

1: Palendar, Year 425

King Darion sighed deeply, as he walked to the sideboard, and poured two tall goblets of cold brew. He was muscled like a wiry jungle cat. The burn scar on one side of his face was all but gone, but what remained gave him a stern, dangerous look. It served as a reminder of his missing son, the one empty hole in his life that still haunted him.

He glanced at his guest, then added a liberal dose of rum to one of the drinks, handing it to his tall visitor with the iron-grey hair. A black leather eyepatch covered the older man's left eye, and a livid scar passed under it from forehead to cheek. Commodore Valnor had the heavily weathered look of a man who'd spent a life at sea.

"Arr, yes, my friend," Valnor commented with enthusiasm, "you often know what a man needs — a rare gift, indeed, my young volcano."

Darion smiled at Valnor. The old salt hadn't changed much over the years, though the grey in his hair was now dominant. The cruel scar from the knife slash hadn't faded in the slightest. Aware of Darion's gaze, he raised a hand to the scar.

"Harr, we're both marked by the evil of others, aren't we my friend. An unscrupulous trader named Jendron gave me this in a fight."

Having seen this huge bear of a man in action, Darion could only wonder at the skill of Jendron, that he could have inflicted such a wound.

“Arr, I was drunk and he wasn’t,” Valnor confided. “He’s avoided me ever since. The only revenge I get is that my ships are faster than his, thanks to you, my great mage — though I hear he’s been copying their designs of late — or trying to, at any rate. That son of his, Foval, may even be a worse bilge rat than his father. He could very well have been the one who captured that ship that your baby son was aboard.”

When the king fixed his sharp, piercing eyes on him, Valnor shook his head. “Don’t get too eager, Darion. There wasn’t so much as a rumour. The best I get is waterfront rumblings that they’re into things that neither King Shondarlas nor I would like. I’ve become sort of a figurehead for the rest of the traders, because of my close connections with Shondarlas and you. They follow my rules, hoping to curry favour with the crown.”

Valnor took a healthy gulp, then, with a loud thump, he plunked a sea boot down onto the heavy coffee table, swinging the other over it, crossing his legs.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Darion joked.

“Aye, thank you, Darion.” The commodore stared at his goblet for a while. Both his silence and the slowness with which he attacked his drink were highly uncharacteristic of the master mariner. “It’s disheartening,” he finally admitted. “We were all so sure we’d find him by now. We know he’s somewhere due east of Kalajhan. That much Shondarlas’s wizards can feel.”

Darion nodded, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “The Inner Circle still searches at intervals, but, after sixteen years...” He shook his head and let go

a frustrated sigh. “I can’t devote the full attention of the Order to this any more, though they never begrudge me their assistance. We get the same traces that Shondarlas’s people get — just vague impressions that he’s out there. Wherever he is, he rarely uses his powers. We can sense the presence of his earthpower,” his eyes widened, “and it’s considerable for his age, but we never have enough to really lock onto. There was something many years ago, a month or so after he was taken, but you know about that. It wasn’t strong enough for us to trace. Well, it was strong, but like a burst — it was there, then it was gone. All we got was a sense of direction.”

Valnor nodded, then took another gulp of his drink. “Harr, as far as the charts say, there’s nothing out there. But there must be. We’ve sailed off in that direction for a week, and found nothing but empty sea. Still, I guess we just go further. But, like you with your wizards, it’s hard. I can’t just send ships out that way, over and over again, with nothing to show for it. My captains start to grumble. They’re good men. I don’t want them looking for berths with the likes of Jendron because they hope to make more money from their cruises.”

Darion nodded. “I understand,” he agreed sadly. “I just keep hoping that he’ll do something I can focus on — something that will let me find him.”

“Still no luck?” a pleasant, musical voice asked from the doorway.

Darion glanced at the beautiful form of his wife, Queen Shaelara. Like Darion, the intervening years had not touched her. Though now forty-six years old, she could have passed for late twenties. Like most wizards, both he and Shaelara would age very slowly until past one hundred.

Walking to the door, Darion kissed Shaelara, then snatched up Princess Malista, who'd been holding her mother's hand. She squealed as he swung her about before settling her into the crook of his arm.

"And how's my little girl this morning?" he asked.

"Mommy's been teaching me to make pictures," she announced. "I think of a story and make it appear. It's great fun, Daddy. I made a story about my brother. I saw him last night."

Darion's eyes shot down, fastening on his daughter's face. In spite of his shock, he smiled proudly at his eight-year-old, a perfect miniature of her mother. He placed a loving arm about his wife's shoulders, she, in turn, snuggling against him and putting a slender arm about his waist.

"What's this about?" he asked Shaelara.

She shrugged. "She dreams of him. It's only natural, but I think there's more to it. I think she really sees him. The details are beyond her age. She tries to describe things that she can't explain, and some of what she sees implies a primitive culture unfamiliar to her." Shaelara shrugged again. "Has Valnor any news?"

