

*The Jewel  
of Andar*



# **The Jewel of Andar**

**By O. H. Reads**

Copyright 2016

## ***Contents***

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

## Chapter 1

They made one last survey of the area with their eyes, checking each dark area and shadow carefully. They could not be caught in the open. Then they closed their eyes. They cast first one spell, then another, then a third, each one more powerful than the one before it, each carefully designed to check the area thoroughly for any sign of magic, making sure the surrounding area was not under watch of any kind. When each spell came back with nothing, indicating there was no magic of any kind present, they still hesitated. To be caught out here, now, was certain death.

At a sign, they moved. There were four of them, each standing about four feet high and dressed in brown hooded robes. They ran quickly, beyond physical ability, to the body that had lain in the open for two days now. When alive the man had stood almost twice their height. He was a bit shorter now -- without his head. Even with their spells the weight of the death on him made him heavy and they moved much slower with the body back into the wood. They traveled without saying a word for several hours. At last they laid the body next to a large tree and began digging next to the purple trunk that was almost black in the moonless sky. By the time the body was buried the light of the twinkling stars was beginning to dim in the light of the small twin suns. The four moved quickly and silently deeper into the forest. At a rocky hill they paused, looked around them, then vanished into the rock.

The Skellians were of the lower races of Andar. They lived underground in the forests, hills, and mountains of the world of Andar, rarely venturing out during the day and almost never interacting with any of the world's other inhabitants. They lived simply, wearing only what they needed, taking no more than necessary so that their presence and location remained as hidden as possible. They continued practicing their sorcery away from the eyes of any and all, believing and hoping that even as they sat on the edge of extinction a day would come when they would find a way to reclaim their place as the leading race on Andar.

It had not always been so. What few books they still had told of different days in the world of Andar. In the time long ago, the Skellians ruled Andar. They had been a tall, proud race, and not entirely benevolent. Their atrocities were few, and even in the light of these, they were mostly given deference by the other races because of their powers.

Then had come the first war. The leader of the rebellion was of the race of the dar-Skellians, a lower order of the Skellians. He had called himself Kor-Etath, Bringer of Light, and preached an end to the rule of Skellians. He promised a new world, more fair to all the races of Andar. He fought with mace, spear, sword, arrows, and a raging internal fire. Tired of the rule of the Skellians, the other races had joined him and after several years of continual and bloody fighting had at last overthrown the Skellians.

Kor-Etath sat on the throne at the palace in Jankor for only four years before the Skellians rose up once more. They had brought to their world and been led by another, an outworlder. His sword was no less keen than that of Kor-Etath's, and backed by the sorcery of the Skellians the second war was a brief one. In less than a year's time Kor-Etath had been overthrown and went into hiding. No amount of searching or sorcery had divulged his whereabouts. Many were the Skellians who believed, had hoped, he was dead.

While the outworlder sat with the Skellians, Kor-Etath had remained hidden. The Skellians ruled for over a hundred years again. Yet this time they were cruel rulers. A race imbued with

magic full of individuals that could live for over a thousand years, the Skellians refused to forget that it was the other races of Andar that had helped end their first rule. Their power and thirst for revenge created a world where no race was safe from their wrath.

When the outworlder at last died, his life having been unnaturally extended through magic, Kor-Etath reappeared. The races of Andar, who were now afraid and angry at the Skellians, were led once more by their charismatic leader, who fought even harsher than before. The Skellians had been driven out. The races of Andar did not stop there this time. This time the Skellians were pursued, the lessons of the past not forgotten in the century that had passed. The Skellians were hunted and killed wherever they could be found. For generations they were sought and massacred until the once proud, ruling race of Andar looked little like their former selves and took to living underground or in other inaccessible places. The third war had ended over a thousand years ago.

Now, the four eldest of the forest Skellians, who still waged their small battle against Kor-Etath, gathered in their cave.

"It is no use," Dar-Ven said as he looked somberly into the dark liquid in the clay cup before him. "Kor-Etath grows stronger with each passing turn of our world. There is none that can stand against him."

"I must agree," said Sur-Lal, Dar-Ven's mate. "This last one was the strongest of all we have sought, yet he could not stand against Kor-Etath when the sorcery was used. Our time on this world will soon end. It will not be long before Kor-Etath begins his last battle against us."

There was silence around the table. The four figures sat looking at each other with their large eyes, almost all of which was pupil. They fingered their cups and bowls, each one contemplating the fate of their race. It was Ger-Koth, youngest of the four, who finally spoke.

"We must try again," he said.

"I will not!" Dar-Ven said loudly. "It is murder!"

"Nor will I," Sur-Lal echoed. "Come what may, we cannot bring another outworlder here to die against Kor-Etath."

"We must try," Ger-Koth insisted. "It is the only way our race will survive. If we do not continue to fight and seek a way to overcome him, we will all find ourselves buried in time."

"That I understand," Dar-Ven said firmly. "And I do not doubt the truth of what you say. Yet this is the ninth outworlder we have buried there. That is nine lives that I have taken. I have read our books and I know that in times past our race was at times as cruel and heartless as Kor-Etath has become. But I am not made of the same material. I cannot-"

"*Puntuk!*" spat out Mer-Vetang. "You are not made of the same material," she scoffed. "Your words hurt my ears."

A deathly silence settled over the four and hung heavy in the cave for several minutes. Mer-Vetang was the oldest member and most powerful of the Skellians in this region of Andar and

it was rare that she spoke. It was more rare for her to be harsh in her language, even to those she despised. For those reasons her words stung Dar-Ven.

"I am sorry, Revered Mother," Dar-Ven said quietly without meeting her eyes. "I did not mean to offend."

"Always it is this way with you, Dar-Ven. A single defeat and you cover yourself with high words to escape action. Did you not voice similar doubts before this last one? And did we not progress more than before? Did you not say that we could not even hope to harm Kor-Etath?"

"It has been many," Sur-Lal spoke up in a respectful tone in support of her mate. "We have lain nine to rest under the Tree of Life."

"Nine outworlders," Mer-Vetang said less harshly. "And how many of our own? My mate lies beneath that tree, as does my eldest and only son. Your father lies there as well. Would you see your own offspring there as well, Sur-Lal? Your friends? I will not give up and wait for the day when Kor-Etath's sword finds us shivering beneath the ground. Is it your wish to have your children watch as we are cut down one by one by Kor-Etath? Do you want one of your children to be the last Skellian on Andar long enough to know that Kor-Etath will slay the last as surely as he did the first? I do not. I am not made of that material." She cast a withering look at Dar-Ven. "For the first time Kor-Etath needed to use his skills beyond the sword to stay alive. We are close. No longer can he sit on the throne in Jankor with ease and drink from the well of our fear. It is his time, not ours, that is drawing to a close. Perhaps the next one, or the one after that, will see the end of his reign and the return of ours on Andar. Then, Dar-Ven, we will see of what material we are all made."

There was another long minute of silence. Yet Mer-Vetang's words were not empty. A new look was on the faces of Dar-Ven and Sur-Lal. A look of renewed hope. A chance at a life beyond fear and dark dwellings.

"Where shall we point the doorway?" asked Sur-Lal.

"The same world," Mer-Vetang answered.

"But we need strength," Ger-Koth interjected.

"The last one was strong," Mer-Vetang replied, "but strength is not all. Of greater strength than this last one were many of the others. Strength of the soul is what we must find. Open the doorway. Bring back one who will raise the Skellians back to our rightful place on Andar."

\* \* \* \* \*

The creature moved silently through the darkened room. His appearance suggested a slow, clumsy gait, yet he moved with a speed and surety that belied that. His spindly legs and feet with their three pointed toes in front and one in back, reminiscent of the birds from which his race had descended, seemed incapable of holding up the apparent weight they bore. Where

the wings should have been, two short arms now hung, ending in hands that mirrored the feet. What had been feathers on the round body thousands of generations before were now short gray hairs. The head, like the feet, still retained almost all of the birdlike form, except for the long bill that had flattened and was several inches wide. At the stairway to the throne the creature, Ellrun by name, slowly sank to his knees with his head bowed and waited.

Above him on the throne sat Kor-Etath. He could have been mistaken for a tall, very handsome human. His black hair that hung low over his olive-skinned complexion had made him very desirable among his own kind for his whole life. Even Skellians had found his appearance attractive. The lone difference between Kor-Etath and the Skellians, indeed the lone difference between all Skellians and dar-Skellians, was his eyes. They were white, with no pupil nor iris. As had been true of all dar-Skellians since they had split from their mother race, physical sight had been traded for the sight brought about by sorcery embedded in the life force of all dar-Skellians. He could "see" equally well in the dark or blinding light, and could see both before and behind him at the same time for a distance of a hundred feet, even through solid objects. He had seen his advisor coming long before Ellrun had entered the great throne room.

"Rise, Ellrun," spoke Kor-Etath, and his voice echoed in the darkness, bouncing off the walls with tremendous power even though his speech had been barely above a whisper.

The birdman stood up. He spoke in a voice that was as much words as quiet squawking.

"Another doorway has been opened. The Skellians seek another champion to challenge your reign."

"Why do you tremble when you say this?" Kor-Etath asked, turning his eyes to look down on Ellrun. "Do you doubt what you have witnessed for a thousand years?"

"I do not doubt you, Bringer of Light, but I fear. For the first time in a thousand years the Skellians brought forth a challenger that wounded you," and he glanced at Kor-Etath's right arm where, under the sleeve, a long gash was healing.

"That wound was more my carelessness than the prowess of their champion. Even so, even if the last challenger had threatened me in some way, there was no danger once I summoned the Korisheray. Let them bring me another challenger." He leaned back in the throne and closed his eyes. "I must show them that this wound was but chance, and that the best and strongest that they can bring are no match for me. It will be my last enjoyment before I begin the last campaign and wipe the Skellians from the face of Andar."

Ellrun bowed low. And yet, beneath it all, he still trembled. Was not his fate now tied to that of Kor-Etath's?

## Chapter 2

Robert Bacon was sitting at his computer in his apartment. He was searching Amazon for a specific book when the computer had suddenly frozen. Nothing had happened on his monitor for over 30 seconds now. He had tapped the escape button on his keyboard, but nothing had happened. He had tried to reboot, and still nothing. He had even tried a hard reset to no avail. He was on the verge of yanking out the power cord when the lights in the apartment began to flicker. He figured there was a power spike and he rushed outside the apartment to the fuse box. The computer had cost him over \$1500 and was only two weeks old, and he had no desire to see it ruined. But he hadn't taken two steps outside his door when he stopped. There, on the walkway in front of him, was a glowing silver...something. It was about the size of a baseball, but instead of round it was some sort of polyhedron with multiple sides. As he looked at it, he noticed a high-pitched sound coming from it and growing louder. At the same time, the glow increased in brightness. A thought went through his mind that it was some sort of bomb, but he had never seen or heard of anything like it and doubted that any military on earth had come up with such a device. It was too tidy, too clean, and too small. And if a military had developed it, why would they waste it on his apartment? He was nowhere near a military base.

As the sound grew louder, Robert gingerly nudged the thing with his foot. Immediately the glow died down and the sound went away. He stood there watching it for several moments. Then it began to glow again and the noise started up once more. Another nudge brought the same result and Robert wasn't sure if he'd found the world's most annoying toy or a truly sophisticated device. He kicked and nudged the thing back into his apartment. By the time he did, both the glow and noise were gone, and Robert figured he had found some sort of high-tech proof of concept that someone had dropped. He figured in addition to the sound and glow, it generated some sort of electric current, which was why his computer had frozen and the lights had flickered.

Robert reached down and carefully picked it up. Except for the edges on the twenty-some faces, the object was completely smooth and polished like a mirror. Then he noticed the four black sides. He thought for a moment that whatever light was being emitted was probably being blocked. So he touched one with an index finger to try to scrape off whatever the black was, and a tone was emitted. He pushed it again, intentionally, and got the same tone. He pushed the others, one at a time, and each one emitted a different tone. The sounds were pleasant and seemed to stay in the air long after they were done.

Robert was sure that he had found a most ingenious child's pacifier that someone was developing in secret. The thought made him want to play with it a little more before reporting it to building security. He touched the squares again and tried to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," only to find that the notes weren't there. Then he tried chorded notes, pressing two and three buttons at a time. The chorded tones were even more beautiful than the single notes, like some sort of wonderful synthesizer. Then he touched all four squares at once. There was a blinding flash from the object, a high-pitched noise that hurt his ears, and then everything went black.

When Robert opened his eyes, he was on his back in complete darkness. There was a slight ringing in his ears and he felt dizzy and disoriented. He had almost gotten drunk once, and the feeling he had now was worse than that. His head wasn't light, it was heavy, and the thought of trying to move made his whole body feel like lead. He stayed on his back for a



minute, trying to remember what had happened. The first thought was that he had been knocked out by the sound and the power had gone out. But when he moved his hands he found he wasn't on either carpet or tile, the type of floor in his apartment. Beneath him was dirt.

As his eyes adjusted he found that he was inside what must be some sort of cave. Panicked, Robert rose unsteadily to his feet...and banged his head against the low ceiling of the cave. He half-fell, half-sat back down on the dirt and put a hand on his head. Thankfully he didn't feel any blood, but he was almost certain he'd given himself a mild concussion. He waited for the pain to subside. Any thought that this had been a concussion-induced hallucination was gone now. Something had happened and he was no longer at home.

As he sat there holding his head and blinking the tears of pain from his eyes, Robert reflected on what he last remembered. Wild ideas notwithstanding, he could come to no other conclusion than that he had somehow been set up. The thing, whatever it had been, had knocked him out, and then someone had come in and kidnapped him, leaving him here. It was the only conclusion that made sense. But who would do that? Sure, he had forwarded a few emails to some of his friends about government conspiracy theories, more for laughs than anything else, but it's not like he had any proof or was on speaking tours. Still, here he was in a dark cave.

"Hello, Outworlder."

Robert spun around at the words, nearly standing up and braining himself again. The words had been English, but the speaker sounded like he was gargling rocks. Almost like a bird with a sore throat. In the dark he couldn't make out exactly who was there, but he could see a large shape in front of him.

"Who are you?" Robert demanded. "Where am I?"

"I am Vornur. You are on Andar."

"Andar? Where is that?"

"Talk more later. When it is light. Eat."

There was a shuffling, sliding sound in front of him and a sort of plate was pushed toward Robert. He fingered it, then felt the items on it. They could have been fruit. Several things, sort of fuzzy like peaches.

"What is this?" Robert asked.

"Good food," the shape said. "Eat now."

"Is this some sort of trick? Who are you?"

"Eat," the person repeated.

"Not until I get some answers."

The person said no more. Robert tried to get more words out of whoever it was, but they simply sat there, saying nothing. Then he recognized that he actually was hungry. He looked back at the plate and the things on it, which were little more than blobs to his eyes in the darkness. He picked one up and felt it. It seemed like it was okay, and certainly smelled ripe. He took a cautious bite. It was sweet and juicy. Like a peach, but not. He ate it, then another, then a third. Underneath he found something that felt and tasted like bread, which he also ate. Vornur, whoever he was, pushed something toward him that he made out as a cup. The liquid inside was a juice, similar to the taste of the fruit he had eaten, but not as sweet and somewhat thick, almost like a thin yogurt.

After the food Robert felt better, but he was still confused. He could reach no other conclusion than that this Vornur was not there to harm him. What he was there for, however, was a total mystery. Maybe he was supposed to be the "good cop" and the "bad cop" was going to come in and begin the interrogation. This thought didn't make Robert feel any better. He tried to ask Vornur more questions, but still received no response. That he was still there was obvious because he could see his shape and hear him lightly breathing, but he remained silent.

"Okay," Robert finally admitted. "When it is light."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the other side of Andar, the oldest of the Pozerans awoke from her years-long sleep. Her immense, slug-like body slowly rippled as the muscles within it stretched. The stalks of her eyes extended and two large dots rose up the stalks to the top to look around. Around her, others of her kind, though none as long or wide, began to gather around her. Her body rippled for a few more minutes, then stopped. She rose up on her body, snake-like, until she stood far enough above all her kind so that she could be seen by those still emerging from the swamp and reeds.

"I must journey to the Skellians," she said, her thin mouth barely moving. "Their doom is at hand if they do not learn that which we know."

"The Skellians are not our allies," said a strong voice from within the gathering. "Nor were they the allies of Andar when they ruled. Their death will not be our loss."

"The time is late for all the races. We are all allies now. The death of any who would stand against Kor-Etath is a loss for all of us. We must all stand together if we do not wish to fall one by one, as we surely will if the Skellians fail. It is not to restore the Skellians to the throne in Jankor that we must help them. Though they have learned much since their cruelty ravaged our world, they have not learned all that they need to know to rule once more. Through their efforts it is possible that they have brought one to our world who would rule justly. This outworlder cannot defeat Kor-Etath without knowledge that we possess."

A large Pozeran in the front slid forward.

"Or-Pozeran," it said, "First of Us All, the way to the Skellians is long and harsh. I pray thee, let another go in your stead. Impart to that one that which must be known while you remain here."

"My child," she said gently, looking down at the other Pozeran, "I go because the Pozerans roamed Andar before any other race. And I go because I am she from whom the Pozerans came to be. No other carries that authority and what it means on Andar. And no other carries what I know. No other must know it if I do not succeed, for the balance of Andar is at stake. Already has Kor-Etath learned of the Korisheray. Were he to know what I know now, all life on Andar will suffer and wilt under a reign that will last perhaps into eternity. That is why I go. It is this knowledge I must impart to the outworlder who has been summoned here by the Skellians. Knowledge that the Skellians themselves no longer remember that they know."

The smaller Pozeran slid back. Or-Pozeran lowered her body back down and slid to the edge of the swamp. Slowly, she began to feed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert was startled awake by a hand on his arm gently shaking him. He opened his eyes slowly, then opened them wide. A gigantic vulture was just inches from his face. He shook himself loose of the hand and backed away. That was when he saw that the 'hand' was more like a giant talon. And it was connected to the vulture-thing that was looking at him.

"I am Vornur," the thing spoke. "You are on Andar."

Robert scooted away from the thing until a cave wall stopped him. In the light coming into the small cave he could make out the features of the vulture-thing. It reminded him of a vulture in most respects, but the beak looked like something between a platypus and a toucan. He noticed the hair instead of feathers, then the legs and feet, and the arms and hands. The eyes of the thing looked at him.

"What in the world..."

"You are on Andar," the thing repeated. "I am Vornur."

Robert stared, unable to make sense of anything. Part of him wanted to get up and run, but most of him was scared stiff. Was it some sort of trick? His mind raced back over the events from the last day. There was the silver ball thing that made sounds, the bright light, the strange food, and now this thing that called itself Vornur and spoke to him in his own, although rough, language. If this was a government trick, they were being pretty damn elaborate.

"Where the hell am I?" Robert asked.

"You are on Andar," the thing said again.

"Where's Andar?"

"Many stars from your world."

Robert's mouth opened and then snapped shut. This had to be some sort of trick. Or was it?

"Many stars? You must be nuts, birdman. Are you telling me I'm on another planet?"

The thing just looked at him, its face expressionless. Robert shook his head.

"This is nucking futs," he thought out loud. Then he turned to the thing again. "I'm where?"

"You are on Andar."

"Andar. And Andar is many stars from Earth?"

The thing stared at him again. Robert took that as a yes.

"And you are who?"

"I am Vornur."

"Vornur. On Andar. Who am I?"

The thing cocked its head at him.

"I'm Robert," Robert said, mostly to himself. "And I'm on Andar talking to a birdman named Vornur."

"I am Vornur. I am Roduran."

The last word was barely decipherable for Robert.

"I'm in the freaking twilight zone," he muttered. "Where the hell am I and how did I get here?"

Vornur looked at Robert momentarily, then shook his head.

"No time," it said at last. "Come."

Vornur reached out and took hold of Robert by the arm. With more strength than Robert had expected of a bird, it lifted him to his feet and dragged him toward the cave entrance. Vornur, who was at least as tall as Robert, kept his head low. Robert did the same, the bump on his head from the previous night reminding him of what would happen if he did not.

