

1: Darios

As the round, white face of Calebra's moon of looked down upon the Plains of Nelos, a shaggy misfit of a terrog squinted at the brightness. He felt as though the moonlight illuminated him for all the world to see as he dashed frantically northward. At regular intervals, he looked back over his shoulder, fearing pursuit.

His appearance embarrassed him: a mangy beast, not the proud predator that roamed the plains or wooded mountain slopes. But then, in a natural sense, he wasn't really one of the wolveren beasts. He was a wizard who had taken the shape of a terrog. He hated transformations – he hated anything that was hard for him to do. Indeed, if not for the small landia pendant hanging from his furry throat, he would have failed in this shape shift.

Balios was a wizard of the Kingdom of Palendar; at least he had been until the Order of the Earthpowered discovered that he had been engaging in necromancy and sorcery. When they found that he had been summoning spirits and creatures from other dimensions to learn their powers, the Order had summoned him before a meeting of the Wizards' Council and banished him. King Brelan had also banished him from the High Kingdom of Palendar and its satellite kingdom, Klerandia. Of course, once that happened, it was inevitable that other kingdoms would shun him.

Mediocre, he grunted in his mind, I'll show them I'm not mediocre. I'll show them all. They just didn't want to teach me properly. I know I can be great.

Overlord Lentias, and that old fart, Shyntarlas – they want to look so wise, so powerful. That's why they keep wizards like me from learning. That's why they keep secrets to themselves.

Fear and anticipation drove him on – anticipation of what he was about to do, fear that he might be forestalled by powers greater than his own.

Long ago, he had discovered the long-lost Bondrell Caverns, in the bowels of Mount Trender, an extinct volcano deep in the Chondar Mountains. Though the cavern was partially caved in, the landia ring set there almost two and a half centuries before by the great sorcerer Darios was still intact. With its power Balios had been able to restore the chamber to a usable condition. Soon he would have more than just the caverns of the evil one; he would also have Darios's knowledge and powers!

The landia stone about his neck was one he'd found in the cavern. Too small to be used in the power ring, it hung by a chain about his neck, amplifying his limited powers.

Limited – I'll show them who's limited!

But there were other voices in his head besides his own thoughts. The voice of the sorcerer rang in his head as he dashed ever onward, day after day. Finally, just inside the hidden entrance to the caverns, the terrog blurred back into human shape. Night was beginning to settle over the land.

Balios sneered. *Soon they'll feel another, more awesome darkness settling over Calebra – my darkness!*

He watched the last rays of sunset worm their way down the passage that led to the caverns like dying fingers clutching at the harsh granite walls, trying to cling to an extra moment of life. He cringed. It was like something sneaking in, spying on him. As the daylight faded, a glow of a different type began. This illumination emanated from the very air and stones of

this deepest cavern. The world of Calebra had power in its earth, awesome power for those who had been born with the gift of its control.

Earthpower! He took a deep breath, as if hoping to inhale it. *This whole mountain – these caverns throb with it. And it's mine, all mine!*

He stood now in the centre of the depression within the ring of landia stones. He could feel the earthpower building in his, feel the warm fire in his eyes pulsating with the throbbing of the landia stones. Throwing his head back, his hair and beard swirling in the turmoil of power about him, he raised his arms and concentrated his powers, so that the amplifying earthpower of the landia ring flowed through him. The words of sorcery that poured from his thin lips were almost unintelligible, barely more than a humming chant. But as the blood-red aura around his body became more intense, so did the cold, green glow of the cavern.

“Come, Lord Darios, harken to my will. Come forth to do my bidding!” he ordered.

All around him, the radiance of the grotto swirled and flashed, then seemed to expand, until it finally condensed, taking shape before Balios. As the light took on the outlines of a slim silhouette, similar to his own physique, the sorcerer flexed his radiant arms, thrusting them upward. Light exploded from his fingertips, the red flashes mingling with the green, glowing form, and again his voice rose in a shrill command.

“Come to me, Darios! I summon you! I, the great Balios, command it!” At the last invocation, his voice rose to a startling shriek.

The glowing shape continued to coalesce. The more distinct the features of the man became, the more they resembled Balios's. Now the swirling glow of energy was confined to a green aura about the summoned form, casting a shimmer of radiance throughout the cavern.

Balios viewed the materialized form in front of him with a feeling of victory. His thin lips drew back in a wicked smile.