"We keep looking," he admitted, "but, no, we're no closer. We need Landorlas to do something with his powers. He seems reluctant."

"Can he even develop his powers properly with no one to train him?" she asked.

Darion nodded confidently. "From what I feel, he has ample earthpower, easily equal to my own at his age," he assured her. "Your father and the Inner Circle confirm this. I don't know why he's hiding his powers, but he is."

"His spirit-voice wants him to," Malista announced in a precocious manner.

“What’s this?” Darion and Shaelara spoke in unison.

“What do you know about this?” Darion asked. He set her down, squatting at her level.

“Sometimes I see him doing things in my dreams, and sometimes he tells me things,” she said.

“Sweetheart, in your dreams, can you tell where he is? And what do you mean about a spirit-voice?” Darion fought to repress his anxiety.

“What does he look like?” Shaelara added.

Malista thought.

“He looks a bit like you, Daddy. He’s in a warm place,” she said, then giggled. “He hardly wears any clothes. He wears just a white cloth around his waist. He dives in the sea a lot. His spirit-voice tells him things. You know, Mommy — you’ve been teaching me to call spirits to come and tell me things. Well, he has one special spirit that talks to him all the time, in his head. The wise men where he lives call it his spirit-voice. They call him Kadua-Ka and say he’s a spirit-talker.”

Darion and Shaelara flashed amazed looks at each other. Darion smiled and nodded. “When he was a baby, we thought he was listening to something we couldn’t hear — remember? He’d stop as soon as we tried to find out what was happening in his head.”

“But who could it be?” Shaelara pondered.

“Who knows?” Darion replied. “It could be Shyntarlas or Taronlas or even Lentias. It could even be my father, though I get the feeling he’s been exceptionally busy with Calebra’s earthpower since we stabilized everything with the mending of the Ice-Fire.”

“This is good news, little lass,” Valnor assured the queen. “If he has a teacher, we have less to fear.”

"I'm sorry, Valnor," Shaelara declared, "In my preoccupation with Landorlas, I've completely ignored my manners." Smiling sweetly, she rose on tiptoe, and kissed his cheek.

"Ah, my favourite little princess," Valnor greeted. He no longer grasped her up the way he used to in her youth. Instead, he bowed and kissed her hand.

She smiled. "You're always so careful, Valnor. It saddens me a little. I miss the great bear I remember from my childhood. I've been healed for years. Look at me." She twirled about.

"Aye, there's no denying you're the great beauty you always were," he agreed with a laugh. "And there's no denying that those healers did a wizardly job, especially the master..."

"Deloron," Darion prompted.

"Aye, that's the one. I gather he's teaching a vast crew of healers now."

Darion nodded. "We're trying to encourage the junior ranks to specialize in some interest. Andaria is so far ahead of us in certain types of technology because we rely on wizardry rather than exploring science more. We're changing that, to the benefit of both kingdoms."

"By the way, Valnor, your daughter is anxious to see you," Shaelara announced.

"Harr, not pregnant again, is she?" Valnor asked, his tone hopeful.

Shaelara laughed. "No; and Nelron's probably relieved. Your granddaughter is a gem, but, now that the twin boys are ten and learning Taelen, Nelron says they're a handful."

"Aye, fighting age, ha-harr. And how is the baron-warlord?"

Darion smiled. "He works out with me three days a week. I can assure you he's fit, and keeps me so, as well."

"Harr, he's a good man," the commodore declared. "So was Krellas, though I think the warriors have a different feeling for my son-in-law."

Darion nodded. "Krellas carried a shadow from his time under Elontar. It was no fault of his — Elontar was a madman. When it came down to the crunch, he stood with me against the zealot."

"Aye, I was there, Darion," the trader acknowledged, "but I remember Nelron goading him past his indecision. It was Nelron who stood for you that day, breaking Krellas's inability to let go of the established authority."

Darion was reluctant to tarnish Krellas's record. "I know. When Trelmar took his rank away, he didn't want to take it back from me. He retired a year later. He's well, though. I gave him some land in the foothills. He runs a training school for warriors who can't make the cut into the guard. He hires them out to the nobles for their security forces. It was Nelron's idea, and it's working out well."

"You've not spoken of your friend and cousin, Kendar, in some time," the old salt prompted. "What of him. He married that fighting wench of his. Harr, now she was a fair one, though feisty with steel, as I recall."

Darion smiled. "Kendar and Narayla have been King and Queen of Klerandia for some time," he explained. "They have two sons, Narell and Chadrell, seven and four. Kendar has been overseeing the start of a Klerandian navy. He was inspired by our efforts. The first three of my ships should come rolling down the ways shortly."

