



For the honor of Queen Lishara, Ruler of Darg, Favored of All-Knowing Scindrath, Keeper of the Wisdom, and Holder of the Books of Knowledge, Your Most Gracious Majesty:

It has been nearly a month since I last saw our fair coast. I freely admit that when I left I was somewhat skeptical as to the situation of the world and my specific role within it. It has been over one hundred and fifty years since the All-Knowing Scindrath has blessed one of our people with the Gift of Recall, and I was loath to admit that the winds of change did once more blow.

During my time upon the road with my squire Damar, I have come to realize the truth of the matter. Every conversation that I have had with every barkeep, merchant, innkeeper—even the more drawn-out ones with Damar—I remember word for word, exactly as it was spoken to me and by me. It is uncanny, even unnatural, but such was the power of Scindrath recorded in our oldest books; such is His power now.

It is written in our most sacred texts that this gift is bestowed only upon those who will be at the center of some maelstrom of events that may change the world, and in my journey to western Auren, I have seen tensions rising at rumors of demons gathering in Baria. Among the Orman Perisie to our north, there is similarly something causing

them to quietly mobilize their warriors, but in their typical fashion, I was able to glean little details as to what was the cause of their unrest. There is a general feeling that the tranquility and calm which has prevailed throughout the lands for the last century is beginning to turn, as Your Majesty predicted, to a sense of underlying caution—even dread. If some manner of evil has begun to stir, and this seems more likely due to Scindrath's blessing upon me, it is important for us to be prepared.

Damar, of course, looks for trouble over every new hill, embracing the fall of night in hopes of encountering some foul creature to bring violence upon. Recalling my own youth, I allow him first watch each night, for which he seems ridiculously grateful.

As per your royal command, I have journeyed to the monastery of the Children of the Beast; I write this missive now from within a guest cottage there. Along the way, I inquired of various citizens from differing regions as to their knowledge of the Children. Few could offer me anything of worth other than the fact that they are seen rarely and are not to be trifled with. One would think they were describing the Barians of the north. At least the Children have the courtesy to send ambassadors to the other nations, if only for short intervals.

Damar and I were greeted near midday at the border of the Great Forest by one of the Children of The Beast. She was dressed in a brown, hooded robe, but I could still detect dark hair and the true mark of all Children, green eyes. She is a marvel, Your Majesty. As much in tune with her forest as the Orman Perisie to our north are within theirs. Although I pride myself on my keen senses, I did not see the woman until Durith had nearly trodden upon her.

"I greet you in the name of The Beast," she intoned formally. "I am Rena."

I dismounted from my steed and bowed, as Damar did likewise. "I am Sir Garith of Darg, and this is my squire, Damar. I have traveled far to seek the wisdom of the Learned Mother and Father. I seek safe passage to their halls."

"The Learned Mother bids you welcome, and the Learned Father asks that I direct you through the forest." Again, her words seemed formulated. "Your safety is assured, Garith of Darg."

Without another word, Rena turned and began down the small trail into the forest. Damar and I exchanged glances, shrugged, then remounted and shortly caught up with her. The pace she set afoot was impressive, nor did it appear to be a strain to her in any way. Indeed, I was reminded of a deer by her smooth grace.

An hour passed with no words being spoken, causing my squire to glance at me with a small amount of confusion more than once. The trail was wide enough to allow us to ride abreast of each other, and I was therefore able to note that Damar's curiosity was beginning to get the better of him. He finally gestured toward our guide with raised eyebrows, seeking permission to speak to her. I shrugged casually, inwardly amused at his impatience. All questions would be answered soon enough, I was sure, but the lad had a deep need to know things now. Although I've always admired his desire for knowledge, I despair of him tempering this with patience.

"Child Rena," Damar called out.

The woman slowed her pace to a quick-stepping walk just in front and to the right of Damar's horse, brushing against the thick ferns that lined the trail. She lowered her hood and glanced back at my squire with a slight smile that seemed to contain some amount of good humor.

"Just Rena," she said lightly.

Damar is but sixteen, yet seems to have a truly difficult time keeping his emotions in check, or even hiding them. Now, his jaw was slack as he gazed at our guide's face. Truly, the woman was beautiful, with short-cut hair that accentuated the curve of her neck admirably, deep green eyes, and finely sculpted cheekbones, yet it seemed obvious to me that she was many years his senior. I would not have placed her age above twenty-five, but for the look in her eyes and the knowledge of all

Children's longevity. In faith, there are many similarities between these people and our Orman Perisie friends to the north.

The woman's reaction to Damar's stunned look was one of surprise, followed by partially concealed amusement. I believe that he missed the minute expressions upon her face, so caught up was the rogue with her features.

Finally, perhaps realizing the indignity of his ogling, Damar tried to recompose himself. "Rena, then," he said in his still-deepening voice. He smiled in a way that was calculated to be both knowing and casual (something I have seen him practicing at with all manner of young ladies—with varying degrees of reward in our travels), and gestured to the trees surrounding us. "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?" she inquired in a suddenly neutral tone.

"So full of life," he returned. And, indeed, there did seem to be a notable number of squirrels, chipmunks, birds, even the occasional fox and deer; it was more active than any forest I have ever been in.

Rena's reply seemed to have a touch of defensiveness in it, which confused me somewhat, given the innocent nature of the question. "No." She paused. "No, it is usually different."

Sensing the conversation to be going in a direction he did not desire, Damar quickly changed tactics. "Have you ever visited our kingdom of Darg?" he asked, with a gesture to include me within Darg's citizenry. My lectures on politeness, it seems, had borne some fruit, at least.

"I have not left His forest in over forty years," she answered with an open smile.

Damar's composure vanished, and he nearly choked. "Forty—you mean forty yea—You'd have to be—"

"I am fifty-nine years of age, Squire Damar."

The boy's jaw clamped shut, and he glanced at me as if to gauge the degree to which he had embarrassed himself. I regarded him with half-lidded eyes and an otherwise blank face, a look I know he despises.

Finally, he forced a smile toward Rena and said without a hint of wounded pride, "Just Damar."

"As you wish," she said, eyes twinkling.

We continued in silence for nearly a minute before she glanced up toward my squire's stony face. "I am flattered."

"I find that the summer's heat seems to be lingering this year. Would you agree?"

"Indeed, it does seem warmer," Rena replied dutifully.

The pair engaged in some amazingly inane small talk, mostly initiated by Damar as if to erase any foolish impressions he might have made. Rena played along quite graciously, with a touch of solemnness that I'm sure was designed to placate the youth's dignity.