"At last!" the sorcerer gloated, "After all this time, the power and the knowledge of Darios shall be mine. Those fools in the south will know the fury of my revenge!"

"And is your vengeance of such paramount importance that I have been summoned from the realms of the black beyond, just to be the servant of your wishes?" The strange, deep voice was cold and eerie, almost like an echo from the grotto rocks. An amused smile danced about Darios's lips. The voice was emotionless, but the expression was that of boy talking to a bug he was considering squashing.

"It is as it must be," Balios retorted. "It was I who summoned you. Just as you came at my command, so must you answer to my will!"

The shimmering form of the long-dead sorcerer gave a chilling laugh. "Summoned by your command?" he taunted. "Answer to your will?" He shook his head in amusement. "Poor, silly Balios, how did you ever advance beyond the rank of intermediate wizard? Your puny command barely allowed me to break through the barrier of the spirit world. It was *my* will that brought me here, just as it was *my* will that enabled you to find these caverns. It is you who are the tool, not I."

Anger and resentment surged through Balios. The red aura about him erupting into a flaming glow as he thrust his arms upward in command.

"The summoner has charge!" he declared. "The power of command is mine by the rights of necromancy! The power that brought you shall have control!"

Incensed at Darios's resistance, he directed his flaming fingers at the Black Sorcerer.

Darios snickered. "Where do you get such drivel? Rights of Necromancy! Do you think there's a book of

rules somewhere? I am not to be the puppet of one such as you. I am farther beyond you than you could ever comprehend!”

As he spoke, he raised his own hand, and the cold, green glow flowed out from it until it enveloped Balios. Wrapped in the emerald radiance, Balios felt a terrible chill, then his aura went out.

Slowly, Darios advanced.

“*No!*” Balios screamed in sheer terror. “*It cannot be! You were summoned to my will...*”

He turned to flee, but he couldn’t move. It was as if his feet were glued to the floor.

“*No!*” he screeched again, “*NO-O-O-O!*”

His scream became a drawn out, dying wail that faded into oblivion as Balios felt the icy numbness of the spectre’s shimmering form merging with his. He felt his awareness flickering, like a candle guttering in the wind. Then it went out.

2: Landon

Prince Landon met King Brelan's glare with a calm, steady gaze, waiting for the tirade to finish.

"That's my last word on this!" the king roared. "I'm your father and, damn it, I'm the king! I will not be argued with."

Eyes wide with rage, he seemed to dare his son to speak, but the twenty-eight-year-old remained silent. Holding his father's stare with one of his own, he breathed slowly, deeply, the calming power-breathing technique of Taelen. He could feel the silver-blue glow igniting in his blue-grey eyes. One by one, every cresset lamp along the side walls of the audience chamber seemed to light itself.

"Stop that!" Brelan raged. "How many times must I forbid it? You insist on being irresponsible."

"Perhaps you should command me to stop breathing," Landon suggested in a low tone. "It might be easier for me to comply. You see, Father, whether you like it or know, the earthpower is in me. You can't order it away. And not allowing me to be trained by the Order just puts others in danger. *That's* irresponsible."

With that he turned and walked out. As he passed through them the doors slammed shut.

At the entrance to the palace he was met by a groom resting a hand on the neck of a proud, pale grey horned-one, a horse-like animal with a spiral horn growing from its forehead. His anger still fuming, Landon vaulted to the beast's back, took a gentle, steadying grip on its mane, then sent out a commanding thought.

With a snort, the beast was off at a gallop.

“Open for Prince Landon,” the groom yelled to the guard at the gate.

The hours tore by in a blur as Landon raced north away from Palendar.

“Perhaps if you run fast enough, Shantra, we can leave my frustrations behind. Fat chance, huh?”

Shantra just snorted.

For days they rode with very little rest until Landon slid off Shantra’s back before the Palace of Klerandia. He’d barely had to slow down while passing through the outer gates. The son of the High King of Palendar was a well-known and very welcome visitor.

“Prince Landon,” a warrior of the King’s Guard greeted, snapping to attention. “Princess Leeann awaits Your Highness in the gardens.”

Princess Leeann loved the peaceful, shady gardens of the Palace of Klerandia. She strolled the lush, jade lawn beneath the blossom-laden boughs of the salontar trees, gazing ever upward at the bright yellow and orange blooms of autumn. As Landon appeared from around a large maleshne tree she frowned. He looked troubled. It was a shame; he was such a handsome man, with so much potential. The future High King of Palendar had the manner and bearing of a trained warrior, an acclaimed master of Taelen. His wavy, shoulder-length hair was almost jet black, his eyes a cool blue-grey.

