

1: Decisions

Landon sat alone on the slopes of the Chondar Mountains, a mile from an entrance to the city of Andros. As his thoughts ranged in many directions, he stroked the side of his beard, smiling in chagrin. He felt conscious of how much he had changed since his victory over Darios, thirty-one years ago. It wasn't just the beard – obliterated by an energy beam in the healing labs of Andros, he'd restored it by the power of his magic – it was his whole appearance, from the weathered lines of his face to the iron-grey of his hair. Granted, any mortal of fifty-eight years might have looked as old, but Landon was no mortal. He was a wizard. To many, Landon was *the* wizard. For thirty-one years he had been Overlord of the Order of the Earthpowered, and for over twenty years he had been High King of Palendar. But a wizard of fifty-eight was expected to look like a mortal of thirty. In fact, he shouldn't have looked this old until about one hundred fifty or more. Nor was his aging the only change. Landon knew he looked like a weary, troubled, and defeated man. It was also how he felt.

His first five years as Overlord of the Wizards had been satisfying and productive. The Order thrived under his wisdom. Then his father, King Brellan, died. Weary from the guilt he felt over the fate of Lady Malista and the treachery of Lord Banorlas, Brellan's heart eased into a final rest. Thus Landon added the throne of Palendar to his duties – dealing with truculent barons, fighting for what was best for his people against certain barons who insisted on regarding them

as chattel.

At first, he managed. Then he began to feel the changes – the first traces of instability in Calebra's earthpower. For years he studied the phenomenon. Finally, six years earlier, he renounced his title of High King and his role in the Order to devote himself to the problem full-time. The Order elected Elontar in his place, a move that troubled him. Elontar had been something of a prodigy until Landon's fame overshadowed him. He became bitter and resentful. Privately, Landon wished that the Order had chosen Lenthorlan. Another contemporary of Landon's, Lenthorlan had developed in a steady, less flashy manner – *No, Landon corrected himself – Lenthorlan was just modest and never sought attention. Elontar, on the other hand, always made sure he was noticed. He also contrived that Lenthorlan be always absent, dealing with distant tasks, especially when the Order voted in a new overlord.*

Rather than abdicating the throne, Landon created a Regents' Council, made up of wizards and lords. As Overlord of the Order of the Earthpowered, Elontar became its natural head.

Yes, he thought, anyone looking at me now would see how old and tired I feel.

As fate would have it, there was no one there to see him, just the brilliant, round disc of a late winter moon. As if to compete with his only spectator, a glow began to spread about Landon's form, increasing in radiance until it rivaled that of the moon. Then the glow began to flicker violently. With a sigh, Landon allowed it to fade until just his eyes flamed with silvery-blue fire.

"Lady," he called softly, "Lady Earth Mother."

A shimmering form seemed to materialize before him.

"It continues to deteriorate, Danshalla," he confided. She replied with a slight nodding of her head,

speaking in his mind. "It's all prepared," he said with some reluctance. "We head for Palendar tomorrow. I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I guess there's no way to be ready for this, but I have no choice. Already earthquakes are showing up in the Chondars. There was even a minor tremor in Palendar."

He and his wife, Queen Aralyn, were to journey to Palendar the next day to commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of Brelan's death and Landon's ascension to the throne. Whatever pleasantry might be found in the event was, for him, overshadowed by the impending doom he felt.

"Yes, My Lord?" the warrior said as he stopped before the unusual throne, carved from a solid block of crystal-rich granite. Absent were the King's Guard that would have been so visible in Palendar and Klerandia. In their stead, two fierce-looking terrogs sat, one to the left, one to the right.

The king studied the stern, highly trained killer before him, rubbing a wrinkled, copper-tanned hand against the white beard of his chin. There was no sign of subservience in the warrior, no sign that he stood before a powerful king. The king smiled. He could feel the power in the young man and knew that no man in Calebra, save one, had ever impressed this warrior enough to inspire real devotion. The warrior was a leader, not a follower. He was lean and broad-chested, looking as if skin had been stretched over muscle. There wasn't an ounce of flesh on him that didn't serve a purpose.

"You are ready?" the king asked.

The warrior nodded soberly, his face becoming even more stern and resolute.

"Where to find the scrolls, do you know?"

Again the warrior nodded. "I've been in the

archives many times, in many guises," he commented.

The king nodded. His brilliant purple eyes seemed to sadden a little.

"The greatest wizard and one of the greatest kings Calebra has ever known is about to die," he said, as though thinking out loud.

The warrior nodded. The muscles along his jaw stood out, showing how hard he was clenching his teeth. "As planned," he said finally, as though saying it caused him pain.

2: Tragedy

The Kingdom of Palendar was in an uproar. King Narell and Queen Leeann of Klerandia reached the top of the northwest tower, accompanied by Narell's warlord, Chadrell. Narell forced a path through the gathering cluster of agitated people, into the chamber where Landon had maintained a study. There, in the centre of the room, was Queen Aralyn, kneeling beside King Landon's still form, sobbing as though her entire world had ended. It had.

Pushing past Elontar, Narell reached Krelas, Palendar's warlord.

"What happened!" he demanded. One might have thought that he was the High King, the way he took command of the situation. He reminded himself that he wasn't Warlord of Palendar any more.

Krelas could only shake his head and spread his hands in a helpless admission of ignorance. Even Elontar was at a loss, though Narell noticed the Overlord wasn't shedding any tears over the fate of his High King and former Overlord.

