he knew better than the others. He didn’t agree with the methodology of the admirals and generals of the military, and refused to obey orders he didn’t think were good or correct. That was a bad trait in a military man, but after talking with Skairn a while, he started to understand the root of it, and respect the leopard for his integrity.

Everything Skairn did was rooted in love of country and allegiance to the Queen. It was why he obeyed her utterly, even when he thought she was making the wrong decision...because she was the Queen. But, his belief that he was right often got in the way, because he refused to admit he was wrong.

Easy enough to solve, Tarrin felt. He gathered Skairn together with a small force of fifty troops; Wikuni, Vendari, Knights, Elaran warriors, and Selani. They all looked at Tarrin curiously when they were summoned. “Skairn,” Tarrin told him.

“Aye, Lord Tarrin?”

“These are some of the best fighters in this army. The best of the Knights, the fastest of the Selani, the strongest of the Vendari, the most experienced of the Elara, most clever of the Wikuni. They’re yours.”

“I beg pardon, Lord Tarrin?”

“These troops are yours to command,” he told the leopard. “If you want to understand the art of being a general, then you have to know what it’s like to *lead* and not *argue*. You’ve never led men before, Skairn. I think after learning what it’s like to be in command, you’ll have a more respectful attitude of superior officers. It’s not an easy job, and these troops won’t make it any easier. They’re all grizzled veterans, they

know what they're doing. And if you mess up, they'll be sure to let you know."

"I, I'm honored that you trust me with the lives of others, Lord Tarrin," Skairn said uncertainly. "What mission is my unit to pursue?"

"You don't put together this kind of talent without an idea in mind, Skairn," Tarrin told him. "You have a job in the battle ahead, that's no lie. And it will be dangerous. The most dangerous task anyone will have."

"Sounds fun," one of the Knights said.

"A fitting task for a Vendari," one of the Vendari added. "Simple victories bring no honor."

"What are we to do, Lord Tarrin?" Skairn asked.

"I want you to find Shaz'Baket," he told them. "Eventually, she's going to abandon the rear and attack in the front lines with her army. It's her only real weakness, a need to be in the thick of combat. When she feels that she'll be more use spearheading an assault, she'll be open to attack. When that happens, I want your company to be right there to take her on. I want you to kill her."

One of the Knights whistled, but the Selani just looked enthusiastic. "A difficult task, Lord Tarrin. We won't know when or where she may do that...if at all."

"Welcome to command," Tarrin told him. "It's up to you to be there when she does it, Skairn. Think about it, ask Kang for some advice, and listen to your troops. They have more experience than you, and know what they're doing. I'm sure that as a unit, you'll be able to figure it out and be in position when it happens."

"It will be so," one of the Vendari, a brown saltwater Vendari like Szath, said with a simple nod.

"We can't thank you enough for this honor, Tarrin," one of the Selani said, grinning like a child. "A chance to battle the leader of the Demon army? I'm quite excited about this now!"

"We should withdraw to learn about this Demon and consider our options," Skairn said. "May we be dismissed?"

"Be my guest," Tarrin said, shoos them with his tail.

"Cute," Triana told him as she came over after Skairn and the others left. "Was that a good idea? That Wikuni isn't the first one I'd have picked for a job like that."

"It's time for him to show his hand," Tarrin shrugged. "Now he'll find out if all that arrogance is justified. But, he's going to discover that command isn't about just barking orders. The Selani especially will educate him about that, since they'll disobey him if he's stupid."

"He'll get a taste of what he dishes out."

Tarrin nodded. "We'll see how he handles it."

Triana chuckled. "This I want to see."

An excited Selani scout rushed up into the compound and started calling almost immediately. "Marshall Kang, Marshall Kang! The Dura have arrived!"

“I’m, surprised, I thought they’d be here tomorrow,” Tarrin grunted. “I’m glad they’re here, though. Bragg needed to be here days ago.”

“Kang will be overjoyed to see him,” Triana noted. “I heard while I was here that they get along very well.”

Tarrin nodded. “Those two are good friends.” He put his arm around his bond-mother and pulled her into the Conduit. “Let’s go take a look. I’ve been tracking the Dura ever since I found them, but I’m a little surprised they got here this fast. They must have went on a forced march since I checked on them yesterday. Up we go,” he said, his wings flowing from his back, and then the two of them lifted into the air. They rose up over the walls, high over the plateau, so high that the Pyrosian plain stretched out before them to the east. To the north, a rope-like formation of dark dots moved forward with a plume of dust behind them, a huge formation of Dura, marching in perfect lines as they approached Pyros.

“That’s a lot of Dwarves,” Triana noted, holding onto Tarrin’s shoulder as they looked to the north.

“That’s almost all of them,” Tarrin told her. “Outside of those Darax held back to protect the legacy of his people, that’s the entire Dura race marching towards Pyros. Just like what happened back home, thousands of years ago.”

“Let’s hope this time, there’s a different ending to the story.”

“Amen.”

A complement of Dwarves were brought to the central compound about an hour after the army was spotted, and Tarrin was a bit surprised to see them being led by Darax, Dain of the Dura. The young king was resplendent in his heavy plate armor, the Axe of the Dwarven King slung over his back. He led his generals, foremost of them being Bragg, the heavily scarred Dwarf who was the true genius behind the Duran forces. Much as Kang and Darvon were the greatest military minds of the humans, Bragg was the best tactician the Dwarves had. Darax and Bragg approached the Conduit, and Tarrin nodded to them.

“You’re late,” Tarrin told them.

“We’ve been breaking up armies tryin’ to march in on ye from the north,” Darax answered with a slight smile. “I see ye aren’t as dead as we’d heard.”

“Death is just an illness. Easily overcome if you know the cure,” Tarrin said dryly, which made Darax laugh. “I got a little present out of it this time, though,” he said, rubbing the white fur of his arm. “I thought you’d be staying at the Iron Mountain.”

“A Dain’s place be at the side of his men,” Darax said bluntly. “I left me best warriors among us back at the Iron Mountain to defend those who stayed behind, but this is where I need to be. I’d be a sorry Dain if I hid under me bed like a baby.”

“Aye. We’d have drug him out and strapped him to a mule if he’d tried,” Bragg noted, which made the other Dwarves laugh. “Ye’ve built quite an army here. Most of them look to be from yer world, not ours, though I’ve seen quite a few humans.”

“We have a vested interested in what goes on here,” Tarrin told them. “Our world was ravaged by Demons once, long ago. It’s why the Dura are here. We don’t want to see that happen to anyone else, even if it means coming here to fight. This may not be our world, but it is *definitely* our fight.”

“Aye,” Kang said simply.

“I nearly wet me codpiece when I saw one of those bloody huge blue beasts,” Bragg chuckled. “What manner of beasts they be?”

“Those are dragons,” Tarrin told him, motioning towards the human-looking, robed Tenshale. “Tenshale here is one of them, just in a magical human form. I’m sure he’d be happy to tell you all about them.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Tenshale said with a nod.

“We can see to the dispensation and deployment of the Dura right now,” Kang said. “I’m sure they’re tired, and would like to rest. We already have a section of the city set up for them to make camp.”

“Aye, it’s been a hard march,” Darax said. “And I’d really like to get me men settled in while ye catch us up on what the plan is and where we fit into it.”

There was little to do but wait. Wait out the days as the Demons approached Pyros, as Kang and Bragg integrated the Dura into the city’s defenses, wait as Tarrin continued to try to figure out where the other Demons were, and work out how they were going to take the city when they were outnumbered against an army behind heavy fortifications.

The Demons were officially outnumbered now. Fifty thousand Dura tipped the scales, even with the humans in the opposing army, and now the Demons were outnumbered by at least ten thousand. The infusion of troops continued, however, as more and more humans, followers of the One, arrived at Pyros in response to the One’s call and took up arms against the coming Demonic horde.

Those humans in the Demon army...what were they doing? Tarrin had slowed down their forces, gave them ample opportunities to escape with his rain and fog, yet not one had done so. Not a single one. He even consulted the One about the issue, and he too was unsure why they hadn’t escaped. “Truly, Lord Tarrin, I do not understand this. I have given them many omens that they need to flee, but to a man, they remain. Perhaps they are under some kind of mind control?”

“Over a hundred thousand men all under a spell? I don’t think so,” Tarrin replied. “Can you imagine how long it would take, even a Demon that specializes in control, like a Succubus? I doubt even Shiika could dominate so many so fast, and make them all hold.”

“Truly, but I can fathom no other explanation.”

“Maybe they be wantin’ to stay,” the scarred Bragg noted from across the table from where he was poring over a map of Pyros’ northern sectors with Kang, shooting any number of dark looks at the One, who had been the god of his mortal enemies his entire life.

“It may be so. Perhaps the Demons promised them something,” the One fretted.

“That would be a bargain no mortal would find fair when all is said and done,” Kyrienna noted, who had rejoined the host the day before. Phandebrass too was back, and Kyrienna kept an eye on him as he talked with Lorak and several Elaran and human Wizards, no doubt talking about Wizard magic. There was something odd going on between those two. Tarrin could see that Phandebrass represented a challenge to her, a Wizard of such towering reputation, a strange human that had burst into their Elaran world with his amazing abilities and stood shoulder to shoulder with the best they had. Kyrienna seemed the competitive type, but she also was too refined and cultured to be direct about her perceived rivalry with Phandebrass.

Tarrin could see that she would prove to be his better during the battle, proving to everyone that she was the best Wizard.

But there was more to it than that, he could see. Kyrienna was...intrigued by Phandebrass. Infatuated. But he could see that she didn't quite seem to know what to do about it. After all, Phandebrass was a human, and he was from another world. She didn't quite know how to talk to him. The few attempts Tarrin had seen her make were mostly about Wizard magic, where he overwhelmed her with exacting discussions of formulae and theories. He had no doubt she found it interesting, but he also could tell that it wasn't quite what she wanted to talk about.

They'd figure it out. Maybe Kyrienna could teach Phandebrass that there was more to life than magic and learning.

As the days marched by in a frenzy of preparation, other faces returned. Four days before the southern element of the Demon army would reach Pyros, Azakar trotted into the inner compound riding a new Brandywine Ro, the only horse big enough to carry him. The chestnut stallion with his shaggy fetlocks was wearing a full set of plate barding, and when it carried the massive Mahuut Knight, they looked like a walking iron works, over a ton of deadly steel, bone, and muscle. Azakar had gold filagree on his breastplate, which shocked Tarrin more than a little bit. That filagree and design on his breastplate marked him as a Lord General. He dismounted as more mounted Knights rode in behind him, taking hands in greeting as he approached the Conduit. "Tarrin, I've brought the last of the ships," he called. "As well as the rest of the reinforcements from Sennadar."

"It's good to see you up and about," Tarrin told him. "I think Darvon would have a few words with you over your armor, though."

"Darvon was finally given permission to retire, but not quite yet," Azakar said. "I don't understand why, but Karas chose me to take his place. From now until Darvon officially steps down, I'm his Liege General. When Darvon feels he's trained me enough, he'll retire, and the burden will be mine."

"Well, I think it was a good choice," Tarrin told him. "You're everything a Knight should be, Zak. Brave, intelligent, and skilled, but also modest and kind. You're what they had in mind when they founded the order."

"I think we'd disagree about that, Tarrin. I don't like it. I didn't want it."

"And that's why you're the perfect choice," Kang said as he stepped up. "Great men don't seek greatness. Greatness seeks them out."

"I just hope I don't make a fool of myself," Azakar said with a sigh.

"Never that, friend. Now, since you're the Liege General of the Knights, I think you need to be brought up to speed on what's going on. Come join the council and meet the rest of the command staff."

"Liege General? What's that, father?" Rina asked from where she and Tara were playing with Fireflash.

"I guess Darvon made it up, the way he made up my and Allia's titles, but I'd guess it means that Zak is second in command of the Knights. He'll be the Lord General when Darvon finally retires."

"Oh."

Azakar's arrival in Pyros was like a trigger that caused an absolute frenzy of activity. Defenses were

shored up around the northern sectors of the volcano to prevent the Demons from coming up and over the mountain. The walls were magically fortified to strengthen the stone, and the ships were fully shaken out and made airworthy as their crews trained ceaselessly to master flying the ships, and the defenders and magicians that would be on them practiced to get a feel for casting spells from the rail down to the ground below. The army was fully deployed, and everyone knew where they were to be and what they were to do. Just looking down at them from the plateau was a curious display of both the diversity and commonality of those here. Sennadite and Pyrosian humans, in the uniforms of their armies, played dice and cards with Wikuni and Dwarves. Selani and Vendari trained with Elaran soldiers, where no doubt the Elarans were the ones being taught the deadly fighting arts of the Dance and the Vendari style. Skyships soared high above as dragons swooped by them, keeping an aerial surveillance seeking out any advanced scouts from the southern army, the one that would arrive first since Tarrin had bogged down Shaz'Baket's main army to the east in an endless heavy rain. Wikuni artillery masters trained others in how to use their cannons, as Keritanima hovered nearby, as in a building near the inner compound that had converted into a makeshift library, Wizards from Pyrosia, Sennadar, and Elara pooled their knowledge, traded spells, and learned from each other. Phandebrass and Kyrienna were the shining stars in that building, as the most learned Sennadite Wizard and the most experienced Worldwalker were head and shoulders above most others. Some Elaran Wizards had more education than them, but not more experience, and that was where it counted. The High Masters of the Wizard's Council of Elara had more extensive libraries of spells and more time to ponder the deepest mysteries of Arcane magic, but they couldn't come close to the abilities of Phandebrass and Kyrienna when it came to actually *using* Wizard magic. Phandebrass could cast any of the High Masters under the table, still casting long after they wore themselves out.

From where Tarrin could see, though, everything looked ready. He, Allia, and Keritanima sat in on the final major planning session, as the generals went over the overall strategy...though they weren't the only ones there. Anyone with any kind of input was there, including Sapphire and Tenshale, Nightshade and Triana, Phandebrass, Lorak, Kyrienna, Ianelle, Tsukatta, Haley, Dolanna, Miranda, and Darax, as well as three Wikuni generals who had come with Azakar, a bobcat, a wolf, and a large bear Wikuni. Kang began by unrolling a huge map of Pyros and setting it down. "The last of the fortifications are installed," he announced, "so now it's just building up what's already there to make things as hard as possible for the Demons. Since Tarrin doesn't really attend most of our meetings, we're going to go over the entire plan so he knows what's going on."

"I've been busy," Tarrin told him. "It's not easy keeping a rainstorm in place for six days, Kang."

"I'll bet Shaz'Baket is waterlogged by now."

"She's furious, but that's beside the point. They can't take a single step without sinking to the waist in mud, so the bulk of their forces isn't going to be here when the southern army arrives."

"Nice," Darax chuckled.

"This is why nobody crosses the *katzh-dashi* back home, Dain Darax," Kang told him. "You don't irritate people who can control the weather."

"Aye, I can see the truth of that."

"Anyway, Tarrin, this is what we're going to do. Since defending this compound and you is the ultimate goal, everything radiates out from here. We have four lines of defense. The outer wall will be the least manned, holding mainly catapults and magic-users, with enough forces there to protect them. Their job is to harass the opponent until they reach the wall, then retreat. That wall has no gate, and our magicians have done admirably in making it unbreakable."

"I don't get it. If it's so strong, why not defend it?" Jasana asked curiously.

“Because, little lady, it’s nothing but an obstacle. The scaffolding the defenders will use is simple wood, and it will be destroyed when they pull back, giving the enemy no way to use the wall to its advantage. That wall is there only to force the Demons to climb it, and they won’t be able to move any siege engines or heavy equipment past it. I know most Demons won’t need it, but those humans in the army *will*. It’s going to slow those humans down considerably. It’s going to be impossible for them to engineer moving any heavy equipment over an impenetrable wall that’s going to be open to attack from *this* wall,” he said, pointing at the second wall, which was close to the first. “This wall is just out of the range of most spells, but *easily* within range of the Wikuni cannons. Anyone coming over that wall has to cross this no-man’s land filled with traps and obstacles and reach the second wall, facing enemy fire, dragon attacks, and magical assault from the air the whole time. The first wall prevents an easy retreat, and there’s nothing out there to grant cover.”

“The first wall is just there to pin them inside the bailey,” Rina reasoned, looking at the map. “Give them no room to maneuver.”

“Precisely, my dear,” Kang nodded. “This bailey will be a killing ground. This wall will be manned with every type of ranged weapon we have. Artillery, catapults, archers, Wikuni musketmen, magicians, Duran crossbowmen, everything. Every step the Demons take is going to cost them dearly.”

“The third wall is a more conventional kind of defense,” Azakar began when Kang looked to him. “But up to a point. Since we have so much wall to defend, there’s only going to be scouts, artillerymen, and ranged attack forces on most of it, with the infantry forces in the inner bailey ready to move. When Demons approach parts of the wall, defenders will rush to that area. That way we don’t try to defend the entire wall, only those parts of it under attack, always holding enough reserves back to respond if the Demons split up to attack other parts of the wall. If the second wall is breached, everyone will retreat back to the third wall, which will hold the majority of the reserves. The bailey between those walls holds the moat for the ships, so it’s an added obstacle. The rest of the cannons are on this wall, the long range ones that they can fire at anything right up to the walls.”

“Aye, my artillery masters can fire at trajectory from the third wall and land a cannonball anywhere from the second bailey all the way out past the first wall,” the Wikuni Marine General Zain said, a bobcat Wikuni with a missing left fang. He’d arrived with Azakar, and was the commander of the artillery school. It was said Zain could land a cannonball on a dinner plate from any range, on the first shot. He had a talent for it.

“If the third wall is breached, the inner wall is the last major line of defense. All our remaining reserves will be here, as well as our best warriors and our mounted cavalry. Also, Lord One has agreed to participate in the defense of the lower plain should they reach that far, meaning the Demons have to contend directly with a god to get up here.”

“Yes, I will raise my sword and shield and smite our common enemy,” the One affirmed. “Protection of this site is of utmost importance, for all our sakes. It must be protected, and I will lend my sword to that defense. My power is still weak yet, but I can still wield my sword and use what power I do command to defend this inner compound. During the battle I will be doing what I can where I can with my divine power to help our cause, but if they penetrate to the inner areas, I will take up arms and fight if need be.”

“They’ll defend the lower plain leading up to here while Duran mountaineer specialists man the volcano’s fortifications to defend any approach over the volcano’s slopes. That rings the inner compound with defense. Miranda will be here to defend the inner compound, to use her ritual magic to banish large numbers of Demons if it comes to it. Have you prepared the area?”

“Aye, Zak,” she told him. “I consecrated ground for a shrine, and there are enough Wikuni here now to allow my Mistress to enact her power directly in this world. I can perform the ritual.”

“And I also can directly enact my will here,” the One added. “Because I am a god and not a Priest, I cannot enact the ritual Lady Miranda can use. That requires a mortal, and I have no High Priest here capable of the task. However, I can banish Demons directly, and not exhaust myself. I understand that defending the Weave is the lynchpin of defeating the Demon Lord, so I will use all of my power to keep it safe. If, by some extraordinary means, they push past the defenders below, I will return here.”

“Good. If they penetrate all our defenses and breach the walls of the inner compound, the last line of defense is *you*, Tarrin.”

“Aye. Lad, we don’t want you using your magic unless they directly threaten you. You’re our strongest weapon, but we can’t let you wear yourself out and find yourself without any strength if they reach you. So, lad, you stay out of it.”

“But you’re going to need some major firepower,” Tarrin told him.

“Aye, that’s what she’s for,” he said, pointing at Jasana. “Put *her* in the Conduit with you and let her be the one to strike at the enemy. Dolanna told me she’s as strong as you. Well, if she’s in there with you, she can put the hammer on the Demons, and that leaves you fresh and ready if they get too close, capable of defending yourself.”

“It is a very wise idea, dear one,” Dolanna told him, heading off any objection. “Jasana can be the scythe and allow you to be the spear. She can sweep down the Demons and allow you to hold back all your power for more precise attacks.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Tarrin said flatly. “Jasana has my strength, but not my endurance. If anyone is going to strike first, it’ll be me. I can pull back and rest while Jasana stays fresh to protect me if needs be,” he said, holding up a paw over the coming objections. “Besides, at the beginning, I already have a plan that’s going to involve all four of my daughters. When we Circle, we can dish out some serious magic, and it won’t tire us out. Once that’s done, I’ll pull back and rest and allow the rest of my daughters to continue fighting, that way I’m fresh and ready if they get too close.”

“That’s acceptable,” Kang said with a nod. “As long as you’re not out there using up all your strength, that’s what’s important. If they get to you, Tarrin, you *must* be able to defend yourself.”

“What do you intend to do?” Bragg asked.

“I’m honestly not sure yet. It’s going to depend entirely on where the Demons are and how many there are. I’ll basically just wing it. I’m good at that.”

“My heart sometimes cannot take your improvisation,” Dolanna laughed lightly.

“How are the dragons and flying ships going to work in this?” Jasana asked.

“They will basically roam freely in groups of two or more,” Zebri answered. “No dragon or skyship will be alone, for mutual protection. Two dragons and five skyships will be held back in reserve. Each skyship will have a *da’shar* aboard who can accept commands, to strike where the generals call. Dolanna will be the one to call commands to the skyships. An Elaran will be the one to call targets to the dragons. Have they chosen the magician yet?”

“My sister Neh is going to do it,” Kyrienna noted. “She’s quite adept at the sending spell.”

“What about the humans in the Demon army?” Eron asked. “The ones that won’t leave?”

“Sadly, I must declare them enemies,” the One answered. “I have repeatedly warned them to flee, but they will not. I do not understand why. If they come here and raise arms against us, they must be defeated as any foe.”

“I know that can’t be easy,” Miranda told the One, a little compassionately.

“I do not wish to bring harm to my own, but if I must sacrifice some to save all, then that is what must be done. I will find no pleasure in it, however.”

“And that’s basically that,” Kang stated. “Our greatest liability is the amount of wall we have to defend, but Zak’s idea of holding the main force in a central location and deploying them only to the sections under attack cuts down on our vulnerability.”

“Then why not pull back and concentrate everything?” Jasana asked.

“Because the enemy force is too large, and we can’t gamble that Shaz’Baket has a trick that would let her get within striking distance of Tarrin,” Kang answered. “We have to wear them down *before* they get too close, keep the Demons as far from the inner compound as possible. She’s too dangerous. Our battle plan was designed around the fact that she’s leading the enemy army. We do *not* take her lightly.”

“Wise,” Dolanna murmured.

“She won’t get anywhere near Tarrin,” Mist hissed, her claws extending. “I have to pay that bitch back for what she’s done to my son and my mate.”

“You’ll have to get in line,” Azakar told her. “There’s quite a few of us who want to take a bite out of her, myself included.”

“Tarrin set Skairn and some elite soldiers to shadow that Demons and kill her if she leaves the safety of the rear area,” Kang told Mist.

“Then I’ll have to go through them,” Mist snorted. “Nobody lays a finger on that bitch but me.”

“That’s not going to be a healthy attitude here, mother,” Kimmie told her carefully. “I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if they helped you kill her? After all, she’s bound to have powerful bodyguards. It wouldn’t be wise to go after her alone.”

“I guess that would be alright. But that bitch is *mine*,” Mist said hotly, balling one of her huge fists and shaking it at the assembled command staff. “I’m going to rip her heart out and stuff it down her throat.”

“We should warn Skairn he has one more in his unit, and one he’d better not try to order around,” Haley chuckled.

“Let him figure it out,” Jasana giggled.

“There’s just a matter of deciding who stays in here to defend Tarrin,” Azakar said.

“I’ll be staying,” Haley said. “I have a promise to keep,” he added, looking at Dolanna.

“I have vowed to defend Tarrin-*san* at all costs, so my place is here, where I can honor my word,” Tsukatta said.

“Tarrin already told us we’re staying in here,” Keritanima grunted, patting Allia’s shoulder.

“No, your Majesty, it wasn’t just Tarrin. You should not be out there putting yourself in jeopardy. If you were injured, it would demoralize your Wikuni troops. We can’t risk that,” Kang warned her. “And Tarrin will need the absolute best warriors in here with him if the Demons get this close, so naturally Lady Allia should remain here.”

“Such a sweet talker, Kang,” Allia murmured.

“Besides, I need some company. A delicate lady like myself shouldn’t be left alone with such rough-looking scoundrels,” Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

“You’re worse than they are,” Keritanima accused.

“I think you’d better revise that statement, since I’ll be here as well,” Camara Tal stated. “And Koran. He’s going to lead the Sorcerers staying here if it comes to it.”

“I don’t think I’m much of a lady,” Koran Tal objected.

“Well, naturally, you’re one of the ladies keeping me company, Camara,” Miranda teased. “And Koran? No comment.”

“I love you too, Miranda,” he said acidly.

“I say, I’d love to stay here, but I’m needed more out there, I am. But I can set a Gemjump spell that would allow me to return to the compound with a single word, it will,” Phandebrass announced. “That way I can do what I can where I can, but be available at a second’s notice.”

“I’ve already deployed a force of Knights, the Imperial Guard of the Legions, and the best of each individual army to remain in the inner compound as the last line of defense,” Kang added. “My Legions are extensively trained in defensive tactics, and you’ll find them an excellent anchor for the others to hold the inner compound.”

“And ye’ll find that nothing is tougher to crack than a wall of Dura defending a line,” Bragg added. “The stone of the Iron Mountain is in our bones. The Demons can crash against us all day.”

“Eron, you’re staying here,” Tarrin told his son.

“Aww! Father, I can fight!”

“I know you can, but there may come a time when your unique abilities may matter more here than out there. If Shaz’Baket has worked up some way to get in here with magic, I’m going to need you.”

“Alright,” he sighed.

“What ability?” Kang asked curiously.

“My son can stop all magic around him, at will,” Tarrin said, rather proudly. “He’s the ultimate shield against any surprises Shaz’Baket might have in store. As long as he’s careful not to get *me* tangled up in his ability, he can protect the inner compound from any kind of magical attack.”

“I’ve been practicing, father. I think I can kind of pass you over when I do it,” he announced.

“A formidable ability,” Kang said with a nod. “Your father is right, young Eron. This is the best place for you to be.”

“I would think that you could protect yourself, my dear one,” Dolanna smiled.

“I’m going to have other things on my mind, Dolanna. I’d much rather have Eron here to help, so I can focus on killing Demons rather than protecting myself. Besides, it puts him here if it comes to a fight. Not many can face down Eron when it comes to blows.”

“He had better not be easy to defeat in battle,” Allia said dangerously. “Not after his father and me spent all that time training him.”

“I won’t embarrass you, Aunt Allia.”

“You had better not, or I will take you from your father and give you *real* instruction, without his soft sentimentality.”

“I wouldn’t call learning under father soft,” Eron laughed. “If I could scar, I could show you some doozies. He once cut my arm off.”

“You struck the arm off your own son?” Zebri asked in surprise.

“He wasn’t paying attention,” Tarrin shrugged. “That’s the price you pay for not paying attention. Better to lose an arm to me and learn your lesson than lose your head to someone who won’t give you a second chance.”

“Truly,” Allia nodded in agreement.

“I know that feeling,” Jasana growled, looking at Triana.

“Were-cats are very...direct, Zebri,” Dolanna told her. “Their unusual racial abilities give them a different outlook on things like pain and injury. They can only be truly harmed by magic or silver, so the use of what might seem barbaric punishments are the norm for them. After all, they can do their children no true harm, and the memory of the pain is a very healthy motivator to prevent making the same mistake.”

“Ah.”

“All that’s really left is to assign each division to a location,” Azakar said.

“Then let’s get to work,” Kang said. “I’d like to make one last tour of the fortifications to make sure we haven’t missed anything. How long do we have, Tarrin?”

“Three, maybe four days until the southern army gets here,” he answered. “The main force is six or seven days away.”

“That should be plenty of time,” Kang nodded. “I don’t think the southern army will be much of a danger. I doubt they’ll attack without Shaz’Baket.”

“I’m not sure,” Tarrin said quietly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they did.”

The meeting broke up, but Jasana hovered nearby, then sat down inside the Conduit with him. “What is it, cub?”

“What’s really going to happen, father?” she asked, in the manner of the Cat. “I don’t think you’re holding much to the plan. I know you. You could wipe out most of the army by yourself. Why are you holding back? What’s going on?”

Without a word, he enveloped Jasana with Sorcery, brought out his wings, and lifted them high, high over the city, so high they were just below the clouds. Jasana showed no fear on her perch of solid air, hanging her feet over the edge and leaning back on her paws. “So, father, what’s really going on? Why play this game?”

“Because it has to be done,” Tarrin said, hovering near her. “You don’t know Shaz’Baket, cub. Not the way I do. I hate her for what she did to Eron, but I *never* let that blind me to the fact that she’s brilliant and she’s dangerous. She’s marching on us, despite knowing that we can obliterate her army. By the trees, cub, I could be blowing large chunks out of her army right now from here, but I’m not sure what’s going on yet. She wouldn’t bother marching on us if she didn’t have a plan. And it’s as if her being outnumbered doesn’t matter at all.”

“So, why aren’t we blowing her army to pieces? Wouldn’t that help?”

“It would help, but it wouldn’t help in the long run, cub. It might just be exactly what she wants, and if I destroy too much of her army, it might cause her to turn away, cub. I *do not* want that. I want them to attack Pyros,” Tarrin said. “Whatever Shaz’Baket has in mind, it has to be something that will make our defenses and our army pointless. She wouldn’t be coming if she wasn’t confident she can get around our advantages. That’s one reason I’m not doing it. The other is because those Demons must carry out their attack here.”

“I think it’s a mistake, father. We have a chance to kill off some of the enemy army.”

“You’re thinking in the moment, cub. I’m looking a little past that. Cub, if I lash out from here and wipe out a large swath of her army, it might cause her to break off the attack and take what forces she has to Verix, where I’ll have to go through them to reach Gruz. Besides, I’ll bet Shaz’Baket is asking herself the same question. Why *am* I not taking chunks out of her army? I don’t want her to find an answer to that, cub. I want her to stew on it. Maybe it’ll keep her distracted long enough for us to figure out what she’s up to.”

“Well, it doesn’t make much sense to me, but I trust you, father.”

“That’s so good to hear, cub,” he said dryly.

“So, what about what we’re going to do? Are we going to go by Kang’s plan?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “Like I said, Shaz’Baket has something planned. I can feel it. Kang’s plan isn’t going to hold up to whatever surprise she has for us, at least as far as you and me go. I’m sure his battle plan will protect the city, but there’s going to be more going on than that. You and me, cub, we’re going to be dealing with whatever the Demoness has up her sleeve. After all, she *must* have something. She wouldn’t bother coming all this way just to fight a hopeless battle.”

“I think you’re worrying too much about it, father. Just let her come. Let her spring her trap. Between you and me, what could she possibly do that we couldn’t deal with?”

“Cub, that arrogance of yours is going to be your downfall,” Tarrin told her bluntly. “You may be a *sui’kun*, but you’re still *mortal*. You’ll die just as fast as an Aldreth villager if someone sticks a knife in the right place. You’re making the last mistake you’d ever want to make against someone like Shaz’Baket.

You're *underestimating* her. Don't *ever* do that. If you do, she'll beat you down like a dog. And don't ever forget it."

"I'm not underestimating her, father. I just don't see how she could possibly threaten us."

"That's underestimating her, cub. You'd be amazed at how resourceful she is, or how intelligent. I expect her to surprise us all. And we have to be ready for that, at a moment's notice. That's why I'm not going to wear myself out taking bites out of her army until she's here. I don't want to put myself in a position where I'm not ready for her, at *any* time. And when she gets here, I'm going to be ready for her, even when it looks like I'm busy with something else. And you'd better be ready too."

"Well, I think it's not necessary. I'd rather protect the soldiers here helping us than put them at risk staying on guard for something that may not happen."

"That's the Cat in you talking, cub. What's going on is more important than what's happening *right now*. I know I'm taking a risk, but it's not as much of a risk as attacking them would be. And all this, cub, this is just a distraction from the real goal. Pyros isn't the main focus, cub. The Demon Lord is. Defending the Heart is important, but remember *why* we're doing it."

"So we can use magic here."

"No, cub, we're doing it so the Demon Lord is kept powerless," he answered. "That's what all this is really all about. That's why Shaz'Baket's coming. Look past the moment, cub. Look at the big picture. Shaz'Baket is coming here to destroy the Weave and restore the powers of the Demons on this world, which would make them almost unstoppable. We're trying to prevent that. When all *this* is over, then the real fight's going to begin, when I go to Verix and kill the Demon Lord. Half of what's going on here is just luring in as many Demons as possible so we can kill them without them getting in the way when I go after Gruz. Every Demon that survives this battle may be another enemy I have to plow through to reach Gruz when I go after him. It's much safer killing them here, from a defensive position where we have the advantage, than it will be there, where the Demons control the ground and have the advantage. Do I like it, cub? No. I know I'm putting the lives of these people at risk, and more will die because of it. I have enough blood on my paws, I don't need anymore, but it has to be done. Because in the big picture, we need to wipe out as many Demons as we can. And if we start killing them before they get here, they may break off the attack and focus on defending Verix. That will make it easier for us here and now, but it'll make it harder for us down the line, when it's really going to matter. I hate that some of our own are going to die because of it, but when you look at the big picture, you see that those sacrifices are critical for our ultimate success. It's never an easy choice, but it's a choice that has to be made."

"I...I see, father. I never realized," she said, breaking off and looking down. "I never realized being a general would mean you have to make such hard choices. I thought you just told men where to go."

"No, cub, it's about gambling with the lives of the men and women under you. Go talk to Kang, or Zak. They'll tell you that it's a world of difference between pushing little wooden counters over a map and making battle plans, then seeing the real people those little pieces of wood represented about to go into battle and die. All we can do is ensure that any lives lost aren't lost in vain, that it counted for something, and that we honor their sacrifice by carrying through to ultimate victory."

"This isn't quite as fun as it seemed to be this morning," she sighed.

"Welcome to the real world, Jasana," Tarrin told her quietly, dropping down just a bit and putting his white-furred paw on her shoulder. "It's harder for me than it is for the others," he admitted. "To *know* that I can blast a good chunk of her army and save lives here is always in the back of my mind, and it's going to make me very angry when the Demons get here and people start to die. But I know that it has to be done,

cub. We have to lure them in and kill them here, and that means leaving them alone until they're in the trap. Once we have them here, and I'm sure we've neutralized whatever trick Shaz'Baket has for us, we can unleash ourselves on the Demons. But not until then."

"Then why slow Shaz'Baket down?"

"To give us some extra time," he answered. "And I was trying to give the humans a chance to run, but they won't leave. We needed to shore up our defenses, and the rain was the perfect way to slow them down while giving the humans a chance to escape. Besides, if I did nothing, Shaz'Baket would see that as strange. She knows I can reach that far. If I didn't do something, she'd wonder why, and maybe pull her forces back. And that's not what I want."

"Father. You once said that if we kill the Demon Lord, that all the Demons he summoned would be banished. Why waste time killing them here if we can just kill the Demon Lord and banish them all?"

"I thought of that, cub, but it's a problem much like Shaz'Baket," he answered. "If we kill her, we win, the army will fall apart. Demons don't cooperate well without something like a *marilith* or a *balor*, something they obey out of fear. So, to beat the army, we kill Shaz'Baket. But to get to Shaz'Baket, we have to go *through* the army."

"Ohhh, so the more we kill here, the fewer will be in the way when you go after it," she realized.

"Yes, cub. I'd have preferred him to be here so we could kill it, but it either knows what I'm carrying or it's confident Shaz'Baket can succeed without it being here. If it had come, it would have made this much —" He cut off when he felt a sudden shift out there. It took him a moment to understand what he was feeling. It was the other half of his sword. It had just moved a large distance in a very short time, and it moved towards him. Tarrin considered it a moment, then realized that his shadow was coming this way, in leaps and bounds, most likely using magic to travel a large distance. It was coming right towards him. Clearly, it intended to come to him...but why? Why now? It had to know he'd been back, for days now, and it ignored him. It was going by itself now, obviously having gained enough power from the Demons to begin to think for itself. Had it completed some task it had given itself, and now had the time to come to him?

He'd find out in about five minutes, from the feel of it.

"Cub, we should get down," he told Jasana. "My shadow is moving this way. It's coming to Pyros."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure how it's doing it either. It's using magic to travel."

Tarrin brought them back down and set Jasana on the platform, but he felt his shadow jump a tremendous distance in an instant, going from hundreds of leagues away to just a few longspans to the southeast. Before he could even tell the others it was coming, he felt the shard of the sword lunge again, and Tarrin's shadow winked into being directly in front of him.

It didn't look anything like he remembered. It was still a shade, a being of shadows, but it had substance and depth now, a mirror image of Tarrin with gray skin, black clothing, and glowing red eyes. But there was more. There was a *presence* about the shadow, a feeling that it was more than a magical construct. Tarrin sensed in that instant that the shadow had absorbed enough magic, had experienced enough through its tasks that it had gained a spark of self-awareness. It was more than a simple magical force now, it was a semi-sentient magical creature with intelligence.

It didn't say a word. It raised a gray paw, and Tarrin felt something *jerk*. Instantly, something appeared in that raised paw, something that made Tarrin's heart skip a beat.

It was Tarrin's half of his sword.

The shadow turned as if to flee, then vanished like it had never been.

Tarrin was thunderstruck. He was beyond stunned, he was totally immobilized by the absolute impossibility he had just experienced, something that went completely beyond the fact that the shadow had just stolen his half of the sword, and now could reassemble the weapon and reawaken the power it contained. It went beyond that. The theft of the shard was really nothing that concerned Tarrin too much, for he could get that back, and besides, he trusted his shadow. It was how it was done that floored Tarrin, leaving him to gape at Triana in shock, who could only stare in disbelief in return.

He could only gawk at Triana, his mind totally numb from the implausibility of what they had just witnessed. Haley ran up, Jasana gasped and looked to Triana, then her father, but the two Hierarchs could only stare at each other and try to come up with some kind of explanation to explain the impossible. He was so shocked he barely registered the sudden influx of power that told him that his shadow had restored the sword, and now wielded the power it contained. He felt it bound away to the east, towards Verix, towards the Demon Lord. Even in his stunned state, he realized that the shadow meant to do war upon the Demon Lord by itself, using the power of the sword to take on the army protecting their master. Tarrin was too busy, though, trying to find an explanation for the miracle they had all just witnessed.

But there was no explanation. There was no answer to what Tarrin's shadow had done, how it had managed it.

Tarrin's shadow had used *Druidic magic*.

Chapter 11

Pacing. Back and forth, step, step, step, silent gray feet ghosting over knee-high grass that shifted with the movements, but made no sound.

Back, and forth.

Back, and forth.

Some blades of grass and their seeded stems shuddered and drifted to the ground when sliced through by a black sword, a sword that almost seem to glow with hidden power. The grass settled into the wavering sea of grass, grass growing on a flat-topped ridge that overlooked the port city of Verix. The sun was high in a sky devoid of clouds, a sun that shimmered summer heat down upon a dry sea of grass, which had not seen rain for days. The high grass slowly became shorter and shorter as the sword held within a paw inadvertently sheared the grass in the path of the holder's pacing, until a long trail of trampled grass became clear and open.

Back, and forth.

Back, and forth.

Back, and forth.

Minutes became hours. Hours became days. For two days, the shadow paced along that same line, unmolested by those in the city for fear of his power, unsure of what he was doing, unaware that it was now over, no matter what they did...it was just a matter of cleaning them out of Verix. They had been defeated the instant the shadow had reclaimed the sword. They were afraid to face him, afraid to abandon their defenses, allowing the shadow to lay siege to Verix all by himself, since the shadow seemed unwilling to come in after them.

But there was a method to the madness. Those days pacing the ridge had been important days, and what was more, those were days when the attention of the Demon Lord was firmly affixed in one place, to one person, watching for an attack that did not come.

The Demons. They were afraid. They could feel the power. They knew what he had. They knew he meant to attack Verix. But they didn't know why he had not done so the instant he arrived, why he paced the ridge day and night, step by step, pacing, pacing, pacing. But it served its purpose. With the sword held tightly in a gray paw, he was keeping every eye on him, keeping all the Demons in fear, but keeping Gruz unsettled.

Within Verix, inside a grand palace raised for its occupant, there was another being pacing back and forth, on a balcony overlooking the land, in sight of the pacing shadow. The feet pacing back and forth within that palace were massive and unnatural, dog-like paws so wide across four men could put their feet into the print they would leave behind. Those were the feet of Gruz, the Demon Lord of the *glabrezu*, a Demon of unmatched power and intelligence. But that intelligence was baffled, unsettled, confused.

Why did the shadow refuse to attack?

Gruz wanted that sword, but it was now being held in the paw of the one being on the entire planet that Gruz could not kill easily. If it had been in anyone else's possession, even the damnable Tarrin Kael who had returned to Pyrosia as a *mortal*, it would have been a simple matter to retrieve it. But not that one.

Why didn't it attack? With the power of the sword, it could shear through the defenders and challenge Gruz himself, but it did not. It simply stood on that ridge, hour after hour, day after day, pacing back and forth like a predator waiting for a treed squirrel trapped in a solitary tree in an open meadow to come down and make a run for it. The Demon Lord's vast intellect couldn't understand the reason for it. It had spent days, weeks, months systematically killing Demons, in some kind of plan that even the Demon Lord couldn't fully comprehend. It had also been saving villages and towns from Demonic occupation, breaking up marches where Demons emptied villages to move the mortals to large cities, and most unusual of all, it had been abducting humans, seemingly at random, and spiriting them away.

But it wasn't as random as it seemed. The humans the shadow took were Sorcerers. It seemed to instinctually understand that they needed to be kept alive, so it worked very hard to save them, even as the Demons were trying to find and kill them.

It seemed to have completed those plans, and with shocking ease, it had killed the *hezrou* that had retrieved one shard of the sword, then somehow wrested the other half of it from the Were-cat. It had restored the Sword of Fire, and now held that dangerous artifact in its paw as it stalked the ridge.

That in itself was...almost unbelievable. The Were-cat was not an enemy to take lightly, and he wouldn't have simply given that shard up. The shadow had attacked his own creator and stolen the shard, and had managed to do it without being destroyed. It had either tricked the shard from its creator with guile, or had ambushed him by pretending to be amiable.

Either way, it now had possession of all that power, the power that was once possessed by a god. And the sword, having no master, now obeyed the one who held it, just as Gruz had hoped to do.

Why not attack, when it had an advantage? Why stop now, after coming so far?

It was...waiting. It was waiting for something, something to happen. That was the only logical answer. But the question was, what was it waiting for? A sign? Waiting for Shaz'Baket to attack Pyros? That was still three days away. Or was it waiting for them to send out their human chattel to try to kill it? Was it wary of attacking the city with so many humans inside, and was waiting for a chance to attack without mortals getting in the way?

That was unlikely. No, it was waiting for something to happen. Gruz didn't know what that was, but he understood that he'd best quickly figure it out.

Movement. Gruz stopped pacing and peered out to the ridge, for he'd seen movement. Yes, there was movement. A single, solitary mortal, a human woman wearing a peasant smock of rough burlap, with long blonde hair. She walked up and into view, holding a rough farmer's hoe. The shadow stopped, looked back to her. She stepped up to the path the shadow had made in the grass, and the shadow came back to her. She curtsied to the shadow when it stalked up to her.

There was...something about that human female....

In that instant, Gruz put it all together. And he knew fear.

Summon forth all our chattel humans and Cambisi and prepare to attack! Gruz barked telepathically.

At once, my Lord, came a reply.

That was why it was here! It was waiting for *her*! It was showing her to him, to force him to play his hand!

My minions, attend me, he ordered hotly. *If the shadow penetrates our defenses, we will face it in force.*

Let it come, Gruz would be ready. It was in for quite a shock when it found out that Gruz could defend himself. He wasn't strong enough to destroy the shadow when it wielded that sword, but he could certainly defend himself from it.

"Will they attack now, my Lord?" the girl asked the shadow.

The shadow nodded silently. To her knowledge, he had never spoken.

She set her hoe on the ground. "Mistress of the Dawn, grant me strength now and bolster me in the face of our enemies," she whispered under her breath, her hand going to a silver medallion tucked under her rough smock, a medallion showing the rising sun peeking between two rolling hills. "Give me the strength to smite this scourge on our land in your holy name and restore our land to prosperity and peace."

The girl put the base of her palms together and raised her spread hands, looking like a flower, towards the east, then withdrew her medallion and kissed it, as the gates of Verix opened and a horde of half-human *Cambisi* and human soldiers poured out of those gates.

Like a ghost immune to gravity, the shadow bounded down the hill, his feet barely touching the ground, looking like he was floating as he raced towards those city gates, towards those enemy forces. The sword in his huge hand burst into flame, and he took it up in both hands, holding it low and to his side, as he rushed fearlessly right towards the middle of the army rushing out to kill him, thousands of men and monsters screaming and banging swords and axes against shields. The girl blinked and took up her hoe, then started running after him. This was not her fight. He needed her inside, when they faced their greatest foe, and she would not let him or her Mistress down. Her task, for now, was only to follow him.