"If I may inquire, does Warlord's Keep bother your people?" he suddenly asked, finally steering away from the bland pattering.

Rena was a moment in her response. "In what way?" she asked in a careful and once-more neutral voice.

"You know," he said off-handedly, "he puts up a practical fortress on your back doorstep and stocks it with warriors for no reason."

"Yes?" she returned, tight-lipped.

"Well," he went on, oblivious to her warning signs, "did he even ask permission or just start building? Strictly speaking, I assume the keep isn't in the Great Forest, but still..."

There was a long moment of silence where Rena's quick walk fluidly became a slow jog, and she began to minutely pull ahead of us. I don't believe even she was aware of what she was doing. I noted Damar's puzzlement and placed a hand on his forearm as he was about to speak. He looked at me with a lack of understanding as I gravely shook my head, then glanced once more at our guide's back. I tightened my grasp on his arm.

He finally nodded, and I released my grip. The lad had asked a good question, hitting upon a sore point that we had not known existed. Now I had one more thing to ask the Learned Ones about.

“We will arrive shortly,” Rena eventually said. “Stay on this trail. I will go forward to prepare for your reception.”

Then she bounded off at an inhumanly fast pace, rivaling even what our steeds could have accomplished.

“What..?” Damar left the question unspoken.

“We shall find out soon enough, lad, have no fear of that.”

He shook his head in bewilderment.



Your Majesty would marvel at the complex we were led into a short time later. Not for any reason of beauty or style, but simply for its utter lack of defensible positions. Spaced in neat rows around various portions of the monastery are what appear to be the meanest sort of barracks believable. Each shelter—for I am loath to call them buildings—has only three sides, and room for perhaps two people. There appears to be little, if any, privacy, nor any possessions save those of the most base peasant.

I could see no walls to protect the community, nor are there earthen fortifications. Yet at the center of this monastery sits one of the greatest repositories of knowledge in all of Auren.

Lest I give the impression of an impoverished society, let me hasten to add that though they seem to possess few valuables and have no apparent comforts (not even straw to sleep upon), they nevertheless show every sign of being a very healthy and strong people. Their lifestyle of moderation would not appear to extend to the field of agriculture, and there is an abundance of vegetable and flower gardens both within the monastery itself and the surrounding area as well. We also saw fruit trees and bushes, all bearing remarkable-sized prizes despite the lateness of the season.

As we made our way through the community, Damar found himself taken aback by the sea of faces that reflected no age. He had learned from his experience with the Child, Rena, that a closer look was in order

before coming to a decision about any of the Children's years. I admit to being somewhat dismayed, myself, at the degree to which the situation affected me. With Orman Perisie or Vansernic, I expect there to be some degree of mystery, yet among fellow Humans, I found it disconcerting to be speaking to someone who appeared to be a similar age as myself, yet discovering later that person to be my senior by over a century.

Upon our arrival at the edge of the monastery grounds, Rena had been replaced by a young man, some fourteen years of age, who appeared to serve a function similar to Your Majesty's pages. His eyes were not yet the deep green of the other youths about the area, and I therefore surmised him to be an apprenticed boy, rather than the actual son of any Child residing here.

The lad approached us with an even younger girl beside him as we took in the sights of the monastery. "I am Son of Sky," he said in an even tenor. "In the name of the Learned Mother and the Learned Father, I welcome you to our home. Daughter of Man shall take your mounts to a place of rest and refreshment."

The girl, no more than ten, stepped forward and appeared unintimidated by Durith's size, much less Damar's mount. She waited expectantly for our reins with a serious expression that made me wonder if even the youths here were older than they looked. My squire glanced at me questioningly before following my lead and dismounting.

I gravely held forth Durith's reins to the young lass who just as gravely grasped them tightly. She then gathered Durath's reins from Damar in the same manner. Pausing a moment as if in deep thought, she pointed firmly at my squire's steed. "He was sired by yours, Sir Knight?" Her eyes were between a sea green and sky blue color, and she kept them firmly fixed upon mine. Though she had asked a question, those eyes said that she knew the answer already.

I lowered myself to one knee so as to speak with her at eye level and somberly nodded. "Yes, indeed, Daughter of Man, Durath was sired by Durith."

Her head bobbed once in apparent satisfaction. "I thought so." She curtsied delicately, and then led our mounts toward the outer edge of the complex.

Even though Durith had seen me give the girl his reins, palms up, I was surprised by his calm manner. I had heard that all Children of The Beast have a reassuring influence on animals, yet was still unprepared for the ease with which a mere child of ten had handled two trained warhorses.

I rose and turned my attention to the young man. "I am Sir Garith of Darg, and this is my squire, Damar."

"I have been instructed to show you to a guest cottage where you may wash the dust from your, ummm, raiments." He grimaced at his verbal stumble, then turned and began to walk through the center of the monastery grounds. A moment later, Damar and I followed.

"Are they always like this?" my squire asked in a low voice. "It may be that I'm just used to all the ceremony surrounding our customs, but don't you think it's strange the way everyone just starts out walking without even making sure we're following?"

I shrugged noncommittally. We had been warned by our own diplomats that the Children did almost everything in a manner that may seem foreign to us.

Damar frowned. "And Daughter of Man? Son of Sky? What kinds of names are those?"

"Actually, I do not have a name yet," the boy's voice carried back.

I noticed the flushed look upon my squire's face. That was twice his impatience had embarrassed him, and he knew it. Son of Sky glanced back at us with an impish grin, causing Damar's jaw to set.

"I meant no insult, Son of Sky," he said with painful civility. "I wasn't aware that you were listening to us so closely."

"What my squire intended to say," I corrected, laying a hand upon his shoulder, "was that he was not aware that his rude observations would carry so far."

"And I apologize," he hastily added as I tightened my grip.

Son of Sky glanced back at us again, then stopped and turned with a look of mild surprise on his face. "Oh, but I did not intend for Squire Damar to get in trouble," he protested with sincerity. "I was only having fun with him. That is—" His face became crestfallen.

"That's all right," Damar interrupted with a suddenly bright smile. He ducked under my hand and clasped the younger boy on the shoulder. "Sir Garith is always correcting my manners. It gives him something to do when not intimidating the other knights in Darg." A ghost of a smile touched his lips, "And it's just Damar, please."