Ignoring the others, he knelt next to Aralyn, beckoning to his wife, Leeann.

"Is there any hope?" he asked, steadying "the Lady" with a gentle arm, while Leeann put an arm about her from the other side.

Aralyn shook her head and gasped out another sob. Fighting for composure, she gestured to the still body before her.

Narell understood. Already there was a translucent quality to his dear friend. Landon was beginning to

fade from the world. He was dead. Narell glanced about the room. Even Elontar was shocked at Landon's fading. No one had ever seen it before – no one but Landon. If anyone had ever known why, it had been forgotten.

Reaching for his friend's shoulder, Narell was unnerved by how his hand passed through it.

"Be at peace, dear friend," he whispered. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Looking up, his eyes locked on Elontar's, then he switched his attention to Krelas.

"Investigate this thoroughly," he said, in a tone of command.

"This isn't Klerandia," Elontar hissed. "You're not king here."

Narell straightened. He was a powerful, athletic man – an aging vad-Taelen, but a vad-Taelen none the less. One stride brought him inches from Elontar's face. His eyes locked on the overlord's eyes, he said, "Perhaps that's lucky for both of us."



At that very moment, on the slopes of the Chondar Mountains, just east of the edge of Farenwood, a lone terrog, his handsome grey and brown coat streaked with the silver age, let out a long, heart-wrenching howl. The bright silver glow of his eyes seemed dulled as if by tears. For a long time he voiced his distress until a tiny hand worked its fingers into the thick fur of the terrog's neck.

"I know, old friend," a quiet voice comforted. "It is a great loss for both of us. Now we must begin our journey south and become part of a greater plan."



"What can you tell me?" Narell asked Aralyn, ignoring Elontar fuming in the background.

Aralyn took a deep breath. She glanced about the room at people sobbing about her.

“Landon had come up here to complete something – he’d been studying ways to stabilize instability in the earthpower. I know he told you about it.” She lowered her voice for the last comment, her tone confidential.

“I came up to remind him that it was almost time to join the festivities. When I reached the doorway, he was just falling to the floor. He seemed in no pain; he just fell, went cold, and began to fade. I’d heard about the fading – he said his mother Lady Malista faded thus – I thought it took longer.”

“It probably depends on power and will,” he murmured, helping her to her feet. “There was only one *Silver Flame*. There will never be another.”

He made eye contact with Leeann, who took over comforting the Queen, guiding her out of the chamber and away from the gathering.

Turning back to Krelas, he asked, “Has the palace been searched?”

“You are not in charge here, Narell,” Elontar reiterated through clenched teeth.

“Nor do I wish to be,” the King of Klerandia replied icily, “but, clearly, *someone* has to make sure that this gets a proper investigation while evidence is still fresh.”

“I’ll order an immediate search,” Krelas intervened. He nodded to Lieutenant Shendar of the Guard, indicating that the task was his immediate responsibility.

“Prince Darion will also have to be sent for,” Narell commented.

Elontar only grunted. The implication that the Crown Prince would now become High King didn’t seem to inspire enthusiasm in the head regent.

Just then a breathless young wizard forced his way into the chamber, going straight to Elontar.

“Overlord,” he gasped. Then, seeing what had happened in the chamber, he blurted, “Merciful Earth Mother!” He stared at the empty wizard garments on the floor, the lingering traces of fiery silver earthpower that were just dying out.

“What is it!” Elontar snapped.

His eyes still drawn to the evidence on the floor, the mage tried to answer, but this new tragedy seemed more important to him.

“Ah ... Someone ... violated the library archives,” he answered, his eyes still riveted on the floor. “The two members of the Guard stationed there were unconscious, as were four wizards who were inside.”

“WHAT?” Elontar blared, seizing the wizard by his robe. “What’s this?”

“All have been aroused, but no one knows what happened,” the wizard stammered. “No one saw or heard anything. One of the Guards insists that it had to be a *warrior of darkness*. And ... Tarnelas’s scrolls have been stolen.”

Elontar’s eyes widened.

“Are you sure?”

The wizard nodded.

“Sorcery!” Elontar blurted, his eyes widening in fear. Just as quickly, they acquired a fire of determination. “The scrolls must be found and this villain destroyed! Whoever he is, he must have had something to do with King Landon’s death.”

“I’d like to speak to the two guards,” Narell offered.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Elontar said coldly. “This is a matter for Warlord Krelas and his people. It would be better if Your Highness returned to the safety of Klerandia.”

A sarcastic smile spread across Narell’s face. “I may not be a young warrior any more,” he said calmly, “but I’m still a vad-Taelen, and I know more about the art than most. (The embarrassed facial expressions of both

Krelas and Chadrell implied that Narell had made a gross understatement.) Besides, I don't think there's anything in Palendar that I need be afraid of." He looked straight into Elontar's eyes as he said it.

"Be that as it may, Your Highness," Elontar replied in a more controlled tone, "under the circumstances, it might be best if Warlord Chadrell saw to the security of your own realm. Whatever this sorcerous mission is, it may lead the villain to Klerandia next. The people of Klerandia might feel better knowing their Warrior King is with them."

Narell smiled. "Very well," he agreed. "We'll depart in the morning."

Leeann returned and murmured to her husband, "I'll see Aralyn to her chambers." The latter nodded, steering his warlord toward the door.