That task was easy. The shadow slammed into the lead elements of the army, and there was a huge *BOOM*, and to her surprise, bodies were flying in every direction! Screams of fear and agony followed the loud blast, and then the shadow turned and slashed the sword towards his left side, causing a scythe of brilliant light to erupt from the sword. That line of light sliced through everything it struck, striking down dozens of humans and half-Demons in a single swipe.

The girl struggled to keep up, because the shadow did not slow down. It charged right through the enemy host as if they were not there, and not a single thing survived once he passed by. Loud explosions, scythes of magic, eruptions of fire, and shrieking gales of air were unleashed from the sword, slaughtering everything in the shadow's path, leaving nothing alive to threaten the girl following him from behind as he closed in on the city gates, gates that they were now trying to close.

As if that made any difference at all.

The shadow slid to a stop and raised the sword in both paws, the slashed it into the ground. A massive shockwave erupted from the point of impact, a heaving of the earth up to the girl's chest if she were there, rampaging across the ground between the shadow and the city wall. Men and halfbreeds were flung like dolls thrown by a toddler in a tantrum as the shockwave roared past them, then that wave struck the

gatehouse and city walls.

There was a thunderous noise of shattering stone, and then a roar as the gatehouse and the walls to either side of it *exploded*, sending shards of stone rocketing away from the point of impact and sending a huge cloud of dust into the air. The girl staggered back with a gasp of surprise at the tremendous power unleashed by the shadow, but she had been warned not to be too surprised, that she would witness power on a scale unheralded for this world unleashed in this fight. She collected herself and ran to catch up with the shadow, which invaded the city of Verix.

Running past the ruined walls, the girl tried to keep up with the rampaging shadow, who was destroying everything in his path that challenged him. A blast of fire incinerated a company of human soldiers, then the shadow turned the sword and slashed fifty ghastly Demons apart with a shearing blade of pure magic. One huge Demon, twice the size of a man and with big pincers instead of hands, charged out of the dust and smoke and ash, but it tumbled to the earth in two smoldering pieces when the shadow cut it in half at the waist, using the sword in the manner in which it was intended.

Her breath quickening, the girl raced on, trying not to look at the carnage. The shadow was being absolutely ruthless, killing anything in his path, even the women and children that the Demons had tried to pull from the buildings. Nothing survived his rampage, and he considered everyone within these walls except for her to be an enemy. But every moment racked up more and more dead, and every moment brought them closer to the palace in the center of the city where their ultimate enemy waited.

She screamed when something lurched out of the dust towards her, a huge bony *thing*, but then it squealed and was sent flying backwards to vanish into the pall. She looked at something over her head, then took a quick step back in surprise.

It was another one that looked like the shadow, but this one wasn't a shadow! He looked just like the shadow, but had bronze skin and black fur, except his right arm, and large wings made of living fire!

"I have no idea what he's doing, but clearly you're a part of it," the creature said. "Come on, keep up with him. And explain this to me."

"Yes, good Master. My Mistress sent me to help him," she said breathlessly as the new being simply floated along with her as she ran to catch up. "He needs me to face the Demon Lord."

"Your Mistress?"

"Mistress Breina of the Dawn," she answered. "I am Rilli, her faithful subject and humble Priestess."

"I should have figured," the creature growled. "So, he means to take on the Demon Lord alone?"

"Not entirely alone, good Master," she panted in reply, ducking under a twisted piece of wreckage, the remains of a building that had been thrown into the street. "Who are you?"

"I created him," he said dryly. "You can call him my son."

"You are the Mortal God?" she gasped.

"Breina needs to keep her mouth shut," he growled. "I *was* the Mortal God, human. Now I'm just a mortal like you."

"I was told you are in Pyros. How did you get here so fast?"

"I *am* in Pyros. What you see here is just a projection, an image of me I can send anywhere," he told

her. “This isn’t working. Hang on.”

The girl gasped and gave a squeal when *something* picked her up, and suddenly she was flying just above the ground! She was going so fast, she saw that they would catch up with the shadow in seconds! “If he’s going to attempt this insanity, we should help him as much as we can,” the Mortal God grunted. “What did he want you to do?”

“I am to strike at the Demon Lord with the power of my Goddess, to weaken it so the shadow may kill it,” she answered. “My Mistress told me that it is magic far beyond my current training, but she would help by doing it directly, through me.”

“She can do that,” the Mortal God grunted as the shadow blasted another large swath of Demons and humans that had moved to block his march to the palace. Body parts and black sludge went flying in every direction, and Rilli flinched and moved to cover her face when a mangled arm nearly hit her in the face. “I see he takes after me,” the Mortal God said undelicately. “Listen, human, what Breina intends to do isn’t going to be easy on you.”

“I was warned, good Master,” she said calmly. “My Mistress explicitly warned me it might kill me. But I would gladly die in her service.”

“Well, you’re a gutsy little thing, that’s for sure,” the Mortal God told her with a humorless chuckle. But that half-smile turned to a stony mask that seemed *scary* as the towering palace of the Demon Lord came into view ahead of them, through the dust and smoke. “He’s being an idiot, I can kill the Demon Lord once we’re done in Pyros,” the Mortal God complained. What did Mistress Breina call him? Torran? Taron? Tarrin! yes, Tarrin! That was his name! “Did he explain *why* we’re doing this right now to you, cub?”

“He has never spoken a single word, good Master,” she said as they flew over a large pile of unidentifiable body parts, which nearly made Rilli sick to look at. “Must he be so brutal?”

“When you’re killing the way he is, it’s the easiest way to go about it,” Lord Tarrin said evenly.

“My Mistress did explain that he’s trying to *prevent* the battle in Pyros, good Master,” she continued as they turned down a long avenue that led to the palace, where the shadow had stopped to eradicate a howling gaggle of small, pitiful little things that had a Demonic presence. The shadow’s sword slashed the air before him, and a shockwave exploded outward, making their bodies *pop* in grisly explosions of black spoor and gray bones. “If the Demon Lord is killed, then all the Demons will vanish. The shadow seeks to make that come about.”

Rilli could feel the crushing presence of the Demon Lord. What *power*! Even from where she was, she could feel it like a great weight pressing on her chest. But Lord Tarrin began to swear sulfurously. “Damn it all, pull back!” he shouted to the shadow. “Can’t you feel it, you idiot? You can’t charge in there alone!”

“What is wrong, good Master?”

“The Demon Lord somehow got a piece of his powers back,” the Mortal God snapped hotly. “My shadow will be fighting someone with the powers of a *god*! If Bane takes him on, he’ll wipe Verix and most of the area around it off the face of Pyrosia! The land can’t support that kind of confrontation if the Demon Lord and my sword battle each other directly! Pull back, damn you!” he shouted. “Not here! Not now! You’ll destroy half of the east coast of Pyrosia!”

It was too late. The shadow launched himself high, high into the air, landing on a balcony and disappearing inside. Almost immediately, the entire palace seemed to shudder, pull in, and then the entirety

of the massive construction simply *obliterated*. The air seemed to split, and the sound was so loud that it ruptured Rilli's eardrums as half the city of Verix collapsed to the ground in a thunderous cloud of dust and a sound so loud that it was felt rather than heard.

Rilli covered her head, but nothing fell on her. In her pained silence, she saw the Mortal God reach out and put his huge white-furred hand *through* her head. Her ears stung, then felt icy cold, and then she could hear again! "Wh-What was that, good Master?" she said in stunned disbelief.

"That was Bane learning the hard way what happens when powers confront each other directly in the material plane," he growled in disgust. "The Demon Lord struck at Bane with his power, and Bane struck back. This world can't handle that kind of power, cub."

"Is the good Master alright?" she asked fearfully.

The Mortal God looked this way, then that. "He's still there, over there," he said, pointing. "He won't back off, he's going to attack again. This is going to get ugly, little one. Hang on!"

Rilli screamed when the air around what used to be the palace seemed to stretch, snap back, and then explode in a rush of air that destroyed the rest of Verix that the first explosion did not. All the dust and smoke was instantly blown away, showing a massive monster out of the nightmares of children, at least twenty rods tall, with a dog's head and four arms, two with bone swords for hands and two growing out of its chest, looming over the shadow. She had always thought the shadow was so very tall, but standing before that monster, it looked like a toy soldier! The sword in his hands blazed with blinding light, burning so brightly it hurt to look at it. Rilli found herself suddenly on her feet as the Mortal God surged forward, his fiery wings flushing with brilliant white light. "Now, girl!" he barked as an incandescent ball of pure light formed between his big furry hands, which then turned blacker than the blackest night, lightning crackling around its surface. "GRUZ!" he shouted, causing the titanic Demon to look at them.

Rilli almost froze with fear, but the gentle warmth in her reminded her of her task here. She began speaking the words, words she did not know, words that came tumbling from her lips of their own volition. They were words of immense power, words that caused the air to shiver around her. As she recited the incantation, the Mortal God unleashed that black ball of magic at the Demon Lord, even as the shadow vaulted into the air, his blazing sword preparing to shear the Demon in twain.

The Demon Lord seemed to take in the entire situation in an instant, and decided not to battle three adversaries. His form wavered, and then he vanished into thin air! Lord Tarrin's black ball of magic almost hit the shadow as it jumped through the air where the Demon Lord had been, coming dangerously close to him.

The shadow approached them, sword blazing in his charcoal hand, red glowing eyes looking accusingly at Lord Tarrin. "He has some of his power back," the Mortal God grunted. "What did you expect?"

"Um, where did he go?" Rilli asked.

"He ran," Lord Tarrin growled. "That way, far away. Can't you feel it?"

"Umm, no," she said sheepishly. "He fled into the sea?"

"No, cub. He's far out. Maybe as far as Auromar."

"Auromar!" she gasped.

“It would be the perfect place for him to hide, a dead continent, far from his enemies,” he grunted, then he looked to the shadow. “Well?”

The shadow simply glanced at him, the fire around the sword fading. He then turned to walk towards the harbor.

“At least explain how you used Druidic magic.”

The shadow stopped, glanced at him over his shoulder, then vanished like smoke.

“Stubborn fool,” the Mortal God spat. “Well, let’s get you somewhere safe, little one. Stand still, I’m bringing you back to Pyros.”

“What is he doing?”

“Chasing after the Demon Lord,” he answered. “He knows it won’t be an easy fight. The Demon Lord somehow got some of his power back, and he can’t take any help with him. But, I think maybe he won’t try to kill him.”

“Then why chase him?”

“To keep the Demon Lord away from Pyros,” he answered. Rilli gasped as the entire world seemed to shimmer, and she was suddenly standing in a walled compound filled with all manner of people—and non-humans! “Now that he has some of his power back, he could really complicate things here. But he won’t show up here if my shadow keeps him busy. Actually, I understand now why he attacked. He couldn’t let the Demon Lord come to Pyros. He had to know the Demon Lord had his power back, he’d only been stalking outside of Verix for two days. It must be why he called you in.”

“Who is this, Tarrin?” a monstrous human with brown skin asked, wearing a very ornate, gold-inset breastplate.

“One of my shadow’s little helpers,” he answered the huge man. “She’s a Priestess, Zak. Get her some clothes and find her a place to get some rest.”

Rilli looked at the Mortal God, then gasped when she saw *another* of him standing in the middle of a raised area in the middle of the compound!

“Oh, that’s the real me, little one,” he said with a chuckle. “I told you, this is just an image. It’s not real. *That* is the real me. Oh, little one, tell your Mistress I want to talk to her.”

“I, I can try to give her the message, my Lord.”

“She’ll listen. She probably already heard it. Now, go get some decent clothes, grab some food, get some rest, and we’ll talk later.”

She was led away by the big brown man, who handed her over to a pair of armored men who treated her with kindness and respect. She realized, looking around, that she really was in Pyros, that he had brought her halfway across Pyrosia in the blink of an eye. What amazing powers these people had! But, it was good that she was here. Since she couldn’t really help the shadow, she could be here to help when the battle here began. She’d heard about this through her meditation, omens and visions her Mistress showed her. There was going to be a battle here, a huge battle, and the very fate of Pyrosia hinged on who emerged from that battle the victor.

If that was the case, then she was in the right place. She had to help.

“What happened, Tarrin?” Kimmie asked as the projection dissolved, and Tarrin shivered his wings and then withdrew them. He, Kimmie, and Camara Tal had been having a talk while Tarrin and Camara played a game of chess, before his light touch of awareness about his sword warned him that something major was happening, causing him to project out to Verix to see what was going on.

He went over the quick yet ugly confrontation in Verix. “The Demon Lord somehow got some of his power back,” he explained. “When my shadow confronted it, there was one of those cataclysmic exchanges when those kinds of powers clash in the material plane. Verix basically isn’t there anymore,” he said bluntly. “The Demon Lord fled when me and that little girl got into the fight, which was only smart. That little peasant girl is a Priestess, and she was about to complete a spell that would have weakened the Demon Lord enough for my shadow to kill him,” he told them.

“How did the Demon Lord get his power back?” Camara Tal asked in surprise. “Shouldn’t that be impossible?”

“Nothing is really impossible, Camara, just unlikely,” Tarrin answered. “He’s smart, he must have found a loophole somewhere. He didn’t feel as strong as he was before I made the Weave, but there’s certainly something there. Enough to exercise some divine power, at the very least. It’s good it happened there, though, and we know about it now. It would have been messy if he just popped into the middle of the coming battle and started throwing that power around.”

“That might have been one of the surprises the *marilith* has up her sleeve,” Kimmie reasoned.

“Possible, but I don’t think so. The Demon Lord has to know what I have. I don’t think he’d risk it all like that coming within bowshot of me. Either way, it’s something that I’m glad I know before I’m the one hunting him down. Now I know what to expect. What I didn’t expect is that the Demon Lord fled to Auromar.”

“Auromar? There’s nothing out there,” Kimmie said in a curious voice. “Why go there?”

“Because there’s nothing out there, and it takes a ship to reach it,” Camara Tal answered.

“My shadow is chasing it down, and will probably keep him very busy for the next couple of days. The Demon Lord is going to find out quickly that my shadow can travel as fast as any Demon, thanks to it using Druidic magic,” he nearly choked on those words.

“Has Triana or Sapphire figured it out yet?”

He sighed and shook his head. “They won’t even let me try. They just tell me that it would be suicide to try from their attempts to even touch the All of this world. They say it has no will, that it would vaporize any Druid who tried to use it. I just don’t understand how my shadow can use it. It should be dead. By the trees, it’s not living, it shouldn’t be able to use Druidic magic at all! Druidic magic is the magic of life. It doesn’t work on undead, and undead can’t use it. And my shadow isn’t really truly alive!”

“Maybe the fact that isn’t really alive is why it can use Druidic magic here,” Kimmie mused, tapping her cheek with a tabby-furred finger. “After all, it’s a magical construct. If there was anything that could survive touching the All here, it would be someone without a physical body that couldn’t stand the strain of it.”

“Then why can it use Druidic magic if it’s not living?”

“Well, it’s not really alive, but it *is* a direct creation of you, dear,” she told him patiently. “It’s your shadow, a part of you. That it might have gained some of your magical abilities doesn’t seem very far-fetched. It just took it a while to learn how to use them, that’s all. I’d bet it can use Sorcery and Wizard magic, too.”

“Well, that’s a reasonable idea, at least,” Camara Tal grunted, moving a pawn.

“I guess it is, but still. I just don’t understand it.”

“If nothing in life was a mystery, dear, it would be a very boring life,” Kimmie quipped.

“I’m not in a position where I like things I can’t explain, Kimmie,” he said darkly. “Not here, not now. Not with two armies marching here to wipe us out.”

“I guess not,” she sighed.

Tarrin raised his chin and reached out through the Weave. In seconds, he found what he was looking for, two separate armies plowing through mud by using their largest Demons as trailbreakers. Yesterday, both armies abandoned their positions and began pushing to get here. Shiika’s forces were moving much faster than the southern forces, trying to get here at the same time, but Tarrin could see that that wasn’t going to happen. Even at her increased speed, the southern army would beat her to Pyros by at least a day.

“How long?” Camara asked, looking at him.

“Two days for the southern army, three days for the eastern army,” he answered immediately. “I’m keeping the rain on them. I want the humans to be exhausted when they get here.”

“I don’t think the southern army will attack without Shaz’Baket, so they’ll have time to rest.”

“We’ll see,” Tarrin grunted.

The mystery of his shadow dogged Tarrin every moment while they waited for the enemy to arrive, as everyone secured provisions and supplies, practiced drills for moving from wall to wall, and made sure everything was in working order and ready. As the generals kept all the troops busy with endless practice sessions, drills, and assignments, Tarrin pondered his shadow. He couldn’t feel any more releases of power, so the shadow wasn’t fighting the Demon Lord. It was clearly on Auomar, he could tell, but either the shadow feared attacking the Demon Lord after the nasty shock it received in Verix, or the Demon Lord was staying away from his shadow.

But there were other things he had to do. When the southern army was one day away, he turned his power over the weather on Pyros itself. Soldiers watched in amazement as a massive storm formed in a perfect ring around the volcano, then unleashed a deluge so thick it looked like a wall of water that saturated the ground and turned the rocky, lava flow-strewn plain into a grayish quagmire of mud and rock. But, not a drop of rain fell on the defenders of Pyros. The rain pounded out beyond the wall for hours, then as quickly as it began, it simply stopped, though the clouds above remained in place, casting shade on the mud to prevent the sun from drying it out. The ring of mud started about five hundred spans out from the outer wall and extended out nearly two longspans, a muddy morass that would make any attempt to cross it an unpleasant, difficult, slow affair. The lava flows were broken up and rendered down to soil, which was then saturated by the water around it to become mud, robbing the army of any easy approach. Tarrin reached deeply into the ground, down into the heart of the volcano, and stabilized the volcano, to prevent another eruption should magical forces put enough stress onto the local geography to cause it. He did *not* want to have to quell an eruption, that was *much* harder than triggering one. He did, however, put some selective

fault lines through the rock, isolating them from the magma chamber, which would allow him to vent magma to certain selected parts of the local region, a deadly lava trap should human soldiers wander into one of the release areas.

Everyone in Pyros stopped when they saw the light emanating from Tarrin Kael's wings, a brilliant white as he rose above the city, arms outstretched as he worked his magic, magic that enveloped the entire area. Stone was strengthened, both in the walls and in the ground, and imbued with a latent magical aura that would prevent any earth-native creatures from penetrating it... Tarrin remembered well Shaz'Baket's use of Xorn at the battle of Iron Mountain, and he wouldn't let a trick like that happen again. Once that was done, he lowered himself back to the ground and summoned all four of his Elementals, each in its preferred natural form, who looked quite sober and grave. They knew what was going on here. The fire Elemental asked him if it was time, and Tarrin shook his head.

"They probably won't be here until tomorrow," he said, "but I need to talk to you now. My friend, I need you to go outside the city and try to penetrate the walls, to make sure my counter works properly," he told the earth Elemental. "And the ground beneath us. I don't want any Xorn sneaking in here."

The earth Elemental nodded to him, then turned and lumbered away.

"I need you to check the magma chamber in the volcano and make sure I set it correctly," he told the fire Elemental. "I don't want it erupting on us."

The fire Elemental spread its wings and soared up towards the caldera of the volcano. His fire Elemental was a bird in its own plane, and always felt most comfortable in that form.

The air and water Elementals looked to him curiously. "I don't have any tasks here for you two, but I know that both of you hold some sway in your planes, particularly you," he said, looking to his water Elemental. "I want you two to go back home and spread a warning of what's coming. Can you pass that warning on to the other planes?"

The water Elemental nodded, then deigned to speak audibly. *"I can ask my Mistress to contact the other monarchs, so that the message might be passed among all."*

"Good, that's what I was hoping for. Just pass the word about the coming battle. I want the Elementals to know what's going on before they show up, so they understand how serious it's going to be. Hopefully, any Elementals summoned by Wizards on our side won't be so quick to try to break free if they understand what's going on."

"I doubt that would influence them. After all, what happens here truly has no meaning to us, Master," the water Elemental warned him. *"It is in their own personal interest to try to break free, after all."*

"Well, it was a thought," he grunted. "I could tell you to threaten them with retaliation from *me* if they try to break free, but I doubt that would hold much water."

The water Elemental tittered with laughter.

"Well, I haven't seen you two in a long time," Kimmie said as she came up, with Mist. "How have you been?"

"It has been well, Mistress," the water Elemental said aloud.

"More preparations?" Mist asked.

Tarrin nodded. “My earth and Fire Elementals are checking over what I just did to make sure it was good. These two are going to go back home and warn the Elementals of the battle, so any that get summoned here know what’s going on. It might make a difference.” He looked to the two Elementals. “I’ll release you now and summon you back in half a day, so you can tell me how it went. Is that alright?”

They both assured him it was, and he released them. Both Elementals vanished in a puff of mist, and Tarrin rubbed his paws together. “I’m not sure how much help that’s going to be, but you never know.”

“You act like we’ll be facing an army ten times our size, my mate,” Mist noted.

“I know Shaz’Baket, Mist. She’s up to something. I’m going to assume we’re up against the wall until I see what she has planned. You don’t know her the way I do.”

“You won’t know her much longer,” Mist growled.

“I certainly hope so.”

Tarrin had never been very good at waiting.

Were-cats were not waiters. Creatures who existed in the moment, with a dim awareness of the past and not much concept of the future, did not wait well. Knowing that it would make him short tempered, he withdrew from everyone else and lost himself in the Weave, trying to learn more, learn as much as possible before the armies got there and the fighting began...but there wasn’t much to learn. So, instead, he spent most of that time with his awareness floating through the Weave, keeping a distant eye on many things at once, seeing just as much as the Elarans could up on their moon, looking down on the land of Pyrosia in the night.

He saw many things. To the west, He saw Pyrosians in distant villages rejoicing that their Priests could speak to the One once again, that he had not abandoned them...and he saw those Priests with slightly surprised looks on their faces. The One was honoring their agreement already, ordering them to dismiss any Demons they had summoned and forbidding them from ever summoning another, and ordering his Priests to begin preaching that the taint of the non-humans had been purged from them without destroying them, and they were no longer Defiled. The One told those far-flung Priests to begin preaching tolerance of the non-humans, for since they were no longer Defiled, they were no longer a threat to the purity of the people of the One.

Quite the clever talking there, Tarrin had to admit. The One explained his absence by saying he had crusaded personally to cleanse the non-humans, and had succeeded. He even claimed to bring the purity of light into the “witchcraft” used by some people, making it good magic, and no longer a thing to fear...for it would no longer Defile those who might use it.

The story had a few holes in it big enough to walk through, but Priests were Priests, and they would obey blindly. And the simple folk of Pyrosia would accept the new teachings without questioning them. The Priests of the One had beaten questions out of them a long time ago.

Tarrin had to grudgingly admit, the One was honoring his word. He was sure it was making the One scream, but he was starting to bring his people into a more accepting mindset, as he had promised.

To the south, he saw the army slogging through his rain and mud to reach Pyros. They were on a forced march, and their advance scouts would be encountering and dying to the Selani outward scouts in a matter of hours. Tarrin almost pitied them for what those scouts were about to get into. The Selani outward scouts were waiting for them. The first clashes of this battle would happen far from Pyros. Behind that army, there

was nothing. They had destroyed every town, village, and farm on their march northward, killing or capturing the inhabitants and torching and killing all the crops and livestock.

To the east, Shaz'Baket personally herded her vast army towards Pyros on a murderous pace, where humans were being *carried* by larger Demons in shifts so they didn't get exhausted slogging through waist-deep mud. That was actually rather clever, showing again that Shaz'Baket had a mind that one had better respect. She had gained more ground than Tarrin had expected, and he saw that she was now only half a day behind the southern army. Behind Shaz'Baket, minor Demons held humans in check in the larger towns, keeping them alive for some reason, but every village, hamlet, and farmstead had been leveled. In Verix, those who survived the clash between the Demon Lord and Demon's Bane were not moving towards Arten, the closest city to the north. They were all humans, Tarrin saw; the Demons had abandoned their mortal chattel and had vanished, probably to attend their Master on Auromar.

To the north, there was disorganization. There had been a rather small Demon army up there, only about ten thousand, marching on the Iron Mountain, but Darax's Duran army had effectively shattered them, and they made their way towards Pyros in bits and pieces. They hadn't expected the Durans to flank them as they approached the mountains and hit them.

And far to the east, on a barren wasteland of gray soil and bare rock, Tarrin's shadow stalked the Demon Lord. To Tarrin's astonishment, there was a massive citadel there on the southern central coast of the continent, a city the size of Suld with a fortress of massive dimensions, with half-built walls and buildings around it, covered by a thick pall of clouds that hid it from the Elaran eyes above. The Demons were building a city! And there, on Auromar, the mystery of the missing Demons had been solved. They were there. They were building the huge city and citadel, and would serve as the defending army protecting their lord if the natives of Pyrosia attacked.

There was...a sense there. The Demon Lord had invested some of his own power into that place, a place that Sorcery could not enter. It was a bubble of the Abyss incurring into the material plane, a conjunction of two dimensions, where the Abyss and Pyrosia occupied the same space, a place where Demonic powers would work. Tarrin had never sensed it there before, but then again, it was so far away, it wasn't a surprise. Within that citadel, the Demon Lord had all of its powers, but *only* within that citadel.

Now he understood. The Demon Lord had decided to play the waiting game. From that bastion, he could simply dig in and rebuild his army one summoned Demon at a time, while waging a war of attrition from an unassailable continent across the straits. Shaz'Baket was going for the fast victory, but if she failed, the Demon Lord had prepared a place where they could stand against their foes.

When they finished here, that was where Tarrin had to go. He could see that now. His shadow would not attack that place by itself. It would wait for Tarrin, and they would attack it together.

And now Tarrin could understand why the shadow did what it did. It attacked the Demon Lord before that place was finished, trying to finish it before it could retreat to that fortress, where it would be much harder to kill.

"Wait for me," he called out to his shadow, fixing his ghostly eyes upon it, where it loped easily towards the construction site, basically staying out of sight and out of reach of the Demon Lord until it was time to destroy him. *"I see what's been happening now. When we finish here, I'll come, and together we will finish this."*

The shadow stopped, looked upwards towards the strand from which Tarrin was looking, and shook his head. He crooked his finger towards the strand.

"I can't come now, things are about to come to a head around here."

The shadow pointed towards the distant citadel and looked deliberately at him.

“What do you mean?”

The shadow shaded his eyes and looked towards the citadel meaningfully.

“Look again? Hold on.”

Tarrin shifted his awareness to a strand close to the citadel, and looked again. He could see the huge, heavy black stone monstrosity before him, and could feel the Demon Lord inside. He could see an army of Demons hauling stone, using whips on human slaves who were doing the same, rushing to build walls and buildings, as some continued building on one of the wings of the citadel fortress. He didn't see anything that would warrant immediate action—

Then he *felt* it. The strand he was occupying *moved*. It was being pushed back, pushed away, slowly but inexorably, so slowly he hadn't sensed the disruption back in the Heart, but now that he was here, he could feel the push coming from the citadel. The conjunction was *growing*. It was getting bigger, expanding, by a finger every minute.

That was why his shadow was so impatient. Given time, that conjunction would grow larger and larger, expanding the sphere of influence of the Demon Lord.

Sphere of influence....

That was how it did it. A sphere of influence...the Demon Lord was making mortals worship it as a god! That was establishing him as a divine power on *this* world. That was how it had the power to fight back against his shadow! They had to be close to the Demon Lord, probably in the citadel itself, but it had true believers, true worshippers. Without an Elder God here to establish any kind of rules about the gods, the Demon Lord was exploiting that divine anarchy by establishing its *own* order...the conjunction. Just as Tarrin had done so to make the wish spell work the way he intended, the Demon Lord was using the same trick.

He felt the resistance around him. The Weave was why the conjunction grew so slowly. It was resisting it, it was trying to maintain a different order on the land, resisting the alteration of things. The Demon Lord moved very slowly, very lightly, very gently, pushing out with a gentle touch that hadn't alarmed Tarrin as to what was going on...which was only smart. It had to know that if Tarrin knew what was going on over here, he'd have attacked the citadel immediately and mercilessly. But it had worked, the conjunction was large enough now that Tarrin couldn't strike directly at the citadel with Sorcery, since the rules were different *inside* that bubble. In there, the Demon Lord was the one in control, and it was large enough now to offer the Demon Lord a modicum of protection by giving it time to react. But, it still wasn't big enough. Tarrin could invade that bubble and use the Firestaff, and his shadow could use the sword, and the One could use his own divine power to undo what was being done, allowing them to engage and kill the Demon Lord. No, it didn't want to be discovered yet. It didn't want to risk it. It wanted Shaz'Baket to destroy the Weave and give the Demon Lord the freedom to expand that sphere to cover all of Auromar, all of Pyrosia, and maybe more, which would guarantee its victory. It knew that Tarrin had built a Weave once, it didn't doubt that he could do it again, so it had to enact its *own* control over the land to guarantee the victory, and do it quickly, before what it was doing on Auromar was discovered and Tarrin moved to put a stop to it. For the Demon Lord, the fast destruction of Pyros and the Weave was the key to victory. It was why Shaz'Baket was now on a forced march to Pyros, she had to get there as fast as possible, before Tarrin found where the Demon Lord ran off to, and discovered its secret.

For Tarrin, the fast destruction of Shaz'Baket and her army was critical so he could get to Auromar and stop the Demon Lord.

A darkly humorous irony that the needs of both sides hinged on a hasty battle at Pyros.

He felt the Demon Lord suddenly reach out, as if it sensed something amiss. Tarrin masked himself within the Weave, hiding from that seeking eye, and felt it pass over him. If the Demon Lord knew that Tarrin knew what was going on here, he might order Shaz'Baket to pull back and keep the *threat* of attacking Pyros there to hold Tarrin in place. He couldn't allow that, he had to deal with Shaz'Baket as quickly as possible, to remove her threat.

He returned to his shadow. *"I see what you're talking about, but I can't pull out of here right now. The growth is slow, Bane, I can afford to wait a little bit. Give me two days, and only two days,"* he told it. *"It won't grow enough to be dangerous in two days. By then, we should have things wrapped up here, and I can also bring along some help. I'm sure the One would love to help break up this little party,"* he grunted. *"But that's all the time I can give myself. If we haven't finished here in two days, I'll have to leave Pyros and help you there. Is that alright?"*

The shadow considered it, then abruptly sat down and put the sword in his lap, nodding.

"Two days. I'll be right where you are, in person, with the One in tow, in two days. Be ready for us."

The shadow nodded, and Tarrin withdrew from the Weave, returning to his mortal body. "One!" he boomed in a loud voice. "We need to talk. *Now!*"

The One appeared directly before him by magic. "What is it, Tarrin?"

"We have a problem," he growled, then used Sorcery to build an Illusion of what he'd seen on Auromar, explaining what the Demon Lord was doing.

"By the Highgod," the One gasped. "We must put an end to it!"

"I know, but we need to stay here. If we lose the Weave, it's going to give the Demon Lord free reign. I felt the resistance, One, the Weave is the only thing holding the conjunction back. If we lose the Weave, the Demon Lord wins. So we *have* to stay here. But, it's growing, and we can't wait long or the Demon Lord will have so much room inside that it'll be very hard to get at him. So, we have two days," he said. "Even if we have to leave in the middle of the battle, we have to get there to put a stop to it." He looked to the east. "It may not be an issue. The southern army will arrive tonight, and Shaz'Baket has her army on a forced march. It will get here tomorrow morning." He growled. "She'll attack as soon as she resets her lines. She'll send the southern army in the instant it hits the field. They're trying to keep my attention on *them*, hide what the Demon Lord is doing. And it almost worked," he admitted. "I was ignoring the Demon Lord, seeing Shaz'Baket as the bigger threat. And all this time, Shaz'Baket was the *decoy*."

"Not entirely a decoy, Tarrin, but she did do her job of holding our eyes on her," the One said. "Praise be to your shadow for seeing what we did not, and acting."

"Amen."

"Mayhap, striking at Shaz'Baket now would be prudent."

"No, if I do that, she might slow down, and we don't want that right now," he grunted. "Let her come. We'll deal with her here, when she can't back off and stall."

"She may not do that anyway."

“I know, but if I start laying waste to her army now, they may realize I know what’s going on, and pull back and just *threaten* to attack to give the Demon Lord more time,” he reasoned. “We can’t allow that. They want to kill me and destroy the Weave as fast as possible, so let them keep right on doing it. It only helps *us*.”

The first clashes between the Demons and the defenders were far to the south of Pyros, between bands of Selani scouts and scouts for the Demon army. Those clashes ended quickly and eternally for the attackers, even the Demons sent out to scout. But the Selani didn’t press the issue, they simply backed up and continued to kill scouts as the army advanced, staying out of its way and blinding it to what was ahead by killing off its forward eyes. Then, about an hour after midnight, the Selani returned to Pyros and reported that the army was only an hour away, and they had pulled all the bridges over the quagmire of mud Tarrin had set to rob them of any easy route to Pyros. When the Selani pulled back, everyone knew that the preparations were over. The battle was about to begin.

The alarm went out, and the army mobilized. Men rushed to their positions, armor was donned, weapons were given one final check, artillery was primed and prepared, ammunition and gunpowder stocked and readied. Sulasian Rangers strung their bows, Wikuni musketmen loaded their weapons, and both human and Elaran Wizards loaded spell components into pouches on their belts and bandoliers as everyone rushed about. The skyships were manned, as Wikuni crews unfurled sails and Sorcerers and Wizards assigned to those ships rushed aboard, and one by one, they rose up out of the moat and into the sky. Dragons formed up and waited in their area, saving their strength by staying on the ground until it was time, and the first wave of defenders manned the wooden palisades built upon the heavy outer wall.

And there, they waited.

They didn’t wait long. To the south, for those who could see in the darkness of night, there was a thin cloud of dust that did not approach, as the enemy marched over the first dry ground they’d encountered in days and then ended up right back in mud. Moments later, the Demons were visible, marching at the head of a column of seventy thousand Demons and nearly thirty thousand humans, a massive force that was still outnumbered by the nearly two hundred thousand men and women manning the defenses of Pyros.

As they approached, Tarrin, Miranda, Camara Tal, and the One could all feel it. Now that they were close enough, in person, they could sense it. Now they knew why the humans didn’t run.

They were possessed. Demonic power was housed in their bodies, and Tarrin could see that they were being controlled.

Tarrin and the One rose up over the walls to get a personal look at the adversary, and see the humans for themselves.

It all snapped together in that instant. Everything. The Demons in Auromar, not *all* of them were building the city. They were controlling the humans here, fighting from a position of safety while allowing their puppets to face the danger. This was one of Shaz’Baket’s surprises, for those humans would have absolutely no fear of death. They would be like the undead in the battle of Suld, savage brutes that would be hard to kill and unafraid in the face of overwhelming odds. In that state, they would not feel pain. They wouldn’t fall to a sword in the chest. They would have to be dismembered or decapitated to take them out of the fight.

“Can you break the connection?” the One asked him.

He shook his head. “It’s not actually magic, it has nothing to do with the Weave. It’s internal,” he answered. “Even if I cut off the army from the Weave completely, it wouldn’t free them. Only one spell I know of can do it.”

“Exorcism,” the One nodded. “But it cannot be cast on large numbers.”

“Can you free them? They’re your subjects.”

“Nay, I lack the power to affect more than one at a time. I too am limited in this instance.”

“I know. We’ll have to deal with them as they are,” he surmised.

“I will go warn Kang.”

Word of the nature of the humans was filtered down quickly, warning all soldiers that they had to be decapitated or dismembered, that they would not react to wounds like normal humans.

The enemy army seemed to pause as it took stock, saw that there were no Wards up defending the city, no magical barriers or protections. It was an invitation to attack, an invitation that the Demons would find irresistible. But they all flinched and looked away when the Conduit in the center of all those heavy fortifications flared with a brilliant light, so bright it transformed night into day, illuminating the huge army for the defenders and ensuring they did not use the cover of darkness to move troops. The troops began to move, circling the city, and Tarrin could see that they were setting up to attack from the east.

“Daughters, I need you,” Tarrin called as he descended back to the ground. “Let’s get this overwith,” Tarrin told Kang.

“Aye. Begin the attack!” Kang boomed. “Send the order, begin the attack! What are you going to do, Tarrin?”

“I’m going to take a big bite out of that army,” Tarrin answered. “I’m going to kill everything I possibly can.”

“Good luck but remember, don’t overexert yourself,” Kang said as his four daughters rushed in from outside the inner compound. “You need to be strong if you have to protect yourself if they get this far.”

“We’re here, father!” Jasana shouted. “Let’s kick some Demon butt!”

Quickly, the four female Were-cats joined into a Circle with their father. He lifted them all up into the brilliantly lit Conduit, so they could get a line of sight on their foes. As always when he Circled with Jasana, he felt almost drunk with power, a power no mortal was ever supposed to have, so much power he felt he could change the orbit of the moon or sink entire continents into the sea. All that massive power was focused on the army, though, as Tarrin studied it as it made a mad dash along the perimeter of the heavy mud, moving not in elements and formations, but all at once, staying together as best they could.

That just made it easy.

Weaving together a tangled jumble of Fire, Air, Water, Divine, and token flows of the other spheres to give the spell the power of High Sorcery, Tarrin generated a blinding aura of light around his paws, and then, when he snapped down and released the spell, a brilliant white-hot bar of light blasted from his paws, almost fifty spans across, a Sunbolt of such magnitude and so hot that it would vaporize stone when it struck.

Almost instantly, Tarrin felt a *pressure* from the army, and then a dark, shimmering plane appeared, a flat surface of incongruent realities. It was a shield, and when Tarrin’s spell hit it, it was stopped.

He recoiled in shock. That was almost unbelievable! Now he saw how Shaz’Baket was going to get

around Tarrin. It took him only a moment to find the human that did it, a human carrying the mark of Gruz branded on his forehead. He was a vessel, a focus allowing Gruz to use his power here directly, without fear or retaliation, just like the *mafeli* that Val used at the battle of Suld. It was a trick he'd seen Shaz'Baket use before, but it made it no less effective for repeating, since this human Tarrin couldn't simply destroy from within the Weave. This was different. Tarrin couldn't interfere in the connection between Gruz and this human in any way, they could only kill him. Tarrin couldn't stop the magic the human used, since it was coming from the Demon Lord, but he could counter it. Magic was magic once it manifested in the material plane, no matter its source. That was how he had to attack it.

The ground, he thought to his daughters. We can't attack it directly.

The fault lines you placed, father. They're almost to one of them, Jula thought in reply, echoing among the five. Look.

That should work. I don't think they can stop that, Rina said. Father always says physics can be stronger than magic. Once all that lava gets going, they can't just make it stop.

Let's do it. Get ready.

The formation rushed around the city, moving to attack from the east, but then they turned and charged the wall before they reached the fault line. Tarrin cursed and changed tactics, even as he reached out. "Sapphire, Tenshale, I need you," he called. Both dragons, far below, turned and looked up at him. "See this human? He's a focus for the Demon Lord," he said, showing them an Illusion, formed between them. "He can stop my magic, but he's got limits. I need you to both hit him at the same time from two sides, so I can hit him in a way he can't stop."

Sapphire looked back up at him and nodded, and the two dragons immediately took off from their bailey. Tarrin refocused the Circle on the ground in front of the formation as it charged towards the wall, even as the first cannonballs started landing among them. Demons were blown apart as cannonballs brought from Sennadar, weapons against which they had no immunity, tore them to shreds in loud explosions of dirt and smoke. The two dragons split up even as four more took off, including Nightshade, and twenty skyships came around the mountain from their reserve position well away from the fighting, descending to attack. Tarrin watched them carefully, timed them, and then worked out where the human was going to be when they struck. The two dragons dove on the army from two sides, and in unison, they unleashed intertwining columns of lightning, blasting at him. The human focus for Gruz reacted to those two attacks, defending himself with shields of dark magical power that stopped them, but as Tarrin expected, he expended only that power he needed to expend to protect himself, no more, no less. The ultimate in efficiency, which he would expect from a Demon Lord.

The ground under the army, already quivering from the charge of massive Demons, began to shake. Then it began to shudder. The human focus looked down in surprise and moved his arms down, but it was too late.

The ground under the focus exploded with a cataclysmic *BOOM*, sending tiny pieces of Demons and humans flying for thousands of spans in every direction. The focus didn't raise his defense fast enough, and his body was shredded into less than what could fill a bucket. Debris and body parts rained down on the artillerymen and magicians on the first wall, who scrambled to take cover.

"*ATTACK!*" Tarrin's voice thundered across the plain, audible for leagues in every direction, even as a titanic blast of pure magic lashed out from the Conduit, melting rock and incinerating hundreds of humans.

It was a wave of magical death and a rain of cannonballs and catapult stones. The front ranks of the attacking army withered away from the hellstorm, driving them back, but the sheer force of numbers caused

that shrinking mass to inexorably creep forward. But the entire front of that mass vanished in another massive blast of magical power that erupted from the Conduit, magic that nothing could withstand now that the focus had been killed. The charge wavered for a split second, then exploded forward when Sapphire and Tenshale raked the column with their breath weapons right through the middle, killing hundreds in an immolation of pure lightning, to which the Demons were not immune like they were fire. Nightshade shrieked and dove on the column, enveloping it in her strength-stealing breath weapon. The Demons charged through the inky cloud unscathed, but no humans came out of that cloud alive.

Strange. Tarrin looked at the Demons, and wondered what they were doing. Instead of attacking in a long line and rushing the wall, they instead all grouped together and charged in a long line at one section of the wall. That was...inefficient, to put it kindly. What were they doing? It didn't make any sense. They'd take far less casualties spreading out in a wide front and charging the wall.

Thousands died on that charge on the wall, charging through spells, cannonballs, and strafes of massive dragons unleashing deadly breath weapons, but they did not slow down. So many came, so fast, that they could not kill them all before they reached the wall. When the forward commanders saw that the Demons would reach the wall, they began pulling back. The catapults on the forward wall were destroyed as they raced down the ladders and rushed across the trap-laden first bailey. The last of the magicians off the wall set fire to the wooden scaffolds with magic as her companions were picking their way along pre-determined paths while the artillery masters on the second and third walls opened up, firing at trajectory arcs, and the skyships sailed over the walls and turned broadside. The withering magical attacks recommenced when they were in position.

As the defenders rushed through the bailey to reach the second wall, the first of the Demons reached the first wall. Some of them pounded on it and scratched at it with huge claws, but found that it was stronger than steel, while others started climbing it first. The first Demon to crest the wall, a *glabrezu*, appeared through the fire of the burning palisades, but his head exploded into black gore when a bullet fired from one of the new rifled muskets, with the new ballistic shaped bullets, went through his head and tore it apart. The body tumbled back into the seething mass of Demons and humans at the wall, scrambling to climb over. The first Demons over the wall all were shot by the rifled weapons, and then fell backwards back to the ground below.

One of the skyships saw a splinter element of the Demonic army splitting off further to the north and rushing the wall. The commander of the ship, a bull Wikuni, had the Sorcerer tending the flying device warn Dolanna, who relayed it to Kang, who rushed the order down. Artillery and cannons unused so far turned on the new threat and took aim, then began firing as the skyship and its partner turned and started attacking the element of about two hundred humans and Demons. Densheen sizzled between the skyships like an arrow fired from a bow, nearly capsizing one of the vessels, then she unleashed her breath weapon squarely at the center of that formation, strafing it from its left flank.

The explosion was teeth-jarring, shaking the walls of the inner compound. Densheen's breath weapon triggered a huge explosion, the shockwave knocking her off her flight path and nearly sending her crashing into the wall herself. Her belly and tail nearly swept a few dozen defenders off the second wall as she recovered and pulled out of her diving spin, and she shakily veered off to the north as she tried to gain altitude. The bull Wikuni immediately reported in that something one of the humans was carrying had exploded, and exploded with terrific force. But even as he reported, the rest of that element rushed towards the wall, as the explosion had knocked both the dragon and the skyships out of position, and the artillery had only just begun to rain cannonballs down on the small element. Most of the rest of them were blown apart in a hail of cannonballs, but six of them managed to reach the wall alive. One of them was a Demon, a *hezrou*, carrying a large barrel on its back. That Demon immediately turned and slammed its back into the wall, without hesitation.

The resulting explosion was huge. The mighty, magically strengthened wall shook and shuddered,

cracks appearing at its top as it resisted that explosive force, but it did not collapse.

“They are using gunpowder as bombs!” Sapphire called to Tenshale. “Report it to Dolanna immediately! We must keep those suicide attackers from reaching the wall, at any cost!”

“Clearly, they thought ahead,” Tenshale noted to her. “An effective way to bring down a wall without magic!”

“Less thinking, more talking,” Sapphire ordered as they both banked to the north to make another pass at the Demonic horde.

But stopping them all was not easy. The main host suddenly had dozens of small units rushing the wall all along the southeastern arc, Demons carrying huge kegs of gunpowder with enough bodies around them to make it hard to pick out the ones that had to be stopped. The artillery rained cannonballs in a large swath all through the southeastern arc, abandoning concentrating their fire on the main army to stop those attackers. The loss of sustained fire on the main army allowed Demons to manage to get over the wall alive, who then started rushing the second wall, charging through the stakes and pits and trenches and hedgerows of logs placed in the first bailey to slow down any invaders. Most of them didn’t get but a few steps before they were felled by musket fire or spells, but more Demons were behind them to trod on their melting bodies. Dragons and skyships peeled off from the main host to stop those bomb units, as huge explosions rocked the land beyond the wall, bombs detonated by spells or breath weapons before they could reach their target. But they could not stop them all.