“Kendar wanted to contribute his share. He acquired an interest in ships from our voyage together years ago. Between the two of us, we’ve forced so much business on Parnell that he’s had to open another shipyard. He bought out a yard in Hadron about ten years ago, and his youngest son, Darrell, runs it with an older brother. Darrell designs the hulls.”

“Aye, I know about the yard, and I know you’re half-owner of it. And I know the battles you went through in council to make it happen. I also know Parnell’s lad. He’s a brilliant craftsman, just like his father,” Valnor added. “I gather the oldest boy, Bannon, has also given up the sea, and works with Darrell in the yards. Seems his wench finally tied him to a dock, ha-harr, and it’s our gain, too. He was a good captain, but he’s even better at designing a rig. Shame about Grellan, though. The twins, Grellan and Fallon were great captains. Now, with the disappearance of Grellan’s ship, Fallon commands the fleet.”

Darion nodded. “I know.” He shook his head. “It’s been three years, yet Breeann still grieves the loss. There’d been a storm, but not such a bad one. I often wondered if it wasn’t pirates, like those who took the ship that carried Landorlas. The fact that his wife insisted on making that voyage with him makes it even more tragic.”

The old salt hung his head, a gesture that seemed very uncharacteristic for him. “Aye, it’s a great shame, but he’d been at sea a month, fishing for tuna. His plan was to make a run to Palenport and Hadron with some of his catch, then remain home for the midwinter feast season. Poor Cathara insisted on making the trip with him. It was to be a romantic vacation for them. She was quite a bit younger than Grellan, and all excited about being pregnant with their first child.”

The King forced a sad smile. “Breeann was heartbroken. Now she focuses even more proudly on the accomplishments of her remaining sons. She is so proud of young Darrell. I’ve seen Darrell’s work. He designs beautiful and fast hulls, and Bannon has a subtle finesse with rigging. In a few months, I’ll have new vessels to search for Landorlas, and you can focus on commerce.”

“Nay, lad,” Valnor argued. “I love the trade and the deals, but don’t get it in your head to keep me out of a fight — especially if it’s a fight with Jendron. That sea-rat’s blood is mine to spill, make no mistake. Many a time I wished I’d ignored King Shondarlas’s rigid sense of justice.”

He grumbled and made a wry face. “He can be stern, but he can also be like an old grandmother with all his rules — needing evidence and all that nonsense. I know Jendron is a devious thief and a killer, without a trace of conscience. We all know it. Shondarlas won’t allow us to act until we can prove it.”

The master mariner fixed his steely-grey eye on King of Palendar with intensity. “Make no mistake, Darion, this Jendron is dangerous. He’d make a great warlord. He has that kind of tactical mind.”

“What of his son, this Foval you mentioned?”

Valnor’s look was filled with disdain. “Foval has all of his father’s bad traits, and is even more cruel. He is a great bully. But he’s a great coward. He uses the fear of his father to intimidate his crew, instilling fear that they’d never feel for him. He’s a competent mariner, but he has none of his father’s brilliance.

“But I want to hear more about your battle in council. The rumours make it sound like a great story.”

Darion wanted to dismiss the issue, but Shaelara spoke up.

“He had the Elected Council behind him, as well as the Order, but most of the barons didn't want to part with any money for a navy,” she explained. “So, our feisty warrior here just reminded them that, as owner of almost all the iron and nickel mines in Palendar, as well as the steel mills, he could easily afford to finance the navy himself.

“The barons argued that the pirates weren't their concern. Of course, that's nonsense, since they attack anything they think they can safely plunder at sea, and many of the ships belong to Palendar. But it was our Baron of Oathron who turned the tide.”

“Did he now?” Valnor interrupted with enthusiasm.

Baron of Oathron was Nelron's title, having been given Trellmar's estates and title. He'd renamed the district for its principal town.

“I'm sure my son-in-law had something quick and cutting to say to that sniveling pack of money counters. Go on, lass.”

“Well,” Shaelara resumed, mischief twinkling in her eyes, “He merely applauded their good sense in letting the king pay for his own navy. He then made a comment about how safe they should all feel with the king owning his own navy, and one baron having complete command of the warforce. Of course, he threw in a comment about how he was the king's best friend.

“You should have heard the uproar. Many of them are still jealous of how much power Darion has with the people because of his popularity. The Elected Council stings them by its very existence, and it always backs the king, because he always tries to do what's best for the people.

“So, before long, all the other barons were trying to save face while reversing their positions. They

finally voted to pay for three quarters of the final cost of the navy.”

“Ha-harr,” Valnor guffawed, slapping his knee. “I must raise a glass to my good son-in-law about this,” he announced, arising.

“Well, I’d better head for Oathron Castle, and my daughter, Vallara,” Valnor concluded. “I’d have stopped there on the way from the port, but I thought you’d be anxious for a word.”

Darion nodded. “We never give up hope,” he assured his friend. “With all his powers, sooner or later Landorlas is bound to do something we can track.”