“Lord Lenthorlan told me you’d be coming,” she said. “Lord Shyntarlas sent him a telepathic message. Once you were close enough, Lenthorlan could sense your presence.”

Landon forced a weak smile. “Lenthorlan is showing impressive talent for one whose only been a

senior member in the Order of the Earthpowered for a year. I envy him.”

Leeann giggled. “According to him, reading your approach took no effort on his part. He could feel your earthpower and your anger like an approaching thunderstorm.

“I don’t understand why your father refuses your admittance into the Order of the Earthpowered,” she went on. “As long as I can remember, you’ve been reading the thoughts of others, moving things, making lamps light by themselves – everyone in the High Realm knows that you were born to be a wizard. Lenthorlan claims you have more earthpower than he does.”

Landon shrugged, his face showing discouragement. “It’s infuriating,” he sighed. “My powers are of little use to the people, and without the training that should have started years ago, I’m dangerous. Every day I discover some new skill I can barely control. I’ve been meeting secretly with Overlord Lentias and Lord Shyntarlas. They’ve been of some help, but, when my father heard that the overlord was tutoring me, he almost exploded. He now forbids me to have any contact with any of the wizards. It’s as if he’s afraid of something. I can’t for the life of me imagine his reasons.”

“Father is just as puzzled,” Leeann admitted. “Your grandfather was a wizard, as was *his* father. So was King Brylon, the son of the famous King Palron. Is King Brelan piqued because *he* never displayed true powers? He allowed you to enter Taelen training with your cousin Narell, and seemed proud when you excelled, especially when the two of you achieved vad-Taelen status so young. Even Father was proud. Since the days of Valias, no member of the royal house has achieved high mastery of the deadly combat art. Narell’s father, Warlord Weslyn, was much older. And now you and Narell are the current masters. Yet with all

of that, your father refuses to allow you to serve in the war force.”

Landon’s frustration seemed to grow. “Of course it makes no sense! We’ve been at peace for two and a half centuries. What’s he trying to protect me from? I’m not even sure he’s trying to protect me. He’s been so strange since Mother died. I get the feeling that he resents me. But this business of keeping me from the wizards is stupid. Every time my powers flare up without my wanting them to, I feel like some kind of freak!”

“Now don’t start that *freak* business with me, Landon,” Leeann admonished, “I’ve known you all of my life – you’re the brother I never had. Under the circumstances, I think your control is astounding.”

“Yes, well, you can give Shyntarlas and Lentias all the credit,” Landon replied.

They stopped to sit a bench beneath a tree.

“I used to use Taelen stealth to sneak past the King’s Guard, into the northeast tower to meet with Shyntarlas. Now we commune telepathically at night. But if you don’t think I’m dangerous, watch this.”

Raising his right hand, he gestured toward a huge stone that a gardener had been struggling to remove from a flower bed. His expression became intense, his fingers trembling slightly.

Leeann gasped. It wasn’t a tremble, it was a shimmer of light. A silvery-blue glow formed around Landon’s hand. As she watched, the glow increased. Yet, as amazed as she was, it was nothing compared to her surprise at what happened next. At the an abrupt upward gesture of prince’s glowing hand, the massive boulder soared out of the dirt until it hovered more than thirty feet in the air.

“Unbelievable!” she exclaimed.

Landon looked unimpressed. “It seems easy now,” he admitted, “but a month ago, I would have been struggling with all my will to manage something of that

mass. *This* would have exhausted me.”

He hurled the stone high into the sky, almost out of sight, where, with a burst of light, it exploded. Leeann just stared in disbelief.

“It may have been a struggle a month ago, but that doesn’t mean it’s never happened,” he confessed. “Every time I get really angry, that sort of thing happens. I lose my temper, and things too close to me explode. Now you know why I feel like such a freak. I’m a danger to anyone near me! I should do like Tarnelas did – run away from home, start a new life somewhere else, far away from people.”

At first she thought he was just being dramatic, expressing his frustration, but she saw nothing but sadness and sincerity in his face. She put a gentle hand on his arm.

“You mustn’t talk like that,” she said. “You are respected and loved by all who know you. All wizards are respected by our people, even if we sometimes fear them a little. Why, your father’s chief advisor, Lord Banorlas, is quite high in the Wizards’ Council. You’ll find a way to work through this.”