The wall rocked from a detonation. And seconds later, another one, and then another. A moment later, another explosion in the same place on the wall caused it to bulge inward, and then it crumbled from the top outwards, a breach nearly twenty spans wide. As if on cue, the entire army turned and rushed towards the hole, nearly a longspan south of where they had made their initial attack.

“Now it gets ugly!” Ulger barked, commanding a defending squad of Knights near one of the Wikuni cannon batteries, almost directly across from the breach. “Focus all your fire on the ground behind that breach!” he boomed to the alligator Wikuni. “Archers, target that breach!” he called to the other side, to a complement of Sulasian archers and Duran crossbowmen. Ulger picked up a longbow himself and nocked an arrow from a nearby hanging quiver. “Let’s give them lots to think about!” he shouted, raising the bow as the alligator Wikuni barked orders that caused his cannons to be turned and elevated to fire at a lobbing trajectory that would land cannonballs behind the wall.

Demons poured through that breach in the wall, but they were cut down by a withering hail of arrows, crossbow quarrels, and musket balls. More and more Demons dove through the breach, shielding a host of humans, and to Ulger’s surprise, many of them were holding huge metal shields. They quickly organized into a phalanx of raised shields, and the hail of arrow fire started clattering off shields so heavy and thick that even musket balls couldn’t penetrate them completely. That phalanx started moving forward as Demons raced past them, moving slowly and carefully. Ulger watched them and saw that they were clearing the ground over which they moved of obstacles, clearing a path for those behind. “Sergeant!” Ulger barked. The alligator looked to him, and he pointed at the phalanx. “You got a crew good enough to land a cannonball right there?”

“I can hit it, no problem sir!” he shouted in reply. “Mart, direct line, line her up! Let’s break up that shield wall!”

The phalanx didn’t get far. The alligator Wikuni’s chosen cannon crew was a good shot with it, landing a cannonball right dead in the center of the formation. Men were blown in every direction, and they were peppered with arrows and musket balls. But, surprisingly, many of them simply got up with as many as ten arrows sticking out of them. Ulger cursed when he remembered the humans had to be hit in the head, that

they felt no pain and wouldn't be put off by any injury that didn't literally tear them apart. "In the head, aim for the head!" he shouted to the archers and crossbowmen, then turned and waved at the musketeers on the barbican above and behind him. "Aim at the heads of the humans!" he shouted.

"That's a tall order from this distance!" one of the Wikuni answered. "Muskets aren't very accurate from this distance for a shot like that, sir Knight!"

"Archers, it's yours!" Ulger called to the Sulasians. "Show them why a Ranger's longbow is the most feared weapon in the West!"

"Save it, we got it!" the alligator called. "Let's see them get up from this!" he added, firing one of the cannons personally. The cannonball ripped through the humans as they tried to reform their phalanx.

As Ulger worked to break up the phalanx, Demons charged across the ground in front of them. They fell at a blistering rate, but more and more Demons poured through the breach and over the wall. Several soldiers screamed and scrambled out of the way when a dragon's blue-scaled head appeared over the wall. "Down, bipeds!" the dragon called in a male voice. The dragon, Sirocco, sucked in his breath, then unleashed a wide fan of lightning bolts in an arc before him at the Demons who had gotten halfway across the bailey. The Demons were blasted back, dead before they hit the ground. The men under the dragon's head could actually feel the charge in the air, an ozone smell that made the fur of the Wikuni stand on end.

"Warn us next time, Sirocco!" Ulger shouted, shaking his fist at the dragon.

"What fun would that be?" the dragon challenged with a toothy grin larger than a carriage.

"Damn bloody dragons," Ulger growled as he nocked another arrow.

Time marched on. Minutes dragged into an hour as the slaughter in the first bailey continued, until human corpses littered the bailey and black sludge dissolved almost all the traps and defenses, leaving a pall of black smoke hanging over the city like a miasma, and still the Demons and humans came. They died closer and closer to the second wall, dying faster now that they were within range of the Sorcerers, Elementalists, and Wizards on the second wall. They continued to claw towards the wall, until the Demons on the edge of the incursion, reaching the base of the wall and preparing to climb up, screamed in surprise and alarm when a fifteen span tall conglomerate of earth and stone stomped towards them fearlessly, then started laying into them with massive fists that sent Demons flying with every sweep. Ianelle directed her Elemental expertly to break up an attempt to scale the second wall, as the Demons were pushed back out into the bailey and then felled by musket fire, spells, and arrows.

"What's going on back there? Why isn't Jasana—" Ulger snapped, then there was a sudden light at the base of the wall beneath them. He looked over in time to see projections of the five Were-cat Sorcerers appear at the base of the wall, Tarrin leading them. He turned and then swept his white-furred paw in an arc before him. The air seemed to shudder, then there was a cracking *BOOM* like lightning had struck, nearly causing Ulger to topple to the ground. One of his brother Knights steadied him, but he didn't see what happened...nor did he really need to. He knew what Tarrin had done. He had used a wall of solid air, that trick where he sent it away from him faster than anything, even a cannonball. When he looked up, he saw the aftermath of that attack, a steady black and red smear on the wall across the bailey, the liquefied remains of *every invader* that had been between the walls.

"Where have you been!" Ulger yelled down at them.

"Stopping more of those bomb squads from reaching the wall, as well as arguing with Kang!" Tarrin replied, looking up at him. "He was ordering us to stand down and save our strength, but we're not even close to tired yet."

“How many are left?”

“About half are dead. Just hang in there, troops, we’ll have this mopped up soon.” Tarrin gestured over his head, and the acidic black cloud over them started to lift, then break apart in a gentle vortex of wind, clearing the visibility for those above to attack the ones on the ground. Tarrin and his daughters then vanished in the blink of an eye, off to get into more mischief, most likely.

Mischief wasn’t exactly what they were up to, but it wasn’t easy. Tarrin and his daughters had been defending the outer wall against any more explosive breaches, lashing out at the many small groups that had tried to reach it, but the Demons had changed their tactics. Instead of trying to funnel through the breach, they had spread out in a vast line all across the southeastern arc of the wall, and then they charged. Tarrin couldn’t understand their change now, when they should have done this an hour ago, for this was something that none of them could stop. All Tarrin and the cubs could do was raise a ring of fire around the wall and hope that the flames ignited their kegs of gunpowder before they reached the wall. “*Tell them to prepare for a wide line of invaders,*” Tarrin Whispered to Dolanna as the Demons and humans ran fearlessly through the flames. Why do this now? They should have attacked the wall like this from the start. Why the delay? Were they getting their orders from Shaz’Baket, and it was taking time for the orders to reach them?

No, he saw what they were doing now. This part of the army’s job was to break enough of the defenses to give Shaz’Baket’s army a clear path to penetrate into the heart of Pyros. That was why they had spent so much time focusing on one area, trying to breach the second wall. They’d achieved their breach of the first wall, and were attempting to breach the second. Now, having been repelled by Tarrin’s superior power, they were now going to attack the outer wall and open it more, to make it harder for Tarrin to stop them from breaching the second, give them an easier ingress into the first bailey then funneling through a single opening and climbing over the walls.

A series of explosions rocked the wall, one after another after another, and the wall was breached in nine places about a longspan’s width from end to end. But, instead of charging through those holes, the enemy forces inexplicably ran along the damaged sections, all heading for the same breach that was initially opened. That made no sense at all. What in the furies were they doing? Why not attack along the entire length of the breach to spread out the artillery and ranged fire instead of concentrating in one place? All it did was give everyone one place to aim at. It just—

It just drew all the forces to one place, that’s what it did! They were going to flank the wall and attack in another location, trying to lure all the defenders to this point before doing so.

The second wall defense was indeed concentrating, as archers, magicians, and artillery had shifted closer to the main action, but it still gave them a large cover of most of the wall in the south and east. The Demons couldn’t attack another section of wall without being spotted, and Tarrin had ensured that the only way in was over the ground. No, so that wasn’t exactly what was going on here. Why else would they want all the defenders to concentrate?

So they could kill them. If the Demons had managed to get access to gunpowder, they could also get access to poison. And Tarrin’s exposure to dragons showed him that there were such things as airborne toxins and poisons.

Jula spotted it, a group of *hezrou* hiding among their larger cousins, carrying a large barrel or drum towards the outer wall. It was larger than the explosive drums the others had used, sealed shut.

They took care of that. Tarrin ruptured the drum using Sorcery.

A ghastly greenish liquid boiled forth, which instantly frothed into a thick gas when it came into contact with the ground. Every human near that cloud of gas instantly fell to the ground in convulsions, and that

toxic mass began to drift on the night wind, towards the east, away from the city, mercifully drifting back over the army itself, killing a large swath of the possessed humans within.

Damn, but the Demons were pulling out every trick they could think of. First the *mafeli* like focus, then suicidal explosion teams to breach the wall, and now they tried to use deadly gas, tried to get it to the second wall and open it to kill the defenders on the wall.

Damn clever. Diabolical, but clever. And all of it had been done without magic!

“Bring up the skyships and the dragons. Have them target anything carrying anything large enough to be noticeable. The Demons are using barrels filled with poison. We can’t let that get to the second wall,” he relayed to Dolanna *Now we break up, cubs. Three sets of eyes are better than one, and the twins are getting tired. Range out and stop any Demon trying to carry something in.*

The Circle disbanded. His four daughters were lowered to the ground, and while Tara and Rina staggered off to rest, Jula and Jasana sat crosslegged within the Conduit and projected out to the outer wall. Tarrin sent a projection of his own, and the three of them worked to pick off any barrel-carrying human or Demon in the host, even as skyships and dragons swung over the main army and also started hunting for any Demon or human carrying something, and attacking it.

While they were doing that, Ulger commanded a renewed defense against another wave of Demons trying to attack the second wall. Demons charged across the bailey as the humans pulled back and took cover, as actual military equipment started filtering in. Possessed humans with bows gathered just outside the first wall, but a sharp-eyed Selani scout on the wall reported it to Ulger, who realized they were going to try to get those archers close enough to start raking the walls with arrow fire. But they had more pressing problems to deal with, as the Demons began reaching the second wall, first one here, one there, then they started reaching in small groups. So many came so fast that the defenders simply couldn’t kill them all before they reached the wall. The first Demon to scale the second wall was a *nalfeshnee*, using its tiny wings to fly up to the top, and found itself facing a host of defenders ready for it. Ulger was right there, sword and shield at the ready, as well as several of the One’s church soldiers, two other Knights, and a Selani. The pig-faced Demon barely had time to take a swing at Ulger before the burly Knight stabbed it in the side with his sword, then it staggered forward when two of the musketmen behind it turned their guns and peppered it with fire. Ulger jerked his sword free and pushed the body back over the wall before it began to melt into that toxic black ichor. “Have someone use magic to clear this pall!” Ulger shouted as he squared off against another Demon, a small little thing that looked like nothing but bones sheathed in pale leather, carrying a barbed hook of some kind. It was one of the first Demons Ulger had seen that carried a weapon outside of the winged *vrock*. It too was shot off the wall by the musketmen before Ulger could even engage it. “Stop them from getting up here!” he shouted at the Wikuni. “Let us handle the ones that do!”

Defenders rushed to Ulger’s position as more and more Demons managed to climb the wall, as the archers and musketmen scurried off to a new position, the Duran shouldered their crossbows and drew their axes and swords, and the Wikuni artillerymen moved their cannons further to the south to keep them out of the fighting. The Demons managed to gain a foothold on the wall, but Ulger and an influx of warriors pushed back, trying to drive them off. The stone beneath them became slick with a nauseating combination of sizzling black slime and red blood as the Demons began dealing casualties. Ulger gave ground when a pair of *glabrezu* got onto the wall and entered the fracas, using their huge size to push the defenders back and give their Demonic cousins room to scale the wall behind them, but the arrival of three Vendari on the scene changed that quickly. The eleven span tall *glabrezu* could not bull the Vendari like they could the smaller humans and Dura, and the three huge lizardmen dispatched the two dog-headed Demons with shocking speed and skill. Ulger reformed around the three Vendari, and together, they pushed the Demons back off the wall with powerful, heavy strokes of his broadsword. Ulger was a fencer, but he abandoned his usual finesse and reverted back to the brute power of a broadsword swung by a strong arm, hacking into the Demons. The defenders pushed the Demons back to the edge of the wall, then used their weapons to beat at any Demon

trying to climb up. Demons howled and foamed at the mouth as they struggled up the wall, then, to Ulger's surprise, things changed quickly. A horde of the little four span tall ones were herded onto the scene, the ones they called *manes*, the little mindless ones, and the larger Demons began *throwing* them like catapult stones launched from a catapult!

The Demons doing the throwing were the big ones, the *glabrezu* and *nabassu*, and those little Demons made it up the wall. As soon as they landed, they got up and mindlessly sought to kill the closest defender, no matter what odds were against them. *Manes* were thrown up onto the wall in a wide area along the Demonic incursion, forcing archers and spellcasters to deal with the sudden threat within their ranks. "Amanelle, call someone in to take out that force of *manes*!" Ulger barked at a Sha'Kar Sorceress not far from him as he hacked at the head of a *hezrou* climbing the wall. "Someone get those *manes* on the wall!" he shouted loudly.

The Dura proved quickest to respond to the new threat. On command from their sergeant, the Dwarves broke up and scattered along the wall in two man teams, attacking the *manes* quickly and efficiently wherever they were. Archers and musketmen settled back into their task of raining death down on the invaders as the Dura mopped up the *manes* hurled onto the wall, and magicians stopped killing the little Demons threatening the wall and went back to attacking the gibbering horde of Demons and humans below.

Wikuni artillery and muskets rained death down on the *manes* waiting to be thrown, disrupting the formation and causing the organized attempt to get swallowed up in the chaos of the base of the wall, removing the threat.

The battle continued to rage, into its second hour, and then its third, as the defenders managed to hold the second wall, despite several Demon pushes that got them onto the wall until the defenders rallied to the point of breach and beat them back. The humans in the army did not attack the wall, instead they tried to ferry in weapons and equipment through the breaches in the wall, clear obstacles, widen the breaches, and build makeshift fortifications, though the eternal threat of the skyships and the dragons made it impossible to do anything that required any amount of time. The one time the humans tried to salvage a half-burned catapult that had been on the first wall, Nightshade swooped in and slaughtered them all, then used magic to set fire to the catapult anew and render it unusable. The only thing the humans really managed to do well was widen the breaches in the walls, mainly by forcing the artillerymen to use cannons to break up what they were doing near the wall. The impacts brought down parts of the walls that were weakened but had not collapsed in the initial attacks that created the breaches.

Finally, Ulger saw light. Literally and figuratively. The eastern horizon was stained with the light of the coming dawn, and he looked out over the mass of Demons rushing the wall and realized that they were no longer streaming in from the outside. There were tens of thousands of Demons left, and the humans that had not charged the wall, but Ulger saw with relief that this battle would be over soon, and that they had managed to hold the wall.

So far.

But that didn't distract him from the task at hand. He chopped the hand off a *manes* trying to climb the wall, he bashed a *babau* that had gotten half up dead in the face with his shield, sending it plummeting thirty spans to the ground below. An explosion of dirt fountained up and over the wall, spraying the defenders with dirt and grime, forcing Ulger to kick a melting Demon foot off the edge of the wall that had bounced to a rest atop it. He couldn't figure out what caused that, until he looked over at the alligator Wikuni's unit, now further down the wall, and saw that they had trained their cannons on the Demons in front of the wall in front of him, having just enough of an angle to sneak a cannonball by the curve of the wall and land them about twenty spans out from the wall, where Demons howled with impatience as they awaited their turn to try to climb the wall and kill the defenders.

“That’s clever,” the Vendari by him noted, a brown saltwater Vendari holding a massive steel-banded club in his huge hand.

“Wikuni are good at clever,” Ulger grunted. “On your left.”

“I see it.”

The Vendari reared back and slammed the club into the face of a *hezrou*, tearing its head clean off its body. The head sailed several dozen spans in an arc to land in the thinning army while the body tumbled down to the base of the wall. Another blast of cool air raced by them as one of the Sorcerers or an Air Elementalist swept the toxic black smoke rising from the base of the wall away from it. Ulger nearly slipped when he put his foot down in an irregular hole burned out by a Demon corpse, and that act made him blink. He knocked a *manes* off the wall in front of him and boldly leaned over and peered down.

He saw a nightmarish cacophony of Demonic faces glaring up at him with utter hatred in their eyes, but what was more, he saw the copious black smoke marking the decomposing Demonic bodies boiling up around them from the base of the wall. His sharp eyes realized that the Demons at the base of the wall were *lower* than the Demons further out, showing that the thousands and thousands of corpses had decayed into that acidic sludge that had actually eaten away at the ground, lowering the ground level. He even saw some of the Demons picking up the still-decaying corpses and throwing them against the base of the wall, which was now no longer vertical. The acid of the decaying Demons had burned into the base of the wall, a fact easily hidden by the swarm of Demons and the thick black pall hanging over the battlefield.

Of course. That was why they were attacking the same section of wall, with almost mindless determination, instead of spreading out and trying to hit a wide section of the wall all at once. They were letting the acidic spoor of their corpses melt away the foundation of the wall!

Ulger swore sulfurously. “Amanelle! Amanelle!” he shouted, absently braining a bloated *dretch* that had scabbled up the wall. “Amanelle, can you do Earth weaves?”

“Of course I can, Lord Ulger,” she called.

“The Demon corpses are eating away the base of the wall!” he shouted. “We have to shore it up before they send in grapples to try to pull the wall down!”

Amanelle blinked, then nodded vigorously. “I cannot do that on my own, but I will send it to Dolanna!” she answered. “She will dispatch a Circle to come fix it quickly!”

“Well, make it a priority!” he shouted, bashing a *manes* in the face with his shield, sending it tumbling back down. “We have to hold this wall!”

“You can admire the Demons for their cunning,” the Vendari noted to Ulger as he killed a *glabrezu* that had managed to climb over the backs of its own, its pincers stained in Demon blood from punching them into its own to use them as handholds. “Using their own dead as a weapon is quite ingenious.”

It wasn’t a Circle that arrived to fix the problem, it was Tarrin Kael himself. The army cheered when he appeared on the wall near Ulger, looking down. “Where, Ulger?”

“Right under me!” he shouted back. “It’s getting pretty deep in there, Tarrin! The wall is getting undercut!”

“I’ll fix it,” he said, closing his eyes and kneeling down to put his paws on the wall beneath him.

One Demon, a *glabrezu*, scrambled up the wall with feverish intent, managing to get up to where Tarrin knelt before anyone could react. It crested the wall, reared back a pincer claw, then drove it towards the unreacting Were-cat, but the claw passed harmlessly through the projection. It shrieked in pain when a Dura slammed his axe down on his arm, shearing the pincer off and a good part of the arm below the elbow. The Demon's head snapped to the side when a musket ball punched through its skull, just below the ear, and it tumbled down lifelessly to the ground, black smoke already starting to waft up from its ghoulish green fur.

"Did you notice something, sir Knight?" the Vendari mentioned. "There are no *Cambisi* in this army."

"Yeah, actually, I did notice that. I think they were all pulled back to deal with the shadow. I remember Tarrin saying that the halfbreeds were the only ones that really had a chance to kill it."

"So you think we will not see any in the other army?" the Vendari asked, crushing the skull of a *babau* with his club.

"We might, but I don't think we'll see many of them," Ulger answered. "I've also noticed that there are a lot of the stronger Demons in this army, and not many of their usual footsoldiers, those little ones. I think we'll see a lot of those in the other army too." He glanced up to see a complement of humans moving towards the wall, but most of them were pulling out, pulling to the other side of the wall. "Hit those archers, Sergeant!" he boomed at the cannon crew, pointing at the humans out in the bailey.

"We already saw them, Sir Knight!" a dog Wikuni shouted back. "We're setting to hit them now!"

As the artillerymen broke up that human archer formation, Tarrin repaired the wall. Stone was brought up from the ground to fill the deep hole burned out by the Demon corpses. Demons were hurled from the base of the wall when Tarrin fixed it, sending a hail of Demonic bodies to fall into their comrades further behind. The stone was grown out to its original dimensions, filling the pit that was growing at the base of and under the wall. Tarrin repaired in moments what the Demon corpses had taken hours to melt away, but he also put the final piece in the puzzle of why this army had done what it did. That was why they hadn't spread out. By concentrating the dead here, it only helped them by damaging the wall. Even now, the surface and sides of the wall had deep scars in them, pits and burns on its top from Demons killed on the wall, and burns and etches into the stone on the face of the wall where Demon corpses bounced off it on the way down. By concentrating the collateral damage, they were trying to open the wall for Shaz'Baket's forces, forces that were nearly here. And had Ulger not been alert, they may have succeeded in undercutting this section of the wall and making it collapse.

"It's fixed, Ulger! I need to go rest now or Kang will brain me, so be safe!"

"Always, Tarrin, always!" he said, splitting the skull of a *dretch* that reached out to scratch at him with its spindly arms and small claws.

The battle raged on. Ulger and his Vendari companion formed the core of a steadfast line that would not relinquish the wall, an unwavering figure that swung his sword and shield like a farmer chopping wood, steady, rhythmically, and tirelessly. Church soldiers of the One looked on the armored Knight in awe, a human of almost superhuman skill and endurance, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Vendari behemoth and proving to be its equal in battle. Church soldiers, Elaran warriors, Dura, and swarthy-skinned outworlders called Arakites rotated in and out of the defense while the Knight and Vendari remained, felling Demons it seemed with every swing of sword and club. The Demons had abandoned coming up the same section of wall after Tarrin repaired it, spreading out somewhat and scaling the wall in an arc about a quarter longspan distant. But Ulger stood in the exact center of that push, like an armored mythical hero, almost seeming to defend the entire wall by himself.

Demons relentlessly battled the defenders on the wall, but then, after Ulger slashed the arm off a *dretch*,

stabbed it through the head, then kicked the body off the wall, he blinked and realized there were no Demons scrabbling up the wall behind it. He looked to his left, to his right, then looked over the wall with his Vendari partner and saw there were no more Demons. And the possessed humans were nowhere to be seen.

“Amanelle, report!” he barked over his shoulder.

The lithe Sha’Kar, with a gash over her right eye and her shimmering robe torn, her right sleeve gone and a quartet of nasty gashes on her bicep, looked back towards the Heart. Then she looked to Ulger with a grin. “The Demons are felled, Lord Ulger,” she reported. “The dragons and skyships harass the possessed humans, which retreat to the east. But, the main army is less than an hour away. Already, the Selani report contact with the *marilith*’s advance scouts.”

“They’d better not chase them too far, or Shaz’Baket might have a nasty surprise waiting for them,” Ulger growled. “They’ll be too exposed and too far from support if they get ambushed.”

“Truly. I will send along your concern,” Amanelle told him.

“Quite the sunrise,” a Dwarf grunted, looking through a breach in the wall to the rising sun.

“Aye, but don’t get too content. We have a lot more battle to go,” Ulger told him. “Everyone take a break after you’re sure you’re ready for the next wave! We won’t have long to rest before the second army gets here!”

High above Pyros, Tarrin too shared Ulger’s worry and ordered the skyships and dragons recalled on his own authority. He knew Shaz’Baket. He knew she would be ready and waiting. He did not want his friends and those skyships hanging out there all alone for whatever little surprise the Demoness had waiting for them. Quite a few angry retorts awaited him when Sapphire and Tenshale returned to the inner compound, but he ignored them.

But there was...something, something coming. He could sense it more clearly now, something he hadn’t sensed all the times he’d looked in on Shaz’Baket’s army. Now that Tarrin had seen one of those human *mafelis*, he knew that Shaz’Baket did have access to some magical power, something he could neither sense nor stop. Tarrin had no doubt that Shaz’Baket’s army had a *mafeli* of its own, maybe more than one given it was more than twice the size of the first army, and to him, that changed everything. No, something more had to be done, something to slow them down even more.

Why did he feel this way? He didn’t know. But it was there. Something just...told him to take extra precautions. Something told him that he had to be ready, and that he had best be ready to use every weapon at his disposal, including the one weapon he knew would be a risk to use.

It was time.

Tarrin raised his left paw, holding the Firestaff, and commanded the artifact to do his bidding. The artifact shuddered, then strove to resist him, attempted to break free, but its will was crushed under Tarrin’s own. When it called forth the power to perform its task, its resistance increased exponentially, forcing Tarrin to use his own strength to quell the artifact...but again, the Firestaff found itself helpless to resist the indomitable will of Tarrin Kael. Sulkily, it performed the task which had been laid out before it.

With Tarrin forming the apex, a glimmering shield of pure magical energy descended in a spherical arc towards the ground, a huge magical construction, descending towards the ground like a scillinting curtain made of solid starlight, opaque but visible, covering the entire city of Pyros. The shield descended to touch the ground just outside the first wall, encompassing all the fortifications to the south, east, and north, and

more than half of the volcano to the west. The glimmering shield shimmered, and then it vanished from sight. Tarrin's voice then boomed out across the city. After that was done, Tarrin commanded the Weave and wove a Ward of titanic dimensions, laying it just in front of the shield that the Firestaff had laid down.

"The shield you saw at the edge of the city is designed to stop magic coming in, but not going out. But, set right in line with that shield is a Ward," his voice reached to every corner of Pyros, though it was not loud, causing everyone to stop what they were doing and listen to him. *"The Ward is set to kill any human or Demon that crosses it. If you're human, do not pass through it, or you'll die. No skyship carrying any humans as its crew can go past the first wall. Keep in mind, you can fire through it and cast spells through it safely, but only from the inside out. If you're not familiar with Wards, talk to a nearby Sorcerer and they'll explain what it is and how it works."*

Sapphire, in her human form, rose up to him, standing on a glowing disc of magical energy. "Tarrin, what are you doing? You are restricting the ability of our aerial forces to engage the enemy!"

"I'm not letting anyone out there until I see what Shaz'Baket has up her sleeve," he told her. "Call it a hunch, or a feeling. But I don't think any of you would be safe. Not even the dragons."

"What makes you believe that?"

"I...don't know. But I do," he told her. "Until I see what Shaz'Baket's going to do, we have to take a completely defensive stance, Sapphire. I just *know* we do."

She blinked, then nodded. "Then it shall be as you wish," she said simply. "I will tell Kang."

She descended down to the inner compound, leaving Tarrin, who hovered within the Conduit, within his prison, staring to the rising sun. But he was looking beyond that red crescent on the horizon. His eyes were locked on the dark shimmering mass starting to spread across the eastern plain. His eyes were fixed on the army of Shaz'Baket, nearly twice the size of the first, but this one being commanded by the one Demon on Pyrosia that Tarrin feared in any way, shape, or form. Not for her power, not for her martial prowess, but for her mind.

He'd thought many times that the true enemy here was Shaz'Baket, that the Demon Lord was only the prize awarded for her defeat. But this would be the end. The *marilith* had dogged and haunted him and his family for years, and he was sick of it. He vowed that it would end here, in this place, on this day.

One way or another, Tarrin was going to deal with Shaz'Baket. But Mist was too primal. There were better ways to deal with Shaz'Baket than simply killing her. Just killing her wouldn't be enough of a punishment for everything she had done to his family.

He glanced down at the Firestaff. Yes, that would work perfectly.

"Come on, Shaz'Baket," he whispered into the wind, taking the Firestaff in both paws and looking deep into her army, searching for her. "I'm waiting for you."

Chapter 12

Kang was furious, but Tarrin didn't care.

With the city settled behind its magical defense, Shaz'Baket had plenty of time to march in her huge army without harassment and prepare them. Tarrin simply tuned out the Arakite field marshal as he raged that they needed to disrupt those preparations, that giving her time to set up was going to jeopardize the city itself.

On that account, Tarrin couldn't argue too much. Shaz'Baket's army was *huge*, fully twice the size of the first, but more than half of it were humans, and there was a large proportion of weaker Demons in her force than was in the first army. Those humans, Tarrin sensed, were all possessed. But, beyond those, he could sense three of those human focuses out there. Three of them. The first one had died because Tarrin had realized what it was quickly, and attacked it in a way that it couldn't react fast enough, forcing it to respond to the visible threat while it was killed with the invisible one. It wouldn't be so easy this time. With three of them, one of them could concentrate solely on protecting them while the other two could attack.

But, that wouldn't be too much of an issue. Jasana could Circle with her sisters and deal with those three, that would be their job. It would balance out two of the biggest weapons on either side, leaving the armies to fight it out without any kind of overwhelming magical advantage.

Tarrin watched Shaz'Baket deploy, and then, to his surprise, he saw quite a few of the humans in the army collapse. In a grisly kind of metamorphosis, the spirits of the Demons within them came through those mortal vessels and manifested into the material world, killing the human host in the process. Those Demons, several thousand of them, were the Demons that they had thought wiped out. *Vrock, chasme*, the full adult stage of the *nabassu*, the Demons who were adept fliers, not like the ungainly *nalfeshnee*. In that moment, Tarrin felt justified in calling back his skyships and the dragons, for they would have been attacked by a horde of flying Demons.

It seemed odd that Shaz'Baket would reveal this secret weapon so early, before she even attacked... unless, of course, those Demons were going to be part of her initial attack strategy.

It was clearly time to start showing Shaz'Baket that they were ready for her. "*Jasana, gather your sisters and Circle,*" he Whispered into the Weave. "*There are three more of those human focuses for Gruz in that army. Find them and kill them.*"

"We're already here, father. Just give us a couple of minutes, and we'll go take them out."

"Dolanna. Have Kang gather the skyships and the dragons and prepare to fend off flying Demons," he ordered. *"Have every da'shar summon air or fire Elementals to help. If Shaz'Baket's revealing them now, she intends to use them first."*

"At once, dear one. Oh, Kang tells me to warn you not to tire yourself."

“I’m not going to use Sorcery after I summon my Elementals,” he answered, hefting the Firestaff. “But I’m going to make sure they know I’m here.”

“Be careful, my dear one.”

Tarrin summoned all four of his Elementals. His earth and water Elementals were set down in the inner compound to act as reserves, but his air and fire Elementals were sent out. His air Elemental was ordered to escort one of the skyships and help protect it, which just happened to be a skyship upon which Sevren was stationed, and his fire Elemental was tasked to escort Sapphire and Tenshale, since its fiery body could ignite the rigging of the ships. The Elemental was smaller than the dragons and very fast, capable of reacting to any Demons that tried to land on the huge dragons and try to do them harm.

Once he felt his daughters Circle and Jasana project out to be able to see what was going on, Tarrin struck first. Raising the Firestaff in both paws, he called upon its power, and he called upon *all* of it. He summoned forth the same power he had used to protect himself from the One when they were in Acheron, as much power as he could control, and maybe just a little bit beyond that, pushing his ability to control the artifact to the limit. It was a huge blow, a devastating strike meant to force all three of Gruz’s foci to act in concert to protect the army, something he had not done the night before because he didn’t want Shaz’Baket to see what kind of power he could use and prepare for it before they arrived. He felt the Firestaff slip, shudder, try to wriggle free, and then when he summoned its power, he felt it strike back at him like an enraged bear, pushing, trying to wrest itself free of him, but it again felt the iron jaws of Tarrin Kael’s unshakeable will clamp down on it, and again could not find the strength to resist. It capitulated to him, submitted to his will, and did as he commanded.

The defenders of Pyros saw, first hand, the kind of power Tarrin Kael could command. They shrank back as a blast of pure, unmitigated magical power erupted from the glowing Conduit and raged through the air above the city, much stronger, much more powerful than the previous attacks they’d seen originate from the Conduit. That rampage of magical might slammed into a sheet of discongruent darkness that hastily appeared in front of it, a barrier of protection erected by the human foci employed by Gruz. The meeting of those kinds of powers, though, didn’t just stop when they hit each other. A powerful blast of wind blew out from that impact, where a blazing orb of magical backlash boiled around the contact point between the power of the Firestaff and the power Gruz derived from the mortals he had forced to worship him, and what was more important, it gave his daughters a point of reference to find those humans, and kill them.

The attack was almost like a signal. The massive numbers of soldiers in Shaz’Baket’s army rushed forward with horrid screams of anticipation, and the thousands of winged Demons took to the sky...but they didn’t fly towards the city. They instead flew the other way, quickly retreating back to the rear area of the army, some of which still had not fully marched in and reset. Even as he maintained his attack on the army, he felt something reaching around, feeling, probing the work he had done with the shield and the Ward. It was then he realized that only *one* of the foci was actively defending the army from him. The other two were already looking to undo the work he’d done to defend the city until Shaz’Baket revealed her tricks.

“Jasana,” he called.

“I sense it. We’re trying to find him now.”

However, it was already too late. With surprising speed, the focus found the Ward and disrupted it, destroying its power. It was done with such speed and ease that it was clear to Tarrin that the focus had trained specifically for that task, and it had performed that task well. It could not, however, find the weakness in his anti-magic shield that prevented any magical attack into the city. He could feel it sliding over the shield, trying to reach into it, puzzle out how it had been built so it could undo that work. But then it pulled back, and he felt no other attempt to try.

Naturally, it didn't understand what it was looking at. The Ward was raised with Sorcery, which Shaz'Baket had probably had those foci trained to recognize and undo. The construction of the shield was done by the Firestaff, which built it using radically different techniques than a Sorcerer would. She had had her foci trained to deal with Sorcery, but they were not prepared to deal with the Firestaff in any intricate or detailed way. They could only protect against its attacks with the most basic forms of defense, dealing with the Firestaff as he dealt with the foci, at the basic level that stated that magic of any kind was still the same kind of energy once it manifested in the material plane, and could be attacked or defended against on that level. They could try to batter down the shield with raw power, but without understanding how the Firestaff had built the shield, they couldn't reach in and unravel it as they could Sorcery.

And that was exactly what they did. Tarrin saw the attack, a crude release of raw power, originating from Gruz but channeled through his human foci. He reacted instantly, channeling all the power he was using against the defender to reinforce his shield. The shield flared into visibility when the attack struck it, and for a split second it almost shattered, until the power of the Firestaff reinforced its magical power and stabilized it.

Damn that bastard, Gruz. With three of them, they had Tarrin and Jasana both effectively tied up. Neither of them could help the army as long as they had to fight those three foci. They were on the defensive here.

Almost. Eron was the ultimate answer to those foci, but it would be insane to send him to kill them now. He had to wait, wait until the army was fully engaged, when they could send a counterattack to hit the back of their lines, which would let Eron get close enough. Either that or send him on a skyship once the flying Demons were killed off and returned mastery of the skies to the defenders, but that would be much more dangerous. The instant Eron had to defend the skyship from a focus, Shaz'Baket would do anything in her power to knock that skyship out of the air, because she would know what was coming.

"Cubs, back off. This up to our army now. Just pull back and defend the city from those three foci. We'll send Eron to kill them once most of the army is engaged in the city, so just hold fast until then. Don't overexert yourself, any of you."

"Can do, father."

"Dolanna."

"Yes, dear one?"

"The foci have us stalled, we have to be fully defensive. There are too many of them. So listen carefully."

"Go ahead."

"Eron can kill the foci if he can reach them, but we can't send him to do that right now. Once the enemy is fully engaged and we can send a force to circle around and hit them from behind, or we can clear the flying Demons and get a skyship over them, I need a force of men not afraid to hit a superior force head-on to escort Eron in there so he can find and kill those humans. Have Kang arrange it."

"I am sure we can arrange that, dear one. And I will ensure it is the very best. We cannot expose your son to too much danger, both because of who he is, and what he is."

"I appreciate that, Dolanna."

With the Ward down, the Demons and their human allies charged towards the wall without fear. Wikuni artillery opened up, sending a hail of cannon fire into the lead of that line, led by the small *dretches* and *manes*, the dumb weaklings of Demonkin, but more than a match for the average human soldier. The *dretches* and *manes* were the cannon fodder of the Demons, the pawns, the footsoldiers, weak by themselves but existing in such vast numbers in the Abyss that they could be considered uncountable. Tarrin could see from his vantage point that while one focus attacked and another defended, a third was using magic to transport siege engines and equipment directly to the battlefield, which Tarrin had to admit was very clever. The army hadn't been bogged down by having to move catapults and trebuchets with them, they simply brought them directly to the field. Huge non-Demons but extraplanar beings called *slaads*, massive creatures nearly fifteen spans tall, were put to work moving those siege engines, pushing them towards Pyros.

But before the foot army reached the wall, the flying Demons returned. They were all carrying large bundles, some of them struggling to maintain altitude while carrying them, and Tarrin quickly recognized the shape and color of those objects.

"*Bring up everything that can fly and stop them!*" he snapped as he divided his attention, maintaining his defense of the shield with the Firestaff and reducing the power he was feeding into it while calling on the power of Sorcery. Under no circumstances could they unleash those things on the city.

They were carrying kegs of gunpowder.

Alright, that was *really* damn clever. Shaz'Baket had maximized the destructive power of what few fliers she had available to her by having the drop kegs of gunpowder on the city, which would kill soldiers and damage fortifications.

The fliers came as fast as they could, even as the skyships and the dragons rose up, moving to intercept them, even as the order to seek shelter was called out to the defenders on the walls below. Not everyone fled, however. Wikuni artillery crews remained at their posts, continuing to fire on the advancing army. The Demons crossed over the first wall and were met by skyships and dragons. Demons tumbled out of the air in droves, and explosions high over the city heralded the magicians igniting the payloads before they could be released, but there were too many attackers. Demons slipped through the defense and dropped their kegs, aiming them at the second and third walls. Explosions rocked Pyros as the kegs hit the walls and the ground and exploded, most of them striking the ground between walls, but quite a few hitting where the Demons had aimed them. Sections of the second and third walls in the southeast quadrant were shattered by the explosions, but it was one hit close to where the defenders had pushed back the first army that did the most damage. One *nabassu* had dropped his keg directly onto the Wikuni artillery emplacement commanded by the alligator Wikuni, and the keg ignited the gunpowder they had on hand to use their cannons. The wall at that position was obliterated nearly to the ground, killing the crews of all five cannons and sending stone and fiery debris flying in every direction. The Demons who survived the initial attack turned to flee, but were chased to the protection of the shield by the defenders, killing many of them. Those defenders did not pass over the wall, however, for fear of being open to attack from the other side. Sapphire and Sirocco dove under the constant stream of power that Tarrin channeled into the magical shield defending the city from the magic outside, as Tarrin's fire Elemental dove on a *vrock* with its talons at the ready, striking its smaller foe and tearing it in half with a defiant shriek of victory.

On the wall, Ulger came out from his covered position and surveyed the damage not far from his position, and came to an immediate decision. "Listen up!" he shouted, waving his hand on both sides of himself. "The wall is breached! All artillery pull back to the third wall! Vendari and magicians, assist the archers in towing their cannon to their fallback positions, then return to your positions! Archers, musketeers and footsoldiers hold fast and prepare to give the Demons trying to get through that breach one hell of a rough time of it! Do it fast, we're about to have company! Amanelle, relay that order down the line and send it up to Dolanna!"

The horde of Demons passed by the first wall and spread out in a wide front, preparing to attack a wide expanse of the second wall despite the opened breach, to tie up the defenders and prevent them from focusing their fire on the breach. Wikuni and Vendari manhandled cannons, then were helped by Sorcerers and Elementalists to quickly move them across the second bailey, to their assigned second positions on the third wall, as the ranged attack units opened fire on the massive horde of small Demon lackeys rushing across the war-ravaged first bailey. The wave of small Demons surged forward like a wave on the beach, charging mindlessly and fearlessly through a withering sheet of arrows, crossbow bolts, musket balls, and once they got close enough, lances of magic, waves of cold, sprays of acid, and explosions of earth at their feet. Those Demons aiming for the breach missed a step when a hulking mass of brown earth rose up in the breach, an earth Elemental summoned by Amanelle to fill the hole and slow them down, but they did not veer away or slow down. Elementals of all four types appeared on the wall, then they dropped down to the ground and charged the Demons without fear. The forty Elementals slammed into the Demon lines, but the Demons did not stop to engage them, they simply ran past as the Elementals killed anything they could reach.

After carpeting the ground with decomposing Demon bodies from the first wall to the second wall, the Demons reached the wall and started their assault. A flying Demon dropped with a wet *splutch* of black blood and gore on the wall by Ulger as the Knight took up his sword and shield, and an explosion out in the carpet of invading Demons sent a shower of black blood and dirt spraying the men on the wall as a skyship turned and descended, laying into the horde below with magical attacks. *Dretches* and *manes* swarmed up the walls and up into the breach, where the earth Elemental standing steadfast in that hole started beating at them with its massive arms, slaughtering the little Demons with every blow. It effectively stopped any wholesale spill of Demons into the second bailey, but some did get by it. Small groups of *dretch* and *manes* got past the Elemental and started running towards the third wall, but they were cut down from both sides by musketmen on the second and third walls.

On the walls, the defenders were embroiled in a pitched, brutal fight to hold the wall, to give the cannons enough time to reposition and do as much damage as possible to the enemy before they were pushed off the second wall. Though the little Demons were weaker and easier to kill than the ones in the first army, the sheer numbers of them made it a heated battle. They covered the ground like ants all the way back to the main host outside, and still they came. For every one that was killed, three more stepped in behind it to take its place. Those numbers pushed the defenders back away from the edge of the wall and gave the Demons a foothold along a two longspan stretch in the main area of contention, as the Demons poured through the breaches in the first wall, even climbed over it because there wasn't enough room for them all to go through at the same time, and rushed the city. Ulger refused to give any more ground, anchoring the line about halfway back and holding fast, spurring a surge of force from the defenders as they repelled the invaders. The wall became a bubbling morass as hundreds, then thousands of Demon bodies fell on the wall and decomposed, forming an acidic sludge that ate at boots and sollarets, burned skin, and forced magicians to constantly blow the toxic cloud away from the eyes and mouths of the defenders to prevent choking and blindness. The wall literally began to melt from the top down, but the defenders would not yield. These little Demons, they were the *easy* part of this battle. Behind them would be the possessed humans and the larger, more dangerous Demons. If they could not hold the second wall through this charge of the cannon fodder, they would lose this battle and Pyrosia would be lost to the Demon Lord.

"Amanelle!" he barked. "Can you summon another Elemental?"

"I already have two out!" she called. "My air Elemental is defending the air above us!"

"Find someone who can summon a water Elemental and clear this wall before these corpses melt it to the ground!" he shouted.

"Och, I'll get it!" a Pyrosian Elemental, a burly, sun-browed fellow wearing simple canvas clothing shouted. "I be a Water adept, me Lord! I'll keep the deck clean!"

“Do it!” he boomed back.

The Elementalist was clever and experienced. He didn't sweep the stone with a torrent of water, he instead used a light touch, sliding a layer of water beneath the corpses and the acidic sludge into which they degenerated to keep it from burning into the wall, then pushing it all back over the wall, between and around the feet of the Demons advancing on the line as it was pushed up and over the edge to dribble sloppily on the Demons climbing up and waiting their turn. The cleansing of the wall gave the defenders better footing, and they pushed back even harder against their smaller foes.

Above the melee, the flying Demons returned in force. They no longer carried kegs of gunpowder, they instead attacked the skyships. The Demons who landed on the decks found not spellcasters they could easily kill once they got within glaivethrust of them, but crack Wikuni Marines and Vendari soldiers, troops highly trained in fighting on a ship. *Vrock*, *chasme*, and *nabassu* contended with air and fire Elementals and the spells cast at them by the magicians to even reach the skyships, and those that managed to land on the skyships were immediately embroiled in savage combat with the ship defenders, highly trained, highly disciplined soldiers. The attacks on the skyships were short and savage, with the Demons retreating to regroup after a flurry of combat that left many Demons dead and not one skyship knocked out of the battle. The skyships all grouped into a tight formation for mutual defense as the dragons circled nearby, diving on the horde of Demons in the first bailey to rake them with breath weapons in turns so at least three dragons circled the skyships to protect them from another attack. The Demons did return, though, more organized. They moved in a loose formation and attacked only one skyship, losing nearly a quarter of their number to the dragons, Elementals defending the formation, and the magicians that turned their attention from the ground below to the threat above. On the ship, it was a chaotic frenzy of spellfire and flashing weapons as defenders and magicians fended off *vrock* and *nabassu* armed with heavy glaives. The deck became a savage bloodbath on both sides, as Demons were cut down more than their defenders, but one *vrock* managed to reach the flying device and plant its glaive into it before a Vendari crushed him to the deck with a hammer.

The skyship lurched as every Demon took to the air and tried to swarm the next skyship, listing to its port side as its bow dipped towards the ground. The panther Wikuni in command ordered the ship abandoned, and magicians helped Marines and Vendari off the wounded ship as Elementals and the dragons assisted. The stubborn captain remained at the helm as the ship sank from the formation, then plummeted towards the ground. The courageous captain turned the ship over the second wall, and crashed it directly into the horde of Demons in the first bailey. The crash of the skyship was a thunderous cacophony of shattering wood and geysering dirt and black blood as the ship plowed into the bailey, crushing a slough of Demons in the process. But it did not even phase the lowly Demons who simply swarmed over the wreckage as yet another obstacle.

