

1: The Conflict Begins

As the line of seasoned warriors cleared the last rise of the rolling plains before the Shurenflood River, Warlord Valias raised his hand, signaling a halt. Off in the distance to the northeast lay the Kingdom of Lenost. Much closer, the ground sloped down to river level, giving way to the soft, treacherous mire of the Grenat Marshes, a nasty haven for dangerous swamp creatures, safe only during a winter freeze.

In the midst of this inhospitable bog was a newly created five-square-mile section of arable land, right on the border between the kingdoms of Lenost and Grenat – a jewel of fertility in a realm fit only for the growing of cereal grains on the plains, and bull rushes and rice along the edge of the swamp. It was barely a month since the wizard, Darios, had used his vast powers to isolate this stretch of land from the rest of the mire.

As Valias surveyed the scene before him, he shook his head in bewilderment. Arrayed before him were the armies of Grenat and Lenost, about to fight a war over the ownership of these few acres of soil.

“You still mean to go through with this?” The gravelly voice next to him was so close to a growl in nature that it gave Captain Chadrell a reputation for being more cantankerous than he really was.

Valias smiled at his second-in-command. “Of course,” he said with a shrug, “unless you have a better idea. By the way, what’s Lt. Dorell grumbling about?”

Chadrell sneered. “His lordship doesn’t want to wear his custom embroidered dress poncho into battle. He wants to know why we’re not wearing battle

black.”

“Lieutenant,” the warlord called. As Dorell reached his side, Valias said, “I hear you object to the uniform order.” Dorell was about to say something but Valias cut him off. “Let’s make this clear, *Baronet Trellmar*, we’re not here to fight a war, we’re here to stop one. Most of those men down there have never seen a member of the King’s Guard, but they’ve heard of them. The few that have seen us have done so at Trade Fairs, where they’ve seen us on duty in dress crimson. When we ride down off this rise, I want every man down there to know the King’s Guard is coming. I plan to win this engagement without drawing my sword. Is that understood Lieutenant?”

With that, he led his three companies of warriors down toward the impending battle.

As the troop neared the brief no-man’s-land separating the two armies, Commanders Demstole of Lenost and Grisholm of Grenat, each about to launch his warriors against the other, paused to watch the relatively small force approaching from the south. Valias hid a smile. As the men took in the sea of red ponchos of the war force of Palendar and picked out the emblem of the King’s Guard, worn by more than a third of the three hundred advancing warriors, their expressions said it all. Their faces paled and the commanders signaled for their men to stand easy.

In a world where few men left their homes without carrying a sword, the warriors of Palendar were legendary. But the King’s Guard of Palendar were in a class by themselves. These were the dreaded *warriors of darkness*, masters of the martial art of Taelen. As swordsmen, the King’s Guard knew no masters. Nor did they need their swords. Legend spoke of lone, unarmed *vad-Taelens* disposing of as many as three or four armed assailants, using their hands and feet. A brief glance at the lithe figures gave credence to the legends.

Easing his mount to a stop before Commanders Demstole and Grisholm, Valias took in the nervous smiles and uneasy looks. He gently stroked the neck of his horned-one, then scratched its head just behind the spiral horn growing out of its forehead. It was an enduring beast with earthpower, the magic of wizards, in its blood. He took his time before focusing steel-grey eyes on the commanders.

“Good morning,” the warlord greeted. His smile was a jovial one.

“Prince Valias,” Demstole almost stammered.

Grisholm just nodded. He looked uncomfortable and he had to clear his throat before he could speak.

“What brings the Warlord of Palendar so far north?” he finally asked. “This is a local dispute.”

Valias sat silently for a moment, allowing their anxiety to simmer. He casually scratched at the back of his neck, pushing away black hair which fell to his shoulders in a wavy mane.

“Please, don’t let me interrupt, gentlemen,” he said. “Carry on with your battle. We just came to watch – for now.”

“For now?” Demstole repeated in confused surprise.

Valias nodded. “Well, actually,” he added, still smiling, “my men were hoping to take on the winner — if you don’t mind.”

What ensued next was a confusion of unfinished sentences from both Demstole and Grisholm. Blame was cast back and forth, and many excuses were made. There was no battle that day.

The chamber set aside for the Order of the Earthpowered in the Palace of Palendar was normally a very serious place with a calm atmosphere. Massive grey stone walls glittered where the lamp light reflected off the specks of crystal embedded in smooth

granite, creating a feeling of grandeur that often inspired a hushed silence in those present. Here the members of the Order of the Earthpowered assembled to deal with matters worthy of their attention.

But today, as Overlord Taronlas, their leader, cast his eyes over the assembly, he viewed a scene of chaos, as novices and some of the more youthful of the wizards raised their voices in a bedlam of forceful opinions. The assembly had been summoned to hear from one of their number, a great and powerful mage called Darios. There was much controversy surrounding his many achievements. And, though there had been great praise for the things he had done to benefit the entire known world of Calebra, of late there was a rumbling of rumour concerning the sources of his great knowledge. The Inner Circle, a panel of senior wizards, had met to discuss the controversy and had decided to lay the matter before the entire Order.

It had been Darios who had revealed the true nature of earthpower. No longer were wizards regarded as the chosen of the Earth Mother. Darios had made it known that the power was an extension of the planet's energy, channelled through a few individuals. Although the precise mechanism was still a mystery, it seemed hereditary, passed on from father to son. Female wizards were rare to the point of being almost unknown. Sometimes it skipped a generation with males, but female wizards only occurred when both parents were wizards.

At a gesture, a large chair slid toward Taronlas, turning slightly. Sitting, he closed his eyes a moment, opening his mind, allowing his senses to hear what was being said, his mind to pick up some of the thoughts, particularly from the novices and juniors. He wondered how the novices would see today's problem. They had no vote yet, but their views represented the future. *We can teach technique, we can teach the laws of physical matter, but we can only encourage philosophy,* he

thought. *Darios is a perfect example. He defies the Order at every turn – defies traditions, and defies protocol. Were it not for that, he'd be Overlord, not I. Now he's about to amaze us with another outlandish discovery, if rumours are true.*

Sighing, he turned his attention back to the crowd, tuning in to voices.