I shook my head in resignation of my squire's mercurial manner, though in truth, I was quite pleased with the turn of events. As you may recall, Your Majesty, I have had serious misgivings over my abilities as a diplomat. Though it has been said that I am polite to a fault, I do not feel I am an adequate replacement for any of your ambassadors of goodwill and would feel much more comfortable in my normal role as Queen's Champion.

One of the reasons that I had doubts over this particular aspect of our mission was the great lack of knowledge that we possessed regarding the Children's social customs. My feeling of relief upon discovering that Son of Sky was like any other boy his age was great indeed.

"Shall we continue?" I asked with a slight smile, more for Son of Sky's benefit than Damar's, who knew my humors well.

"Yes, of course, Sir Knight," the boy nodded. "Actually," he said to Damar, now at his side as we resumed walking, "I am close to choosing a name for myself. If I continue to do well, I will be of naming age in two years."

"Is 'Son of Sky' a title then?"

"Of a sort. Once a year, two new Children, one of each gender, are initiated into our order. They have no name until they are of age to choose it for themselves. It is both a right and a privilege."

"So, 'Son of Sky'..."

"States my age more than anything. There is only one Son of Sky at any time, so that is what I am called. Next will be 'Son of Wind' and then the age of naming, 'Son of Auren'. At that time, I will have one month to choose my name."

"It sounds like a better way than ours," Damar said gloomily. "I was named after a war hero from the Age of Legends. I must know a half-dozen people who I share it with."

Son of Sky frowned in thought. "But then how do you know if someone is speaking about you, specifically?"

"Usually, you're called by your occupation. Or one of your parents'. I was Damar the Scribe's Son if someone looked for me in particular. Now I'm Damar, Squire to Sir Garith."

Son of Sky regarded the other lad with studied deliberation for a moment before a smile suddenly crossed his face. "You are right. Our way is better."

My squire grinned back, then noted that I had slowed and turned to me expectantly.

"May we stop for a moment?" I asked Son of Sky. To our left, some Children were being trained for combat, and I found my curiosity roused.

"Absolutely," Son of Sky returned with approval evident in his voice. "Sirna is the most beautiful woman I think I have ever seen. I can watch her for hours."

I regarded the boy with raised eyebrows, inwardly appalled at his audacity. Even Damar seemed momentarily surprised.

Son of Sky glanced back and forth at our faces for a moment. "Have I said something wrong?" he asked in bewilderment.

"I think you misunderstood My Lord's interest," Damar said after a second's hesitation. "Sir Garith is a matchless warrior and teaches knights in the arts of war himself. I believe he wished to view a different style of combat more than admire the lovely woman's...form."

"Oh." Son of Sky seemed only partially convinced and regarded

my features closely. I allowed my eyes to slip past him without revealing anything, turning my attention to the Children as they practiced. After a moment, I still had only the vaguest of ideas as to what was transpiring. No weapons—even wooden ones—were in evidence, nor were any classic moves being performed. In truth, I recognized only the most rudimentary of their actions—punches or kicks—while barely being able to discern an attack from a defensive stance. The students stepped forward and turned their bodies to the side even as they moved arms and fists in different directions.

I changed tactics and focused on the instructor to see if I might not better understand what was taking place. Sirna wore a brown, sleeveless robe that allowed her more freedom, and there was something about her that was breathtaking. Her hair was the color of honey; long with a thick braid beginning at the nape of her neck, and the sun seemed to take great delight in making the locks shimmer whenever she moved. I could not have been closer than fifty yards, yet felt as if I were beside the woman, watching the subtle flexing of her muscles and marveling at the fluidity of her motions, as well as her beauty and grace. I found myself noticing the smallest details of her arms, shoulders, and neck as she initiated each form, speaking to her students in a soothing but firm voice, and began thinking along lines that were certainly not those that an instructor should contemplate while watching a fellow peer teach. It wasn't until I started wondering what Paric would think of her that I realized how my thoughts had strayed.

Abruptly, I shifted my eyes to the youngsters beside me and instantly hoped that such a look of mindless fascination had not been on my face.

"I have seen enough," I said, my voice perhaps coming out harsher than I intended, hoping that my cheeks would not betray me with any sign of my embarrassment and self-reproach. I would have to apologize to the woman for such thoughts should I ever encounter her, but in truth, my curiosity was strongly piqued by the forms that she and her students

danced and glided through. It is strange in the extreme to watch warriors practice at battle in a manner that I can barely comprehend.

Son of Sky nodded slowly at my words, then reluctantly turned his gaze away and resumed walking east through the grounds. I followed after gently turning Damar away from the training area.

It was but a short time later, while the two lads continued to compare cultures, and I went over what I had seen—still unable to grasp but the most basic of ideas behind the forms I had observed—that we came away from the casual barracks at the center of the monastery and were shown to a small cottage. Son of Sky bowed us inside, where we discovered all of the comforts one would expect in any civilized land, including a stove and a bath chamber, a well no more than a few rods distant, and even a privy at the end of a short covered walkway. The inside was comfortable, with chairs before a large hearth, a table with a basket on it, and two feathered beds against the opposite wall. Our horses were stabled nearby, and our packs had already been brought inside.

“There is a river through the trees there,” Son of Sky said, pointing to our right. “I shall be there should you need me.” Damar gave the other lad an envious look before the Child bowed formally again. “I shall return after you have had a chance to eat and refresh yourselves.”

The next two hours were spent in quiet preparation for our meeting with the Learned Ones. We each took time to bathe, of course. It had been two days since we’d seen an inn and we were both more than pleased to wash the dust and sweat of the midsummer sun from our bodies. The basket left on the table for us had warm bread, a small jar of honey, and an assortment of fruits and cured meat. Between the two of us, not a crumb escaped our hunger from the road. Although Damar bounced back quickly as the youth tend to do, I allowed myself only a single envious look at the bed before carefully removing the finery I had carried from Darg out of my pack and gently airing as much of it as possible without wrinkling things further than was necessary.

I was beginning to have my doubts about how essential the clothing

was. I had closeted myself for an entire day with our last ambassador, Romar, who did try and warn me that although the Children of the Beast comported themselves with a quiet dignity and warmth, they rarely stood on ceremony. As Your Majesty's representative, however, I couldn't quite bring myself to meet the rulers of even such a small community as the monastery without a certain degree of formality. Thus, despite the summer sun we would be walking through, we both wore doublet, vest, and gloves, complimenting hose and knee-high leather boots, I in silver and blue, while Damar dressed in the black of a squire.

We formally inspected one another before he nodded at me with approval. I raised one eyebrow in a question. "Too much?"