Demons swarmed another skyship, but fewer made it to the deck than reached the first ship. A new pitched battle erupted on the deck, as Vendari warriors defended the flying device in a wall of formidable steel and muscle while the Wikuni Marines engaged the Demons in armed combat. This time, however, the other ships reacted quickly. The ship to the port of the invaded vessel dipped to starboard to turn her whole deck visible to the afflicted ship, and every magician on that vessel attacked the Demons with magic. The Demons withered under the crossfire between the magicians on the ship they attacked and the ship beside it, and the few that survived to flee were harassed by dragons and Elementals as they tried to scramble back over the first wall and to safety. Nightshade and Sandwing, the smallest of the dragons newly rotated into the battle to give Sirocco and Densheen rest, proved to be lethal to the Demons, for they were smaller than their larger, more plodding relatives, able to fly faster and turn quicker, which allowed them to chase the Demons down and kill them with speed and efficiency.

Only four made it back alive.

With the majority of the aerial Demons killed, the skyships and dragons broke into small units and spread out over the Demonic masses clamoring towards the second wall, and unleashed havoc upon them. Demons

died in large chunks as the magicians unleashed on the small Demons, and whole companies of them withered and died when the blue dragons dove on them and raked them with their breath weapons.

They died by the thousands, but still they came.

The defenders were again hard pressed as the Demons kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming. Ulger was pushed back further and further on the wall, because the Demons came in an endless wave that had no pause. Every Demon that died was replaced instantly, while every defender that fell left a hole that took time to replace, and that caused the defenders to fall back or get swarmed. When Ulger saw that he was only steps from the edge of the wall, he gave a shrill whistle and waved to Amanelle. "Call the withdraw of the center!" he shouted to her. "Shore up the defenses on the flanks, all defenders in the central push, fall back! Fall back!" he shouted.

The maneuver had been practiced over and over, to perfection. Sorcerers and Elementalists sprang into action as the soldiers at the center of the line turned and boldly jumped off the twenty span high wall. But instead of falling to the ground, they slid on invisible solid air, frictionless ramps that slid them down and well into the second bailey as the Demons that chased after them tried to follow, but then plummeted to the ground, a ground littered with non-native rock bristling with long spears and stakes placed into them. Those Demons were killed by the fall and impalement. A thousand men, Elarans, Dura, Wikuni, and Vendari raced across the flat second bailey, running over the moat that had been solidified so they could tread upon it by waiting Water Adepts, and charged for the far wall. The defenders on the flanks of that push absorbed the defenders closer to them than the center, and they held the wall against Demons that pressed them, but there weren't many. The rather dim Demons had been told to make for the center, and that was exactly what they were doing. Very few stopped to attack the defenders holding the sections of the walls outside of their path to the inner compound. The defenders climbed up rope ladders to scale the forty span tall wall, twice as high as the first, with an extended barbican that would make climbing up it much harder. This third wall was the main defense, the wall the defenders would not surrender willingly. The plan had taken into account, even planned upon the eventual breach of the first and second walls. It was here, at the third wall, where there was less overall wall to defend, that the defenders make their stand.

The Sorcerers at the moat, after the last of the defenders were across, then worked their power on the water of the moat. They were already joined into a large Circle, and they used that power to alter its very makeup, as the entire moat, all the way around, suddenly turned a dark metallic green. When that was done, as the *dretch* and *manes* rambled towards them, they turned and fled. As soon as they were at a safe distance, the full complement of the most concentrated ranged weaponry possessed by the defenders, row upon row of archers and crossbowmen, unit after unit of musketeers, rank after rank of cannons, and *thousands* of magicians, all opened fire on the charging Demonic horde. A volley of musket fire and arrows so thick it shaded the land by their vanes and the smoke from the muskets arced through the air and slammed into the Demons, felling thousands of them in the first volley. Even the mindless *manes* seemed taken aback at the sheer power of that initial salvo, so much firepower concentrated on the wall facing them, it even caused the fearless dredges of Demonic society to hesitate, if only for a second.

The Demons began to advance again, but much slower. The slowness wasn't from them moving slower or more carefully, it was from the sheer numbers of casualties inflicted upon them by the defenders. Hundreds died every second, so many, so fast, that their smoldering corpses piled atop each other before they could decompose. They marched into that flying death fearlessly, until they reached the moat. The first Demon to jump into the moat shrieked in pain, a high-pitched, tinny sound as it discovered, the hard way, that the magicians had transformed the entire moat into acid, and the Demons were not immune to it. That first *dretch* sank under the surface, a blackened hand stiffened into a claw as it slipped beneath the rippling surface, but it was not alone for long. The *dretches* in front, having some modicum of intelligence, tried to avoid the moat, but the press from behind by Demons unaware of the lethal nature of the obstacle pushed them in to their doom. The *manes*, being mindless and fearless, walked right off the edge and into the deadly liquid without even slowing down. A sizzling cloud formed over the moat as Demons by the hundreds were

driven in, so many that the acid began to overflow the banks as their sheer volume of Demons began to displace a significant volume of liquid.

“Gunners, now!” Ulger commanded from his new position on the third wall. A horn blared, and all the artillery masters turned their guns not on the Demonic horde, but on the second wall behind them. Cannon fire struck the wall in a massive barrage from both the second and third walls, shattering stone and rocking the entire city from the impact. The cannons systematically destroyed the wall in those sections where the Demons had taken control, robbing them of the ability to spread out along the circumference, hitting it with deadly accuracy to destabilize it, and then collapse it. Demons were tumbled into the debris as the wall tilted, then fell outwards, towards the second wall. It collapsed in a cloud of dust and a rumbling shudder through the city, denying the Demons an easy route to totally conquer the second wall and lowering the obstruction to give the musketmen the ability to fire on Demons all the way back in the first bailey.

Ulger waved for the artillery crews to again target Demons when Amanelle scurried up to him. “Word from Dolanna, Sir Ulger!” she said breathlessly. “The rest of the Demons are starting to follow these in, as well as the humans! They are also bringing up catapults!”

“Get everyone set and ready to deal with incoming fire!” Ulger screamed, repeating his order to the other side. “Bring up the Legions! Everyone, find your shields and keep them ready! Musketmen, prepare to sustain fire on any engineers they bring up to deal with the moat!”

Everyone flinched when the glowing shield around the city seemed to buckle. The Conduit behind them blazed with sudden light, and the column of magical energy feeding from the Conduit to the shield grew in intensity. “It looks like Tarrin is really slugging it out with them,” he growled. “I hope he can hold, cause this is going to take a while.”

“What could they have sent to cause so much trouble for the Keeper of Keepers?” Amanelle wondered aloud.

“Whatever it is, it must be nasty,” Ulger answered her. “Relay my order down the wall, Amanelle.”

Tarrin was now the sole defense against the foci. Jasana and his daughters had to stop and rest, and the transition had been fast and sharp. Tarrin focused all his attention on holding the shield, keeping those foci from breaking his defense and using their power on the city proper, which meant a constant battle with the Firestaff as he continuously called on its power. Below him, Kang was already forming up the strike team that would slip around the city and counterattack the Demon host, because they were now committing more of their reserves. It would be a very dangerous mission, but they had no shortage of volunteers. In the end, one hundred Selani were assigned to the deadly task, with all four of his sisters along to help conceal them until the absolute last minute, and put his sisters in a position where they could react with immediacy in case of attack. Selani were chosen because they were stealthy and faster than a charging horse when on the move. If anyone could get Eron there alive, it would be the Selani. They were going to get Eron close enough to those humans so he could strip them of their power, and when that happened, Jasana’s Circle would strike and kill them. Eron seemed completely nonplussed by the deadly task, mainly because Allia and his sisters would be going with him, a fact of which Tarrin was unaware.

“I would not send the son of my brother into battle without taking the same risk,” she told Eron simply as she checked her shortwords.

“No other magicians could keep up with the Selani but us,” Julia shrugged.

“The children aren’t going without some adult supervision,” Triana said bluntly. “Kimmie, let’s get

ready to move.”

“Yes, Triana,” she said with a nod, running towards Phandebrass to hand him a book.

“Remember, you have to get as close as possible before they see you,” Kang told the Were-cats going with them as Kimmie returned. “Stay low, move fast, and don’t use your powers unless they attack you first. Follow the Selani and obey them. They specialize in this kind of tactic. They’ll get you there, and once the foci are dead, they’ll get you back alive.”

“They will cause no problems. Were-cats excel in the art of ambush, Kang,” Allia told him, pulling up her veil. “Come, my nieces and nephew. We have a task to perform.”

“I knew this would be exciting, but this might be *too* exciting,” Rina said, putting her paw on her stomach.

“Aw, grow up you baby,” Tara chided. “This is everything I wanted it to be, and more. We get to go save father and the city, and be heroes! What more could you ask for?”

“I would ask for my nieces to be silent!” Allia snapped at them. “This is not a game, and what we do will be very dangerous! Now remember what we have taught you and let us move out!”

“Sorry, Aunt Allia,” Tara and Rina said in unison as they ran on silent feet out of the inner compound.

“Azakar, get a lancer formation of Knights formed up and ready,” Kang ordered. “If they pull this off, we can send a lance charge right down their throat.”

“I already have a division of Knights at the west slope,” Azakar answered. “That idea already occurred to me.”

“Good man. Darvon would be proud.”

“If I don’t do well, he’ll kill me,” Azakar grunted.

The addition of the larger, smarter Demons and the humans changed things significantly.

The *dretches* and *manes* sacrificed themselves to the moat for a good five more minutes before they all seemed to stop, and just *stand there*, sitting ducks for the defenders to pick off, not even trying to find cover. But the majority of the fire on the Demons shifted when the humans in the Demon army appeared, climbing over the rubble of the second wall. The defenders also got their first glimpse of the Demon commander, Shaz’Baket, as she glimpsed over the rubble to get a personal view of the situation, then disappeared back behind the wall. Artillery fire slammed down on where she was spotted immediately, and the skyships and dragons overhead raked the area with breath weapons and spells, but none of them were very hopeful that she had been killed, since the army did not disintegrate into chaos.

That one glimpse seemed to be all she needed, for the Demon army reacted quickly. The Demons near the moat seemed to shiver, and then, to the defender’s shock, they again started jumping into the moat, but only in a narrow area. In moments, a boiling cloud of blackish-green smoke was wafting from the moat, restricting visibility for a short moment before a dragon blew the smoke away with its wings as it landed. Another landed, then another, on the far side of the moat, and for a moment nobody was quite sure why. At least until the larger of them, a male named Basker, turned and then whipped his two hundred span long tail

across the moat. Like a massive broom, the dragon swept hundreds of Demons into the air, sending them flying hundreds of spans, killing many of them outright from the massive force with which the tail struck. The smaller dragon, Goldeneyes, also turned and whipped her tail, slaughtering Demons by the score, while staying safely on the far side of the impassible moat. Though the two dragons were blocking the line of fire on the Demons at the moat for the archers, they were killing them at a fast pace and not using up the archers' ammunition while doing so, and freeing up the archer to fire on the Demons further back while the musketmen concentrated on trying to kill the humans and larger Demons that were appearing at the rubble of the second wall.

But the Demons did seem to have a plan now. *Dretches* started carrying rocks from the rubble of the second wall with them, and those who got close enough tried to throw them into the moat before the dragons swept them out of the way with their tails. The dragons would not move from their defensive spot, even when archers among the Demons started loosing volleys at them. The arrows weren't strong enough to penetrate their heavy scales, so all they really had to do was protect their vulnerable eyes by looking away or shielding their eyes with a forepaw. But, while that went on, the larger Demons began scaling the rubble of the second wall and attacking the defenders still there, who fought back with savage tenacity to hold their flanking positions that let them fire on the passing Demons with impunity. Vicious battles ensued on both sides of the collapsed wall's edges as Elaran and Duran soldiers battled Demons to protect the archers and Wikuni musketmen behind. Skyships raked the Demons with ferocious persistence, but they also began to pull back to rotate out fresh magicians and allow their former crews to rest and memorize spells. Sapphire and Tenshale rotated back in from the reserves, and their savage breath weapons were only slightly more destructive than the punishing Wizard spells she unleashed on the Demons from the air above them.

And still they came.

More and more stones were thrown into the moat. Demon bodies added to that detritus that dissolved quickly in the acid, as they decomposed into acid themselves. Goldeneyes and Basker just couldn't kill them all fast enough, for it seemed that every minor Demon rushing the moat carried a stone or boulder, and enough of them were managing to get them into the moat that the bridge they were trying to build began to take form. The rock resisted the acid, and in two places, rocks did not settle under the surface. Basker bravely slammed his tail into the acid itself to knock down the land bridge, but the hiss of pain and the smoking tail he pulled out caused Sapphire to call him back to receive healing. He did what he tried to do, however, knocking down the stones and forcing them to start over. Sapphire called in a skyship, and the Sorcerers on the skyship attacked the wall, not the Demons, fusing all the rubble back into a solid mass, robbing the Demons of an easily obtained and ready supply of rocks to throw into the moat. The Demons were not phased by that counter, as they simply ripped the lumpy mass apart with the claws and continued carrying stones to the moat. Tenshale landed in Basker's place and took up the defense of the moat, but even the old male found that it was like trying to kill a million ants with a maple switch...there were just too many to stop them all.

For over an hour, the Demons struggled to build a bridge over the moat, and the defenders labored to stop them. The cost to the Demons was absolutely staggering, as they lost tens of thousands of their pawns to the dragons, the ranged fighters, and the magicians, but they managed to continue to get stones into the moat, continued to do their job, until the land bridge they were building reached almost all the way across. At some unspoken signal, they all charged the bridge. Tenshale moved to smash the bridge with his tail, but he staggered back with a roar of pain when he was struck by an arrow that exploded into a puff of some kind of gas directly in his face, an arrow with a payload at the head, an arrow fired by a formation of archers that had managed to get close enough to fire on the dragons. Tenshale beat his wings mightily to blow off an incoming volley of arrows, then he and Goldeneyes turned and bounded away to give the ranged attackers an open shot at a large complement of human archers. The mighty male dragon only got a short distance before his knees seemed to falter, and he crashed to the earth, shaking the entire city. A single human female lowered herself down from the wall and fearlessly rushed to the dragon's aid. It was Rilli, the Priestess of Breina, who divined quickly that Tenshale had been poisoned, and then chanted a counterspell that would

neutralize it. Sapphire landed near him and unleashed a titanic blast of lighting on the that slaughtered nearly a thousand Demons and human in one massive blow, and Sandwing strafed the archers among the enemy with the last of his charge, killing half of them and injuring the rest before he banked away and returned to the inner plain to recharge his internal electricity. Sapphire then turned to her companion, forcing him to revert to a human form with magic, then picking both him and the Priestess up and spiriting them away to safety. Until the poisoned arrows were stopped, the dragons would pull back.

The Demons crossed the moat. Those first to make it across died in a hail of magical spells, for the moat was the outer range of most of the offensive battlemagic the defenders employed. But back at the ruins of the second wall, something new appeared. They were major Demons called *bar-igura*, ape-like Demons that looked like huge long-armed simians with a sickly orange fur. They had been held back, and did not advance, instead seeking cover among the rubble as the other Demons continued to advance. Ulger spotted them, however, and he warned that when they moved up to engage, they would climb the wall *very* quickly. Also with the ape Demons were *glabrezu*, many, many of them, all of them wearing piecemeal plates of steel tied to them with thongs, and carrying huge shields that looked like doors. These armored Demons quickly began to advance, rushing past their smaller kin, and every musketeer and archer turned their weapons on them. The artillery that had been setting to blow the bridge apart now that the dragons were out of the way scrambled to find the mark as more and more Demons rushed over the bridge, sending geysers of acid into the air, splashing the Demons, until one gunnery crew finally had the mark. The bridge shuddered violently when it took a direct hit, blowing a ten span wide hole out of its center, but the larger Demons simply jumped the hole and continued rushing across. The armored *glabrezu* got across the bridge and charged the wall, meeting a hail of musket fire and spells. The musket balls were stopped by the shields, but the spells felled them. However, a dozen of them managed to reach the wall, under the barbican and out of reach of the defenders atop it...or so they thought. From tiny slits in the wall at the top, called murder holes, archers and musketeers turned their weapons down through those holes on the Demons at the base of the wall. Three more were killed, but the rest of them turned their shields up, shielding them from the attacks over their heads.

Just as more keg-carrying Demons appeared at the land bridge, escorted by armored *glabrezu* holding huge shields to protect them as they made their run at the wall.

The defenders reacted with desperate fear and speed as a wave of Demons carrying kegs and their armored protection charged over the bridge, burning their legs in acid, trying to reach the far wall. That tide of Demons stopped when the gun crew that had the line on the bridge had managed to reload and fire again, blowing another ten spans out of it and making it impossible to cross. Everyone watched in fear and worry as the Demons raced for the wall, as their armored protectors were struck and felled, but there were so many of them. Skyships above rained spells down on them, magicians on the walls tried to ignite their kegs before they reach the wall, and archers and musketeers peppered them with lead and arrows, but they still doggedly charged ahead, some of them staggering, some even crawling, trying to reach the wall.

Some how, some way, three keg-bearing Demons managed to make it to the wall alive. Everyone on the wall expected an explosion to rock the wall, but no explosion came. Those at the murder holes over the Demons looked down and prepared to kill them, but they saw them open the kegs and pour the contents onto the ground at their feet. They then knelt over that substance, as if to shield it from attack from above, which spurred the defenders to tear into the Demons with musket balls and arrows. All three of the Demons collapsed onto their kegs, their bodies starting to corrode into that acidic black sludge.

The instant the black ichor of the Demons touched the powder, a violent chemical reaction ensued. The powder flashed and turned highly energetic, generating a heavy black cloud of caustic, highly smoke. It clung to everything it touched and began to corrode it, forcing all the defenders to scramble away from the deadly miasma while Sorcerers used Air weaves to break it up. But the sudden commotion caused some of the forward fire to wane on the Demons, and still they came, daring to swim across the void blown open by the gunnery crew.

And still they came.

More and more reached the wall, all of them smoking and with some of their skin melted away, and they began to climb, but they were injured and weakened from the acid, and were easily killed off by the snipers using the murder holes.

But everything stopped when the entire city shook violently. The glowing shield over the city shuddered, then it shattered like glass, evaporating. Tarrin Kael, in the Conduit high above and behind them, roared in a voice so powerful it was audible to everyone, and lashed out with a brilliant, incandescent blast of magical power that raged from the Conduit towards the southeast. In seconds, as everyone picked themselves up off the ground or the wall, the shield restored itself, but in those seconds, Ulger saw as he picked himself up, they did their work.

The moat was no longer green. It was now a muddy brown. In those few seconds, in that narrow window of time, the magicians outside had changed the moat back into water. That seemed a strange choice to Ulger. Why had they not struck at Tarrin directly? Clearly, they had done something to beat his shield, why not press the attack?

Ulger looked back up at Tarrin, and then understood. They broke his defense because he was defending the *entire city*. If they took a direct shot at him, all he had to protect was *himself*, and they would fail. Instead of failing in an attack on Tarrin, they did the one thing they could do quickly that would give the Demons the most help, and that was remove the powerful defense of the moat.

He swore. That moat was their most powerful barrier, and now it was useless until another Circle got down there and changed it back, and that was going to take time. They could do it from anywhere, but the magic that changed it was very powerful, and required a large Circle with the right makeup and someone leading it who was a master of both the Earth and Water spheres. It was going to take them time to get the moat back to acid, and already, an absolute tidal wave of Demons were jumping into the moat and swimming across.

The defenders braced themselves as the Demons and humans swarmed towards them, no longer concentrating in one spot, but instead quickly spreading out to assault a large section of the wall at once, now that they no longer had to try to cross the moat in one point. Some of the humans were carrying scaling ladders, but the true threat were the *bar-igura*, who had rushed forward the instant the moat was changed. They were already across the moat, and those agile Demons, those great climbers, would be the first to get up the wall and engage the defenders. Ulger called quickly for everyone to prepare to repel climbers, as he dropped his bow and took up his sword and shield. In just a few minutes, he knew, he was going to need them.

Above the city, Tarrin struggled to recover. That push by the foci had worked, but it had also cost them. He could feel it, he could sense that one of them was dead. That one had sacrificed his life to put so much behind an attack that it broke his shield, and in the frantic seconds it took him to restore it, he felt them reach into the city and do Shaz'Baket's bidding, transmuting the moat back into water. He would give them that small victory, for the Sorcerers down there would change it back any moment now, and it had killed one of them to do it. There were only two now, and that meant that they could either sacrifice another and leave the last exposed to Tarrin's wrath to buy enough time for the last one to try something, or they could accept the stalemate and work only to prevent Tarrin from venting his wrath on the Demon army.

From that vantage point, he saw the fruit of that sacrifice. A sudden surge of Demons reached the third wall, and with shocking speed, many managed to climb it. All along the contact line, ugly battles erupted on the walls as the defenders fended off the Demons that had climbed the walls, long-armed ape Demons called

bar-igura, masters of climbing and guerilla warfare. Those ape Demons lashed at the defenders with their long arms, and while many were shot off the wall by archers and musketmen, enough of them managed to gain enough purchase to fend off attempts by the defenders to reach the scaling ladders that hit the walls with loud *clacks*, giving the Demons and their human allies the time they needed to try to scale the wall and enter the battle.

Just like that, everything changed.

They had gone from holding the Demons at the moat to fighting tooth and nail against a horde of Demons and humans that were now scaling the walls. The fighting was chaotic in those first moments as Demons appeared in multiple places, those damned ape Demons, and that confusion was just what the Demons needed to get ladders up and get Demons starting up them. By the time the *bar-igura* were dealt with, most killed, the damage had been done. Demons were now on the walls, and the defenders still struggled to recover, to fight their way to the ladders and push them off the wall.

The moat was changed back to acid, killing every Demon that had been in the water and cutting off the Demons from additional reinforcements, but only temporarily. The ranged fighters on the wall now had to fight around Demons and could not concentrate on the bridge, and the Demons on the walls pushed to kill off Wikuni gunnery crews wherever they could reach them, to prevent those who could most easily hit the bridge with cannon fire from doing so. And the rebuilding of the bridge happened quickly as human threw down ladders over the opening, then dropped planking over it to form a wooden span over the destroyed area. Demons again started pouring over the bridge, charging the wall, and climbing the ladders.

Ulger met his first human adversary, and he was everything they warned him about. Chopping off one of his arms didn't even make him flinch, but when Ulger decapitated him, he certainly didn't shrug that off. The defenders again found them hard pressed by ever-increasing numbers, but for this, they had a plan. Ranged fighters were withdrawn and heavy infantry rushed to the scene of the attack from the reserve formations on the inner plain. Vendari, Knights, Selani, Elarans, Dura, church soldiers, and Arakite Legions swarmed to the scene, and when they arrived, the attackers were staggered back. Arakites formed a shield wall and advanced on the attackers with those behind attacking with spears and polearms, as they stabbed at the attackers with their swords from between their shields. Ulger and the other initial defenders quickly folded into the reinforcements. "I could kiss you, Captain!" Ulger called to the Arakite commander.

"Not on a first date you won't!" the captain called back as the Arakites absorbed the Demon press on a wide front atop the wall, forming a solid anchor for the defenders from which to rally to push the Demons back.

The stalemate on the wall held for long moments, as the sun climbed higher into the sky, as Demons and humans crossed their makeshift bridge, restricting how many could charge the wall at any one time, but it was still enough to replenish the forces of those Demons assaulting the wall. Skyships and dragons appeared to the south to attack the bridge, but a sudden hasty call, showed the four surviving flying Demons, all of them carrying a large keg. They were high, high over the city, and then all four dove with blazing, amazing speed.

No one was in a position to stop them. The four Demons dove on the third wall, attacking directly across from the land bridge, one after another after another. Archers and musketmen tried to shoot the lead Demon down, magicians tried to intercept it, but it came so fast that it was already there before spells could be woven or incantations completed. It swooped in and then pulled up as it released its keg, which lanced in under the barbican and impacted the wall near the base, and when it struck, the entire wall rocked with a huge explosion. Ulger and his defenders, as well as the Demons and humans they were fighting, were thrown to the wall as the entire structure rocked violently. The second Demon slammed did not release its

keg, it instead slammed into the wall in the same place as the first, diving into the cloud of dust, and Ulger was thrown violently several spans backwards, landing on an Elaran soldier and a Duran as a second explosion rocked the wall. The third Demon twisted in the air and dove on the *inside* of the wall, releasing its keg as it pulled out to sizzle only spans over the top of the wall, and its keg managed to hit the wall. Another thunderous detonation shook Pyros, and then the fourth Demon dove on the top corner of the wall, hitting it near the front, killing itself in the impact. Ulger found himself protected by a magical shield of defense, as Amanelle protected everyone around her with her Sorcery, but it did nothing to help the wall. With a shriek of protest, Ulger felt the wall shift under him, and then he heard loud *cracks* as the stone of the wall began to tear itself apart.

“Aw, nuts,” he breathed as he and over a hundred defenders found themselves on a section of wall that began to collapse inward, towards the inner compound. The defenders had no choice but to grab anything they could find and hold on as the structure fell out from under them, sending defenders and attackers down into an explosion of dust and cacophony of tearing stone. Ulger, Amanelle, and everyone around them vanished down into the dust plume as the wall upon which they stood collapsed into the inner plain.

The third wall was breached.

The dragons were all low on charge, having expended almost all of it defending the city thus far. Sandwing dove down towards the Demons with a ear-splitting roar, and then, to everyone’s horror, the young dragon crashed directly into the moat at high speed. A massive wave and splash of magical acid inundated all the Demons near the moat, pushing a wave down the moat’s circular bed that washed out onto land, but what was more important was that the brave dragon had plowed into the bridge built by the Demons, tearing it down well down under the surface. The dragon shrieked in pain as it scrambled out of the acid, limping on a broken left foreleg and both wings badly damaged, acid eating away the membrane between the bones, burning into his scales, blinding him when it got into his eyes. Tenshale and Sapphire immediately landed, and as Tenshale defended the injured dragon and his mother, Sapphire guided her broodling away, hurrying him to an area of wall to the south where he could climb over and receive magical attention for his terrible wounds.

Not every dragon was out of breath weapon, however. Nightshade gave her keening screech and returned from her rest, and seeing the humans now engaged with the rest of the army, she swooped down on them. As she passed over the host of Demons in the second bailey, she blasted them with her breath weapon, billowing a cloud of inky darkness. Within, the Demons were unharmed, but the humans in the Demon army shuddered and fell the ground stiffly, their strength and warmth sucked away by the attack, leaving them cold, dead husks. She killed hundreds with every pass, and her brief glimpse showed her that now the not-so-countless army would start feeling the bite of loss. More than half of Shaz’Baket’s army was destroyed, the numbers of reserves standing outside the walls dwindled more and more. Though the third wall was breached, Nightshade saw that with the destruction of the bridge over the acid, the Demon commander would have a problem getting enough troops over there to get through the army sitting on the inner plain in front of the plateau holding Tarrin’s compound and reach the Heart.

It seemed she had an answer for that, as well. From the army near the moat, a sudden thick white smoke billowed up, obscuring vision for a moment. Before the dust had settled from the collapse of the third wall, even as the echoes of its sound still reverberated off the walls, the enemy army vanished into a smokescreen. Sirocco and Nightshade moved quickly to blow it away with their wings, but in those short moments, as the dust and smoke blew away, the dragons saw to their dismay multiple heavy slabs of iron and stone spanning the moat, laid side by side, forming a bridge over the moat nearly two hundred spans across.

Shaz’Baket was now visible, with two dozen humans that carried no weapons, males and females.

Shaz'Baket had brought up her War Wizards, the only enemies who could use magic inside the shield for her side, since the attack of the wall had knocked the Sorcerers off balance and in no position to stop them.

It was a brilliant use of her limited resources, Nightshade could see. She had saved those magicians until the last moment, having them act in a moment of confusion where the defenders could not respond. If she had used them any earlier, the defenders would have reacted to them and destroyed their bridges, but instead she had waited until the third wall had been breached, when now the defenders had to redeploy to cover the hole in their defenses.

The Demon army surged across the wide bridge over the acid like an avalanche, charging the third wall, heading directly for the breach, and Shaz'Baket was among them. Nightshade dove on the six-armed Demon, but lances of lightning and bolts of fire launched at her from the magicians surrounding the Demoness burned into her scales, injuring her, one bolt of lightning hitting her in the head and causing her to swim in a haze of semi-consciousness. She tried to pull out of her dive but could not see, and plowed into the ground near the third wall north of the main breach, digging a ten span deep furrow into the ground as she plowed to a stop. Demons turned to swarm the dragon and kill her, but they were met with a withering round of arrows and musket fire, as well a heavy rumbling. Tenshale charged directly through the army, trampling dozens, roaring with fury to protect the injured shadow dragon from the Demons that sought to swarm over her. They were trampled, lashed with his long tail, slashed with his massive claws. They scrambled away from the rampaging elder wyrm as it used its five hundred span long body as the ultimate weapon, stampeding all over the ant-sized Demons that threatened his compatriot. Dazed and shaken, Nightshade somehow managed to take her human form, and Tenshale scooped her up and took to the air, rushing her to those who would attend her.

On the inner plain, Azakar, sitting atop his Brandywine Ro, settled his helmet as he looked at the thinning dust, at the toppled wall. Behind him were an army of mounted Knights, Arakite Legions, Elaran soldiers, and Wikuni Marines. Vendari flanked the mounted line, and all of the remaining skyships settled into the air over the Mahuut, a wall of steel and resolve to beat back the Demon assault.

A figure came up beside him. It was Zebri, mounted on a Knight's charger, holding a large scimitar in her left hand and a triangular shield in the other. "A general should never charge at the forefront of her army," she told him lightly.

"There are no generals among the Knights," Azakar answered evenly. "We all serve equally. If I didn't lead my men into battle, I wouldn't deserve to wear this breastplate."

"Honorable," she murmured. "If you will stand in the face of the enemy, I would be a poor commander not to match your bravery."

Azakar accepted a lance from a Wikuni footsoldier who was handing them out. He hefted it, then couched the butt into the stirrup of his saddle.

In moments, they were ready. The formation fidgeted in anticipation as Demons swarmed over the breached wall, running out onto the inner plain in a disorganized knot.

"Duty calls to us, my brothers!" Azakar shouted, raising his lance over his head. "Who honors the call?"

"The Knights of Karas!" came a thunderous reply.

"Five thousand years ago, the Demons tried to destroy our world!" he boomed, urging his charger out and turning to face his army. "This day, this world, a world not ours, is threatened with the same fate that nearly befell our own world. Who will answer the call to stand against the Demons? Who will defend the helpless, protect the weak, and stand strong in the face of evil? Who will protect this land from destruction?"

“The Knights of Karas!”

Azakar raised his lance once more, then clapped the visor down on his helmet. “Let us this day teach them what it means to be an enemy of the Knights of Karas!” he bellowed. “Come, my brothers! There are Demons waiting to be slaughtered! There is a world crying out for protection! There are people wailing into the night looking for justice and righteousness! Let the hammer of Karas fall on our enemies and restore peace to this land!”

Another rallying cry roared from the army before him.

“Let this day be known as the greatest sorrow the Demons have ever known!” he shouted, “the day they were defeated by *mortals*! Follow me into battle, and strike a blow for justice!”

A great roar rose up from the army, as Azakar turned and started towards the Demons at a trot. The Knights caught up with him, and that trot stretched into a canter. Demons slowed down and gathered into a line before them, then slowed to a stop as humans with pikes hurried to the front of the line. The Knights extended out into a trot, and then a full-scale charge, lowering their lances in unison, presenting a lethal wall of steel and flesh that hurtled towards their enemies. The Demons set to receive that charge fearlessly behind the wall of pike-wielding humans.

But then there was a bright light. The One appeared over the Knights, flying past them, and he dove directly into the heart of that formation without fear. Demons withered and died in a burst of holy power radiated from the icon, killing those reinforcing the human line, and then the armored figure raised sword and shield and struck down the nearest human, slicing into the line of pikes. Demons and humans swarmed the armored icon, but the One proved he could fight in the mortal way just as well as any warrior, expertly defending himself even as he disrupted the front line of the Demon army directly across from Azakar. The magicians on the skyships above attacked that lead line of pike-wielding humans, burning them, blasting them with explosions of earth and lightning and pure magical power. Humans were slashed apart with scythes of air, crushed between boulders, decimated on their front ranks, which created a moment of confusion.

Just as the Knights slammed into the Demonic horde.

Azakar and Zebri led the assault. Azakar’s massive horse plowed through humans and Demons, his lance splintering as it skewered a *glabrezu*, but he simply drew his sword and began chopping enemies down to the left and right of his horse as he stomped through the ranks of the enemy. Knights and Elaran regulars continued the press to his sides and behind him, the large Elara proving they were expert warriors, widening the gap created by the One and Azakar. The organized charge turned into a wild melee as the Vendari closed around the flanks of the enemy and crushed them into a tight mass, through which the Knights raged back and forth as the Elarans, Dura, and Arakite Legions formed a perimeter that prevented them going in any direction but backwards. But the lines of the Demons swelled as the next wave climbed over the wall, dodging musket fire, arrows, and exploding cannonballs fired from the unbreached sections of the third wall. Those sections of the wall, like the second wall, found themselves under attack from Demons who climbed the broken sections and got to the top, trying to push the defenders back to where they couldn’t threaten the army pouring into the plain. The defenders on the plain stretched, backed up as a crashing wave of the largest Demons in the army slammed into them, a large number of pincer *glabrezu*, but they didn’t buckle, they didn’t yield. A *glabrezu* killed a horse of a Knight, and the armored warrior toppled into a milling mass of flailing arms and flying weapons and claws. Two Knights worked in tandem to kill one of the twelve span tall Demons to Azakar’s left, while he and Zebri reached the One and flanked him. “Now would be a good time!” Azakar shouted to the One.”

“Just a moment more,” he answered, slashing a human wielding a pike in half at the waist. The upper half crawled towards the One steadily, but he fell still when a Duran warrior charged up and planted an axe in

his skull. The Dura was none other than Darax, flanked by two gold-armored Dwarves wielding axes and shields.

“Ye didn’t think we’d let ye hog all the glory!” Darax shouted to them, chopping the knee of a *glabrezu*. The beast howled and fell limply, where it was swarmed over and killed by the Dura.

More and more *glabrezu* pushed in, until Azakar and Zebri’s horses were flank to flank, and the One stood just before them, beating back at the horde of humans, while the Demons actively avoided him.

“Now!” Azakar barked.

The One began chanting the language of the gods, casting a Priest spell. A sudden shower of golden rain descended upon them, glittering in the morning sun, covering nearly half the plain. The defenders were touched by that liquid and felt refreshed, strong, vital, as cuts and gashes and injuries healed over quickly. The Demons recoiled from that rain with shrieks of pain, as it burned into them like acid, but it had no effect at all on the possessed humans. The shower lasted only a moment, but in that moment the Demons in the army were injured and sent into confusion, which allowed the defenders to press the counterattack. Arakites and Elarans marched side by side in from the rear in sawtooth wedge formation, but the Demons roared back with a large complement of *glabrezu* charging over the wall, leading an eerily silent reserve of humans.

“This is it!” Azakar boomed. “Send back the order, rally all defenders to here! This is where they’re going to make their push for the Heart!”

Azakar was right. The Demon army surged ahead in an endless wave, cascading over the destroyed wall like sand pouring down the side of a dune. The defenders found themselves in a chaotic, frenzied slugfest on the flat plain, as the reinforcements rushed to shore up lines stressed by an avalanche of Demons, as Shaz’Baket called in all her remaining forces to drive to the Heart. After all, that was all she had to do. It was why she ignored any part of the city that was not in a direct line to the Heart. If they destroyed that, then the Demons would regain their powers, and they would win.

The defenders were pushed back, and pushed back, and pushed back. The Demons were in a frenzy, throwing themselves at the defenders with wild abandon, as the human pressed the attack with maniacal fortitude. Azakar found his charger being pressed backward by the horde, and he tried to reset the line while reinforcements charged in from the north and south, hitting the Demons on their flanks. But they continued to be pushed back, and pushed back, and pushed back. The One struggled to anchor the line, using his invulnerable body as a rock, flailing at all those around him, but the Demons simply passed him by, ignoring him as much as possible to continue raging towards the inner compound.

They were a quarter of the way across. Another charge of Knights hit the line near the wall, trying to cut it off, but they were repelled and had to fall back. Duran regulars raced across from the south and dove directly into the horde, as Demons vanished from sight in a powerful line as they slammed into them. But the void in the Demons filled in quickly, and then the Dura vanished from sight, swarmed over by the opposition. And still they came.

They had pushed halfway into the plain. Skyships and dragons converged, the dragons landing and attacking with their tails, claws, and teeth, for they had no breath weapon left, not even Nightshade. The Demons folded around the dragons and withered under the barrage of the skyship, but still they pushed forward, pushing the Arakite and Elaran line back, bearing down on it with their great weight and feverish need to reach their objectives. The gates of the inner compound were within sight now, defended by a gatehouse at the base of the slope and another at the top, and once they breached those, there was nothing but the compound defenders. The Demons pressed ahead with no thought of casualties, trying to bull their enemies out of their way with the sheer weight of their charge. Elementals entered the battle, beating, flailing, slashing, tearing, but they too could not stop the forward press of the Demons, who pushed forward

with single-minded brutality, trampling their own if they did not move fast enough.

They were three quarters of the way across. Azakar tried feverishly to slow them down, for the gates of the lower gatehouse were now dangerously close, and the reserves trying to get into the path of the Demons were almost with their backs to the portcullis.

The surge pressed onward, but then, as if on some unspoken command, they all turned to their rights and hit the corner of the line, hitting right where the Knights and Arakites joined the Vendari flankers. Those flankers suddenly became defenders, massive walls of heavy muscle that resisted the crash of Demons, but the Arakites were trampled by the charge. The Demons weren't going for the gatehouse, Azakar saw, they were going straight for the rocky cliff leading to the plateau holding the Heart!

They were going to *climb* it!

Clever Shaz'Baket, she baited them into putting all their reserves between the gate and the advance, only to attack a different place! The reserves charged to hit the Demons from the flank, but the fastest of them and the largest, the large complement of *glabrezu*, were already starting to climb up the wall.

But then Phandebrass was there.

He was a one man magical army. Spells flew with shocking, incredible speed as he cast spell after spell. The Demons climbing the wall were encased in ice, and then the entire wall was iced over to make climbing it impossible. He then rained absolute death down on the Demons trying to climb the icy wall, bolts of lightning, waves of brilliant light, rays of rainbow colors, little glowing bubbles that hit Demons and trapped them inside, then vanished, taking the Demons with them, even meteors crashing to the earth from the sky above to obliterate whole companies of Demons as they charged the cliff. He was a solitary man casting more magic than a skyship, his words never wavering, moving from spell to spell to spell without hesitation. So savage was his magical onslaught that the Demons retreated away from him in fear, running back towards Azakar's army, which effectively surrounded it. The Demons who had been pressing into his exposed right line then surged ahead again once they saw that getting past Phandebrass would be impossible, and before Azakar knew it, Demons had broken his left line and were trying to surround his troops.

He found his army enclosed on all four sides, cut off.

Azakar swore and worked hard with his sword to chop Demons and humans down from his saddle as the Demons that had charged the cliff and were turned back by Phandebrass' amazing defense now turned on the troops trying to cut them off, squeezing them between the two sides of the Demon army, but now they didn't have the sheer momentum of the initial charge. The Demons were pushed back, fended off by the quickly forming lines, as Azakar pulled his troops into a triangular wedge with the gatehouse and cliff securing their rear. From this defended position, the Demons encountered much stiffer resistance. They were rebuffed by Arakite kite shields and chopped down by Elaran scimitars and falchions, as the dragons rushed up to help by pulling up to the parts of the wall not encased in ice and holding it, beating the Demons back and killing anything that tried to scale the cliff. Azakar marched his wedge against the Demons to the south, pushing them back until the wedge's back was at the gatehouse, forming a bristling wall of steel and shields through which the Demons had to go to reach the Heart. With the dragons defending the cliffs, there was only one way they could go. And to make it more daunting, Sandwing, the smallest of the dragons, jumped up with a single beat of his wings and occupied the road leading up to the Heart, between the gatehouses, showing the Demons what awaited them should they penetrate the defenders and the gate. Phandebrass was joined by the Elaran Worldwalker, Kyrienna, as he ran down the ramp, past Sandwing, and again the Demons found themselves being pummeled by magic unleashed from two of the greatest Wizards alive, their numbers withering away with shocking, staggering speed as Kyrienna joined the Tellurian Wizard in laying waste to the Demons trying to get to the Heart. The Demons seemed to fear those two more than anything else, and

their disconcerted pause gave Azakar the time to fully reset his lines in front of the gate and get some calm and order in there. They were at the point where there could be no more retreat. If the Demons got into the inner compound, they would admittedly face the absolute best the defenders had, but they would also be within striking distance of Tarrin, and that could not be allowed, no matter what. The defenders would give no more ground. From here, the Demons would have to slaughter them all to pass.

Moving with speed on utterly silent feet, Eron and the Were-cats were escorted by one hundred desert-garbed Selani along the outer wall of Pyros.

They had come down around the volcano and now moved with the speed of a running deer. The Were-cats had no problem keeping up with them, moving with speed and silence, led by the matriarch of their race, whose confidence and calm demeanor kept the children settled and focused on the task at hand. The formation moved loosely around the wall as Allia and another Selani were far ahead, their eyes protecting the group by ferreting out any scouts the Demons had deployed along the wall. They passed several hissing, smoking black stains on the ground, testament that the land outside the walls was not safe for the defenders. Allia and the other scout were not only acting as the eyes for the group, they were also killing the Demon scouts so the Selani could advance and attack by surprise, blinding the army to their coming.

It took them about half an hour to work their way around the wall to where the fighting had taken place. The leader of the Selani held up a fist, which caused all the Selani to immediately stop and take cover, and the Were-cats followed suit. Triana slithered up to a rock with the Selani commander, a mature white-haired male with a long face and a scar just in front of his right ear. "Allia reports there are about a thousand Demons ahead of us, who stand in protection of a ring of wagons," he whispered to Triana. "We were told that one among you can sense the location of these humans we must kill. Where are they?"

"Jasana, up here," Triana whispered back. The white-furred Were-cat crawled up to their location.

"What is it, grandmother?"

"Where are the humans we have to kill?" the Selani asked her.

"They're about a half a longspan ahead of us, just a bit to the right. That way," she said immediately, pointing.

The Selani smiled. "Then Allia has found our quarry," he told them. He gave a series of quick hand signals, and the hundred Selani quickly melted back, then turned away from the wall. "We circle and attack from the east, so the sun will be behind us and we will be downwind," he told the Were-cats. "Follow us. Swift and silent."

"We can do that," Triana whispered back to him.

"A thousand to one hundred? Those are some long odds," Tara said in the manner of the Cat, which was utterly silent.

"Not for the Selani it's not," Triana replied in the same manner. "And remember, girl, we're not there to kill them all. We have a specific job to do. This is a hit and run surprise attack, plain and simple. We hit them hard and fast, kill our targets, then run."

"I get it, gramma," Tara grunted.

It took them about fifteen minutes to run in a wide circle around the formation of Demons and humans. When they got closer, Eron called for them to gather near him, and he shielded them from magical detection using his unique ability, allowing them to sneak up on their quarry. With the sun behind them, the Selani crept up on the inattentive formation, crawling up to a very gentle ridge that let them look over the encampment. It was filled with larger, more powerful Demons and about two hundred humans protecting some supply wagons, as well as two humans sitting facing each other, looking into a dancing flame emanating from a bronze brazier on the ground between them.

Jasana pointed silently to the two seated humans in the middle of the camp. "Them," she mouthed soundlessly to the Selani commander. He nodded and gave hand signs to his Selani compatriots, then he waved the Were-cats to follow him as they slowly started creeping forward, getting as close as possible before attacking.

Eron was impressed, mightily impressed. Were-cats had stealth in their blood, and could sneak up on almost anyone, but the Selani were absolutely *amazing*. They slipped so close to the Demons that the closest of the Selani could have reached out and touched them, and they did it without the Demons or humans seeing them. But sight was one thing, and scent was another, and when the wind shifted, several of the dog-headed *glabrezu* stood erect and started sniffing at the air. They were now upwind of the Demons, and their scents were giving them away.

The commander gave a single sign, and then the Selani attacked.

The encampment was flabbergasted, both that enemies had gotten so close to them, and that they would be attacked by such small numbers. But some of them, those with experience of Sennadar peoples, did not think it such a weak attempt. The *glabrezu* especially barked in alarm and moved to intercept the Selani as they rushed into the encampment. One of the two humans looked their way, and narrowed his eyes. There was a sudden oppressive dark wave that rushed at them, but it fizzled to nothingness when Eron raced forward and starting using his ability, stopping the attempt before it could reach the Selani.

As the Selani attacked, moving Eron into the camp, the four daughters of Tarrin Kael stood up and formed a Circle. They immediately prepared to attack the foci, but they also turned their power on the Demons. The Selani saw the first ranks of the Demons moving to intercept them squeal in agony and fall to the ground, dead, allowing the Selani to pass them by and hit the less prepared Demons further in.

