



TWO

HE WAS DRESSED in a simple brown robe that was a bit travel-stained and patched in places, thin enough to accommodate summer's warmth, but sturdy enough to survive through autumn and the rains that would inevitably come. His hair, a bit long and unkempt from the road, was the dark brown of an acorn, the color matching his dusty brown eyes which had just a hint of epicanthic folds at the corners. For a long moment, he stood in the shadow of the first tree that marked the beginning of the Great Forest as if he were greeting an old friend.

He spread his arms out and breathed in the scent of pine, the leaves of the oak and ash, even the rich forest soil. A gentle breeze caressed the highest branches in a sound as soothing as a mother's whisper. Lowering his arms, he adjusted the small leather pack riding on his shoulders and then picked up the walking staff he had allowed to fall to the soft earth. *Soon*, he thought.

A woman appeared on the trail ahead as if she had been waiting for him, a gentle smile on her lips. "Kitoor," she said as she approached. "Welcome home, brother."

"Yes," he said, looking once more at the towering trees. "Home."



They walked in silence for a time; Kitoor refamiliarizing himself with the forest that he had grown up in, and Rena respecting his unspoken desire for quiet.

“It has been a long time,” he finally murmured.

“Eight years, more or less,” Rena said.

Kitoor shook his head. “It did not seem to be so long on the road.”

“Many things must have befallen you, brother.”

He smiled at the invitation in her voice. There were mixed feelings about Kitoor’s wanderings among the Children of The Beast, who made the Great Forest their home. Rena was one of the few who actually looked forward to his return, always hungry for stories of the outside world.

“There will be time later,” he said gently before his smile faded. “I do not yet feel...at peace with the forest.”

“I understand, brother,” Rena nodded. “Shall I tell the Learned Ones of your arrival?”

It was merely a courtesy, they both knew. The Learned Mother and Learned Father would have known of Kitoor’s arrival the moment he set foot into the forest.

“Yes,” he replied after a moment’s thought. “But tell them I shall need some time alone.” He looked at the dense foliage around him, feeling out of place somehow. “Perhaps as long as a day or two.”

“As you wish, brother.”

“Have no worries, my friend,” he said, laying a light hand on her shoulder. “I have a few stories that I have saved only for you.”

“I shall hold you to your word,” she warned.

“I would expect no less from you, Rena.”

“His eyes watch over you, brother.”

“His eyes watch over you.”

As she darted away into the heart of the forest where the monastery lay, her movement swift as any deer, Kitoor wondered at the

sudden sour taste in his mouth after saying the ritualistic words of farewell.

He took a few deep breaths of the clean forest air, hoping it would help. No cooking fires, no smells of people tightly packed behind city walls, not even the dust of the road to contend with. The air was as pure as the virgin forests of the Orman Perisie, and yet...

"It is still not right," he whispered. There was little of consequence inside his leather pack, but it weighed as heavy upon him as if it were filled with iron ingots from the Vansernic's mountain steadfast. It was something he had always feared would happen someday, and now it seemed those fears were realized: He could no longer feel The Beast within the forest.

Millenia ago, the Children of The Beast had made the Great Forest their home, forging an unshakable bond with their protector, the first immortal in all of Auren. The Beast taught his Children mastery of the mind and the body, granting them gifts unmatched by other mortals. Any Child could feel the presence of The Beast as surely as one could feel the gentle rain of a summer shower. As light as the touch of a feather, as strong as forged links of steel, his presence was as much a part of any Child as the green in their eyes.

Yet Kitoor was different. No Child would willingly leave the Great Forest longer than a few months, and only then to keep up diplomatic ties with the other people of Auren. *His* wanderings lasted years at a time, and they were almost always without a sense of purpose. But what truly marked him apart from those at the monastery were his eyes; a dusty brown color that was as alien to the Children of The Beast as a bird without wings.

The wanderer had seen enough of the outside world to know that in most societies—Human, Orman Perisie, or Vansernic—his differences would make him a pariah. Aside from some occasional cool words, however, the other Children treated him as little more than an oddity.

But he knew that everything would change if he could no longer sense The Beast. The immortal's presence was as vital to the Children as the rain was to the forest. As far as Kitoor knew, nothing like this had ever happened.

Of course, no Child of The Beast has gone wandering like a lost soul, he thought with some bitterness. Stayed away from his home for eight years.

He stared at the trees around him for a time, allowing their strength and peace to flow into him. *No, he finally thought, I have been gone longer before. This is nothing that some time alone can not make whole.*

His resolve strong, Kitoor turned away from the main trail, moving as silently as a fox through the underbrush. He allowed his mind to slowly clear itself of the impurities of the outside world, his heart rate to slow, and his breathing to deepen as his senses opened up to encompass the Great Forest.

Before the sun had set, the Child of The Beast came upon a small clearing near a pond, looking as if it had been waiting for his arrival. The last rays pierced the canopy above like a painting, lending a faint green hue to everything as if celebrating all things healthy and growing.

"Perfect," he breathed, letting the warmth seep into his skin like a balm. He removed his pack and laid it down as a pillow, then lowered himself to the tall grasses that lined the water's edge. The frogs and crickets had begun their evening music early, and the wanderer leaned back into the grass and the sounds of twilight until the burdens of the road and all of his cares were washed away by a sweet and gentle sleep.



With the morning came peace and acceptance. If the gods willed that Kitoor's bond with The Beast be taken for a time, so be it. It would not be a permanent thing. Perhaps some of the Learned Ones' wisdom would prove to be a more potent remedy than his own humble attempts had been.

"I will not tell them my true problem, of course," he said to a passing wood duck as he sat up. She waddled up to Kitoor's side curiously, deciding to wait a moment on her morning swim.

"It is not through a lack of honesty that I do this," he hastily assured her as he crossed his legs and stretched his back and shoulders. "It is just that...well, they have so much on their minds and my problem may only be of a temporary nature." *And if it is not, a seed of doubt spoke in his mind, will they allow you to stay?*

The duck quacked by way of reply, then eyed both the pond and Kitoor carefully, as if deciding which of the two required her most immediate attention.

"I shall be fine," he said with a smile. The Child rose smoothly to his feet and began to slowly stretch out a bit more thoroughly. "I am sure your breakfast is eagerly awaiting your arrival."

She moved forward a step and spread her wings fractionally, causing him to smile. "If my difficulties persist, I do know where to find you."

Giving a satisfied grunt of approval, the duck bobbed her head once and turned back to the pond, her tail feathers wagging in anticipation.

The sun had not quite cleared the tall trees of the forest by the time Kitoor's morning routine of stretches, working their way up to simple calisthenics, and then to faster and more challenging katas, was finished. He dunked his head into the pond to both cool himself and help him wake up, and then quickly rebraided his hair, which nearly reached to mid shoulder-blade. Finally, he picked up his worn leather pack and slipped his arms through the loops, rested

his simple walking staff against a tree with an air of thanks, and then set out west.

He had no real plan in his mind, no specific places within the forest to see. But the monastery lay to the west, and eventually his steps must lead him to where his true home lay waiting.

Kitoor spent most of the day traveling throughout the heart of the Great Forest, noting with a mixture of delight and melancholy the many changes that had occurred in the span of eight years. An acre of land had been destroyed some five years ago by fire, and there was evidence that it had been contained by the Children. With a bit of effort, he even managed to find the lightning-blasted stump that had begun it all. He reintroduced himself to a family of deer who had grown by three generations in his absence. Lunch was taken from a stream and shared with a brown bear who had been old almost as long as Kitoor could remember, while the rest of the afternoon was spent climbing his favorite trees and either resting on their broad lower limbs or risking the gentle winds and the less sturdy branches higher up.

He bathed in a deep pool of swirling water at the edge of a riverbank, and then enjoyed a home-cooked meal with one of the few Shrub Gnomes who lived within a day's walking distance of the monastery's grounds.

Twilight found the Child of The Beast in quiet contemplation of the Great Forest. He sat cross-legged with his back to an old ash tree, attempting once more to find The Beast's presence resonating throughout his chosen home. Kitoor had periodically tried this all day, hoping each time that the spirit of the Children's protector would once more resonate within his soul, but to no avail.

"I have not yet gone into a trance," he reasoned aloud, knowing that he was beginning to grasp at anything to avoid the truth even as he said it.