They came out into light in a wooded clearing. Robert stopped and looked around. The trees were anything but normal. Many of the trunks were green, a few black, and others a deep purple. The leaves were mostly green, but purple and brown were also common. Just above the treetops in front of Robert he spied the rising sun. Or rather, both of them.

"Oh...my...god," he said slowly, realizing that he, indeed, might not be on Earth any longer.

Vornur gave him a moment to adjust to the light then shoved something in his hand. Robert looked down. It was a sword. He looked at Vornur. The Roduran had one too.

"We fight," Vornur stated simply.

"Huh?"

Vornur moved toward Robert with the sword upraised and swung at him. Robert ducked out of the way, dropped his sword, and made a dash for the forest. He hadn't taken more than ten steps when Vornur dropped down in front of him with his sword. Apparently, even without feathers, he could still fly.

"Forest dangerous," Vornur said. "You are not ready. You must fight."

Vornur handed Robert back his sword. It dawned on Robert that Vornur wasn't trying to harm him, but to teach him. Or at least that's what he hoped. He was going to teach him to fight with a sword. But for what purpose?

"No way," Robert said, dropping the sword.

"You must learn, or you will die."

It was hard for Robert to decide if it was a threat or a promise. There was almost no inflection at all in the Roduran's voice. Until he knew more, he figured it was best to go along with things. Just in case it was a threat. After all, now that the Roduran could stand straight, Robert saw that he was indeed almost a foot taller than Robert. And, of course, he was strong and could fly. All of those were good enough reasons for Robert for the moment.

After several hours of practice, with only a couple short breaks for food and drink, Vornur indicated they were done for the day. Robert was happy. He didn't consider himself a couch potato, but neither was he the type of guy who hit the gym seven days a week. Or even two. His arms, Vornur had made him use both his left and right hands, were sore, his back ached, and he had bruises on his arms and legs where Vornur had struck him with the flat side of his blade. Robert had learned quickly that Vornur was an expert swordsman. And for that he was grateful, though in pain.

Instead of heading back into the cave, Vornur sat Robert down just outside it while he went inside. He came out a moment later with a book.

"You must speak our language," Vornur said, handing him the book.

"Why? You speak mine okay."

Vornur said nothing, still holding the book out to Robert.

"Let me guess," Robert said resignedly, "learn or I will die, right?"

Vornur said nothing, but sat down next to Robert. He opened the book. Vornur pointed out the first symbol, and Robert's education into reading and speaking the language of Andar began. The language was both simple and complex. The letters, more akin to glyphs, represented sounds and ideas rather than letters. It made some words easy to identify and learn, while some concepts seemed to defy literal explanation. But as it was the only language Vornur knew fluently, and indeed the one language of Andar, Robert devoted

himself to learning it. He had no idea how long he would be here, and he needed to be able to communicate besides the most basic necessities.

Time passed and lost most of its meaning for Robert. He knew day and night and approximate time of day by the position of the twin suns of Andar, but there were no calendars or watches that Vornur had ever shown him. The clothes he had been wearing when he had first come to Andar had long ago worn out and been thrown away. He dressed as an Andaran in light pants and a belted tunic of dark brown. He had learned to tell the passage of time mostly through the change of seasons, and based on that he figured he had been on Andar for about a year, though whether it was longer or shorter than an Earth year he was unsure. He had asked Vornur about it once, but he had been somewhat evasive in his answer. Robert had learned that in some places, like the larger cities of Andar, calendars were indeed kept, but that neither Vornur nor the Skellians had maintained any for several centuries.

"A specific day," Vornur had told him, "has little meaning when one does not have children and making it to another sunrise is the highest priority."

Robert also began to understand Vornur more. Though the Roduran had no facial expressions and indeed seemed to lack anything but the most rudimentary emotions, there was something inside him that always seemed to Robert to extend beyond his actions. One afternoon, after finishing a sparring session, Robert broached the subject with Vornur as they sat with their backs to a tree.

"Tell me about yourself, Vornur. Are all Rodurans like you?"

Vornur stiffened just slightly. Robert made a mental note of it. Either Vornur did not like to talk about himself or there was something about Rodurans that he wanted to keep secret. Robert wasn't sure which one it was, but it must have been significant to make Vornur react at all.

"Rodurans are an old race. We once existed like simple animals, but over generations developed *nrtsg* – a brain that thinks," he clarified when Robert looked puzzled. "We kept our thoughts to ourselves, but as we flew we could see all that happened on Andar. We could see what races grew and flourished and which ones struggled and died. We saw that the loss of some races was bad when it meant that another race might become too dominant and change the planet forever. So we left our trees and came among the races. Rodurans became advisors to all the races of Andar. Their leaders spoke with us to decide what was best to do. We made the world speak one language. We strove to maintain balance between the races."

"Balance?" Robert interrupted. "That is different from peace."

Vornur paused and looked at Robert with his blank face.

"Balance is what is required, Outworlder. To what level should we have sought peace? Should we have raised up one race to rule all? Should we ourselves have killed all but the most simple animals? Do you not eat the animals that run in the forests without wishing you harm? Would they not want peace with you? Do not even the animals themselves, though they have all of Andar to live in, struggle among themselves for the best homes, the best

food, and the best mates? How could we seek peace when no such thing exists? We sought balance. And for thousands of years it was maintained."

"You achieved peace?" Robert asked, surprised.

"You must listen, Outworlder," Vornur admonished him.

Robert had learned to almost hate the word "Outworlder." The concept of it was simple, that he was not of Andar. The meaning, however, was more subtle and yet incredibly firm. He was not one of them. Even so he knew, after having stayed on Andar as long as he had, he was not what he had been before and would have a hard time going back to his home world and doing what he had done before.

"There was never peace as you would define it," Vornur continued. "There were still wars between the races. But while we served, no races went into darkness. Even so, there were races who did not desire such balance. Such has brought us to where we are now."

"And where is that? Is that why I am here? Am I to help you achieve balance once more?"

"My race did not summon you here. It is our belief that you can help achieve balance. If it can happen is not for me to decide. I only help."

"Who did summon me here, Vornur? Is that who decides?"

"Some decisions are made for you; others you make on your own."

Robert did not want to ask what those might be. That he was here and learning to fight meant that there was at least one decision that had already been made for him, that he was no longer on Earth. The other, if he was going to fight for whoever had summoned him, was yet to be made.

As Robert's third summer approached, meaning that he had been on Andar now for two years, he had become familiar with the written and spoken language of Andar. As a result, he had asked Vornur for as many books as he could get and had spent most of the winter nights reading by candlelight. He had learned much about Andar and the different races and species that called it home. Aside from Vornur, his interactions with any intelligent creature were nonexistent. On some occasions he had observed eyes watching him from behind trees and from within other caves as he had practiced. Vornur told him they were Skellians. But Robert had never met one. He also wondered if they were different from the Skellians described in the books who, from pictures and descriptions, looked almost identical to humans.

His training had become more intense. Vornur had taught him the sword, spear, bow and arrow, dagger, fighting by hand, and several other variations of weapons that Vornur said could be found on Andar. Robert had practiced dutifully and, over time, with purpose. What that exact purpose was he didn't know, but he had become proficient enough to beat Vornur at all of them -- except hand-to-hand. It wasn't the Roduran's speed, flight, or always surprising strength, but more that he found it hard to strike the one creature that had been everything to him for the past two years. As Robert had learned the language and could communicate almost fluently, he and Vornur had had long talks late into the night. Vornur had learned about him, though he knew a surprising amount about Earth already, and he had

learned more about Andar, its races, and even some about how Vornur thought. For that reason, hand-to-hand combat was like fighting a best friend for no reason, and Robert could never put his heart into it.

Vornur appeared to have no such conflict of interest. If Robert did not adequately fight back, Vornur would often beat Robert senseless. After Robert would wake later, the expressionless creature would simply state, "You must learn to fight any and all opponents into submission. If you cannot put aside loyalties and feelings to see an opponent as just an opponent, you will not survive. Understand that loyalties on Andar are not fixed."

It was after comments like that one that Robert had been the most perplexed by the Roduran. The words were obvious enough as a warning, but whether they were a warning to Robert of things current, things past, or things to come, he couldn't tell. Vornur would never say more, and his darned expressionless face always left Robert wondering.

One morning in midsummer Vornur woke Robert up a little earlier than usual. Robert woke up feeling uneasy. It wasn't the birdman's expression, of which there was nothing, just a feeling.

"You sense something," Vornur had stated. "It shows in your face. That too you must learn to put aside. Pain, fear, anger, discomfort, these will help your opponent."

"Do you see and know everything?" Robert asked, somewhat uncomfortable that he was so apparently transparent.

Vornur did not answer.

"Come, you must eat before the day begins. It is your first test."

Vornur turned to lead Robert out of the cave, but Robert reached out and grabbed him by the arm. Vornur turned to him.

"Where are the other Rodurans?" Robert asked. "I have been here for two years, but have only seen you, some animals, and the eyes of some Skellians. Where are the other Rodurans?"

There was a long moment of silence, which Robert had learned meant that he had asked a question that required more than a simple answer.

"When balance was lost," Vornur began softly, "many of our kind fled to areas that could not be reached. Others cast their lot with the races who sought power and the rule of Andar. They betrayed our race."

There was a long moment of silence.

"And you?" Robert finally asked.

"For many years I sat with my kind. We watched. Long ago we saw the races of Andar starting on a path that must be changed. That is when I came. Time is short on Andar. It is almost too late."

"Too late for what?"



"It is like a river that leads to the sea. If you go too far, you are swept away. It is almost too late. It may already be too late."

Robert followed Vornur out of the cave. It was what the Roduran had not said that made him think most. If Vornur had come long ago, a phrase that was meant to convey a period of decades or perhaps even a hundred years, why had it taken so long for them to summon him?

As they sat in the open and ate breakfast, Vornur told him what was to happen today.

"Today is the day of The Contest. Many warriors from the races will gather to fight. One will win. You will fight."

"I thought I was here to help you restore balance."

"You have not proven yourself yet. In The Contest you will."

"What if I don't want to fight?"

"I have trained you as well as I can, Outworlder. There are those on Andar who have tolerated your presence only for the purpose of The Contest."

"The Skellians?"

"There are others."

"Kor-Etath, the ruler of Andar?"

Vornur waited a long time before answering.

"He will be taking an interest," he finally stated.

"But he won't be there."

"He will have many watching for him."

Robert fixed the Roduran with a long glance, then managed a small smile.

"Vornur, you always give me the impression that you are not telling me everything."

"It is as you say, Outworlder. I am here for a purpose, and I must do that. In another time, another place, things would be different between us."

"I would like to get to that place and time, Vornur. You have been a good mentor and friend to me even under the watch of whoever has summoned you. I would like to know you outside of that."

"If the time comes, you will have that. If that step to balance can be taken, I will take it with you."

After finishing breakfast, Vornur led Robert through the clearing and into the forest. Vornur's pace was brisk, but Robert had grown used to it. In the time Robert had been on Andar, he had now been in the forest numerous times with Vornur, both for hunting and for learning some of the plants and animals of Andar. After going for what Robert guessed was about two miles, they turned and went in a direction he had never gone before. They walked perhaps another two miles before it became apparent that they were headed toward a small valley. They came to the edge and looked down. In the middle of the valley stood a stone amphitheater. On the one side were the stone bleachers, perhaps fifteen rows high and long enough to seat perhaps a hundred men on the topmost level. Opposite the bleachers was a large stone building, which Robert guessed was the one where the fighters would wait their turn to fight. In between the building and the bleachers was the open space for fighting. There were no walls around the space; it was simply an open, mostly round area with small clumps of grass scattered about. He felt like he was going to gladiator games. Then he felt a knot in his stomach as it dawned on him that he would be the gladiator.

"There are perhaps one or two races you may fight for which I could not adequately prepare you," Vornur said without looking at him. "When one has great speed, it is usually at the cost of great strength. Where your sight fails you, you have many other senses. I can say no more."

Robert did not take Vornur at his word. He had learned in two years that the difference between unable to say more and unwilling to say more was a personal choice for Vornur.

"Then I will ask only one question," Robert said. "Am I to fight to the death? Will I have to kill?"

Vornur faced Robert without answering. His face showed no expression as, Robert assumed, he ordered his thoughts.

"For some, life is worse than death. Remember that loyalties on Andar are not fixed, but there are races for which a debt is never fully repaid."

Robert nodded. Some he would have to kill, and some, if he did not kill them when it was obvious that he could have, might bind themselves to him. Of course, he thought to himself with a bit of sarcasm, Vornur hadn't said which races. He hoped it would become clear.

Then another thought struck him. Loyalty. This was more than a test of strength. The Contest was as much political as it was physical. He was fighting to win The Contest, as well as fighting to win over the other races of Andar. If he won, they would support him...at least for a time.

They walked into the valley and for the first time Robert was able to look at some of the other intelligent races of Andar. Most of them he had read about and seen pictures of in the books Vornur had gotten for him. He recognized creatures that looked like shrimp, reptilian types, and even a couple other Rodurans. But the two races he most wanted to see he could not find in the mingling crowd.

"Will the Skellians be here?" he asked Vornur in a whisper.

"Before it begins, yes."

"And...any dar-Skellians?"

Robert wanted to meet one of these individuals. While the Skellians were now a small race, the dar-Skellians still looked human. A race, light years away, that resembled a human being was remarkable to him and without meeting them he already felt a kinship to them.

"The Skellians were once as they, and even more as you," Vornur stated for an answer.

Robert had to chuckle to himself. Vornur had grown to know him quite well too.

The two walked to the stone building and entered. To Robert's surprise there were only about a dozen other combatants in the building.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"You wish to fight more?"

Robert stared at the Roduran in shock.

"You mean I am to fight all of these?"

"It is your test," Vornur replied simply. "One at a time."

His stint as a gladiator was feeling less comfortable.

Robert looked about him at his opponents. He had a height and size advantage over almost all of them. The only two he did not were one that looked very much like a hairless gorilla and one that looked like a giant snail. The gorilla one, a Pantuen, bothered Robert the most. He didn't know if the creature was as strong as it appeared, but if it was, and if it was intelligent, he felt he was in serious trouble. Then his eye caught something that looked like a kite. He stared a moment longer and the thing folded its wings in to look more like a tall, white stick. A Veroneer.

"When you and your opponent step into the arena," Vornur began, "you will have the choice of weapon for any race larger than you. There are but two, and against only one will a weapon serve you well. For the smaller races, they will have choice. If they should choose no weapon, you may choose no more than a long dagger."

"That hardly seems fair against an unarmed opponent," Robert said.

Vornur nodded toward the shrimp-like creature. Robert noticed clearly that the thing was armed with two large pincers, each about the length of his arm.

"Most races are already able to protect themselves. In truth it is only the races such as yourself who need to make weapons."

Even looking at the pincers Robert felt it would be too much of an advantage to be armed against a creature who chose no weapon. Of course, those were his thoughts at this moment. In the arena, as he faced those pincers, he might feel differently.

Robert sat in the building for perhaps another hour before another Roduran came in and announced that The Contest was ready to begin. In all respects this one looked the same as Vornur, though it was slightly shorter. The two spoke but briefly, and when they did it was in a language of low clicks and whistles that was entirely undecipherable to Robert. Then the other Roduran left and Vornur approached Robert, nodding that it was time to begin.

Vornur led a somewhat nervous Robert out of the building and into the arena. He was surprised to see that all the bleachers were filled now with several thousand spectators. All the races were present in the bleachers that were also in the building. There was also one section of the bleachers, on the top left as Robert looked at them, that was covered in shadow. In this section Robert could make out the bodies of about eight or ten individuals. They were about the size of older children, and of the same shape and size of humans. Robert knew them to be the Skellians. There was a space around them that no other race entered. A similar space existed on the top right of the bleachers. But these individuals, both of them, were not covered in shadow. They were tall and straight, and looked otherwise like prime examples of humans -- dar-Skellians.

"Your attention must be on what is at hand," Vornur said softly. "No one will speak to you if you do not win today."

Robert turned away from the races in the bleachers and faced Vornur. He nodded.

Robert's first opponent was announced. It was the Veroneer.

"I can help you no more," Vornur said as he walked to the edge of the arena.

Robert stood alone in the middle of the arena as the Veroneer came from the building. It looked at Robert with its small, black eyes as it opened and shut its wings. It moved to the edge of the arena and picked up a sword in one of its hands. The creature itself was only a little over three feet high, so the sword was almost as long as the creature itself. Inwardly Robert smiled. He felt most comfortable with the sword, even against a creature that was faster and could fly. Robert walked to the opposite side of the arena and picked up a corresponding sword. He waited for the signal, and then the first fight began.

It took only a moment for Robert to realize the truth of what Vornur had said. The Veroneer was incredibly fast and much stronger than it looked. Even with its short arms, its movements were quick and when it took to the air and flew at him, it was all Robert could do at first to avoid being struck. The crowd roared its approval with each strike and avoidance, encouraging each combatant.

After several close calls Robert realized that he could perhaps overcome the speed, but only if he could prevent the creature from taking flight. He had to keep the Veroneer on the ground. He had to clip its wings.

Robert lunged at the Veroneer, driving it to the air. He waited for it to come at him, but instead of parrying the full blow, he ducked to the side and blocked part of it, continuing his swing. There was no sound, no feeling as the sword swung through the air. But there was a white thing that tumbled through the air and fell to the ground. It tumbled over itself and Robert knew that his strike had cut through a wing. The crowd roared as one in approval.

Robert pressed the advantage and charged at the fallen figure. It spun around on him and blocked his blow, rising to its feet. It staggered as it stepped away from him, telling Robert that the Veroneer was badly injured. But it still stood and was still quick. He charged again, striking at the creature that could only block him now. Robert pressed. He used his height and strength to his advantage, pushing the smaller, lighter Veroneer around the arena, sometimes cutting the white skin to create a cut that oozed dark brown blood. It was only a matter of time now.

"Wing will not heal!" came Vornur's voice over the roaring of the crowd.

The wing wouldn't heal. The Veroneer would never be able to live life as one of his own. Robert had thought that his display would be enough, but now he realized that while it would be cruel to kill it, it would be more cruel to let it live. The Veroneers, like other races on Andar, would not tolerate this one, so wounded, among them. It would die a lonely death. So Robert continued. A minute later the Veroneer lay in two quivering pieces on the ground of the arena. The crowd roared its approval as Robert passed the first of his tests. He felt the adulation and joy of the crowd. He also felt empty. He had never killed before. The twitching body before him, that just moments ago had been a flying, living thing, did little to make him feel as if he had done anything of value. He went into the building and threw up.

Vornur came to him a moment later as he was wiping his mouth and taking a drink of water.

"I can't do this," Robert said, nearly sick again.

"The Contest is easy compared to bringing balance. If you cannot do this, can you do the other?"

"Why do I have to kill? Can't it just be obvious?"

"What is obvious, Outworlder? To Rodurans, balance is obvious. To others..."

Robert understood. He didn't like it, but he understood.

The next three opponents for Robert were more easily dispatched, each one choosing a weapon that he was familiar with and that his size and strength gave him an advantage over. With each defeat the crowd seemed to surge more and more behind him, yet Robert could not shake the idea that he was doing little more than commit murder. He washed himself after each fight, but he was certain the blood would never truly be washed away. Why were these creatures fighting against him? Why did even their own kind cheer their deaths?

As he rested in the building before the fifth opponent, Vornur approached him.

"You demonstrate great ability," Vornur said in his familiar monotone. "I admit to a certain pride in being the one known as your teacher."

Robert took a long drink of water and nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"I do not understand, Vornur," he said at last. "I fight, as you tell me, for my life. Why do these others fight? If all goes as you expect, they are offering themselves to be killed. I do not

believe they enjoy the possibility of dying. Neither do I find that I like taking life. I am not a murderer."

"That is good. Taking life should never be something for which any race longs. Understand, Outworlder, that they also fight for their lives."

"For their lives? I'm not threatening them."

"You will understand soon."

Robert's next opponent was the Pantuen. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach when the creature stood before him. It was only a foot or so taller than he was, but its arms and legs were massive. It had a long, lean stomach. As the smaller of the two, Robert would have the choice of weapon. For the first time, the size and strength advantage were not his.