“Already,” one pointed out, “he has found successful treatments for three of our most common illnesses.”

“And what of the swamps between Grenat and Lenost?” another reminded him. “He turned five square miles of treacherous mire into land where almost anything would grow.”

“But what’s this talk of spirits I keep hearing?” another interrupted.

“It can’t be!” several interjected in horror. “No wizard would dare become involved in necromancy! It’s a violation of everything we’ve ever stood for.”

“Darios came here as a boy with Tarnelas!” blurted a new voice. “He’d never go against the very reason our people left the old kingdom.”

“Enough! Enough!” Lord Taronlas boomed, silencing the novices. “Whatever business Lord Darios wishes to present will be set before us at its proper time. There has been sufficient concern to warrant a meeting of the Inner Circle. We will address these concerns during the course of the meeting. But, first, we shall hear from Lord Darios.

“Now, if the novice and junior members will regain some measure of dignity, we may proceed.”

It was not by any means a suggestion. The noble bearing of Lord Taronlas commanded attention, and the power of his voice was enough to silence the younger, more boisterous of the wizards. As soon as all were seated, Taronlas turned and nodded to a figure waiting to one side.

As this mystic rose to his feet, every eye in the

room was upon him. He was of medium height and rather slim, but there was a sternness to his bearing, a sense of tremendous power that commanded instant attention. He had been considered handsome in his day, but of late there was a change in him — something about his eyes — cool, blue-grey, they seemed filled with a mysterious darkness, a coldness. Taronlas felt a sudden chill. There was something new in Darios's eyes, a hint of danger.

“My friends,” Darios addressed them. “My fellow members of the Order of the Earthpowered.” The voice was calm and low, almost patronizing, but there was an iciness to it that compelled people to listen. As he continued, the fingers of his right hand brushed at the side of his short, black beard, peppered with grey. “I do have knowledge to share with you, and today, I will also share with you the sources of my wisdom. But first...”

Darios held his arms aloft and seemed to concentrate, his eyes flashing pale green fire. There was a sudden blurriness to his form, an apparent shrinking in size. The assembly gasped. Instead of the wizard, poised on the dais before them was a very large snake. The serpent was vividly striped, and the back of its neck, just behind the head, was spread out like the hooded cowl that wizards often wore.

Several senior members of the Order concentrated, eyes glowing as they stared at the serpent. One young wizard seated beside Taronlas raised an eyebrow.

“It's no illusion,” he murmured to the overlord. “At first, I thought it a mental trick, but I've probed. It is a snake — a viper or cobra, I believe, although I've never seen one before. Lord Tarnelas wrote of them. They are found in the deserts to the south.”

Taronlas nodded. The young mage had achieved full membership in the Order only seven years prior, but was already a senior member. His talent with earthpower was well above average, but he stood out

as having an exceptional mind and astounding perception. If caught unsuspecting, a wizard might be fooled by another wizard's illusion, especially if the other was more powerful. But Shyntarlas seemed born with a gift for seeing through illusion and into the minds of others. He could read a situation very quickly and accurately. So amazing was his mental prowess that he was the youngest mage ever to be admitted to the Inner Circle.

"I don't like this," Shyntarlas continued. "It's not the snake that troubles me; there's a change in Darios. He doesn't *feel* the same. It's as though there are many other personalities crowded into his mind."

Taronlas said nothing; he merely turned his eyes toward Shyntarlas, nodding slightly. His young companion had just brought into clear focus something that the overlord had been sensing, but couldn't quite define.

Shyntarlas seized his arm and nodded in the direction of the snake. The form of the serpent was becoming hazy and indistinct. Slowly, the blurred form swelled and altered until once more it was Darios.

"There is much that can be done, and much that can be learned under my leadership," he declared, looking straight at Taronlas.

"I have not heard this council raise the question of leadership, Lord Darios, but I would like now to raise a question concerning your powers." All eyes turned in amazement to see who dared challenge Lord Darios in such a tone. There, confronting the great mage, stood Shyntarlas.

Taronlas made a cautioning gesture as he stood, stepping in front of the young wizard. "Lord Shyntarlas has a valid point, Lord Darios," he agreed. "Questions and rumours have arisen concerning the sources of your knowledge. Many find it odd that you tend to come forward with many amazing and yet diverse discoveries at a time, with gaps in between. We have

no doubt of your powers. Since birth you have been something of a wonder. Indeed, it was Prince Tarnelas's great respect for your abilities that led our revered founder to include you in the company he brought here when he settled Palendar. But of late, your astounding achievements have been leaning more and more toward the outlandish."

Darios arched an eyebrow, a half smile playing about his lips. "Very well, Taronlas and Shyntarlas. The question has been raised, and it shall be answered." Many frowned at his omission of the title 'Lord.' No matter how intimate wizards might be in their daily lives, such formalities were a tradition in council.

With a look of extreme concentration, and a great waving of his arms, he created a cloudy area to one side of him. The cloud resolved into a bright, multicoloured ring of energy, rotating about a void of empty blackness, beyond which could be seen shadowy shapes crawling toward the forefront. Every wizard in the chamber gasped, protective energy auras igniting about mages closest to the front.

Taronlas was outraged, his amber aura ablaze. "Close it!" he commanded in a tone as cold as death. There was no mistaking the seriousness of the command.

With a surge of power, and another wave of his arms, Darios closed the void. There was a *whomph*, and a blast of cold. The room was dead silent.

"There are many worlds," he said in a defiant tone, "and there are those with knowledge to offer."

To one side of the hall was the one female present. Her attractive face, framed by soft brown hair, had lost all colour as she stared in amazement. She was Nalesha, the only living wizardess known to the Order, and she was Darios's wife.

"What has happened to you?" she pleaded. Her voice was barely above a whisper, but her sapphire-like eyes flashed in thinly-veiled alarm.

Several voices near her began to mutter, “Sorcery!”