It was no difficult thing for any Child to enter a trance. Kitoor

had done so many times in his wanderings, whether to induce accelerated healing or simply to allow a more restful sleep. Perhaps if he entered this more profound sense of awareness, he could sense the presence that had thus far eluded him.

He began taking slow, deep breaths, allowing his senses to reach out beyond the physical. His focus needed to be tight, his spirit to be centered. He concentrated on his sense of self even as he stretched his awareness of the world further out. Past the songs of the night creatures (*why did they seem so subdued?*), beyond the movements of nocturnal predators (*did they always move so sluggishly?*), out of the sphere of the corporeal (*where all was lost*) and into—

Kitoor's eyes snapped open. Someone was near and moving in his direction. He had seen a few of his fellow Children in the distance today, but all had respected his privacy and done little more than nod an acknowledgment to him.

It appeared his isolation was about to be imposed upon.

No matter, he thought with disgust, my concentration level was below that of an apprentice.

Kitoor's brow furrowed in concentration as he listened to the quiet approach of the stranger. His face broke into a smile as he recognized the slight hesitation before every other step; a nearly undetectable limp caused by a rogue grizzly during the man's childhood outside of the Great Forest.

"Good evening, Dalen," Kitoor called out, forgetting for a moment his failed attempt to find The Beast.

"I am not disturbing you?" Dalen's soft voice returned from Kitoor's left.

"Never you, my brother." He rose quickly and turned to see his oldest friend regarding him cautiously from a few yards away. "Dalen?" he said with a puzzled look. "Is something the matter?"

The man stepped forward with a warm smile. "I was beginning

to wonder if I was going to see you at all before you had to leave us again.”

Kitoor grinned and embraced the man fondly. “It *has* been long, has it not?”

“Seven years?” Dalen asked.

“Eight.”

“Let me take a look at you,” he said, holding the wanderer at arm’s length and making a show of regarding his companion’s features.

Kitoor took in Dalen as well. Slightly taller, but only a few pounds heavier, Dalen was twenty-eight years older. Age distinctions among the Children of The Beast were next to meaningless, however, as they all maintained themselves at the peak of their physical prime for nearly two centuries before passing on to the Place of Light. The only thing betraying Dalen’s true age to the other Children was the depth in his eyes.

And yet... *There is something missing*, Kitoor thought as he looked at his old confidante. He had to keep his feelings carefully hidden, knowing that Dalen would be able to see the disquiet in an instant if he didn’t; the pair had known each other far too long.

Everything else about Dalen remained as unchanged as ever. His blonde hair hung near his eyes and over his ears as if it needed to be cut, even though his robes were immaculate. The man had ever been a dichotomous mixture of the focused and the absent-minded. It seemed to endear him to all of the Children at the monastery.

“You have changed somewhat, my brother,” Dalen said after a moment. “Yet I can not place that change.”

Kitoor toyed with the idea of flat denial before settling on a compromise. “The world outside our forest,” he said in a careful voice, “is on the verge of something...different.”

“Is this good or bad?”

“I can not say, my friend,” Kitoor replied with a slow shake

of his head. "Auren is restless and perhaps some of that unrest has touched me as well."

"And this is why you have secluded yourself within the forest? To feel its rhythms?"

"For the most part," Kitoor acknowledged, once more holding back the rest of the truth. "And I will confess it has helped me but little."

"Perhaps the Learned Ones could help speed things along," Dalen offered.

Kitoor had to exercise a good deal of control to keep himself from frowning. Dalen seemed uncharacteristically straightforward, even after eight years. There was certainly nothing odd in his suggestion to see the Learned Mother and Learned Father, but his manner had been lacking in any degree of subtlety, nor did it reflect his usual finesse. It was almost as if he was distracted somehow.

With an effort, Kitoor smiled and forced a lightness into his words. "Did they ask you to seek me out, oh my brother?"

"Well," Dalen smiled in return, "I would not say that they asked to see you, so much as they were only interested in your well-being."

"Ah. Of course," Kitoor said while rolling his eyes. It was well-known that the Learned Ones were always hungry for news of the outside world and thus treated his homecomings as a double blessing; first and foremost, thankful for their wandering Child's safe return, but they also took delight in Kitoor's information and had been known to talk to him for days at a time.

"I suppose it is just as well that I *did* rest up since my arrival. I may see little sleep tonight."

Dalen's face became one of studied thought. "They made no mention of keeping you from your sleep."

Kitoor fought back a genuine grin. *This* was more Dalen's style.

"But then again," the older man continued with an exaggerated shrug, "you *have* been gone for eight years." He clapped his friend

on the shoulder and began leading him to the monastery as the purple twilight deepened and the stars began to shine. "Perhaps if I am lucky, I shall see you sometime next week."



Kitoor saw the Learned Father on the steps of the monastery's great library at once despite the rods that separated them and the meager light shed by the stars. There could be no doubt that it was him. No other Child could know that Kitoor had chosen this time to make his presence formally known to the Learned Ones. Nor, he reflected, could any man sit quite so patiently—as still as a statue, but with the relaxed manner of someone who had just sat down.

His eyes were turned up into the night sky, and a look of lazy contentment radiated from his face. It wasn't until Kitoor began to climb the steps to the library's doorway that the other man's eyes slowly focused, and he rose to his feet with a knowing smile.

"Kitoor," he began without preamble, "I have missed our talks together."

"Learned Father," Kitoor returned with mock solemnity, "I believe I have tales enough to make up for lost time."

The Learned Father's smile broadened as he clasped the other man in an affectionate hug. "It has been too long, Child."

As always, Kitoor basked in the strength and calmness that flowed out from the Learned Father in nearly palpable waves. The man had always been as enduring as the Vansernic mountains—eager to welcome the wanderer back to the monastery, but understanding when the restlessness struck. Indeed, it was the Learned Father himself who had made known to all of the Children (in his usual, unassuming manner) that Kitoor's small cell was not to be disturbed during his absences.

"I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten us," Learned

Father said, clapping an arm around Kitoor's shoulder and leading him up the stairs.

"Sometimes it takes longer to find my center," Kitoor returned with a slight shrug. It bothered him to leave unmentioned the fact that he still *hadn't* found it, but this was an ants' nest he didn't feel the need to stir up just yet.

"It is true that you have been gone longer than usual," Learned Father said.

"Eight years," the wanderer nodded.

"Eight years, three months, and fourteen days," the Learned Father amended. "Not," he added, raising both hands to shoulder level, "that I was counting them in your absence, of course."

Kitoor grinned wryly. "Of course."

"Did you visit with the Orman Perisie this time?"

"Yes, Learned Father."

"And you received my missive in time to speak with Dwaradath as I asked?"

"The Vansernic king sends his greetings and politely asked me to remind you that you promised him a visit before summer's end next year."

"A promise I shall honor," the Learned Father said firmly. "And on the proposal I sent him?"

"He will approve it with only minor changes upon your arrival."

The pair walked down the long central hallway of the Great Library, side by side. Small braziers sputtered fitfully, placed so far apart as to keep the area perpetually dim. *Almost gloomy*, Kitoor was surprised to find himself thinking. It had been some time since he had been among folk who felt no need to dispel the natural darkness of night, and were it not for the other man's presence, the lighting may have affected Kitoor's mood more. The starkness of the hall was similarly lessened in his mind by the Learned Father's words;

questions piled one on top of the next with barely time enough between breaths for the traveler to answer them.

Despite the apparent urgency of the man to squeeze every bit of information out of Kitoor that he could, he walked with an easy, unhurried stride, broad shoulders relaxed, and arms swinging loosely at his sides. Standing almost a head taller than Kitoor, the Learned Father's closely cropped red-brown hair and muscled body made him look more as if he were an off-duty mercenary than a scholar. But there could be no mistaking the wisdom and the strength of will in those deep green eyes. Nor, the wanderer was beginning to remember, the limitless hunger for knowledge that rested there as well.

"And what of the Barians?" the Learned Father asked. "We have heard word that a plague of demons has been growing over the last two or three years there."

"Should we not," Kitoor said, holding up a hand, "invite the Learned Mother to share in on some of this? She will ask the same questions you have, you must realize."

The Learned Father turned his nose upward as if his dignity had been somehow wounded. "*She* is poring over a history book recently acquired from southern Cortia and will not let me see a page of it."