Robert looked to his side of the arena. He thought about choosing a spear, a weapon that would allow him to keep his distance from the Pantuen. Still with the reach advantage, the Pantuen would be perhaps even more dangerous. He thought about a dagger, a weapon that would rely more on precision than brute strength and so play to what he hoped were his advantages. When he decided not to choose a weapon, he did not look at Vornur seated in the front of the bleachers. He knew the Roduran would only look at him, saying nothing. He also knew that Vornur would never let honor or friendship stand in the way of what must be done. He'd learned as much in the many beatings he had taken over the last two years. Even so, Robert could not bring himself to fight against an unarmed opponent. He believed Vornur had trained him well enough. He also didn't like the idea of killing yet another creature and hoped that he could do some sort of submission hold or something that would not require another death on his conscience.

He regretted it from the beginning. The Pantuen's long arms reached out and struck Robert across the face before he could get anywhere near the creature. He spun around and fell to the ground. In a moment he was on his feet and out of the way of a large foot that would have surely crushed his chest. He said a small "thank you" to Vornur for having taught him to endure pain so well and keep his mind clear.

Robert dodged the next blow, but he was still too far away to deliver any sort of blow himself. He thought to himself that even a dagger would have been of little help since he could not get close enough to use it. He doubted a scratch on its hands would slow the Pantuen.

Robert knew he would have to fight in close to the creature to have any sort of chance. Robert looked at the long, strong arms of the Pantuen. To put himself within them seemed suicidal. Of course, to put himself at the end of them seemed just plain stupid. But at least in close he could deliver blows of his own.

The next swing went wildly over Robert's head, but instead of dancing away, he rushed in, his shoulder burying itself into the Pantuen's stomach. There was a huge rush of air from the creature, and Robert was barely able to register in his mind that there was little muscle there before the two fell to the ground.

Without bothering to balance himself or get an idea of where he was, Robert sat up on the creature and began to rain blow after blow on the Pantuen's body and head. After the first two

to the body and one to the head there was almost no resistance by the creature. His momentum delivered four more hits before he stopped. His hands were covered in the creature's blood. He looked down into a pair of eyes filled with fear. He remembered that Pantuens were arboreal creatures. That explained their great arm and leg strength, but it also explained what Robert was feeling -- that these creatures had thin bones. He could, literally, beat this creature into a pulpy mass. Shocked at his own ability, Robert stood up and backed away from his fallen opponent, nearly as much fear in his own eyes as in the Pantuen's. He could not hear the roaring crowd. He reached out and offered a hand to the Pantuen. Its eyes still filled with fear, it hesitated.

"Come, take my hand," Robert said.

There was another moment of hesitation, then the creature reached out and took his hand. It was surprisingly light as Robert helped it to its feet. It looked at Robert, its eyes showing wonder...and perhaps gratitude.

"You are friend, Outworlder," the thing said to him as it leaned against him for stability.

Robert nodded as he led the Pantuen out of the arena and into the building. Others of its kind followed and began to nurse the creature as Robert sat and rested. Vornur appeared next to him.

"Your compassion is great, greater than those who came before you."

"I couldn't do it, Vornur. I could not bring myself to-- Those who came before me? There were others?"

Vornur said nothing.

"Tell me, Vornur," Robert insisted. "How many others? What is the purpose of this?"

"There are still others to fight," Vornur said softly. "Your attention must be on what is at hand."

Robert sat staring at the Roduran. Whether he had meant it or not, Vornur had said more than he had before. Had he let something slip or was it intentional? He knew he would not get any further answers from the Roduran now, but he would not let the matter go. He had to find out more.

The remaining opponents were little more than exercises for Robert, even a mammalian one with the ability to change color. As Vornur had warned him, he let his other senses focus on the creature, and the color had done it no good. With the snail-like creature he had chosen only a dagger, having learned that the slime trail of the creature was toxic. Still, he had been able to sever its eye stalks and be pronounced victorious without killing the creature. Vornur assured him that the eyes would grow back. The shrimp creature had chosen no weapon, nor had Robert. He had eventually wrestled the creature onto its back and held it there until it ceased struggling. That creature had left the only real mark on him, a gash on his right leg that was long though not deep. In all, Robert had killed nine members of the other races and spared three. It was not something he would write home about, even if he could, but he had come through.

Shortly after the last opponent had been defeated, both the Skellians and dar-Skellians had quickly left the area. The Skellians, under their cloud of darkness, had quickly retreated, and the dar-Skellians had simply walked out of the valley and into the forest and been lost among the trees. Members of the other races had come down into the arena and spoken with Robert. Many of them expressed admiration of his skill and strength, and those of the races whose combatants he had not killed expressed gratitude. Two Veroneers had also expressed gratitude. Robert had expressed sorrow, but they told him it had been necessary, both the fighting and the death. Robert thought of this as he limped back to his home beside Vornur.

"How many others?" Robert asked again, breaking the silence.

"There have been nine other outworlders," Vornur stated.

"For what purpose? Why were nine others brought here? What happened to them?"

"Two of them died in The Contest. The other seven survived."

"Where are they now?"

Vornur waited a long time before answering, telling Robert he would not like the answer.

"They are all dead."

"From what?" Robert demanded, stopping in his tracks. "Those are supposed to be the strongest races on Andar. If seven others from Earth came before me, what killed them if not those?"

"Most of the others were not from your world. You are but the second from your world. The others came from other worlds."

"Other worlds? What for? Why were they all brought here? And you never said how they died. What killed them?"

Vornur looked him straight in the eyes.

"Tonight you must rest," Vornur stated. "Tomorrow you will meet with the Skellians. They will answer your questions."

Robert had a strange feeling in his inner being. For some reason, he no longer wanted to know what had happened to the others. Nine of them? Seven of them killed by something outside of The Contest? Vornur had said it had been a test. He knew it was a test of his fighting ability. And now that he had won he was supposed to fight someone or something else. The someone or something that had put Andar out of balance. The someone or something that had killed all the others before him. He considered running away. It was a silly thought. Where would he go? Vornur could easily find him, even if he wasn't hobbled by the wound to his leg. And what would he be running from? Or would running away simply put him at it faster? He sighed to himself. He couldn't run. He would have to get his answers from the Skellians.



\* \* \* \* \*

"Does the outworlder still live?" asked Kor-Etath.

"He does, Bringer of Light," answered Ellrun.

"And how did he perform?"

"Word has come that he survived The Contest and fought well."

"Did he kill them all with ease as did the last one?"

"He did not kill them all," Ellrun answered simply. "He let some live."

Kor-Etath opened his sightless eyes in wonder, then laughed. The hollow sound echoed in the throne room around him.

"Did not kill them all? He would challenge me when he could not kill the weaker races? What manner of creature is he?"

"He is from the same world as the last challenger."

"Then he shall suffer the same fate," Kor-Etath spat out. "That the Skellians would insult me in such a manner is unforgivable. Their end is nearer now than they thought. When I meet this challenger and defeat him, we will march upon all Skellians. Go now and begin to ready my army."

## Chapter 3

Robert woke the next morning before Vornur had touched him. It was almost as though he could hear the thoughts of the Roduran telling him it was time.

"Come," Vornur said when he saw that Robert was already awake. "It is time to meet the Skellians."

Robert stood, careful of the low ceiling. To his surprise Vornur did not lead him toward the morning light, but back into the cave. He expected to hit a wall, but a doorway stood where there had been none before. Robert followed Vornur deep into the mountain through corridors dimly lit by small torches. On occasion there were other corridors leading off the one they followed, but few. After a lengthy walk they came into a large chamber. A great table stood in the room. Seated on the far side of it were four Skellians. Robert took a moment to look at them. They were dressed in dark robes with hoods pulled back. Their faces seemed almost human. Almost. Their skin was pale from living underground for so long, and their eyes were unnaturally large.

"I am Mer-Vetang," said one in the middle. "I am the oldest of the deep forest Skellians. Please eat and sit down."

Robert moved to where she had motioned and found a small buffet set out. He gathered some fruit and meat on a plate, then poured himself some drink into the same sort of clay cup he had been given when first he had arrived on Andar. He moved to the table and sat down. Vornur came and sat next to him.

"Forgive our poor fare," Mer-Vetang said graciously. "This is not as we would have liked to present to one such as you. In better times we would honor you properly."

Not knowing exactly how to respond, Robert nodded. He picked up some fruit and began chewing.

"This is Ger-Koth," Mer-Vetang said, indicating the Skellian on her left. "And these are Dar-Ven and Sur-Lal."

"Why have you brought me here?" Robert asked.

"You speak with little respect," Mer-Vetang shot back, the cordiality in her voice replaced by ice. "You have learned nothing of how to treat your superiors."

Perhaps he should have been more respectful, but after having given up two years of his life and fought the previous day for his life, he was a little upset.

"You have brought me from my world through trickery, kept me in a cave, and pitted me against other races to fight or die," Robert answered with more anger than he thought he had truly felt. "More than that, you have done the same with others, all of which have died before me. Do you call yourself my superior when you have sentenced others to death and perhaps me as well?"

Mer-Vetang stood up and the anger in her face was tangible. The lights in the chamber grew brighter and for a moment Robert could see Mer-Vetang as she might have been, a proud, tall

Skellian of great beauty and power. The effect, if not terrifying, was certainly frightening. Robert shrunk in his seat.

"You will speak with the respect due the Skellians, Outworlder!" Mer-Vetang said loudly, her voice echoing in the cavern.

Whatever the Skellians had become, they still seemed to wield some power. Robert was immediately sorry to have provoked her. Apparently he still had much to learn about the races of Andar.

He was about to respond with an apology when another Skellian entered the chamber and rushed up to Mer-Vetang. Robert could not see if it was a male or female, as it had its hood pulled over its head. The Skellian whispered in Mer-Vetang's ear. Mer-Vetang's countenance immediately changed and she seemed, if not slightly cowed, at least more than a little disturbed.

"Yes, of course," Robert heard Mer-Vetang whisper.

Mer-Vetang sat down. The four Skellians leaned in toward each other and whispered among themselves, ignoring Robert. Robert went back to his breakfast, keeping one eye on the Skellians.

"Keep your courage," Vornur whispered to him. "There is nothing to fear from the Skellians."

"Are you certain?" Robert asked. "That was no trick I just saw."

"They still have power, but it is not as it once was. Have courage. You will need it far more than just here."

Robert nodded up at Vornur. Of course, having just witnessed what he had, he wondered what Vornur meant. There was some power the Skellians still had, and he had no idea how great it was. All he knew was that it was greater than what he had.

Robert's thoughts were halted when a creature began to enter the chamber. He thought it was at first a snail-like creature similar to the one he had fought the day before, but then he saw that it had no shell. It was also enormous.

"Stand," Vornur said, rising. "She is the first."

Robert stood up silently while the Pozeran continued to enter the chamber. Several minutes later when she had finally made her way in, she began to rise. Robert could only compare the motion to a snake about to strike, but that image was hard to reconcile with the slug he saw before him. That it, or she, was more than just a giant slug was obvious. Something emanated from her that seemed to fill the room. Robert felt himself trembling and noticed that even the Skellians were standing and looked very uncomfortable. The Pozeran continued to rise until half of her body was off the ground and she stood more than a foot taller than Robert.

"You are the outworlder?" the Pozeran asked.

She spoke slowly, and her voice was smooth and deep. That she spoke in the language of Andar did not surprise him as much as that she spoke at all.

Robert bowed in response, thinking it was simply appropriate to the Pozeran.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

Slowly the Pozeran turned to face the Skellians. They seemed even smaller next to the thick-bodied creature, and he could see both Dar-Ven and Sur-Lal almost fearful under her gaze.

"Have you told him why you have brought him here?" the Pozeran asked.

Mer-Vetang, though uncomfortable, looked defiant. She bowed just slightly to the creature.

"That is the purpose of this council," she answered, her voice still strong.

"Would you tell him all he should know?" the Pozeran continued, her voice growing louder.

"Would you tell him of the others who have come before him and failed? Would you tell him what you would do should he succeed? Would you tell him of the Korisheray?"

At the last word Robert felt a shudder go through him and absolute silence fell on the chamber. Robert looked at the Skellians whose heads were all bowed, even Mer-Vetang's. He looked at Vornur who stood motionless, saying nothing.

"I ask, First Pozeran," Robert finally said when no one spoke for almost a minute. "Please tell me."

Robert looked around the chamber. The Skellians would not look up and meet his gaze. He looked pleadingly at the Pozeran.

"Speak," the Pozeran commanded.

Mer-Vetang looked up as if some force made her do so. She looked first at the Pozeran with venom in her eyes, the rage of the impotent. Then she turned to Robert. He felt himself taken aback by her look. There was a boiling rage in her countenance that chilled his blood. In a low voice she began to speak.

"Long ago on Andar, the races lived in balance. That is not to say that we did not fight and war, but there was a balance that was maintained so that all the races lived and thrived to their own degree. Then, several thousand years ago, the Skellians, as the strongest and most beautiful race, decided that we should rule the others. We abandoned balance and conquered Andar. We chose a path of peace. And for thousands of years we did rule and peace settled on all of Andar. A peace that Andar has not enjoyed since. Our precedent did not go unnoticed. While we ruled, others planned and plotted. Our peace was not what they wanted. A thousand years ago a dar-Skellian who called himself Kor-Etath raised an army and with it overthrew us. Any Skellian who dared show his face above ground was killed. We went underground. A thousand years of darkness has changed us from what we were to what we are. But we will not live in fear of our extinction. We called on others to help us in our fight, to bring peace back to Andar."

"How many others?" Robert interrupted. "How many others before me?"

"We did not give up," Mer-Vetang stated with an edge in her voice. "We fought back. We sent many of our own to challenge Kor-Etath. My husband, my son, the fathers of all those you see here today. They all fought...and died. Who knows how many? A thousand? Two thousand? Then we looked for help from somewhere else. Our race no longer had the strength to overcome Kor-Etath. We began to bring in outworlders, like yourself. Nine other outworlders before yourself have we brought here. Two of them died during The Contest. The others succeeded and went on to face Kor-Etath." She paused. "He killed them all."

There was a long silence in the room. Now that Robert knew what had happened to the other seven who had survived The Contest, he wondered what his victory the previous day meant. Was he just the next to face Kor-Etath and be killed by him?

"Tell him all," commanded the Pozeran.

Mer-Vetang looked at the Pozeran like an angry child who had no real recourse, then looked back at Robert.

"Six of them he fought and killed with the sword. The seventh, the last one before we summoned you, managed to wound him. In his rage, Kor-Etath released his magic, the Korisheray, the Deathbringer."

"And that is who you would have me fight?" asked Robert incredulously. "You would send me to my death at the hands of a man who has only been wounded once in a thousand years?!"

"What else would you have us do?" Ger-Koth spoke up loudly. "Do you believe that we would have done what we have done if there was any other way? Kor-Etath will kill us all, all Skellians, in time. That is no mystery to us. Neither is it a mystery to all who were at The Contest. The entire world of Andar is but moments from death or domination! We sent for the others, and you, to try to live. Would you not do the same? Would you not try to save your family? Would you not try to save your kind from extinction? Would you not try to save your world?"

Robert found himself nodding. It seemed that it had not been out of malice that they had done what they did. It was desperation, the desperation of a race who could see the end of its days. Yes, if he could have, he would have done the same thing. Though he wanted to think he would have done it differently.

"And should he defeat Kor-Etath?" cut in the voice of the Pozeran. "What would become of the Skellians if Kor-Etath should at last fall?"

"We would take our place once more as rulers of Andar," Mer-Vetang said quickly and with pride. "We would bring back the peace that Andar enjoyed for so long."

"Then you have learned nothing," the Pozeran said acidly. "You are little better than Kor-Etath."

"We are not of his kind!" shouted Mer-Vetang rising to her feet, the lights again growing brighter and the image of her former self again briefly visible.

"And how are you different, *rulers of Andar*?" asked the Pozeran, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

The image of Mer-Vetang receded and Robert saw her once again as the small creature who hid in caves, fearful of being seen and slain.

"We seek only peace," said Mer-Vetang quietly. "Peace, and life. Only what any of the other races seek."

"And rule," the Pozeran filled in, silencing Mer-Vetang.

For several moments there was no sound in the chamber. The tension became overbearing. Robert looked from one race to another. From his learning Robert knew that the Pozeran had come far to speak to them. This issue was important to her and her kind. As Ger-Koth had said, it was probably of great importance to all of Andar. Vornur, the Roduran, had also left his own race to lend aid. And before him sat the Skellians, who for a thousand years had fought and died in vain attempts to regain a place of prominence in their own world. That they claimed to seek peace seemed superficial compared to what they really wanted, power. Amid them all he stood, an outworlder, asked to win a fight that was not his on a planet that was not his home. And yet, it truly was the same as he, or any other race, would have done. Right or wrong, the Skellians had given him something to fight for. Still, as he had witnessed, to put the Skellians, and Mer-Vetang, in control of Andar seemed, as the Pozeran had said, to replace one cruel ruler with another.

"I will fight Kor-Etath," Robert said at last.

All eyes turned to him. The Skellians looked happy and relieved. Neither the Pozeran nor Vornur showed any emotion.

"But I must know all I can of Kor-Etath and the Korisheray. If he can be wounded he can be killed, though I do not know how I will stand against him and his magic."

"There is but one way to beat the Korisheray," the Pozeran stated.

Mer-Vetang laughed softly.

"I know that of which you speak," she said. "I have not forgotten. No one has seen that since before we ruled. If it ever existed at all. Myth and legend."

"It exists," the Pozeran replied. "The Jewel of Andar is only hidden, away from the hands of Skellians, dar-Skellians, and any other who would seek to rule Andar."

"What is the Jewel of Andar?" Robert asked. "Where can I find it?"

"The Jewel is in a dead city deep within the forest of Gundoon."

"No one goes to Gundoon," Dar-Ven said softly.

"Even Kor-Etath would not go there," Sur-Lal echoed.

"That is why the Jewel has been safe for these many thousands of years. If you wish to end the rule of Kor-Etath, the outworlder must go there and bring back the Jewel. There is no other way."

"Vornur," Robert began, turning to his friend, "can I get there?"

"As you have been told, the way is dangerous even for one like Kor-Etath. Or-Pozeran would not have come all this way if it were not at least possible." Vornur paused. "Outworlder, there is little chance for any of the races of Andar if the Skellians fall. And there is little chance for you if you do not have the Jewel. Kor-Etath can be killed, but there is no way to defeat the Korisheray without the Jewel."

"Then I must go. Can you show me the way?"

"I will go with you, Outworlder."

Robert turned to the Skellians and the Pozeran.

"I am not of your world," he stated. "I have been brought here to face an enemy that was not my own. I would ask to be sent back to my world, but in the time I have been here I have become more like you than I am to my former self. I will journey with Vornur to seek the Jewel of Andar and face Kor-Etath in battle. But hear me now, Skellians, I will *NOT* let you rule Andar if I should defeat him. You will live as the other races, in the balance that was here before your arrogance set you on this path that may very well end in your own destruction."

"Strong words, Outworlder," said Mer-Vetang in a voice that more resembled her esteemed position of days long past. "And will you enforce this balance with your own power?"

"I do not want to rule over you or any other race on Andar," Robert answered back, staring her in the eyes even though it made his knees weak. "But know this. If I can defeat Kor-Etath, then I will defeat any others who would not seek balance. If need be, I will do what Kor-Etath would have done."

"You would do this alone?" Mer-Vetang sneered.

"He will not be alone," the Pozeran intoned.

When there was no response from the Skellians, Robert took a final bite of food, then excused himself to begin. Vornur followed after him.

"You have sent him to his death," Mer-Vetang said to the Pozeran after a moment.

"You summoned him to his death when you brought him here, Skellian," the Pozeran answered. "Just as you did all the others before him. I have given him a chance. That chance is yours as well."

"It is not even a fool's chance," Mer-Vetang countered. "Kor-Etath knows of the Jewel, yet in a thousand years he has not chanced to seek it. How can this Outworlder gain something that a foe more powerful than he has refused to attempt?"

"You forget one thing, Skellian," the Pozeran said slowly. "You have brought nine outworlders to this world, but have yet to give them a reason to face and defeat Kor-Etath. You have given them skills, but not secrets. Already are things in motion that will give this one a reason to defeat Kor-Etath. If all goes as it should, the Jewel of Andar will be only symbolic."