“Open your minds!” Darios almost shouted, his voice dripping with disdain. For the first time his calmness seemed to slip. “We seek knowledge. What I offer is a new way: infinite knowledge and infinite power from worlds beyond our own!” His tone implied that he thought that only a fool would disagree with him.

“At what cost?” Taronlas challenged, his voice still low and controlled. “Our souls? Our lives? Our world? What you suggest is necromancy, the blackest sorcery! Would you tempt all those who have died to return to Calebra, to challenge us for what was theirs in their time? How many dead kings would we have wanting their thrones back? How many out-world demons would you see loosed upon us?”

“Fools!” Darios growled, “With unlimited power comes unlimited control...” Again, his tone seemed to dismiss Taronlas’s opinion.

“Who are you?” Nalesha stepped forward until she stood next to Taronlas. “What have you become? Once we shared a vision. Now I’m not even sure if I know you. You used to talk of good, of helping. Now you talk of power, of control. You frighten me, Darios.”

Darios’s arguments seemed temporarily quieted. Taronlas seized the moment.

“Lord Darios,” he said in a rigid tone, “for the sake of tradition and procedure, the Order must consider and rule upon this. However, due to the extremely unusual nature of what we’ve seen, I would request that you withdraw during our deliberations.” He gestured toward the door. “If you please.”

Darios’s glance moved between Nalesha and Taronlas. Scorn filled his demeanour. Then, with a disgusted grunt, he stormed out of the hall, pausing at the door for a moment. At that instant, his gaze wavered between Nalesha and Taronlas, then turned cold.

“Fools,” he roared with a laugh. “I have given you the chance. The powers shall be mine – with you, or without you!” Then, with a blinding flash of flame, he disappeared.

The chamber fell silent.

“Novices,” Taronlas announced in his clear, deep voice, “while you do not have the voting privileges of junior members, you should remain and observe. This is such a serious matter, I feel you are entitled to that.”

As one, the assembly took their seats, and seemed almost in a trance. For a few minutes each would ponder what had happened, all of its possibilities, and all imaginable consequences. This was not one of the king's council meetings. There would be no long, drawn-out debate where everyone took a turn expressing the same opinion over and over again. There would be little wasted discussion. Each member present was a person of advanced powers and intellect. None needed the persuasion of another's opinion, nor would Taronlas have allowed any attempt to guide another's decision. The very nature of earthpower usually excluded the weak-minded.

The vote was unanimous. They wanted no part of what Darios offered. An amazing majority wanted no further contact with the wizard. In Calebra, sorcery was any form of wizardry involving powers acquired with the aid of necromancy, and it was an abomination to the Order. It was the desire to separate themselves from the practice of sorcery that led the wizard-prince Tarnelas to leave his home kingdom of Kalajhan, one hundred thirty-seven years before.

In the end it was decided with unanimous acceptance. Darios was to be banished from the Order of the Earthpowered.

The messenger sent to locate Darios returned alone. “My Lords,” he said, “Lord Darios is not to be found.”

“He knows,” Nalesha said. “He knew the moment we decided, though I'm sure he had little doubt of the

outcome when he left. He has returned to Tol Keroth. There he'll be untouchable. I know. I helped make it. What started as a castle is now a fortress, with tunnels and chambers running back into the heart of the old volcano."

"What will you do now that Darios has been banished?" Taronlas asked her. "King Palron will almost certainly extend the banishment to all of Palendar."

Nalesha nodded. "I'm not sure yet," she admitted, "but I can no longer stay at Tol Keroth. It's not just the conflict of my continued membership in the Order. I think that Darios rather expected today's outcome. I'm sure that he's seen this day coming from a long way off, and that's why he has made Tol Keroth so impenetrable."

There were tears in her eyes as she shook her head. "What has happened to the man I married?" she murmured. It was almost a helpless plea for some sane justification of the changes in the man she had loved, the father of her child. The very tone of it pulled at Taronlas's heart. "You remember how he was years ago, Taronlas, but he has changed so much. There was a time when, if he had an idea that might help the world, he offered it, and was guided by the collective wisdom of the council. Now he assumes that no one knows more than he. I think all the praise he received as a child prodigy did more harm than good. You know my work as a disciple of the Earth Mother often takes me away, but, even when I'm with him, he tries to shut me out, insisting on privacy for his research. Now I can see why."

"I don't know what to offer you, Nalesha," Taronlas sympathized. "You're right. He has changed much over the years. Perhaps it's the voices he calls to him from other realms."

Tears still flowing, Nalesha looked straight into Taronlas's eyes. "This will not stop him, you know,"

she warned. "He really believes that his ideas will help the world and must be put to use, regardless of what anyone else thinks. With all these new powers, he sees himself as some sort of all-knowing father image. We are the ignorant, wayward children who can't see what's best for us. You stand between him and the welfare of Calebra. And by 'you', I mean you personally, the Order, the Kingdom of Palendar, or anything else that attempts to hinder him."

Taronlas let out a deep sigh. "This will mean trouble," he agreed. He shook his head, bewildered and exasperated. "You are welcome here, of course – you and little Malista."

"I know." She attempted to smile. "She is the main reason I fear Darios. I just don't know what to expect. Lately, if he notices us at all, it's as chattel. He may see our absence as a betrayal to be dealt with, or he may not notice. He may just see it as the removal of a distraction. For her sake, I must take Malista somewhere where she can be safe from him, somewhere where she can learn to love the works of the Earth Mother as I do. Farenwood has always been the home of my heart; perhaps we will find peace there. In the meantime, I think it best for Malista to be as far from her father's influence as possible. I'm afraid that Palendar is the first place he'd expect to find us. Perhaps his preoccupation with this latest obsession will keep us out of his mind. Who knows? Maybe he'll leave us in peace."

"I hope you're right," Taronlas offered. "You're still studying the little people of the forest kingdom?"

Nalesha nodded. "Their king's control over the forest mystifies all of us. He cannot explain it himself, except that it has always been a talent of the *Elyndiaarna*, as his people call themselves. They have no earthpower, yet King Palyut even controls the climate, to some extent."