"You gave up rather easily back there," Chadrell murmured as they descended the stairs.

Narell just shook his head. "There's nothing we can do here."

Dawn found the Klerandians just setting out on their homeward journey.

"I still say that Aralyn should come with us," Leeann asserted.

Narell nodded. "I know, but she has things that she wants to do in Palendar. There are things of Landon's that she'll want to gather up before returning to Andaria. That's where she'll find the most comfort for a while. Elontar would love to get his hands on some of Landon's personal writings. He's convinced that Landon kept many secrets from the Inner Circle. It was the only way he could dismiss his inability to master many of the techniques that Landon had shown the Order."

Leeann sighed. "He was so promising years ago.

Now he's become so petty.”

Narell shook his head. “He's been ruined by his own bitterness. He got so much attention in youth that he convinced himself he'd be the next overlord. Yet, even before Landon's powers were revealed, Shyntarlas had already spotted his tendency toward paranoia. It was beginning to interfere with his powers even then. He also liked to take credit for things, working his name into any accomplishment, even if only remotely connected to it. Landon's return to capture the High Realm's attention away from him just accelerated things. Rather than honour Landon, he blamed my cousin for overshadowing him. Now he hates anything that threatens his position. He dreads the thought that Darion might ascend the throne and dissolve the Regents Council.”

Narell paused, shaking his head. “Look at poor Lenthorlan. He was a bit less noticed than Elontar in those days – he sought less attention, and his powers were developing a bit more slowly. But, in his slow, methodical manner, he surpassed Elontar. He should have become overlord, but Elontar has contrived to keep him busy far from Palendar. Even now, he's in the Chondars somewhere, studying this odd fluctuation in the earthpower.”

Leeann nodded sadly.

“Krelas tries to balance things but his effect is limited,” Chadrell offered. “He'd make a good warlord if he were less afraid of Elontar. He tries too hard to keep the peace. Sometimes I think Palendar needs a shaking up.”

Narell nodded and sighed. “If only Varon hadn't disappeared.”

Chadrell nodded, then broke into a grin. “Varon would have driven Elontar deeper into madness. I fear he was too much like Your Majesty. He was devoted to the task and had no time for licking boots. He also had

a very sharp mind.”

Narell nodded. “He often reminded me of Valias – how I pictured the great warlord from all I read about him, but, that’s all water under the bridge, Chadrell.”

Narell smiled weakly. Varon had been a sterling officer, and thinking of his mysterious disappearance wasn’t helpful. He’d just lost his best friend. From earliest boyhood, he and Landon had been closer than most brothers. They’d played together, studied Taelen together, and had even advanced to vad-Taelen status at the same time. He’d watched Landon’s powers grow at a prodigious rate, empathizing with his cousin’s frustration at King Brelan’s attempts to isolate him from the wizards who wanted to train him.

“What about these scrolls?” Chadrell asked eventually, intruding on Narell’s thoughts.

“They were written by Tarnelas and one of his scribes while making their way through the mountain labyrinths between Kalajhan and here,” Narell explained.

“Landon told me once that they were filled with references to sorcery,” Leeann commented.

“He’d know better than anyone,” Narell confirmed. “He helped me read some of them, teaching me the old language. It’s amazing how much our language has changed in four hundred years. Kendar knows the old writing well, and I gather that Darion also mastered it.”

“If they speak of sorcery,” Chadrell suggested, “it’s no wonder Elontar was so agitated.”

3: Rumblings

Krelas took a deep breath before entering Overlord Elontar's study. He waited while Elontar ignored him. The wizard knew he was there. He would have sensed him coming down the corridor – sensed his presence, sensed his thoughts. When Elontar did look up, it was to glare at Krelas.

Twenty years older, the wizard could have passed for ten years younger than the warlord. *If I'm more grey at forty than you are at sixty, it's from having to deal with your insufferable ego.* Panic gripped him. What if Elontar sensed that thought? Here he was already being glared at for interrupting the wizard by bringing him a report that he'd been screaming for during the past hour.

"Well?" Elontar blurted.

"Nothing, My Lord," he replied. "We've scoured the valley with no results. There's no sign of the thief anywhere near Klerandia. It's as though he never existed. Vad-Taelen trackers can find no evidence of how he entered or left the palace. Whoever he is, he's good. We've even considered that he had earthpower, but there's no lingering energy trace. All we can do is keep searching."

"See that you do!" the overlord snapped. "Concentrate to the north. He'll head for Mount Trender."

"Why there, My Lord?" Krelas seemed puzzled. "The scrolls refer to the south."

"Because there's power there, fool!" Elontar

screamed, launching to his feet, almost lunging across the desk. For a moment Krelas thought the wizard was going to attack. “Most of the mountain may have been destroyed, but Darios’ ring of power is still buried in the rubble of the Bondrell Caverns. Anyone with enough ambition to do this would know that. They’d be willing to do whatever it took to uncover the landia ring.”

The warlord nodded. It made sense. “As you command, My Lord,” he said, coming to attention.

“What about Darion?” Elontar asked. “Is there any news of his coming?” He sounded anxious, almost fearful.

Krelas shook his head. “We had King Ralontyn contacted telepathically.” He paused, sighing.

“And...” Elontar snapped.

“The Crown Prince seems to have disappeared.”