"And if all does not go as it should?" asked Ger-Koth.

"It is the end of the Skellians," the Pozeran replied. "And perhaps the end of us all. I have given us all a chance. The only chance we have left."

"But you have not given him all secrets," Sur-Lal said gently. "The Jewel of Andar, if it still exists, is guarded."

"That he must learn on his own," the Pozeran said, lowering her body to the floor.

Back in the cave Robert had come to call home, he strapped on his sword, a dagger, put a quiver of arrows and a bow on his back, then lifted a skin pouch of water over his shoulder. Vornur was similarly attired.

"I do not recall reading much of Gundoon," Robert said as the two walked out of the cave into the light. "I know it lies to the north of here, but I know nothing of its story or why it is such a feared place. Who lives there, or lived there, that would keep Kor-Etath from even trying to go there?"

"Much of the knowledge of Gundoon was lost when the Skellians ruled. They refused to let books be written to educate the races. Books that were found were either taken or destroyed. Knowledge was passed on by word of mouth only. What is known is that Gundoon was the only region on Andar that was never subjected to the rule of the Skellians. The forest there is dark and the creatures of it are said to be mighty and vicious. Very few who have ever gone to the forests have ever returned. They speak of trees that move, creatures that cannot be struck by sword or arrow, and a mist that travels the ground at night and devours anything it touches."

"Why did you not tell me this before I said I would go?"

"Outworlder, one day you must face Kor-Etath whether you would desire it or not. He will have it no other way. He has known of you all this time and has waited only so that he may face you as he did the other. It is all but certain that Kor-Etath will defeat you as you are this day. The Korisheray is a magic that can only be defeated by another magic. Trees, creatures, and mists are physical things that can be defeated. Which would you rather face?"

"Then why did I fight in The Contest yesterday? Why have you trained me if I have no chance?"

"There is always a chance. The Pozeran has told you more than any others, including the one before you who wounded Kor-Etath."

"But she hasn't told me everything, has she? Like you, she has kept some things to herself."

It almost wasn't a question.



"Even as you say," Vornur answered at last.

"And even knowing less than I probably should, you believe it is possible?"

"I journey with you, Outworlder."

Robert looked at Vornur and gave a little snort of resignation.

"What of this jewel? What is it?"

"That is also lost. It has only been said that a thing of such power would be clearly recognized when it is found."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Robert said as he looked into the sky at the twin suns. "A fight against a man who has only been wounded once in a thousand years, a forest full of vicious creatures, and a magical jewel that no one can identify. Is there anything you have not told me? Should I be looking for fire from the sky as well?"

Vornur only looked at him. Robert shook his head. Irony and sarcasm were apparently lacking in Rodurans as well.

"Let's be off," Robert said. "The sooner we begin, the sooner we can return."

Vornur started off into the forest, heading north. Robert walked after him. He had hoped for a cheer or words of encouragement from the Roduran or even from the Skellians behind him who he was trying to save, though he knew that was not in Vornur's character and did not seem to be in the character of the Skellians either. Still, it would have helped.

"Stuck between a rock and a hard place," he mumbled in English.

\* \* \* \* \*

They traveled almost at a fast jog for the first two days, catching what they needed to eat and sleeping as little as possible. Vornur impressed on Robert the need for haste as the last champions had fought Kor-Etath within days of The Contest. When he did not show up in that time to face Kor-Etath, he would realize something was amiss and would react. The journey to Gundoon was at best 10 days away, then 10 days back, plus whatever time would be needed to recover the Jewel of Andar. It would take at least 21 days, and there was no way of knowing if Kor-Etath would wait that long.

On the evening of the second day they sat beneath some trees resting and eating the last bits of a large rodent they had shot with an arrow.

"Why have the races not allied themselves to defeat Kor-Etath?" Robert asked. "Surely one man could not stand against an entire world."

"There have been but two ruling races in several thousand years, Outworlder, the Skellians and Kor-Etath of the dar-Skellians. That is a long time for races to accustom themselves to being ruled. Kor-Etath did not wage his war on all races. His coming was hailed by all races who had grown tired of the rule of the Skellians and had been aroused by his words. Many are the races that fought alongside him, including most of those with whom you fought. When he first sat on the throne, he demanded but little of all races. It was a great change from what had been before. A welcome change. When he asked for more, they gave more, telling themselves it was his due and that it was still far less than the Skellians had demanded. The one before you, from your world, had used a phrase that total power corrupts totally."

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," Robert corrected.

"Yes. When he asked for more they gave him more. Then he asked for their people, their men and women. That is when there was resistance. He assembled his armies of dar-Skellians and marched on those who denied him. No one helped, thinking it was only this race or that race. But it came to them all, one by one, and by the time each race realized it, there was no other race to help them. It has only been the Skellians who gave him no tribute, instead retreating to the caves and underground, fighting against him and those with him as best they are now able. They are not what they once were, but they are the only resistance, and the other races have come to look to them for help and the only way to defeat Kor-Etath. That is how The Contest began. Every four years it is held and each champion faces Kor-Etath. It has been going for over a hundred years now."

"A hundred years," Robert repeated softly. "Then I take it The Contest at first included no outworlders?"

"It is as you say. For many long years they sought a champion from one of their own."

"How is it that he lives so long and has not grown weak? There is no record of that in the books you gave me to read."

"The Skellians and their descendants, the dar-Skellians, are beings not entirely physical. They are possessed of a magic that is in their essence and gives them unnaturally long life. But...they are still mortal."

"I'm glad you added that," Robert grinned. "My candle of hope burns low enough as it is."

"As do all of them," Vornur replied.

Robert found himself looking at the Roduran in surprise. It was the first bit of admission he had heard from the Roduran in two years. The fact that it was tinged with emotion of near desperation made it less of an occasion than it might otherwise have been, but it was something.

The next morning they arrived at a large river. Vornur explained that this river marked the halfway point of their journey through the forest and that three days beyond it would find them out on the Great Plains of Andar, a vast area of flat land and small plants. Best of all, travel on the plains was relatively free of danger. Only small animals lived there and a few creatures of flight that preyed on them, none of which was a threat to them because of their size.

They were refilling their flasks when a faint sound came to Robert's ears. He paused to listen. Vornur also paused.

"There is a struggle," Vornur said.

Robert capped his flask and began to run in the direction. Vornur took to the air and flew ahead. A few moments later around a bend in the river the struggle came in sight. On the bank of the river perhaps another 50 yards ahead Robert could make out the shapes of perhaps six or seven of Andar's race of giant, semi-intelligent fish, the Argullians. They were moving around something on the bank that was struggling against them. Robert remembered from his readings that this race lived almost entirely in water, but could drag themselves out onto land and even live out of the water for short periods of time. Their front fins, which were almost useless for swimming, worked similar to tentacles, wrapping around their prey and allowing them to drag it back into the water to drown where they would devour it. They lived in schools of 20-30 and would eat any aquatic animal they could catch -- or any land animal they could subdue. What Robert was witness to was simple feeding behavior.

"They have a dar-Skellian," Vornur shouted from above him.

A dar-Skellian! Robert could not repress a sense of obligation. He was not of Andar and was no relation, distant or otherwise, to any of its races, yet the similarities in a foreign world were enough for him. Having not seen another human in two years, this dar-Skellian was family.

As Robert ran he could see that the dar-Skellian had a sword and was not defenseless, but the fact that the dar-Skellian was not standing was disconcerting. That meant that one or two had its legs and that it was only a matter of time before numbers won out. He ran as fast as he could and drew his sword.

By the time he arrived, six more Argullians had come from the river and were swarming about the shore, using their medial and back fins to move along the shore and their front fins to lash out and grab. Vornur was already engaged, wielding his sword against the light blue fish. Three Argullians lay dead and two more were wounded, flopping back toward the river. Robert didn't hesitate as he ran up to the melee and struck at the Argullian nearest him savagely, cleaving a gash a foot deep into its head. He was momentarily disconcerted by its almost human-like cry of pain and distress as it flopped away from him toward the river. As another grabbed his legs with its fins, he forgot his initial distress and engaged it with a slash first at its fins and then its body. A moment later he and Vornur had hacked away at the two Argullians holding the dar-Skellian's legs, forcing them to let go. Freed, the dar-Skellian stood up and Robert noticed with great surprise that it was a woman.

The three fought for only a moment longer before the Argullians retreated into the river. Five of their number lay dead on the shore, and a sixth floated belly-up with the current, drifting downriver. Given the wounds that Vornur, Robert, and the dar-Skellian had inflicted, another three or four Argullians would likely be dead before the sun set.

Robert turned to ask the dar-Skellian if she were okay. The words stuck in his throat. She was dressed in a tunic and pants like he was, though her pants had been ripped in enough places to show her toned legs. She was almost as tall as Robert with long, flowing brown hair. Even though her eyes were typical of dar-Skellians in being pure white with no pupil or iris, Robert could not help but find her beautiful.

"Why do you stare?" she asked.

Her voice was low and deep, but not masculine, and Robert thought it was the most beautiful sound he'd heard in his life. Then her words struck him and he blushed as he turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "You are the first dar-Skellian I have met."

She laughed, and Robert looked up to see her smiling at him.

"You must be from the northern Skellians to have not seen a dar-Skellian before. It is said that they have not interacted with the other races for generations. Is such true?"

"I would not know," Robert answered. "I'm not a Skellian. I am not of this world. I am an outworlder."

Her smile faded and her eyes narrowed just a little as she looked more closely at Robert.

"And yet you have the look of a Skellian," she said softly. "It is true, as they said but a few years ago. Another race from the stars that is like and unlike."

She approached closer to Robert and began to look him over carefully as if she were looking for something on him markedly different from either herself or the Skellians. As she did, Robert found himself staring at her face. He looked into her eyes and found himself lost in them, realizing they held expression just as if there was color in them.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper. "And what manner of spell do you cast in doing so that I do not want you to stop?"

Robert was attracted to her, having not seen another of his kind, especially a woman, in over two years. Her manner and eyes made it known that his attention was not unwelcome. This was his time to say something suave or witty, to woo her with the magic of his words.

"Um, nothing," he said at last. "I don't know any spells."

The moment vanished as she turned her face from his. He thought he saw a bit of red come to her cheeks, but he was not sure.

"You are a Roduran," she said as she turned to Vornur. "How is it that you travel with this outworlder?"

"At this time I am no longer of my race. We are of the same now, he and I. How is it that you come to be by this river alone? You have no bow or spear for hunting. You are two days' travel from any dwelling."

"We are all the same," she answered simply.

"Why?" Robert asked.

She turned to Robert. An involuntary gasp escaped him at her beauty.

"I cannot lie to you," she said softly. "Nor would I want to. I came of age two days ago. My parents let it be known that I was now old enough to be wed and chose a mate for me. I did not want to wed the man they chose, so I fled into the forest. I stopped to rest by the river when I was attacked. The rest you know."

"Have you eaten?" Robert asked.

"No."

"Vornur, is it safe to eat an Argullian?"

"Very enjoyable," Vornur replied.

"Would you like some food?" Robert asked.

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"I am Mandu."

"This is Vornur. I am Robert."

"Robert? Is that a name from your other world?"

"He may also be called Kor-Eln," Vornur said.

Her eyes went wide and she dropped to one knee.

"What did you tell her?" Robert asked in English. "What did you say?"

Before Vornur could answer Robert turned back to Mandu, gently gripped her shoulders, and brought her to her feet.

"It is a title of great respect, a ruler of races," Vornur said in the language of Andar.

"I will not rule Andar," Robert said, turning to face Vornur.

"If you defeat Kor-Etath," Mandu said, "you will have to."

Robert turned back to her. Her gaze was steady. For some reason Robert had expected resistance from her to the idea of killing one of her own race, even if it was Kor-Etath. Even as he ruled the other races of Andar with cruelty, he still showed favor to his own race, the dar-Skellians. He felt that he would have reacted with some sort of resistance if someone from another planet had spoken of killing a ruler on Earth, even a bad one. Or would he? Would he have resisted someone who would save him and his entire planet?

"I do not want to rule," Robert repeated.

"You are a ruler of races," Vornur repeated. "Your destiny was written long ago, Kor-Eln. You are living it out now."

Robert looked at Vornur, at Mandu, then back to Vornur. Well, he would go through with whatever happened. He would deal with the issue of ruling Andar when -- and if -- it came.

"Let's eat," he said.

Using their daggers they cut away at one of the large fish until they had enough to eat. Then they moved away from the river's edge, lit a fire, and cooked the fish in silence. Robert wanted to say something, but there was nothing that came to mind. The other two seemed content to not speak.

"Where are you going?" Mandu asked as they began eating.

Robert looked to Vornur. The Roduran said nothing.

"We are going to Gundoon," Robert said slowly. He expected some sort of reaction from Mandu, but apparently Rodurans weren't the only race with great poker skills. "I must find the Jewel of Andar."

She took a bite of fish, then looked down at the ground as she chewed it. When she looked up again her face was set.

"I will journey with you, Kor-EIn. Three can travel more safely than two, and as an outworlder you will need to know of the Jewel before you accept it."

"I cannot let you come," Robert replied. "It is dangerous."

"It is dangerous in many parts of Andar," she answered back. "There are times when taking a drink is dangerous."

She smiled as she said it and Robert had to smile back. Then his smile slowly faded.

"I feel that I found in you a jewel even more valuable than whatever it is I seek," he said. "I do not want to lose you. I would not want to risk you on such a journey."

He wasn't sure why he had said it, but as he did he blushed. She did as well. For a moment no one spoke. Finally, she shifted her gaze from his.

"My family was once high in the esteem of Kor-Etath. Much of the knowledge written in books was made available to us. I know much that will help you."

As she finished speaking she turned back to face him.

"I wish to say no, to tell you not to come. But I cannot. Now that I see you, I do not want to part with you. Please come with us."

She nodded and stood up. Robert watched questioningly as she walked into the forest out of sight.

"Listen to me," Vornur whispered sharply. Robert looked at him in surprise. "If she returns with her legs bared, she is offering herself to you. You must receive her. Do not question it."

Robert wasn't sure he had heard right. He wished for the thousandth time that Rodurans had facial expressions or that Vornur spoke in full explanations.

"What did you tell her my name is?" he asked. "What is Kor-EIn?"

Vornur began to speak quickly in quiet tones.

"Long ago, when the Skellians ruled, the races dreamed of one who would come and free them. That one would be called Kor-EIn, Bringer of Balance, and would rule Andar in fairness and peace. They accepted Kor-Etath, believing that he would be this one."

"You gave me the name of a legend?!"

"Hear me now, Kor-EIn," Vornur said with an edge Robert had never heard before, "my life, her life, the lives of all Skellians, and the lives of much of Andar rest now in your hands. The future of Andar is in your hands. You will be Kor-EIn if you succeed." He paused. "If you do not, it will matter little to those of us who have journeyed with you, as we will be dead as well."

Robert was about to protest more but Vornur suddenly stood up and moved away with the quickness that always surprised Robert. A moment later Mandu came out of the forest. She still wore her tunic, but the pants were gone. Her legs were bare. She stood, saying nothing. There was a moment of awkward stillness, then Robert remembered what Vornur had said to him. He stood. Part of him wished he could muster up some sort of confident swagger. Instead, he half walked, half stumbled over to her. He placed his arms on her shoulders, then around her. He drew her to him and his world disappeared when their lips touched.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kor-Etath looked angrily down from his throne. Or perhaps it wasn't anger. Ellrun did not look up to come to a determination.

"Where has he gone?"

"North, Bringer of Light. It is believed he is traveling to the forest of Gundoon to the dead city within."

"Gundoon?" Kor-Etath asked with both surprise and incredulity. He was silent for several moments, thinking. There was something he remembered about Gundoon. "Ahhh, he is after the Jewel. Ellrun."

The Roduran stood up to face his lord.

"Ellrun, how many days does it take to travel to Gundoon?"

"A Roduran can make the journey in six days. A Skellian may take six days more."

"Then we will wait."

"And if he returns with the Jewel? The writings of long ago teach that with the Jewel one may defend against all magic. The Korisheray will have no effect on him."

"Do you doubt me, Ellrun?" Kor-Etath asked. His voice was almost teasing. Almost. There was an edge to it. "This one who would not kill in The Contest is not a threat. If he should fail, I will have no defender of the Skellians. But if he should succeed, if he should bring back the Jewel, then it will be mine when I kill him. The Jewel of Andar has great power, Ellrun. Who would dare oppose my will when I have it?"

Kor-Etath laughed in his chamber, a laugh that bordered on madness. He stood from his throne and walked up to his counselor. Kor-Etath placed his hands on the shoulders of the Roduran and looked him in the eyes. The Roduran flinched only slightly.

"Let him bring back the Jewel, Ellrun. Wish him the speed of the wind. When he returns I will rule Andar forever."



## Chapter 4

Vornur returned an hour later. He ate in silence. Robert let him eat before saying anything. He wasn't sure if Vornur felt awkward now with them and he did not want to risk anything. He valued the Roduran's advice, friendship, and strength. He was relieved when the Roduran finally spoke. His voice was the same as it always was.

"We will need to cross the river. The Argullians will be waiting up and down from our location. It is perhaps half a day to a point farther down where we can cross safely. It will cost us a day."

"There is no other way across?" Robert asked. "No bridge?"

"The Argullians have not allowed it," Mandu said. "They have taken workers and torn down any bridge that we have tried."

"Then finding you has been a great help," Robert replied with a slight smile. "We perhaps would have become victims ourselves had you not been here. It is good fortune for all of us."

There was a moment of silent assent and hidden meaning that then passed. Robert realized then that both Mandu and Vornur were waiting for his next statement. That Mandu acquiesced to him was not entirely unexpected given what Vornur had named him, but that Vornur, who had taught him, now deferred to him made Robert uneasy. He had relied on the Roduran's direction for two years and now found that without it he felt somewhat lost.

"Is it safe to travel along this river?" he asked them both.

"With three of us armed, we should not be troubled," Vornur replied.

"Then let us begin our way. We should travel as long as we can, even after dark, to hasten our journey. We do not know how much time is left."

Vornur stood and began to lead them downstream at his usual pace. Mandu fell in behind him and Robert after her. He thought he was being chivalrous in bringing up the rear and perhaps being there to slow Vornur down if needed, but she seemed in as good condition as the Roduran and he was the one who had to urge them to slacken the pace just a bit, and not just because of the wound in his leg that, though not healed completely, caused him little trouble. It caused him more than a bit of embarrassment, but Mandu smiled at him indicating that it was okay and he felt better. He made a mental note to pick up jogging just in case he ever needed to do this again.

The sun was beginning to set when they arrived at the place in the river where Vornur indicated it was too shallow for the Argullians to get to them. Vornur took to the air to oversee the safety of their crossing, and Robert and Mandu waded across, the water coming about to their waists as they did. When they were across they stopped for a short rest and drink.

"In this area of the forest," began Vornur, "like the forest near the caves, there are few dangers. We can travel as long as we wish and sleep where we stop in safety."

"What about food?" asked Robert, whose stomach noted that they had eaten nothing since the Argullian perhaps six hours back.

For an answer, Mandu stood up and looked around. Seeing something in a tree, she asked Robert for his bow and arrow. She fitted an arrow and aimed. There was a small squeal and then a soft thud. She handed Robert the bow and trotted a short distance away, returning with a small animal that resembled a fat, hairless squirrel.

"Pokombe," she said simply.

"Pokombe," Robert repeated to Vornur, stating it as though it was obvious.

Mandu smiled, apparently understanding the little joke. Vornur simply stared in his expressionless manner.

A few moments later they had a fire going and the creature on a stick. As they ate, Robert asked questions of Mandu. There was so much about her that he wanted to know. Why had she not wanted to marry anyone? How were her parents associated with Kor-Etath? Where did she learn to fight with a sword and use a bow and arrow? And what was it about him that had attracted her? That part had been his own ego, but he asked it anyway.