They turned a corner near the end of the hall and approached a door marked with the runes of the scroll-makers, the Children who transcribed and made copies of books to be used by all at the monastery. Inside, they found the Learned Mother poring over a leather tome dyed in the violet color of Cortia.

"Kitoor," she said warmly, rising fluidly to her feet. She opened her arms and glided toward him with a smile. "I have missed you terribly," she confessed as Kitoor returned her embrace. Today was beginning to feel like a true homecoming after all. "Khrylor insisted on greeting you alone, and I have had nothing but this book to keep me occupied."

“That is normally enough,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“You are not normally gone for so long, child,” she reminded him.

He shrugged fractionally and then contented himself for a moment by absorbing her features; the black hair flowing to just below her shoulder blades, the almost perfectly rounded face, and the eyes as deep and green as the southern seas.

Those eyes now studied him as well, and Kitoor knew that by projecting a calmness he by no means felt, he lied to her as surely as any thief standing trial before a judge.

He turned back to the Learned Father, half afraid that his composure would fail him, and hid his feelings behind the familiar mask of the jester. “You see? Had you wished it, the roles would have been reversed and *you* would be allowed the first glimpse of Cortia’s version of history.”

“Oh no, Kitoor, I am not allowed in the same *room* as she when she reads, nor can I see it should she be away from it. She will not be happy until she has given each sentence the same scrutiny that a mother bear gives her cub.”

“*Some* of us prefer to do things in their proper order,” the Learned Mother countered with a haughty expression that her twinkling eyes betrayed, “instead of moving from place to place with no discipline.”

“I was under the impression that you enjoyed such variety.” His tone left room for broad interpretation of the subject at hand, and Kitoor had to hold back another grin.

“There are differences between how a manuscript should be read and how one should play at love,” she replied with a sniff.

Kitoor raised his eyebrows impishly. “I could come back in a few hours,” he said with a slight bow.

The Learned Ones smiled at this and turned their attention back to Kitoor, though the Learned Mother’s eyes held a promise to her counterpart.

“Oh no, child,” Learned Father said. “You have too much to tell us. If we let you get away now, we may not see you for another eight years.”

“I hope you have no plans for the next few days,” Learned Mother added.

“Would it matter if I did?” he laughed.

The pair glanced at each other. “No,” they said in unison.

“Well then,” he agreed easily. “Where shall I begin?”



The Learned Ones took turns questioning him on the subjects that interested them most. True to their word, Kitoor was kept inside the Great Library for two full days and part of a third with only occasional halts for food and the odd hours' sleep.

Staying awake for such long periods of time was elementary to all Children, who could catch up on a full night's rest with only an hour of deep sleep. The aches and pains accumulated during a long day were not as easily dispelled as the body's fatigue, but if necessary, the trio could have kept up the pace through the remainder of the week.

Kitoor's voice, of course, was another matter entirely. He had traveled with enough bards, minstrels, and storytellers to learn some of the tricks to keep his vocal cords from getting too raw, and his time with Tarzha's disciples had increased his already ample knowledge of useful herbs so that he was able to salvage his voice for the benefit of their insatiable curiosity.

It was on his third cup of some of those same herbs mixed in hot water that Kitoor began to realize that he would never survive the barrage of questions unless he went on the offensive. To that end, he began asking about how the monastery had changed during his absence. Who may have moved on to the Place of Light, who had

joined the family of the Children of The Beast. To his delight, he learned that his childhood friend, Jarreth, had become a *Tez'ari* in the *Kalanti* disciplines, and another companion, Sirna, had become the youngest *Tez'ari* in the arts of war within the history of the monastery.

Despite his attempts to save his voice by getting the Learned Ones to answer a few of his own questions, Kitoor found that he was completely outclassed, answering at least three queries for every one that he asked. Near the end of the third day, he felt much like a rag that had been wrung of every last drop of moisture.

"Enough," he finally croaked, his voice ragged despite his best efforts. "Have mercy upon me and allow me to recover before I lose my voice forever."

The Learned Father frowned as if considering Kitoor's request. "Well, it has been two days..."

"And almost three nights now," the wanderer protested.

"And it would be a shame to destroy such a beautiful voice," the Learned Mother said with a wistful sigh at the thought of her prey escaping.

"Indeed, his time with the bards was well spent," her counterpart agreed with a nod of his head.

"We have not finished with you yet, Kitoor. Khraylor and I shall call upon you again."

Kitoor bowed in gratitude. "A week to recover would be appreciated."

"A whole week?" the Learned Father said with a frown.

"You *have* been gone eight years," the Learned Mother added.

"Soon then," Kitoor said, walking backward to the door. "Very soon."

The Learned Ones smiled. "His eyes watch over you, Kitoor."

"Very, very soon," he said, as if drunk with exhaustion.

It wasn't until after he had closed the door that he realized it

was the first time in his life that he hadn't returned the ritual words of farewell.



He spent the night in his three-sided cell, barely more than a stone lean-to with little protection from the elements. The Children of The Beast lived in harmony with nature and needed little to insulate them from most weather and temperature extremes. The cells were not much more than a place to keep one's few belongings protected from the rain.

Kitoor slept fitfully despite his exhaustion. The small building that had been his home for so many years seemed to be closing in on him for some reason, and his dreams were filled with uncomfortable images of being stranded on an island barely two paces across with a storm approaching and the sea swelling dangerously.

The Child rose with the first hint of the dawn and went through his morning exercise routines half-heartedly. His mind kept drifting to elusive wisps of half-remembered dreams and the emptiness in his soul. This, more than any other place, was his home. There could be nowhere else in all of Auren better suited to find his center than here. To that end, Kitoor lowered himself to the cool stone floor just as the rays of the morning sun began to clear the tops of the Great Forest's trees. He sat cross-legged, arms relaxed over his knees, hands upturned and fingers spread out.

It was the oldest ritual in Kitoor's many years of knowledge. The first he had ever learned upon achieving the position of Young Child when he was but ten years old; a deep meditation designed to look inward and find peace. He brought his mind back to that time, when he had tried to overcome the exuberance of youth to find that moment of intense calm and let his mind feel apart from the world while merging his spirit with everything surrounding him.

Kitoor breathed in slowly and deeply, expanding his nostrils as he did so, held the breath for just a few moments, and then breathed out through his mouth, emptying his body of distractions. As he took a second breath and a third, he began reaching out with his awareness, his spirit, to capture the essence of the protector of the Great Forest, the heart and soul of every man and woman who called themselves Children of The Beast.

Reaching out...and failing utterly.

Kitoor's body collapsed upon itself; his shoulders slumped, his chin resting on his chest, and his arms curled into his abdomen.

"Why can I not find you?" he whispered.



The midsummer sun was almost directly overhead by the time Kitoor was able to pull himself together. He had decided to go about his daily routines within the monastery as he always had in the past, giving himself a full week to discover that calm within. If the nine days passed uneventfully, then he would bring his problem to the attention of the Learned Ones.

Maybe.

The first order of business was his garden. In eight years, quite a few weeds would have managed to choke out his precious flowers were it not for the care of four individuals. The touch of the Learned Ones was unmistakable; small rose bushes intertwined in a graceful dance that yielded only a few blossoms, but their dark brown color was a source of amusement to Kitoor, and their smell was a sublime scent that left him wondering where he had encountered the fragrance before.

A collection of stones circling the garden was no doubt due to Dalen's vigilance against the encroaching grass. In his wanderings through the forest, Kitoor's old confidante had amassed an

impressive rock garden that surrounded his own cell. As he went about the task of further moving the grass back, Kitoor recognized some of the more remarkable stones from the other man's collection, and he smiled, making a mental note to thank Dalen when their paths next met.

Finally, the neat columns of raised dirt indicated the former presence of another person's hand. But here, he was unsure of who exactly had helped protect his garden as well as brighten it. The tiny dirt mounds left no indication as to what had no doubt blossomed during the spring, and the wanderer only wished he could find a clue as to the type of flower that had been planted (without disturbing their current rest, of course) so he would know whom to thank.

Kitoor was in no particular rush this morning, so he finished his work in the garden in a leisurely manner before setting off to see some old friends. Sirna would just be finishing with the class that the Learned Ones said she taught, and he decided that he would like to see how well the young woman handled her students.

He moved off at a comfortable run, passing quite a few Children along the way. Some acknowledged him with a nod or a half-smile, while others paid him no heed whatsoever. Whether they were too absorbed in their own tasks or just didn't know him well enough, he didn't mind one way or another.