Elontar raised an eyebrow but, to Krelas’ amazement, showed no sign of alarm.

“No one in Andaria knows where he went,” the warlord continued. “He disappeared a few days before Lord Landon’s death. The wizard’s find no trace of his power signature.”

Krelas studied Elontar. Was there a trace of a smile on the wizard’s face? *Of course*, Krelas thought, *all this means to him is that Darios can’t come to take his authority away from him. He cares nothing for the son of the Silver Flame.* He froze, fearing that Elontar might be reading his thoughts, but a glance at the overlord showed him to be concentrating elsewhere.

“Off with you, then,” Elontar snapped, then ignored him as though he’d already left.

As Krelas departed, he overheard Elontar muttering to himself. “Calebra’s earthpower is unstable, some sort of renegade vad-Taelen or wizard or both has stolen Tarnelas’s scrolls and was able to kill Landon! Darios is at the bottom of this somehow. I knew that

upstart just got lucky, like Valias before him. He didn't have the power or the knowledge to destroy the sorcerer. The fools still celebrate his so-called victory, but his opening of the spirit portal for Darios' departure was nothing short of the vilest sorcery! Now Darios is coming again! I can feel it! It's why the planet's energy is being shaken to its very roots!"

Krelas paused just outside the door, watching Elontar a moment.

Turning back to the papers on his desks, the wizard stared at what Krelas recognized as a report from wizards concerning the increasing instability of Calebra's earthpower, as well as the recent disappearance of landia fragments believed to be shards of the Ice-Fire of Calebra. Krelas had receive a synopsis of the report. Elontar looked frightened by the rumblings of his world.

With the world in upheaval, we're stuck with you as a leader. Earth Mother help us all, Krelas thought as he left.

Lady Aralyn had just finished packing and her Andarian servants were preparing to take her belongings down to the courtyard where horned-ones awaited – one for her, two for her belongings, and two for her servants.

Breathless, the majordomo of the palace entered the open door.

"Are you leaving so soon, Your Majesty?" He asked. He insisted on referring to her as *majesty*, knowing Elontar fumed if he heard her acknowledged as anything more than *highness*. To the majordomo, she was High Queen. To Elontar, she was merely the wife of a king – a foreign interloper with no place in the politics of his kingdom. There were many, however, who hoped she'd assume the throne. Gannon

was one of these.

“Yes, Ganron,” she replied. “Palendar and her people will always be in my heart because this was the place my dear Landon loved. However, my home is in the north. They tell me my son is missing, as are several landia stones. Until I know my son is safe, my place is in Andros. I’m also responsible for the landia stones there.”

“I’ll notify Lord Elontar,” Garon announced, turning to the door.

Aralyn nodded. “I’m sure he’ll understand. Besides, he has enough to worry about without the nuisance of protocol created by my presence. By the way, how is your son doing?”

Ganron beamed. His son, Garon, had been admitted to the King’s Guard.

“We’re proud of him, Your Majesty. He has the talent. Captain Nelron confided that he has his eye on him. He shows much promise. He’s corporal already, and studying for his sergeant exams.”

Aralyn smiled. She gave the majordomo a hug. “Wish him well for me,” she said, then left.

Elontar managed to appear at the main doors of the palace to see her off. She forestalled him before he could voice any insincere platitudes.

“You shouldn’t have troubled yourself, Lord Elontar,” she assured him, smiling pleasantly. “I know how busy you are with all that’s happened.”

“On the contrary, My Lady,” he argued, “I would be remiss if I didn’t try to persuade you to delay your departure until I can at least have the Captain of the Guard detail an escort.”

Aralyn shook her head gently. “Thank you, but I doubt if that’ll be necessary. I still have this.” She reached inside her cloak and forth the fist-sized landia gem that had become so famous during the war.

Elontar hesitated, then nodded. Yet he continued to

look at the stone, conflict in his face. Aralyn knew that Elontar believed such things should be the property of the Order, as if only wizards should have access to earthpower. *The fact that its power surpasses his own may be the only thing that engenders any respect for me at all*, she thought.

"I must go immediately," she insisted. "My son is missing. I need to be in Andros."

Elontar seemed to give in. "As you wish, My Lady."

Prince Kendar entered the courtyard of Klerandia amid the metallic clang of blade on blade. Two warriors attacked a third with a fury, their Taelen blades seeming more a blur of light than cold, hard steel. Yet, for all their efforts, the lightning-fast blade of their opponent deflected their every attack. The newcomer smiled, noting the hint of embarrassment. After all, Bralyn was a captain in the army of Klerandia, highly trained in Taelen, and his colleague, Chadron, was a lieutenant of the King's Guard and a vad-Taelen. What's more, the latter was also the son of Klerandia's Warlord. Kendar saw both chagrin and pride in the warrior's faces, pride in their opponent – their king. The man they fought, two years older than their combined ages, was King Narell.

It still takes all my focus to beat him, Kendar thought.

Without warning, Narell was inside the guard of the captain, striking him in the chest with the butt of his sword hilt. As he returned to guard against the Lieutenant, Captain Bralyn fell to the floor, his heart having paused from the blow. Moments later, Chadron's weapon flew out of his hand, as if by magic. Narell's point swept back, stopping an inch from Chadron's throat.

Smiling, Chadron raised his hands in defeat.

“Ungh!” Bralyn let out a painful grunt as he sat up, rubbing his chest. “I don’t think that was fair, Sire,” he protested in a groan.