She had been as honest with him as his understanding of the language allowed. On a couple occasions Vornur had had to provide explanation for words Robert did not understand. Her grandfather had been an advisor to Kor-Etath and had brought his family to live at the palace at Jankor. He had indulged them in the books gathered there, giving them access to all the learning of Andar. In the end, this had brought the ire of Kor-Etath down on him. Apparently the history of Andar beyond the greatness of Kor-Etath had angered him. He had banished the family and killed the grandfather. They had gone to live in a forest village of the dar-Skellians. Even as a dar-Skellian, Kor-Etath was not a favored son, as his demands had become burdensome to all races. Her family had at first been unwelcome in the village, but as time passed her grandmother had achieved a sort of peace within the village so that she could raise her family there. The peace had been at a price. Her family had lived on the outskirts of the village closest to the forest and any danger that might come from there. Her father had been a great hunter and had earned respect from all the village. He had taught his family, including his eldest daughter, how to hunt and defend herself with the sword. He had hoped that her beauty and skills would allow her to marry into the family of a village elder and finally allow the family to become a true part of the village and move away from the edge. On the night before she had come of age, she had had such a terrible dream, a sort of premonition, that she knew she must leave the village. She did not want to leave her family, but she could not stay and there were none among those to whom she might be wed that appealed in any way to her. She finished by stating that she did not know why she had been so attracted to him, an outworlder, but she had, and it had felt right.

"I trust I can live up to your feelings and experience," Robert said softly.

"I do not doubt it, Kor-EIn," she said, staring into his eyes.

The faith she had already put in him made Robert both giddy and embarrassed. It was also uncomfortable to be called 'Kor-EIn.' He knew at some point he would have to speak to Vornur about it. He was certain that the mantle of 'Bringer of Light' was one he did not want to wear.

He wasn't sure how to respond to Mandu, but was saved when Vornur stood up.

"It is time to go," he said. "We have lost many hours."

Relieved, Robert quickly got to his feet. Mandu stood next to him. They fell in line and began their trek through the dark forest. They moved for about four hours before they became too tired. Despite their relative quiet, it had surprised Robert that they had not seen or heard any animals. Vornur assured him that there had been animals about, but the three of them, being in a group and larger than most, were entirely safe. They found a small area that was obscured from view by bushes and settled down to sleep. Robert lay next to Mandu, feeling her warmth. For the moment his thoughts were not on fighting a duel with a ruler who had only been wounded once in a thousand years or finding a legendary jewel that would protect him from a magic spell; he only wondered if he snored and if Mandu would mind. Then he was asleep.

They woke shortly after sunrise, refreshed themselves, then set off again. Vornur said if they quickened their pace they would leave the forest by the end of the day and be on the Great Plains of Andar. They could sleep at the forest's edge, then begin the longest part of their journey after that. Robert thought to himself that a quickened pace was one of the last things he needed, but he nodded. Then they were off.

Near midday their pace made them burst onto a herd of animals in the forest that were akin to small deer and stood about knee high. The animals began to scatter in all directions as Robert quickly fitted an arrow to his bow. He was able to get off one arrow that hit one of the animals in the left rear flank as it ran off. Vornur went after it. He returned about 15 minutes later with the creature. It had a fresh slit on its throat.

"Too slow," Vornur said to Robert when he returned. "We have more work to do with the bow and arrow. Perhaps it is best if Mandu takes them as she is more familiar with them."

Vornur's flat tone as he finished didn't make the words any easier for Robert to take. In fact, the words would have been a blow to Robert's ego had he and Mandu not already spoken of it while Vornur was gone. She had, very gently, told him that his aim was good but that it seemed he was not comfortable with the weapon. She had been so sweet about it that all he could do was concede that the bow and arrow was his least favorite weapon. It was he who had asked her to take them.

They cooked the *ornam* and ate it quickly, then rested for a few minutes. Mandu asked Robert, Kor-Eln, about his world. It was hard to explain it to her. There were so many things in it that he took for granted that were not present on Andar. Cars and airplanes were concepts that she could almost understand, though they were fantastical. Not having ever been mechanically inclined himself, Robert could find no real way to communicate to her how they worked. Computers were something that just did not even enter into something she could comprehend. When he compared them to a combination of books and Vornur that sat on a table, she had laughed delightedly. She did not understand, but the idea was extremely funny to her. Robert laughed with her. After over two years on Andar he found many of the things he had occupied his time with were simply unimportant. If he ever did rule Andar, he would make sure that technology remained a fantasy.

Feeling rested, the three stood up and began to move again at Vornur's pace, a near run. They covered the ground swiftly and once again surprised a herd of ornams. Robert had been focusing on the fleeing creatures when he thought of Mandu. As his head turned to her she

already had an arrow fitted. An instant later it flew out, striking an ornam just behind its front leg as it turned to run. The shot was almost perfect. A moment later the ornam lay dead on the ground. Robert had to admire her ability. She was tremendously gifted with the bow and arrow. They field dressed the creature, slung it over Vornur's shoulders, then were off again.

Near sunset the forest began to thin out. Vornur signaled them to stop. They gathered wood, made a fire, and began to cook the ornam.

"We are near the Great Plains," Vornur said as he slowly turned the animal. "It is maybe another hour away. Our travel will be much easier then. The way is far. Five days in the Great Plains."

"And then Gundoon," Robert said softly.

No one said anything. The city was lost not because of its location, but because no one had ventured to go there in many decades. Of those that had attempted the journey, the very few that had returned to tell their tale had never made it to the city.

"We will need to conserve water," Vornur said after a while. "It will be hot and dry. There will be one stream that we will encounter two days from now where we can drink. That will be all until we reach the forest of Gundoon."

"How safe are the Great Plains?" Mandu asked. "Can we travel at night? That will help to conserve water."

"There is little to fear there," Vornur replied. "If we sleep during the day and travel at night we need not worry."

"Then we should travel as much as we can tonight," Robert stated.

Mandu and Vornur both nodded. Filling their skin pouches at a stream and drinking their fill, the three set off. An hour later, as the light of the two suns left the sky, they exited the forest and came upon the Great Plains of Andar. They paused in the starlight, looking out over the great expanse of almost level ground filled only with small bushes and grass. There was nothing to be seen, only vast emptiness.

They were able to travel for about six more hours before exhaustion took over. They each took as small a drink of water as they could to slake their thirst, then curled up to sleep using the skin of the two ornams to cover their heads throughout the day. They endured the smell knowing that the midday sun would be too draining on them otherwise.

Two nights later they arrived at the stream. Their skin pouches were empty at this time, as were their stomachs, and they drank with abandonment. Then they sat still and waited, Mandu with an arrow at the ready. An hour after the two suns had risen she had managed to shoot four creatures. Each was about the size and shape of a large gopher and made meager fare, but far better than nothing. They were cooked over a fire made from grass and eaten quickly. The three slept through the day, drank one last time from the stream, then began the trek once more toward Gundoon. Two nights later the forest, a blackness looming against a starlit horizon, came into view. Vornur halted them.

"We must not enter the forest at night or get too close," he said. "We will sleep here and enter during daylight."

Neither Robert nor Mandu said anything. Over the last several days they had asked Vornur what he knew about Gundoon. He had told what he knew, though it seemed very little. As they looked at the darkness ahead of them, Vornur's tales of the forest of Gundoon filled their minds and it seemed that even at a distance the forest gave off an aura of malice. The three sat down.

"Many years ago," Mandu began quietly, "when I was a child, I read of an adventurer who had gone into the forest of Gundoon. With him were 20 others, all brave and strong. They were seeking the lost city. It has been rumored for generations that the lost city is that of the first Andarans, the Manturs, the lizard men. They were the only race strong enough to survive in the forest. There, safe from the other races, they hoarded their treasures. That is what the adventurer believed. Only three men came out of the forest. Half were lost on the first night, devoured by the creeping mist. Four others were killed the next day by Pantuens. Not the Pantuens that we know; a taller, stronger race of them that lived on the ground and moved with great speed. The remaining seekers retreated from the forest. The story does not say how the other four died."

"The story would have us believe the Manturs killed the other four," Vornur said after a pause.

"Who are the Manturs?" Robert asked. "I do not recall reading anything of them."

"There is little written of them," Mandu said. "They are spoken of only as images from a time long past."

"In truth, there is little known about them. Many times they were mentioned as a myth to scare younglings into behavior," Vornur continued. "They were a powerful race and tolerated none. Yet for all their strength, the teachings that mentioned them tell that they chose not to rule Andar and instead kept themselves secreted away. Those that saw them were lucky to live. Little more than tales, Kor-Eln. There are no records of anyone having ever seen a Mantur since before the Skellians ruled Andar."

"But if they were still alive," Robert said slowly, "Gundoon would be the best place for them to live. Is that why Kor-Etath has not ventured to the forest? Does he believe the Manturs still live?"

"If they do, they would still be the most powerful race on Andar," Vornur answered without truly answering.

"Powerful enough to help overthrow Kor-Etath?"

"The Manturs allied with none," Mandu said. "If they are in Gundoon, it is on purpose."

"If they even exist anymore," Robert added, a little disheartened. A powerful ally was what he felt he really needed.

"Let us hope they do not," Vornur said. "That is a danger no living creature has known."

There was little more said. If Gundoon was every bit as dangerous as the tales would lead them to believe, then the Manturs were the most dangerous of all races on Andar. Encountering them would be the stuff of nightmares. The three lay down to sleep. Despite his exertions during the last week, Robert found it hard to go to sleep.

"What is it, Kor-EIn?" Mandu whispered. "Why do you not sleep?"

"I don't know for certain," he whispered back. "Part of me wants to jump up and run into the forest, to get the Jewel of Andar, and rush back to face Kor-Etath. Part of me is afraid that we will all die at the hands of the Manturs."

"You believe the Manturs live in the forest?" she asked quietly.

"I believe Vornur does as well. I have lived with him for more than two years and know a little of his ways. I have not heard him deny anything that he did not have reason for. Yet he has not ever said the Manturs do not still live. If he thought they were gone, he would say so. Mandu, when I first learned of Kor-Etath from the Skellians, they told me he had been wounded but once in a thousand years. They have been fighting him for a thousand years, Mandu, but have only wounded him once. Yet even he has not dared to enter the forest. The mist and creatures of the forest would not frighten one such as he. If I would face them, certainly he would as well. But how am I, are we, supposed to go into the forest where he would not? He must know that we have gone, and he has not tried to stop us. He is certain either that what we seek does not exist or that we will never return to face him. He is certain that the Manturs still rule in Gundoon."

She sat up and looked at him. Despite the lack of a moon in the Andaran sky, the stars were many and shined down bright enough for Robert to make out the concern on her face. She looked at him for a moment, saying nothing, then raised a hand to his cheek.

"What else?" she asked. "You have fought in The Contest, facing races that would not have hesitated to kill you. I do not believe that the Manturs are your greatest fear."

He looked at her and managed a thin smile.

"Yes, you are right, Mandu. I wish I knew the words in your tongue to explain it."

"Think of the word," she said.

Robert fixed the word in his mind.

"Destiny," she said in Andaran. "Why do you fear yours?"

For some reason her ability to penetrate his mind did not bother him.

"I am afraid that you and Vornur are right, that I will have to rule Andar, at least for a time." He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I'm not a ruler, Mandu. On my world I was just another person, one of many. I'm not special. I'm not as afraid of failing as I am at succeeding."

"You will not be like him, Kor-EIn."

"How do you know that? How do you know what I will become if I succeed? I've never done this before. I might be worse."

She smiled at him so broadly that he thought she was about to laugh and wake up Vornur.

"I know," she began in a voice that resonated as much in his head as in his ears, "because I have chosen you and you me. Your heart does not beat for the throne or long for killing. You did not choose this quest for glory or honor or even to appease the Skellians. Vornur does not travel with you because he seeks to be an advisor to the next ruler of Andar. What you were on your other world does not matter here, now. It may even be of benefit in that you know how it is to be ruled and not the ruler. I do not know what the future holds, Kor-EIn. I only know that you, I, and even Kor-Etath cannot run from our destiny. Every path we take is the one we are meant to be on. Just as I thought I was running away from being wed, only to find you, you shall find that whatever lies in the forest of Gundoon is there for you."

Robert could only look at her. He wondered how he had lived as long as he had without her, and how he would ever live if she were not with him.

"I love you, Mandu," he said in English.

She looked quizzically at him. He said the words again in his mind, focusing on them. Her look changed and softened.

"I love you, Kor-EIn," she said in halting English.

He held her in his arms and together they fell asleep.

Early the next morning Vornur woke them. The Roduran said nothing as the three stood and stretched. Robert sensed the unease within his friend and mentor. He turned to Mandu.

"We will go together," she said firmly, reading his thoughts.

He smiled at her, thankful for her companionship, skill, and support.

"Let us go, Vornur," he said. "We must travel as far as we can before sunset."

The forest was two hours away, which had given them a chance to hunt a couple *simems*, the gopher-like creatures, and eat before entering. Though the food did not fill them completely, within the forest they did not want to risk hunting. At the edge of the forest they slowed their pace and entered at a walk. The sounds were like any other forest, with birds, insects, and other creatures making noises in the beginning of the day. Robert caught himself more than once holding his breath and turning at every sound with a hand on his sword. Mandu walked between them and seemed the most calm. Her dar-Skellian vision let her see past the trees and other obstacles to help avoid ambush.

"We are being watched," she whispered about an hour into the forest.

"By what?" Robert asked.

"A small Pantuen, to the right. It has been following us for several minutes."

Robert and Vornur slowly turned to the right. The trees had already become so clustered together from the edge of the forest that seeing any distance in any direction was difficult, but as they moved they caught a glimpse of a fast-moving Pantuen, on the ground, about 50 feet away. They continued walking. A few minutes later there was a space among the trees. Vornur suddenly stood straight up and turned toward the Pantuen. It froze in open view, then turned and ran at amazing speed deep into the forest.

"They will be more wary of us," Vornur said softly. "If they cannot surprise us, they may not try to come for us at all."

Robert left unsaid what he was thinking. There was another option. If they could not surprise them, they would come in force. He wondered if Vornur and Mandu thought the same thing.

They encountered only one other creature of significance that day. While resting under a tree, Robert happened to look up toward the sun when the thing came into view. It blended in so perfectly with the dark green leaves of the tree it was on that at first he thought he was seeing things from hunger or exhaustion. When it was seen it paused, just long enough to allow Robert time to tense up. When it came at him, he dodged out of the way. The thing landed with a thump where he was. A tail whipped out toward his legs. Robert jumped back from his prone position on the ground, but the tail hit his left leg, leaving a series of small scratches. The thing pulled its tail back to make another swipe as Robert quickly scrambled to his feet, unsheathing his sword as he did.

The thing paused, giving Robert an opportunity to look at his attacker. It looked, in many respects, like a large snake, but a closer look showed a difference. Instead of just sliding along, the thing had numerous small legs at its sides, like a centipede. Some of them were tucked in, while others were out. Robert understood what had made the scratches on his leg. As the thing coiled up to get in position for a strike or charge, Robert looked to Vornur and Mandu. He saw Vornur with a hand on her arm, restraining her. The Roduran was testing him.

"I get it," Robert said loud enough for them to hear.

Robert pulled his dagger out with his left hand. Doubly armed, he approached the creature. It reared up at him, much like a snake, and hissed, its arms waving at him. Robert let fly with his dagger at the creature. His aim was true, even though it had little force. The dagger stuck in perhaps an inch, but it was enough. As the creature looked down at it, Robert moved in with his sword. He severed the head with one swing and then backed away as the thing, headless, writhed in the throes of death. A minute later it was over.

"Well done," Vornur said as he stood. "I have not seen the likes of this animal before. How did you see it?"

Mandu walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. She looked at his leg. There was no sign of any poison, only scratches.

"Chance, luck," Robert answered.

"Destiny," Mandu whispered. "Had it moved for one of us, our party would be one less now."

Robert shrugged.



"Maybe," he answered back.

He walked over to the creature and retrieved his dagger. He wiped the blade in the grass, then wiped his sword and sheathed them both.

"Do you think this thing is edible?" Robert asked Vornur.

"All creatures are edible," Vornur replied. "Let us cut it and take it with us. Before nightfall we can make a fire to cook it. I do not wish to attract attention at this time."

They cut three pieces from the creature, each about eight inches long. The girth of the creature was such that each piece, when cooked, would still weigh more than a pound and would be enough to give them a good meal for the first time in days. The rest they left, hoping the smell would distract other creatures in the forest that might not be as easy to dispatch.

As the suns drew close to the horizon and were lost amid the trees, they gathered wood for a fire and cooked the meat. It had little taste and even fully cooked was the consistency of jelly, but food was food and they ate it without much complaint, though without enthusiasm. They moved for another half hour or so to get them clear of the fire and the smell of the meat, then found sturdy trees and climbed into them. They used strips of cloth and branches to make sure they were lashed securely to the trees, then tried their best to get comfortable. A short time later, after the suns had fully set, the forest was dark.

They had started to get comfortable when a noise woke them. In the stillness of the dark forest it sounded like a small stream, but it was moving and coming closer. They watched as a mist came slowly over the ground. It moved in and around the base of the trees, always coming back into a thick whitish cloud.

"The creeping mist," Mandu whispered.

They watched it in silence. It moved toward them, its shapeless form seeming to send tendrils out to the sides in search of prey. It was perhaps 30 feet from the front to the back and at any point in time at least another 10-15 feet wide in any of several places. It came to the tree where they were and seemed to pause. Part of it seemed to begin coming up the tree. Robert reflexively moved, trying to get away from this silent killer. But it apparently wasn't solid enough to support itself and could get no farther than about a foot up the trunk. Curious, Robert broke off a small twig and tossed it down. With a speed that startled him, the entire mist converged on it in a solid white glob. A moment later it returned to its previous form and slowly moved away. The twig was intact but glistened now in the starlight.

"How does one kill something like that?" Robert asked Vornur. "It has some substance, but no shape."

"When it chased the twig, it had substance then. I would think that would be the time to strike."

"Strike where?"

Vornur looked at him without answering, the Roduran equivalent to so many things, but in this case a shrug of the shoulders. Robert turned to Mandu.

"As many places as you could," she answered. "As quickly as you could."

Robert found more reason to love her every minute. Her sense of humor was refreshing, and her calmness in the face of danger was reassuring. For the first time Robert allowed himself to believe that with her at his side he might just succeed.

Robert slept little that night. The forest was so quiet that every noise woke him from his almost comfortable position. Three more creeping mists passed beneath their tree during the night, though Robert was only sure that one was different from the others, being much smaller while the others were all about the same size. He was also slowly being overcome by a sense of closing danger. By the time light began to permeate the foliage around them he was feeling like a great weight was on him.

"Let us go," he said in a hurried whisper.

"What is wrong?" Mandu asked.

"I do not know," Robert replied. "I just feel that we need to go, fast."

They were quickly down the tree and heading off into the forest. Mandu took a moment to look around but could see nothing.

"He has a sense," Vornur explained. "We must hurry."

They went off at almost a dead run. Branches scraped them as they went, but they did not slow down. They paused long enough for a drink at a stream and to refill their skin pouches, then were running again. An hour later Mandu spoke.

"Pantuens are behind us," she said through breaths.

Robert glanced behind them. The trees were thick, but every few seconds he caught a glimpse of a dark brown shape. They were gaining.

"We cannot outrun them," Vornur said over his shoulder. "We must find a place to make a stand."

As they looked and continued to run, Mandu informed them every few moments of the situation. There were at least a dozen of them. They had come in strength.

An opening loomed ahead and when the three got in it they stopped. With Mandu between them, Robert and Vornur pulled their daggers and swords and stood back to back. Mandu told them the Pantuens were arranging themselves in a circle around them. There were more than twenty now.

"Stay low," Robert said to them. "And strike at the stomach."

One came out of the trees. Like the other Pantuens it was dark brown and hairless, but it was much larger, perhaps eight feet tall as it stood on its hind legs. The arms were shorter while the legs were longer. These were not arboreal. Robert hoped they had not developed too much more density in their bodies from their cousins. If they were as strong as they looked and tough, this was going to be a short battle.

Robert reacted, swinging his dagger above his head even as he ducked. It caught something, stuck for a moment, then continued moving. A Pantuen had moved in from the side. As the creature howled, Robert kicked at its stomach. It was not as soft as the stomach of the one he had fought, but the kick was still greatly effective. The creature doubled over. A thrust from Vornur found its heart. The bushes and trees around them began to rustle.