2: Storm Cloud, Spirit-Talker

Kadua-ka paused in his exercises to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his eyes. It was a sweltering hot day, and, as always, Kadua-ka had sought his favourite secluded spot in a jungle clearing high above the beach and coral rock that surrounded most of the island of Tanao. Adjacent to his training space were a stream-fed pool and a hidden cave. Only Kadua-ka knew about the latter. Up here, fanned by the steady tradewind, and shaded from some of the sun's intensity by jungle foliage, the air was a bit cooler. He could workout away from curious eyes.

He selected another armful of two- to three-inch thick bamboo shafts, and drove them into the ground in an eight-foot diameter circle, replacing those that had been broken or cracked. He paused in the center of his circle, breathing deeply, allowing his mind to relax until it was completely thought-free. He drew a deep breath, blowing it out slowly through compressed lips, then adjusted the layers of tappa cloth tied about his hands to protect his knuckles and the backs of his hands. He began again.

With a skidding skip to his right, his right leg delivered a sidekick that snapped a bamboo pole. His right hand backslapped to the right, striking the next pole in what was the beginning of a 1-2-3 combination, his left performing a block that gripped the pole, as the right palm thrust in and broke it. He skidded to the left, taking out another pole with a snap-sidekick, then,

planting that foot, spun almost a half circle, his heel shattering another pole.

Around the circle he went. He never missed. The poles seemed to be attacked in random order, yet he never approached a pole he'd already damaged. After fifteen seconds, he'd either splintered or broken all twelve poles.

Kadua-ka did this almost everyday. Some days, instead of his hands and feet, he used a wooden sword he'd made. Always he practiced alone. It was too hard to explain to those of his village why he felt the need to do this. He didn't want to explain about the voice in his head, the quiet, gentle, friendly voice that had been there as long as he could remember. It told him many things. It answered questions that his foster-father could not. It introduced him to other voices that taught him his style of fighting, and it taught him about the more frightening things that he could do. Most of all, it taught him the importance of keeping all of these things secret.

After his training session, Kadua-ka jogged back down the trail to the village. He spent the remainder of the day with his foster brother, Tainan, diving in the lagoon for pearl-bearing oysters. When they'd collected some pearls, they took an outrigger canoe and sailed out beyond the breakers to prowl the reef wall, spearing fish for the village. They were joined by several other boys of similar age, all close friends.

The pirates, whom the natives called *sea vultures*, had provided them with masks and fins, made by islanders close to the homeland of the pirates. These were not gifts; the thieving sea-vultures exacted a tribute in pearls from the islanders. The equipment merely made it easier for the islanders to obtain a larger quantity of pearls. Kadua-ka had displayed his

own innate cleverness by designing a snorkel that allowed them to breathe on the surface, while keeping their faces in the water, watching for oysters or fish.

Every afternoon the two brothers, so different in aspect, would be out on the reef, spearing fish together. Tainan, able to lift huge stones over his head, which Kadua-ka could barely raise from the ground to waist height without the help of earthpower, fought desperately to get to the bottom at forty feet, while his brother shot down with the grace and speed of a shark, spearing his prey with ease.

“Father wants you to attend the Council of Elders about the village fire this evening,” Tainan announced. He smiled, betraying hidden knowledge but refused further comment.

Kadua-ka could only wonder what this was about. “It’s exactly one moon since the female gahoul fell from the sea cliffs into the sea, and drowned,” he mused.

These sleek, spotted jungle cats were revered and, to the island people, the death of one was an ominous event. They never bothered the villagers, living on small jungle mammals, wild pigs, and birds.

“Perhaps the hide of a gahoul will to be bestowed upon you by the king, Tainan. Kuana would know that I’d wish to see this, brother. After all, you will be our next king.”

Tainan’s smile only broadened.

Kadua-ka waited at the edge of the firelight while the council got seated, passing about fermented coconut milk. Noticing that he had not joined them, King Kuana called to his foster son, seating him to his left. Tainan was to his right.

“Kadua-ka,” he began, “You are not my true son, yet I am as proud of the man you are becoming as I am of my own Tainan. Tainan and I have spoken on the

matter I am about to announce. He agrees strongly with me.”

Kuana’s son was just a few months older than Kadua-ka. Tainan was a strong, athletic lad, taller and much broader than Kadua-ka. And, while they competed in diving for pearls and spearing fish, they were best friends.

“From the day you came among us, when Tainan was a babe little bigger than yourself,” King Kuana continued, “we knew that you were destined to be a man of power — someone very different from us, yet one of us — someone meant for great things.

“The woman who carried you ashore was not treated well by the *sea vultures*. They pushed her and treated her cruelly. During the sea voyage, she had been the one to care for you, and had become attached. You had touched her here,” he placed his hand over his heart, “as is often the way with women who look after someone else’s child. She did not wish to give you over to us. She did not know us. The captain, the evil man called Foval, began to beat her. Immediately, your eyes flashed with light, and one side of his face glowed, as if with fire. He screamed wildly, throwing himself down into the water and thrashing about.