Narell smiled, helping the captain to his feet. “Nonsense!” the former Warlord of Palendar insisted. “When you’re attacked by two men, do you want to be fair or do you want to be alive? When you get to be sixty-one, Captain, you’ll realize that *fair* is a vague concept. But, forgive me. I was beginning to tire and did what I needed to do to prevail against youth.”

“Don’t feel bad, gentlemen,” Prince Kendar announced. “You should see the tricks he tries on me. However, Father, I’m impressed, considering you haven’t even unpacked from your journey to Palendar. I’ll wager you haven’t even had supper yet.”

“So much for respect from my own son,” the king joked.

Prince Kendar shrugged. “Mother says it reminds her of you at my age.” He grinned roguishly.

Narell smiled. “Thank you, gentlemen,” he said. It seemed a sign for them to excuse themselves. “One of these days you’ll get me,” he offered in consolation.

Acknowledging the prince with a bow, they departed.

“So, what have you learned?” Narell asked his son once they were alone.

Kendar pulled up a chair, while his father poured drinks before taking a seat next to his son.

“Well, to begin with,” the prince reported, “as near as anyone can tell, Darion has ceased to exist. The wizards find no trace of his energy signature. The mysterious thief has disappeared just as thoroughly. I evaded the Guard and entered the library archives at night to look for clues. Elontar is being pigheaded about this to the point of stupidity. The fact is, I had enough trouble getting in and out – whoever did it had

to be good – really good. We're dealing with a renegade vad-Taelen, Father."

Narell seemed unruffled by the news. "Yet there was no trace of earthpower?"

Kendar shook his head. "I'm sensitive, but minuscule traces might be too small for me to feel," he admitted. "However, one of the wizards assured me that he sensed out the entire place and found no lingering signature. I don't know who or what we're dealing with, but it worries me, especially with Lord Landon dead and Cousin Darion missing."

"What do you plan next?" Narell asked.

"Well, this is Elontar's province and I have no authority, other than any implied threat to Klerandia," he mused, "but I think I'll take a vacation and go hunting in the Klerans south of Palendar."

"Elontar thinks Mount Trender is the focal point," Narell commented.

Kendar shrugged. "The scrolls spoke of sorcery, but not the way Elontar thinks."

"Oh?" Narell leaned forward eagerly, then nodded slightly. "I almost forgot that Landon taught you to read some of the old writing. The scrolls are about forty percent of what there was. You must have read some of them."

"A little," Kendar nodded. "They deal with Tarnelas's journey through the mazes between Palendar and the legendary kingdom of Kalajhan. I think any sorcery in them is just a record of spells they experienced in the labyrinths. If I had to make my best guess, I'd say that the scrolls are closer to being a road map than a spell book."

Narell thought about it. "Darion knew those scrolls, too," he mused. "Could his disappearance be connected?"

Kendar shrugged. "Without firm evidence, we're just theorizing."

“Yes, but I think we have to at least keep that possibility in mind,” Narell insisted. “Remember, Kendar, we’re not just dealing with the loss of the scrolls. The High Throne is in danger of coming to an end. If Darion isn’t found, Elontar might declare himself permanent regent, or worse.”

The thought gave Kendar cold chill. “He’s mad enough to try it,” he agreed. “His grip on reality is pretty fragile. It’s an outrage, but there’s no one in the Order aggressive enough to oppose him and his sycophant cronies. Most are afraid of him. There are a few young ones who show great promise, but it’ll be years before they have enough experience to be Overlord material. Lenthorlan is the best hope, but they’ve kept him buried in a stupid study of the effects of the Ice-Fire’s explosion on the energy balance in the North Chondars.”

“All the more reason to make finding Darion our priority,” Narell insisted. “Kendar, don’t carry any preconceptions about this thief. Remember, Darion’s safety is your priority. If you find Darion, *help him. That’s* your priority.”

Kendar’s brow furrowed. His father seemed to be pushing the obvious, as if he knew something he wasn’t saying. He was about to question that, but thought better of it. He’d lost enough time already and wanted to be off on his mission.

4: The Stranger

High in the foothills of the Klerans, south of the Kingdom of Palendar, a stranger hiked steadily southward and upward, strolling the lush highlands as though he had all the time in the world. However, his pace was quite steady, and he maintained a constant direction. He had reason to be afoot and was pacing himself, covering as much distance each day as possible. He knew his comfortable, nonchalant manner gave the opposite impression – that, and his efforts to look inconspicuous, as if he belonged here.

Twice, as small groups of mounted warriors approached from the direction of Palendar, he faded into the landscape, reappearing after they'd gone by. At rest stops, he often unslung a tube that hung on his back next to his sword, removing a set of old vellum scrolls which he would ponder for a while before continuing with his journey.

By night he preferred sleeping in the shelter of wooded areas, making it easier to remain unseen. This night, by the feeble light of a small fire, he whipped the ornate Taelen sword from over his shoulder, launching into a rapid series of intricate moves, before sheathing the blade. He then settled next to his tiny fire, as if he had little to fear from the world. Calming his pulse and breathing, he eased into a meditation cycle, purging away all discomforting thoughts. *Simply be*, he thought to himself. *The path will unfold.*

He hoped to pass for a Palendarian, but was just a shade taller than most warriors of the south. He hoped the coppery tint of his skin, too dark for a Palendarian

who had just come through the coolness of the mild southern winter, would pass for a deep tan. His hair was medium brown, a colour not uncommon in the south, though dark brown and black were more the rule. His eyes, however, were an un-Palendarian shade of bright blue, almost purple.