With that she turned to leave.

“Be very careful, my friend,” she warned. “You and the Order have made a very powerful enemy today. Expect the worst. Should he seek revenge, it could come in ways that you would least expect.”

“Then this is just the beginning,” Taronlas replied. New tears formed in Nalesha’s eyes as she nodded.

2: Landia

We need another core sampler over there!” the foreman shouted. “I want a sample from that edge of the vein. That’s where I’m feeling the strongest power waves.”

Falento was senior foreman of the mining crews, deep in the bowels of the Chondar Mountains, under the Kingdom of Andaria. He had been chosen for his job, not just because of his understanding of the mining of power crystals, but because he was a *sensitive*. Earthpower flowed in the foreman; not strongly enough to make him a wizard, but enough to give him the ability to sense its presence. He was typical of his race – taller than those of Palendar, almost six feet in height, with skin of a rich copper-tan colour, and brownish-blond hair. His eyes were a brilliant shade of purple, as though cut from pure, dark amethyst.

Most of the people of Calebra knew his race as the *Stone People* because of their skills in mining, and their understanding of the planet’s geology. They usually mined baryllin and natylir crystals. Baryllin could store energy from the sun and, under controlled conditions, emit low frequency energy vibrations. Natylir, when exposed to energized baryllin, gave off high intensity, narrow-beam radiation. The two combined powered lamps, as well as the core sampler, a large cutting tool that could slice through solid rock with a finely focused beam of energy.

Today they were after something new. To Falento it felt as if there were a wizard with them in the mines. That notion soon gave way to the more incredible fact that he’d come across some new type of power crystal,

one whose powers were beyond anything already discovered. A wizard's power had a feeling of personality, be it kind, stern, or indifferent. This power source was of a different nature. It felt more like an extension of the very power structure of Calebra.

As the delving into the face continued, Falento became increasingly excited, shouting to his men to be cautious. He wanted to expose this vein, doing as little damage to it as possible. He knew that he had stumbled onto a find that would have far-reaching effects on the future of Andaria, perhaps even the whole of Calebra.

The needle-thin beam of energy cut into the rock face, creating an amber glow as it etched a circular path through the layers of stone and lesser crystal. All was silent now, in deep anticipation, except for the drone of the core sampler and the hissing spark of the beam as it burned into the stone wall. Then the beam wove back and forth in scanning lines, powdering the stone within the circle it had etched. Slowly, patiently, with great precision, the beam exposed an inspection tube into the new vein of power crystal.

Alerted by some sixth sense, Falento shouted for them to stop. All activity ceased, and the core sampler became silent. At his curt command, a fan blew all of the remaining dust out of the tubular shaft, forcing it into an elaborate ventilation and exhaust system, and a light was aimed into the aperture.

"It looks no different from the outer layer," a workman commented.

The foreman was undaunted. "I can feel the presence of the strange new power crystal, a hair's breadth into the stone. Take a depth measurement, then widen the excavation."

Once the core sampler had been readjusted to the depth of the tube, the machine and two others like it were started. The beams widened the shaft, biting nine feet into the face on each pass, until the shaft had been opened to a diameter of thirty feet.

Once the extractor fans cleared the air, and the remaining dust settled, the miners pulled off their dust masks and rushed forward.

"I still see no difference," the workman said, "but that means little."

Another nodded. "If Falento feels it, it's there. The slightest tap of a hammer might expose it."

Just as the first hand pick was raised, however, Falento put up a hand, gesturing for the man to wait.

"This is no normal power stone," he commented. His voice echoed in the tunnels in an ominous whisper. "That much I sensed before, but now I'm feeling something else – it's as if it called out to be freed. We need to be careful."

He fixed his eyes the rock face, murmuring the words as if thinking out loud. He seemed in a daze. Tilting his head back slightly, he closed his eyes a moment. Then, opening them, he stared at the surface. For a moment, he remained thus. Then, approaching the face, he placed his palms against the rock. His body was as still as a statue carved from the very stone of the labyrinth, his expression one of stern determination.

As the others gazed at him in confused wonder, the ore face began to glow, a noticeable hum throbbing in their ears.

"We need to back away," a worker urged. "That hum might lead to an explosion."

"It won't," Falento said calmly. "Just watch."

Holding their breath, they watched. The outer layer of the wall sheared off in a paper-thin skin, showering to the floor in a rain of dust and minute fragments. When the dust settled and their eyes were able to make out details of the face, they stared in silent wonder. The wall was aglow with a galaxy of pure, clear crystal. The glow from each speck seemed to throb, oscillating in time with the low, pulsating hum that all could still hear.

Falento grinned through the layer of dust that covered him, then tried to shake some of it off. Several techs stepped forward and began brushing him.

No one asked how the deposits had been exposed just by Falento touching the face. The people of Andaria were long used to the magic power source that was integral to the heart of Calebra. None knew more of the nature of power crystals than the Stone People of Andaria. It was their life. This had to be a new power stone that could amplify or direct Calebra's magic force. As these thoughts passed through Falento's mind, his imagination pictured the rest. Such a stone could give mortals some of the powers that, until now, had been the sole province of the wizards.

All were eager to get at the face, each wanting to loosen a small sample of the new mineral, but Falento was quick to forestall them, bringing them back under discipline.

"Who knows what these specks may have the power to do!" he warned. "The smallest misguided thought might bring this entire tunnel system down around our ears!"

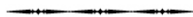
As Falento spoke, many nodded, clearly appreciating the need for greater restraint and caution. They began to extract samples of the crystalline specks, ever vigilant for the first signs of activity in the power stones.

Falento's instincts were renowned when it came to power crystals, but understanding their full potential was the province of the Crystal Masters of Andaria. The foreman intended to take as large a sampling as possible to Crystal Master Laboratory, in the mountain kingdom high above their heads. There the new discovery could be studied under much more controlled conditions, until the full extent of its powers had been determined.