“Fearing for your safety, my Leela-au snatched you from the woman, assuring her that you would be well, then rushed into the jungle with you. She feared that Foval might kill you if he understood that you had been the one to bring this curse upon him. It is not clear if he understood, but he still carries the terrible marks of your anger.” Kuana touched the right side of his face.

“That day we named you Kadua-ka — *Storm Cloud* — the dark line that sweeps in from the sea, bringing the blinding rains and the winds that make the

trees fall over. We knew that you were a spirit-talker. We've heard of these people from men of the *sea vultures*. Every few centuries, there is even one among our people, usually the forced child of a sea-vulture, or the descendant of such a one."

He paused here, glancing at Prince Tainan. It was the latter who spoke now.

"My brother," he said, "perhaps I saw more than our parents, playing with you and growing to manhood with you. I know that you know many things that you cannot have learned from us. Even the elders speak of your wisdom in things we do not understand. I was very young when I told my father of seeing you in a jungle clearing, practicing your strange fighting moves. I knew this was a great skill, for, when I tried to imitate what I'd seen, I fell down many times. Father told me you must be a spirit-talker. He also told me what you had done to the sea-vulture, when you were just a baby.

"The hide of the gahoul is sacred. We do not kill them, but, when one dies, we honour their spirit by having someone of power and importance continue to wear their skin. This is usually a king or a prince. But, in the rare times that there is one among us, we honour the spirit-talker in such a manner."

Smiling, Kuana brought forth a package wrapped in palm leaves.

"Leela-au and Nua-alla have made these for you," the king said proudly. "Tainan paddled out to the reefs last night, by the full moon, and waited for a true sea-lord, a shark, to appear. It was a huge one, Kadua-ka, who came forth to bless these things to give you power. He, too, knew of your great destiny."

He then opened the leaves, revealing footwear with an isolated big toe, and gloves that only covered half the length of the fingers, and were padded where both

the knuckles and the back of the fist might strike. In addition, there was a fine loincloth of the handsome, hollow-spotted fur.

Kadua-ka's eyes were moist with tears as he looked at these gifts of honour and love. He knew he had described Taelen boots to Tainan, repeating some of what his spirit-voice had taught him of the *Warriors of Darkness*, but he had no idea how much detail his foster brother had taken in. He looked at his brother and father, so different from himself. His gaze settled on Tainan. Kadua-ka knew his eyes and his build were probably the greatest difference. His hair was dark brown; theirs was almost black. Kadua-ka was well-muscled for a seventeen-year-old, but it was the lean, swift musculature of a gahoul. Tainan was taller and beefier. In later years, while the great strength would remain, he would become fat about the middle, like his father, Kuana. As if cast from the same mould, the villagers all had round, dark brown eyes, very different from his slightly almond-shaped blue-grey orbs, with their mystical purple flecks.

He didn't need these differences to tell him that he was of a different race than his adopted people. The voice in his head told him. And, though he rarely spoke of it, he knew he had a father and a mother somewhere else, and that they were looking for him. The voice also warned him to keep his powers quiet as much as possible. He was here for a reason and, until that reason had been fulfilled, it was not time for his father to find him.

"This is a great honour," he said solemnly. "I shall treasure these, not just for the honour you've shown me, but because they come from you, Kuana, and you, Tainan, and from Leela-au and Nua-alla — my family. I know that I have another family somewhere, but you

will always be my family as well." He looked from face to face among the elders and added, "And the people of Tanao will always be my people."

He bowed his head, as if embarrassed. "My spirit-voice says that I am here for a purpose, and that my real parents should not find me until I fulfill that purpose."

King Kuana and Prince Tainan smiled and nodded to each other. "We believe this. It is why the Council of Elders has decided to invite you to join their meetings from now on. But we have another important matter, a task that we think is befitting our spirit-talker." The elders about the fire nodded in agreement.

"The great gahoul, who gave her life into the sea, was a mother," Kuana explained. "This was evident to Leela-au when she removed the sacred skin. She had been nursing. The elders want you to find her den and rescue her babies. They will need to be cared for and fed. Her fall was not an accident. There was a bloody hole in her from an unknown weapon. She was killed by a *sea vulture*. Leela-au dug into the wound with a thin knife, and found this." He held up a lead ball for Kadua-ka to inspect.

It troubled the spirit-talker. Was this some great and terrible new weapon that the *sea vultures* might wield against them?



Early next morning, wearing his new footwear and his beautiful spotted loincloth, Kadua-ka set out on his quest. He'd only gone a few hundred yards into the jungle when he felt, more than heard, a presence behind him. With a single step, he disappeared into the greenery about him. Coming along the trail behind him were a half dozen young men, about his age, led by Tainan.