The next night, darkness overtook him in an area of rocky scrub, and he had to settle for boulders and budding bushes as the best available shelter. He composed himself and was soon asleep.

Though he drifted off as if he hadn't a care in the world, his sleep was troubled by dreams. He muttered as if arguing with someone. Later, as the dream faded, his sleep was further disturbed. It felt as though something reached out to touch him on the shoulder. His right hand shot out, grasping the intruder, pulling as he rolled away. A sharp, single-edged dagger appeared in his hand. The stranger came to full wakefulness, his dagger hovering over a medium-sized brown snake held fast by the throat. He released the harmless reptile and sheathed his weapon, smiling in embarrassment.

Still, he thought, better to be safe while feeling foolish.

The aging farmer slugged away at hoeing around his coffee plants, the *chuff-chuff* sound slowing as his perspiration increased. Leaning on his hoe, trying to calm his heart, he glanced up noticing a stranger's approach.

"'Ullo," he bellowed, giving the stranger a big wave. "Are ye 'untin' or jest wanderin'?"

The stranger's brow furrowed then relaxed, and a smile warming his face.

"Good morning," he replied. He seemed to ignore the question, but the curious farmer decided to repeat

it.

Again the stranger smiled, then shrugged. "A little of both, I suppose," he said, "hunting and wandering."

The farmer raised an eyebrow. "Not goin' to catch much with just a sword," he observed.

A look of chagrin came over the stranger's face. "I had a spear until yesterday afternoon," he said. "I lost it to a mountain hart. I didn't hit him well enough to bring him down, but I hit him hard enough for him to make off with my spear. I tracked him, but lost his trail after dark. No doubt he's managed to lose my spear in a ravine by now." He shrugged. "I'll make another when I reach the mountain alders higher up."

The farmer laughed. "It 'appens. Guess ye 'aven't got lunch. I s'pose my misses could give ye some if ye don't mind choppin' some wood. Got plenty o' lunch as a rule but my old back 'ates swingin' an axe."

The stranger tilted his head to one side, then smiled again. "Why not," he said. "It's a nice day for a little exercise."

Shouldering his hoe, the farmer led the stranger across the field of coffee bushes he'd been weeding around. As they neared the large, comfortable-looking cabin, the farmer gestured to an axe embedded in the top of an old stump. Nearby was a pile of lengths of tree trunk.

As the farmer went inside, the stranger picked up the axe and examined the edge. Smiling, he pulled a stone from a pouch on his belt, and began honing it. Once satisfied with the edge, he put the stone away, unslung his sword and tube, then pulled off his tunic. After he'd tossed about a dozen lengths of tree over by the stump, he went to work. His smooth, flowing muscles fell into the task with an easy rhythm that seemed to have little effect on him. His breathing changed to a slow, gentle inhale through his nose, followed by a relaxed, steady exhale from his mouth.

His eyes acquired an unfocused look, as if he were using the chore as a form of meditation.

Approaching where he watched from the doorway, the farmer's wife whispered, "Who do you think he is?"

The farmer shrugged. "Don't rightly know, but 'e sure can cut wood!"

The wife shook her head. "His kind don't usually wander up here looking like aimless drifters."

"'Is kind?" the farmer asked.

"Remember my cousin in Palendar and the winter I spent with her because she had the coughing sickness so bad?" As the farmer nodded, she went on, "Well, her son is in the King's Guard there, and I used to watch him training in the yard when he was home. Breathing like that is something they're taught in that mystical killing art that they have to be good at to get in the Guard – *Taelen*, he called it. And did you notice that sword of his? It's the same as the ones they earn when they pass their special Taelen tests, only his is much fancier. Look at how the handle is made of carved bone. The carving is fancy and old. Whoever he is, he's special. It's odd for one like him to be here without a horse and equipment. But, his business is his own, I suppose."

"Aye, and 'e's earned some food," the farmer reminded her.

"Yes, dear, that he has," his wife agreed, returning his smile.

It wasn't long before the stranger had split all the wood he'd selected. Adding it to the neatly stacked collection of firewood, he selected another dozen pieces and fell back into his relaxed rhythm.

When the farmer and his wife came out, they were dumbfounded. The stack of firewood had almost doubled in size.

"Merciful Earth Mother!" the farmer's wife

exclaimed in amazement.

"Thunder, man," the farmer blurted with a laugh. "Ye didn't 'ave to chop the 'ole pile. Ye could clear the 'ole mountain o' trees in a week!" Again he laughed. "Now I owe ye lunch, supper, and tomorrow's meals as well!"

The stranger just smiled, insisting on finishing the pieces he'd selected. "It's a comfortable task once you get into the rhythm of it," he assured them.

"Guess I never 'ad that kind o' rhythm," the farmer replied with a laugh. "Well, wash up, and get yerself inside. There's lunch on the table, and my misses can pack ye a few day's worth t' take wi' ye."

"Soon Master?" an oily voice asked.

"Yes," an ominous voice replied, "soon. Even now, the veil between our prison here and the world of Calebra continues to weaken. If that fool in Palendar is correct in his fears, we may even have help in escaping the spirit world before long."