He grimaced slightly. "I haven't seen anyone wearing anything more than the robes, My Lord, but..." He shrugged. "For the Queen?"

"Aye, lad," I said, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. "Into battle we go."

He grinned back at me and we exited the cottage to find Son of Sky approaching us through the trees to our east. From the dampness of his robes and the hair plastered to his head, I surmised the river was as refreshing as my squire believed it would be. "For the Queen," I heard Damar repeat under his breath with a touch of longing.



A short time later, we found ourselves standing before the only building of any consequence I had yet seen. I had been under the impression that the Learned Mother and Learned Father had their own hall of admittance, but apparently this was not so.

The library was an amazing structure, at least a hundred yards on each side and three stories in height. I assume that they commissioned mages to put the building together; not because of any architectural impossibilities, but because it seemed to be made from a single slab of marble with the only features being large windows of stained glass,

a pair of huge doors at the center, and five stairs leading up to them. There were no seams or cracks visible in the building's construction, yet for a stone so large to ever have existed seems impossible to me. I have not heard that the Children of The Beast have had any dealings, past or present, with mages, however, and for this reason, my curiosity was further pricked.

Son of Sky opened the massive iron doors with relative ease, considering their size, and gestured us to follow him. We immediately turned to the right and climbed a set of very sturdy but worn steps that, again, appeared to be a single part of the building itself, not something that was brought in and built later.

When we reached the landing on the second floor, Son of Sky gestured with an abrupt bow. "They await you in the reception hall at the very end of this corridor," he said with a pleasant smile that clearly said his duties had been successfully completed.

Damar looked to me with hesitation, and I voiced his unspoken question. "You wish us to merely walk down the hall and burst in unannounced?"

"It is expected of you to knock," Son of Sky returned in a voice of light chastisement.

"Of course," I said wryly. "Do we leave our weapons with you, then?"

Son of Sky gave me a puzzled look as he stared back at me. "Why would you do that?"

I sighed, then favored the boy with a shake of my head before walking down the hall.

"I hope to make your acquaintance again soon," Damar said behind me.

Very polite. There was hope for the lad yet.

"Indeed," Son of Sky replied. "Perhaps we could enjoy Sirna's movements once again."

"That would be acceptable," Damar said gravely.

I turned with a cold look at the youth's audacity.

"...if there is time," he hastily amended with the barest hint of a smile toward me.

I took one final glance at the innocent expression of confusion on Son of Sky's face and then continued into the building. This is certainly a facet of the Children that they do not show the outside world. Mayhap they outgrow it after a time.

"Why would they allow weapons near their leaders?" Damar asked as we began to walk down the broad hallway. Once more, I noted with approval how quickly the lad moved from playing at the rogue to serious contemplation. I have been at him to keep his mind always open to new questions and to try and discover their answers. It seems he is moving forward. "It's disrespectful, My Lord. And dangerous."

"Perhaps," I said after a moment's thought, "the Children's reputation in the arts of war is indeed earned. It could be they fear no one—armed or otherwise—in their presence."

Damar shook his head and I heard him softly murmur, "It's a good way to get assassinated."

The hall that we walked down was welcomingly cool compared to the warmth of the day, and our boots made hollow echoes on the floor as we walked to the end of the passage. Although one entire wall was formed of glass to allow natural light inside, this part of the building was currently in shade. We passed only two side doors to the left and they remained open with perhaps a half-dozen of the Children seated at tables with opened books or scrolls in each room. Only two glanced up at us, and though they made no sound, curiosity was noticeable in their green eyes.

Once more we saw nothing worn save the utilitarian robes, and my suspicions about our dress was quickly becoming a certainty that we would be out of place anywhere within this community. Perchance the Learned Ones would stand on more ceremony than any of the others we had yet seen, though in truth, I was beginning to have my doubts.

The portals at the end of the corridor that Son of Sky had indicated

were constructed of bronze and pictured a forest scene in striking detail with brilliant colors. It seemed as if every woodland being in existence was represented in that one mural. And in the center, overseeing all, were two almond-shaped, green eyes glowing with an inner light. Surely the eyes of The Beast, the Children's protector. I admit to being awestruck by those eyes, yet at the same time, disappointed that I was unable to view the creature's actual shape. Whoever had fashioned the mural, however, had done a superlative job.

I awkwardly pounded thrice upon the door, wondering if any sound would carry into the next room; the bronze appeared immensely thick. After a moment, it seemed to me that the eyes on the door glowed even brighter (although Damar later told me that he had noticed nothing amiss, so it may only have been my imagination), and the portals swung inward silently. A large, high-ceilinged chamber was revealed with naught but a pair of plain-looking marble thrones, which appeared exceedingly uncomfortable, raised against the south wall.

I must confess I stared with confusion upon my face rather than respect due to the spartan—nay, deserted—look of the chamber. Although only half as large as your own throne room, Your Majesty, the area was quite spacious, but with only two pieces of furniture! The walls were bare of torch sconces, nor was there a hearth for a fire. Despite the half-score tapestries—each a variation of the mural on the bronze doors—I was sure that in the winter this room would be very cold indeed, even given the relative mildness of the climate here.

The only truly eye-catching object was a stained-glass window to the right of the room. It was enormous, taking up a full third of the wall in its splendor, and radiating every color of the rainbow. I could make out no actual picture from the collage of colors, yet nevertheless felt that there was great meaning to it.

"Welcome to our monastery, Garith of Darg," a rich, male voice intoned.

Here, Your Majesty, was a diplomat, for I was obviously not prepared

for the marvel of the glass, nor the sparseness of the chamber, and had therefore not begun the greetings, as was my duty. The Learned Father had understood and politely begun the rituals to gain my wandering attention. I am still profoundly grateful for his willingness to overlook my social gaffe.

"Learned Father," I said, bowing formally, "please accept the good wishes of Queen Lishara of Darg, who bids me seek out your wisdom." I turned now toward the woman at his side and bowed once more. "Learned Mother, I thank you for granting me an audience." I gestured toward Damar, who kneeled with bowed head for one full count before rising. "And this is my squire, Damar."

The pair glanced at each other with unreadable expressions.

"Or should I have greeted you first?" I said with a slight grimace to the Learned Mother. This was my first attempt at diplomacy outside the comforts of Darg and I was already failing miserably.

Again, they exchanged glances, now with looks of mild surprise on their faces.

"Your concern is noted, but not warranted, Sir Garith," the woman finally said warmly. "We are not a very formal people, I am afraid, and tend to have little to do with ceremony or rituals."