It was a dazzling display. Demons were frustrated and outclassed by the speed, agility, and grace of their Selani attackers, who attacked a force ten times their own size without hesitation. Demons died by the dozens in the first brief seconds of melee combat, as they were overwhelmed not by raw power, but by blazing, unmatched speed. Allia was in the forefront of the attack, her shortwords moving so fast they were a blur, felling Demons left and right of her, felling them so quickly most of them did not even register they'd been struck before they found themselves laying dying on the ground. But the Selani did not lose their heads. They were there for a specific objective, and they stuck to it. They escorted Eron into the camp, but they found out quickly that the young son of Tarrin Kael was well prepared to fight. Demons came up against him and were quickly killed, as the young male displayed a perfect balance of superhuman strength and quickness of both feet and paws. Triana too waded into the battle, her tawny paws ripping the lifeblood from Demons that challenged her. She wasn't as fast as a Selani, but she was one of the most physically powerful Were-cats alive, and had a thousand years of experience in fighting. Demons that challenged her were knocked out of position with one or two powerful blows, then slaughtered with a precise blow to the throat, chest, or head. Even slender Kimmie showed that she was a formidable fighter, moving with grace, relying on agility instead of power, weaving and evading Demon attackers until she saw an opening, then killing them with fast, precise strikes of her claws. The attackers quickly cut a swath of destruction through the camp, and that line led straight to their targets.

The Selani and their Were-cat allies moved with blazing speed through the camp, shearing through the

disorganized defense almost effortlessly, until Eron found himself looking face to face with the two humans he had been sent to stop. He immediately cast his power over them, severing them from all magic, and the expressions on their faces was beyond priceless. They believed that nothing could come between them and the power Gruz gave them, used through them, but they had never dealt with the likes of Eron Kael. Eron's *mi'shara* power smothered the connection between the Demon Lord and his human vessels, and the two tattooed humans found themselves cut off from their power, cut off from their god, and at the mercy of attackers who had none.

Instantly, Jasana's Circle struck. The two humans didn't even have time to flinch before they were immolated in a pillar of brilliant fire, reducing them to ash in a heartbeat.

They had finished their job, and they were successful.

The Selani commander gave a shrill whistle. "Retreat!" he barked in Sulasian to the Were-cats. "Our task is complete!"

Selani who had torn into the Demon ranks instantly changed direction. The shocked Demons barely had time to fathom what was going on before the Selani and the Were-cats melted away, leaving only two Selani corpses behind among the hundred and fifty Demons and humans killed, and what was more important, the two human foci threatening Tarrin Kael were now dead, and he and Jasana could now use their power with impunity in this battle.

Everything seemed to *stop*. The shield around the city wavered, and then it vanished, and the Conduit of the Heart exploded into brilliant, brilliant light, so bright it hurt to look at it. A raging voice exploded in their ears, shaking dust from the walls, and making everyone pause.

"*YOUR FOCI ARE DEAD, DEMONESS!*" Tarrin Kael's voice thundered across the city. "*NOW YOUR ARMY IS MINE!*"

Azakar breathed a low sigh. "Karas, now it gets ugly," he whispered as every strand feeding the Conduit exploded into light, and more, and more, until the entire web-like matrix of strands around Pyros became visible. Tarrin was *furious*, and when he was that angry, a lot of people died. Usually in very brutal, very graphic, very barbaric ways. He could only hope that Tarrin wasn't in a rage and slaughtered his own people in his fury to deal out pain to the invaders.

"Eron must have reached them!" the One said exuberantly. "With the foci dead, Tarrin can unleash his wrath upon our enemies unopposed, and they can do nothing against him. This battle is won!"

"Not yet it's not," Azakar returned, raising his sword. "Prepare to pursue when they rout!" he shouted.

In the blink of an eye, a thousand Demons on the inner plain, threatening Azakar's forces, *melted*.

There was no other way to explain it. A searing light washed over them, and they barely had time to shriek before their bodies immediately melted into that black sludge.

That one act, that one attack, effectively ended the battle. The Demons turned and tried to flee, for now even the stupidest of them knew that it was over. With Tarrin Kael unleashed upon them, they stood no chance of reaching the Heart and killing him. Demons moved to flee, but the wrath of Tarrin followed them. Demons died in huge numbers with every attack that lashed out from the Conduit, as Tarrin decimated the army one bite at a time.

Barely a hundred Demons managed to get back over the third wall, and those died running for the moat.

Other Demons that had been still en route to the inner plain or fighting on the other walls also moved to run, but the defenders turned on them with savage ferocity, chopping them down as ranged attackers laid into the running Demons with cannon fire, musket balls, arrows, crossbow quarrels, and magical spells. Tarrin eradicated more Demons, and even more, with those blasts of incandescent light, but the defenders took their own toll on the fleeing Demons.

Not every Demon was within Tarrin's sight and at his mercy, however. A small contingent of fifty *glabrezu* were already outside the wall, herding a furious Shaz'Baket away from the carnage, but they didn't get far. A mixed force of mortals dropped from the first wall and gave chase, and Shaz'Baket gasped in fear when she saw who was leading that charge.

It was Mist.

Attack! Shaz'Baket commanded. By the Demon King, she had been humiliated once again by that damned Tarrin Kael, but she would go back to face her punishment from Gruz at least with the warm memory of spilling the lifeblood of his bitch of a mate!

The initial impact between the Demons and the mortals was bone-jarring. Mist, Skairn, and five Vendari met the Demons head on, kicking up a huge cloud of dust as bodies slammed into the ground. Undulating cries from the Selani announced the beginning of a short, brutal melee as the mortals drove into the attacking Demons with determination and fury. Speedy Selani quickly flanked the Demons and harried them from the flanks and rear, slashing and stabbing with blazing speed, often distracting *glabrezu* while Elaran or Duran elite soldiers delivered the killing blows. Knights on foot worked in tandem with Elaran warriors and Arakite Legionnaires to prevent any Demons from flanking the small company, keeping the fight head to head. Skairn boldly stood in the center of that whirlwind of chaos and death, swinging his battle axe with exacting precision, fearlessly taking on a Demon nearly four spans taller than he was. But Skairn was a student of war and a fast learner, quickly adopting the Duran tactics for dealing with bigger races, going after their legs. Skairn parried a pincer thrust, ducked under a second, then chopped his axe into the knee of his adversary, which made it squeal and collapse around its lamed leg. Once it was down, he planted his axe right in its thick skull, killing it. He wasted no time yanking his axe free and seeking out his next opponent, finding a Knight beside him to help him face the next challenger.

"Nobody touches that bitch but me!" Mist's enraged voice boomed over the ugly fight as she ripped her way through the Demons that charged her, her eyes glowing slits of green evil and her paws and claws dripping with Demon blood as she vented her rage on the *glabrezu*. Selani who had been preparing to take on Shaz'Baket looked at each other, and then, to the Demoness' surprise, they backed off and chased after a *glabrezu*. The mortals would not attack her; it seemed that the Were-cat had called her claim, and it was a fight that Shaz'Baket was almost as eager to pursue as Mist. Her defeat at the hands of the Were-cat was still fresh in her mind, and she ached to kill Mist both to avenge her loss at Pyros and to settle the score of who was the better in hand to hand combat.

Shaz'Baket did not waste any time seeking out Mist, ordering her bodyguards to leave the Were-cat alone, then screaming her challenge. The two squared off against each other, Mist roaring at the Demoness as she brandished her four swords and two axes, each ornate weapon held in a different hand, and Mist wasted no time throwing herself at the Demoness. Shaz'Baket expected her to be fast and lithe, hard to pin down, and Mist was everything she remembered. The black-furred Were-cat elder was fluidity of motion, always just out of reach of her swords and axes, always one split-second ahead. Her paws batted away sword blades and axe heads with masterful skill, her eyes following each weapon even as they moved independently of each other, weaving before the Demoness in a nearly hypnotic display of coordination. Even Selani eyes had trouble keeping track of those six weapons, but the furious Were-cat seemed to have no trouble at all knowing exactly where all six weapons were at any instant, which ones were out of position and which ones

were a threat, and which weapon would be used next. Paws batted, black bracers on her forearms parried or blocked, and her body flowed to dodge and evade swing after swing after thrust after swing, and the Demoness quickly became fearful and angry at the same time. By the Demon King, why couldn't she *hit* this willowy bitch?

In moments, the rest of the fight was over. The *glabrezu* all lay dead, and Skairn's unit was looking to tend to its wounded, and staying out of the way. Mist had warned them that she would kill anyone who interfered with this fight, and they honored Mists claim on Shaz'Baket's head...if only to keep their own. They looked on in a loose circle, ready to jump in if Mist fell or retreated, keeping the *marilith* from escaping if she defeated the Were-cat.

The fight only got faster. Shaz'Baket's weapons blurred around her, but the hands of the Were-cat moved with amazing precision, absolute control. Mist was faster than the Demoness, but the six arms of the Demoness balanced that advantage. Shaz'Baket tried every trick she knew to kill Mist, but the Were-cat seemed to sniff out the feints and the traps, always seeming to know exactly where the true threat was and reacting to it. And as every moment passed, Mist seemed to be able to predict the movements of the Demoness, starting to shift from a defensive stance to an offensive one, lashing out in those tiny windows between attacks of her swords and axes to threaten the *marilith* with injury. More than once, the Demoness had to abandon her attack to evade Mist's counter, and her swordwork became even faster, even as she became more desperate.

The Demoness hissed when Mist's claws slipped in under her sword and over her axe, raked her left shoulder, leaving a quartet of black-blooded lacerations, and then the Were-cat twisted aside as an axe and sword attempted to counterattack. The *marilith* engaged her tail into the battle, striking suddenly and without warning. The long appendage lashed out at the Were-cat, seeking to envelop and constrict her, but Mist evaded the wrapping attack with a light jump that took her six spans into the air, and then she turned in the air in that split second that the Demoness was off balance and recovering, and kicked Shaz'Baket dead in the face with her shin, ankle, and top of her foot. Shaz'Baket's head snapped to the side and she saw stars.

In a sudden fury, the Demoness screamed at the top of her lungs, speaking a word of such power that the word itself was the spell, carrying all the power behind it. It was the Power Word of *stun*, a Wizard spell, and it caused most of those around her to stagger back. Given Shaz'Baket's martial prowess, it was easy for many to forget that she was also an accomplished student of Wizard magic. She lunged at the Were-cat, who had taken three steps back, but then her eyes widened when a mask of hatred flashed in front of her eyes, Mist's twisted expression, and the Were-cat lashed out at the Demoness with both paws. Shaz'Baket had expected her to at least be a little off balance from the power of the spell, and she paid for that assumption dearly. Deep furrows were ripped into her face and neck, tearing off her left ear and almost putting out her left eye. Shaz'Baket slithered back in pain, but the Were-cat was all over her, tearing, gouging, ripping, drawing blood with each strike in a frenzy of blows. She withstood a furious assault until she recovered enough to retaliate, managed to stab Mist with a sword while she was in a frenzy. The surprised Were-cat staggered back, holding a paw over a thrust wound to her left side, but then her expression again became crazed, manic, and she launched herself at Shaz'Baket with her claws leading.

Shaz'Baket slithered back to try to intercept her, but...she didn't move. She hung in midair, suspended, her eyes wild with shock. Then, she was placed on the ground lightly, and she did not move to attack the Demoness again.

She felt it. She didn't have to turn around to know that Tarrin Kael stood behind her. She whirled with shocking speed and threw two of her swords where she could sense him. The weapons flew straight and true, but to her surprise, the Were-cat *caught* one of them in his paw while the other swatted the sword aside with the staff held by it, then dropped the caught sword to the ground.

"Let me finish her, my mate," Mist said savagely, ending her words in a hiss at the Demoness.

“No, Mist. You showed her she was going to lose. She’s mine now.”

“Yours? Yours! No mortal will ever take *me*, Were-cat! I’ll—*urk*,” she gurgled when Tarrin raised a single paw, and she found herself constricted in bonds of solid air, constricting her chest, causing her pain. She was jerked down from her rear, pulled eye to eye with him, and gazed into her eyes with a cold, deadly expression that made her very afraid.

“You’ve caused me and my family a *lot* of problems, bitch,” he said in a low tone. “So it’s time to pay you back for it. And believe me, Mist’s idea of punishing me is something you’ll beg for before it’s over.”

Shaz’Baket looked at him with terrified eyes as he reared back that left hand, claws out, and the staff in his right hand erupted into fiery light.

It was the Firestaff! He was going to use the Firestaff to do something to her!

She didn’t have time to panic. She could only shudder in indescribably agony when the left hand of Tarrin Kael plunged into her chest. It reached into her, deeply into her, reached *beyond* her. She felt his hand reach through time and space, reach through dimensions, reach back through the connection between this constructed, temporary body and the true part of her that existed in the Abyss. She felt him reach back along that connection, and take hold of what was on the other side.

Then he *pulled it out*.

She nearly collapsed as he withdrew his black-furred arm, covered in black blood, a golden chain woven through the thick fingers, and a shimmering golden amulet holding a blue crystal hanging from that chain. She felt weak, drained, helpless, and when she realized what he had done, for the first time in the millennia she had lived, feared that her life was about to come to an end.

He held her soul amulet.

“Killing you would be mercy,” he told her in a low voice. He looked to Mist, then, with the Firestaff still alight with its fire, he took hold of the amulet with his white-furred right paw.

She couldn’t even scream. The pain was nothing like she had ever felt, nothing like she could ever have imagined. It flooded every fiber of her, delved into her very soul, the pain of a Demonic soul coming into contact with the pure power of the lingering trace of *holiness* lurking in Tarrin’s right arm. She did manage to find her voice, a ragged, mindless shriek of absolute agony echoing from the walls of Pyros, a scream that curdled the blood, made those around Tarrin shrink back, recoiling in horror. They could never, in their entire lives, even begin to imagine the utter pain Shaz’Baket experienced in that moment, as the holy power of his arm invaded her amulet, seeking out the soul within, and attacking it.

Shaz’Baket passed out. Her heavy body slammed bonelessly to the ground, her mouth still locked open and her expression maintaining that moment of utter agony. But Tarrin seemed unmoved. He held the amulet tightly in his paw, looking at her with narrow eyes, his face a stony mask that betrayed not a single emotion. He looked on with clinical detachment, then he opened his paw.

Fine metallic dust drifted down to the ground between his fingers. The soul amulet was destroyed.

“What did you do to her?” a Selani managed to ask, in a fearful, hushed voice. “Did you destroy her soul?”

“No. I *fixed* her,” he said emotionlessly. “Bring her with us,” he said, looking at one of the Vendari. “I

have to deliver her to her new master.”

“Master? What are you talking about?” Mist asked.

“Shaz’Baket has too much to answer for to just kill her, Mist,” he answered. “Besides, you don’t kill a mind like hers. It would be a terrible waste. So, I fixed her, just like one of Shiika’s Hellhounds. She’ll utterly obey whoever wears the chain that once was part of her amulet.”

“Who will she serve?” one of the Vendari asked curiously.

“Azakar,” he answered. “She has to pay for what she’s done, so she can start by being the personal attendant and advisor of the next Lord General.” He looked down at her. “She will obey completely and utterly, helping her master any way she can, and the more basic elements of her Demonic soul were purged. She’s like Shiika now, not *evil* like a Demon, but never entirely good, but she no longer has an amulet. That body of hers is real now, and her soul is inside her, just like any mortal. But a part of her mind, her soul, will always remember what she was, who she was, remember that she was changed because she was defeated, and that part of her will scream until the end of time,” he said stonily.

Mist looked at him, looked to the inert Demoness, then snorted. “Let Zak have her,” she grunted. “I’d rather kill her, though.”

“Trust me, my mate, killing her will never equal the punishment I’ve handed down on her,” he said as a Vendari roughly hauled the Demoness off the ground and slung her over his shoulder. “She can’t pay for what she’s done if she’s dead, after all. Now, we have to get back. There are things to do while the army mops up the rest of the Demons, and we don’t have much time. We have unfinished business to deal with.”

“The Demon Lord?”

“The Demon Lord,” he answered Mist with a nod. “It’s about time to get rid of him, once and for all.”

Chapter 13

It was over.

After the last of the Demons had been hunted down and killed, the defenders simply sighed in relief. They were too tired to celebrate. Many of them looked over the carnage, the destruction, the bodies, and it was then they saw that they had come through the battle better than expected. Casualties were lighter than anyone had expected, partially due to planning, partially due to luck. No one race or unit suffered disproportionate casualties, and all ten dragons and all but one of the skyships had survived the battle.

But for the inner compound, there was personal news. Ulger was nowhere to be found. Ulger had been on the section of third wall the Demons had toppled, and it was feared that he was killed in the collapse. They had those who had not participated in the battle out clearing rubble along the collapsed walls to find bodies and look for survivors, and collecting the dead so they could be given proper burial, or cremation in the case of the Elara.

But overall, the mood in the inner compound was one of quiet relief. They had done it. They had beaten Shaz'Baket's army, held her off despite her masterful push into the city. For that, the generals could admire and respect her accomplishment. She had attacked an army that outnumbered her own, was heavily dug in, and at a major disadvantage in magical power, and she came *very* close to winning the battle. Now, the generals resumed their supply lines with the apple grove and tended the thousands of wounded. Tsukatta seemed very disappointed that he had missed out on all the fighting, but he had to agree that him being in the compound had been of vital importance. Dolanna, who again stood within the Heart now that the threat of the Demons was over, could only chuckle and assure Tsukatta that he had been a wonderful help, attending Kang and Bragg and adding his own military viewpoint as they watched over the battle.

The city would not be rebuilt for the One. The One did not take that well, but he agreed to move this capital to another city. Some quick negotiation ensued, and the One agreed to rebuild Verix, which would become his new capital.

But Pyros *would* be rebuilt. The Conduit was here, the Heart was here, and this place was the site of the first act of cooperation of the races of Pyrosia. A small city would be built here, built by the Dura, a city that would serve as a central location for various races to meet to discuss diplomatic issues. Pyros would be a neutral city, belonging to no nation or kingdom or race or empire, a city held and managed by the Sorcerers and Elementalists of Pyros, where they were the law.

Tarrin saw Ianelle's mind working when she overheard that statement. He had a strange feeling that she would not return to Sennadar any time soon.

Azakar was not entirely happy when they returned to the inner compound, as he talked with Kang, Zebri, Bragg, and Darax, and the huge body of the *marilith* was dumped unceremoniously at his feet. "You didn't kill her?" he asked in surprise.

"No, that would have been too easy," Tarrin answered. "Congratulations."

“What?”

“She’s yours.”

“Mine? What do you mean, mine?”

“You’re good at managing problem children, Zak,” Tarrin told him evenly. “You watched over Telven, after all. Well, now you can watch over this one.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tarrin explained what he did to her. “She’s like Shiika now, but she has a leash,” he explained, holding up the chain. “I want you to watch over her. I want you to do to her what you did to Telven, beat some sense into her if needs be. And in return, you get an advisor as smart as Kerri, who can teach you in ways Darvon never could.”

“You fixed her that way?”

He nodded. “She’s bound to this chain, Zak. She has to obey whoever wears it, to the best of her ability. You never have to worry about her betraying you.”

“I, I’m not sure. It’s almost as if she’s a slave.”

“No, she’s paying back her debt for what she’s done to me, to you, to Pyrosia, and to Sennadar,” he said simply. “Her welfare is your concern, Zak. Take her in, teach her, do what you want with her, just be fair. And, when you think she’s earned it, give her her chain and let her go. It’s entirely your affair, your decision, and I won’t gainsay you.”

“I have complete say in the matter?”

“Total. All I ask is you make sure she *earns* this chain.”

Azakar looked at the chain for a long moment. “And if I don’t take it?”

“I’ll kill her here and now, and her soul will be sent back to the Abyss. And nothing I could do to her would compare to what the Demon Lord will do to her, because of what I did to her soul, Zak. You don’t want to know what he would do. You really don’t.”

“She has a *mortal* soul?” he gasped.

Tarrin shook his head. “Her soul was changed when I fixed her, the same way Shiika’s soul is different. I have...experience, dealing with souls, Zak. I did to her what I saw in Shiika.”

Azakar gave the chain a curious look, then he nodded. “I’ll take responsibility for her,” he said simply, taking the chain and sliding it over his head, tucking it under his breastplate.

“Do what you think best.”

“I will.”

“Now I get it,” Jasana said quietly to her father as Azakar had Shaz’Baket carried away, following her. “You changed her into something she despises. That’s her punishment.”

"It's a part of it," he agreed. "Under Zak, she'll pay back the debt she owes my family. He'll work her, he'll wear her down, and then, when she's ready, he'll build her back up. When she leaves Zak's charge, she'll be a different woman. Completely different."

"I still don't get it, then. How is that punishment?"

"When you're older, you'll understand," he said simply as he approached Dolanna. "Dolanna." "Yes, my dear one?"

"I need you to finish things up here, and have Miranda send a message back home to warn them that we're going to start getting everyone home in the next few days," he said. "I'll leave you in charge here, Dolanna."

"Leave me? What do you mean?"

"There's still the matter of the Demon Lord, Dolanna," he said. "I'm not taking the army for that. I'm not going to need them. I'd just be getting people killed for no reason."

"You cannot be serious!" she gasped. "You said that all the humans that were possessed were possessed by Demons in Auromar! Dear one, even *you* cannot get through an army that size to reach the Demon Lord!"

"I don't have to, Dolanna," he said calmly. "Trust me. The only ones that have to go are me and the One. We created this mess, and now we're going to fix it, the both of us." He glanced towards Kang. "Besides, for what's going to happen there, Dolanna, I don't *want* our army in the way. The Demon Lord has at least some minor portion of divine power now, and he'll use it against us. It's going to be him, me, the One, my shadow, the Firestaff, my sword, and the *bow*. Do you really want an army there?"

"I...ah. No, you are correct, my dear one. That will be no place for us. But are you sure you can reach the Demon Lord?"

"I'm positive, Dolanna, or I wouldn't go," he answered, stepping into the Conduit. "But, I have to leave quickly, so excuse me while I intrude on your domain for a little bit. One!" he shouted.

The One, who was in conversation with some of his mortal followers, looked up, nodded, and hurried over.

"You're *leaving*? And you're not taking me?" Jasana protested hotly.

"Where I'm going, cub, you can't follow," he told her. "And it's nowhere any sane person would want to go."

"Aren't you going to, well, say goodbye, or warn everyone, or something?"

"I won't be gone long," he shrugged. "I'll be back by morning. This won't take long."

"Every time you say that, father, something terrible happens," she protested earnestly. He looked into his cub's eyes, and he saw a terrible fear there, a fear that he may not come back...and that he had cheated death too many times to get away with it again.

He put a comforting paw on her shoulder. "Cub, this will be easier than what we did here. Remember, I have something with me that can end it immediately. I just need to get into position to use it, that's all."

“And that is why I will go with him,” the One said easily. “Between me and his shadow, we can keep the Demon Lord engaged and give Lord Tarrin an opportunity to finish this quickly.”

“Just so,” he affirmed with a nod. “And once the Demon Lord is dead, we’re done here.”

“We can go home?”

“Well, *one* of us can go home,” he told her. “Remember, this Weave needs a *sui’kun* to keep it here. After this is over, we’ll have to sit down and talk with some people and decide if we want the Weave to stay. And if it does, well, someone has to be here to hold it together. It’s you or me, cub. That, or we lure one of the other *sui’kun* to come over until this world produces a *sui’kun* of its own.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Jasana said, pursing her lips.

“I didn’t think you did,” he chuckled. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, then patted her on the shoulder. “Now let me get this done, cub. Just relax and listen to Dolanna, I’m sure she’ll put you to work.”

“I do have any number of chores that only a Sorcerer of her stature could complete easily,” Dolanna agreed.

“Sometimes I hate being a *sui’kun*,” she said petulantly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and giving Tarrin a pouting expression.

“Welcome to adulthood, cub.”

Jasana stalked off, but Tarrin didn’t quite leave yet. He let Jasana vanish into the crowd in the compound, then he called Eron over. “What is it, father?”

“Cub,” he said. “Listen. We’re about to go fight the Demon Lord. We’re pretty sure we can take him down easily, but just in case he has something nasty hidden from us, I want you to stay close to Phandebrass.”

“Why Phandebrass?”

Tarrin reached into his belt pouch, and pulled out a tiny sapphire. “This is the back end of his Gemjump spell,” he answered. “I’m going to set this near to where we’re going to fight the Demon Lord. If things get ugly, I might need you there to use your power. If that does happen, Phandebrass can teleport directly to where it is and help you get to us, and though he can’t take anyone with him, he *can* bring a small animal he’s holding. That will be you.”

“Oh, I see. Alright, father. I’ll stay near Phandebrass. Does he know you may need him to magic me to you?”

“You and Dolanna will tell him,” he answered.

“Alright. If you need me, I’ll be there.”

“I can always depend on you, cub,” he said, patting Eron on the shoulder. “Just remember, if I call you, you have to be in cat form for Phandebrass to bring you. Are you ready to go, One?”

“I am ready.”

“Then let’s get this overwith.”

Auromar looked like death given form.

It was barren. *Barren* was a pretty good description, for it was totally, utterly dead. There were no plants. There were no animals. There were no insects. The land was a rocky wasteland of gray and reddish rocks, as far as he could see, in every direction. He was pretty sure that at that moment, he was the only *living* thing on Auromar.

They had appeared almost directly beside his shadow, which had not moved so much as a finger since last he saw it. The shadow still sat on his heels, sword in his lap, glowing red eyes open and facing the southeast, facing the direction in which the Demon Lord lay. The shadow did move when they appeared, transported here by the Firestaff after Tarrin used the Weave to survey the location and find a good place to appear where their feet wouldn’t merge with any rubble strewn across the ground. It stood with fluent grace, taking the sword up in its right paw, then turned to face them.

“Sorry we took so long, Shaz’Baket made it challenging,” he said dryly as he extended out his wings, flaring them and beating them twice before folding them back. “Is the Demon Lord still there?”

The shadow nodded.

“Perhaps at this juncture, we should consider a plan of action,” the One stated.

“Plan? My plan is to go in there and kill him,” Tarrin retorted. “How we do that isn’t my affair. We’re so close now, I’m tired of making plans.”

The One chuckled. “Then if it pleases you, attend,” he said, kneeling down, his feathered wings brushing the ground. “The Demon Lord is within a citadel,” he began drawing a triangle in the sterile, sandy soil with a finger. “Surrounded by a city his troops are hastily erecting. Any approach from the ground would be impossible. Therefore, our attack should be from the air. Two of us have the means to fly, and we can easily carry your shadow. We fly in and invade the citadel, flying directly to his location. Once there, myself and your shadow will engage the Demon Lord in battle, while you try to shoot him with your arrow, using the Firestaff to protect yourself from any random or collateral destruction that would be wrought when divine powers oppose one another directly in the mortal plane. He will be hard pressed to defend against the two of us when he knows that you can end him with a single shot. In the confusion, one of us will most certainly fell him.”

“Simple, elegant, effective. I like it,” Tarrin stated.

“There will be more than two to face the Demon Lord,” came a voice from behind.

They all stood and looked, and it was a face Tarrin remembered, in a sketchy kind of way. It was Breina of the Dawn, a tall, lithe woman with hair the color of a rosy sunrise, skin of a light, delicate blue, wearing ornate plate armor and carrying a bow. It was her icon, more specifically. “You wished to speak with me, Tarrin? I assume to ask me to aid you?”

“Not really, but if you want to help, you’re more than welcome,” he said. “What about the other gods?”

“They don’t trust the One enough yet to risk their icons in his presence. I, however, have no such history with him, so it doesn’t concern me.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome along,” Tarrin told her.

She nodded and joined them. “I overheard your plan. Will you truly attack with so simple a strategy?”

“Yes, it will be more than effective,” the One replied.

“Then let us carry through with it.”

“Then gather around,” Tarrin ordered. “I’ll drop us right outside their city. From there, we pick up Bane and Breina and carry them up to the citadel. You two will be responsible for repelling any Demons that attack us on the way, while me and the One worry about any kind of attack from Gruz.”

Tarrin’s shadow nodded, and Breina put her hand on his forearm.

He had already scouted out the landing spot, on a barren rocky ridge overlooking the city they were building. Using the Firestaff, he transported them all to that location, into a sudden wind, into a sudden feeling of pure hatred, emanating from the city. Gruz knew they were there, and already, he could feel the shifting of the bubble in which he hid, trying to overwhelm the Weave and expand.

“This is it,” Tarrin breathed, dropping Phandebrass’ Gemjump focus in case he needed to call Eron to the battlefield. He took hold of the back of Breina’s breastplate and rose into the air, pulling her up with him, as the One picked up Tarrin’s shadow and moved to follow him. All four of them could sense the Demon Lord, could point right at him, so they had no problem going right towards him.

This was it. All the work he’d done over the last few months was about to pay off. Despite the Demon Lord’s clever trick to regain some power, it meant nothing. Tarrin had everything he needed to kill him, had enough support to use it, and had enough power to stand against what the Demon Lord could dish out. Though there would be hell to pay after this was done, when he returned the bow to the Deva, that didn’t matter. All that mattered was now, all that mattered was correcting the grievous mistake the One committed but Tarrin instigated, and preventing a Pyrosian version of Sennadar’s Blood War.

It all came down to this moment.

He wasn’t afraid. Goddess, after everything he’d been through, nothing really scared him anymore. This, this was just another in a long series of hairy life-or-death struggles he’d faced in his life, a life short in years but long in experiences, a life that seemed more fantastic than anything else, even to him, most of the time. Killing the Demon Lord would just be added to the list of enemies Tarrin Kael had vanquished over the years, just another obstacle to reclaiming his life of peace and contentment.

That was what all of this had been about. All he wanted to do was *go home*. He wanted to go home not as the Mortal God, feared, spied upon, and plotted against by the gods of Sennadar, but to return to the life he had before Val’s shadow brought the power hidden inside him out. Everything he’d done went back to that one simple goal, to live his own way, live his own life, and be *free* of all loose ends and lurking complications.

And he was about to come one step closer to that goal.

The Demons below howled and raged when they went over, but there was no resistance. Even those Demons who could fly did not intervene, did not try to stop them. Gruz was letting them come. Gruz was willing to fight.

They passed through the bubble and into land held sway to Gruz’s will, and no attack came. Tarrin

aimed for a large balcony opening to a large gallery, landing on it quickly and taking up the Firestaff in both paws as his shadow and the One landed beside him. They looked at each other, then moved in through the open archway.

It was a cavernous throne room, so large that half of Aldreth would fit in it, stretching almost the entire length and breadth of the citadel's structure. The ceiling soared a hundred spans over their heads, and the walls were supported with elegant, artistic buttresses with Demons sculpted into them, looking like ten mighty *glabrezu* were holding up the ceiling on their shoulders. On the far side there was a dais of a single step, and upon that dais sat a throne. Seated in that throne was Gruz, the Demon Lord, master of the *glabrezu*, flanked by an honor guard of *glabrezu* that were larger and more burly than their kind, and also shared Gruz's trait of having bone sword-like spurs where the pincers would be on a normal *glabrezu*.

And so it comes to this. In a way, I'm glad of it, the thoughts of Gruz entered their minds. When you were killed in Pyros, I thought I'd seen the last of you, Tarrin Kael, and I couldn't help but admire your skill and your courage. Sacrificing yourself to seal away the power of the Demons, that was brilliant. I never saw that coming. I almost regretted being robbed of the pleasure of killing you myself, and taking your soul as my trophy. You have proved to be the most troublesome adversary I have ever faced, but it ends here. You have brought both the Firestaff and the Sword of Fire to me. After I kill you, I will take them up and rule this world, and then return and conquer the Abyss. The Fiends will all bow to me! it said in a kind of ecstatic anticipation.

"I guess I can't fault you for clinging to shallow hopes and hollow dreams, Gruz," Tarrin growled, passing the Firestaff up into his wings, where the living fire curled around them, settled it behind his shoulders. "I brought you a little something from the Outer Planes, Demon. I went to a great deal of trouble to get it."

Yes, yes, I heard. You somehow managed to gain possession of a Solar's bow. But I think you will be the one in for a surprise when you try to use it, Gruz smirked, showing a long, yellow fang. He then stood up. *But enough of this. I hunger for what is rightfully mine, and it is unseemly to be to polite to one's food before eating it.*

"Come get a taste, Demon," Tarrin hissed, his eyes exploding into the green radiance that marked his anger, putting his ears back.

There was no signal that started the fight. Breina, the One, and his shadow charged forward in unison as Gruz's minions surged from the dais and rushed to attack as Gruz stood up from his throne. Little pieces of polished metal rose up from the floor around Gruz's dais and began to orbit his body randomly, but Tarrin ignored that. Gruz knew he had the bow, there was no reason to hide it. He rose into the air and called the bow and quiver out of the *elsewhere*, drew the arrow that had already been nocked, took aim at the Demon Lord, and then loosed.

The arrow screamed through the air, leaving a trail of glowing light and sparks as it hurtled towards Gruz, but the Demon Lord seemed totally unconcerned. The arrow shrieked in, aimed at his chest, but as it got almost within reach of him, the orbiting pieces of metal around the Demon Lord responded. Two of them quickly moved out of their path and interposed themselves between Gruz and the arrow. It struck that obstacle and ricocheted away, clattering to the stone floor and bouncing to a stop as the glow around the arrow faded away.

Alright, Tarrin had to admit to himself, that was pretty clever. Those little orbiting plates would try to shield Gruz from being hit. That would make this harder, but it still wasn't going to be much of an issue to get around.

The guard of Demons that challenged the two gods and his shadow lasted only a moment. The shadow

slammed into them head-on, and any Demon he touched shrieked in agony and collapsed to the floor, dead, their powers and energy taken by the shadow to add to his own. The One and Breina too drew blood, as the winged god tore through the *glabrezu* like a reaping wheat, cutting them out of his way as if they were a minor annoyance. Breina struck at them with her bow, the impacts devastating, sending Demons flying with every swing. The Demons tried to fight back, but they were overwhelmed, outclassed, and quickly were mowed down to leave Gruz facing them alone.

Tarrin's shadow did not hesitate. The sword in his paws bursting into fire, he attacked Gruz head on. The Demon Lord raised one of the arms protruding from his chest and made a flicking motion, and it was as if the citadel itself responded. The shadow raised the sword and struck back at the power that sought to surround him, still trying to advance, get close enough to touch the Demon Lord and drain his power, though his ability to counter Demonic powers did nothing against the power the Demon Lord now wielded. This power was derived from the true faith of mortals—

True faith of mortals.

Of course!

“Breina!” he called. “Breina!”

“Yes, Tarrin?” she asked, nocking an arrow and aiming it at the Demon Lord. She loosed it, but the plates around him deflected it, both the arrow and the divine power behind that arrow. Space itself seemed to buckle when the arrow struck the plate, as the power of Gruz confronted the power of Breina, and a shockwave of air exploded from that impact, but not hard enough to knock them down. Breina's power was very weak, she had few worshippers in this realm, and so their meeting didn't rip space and cause widespread destruction. That she would face the One at such a disadvantage spoke of her courage, risking her fledgeling order on Pyrosia to do so, even when she once told Tarrin she would not interfere.

“The mortals! They're all *here*! Find and kill the mortals!”

Breina's eyes lit up, and she nodded enthusiastically. Gruz roared in sudden fury when Breina turned and ran towards the balcony, as he summoned forth all his power to end it before Breina could find and kill his worshippers. The death of each one would weaken him, and if she killed enough, he wouldn't have the might to protect himself. Gruz charged past the shadow and the One, and it headed right for Tarrin. It was going after the only mortal, the only one he could kill quickly and easily, and the one holding the Firestaff, whose power would bolster his own and make him strong enough to challenge the other three attackers. Tarrin unleashed arrow after arrow at him, trying to slip one through the plates, but those little flying shields were flawless in their defense, stopping each and every arrow that tried to end this battle immediately. Tarrin sent the bow back into the *elsewhere* and took up the Firestaff in the center grip as a wave of divine power lashed at him. He struck at it as if hitting a foe, and the power of Gruz impacted the power of the Firestaff. The Firestaff struggled against Tarrin feverishly, with more power and determination than ever, and the Were-cat very nearly lost control of the artifact as he summoned forth the power to oppose that attack. He just barely managed to keep his will on the artifact and cause it to turn aside that blow, which slammed into the wall of the citadel and tore through it, opening out into empty air and sending an avalanche of shattered rock tumbling down the outside of the fortress to the ground below.

Good Goddess, how did it do that? He'd used much more power than that before, and never so much trouble controlling it! Could it be that it was seeing the end? It had to know that after Gruz was dead, Tarrin would have no reason to keep it, and would destroy it. Did that bolster it, make it try to break free using strength it had heretofore kept hidden? Possible, but one thing it told him was that he had *better* not rely on the Firestaff in this battle, for anything.

The Firestaff rebels against you, mortal, Gruz taunted as his sword-like arms sought to shear the Were-

cat in half. He twisted aside in midair, then lanced upwards to avoid the second attack. But Gruz himself vanished instantly just as the shadow nearly grabbed hold of his leg, reappearing before the One. The One raised his mirror-faced shield and charged, sword glowing with divine might, but Gruz knew better than to try to use his power against the One face to face, not with that shield of his. The air pulsated, charged with energy, as the One battled Gruz sword to bone spurs, parrying those bone blades, blocking with his shield. As the two of them fought face to face, Tarrin's shadow raised the Sword of Fire as it ran to the Demon Lord's flank, then unleashed the full power of that weapon at Gruz. The power, manifesting as a spiralling cone of fire, screamed at the Demon Lord, but then Gruz slashed at it with his sword-ending arm, exercising his own divine power. The citadel rocked when those two powers came into contact, dust filtering down from the ceiling, and the shadow's attack was stopped. The shockwave slammed Tarrin, sending him flying across the huge chamber to tumble across the floor.

For a second, he felt like a mouse caught between the fighting of two stags. He had no divine power here, not with the Firestaff resisting him so strongly, and inside the bubble, he had no Sorcery. All he had was himself, his skill, and the Solar's bow, and he was surrounded by friends and foe alike who either had power or wielded power vastly superior to his own. He was the weak link in the chain, he knew that. Gruz would focus on him, try to kill him to take the Firestaff from him, and then use it to defeat the One and his shadow.

But he would not back off. He had faced down enemies with just as much of an advantage and defeated them. Gruz would be no different. Tarrin's shadow charged ahead with the sword raised to strike, but Gruz again vanished and reappeared on the far side of the room, not allowing the shadow anywhere near him.

Besides, a predictable enemy was a beatable enemy.

Tarrin landed by the shadow and again passed the Firestaff up into his wings and brought the bow back out. "Stop playing by his rules," Tarrin told it as he nocked another arrow. "You have Druidic power. *Use it.*"

The shadow shook his head, motioning around them.

"He's blocking it?"

The shadow nodded.

"I didn't think of that," he grunted. "Alright, we do this the hard way."

It was almost more than the citadel could bear, but somehow it remained standing. The One and Tarrin's shadow fought a game of cat and mouse with Gruz as the Demon Lord struck at them or defended itself against their power with his own, constantly retreating from the shadow while trying to pin down and kill Tarrin. But Gruz discovered that even without magic, Tarrin was a very hard Were-cat to kill. Tarrin understood what Gruz was doing and never put himself in a position where Gruz could blindside him, staying near to the ground, always ready to launch an arrow at Gruz any time he had a clear shot, hoping that those shields would miss and the arrow would kill him. It was a savage fight of quick movements, blasts of divine power, hastily launched arrows, and quick retreats as Tarrin stayed away from Gruz, Gruz stayed away from Tarrin's shadow, and the One and the shadow gave constant chase. But time was against Gruz, and he knew it. Even now, Breina had invaded the city, killing Demons left and right as she sought out the mortals that gave Gruz his power, seeking to kill them and weaken their common enemy, and that knowledge gave Gruz an edge of desperation, and made him dangerous.

Nothing was more dangerous than a cornered animal, for it had nothing to lose.

Gruz appeared not two steps in front of him, so close Tarrin could have slapped him with his tail, inside

the protection of his metal plates, taking a terrible risk. The Were-cat was not surprised, reacted quickly to shoot Gruz with an arrow, but Gruz attacked not with his bone swords, not with a focused blast of his power, but with a wall that Tarrin could not possibly evade or counter. Tarrin was flung across the chamber, hundreds of spans, as bones shattered and his mind swam in a black fog of pain and confusion. He landed bonelessly and tumbled to a stop, and did not move for a moment. Gruz moved in for the kill, but then his shadow was there, standing between the Demon Lord and his quarry with the Sword of Fire held in both paws, daring the Demon Lord to try. The One charged up from the rear, shield leading. Tarrin's shadow unleashed an attack of raging, destructive force, tightly controlled. Gruz vanished, reappearing behind the shadow and Tarrin, but the shadow too quickly moved.

The One saw it coming, realized what he had to do. He slid to a stop and presented his shield to that attack, and braced himself. The attack hit the shield and reflected from it, sent screaming back the way it came, expertly aimed right at where Gruz had reappeared. Gruz saw Tarrin's shadow unleash another attack of pure divine power, but to his surprise, he found himself being attacked from two directions simultaneously. The shadow had timed his attack perfectly, forcing Gruz to vanish again, reappearing across the vast chamber to collect himself and prepare for another attempt. The two attacks hit each other where Gruz had been standing, exploding violently with such force that Tarrin was pushed several spans across the floor.

In pain, weak, his body struggling to heal itself, Tarrin pushed himself to his feet. He moved on broken legs, overcoming the pain, refusing to pass out. If he passed out, the Firestaff would break free. He took the air, where broken bones wouldn't matter, raising the Solar's bow and nocking another arrow, his glaring eyes daring Gruz to try that again.

But there was...warmth. The holy power in his right arm, he felt it surge through his arm, repairing the broken bones. Then that warmth spread through his body, and he could feel it bolstering his own regeneration, accelerating it, allowing him to recover from the attack as if it had not been a magically-induced injury. In a quick moment, Tarrin was whole again.

And he knew what he had to do.

"Defend Tarrin," the One told the shadow as he surged forward on his feathered wings.

The change in tactics was effective. The shadow stayed within reach of Tarrin at all times as the One sallied forth and tried to engage the Demon Lord, but the Demon Lord has his own battle plan. He harried the shadow, trying to draw it out of position with attacks and feints, tried to separate the shadow from Tarrin. Tarrin saw that it was as stalemate, and what was more, since he was the direct focus of this battle, and he was carrying something the Demon Lord wanted...something had to be done about it.

He moved swiftly and without thought. Thought would warn everyone. He sent the bow back into the *elsewhere* and took the Firestaff in his left paw and swooped up behind the shadow. He did not ask. He struck the shadow with the Firestaff, attacking his own companion, striking it squarely in the back. It staggered forward, but Tarrin wrested the Sword of Fire from his charcoal paw, taking it up in his right paw.

The Firestaff became alive in his paw. It twisted and writhed physically, trying to break free of his grip, but the black-furred paw held the staff in a grip of iron, and would not relent. It audibly squealed, a sound of utter terror and rage, but it could do nothing.

As the Demon Lord looked on in horror, as the One rushed forward, as his shadow staggered away, Tarrin set the Firestaff's butt end on the floor, raised the Sword of Fire, and without hesitation, struck it.

The Sword of Fire, the instrument of the Mortal God, a being who had been created by the Firestaff and then freed from it, wielded by the one being in all the multiverse that could destroy the Firestaff, sheared the

reddish-black artifact in half.

The pieces fell to the floor, smoking. The power contained within the Firestaff, the power to corrupt, the power to destroy, turned on those fragments. The two pieces began to glow with both heat and power, vibrating on the floor, but then the Entropy that they represented destroyed itself, unable to exist in the material plane without the protection of the staff to insulate it. The two fragments burst into flames, brilliant, white-hot flames that melted the floor beneath them, and then burned away to nothingness.

Not even ashes remained.

The Sword of Fire, whose power derived from the Firestaff, shuddered in Tarrin's paw. The power within flared with brilliance, causing the sword to illuminate the entire chamber, and then it faded away, leaving behind nothing but mortal steel. Its power was gone. All vestiges of the Firestaff had been destroyed, leaving behind only the memory that it once existed.

Tarrin's shadow gave him a solemn, eloquent nod, understanding what he was trying to accomplish, and then it too wavered, and then vanished like mist. It too was a creation of the power of the Firestaff, and it too could not be sustained once the artifact was destroyed. It evaporated like mist in the summer sun, and it was no more.

Tarrin had fulfilled his promise to Niami and Ayise. The Firestaff, everything that had once been part of the Firestaff, and everything created either directly or indirectly by the power of the Firestaff, were no more. It was removed from the multiverse once and for all.

NOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Gruz roared, his fury shaking the citadel itself.

"That was your last chance, Gruz," Tarrin said quietly, narrowed eyes regarding him coldly, recalling the Solar's bow, arrow already nocked. He drew it smoothly, giving the Demon Lord an icy stare. "Now come and die."

The One gave him a wild look, then nodded in comprehension. Gruz was trying to secure the Firestaff to defeat his adversaries, who were actually more powerful than he was. Tarrin removed it from the game, and took away Gruz's last hope of salvaging victory. Without the Firestaff, with Breina out there homing in on his mortal followers, and facing a god and a mortal who carried a weapon that could kill *anything*, Gruz was out of options, and out of time. All he could do now was try to kill as many of them as he could before his time on Pyrosia was brought to a brutal end. Tarrin sacrificed some of their power and one of their own, but in the end, he ended up with the greater advantage because of it.