He arrived at the training grounds for the arts of combat with a feeling of nostalgia for when he had taught. He found a favorite oak tree at the edge of the area and settled himself comfortably to observe the last few minutes of the class. Sirna walked among the students as they went through a simple kata. Although the *Tez'ari* also taught adults, this class comprised the younger ones, their actions surprisingly smooth despite their ages.

She turned from helping one Child with a kick and noticed Kitoor watching beneath the tree. Even from the distance of a score or more yards, he could see her eyes light up. Her smile was even

more disarming than he had remembered. It was quickly replaced by a more serious expression when her student kicked too low again, and she turned back to him with a swirl of her long, honey-blond hair.

Watching the young woman of twenty-eight summers as she molded and shaped future generations gave Kitoor a sense of peace unlike anything he had felt since his return to the Great Forest. It wasn't a stronger feeling, just different.

He shifted his body into a more comfortable position against the tree and allowed his eyelids to droop until the movements of Sirna and her students became little more than blurs flowing in a pattern that was both soothing and mesmerizing. As his body further relaxed in the midsummer sun, however, Kitoor's agile mind began analyzing what was happening to him.

How could watching an old friend teach her students affect him so much? Such a sense of peace had been difficult to come by in the past few days, and any information he might learn could help him to find his center—to feel The Beast's presence. Why then was this event so important?

Dozens of possibilities leaped to Kitoor's mind—Sirna's proximity (despite eight years of separation), the warmth of the day, being among the Children once more—but all of these were eventually discarded. They just didn't resonate within the nearly trance-like state he had slipped into.

Slowly, his mind came to focus on one child. She was the youngest of the students, yet held her own against the other ten youths in Sirna's class. There was an aura of calmness about her, even as her eyes were narrowed in concentration. She reminded Kitoor of Sirna when *she* had been of a similar age.

And then he understood the source of his contentment. In watching another generation of Children begin their lives in the

Great Forest, he saw the future and was pleased that the cycle of renewal would continue despite...

Kitoor sat bolt upright, his momentary peace shattered as a feeling of heightening dread sapped the warmth from his body. Something was wrong within the forest.

Terribly wrong.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, the movements of the Children a distraction now. He needed to get away from the monastery and think. About The Beast. About the future...

"A future without him?" he whispered.

Kitoor shook his head and turned away from Sirna's eyes, which now watched in perplexity as he rushed away from the other Children and into the heart of the Great Forest. A place where he may not find peace, but perhaps would discover some answers.



"Sirna?"

The young woman looked up from where she was seated on her stone cot and smiled warmly. Kitoor did not miss the question in her eyes, however.

Sirna stood up and approached him hesitantly, almost as if she was afraid he would bound away otherwise. His returning smile banished her timidity, and he embraced her firmly. "I have missed you, my sister."

It was the evening of the same day, and Kitoor had finally returned to the monastery. Many hours had been spent in simple meditation as he thought and pondered until one inescapable conclusion had been finally reached. He needed to talk to someone—someone whose mind was open enough to hear the improbable and not dismiss it out of hand as the speculations of a wanderer.

Sirna was one of the few people who fell into this category—and

since he already owed her an apology for the way he had disappeared this afternoon without saying farewell (or even offer greetings for that matter), he had decided to begin with her.

"I was starting to think I had disappointed my old teacher with how I instructed my own class," Sirna said as she pulled away from him. She held both his hands within her own and studied him closely, eyes the green of pine needles, noting the minute changes that eight years had made upon him.

He shook his head in denial. "You have never disappointed me in anything, my friend. I can not imagine that changing in such a short time."

"Then what was it?" she asked, her smile fading.

Kitoor was not ready to tell her. He had to be certain that this was the same person he had watched grow up. The same little girl who was at once stubborn and yet somehow open to change. The same woman he had grown to love as a friend and sometimes more. They had written one another during his absence, of course, but letters lacked the intimacy of moments such as this. They could hide or gloss over too many things.

"I can see in your eyes that something troubles you," she said, misunderstanding his silence.

"There is nothing in my eyes save the dust from the road," he said with feigned innocence. It was a reference to an ongoing joke the two shared concerning Kitoor's brown eyes.

But she surprised him by slowly shaking her head. "It has not been that long, Brother." She laid a hand gently on his cheek. "You may fool others with that smile, but not me."

He nodded ruefully. "You do know me well. But there is some catching up that needs to be done between us. Give me some time and I will tell you everything before I take my leave tonight."

She smiled impishly. "*If* you leave tonight."

Kitoor's laughter was a mixture of delight and relief. Nothing

would happen between them just yet, but by her words, Sirna had demonstrated just how well she understood his need to laugh. And the wanderer began to realize that eight years was not so very long after all.



It took Sirna nearly three hours to notice that, aside from occasional comments or careful manipulations of the subjects discussed, she was doing all the talking. This convinced Kitoor even more that something was wrong within the Great Forest. Something that affected all of the Children in ways too subtle to be detected by anyone but him.

It was only logical, after all, he tried to convince himself. He had been gone so long that only he would sense the minute changes in his oldest and dearest friends. Dalen had demonstrated a lack of his usual verbal finesse, and now Sirna...

“Why am I doing all of the talking?” she suddenly asked.

She had been telling Kitoor about the flowers she had planted in his garden before suddenly falling silent. Now she regarded him with a faint look of suspicion.

“Do you know how long it has taken you to realize this?” he asked in a low voice.

Sirna frowned, and her green eyes became troubled. “Most of the evening,” she finally admitted.

Kitoor looked at her steadily. “And why did it take you so long?”

“To notice your silence?”

He nodded, receiving further proof in her question. Sirna should have caught on to what he was doing almost immediately. And she should have been able to follow his line of thinking better than she was, as well.

“I am not certain,” she said. “Perhaps—”

“I will tell you something about the outside world,” Kitoor interrupted. “And then I will tell you how the Children of The Beast should be different, but are not.”

Sirna’s brow furrowed as she tried to ascertain her companion’s behavior. Where before his manner had been casual, even playful, Kitoor’s eyes now held a degree of seriousness she saw only rarely.

“Tell me of these things.” Her voice was hushed but firm as she met his look levelly.

“Tell me about The Beast.”

“Tell you what about Him?” Sirna shook her head slightly, confused by his quick changes of subject.

“As if I were a novice,” he pressed. “An outsider. What is The Beast?”

“He is the oldest—the first—immortal in all of Auren,” she said in a deliberate tone. She knew Kitoor well enough to play along with his questions. He had been her teacher when she was younger and recognized how he made his points; by supporting an argument before one was even aware of what the argument *was*.

“Is this immortal powerful?”

“He is.”

“Does this power rival that of a god?”

Sirna hesitated a moment before answering. “No.”

Kitoor nodded, as if pleased with her answer. He then bowed his head for a moment, composing his thoughts as carefully as possible. If he were to have any chance of convincing Sirna of what he was building up to, it would require absolute logic as a foundation instead of gut instinct.

“In the forests of the Orman Perisie,” he finally said, “not a tree is planted, not a mineral harvested without first invoking the blessings of Sylvinaiin. The Vansernic will neither build nor mine until their priests assure them that Shadahs Surespear smiles upon their labors. In Darg, the knights call out to Scindrath as they perfect the

arts of war. And, of course, healers from all the lands must ask for Tarzha's guidance as the mages do with Gathtorinkar."

Sirna was watching closely, but Kitoor was sure that she couldn't see where his line of logic was leading. He was equally sure that eight years ago she would have. Perhaps even eight months ago, she would have. What he was not as certain of was when the change had taken place.

He was beginning to feel trapped inside the confines of Sirna's cell despite its open-faced design. Even the trees outside seemed too close. The evening air was stuffy, the sounds coming from the forest were muted; nothing was as it should have been. He wanted to finish what he had to say somewhere else, where there was more life, but he couldn't risk anyone else overhearing such words. *Words of heresy?* he wondered.

"The Beast is not a god."

Sirna nodded at his words, but too grudgingly.

"He is an immortal being who watches over us, but only as a parent watches over children. He is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. He can make mistakes."

"Even the gods make mistakes," Sirna agreed.