"Help, Master?"

"Hmm, yes," the dark, shadowy essence of power almost hissed. "Something is amiss there. The unstable one fears sorcery. It may be a symptom of his illness, but then, something is happening there. I can feel it. Perhaps some unwary sorcerer is contemplating summoning me again."

"And me, Master?"

"Don't be stupid! Who'd be interested in you? Still," he promised, "if you continue to serve me well, I may have use for you in Calebra – you and others of your friends who are loyal to me."

"Yess, Master," the demon hissed excitedly, almost drooling in eagerness.

"Oh, get away from me!" the dark one bellowed. "Give me a moment's peace from your sniveling and

groveling!”

“Yess, Master,” it hissed as it scurried away in the shadowy dimness.

“Hmm, yes,” the dark one continued once he was alone. “Something of import has happened – someone of great skill has done something. I can’t quite see who he is or what his deed, but I can feel him, and I am in his thoughts. Hmm.” He seemed to ponder something he was sensing. “There is something about the feel of this one – I can’t place it. He’s too young for me to have known him.”

After a rugged, rocky climb, the stranger reached a bluff that looked down into a small canyon-like valley, dominated by a quaint hamlet. In the past day alone he’d found four sets of caverns, one quite elaborate. Yet none was the one he sought. His first instinct was to avoid the settlement, but he might save time if he could learn something here. Decision became action.

The dirt path that passed for a main street seemed almost overpopulated with chickens. As he made his way toward a shop, pushing the fussing birds aside with his strides, the natives either pretended to ignore him or stared with open suspicion. Those who might profit from his presence were friendly, such as the proprietor of the primitive general store.

“’Ello, t’ ye, good sir,” he almost shouted, grasping the stranger’s hand and pumping it up and down like a pump handle. “And what would ye be needin’, M’Lord? I got a sturdy bow made in the Dark Wood t’ the north, and many stout spears made right ’ere, and if ye need provisions, why, I got coffee n’ beans n’ flour n’ some fresh deer meat that come in jest t’day.”

The stranger smiled, trying to ignore the banter as he looked about.

“I heard there were some nice caves around here,

and a tunnel where treasure has been found,” he commented in a bored tone, “but, as near as I’ve seen so far, there’s nothing but the odd bear hole. I might as well just get a bit of coffee, then head back to Palendar.”

“Oh, *no*, sir,” the shop keeper protested. “The treasure tunnel’s jest five miles north of ’ere, but there’s other caves. It can fool ye if ye don’ know where t’ look. What ye need is some fresh food ’n a day o’ rest in town. Maybe I can even think o’ someone fer a guide, hmm?” He watched the stranger with a desperate, hungry look.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he admitted, “I suppose I could do with some beans and flour, as well as the coffee. And that small backpack there should hold it all.”

He leaned against the counter, contemplating the room, rattling a money pouch. “What about this guide?” he said finally.

The shopkeeper studied the purchases, his mind grinding away as he eyed the stranger’s purse. “Six crowns should cover it,” he said anxiously.

The stranger raised an eyebrow. “Assuming I’m paying for information concerning the guide, I think five would be closer.” He fixed his eyes on the other, giving the shopkeeper a cold look. He could sense the shiver running down the shopkeeper’s back.

“Ask the barkeep fer Narayla,” the proprietor said quickly, snatching the coins from the stranger’s hand, taking a rapid step back. “She’s the only one that’ll go there.”

The stranger left without a word, heading up the path toward a building with a garish sign emblazoned with a painting of a hand holding a large wine jug. Looking at the sky, he consulted the crystalline timepiece embedded into one of his metal wrist bands. *It's late enough. I might as well have supper at the*

tavern. It could be a good way to find out about this Narayla.

The pub seemed poor compared with others he'd seen. Still, considering the size of the hamlet, it was appropriate to their needs. At least it was clean, though the furnishings were rough-hewn from mountain timber. Taking in its quaint and unpretentious nature, he decided he liked the place.

Near the bar, he found his way blocked by two drunken patrons. Though neither could walk without staggering, their recent argument had just blossomed into an all-out fight. The taller of the combatants, reeling from a roundhouse to the jaw, lurched into the stranger, who did something very fast with his hands. The big man was propelled past the stranger and sent sprawling onto the floor. The remaining fighter and those standing at the bar bellowed with appreciative laughter.

As the man struggled to his feet, the colour left his face and he seemed to become sober. Striding up to the stranger, he whipped out a heavy knife, plunging it downward at the stranger's back.

The stranger turned toward the attacker, his right hand launched out and snatched the sleeve of the knife arm. The hand was propelled downward so that the knife embedded itself in the bar with a thud. The stranger's hand shot back, heel of palm slamming into the attacker's jaw. The man was knocked backward as if walloped by a club. He struck the floor, flat on his back, remaining there quite still.

For several minutes there was silence, all eyes on the stranger.

"Well, someone had better help him up," he said with a grin. "You can't just leave him there or one of the maids will trip over him and spill somebody's supper all over the floor."

The silence eased into ripples of laughter. As

several went over to pick up the inert patron, the stranger approached the barkeep. He ordered a tankard of ale, and, inquiring about supper, had his attention directed toward a slate board with the menu written on it in chalk. The fare seemed confined to every possible way of cooking chicken, the principle variety being what vegetables came with the bird. The stranger wondered if he hadn't recently stepped over his supper in the street.