That rampage started instantly. Gruz threw all caution to the wind and lashed out at them. The top of the citadel exploded as Gruz held nothing back, lashing out at Tarrin Kael in a bid to destroy the mortal before it was said and done, but the One was suddenly there. The One protected Tarrin with a barrier of divine power, a sphere of force that turned aside the Demon Lord's wrath, though that wrath devastated the grand citadel built in his honor. Smoking fragments of stone were sent longspans into the air, soaring out over the barren wasteland of Auomar, causing the One to protect himself and Tarrin from an avalanche of shredded rock that inundated the floor, a floor now open to the air, a great flat platform on which the final act was played out. The Demon Lord charged in to tear his opponents apart with his bone spurs, kicking boulders out of his way.

Tarrin fired at Gruz, and again, and again, but the spinning metal plates continued to protect him, blocking his shots with perfect precision. Despite the fact that all of Gruz's fury was aimed right at Tarrin, he abandoned the One, racing to the side, then turning towards the One in what seemed a suicidal attack. Gruz turned on him with absolute hatred raging through his eyes, unleashing another attack of divine power. The power lashed out at Tarrin, but the One was again there, defending Tarrin from the attack. Tarrin's

shadow slipped around Gruz quickly and silently, then moved with blazing speed, but the Demon Lord moved with equal speed, unleashing a blast of divine power at the shadow, who did nothing to prevent it.

The One did not just hold back. He pressed forward, his sword and shield flashing in the light of the setting sun, staining the blade blood red with the red light of the horizon as it lashed out. Gruz met that attack with a bone spur, and the power behind each of them caused another shockwave of power to ripple out from them, blasting debris off the citadel, causing Tarrin to shield his eyes with a paw and slide backwards, his claws digging into the rock beneath him to slow him to a stop.

Behind the battle, in the place where the shadow had stood before it was undone by the destruction of the Firestaff, a tiny mote of light appeared. It raised up from the floor, a tiny, dancing point of soft white light, and then it vanished. Another appeared, then another, rising up from the floor like tiny embers, to wink out of sight. More appeared, then more, and then a small ghostly ball of soft, glowing light rose up from the rubble of the ceiling amid the tiny motes. It slowed to a stop, hovering in the air, seeming to regard the drama playing out, and then it too vanished.

To change *everything*.

Both Gruz and the One *stopped*. They both looked around them, looked up, their faces horrified. Even Tarrin could sense...*something*. A, a presence. A feeling that things were different, almost like the very texture of reality had just shifted ever-so-slightly. It came from the All, as the All of this world, it, it... *changed*.

Around Gruz, the little metal plates that protected him ceased moving. They too were distracted by that presence. But Gruz, his face filled with fear, did not register it. He was stunned, fixated.

Vulnerable.

Tarrin reacted with a predator's instinct. In a smooth motion, he drew the bow of the Solar, felt the vanes of the arrow tickle his cheek as he quickly and expertly lined up the shaft with the Demon Lord. All sound vanished. All things except the Demon Lord seemed to vanish from his sight. There was nothing but him, the Demon Lord, and the arrow. He sighed, releasing his breath, and relaxed his fingers.

The arrow was loosed. It burst into golden light, sparks flying from the spinning vanes of its tail, arcing through the air. Gruz seemed to move in slow motion to Tarrin, looking at him, his eyes widening, raising a bladed arm, metal plates lurching in sudden motion to intervene, but it was too late.

The arrow slithered past a metal plate that was a split second too slow, and struck him directly in the face, right between the eyes. Gruz's expression did not change when the arrow burrowed between his eyes, into his brain, and then the arrow blazed with golden light, holy light, as the power of the arrow was unleashed. The arrow invaded the body of the Demon Lord and *shattered* it from the inside, shearing the connection between the material body and the soul, piercing the link holding it in the material plane. Gruz wailed in agony as his entire body began to blaze with golden light, staggering back, and then he screamed.

And then the light faded. Gruz, the Demon Lord, master of the *glabrezu*, was slain. The body collapsed on its back to the floor, and evil black smoke began wafting up from the corpse as it began to decompose.

Sighing, Tarrin lowered the bow of the Solar, then took in a deep, cleansing breath. The One looked back

to him, his expression blank, unbelieving, lowering his sword.

It was over.

Below, in the city, Demons summoned by the power of the Demon Lord shuddered, and then they vanished in a black mist, banished back to the Abyss.

Tarrin took the bow in both paws as he felt the bubble of the Demon Lord's influence waver, and then vanish. The Weave reset to its original position, strands returning to the area, and he felt a sudden wild elation rush through the Weave, rush through the world. Dolanna knew that they had won, that it was over. She was probably passing the happy news even now, but there was no elation for Tarrin. There was only relief.

The One looked at him in wild disbelief. "How?" he could only ask, in shock, looking at Tarrin.

"How what?" he asked.

"How have you done this?" he asked, actually reaching out and touching Tarrin, then recoiling. "It defies belief!"

"What are you talking about?"

"How can you not know? This baffles me."

"One, just spit it out!" he said irritably. "I've had a long day, I'm in no mood for word games!"

The One looked at him, then actually *laughed*. "Tarrin, I do not know how to explain it, but somehow, some way, *you* are here. Everywhere."

"What do you mean?"

"The All sings of it, Tarrin Kael. It has taken a new god as its master. There is a new Elder God of Pyrosia, and it is *you*."

"Absolutely not!" Tarrin snapped. "I'm no god, One! Look!" He took his white furred paw, extended his claws, and raked it over the pad of his left palm, producing a liberal amount of blood.

"And that is the mystery," he said. "You stand before me as a mortal, but yet, I feel the power of this world respond, and it tells me that you are the new Elder God of this plane. You are a Druid, Tarrin. Touch the All. Feel it for yourself."

He did so. Reaching within, through the Cat, he came into touch with the All of this world, tentatively, carefully. But there was no undirected power there, as Triana had called it. He could *feel* something there, a force, a power, a guidance that gave it direction and purpose. He looked deeper into the All, and deeper, and deeper still, and then he saw it. He saw eyes staring back at him, green eyes with vertically slitted pupils. He felt that presence then, that force, that will, that *entity*, and it left him speechless.

It was there. Oh, *Goddess*.

Even he could not deny what was there. The god that stared back at him through the Weave was indeed *Tarrin Kael*, a presence that was both exultant and solemn, overjoyed it had taken up a new place, but knowing that it had much work ahead of it to restore this plane to a rightful, prosperous order.

It was something that Tarrin had seen once before.

What stared back at him was the divine half of his soul, joined to the All of Pyrosia, forming the new Elder God of this plane. It *was* him, but it was a part of him that he had cast off and thought destroyed, ravaged by the material plane when he excised himself from being a part of it. But somehow, some way, how he had no idea, it had survived. It had come here, to this plane with no Elder God, and had taken up that vacant position. And the All of this world accepted it, joined to it, and caused it to be restored.

It was him. But it was not him. That half, that part, it was no longer connected to Tarrin Kael. It was a new entity, a new being, created from bizarre circumstances to be sure, but it was its own soul, its own mind, its own power.

It was too much to even think about right now. He just laughed and sat down on the stone floor, hard, sending the bow back to the *elsewhere*. “It’s not much of a mystery to me, but it’s a surprise that it’s here,” he told the One. He then explained how he had regained his mortality. “The only question is, how did it get here? I saw it die in Sennadar. I saw it with my own eyes. How did it survive?”

“The how may not be relevant,” the One said. “But it seems that I now have a new Master, and I am being summoned. I must answer this summons. You—er, the Elder God here calls all gods to his presence, and we must answer the call without delay. Are you well to return on your own? After all, there is nothing left here to challenge you.”

“There’s probably some human worshippers of the Demon Lord left over—“

“No. They are gone. The first act of the Elder God was to strike dead any who had true faith in the Demon Lord, as is within his power, severing the last thread holding Gruz in this dimension. He is forever banished from this realm.”

Tarrin absorbed that news with quiet efficiency. “Then I’ll be fine. Go on, you don’t want to keep, er, him waiting.”

The One nodded, and then he simply vanished from the citadel, answering the summons.

Tarrin flopped onto his back, looking up at the darkening sky. It wasn’t quite the way one might celebrate achieving ultimate victory after a long, hard, exhausting journey, but for Tarrin, it was just right. He looked up into the sky, up at the stars, and could only wonder how it had been done. How had the divine soul survived? How did it manage to get to this place and convince this plane to take it as its new master, thus becoming the Elder God of this plane? He was sure that it would be quite a story. Quite a story indeed.

Somehow, Ayise had to have a hand in it somewhere. Had she saved the other half of his soul and sent it here? It was possible.

But, truth be told, it really wasn’t his problem. That half of him was in no way connected to him, it was its own entity, a completely separate being, and now running this material plane was his problem. Tarrin had no idea how it got here, how it had come to take the position of Elder God, but it really wasn’t his concern. But, he had to share the One’s surprise. It was as much a shock to him as it was to the One.

Just another crazy twist in his crazy life.

He sat up, feeling just a little bit better. It was over now, but there were some things to do. He had to get everyone home, and once he was sure things were going to be alright, he had to return to the Outer Planes to return the bow, and face his punishment.

He stood up, and felt several presences swirling around him. Dolanna, Jasana, Julia, Ianelle, and several *da'shar*, all in the strands, looking for him, making sure he was alright. He ignored them, looking up at the stars, and he could only sigh. They reminded him that there were people waiting for him, that there was a life to reclaim, and he still had a duty to complete.

My, how things had gotten even more tangled, even after vanquishing the Demon Lord.

The celebration became genuine when Tarrin returned to Pyros, victorious, carrying the black-bladed sword that had once been the Sword of Fire, but was again nothing but a piece of crafted metal. He held it negligently in his paw as he appeared near Dolanna, and the instant he appeared, his daughters, mate, and family rushed to him. But Tarrin had too many questions in his mind to be too joyful.

He hugged his daughter, flicking her on the nose and telling her he really did mean it when he said he'd be right back, hugged the twins, took his son's paw, and held Julia under his arm for a long moment. But the reunion broke up when Triana rushed up, her green eyes blazing, and grabbed him by the paw. "Cub, we will talk *now*," she told him.

She pulled him to where Sapphire and Haley were waiting, on the far side of the compound, and all of them were looking at him with accusing glares. "What did you do? What did you do?"

"Oh, the All," he noted, glancing at them. "It wasn't me, mother. There's a new Elder God of Pyrosia. I'd guess the All works now, and Druidic magic functions."

"Oh, it does all right, but how do you explain just *who* is behind the All?"

"I really can't," he shrugged. "It's the divine part of my soul. It survived somehow, and now it's taken over as the Elder God here."

Haley gaped at him, and Sapphire gave him a long, searching look. "Can you feel it, my little one? Feel that other part?"

"No, we're separate people," he answered. "I'm not an Avatar, Sapphire. When I divided myself from the divine parts of me, I split my soul in two. There's no connection between us. Me and him, we're two completely separate beings."

"A very unusual thing," Sapphire noted. "When I felt the All of this world change, I touched it to assense it, and found *you* behind it. For a moment, I thought you had abandoned your mortality and become the Elder God of this world. When Dolanna reported that you were very much still alive and *mortal*, I was no end of confused."

"No, I didn't become a god," he said intensely. "I was a god once already. I didn't much care for it."

Haley laughed. "Well, that answers that. It really had us in a knot. Any idea of how it happened?"

"Absolutely none, but that other half of me couldn't have gotten here by itself. I think Ayise had a hand in this."

"Always possible," Sapphire noted. "Anyway, now that that is settled, how was it there? Did things go to your satisfaction?"

“Gruz is gone, that’s all I cared about,” he answered. “Breina of the Dawn came and helped us too. She had more guts than the other gods of this world.”

“No doubt why her little Priestess was attracted to her,” Haley chuckled. “That little human is one ball of pure guts. I like her already.”

Once Triana was satisfied, they all returned to the others. Tarrin put aside his questions and just reveled in the moment, relieved beyond measure that, at long last, it was *over*. Gruz was gone, the threat was removed, and what was more, this world now had someone to take the reins and keep things under control. He visited with everyone, one by one, and then they all turned to the task of completing the cleanup after the battle.

There was even more good news. Vendari labored with Dura wielding hammers and rock picks, and they unearthed a void in the rubble of the third wall. Within that void were sixteen survivors, and among them was Ulger. The scarred Knight was tending to an unconscious Sha’Kar Sorceress when the Dura broke into the hole, and all were pulled out and herded to the medical tents so they could be tended. They continued to labor for the rest of the day, either burying or burning the dead, clearing rubble, and looking for wounded and survivors. But, by sunset, once the Sorcerers had time to rest and recover, they used their power to quickly pinpoint any undiscovered survivors, and once they were recovered, everyone stopped for a good meal, rest, and recuperation.

That sunset marked the end of an era of chaos and disorder on Pyrosia, and tomorrow would be the dawn of a new one. There was a new Elder God on Pyrosia now, and Tarrin had no doubt he was laying down the law to his subject gods even as the mortals celebrated their victory over the Demons with a meal and tankards of ale.

But for Tarrin, all this was just temporary. He had a lot to answer for with powers higher up in the food chain, and the reality of that was weighing on him a little bit. He had used the bow of the Solar to slay the Demon Lord, and now the spectre of punishment for the acts that acquired it was starting to creep up on the horizon. He wouldn’t shy away from it, but after everything that happened, he just wanted a little time to be with his family before that came to pass. It made him a little distant and pensive, and his friends and family, sensing his mood, gave him a little space. He sat with them and enjoyed a fine meal Conjured by Triana in the inner compound, where all his friends and family and the command staff sat at long tables and toasted their victory.

After the meal, Miranda got in touch with Kikkalli, and arranged to have Phandebrass and Kyrienna send the armies home using Gates. While that was being done, the Elara and Dura were already preparing to return to their homes. Darax was going to march the Dura out in the morning, and the Elara were planning on having their Gatemasters open gates to send the Elara home when the moon came into alignment with Pyros in two days. They could do it at any time, but it was decided to give the army and the magicians a little more time to learn from the Sennadite visitors.

That night, he lay on a bedroll in a tent pitched in the inner compound with Mist snuggled up beside him, but he couldn’t sleep. He lay with his eyes open, staring at the top of the tent, still not entirely sure why he didn’t feel happier about how things had happened, and still unsure of exactly how things had happened the way they did. He yawned and blinked, then rubbed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was...somewhere else. He sat up quickly, realizing he was sitting naked on a meticulously neat floor. He scrambled to his feet, at a loss. What happened? Was this a dream? Did he nod off and fall asleep? It didn’t feel like a dream, that was for sure. He looked around, and something...tickled him. This place, he’d been here before. It was a shop, a merchant’s shop. The place was neat, with a counter separating the front door from the rest of the shop, where he was. He padded back and found stands, tables, and three busts, each holding clothes of designs.

It was a tailor's shop. He never remembered being in tailor's shop before.

Well, given that he was naked, it was certainly convenient that this dream took place in a tailor's shop.

"It's about time," came a crisp voice from behind him. Boots came down an open staircase in the corner he hadn't noticed before. When a silver-furred tail ghosted into view, it all clicked in his mind. He *had* been here before. This was the shop of Cassiter, a silver fox Wikuni tailor who lived in Suld.

Odd site for a dream, given it happened when he had been human.

"I thought you'd never get here," he said pleasantly, carrying a bundle in his arms. "Congratulations on your victory."

"Cassiter?" he asked in confusion.

"I see you remember me," he chuckled, handing Tarrin the bundle. "For you. Your old clothes were looking a bit worn."

"Uh, thank you. What's going on? How did I get here?"

"You're dreaming, of course," he answered. "And I was getting a little cross waiting for you to go to sleep."

"I don't understand."

"That's normal, of course," he said crisply, walking over to one of the busts. "Hmm. I think this vest could do with something. Maybe some goring," he said, putting a finger to his silver-furred muzzle.

"I'm dreaming?"

"At the moment, yes. I thought it might be best to talk to you without your conscious mind getting in the way. I'm sure you'll be paying me a visit in person, soon, though. After all, you have something that belongs to me."

Tarrin gave him a confused look.

"I *do* want the bow back, Tarrin. I trusted it in your hands, but really, I don't like letting things like that lay around. People might get ideas."

It clicked in his mind, even in the dream. "You're...you're *Him*!" he gasped.

"Yes. And thank you for not having an apoplexy or anything like that," he chuckled, looking back at him. "It's hard to talk to mortals when they're laying on the floor gibbering like a baboon. See, that's why I prefer talking to you this way. If I'd come to you when you were awake, I don't think this conversation would remain rational for very long." He fidgeted with the vest on the bust a little. "Red satin, I think. I could gore it with red satin. I think it would look rather dashing. I'm making it for the Baron of Ultern, you know."

"You're *really* Cassiter?"

"Of course. It's how I keep my eye on things without anyone knowing," he answered, his tail swishing back and forth as he put a few pins in the vest, produced from a silk band around his left wrist. "Nobody

knows, of course. Not even your Elder Gods. I couldn't keep an eye on things on Sennadar if they knew, after all. They'd be running to me every day, asking me this, asking me that, begging for favors, and trying to hide the things they don't want me knowing about." He glanced back at Tarrin with a smile. "Now, what do you think about this one? Brocade or satin?" he asked, motioning at a sketch of a very elaborate dress hanging on the wall by the bust.

"Satin," he said in surprise.

"You think so?"

"Well, you asked," he said, trying to calm down.

"So I did," he chuckled. "So, we have a little problem to talk about, Tarrin. You stole something belonging to one of my Solar."

"I, I had to. I didn't have a choice."

"No, I don't think you did, and for that I can't really fault you. But, we do have to do *something*. If you weren't punished for it, people might think my Deva are getting soft," he chuckled.

"I'm, I'm *really* sorry."

"Oh, it's nothing. You were just doing what you were supposed to, that's all," he said with a wave of his hand, with his back still to Tarrin.

"What I was supposed to?" he asked.

"Tarrin," he said, turning around. "You're a *mi'shara*. Do you know what that means? What it *really* means?"

"I..." he began, then he stopped and thought about it a moment. "I know what I was told, really. That I was born because of a threat so powerful it threatens the Balance."

"Yes, that's a part of it," he nodded. "But there's another side to that, Tarrin. A *mi'shara* is born out of Entropy so they can break the rules, to correct a problem that demands that kind of attention. But the other side of that, Tarrin, is that the *mi'shara* is destined to adhere to that task. Son, you and your son, and Spyder, all of you are the only mortals born with a future laid out for you. No other mortals have that restriction. There's no such thing as a future, after all," he said, motioning towards Tarrin, but he realized he was motioning at something behind him. Tarrin turned and looked, and saw people moving past the shop's windows, Suldani citizens going about their business on a sunny autumn day. "For them, the sky is the limit, Tarrin," he said gently. "There's nothing holding them back. They can do anything they want, *be* anything they want, if they work for it hard enough. But you, and Spyder, and Eron, you were born with a task laid at your feet, locking you down a single path. And in compensation for that limitation, you are given the ability to reach beyond other mortals to accomplish that task."

"But my task was complete long ago," he said. "I was created to kill Val."

"No, Tarrin. Val was just one step along the path, that's all. Come, sit down." Tarrin turned and looked, and found a table and two chairs where none had been before. Cassiter sat down in one of the split-backed chairs, accommodating his tail, and Tarrin found himself seating himself across from him. "Your task was a very long one, Tarrin," he told him. "You see, a long time ago, something came to this world that really had no business being here."

“The *Firestaff*!” he gasped.

Cassiter nodded. “That’s right. *That* was what you were born to deal with, Tarrin. Since the day you were conceived, you were set on a collision course with the Firestaff. But, you’re interrupting me,” he said with a toothy grin.

“Sorry.”

“That’s alright. Now then, when the Firestaff first arrived here, it was enough of a concern to bring about the first *mi’shara*, someone who died long ago,” he explained. “That *mi’shara* was tasked to hide it, keep it out of mischief.”

“Why not destroy it?”

“Because I don’t really like doing that unless the situation demands it,” he answered. “The Firestaff served a purpose, Tarrin. It was a part of the way things work. Yes, it destroyed worlds, but that destruction is sometimes necessary to foster creation. It’s part of the cycle of life, just on a *much* bigger scale. Now, the first *mi’shara* born to deal with the Firestaff did his job well, holding it through its first cycle. Then he hid it and passed on. But, he didn’t hide it well enough. Five thousand years later, Val found it and used it, and touched off the Blood War. Spyder was the *mi’shara* spawned because of that little incident. Her task was to fix the damage and get Sennadar back under control, and she did her job well. But, when its last cycle came about, Entropy spun you out, my son, and tasked you with dealing with the Firestaff once and for all. It had become too dangerous.”

“Hold on. You said there’s no such thing as the future. If that’s so, how does Entropy know to make *mi’shara*?”

“Ah, because sometimes, there are some events that become unavoidable, and the only way to avoid them is to create a mortal that exists outside the normal rules,” he said. “There is no future, Tarrin, but there *is* the *possibility* of the future. Entropy, as well as some gods and even some mortals, are very sensitive to those *possibilities*, and they can read them. Kikkalli, she is a good example, Tarrin. She is sensitive to the lines of probability, and can predict future events with some accuracy. However, when all possibilities converge into a single path, then Entropy knows that something is wrong, and it reacts. In your case, all possibilities converged on a single event, my son, and that event was Val reclaiming the Firestaff and destroying your world. Entropy could not permit it, because it would start a chain reaction that would force the universe down a single path. *That* is Entropy’s true purpose, my son. Yes, it represents destruction, but its ultimate goal is to maintain *randomness*. Fire, as you might have noticed, has a similar reputation as a destructive force, but it’s also vital for survival. Entropy is like fire, just on a very grand scale.”

“I...I see the truth of it.”

“I thought you might. You’re rather clever, you know. As I was saying, when Entropy foresaw the path of things, it then understood that its own agent was too dangerous, and moved to destroy it. You are the result. You were born with a path before you, my son, and you have walked that path to its conclusion. You have succeeded, and for that, I must thank you. The Balance has been protected, because of you.”

“I was just doing what I thought had to be done.”

“Yes, but in your case, it truly *had* to be done,” he smiled. “Everything you have done, almost since the day you were born, brought you to this point. It’s why you trained for battle, when everyone else your age was more interested in girls. It was what brought you to Suld, it was what made you go against your instincts and obey Niami, even when you had no reason for it, and it was the only reason you chose to do what you did when you destroyed Val. You became part of what you had to destroy,” he said with a smile. “You did it

because you *knew* that the Firestaff could only be destroyed by a hand that had once served it. And so, you used the Firestaff on yourself, then you freed yourself from its power. The issue with the Demon Lord did complicate things a little bit, but in its own way, it was necessary to help you reach the end of your road. And let me tell you, it wasn't easy to make the One forget himself enough to make that kind of mistake," he said with a toothy smile.

"You did that?"

"Sometimes destiny needs a little push here and there," he chuckled. "That's why I keep my eye on things. So, now you know that everything that happened on Pyrosia happened for a *reason*. For a little while, the entire world of Pyrosia became locked into your path, and you twisted it to serve your purpose."

"Is what what *mi'shara* really do? Change destiny?"

"No, Tarrin. Destiny conforms to a *mi'shara* because of his actions, but that's not truly makes him what he is. Every *mi'shara* is born with traits that sets them apart from normal mortals, that allows them to reach outside the rules. For Spyder, that trait is enormous power. Her power in Sorcery is what makes her what she is. Your son was spun from Entropy because of Jasana," he said gently. "There is going to come a time later on, my son, when Jasana will threaten the entire world of Sennadar. Eron was born to prevent it. That's his task."

"What happens to Jasana?"

"If I told you, then it would change things, so we'll leave that alone. Let's just say that when that happens, you'll be *very* glad your son happened to be there, and Jasana will be just fine," he said soothingly.

"So, my power is like Spyder's," he mused.

"No, Tarrin. You only have one trait. And it's not your power. It's your will."

"My will?"

"Your will," he nodded. "Your will is *why* you can handle such power. Through sheer determination, you force it to obey you, and that lets you reach outside the boundaries and handle power far greater than any other mortal. And there have been times, Tarrin, when the only thing that made the difference between success and failure has been your will. If not for your will, your utter determination to prevail no matter what, you would have failed long ago. That was Entropy's gift to you, my son. Your will is the strongest thing in the world, so strong it can even affect the material world, though it took it a little time to develop and mature for you to fully embrace your gift. When you set your mind on something, nothing can stand against you.

"And now, Tarrin, there's no longer a single road in front of you. That's why you feel the way you do. It's why you feel so odd, so unsure. Always before, even when you didn't realize it, you *knew* that you had a path to walk. And now that path is gone, and you're not quite sure what to do about it."

He could only nod mutely.

"And, let's be honest here a moment, Tarrin. The world knows too much about you. They all know what kind of power you have now, and I hate to tell you this, but you're not going to be able to sink back into your nice quiet life quite as easily as you'd like."

"I was worried about that," he sighed.

“Well, the main reason I wanted to have this little talk was to make you an offer.”

“An offer?”

“I like to give my *mi'shara* a little time to themselves after they complete their tasks, in an environment where they can make that adjustment a little more easily. So, I'd like you to come work for *me* for a little while.”

“Work for you?”

He nodded. “There are any number of little things I like to do, you know, under the table,” he said with a smile. “Without the Deva knowing. It keeps them on their toes,” he grinned. “You can come work for me for a few years, you know, get used to being your own man, and help me with a few projects I'd like to wrap up. And when you feel you're ready, you can go home and resume your life after all the dust settles. You know, make a quiet entrance.”

He made the connection immediately. “*Mother Wynn!*”

“A *mi'shara*,” he smiled. “She completed her task a few thousand years ago, but when I took her in to help her adjust, she decided to stay on. She's worked for me for a very long time. Mother Wynn can alter reality, that's her gift, and she's very, very good. Sashi's been working for me for about five hundred years. The little flat-chested Arakite girl you met in Saranam,” he prompted.

“*That's* where I'd seen her before!” he realized, slapping the table with his paw.

“Yes, and she'll be overjoyed you remember her,” he chuckled. “Her gift is the ability to alter memories and thoughts. That's not easy, and there was a time, on her own world, where her ability to make someone forget a single thing saved her entire world. They've been helping you, for a long time now. So I'm sure they'd be happy to have you working with them for a while. They know you very well.”

“I have...fond memories of both of them.”

“I know. So, what do you think of my offer?”

“Do you really think it would be best? Stupid question,” he sighed.

Cassiter laughed. “Yes, I think it would be best. And I think you would like a little time away from everyone else for a while, given what happened in Pyrosia with your other half.”

“How did that happen?” he asked earnestly. “How did that other part of me do it?”

“Well, that was my doing,” he admitted with a chuckle. “I've needed a replacement Elder God for a few eons now, but I hadn't really gotten around to it. Other things on my mind and all,” he grinned. “Anyway, when you divided yourself, and after Ayise purged both halves of you, I decided that it might be a good time to stop procrastinating. I saw a good match there. Pyrosia needed an Elder God that would put his foot down and stop all the foolishness, and the divine part of you needed a home. So, I scooped up his soul and put it in your shadow, knowing that when you destroyed the Firestaff, your other self would be there for the All of Pyrosia to find. And things worked out rather well. I got a new Elder God to look after one of the material planes, and your other self found a home. I do tend to meddle here and there when it's needful, my son. That arm of yours is one of my little interdictions. I knew you might need a little extra, so I set it up for you.”

“That explains how I got healed,” he said, nodding, looking at his white-furred arm.

“And the beauty of using your shadow was that your other self wouldn’t take control of Pyrosia and potentially interfere with you until *after* you completed your task. A rather clever solution, if I do say so myself,” he said with a smile.

“Well, of course it was clever, *you* did it.”

Cassiter laughed. “Now, I think it’s about time for you to wake up now, Tarrin. It’s a bit past sunrise there, and Mist is stirring. She might get worried if she can’t wake you up. But I want to warn you that the Deva are coming today,” he said. “In fact, they’ll be there in just a few minutes. They’ll demand you go with them. I suggest you do it without a fuss, because the way things are now, those around you would get into a war with the Deva to prevent them from taking you. They’ll handle things, and when they take you away, they’ll deliver you to Mother Wynn and Sashi. You can tell them whether or not you agree to my terms.”

“Alright.”

“Good. So, think about it. I’d love to give you a place to lay low for a while, and I think you’d really have fun working for me.”

“I will, I promise.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” he smiled. “Oh, and Tarrin.”

“Yes?”

“Good luck.”

He awoke with a start, sitting upright. What the strangest dream! It had been so, so real!

He felt something in his paws. He reached down and found that same wrapped bundle the dream Cassiter had given him, still there.

It hadn’t been a dream after all.

Mist grunted and rolled over, her tail wrapping around his leg, but Tarrin was going over the dream, over, and over, and over. He felt...*honored*. The God of Gods, the greatest being in the entire multiverse, had talked to him! And had explained quite a bit. He understood a little better now, he understood who he was, what he’d done, and where he had to go from here.

A *mi’shara*. Mother told him long ago that one day, he’d understand what it meant, and she was right... just not about *when*. He realized that even Mother hadn’t fully comprehended the true nature of a *mi’shara*, that there were mysteries in the multiverse even hidden from someone like a Prime Elder Goddess.

It was so strange, when he thought about it. All this time, he had been working on a goal even he didn’t entirely understand, where everything converged on a single act, the destruction of the Firestaff. And when he destroyed it, thanks to the God of Gods, the other half of his soul was installed as the new Elder God here, where he would rein in things and put down some order around here.

Tarrin felt this world was in good hands. Then again, he had to admit, he *was* a little biased, since it was the other half of him, and that other half would have many of his own mannerisms and intolerance for foolishness. The gods here on this world were going to find themselves up against someone that wouldn't play games. It might be good for them, after so many years without any kind of order around here.

So strange...and yet, so *interesting*. Everything that had happened had happened because he had to destroy the Firestaff, and the Firestaff might have destroyed randomness in the universe and locked the future into a single path. That seemed an odd thing to defend against, but then again, if not for the ability to make choices, the universe wouldn't really serve any purpose. It seemed strange to think that so many things he thought were good luck were actually necessary, or that friendships and bonds formed with others happened because they needed to. For a moment he felt a little like Miranda did after she discovered what she was, a feeling that she had no control.

But for Tarrin, what made him feel off was a feeling of not *being* in control. This was the first time he'd ever woken up and not had his duty before him, and that's why he'd felt out of sorts and pensive. It was hard to live your entire life working for something, and then to suddenly achieve it. It was like...he had no more purpose. No reason to continue. It was almost depressing, in a way. But he'd been offered a place to think things over with no pressure, a place where he could settle into the idea of knowing that the rest of his life was his own.

A sad thing, he had to admit. He was afraid of the *future*.

That was what was being offered, he realized. He wasn't being offered a job, he was being offered a feeling of *control*, if only for a little while, until he adjusted to the idea of not having that control any longer.

And for a Were-cat, being mentally unsettled was *not* a good thing.

He'd already decided. He would accept the offer of the God of Gods. It would give him time to come to terms with everything that happened, and also give the world a chance to settle down without bothering him while he did so.

And that decision brought him a strange peace. He didn't feel nervous or unsettled now. He felt...calm. Reassured. He felt *right*.

He unwrapped the bundle, and found inside a new leather vest with a *shaeram* etched into each flap, and a new pair of leather trousers, soft as silk. Gifts, from *Him*. Mist rolled over and looked at him as he pulled the trousers on, then got up on his knees and shrugged into the vest.

"Mmph, Tarrin, it's early yet."

"It's actually late," he answered. "And there are things we need to do."

"What?"

"I have to get ready," he said. "The Deva are coming, and I have to go with them."

"*What?*" she demanded, sitting up. "You can't leave already!"

"I have to, my mate. I told you a while ago, I'd have to answer for what I did in Crossroads. I still have the bow, and I did some pretty awful things to get it. I have to answer for that. I have to return it, and face the consequences, whatever they may be."

“Well, I don’t like it,” she huffed, looking at him.

“It won’t be permanent,” he told her, leaning down and kissing her. “I won’t let them kill me. If they try, then I’ll probably show up back home looking for a place to hide.”

“As if you would ever hide,” she said, then she wrapped her arms around him. “I just got you back, my mate. I don’t want to lose you again. We haven’t had time to get sick of each other yet.”

“Mist, when I come home, we’ll have all the time in the world,” he whispered, then he kissed her tenderly.

“Then promise me you’ll come home,” she said fiercely.

“Mist, I promise you, I will come home. I don’t know when, but *I will come home*,” he said intensely.

By the time Tarrin was out of the tent, he saw them. An entire flight of Deva, handsome beings with golden skin and feathered wings, descending on the compound. People watched them in silent awe as they swooped in and landed, then walked towards Tarrin. Mist climbed out of the tent, nude, and gave the formidable assemblage a very dark look. They were being led by a Solar, he could see, a huge, powerful, noble looking Deva with black tips on his golden feathered wings, and glowing green eyes that regarded Tarrin intently.

They stopped in front of him. *Tarrin Kael. You will surrender to us.*

“I knew this day was coming,” he said evenly, bringing the bow and the quiver from the *elsewhere*. “I don’t need these anymore. They’ve served their purpose. You can have them back now.”

The Solar smiled slightly. *Cooperation does not change the fact that you have a lot to answer for.*

“And I’m prepared to face up to it like a man,” he said simply. “I knew before I started that I’d have to answer for it. I’m ready.”

Then come with us, he ordered, taking the bow and the quiver from Tarrin. *And know that though your methods were wrong, your intent was noble. For that, we respect you.*

He turned and looked to Mist, who looked fearful, but he gave her a reassuring smile. “Watch over the cubs for me,” he told her. “I’ll be home soon.”

“You’d better be,” she told him coldly, but her paws were clutched to her chest, and her heart was in her eyes.

Tarrin brought forth his wings and lifted his feet from the earth, and followed the Solar as they rose up towards clouds stained pink from the rising sun. He felt...at peace. That was the only way to explain it. He would leave here, leave this place, no doubt leave behind quite a legend, but he would go to a place where he could calm down, relax, think things through.

It was the beginning of a new day.

It was the beginning of a new age.

It was the beginning of a new life.

And Tarrin was ready for it.

Chapter 14

It took the army nearly four days to return home, but that return was done with a bit of uncertainty. Everyone had heard about the arrival of the Solar to take Tarrin to answer for what he did, and some wondered why he didn't resist them. It seemed odd to many that someone like Tarrin Kael would so willingly surrender to those he could defeat in combat, but those were the ones that didn't know him very well, only knew of his reputation. But still, it put something of a dampening effect on the elation of the victory. Nobody knew exactly what kind of punishment he might face, or if he would even accept it. Mist had made it known that Tarrin promised he would come home and wouldn't allow them to try to kill him, so that put something of a question mark on the whole thing. After all, once rumor of his actions started to circulate, people weren't sure how he was going to avoid a death penalty. He *did* do some pretty terrible things.

Kyrienna and Phandebrass opened Gates for the peoples of Sennadar to return home, and evacuating them back to their world took three days, but not everyone was going to return. Two days after their victory in Pyros, the One returned to them briefly and informed them that it had been decided to allow the Weave to remain in place. The Sorcerers of Sennadar had interbred into the Pyrosian people, introducing the power into the Pyrosian humans and the Elara, and Sorcery was now considered a natural part of the order of Pyrosia. The Elder God of Pyrosia had taken up the burden of being patron of the Weave, for now, but the Pyrosian Sorcerers had no training, no experience with their legacy. The announcement that the Elder God would now support the Weave relieved Dolanna of the burden of acting as the conscious force that maintained it, and she stepped out of the Heart, leaving it to support itself. Dolanna assured Darax and Zebri that she would remain, however, to help teach the native Sorcerers about their gifts, and her decision to remain caused a complement of Sorcerers to decide to stay behind, both to support Dolanna and also to build a Tower. Ianelle was the strongest and oldest of those who would remain behind, which would give the new Tower both discipline and organization. Jasana too had to remain, for even though the Elder God was now guiding the Weave, it still required at least one *sui'kun* to hold it together. She was assured, however, that her stay on Pyrosia would be no longer than three months. A new *sui'kun* would be born by that time to take Jasana's place and represent the Weave, and after that first, six more would be born in quick succession. Jasana only needed to remain for a little while. Though she was out of sorts and upset with worry about her father, she agreed to stay behind. Triana agreed to remain with her, both to continue her training and give Jasana someone in her family to keep her company.

That Tower was erected in two days, raised by a huge Circle led by Jasana, who Circled with Dolanna to act as a bridge between the Were-cat and the others, and allowed for the first time for a Were-cat to Circle with those outside her race. It was a single Tower built on the former site of the One's cathedral, stretching so high that its top was of a level with the volcano's peak. It would comfortably hold a thousand Sorcerers and a staff of servants.

In the end, fifty Sorcerers, a hundred Knights, and a complement of Elara, Dura, and human followers of the One agreed to remain behind, both to defend Pyros from bandits and to begin learning how to cooperate with one another. Azakar would return to Sennadar, but Ulger would remain in Pyrosia with his new promotion to Colonel, to command the Knight garrison left behind at Pyros.

There were other moves, as well. As those from Sennadar decided to remain on Pyrosia, there were some outworlders who were permitted to travel to Sennadar, both to learn and to live. Nightshade was

granted permission to come to Sennadar, honoring Tarrin's promise to her, but only under the stern warning that she had *better* behave herself. Her dark nature was not lost on the Elder Gods, and they really didn't want her there, but they couldn't deny that Tarrin had promised her...and they all felt maybe just a little guilty about how they acted towards him. So, they relented. Elaran and human Pyrosians found with potential in Sorcery were brought to Sennadar to teach them about their heritage and powers, and a complement of Elementalists were permitted to travel to Sennadar to learn at the Tower. Bringing them to Sennadar would free up the pressure on Dolanna and Ianelle, giving them time to get the Pyrosian Tower built, settled in, and work out the details of how it was going to operate. Kyrienna gained permission to travel to Sennadar to study the advances in Wizard magic the Sennadite Wizards had managed, but half of that was obviously so she could simply remain close to Phandebrass.

Tarrin's plea to the Dura to return hadn't fallen on deaf ears. There was a small complement of Dura who were intrigued about the idea of going back to Sennadar, to discover their ancient history and establish a new colony of Dura in their ancestral homeland. And so, when the Sennadar armies began to return home, five hundred Duran men, women, and children went with them. In Sennadar, they would find a suitable site to build their new city, Mala Menn, which meant *City of Hope* in Duthak.

Even the Elara agreed to at least a temporary exchange. One hundred Elaran of the Noble caste had agreed to go to Sennadar to, in their words, investigate the possibility that the Elara and the Sha'Kar were related. Even now, the haughty Elara refused to admit that they were descended from the Sha'Kar.

The Elder Gods of Sennadar saw that their total isolation of the world would cause them a headache as Sorcerers petitioned to be allowed to return to Sennadar from Pyrosia, so special precautions were taken, almost unheralded in Sennadar, a world famous in the multiverse for its secrecy and nearly xenophobic defense against the outside. Niami, the Elder Goddess of the Weave, convinced her parents to allow the creation of a semi-permanent window that would permit a one way gate that led from the Tower in Pyros directly to the Tower in Suld be created using magic. It was agreed to only under stringent conditions and the fact that it was not permanent. Only a Wizard could open that gate, and it would require one every time, to cast the spell. Niami would be given control of that window, meaning that she had to directly consent every time a Wizard opened the gate, which meant that the gate could never be opened on a whim, only by a scheduled window opening. Knights had to defend the location where that gate could be opened in Pyros at all times, and it even required negotiation with the new Elder God of Pyrosia for certain guarantees that *he* would defend that location from his side in case anyone ever tried to use it to invade Sennadar. The Elder God gave his consent in the matter, and the rules were relaxed to create the window. Because of that, Ianelle and Dolanna negotiated with the Elarans, and secured an agreement that one Gatemaster would be stationed in the Tower of Pyros at all times, to perform this magical service.

It took four days to return everyone to Sennadar. Bragg and Kang agreed to exchange letters, via the steady stream of messengers that would come to Pyrosia via the apple orchard gate and then travel to Pyros, and then be returned home through the gate at Pyros. The stream of Sennadite humans, Vendari, Wikuni, and Selani was a steady stream, and along with them came the last of the immigrants to Sennadar, the sneaks. Myn was one such sneak, being literally rolled in a carpet and carted back to Sennadar by Tara and Rina while stern-faced Elaran magicians watched the lines for her, since she had vanished and they wanted her back. Quite a few humans who felt that life on Sennadar would be better than life on Pyrosia had also snuck through the gate, dressing in borrowed or stolen uniforms and pretending to be Sulasian army regulars. In the end, several thousand Pyrosians had snuck into Sennadar without permission, and they quickly dispersed and assimilated into their new world, but never without the watchful eye of the Elder Gods, keeping watch on these unauthorized immigrants, but doing nothing about them yet. They were...curious, to see what they would do, how they would make their way, and besides, even though Ayise could not strike them dead in an instant, they could always dispatch a Sorcerer or Druid to the location to deal with the invader if he became a problem.

And still, those who knew him wondered where Tarrin was, what he was doing, and if he was alright.

The Tower, over the years, had evolved. At first, it was the bastion of Sorcery, but Jenna's tenure there had opened the Tower to new ideas, which was mainly due to Phandebrass and his incessant prodding and meddling in Tower affairs, which got the Sorcerers used to the idea of a Wizard being around. There were any number of Wizards on the Tower grounds now, as they came seeking the lore of the Tower library and to consult, but then found themselves not leaving. After the Pyrosian campaign, seeing the influx of Elementalists coming to learn about Sorcery and try to expand their powers, Jenna decided to take steps to make matters official. She called Phandebrass and Shara to her office, the two most senior representatives of other magical orders, and proposed a plan of action that made both of them wildly excited, a plan that would open new branches of the famous school in the Tower to teach Wizard and Elemental magic, two new paths that those who completed the Novitiate could take, if they had the gift for it or if they so desired.

They agreed to it immediately, and it didn't take them long to draw up plans to make it come about. Phandebrass, it turned out, had had something like that on his mind for quite a while, but had never really brought it up. He returned the next day with a large book filled with his ideas on how to do it. Within that book was a list of competent Wizards who might be amenable to the idea, lists of merchants and certain individuals who could procure the components Wizards needed on a large scale, and even a schedule of courses to introduce the curious to Wizard magic in a safe environment and teach them. The course schedule Phandebrass devised would graduate a Wizard with the basic ability to cast simple spells, the first step over cantrips, and arm him or her with everything he needed to know in order to pursue his Wizarding career further.

"The question here is, can we convince them to come?" Jenna asked him as they went over names of respected Wizards who were known to tutor.

"I say, they'd jump at the chance," he answered. "Thanks to the work of many Wizards, you know my dear, the ones that came to use your library and are still here, your library has become one of the most formidable repositories of magical lore, it has."

"That would be mainly *you*, Phandebrass," she chuckled.

"Well, I can't take all the credit, I can't," he said modestly, but he did smile. "Any Wizard worth his material components would jump at the chance to come here permanently. You must remember, my dear, that even though they'll be teaching, they'll also be *learning*. This would be a wonderful opportunity for them to teach new Wizards but also improve their own art."

"So, you think we can get most of these Wizards?"

"I say, we can get *all* of them," he answered immediately. "I've been contacted by quite a few of my countrymen already, asking me if or when the Tower would open its library to the public, and if not, how they could secure permission to travel here and study in it."

"I don't think I'm quite ready to open the Tower grounds," Jenna warned. "But, I do think we might have to expand it. We'd need a lot more space to accommodate all the tomes a Wizard's library would need."

"I say, don't expand it. There's four unused floors in the northwest tower, my dear. It would be perfect for a splinter library devoted to the school's needs, while the more dangerous or advanced works could be kept in the main library."

"That's a good idea. I guess we could rearrange things, move some people out and set that tower up for the school, so they wouldn't have to go very far."

"I was going to suggest that, but I say, I wasn't sure if you'd like the idea."

“Well, we’re going to be doing some reorganizing no matter what, we may as well just do it right the first time.”

“Always the best course of action,” he smiled.

Shara scurried in and bowed. “Lady Jenna, I have some of the things ye wanted. I’m sorry, but I didna’ have much time to write them down, so it’s a bit o’ a scribbled mess. I thought we could sort it out and fix it while we talked about it, ye know.”

“I love her accent,” Jenna remarked with a smile to Phandebrass.

“It is rather interesting, isn’t it?” he agreed.

Shara blushed, then laughed. “The first thing ye’d need ta’ consider is that ye’ll need four sets of instructors, ye know. I can *only* teach other Earth adepts, and if ye want ta’ be serious about it, ye’ll need instructors for all four elements. But, the good side o’ it is that ye’ll only have a few Elementalists here, ones allowed ta’ come here from home to learn, so ye’d need no more than eight teachers.”

“Well, this is going to be about more than just training Elementalists. It’s also going to be about learning about how Elemental powers work, and how they interconnect with Sorcery. The school is so we can see how Elementalists teach their own, so we can get a better understanding of your power. And of course, it doesn’t hurt to help you train more Elementalists.”