Landon could only shake his head. The mention of Banorlas’s name also brought a look of distaste to his features. “You speak from a basis of logic,” he argued, “but my father’s behaviour defies logic.”

He shook his head. “Look, I’m tired of talking about this; it’s pointless.” He took a deep breath and forced a smile, then asked, “Have you seen much of Narell lately?” There was a trace of mischief in his eyes.

“And why should Palendar’s Captain of the King’s Guard visit me?” Leeann asked, pretending an air of innocence.

“Oh, I see,” Landon teased. “Keeping the romance a secret, are we?”

“Well, your cousin certainly is,” she retorted. “He’s the perfect gentleman, so polite, so mannerly, and very attentive. But my cat is more romantic!”

Landon smiled, as if trying to force his frustrations aside.

“I’ve never seen a more fearless warrior,” he commented. “Yet, he claims that, when he’s around you, he’s afraid of saying the wrong thing. I think that’s why he’s such a tease. He hides his lack of confidence in attempts at humour.”

“Like when he’s an unmanageable flirt, then bottles it up suddenly?” she suggested with a giggle.

Landon nodded. “He fears that being too bold might offend you. To be fair, though, he’s been busier than usual lately. He’s teaching Taelen to advanced students, in addition to his duties as Captain of the Guard. Mind you, he has Lieutenant Varon teaching as well, and is working on transferring more of the load. Varon’s not just a vad-Taelen, his tactical skills are amazing. Narell is giving him every chance to excel.

“Anyway, I expect to meet Narell at the Night-Fire Inn on the way home tonight. He’s on his way to visit you. Maybe you’ll have better luck this time,” he teased.

“We’ll see,” the princess replied. “I try to give him hints, while remaining properly demure. It’s not easy for women, either.”

“Well, I’d better head back,” he said. “Father’s probably got the Guard out looking for me.”

“But you just got here,” she objected.

He shrugged. “I’m lousy company. Besides, I really just wanted to get out and ride. I will stay for lunch, though. Come to think of it, I’m starving.”

She stared at him, shaking her head. “You never stopped once for food on the way here, did you?”

Landon shrugged. “I guess I was just to frustrated and upset. My father can do that to me.”

Poor Landon, Leeann thought. Whatever did you do to deserve this?

The ride through the Kleran Mountains was quiet and lonely. Landon rode alone. Few knew of his coming to Klerandia, none knew of his departure. The prince had long-since mastered the ability to come and go unnoticed, an aspect of wizardry as well as Taelen stealth. As he continued through Ruan Pass, his despondent mood began to return. As he came down out of the southern end of the pass, even the majestic view of the meadow lands of the Valley of Palendar were lost on him.

It had been a long trek through the narrow, winding canyons connecting Klerandia with Palendar, though Shantra, his earthpowered horned-one, showed no signs of fatigue. She was as tireless as if she'd been born to run, and hated to stop. But Landon was restless. As they reached the floor of the valley, he dismounted, walking her the remaining quarter-mile to the inn. He was in no hurry to return to Palendar and his father.

Shantra nudged her nose against Landon's cheek as they walked. Landon knew she was highly sensitive, and no doubt could feel that he'd been troubled for some time. She wore no bridle or bit – Landon could control her telepathically, thanks to her earthpower. There was no need to tie her to a hitching post.

"I'll see that you get some oats," he promised, caressing her muzzle with his cheek.

Set into the base of the mountains at the southeast side of Ruan Pass, the Night Fire Inn was a popular rest spot for weary travelers. Many went out of their way to escape for a few days of rest and merriment, especially off-duty warriors and restless baronets who sought diversion in the hunting for which the woodlands of the Klerans were renowned. Landon looked forward to visiting Tessan, the innkeeper, famous for his food and his ale. The prince chuckled, thinking that Tessan's size and shape were ample proof of his supervision of the inn's meals.

As Landon entered, he was met by sounds of

merriment and a chorus of enthusiastic greetings from all within the large, dimly-lit hall. He knew that his father would have decried the lack of formality and respect due royalty; yet there was no denying that Landon was well-loved. He thought it odd, considering that he was rarely one to join in the festivities. Nevertheless, most of the tavern's patrons seemed genuinely pleased to see him. Tonight, though, he wasn't in the mood to socialize. With a few waves and nods of recognition, he retired to quiet table in a corner.