"I think I'm in the mood for chicken," he joked when the barkeep returned. "Surprise me." After the barkeep had passed on his order to a kitchen maid, the stranger commented, "I'm told you know a guide named Narayla."

The barkeep's eyebrows lifted and he nodded his head. "Oh, aye!" He smiled, his eyes taking on a sudden sparkle.

The stranger was intrigued. "I gather she's a woman – unusual for a wilderness guide. You look like you have a story you'd like to tell."

The barkeep leaned closer. "The face of a goddess and a body a man'd die for!" he exclaimed, then started to chuckle. "That's the problem!" he blurted. "One or two what tried too hard found out!" He roared with laughter and thumped the bar with his fist.

"So she killed someone in defense of her virtue," the stranger prompted.

"Aye," the barkeep nodded enthusiastically. "Cut 'em to ribbons with 'er father's sword, she did. They never 'ad a chance. And they were armed, too – defendin' 'emselves, they were. Ah, there's the curse of it! She should a' been a man – a warrior – but the Earth Mother made 'er a woman jest t' taunt us poor men."

The stranger smiled. "I think I like her already," he confided. "Where can I find her?"

"Well," the barkeep mused, "you can either wait 'ere a week or so for 'er to come back, or you can go

south looking for 'er. She took a party o' five rascals from Palendar t' see that cursed treasure cave."

"Cursed?"

"Aye, it is." He leaned even closer. "Many've gone in search o' treasure, which legend says is there, but none ever come back t' say what they found." He gave a serious nod of his head as if to certify his statement.

"South with a group of five?" the stranger asked. "Did she start on the main path?"

The barkeep nodded. "Aye, she'd follow it fer a mile or two."

When his supper arrived, he paid the barkeep and took his meal to a quiet table, intending to eat without further interruption, then head south while there was still some light left.

"Circle her," Jadron encouraged. The nephew of Baron Trellmar, he was a spoiled, cruel creature. "Get in there, Vadron," he taunted his cousin, Trellmar's son. *Useless!* he thought, *Trellmar's heir; yet no more backbone than a rabbit.*

His companions, Baronets Kelnor and Thallon, with Wesdon, Trellmar's groom, had taken a lustful interest in their hunting guide, a buxom wench, whose ample endowments had sparked them to ungentlemanly behaviour. Rather than give in, as any lowly mountain wench should to her betters, she was holding them at bay with a spear, all the while trying to reach the Taelen sword next to her pack.

And what's a wench doing with a Taelen sword, Jadron wondered. *Probably took it off the body of some warrior she knifed in the back, the she-cat.*

Narayla, for her part, was no easy prey for the five. Almost equal in height to the men who taunted her and tried to grab her, she had strong shoulders, yet they in no way interfered with the feminine quality of her

physique.

“Argh!” Kelnor grunted. She'd just jabbed him with her spear. “She almost skewered me!” He drew his sword. Now, instead of attempting to overpower her, the group seemed bent on murder.

Out of nowhere, a dark form appeared in their midst, seizing Kelnor's sword arm at the wrist with a viselike grip. A right elbow drove into his solar plexus, right palm heel thrust upward into a corner of his lower jaw.

Jadron stared. The stranger was gone. Kelnor fell senseless to the ground. Then Jadron was grasped from behind and heaved into the fire. He screamed, rolling around to extinguish the flames on his tunic.

The attacker was after Wesdon now. The groom turned to face the stranger, bringing his sword to the ready. He was just starting to smile, having the impression that the shadowy figure was unarmed, when the dark one seemed to take to the air. In a whirling motion, one booted foot swept the blade to one side as the other foot thrust forward, smashing into his head. Wesdon fell in a heap.

Still slapping flames from his clothing, Jadron shouted for the others to get the would-be rescuer, but there was no one to get. There was no one but the woman, still armed with her spear.

Ignoring their two unconscious friends, the others looked about. Cold smiles returned to their faces as they saw no further sign of the ‘demon.’ Nodding to each other, they advanced on the woman, seeming intent on not only satisfying their original desires but punishing her for the unexplained interruption.

No sooner had they taken a step when Narayla's spear lashed out, parrying Jadron's sword, and slashing a deep gash in his chest.

As if it were a signal, the demon materialized in their midst again. Thallon's sword was slapped aside.

A series of rapid-fire blows hammered into his gut, ending with the effective palm thrust to the jaw. Spinning out of the way of the remaining blade, a lightning right leg lashed out. *Ba-ba-bam!* Three blows impacted in the stomach, chest, and head, all in the same second.

As Jadron fell, he fought to cling to consciousness. *A Warrior of Darkness!* he thought.

Narayla looked about her in amazement. The demon had vanished again. "I know you can hear me," she yelled. "I just want to thank you."

Kelnor and the others began to groan, and tried to regain their feet, but Narayla dashed to her pack and succeeded in grabbing her sword. The look in her eyes made Jadron hesitate.

Jadron grabbed a folded blanket and pressed it against his chest, staunching the flow of blood. Taking up their swords, the others seemed more intent on peering into the night than renewing their attack on the woman.

"*Be gone,*" a spectral voice seemed to moan out of the darkness. "*It is death to remain here!*"

"Come on," Jadron said.

They grabbed their packs and hobbled off into the night, heading for the safety of the hamlet.