“Aye, and that’s why I gave ye the names of some of the best Elementalists among the Shadows. If ye send word to Dolanna, she can track them down and give them the invitation ta’ come. And since the teachers are going ta’ be busy helping the Sorcerers, it’s a good idea ta’ keep down to small number o’ students for them, at least at first.”

“Sounds good. Do you think we can get these Elementalists to come?”

“Most likely,” she answered. “The big question really will be which Elementalists come here, and which ones stay in Pyros to staff the Tower there.”

“I think they can sort that out, as long as the right numbers of right kinds of Elementalists end up in both Towers at the end.”

“Aye. The big rub for them will be deciding who stays in Pyros to teach, and who comes here to help.”

“The Elementalists here will be teaching too.”

“Aye, but not as much as the ones in Pyros.”

They debated it for a long while, and then Phandebrass and Shara were dismissed, leaving Jenna alone with her thoughts. She stood up and went to the glass paned doors leading to the balcony, and stepped out into a chilly autumn evening, unnaturally cold for this early into fall. Her breath misted around her as she looked down on the grounds, knowing that she was doing the right thing by expanding the Tower’s role in the magical societies of both Sennadar and Pyrosia, but not really feeling all that happy about it.

She too was worried. It had been nearly two rides now, and no word either from or about Tarrin. She couldn’t even really imagine what might be going on, why he was gone so long, but she could just hope he was alright.

“Oh, he’s fine, daughter,” Niami called aloud. Jenna jumped and looked behind her, and saw the Goddess standing sedately in her office, near the desk, appearing as she always did with her shimmering gown of woven starlight gracing her form. She rushed in and took her hand, feeling her power and her warmth emanating from her. “I just received word through the grape vine. He’s fine.”

“What’s happening to him, Mother?”

“To put it in simple terms, he’s working off a debt,” she answered with a smile. “It seems that his penance is to perform some services, the kinds of things that only someone like Tarrin can do easily. He has a few tasks on his list, and once he completes them, he’ll be on his way home. But for now, you can put your mind at ease, daughter. He’s fine, he’s well, and in a way, he’s kind of happy.”

“Happy? About being punished?”

“It’s really not much of a punishment,” she laughed. “This time is being good to him. He was feeling a little unsettled after defeating the Demon Lord. He learned some things that really surprised him, and he needed some time to sort things out. Him working off his debt to the Deva is just giving him some time to think things through in a nice quiet place, where he has the time to make a little peace with himself.”

“Oh. I was worried they would try to kill him or something.”

Niami laughed. “Oh, child, even they weren’t crazy enough to even *consider* something like that. You don’t threaten Tarrin that way, or he makes your life a living hell. They gave him a punishment that publicly rebukes him and reinforces the authority of the Deva in Crossroads, showing the people there that not even someone like Tarrin Kael can escape justice, but not provoking him into another little war that might make them look even worse. Yes, some sages in Crossroads see it as a slap on the wrist, but they’ve also started to learn *why* he stole the bow, which was what the entire little war in Crossroads was about. They saw a man driven to extremes to defend a material plane, and they started to understand *why* he did it when they found out what happened on Pyrosia. They see the light punishment he got from the Deva as them acknowledging that they could sympathize with what drove him to it, but he still had to be punished for his actions.”

“Oh. So, what kind of work is he doing?”

“I don’t know, and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you, daughter. It’s not our business.”

Jenna flushed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, child,” she smiled, lifting Jenna’s chin. “Could you be a dear and let everyone else know? They’re worried about him too.”

“I’d be happy to, Mother. Do you have any idea when he might be coming home?”

“No, not really, but I don’t think he’ll be gone long,” she answered. “Tarrin is very resilient. He’ll work through his issues and return soon. I’m sure of it, child. He has children here who need him, and friends and family who wait for him. He wouldn’t stay gone for too long.”

“I hope so. I really miss him.”

“We all do, child. We all do.”

Rides passed into months, and life quietly settled back into a sense of routine, of normalcy. The war in Pyrosia became simple history, though the repercussions of it did ripple through Sennadar society.

The Tower opened its school for Wizard magic in midwinter, quietly, without much fanfare, but it was an event much heralded by the Wizards, who very much liked the idea of a major center of learning for Wizards in the West. The only real places for Wizards to truly learn from masters in Sennadar was in Arathorn and Valkar, among the old kingdoms of Sharadar, Stygia, Telluria, and Valkar. The academy in Suld was the first major inroads for Wizards in the West, and they had wanted to either build one or see one built somewhere in Arkis or in Suld for a long time. It was just that nobody had bothered to try.

That winter, Darvon officially retired, and Azakar Kanash, former gladiator and slave, became the new Lord General of the Knights. With him at all times, and always causing something of a row, was the six-armed *marilith*, Shaz'Baket. Only now she simply was now as Shaz, and there were wild rumors circulating about the relationship between them. The rumors started when she first arrived, how he would work her hard, make her carry heavy stones, paint walls, clean armor and equipment, do about any menial labor except look after the horses, which were terrified of her. Everyone knew exactly what she was, and that Tarrin had personally captured her to make her work, to pay back the debt incurred on Sennadar by serving its interests, and many of them treated her coldly and callously. And she treated everyone just as coldly, seeing her position as a humiliation, and hating everyone around her. But, as time passed, she graduated up to less demeaning work, and while not earning any friends, at least earning some grudging respect. She began to help train the cadets by giving them an opponent very exotic and unusual. She conducted classes for the Knights on military tactics, teaching them different ways to think, new ways to approach the art of war, but still, Azakar kept a tight leash on her, never letting her out of his sight. By that winter, she wore an ornate breastplate and carried weapons, which worried many Knights around the academy to no end, but Azakar didn't seem concerned at all. He was convinced of her loyalty, and they could not recall a single instance, word, or action that countered that faith. Yes, she had a foul mouth and an evil-tempered disposition, but she always obeyed Azakar's commands, even as she complained about them. Even when she was alone, Shaz acted exactly as Azakar insisted; courteously, quietly, and with calm and focused attention to the task at hand. The Demoness became known as Azakar's personal servant, attendant, and bodyguard, her six weapons ready at any time to defend his person.

But, as the time passed, it became more than that to Azakar. To him, Shaz wasn't a Demon being forced to serve, but a person in need of a new focus in her life to find peace and a reason to continue on. And he provided that focus. Shaz slowly began to come around, until the landmark day when he returned her weapons to her. It was that day that she developed more than just her usual hatred of her position and her loathing of her master. The day he returned a small part of her dignity, she began to see him as something more than a master.

On the ceremony of Darvon's retirement, Shaz was there, lurking behind the new Lord General, who accepted handshakes from dignitaries and friends and kisses from Jenna. That day, she had become, in her own small way, a part of the order, for it had been her arm—or at least one of them—that had led Darvon to the podium, where he gave his sword to Azakar in a blaring of majestic trumpets and the smart snapping flags held by an honor guard of Knights.

The winter was one of quiet progress for Jenna and the Tower. The Wizard school was teaching its first class and the Elementalist school was about ready to open, and more progress was made with the Tower in Pyrosia. Ianelle was installed as the First of the new Council, and she would act as regent until the *sui'kun* who had been born there, on Pyrosia, was old enough to take the position of Keeper. That baby rocked the Elara to the core, and Jenna had a feeling that Tarrin's alter-ego Elder God had a hand in that little event.

The Elaran child was of the Worker caste.

Tarrin hated the Elaran castes, and Jenna had a feeling that his godly half-brother had inherited that dislike and wanted to teach the Elara a lesson...so, the first of the Pyrosian *sui'kun* was of the lowest caste of Elaran society. To say that there was a storm of outrage from the magician casts was the mother of all understatements. The magicians were the second highest ranking caste, only behind the nobles, and the idea

that, if they were stationed in or visited Pyros, they would have to take orders from what to them was a being just higher in the ladder of life than pond scum nearly caused a revolution in Elaran society. They raged and shouted and sought satisfaction from their King, who was wise enough not to get into the middle of this one. The Elara had made binding agreements concerning Pyros, and he wasn't about to renege on those promises...and part and parcel of those agreements was that the Sorcerers ran Pyros as they saw fit. The child was an integral part of *their* system, royalty among the Sorcerers, and he knew he didn't have the legal ground to stand upon to make any kind of challenge. Having been rebuffed by their king, the magicians went so far as to kidnap the child and his parents and refuse to release them to the Sorcerers of the Tower, to raise him themselves and no doubt instill utter obedience to the Elaran magicians into him. The King tried to negotiate, but Ianelle was too angry and annoyed to wait out that negotiation. The magicians would just stall until they conditioned the parents to teach the child the way *they* wanted, then relent. Ianelle displayed rare and uncharacteristic anger at her long-lost cousins, and moved to involve the *katzh-dashi* in the matter directly.

That was when the Elara learned that just because they lived on the moon, where the Weave did not reach, they were by no means out of reach of the might of the *katzh-dashi*.

Ianelle got in touch with Jenna, and asked her to ask a favor of Triana. Triana, who didn't much like the Elara either, gladly agreed to help. She returned to Pyrosia and invaded the moon of Elara, by herself, and took the child and his parents right out of the Halls of Knowledge, the headquarters of the magicians. The Elara did try to stop her, but they had never seen a Druid before, and they were in no way prepared to deal with Triana. Their magic was useless against her, since they'd discovered that Elementalists shared a Sorcerer's vulnerability to a Druid's interdiction. Triana simply cut them all off, beat the stuffing out of anyone who got in her way, and took the family right out of the building. The magicians howled for retaliation, but the king of the Elara simply shrugged and told them that there was nothing he could do. And, when the magicians started talking about doing something about it *themselves*, it touched off a rare and rather tense confrontation that set the entire Elaran society on the brink of civil war, that required the soldier caste to surround the Halls of Knowledge at one point. The magicians did finally relent, but the new Tower of Pyros was emptied of any Elaran magician, even the Gatemaster they had agreed to station there to open the doorway to Sennadar, as the magicians recalled all of their people, refusing to leave them in a place where a *worker* would command *them*.

Ianelle simply shrugged their withdraw off as if it was nothing. Phandebrass had already learned much of their magic, and he was simply asked to return from Sennadar and get things back in order. Phandebrass returned, and Kyrienna nearly got herself expelled from the order when she returned with him from her extended sojourn on Sennadar to study Wizard magic there. Phandebrass got the library in order, negotiated an agreement with a Sennadar Wizard named Jayenne Madelle, a Shacèan man of middle years, to come to Pyrosia and act as the Gatemaster. Jayenne was taught the proper spells, and then he and Kyrienna returned to Sennadar.

The Elara flap settled down, but the birth of the first *sui'kun* did mean that Jasana could finally go home. She returned to Sennadar with Triana, and brought home Fireflash and Fury, both of which deciding to stay with her when Tarrin left, but that didn't last long. Fireflash was very fond of Zyri, and became her constant companion once Jasana brought him home. Fury too found someone to take care of her while Tarrin was gone, and oddly enough, that person was Dar. Dar and Tiella came to visit Jasana when she returned, since both were doing work in Sharadar for Alexis, and Fury took an instant fancy to Dar. Dar's charismatic nature even seemed to work on Gehennan animals. She adored both him and Tiella, even let them ride her, and they took Fury back to Sharadar to take care of her until Tarrin returned home. Jasana was taken back to Haven to continue the training that had been interrupted.

Things in the Tower had also returned to normal, but only just. Tara and Rina started moving up very fast through their training, and by spring, they had graduated the Initiate. The nearly unheard of speed through which the two of them completed the Initiate was because they got private lessons from Jenna Kael

every single day. Jenna trained her nieces diligently, and both were naturals, both strong and smart, able to master new teaching quickly. The time in Pyrosia had been good to them in that regard... Jenna had a strange feeling that when Tarrin Circled with them, some of his skill was imprinted into them, because they certainly came back *much* better than they were when they went. Granted, the Initiate wasn't really that difficult, dealing more with teaching Sorcerers how to control themselves and use basic Sorcery than teaching them anything complicated. They breezed through in months what took some Initiates years. Jenna had really pushed them through, because Kimmie wanted to introduce her twins to *Fae-da'Nar* in the fall and make them adults. Zyri was making her own headway, moving with amazing speed up through the ranks of the Initiate, because she too was getting private lessons from Jenna.

When Tara and Rina graduated from the Initiate, Dolanna returned home temporarily to attend the ceremony.

"Dolanna! You're *married*?" Jenna gasped when she saw her.

She simply smiled and touched the ring. "Not yet. But you can consider it an engagement."

"I'm sure Haley is ecstatic," Jenna laughed.

"He nearly fainted when he proposed," she said with a bright smile. "And nearly fainted again when I said yes. He has waited for me for a long, long time, child. I could not in good faith snub his patience. I agreed, if only out of pity."

"You big liar," Jenna teased.

"I love him very much, Jenna, though it took me time to see it for myself," she admitted with another touch on the ring. "I can never thank Tarrin enough for his help. And, also, that is the other reason I am here. I have a promise to keep to him."

"When's the wedding?"

"After Tarrin returns. Neither of us wish to wed until he is here to share in our happiness."

Dolanna fulfilled her vow to Tarrin while she was there. She passed on to Jenna, Zyri, and Jal her unique condition, and then traveled to Ungardt to pass on the condition to Tarrin's parents, forever protecting them from an accidental Were infection. Zyri seemed stunned by the idea that Mist couldn't infect her now, and Mist had taken a rather direct approach to testing Dolanna's claim, by biting Zyri.

The protection seemed to drop every barrier between Mist and the human children. She was still tender and motherly with them, but she began to be much more *intimate*. She wasn't afraid to kiss them now, or play rough with them, or do many of the things mothers did with their own children, because always before she had to maintain that quiet distance to prevent an accidental infection. It didn't change Mist's feelings for the children, but it did let her express her feelings to them on a much more intimate level.

Dolanna returned to Pyrosia to complete her work there, but she promised that both she and Haley would be back by midsummer. Ianelle had the Tower of Pyros running smoothly, and she wasn't really needed there anymore. The Sorcerers that had gone to Pyrosia were already teaching the first wave of Novices, though now they were all humans since the Elara had yanked all their students from the school.

It was their loss.

The happy news from Dolanna wasn't the only such happening. Phandebrass finally seemed to realize

that Kyrienna wasn't just a Wizard, but was also a *girl*, and a girl that seemed to have a sincere interest in him. The difference in race didn't seem to matter to her, and Phandebrass was simply too bizarre to classify in such terms. The two began to talk of more than magic, and things moved rather quickly from there. By the first bloom of spring flowers, Phandebrass and Kyrienna were engaged. It was a good match, Jenna could see. When Kyrienna was around, Phandebrass was much more focused, more aware of things other than magic, more willing to surface to breathe in the air of life before diving back into his weighty ponderings and endless thinking. Kyrienna was his anchor, and Phandebrass was the only male she'd ever met that matched her magical powers and was dynamic, exciting, and fun. Every day with Phandebrass was an adventure, and that was the kind of man Kyrienna had always sought.

That bit of news *did* get her expelled from the Elara. She was banished from Elara by the High Masters for getting engaged without permission, and to a *human* of all people, which was also a violation of caste law. She was only allowed to marry within the caste. But, it didn't bother her one whit. Kyrienna spent more time in other worlds than she did at home, and being exiled from the Elara meant about as much to her as a split end in her lovely hair. "I spent years out there looking for him," she had confided to Jenna the night after they announced their engagement. "I'm sure the High Masters are going to have a seizure, and I'll probably be declared an outlaw and exiled from Elara, but I don't care. I'm happy here, and that's all that counts."

"Well, Kyri, I think you don't have a problem there. You've got a new home now."

"I surely do, as long as your gods allow me to stay."

The gods didn't seem to care too much about Kyrienna. She moved in with Phandebrass in the Tower and took up a position in the new Wizard academy, and settled into her new position of prominence and importance on Sennadar.

She would have been banished anyway, despite that, if they would have found out that Kyrienna had taken Myn as an apprentice not long after she and Phandebrass had become engaged. Kyrienna had seen Myn's potential the first time she crossed paths with the girl, who knew who she was and managed to avoid her in the halls of the Tower for months. She tracked her down—which frightened Myn, who thought the High Masters were coming for her—and then demanded that the girl become the apprentice of herself and Phandebrass. And she refused to take no for an answer. Myn resisted the idea, for she was quite content serving as a teacher in the Tower for the Wizard's school, but the appeal of learning *serious* magic from two of the best in the business, two who knew more than she did, was just too much for her to deny.

As spring took firm hold, and with summer just around the corner, Jenna was quite content, if not still a little wistful. Everyone seemed to be quite happy now, if not for one little thing.

Tarrin was still away.

It was the first thing Eron and Elke asked when they returned from Ungardt after Jenna's mother got everything all situated with the new clan King and came home. "Any word from Tarrin?" Eron asked as Jenna met them at the dock.

"Not yet, father. How did it go?" she asked Elke.

"Fine. I didn't really need to be there, but you know how the Ungardt can be."

"Yes, I know," Jenna laughed.

"I hope you don't mind a short visit, honey, but we're tired and we'd like to go home," Eron told her.

“Would you be too upset if you took us home after lunch? We have a lot of unpacking to do, and we’d like to get it done before bed tonight.”

“Not at all, not at all!” she laughed. “After all, I can come see you whenever I want.”

“I’m sure the house is all dusty,” Elke grunted.

“I’ve been keeping it clean,” Jenna told her. “I’ve had plenty of help, too. Zyri and Jal go with me.”

“They’re still here? I thought Mist would have taken them home.”

“She wants to stay here while Zyri’s in the Initiate, but she’ll pull her out as soon as Tarrin comes home. I think she doesn’t want to go back to the house without him. It wouldn’t seem right.”

“I can understand that. I bet she’s been quite a handful,” Eron chuckled.

“Actually, she’s been very well behaved. She has cubs to care for, and that always makes her happy.”

“That it does,” Elke nodded.

They ate lunch, and then Jenna took them home. The farm was exactly as they left it, quietly tended by some villagers who came out from time to time to make sure everything was alright and to feed and water the animals, but the instant they appeared within the fenced in area that held the invisible gate to Tarrin’s house, Jenna squealed in excitement and ran towards the house. Eron and Elke followed her in confusion, but they cried out in joy when they reached the front door.

There, by the chairs, their son stood, hugging his sister.

Tarrin looked exactly as they remembered, complete with the white-furred arm. He embraced his parents one at a time, then was barraged by immediate demands to know where he’d been, when he got home, and why didn’t he tell anyone!

“I’m only back for a quick visit,” he told them. “I’m kind of in the middle of something. When I finish it, I’ll be coming home for good.”

“What are you doing, Tarrin?” Jenna asked.

“I can’t tell you,” he told her gently, but with a firm hint to his tone that he would not budge from that position no matter how much they wheedled, nagged, whined, begged, or demanded. “All I can really say is I’m almost done, and it’s not really very difficult or dangerous. I should be home in a month or so. I just had a little spare time, and I’ve been wanting to see you.” He sniffed delicately at them. “I see Dolanna was here.”

“Yes, she made us drink some of her blood,” Eron said with a shudder. “But, she said we’re immune to Lycanthropy now.”

“You are,” he affirmed. “It was something I felt was long past due. It would have been my worst nightmare to accidentally infect one of you.”

“Mother said you needed time to work through some things,” Jenna said. “I take it you’ve got things sorted out?”

“More or less. Most of the reason I stayed away was so things would calm down without me here,” he said. “I didn’t want to be pestered while I was thinking things through. But that’s not an issue now. I’m ready to come home, I just have to finish what I promised to do first. And, I’m bringing some friends with me.”

“Friends? Who?”

“I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise,” he smiled. “Let’s just say that a few friends of mine are going to take some time off, and I invited them here.”

Eron looked at him curiously. “Son, are you...taller?”

Tarrin laughed. “How long have I been gone?”

“Just a few months.”

“Well, it’s been a few decades out there,” he explained. “Time moves differently where I’ve been. I’ve actually been ready to come home for a *very* long time, but I had some obligations to someone you do *not* renege on your promises to. I’ve missed you so much,” he said sincerely, which caused Elke to hug him again. “But we’re almost done, and when we’re done, I’m coming home.”

“That’s why you’re visiting,” Jenna reasoned. “Because another month for us will be ten years for you.”

“Clever,” he said. “Yes, to me, it’ll be ten more years or so until I come home, but that’s the worst case scenario. I might be home in a few months, I might be home in a few years, but it shouldn’t take any longer than ten, no matter what.”

“Well, let’s get in touch with—“

“No,” he said, cutting Jenna off. “Just Allia, Kerri, Mist, Kimmie, my cubs, Triana, Sapphire, and Jesmind, if she wants to come. Jula’s probably already on the way. She can sense me no matter where I am.”

“Why don’t you want to see everyone?” Eron asked.

“I do, but I have to look at some control here,” he sighed. “I only have an hour, father. After that, I have to go. If I spend all that time trying to visit with *everyone*, then I won’t have any time for *you*.”

“Oh. Well, why don’t we sit down while Jenna rounds everyone up?” Elke prompted.

“Mother!” Jenna growled. “Oh, alright! Just let’s get this done quickly!”

It took Jenna all of ten minutes to find everyone and get them to the farm, including a few tagalongs, Miranda, Dar, Tiella, and their children, who had been visiting with people Jenna picked up. They swarmed Tarrin, asking endless questions he wouldn’t answer, then he got them over that and had them catch him up on everything that was going on. Zyri and Jal never left his lap, quietly and subtly fighting each other for room. He heard all about what happened in Pyrosia from Jasana, who had just recently returned from there, and heard all about the Tower from Jenna and the cubs. Sapphire told him that Nightshade was settling in in a lair in the Skydancer Mountains, not far from Aldreth—no doubt chosen deliberately—and Triana told him that things in *Fae-da’Nar* were calm and well. Allia and Keritanima brought their husbands and their own children, and it became a joyous and raucous reunion. Zyri and Jal got their first look at Kor, their cousin,

who was now unsteadily ambling around. Where babies his age would be crawling, maybe standing, Kor was fully ambulatory, if a little clumsy sometimes. Faalken sat with grave dignity by his mother and father, acting the prince, until Dar and Tiella's oldest baited him into a game of jacks by the table. Selani went from helpless to running much faster than human children, because of the harshness of their environment.

But it was entirely too short. Before the children could even get bored, Tarrin sighed and stood up, dislodging Zyri and Jal. "I'm afraid I'm out of time," he told them. "I have to go back now."

"No, not so soon!" Mist protested. "Not now!"

"I'm sorry, my mate, but I have a little more left to do," he told her gently. "I promise, though, I won't be gone long. A month at the most. You can wait for a month, can't you?"

"I don't want to," she told him, looking up the small differences in their heights.

"Remember the promise I made, Mist?" She nodded. "Just remember it. Give me one more month at the most. I might actually be home earlier than that, but it shouldn't be any longer than a month."

She sighed, then nodded. He kissed her gently, and then accepted fond farewells from everyone, and then to everyone's surprise, he got up and went out the front door, careful to close it behind him. Miranda gasped and ran to the door and opened it, not even half a second after it was closed, but Tarrin had vanished. There was no sense of him using Sorcery, no use of Druidic magic, no Wizard spell...he was just *gone*.

Miranda laughed. "He has to tell me how he did that when he gets home!"

"I think he's learning too many tricks from Spyder," Jasana noted to Triana.

"I think you're about right, cub."

A month.

Word of Tarrin's hasty visit stormed through the inner circle, and people became quite excited and anxious. Everyone in Tarrin's life started marking the days off on calendars, getting impatient, wondering if he was going to really come home early and if it would be *today*.

But it wasn't today, day after day after day.

Everything went into a kind of suspension, and word, even rumor, that Tarrin Kael had returned stormed back and forth between the Sorcerers, among the Druids, between Wizards, and even through Sennadar itself. Everything stopped, everyone waited, even people who knew of him only in legend or stories. It was then that Jenna understood why Tarrin had left. Here, so soon after what happened in Pyrosia, he would have found no peace, no tranquility...at least not without killing people. Jenna had managed to worm a little more out of Mother, and had a better idea of the kind of mental quandary Tarrin was in. He'd found out that *he* was the Elder God of Pyrosia...but not him. That was confusing enough, but then Mother tells her that Tarrin had come face to face with what he *really* was, and the feeling of helplessness that came with reaching the end of his journey, the uncertainty. Jenna knew her brother, and knew that those kinds of feelings, in an environment where everyone wanted to bother him, was a very, very bad combination. The time away would be necessary. Either that, or barricading himself inside his house against an army of the curious, the well-wishing, and the opportunists looking to wrangle a little favor from a man who wasn't bound by the rules of reality like the rest of the mortals.

She could forgive him for his absence, most certainly.

She also had to wonder. Where was he that timed worked differently, that months passed for every day here? It couldn't be any place she could imagine, that was for sure. He mentioned he was working for someone, and someone he couldn't deny. Then he let it slip that he was working with others. It could only make him wonder just *who* he was working with. Odds were, she figured, she'd find out. He said he was bringing some people back with him. A vacation for them, he called it.

She was almost giddy with anticipation. When was he coming home? Who was he bringing with him? What stories would he bring from his adventures out there, out in the dimensions and worlds beyond Sennadar? She almost couldn't wait.

News of the impending return did more than make Jenna hard to concentrate on her job, it made things downright antsy. Sapphire had taken up residence in the Tower, not content to wait in her den for news of his return. Triana was there as well, and Dar and Tiella and their children, and Keritania had handed Wikuna over to the *sashka*, handing Wikuna a line about wanting Faalken to get some firsthand exposure to dealing with King Arren of Sulasia and the Keeper, which would be necessary duties for a monarch of Wikuna. Camara and Koran Tal also arrived, with Shaul in tow, who was even more blustery and obnoxious than she was as a toddler. Amazons were raised to be aggressive and commanding, and Shaul was the paramount Amazon, even as a little girl. She was bossy, nosy, pushy, and drove most of them crazy. Saraya arrived the day after the Amazons, with Sathon and Audrey along to check on things in Suld. King Arren began to come over to the Tower every day, to keep up with the news and also to visit old friends. Thean, Jeri, Rahnee, Singer, and Shirazi also seemed to show up, all around the same time, and they made no bones about the fact that they were there to see Tarrin when he came home. They were all closer to the Kael family than other Were-cats. Allia had come as well, but so did half of her tribe. Most of Tarrin's friends had not met Allia's parents, Kallan and Kaira, and they were quite surprised at how polite they were, but also demanding respect through their very stances. They too talked with Allia's distance, her stiffness, uncertainty of their words in Sulasian compounded by the need to act with decorum and honor. Allia's extended family was there, cousins, aunts, uncles, showing her family first hand the Tower and the amazing people who gathered there. They were all quiet and reserved, reluctant to be too friendly with most, but to Jenna they showed warmth and kindness, for she was the sister of Tarrin and was part of the tribe and Selani by virtue of that relationship. Kallan had even gone so far as to quietly take Jenna aside after they were greeted and try to talk her into taking the brands.

Even Dolanna returned. With her hand on Haley's arm, they entered the Tower grounds after Haley checked in down at his festhall to make sure everything was going well. Dolanna was certainly marrying someone who wouldn't make her wash clothes for a living, that was for sure. Haley was one of the richest men in Suld, because his festhall and the surrounding businesses, all his, were the most popular place in town, among both the law abiding people and the shady side of the city. After all, it was the only place in the populated West where someone could come and hear a Dryad sing, four days a ride. That left Ianelle in command of the Pyrosian Tower completely, but Dolanna confided that Ianelle was overjoyed to be able to build a Tower from the ground up, and they couldn't tear her away until the Pyrosians were running their own Tower.

With Dolanna back in the Tower, everyone was ready and waiting, counting the days with anxious excitement. Even without Tarrin, though, it was a time to renew friendships, tell stories, and reinforce the bonds that made them who they were. It was a time to celebrate, a time to enjoy one of those very rare times when everyone was gathered together in one place. Jenna didn't get much done, and got even less done when Alexis arrived from Sharadar. Alexis was never very far away from a party or celebration, and she was also a very old friend of Dolanna.

It was a strain on the Tower staff, dealing with so many, and many with unusual eating habits or mannerisms. Having to feed all those people, and many of different races with unusual tastes or strange activity cycles, put a serious strain on the kitchens. Cooks were staffed there at all hours of the day and night, a large menu was drawn up, and the Tower became responsible for a sudden shortage of seafood in

Suld. But, the kitchen had always prided itself on having anything the Keeper wanted on hand at any time, so it went overboard ensuring that her personal guests and family were afforded the same luxury.

More got done than simple waiting, especially after Shiika arrived, bringing along with her four Hellhounds that she immediately handed out to people. Dolanna and Haley were given the second largest of the four as an engagement present, a truly massive female that Dolanna decided to name Sibann, which meant *greatest gift* in Sharadi. Camara Tal was a tiny bit jealous, since Sibann was larger than Ember, her own Hellhound. Sibann had been the alpha female of her pack, a smaller second pack of Hellhounds, but Shiika had disbanded that pack because of rivalries with the main pack she couldn't resolve. The alpha male, who was the largest of the lot, was given to Azakar to be his bodyguard and companion, which put a second Demonic being under his supervision. Azakar, however, seemed to truly delight in the animal, an animal *his* size, he had jokingly mentioned. Azakar named it Kanja, which meant *formidable* in his native Mahuut tongue. Shiika gave the third one to Allia, but at first Allia simply with a polite decline, explaining that Kedaira was all the protection Kor needed, and besides, Selani children needed to experience danger to respect the desert...at least until Kaira got wind of it. She browbeat Allia into accepting the animal, and Allia couldn't deny her mother. So she took the young male Hellhound, a juvenile but promising to be an absolute beast, maybe the biggest of them all, and named it Siwa, which meant *steadfast* in Selani. Kallan wasn't too keen on the idea of bringing a Demon dog into the tribe, but Jenna had enough experience with Forge to know that a fixed Hellhound wasn't really a Hellhound, it was just a huge dog that was nearly as smart as a person and could breathe fire. Siwa would be just fine, and if Kor wasn't safe before, he was now the safest living being on Sennadar.

The last, smallest Hellhound nearly caused an apoplexy in the family, because Shiika gave it to Janette. Janine almost burst a blood vessel with her vociferous, strenuous objections to the idea that her daughter would own that animal, and absolutely refused to allow it in her house. Janette simply shrugged her mother off and told her, in simple, blunt terms, that the Tower was her home now, and she would probably never move back into her parent's house. That caused quite the row between Janine and Janette, which forced Tomas to intervene. The smallest of the Hellhounds was a male with a somewhat timid disposition, since he had been the lowest member of his old pack and was used to being ordered around. Janette named him Brand, and seemed to be quite happy with him. Forge didn't seem too impressed by him, though, assuming a dominant stance to which Brand immediately capitulated.

Even after that excitement, though, things calmed back down into a nervous anticipation, waiting for the day. Each of them dealt with the waiting in his or her own way. Jenna spent most of the time in discussions with Keritanima, Alexis, and Shiika, talking politics, when she wasn't being evasive about brands with Kallan. Camara Tal spent a good deal of her time over at the Academy, talking with Azakar and grilling Shaz, trying to divine just how Tarrin had changed her, and how trustworthy she was. Allia spent most of her time around the Academy as well, with her parents and family, introducing them to the Knights and letting them get a feel for each other. Sarraya spent her time trying to get the most detailed account possible of what had happened in Pyrosia, even going so far as to write it all down, getting everyone's account of the happenings and the battle. Jula retreated with Jeri into the dark halls of the Tower, and Tara and Rina spent most of their time getting what they learned about Sorcery refined by their elders, for they had picked up a lingering trace of memory from their father and sisters from Circling with them under such stressful circumstances, a memory that literally freed them from the Initiate. They had all this lingering knowledge of the Weave, Sorcery, and spells, but needed time and training to understand it and learn how to master their new abilities. It was here where the only difference between the Twins became pronounced. Rina was a very strong Sorcerer, but Tara was stronger than her, one of the strongest. Only *da'shar* powerhouses like Ianelle would outshine her when she crossed over. Sapphire summoned Tenshale and Nightshade to the Tower, and the three dragons spent much of their time in talks with Kang, Shiika, Keritanima, Jenna, Triana, and Sathon, for the society of dragons wished to start open relations with the humans, but wanted to do it indirectly, through *Fae-da'Nar* and the relationship between the northwest desert clan Blues and Tarrin's family. Sapphire and Tenshale were to be ambassadors of sorts to filter important information directly between the bipeds and the dragons through Jenna, Tarrin, Sapphire, and Tenshale, while Nightshade was tasked by the

dragons to act as a direct messenger when called upon, since she had a great deal of experience dealing with non-dragons of many races and breeds, given she was an outworlder dragon. Phandebrass and Kyrienna got absorbed in their work, as Kyrienna helped Phandebrass move from the rooms and labs he had been given to the northwest tower so he'd be closer to the Wizard school that now operated there. He had the largest apartment in the tower, with the most labs, where two Wizards could set up a common living area and private library, but separate labs, since the two often studied different things. Dar and Tiella often became impromptu babysitters, watching Faalken and Kor while their parents were busy, since they were the only ones that Keritanima and Allia trusted with their children, and the two children adored Dar and Tiella's growing brood. They also became the center of things, for everyone knew that Dar and Tiella knew exactly where everyone was all the time, and they found themselves watching the Hellhounds as much as they watched the children, given that Shadow stayed near Faalken at all times, and Forge often preferred to be with Dar and Tiella if everyone else was busy. Most of the time, Dar and Tiella had someone else in their apartment, and usually had three or four Hellhounds there as well.

And Mist...Mist spent most of her time on the balcony of her room, looking out over the sea, patiently waiting.

As the days turned into rides, people got *very* unsettled. Tarrin had promised a month, and it had almost been a month. There were only five days left before he would be late, and there was already talk, centered on Miranda and Camara Tal, about mounting some kind of expedition out into the multiverse to find him and bring him home. Both of them just couldn't imprint the idea in them that that would be *impossible*. Not even Jula, with her given ability to know exactly where Tarrin was, would be capable of it unless they were in the same plane, and there were an *unlimited* number of planes out there.

It was such an argument that had brought Jula into the thick of it, as they argued about where to start looking. Sarraya, the main protagonist of the group that wanted to find Tarrin if he was late, was arguing with Miranda about the idea of simply waiting in Crossroads until he showed up, but she wasn't too keen on that idea. "So, you want me to drop my own life to sit in Crossroads, maybe for years, just waiting?" she snapped. "Sarraya, father said he'd be home in a month, and he still has five days. Why all this fretting about something? Just be patient and have a little faith. Father never breaks his word. He has five more days, so we give him five more days."

"I hate waiting!" Sarraya snapped.

"You're a Faerie, I'm sure it's a word you can't even really understand. Then again, maybe you do. Just wait a minute, and you'll forget all about whatever got you in such a twist in the first place," Miranda told her with a cheeky grin.

"I hate you sometimes, Miranda," Sarraya growled.

"Then I'm doing it right," she added, which made the Faerie stick her tongue out at the mink.

"How can you be so calm about this?" Sarraya protested to Jula.

"Because I trust my father," she said simply. "He always—" she broke off, standing up quickly, then she laughed. "And my trust in him is never misplaced," she said, giving them a radiant, ecstatic grin.

"He's here?" Sarraya asked breathlessly.

"He just came through the gate," she answered with a nod. "He's in Haven."

"We should—"

“We can’t do anything,” Julia cut her off. “Haven is Spyder’s domain, and no one can even get in without her permission. Let’s just spread the word and wait. He should be here very soon.”

Home.

It had been *so bloody long*. Decades out there, and after long last, he had done everything he promised to do, and he was home. He stepped from the gateway and put his foot lightly down on the smooth, bare stone of the gate chamber, and took his first breath of the air of home.

He wasn’t happy as much as he was relieved. The work he’d done for Him had been relatively easy and straightforward, giving him lots of time to think and understand who he was, and come to a simple conclusion.

No matter who he was, he was still *Tarrin Kael*.

It was the same revelation that Miranda had searched for for all those years, when he looked at himself and saw something that didn’t seem like, like *him*. What he saw in the mirror wasn’t the man he’d thought it was for all those years. In the time he’d been away, he discovered the same truth that came to Miranda for himself, that he was still Tarrin, and the fact that he was a *mi’shara* didn’t mean as much as he thought. Even though there was no longer a path out there for him, it wasn’t that bad. He was just like everyone else now. He had no path, no locked future, no task. He had always wanted to be free, and now he was...and when the moment came that he looked out at the horizon, he’d been *afraid*.

He had been right. All he needed was a little time to get used to the idea that he was no longer a *mi’shara* with a purpose, though he still had the power. That couldn’t be taken away. He’d always wanted to be free, to live each day on his own terms, doing his own thing, and now, finally, he’d *earned* that.

Before him, as he expected, stood Spyder. She looked like a formless shadow in that cloak of hers, a cloak that bent space, and within it he knew was an extra-dimensional area like his Portable Hole. She was just as lovely as he remembered, with her sharp cheeks and large blue eyes, and that little scar on her left cheek, a mark that only seemed to enhance her perfection instead of detract from it.

Tarrin took a few steps forward, and then Spyder smiled and reached her hands out to him. He took her slender four-fingered hands in his paws and held them, smiling down at her, and she picked at the white fur on his right paw, then looked up at him curiously.

“He let me keep it,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

“He?” she asked curiously.

“Long story. Oh,” he said, looking back. “Spyder, there are some people I want you to meet. Well, two, anyway. One you already know.”

Spyder looked curiously, then saw a golden haired Deva step through the gate. It was a face she knew, a face she hadn’t seen for several months, but she did look a little different. Her white wings now had black tips on the feathers, a mark that Ch’Belle had committed some kind of offense against the Deva, and she had been exiled as punishment. She was no longer one of the pure chosen, no longer attached to the order, but had not committed a crime so terrible that her wings turned black, which would mark her as a Fallen One. “Ch’Belle? What do you do here?” she asked.

“Tarrin invited us to come here for a while,” she answered. “I was given permission to come, so how could I refuse?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. We’ve been working together for quite a while.”

“What happened to you?” she asked, looking at her wings.

Ch’Belle blushed slightly and ruffled her wings. “I had to, uh, intentionally get exiled from the order in order to take my new job. They couldn’t know I was called to another task, so I had to misbehave. It’s subterfuge. I’ll regain my position when my work is done.”

“Ah.”

Behind her came a gnarled old woman with long gray-white hair, wearing a simple peasant dress and a cloak, but the sinuous grace with which she move belied her elderly appearance. “Spyder, I’d like you to meet Mother Wynn,” Tarrin said. “She’s been my teacher for a while. She’s almost as strict as you.”

“I doubt that,” Spyder said with a smile. “A pleasure. It is nice to know the name that goes with the face.”

“So, you remember me, do you?” Mother Wynn asked with a cackle.

“I do not forget, madam. Ever,” she said simply. “It has been a few thousand years, but I remember you.”

Mother Wynn cackled again as another figure came through the gate. It was a small Arakite girl wearing a boy’s doublet and leather trousers. Given her narrow hips and lack of a bust, she almost looked like a boy.

“This is Sashi,” Tarrin introduced. “One of my friends.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Spyder,” Sashi said in a gentle voice, offering her hand. “Tarrin goes on and on about you.”

“A friend to Tarrin is a friend to me,” she said graciously. “How did you come to know him?”

“He’s been working with us for a while,” she answered. “We, um, do certain things for certain people that they don’t want to be common knowledge.”

“She means we’re spies, thieves, sneaks, and sometimes we’re assassins,” Wynn said in a slaty voice. “Any time something needs done that people can’t dirty their hands over, it comes down to us.”

“And they’re very good at it,” Ch’Belle noted with a sly look.

“They? You’re in it with us, goldie,” Wynn barked at her.

“Ah. So, this is what you have been doing? Skulking around the planes as a cat burglar?”

“Among other things,” he said dryly. “But right now, I really want to see my family. You need to come with us, Spyder. I think you could do with a little break.”

She took a step back, and threw her cloak back from her left shoulder. “Really? And where do you think you are going, Tarrin?” she asked archly. “You seem to forget that my duty is to defend the gate

against all incursion. And you and your companions are an incursion.”

Tarrin sighed. “Don’t be difficult. You know I have the right to pass.”

“I’m not being difficult,” she said in Sha’Kar with a slight smile. “I just seem to recall a certain promise you made to me. If you want through that door, brother, you have to *earn* it.”

The corner of Tarrin’s mouth curled up slightly. “I just get home, and you’re spoiling for a fight?” he asked.

“I would not hurt my brother,” she said simply. “But you did promise me any place, any time. I have waited quite a while for it.” She did smile then, an eager smile. “I choose here and now.”

“Pay up,” Wynn demanded, holding a gnarled hand in front of Sashi. The small girl scowled, and handed a small white coin to the old woman.

“Girl, you’re just making it ugly,” Tarrin told her, and his voice was not kind or gentle. “I want to see my family.”

“Then you have suitable motivation,” she answered simply. “I am ensured you are not holding back.”

Tarrin closed his paw on empty air, but in his paw was a gleaming crystal staff, the light in the chamber spending prisms of rainbow color scillinting off of it. He pointed it at her. “You just better hope you have enough strength when I’m done to heal yourself, Spyder.”

“You think he’s serious?” Sashi asked Wynn. “He might go after her for real.”

The old woman shook her head. “No, he’s been looking forward to this. And he wouldn’t hurt her.”

“And you bet on if she would press it immediately?” Ch’Belle asked.

“I won,” Wynn said smugly.

“Be glad you did not bring that bet to me,” Ch’Belle chuckled. “I would not have taken it. I know Spyder.”

“That’s why I didn’t bet you. Now, I think we’d better move back a little. I don’t think we want to get between those two.”

“By the way,” Ch’Belle noted as they backed up. “I’ll put ten krin on Spyder.”

“I’ll take that action,” Wynn cackled. “Easy money.”

“You don’t know Spyder as I do, Wynn. The easy money is mine.”

Spyder produced a weapon that Tarrin had never seen before, at least not as a conscious choice. She pulled a very long length of black metal chain from the depths of her cloak, with small pendulum-like weights on each end. Tarrin quickly worked through the potential of such a weapon in his mind as he took a couple of steps back and pulled his staff up into the end grip. Blocking that thing would be useless on the links, he realized. The weighted end would simply swing in, bending around his staff or paw or arm, and strike at the soft parts behind that raised protection. Any blocks would have to be at the weight, nowhere else, or he’d either be struck or have the chain wrap around his staff or arm. He saw the potential of

snagging him in the weapon, a weapon that could snare an arm or leg, or snag his weapon, allowing her to attack with the other end of the chain or her hands or feet. The weapon would give her both long reach and dangerous power close in, and since it was an archaic weapon, and she had thousands of years to practice with it, she would be a total master wielding it. He had no doubt he was about to learn what a chain could do as a weapon. She had defeated Tsukatta repeatedly, and she probably did it using that weapon.

Spyder then did something which shocked him; she unclasped her cloak and let it fall to the floor. She stepped away from it, snapping the chain taut before her. “It makes me invincible, and that is no measure of who is better,” she explained simply, with a slight smile.

“Well, then I guess it’s only fair that I face you with nothing more or less than I had when I left,” he said simply.

“Oh, no, my brother. Hold nothing back. I want to face you at your absolute best.”

Tarrin raised his white-furred paw, and Spyder gasped when she rose into the air, through nothing more than the exercise of Tarrin’s will. “I’ve been taught new tricks while I was gone, Spyder,” he told her. “Want me to spin you around til you throw up?”

“Well, if you are willing to put yours away,” she said, nodding her head upward. Tarrin felt himself get pulled up into the air, in the exact manner he had lifted her. All *mi’shara*, he’d learned from Wynn, had some degree of Psionic power, the ability to exert control or effect change on reality with nothing but the power of the mind. It was a side effect of being what they were, since they were creatures who were just outside the natural order of things, and could command that natural order in unnatural ways. Most of the training he’d received was on how to use this power.

He should have known! Spyder could exert her will against reality, just as Mother Wynn had taught *him*! She knew how to reach beyond her granted power as a *mi’shara* and touch on the power to affect reality with her mind alone, and she had learned to do it on her own! “Then I will refrain from using the powers of the mind I have mastered over my lifespan. Weapons and magic only is fine with me.”

“So *that’s* how you disappear without using magic!” Tarrin realized with a laugh.

She nodded. “Anyone who lives as long as I have cannot help but develop Psionic power. But my question, brother, is who taught you?”

“Mother Wynn,” he said, putting her down. She put him down in return, and then brought her chain up.

“There will be time enough to catch up afterwards,” she told him. “Don’t keep me waiting any longer.”

“This won’t take long.”

“Promises, promises,” she taunted, crooking a finger at him.