The pair could have been in their late twenties for all that I could discern at first. She had flowing black tresses and a smoothly rounded face that was almost non-descript. His features were ruggedly handsome, with flaring nostrils and a classic, squared jaw. His red-brown hair was cropped short, much as mine is, and he looked as if he would be perfectly comfortable in full armor. Their eyes were as green as the sea on a calm summer day.

Both wore white robes, cut with flowing sleeves and soft hoods that remained lowered. Once more, the simplicity of dress made me acutely aware of how our own clothing was considerably overdone, and I found myself itching to remove my vest, but chose only to disengage myself of the gray velvet gloves, signaling to Damar that he could do so as well.

Once more, the pair glanced at one another, perhaps communicating on some higher level. The Learned Mother smiled sweetly and then reached for the Learned Father's hand which she grasped warmly. I looked away in embarrassment, as Damar did likewise.

"Sir Garith?" the Learned Mother's voice called out.

I glanced toward the pair who were now examining me with no small degree of confusion. Their hands remained clasped together, and I regarded my blue and silver-tooled boots carefully. "Yes, Learned Mother?"

"We are not familiar with the customs of Darg, and so if we are forgetting something—a saying or command of some sort—I beg of you to forgive such an oversight."

"There is nothing to forgive," I said after a moment. I had told Damar when we left Darg that we would be traveling to new places with customs that may not be as our own. I reminded him again as we approached the Great Forest that it was not our place to judge others by those behaviors. We had not been among the Learned Ones for a few moments, however, and I was already causing confusion over my own interpretations of impropriety.

"There is much here within the Great Forest that differs from how things are in Darg," I said carefully, forcing myself to return my eyes to them. "It is I who must ask forgiveness if I am occasionally overwhelmed by them. I fear that I am no diplomat."

"Neither is diplomacy my strong point," she admitted. "I would still ask, however..."

And here, Your Majesty, she paused as if pondering her next words. She glanced toward the Learned Father, and, with an almost imperceptible nod, he met my eyes and began to speak.

"The cause of your discomfort—"

"For such it appeared to us," the Learned Mother interjected.

"--seemed focused primarily upon us. If there is some way we can perhaps ease this feeling..?"

"Hands," Damar murmured, I think without realizing he had said it.

"Hands?" Learned Father's voice echoed thoughtfully.

"Some gesture, perhaps?"

My eyes strayed from Damar, who looked as uneasy as I was, to the Learned Ones—just as they discovered our meaning.

"This makes you uncomfortable," the Learned Mother stated more than asked, gesturing with her head to the pair's clasped hands.

"You do not hold hands in Darg?" her counterpart asked with a degree of curiosity.

"It is...tolerated in public places but—"

"But royalty is expected to act a certain way," the Learned Mother surmised with a nod.

"Perhaps it would be easier," the Learned Father said, "if you thought of us as 'spiritual advisors' rather than leaders here at the monastery. It may be a more accurate description of our role."

"I told you we should not have used the thrones," the Learned Mother said with a mischievous smile.

The Learned Father rose and kissed her hand before releasing it (and I willed myself not to look away). "I shall attempt to make amends for my error.

"My apologies for this charade, Sir Garith, Squire Damar. It was my intention to make you feel more at ease by placing you in a familiar surrounding." He gestured to the thrones.

"Again, there is no need for you to apologize," I began.

"Sir Garith, please," he interrupted, holding up his hands, "allow me to play at the gracious host. It is more to my liking."

I smiled and felt the tension begin to drain from my body. That our ambassadors are able to handle such delicate negotiations as trade agreements and border disputes with nerves of iron, when I cannot get past simple greetings without a number of social missteps, fills me with gratitude that I am, first and foremost, a knight.

All thoughts of my mistakes vanished a moment later to be replaced by wonder as the Learned Father fashioned marble chairs for us. This was a most extraordinary talent that he exhibited, and I must confess to being quite overwhelmed by it. With no words of power, the man simply thrust his hands into the floor and drew up enough marble to fashion a simple chair. This was done in a most expedient manner, and although the finishing touches that a master stonemason would no doubt take hours to perfect were visible, the man's hands only negligently shaped an outline for them. A moment later, he had repeated the process.

He explained to us as he created them, that this was a facet of what he called a body discipline, specifically of the Kalanti sphere. When I inquired as to whether the building had been made in much the same way, he nodded. "Just so."

Squatting down with a critical eye, he shaped the legs a bit more, then stood. "Now perhaps we can get along without all of the pretentiousness." He politely gestured to Damar and myself and swept his hand toward his creations with a smile. "Please."

I bowed my head with an answering smile and lowered myself onto the stone. Although marvelously worked, I found the chairs to be none too comfortable, but infinitely better than standing and wondering what I should be doing with my hands.

The Learned Father stooped before his partner and delivered a kiss somewhere upon her person, though I chose not to note where, and once more seated himself. "Now then, Sir Garith and Squire Damar, will you tell us why you have journeyed to our isolated little home?"

"Our ambassador said nothing 'ere he took his leave?" I asked carefully.

"He was very apologetic that we would not be dealing with a 'statesman' regarding this matter," the Learned Mother replied.

"Nor did he appear to know what that matter was," the Learned Father added. "And although that piqued my curiosity, I believe it only gave cause to irritate him."

"It upset him more than a little," she agreed with a slight smile.

"I have heard the ambassador vocalize some amount of..." I returned her smile, "frustration at his being allowed to meet with you only twice yearly, whereas other ambassadors are allowed permanent residencies within the kingdoms they visit."

"But there is no need," the Learned Father said with a shrug. "We are quite self-sufficient, and few things ever change here."

"Nor could one simple monastery be called a 'kingdom,'" the Learned Mother added.

"You need not try to convince me," I stated, raising a hand. "The reasoning of diplomats and statesmen has ever been beyond me."

"He went to great lengths to assure us of your character," the Learned Mother said with a nod. "I do not think he has truly ever understood how rarely we stand on ceremony here. He is relatively new to us, however, and in a few more years I am sure he will come to know us better."

"But now that you are here," the Learned Father prompted, "and have us burning with curiosity..."

I shifted in my chair. Having finally come down to the business at hand, I reviewed everything Your Majesty went over with me, nodded once, and asked, "Are you familiar with the prophecies of Ramdastha?"

"From the Third or Fourth Age?" the Learned Mother inquired.

I was as surprised as you must now be, Your Majesty. "But there can only be one. Ramdastha lived a great life indeed, but it was only in the span of perhaps seventy years."