"They will rush us now," Vornur said.

Robert put his hand behind his back and handed his dagger to Mandu.

"Strike as many as you can," he said without taking his eyes from the Pantuen in front of him. A tear came to his eye. "I wish we had more time."

Something whizzed by Robert's ear and struck the Pantuen in front of him in the chest. It dropped like a stone. There were several more whizzes. The trees seemed alive as the Pantuens took to flight. A moment later nothing moved.

"Manturs," Mandu breathed.

A moment later three of them entered the clearing. They walked on their back legs, thick green tails behind them. They wore dark brown cloaks that covered them from head to foot. The one closest to them pulled back the hood of its cloak. Robert found himself staring face to face with an enormous scaled gecko. In its left hand was a bow. Strapped across its back was a quiver of arrows. Around its waist was a belt with a short sword and dagger. It stood staring at them for a moment, then made a motion with its free hand. Four more Manturs came from the surrounding trees. The group picked up the fallen Pantuen and two others from within the trees.

"Come," it said.

There was no thought of arguing. Even had it not been for saving their lives, the display they had just put on showed the Manturs were every bit as lethal as legends held them out to be.

The three fell in behind the Mantur and followed it out of the clearing. As they moved they noticed there were several other Manturs. It seemed to Robert that this had been a hunting party. But what manner of creature would actually hunt these deadly Pantuens?

Robert watched in awe as the cloaked creatures moved silently and smoothly through the forest. They turned their heads from side to side, but not with worry or concern. In a way it was like watching them survey their kingdom. Two hours later the forest abruptly ended in open space. Several hundred feet from the edge of the forest was the lost city. Gray stone buildings, each no more than ten feet in height, filled their sight. In the middle of the city, perhaps a mile from where they exited the forest, a large, pyramid-shaped structure rose above the other buildings. While most of the party went different directions, two Manturs led them toward this building with two more behind them. There had been about a dozen Manturs total. That they hadn't tried to disarm Robert, Vornur, or Mandu was a sure sign of their confidence in their abilities and their numbers.

Their pace was now a fast walk and Robert was able to look around as they moved through the city. There was very little activity on the outskirts of the city, but as they moved further

toward the middle, they could see more Manturs walking and going about their daily routines. There were Manturs of all sizes, most of them armed, carrying food and other items, and down one alley Robert caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a sort of open-air market. Everywhere they went the Manturs would pause in what they were doing to look at them, then return to their business.

"We do not seem to warrant much attention," Robert said in a low voice.

"We are no threat to them," Vornur said back.

"Then where are they taking us?" Robert asked.

"To their leader," Vornur answered. "There is no other reason for them to have brought us here."

Robert looked at Mandu walking between them. He wondered what she saw with her total vision. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of Manturs here in the city. Still, he noticed that she did not seem uneasy at all. Her pace was even with those of their captors -- or protectors -- and she only looked at him every once in a while with reassurance. It amazed him that she could be so calm when in the presence of the oldest and most powerful race on Andar, a race that legend had it did not tolerate others.

They arrived at the pyramid perhaps ten minutes later. Up close they could see that the pyramid was perhaps six levels high, and every other level was open to the elements. They halted several paces from the entrance which was guarded by two tall Manturs. They were large in both height and width, and they held long spears. At their sides were two long swords. The leader of the party approached them. He spoke in a language none of them understood. One of the guards entered the pyramid. Robert noticed in the time he was gone how quiet the city was. He looked back and could see Manturs moving around, but there was almost total silence. A moment later the guard returned and made a quick motion with his hand. The lead Matur of the party turned to them.

"We enter," it said.

Robert, Vornur, and Mandu followed the Matur in front of them into the pyramid with one Matur behind them. The other two Manturs turned and went back into the city.

There was a slight noise level within the pyramid, and as they moved about there were clusters of two, three, or more Manturs standing together and conversing in their language. Most were unarmed, but there were a few with long swords or daggers. They turned right and entered a doorway that led to a staircase. The steps were far apart but low, and as such the staircase made a wide circle as they went up. They passed two doorways and entered the third. They were led down a hallway and stopped outside a door. The lead Matur motioned them to wait as he opened the door, went in, then closed it behind him. A few moments later the Matur came back out. It held the door open and motioned for them to enter.

It was a sort of royal chamber. The room was large and spacious, but there was little in it. On the walls were carvings of Manturs, some in battle and some doing other things. There was a raised dais at the far end of the room on which sat the only real item of any treasure, a bench made of some sort of gleaming gem. Robert looked at it, but with the sunlight coming in it was

impossible for him to tell if the gem the bench was made from was bright red, red, or dark red. They were led before the dais and stood in front of it. From their left another Mantur entered the room. If the ones that had escorted them were like geckos, then this Mantur was a crocodile. He was giant in stature and breadth. He moved with a fluidity that was particular to the Manturs, yet he was slightly slower. Whether from his size or age Robert could only guess. The other difference was his eyes. Whereas the eyes of the other Manturs had been dark brown, this one's eyes were a deep red, similar to the bench on which he now sat.

The Mantur that had led them bowed slightly and took three steps up the dais. He spoke again in the language of the Manturs, then stepped back. The large Mantur took his time in looking at the three before him. When he at last spoke, he spoke slowly and his voice was so deep that it seemed the entire room rumbled. Robert thought he could actually feel the floor move with the words.

"I see before me two of the races of Andar and an outworlder. Speak now and tell me for what reason you have come to the last true city of Andar."

For a city that had been 'lost' for so long, it surprised Robert that this Mantur recognized him as an outworlder and not a Skellian.

Vornur bowed as he had seen the Mantur do and stepped forward to speak.

"Not you," the Mantur said before Vornur could speak. "Since the time when we roamed all Andar the Rodurans have been known to speak only truth, and only the truth that they wish to be known. I will ask you what I wish to know."

Vornur stepped back. Robert wondered if Vornur was offended. He bowed and stepped forward.

"We have come seeking the Jewel of Andar," Robert said simply.

There was no reaction from anyone in the room, but there was a moment of silence that seemed telling. Robert opened his mouth to say more.

"Enough," the Mantur said. Then he turned to Vornur. "For what purpose does the outworlder seek the Jewel?"

"He seeks it for protection against the Korisheray when he does battle with Kor-Etath," Vornur answered.

"For what reason do you seek to battle Kor-Etath?" the Mantur continued, facing Robert again. "As an outworlder you can have no quarrel with him."

"I have been told that he seeks to destroy all Skellians. I have made a promise to them that I will try to stop that from happening."

"It is the Skellians who are responsible for Kor-Etath," the Mantur said, repeating what Robert had learned all too clearly in his short stay on Andar. "Why should they not pay for their crime? And who is this that travels with you? She is a dar-Skellian, of the race of Kor-Etath."

Would she see you strike down her kinsman in order to place the Skellians back on the throne?"

Mandu made a bow to the Mantur.

"He will not put the Skellians on the throne," she answered. "He has promised only to keep them alive. He bears no ill will to any dar-Skellian, even Kor-Etath."

"What do you know of him?" the Mantur challenged her.

"I know his mind and his heart, and that they are true," she replied in a firm voice. "He is Kor-Eln, and the one to whom I have given myself."

The Mantur on the bench and the one next to them both looked at Robert. There was a tense silence in the room that made him extremely uncomfortable. After several long moments, the Mantur on the throne spoke.

"Manturs do not live by prophecy or the words of the dead. We have reigned supreme on Andar for thousands of generations not only by our strength, but by our wisdom as well. The knowledge of the Manturs runs deeper than the waters of Andar. We have given and we have taken away. The Jewel of Andar has been guarded and kept by us alone, keeping us free from the foolishness of the other races. You have been given the name of Bringer of Balance, and by your companions I see that to be true. You have shown courage, strength, and determination, coming from the stronghold of the deep forest Skellians, across the Great Plains, and through the forest of Gundoon. You have fought with a Pantuen of the forest and slain it with only a dagger. Yet in your heart I see not the desire to rule Andar, but to live simply and in peace. I offer that to you, Kor-Eln, here in the city of the Manturs. You and your friends are welcome among us."

The Mantur finished speaking and waited. Robert looked first to Vornur. As he expected, the Roduran's face held no sign or signal. He looked at Mandu. She met his gaze and he could feel her thoughts. It was a great and generous offer. There would be a lifetime of peace without struggle. It was a chance to live among the oldest and most powerful race of Andar.

*"I will accept whatever choice you make,"* came her voice in his head.

It seemed ideal. Here was what he truly wanted, a lifetime of peace with Mandu. But his thoughts returned to the Skellians and to the promise he had made. There would be no peace inside him if he stayed here and allowed them to die at the hands of Kor-Etath. Robert bowed low.

"I am grateful for your kind offer, but I cannot accept," he said slowly. "I must return."

What might have passed for a smile slowly came to the Mantur's face.

"I would have died with you," Mandu said quietly, motioning with her head behind them.

Robert turned and saw three Manturs lowering their bows.

"You could have said something," Robert said.

"The choice had to be yours, Kor-Eln," she said back.

Robert gave her a little shrug.

"Well, at least you trust me."

The Mantur stood from his bench and came toward them. Robert denied the urge to take a step back as the large lizard man came within a few feet of him. He seemed huge from a distance, but up close he was larger than even the Pantuens.

"None other than a Mantur has ever seen or touched the Jewel," he said in a low voice. "None other than a Mantur has ever taken the Jewel of Andar."

The Mantur on the side suddenly took a half step forward. He and the larger Mantur began to converse in their language. Every few moments one of them would look at Robert. Then the large Mantur caught sight of Mandu. His left eye, on the side where the other Mantur was, blinked once and the conversation stopped. The large Mantur looked at Mandu for several moments. Reflexively Robert's hand went to his sword hilt. The Mantur to his right was just slightly taller than he was. But he would go for the large one if he had to. Then he felt Mandu's hand touch his arm.

"It is okay," she said.

"No other race," began the large Mantur, looking only at Mandu, "knows our tongue. How is it that you understand us?"

Robert couldn't help but be further impressed by her composure. The Mantur's tone was not menacing, but he had already sounded friendly when they had arrows pointed at their backs.

"It is true that I do not know your tongue," she answered, "but I can understand your thoughts."

The large Mantur said nothing, then turned and walked up the dais and out the side door he had come through. The other Mantur next to them followed a moment later. The three Manturs behind them came forward.

"Come," one of them said.

They were led from the chamber down a flight of stairs to a room with several benches and tables. They were placed at one and a few moments later food was brought to them. The three Manturs sat far from them and conversed in their language in low tones.

"Um, okay," Robert began, "what happened back there? Can you really read their thoughts?"

"It is a gift of many dar-Skellians," Vornur answered for her. "I have heard of it among their own race and with certain animals. To understand thoughts between races is a rare gift though."

"My parents taught me to let none know that my gift was so strong."

"You can read my thoughts too?" Robert asked, feeling suddenly uneasy.

She smiled at him.

"I do not listen," she answered.

"What were they speaking of?" Vornur interrupted before Robert could say anything.

"There is a test the Manturs undergo to prove their maturity. If they pass they are allowed access to the Jewel. The leader, Ruan-dul, wanted Kor-Eln to undergo the test. But his son, Ruan-urn, wanted a different test."

Robert waited for more. When Mandu said nothing his first thought was to ask, but it was just as quickly replaced by a warning that perhaps he didn't want to know.

"What is the test?" Vornur asked for him.

"At the time of maturity," Mandu began, "a Mantur is placed in a pit with a Pantuen. He is given the choice of a single weapon with which to fight. Survival is proof of coming of age. Ruan-urn did not want that. He said that Kor-Eln had already passed such a test."

"Then what more could he want?" Robert asked, unable to stop himself.

"He asked to fight with you himself," Mandu answered, looking up at him.

Robert suddenly had no appetite. Mandu placed a hand on his arm. He looked at her and wondered why she did not look as awful as he felt. His fight with the Pantuen in the forest had been more luck than skill. A feeling had told him to duck and strike. What chance did he possibly have against a Mantur, the son of their leader, who had fought and defeated a Pantuen with skill? Why did it seem that facing Kor-Etath 10 days ago would have been the least dangerous choice he could have made?

"There is a reason," Mandu said gently. "Had Ruan-urn wanted to kill you he could have done it in the forest."

"I do not understand," Robert said shaking his head.

"There can be only one reason," Vornur stated. "Ruan-urn does not want the Jewel to leave the city. By doing combat with you he can assure that will not happen."

Anguish washed over Robert and he felt like crying. He had come so far, risked so much. For what? So he could leave the city with nothing and die three weeks later than before?

"How am I supposed to defeat Kor-Etath without the Jewel? I could have just gone out to die without it and not risked everything."

Mandu put her arm around his shoulders. Her touch was a comfort to him.

"Ruan-urn has his reasons," she repeated. "I cannot read his thoughts as clearly as those of Ruan-dul, but I do know that he wants more for the Manturs than life in a hidden city. What part he sees for you I do not know. I only know that he does not seek your death."

"Then at least I will live to die fighting Kor-Etath."



Mandu smiled at him and he felt stupid for doubting even though he had no answers.

"The Skellians ruled Andar for two thousand years, Kor-EIn," she said. "Kor-Etath defeated them, a race of great magic, without the Korisheray. There is a way, Kor-EIn. Too many have put faith and trust in you for this task to be impossible with or without the Jewel."

He reached to the hand over his shoulders and held it firmly in his. He did not try to stop the tears that came to his eyes. He could think of nothing to say, so he simply turned to her and hugged her close.

An hour later they were in an arena behind the pyramid-shaped building. It was large enough to seat several thousand Manturs around it, but there were only a few present. Ruan-dul and Ruan-urn were present, as were about five other Manturs. Robert wondered if this was a private event or if the conclusion was so foregone that no one bothered. He was offered the choice of weapons and chose a dagger. There was a reason for that. If he somehow managed to win, he hoped that any injury he inflicted would be minor enough to heal. It would not do to have the Manturs angry at him. By the same account, if he should lose, he hoped any wounds he might suffer would also not be fatal. Robert noticed that the dagger the Mantur had was very ornate and topped with a jewel that resembled the eyes of Ruan-dul in color. It was at that moment that Robert also noticed the eyes of Ruan-urn were not entirely brown themselves.

The two squared off in the arena. Following the advice of Vornur, Robert looked for signs of motion from the Mantur by concentrating on the area of its body just above the legs on which it stood. He managed to avoid most strikes easily and a few minutes in was even able to make an attempt at striking of his own. The Mantur, however, was simply too fast. Ruan-urn was well out of reach by the time Robert's dagger got to where the Mantur had been. Robert then tried running around the Mantur, hoping to catch it off balance or make it trip over its tail. But the Mantur simply raised its tail behind it and kept Robert in front of him. His last hope was that the Mantur was similar to reptiles in that it tired quickly, but that also proved fruitless as ten minutes later Robert found himself slowing down and the Mantur seemed unaffected. When the end came, it was quick. The Mantur lunged at Robert's left side. As Robert moved to his right, the Mantur spun, bringing its tail around. Robert couldn't avoid it and his feet were knocked from beneath him. He landed on his back. A moment later the Mantur sat astride him, one hand holding Robert's dagger pinned to the ground and the other hand holding the jeweled dagger at Robert's throat.

"You fought well, Outworlder," Ruan-urn said. "You will find yourself, and your companions, always welcome here."

Ruan-urn stepped off of Robert, sheathed his dagger, then extended his hand to help Robert to his feet. Robert stood up. He was breathing heavily and his right leg hurt where the tail had struck him. He knew he would have a bruise there as it was already red and beginning to swell. Sardonicly he thought that with the gash on his left leg and the bruise, his limping would even out. Both he and Ruan-urn turned to Ruan-dul and bowed.

"Do not be disappointed," Ruan-urn whispered to him quickly. "Your quest has not been for nothing."

The words were said so low and fast that Robert wasn't sure he had heard. He turned to Ruan-urn, but he was already walking away. He looked at Mandu, but she was in conversation with one of the Manturs and was not looking at him. He limped over to her and Vornur. The Mantur speaking with her said one last thing regarding a meal, then walked off. Mandu turned to him with a look on her face that said she knew much more than she had before. He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off.

"You fought well, Kor-EIn," she said formally. "Were you a Mantur you would be honored for your skill. Ruan-urn is the offspring of their leader. It is no small feat to have fought as long as you did."

He looked at her quizzically, understanding only slightly that she did not want to speak in the open.

"I was only able to strike at him once," he said.

"That is one more time than any Mantur gave you," Vornur said, his voice holding just a tinge of pride.

"It's more time than I gave myself, actually," Robert acknowledged.

That night they ate in a room with Ruan-dul, Ruan-urn, and two other Manturs. All three were asked many questions about the cities of Andar and Robert about his home world. The Manturs seemed mostly disinterested in the affairs outside their city, asking more out of courtesy than actual curiosity. Only Ruan-urn seemed to have any sort of interest, particularly when Vornur and Mandu spoke of Kor-Etath. Later that night, as they settled in a room to sleep, Mandu motioned Robert toward a window. They stood together, arms on the sill, looking up into the sky. They had the appearance of two people enjoying the view and peace of the city.

"Ruan-urn did not wish you harm," she said very softly. "He feared that a Pantuen would certainly kill you, so he offered himself instead. He had seen what had happened in the forest and guessed your slaying of the Pantuen was not entirely skillful." She smiled. "But during the contest with you he let me know that he believes you would have survived against a Pantuen. That is when you were able to strike at him."

Robert smiled back, a bit sheepishly. It had been a large enough blow to his ego to have lost so easily -- he knew the Mantur was not fighting to his greatest ability -- but to hear that it would have been worse had the Mantur not been carrying on a conversation with Mandu during his fight was too much to take with any severity. He consoled himself with the thought that he had simply been fighting a better fighter.

"At least I did not cause us embarrassment," was all he could think to say.

"Ruan-urn wishes the Manturs to become part of Andar once more," she said, turning back to the sky. "It is his belief that there can be no balance among the races without the Manturs. The history of our world would seem to agree with him."

"Is that why the Skellians, and now Kor-Etath, ruled Andar?"

"There was no race that could stop either. The Rodurans could only advise. They had no power to wage a war."

"Who is to stop the Manturs from ruling Andar?"

"They have no interest in ruling Andar," Mandu answered quickly. "They could rule Andar at any time. They are not blind to that fact. And unlike his father, Ruan-urn is not indifferent to the plight of the other races. All races on Andar have a common language. At some point in the past there was some unity on this world. And balance. It was not all due to the Rodurans."

"If that is the case, then why did he beat me? How can I stop Kor-Etath without the Jewel of Andar?"

"He told me one thing more," Mandu said without facing him. "The Korisheray is an old magic. Its true strength has long ago been forgotten. Unless Kor-Etath has discovered a secret that has been lost since before the Skellians ruled, he cannot know enough of it to use it at its full power."

"The little he seems to know has been more than enough."

Mandu turned to look at him. The starlight reflected off her eyes and gave them a shine that made them look like two lights of their own.

"Ruan-urn wished me to tell you that no friend of the Manturs has ever been left alone in battle."

"He will come with us?" Robert asked with renewed hope.

"No," she answered. "But he will not leave you alone."

Early the next morning they were awakened by a Mantur who led them to the room where they had dined the night before. They were given a hearty meal, fresh clothing, and cloaks such as those worn by the Manturs. They also provided them with dried meat and a skin pouch of water for Mandu. Robert guessed where the dried meat had come from but did not voice his thoughts.

Two Manturs led them to the royal chamber where they paid their respects to Ruan-dul. He wished them a safe journey as they were escorted out of the room. The two Manturs then led them to the edge of the city where Ruan-urn and three other Manturs waited. The nine members of the party traveled quickly through the forest of Gundoon. Mandu twice saw Pantuens in the forest around them, but at sight of the Manturs they had fled deep into the forest away from the group. That night as they slept in trees, a task made much more comfortable by hammocks the Manturs had brought along, Ruan-urn spoke to them.

"It was good fortune for all of us that you came when you did," he said. "The Pantuens have grown accustomed to us and it is rare to find as many in one place as we did. A good hunting party can perhaps kill two Pantuens over several days of tracking."