The tavern was a low-ceilinged room, with stone walls and beautifully carved wooden beams. The walls were punctuated by bits of richly grained wood paneling. All the lamps and fireplaces burned smokeless jellied fuel, but the many pipe-smokers about the place made up for that, creating a blue haze. As they sipped their mugs of ale and joked with their comrades, now and then one would burst into song, though the loudest were usually too drunk to remember the words or remain on key.

Landon's frown weakened. *If ever there was a place to try to forget one's troubles*, he thought, *it's the Night Fire Inn.*

Soon old Tessian approached. "Ah, young Lord Landon, it's good to see you again," he greeted his guest. His voice was quiet and sincere. "You'll be pardoning my saying so," he continued, "but you seem at odds with the world tonight – more than just the weariness of a long journey. A warm supper and some cool ale are what you need, I'm thinking."

Landon forced a tired smile. Laying his cloak aside, he slipped an unusually ornate Taelen sword off his back, laying both on a bench to one side. Easing back in his chair, he stretched his legs beneath the table.

"My old friend," he answered in a low, tired voice, "the offer may not erase my worries at present, but I can't think of anything better to help take my mind off them." As though to confirm it, his smile broadened

slightly. "It's good to see you."

He clasped the innkeeper's hand, giving it a squeeze.

When Tessan left to intercept one of his many tavern maids, Landon took a pipe from a pouch at his side and filled it with tobacco. Placing a glowing fingertip over the bowl, he puffed until smoke began to wisp upward. No one near seemed to notice that he hadn't used a match to light the pipe.

A maid soon appeared from the kitchen with a tray, which she set on the bar near Tessan while she filled a large mug with ale.

As Landon relaxed with his pipe, letting his mind clear itself, every sound in the room came to him. It was startling at first, then he found he could focus on just what he wanted to hear. He'd done it before, of course, listening to his father talking to people in the Great Hall, but he'd never tried it in such chaotic surroundings.

"I'll take it to him," a warrior at the bar was saying to Tessan.

Recognizing his cousin, Landon focussed on him. Narell was a few years older than the prince, with a graceful, almost catlike way of moving. In build he was a little beefier in muscular development.

"That would be a kindness, Captain," Tessan thanked him. "I'd like to be taking it to him myself, I would, but, as you can see, it's a madhouse, and my poor, fat feet are almost worn out. Even my girls can barely keep up."

Landon saw the innkeeper's grin change to a frown. When Tessan lowered his voice, Landon had to focus closer. "Between you and me, though, I think the evening might be weighing more heavily on our young prince over there." He cast a quick glance at where Landon sat smoking. "Ah, but it's a care to see him so. He's usually in such a pleasant, friendly mood – much more cultured than this pack o' riffraff." The two

shared a smile at the description of the congregation of warriors, many of whom were Captain Narell's own men from the King's Guard of Palendar.

"I agree on all counts," the captain replied. "Prince Landon is well-loved in both kingdoms. It pleases none of us to see him like this. Brellan is overly hard on him, and no one knows why. This business of refusing his entrance into the Wizards' Order, and the latest command forbidding him contact with the wizards have half of Palendar secretly outraged."

"Dear me," Tessan remarked. "Well, he'll be liking his supper better if he gets it while it's still hot." With that, he handed Captain Narell the tray, and turned to other customers.

Landon felt guilty at their concern. He sighed. *I shouldn't have come here*, he thought. *I'm just imposing my mood on my friends*. But Narell was coming, and it was too late to leave.

"Such service," he commented, trying to sound cheerful. "It's nice to see that the Night Fire is acquiring such a noble staff these days. Do you work here often?"

Narell grinned, setting the tray in front of his cousin. "When Your Highness honours us with his noble patronage, we must put forth our best," he replied with a bow. "After the gloom you've been casting about the place since you arrived, it's good to see you can still manage a cheerful side."

Landon smiled, gesturing to the seat opposite him. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "Have a seat. I'm not much company at the moment, but I wouldn't mind some of yours."

Narell nodded and sat down, removing his own mug from the tray. Landon could feel the captain studying him as he began to eat.

"I guess all of it must be pretty hard to take," Narell commented.

Closing his eyes, Landon rolled his head back,

letting out a slow sigh and rubbing the back of his neck.

"One of these days my earthpower will flare up in anger and someone will get hurt," he warned. "What will the king do then, ban me from contact with everyone? Lock me in a tower like Valias and Palron's father?"