The work was slow, requiring great patience. Many a moment was spent with sweat streaming from a

furrowed brow, as an uncooperative or slightly larger speck was extricated from the rock face. No picks or hammers were used – direct impact might elicit a dangerous response from the crystals. The entire operation was carried out with scraping edges, wire brushes, and small, sharp probes. Some hours later, however, they were able to sift out almost a cubic foot of relatively pure crystalline dust, as well as a handful of more solid pieces, about the size of a pea.

That was the beginning. Thereafter, things moved much more slowly, at least in Falento's opinion. He had hoped that the crystal masters would be so excited by the find that their report to King Dantoryn would recommend that the foreman delve deeper into the newly-cut corridor. Instead, all mining for the new power stone seemed to be at a standstill. To his frustration, Falento was ordered to simply record the locations of mental readings from new deposits of the gem, rather than pursuing the vein. All mining operations anywhere near a suspected lode were suspended.



At Crystal Master Laboratories, Director Koralet looked up from reading Falento's latest report.

“So, Falento, early tests indicate that the power of a crystal is in proportion to its size. Several small pieces placed together could accumulate their powers, but this was not nearly as strong as the effect of a single stone of the same total mass. And you've documented the risks in detail. If a mining crew stumbles onto a large enough deposit, and causes the crystals to become active in a destructive manner, it might destroy an entire section of the mountain. After all, you exposed the first deposit with a mere thought. Did you really just project the thought of the crystals pushing against the outer layer of the face?”

Falento nodded. “Until more is known of the stone

and how its powers are controlled, it should be considered potentially dangerous.”

“I agree,” Koralet said. “I’ve already notified the king that your report is complete, and that further mining can be continued in a cautious manner. He wants to discuss it in an hour. I told him I’d bring you with me.”

Falento paused a moment as he and Koralet entered the Royal Audience Chamber. He’d been there a few times but he never failed to appreciate the gentle curves of the arching walls and the smoothness with which they flowed into the domes that formed the ceiling. They were richly accented with sparkling quartz, amethyst, and diamond.

“I brought Master Falento, Your Majesty, as you requested,” Koralet announced.

King Dantoryn smiled, and gestured for them to be seated in chairs in front of the throne.

“You intrigue me, Falento,” he commented. “You’ve been elevated to senior crystal master, yet you insist on remaining a mining foreman.”

Falento felt embarrassed by the king’s interest. He hesitated, unsure of how to answer, then decided on candour.

“At heart, Your Majesty, I am and always will be a miner. Yet it seems I also have the ability to be a crystal master. The latter improves my usefulness with the former. I hope being a miner doesn’t detract from my usefulness as a crystal master.”

“Relax, Falento,” the king replied. “It was an observation, not a criticism. So, tell me about this – what are you calling it – landia?”

“Yes, Sire,” he replied. “It means *power stone* in the old language. All other crystals function in association with other natural phenomenon. They store and release solar energy, or convert energy into light and heat or

high energy waves. Landia, however, acts as an intermediary between humans and Calebra's energy structure. It gives an ordinary mortal the powers of a wizard."

Dantoryn was silent for a moment, pondering this new information. "Do you think there might be a relationship between this landia and the power of wizards?" he suggested.

Falento shrugged. "I think landia is the basis of wizardry. Certain people seem to be born with the ability to absorb and retain trace amounts of landia from food or water. The trait seems inherited, but the mechanism is complex. Female wizards are rare. The more powerful a wizard is, the more likely one of his children will be one. These are just observations, of course, based on limited statistics."

Dantoryn nodded pensively. "That might account for the powers not being developed until the mid-teen years. Perhaps, that amount of time is required to accumulate enough concentration of landia."

Falento agreed. "It also accounts for the fact that some wizards are more powerful than others, due to stronger will, or a greater accumulation of landia in the tissues, or a combination of both. The ability to accumulate landia may be controlled by a heredity unit, but it may also be influenced by the hormones that cause maturity at puberty."

King Dantoryn nodded as he took this in. "And what of the powers of the stone?" he asked.

"Well," the Falento continued, "it seems similar to what wizards have said about their own powers – a matter of will. The wizard wills something to happen. If the wizard has the power, and the will is strong enough, it happens. Of course it is not as simple as that. The wizard must understand what he is attempting to do, in terms of physical laws. For example, you could not command a rock to explode unless the process of explosion, and the molecular structure of the

rock were understood. It must be done step by step, just like a natural phenomenon. With landia, it is the same. The stone just gives the power. The person concentrates his will into the stone. What he is able to accomplish depends upon his knowledge and his will.”

“Can we assume that the stones are safe to use, so long as the handler has sound judgement?” the king inquired.

Falento thought a moment. “Assuming the users were cautious, and not irresponsible, I see no reason why they wouldn’t be relatively safe. In some cases, supervision might be advised.”

“Then it would be best if we had to jointly approve of anyone wishing access to a stone,” the king mused, “Director Koralet, see to it that Falento has access to his choice of stones.”

“Immediately, Sire,” Koralet agreed. “His input has been invaluable.”

“I think we should also send a special envoy south to Palendar, with a few of the stones,” Dantoryn added. “Deposits of the gem might exist in the Klerans. If someone came across a loose outcropping of landia without knowing what it was, it could be dangerous. This contact would also let us to acquire assistance or advice from the members of the Wizard’s Council.

“And, Falento, make use of your landia stone to map out other deposits. I look forward to your next report.”

3: Valias

The early morning air was alive with the ring of cold steel as the combatants fought back and forth across the palace courtyard, lit by the angled rays of the rising sun. Valias wanted to give his brother, King Palron, a good workout, but he felt distracted.

“Come now, brother, is this the best you can do?” the King of Palendar teased. “Six times now you had me, and each time you let the moment pass. I fear that your mind is not on the practice.”

Valias smiled a little as they continued to fence back and forth with the special blunted blades. “I guess you’re right, dear brother,” he admitted. “My mind isn’t exactly at ease over Darios and his sorcery.”

Palron nodded with a grunt as Valias, in a preoccupied manner, parried three attacking strokes, touching the king twice each time in the chest or abdomen. Great control was required for, while the blades were dulled, being poked by three feet of steel could still be painful.