"*We* make mistakes," Kitoor said in a firm voice. "We invoke The Beast's name as if he were a god. We are no different than the Barians in the north asking for Tirnashc's blessings. We act as the Vansernic or the Orman Perisie do. How common is it for any here at the monastery to say 'The Beast willing'? It does not matter *what* he wills. 'His eyes watch over you'? How can they watch over us all when he has an entire forest to oversee and protect?"

Sirna's face was a mask to Kitoor. She was being careful to allow no emotions to show, and this caused him no small amount of concern. If she didn't want him to know how she was taking this, it could only mean that she was not taking it well.

“Do not make up your mind before hearing me out, my friend,” he said quietly.

A brief flicker of surprise registered in the woman’s eyes before she let her mask drop completely. The doubt on her face was unmistakable, although she did not seem completely closed to his words. “I do not even know what your argument is,” she finally admitted with a half-smile.

He nodded in understanding. “I fear it will become less easy to hear.”

She studied him closely as if searching for something, and then closed her eyes and took a few measured breaths until the doubts slowly eased from her features.

Sirna opened her eyes. “I am ready.”

Kitoor took a deep breath in turn, wet his lips, and then told her.



The rising sun found the wanderer climbing the steps to the monastery’s library. His talk with Sirna last night had been an equivocal success at best, but she had at least promised to think about his words. The possibilities that he, himself, had raised to her kept Kitoor awake most of the night, but too many more possibilities had come into his head for the Child to want to enter a mind-clearing trance and sleep.

He needed to think on other things for now, however, to at least try to assume a semblance of normalcy within the monastery. There were some people he would like to see since his return, but there were other priorities.

One of the lessons Kitoor had learned in his time with the Thieves’ Guild of the Free States was to know the lay of the land no matter where you were. Few things changed in the Great Forest, however, even in eight years. To be sure, there were some new faces

both inside and outside the monastery, but there was only one striking difference that had caught his eye: the presence of a small castle at the edge of the eastern timberline.

The Learned Ones had mentioned it briefly during their talks with him, but, in their typical fashion, had managed to get Kitoor back to answering their own questions before he could follow up on one of his. With the few hours he now had to himself, the Child planned to find out all that he could about the structure being called Warlord's Keep.

The library was as busy as he remembered, with the smell of leather and paper mixing with the smoke from the few braziers to create an aroma unlike any other place he had been. Most true libraries in the rest of the world (except, of course, in Darg) were reserved for scholars and the wealthy, with the common populace able to access tomes and scrolls only at the public schools or universities. As a result, almost every library the wanderer had ever been in was lacking visitors more often than not. Candles and lanterns were also more common as sources of light, unlike here, where huge windows provided a natural radiance that more closely matched that of the outdoors. Were it not for the adverse effects the weather would have on the books and scrolls themselves, Kitoor was sure the Children's library would have no roof at all.

He began in the map room, one of the few chambers that was nearly empty. A young woman still in her teens was poring over a map of Baria with the single-mindedness most of the Children displayed. Kitoor nodded politely when she glanced up at him, then walked down the wall until he found the niche he was looking for.

The room's walls were filled with small holes that held rolled-up maps painstakingly hand-drawn onto vellum sheets by those Children most adept at such things. Kitoor pulled two tubes from their place and then sat at a nearby table.

The first map he only glanced at to make sure it contained the

detail of a star that had fallen to Auren 77 years ago, destroying a section of the eastern border of the Great Forest. It was the second map, however, that Kitoor studied with much more interest. For within the blasted area where the star had fallen, the markings on the parchment revealed a fairly detailed sketch of most of Warlord's Keep.

The Child found it odd that the Learned Ones would allow what amounted to spying to get such details. Traditionally, the Children of The Beast cared little for the outside world, save from a historical point of view. The autonomous monastery preferred to *watch* Auren's changes rather than become an active participant in its shaping. Yet for some reason, the man from Edderish known as the Warlord had decided to build this particular structure and it had caught the attention of the spiritual leaders of the monastery.

Kitoor's gaze drifted up and to his right, watching a light breeze play with the leaves on the trees he could see on the other side of the large window and let his mind sift through things. He knew of the Warlord, of course. No one who paid attention to the world *didn't* know of his exploits. In a time where armies and anything beyond a border skirmish were rare, it seemed strange for a man to take on a title like Warlord, but then Damone Kavamar of Edderish was no ordinary man.

There were many people who believed the Warlord had been born in the wrong time period; a true anachronism in the modern era of peace and prosperity. From early on in his life, Damone of Edderish had been a nagging worry to royalty of any sort within the Free States. No king had risen for nearly two centuries out of the small areas that were now ruled by Regents. Each state had become fiercely nationalistic over the years, and even the hint of a potentially forceful unification was looked upon with disfavor.

Edderish was the largest of the Free States, and Kavamar's uncanny abilities with the sword, when coupled with his tactical

mind and powerful charisma, were enough of a combination to shake the lethargy out of any monarch sharing Edderish's borders. Much to their relief, however, the young man was content to lead his "personal honor guard" of 100 men deep into the wastelands and subterranean recesses wherein the last of the ogres and trolls were rumored to dwell.

His expeditions could take weeks or months, but he always returned with nearly every last man and a disproportionate amount of trophies. It was becoming clear that even on hostile ground, the Warlord, as he was now beginning to be called, was a formidable opponent.

The one event that convinced even the skeptics who would believe only in what they could see (ogres and trolls were just stories, after all, they would say) was the Drakin Uprising. In the grand scheme of history, 500 loosely organized barbarians seeking to raid the herds of cattle and steal the harvest of the southern states may have only been of minor significance. But in the midst of decades of peace, where the only soldiers were largely used as honor guards or as a constabulary force, there was the potential for much bloodshed.

Upon returning from a foray deep into the middle of the wastelands, the Warlord found himself being beseeched for help by the largely defenseless southern states. Pausing only to get fresh horses and three men to replace those he had lost in the wastelands, Damone rode hard to the Free States' rescue.

Many stories arose from his brilliant strategies which systematically cut apart the disorganized horde of the Drakins before the Warlord and what remained of his honor guard rode down the attackers' leader in one final skirmish.

A few songs were even written in honor of the "proud child of Edderish" who had defeated a foe five times his size with only 100 road-weary soldiers. By the time he was 32, the Warlord had a reputation that stretched from one end of the continent to the other.

Kitoor had even heard the man had convinced a dragon to protect Edderish's trade routes. Within some of the Free States there was less fear of his conquering the separate monarchies. Indeed, some went so far as to speak of proclaiming him king over all and putting away their separatist thinking. To the relief of the Regents, however, Kavamar expressed no interest in the idea.

Kitoor's eyes now drifted back to the map in the center of the table. What possible motivation could Damone have for erecting his fortress on the very border of the Great Forest? There was nothing of value in the area that he was aware of; no mines, no rich soil, certainly no seaports.

One of the many possibilities that had entered his mind last night returned to his thoughts. "Worst case scenario," he breathed aloud, and tried to dismiss it as he rolled the maps up carefully and replaced them in their marked niches in the wall. Then he decided *not* to throw out his concerns and made his way instead to the room within the library that housed the historical records of the Great Forest. He found the most recently completed book at the end of a shelf that still left room for many more volumes to be added and took it into his hands. The journal ended two years ago in 525 of the Fifth Age, and, nodding politely to those who glanced up at him within the comfortably spartan room, he sat himself on the floor cross-legged to begin going over the time of the construction of Warlord's Keep and the two years after. Although others in the room sat in hard wooden or marble chairs alone or at tables, Kitoor was by no means the only one to seat himself so casually.

After absorbing all the details of the Keep's construction and subsequent staffing (and wouldn't it just irritate Damone to know that he had been observed so carefully?), he rose effortlessly to his feet, closing the large leather-bound tome. He replaced it on its shelf and then reached for the most current volume involving the cycles of the Great Forest. The Child wandered a few steps away as

he began thumbing through the pages, enjoying the crackling sound the parchment made as he turned each leaf. Seating himself on the floor once more, he discovered that the Keep had kept a small staff of mages on hand, but only a skeletal staff of militia.

Why build a fortress and leave it all but empty? he wondered. He began skimming through the book until he came to some passages written almost two months ago that revealed Kavamar himself taking up residence at his Keep along with a small group of soldiers. And then, as the days progressed, more soldiers began arriving in twos and threes. Almost all of them unmounted, and none moving in any kind of formation. *And is that not exactly the way I would bring the numbers of my fortress up if I did not want my neighbors to know what I was doing?*

Kitoor's eyes drifted up from the pages of the historical journal, and he slowly brought himself once more to his feet, closing the book thoughtfully. He took in the dozen or so quiet scholars in the room, each involved in their own studies and content to allow the world to move in its cycles through the years, unsure why this struck him as an error somehow when before he had always considered it something to be lauded.