"I think it was probably better fortune for us," Robert replied. "We owe you our lives."

"There are lives that are sometimes not worth living," Ruan-urn stated. "There are things one may do to correct that. I feel those things are now happening."

"Your words encourage me," Robert said respectfully. "I had not expected to find allies in Gundoon."

Ruan-urn suddenly turned to look down at the ground. Robert saw a creeping mist approach the trees where they were. As it surrounded the tree where Ruan-urn, Robert, and Mandu were, Ruan-urn spat at it. The drop of spittle made a hole the size of a large rock. The mist recoiled and moved off quickly.

"It is not enough to fight off the mist," Ruan-urn said as he rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, "but there are times when a single moment can mean the difference between life and death."

He said no more, and in a few minutes his regular breathing indicated that he had fallen asleep.

The next morning Robert and the others woke up to already find the Manturs on the ground and cooking a creature over a fire. It took Robert a minute to recognize it as one of the large snake creatures that had attacked them a few days before.

"Good fortune continues to accompany you," Ruan-urn said as the three joined the Manturs around the cooking fire. "Very tasty. And big enough for all of us."

Robert did not argue with them about the taste. After eating, the group moved on through the forest toward the Great Plains. In the early afternoon they came to the edge of the forest. Before them stretched the miles and miles of flat land that was the Great Plains.

"From here you journey without us," Ruan-urn said. "You know the way."

Robert placed his right hand on the left shoulder of Ruan-urn. As he did he felt a quick movement at the sheath where his dagger rested. His cloak flapped, indicating little more than a breeze.

"I will not forget the Manturs," Robert said.

"Remember this as well," Ruan-urn said firmly. "You must put away who you were and be who you are. Remember also that there is no balance without the Manturs. I will visit you soon, Kor-EIn. Until then, keep my gift and use it wisely."

Robert nodded. Then he nodded again, this time as Kor-EIn. Ruan-urn nodded slowly, then turned and walked back into the forest. In a minute the six Manturs were out of sight.

"Are you ready, Kor-EIn?" Vornur asked.

Kor-EIn looked at Vornur. He could not explain why he felt different now. Perhaps it was the "gift" Ruan-urn had spoken of. He could think of no gift the Mantur had given him. Then again, he knew that Ruan-urn could communicate his thoughts to others, perhaps better than Mandu. It was possible the Mantur had given him something he would not know until the time came.

"I am ready, Vornur. Mandu?"

She looked at him with a question in her eyes. Did she sense that he was somehow different now?

"Who am I?" she asked him.

"You are the one who chose me," Kor-EIn replied. "And the one I chose."

"Will you never forget?"

"Forget? How could I? You are part of me, Mandu."

"The Jewel of Andar makes one different. I see it in you."

"You are my only jewel, Mandu. I do not-"

She cut him off and pointed to his dagger. He lifted his cloak to show that it was the same dagger he had carried since they began...it wasn't. In its place was the jeweled dagger of Ruan-urn. At the base of the handle was a single jewel of deep red. Ruan-urn had given him a piece of the Jewel of Andar. This was the gift. Robert lowered his cloak to conceal the blade and looked back at Mandu.

"I am different," Kor-EIn acknowledged. "I am Kor-EIn. But that does not change you or me or how I feel for you. Andar has its jewel, but so do I."

## Chapter 5

It was just short of mid-morning of the seventh day since they had left the forest of Gundoon when the three arrived at the village where Mandu had lived. She was recognized almost immediately and someone ran to tell her parents of her return. A group quickly gathered around them as they waited at the outskirts of the village of wooden homes with thatched roofs. Though many of them talked freely to Mandu and expressed joy at seeing her safely returned, they kept about an arm's length away. It was not just the Roduran, but Kor-EIn. He had the appearance of a Skellian, and he was armed.

Mandu's father came through the crowd. He had the physical bearing of a man of strength and great appetite. He did not pause when he saw his daughter and came forward and hugged her.

"We feared the worst," he said in a gruff, relieved voice. "We saw the bodies of the Argullians at the river. We thought they had taken you."

"These two saved me," she said, nodding to Vornur and Kor-EIn. "Had they not come the Argullians would have gotten me."

"You have my thanks," he said to them. "And I believe you will have the thanks of her future mate as well."

"I have a mate," Mandu said firmly.

Her father looked at her with surprise, then anger. His anger quickly turned toward Kor-EIn.

"By what magic, Skellian, did you enslave my daughter? Speak!"

"Do not be hasty in anger," Vornur interrupted. "Your daughter has chosen no Skellian, and no simple creature. Before you stands an outworlder, the one who would free Andar. This is Kor-EIn."

Had the words been spoken by any other, Kor-EIn was fairly sure they would have had little or no effect, but Vornur's reputation as a Roduran lent them more than enough credence for the crowd around them. An audible gasp came from many of them, and the look on Mandu's father's face softened instantly.

"I am sorry if I have offended you in any way," the man said looking down. "It is just that..."

His voice trailed off into silence. Kor-EIn placed his right hand on the man's shoulder. He looked up.

"I understand," Kor-EIn said. "Mandu has told me."

There were a few moments more of conversation, then it ceased as someone announced the arrival of the elders. The crowd parted as a group of four dar-Skellians, similar in appearance to Mandu's father yet with an air of arrogance about them, walked up to the three travelers. They were dressed in robes of gold, red, and purple that shimmered in the sun. Kor-EIn immediately took a disliking to them.

"I see that your daughter has returned, Litos," the one in the middle said in a booming voice. "You will begin preparations at once for the ceremony to join her with my son."

There was an awkward silence before Litos spoke in a subdued voice.

"I cannot do that, Tornu," he said while looking at the other's feet. "Mandu has chosen her mate."

The three elders turned to Kor-EIn. The contempt on their faces was nearly palpable. The dar-Skellian on Tornu's right spoke.

"Any pairing of a dar-Skellian with the remnant of the Skellians is void," he said with a note of finality. "The laws of our village do not permit it. Mandu is to be joined to the son of Tornu at sundown."

"Mandu has chosen her mate," Kor-EIn said, unable to keep his silence any longer.

"Silence, Skellian!" the man roared. "You have no authority here and your presence is most unwelcome!"

Kor-EIn paused for a moment, waiting for Vornur to speak. When the Roduran kept his silence, Kor-EIn spoke again. He kept his voice low, but spoke firmly.

"I am no Skellian. I am Kor-EIn, an outworlder brought to Andar to end the reign of Kor-Etath. Mandu has chosen her mate, and I have chosen mine in her. Speak now of what authority you hold to dissolve this choosing."

The three elders were speechless. There was an implied threat in the words they had heard. It was a threat that none of them held any power in opposing.

"I will speak," came a voice from behind the three.

A dar-Skellian came forward. He was as tall as the others, but his features were not hardened with the passage of time. He was young, handsome, and spoke with an authority that he backed up with the sword at his side.

"I am Stolir, son of Tornu, and the one to whom Mandu is to be joined. If you would deny me this, I will join you in battle."

"Hold fast!" Tornu hissed to his son, placing a hand on his arm. "This is no Skellian, but Kor-EIn."

"Kor-EIn is a story told by Skellians," Stolir spat. "This one is no more than a Skellian who would take what is not his, as Skellians have from the beginning of Andar. Step away from her, Skellian, or fight."

Stolir unsheathed his sword. Everyone backed away from him.

"Before you begin," Vornur said at last, "you would be asked to consider the rules of your village. If you fight, one of you must die. If it is you, Stolir, it also means that your family will be banished from this village or face execution at the hands of the one you would call a story. Is

that your wish, Stolir, to sentence your family to death for one who has already given herself to another?"

As far as Kor-EIn knew Vornur was speaking the truth as he knew it. He had read of certain formalities the dar-Skellians adhered to, at least in times past. Whether they still did or not only Mandu could say, but as Stolir hesitated it seemed that some of what Vornur had said still held true. Stolir's hesitation did not last long however, and he approached Kor-EIn.

"Draw your sword, Skellian. I will take back what is mine."

"I am not yours, Stolir," said Mandu, "and never will be."

Kor-EIn looked at her for a moment, saw the fire and determination in her eyes, then faced his opponent. He drew his sword.

"I do not wish to take your life, Stolir," he said. "Leave now and I will spare you."

"You will spare me," Stolir repeated in mockery. "I think not."

He lunged with a swing meant to sever Kor-EIn's head. Kor-EIn easily dodged the strike, then turned, delivering one of his own. The sword passed from one side of Stolir's chest through to the other. Kor-EIn held the blade in place for a moment, then withdrew it. Stolir's body crumpled to the ground. The swiftness and ease of the fight seemed to have the desired effect on those watching as they all stepped back. Kor-EIn wiped his blade on the dead dar-Skellian's pants and then sheathed it.

"I hold no ill will toward any of this village," Kor-EIn said loud enough to be heard. "I have come for the benefit of all. If there are any who are opposed to my presence," and he fixed his eyes on Tornu, "you may leave in peace."

As Kor-EIn looked at the faces of the elders it became obvious to him what he had done. In front of the entire village he had told the elders to voluntarily leave the village or fight him. Unless they proved to be cowardly bullies, they would choose to fight and he would find himself knee deep in blood. There were also the villagers to contend with. How many of them would side with the elders? Even if they did not like them, would they submit themselves to an outworlder?

Kor-EIn heard a sword come out of its sheath behind him. He turned his head just enough to see Vornur hand his sword to Litos. Litos stepped forward and stood next to Kor-EIn.

"Your rule is over," Litos said. "You have ruled this village as Kor-Etath has ruled Andar. That will happen no longer. Take what you need and be gone. My family will stand by Kor-EIn."

It was with relief rather than triumph that Kor-EIn saw other villagers draw swords and point them at the elders. Any doubt the three may have had as to whether or not they could withstand was gone. It was with a tinge of sympathy that Kor-EIn saw the blood within the three turn to water. Without a word they turned and left the gathering. An hour later they and their families were no longer in the village. Litos and his wife moved into the home of the adjudicator, while two other dar-Skellians took the homes of the other two elders. The village celebrated with a large feast that night at which most of the village expressed appreciation.



Kor-Eln wanted to bask in the glow of all that had happened, but Vornur kept him from enjoying his fortune too much.

"Do not think that they are gone forever, Kor-Eln," Vornur whispered at one point during the evening. "No one gives away their power and position without a fight. One day you will meet them again. You must be ready for that. You must also consider that not all in the village here were opposed to them. There are those to whom the elders were favorable. Those must be watched closely. They will feel discontent at not being favored. It will be the task of the new elders to ensure that discontent does not turn into revolt."

"Must you always be thinking ahead, Vornur? Do you not ever enjoy the moment?"

"Kor-Eln," the Roduran said in a low, serious tone, "in order to bring balance to Andar you will fight many battles. You may discover that doing battle with Kor-Etath is the least of these."

"So I'm beginning to see," Kor-Eln responded drolly.

He turned to Mandu and her smile made most of the concern melt away. He lifted a cup and drank with pleasure.

The next morning Kor-Eln and Vornur arose early. Kor-Eln had to be careful to not awaken Mandu next to him. He did not want her to come on this last leg of the journey. He would have to speak with the Skellians and then go forth to meet Kor-Etath in battle. He was outside the home before the sun rose, but before he and Vornur had finalized anything Mandu was there.

"I had hoped to spare you whatever may happen," he said to her.

"We are joined, Kor-Eln. Whatever befalls you is my chosen destiny as well. I would not have you face Kor-Etath without me."

"In truth I did not want to face him without you, Mandu. I only wanted to save you from further fighting and, should I not defeat Kor-Etath, I did-"

She placed a hand on his lips to stop him.

"We do not speak of such things," she said with a gentle firmness. "Do not let such thoughts into your head. I walk with you to victory, not to our death."

"Mandu," Vornur began, "are there any in your village who know where the Pantuens dwell?"

Kor-Eln opened his eyes wide for a minute, then he recalled that these were not the Pantuens of Gundoon of which Vornur spoke.

"Yes. There are many," Mandu replied.

"Send two of your people to them. There is one among them who fought in The Contest. Tell that one to bring as many as he can. And if they see any of the Veroneer, send them word as well."

Vornur listed all the races that had fought in The Contest. Moments later, runners from the village were off to contact them all. Vornur turned to Kor-Eln.

"It is best to show unity and force," Vornur said. "Remember, as always, that Kor-Etath does not rule on his strength alone. When you ascend to take his place, neither can you."

"Vornur, I do not want-"

"I understand, Kor-EIn, but this must be."

Robert said no more.

They walked at their quick pace for most of the day and arrived at the caves of the Skellians just before sunset. They were greeted cordially but coolly by Mer-Vetang and the others. They were shown into the meeting chamber where they had last been. Food was placed before them as the Skellians took their seats. Robert noted that the four Skellians looked closely at Mandu and not without a little malice. He wondered what was in their minds. Did they see in her what they had once been? Did they see in her a traitor or lower life form? He looked at Mandu. If she was able to read their thoughts as she did the thoughts of others, she was not showing it.

"You have been gone many days," Mer-Vetang began. "I see not the Jewel of Andar with you, but instead a dar-Skellian. Is this what you have learned on your journey, to become one with them?"

Kor-EIn fought down the urge to answer back with angry words. He also kept the dagger hidden beneath his cloak. He no longer trusted the Skellians.

"This is Mandu," he said evenly. "She has chosen me and I have chosen her. She stands at my side as one also opposed to the rule of Kor-Etath."

"And is she also opposed to the rule of the Skellians?" Mer-Vetang pressed.

"Should she instead place her trust in you?" Kor-EIn retorted. "Everywhere I have gone I have heard of the atrocities of Kor-Etath, yet the atrocities of the Skellians are told to be worse. Should I, Kor-EIn, bring back to Andar that which it so happily shed a thousand years ago?"

At the name he now used, the Skellians opened their eyes in wonder. They leaned in close to each other and conferred for several moments.

"A change in you is evident," Ger-Koth said with measured words. "The cloak you wear is also something strange to us. But are you truly the Bringer of Balance? As always, you speak as though you were our equal. Are you now? Or have you come back to rule us as Kor-Etath rules Andar?"

Kor-EIn looked to Vornur, then Mandu. They nodded to him. He stood up. He began to speak in a clear, level voice.

"More than two years ago you brought me here as an outworlder. You placed your hope in me. It was a hope of something more valuable than the rule of Andar; it was the hope of life. Your race is threatened by Kor-Etath and in your desperation you sent for me to come and save you. The one you brought here was taught and trained. The final part of my training you could not give me, and so I journeyed to Gundoon, to the lost city. I had gone in search of a

prize, the Jewel of Andar, with which I could defeat Kor-Etath. What I found was a friend in Vornur, a mate in Mandu, and the destiny of my life. I return to you now not as an outworlder, but as Kor-EIn. I will bring balance back to Andar. I am ready to face Kor-Etath. If I should defeat him, all of Andar will be free, and the Skellians will not need fear that their race will no longer walk the face of Andar."

A long silence lingered in the chamber. Kor-EIn sat down and waited.

"Perhaps he is right," Dar-Ven said at long last. "Perhaps--"

"Silence!" roared Mer-Vetang. "Do not be swayed by his words, no matter how well spoken."

"And do not be swayed by threats," Vornur said quickly. "One who would rule by violence here, in the belly of Andar, would rule by violence on the throne in Jankor."

"I think it is time to listen to the Roduran," Sur-Lal said quietly. "Dar-Ven and I are in agreement. It has been too long since--"

"Would you turn traitor to us too?" Mer-Vetang asked icily.

The look on Sur-Lal's face darkened immediately. The air in the chamber seemed to grow heavy and Kor-EIn felt that he might be seeing a shift in power among the Skellians. But as quickly as it had come, it vanished. When Sur-Lal answered, her face had resumed its placid look.

"You have known me too long to use such words against me," she stated. "That you would choose to use them here, in open council, bothers me not a little. If you question me, Mer-Vetang, do it in private."

In the ensuing moment of silence, Kor-EIn wondered if Mer-Vetang would attempt to apologize. When she didn't, Sur-Lal continued.

"It has been too long," Sur-Lal began again, "since Andar lived in balance. It has been too long since the arrogance of the Skellians plunged Andar into the darkness in which we now live. The offense that was committed by the Skellians was not just against the races of Andar, it was against ourselves. I know what you would say, Mer-Vetang, and I do not question your wisdom or your age. But I question your vision. Have you lived so long in these caves that you have forgotten the light? I see how the other races live, Mer-Vetang, and I too long to feel the warmth of Andar's two suns. I wish to see the rain as it falls, not as it dribbles into our homes in the darkness. Too long have we all lived as creatures of the night and darkness. I would live in balance with Kor-Etath himself if it but meant I could live as the other races. Ask of us what you will, Outworlder, Kor-EIn. The Skellians stand behind you."

Kor-EIn looked at Sur-Lal. She nodded at him. He turned to Ger-Koth and Dar-Ven who also nodded at him. Then he looked at Mer-Vetang. For a moment he felt pity for her, imagining her as she must have been a thousand years ago, before the reign of Kor-Etath. He saw her beauty, her power, and her pride. He also saw how, after carrying on the battle for a thousand years to preserve her race, they had now turned against her.

"You have sold our lives to this outworlder," Mer-Vetang said softly without looking at anyone.

"And gladly would I do it again if it but meant a chance to live as we have not lived in a thousand years," Sur-Lal responded.

Mer-Vetang looked at each of the Skellians. They met her gaze without shrinking. Mer-Vetang did not nod. Kor-EIn looked at her and saw for the first time the Skellian leader overcome by her own pride. Mer-Vetang stood and left the room.

"We will send word to Kor-Etath," Sur-Lal said. "On the morrow will you meet him. We stand behind you for the sake of all Andar."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ellrun!"

The Roduran turned at the sound of his name being shouted. If a Roduran could have shown confusion, Ellrun's face would have shown it then. That he was being yelled for was new to him, and that the voice was Kor-Etath's was something he had never heard. He had never heard Kor-Etath yell, even on the battlefield.

*"ELLRUN!!"*

The Roduran turned and began to run toward the throne room. His haste was such that he nearly forgot to bow before his ruler.

"Ellrun."

Kor-Etath's voice was shaky, unsteady, and his breathing was rapid.

"Yes, Bringer of Light, I am here."

"What time is it, Ellrun? Have the suns gone below the horizon?"

"An hour ago."

Kor-Etath breathed a sigh of relief and his breathing slowly became normal.

"My eyes grow dark," he said. "It is as though shadow has fallen over them. I am glad it is just the night."

Ellrun looked up at Kor-Etath. As a dar-Skellian, it did not matter if it was dark or light.

"It is the shadow of death, Ellrun. I do not know if it is mine or that of the Skellians."

"It is most certainly not yours," Ellrun said, trying to bolster his lord.

"I cannot tell that, Ellrun. I know that I sense a messenger from the Skellians who will arrive on the morrow. The outworlder has returned from Gundoon."

"It is just as you had hoped, Bringer of Light. He will bring with him a piece of the Jewel of Andar, and you will be invincible."

Kor-Etath did not reply for several minutes.

"Gather my army, Ellrun. Have them assembled and battle ready. If I should fall-"

"You cannot fall," Ellrun interrupted.

Kor-Etath stopped and looked down at his advisor. A smile came to his face, but whether it was the knowing smile of one whose fate is already decided or one who had resumed his confidence, Ellrun could not tell.

"Have them assembled and battle ready. They will stand behind me at E thira. If I should fall, they are to march on Andar and destroy all who will not yield. If I do not fall, I will lead them in the same. Do you understand?"

"They will know. The Skellians will spread word to all the races. Andar will plunge into war for many years."

"Do as I say," Kor-Etath said darkly.

"As you command."

Ellrun bowed and exited the throne room.

## Chapter 6

Two days later the opposing forces met at what had become the battleground for Kor-Etath and his challengers, the field of Ethira. Word had spread throughout the races that Kor-Etath had assembled his army and many were the races who felt that Andar was on the edge of war. The Skellians had been strangely quiet on the whole matter and had made no overtures or contact with any of the other races. It was well known that they would be the first race to fall if Kor-Etath triumphed again. Their fear and uncertainty had hung like a cloud over their cave homes. This day could possibly be their last day on Andar. And if the Skellians fell, who would be the next race? These concerns seemed to spread throughout Andar, affecting the crowd of races that had come to witness the battle. Many of them had come armed.