“But he was just ahead of us,” a young man named Lakau declared in a whisper. “How could he disappear so fast?”

“He is a spirit-talker,” Tainan reminded them. “We know little about them, other than each can have differing powers. They are capable of great magic beyond their gifts of talking to spirits and having great wisdom.”

“Perhaps he became a bird and flew away,” Tono suggested, looking about in a wide-eyed fashion. “My grandfather said that a spirit-talker in his father’s time could become a parrot and fly about the island. He used to warn when the *sea vultures* were coming.”

Tainan’s demeanour became one of dejection. “Kadua-ka doesn’t need our help,” he said sadly. “It is we who seek some small portion of the glory in aiding him with his quest.”

Tainan’s words touched Kadua-ka’s heart. Smiling, he stepped silently into the path, his presence startling them. Seeing their amazement at his apparent appearance out of nowhere, he tried not to laugh.

“It’s not magic, but a skill you can learn,” he assured them. “There are warriors among my father’s people who have great fighting skill with their hands and feet, as well as swords, like the long knives of the *sea vultures*. The people call them *Warriors of Darkness*. I plan to make some of their swords, if father Kuana can persuade the *sea vultures* to give him some of the special coals they use for cooking.”

“They can disappear like a spirit?” Mahuna asked.

Kadua-Ka smiled. “They make use of shadows, and learn to move quickly and silently,” he explained. “It is skill and cleverness. But they have another gift common to wizards and sorcerers, whom you call spirit-talkers. They can sense some of the thoughts of

others, and sometimes see just a hint of what is about to happen. It makes them react much faster than normal warriors can. They are also taught to climb with great skill.”

“Is that why you like to climb the cliffs in the impossible places?” Tainan asked.

Kadua-ka nodded. “One of my spirit-voices taught me about these things. He is very wise, and knows much of the ways of the *Warriors of Darkness*.”

Tainan nodded his appreciation of this sharing of what he considered secret knowledge. “May we assist in your task, brother? We know this is your quest, given you by the elders, but, aside from our willingness to help a friend, it would be a great honour to be able to tell our children someday how we aided the spirit-talker in his task. We promise to be very quiet and follow instructions, even if you need us to follow somewhat behind, so as not to disturb the spirits.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he chuckled. “I have no idea how to find the lair of the gahoul, but we all have a general knowledge of the type of terrain the cats preferred for a lair.”

What they sought was a cave, even if it was just a small one. His spirit-voice had advised him on how to feel with his senses, reaching out over the distance, sensing changes in the land. He could sense the hollow spots in the mountains where caves were.

It took all of that day to climb to the highest heights. They rested at noon, and again at supper, eating fruits and edible roots. It was late afternoon when Kadua-ka sensed the presence of a wild pig rooting about in the jungle.

“Quick, Tainan, your spear,” he said, holding out his hand for Tainan to pass it to him. Taking the weapon, he crept to within a few yards of the tusker,

easing the spear back for a throw. With a sudden squeal, the tusker charged.

He'd never speared anything but fish before. As the sharp-tusked boar got within ten feet of him, he launched the spear. He only missed by inches, actually grazing the animal's back. Sixty pounds of angry pig, with very sharp protruding tusks was coming at full speed, now just four feet away.

Instinctively, Kadua-ka dropped to his knees, whipping out his knife. As the tusker was about to gore him, he thrust his left forearm up under the jaws in a block, while driving his knife into the chest at heart-level. The pig flipped over and slammed onto its back. Kadua-ka exhaled in a power-breathing maneuver, forcing his knife sideways along a rib. He tore such a terrible slice through the creature's heart that it died instantly. His friends came upon him just as he was cutting the pig's throat to bleed the carcass. The people of Kadua-ka's village preferred white meat.

What he considered almost an embarrassing failure, his friends hailed as a great victory. Kadua-ka spoke of missing with the spear. All his friends could see was how he'd killed the tusker with nothing but a fish knife. They were in awe.

That night, as he watched Buaka and Pulo roasting the pig over a small fire, he thought more about what had happened. None of the others could hear what he heard in his head. It used to make him wonder if his hearing differed from theirs, until his spirit-voice explained to him that he could send all of his senses across a distance in a way that his friends could not.

"You hear more than they hear because they hear only what is close," the voice said. "Tomorrow you will use wizard-sight to find both the surviving babies and the father. The father will be angry and dangerous.

Only you will be able to manage him. The others may take charge of the two cubs. One cub is stronger. The other is weaker. Save some of the pig for them. You will also want to save some for the father. This is what you must do with him, then he will understand you.” Kadua-ka listened very carefully to a difficult lesson about blood, and a strange mineral called landia.