I need to slow down. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *All things in their time.* He promised himself that he would go out and see Warlord's Keep sometime tomorrow, and then did his best to dismiss his worries about master tacticians setting up fortresses on the Great Forest's borders.

He had arranged to meet with Dalen in a few hours, ostensibly so that they might do some more catching up, but Kitoor had an ulterior motive in mind. With the possible (if unlikely) exception of his other childhood companion, Jarreth (if the man could forgive the wanderer's long absence), the only two people in the monastery who might listen to his suspicion were Sirna and Dalen. He planned to visit with Sirna before her class later in the morning and find out

if she had reached a conclusion about what he had already told her. That left only Dalen.

But I must be sure, Kitoor thought as he left the library and made his way outside the monastery's boundaries. *I can not expect my friends to see or feel an absence if nothing is missing.*

He walked for nearly a league before he found a suitable place. *One last try to feel The Beast within our forest*, he thought, his mind strangely at ease. In his heart, Kitoor had no more doubts. Something unheard of in the entire history of Auren had happened, and he would soon begin taking steps to set things right.

The Child lowered himself to the soft forest floor, noting the hushed sounds around him, the colors of the midsummer trees. The air was not as sweet as it should be, the sky seemed somehow too close to the earth, as if the world were collapsing in on itself.

He thought for just a moment of what Dalen would say to his words, but then allowed his mind to empty as he tried for the last time, in what would become more years than he would ever believe, to find the presence of The Beast.



“One does not capture an immortal, Kitoor.” There was a note of gentle reproach in the older man’s voice as he walked serenely down the forest path. This was a bad beginning, Kitoor knew, for he had not even named the immortal. Many lived within the Great Forest, though none approached the power of The Beast.

“Why not?” he asked pointedly.

“Why not?” Dalen returned with mild surprise. “Because it is...” He trailed off, perhaps not wishing to set absolutes about things which may or may not be.

“Because it is impossible?” Kitoor gestured toward the towering trees that filtered the warm summer sun in a canopy of green. “Look

around us, my friend. Inside our forest few things of darkness *seem* possible. Yet, can you not feel it?" His brown eyes swept the thick foliage surrounding the pair as if searching for something. "The animals do."

Dalen's brow furrowed, and he glanced about uncertainly. "They do seem a bit...restrained," he finally admitted.

"Restrained?" Kitoor echoed with amazement. "Dalen, in the hour that we have been walking, I could count the number of squirrels I have seen on my fingers alone. The trees should be swarming with them at this time of the year!" It was a blatant exaggeration, he knew, but he had always been easily excitable when compared to the gentle calmness exhibited by the rest of the Children.

"There is truth to what you say, brother," Dalen returned, "yet I can not make the connection between a..." he smiled, "...restrained forest and the capture of an immortal. Besides, The Beast would let us know if one of His brethren had been made a prisoner."

Kitoor's face fell and his manner became more subdued. He had hoped to get his friend to at least agree to *this* proposition. "Dalen, you were my *Tez'ari* of the early disciplines of the mind. You taught me that there are no limits." His features seemed clouded for a moment. "I believe that I share an...empathic bond with this particular immortal."

To his credit, Dalen's step didn't falter. He slowly nodded once. "Such a thing is not unheard of. However, there have been no such bondings in nearly a hundred and fifty years." He paused. "What makes you believe that you share one?"

"I do not know for certain," Kitoor answered with a half-shrug. "I have felt almost penned in or caged since my return. At first I thought I had just been gone too long, but now?" He glanced about him before returning his gaze to Dalen. "Now I feel as if walls that I know do not exist are closing in on me. When I have returned here

in the past, this forest always seemed a haven to me. A soothing balm compared to the chaos of the cities.”

“Your...wanderlust,” Dalen began carefully, “are you sure—”

“Am I sure that my restlessness is not the cause of my feelings?” the wanderer interrupted. “‘One can never be certain of anything,’ you once taught me. But you must understand that there *is* a difference in these feelings. Similar, yes, but different.” His voice became a near-growl. “I feel trapped.”

The pair walked in silence for a while as Dalen digested the words of his companion. Kitoor understood how the older man thought, and gave him as much time as he needed.

Eventually, the pair’s steps began to lead them back to the monastery’s grounds. Kitoor waited patiently for Dalen to speak until they arrived at the library where the older man would soon hold his class.

“With whom do you share this bond?” Dalen suddenly asked.

Kitoor hesitated, remembering Sirna’s doubt. “The Beast.”

Dalen frowned. “I do not wish to sound close-minded, but such a thing is...very unlikely.”

“Do you think I am unaware of that?” Kitoor burst out, earning a few glances from others making their way up or down the library’s steps. He lowered his voice, but couldn’t quite bring his emotions down. “If anything were to happen to The Beast, the Learned Ones would almost certainly know.”

A new thought seemed to cross Dalen’s mind. “Has He revealed Himself to you?”

Kitoor had been hoping his friend wouldn’t ask this. It was a very personal thing to him, but he couldn’t hide the truth now. “Yes.” His reply was just above a whisper.

“And the Learned Ones?”

“I have not told them.”

“Kitoor, have you forgotten so much in your wanderings?”

Dalen's voice was heavy in its reproach, though his features remained composed.

"I know what I have done is...unprecedented." His voice had choked on the word *wrong*. "But it occurred several years ago at the edge of the forest, days from here. He said nothing."

"Of course He said nothing," Dalen replied, still sounding distraught over his companion's transgression. "How could He say anything unless—" Dalen's face finally reflected his internal turmoil—a sure sign of how upset he truly was. "Eyes, Kitoor!" he hissed, glancing around to make sure no one could overhear. "Was He in His true form?"

This time, he did whisper. "Yes."

Dalen was suddenly the picture of calmness, save for his eyes, which glinted with a hard light. Kitoor saw the look immediately and knew how close he was to alienating his long-time confidante in a way he hadn't foreseen.

"I have not kept this to myself out of pride." Kitoor's voice was unfeigned humbleness. "You must believe me, brother. When he revealed himself to me, I felt as if...as if he was acknowledging me. As if he wanted to know what I looked like."

It was strange to talk about, even now. Something the wanderer had held like a sacred trust. Seeing the harsh light soften in his friend's eyes only minutely, Kitoor continued to explain. "All of the instances wherein he has revealed himself to the Children have been within a day's march from here. And each time he has shown his true form, he has spoken. It is said that he has the power to communicate feelings or even the seeds of ideas without speech, does it not?"

"Yes," Dalen admitted slowly.

"If you were to have seen him, and you thought that all of the prior revelations were different than what had just happened, what would you think?" Dalen's eyebrows knitted together slightly as Kitoor continued. "And if you felt—felt in your *bones*—that an

immortal wanted you to see him for some reason that you could only guess at, and wanted you to...I can not say for certain.” He gestured vaguely. “Not keep it to yourself exactly, but not make a ceremony out of it, either. Can you see?”

Dalen’s expression was unreadable as Kitoor finally ran out of words. Then, after a moment, the older man nodded curtly. “I will need time to collect my thoughts on the matter, and perhaps re-read some of the history between the Children of The Beast and their protector. I will speak to you more about this tomorrow.”

He glanced once at his friend’s face, then at the doors to the library. “His eyes watch over you, brother.”

He nodded once more, then began ascending the steps. Kitoor watched him go, hearing Dalen’s last words, but they seemed hollow—even ironic. His eyes could not watch when he was held somewhere against his will. Yet how was this even possible? Kitoor wet his lips and walked away.

It was a little more than an hour before the monastery’s activities would slow for the mid-day meal, and the Child directed his steps toward the training grounds for the arts of combat.

For centuries, the Children had maintained a delicate balance between protecting their forest’s boundaries and keeping with their non-aggressive reputation; a feat that was not accomplished without a great degree of practice within the sphere of war. It was known throughout the domains that the Children were the most deadly warriors in hand-to-hand combat of any nation—save, perhaps, the Barians of the northern lands. The fact that the Children seldom used weapons and shunned all armor only added to their mystique. Legends of a single Child defeating a half-dozen heavily armed men were common in the kingdoms—if not always true—and much respect was accorded the monastery that Kitoor had always called home.