“Not all of your abilities have been dulled by your lack of concentration,” Palron declared with a gasp, lowering his sword as though to take a rest.

Valias just smiled and shrugged. “Reflex,” he commented, relaxing his shoulders, lowering his blade.

The king suddenly swung a two-handed blow, knocking Valias’s sword several feet away, then came back with a back sweep that, with a sharp blade and a bit more lean to the blow, could have sliced into the warlord’s abdomen. The blade cut empty air.

Valias skipped forward, just past Palron’s forearm.

A two-finger stab into the king's wrist numbed the hand, causing Palron's sword to drop. Another step took Valias behind the him, rigid fingers striking the base of the skull, then two stabs to the ribs.

Palron staggered, his eyes slipping out of focus, then gasped for breath. He only got one painful gasp before Valias's fingers closed, pincer-like, on his windpipe. The warlord pulled his brother backward from behind, seating him upon the cobblestones of the courtyard.

As the king fought for breath, he scowled, then began a coughing chuckle. "That'll teach me to try to trick you!" he conceded, rubbing his head behind his right ear. "I wish someone had timed that. Damn, you're fast!"

"Your fault, Palron," Valias pointed out. "When you get sneaky, my reflexes take over." Stepping behind the king, he counted down from the most prominent vertebra at the base of his neck, then performed a firm palm strike between two vertebrae. The mild blow triggered a motor nerve pulse that eased the king's breathing discomfort. "Give it a moment," he advised. "I know the snake strike to the base of your skull left you dizzy."

"And what do your instincts tell you about Darios?" Palron asked, clearly eager to change the subject.

Valias let out a deep breath, thinking a moment before looking the king right in the eyes.

"Trouble," he said. "His actions speak for themselves. He challenged Taronlas's authority over the Order, and more or less promised that he would have his way, regardless of what the Order decided."

He paused, his brows furrowing. "I don't know what to expect from him, but we should definitely expect something. Who knows what his sorcery is capable of? Even Taronlas isn't sure. He might use his powers to attack us from within, or he might conjure up an army to send upon us. My primary hope is that

he broods over it a while before making a move. The longer he takes, the more chance we have of being prepared, perhaps even finding out what he's planning."

Palron nodded. "I've already sent word to Lenost, Grenat, and Molanta to warn them, and the wizards have contacted the Foresters of Elyndia, and the Stone People of Andaria."

Valias smiled a little. "At least Grenat and Lenost aren't at war."

"The ambassadors of both countries still grumble whenever your name is mentioned," Palron commented. "They also admit that Darios was playing them against each other. He gave each kingdom the impression that he was doing it solely for them. However he managed the alteration of the land, it must have been almost effortless for him. One moment he'd be in Grenat, making them feel grateful. Then, when they thought he was off in the marsh, working his magic, he'd be in Lenost, working the same game on them. You know, Darios displayed a complete lack of surprise when they threatened war. It was as if he'd been experimenting to get that very result. How would that benefit him?"

Valias had no answer. The idea troubled him. It hinted that the scene in the Wizards' Council might have resulted from a much deeper, more formulated plan than the angry reactions of a spited and banished sorcerer. He continued to ponder, as servants came with towels and jugs of cold water for the two perspiring men, and collected their practice swords before leaving. The silence continued as Palron beckoned for him to follow him through the large double door, into the hallway leading to the Great Hall.

King Palron dropped casually into his throne, flopping a leg over the arm in a relaxed, unregal fashion. Valias settled similarly into the queen's empty throne, next to the king's.

“How are relations between the north kingdoms now?” Valias asked him, pouring more cold water into Palron’s tankard.

Palron smirked and shook his head.

“They’ve made up as though nothing ever happened,” he commented.

The warlord scratched his short beard. “Once they had a clear picture of Darios running back and forth, working his confidence game, I think the commanders felt like fools. Grisholm was the first to actually laugh and admit their folly. He’s a good man. Soon, both he and Demstole, Lenost’s commander, were bemoaning how they’d let a devious wizard take them to the brink of war.”

Looking perplexed, the king blurted, “I still don’t see why Darios did it. Why should he want a war?”

“I think he did it simply because he could.” Valias’s expression reflected a sense of worry. “You know how some spoiled brats will pull the wings off butterflies? It gives them nothing but a feeling of power over something harmless. I believe Darios just wanted to see if he could start a war and walk away unaffected by it – a warped sense of curiosity.”

“I think that you should have a lengthy discussion with Taronlas as soon as possible,” Palron said, still mopping his brow. “This situation may prove to be much more serious than we think.”

Valias let out a sigh. “I’m glad that I’m not the only one who thinks so. I sometimes think that half my men humour me as some old fool who’s afraid of a harmless wizard. Anyway, I’ve already arranged to meet with Lord Taronlas later this afternoon. It seems he’s just as troubled as we are. He has young Lord Shyntarlas constantly probing with his mind in the direction of Mount Trender, in hopes of sensing something.”

“Now there’s a wonder, that Lord Shyntarlas,” the king commented. “No wizard has ever risen so fast in the councils, based solely on his mind. Don’t mistake

me – I hear that his earthpower is also quite amazing, but what a mind!”

Valias nodded. “I know. I’m really just getting to know him since this Darios business started, but he’s wise far beyond his years. Taronlas keeps him close at hand and for good reason. I think he’s grooming him as his eventual successor.”

“Yes,” Palron agreed. “I’ve noticed that. Yet he’s as unpretentious and likeable as a novice warrior. Too bad none of Father’s power came to either of us. You were close though. I still say you should have stayed with the Order.”

Valias shrugged. “We play the hand we’re dealt, brother. I tried their studies. I can move things but that’s about it. Their science of matter is a foreign language to me. No, brother, I’m a warrior, not a wizard, even if father was too stubborn to change my name.”

“Excuse me, Your Majesty, I hope I’m not intruding.” The two men looked up to find a very attractive young woman standing in the doorway.