Kor-EIn stood on his side of the open area. Just behind him and to his right stood Mandu. Just behind him and to his left was Vornur. Behind the three of them stood all the other races of Andar that had taken part in The Contest. Surprisingly, there were also several villages of dar-Skellians who stood with them. The crowd of races made for a large and imposing force that stood behind him. Even so, they were not as large as the army that stood opposite them. Looking at the ranks of dar-Skellians across from them it was obvious how Kor-Etath had reigned supreme for so long. There were close to ten thousand of them, dressed for war. They held spears and shields, and at their sides were strapped swords. The dull bronze color of their armor in the early morning light gave them the appearance of ghosts that had materialized out of the ground. A large tent sat in the middle of the force. From there would come Kor-Etath.

"Look well, Kor-EIn," Vornur said quietly. "Standing before you and behind you are all the forces of Andar. On this day will the future of Andar be decided. Should you defeat Kor-Etath, you will have command of all those behind you. Kor-Etath's army is larger, but without him they will scatter like smoke in the wind. Should you fail, the army that you see will sweep across Ethira and cut down any that remain here."

"No pressure, huh?"

Vornur looked at Kor-EIn. Mandu placed a hand on Kor-EIn's shoulder.

"Understand," she began, "that Vornur speaks as a Roduran. We will follow you, all of us, to whatever end there is. Kor-Etath has ruled for a thousand years, and those who have served him have prospered. It is not just Kor-Etath who will lose power today if he falls. That he and all who serve him have come to fight is not unexpected."

"But did you expect to die here?"

The reassuring smile she had shown him before did not come. Her eyes turned from him toward the large encampment.

"We hope that Vornur's words sound true when the day is done. Know this," and she turned back to him, "today is a new day for Andar. The races stand united behind you. We will see to it that even if all of us leave our lives in Ethira today, Kor-Etath will be among us. Know also that in this life, or whatever comes after, I will be yours, Kor-EIn."

"And I will be yours, Mandu. I will fight today all the harder because I want to enjoy this life with you."

Across the open space the army of Kor-Etath rose and stood at attention. It was impressive. The flap to the tent was opened and Kor-Etath stepped out. He wore only a tunic and pants. In his right hand was a sword that shone like fire in the early morning light. Kor-EIn felt himself reflexively step back, even as far from his opponent as he was. Kor-Etath wore no decorations, but he carried himself so certainly that it was hard not to look at him like the demigod he had become to the races of Andar. Beneath the tunic his body was firm, but not overly muscled. He was not built for brute force. Kor-EIn looked at his opponent and saw nothing that he could use to assure himself. Even at a distance of some two hundred feet he could tell that Kor-Etath was even several inches taller than he was.

Kor-EIn removed the cloak he had been given by the Manturs. As he did, the jewel on the hilt of the dagger caught the light of the twin suns and for a brief moment a flash of red covered all of Ethira. There was an audible gasp from both sides of the field and for the briefest of moments something that could have been doubt flashed across the face of Kor-Etath. It was gone quickly and replaced by a thin-lipped smile. From where he stood, Kor-EIn could not tell if the smile was of respect or something else.

Kor-EIn handed the cloak to Mandu and stepped forward. They met in the center of the open field, only a few feet separating them. The two stood facing each other silently for a moment.

"Tell me, Outworlder," Kor-Etath began in a voice that was almost conversational, "did the Skellians tell you what happened to all the others who came before you? Did they tell you how their headless corpses were left here in Ethira? Did they tell you that the last one was from your own home world?"

The last question was finished with a sneer so evil that Kor-EIn felt his skin crawl. Kor-Etath did not kill because he had to, but because he liked to.

"I have heard," Kor-EIn said simply.

"Then you must know that you are throwing away your life. When you lie here, dead, know then that my army will march on Andar. We will spare none, not even the dar-Skellian woman or the Roduran."

"That is not the way the Pozeran told me it would happen," Kor-EIn replied.

There was no mistake in reading the expression on Kor-Etath's face this time. It was real concern. Kor-EIn told himself that if he lived through this, he would have to learn what he could of the Pozerans. He drew his sword. Upon seeing the sword come out, Kor-Etath regained his composure. The sword was something he could deal with on his own terms.

"You are a fool, Outworlder. You come here and fight for a race that is not your own. Do you really believe that you can bring balance to Andar? Do you really believe that there can ever be balance on Andar while the Skellians live? *They* created this world we live in! *They* caused the races to fracture and fight! You cannot bring balance to Andar, you can only bring chaos."

Kor-Eln heard the words and hesitated. Only for a moment.

"I would sooner have chaos than the death you would bring. This is not your world to rule. We will have peace on Andar. And it will not be yours."

"We shall see."

The two swords came together in the middle of Ethira and what should have been a triumphant sound of metal against metal rolled across the quiet area as a muted thud. It was as if the two met in a vacuum with no sound escaping. It had the effect on both sides of watching an animal die of agony, and so all remained silent.

Kor-Eln found himself fighting defensively. Kor-Etath was obviously a far more experienced swordsman, and he was stronger. Already Kor-Etath had drawn blood from a cut on his arm. A moment later another cut was slashed across his chest, followed closely by one on his leg. None of them were deep, but together they were a sign that at the present course of events, Kor-Etath would be the easy victor. If he was going to survive and beat Kor-Etath, Kor-Eln would have to fight offensively and take some chances.

The first chance came courtesy of Kor-Etath himself. Kor-Eln had stepped on a loose stone as he backed to avoid a thrust and so stumbled. Kor-Etath rushed in to take advantage. Kor-Eln, unable to raise his sword in time, dropped to his knees and ducked his head. The tip of the blade went just over his lowered neck. Kor-Etath had over-reached, and Kor-Eln took advantage. He stood, throwing Kor-Etath off balance. He came around with his sword swinging and cut a lengthy gash in Kor-Etath's left arm. At sign of the dark red blood a shout went up from the ranks of Kor-Eln. It was the first sound that had been heard in nearly twenty minutes and Kor-Eln felt himself buoyed by it.

Kor-Etath took a couple steps back and stared, almost in disbelief, at the blood coming from his arm. He tried to lift the arm and flex it, but it was too painful. He looked up at Kor-Eln and gave a grim smile.

"That is the most serious wound I have ever suffered," he said, his voice sounding not nearly as confident over his heavy breathing. "It would seem that on this day fortune has chosen to favor the lucky over the skilled."

Kor-Eln could not bring himself to answer, knowing that it was indeed luck that had provided him the opening.

The two stood for a moment, facing each other. Kor-Eln wondered what was happening when suddenly he felt a pricking sensation at his right hip. He looked down. Nothing. But when he looked back up, Kor-Etath was advancing. The two clashed again.

Kor-Etath pushed the attack, and a moment later Kor-Eln dodged a thrust only to be knocked to the ground by a fist thrown with Kor-Etath's left arm. As he rolled over, he felt the blood come into his mouth from a cut somewhere inside it. A shout rose up from Kor-Etath's army.

Before Kor-Eln could rise, Kor-Etath delivered a kick to his gut that rolled him over and knocked the wind from him. Kor-Eln found himself laying on the ground, gasping for air, and looking up into a soft pink sky. His mind drifted back to thoughts of the world he had come



from. Then those thoughts blurred and all he could see was Mandu's face. He knew, in that moment, that if he died, she would die too. He rolled away and just avoided a slash from Kor-Etath's sword that made dust rise from the ground. Kor-EIn rose to his feet, still a little out of breath. Kor-Etath seemed a little surprised.

"You have more spirit than those before you," Kor-Etath said. "Indeed it has been my greatest fight."

Kor-EIn gulped for breath and stood up.

"Thanks," he managed to mutter. "Same to you."

The two joined again. This time the movements of both were slower. Kor-EIn was still trying to regain his breath, but it was obvious to Kor-EIn that the wound on Kor-Etath's arm hurt more than he was letting on. As the blood continued to flow, the sword thrusts seemed to carry less force and move more slowly. Then the pain started in his hip again, this time more intense. Around them the wind began to blow, but neither noticed it.

"It is the Korisheray," Vornur said to no one in particular, but loud enough to be heard by Mandu next to him. "Kor-Etath is calling the Bringer of Death."

Mandu looked at the Roduran, then back to the battle. She tried to reach Kor-EIn in his mind.

*"Pull the dagger," she thought. "Unsheath the Jewel of Andar and save our world."*

But the spell of the Korisheray blocked her. She could not reach him. She watched, helpless, as the light from the suns seemed to fade just a little.

Kor-Etath was slowing drastically now, the blood loss from the wound taking its toll on his exertions as Kor-EIn regained his breath. A certain ferocity seemed to cling to him though, and a look of confusion showed in his features. Kor-EIn held the upper hand, but the pain in his hip was increasing now and he found himself limping. He had not been struck by Kor-Etath's blade since the cut on his arm, nor had he been struck at all, but he felt himself weakening to something that seemed to drag the energy from him. Kor-Etath aimed a wicked slash at him and the pain he felt made him stumble as he backed away. Kor-Etath noticed. With a renewed energy he stood straight up and smiled.

"Do you feel it, Outworlder? I know you do. It is the Korisheray, Bringer of Death. You will fall, Outworlder."

Kor-Etath strode forward, his confidence as overwhelming as the pain in Kor-EIn's hip. Kor-EIn gave ground, limping back. For the first time he noticed the biting cold of the wind.

"It is useless to resist," Kor-Etath said, almost laughing now. "You can only die now. You are not Kor-EIn. You are only another outworlder who will die here in Andar, forgotten by the races of your world and this one. Only there will be no one to bury you. Your headless body will lay here as a symbol that none can resist Kor-Etath."

Kor-Etath swung his sword again and Kor-EIn raised his to block it. As he did the pain in his hip was so sharp that he dropped his free hand to it. At that moment he felt the dagger. He

looked down and saw the red stone glowing. He pulled the dagger from its sheath. The pain stopped. So did the wind. Kor-Etath's smile vanished with them. Kor-Eln stood up. The field of Ethira seemed to be bathed in a red light.

"Your reign is over, Kor-Etath."

Kor-Eln began his attack. Kor-Etath backed up against the onslaught. A moment later Kor-Etath's sword was knocked from his hand. Kor-Eln plunged his sword into the gut of his opponent. Kor-Etath's eyes went wide in shock and pain. He slumped to his knees. With his other hand, Kor-Eln plunged the dagger into his chest.

"Now is the time for the reign of peace to begin," Kor-Eln said through clenched teeth.

Kor-Etath managed a weak laugh.

"Fool," he hissed as his life ran from him. "Son of a fool! You send this world to war."

"Better that...than you."

Kor-Etath coughed weakly.

"My army will destroy you," he gasped.

"If it does, you'll never know."

Kor-Etath took one last breath, closed his eyes, and fell over.

Kor-Eln wiped the blade of the dagger and sheathed it, then wiped his sword. He turned to Mandu and gave the smallest of smiles, half in victory and half in relief. She did not smile back. Kor-Eln turned. The army of Kor-Etath was forming ranks. Kor-Eln rushed back to stand at her side.

"His reign is over, and yours was too brief," she said sadly. "There is no jewel that can save us from his army."

"We do not go down without a fight," Kor-Eln replied. "Vornur," he said, turning to the Roduran. "Give the word. We stand for Andar here, now."

"Races of Andar!" Vornur shouted. "Stand and fight! The army of Kor-Etath must fall with him!"

The races shouted and raised whatever weapons they had. Kor-Eln raised his sword and turned back to the advancing army. Ellrun was leading them across the field. The other Roduran stopped long enough to pick up the blade of his fallen leader, raised it above his head, and began to run. Two steps later he dropped in his tracks.

"Manturs!" someone shouted.

Kor-Eln whirled around. The races had parted in the middle and an army of Manturs advanced. There were perhaps a thousand of them, advancing quickly and with bows drawn. Several hundred of Kor-Etath's army were felled by more arrows as the Manturs came clear

of the crowd of the races of Andar. More than a thousand of Kor-Etath's army were dead before the two armies closed. One Mantur stopped by Kor-EIn. It was Ruan-urn.

"How can there be balance on Andar without the Manturs?" he asked.

"There cannot," Kor-EIn said with a look of intense relief. "I believe this is yours."

He held out the dagger to Ruan-urn. The Mantur pushed it back toward Kor-EIn.

"Keep it for now," he said. "I will ask for it when it is time. Will you join?"

Kor-EIn nodded. He turned to the races.

"We fight with the Manturs for Andar!" he shouted.

As a mass, the races of Andar rushed forward toward the army of Kor-Etath.

\* \* \* \* \*

For a battle as crucial to Andar as it was, Kor-EIn felt it was all over too quickly. The Manturs had been so quick and so thoroughly efficient that it had appeared at times like a wanton slaughter. Within an hour Kor-Etath's army had been decimated and all those who had not thrown down their arms in surrender had been executed. It was something Kor-EIn had not wanted to do, but Vornur and Ruan-urn had both told him that any resistance from the army would be a source for potential war later on. Kor-EIn had stayed to make sure there were no revenge killings, then he was led to Jankor.

The races formed a massive crowd behind him as he walked to the stone palace with Ruan-urn, Vornur, and Mandu beside him. A song broke out behind them somewhere, a tune that had been sung only in secret for three thousand years, a song of the time when Andar would become a world where the races once more lived in balance. Kor-EIn was surprised at the number of individuals who knew the words. The crowd stayed behind him, and as they walked along it seemed to grow larger and the song louder. As Kor-EIn climbed the steps into the palace, the crowd followed. Vornur led him down the hallway and into the throne room. There they stopped. At the foot of the stairs to the throne stood a lone individual. She turned to face Kor-EIn, Vornur, Ruan-urn, Mandu, and the crowd that was filling in behind them.

"Step aside, Mer-Vetang," Vornur said.

The Skellian that faced them was not the small, large-eyed creature of the dark mountain caves, but a tall, strong, beautiful Skellian, a reminder of the race that had once stood as the proudest on Andar. Mer-Vetang looked as she had in the cavern, a certain power radiating from her and crackling in her eyes. She was as alluring as she was dangerous. Kor-EIn wondered what hold Kor-Etath had held over the Skellians and Mer-Vetang. She was so different now.

"Why?" she asked back, her voice echoing in the suddenly quiet room. "So that this outworlder can rule us? I think not."

"I am not here to rule Andar," Kor-EIn said. "I am here-"

"Because we summoned you," Mer-Vetang cut in. "Summoned you to perform a single task. Now that your task is complete, you are free to go. Would you like to return to your world? We can open a doorway this night and send you back to your home."

"This is my home now. With Mandu, Vornur, Ruan-urn, and all the races of Andar...in balance."

Mer-Vetang looked from Kor-EIn toward Ruan-urn. She seemed only slightly less confident when looking at the Mantur.

"A Mantur. Once your kind roamed Andar freely. That was before the time of our rule. Tell me, Mantur, did you not hear the stories of why your race went into hiding? Did you not learn how it was that a race of Pantuens, different from all others, surrounded your city and kept your race from rejoining all others? Did Ruan-dul not tell you that it was the Skellians who defeated your race, drove you from the light of Andar, and created the Pantuens that kept you and your kind separate from all others?" Then, derisively, "You have changed little, Mantur. Trouble me not."

Ruan-urn said nothing in response. Kor-EIn was struck once again by the fact that most of the races of Andar showed no expression on their faces. He thought about asking Mandu if she could read Ruan-urn's thoughts when Mer-Vetang spoke again.

"What will it be, Outworlder? Do you wish to return to your own world, or do you wish to stay here under Skellian rule?"

Kor-EIn looked at Mer-Vetang. Then he turned and looked at Mandu, Vornur, and Ruan-urn. They looked back at him in silence. The entire crowd behind him was also silent. Kor-EIn turned back to Mer-Vetang. She glared down at him. Loud enough for all to hear, Kor-EIn at last spoke.

"I do not know what power Kor-Etath held that kept you from taking this form, but it was enough to do so. As the one who at last defeated Kor-Etath, I must hold at least some of that power as well, even though I do not know what it is or how to use it. I state now, for all the races to hear, what I stated before. You will live on Andar with all the races or the Skellians will be of Andar no more."

"You will not deny me the throne," Mer-Vetang replied.

As the words came out, a darkness came upon the throne room. In the dim light, a yellow glow seemed to radiate from Mer-Vetang's body. Kor-EIn felt the pricking of the dagger at his side. He recognized it immediately this time and pulled it from its sheath. The red jewel gave back a glow of its own, and the red light fell over the entire room. Mer-Vetang involuntarily stepped back. Then she stepped forward, head high and a challenge in her eyes.

"Will you strike me down, Outworlder?" she asked, daring him to do so. "Will you take the place of Kor-Etath and begin here, in front of all the races, the final death of the Skellians? I give you no choice. I will haunt your steps if you do not. Of what material are you made? What sort of ruler will you be?"

Kor-EIn stepped forward, dagger held in front of him. Mer-Vetang involuntarily took one step back. Then Kor-EIn charged. Mer-Vetang jumped to one side and rolled down the steps to the throne. Kor-EIn continued up the stone steps. He stood in front of the throne, dagger held high.

"No!" Mer-Vetang shouted. "The throne is mine!"

He brought the dagger down with all his strength into the throne. The room seemed to burst into fire and for a moment no one could see. Then the light of the day returned. The throne lay in two, split down the middle.

"You fool!" Mer-Vetang shrieked. "Curse you and your world!"

"We will have balance," Kor-EIn said firmly.

"Balance is a word for fools!" she shouted back. "There has never been balance on Andar except when the Skellians ruled! And we will rule again! Jankor is not the only seat of power on Andar!"

She turned and ran from the room. Kor-EIn watched her go. He was not sure if he should chase after her or not. What he was sure of was that as long as Mer-Vetang lived, there would be danger. That much she had promised.

Then he turned to face the crowd. He motioned to Mandu, Vornur, and Ruan-urn. They came up the steps and stood by him. Then he motioned to a Pantuen, a Veroneer, and one of each of all the races. As they all stood on the steps before the broken throne of Jankor, Kor-EIn addressed them.

"Today has seen the end of the reign of Kor-Etath. Let us all remember that if we do not exist in balance, another of his kind will come to rule us. Keep this in your minds and hearts; teach it to your offspring so that years from now, when this day is but a memory even to Andar itself, the lessons learned from Kor-Etath and his kind will still be remembered and Andar will never fall into such darkness again. Let us work today, tomorrow, and forever to keep Andar as it is meant to be."

\* \* \* \* \*

Preparations were begun that day and a feast was held that night. Despite his protestations, Kor-EIn found himself seated at the place of honor at a large table in the palace with his friends and allies around him, including Sur-Lal, Dar-Ven, and Ger-Koth, who also had been transformed into their previous appearance. During the meal Kor-EIn turned to Ruan-urn.

"I believe this belongs to you," he said, offering the dagger again to the Mantur.

Ruan-urn took the dagger and placed it in his sheath. He then handed Kor-EIn another dagger. The handle looked familiar, but the entire blade was made of the Jewel of Andar.

"To the new ruler of Andar," Ruan-urn said quietly. "A gift from the Manturs."

"It is best to accept," Vornur said quickly before Kor-EIn could respond. "You have made many friends, but you have also made many enemies. Mer-Vetang spoke the truth when she said that there are other seats of power on Andar. Know that she will seek one, and that there are other Skellians of this world who would join her. If they should find one, they will come again to Jankor."

Kor-EIn nodded at Vornur, then nodded at Ruan-urn as he accepted the dagger and placed it in its sheath.

"And to the one at his side," Ruan-urn continued.

He presented a necklace to Mandu. The metal was the equivalent of gold on Andar, woven into a pattern that resembled a vine growing around a tree. At the end was a small pendant, about the size of a teardrop, made of the Jewel.

"Thank you," Mandu said, placing the necklace around her neck.

"I wish that I could offer you something in return," Kor-EIn began, "but I have nothing. I-"

"You have given us back our world," Ruan-urn cut in. "There can be no greater gift."

"There is one," Kor-EIn said, and he turned to Mandu. "The real Jewel of Andar."

THE END