In all of his wanderings, this mystery surrounding his fellow Children’s style of fighting had been a source of amusement to him.

He had taught the arts of war for a few years at the monastery at one point, and it always seemed like a miniature homecoming each time he returned to the training grounds.

And yet, yesterday he had been too caught up in seeing Sirna after so many years, and then too confused by his sudden revelation to enjoy the memories; running out on her like an undisciplined youth. And now...Kitoor could only shake his head at the mess of things he had made with Dalen.

I sounded like a novice, he berated himself. *No evidence save for a few missing squirrels. And then trying to explain the unexplainable.* His thoughts turned to that encounter that now seemed to have occurred in another world. To actually have seen The Beast in his true form...

He had never spoken of it to anyone, and had thought of it himself only rarely, as if dwelling on it might somehow tarnish the memory.

Kitoor let out a breath of air and settled himself against the great oak tree as he had yesterday, noting that Sirna had already arrived and was warming up her muscles. He folded his hands in his lap and watched as her well-developed body moved smoothly from one form to the next in her kata. There was still some time before her novices would arrive, but the current routine that she was going through was years beyond their training. He watched with a peculiar mix of pride and admiration that was not paternal, but still quite strong. It was the feeling of teacher for student when it became obvious that the roles might soon reverse.

The day was quite warm, yet there was no sheen of perspiration or flush to her skin; a testament to her degree of body discipline. Her honey-colored hair swirled about her head as she spun quickly in the dancing sunlight, her green eyes sparkling. Kitoor's impatience with his dilemma slowly washed away as he regarded her with half-closed eyes. The calm that was such a standard with the other Children, yet had been eluding him, finally seemed to wash over his mind. A

moment later, she ended her routine in the standard *lataka murin* position.

She rose smoothly, and regarded Kitoor's now-smiling face with a raised eyebrow. "Does something amuse you?"

Kitoor's smile broadened. "You bring my soul peace where there was naught but turmoil," he replied. "For that, I thank you."

Sirna's eyes glittered merrily. "A very pretty thought. Why do I wonder about other motives?"

"I would not know what you refer to," he replied with mock solemnity.

Eyes still bright, Sirna gracefully lowered herself to the ground close to him and laid a hand gently over both of his. "And why are you so troubled?"

He looked at her squarely. "You know why," he said softly.

Her hand tightened over his. "The Beast." Her brow lowered slightly, a minute expression of her unhappiness with the subject. "Kitoor, you must understand that I feel such a thing is...very unlikely."

Removing his right hand from beneath hers, he rubbed at his eyes a moment. "I have just had a similar conversation with Dalen over the possibility of such a thing."

"I am not saying it is not possible..." Sirna began.

"I know," he replied with a rueful smile. Then he placed his free hand back over hers, cupping it gently between his palms. "But have you thought about it as I asked?"

She nodded. "I still believe that capturing an immortal is unthinkable."

"What of The Marauder's capture in the books of the Holy Ienouht?"

"I do not discount the stories in the books of Ienouht," she said carefully, "but this is not the Age of Legends, Kitoor."

"You are very stubborn," he finally said, not without some affection.

She grinned impulsively at him. "So you have always said. Do you remember how I forced you to show me how to get out of the *kala norus*?"

Kitoor returned her look. "Of course I remember. I had to break two of your ribs to break the hold. As I told you."

"You did warn me," she conceded with a shrug. "But, as you say, I am stubborn."

"And why are you so sure The Beast can not be captured?"

"How could one capture Him?" she asked. "He can not be harmed by anything of this world, my friend, nor held, for that matter."

"But magic can harm him—or bind him."

"You know of this through...personal experience?"

"I do not understand why you walk so carefully about the subject," Kitoor said with a small shake of his head. "I know that no Child has ever 'abandoned the way' and then 'returned to the path'. That does not make it wrong—or even taboo to discuss. It is only different. Surely you can see that."

Sirna's face appeared untroubled, but he had known her too long.

"Eyes, Sirna, I am sorry. My control is not as strong as others when I am caught up in something."

One corner of her mouth turned up a bit. "Yes. I know." Then she leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial voice, "However, that does not answer my question."

Kitoor laughed warmly and shook his head. "You have always understood me better than most. Very well. I have learned in my brief time as a mage-in-training, if you will, that catching someone off-guard with magic can be done, especially if they are not expecting it. If they have not prepared their will to offer a defense.

Perhaps,” he continued, raising a hand to forestall her objection, “it is not as easy to do so with an immortal.” Kitoor paused to emphasize his next words. “But we must always remember that The Beast is an immortal and not a god.”

Sirna bowed her head in thought, and so did not see him mouth a few syllables while making two minute gestures. He felt his reserves drain at the powerful spell and sat back slightly. A moment later, the sounds of approaching voices were heard, and several novices could be seen making their way toward the open field. Sirna’s class would begin soon. She looked back up at Kitoor who was now resting against the tree with a small smile on his face.

“I must go,” she said, beginning to rise.

Nothing happened.

Her legs remained crossed on the ground—nor, she quickly discovered, could she move any muscle below her waist. She realized that Kitoor was the cause of her immobility immediately and closed her eyes to focus her mind better.

“That may have helped a few seconds ago, but if you are attempting one of the body disciplines now, you will find that your legs no longer exist. I have effectively cut off your ability to use them.”

Sirna’s eyes opened quickly, then narrowed. “You are doing this because I doubted you.”

“No. I am doing this because you are stubborn.” He smiled innocently. “Is this not more pleasant than broken ribs?”

His smile was not returned, but Kitoor could see the laughter in her eyes. “You do plan to release me so that I may teach my class?” She gestured toward the gathering novices a few yards away that had begun some simple stretching exercises.

“I am qualified to teach them,” he drawled as if weighing his choices.

“You would not!” Her eyes were now alight with both shock and amusement.

"They are prepared to learn of the *Kalanti* disciplines, are they not?"

This comment caused Sirna to struggle comically in an attempt to rise, which ended in her falling over backward in laughter, her legs still crossed and unmoving. "Kitoor," she moaned, "that is *years* beyond them and you know it." She raised herself on her elbows to glare at him with mock exasperation. "You win. I have learned my lesson and humbly ask to be released."

"And what have you learned?" Kitoor asked carefully. He stretched himself out on the ground next to her, propping his head up with one arm and regarded her pleasantly.

"That it *may* be *possible* to..." She sighed. "Imprison an immortal with magic."

"And?" he pressed, edging his face closer to hers.

"And," she returned with more seriousness, "I will consider the ramifications."

"That is all I ask."

"Release me?"

"Yes." Softly, he brushed his lips against her own. The kiss was neither passionate nor chaste, lasting no longer than a second or two. At its end, Sirna was in control of her legs once again. She rose quickly, brushing at her utilitarian robes.

"And is this how all spells are broken, then?" she asked somewhat diffidently.

Kitoor rolled onto his back with his hands behind his head. "No, but it *is* more fun that way."

She looked down at him, then smiled with uncharacteristic shyness. "His eyes watch over you, brother."

Kitoor's look was almost sad in return. "Teach them well, sister."



Evening settled slowly over the monastery. The sky was cloudless, and a light breeze murmured gently through the forest surrounding the cleared area where the gardens and cells had been built up. There was a feeling of peace throughout the woods that could seemingly soothe the most troubled of souls.

Yet Kitoor felt enclosed somehow. He had seen neither Dalen nor Sirna after the evening meal, honoring the former's implied request for solitude and imposing that same condition upon the latter. Now, he walked silently through the forest, his feet taking him away from the human-made paths where the Children walked, lost in thought.

He had spoken to the two people he knew best—the two who knew *him* best as well. There was no one else he could speak with now except for the Learned Ones. For the first time in his life, Kitoor was keenly aware of how close he was to being alone.

Because of his wanderings, he was looked upon with awe and trepidation by the younger Children, and with confusion and faint disappointment by the elders. Raised since near-infancy within the borders of the massive forest, he had shown much promise as a youth. Many of his teachers had spoken highly of his mind's agility and his eagerness to learn.

When he was only sixteen, however, he had become restless. The feeling grew each day, and after months of denial and frustration, he realized that he could no longer stay at the monastery. The world beckoned, and Kitoor could not resist its seductive pull.