There was no feeling out, no signal, no warning. Tarrin was upon her in an instant, and from the first chiming *tang* of steel against the harmonic crystal of his staff, he knew she would be the most dangerous foe he had ever faced. She was as fast as Allia, and moved with sinuous grace and strength. In the blink of an eye, that taut section of chain blocked seven strikes of the staff from various angles, almost impossible ones, high low high low low high low as the staff moved with such blazing speed it looked like a rainbow of light captured in his paws. Spyder slithered back and lashed out with both ends of her chain, which caused him to weave and dodge, contorting himself even as he struck back with his staff. End grip flowed into center grip and back to end grip as the two traded furious, mind-numbingly fast series of strikes, which Spyder blocked

and Tarrin evaded. Spyder flowed through her forms like living water, her entire body moving with a strange, hypnotic kind of rhythm that he realized what kept the chain moving, kept it dangerous. Her entire body moved in harmony with that twenty span length of chain, and she was as much a weapon as it was. He found that out the hard way as he evaded several whizzing chain ends, as she seemed to bobble and teeter in the middle, then he felt his breath try to whoosh out of his lungs when her booted foot slammed into his ribs. He reacted with his unnatural strength, tensing his muscles even as her foot tried to drive into him, resisting the force of the blow. She rebounded and lashed both ends of the chain at his head from opposite sides, but he responded by evading the left weight and snapping his staff out to catch the right side. The weighted end wrapped around his staff and snagged tight, and the instant it did, he yanked as hard as he could to try to rip the weapon out of her hands.

She simply came with it. She vaulted into the air when he yanked and let his pull drag her along. Tarrin raised a foot and slammed it into her leg in defense, kicking her backwards and out to the length of the chain, which prevented her from going any further. She let more slack out and pulled back in, spinning, and he barely got his foot up to intercept her own. He blocked three kicks with his leg, bent back to evade the weighted end of the other side of the chain, then his back twisted in an unnatural position for a human when she punched him squarely in the midsection with her free hand, all done before her feet even set back on the floor. And the instant those feet were on the floor she knelt and tried to sweep Tarrin's feet out from under him with her shin, but he set his tail on the floor and looped over it, putting a paw down to let him walk over, putting him back out at a safe distance. He stayed low as she tried to hit him with the end of the chain, then she snapped the chain in an odd manner that caused it to release from his staff.

Goddess, she was *good*! It was like fighting a nightmare version of Allia, the ultimate potential his sister would reach one day. But he wasn't frightened at all, he was *eager*.

He slashed forward by springing off his coiled legs, staying almost horizontal and low to the floor, then slammed the staff on the floor and went into a high arc, even as Spyder's chain lashed at the air where he had been. He turned over and swept the staff out before him in a massive arc, so fast it whistled through the air shrilly. Spyder jumped back out of the reach of the weapon and retaliated with her chain, but the Were-cat slithered through the air like a dancer and evaded both weighted ends. His foot came down for just an instant, but that instant was all it took to vault him forward and over the chain as it was whipped back towards her. Tarrin was hoping she'd have to evade her own chain, using the weapon against her, but she simply twisted in an odd manner and got both ends of the weapon back under complete control, spinning on one foot and immediately going from a defensive retreat to another offensive barrage. Tarrin evaded several whizzing weights, slapped one aside with his free paw, then slipped under another strike and whipped his staff forward. Spyder did a move he had never seen before, some kind of sideways cartwheeling flip as she flipped over his staff and pulled back the chain. Tarrin felt both lengths hit him in the back, but while one rebounded off, the other wrapped around his left bicep and pulled taut.

The second her feet hit the ground, she yanked, but Tarrin had that half second to set his feet to prevent her from pulling him off balance. She tugged on his caught arm as he took his staff in one paw and slid down to the end, holding it like a sword, but she displayed amazing command of the chain as she kept the tension on his arm even as she blocked savage blows from the staff with the rest of its length. Tarrin grabbed the chain cinching his arm and started wrapping it around his paw, robbing her of the command of her weapon, just reeling her in.

Or so he thought. With amazing speed, she slipped forward as he recovered from another heavy blow of the staff, and wrapped the other end of her chain around his right wrist, then ducked under his left arm and twisted the chain together, effectively tying his paws. But she found out that the three limbs Tarrin had unfettered were more than enough. His legs and tail blocked a flurry of punches and kicks, as Spyder kept the tension on the chain to keep him tied while battering at him with her free arm and legs. At one point she landed on his knee and vaulted up over his head, both her feet coming down on the back of his neck, and then she kicked off of him, trying to stagger him forward even as she pulled on the chain, a move with upward

leverage that would cancel his strength advantage and put him on his back; his strength meant nothing if he had nothing to push against, no ground as an anchor. But she underestimated his claws. He could see what she tried to do, pull him *up* so he couldn't use his strength, but his claws dug in and held him on the floor, and that gave him the leverage to pull back with his arms. Spyder was pulled short in midair by the chain, nearly coming down on her backside, and it slackened the chain enough for him to slip free of it. He turned and was on Spyder in half a second, but that was all she needed to regain her balance and have enough chain in her hands to use as a shield against him. The chiming *tang* of steel on crystal echoed off the walls of the chamber as Spyder expertly fended off the staff, but she suddenly pulled back and held her arms out, presenting the chain as the staff whizzed in towards it, then quickly and deftly wrapped the chain around the end of the staff. Tarrin reacted instantly from his hold in the end grip and weaved the staff's tip to and fro, up and down as Spyder pulled in the slack, but she kept the chain in place. She then, to his surprise, used the chain's grip on the staff as a fulcrum. Her feet left the ground and she lashed them at him. Two solid kicks struck him right in the back of his right paw, but where that would have numbed the grip of a human, it barely made Tarrin twitch.

But that wasn't even half of her bizarre move. The chain's end had been hooked into her own feet, and when she lifted up using his own staff, the end of that chain skittered forward, kicked forward by her leg. It hit Tarrin in the ankles and wrapped around, and after kicking him in the paw, clearly a feint, her foot came down behind the chain and she kicked backwards, locking it around his foot. She pulled *hard* on the chain as soon as she had leverage, and despite his strength, he found his foot coming out from under him.

Again, he was saved by his tail. The long appendage slapped down onto the floor and stabilized him, kept him from falling flat on his back, allowing him to twist over his own tail and get his chest down towards the ground. The tail gave him a stable base, and gave him a point of leverage to apply force. He pulled back with his foot as his paw hit the floor, his legs over the back of his head as his spine bent at an unnatural angle for anyone but a Were-cat. Despite the twisted nature of his body, he was able to pull back with considerable power, yanking his foot free of the binding chain. She'd slackened the chain around his staff to try to pull him off his feet, so he pulled completely free of her and backed off a second to regroup.

Goddess, was she dangerous with that thing! But, after getting to see her use it, he was starting to see how it was going to move when she moved in certain ways. And some of them were subtle, like the slight flare of her hip which made the chain seemed to curve back in on its own path. That gave him at least some ability to predict, which was something that was very hard to do with her. He did, however, see one mistake he was making. By evading the chain, he was just giving her a chance to set him up by allowing her to be the one in control. He had to take that back, make her be the one on the defensive.

Tarrin took the staff up in the center grip and gave her a narrow-eyed stare, his ears fully back and his tail slashing the air behind him.

She waded in without fear, but quickly found that Tarrin was not quite so easy now. Instead of weaving and dodging her chain ends, he instead blocked them, striking them hard and fast with his staff, using it as a defensive shield. He struck only the weights, and struck them with so much force that the entire length of chain was knocked back and away, taking it out of her control and forcing her to regain control of the weapon. That was the flaw in her choice of weapons, he realized. The chain was a weapon of low control, and if the control was taken away, then the one using it had to invest time and effort to regain control of the weapon. And in a fight like this, the split second it would take her to regain control would not be good. Spyder gave ground to him as he pressed her, beating back the ends of her chain, the two ends of his staff moving with blazing speed, almost seeming as if they were no longer connected in the middle. But Spyder didn't retreat for long, and came storming back by shortening the ends of the chain and using much faster, more precise strikes that allowed her almost instant recovery of her wayward weapon if he deflected it. Tarrin knocked aside a weight and reversed the staff, swinging for Spyder's head, but she ducked under it and coiled her hand in the chain, then punched at his solarplexus. He twisted aside and slashed at her legs with his tail, but she struck his tail with the end of her chain with enough force to make half of it go numb,

which didn't give it the rigidity to sweep her feet. It instead bounced off her leg harmlessly. She followed up with a straight kick at his side, but he moved with his momentum, slid around her foot, turned, lifted his foot, and then kicked straight up, performing the powerful standing split kick that had laid out more than one opponent over the years. Claws leading, his foot screamed right towards Spyder's chin, but she got her hands out to catch the blow. It kept him from kicking her under the chin, but the raw power of the attack sent her flying. When Tarrin's foot was fully extended, claws out and up and his head looking around his body to see where she was going—he knew he hadn't connected when he felt the cold metal of the chain against the pads of his feet—Spyder twisted in midair and got her feet back underneath her. Before she even landed, she lashed out with the chain towards Tarrin's raised foot, but he was ready for it. He pulled his foot down even as he reacted with his staff, and he whipped the staff up and over his own foot, striking the chain and knocking it away before it could snag his raised foot and put him in a *very* bad situation.

“Enough play,” Spyder said, her eyes filling with brilliant white light as she set her will against the Weave, and it flooded into her. Her hands limned over with Magelight, and Tarrin extended his wings defensively, flaring them out to their full glorious breadth, then they too flooded with white light as he set his will against the Weave, filling with power.

It was taken to a level few could even dream to attain. Ch'Belle, Wynn, and Sashi watched in mute awe as two masters of combat introduced a new wild card into the fray, and they traded magical blows even as they traded attacks of chain and staff. Wild weaves of battlemagic raged between the two as spells were woven and released, and then were taken apart, and the flows even rewoven to use against the originator. In the span of a second, Spyder attacked him with six different weaves, showing an astounding ability to weave multiple weaves at once and use each one independently, but Tarrin showed that he was truly one of Syder's best pupils. Wild stray magic flittered away from the pair as the air around them erupted into magical saturation, as weaves passed back and forth. A Black Doom weave was intercepted and had its Air fizzled out of it, then reorganized and sent back through the link between weaves and weaver as a Blast weave. The Blast was rewoven as a Burning Breath by overcharging the Fire flows and shifting the Divine in the weave. The same flows found themselves woven and rewoven and rewoven as two *sui'kun* scrabbled at every iota of power, every flow in every strand around them, literally disassembling the strands connecting the gate chamber to the Weave to use their power and their flows. And while all that went on, Tarrin continued to press Spyder with his staff, forcing her to duck and weave and block his weapon, even as he slapped aside the ends of her chain and either blocked or avoided her sinuous kicks and chain-wrapped fists.

The Weave around the gate chamber began to waver, and then to get unstable as the two of them raged back and forth, unleashing more power at each other than most could have withstood for more than a split second, showing the three onlookers what it looked like when true titans faced each other on the field of battle. Each of them adjusted quickly and fluidly to the instability around them, even using it to their advantage, as shaky flows were woven into spells as nothing but traps, which would reset the weaving into a new spell if one tried to take it apart. Neither of them were even thinking anymore, acting on pure instinct, impulse, the honed reflexes and conditioning of two who had been born for battle, trained to fight, and were the best there was at what they did.

Period.

It wasn't a mistake from either of them that tipped things in an unexpected direction, it was the simple fact that the Weave could not sustain such power for such a length of time. Haven was built on a strong Conduit, but still, Haven was not near a major Conduit, and the Weave in this place could only handle so much. They'd gone well beyond *too much* already. The Weave shuddered, and then the spells that both of them were weaving suddenly flinched, and then exploded as Wildstrikes as the strand both of them were using *snapped* from the strain. The backlash of the broken strand fed back into the Weave, but the Wildstrikes enveloped both Tarrin and Spyder, threatening them. In an instant, two combatants that had been savagely attacking each other moved in perfect unison and graceful harmony, gathering up the power and containing it, and then using it. They built two halves of the same weave using that wild magic, untangling

the mass of confused flows and reorganizing them, and they brought those two halves together. The spell snapped down and released, which completely nullified all of the wild magic in the room, then Spyder caused both of them to vanish from the gate chamber by using her Psionic gifts.

“Where did they go?” Sashi said in surprise.

Wynn looked to her left. “Suld,” she answered. “Gather in, duckies, I’ll get us there in a hop. We can’t miss this!”

They appeared on the sandy training field used by the cadets of the Academy, and not even a second was wasted before they were at each other again. For every blow of a weapon, five spells were traded between them, and were defended against, reworked into a new weave, or deflected away. Neither of them really registered the change of location; Spyder had moved them insidiously, moving to a place that could handle the power they were using, and though they saw where they were, it hadn’t impacted their conscious minds. For long moments the two raged against each other, as flashes of light, gusts of icy wind, sprays of acidic slime, and blasts of raw magical power spiralled away from them, spells either randomly created from the flux of flows orbiting the pair or spells actively built and then released. Those flows drifted about them, sometimes connecting and fizzling each other, which introduced a random element into the battle as flows within weaves had tail ends hanging out there in space, which could fizzle when contacting another flow of the same Sphere. Tarrin parried a dazzling series of slashes of those weighted chain ends, then pivoted into a thrust of his staff to her midsection, which she evaded by twisting aside. She again wrapped the chain around the end of the staff, but Tarrin released a latent weave hidden in the staff that electrified it, sending a powerful blast of lightning up into the chain. Spyder shielded herself with a weave of Air and Water, bleeding the lightning away and to ground, but Tarrin twisted his staff in a tight circle to loosen the chain, then pushed it and her away. He brought his crystal visor from the *elsewhere*, it appearing already on his face, then he snapped out his wings as a quickly woven weave of pure Air kicked all the sand in the pit up into the air, forming a miniature sandstorm that flayed at exposed skin and threatened to damage eyes and clog airways. Spyder built a weave around her that made every grain of sand *stop*, then raced straight at Tarrin, seeking to entomb him. He responded by Transmuting all the sand to water, again concealing his form, but then the foggy cloud around him exploded into reddish light. Spyder danced back as lashes of living fire erupted from the cloud, a writhing mass of tendrils from his wings. She avoided them all with dazzling agility, then sliced into the cloud low and fast as they retreated. A single hand on the ground made the ground under them explode violently, sending both of them catapulting into the air. Tarrin stabilized himself using his innate power to fly and used that brief respite to regather himself and gather up a *huge* amount of flows around him. He wove them into sixteen separate spells in the blink of an eye, then unleashed them at Spyder even as he dove at her, staff leading.

She reacted with brilliant speed, killing every spell but two, then taking those apart and reweaving them into hammers of Air that struck at Tarrin, even as she wove two more spells behind those distracting attacks and gave slack to one side of her chain. Tarrin fizzled out the two hammers by tapping the Earth flows in them, killed every spell she sent at him, then struck at Spyder with his staff. She intercepted with her chain, causing a loud *tang* to echo over the grounds, but the staff was just a feint. Tarrin curled around the staff and sent both feet towards her in a powerful driving kick, but Spyder snared both feet with the slack end of the chain and yanked as she slipped away, jarring him off target. He pulled up before hitting the ground, hovering in midair, then realized that her chain was still wrapped around his feet. He then surprised Spyder by spinning at high speed in midair, which reeled her chain in around his ankles so quickly she almost lost a finger. She was forced to let go, and Tarrin collected up her weapon, taking it from her.

It wasn’t quite the victorious move. The chain began to writhe like a snake, moving on its own, and it quickly started climbing up his body, trying to constrict him. He shifted into cat form quickly, taking the chain by surprise, dropped out of its coils, then returned to his normal form. The instant he did so, he had to fend off a dizzying assault of both magic and fists as Spyder pressed him, trying to get to him before he could shapeshift out of cat form. He evaded or blocked a series of kicks and punches that had the Dance written all

of them, Spyder's hands leaving trails of wispy Magelight behind them as they moved.

Magelight!

Tarrin backed up a single step, ducked under a kick, slapped aside another kick, then waited for it. He knocked aside a blazing bolt of magical energy, picked apart a Summer's Drought weave that would have sought to steal the water from his blood, then saw it coming. He intercepted her fist, catching it in his open palm, and in that contact, there was a huge explosion of released power, as the magical power in both Tarrin and Spyder found quick escape, the flows of them connecting and bleeding out. The move would do neither any harm nor really stop their ability to use magic, but getting hit with something like that never failed to hurt.

Tarrin was prepared for it. Spyder was not.

But the surprise was Tarrin's, for Spyder did not flinch, did not miss a step, did not show any sign that the trick had affected her in any way. She simply punched him dead in the jaw with her other hand, snapping his head back, then kicked him in the pit of his stomach, staggering him back. But Tarrin didn't reel for more than a half second, spinning around and whipping his tail around. The long appendage, the longest he had, was just long enough. The very end of it hit Spyder in the face, and the impact sent her staggering to the side. He came around with his staff leading, held at the very end, and with a mighty sweep, he caught her just under the ribs with a heavy, crunching blow. She was picked up and flung nearly ten spans from the raw power of the blow, but she flipped over and landed lightly on her feet, even as her chain slithered across the ground and rose up to her waiting hand. The other end suddenly grabbed Tarrin around the ankle, surprising him, and then she yanked.

He used his power to fly to keep from falling over, but she seemed to expect that. Tarrin dealt with a raw jumble of weaving that came at him, a chaotic mess that had no purpose or function that he could see, pushing it back as Spyder surged right through it. When she did, the flows that touched her connected with the power within her fizzling out, which caused the entire mass to suddenly shudder, then collapse into a coherent weave, a weave that suddenly intensified gravity all around them. Tarrin suddenly felt like he weighed a thousand stones, the sudden weight driving him to the ground, his knees buckling as his inhuman strength fought against the magical gravity. The gravity didn't seem to affect Spyder, who had jumped up and lunged at him, but he saw that she wasn't lunging *at* him, she was jumping *over* him.

He puzzled out the attack immediately. He attacked the integrity of her weaving and found it would take too long to pick apart. By the time he did, she'd be over him, and the weave would affect *her*. It would be like a thousand stone boulder dropping on him, and that was something he didn't think he could overcome. He reacted quickly, reaching within, though the Cat, and touched the boundless power of the All. The All saw his image, read his intent, but then was stalled as a series of images and intents rolled through his mind, as he set up a multistep spell, and then the spell triggered. She got into the effect of her weave, and then dropped like a thousand stone boulder right at him, leading with a chain-wrapped fist.

She passed *through* Tarrin Kael as if he were a ghost.

The impact with the ground was impressive. A cloud of dust rose up from the massive impact, shaking the ground for a thousand spans in every direction. As the dust cleared, Spyder knelt in a five span wide shallow crater created by her impact, her fist a span deep in the ground. Spyder laughed lightly, then gave Tarrin an evil, almost predatory smile. He backed up, but then she pulled her hand from the ground, took the chain in both hands, and yanked.

The chain was still wrapped around his ankle, and it kept hold, even in his phased state. It pulled him off his feet, and instead of falling to the ground, he instead fell *into* the ground, for the Druid spell allowing him to pass through matter was still affecting him. But he solved that problem by shapeshifting once more,

freeing his leg, and then shifting back, all done while phased and under the earth.

Spyder backed up, looking to and fro, gathering herself, her entire body limning over in Magelight as she prepared. Tarrin was still down there, under the ground, and he was setting something up.

The ground began to shiver. Then it began to tremble. Then it began to heave like the rolling sea.

Then it exploded. Spyder used Sorcery to rise up and away as a fountain of earth and rock blasted right from where she'd been standing, and Tarrin Kael emerged, wings spread. Spinning bits of earth and rock rose up with him as he rose up and over Spyder, but then those little bits of earth *changed*, taking on the form of small, winged little creatures. Earth Mephits. A *swarm* of them, all summoned by Druidic magic. Tarrin pointed at Spyder, and fifty small Earth spirits raced at her, gibbering with slaty voices, diamond-tipped claws outreached and seeking to grab hold of her. Spyder swept them all away with a lash of her chain charged with Sorcery, dispelling them back to their home plane, but Tarrin came right in behind them with an avalanche of grinding stones and earth following. He pulled up suddenly as the avalanche passed by, then lashed out with a scythe of air that cut through them as it screamed at her, then wove a chaotic mass of flows behind her and on each side, flows that did nothing. That finished, he dove at her, wings back and folded, staff leading.

Spyder reacted quickly and measuredly to the multiple threats. She burned out the Fire flows in the weaving behind her, seeing that it was a trap daring her to intercept the air scythe. The weaving had been set so it would self-fizzle and collapse into another spell, where the air scythe's Air flows would have *prevented* it, to protect Tarrin from his own trap as he charged her. Spyder's action caused the traps to explode into a blast of pure force, force that deflected the avalanche of rocks, but did not stop Tarrin, who punched through it and struck at her with his staff, with so much momentum that she would be hard pressed to block it.

She instead slipped to the side, then raised a hand, palm out, at his exposed flank. But then her eyes widened in surprise when the Magelight faded from her hand. Tarrin's glow of Magelight also faded, and he landed in surprised confusion.

"That's about enough of that, you two!" Niami's voice chastised through the Weave. *"Look what you've done to the Knight's training field! It was fun to watch before you started taking apart the local geography, but you're taking it too far! If you knock over one of my towers, I'm going to take it out of your hides! Now fix your mess, and if you want to continue with this game, either take it somewhere else or do it without Sorcery!"*

Tarrin and Spyder looked at each other, then Spyder spluttered into helpless laughter. "I think we've been spanked," she told him, which made him laugh as well.

They looked around, and couldn't deny Niami's accusations. There was now a smoking crater where the Knights trained their cadets, and boulders and mounds of earth were scattered all over the usually manicured lawn. Little licks of fire, patches of ice, and scarred pits were interspersed among them, the victims of wild bits of magic that had bled away from the pair.

And at a safe distance, a large crowd stood, watching the two of them fight. There were even Sorcerers on the balconies of the ring towers, getting a bird's eye view of the show.

"I think we went a bit far," Tarrin noted, which made Spyder laugh. "So, who won?"

"I scored more hits than you," Spyder told him lightly. "But you were holding back. You didn't use your Druidic gifts."

“I didn’t want to. I wanted to face you head to head with nothing but fighting and Sorcery, to see who was the better. Druidic magic would have opened the floodgates for us to use everything else, and I wanted to keep it simple.”

“I told you not to hold back.”

“If I’d have done that, we’d never have used magic at all, sister. I could have blocked it, and that would have been no real challenge for either of us. Besides, in a purely physical fight, I think you’d win, so I didn’t want to disappoint you. You’re just too good with that chain.”

“Ah. True. So you wished to give me the fight I wanted, instead of a real fight.”

“Well,” he hedged, but she simply laughed.

“Brother, I truly adore you for making me happy,” she assured him. “I’m not angry at all. By the way, your use of Sorcery was masterful, brother. Truly, you have become the equal to your teacher in the art.”

“It wasn’t good enough. You forced me to resort to Druidic magic, which would have put me back into the position of facing a more skilled opponent weapon to weapon,” he admitted. “I yield to your superior skill, sister. Even if I’d have held nothing back, and you held nothing back, I think you would have still won. Even if I channeled Sorcery through the All while denying you Sorcery, I think your Psionic powers would have beaten me. I’m not really very good at them yet, I’m still learning. Either holding back or all-out, sister, you’re the better. You win.”

She looked at him, laughed, then jumped up and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. “Now, let us put things back to right, and you can go see your family.”

It became a national holiday.

The entire kingdom of Sulasia celebrated Tarrin Kael’s return, and word of the legendary Were-cat’s return home spread across the entire world like wildfire. Some took the news happily, some didn’t care, and others started sharpening their silvered swords in anticipation.

But for Tarrin, it was the almost the end of a long, long journey. For decades, he had been out there in the multiverse, basically doing the dirty work of the God of Gods, an enigmatic being that Tarrin had become less sensitive to over that time. His relationship with Him was in a way sort of personal, since they received their orders from Him, but He did keep his distance, and didn’t ever let them forget just who He was. It was very much different than his relationship with Niami. There was a feeling of *closeness*, something that made him feel oddly giddy at times, but He kept a line in the sand between Himself and his *mi’shara*, and that line kept things in perspective. Though He did care about the welfare of His servants, they all knew just that, that they *served* Him.

But that was over...for now at least Tarrin had been given the choice to stay and continue his work, or go home, and he had opted to go home with the condition that from time to time, He could call Tarrin back into service to help Wynn and Sashi with particularly challenging assignments. This, Tarrin rather liked. It allowed him to enjoy his family and have his freedom, but also let him test himself and push the limits of his power, challenge him with the tough work that they did for Him...and also feel like he was useful for something important.

For now, though, that was done. In fact, all of them had been given time off for work well done, and it was time to rest.

The reunion took place on the destroyed field where he and Spyder had been fighting, even as they were repairing all the damage. Mist was the first to reach him, crushing him in a fierce embrace, and Triana was close behind, putting her paws on his shoulders in welcome. The others all surged to him by then, and he found himself hugging, shaking hands, surrounded by dear friends and family. It seemed complete when Fireflash landed on his shoulder so hard he almost broke his little neck, rubbing his horned head against his neck with ecstatic enthusiasm. It took him almost an hour to greet each and every one of his family and friends properly, all right there on the field, a field which Spyder quietly completed repairing and then withdrew, returning to Haven.

The meeting between Tarrin and Shaz was interesting. Shaz glared darkly at him when Azakar reached them, but said nothing, just holding back. But when Tarrin approached her, her defiant demeanor melted away into a more submissive posture, and she looked away from him pointedly. But when he walked away from her, she couldn't help but look at him, and her expression was not quite so hostile.

The others were quite mystified by Wynn, Sashi, and Ch'Belle. The three of them seemed a trifle uncomfortable among so many strangers, but they quickly got introduced around and were accepted when Tarrin explained that they were the ones he said he'd bring. Wynn and Sashi weren't all that conspicuous, but Ch'Belle drove quite a few of them crazy, especially Phandebrass. Right there before them was a real *Deva*, and he couldn't help but to ask her a million questions, even going so far as to brazenly ask her what she did that gave her her black markings, announcing to everyone that Ch'Belle was exiled from her order for misdeeds, which was indescribably rude. Tarrin hustled Phandebrass out of there before Ch'Belle took her mace and smacked Phandebrass upside the head with it. But Jenna was much more interested in Wynn and Sashi, quietly pulling them aside and asking them quite a few very pointed questions, the answers to which almost curled his sister's hair. Wynn was never one to beat around the bush, and he had no doubt that she told Jenna exactly what she asked about, no matter how she might take that news.

The celebration was moved inside when dark clouds gathered on the horizon, and the celebration continued. Tarrin saw everyone, even people he barely knew, names and faces swarming around him, which were lost in the confusing mill of voices and faces. But he wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world, for *everyone* was here, and he hadn't seen them in so long. It continued all day, and got even more interesting when Jesmind appeared. It was the first time Tarrin had seen her in a long time. All his old love for her was there, but, over time, most of the animosity and anger was gone. Between them, he felt, there was nothing but a clean slate. She slinked in quietly, then, while Tarrin was sitting in a chair with Zyri and Jal in his lap, she came up to him. The look on her face was almost heartbreakingly longing, but her worried look became a radiant smile when he offered his paw to her. "Zyri, Jal, I'd like you to meet Jesmind. She's Jasana's mother."

"Hullo, Auntie Jesmind," Zyri said, looking up at her, but Jal simply smiled and nodded.

"It's good to meet you," she said graciously, patting Zyri's shoulder and putting her paw on Jal's head. She glanced over at Mist, who was watching her like a hawk, then cleared her throat. "I don't think this might be the best time. Can I come see you later, Tarrin?"

"You're welcome at the house, Jesmind," he told her kindly. "I have to take my children home and get settled in. You can help. I'm sure I'll have a lot to do."

"I don't want to stay long. Just long enough to catch up," she said with a nod.

Jesmind wasn't the only long lost face in that crowd. Auli was there as well, coming late and scurrying up to Tarrin, then giving him a huge hug. "I just got in from Sharadar," she told him. "It's so good to see you! How are you?"

"Tired," he said. "I heard you came with a *Deva*. Are they keeping an eye on you by sending a

babysitter?”

Tarrin laughed. “No, Ch’Belle’s been helping with something. She’s a lot like you, Auli. She’s the troublemaker among the Deva, if there is such a thing. She’s much more independent and free willed. That’s probably why she was chosen to go with me.”

“You just attract bad girls,” Auli said with a flirtatious wink.

“You should know, Auli,” he said dryly.

“I wish I could stay, but I’m late,” she told him with an excited grin. “I’m going to Pyrosia!”

“Really? Your mother summon you to keep an eye on you?”

“She probably did,” Auli laughed. “But I’ve been asked to come teach. I can’t wait!”

“I thought you’d hate a teaching job.”

“I know, it’s boring and monotonous, but it’s on *another world*, Tarrin! I get to see something new, something exciting! I can put up with teaching for the adventures I can have between classes.”

“Well, just be careful out there, girl,” he said. “Pyrosia’s going to be a little crazy for a while, til things get hammered out.”

“That’s half of what makes it so exciting,” she said with a grin. “I’ll write you and keep you up to date,” she promised.

“Be careful, girl.”

Auli swept out as quickly as she rushed in, but it was a good thing. Give Auli a little excitement, and she was actually a good Sorcerer. It kept her from getting bored.

“That was abrupt,” Sarraya noted. “I’m jealous of her now,” she added.

“You’re your own adventure, Sarraya. You don’t need any help.”

Sarraya looked at him, then laughed.

A grand feast took place that night, and the entire Tower was invited. It was held out on the largest lawn, on hastily set up tables, requiring Jenna to shoo away the rain with Sorcery so they wouldn’t get wet while doing so. Hundreds, even thousands of people, most of which had never met Tarrin, ate a delicious meal and celebrated the holiday, even the Initiates and Novices, who sat in a large knot at the edge of the celebration, happy to have the day off but nervous in such august company. And it was *august*. There were six monarchs attending the feast alone; Keritania, Arren, Shiika, Kallan, Alexis Firehair, regent of Sharadar, and Andos of the Aeradalla, all attending with their husbands or wives, or in Shiika’s case, her bound concubine and father of her next brood of *Cambisi*. If that wasn’t enough, there were princes and nobles by the score, and even more exotic and prestigious attendees, such as Sapphire, Tenshale, and Nightshade, Sathon of the Druids, several races of *Fae-da’Nar*, quite a few Wikuni diplomats, two Vendari dignitaries, and many ambassadors and emissaries that usually attended Arren’s court. Darvon was there, now wearing civilian clothes and looking a trifle uncomfortable in them, who kept looking at Azakar with this look on his face that made one wonder if he retired by choice or if Karas told him it was time.

And there was one other visitor, one that Tarrin's sharp eyes caught in the crowd, someone he just had to go talk to. He excused himself and padded down long tables as musicians entertained, and sat down across the table from a nondescript silver fox Wikuni named Cassiter, a tailor by trade who was rather well known in the city for good products at reasonable prices. "I remember you," Tarrin told him. "You made me clothes once, when I was human."

"I'm not surprised that you do," he said with a slight smile. "Thank you for the invitation. I rarely find time to enjoy the simpler pleasures in life. Food, music, and the company of those who have joy in their hearts. It's been quite nice."

He leaned in a little. "Do Wynn or the others know?"

"Of course not," he answered before putting another spoon of stew in his mouth. "Ch'Belle can't even see me. Enjoy your vacation, my son. When I need you, you'll know. When that happens, come to me, don't go back. I'll explain everything here."

"I'd hope it won't be for a while."

"No, you all managed to clear the backlog, I don't think anything's going to come up for a while. So rest easy."

"I will. By the way, thank you. For everything."

"Any time, my son. Now go on, you just got home, they're not going to let you wander very far for a while."

He chuckled, standing up. "I think you're right about that."

The night passed in simple pleasure, as Tarrin, Wynn, Sashi, and Ch'Belle described much of what they'd been doing out there while Tarrin was gone, without going into too much detail. Wynn demonstrated her amazing Psionic talents, which astounded even hearty Sennadites who were used to earth-shaking magic, and were even more surprised when Wynn explained that over half of Tarrin's time had been taken up in training. "He's a psionic, same as me," she explained. "That boy has so many talents he doesn't know what to do with them all," she added with a cackle. "I've been teaching him up so he doesn't hurt himself. He's been a good student."

"Are you really that old?" Zyri asked, then blushed. "I mean, I'm sure you could make yourself look different. Why stay old?"

"Aye, girl, I could make myself look like a young lass, but I've found that many of the kinds of people I deal with underestimate an old woman. I'll take that advantage."

"So it's a trick."

"Halfway," she nodded. "I *am* really old, so pretending to be a young girl like Sashi just wouldn't suit me."

"Sashi, are you a psy—psi—psi—"

"Psionic? Yes, dove," she said with a nod. "I'm not as strong as Mother Wynn, but I have a few tricks. The power's a little different in each of us, honey. What Mother Wynn is good at isn't the same as what I'm good at, so together we make a pretty good team. We complement each other pretty well."

“And the young buck’s been a good addition. He has the physical power and ability to get nasty with folks we don’t, since we’re just an old woman and a young girl,” Wynn said with a deceptive smile. “We needed a pair of wide shoulders, and we found a good one.”

“So you’re leaving again when they go back, father?” Zyri said worriedly.

“No, cub, I’m home to stay. I’ve agreed to go give them a hand when they need it, though.”

“Besides, we all have a break, honey,” Sashi added. “We’ve been given ten years off. None of us have to go back for quite a while. I intend to sleep for half of it,” Sashi said dreamily.

“See? Plenty of time,” Tarrin told her, hugging her a little.

“When are we going home?” Mist asked directly.

“Tomorrow,” he answered. “We can put up anyone who wants to visit at the house or the farm.”

“That works for me, since I still have a ways to go with this one,” Triana said, patting Jasana on the shoulder. “She doesn’t want to listen.”

“You don’t want to teach fast enough. Oww!” she complained after Triana slapped the back of her head.

“I must have so much dust in my tower,” Kimmie sighed.

“Is Anayi coming back to apprentice?”

Kimmie nodded. “She’s taking some lessons from Phandebrass and Kyrienna right now, then she’ll be back.”

“Mother, can I be your apprentice too?” Rina blurted. “I’ve already learned a little.”

“Of course you can, dear, just as soon as you finish the Initiate.”

“They’re out of the Initiate,” Jenna announced. “They’ll finish their lessons with me and Tarrin teaching them. I’m sure he’ll do it right when I’m not there,” she winked.

“I can try,” he said dryly.

“You’re out too, kitling,” Jenna told Zyri. “You get private tutoring from here out. Just me, your father, and Julia.”

“Goodie. What about Jal?”

“His teacher is going to be ferried out every day to train him,” Jenna answered. “But he’s come a long way already.”

Jal held up his hands, and produced a rose made of ice, exquisite in detail, then handed it to the Keeper.

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” she smiled at him. “See? These get more and more beautiful every time. He’s really come far. I think this one is a keeper, hon,” she told him, then Transmuted the ice into crystal. “There. Now it won’t melt.”

Jal smiled shyly.

That night, though, Tarrin found himself a little restless. He wandered the halls a while, but ended up on a public balcony overlooking the seaward side of the city, showing the harbor lit by a full Dommammon. He put his paws on the rail and took in the view, and then sighed and let it all soak in. He was home. He was done. His task was complete, and now, finally, at long last, he was *free*.

Such a thrilling word, that. Free. Free to do whatever he wanted, free to go anywhere he wanted, free, for the first time in his life, to pursue whatever made him happy. He thought he'd been free after destroying Val, but he realized that he'd just been waiting, simply wasting time, amusing himself while always feeling that there was more out there...he just didn't know what. Well, that was done now, and for the first time in his life, he looked into a moonlit night and knew that from here out, no matter what he did, no matter where he went, no matter who was with him, it was all his own choice, that the path laying before him *was not set for him*.

And what would he do with his first step down this unknown, exciting, slightly scary path?

He would go home.

"I thought I'd find you up here eventually," Camara Tal said as she came out onto the balcony. She was wearing nothing but a white robe, which strained to contain her formidable bosom.

"You always did seem to know where to look for me," Tarrin chuckled. "Do you think we did well, Camara?"

"I think we did," she answered. "It was quite a long run, wasn't it?"

"Sometimes it was too long, I think," he said. "When are you going home?"

"Tomorrow, I think. I'll come visit you at home after you have some time to settle in."

"You have some work to do at home," he said, glancing at her.

She laughed and patted her belly. "I know, I know. I just found out around sunset. It's a boy."

"A boy? You must be disappointed."

"I could never be disappointed any child given to me by Koran," she said with simple contentment.

"Well, congratulations, Camara. You're catching up to Tiella."

"All she has to do is let Dar impregnate her all the time," Camara grunted. "Some of us have jobs. Besides, it's not Tiella I have to catch up with."

Tarrin laughed. "Well, I cheated. It's easier for me to have more kids than anyone else, given I have three mates."

"Well, I'll just take that as a challenge. I'm so far behind as it is. I'm nearly thirty eight, and only have one child and one on the way. That's pathetic."

"You said it yourself, Camara. You're busy. It's not easy being a High Priestess and juggling a home life at the same time."

“You’d think I’d find more time. It doesn’t take long, after all.”

“Then you need to give Koran more training.”

She looked at him harshly, then laughed. “So, what now for the legendary Tarrin Kael?”

“Peace and quiet,” he answered fervently. “I’m too old for this nonsense anymore.”

“Boy, you’re younger than me.”

“Not anymore. I’m about eighty now, Camara. The time I spent out there was different than time here. I was only gone from here a few months, but out there, in that other place, it was nearly fifty years. But I’m still just a baby compared to some.”

Camara laughed. “No, you’re no baby, Tarrin. And what happens after you get restless? I know you too well, old friend. Peace and quiet is only good for you for so long.”

“Oh, I’ll think of something,” he told her. “It’s a big wide world out there, Camara. And now, finally, if I want to, I can go out and *experience* it.”

She gave him a long look, then put her hand on his white-furred forearm. “Well, when you do, don’t forget us. I may be getting on in years, but I’d love to go with you.”

Tarrin patted her hand fondly. “Old friend, what fun would an adventure be without friends there to enjoy it with you?”

Dawn.

The sun rose over the familiar trees on the edge of the meadow, and warm autumn sunshine radiated down upon a large house built, literally, in the middle of the forest, in a small clearing with a little burbling brook flowing along its southern reach. It was a house that held many secrets, and had stood alone, waiting, for many months.

But that wait was over. On the west edge of the clearing stood an odd assortment of creatures. The master of the house, Tarrin Kael, had finally returned, and with him were his mate, children, sisters, and his closest friends, as well as new additions to the house. The two human children stood and looked on in wonder at the house that would be their home, and the Firewing Pegasus, Fury, snorted and nudged Tarrin’s back with her snout as Fireflash rode atop her head. Kimmie and Anayi, Triana and Saraya, Dolanna and Haley, Jenna, Eron and Elke Kael, Keritanima, Rallix, and Faalken, and Allia, Allyn, and Kor, Tomas, Janine, and Janette, and the family Hellhounds, Shadow, Forge, Siwa, and Brand, they were with all with him, the core of the family, the family that was to reclaim residence in this, Tarrin’s gift from his goddess, his home. There were others as well, though. Mother Wynn, Sashi, and Ch’Belle were with them, guests

Things had come full circle. There was a time, long ago, when he stood looking at this house, and finding himself in awe of it, feeling that his journey was complete. But that had been an illusion, a false hope, because he had not completed his task. That task was over now, though. The Firestaff was destroyed, all vestiges of its power had been scoured from the universe, leaving behind nothing but its memory, a mortal who had once been its thrall, and a black metal sword that had once been the artifact of that power. All of it was gone, though. Nothing was left but the memories.

Not all of them were bad, though. Tarrin was sure the Firestaff would be furious to know what happened in the end, that the divine part it helped create now governed a world, now represented harmony

and order instead of chaos and destruction. The Firestaff had been a destroyer, but in its own way, it helped foster creation in its wake. And perhaps, that was it was all about. But it had become too dangerous, being on Sennadar and refusing to leave, so Entropy had raised its hand against its own creation and removed it permanently.

All that was over now. The path Tarrin had walked since before he was born was behind him, and now there was nothing but his choices, his decisions. Finally, he was *free*.

It was the first day of the rest of his life. It certainly wouldn't be boring. He was sure that He would be calling on him from time to time to help Mother Wynn, Sashi, and Ch'Belle, so there would always be the potential to use all his gifts and his training and his power constructively, for something that *mattered*. And between those adventures, he would have all the time in the world to be happy. He had children to raise, family to watch over, and friends to keep in touch with.

His life was rich in family and friends and the love they shared, and more than power, more than gold, more than anything else, that was the one thing that mattered most in the universe. Tarrin knew, he'd seen it for himself.

For the first time in his life, he felt...ready. He was ready to take that first step down this unfamiliar path, a path whose ending was Tarrin's own choice and decision. He was ready to be his own man, ready to make his way without help or the confining limits of a path chosen for him.

As the rest of the family rushed into the house to unpack that which had been stored away and brought from the Tower, Tarrin instead decided to sit on the rocker on the porch before going in. There would be time for that other stuff later, and besides, he really liked his rocking chair. He sat there and watched the sun rise, just revelling in the last quiet moment he'd have for a while. He could hear them in there, as Mist told them were to drop things and told the visitors which rooms they could have upstairs while the cubs and Zyri darted this way and that, as Tara and Rina showed Zyri all around, and Kimmie and Triana barked at them. He could hear Janine boasting that Deris had taught her how to cook, and she'd handle lunch, heard Faalken playing with Kor already. He heard voices of loved ones, he heard idle chatter, he heard laughter.

He heard his life. It was just inside that door, and there was nothing sweeter in the whole world.

Jal came out and climbed into his lap. He sat with the boy for a long moment in comfortable silence, then Tarrin patted him on the chest. "There it is, Jal," he said quietly. "The sun rising on the first day of the rest of your life. And I promise, I'll do everything I can to make it a happy one."

Jal twisted around and looked up at him, and smiled. He reached up and touched Tarrin's face, then opened his mouth.

"I love you, father."

Tarrin gave a start, then laughed and hugged the human he had taken as his own. "I love you too, Jal. Welcome home."

Epilogue

The plane of Nirvana was the plane of absolute order.

Infinite in size, endless in scope, it was the plane where order ruled everything. In this place, there were exact equal portions of light and dark. There were exact equal portions of land and air, and there were exact portions of water and land. All land and water were concentrated into vast discs with toothed edges which locked together and slowly turned, turning the grand clock which ruled the entire multiverse, the ultimate time. Some of those discs were small, the size of a noble's estate, but some were so huge that it would take a man on foot years to traverse from one side to the other. This was the home plane of the Modrons, the beings of ultimate order, whose leader Primus guided the working of the plane with the light surrounding his right hand and the darkness surrounding his left.

Nirvana was the home of many gods, Archons, upper dimensional beings, and even some mortals. But on one disc, far from the disc of the Modrons, was the largest disc of its kind in its part of Nirvana, the home realm of Niami, the Prime Elder Goddess of magic, one of the ten Elder Gods of Sennadar. Formidable was her power, vast and terrible, a power so great that no other beings lived on any disc around her for fear of that power. Nirvana was the realm of ultimate order, but where there was peace, also was there violence, in equal measures. All feared the power of Niami and would not settle near her, for fear that her wrath might find them.

It was a misgiven reputation to be sure, for Niami was actually a quite agreeable goddess. Her realm, populated by the souls of the mortals who followed her in life, her *katzh-dashi*, was a very peaceful, orderly place filled with gentle love and quiet peace, the reward for her children who had given so much to her in life, that she returned that devotion and gave so much to them when they were brought to her by Dakkii.

She was there, as she always was. Like all Prime gods, she was restricted to her home realm by the Overgod, but in her realm her power was absolute. Her vast disc, larger than worlds, was her personal vision, her perfect creation of wondrous seas, towering mountains, vast plains, steaming jungles, arctic ice, endless forests, every environment that appeared on her world of Sennadar, and all created just for the souls of her children, a wonderland of harmony and happiness that was theirs to enjoy for all eternity. In the center of that vast disc was a golden tower that reached longspans into the sky, the Tower of Niami, the throne from which she ruled.

This was just another day in the endless marching of time on Nirvana, but for Niami, this was a special day, a wonderful day. It was the day Tarrin Kael stepped from the protection of her shadow and made his own way in the world, but that wasn't what made this day so special, so wonderful.

Within her golden tower, sitting upon her throne of rosewood and pearl, Niami sat. She looked as she appeared to the mortals, a tall, beautiful woman with perfect skin and hair striped in the seven colors of the rainbow, wearing a shimmering gown of solid starlight. But here, a slender tiara with a *shaeram* of silver graced her brow, the crown of her station. She sat there, quiet and contemplating as vast aspects of her divine mind listened to the voices of her children and watched over her realm in Nirvana, but the only thing she was truly paying attention to was the figure striding down the hall in long, confident steps. Her royal guards and retainers bowed and stepped aside as the figure approached, entering her grand hall, and she stood up. The figure strode confidently up to her, then stopped at the edge of her dais and bowed.

She could only smile and offer her hand. "Welcome home," she said lovingly.

Her slender hand reached forward, and was swallowed up by a black furred paw.

And so, my children, the story

of Tarrin Kael and the Firestaff

has come to an end.

*But the universe is vast,
filled with many who are
awaiting their own turn
for magic, excitement,
and adventure.*

*And as in all things, one
ending is naught but the
beginning of another story.*

And there will be other stories to tell.

To: [Title](#) [ToC](#) [14](#) [LastRead](#)

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [Epilogue](#)

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