Narell had no answer.

The doors burst open then. A stranger struggled in, half carrying, half dragging another. Both were barely three feet tall, child-like, with dark complexions and curly brown hair. Their narrow, slanted eyes were a rich, cobalt blue colour. The one being carried was badly wounded, his helper also splattered with dried blood.

"Elyndiaarna?" Landon murmured.

"Please help," the stranger begged. "My friend has little life left in him." The voice matched his size, adding to the resemblance to a boy of about four or five.

In an instant they were surrounded and the unconscious one had been laid on a table, his injuries getting immediate attention as the innkeeper's wife rushed from the kitchen.

"Come," Landon said.

He and Narell forced their way through the crowd.

"What happened?" Narell asked quickly. "What brings two Foresters so far from home? And who did this?"

The stranger looked about as if confused.

"It's all right," Landon assured him, placing a gentle hand on the Forester's shoulder. "I'm Landon, Prince of Palendar. This is Captain Narell of the King's Guard of Palendar. Tell us what happened?"

The stranger seemed to relax a little, as if some duty had been accomplished.

"Selva has fallen!" he blurted.

"What?" Narell exclaimed. "That can't be! Who would have attacked the northern forest city?"

But for the moment, the only reply was a dazed repetition. "Selva has fallen!"

3: Tulat's Story

The next half hour was devoted to cleaning and bandaging the badly-wounded Forester, then treating the less serious injuries of his companion. Tessan's wife performed the task, then Landon and Narell carried the injured one up the stairs, putting him to bed in one of the many rooms.

"If he makes it through the night, he'll eventually recover," the innkeeper's wife pronounced. "Only time will tell."

"He'll be all right," Landon assured the other Forester. "Come down to the kitchen and tell us what happened."

Tessan placed three chairs by the kitchen fireplace, and moved Landon's supper to a small table set there. The Forester hesitated before setting aside his bow and quiver of arrows and accepting the comfort of the chair. With a mug of hot tea in his hands, he seemed to relax, then finally broke silence.

"My name is Tulat," he began. "I was Commander of the Warriors of Selva, what your people call a warlord. Carlef is one of my lieutenants. Selva is – was – in northern Farenwood, north and west of the Shurenflood River. About a year ago, my people began to sense a strange feeling of power coming from the Chondar Mountains, near Mount Trender."

Landon and Narell shot a quick worried glance at each other at the mention of Mount Trender. The events there had been long before their births, but the name still carried an evil reputation.

"We heard rumours that Balios had gone there after

his banishment,” Tulat continued, “but we never really worried. We figured that the Order had the power to stop Balios if he attempted any evil. But one day he came to Selva. He claimed that he wanted to make peace with the Council. He requested an audience with Prince Krolan, in the hope of getting advice.

“When we heard this, many of us were suspicious. Why come to us instead of the people of Grenat or Lenost? They have wizards and can contact the South Kingdoms. But Prince Krolan agreed to a private audience. No one knows for sure just what happened, but, after that meeting, the Prince’s advisors made regular visits to Mount Trender. Only Prince Krolan knew what took place at these meetings, but we did hear that Balios was rebuilding Tol Keroth. We expected the prince or his advisors to contact the Wizards’ Council, but they never did.

“Then strange creatures began to be sighted around Mount Trender – ugly things, human in shape, but not truly human. Their skin looked almost dead – a sort of yellowish-brown colour, with an unnatural leathery appearance.” He paused, looking wide-eyed at Landon before adding in an incredulous tone, “And they had claws and fangs, just like wild animals!”

Landon could sense the fear and loathing as Tulat described the strange creatures. The Forester shuddered, pausing in his tale. Landon used the interruption to pour him more tea, while Narell added fuel to the fire. Tessan reappeared with a plate of food for the Selvan, then hurried back to the tavern.

“You and your people have been very kind to Carlef and me,” Tulat said, trying to smile. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, releasing it in a loud sigh.

“Take your time,” Landon prompted. He could sense the pain in the Forester’s reliving of the ordeal.

“About four months ago,” Tulat resumed, “Prince Krolan suddenly went mad. He tried to set fire to the palace. We restrained him and thought he had calmed

down, but he broke loose and ran across the room, then leaped through a window before anyone could stop him. The fall to the forest floor killed him.