“Ah, Lady Shaelene,” Palron greeted, arising from the dais.

As Valias’s eyes met those of the beautiful brunette, a warm smile passed between them.

“And how is your father?” the king continued. “The Baron of Shirdon hasn’t been to court since his injury. I do hope he is well.”

Shaelene made a slight curtsy to King Palron before taking Valias’s arm in an affectionate manner. “Father is well enough, Majesty,” she replied. “His rheumatism makes his injury worse, keeping him from getting out as much as he would like. His heart, I fear, will never be strong again. Mother calls it a mixed blessing. At first she was glad that it ended his hunting for wine kegs at Palendar Place, but now, with his grouchiness as a constant companion, she’s not so sure. I fear he doesn’t take his lameness well, and misses his

carousing.”

Valias had to laugh at that. “By thunder,” he chuckled, “when I first set eyes on this fair, young lass, I was but a lieutenant in the Guards. I had the honour of escorting her father home.”

“Prince Valias uses the word *escort* where another might find the word *carry* a more accurate description,” Shaelene commented with a smile. “But Father pays for those days now with the injuries to his leg and back from that silly riding stunt he tried while in his cups – that and the terrible heart pains that worry us so.”

Palron looked sympathetic. “Well, I must leave you two,” he said. “I have a council meeting with Taronlas and the barons in an hour, as well as several other matters to attend to. I’m sure that you two don’t need a chaperone. Valias, I must thank you again for the exercise. It’s about the only sport I have time for these days.”

Valias nodded, getting to his feet.

“Your Majesty,” Shaelene saluted with a curtsy as the king was about to leave.

“I’m afraid that I have little more than an hour, myself,” Valias admitted once they were alone. “I have to meet with the Captain of the King’s Guard first, then find time to get cleaned up. I promised to meet with Lord Taronlas right after his council meeting.”

“So,” Shaelene pretended to complain as she and Valias walked along the corridors, “And what is the big secret that makes you and that dusty old wizard as thick as thieves these days? Do you mean to tell me that you prefer his company to mine?” As she teased him, she snuggled closer against his arm. “Shall I always be an old maid while the Warlord of Palendar consorts with wizards and kings?”

“That’s nonsense and you know it,” he chided her.

Stooping, he gave her a brief kiss, then put his arm about her shoulders. She leaned in closer as they ascended the steps that led to the east wing where his chambers were situated. "I do have serious matters to deal with at the moment. Things are not quite as peaceful as many would like to believe."

"You mean Lord Darios?" she replied, anxiety in her voice. "Is everyone still upset just because the old wizard talks to ghosts? Why, the poor dear is nearly one hundred fifty-two years old. One would expect him to have a few eccentric habits at almost twice the age of a normal mortal. I was hoping that, in a few weeks, all of this would be forgotten. When I think of that lovely child of theirs – by the Earth Mother, Malista is a little angel. It's incredible that the father of such a darling is the monster that has all of Palendar trembling with fear."

"You're right about the child," Valias conceded. "She's more the product of her mother than her father. One would almost think that Nalesha is an avatar of the Earth Mother herself."

"Darios is an enigma," Shaelene said. "He saved my father's life, helping to repair the terrible damage from when that horse fell on him. Yet you say he tried to start a war in the north."

Valias nodded.

By now they had reached the doors to Valias's chambers. As they entered, a servant announced that the warlord's bath was being prepared and that a change of clothing had been set out. With a sigh, Valias collapsed into a chair near the window.

"You mustn't try to take all this on yourself," Shaelene whispered. She massaged the muscles of his shoulders and neck. "You need to relax. You have officers to delegate to, and there are the wizards. Yet, here you are, getting yourself all tensed up, as if you're the only one who can fix things."

Her voice was soothing and he focused on it, letting

his mind relax.

“At least you seem to be able to put worries behind you easily,” he observed. “Just a week ago you were almost frantic about your father’s persistent heart pains after his injuries. Now you seem more at ease with that. Is he really better, or are you just used to it?”

Valias sensed Shaelene tense, then force herself to relax.

“I guess it’s a little of both,” she answered, her tone either uncertain or uneasy. “He’s had treatment from wizards, and it has helped. But I fear for him, Valias. He knows he might die. You can see it in his eyes. I suppose that Mother and I are trying to hope for the best. We do what we can to cope with the situation.”

He reached up with his hand to where hers still rested on his shoulder. He held her tiny hand in his, caressing it with his thumb, before drawing it to his lips. “That’s a good philosophy,” he said. “I try to hope for the best, even as I prepare for the worst.”

They were interrupted by knock at the door.

“Come,” Valias called.

As the door was thrown open, a muscular warrior wearing a captain’s circlet and King’s Guard tunic entered.

“I’m sorry,” Chadrell blurted, “but we’ve had an incident in the Library of the Order. Someone’s broken in and stolen a book of sorcery!”

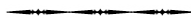
Grabbing his sword, Valias gave Shaelene a quick kiss.

“Sorry, Love,” he said. “Duty calls.”

Shaelene sighed. “‘Fall in love with a prince’, my mother said, ‘and your life will be a fairy tale’. So much for motherly advice!”

Valias laughed. “Dine with me this evening, and I’ll try to make it up to you,” he promised.

She hugged him tight. “Until then,” she whispered.



“Okay, fill me in,” Valias ordered as he and Chadrell headed for the library tower.

“The sentry at the Library of the Order just raised the alarm. On the surface, it’s nothing more than the theft of a book. It would seem like nothing, were it not for the manner of the theft. Brandon’s a good man – you took note of him the other day in a training session. He claims a cloud of smoke materialized before him and blasted him into the wall. I’ve initiated an investigation, headed by Lieutenant Dorell, and aided by Lord Shyntarlas, their young genius.”

“Darios!” Valias blurted. “And the book?”

“It’s essentially a book of sorcery, written hundreds of years ago, by some wizard in Kalajhan. Why they even had a book on sorcery is beyond me. Anyway, Shyntarlas seems to think it’s very serious.”

“Is there any other evidence? What did the sentry inside see?”