Kadua-ka couldn't help but notice how different this voice was from the patient, gentle voice he'd known much of his life. This one seemed to know an amazing amount about wizardry and aspects of sorcery, and had a sense of military organization, but he had a brusque, matter-of-fact manner, lacking in warmth. Sometimes the young sorcerer thought that this spirit-voice wanted to seem warmer but simply didn't know how.

They awoke with the dawn, breakfasting on roots and fruit from the night before, saving the remaining pork as per the spirit-voice's instructions.

“The male gahoul will be about,” Kadua-ka warned. “You must leave him to me. Rescue the cubs and give them some tiny slivers of pork. Be extra gentle with the weaker one.”

It was mid-afternoon when they neared the highest portion of the interior. Here the jungle thinned to rocky terrain and more broad-leafed undergrowth. There were still trees, but they were stunted and their canopy did not close in like the jungle of the slopes. Kadua-ka paused and sent his magical senses on ahead. It amazed him that he could actually see in his mind the terrain ahead of him. He could hear what was there; even smell the surroundings. It was as if the world about him almost ceased to exist. Soon he found a cave, just where the thinning jungle showed signs of giving way

to the rocky summit. He could hear the mewling of the gahoul cubs coming from inside the cave, knowing the exact distance and direction.

“Don’t forget,” the spirit-voice cautioned him, “you must create the masking wall about the area before you do anything of great earthpower. The Orders of two kingdoms seek for you. If they find you now, it will be difficult to explain why you cannot leave here yet.”

Kadua-ka nodded. He understood the instructions. Breathing deeply, he calmed his thoughts, cleared his mind, and entered Taelen meditation. Exhaling gently, he raised his arms slowly, fingertips glowing slightly. His companions stared in awe as the sky seemed to change from bright blue to a more silvery tint.

“He can change the sky!” Tono exclaimed in a whisper.

“Even the leaves have changed colour,” Buaka observed.

The group had pulled closer together, shying away from Kadua-ka.

Tainan’s brow furrowed as he studied the changes. “No,” he said finally, “he hasn’t changed the sky or the leaves; he has enclosed us inside a shell of magic. We are looking at the leaves and the sky through the silver-blue colour of this magic. That is why they seem to have changed colour. Look at how the leaves near us have not changed. And I can feel the air tingle.”

“Yes,” Mahuna and Lakau said, looking quickly at each other. They were brothers, barely a year apart. “We feel it, also,” Mahuna finished.

Pulo nodded, but Buaka and Tono just looked puzzled.

“Feeling it means that you are *sensitive*.” Kadua-ka’s voice sounded distracted. “It is a good sign. You

can learn to be *Warriors of Darkness*. Now, you must get the cubs. Wrap them in your sleeping blankets. It will calm and comfort them, and possibly keep them from scratching.”

As the others approached the cave, there was an aggressive coughing *ga-howr* sound from the jungle. Kadua-ka knew now how the gahoul got its name.

With his hands out, palms toward the ground, fingers splayed, he cleared his thoughts and pulled. It took a great deal of effort. Gradually, little by little, tiny glowing particles seemed to pull themselves out of the rock, shimmering like fine grains of powdered glass, no bigger than coral sand. Drifting to him, it hung in the air about him, like a cloud of glowing dust, the glow oscillating and throbbing.

Tainan paused at the edge of the cave. “Look! He pulls magic out of the ground!”

Kadua-ka waited calmly as the coughing came closer. Then, just as the others entered the cave, there was a great crashing in the undergrowth. With a guttural snarl, the gahoul leaped into the clearing and charged those entering the cave. Kadua-ka, arms still extended, stepped calmly into his path.

Fully seven feet long from nose to tail, and at least two hundred pounds, the enraged monster bore down on the young spirit-talker. Kadua-ka never wavered. As he inhaled a deep breath, his eyes flashed silvery flames of earthpower. The cat froze in his tracks, just as he was about to leap. He was decorated with black, irregular, ring-like splotches. The brown inside the splotches was darker than the yellow-brown of the body. The fur lightened to almost white at the chest. His fangs looked very long and very sharp. But, as magnificent as the beast was, Kadua-ka didn't have time to admire it. Holding the huge cat with his

earthpower, he probed inward, beginning the difficult task his spirit-voice had described.

At a gesture from his fingers, the glowing landia dust gathered about the cat, coalescing into a dense cloud, then slowly merged with the beast. Kadua-ka, his glowing hands now angled palms toward the gahoul, walked slowly forward. The light went out of the beast's eyes, and he collapsed to the ground.

"Sleep and feel no discomfort," the spirit-talker said in a low tone. He then squatted over the great cat, his flaming eyes focusing inward with wizard-sight, his mind concentrating on the difficult process of making the landia a part of the creature's blood and tissues. First he had to change one of the cat's genes, giving it the ability to retain landia in its cells. The next stage was more precarious. In nature, the creature's body would never retain more than it could absorb and assimilate in a given time. It took years to achieve a natural accumulation. Kadua-ka was going beyond nature, but forcing the gahoul to assimilate too much would damage the cells. The gahoul could die. Kadua-ka had to become one with the body of the gahoul. He had to feel what was happening in the cat's cells, and compare them with his own. The balance must be correct. Finally, having a feel for what was just too much for the gahoul, Kadua-ka achieved a balance, then backed away from that by about a third.