"The Fourth Age then," the Learned Father said knowingly and his counterpart nodded in agreement.

"But—"

"That Ramdastha was born nearly a thousand years ago is fairly common knowledge," the Learned Mother said smoothly. "But what few know today is that his coming was prophesied—and, in fact, he was named after—another man called Ramdastha from the Third Age, who was one of the first prophets."

"Lore," I murmured, "this will upset our historians more than a little."

"Would it be possible, Learned Mother, Learned Father, for me to make a copy of this...first Ramdastha's works?" Damar suddenly asked. Frankly, Your Majesty, I was puzzled at this. Although he has remained a solid and reliable student as a squire must be to any lord, his pursuit of the knowledge and wisdom to which every true knight aspires has been less than enthusiastic in the past, and I found myself wondering what had caused this sudden change in attitude.

The Learned Mother nodded with approval. "Your pursuit of knowledge is commendable, Squire Damar."

"And out of character," I said quietly with a sly smile.

The lad's eyes shifted toward me as if I had caught him at something, then he inclined his head toward the Learned Ones gratefully. "You are very generous." He swallowed once, shyly. "And, please, it's just Damar."

"We are always pleased to teach, Damar," the Learned Father replied in a gentle voice.

I cleared my throat in mock embarrassment. "Well," I said, shifting in my seat again, "it's obvious that I have nothing to teach to you regarding Ramdastha."

"There is little for us to do here save read," the Learned Mother said with a smile, and once more grasped the Learned Father's hand. "We are slaves to our studies." The outrageous way in which her thumb stroked one of his fingers nearly caused me to make a comment regarding some of their other hobbies which I was sure that they engaged in, yet I restrained myself.

"You have heard of the 'Darg Supplement' then?" I asked with calculated nonchalance. I was rewarded as her thumb ceased its indecent movements.

The Learned Father leaned forward hungrily, releasing his partner's hand. "It exists?"

"It does."

“Do you have a copy with you?” he demanded.

“Of course not,” I replied.

“Excuse me,” Damar interrupted politely, somehow missing the eagerness in the Learned Father’s eyes. “What is the ‘Darg Supplement?’”

“Forgive me, squire,” I said with an apologetic glance to the Learned Father. The thirst for knowledge that was on his face was palpable, but with a slight gesture, made as if to himself, the excitement drained from his features into the lazy contentment of a great cat that knows its prey cannot escape. I turned toward Damar to continue my explanation.

“Near the end of his life, Ramdastha gave to Darg, and, we believe, some few other leaders, a small scroll of prophecies that would help to guide them through various troubles that he had foreseen. Some of these prophecies we received involved Darg exclusively, and some involved all of Auren. Not all of these ‘supplements’ have survived the centuries since they were written down, and they were supposed to be kept as a closely guarded secret from all but our high priests. This is the reason you have not heard of it.”

“Nor are copies allowed to be made,” the Learned Mother added with a half-smile directed toward her counterpart.

“Thank you for entrusting me with this, My Lord,” Damar said with sincerity.

“This is a sacred trust that you have been blessed with,” I said in my teaching voice, and he nodded gravely before I leaned closer to him. “And despite what you may believe, I do remember what curiosity is.”

“Aye, My Lord,” Damar returned with a quick grin.

“The Supplement?” the Learned Father prodded gently.

“Yes.” I paused a moment, moving slightly forward on the hard seat beneath me, then quoted the passage that Your Majesty revealed. “And lo, within the next age the trees that hath been watched by the One Who Is All And None shalt find the favored son of All, who is not The Chosen. And All shalt know him as he shalt knoweth not his own. His steps shalt follow Tirnashc’s son to the flame in the snow—the beginning

that doth mark the Ending of an Age. Thou shalt know his coming by the fall of the star and the dreams of my children’.”

The Learned Mother regarded me with a sour expression. “That is Ramdastha of the Fourth Age,” she said with distaste.

“Of a certainty,” her counterpart added.

“What was capitalized within the text?” the Learned Mother inquired.

“One Who Is All And None’ first of all,” I replied. “The ‘All’ in ‘favored son of All’ and ‘All shalt know him’ as well.”

“Those would all refer to gods or immortals,” the Learned Father said matter-of-factly.

“Aye, we had come to the same conclusion,” I confirmed.

“Ending of an Age’ must be an Event,” the Learned Mother said thoughtfully.

“Indeed. ‘Chosen’ is also capitalized, but I’m sure you have read of him before.”

“Yes,” they replied in unison, almost absently.

“What have your scholars determined?” the Learned Mother suddenly asked.

“We have found that Ramdastha seems to take great delight in finding new words to describe things he has referred to countless times before. For Scindrath we have heard ‘Keeper of Lore’, ‘Guardian of Wisdom’, ‘First Knight’, ‘God Protector’, and ‘He Who Knows And Guards’.”

“Credit the man with originality, then,” the Learned Father said wryly.

“We have an old, if somewhat irreverent saying regarding him,” I replied with the ghost of a smile. “Why use one adjective when three will suffice?”

The Learned Father barked a short laugh as the Learned Mother nodded. “We have similar sayings for him, as well,” she confessed with a glance at her partner.

“Though perhaps not as polite,” he added.

"In any case," I resumed, "we have had no small amount of difficulty in trying to determine which Being the phrase 'One Who Is All And None' refers to. We feel that time is short, however, and decided to go with our best guess. There are only two Higher Beings associated with trees, Sylvinaiin and The Beast. I have already spoken with the Orman Perisie, and despite their own occasional dichogamy, they do not think the passage alludes to their goddess."

"Which leaves The Beast," she murmured.

"Aye."

The Learned Father glanced at his counterpart questioningly. She nodded after a moment of thoughtful silence. "It is The Beast," he finally said.

"You are sure?" I pressed, quelling a sense of elation.

"There can be no doubt." He paused. "What I tell you now must be kept a closely guarded secret. I see the need for your rulers—"

"--and high priests of Scindrath—" The Learned Mother added.

"--to know," he nodded at his partner thoughtfully, "but I must ask that it not go beyond them."

"Squire," I commanded in a formal voice. Damar and I rose from our chairs knowing what our traditions and what honor itself demanded, but were hesitant to give offense. Following my lead, we stepped three long paces back as the Learned Ones regarded us with closed faces. I prayed to Scindrath that I was not starting an incident between heads of state and our own kingdom, but was beginning to see that everything was done differently at this monastery. Damar watched me from the corner of his eye so that he might better mirror my movements and we lowered ourselves to one knee before slowly drawing our swords and then cautiously placing them on our outstretched palms.