Chadrell shook his head. “We’re not sure how reliable it is. He claims a mouse turned into a dark cloud, then blasted him with power. The cloud then became a shadow, and stole the book. Lord Shyntarlas is with him now, trying to separate fact from delusion.”

Valias was troubled. “Let’s hope Taronlas has an update when I meet with him.”

When Valias knocked on the door to Lord Taronlas’s chamber, it opened, apparently of its own accord.

“Wizards,” the warlord muttered to himself.

“Come on in, Valias,” Taronlas invited. “There’s coffee and some cake there on the table. But I’m sure you want to get right to the point.”

Valias nodded. “I just came from the library. I examined the site myself. The background residue of the use of earthpower is strong. I looked for evidence of a renegade vad-Taelen – scars on the tower from

climbing claws – this had to be a wizard, meaning Darios. Shyntarlas was there, and he confirmed the sentries' stories. He even pulled some clear images from Brandon's mind of the shadow morphing into a large eagle and flying out the window. I found traces of feather on the edge of where he smashed through the glass. No bird I know would willingly try to burst through a glass window."

"He was after a small, leather-bound book by a Lord Fanorlas, quite an ancient text," Taronlas explained. "It was originally a set of scrolls, but Fanorlas transcribed it, and bound it as a book. Tarnelas brought it from Kalajhan. He used it as a sort of reference for identifying those who might be experimenting with sorcery. Fanorlas's intention was a document to warn of signs of the misuse of the dark art, but for someone wanting to dabble in the forbidden powers, it might make a fair textbook."

"You think Darios stole it?"

Taronlas nodded. "From what both sentries can relate, it was Darios, using his ability to transform. Shyntarlas insists he feels traces of Darios in the earthpower residue. The second warrior reported in some detail. He has a strong mind. Others would have been rendered senseless. Shyntarlas has confirmed that the man's description is reliable. Darios came under the door as a mouse, expanded into a cloud, blasted the warrior, then took on just enough substance to steal the book. He left as a large bird, probably an eagle."

Valias then reiterated some of his conversation with Palron, including the speculation that Darios might have tried to manipulate a war between Grenat and Lenost.

"What you're suggesting hints at a somewhat darker situation than previously anticipated," Taronlas commented. "Until now, it might never have occurred to me to suspect Darios's motives in locating those sections of arable land where he did, exactly where the

border between the two kingdoms is the most vague. But, now that you point it out, it would have been more surprising if they hadn't disputed the ownership. Then again, we might be using our shock of his involvement with sorcery as an excuse to assume that the effect of his actions was in fact the motivation."

Valias shook his head. "While the Grenatians thought he was working the swamp, he was selling the same confidence ploy to Lenost. No, Taronlas, I think Darios is evil. We have always associated sorcery with evil..."

"And for good reason," Taronlas interrupted. "History has shown too many times that, while motives may be pure and honourable, dealing with spirits has a way of altering a wizard more to their purposes than his own. Darios may have started out with the good of Calebra in mind but, after his last display, I have no doubt that his mind has changed. There is an evil in him that was not there before. So, while he believes his ideas to be for good, the many voices that he has invited into his head must be urging him that his *good* must be done, even if we are *too foolish* to recognize what is best for us."

Valias frowned. "Darios has always had a cold, unfeeling air about him. He seems to see the world as his private stage to perform upon."

Taronlas raised his eyebrows a little as he nodded. "Sometimes, in council, he would address the Order, and his manner was as if he were looking at himself in a mirror. Shyntarlas thinks there may have been some darkness in his mind which made him vulnerable to the entities he invited in via his sorcery. Shyntarlas probed his mind that day in council and was shaken to the very core by what he found. He has a way of reading a man, sometimes without him even knowing it. Many wizards have this gift, but none to the degree that Shyntarlas has."

"Shaelene fears him," Valias said after a moment.

“She tries to hide it, focusing on how he helped her father, and how sweet the child Malista is, but the fear is there. It’s in her eyes. She’s been a regular babysitter for the child. I guess she’s known Lady Nalesha for a few years.”

Taronlas smiled. “Nalesha spent some time studying the plants and animals in Shirdon, Salber’s district there in the mountains to the south. I imagine that’s how she met Lady Shaelene. I suppose Shaelene has some unique insights into the man but Darios has been too reclusive for any of us to really know him. It’s that very reclusiveness, since he started to create Tol Keroth at Mount Trendar years ago, that kept him from being elected Overlord of the Order.”

The wizard’s bushy eyebrows furrowed closer together, his expression becoming more troubled. “Were it not for the Spring Trade Fair and the expected arrival of the Aralyntae with these new landia crystals of theirs, I’d be tempted to pay an unannounced visit to Tol Keroth. It would certainly satisfy a few worries, and eliminate the need for speculating.”

“How much do you know of these new magic stones?” Valias asked. “I hear people talking about them, but I rarely put credence in rumour.”

“I have a small stone sent to me by their Director of Crystal Master Laboratory, a fellow called Koralet,” Taronlas replied, “and I must admit, it is incredible. I can see that it would give a mortal the powers of a wizard. It lets me focus my thoughts and powers in areas where I had extreme difficulty before. I wouldn’t be surprised if it could be used as a temporary aid for novices in training for the Order, to help them focus their powers until their abilities are more developed. It might speed up the learning process and remove some of the frustrations. I can even transmit my thoughts to Koralet, relaying messages to King Dantoryn for King Palron.

“I’m determined to make a secret visit to Darios’s

fortress at Mount Trendar. Spying on the sorcerer's activities might determine just how much of their worrying was justified. In the meantime, we have the four-day Spring Trade Fair. It's my best chance to study these new landia gems."

Valias smirked. "Have fun with your magic stones. I have to oversee the security plans being set up by Captain Chadrell and one of the captains of the regulars. Frankly, I'd rather go to Tol Keroth, but Palron insists I'm needed here. I'm going to increase security patrols about the palace. Now the guards have to be extra suspicious of rats and large raptors. I'm worried, Taronlas."

The wizard nodded. "So am I."