"There's no sense in having you set the trees on fire every time you growl," he suggested with a laugh.

"You've done well," his spirit-voice praised him. "You have achieved about the same level of earthpower for body weight as your father's terror friend, Karon. Now, reach into his mind, and wake him up."

As the animal started to stir, he also began a guttural rumble of anger. The spirit-talker projected a feeling of peace and calm, willing the creature to relax and focus on his thoughts. He sensed shock. The cat could now feel his thoughts, and this startled the beast greatly. The gahoul also was startled by the sense of power he could now sense in Kadua-ka. There was no aggressive dislike of humans — his kind had lived in relative peace with the islanders for time untold. He was just protecting his offspring.

Kadua-ka was curious to note that the gahoul mentally catalogued him as an islander, as opposed to a *man from the sea*. This gahoul did not like the *sea vultures*. His mind held a memory of a man from a ship shooting “fire” at him from something he held in his hand. Anger coursed through Kadua-ka. His spirit-voice had educated him well in the history of his homeland. He thought that a pirate had fired an Andarian energy weapon, then he remembered the lead ball. He searched the cat’s memories. There had been a loud crack, like thunder.

“We are friends,” Kadua-ka told the gahoul. “The sea vultures wounded your mate so that she fell from the cliff and drowned in the great water. I was given her skin to honour her. We knew her cubs might die with her no longer feeding them milk.”

They cry for their mother, the cat replied with his mind. *I tear small meat for them. They chew it a little, but they need her milk.*

“We have come to take the babies to our village,” the spirit-talker explained. “My mother will mix coconut milk with fish fat and oil, and make it warm. It will be different from their mother’s milk, but she thinks it will help them become strong enough to eat meat. We will also catch fish for them. Cooked fish will be easier for them to chew.”

I am not a mother, the gahoul said, but they are all I have left of my mate.

Kadua-ka smiled. Confident of how they got along so far, he reached out and stroked the huge cat's spotted neck. Immediately, the gahoul cocked his head and purred. Getting to his feet, he arched his neck, pressing against Kadua-ka's scratching fingers.

This feels good, he said.

"It's just something friends do," the lad explained.

What are friends? He brushed his head against the young man's loincloth, deeply breathing in the scent of his lost mate, mixed with the scent of the spirit-talker.

"Friends do things with you, like a companion who is not a mate. They hunt together, help you fight an enemy, or just keep you from feeling lonely. You need not miss your babies. You may come with us to the village. You can be my friend. You can hunt in the jungle near the village, and visit your babies whenever you want. When they are bigger, you can teach your babies to hunt." Kadua-ka continued to scratch the gahoul's neck.

I will come with you, the jungle cat said finally.

Kadua-ka smiled. "Good. I will call you *Kona*. It means *hunter*. My friends will be nervous of you."

I will not hurt the males who are in the cave with my babies, Kona promised. What have you done to me?

"Can you feel the power inside me?"

Yes. It feels like the feeling in the air when the sky cracks and shoots fire down from the clouds, only much more so.

Kadua-ka smiled at the animal's apt comparison, appreciating his unusual intelligence. "It is called *earthpower*. I gave you some of this power. It will make you stronger, faster, more enduring, and will make you live longer. It is what lets us talk with our

minds. You may also be able to sense the thoughts of some of your enemies, and know what they are going to do before they do it.”

Kona rubbed against Kadua-ka's thigh. *This is a very large gift, friend.*

“I am called Kadua-ka,” the lad told him. “It means *storm cloud*, like the clouds that come with the great winds.”

It was then that the remainder of the company emerged from the cave. Tainan and Mahuna were smiling. Each had a purring gahoul cub wrapped in a blanket, and was trying to give it Leela-au's milk mixture from a small gourd. Tono looked rather chagrined, his forearms bearing enough scratches to prove that the cubs weren't too small to defend themselves. When they saw the huge gahoul standing next to Kadua-ka, pressed against his leg, they halted, freezing in their tracks.

“His name is Kona,” the spirit-talker announced. “We are friends. He will not harm you, though he may not trust you until he becomes used to you. A *sea vulture* tried to hurt him with a strange weapon. He doesn't like them, but he can tell the difference between *sea vultures* and islanders.”

The others stared. Accepting that their spirit-talker could not only talk to a gahoul, but could make friends with one, seemed a very big thing. Kadua-ka, who, in spite of his unusual talents, had been their friend all their lives, felt like he'd just taken a huge step beyond their reach. It saddened him.