"What I shall hear, shall be as a sacred trust," I intoned, my squire echoing my words with equal solemnity. Then we continued together. "By my Honor, By my Sword, By my Life, so do I swear in Scindrath's name."

We rose as one and simultaneously sheathed our blades before

stepping once more around to the front of the chairs and seating ourselves again. I could feel perspiration beading on the back of my neck as the two contemplated us in silence, and I bitterly regretted both my ignorance of their traditions as well as the too-warm clothing I had chosen to wear for this meeting—almost in equal measure.

“That was educational,” the Learned Mother said in a casual tone. “In your books, it usually says something along the lines of, ‘And so did they swear their oaths’. It’s much more impressive in person, is it not, Khraylor?”

“Indeed.” The Learned Father was watching me with eyes that once more burned with the need to know. “You stepped back and placed the chairs between us to show respect, yes?”

“Aye, Learned Father,” I agreed, trying not to let out the explosive sigh I could feel in the bottom of my lungs. “When live steel is used to bind one’s word before monarchs, there are usually guards to protect them.”

“With archers in the wings,” Damar added.

The Learned Father suddenly grinned and grasped the Learned Mother’s hand once more. “Marvelous, was it not, Thersa?”

She noted my look at her counterpart’s expression and then nodded her head at both Damar and myself. “Your words were most eloquent, and we accept them in the spirit that they were offered.”

“Of course we do,” the Learned Father added in a more subdued, but still ebullient tone.

“Very well,” the Learned Mother said with another nod. ““Know this, then: The Beast is an immortal with a true form that he reveals to those he favors or when he protect his forest. To all others he takes the shape of any creature he chooses, be it from this world. In these forms he is known by his eyes.”

“One Who Is All And None,” Damar breathed. “A shapeshifter.”

“Yes.”

“This is indeed most helpful,” I said gratefully.

"You said that you feel time is short," the Learned Father said abruptly. "Why is that?"

"There is a theory," I replied slowly. "In our age, a small but fixed number of...soothsayers have cropped up within Darg, and on occasion as far west as the Free States. They claim to see the future, but there are those who would dispute this."

The pair glanced knowingly at each other before the Learned Mother spoke. "Our sources have revealed that the soothsayers of Darg are wrong as often as they are right."

"That is truth," Damar breathed.

The Learned Mother regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

"For reasons that I cannot fathom," I said in explanation, "the lad has seen three of these charlatans. One said he would be dead before his fifteenth year, another that he was 'mankind's last hope', and still a third claimed he would reach his potential only when," I smiled mirthlessly, "thy Lord doth rot in Khadûl'."

"A joke?" the Learned Mother inquired.

"Merely stupidity on the part of the soothsayer, and gullibility on the part of the boy for paying the wretch. Damar is, after all, a year past fifteen and fully into his manhood."

"Nevertheless, you think these soothsayers are the children that Ramdastha spoke of, do you not?" The Learned Father's eyes regarded me shrewdly.

"I will confess that I did not at first. I have little respect for these people and even less faith in their 'skills'. There are many among our scholars, however, who believe them to be the children of Ramdastha, and now..." I paused a moment, still balking at the evidence. "Now they have begun having dreams that they can recall in only the vaguest of details. They claim that these 'night visions' have been sent by Scindrath to warn them of the coming of the End."

"Did they have knowledge of the Darg Supplement?"

"No," I snorted with contempt, then frowned. "And unfortunately,

this gives their insubstantial dreams more credence. My Queen sent me here to speak with you on these matters while I remained convinced that even considering these 'prophets' to be the children of Ramdastha many times removed was more credit than they deserved."

"But something has changed your mind," the Learned Mother prompted.

"Yes, something has changed my mind," I admitted ruefully. "It appears Queen Lishara's foresight is quite impressive on many levels. She knew to send me, specifically, to do the job of a diplomat. She told me that I would understand why it had to be me before I reached our kingdom's northern borders en route to the nations of the Orman Perisie." I shook my head and sighed. "And she was right.

"In the past, Scindrath has granted a gift to certain knights. It is the ability to remember and record all things with perfect clarity." I paused a moment, still overwhelmed by what has befallen me. "I now have this gift. I can recall all conversations verbatim that I have had since leaving Darg, thirty-six days ago. This tells me something has begun that will affect generations of people, and Scindrath wishes it recorded."

"This explains much," the Learned Father said softly.

"For centuries, the historical books originating from your kingdom have been the standard to which we have had all others measured," the Learned Mother added. "Now we can see why."

"Learned Ones," I began formally, "My Queen commands that I ask..." I paused and turned toward Damar, who had been staring at me in the most disconcerting way.

"You have been blessed with the Gift of Recall?" he asked almost reverently.

"Have I not said as much?" My reply was perhaps more gruff than I intended, but his manner was disconcerting. When I had realized exactly what Scindrath had blessed me with, I had determined not to tell Damar of it until absolutely necessary. How could anyone be truly comfortable knowing all he said and did may be written in history books?

His look of wonder was slowly replaced by one of satisfaction. He settled back in his chair and nodded to himself. I kept my eyes on him for a few moments, trying to make sense of him, but finally gave up and reluctantly returned my gaze to the leaders before us. They, in turn, were examining Damar and I with a silent scrutiny that I found to be unnerving and as inexplicable as my squire's looks.

I do not claim to be the most intelligent knight in your guard, Your Majesty, yet I do pride myself on my attention to detail. Nevertheless, it was becoming obvious that I was missing something of significance here, and it left me more than a little frustrated. Diplomacy required me to ignore the Learned Ones' somewhat rude stares, however, so I decided to press on with your request as if nothing odd were occurring.

"I must ask of your kindness and wisdom," I said as eloquently as I could manage. "Queen Lishara has sought this 'favored son of All' ever since the 'dreams of Ramdastha's children' began. She is convinced, as now am I, that the time is near for his coming."

"Learned Ones," a voice said from behind Damar and I. "I would speak with you if you have a moment."

I hurriedly rose from my chair, as did Damar, and turned toward the man now approaching us. He had left the doors opened behind him as if he had forgotten them, and even though he had spoken to the Learned Ones, his eyes were on the floor as he walked with the distracted air of someone with too much on his mind.

"Kitoor," the Learned Mother called gently.