He had drifted for many years and found that he had a gift for assimilating knowledge. He studied with the Wizard's Guild in Torinia for three years, surpassing peers and surprising some of the most demanding taskmasters in the school.

Then the restlessness struck him again. Hungry for more of the kind of knowledge that he had already absorbed, Kitoor once more fought the urges that seemed as powerful as the changing of the

seasons. This battle was even shorter than the first, and within weeks, he found himself wandering once more. By the time he had returned to the monastery, ten years had passed and his learning extended to the realms of healing and entertainment, as well as the arts of magic.

Strangely enough, his cell had remained vacant, despite the small growth in population at the monastery. The Learned Father had somehow been aware that Kitoor would return, and had made it known that no matter how far he roamed, or how long he was gone, he would always have a home waiting for him.

Many of the elder Children were confused by this declaration, but his casual word—by no means an edict—was backed by the Learned Mother, and no Child of The Beast would be so foolhardy as to argue with the two most favored Children of their protector.

As the years had gone by, the other Children realized that Kitoor had changed little. He remembered everything he had been taught in his formative years, admitting to his teachers that he had practiced and used all of the mind and body disciplines while away. Upon his return, he seemed to throw himself into all of the arts that were taught—almost as if to make up for lost time. Once more, many spoke with approval of his quick mastery of disciplines and his respect for tradition while not being blinded by it. Yet also, there was a faint puzzlement at his near-frantic desire to accumulate as much knowledge as possible.

Six years after his return to the monastery, it became clear why; he was restless once more. None of the disciplines of the mind could order his chaotic thoughts, and his anger at himself would perhaps have reached unhealthy heights had the Learned Mother not spoken to him. There was much speculation as to what had been said between them, but a short time after, Kitoor had once more left the monastery.

And so the cycle had continued for over half a century. Kitoor's stays at what he always considered his home were sometimes longer,

sometimes shorter, but he always came back—and he was always made welcome. No teachings were denied him, and the word “outsider” was never used. Yet still, there were few who felt wholly comfortable when interacting with him.

With a frustrated shake of his head, Kitoor looked up into the clear night sky. He was deep in the forest now, moving east, and could only make out a handful of stars through the constricting canopy of leaves and branches above him. He knew he would feel better once he could identify these feelings of entrapment and resolve them. That was what the Learned Mother had once told him: Don’t fight such deep impulses—learn to understand, and then act upon them.

It seemed that one of those impulses was to move quickly. Glancing about, he realized that he was much further from the monastery than he had thought. Nothing around him looked familiar, but he was unconcerned. Even without the tracking skills that he had mastered in his wanderings, it was nearly impossible for a Child to become lost within this particular forest. The order and feel of their home was almost like a pulse that could be felt if one tried hard enough.

This is not what Kitoor focused on, however. He kept searching for an answer to the questions regarding his feelings. Did he really believe that he shared a bond with The Beast? It seemed so unlikely, but there it was; all the signs pointed to it.

He began to take apart all the facts as he knew them, breaking into a jog at the same time. If his mind was going to race anyway, he saw no reason to allow his body any rest. Maybe it would release some of this pent-up frustration he felt.

In the entire history of the Children, only eleven encounters had occurred with The Beast assuming his true form with anyone other than the Learned Ones. In all eleven cases, he had spoken, and in

only one of those instances had he formed an empathic bond with the one he had spoken to.

In each of the encounters, there had been a crisis in the world and time had not allowed The Beast to work through his chosen; he had spoken to the nearest of his Children in the forest before disappearing for a season or less, only once taking the one he had spoken to with him.

Kitoor had gone over this dozens of times in his mind. Where was the crisis? The last one had been over 150 years ago, and since then, the world had been in a golden age. Major wars were unheard of, even between bored royalty; ogres, dragons, trolls, most of the traditional “enemies of mankind” had faded away into myths told around evening fires; the dark gods spawned by Kazultuzak had seemingly taken leave of the world.

Kitoor had sensed no urgency in his encounter with The Beast—no sense of impending doom. It was almost a dream-like happening. From the moment of his appearance until he had shifted his form to that of a massive black wolf and loped off into the woods, only a short time had passed. And in the end, all that Kitoor was left with was the sense that it had been very personal somehow.

Had other Children experienced this and never told another soul? How many people had been so blessed and yet felt compelled to carry their secret to the Place of Light?

Am I to be the next Learned Father? Kitoor burst into a sprint unconsciously at such a thought, as if to outrun it. It was well known that one of the most dangerous things to the greater disciplines of the mind was pride. The thought had come unbidden, a logical leap-frogging of the speculation as to whether or not all Learned Fathers had had such sightings.

I will tell them, he thought resolutely, ignoring the slapping of branches against him, leaping over thickets and fallen trees, bounding like a deer in his near-frantic rush through the dark trees. *I*

will tell the Learned Ones that I have seen The Beast and ask for their guidance.

But he knew that he would not. It was too private. *Too private to tell Dalen?* he berated himself. Overwhelmed with confusion, he put another burst of speed on, his legs becoming a blur, the pounding of his feet on the soft loam of the forest floor turning into an impossibly rapid staccato of muffled noises until it was one sound, mercifully cleansing his mind of the unanswerable questions.

A scant second later, Kitoor's eyes widened, and he dug his feet into the earth, leaning backward and quickly preparing a spell of levitation should he need it. A sudden drop had appeared some fifteen yards before him and he wasn't sure if he could stop himself in time. He fell hard on his backside and clutched at a tiny sapling growing near the edge, before sliding to a bumpy halt with both legs up to his knees hanging over the edge of the cliff.

For a moment, the only sound that he could hear was the sliding and shifting of loose rock tumbling down the steep embankment and the deep gulps of air he was taking. He finally pulled his body up with the help of a large, solid-looking tree, and exhaled deeply.

He had come an incredible distance, he realized with some degree of shock—nearly eight leagues in little more than an hour. He recognized where he was now, but not from anything in the forest. Looking out over the trees at the bottom of the embankment that began yards below him, Kitoor could see Warlord's Keep sparkling with hundreds of torches like a polished gem in the night nearly a quarter mile from where he stood. Despite studying its sketch this morning, he was nevertheless surprised at the small castle's design when viewed firsthand.

Warlord's Keep was more a fortress than anything else, with absurdly thick stone walls circling a dark and squat building in the middle. The only reason it was probably named a keep rather than

the grander title of castle was due to its relatively small size and its ridiculously indefensible position.

The plain upon which it had been constructed was surrounded on three sides by the trees in which Kitoor now stood. It would be a simple task for an aggressor to approach unseen to the very doorstep of the keep by marching quietly through the forest. The tall branches of the trees would protect an army from any catapults or other siege weapons that the fort might have. And since the forest was known to be under the protection of The Beast, not even the Warlord himself would wish to incur that immortal's wrath and that of the Children by setting the trees afire.

The fourth side of the keep faced smooth, grassy terrain that would favor easy movements for an attacker's siege engines as well. And to top it off, the keep sat squarely in the center of a depression in the field.

To be sure, the structure looked grim enough to discourage attacks. The walls were twice the thickness of a normal castle—though not quite as tall. Even from where he stood, Kitoor could see archers lining the tops of the fortifications, which seemed extremely defensible for reasons beyond his own understanding. But then, Damone Kavamar of Edderish was a master tactician who had proven time and again his skill at taking an enemy's measure.

But who is the enemy? Kitoor found himself asking.

Looking over the keep from where he now stood, the Child felt something. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but—and then he had it. Not a feeling, but a *lack* of one. The pensiveness was gone. With a start, he realized that he had been heading in this direction since leaving the monastery. He looked upon Warlord's Keep with a sense of dread, trying to ignore the incessant pull on his soul that he knew would not release him until all was made right.

Why did I come to this place? he wondered, hoping against an answer.

But he knew why. Somewhere behind those thick walls, guarded by hundreds of men, the greatest military mind in centuries had captured an immortal.

The sounds of the night creatures were not as loud as they should have been, as if the animals were mourning the loss of their protector. The heat of the summer night had finally begun to fade, and a light breeze helped cool the sweat still drying on Kitoor's brow. Now he knew why The Beast had revealed himself. He had somehow known what was to happen—and who could help him.

“I will free you,” Kitoor whispered.