“He had no son, so he was succeeded by his nephew, Flontas, a brave man whom we all loved and trusted. Prince Flontas ended relations with Mount Trendar. He didn't trust Balios and suspected that he was behind Prince Krolan's madness and death.”

Tulat shook his head sadly. “We didn't have long to wait. After the third or fourth refusal to meet with Balios, we were given an ultimatum: serve him or be destroyed. We were shocked. Flontas decided to send someone to inform the Wizards' Council. I insisted on going, and chose Carlef to come with me.”

He paused again, tears forming in his eyes. Landon could tell he was thinking of his homeland, now destroyed.

“That night, it happened. We had just left the city, when we spotted over a hundred of the sorcerer's creatures at the bases of the trees. We had to fight to escape. That's how Carlef got his wounds. The long journey probably made them worse. By the time we reached the edge of the Shurenflood, we knew it was too late to save Selva. Our only hope was to warn the Order of the danger to others. Perhaps we could spare Elyndia from a similar fate. I was tempted to go to Klerandia, but I knew the Order was in Palendar, and didn't want to waste even an hour of time.”

“But I don't understand,” Landon interrupted. “I've never seen Selva, but I've been to Elyndia. It's invulnerable to attack from underneath. I was with a wizard at the time, and was just a lad, but we couldn't even find the place until some of the Foresters came to meet us.”

Tulat shook his head.

“Our city was newer, not hidden by foliage the way Elyndia is. Besides, they set fire to the trees.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “I know it sounds

impossible. The forest is made up of mostly salontar, aliantha, and maleshne trees, all of which must be dried for almost a year before they'll burn. Balios used some sort of sorcery. Once the fires started, they shot straight up into the city, ignoring the neighbouring trees."

Landon was astounded. For the next several moments, a deep silence held reign over the room. Then the prince arose.

"The Inner Circle of the Order will have to be told," he said to Narell. "I'm amazed that one of the wizards didn't sense the loss of the city. Anyway, we need to leave immediately. We've at least a four-day ride, even with horned-ones."

Narell nodded. "Let's hope we're not too late," he muttered.

Landon gripped Narell's arm. "In case you're not up on the history, Darios had a lot more landia stones than the Ice-Fire, and *that* was the only one taken away from Tol Keroth. The stories tell of a conjuring ring powered by landia stones. Also, compare Tulat's description of Selva's attackers with that of the horde Darios created during the Sorcerer's War."

Narell let a low whistle. "We'd better get back in a hurry."

He turned to Tulat. "You can rest here," he suggested. "You've been through a lot. We'll pass on your story and get things started. Once Carlef is stable, we can have a coach bring you to Palendar."

The Forester shook his head. "Your king and the wizards will want to hear it from me," he said. "It's why I'm here."

Landon nodded, then called Tessan.

"We must ride tonight," he announced to the innkeeper. "Can you provide a horse for Tulat?"

"It'll have to be a special one to keep up with yours," Tessan mused, "but I have just the one. I'll tell the groom to bring your mount around, Captain. I had her readied while you were speaking. I had a feeling

that you'd be having to report all of this. And, Lord Landon, your Shantra's had a good feed of oats, and plenty of water. My lad says she wandered off for a pee and a dump, then came right back where you left her."

Landon put a hand on the innkeeper's shoulder. "What would we do without you?" he commented with a smile.

A troubled look came over Narell's face. Getting up suddenly, he went out to the bar counter, got pen and paper, and wrote a hurried note. Grabbing one of his warriors from the Guard, he commanded, "Go to Klerandia. Deliver this into the hands of Princess Leeann, with my apology."

After a quick salute, the warrior left.

As they were mounting up, Landon realized, "By the Earth Mother! They must have walked here!" Turning quickly to Tulat, he added, "Are you *sure* that you're strong enough to ride?"

Tulat shrugged. "It must be done. We were forced to rest when we reached the pass. We'd been avoiding the other kingdoms. The king's orders were to go straight to Palendar."

Immediately, they were racing through the night, across the Palendar Valley, toward the broad expanse of the Oathra River. The young horned-one had little trouble keeping pace. Landon had no idea where the innkeeper had obtained the yearling. He recognized Shandar as the foal of his own horned-one's sister. He shrugged. Tessian, a seemingly common innkeeper, was wise, and a friend of wizards. It was a curious mystery.

Still, they had a long journey ahead of them. Hundreds of miles to the south lay their destination, the mighty Kingdom of Palendar.