The man looked up absently, then frowned. He was of average height, with rich brown hair, a complexion that bordered between tan and flaxen (hinting, perhaps, at some Orman Perisie in his lineage) and, strangest of all, brown eyes! Never have I seen an adult Child of the Beast with eyes any other color than green, yet there could be no doubt that he belonged at the monastery despite the fact that his eyes were a dusty brown in hue. His hair was slightly longer in the back, hanging in a loose braid that reached a few fingers past his shoulder blades and

looked as if it had been an afterthought. There was no denying the ageless look about his face, however, common to all the Children. He had very handsome features, with a slightly exotic look that I could not place.

"I am sorry, Learned Ones," he said, blinking twice as if he had been nodding off. "I was not aware that you were entertaining guests." His face betrayed his irritation, surprise, humbleness, and self-reproach in rapid succession, phenomenally readable when compared to all of the Children I have seen before this.

(A side note for Your Majesty—Considering all of the ambassadors from the Children that we have had dealings with as the standard, I thought that to meet the Learned Ones must be to meet the most closed and controlled beings in all of Auren. Yet these two seemed more... human, for lack of a more eloquent word, in person than I would have imagined. I shall investigate this further at a later date.)

"There is nothing to forgive, Kitoor," the Learned Mother said graciously. "These men are from the Kingdom of Darg."

With a visible effort, the man recomposed himself and regarded Damar and I closely. His scrutiny was much more thorough than I would have expected from a man who had been so distracted just a moment before. I felt that there was very little that this man missed. His eyes brightened, and then he approached me with left arm extended in our own manner of greeting, and his next words confirmed for me his acuity. "Sir Garith, is it not?"

I rose and grasped his forearm with open amazement, shaking firmly. "Aye. How did you know?"

"Anyone who has stayed more than a month in Darg within the last twenty years knows of you." He glanced past me to Damar. "Are you his squire?"

The lad nodded. "Aye, Damar by name."

Kitoor grinned conspiratorially while still shaking with me. "Do they still call him 'The Patient Man'?"

I turned my head toward Damar, my brows heavy, while trying to disengage the rogue's hand.

"I seem to recall hearing that name before," my squire replied with mock thoughtfulness. "That and 'The Humble Knight'."

Their conversation degenerated greatly from there, though its length was not much longer. I do not think that history need hear of my past exploits, nor the rude monikers attached to them or myself.

It was but a moment later that a gentle reminder from the Learned Mother caused Kitoor to once more apologize for his interruption. "I shall take my leave," he said respectfully.

"We shall speak today, Kitoor," the Learned Mother promised.

A weight that I had somehow sensed upon the man, despite his bantering with Damar, seemed to lift at that. "Thank you," he said softly, then turned once more to me with a more serious face than before. "I meant nothing to be taken too heavily, Sir Garith. Your deeds are legend, and it is a pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you," I said graciously—something I have practiced at Your Majesty's behest.

"You are a lucky man, Damar," Kitoor said to the lad.

My squire nodded and glanced at me with something akin to pride. "I know it." That boy was most assuredly getting spoken to, and soon.

"His eyes watch over you, Kitoor," the Learned Father intoned.

Kitoor bit his lip before opening his mouth for what I assumed would be a formulaic reply. Instead, he shook his head and, with clouded brow, turned and left the chamber.

The Learned Father frowned in turn, but his partner placed a hand over his and he only sighed. She leaned close and whispered something to him, which caused him to nod shortly.

"We apologize for Kitoor's timely interruption," the Learned Mother said with an ironic smile.

I must have heard wrong. "Ummm. Yes," I returned, admittedly caught off-guard, which I tried to cover by seating myself again.

*"Kitoor is the one you seek," the Learned Father said helpfully.
"Ah."*

The pair regarded me with suddenly unreadable expressions, causing me to quickly scramble for mental equilibrium. And then the pieces came together. I turned toward the now-closed doors and pointed. "Him?"

"'Ki' means god in an archaic tongue, obsolete for millennia. 'Toor' means favor. Kitoor: favored of the gods."

"I was recently informed that all Children choose their names," I said carefully.

"Kitoor is an exception to that and many other traditions here," the Learned Mother said in a strangely neutral tone.

I leaned back into the unyielding surface of the chair and steepled the fingers of my left hand with the stubs of my right. I allowed several moments to pass in contemplation. Damar, by now used to my mannerisms, remained quietly still. The Learned Ones became as silent sentinels, appearing to neither breath nor blink as I regarded them beneath half-lidded eyes.

"Tell me of him."

"It may not go beyond this room."

"I have an obligation beyond this room to Scindrath."

The Learned Father frowned. "Kitoor must never learn of what is said, then."

"Ever," the Learned Mother added with conviction.

I nodded slowly. "Squire?"

"Aye, My Lord," he affirmed.

"Our oaths still bind us," I said to the monastery's leaders. "But we shall swear again, if you wish it."

The pair measured us with green eyes fiercer than any falcon that I have hunted with 'ere they seemed to find what they sought. Their looks flitted toward one another, and the Learned Father nodded to his counterpart.

She wet her lips once and spoke softly, but with strength as well.

“Kitoor was brought to us when no more than three years old by one of our own. The Beast Himself told the Learned Ones of that time where to find the pair. The Child carrying Kitoor had been waylaid by what we later discovered was a trio of ogres prior to entering the Great Forest. When they were found, the Child was nearly dead. He managed to tell us the boy’s name, but little more before leaving this world.

“Kitoor did not go through the naming process, but in all other respects was raised as a Child of The Beast. We did not know the meaning of his name then, and such things are important to us. As the boy grew, therefore, we continued to search for it, eventually seeking the wisdom of other kingdoms.

“It was not until Kitoor’s seventeenth year that we found our answer. Across the great southern sea there is a land mass that was hitherto unknown to us. It was there, among a godless people, that the meaning was brought to light.

“Our supplement to Ramdastha’s works warned us that one day the Dark Gods would seek to destroy the one ‘favored by All’, and that we must therefore not reveal the true meaning of his name. ‘For the day that the one whose name is unknown doth speak aloud that which cannot be revealed, shalt be the day that the world doth descend into anarchy.’”

Her eyes bored into mine. “Something to be avoided, no?”

“If,” I stated firmly, “he is the favored one. My kingdom has seen the dreams of Ramdastha’s children, but not—”

“A star fell to earth no more than eight leagues from here one year to the day after Kitoor’s arrival,” the Learned Father said matter-of-factly.

I nodded slowly, not knowing why I felt a sudden chill when I had expected triumph. “Then he is the one.”